



Criminal Justice Policy Foundation Reprints

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The War on Drugs: Do the American People Have Battle Fatigue?

Eric E. Sterling

Summary:

- 1) The poll reveals a marked dichotomy between public opinion and expert opinion on the elements of effective anti-drug strategy.
- 2) The poll reveals a public faith in the primary elements of the “drug war” that the public overwhelmingly sees as being lost.
- 3) Polls such as this can generate misinformation about national problems and strategies to address them.

Losing the Drug War?

I have been studying the drug problem and the national antidrug strategy since 1980 when I began setting up hearings on drug policy for the House Judiciary Committee. One way to interpret this poll is that the views of the American people about drugs are so inconsistent and contradictory it helps explain why national anti-drug policy has been ineffective. Public officials recognize that ineffective policies remain very popular. Thus why take political risks for different but unpopular policies that might offer, but cannot guarantee, better results?

One quarter of the public sees drug abuse as a national crisis, and another two-thirds see it as a serious problem. Three-quarters of the public see what we have been doing to address this crisis for more than twenty years as a losing effort. We have been doing largely the same thing with every greater intensity. All of the key elements of U.S. anti-drug strategy have been largely the same for twenty-five years. Federal anti-drug spending has grown from roughly \$1 billion in 1980 to \$19.2 billion in the current fiscal year. Since 1979 the number of deaths from drugs has more than doubled. Availability of drugs to kids has never been greater, according to the annual Monitoring the Future survey of high school students. More people are going to hospital emergency rooms for drugs than ever before. Teen drug use has dramatically increased. Imprisonment of drug offenders is at an all-time high. The street-level purity of heroin and cocaine is at record highs. About \$50 billion worth of illegal drugs are purchased every year in the U.S.

The Public’s View of the Effective Actions the

Government Could Take to Control the Use of Drugs Stopping Importation

The public sees as the most effective component of anti-drug strategy the stopping of the importation of drugs from other countries – what is formally called “interdiction.” Half of the public sees drug interdiction as the most effective anti-drug strategy.

Yet, I think most drug policy experts see that element of the strategy as being the least effective, or at a minimum, the least cost-effective. Stopping the importation of drugs has enormous costs in inspection personnel at every border station, at every port, and at every international airport. The costs to legitimate importers, the delays in the shipment of goods, especially perishable commodities such as fruit, vegetables, and flowers, is great. Roughly one million persons enter the U.S. from other countries every day. For the business or commuting bordercrosser, the delays amount to tens of millions of hours in lost productivity each year. For pleasure travelers, entering the United States is a stressful and unpleasant hassle compared to customs clearance for most other countries around the world. There are not only the obvious, at-the border activities of the U.S. Customs Service and the U.S. Border Patrol but the interdiction activities of the U.S. Coast Guard and the armed services. While justified as training missions, flying sophisticated AWACS aircraft, with an airframe life span of 2000 hours and a crew of more than a dozen people, or deploying a Coast Guard patrol boat or Naval vessel with large crews entail substantial costs.

Estimates of the success in seizing drugs vary widely. From traditional estimates of ten percent to claims as high as thirty percent, the fraction of the drugs that is seized of the total that is smuggled is inadequate to affect the marketplace. Drugs, once they cross the border, increase in value at least five to ten times. From a cost standpoint, if interdiction were actually seizing 80 percent of the volume of drugs attempted to be imported, current domestic pricing would enable the trafficker to break even. But the demand would tolerate an increase in

price that would still assure a very respectable profit. It must be recalled that current prices reflect profound declines from price levels over the past decade when drug consumption was probably higher than it is today.

In fact, drug seizures have increased dramatically over the years. But there is no evidence that these seizures have raised the prices of drugs on the streets. Heroin and cocaine prices have fallen almost continuously for twenty years and are near historic lows.

Why does the public believe that interdiction is effective? Perhaps because they witness on television news the piles of drugs seized by Customs and the Coast Guard? Perhaps because they hear in the news the periodic statements by prosecutors and law enforcement executives that another major trafficking organization has been arrested and dismantled?

Or is the belief a matter of faith? A decade ago the United States seized a shipment of Chilean grapes that were believed to be tainted with, as I recall, pesticide. For several years thereafter, in the questions following my presentations, members of the public would insist that America could stop the drugs if we wanted to because we could find a handful of tainted grapes.

Interdiction can never be an effective way to impact the drug problem. The border is alchemy. Drugs are relatively cheap in Latin America. Simply by getting them into the U.S., they are worth ten to one hundred times their weight in gold. A better way to understand drug interdiction is to see it as a government created price-support mechanism.

Arresting Drug Dealers

The public’s second-ranked strategy in their belief in its effectiveness is arresting drug dealers. While researchers in the 1980s, such as Mark Kleiman, found important anti-crime benefits from intensified street-level drug enforcement, I think there is a near consensus today that arrests of street-level drug dealers has had little effect upon the price or availability of heroin or cocaine. It is not simply a joke to observe that the arrest of a drug dealer creates a

job opportunity. In the absence of making profound changes in the demand for drugs, hundreds of thousands of Americans continue to earn substantial income from the sale of illegal drugs. ONDCP estimates annual retail expenditure for drugs at more than \$50 billion. These receipts reflect markups on wholesale prices of 100 percent or more. For more than a decade, nationwide arrests of drug dealers have been in the hundreds of thousands of defendants per year. An overwhelming majority of those arrested are convicted, and the majority are sentenced to prison terms of at least several years. Yet there is no evidence from price or availability measures that these arrests and prosecutions are affecting the market. Drug prices continue to decline. The declining prices reflect that drug dealers are continuing to discount the risks they face and costs of arrest and incarceration. The pattern of a twenty-year increase in the purity of drugs sold in the street suggests a continuing competition for market share in the face of strong demand and supply.

Drug Education

The public's third ranked effective anti-drug strategy is education. Fifteen percent of the public, and almost one-quarter of the Black respondents, believe it is the most effective strategy. Federal anti-drug education expenditures grew about 33 fold between 1985 and 1999. Yet between 1991 and 1999 drug use among teenagers increased, especially among younger teens. The Monitoring the Future survey found that past month use of marijuana tripled and cocaine use doubled during this period. Evaluations of the most widespread curriculum, D.A.R.E., have found it almost wholly ineffective a couple years after students finish the program. A new curriculum is now being distributed.

Drug Treatment

Only one-tenth of the public views drug treatment as the most effective anti-drug strategy. Yet, the work by Peter Rydell and Susan Everingham at the RAND Corporation, among others, suggests it is the most cost

effective mechanism for changing the drug trade. Currently the American drug problem is driven by the demand from the hard-core users. Collectively they consume approximately eighty percent of all the cocaine and heroin imported into the U.S. Changing their behavior would have the most effect upon the market. Unfortunately, according to ONDCP, the number of persons being treated for drugs has changed little over the past decade, and for a number of years the number of addicts receiving treatment declined from the prior year. Former ONDCP director Gen. Barry McCaffrey continually touted his anti-drug strategy as balanced and, in particular, insisted that he recommended significant increases in drug treatment funding. Unfortunately, other anti-drug activities grew at greater rates. It should be noted that at less than \$5 billion per year, drug treatment is a wholly insignificant fraction of all Federal public health and medical care expenditures which exceed \$250 billion.

The ONDCP director has the authority to decertify Federal agency budgets that fail to adequately provide for the agency's assigned role in the anti-drug effort. In November 1997, for example, Gen. McCaffrey threatened the Pentagon with decertification unless it committed to do more to stop the importation of drugs – a pointless exercise. During his five years, however, Gen. McCaffrey never threatened HHS with decertification for not adequately funding the nation's drug treatment effort. Doubling drug treatment expenditures would have been an insignificant increase in the health expenditure total.

Contradictory or Anomalous Responses

The report on the poll highlights the finding in question 38 that three-quarters of the public agrees that we are losing the drug war. However, an equal percentage agrees that "we will never be able to stop drugs from coming into this country because the demand for drugs is so high in the U.S." Yet the public considers demand-reduction strategies to be relatively ineffective. The greatest component of the demand, of course, is not from kids, but from hard-core adult

drug addicts who consume the bulk of the drugs. And such demand could be changed with a national commitment to treatment.

Fifty-nine percent of the public believes that “parents who used drugs in their youth don’t do enough to help their kids to stay away from drugs.” On what basis do the American people believe this? How can we know what other families do or do not do in the way of parental anti-drug education? This is pure conjecture.

Sixty-eight percent of the public believes that “the television and motion picture industries fail to accurately portray the dangers of drug abuse.” The movies are filled with examples of adverse consequences of drug use. Think of “Drugstore Cowboy,” or “Trainspotting,” or “Traffic.” There is no data showing any correlation between movie/TV drug depictions and drug use rates. Again, pure speculation.

In question 37, adults are asked to speculate about why teenagers try illegal drugs. Eighty-two identify peer pressure. Fifty-five percent identify the portrayal of drug use in movies, music, and TV. But curiosity is not an option. Improved performance in athletic competition is not an option. The overwhelming majority of American youth are exposed to antidrug education in their schools that at a minimum provides information about the health dangers associated with drug use. Yet 44 percent of the respondents speculate that “a lack of information about the dangers of drugs” is a major factor in trying illegal drugs.

Conclusion

This data is most likely a scientifically accurate measure of the public’s answers to the questions posed. However, the answers themselves are often sheer speculation about the matters inquired. Polls such as this encourage people to speculate about matters they know almost nothing about. The scientific presentation of this collection of speculation is then presented as evidence of national opinion about matters of substance. Policy makers make choices based upon such assessments of national opinion.

Sixty-eight percent of the public agree that “Latin American governments will never be able to control the problem of drug trafficking.” Whether ten percent agree or ninety percent agree has nothing to do with the accuracy of that assertion. Should decisions about how and whether the United States provides law enforcement and other assistance to Latin American nations turn on the public’s response to such a question? I hope not. I happen to believe that as long as drugs such as heroin and cocaine remain outlawed, then Latin American governments will never be able to control the problem of drug trafficking, and neither will the U.S. government. I believe that adopting a system of regulation of manufacture and distribution of drugs could enable governments to better control the problems we think of as the problems of illegal drug trafficking. But until there are experiments undertaken using the many mechanisms of regulation modern governments have developed, we will have no empirical basis for such opinions.

Until we change our policies, America will continue to lose the drug war. To fight Germany in World War I, the Allies bogged down in trenches in France and allowed a million of our troops to charge to their slaughter in a failed strategy. In World War II, we fought Germany in Africa, Italy, and from the air before we landed in France.

In fighting drug prohibition violence, corruption, poisonings and overdoses, and money laundering, we need to be much more creative than we have been. And that will require courage.

Eric Sterling is the Executive Director of the Criminal Justice Policy Foundation in Washington, D.C. He was counsel to the House Judiciary Committee from 1979 to 1989.