

Fixing National Drug Control Policy



Policy Brief

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Back to Basics: Principles of an Effective National Drug Policy

Background

A recent Zogby/Inter-American Dialogue Survey reports that three out of every four Americans think the nation is losing its war on drugs (<http://www.thedialogue.org/page.cfm?pageID=403>).

The 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH)—our primary tool for measuring the success of demand reduction efforts—indicates that the prevalence of illicit drug use has remained largely unchanged for more than five years (<http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/nsduh/2k7nsduh/2k7Results.pdf>):

- While some initial progress was made in reducing drug use among young people (a trend that began nearly ten years ago) this seems to have come to an end. The rate of illicit drug use among America's youth has not changed in three years.
- Illicit drug use by adults also remains unchanged. Approximately 20 percent of those aged 18 to 25 and approximately 6 percent of those aged 26 and over had used in both 2002 and 2007.
- The number of individuals "abusing" or "dependent upon" illicit drugs has hovered at about 7 million for a decade.
- Prescription drug abuse continues at epidemic levels and treatment for methamphetamine abuse has doubled since 2000 (<http://www.usdoj.gov/ndic/pubs26/26594/strat.htm>).
- The incidence of illicit drug use continues unabated—and 31

percent of the 2.7 million new illicit drug users identified in the 2007 survey had used prescription drugs non-medically.

Data related to supply reduction efforts also show frustrating results:

- Poppy and coca cultivation are at near record levels.
- The US-Mexican border has become a war zone. More than 1,000 deaths related to conflicts occurring among warring cartels and between the cartels and the Mexican government have occurred in the past year alone (<http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/americas/06/25/mexico.drugs/index.html>).

These facts should provide a clarion call to policymakers that our national drug strategy needs to change and become more evidence-based. Experience indicates that a well-formulated strategy involves:

1. Adopting policies that are grounded in research;
2. Developing a budget that supports these policies; and
3. Maintaining a performance measurement system to ensure accountability.

Adopting policies grounded in research.

Decades of research has taught us a good deal about the ingredients of a successful national drug control strategy. Achieving any measure of progress requires a comprehensive agenda involving treatment, prevention, domestic law enforcement, interdiction, and source country ini-

Quick Facts

- According to polls, three out of every four Americans think that the nation's war on drugs is failing.
- The fact that drug use, especially problem drug use associated with addiction, did not change during this decade contributes to this national perception.
- Drug use initiation continues unabated.
- Addicted individuals, who represent a small portion of the overall drug-using population, consume most of the drugs. Therefore, expanding access to treatment programs would help to reduce the demand for drugs and is an effective part of any supply reduction policy.
- However, the federal drug budget has never provided adequate support for demand reduction services, such as drug treatment and prevention. Today over two-thirds of the federal drug budget supports supply reduction programs as opposed to demand reduction programs.
- The next administration should: 1) Adopt drug policy that is research-based; 2) Address existing and emerging drug problems; and 3) Request a performance-based budget that supports the drug control strategy's measurable goals.

Principles of an Effective Drug Policy

tatives. But these ingredients are not all of equal value and represent very different returns on investment.

Attacking drugs at their source by focusing mostly on eradication is expensive and unproductive. Trying to spray our way out of the problem has done little to curb cultivation of coca and poppy plants. Interdiction alone does not prevent drug traffickers from moving drugs into the United States and onto the street corners where they are sold.

Investing in prevention and treatment is a more effective means of reducing drug demand and use. However, the scale and scope of substance abuse treatment must be greatly expanded to further mitigate drug use and addiction. Community-based treatment programs, as well as prevention programs, such as Drug Free Communities and Weed and Seed, are particularly valuable in this regard. In addition, research shows that diversion programs, such as drug courts, that emphasize treatment over incarceration and use the coercive power of the criminal justice system in a productive way, are effective and should be greatly expanded.

A small portion of the drug-using population—specifically those who are addicted—consume well over two-thirds of the illicit drugs that law enforcement tries to prevent from entering the United States. Helping these individuals to stop using drugs would substantially reduce the quantity of drugs demanded by the marketplace. In other words: Good treatment policy is smart supply reduction policy.

Developing a budget that supports these policies.

The goals implicit in a national drug control strategy should drive the federal drug control budget. In an ideal

world, there would be consistency between funding and the relative value of competing programmatic alternatives. But instead we have a budget that over-weights source country and interdiction initiatives while under-weighting their domestic law enforcement, prevention, and treatment counterparts.

According to the latest budget numbers, funding for supply reduction has increased by nearly 57 percent since federal fiscal year 2002 and now represents nearly two-thirds of the total federal drug control budget. Source country resources increased by nearly 50 percent while interdiction resources increased by 100 percent—from about \$1.9 billion to \$3.8 billion.

By comparison, funding for demand reduction grew by less than 3 percent over this same period of time and now represents about one-third of the federal drug control budget. While resources for substance abuse treatment increased by 22 percent, resources for prevention programs actually declined by almost 25 percent.

The implications are clear: Any new administration must ensure that there is a match between the goals of the federal drug control strategy and the budget to support it. This will require that the next administration focus on reshaping our national drug control strategy in a manner consistent with the knowledge regarding the effectiveness of supply- and demand-reduction initiatives and undertake a bottom-up review of the federal drug control budget with regard to its ability to support its strategy.

Maintaining a performance measurement system to ensure accountability.

The coming era of fiscal austerity will

place a premium on program performance and accountability. Suitable performance measures will help provide feedback to policymakers on program effectiveness, and allow them to revise the national drug control strategy and its supporting federal drug control budget accordingly.

Historically, adopting a research-based strategy has led to identifying performance measures in three broad outcome areas of reducing: 1) Demand (use, initiation, and addiction); 2) Consequences (drug-related crime and health problems); and 3) Availability (access to drugs). In contrast, the current strategy identifies performance measures in only one of these areas—reducing demand.

Performance measurement assumes the existence of surveillance systems that monitor indicators related to supply and demand. However, over the past five years a number of critical components of the drug control data infrastructure have been reduced in scope. This trend must be reversed so that collection of this valuable data needed to assess strategic needs and performance outcomes can begin again.

Conclusion

The next administration must rely on data and research when formulating the drug control strategy. Such an approach will likely lead to: reallocation of resources from supply reduction to demand reduction initiatives; identification of performance measures suitable for use with a research-based strategy; and re-establishment of surveillance systems essential to making the strategy responsive to emerging problems. Such fundamental change will produce better results while saving countless dollars and lives.



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