

Drugs: the third rail of US politics



In the 2012 US Presidential election, America's health-care policies remain hotly disputed. But the issue of drugs and addiction, formerly a prominent public and health concern, is now largely invisible in national political debates. Its public health importance is overlooked in favour of the continued criminalisation and punishment of drug users. Once the war on drugs was centre stage in national elections; now drugs are treated as the third rail of US politics—touch it and you die.

There are some differences between the main political parties' position on drugs. The Republican Party's platform typically takes a hard line: gaol time for addicts, death penalties for drug kingpins, and drug testing in schools.¹ Democrats want to bring to justice those trafficking drugs to the USA, require addicts to stop drug use to get out of prison, and favour more enforcement of drug laws and treatment for drug users.² But in practice local candidates fight over who can be toughest on crime—any sign of being soft on drugs leaves candidates open to attack. Hence the deafening silence on drugs in the Presidential election. Yet drug issues—and their implications for the nation's public health and global security interests—will inevitably confront the next US President.

America's HIV/AIDS epidemic, for example, has always implicated drug use among poor and minority communities. New HIV infections in the USA continue at a high rate: the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate 50 000–60 000 new HIV infections in the USA annually.³ Meanwhile in the more populous European Union, researchers estimate there were about 5000 new HIV infections in 2008⁴—less than 10% of the US incidence, owing to better provision of access to antiretroviral therapy in many EU countries and a less punitive approach to drug use.⁵ In the USA, drug offences feed the nation's bloated prison system, and damage the social and economic prospects of America's poorest families and communities where drug use is concentrated.⁶ There are now more drug offenders in US prisons and gaols (more than 1 million)⁷ than prisoners in the European Union for all offences.⁸

Globally, drug wars have entered a new stage that demands attention from the US President—from Afghanistan, to US neighbour Mexico, where violence associated with the trade in illicit drugs has produced

60 000 murders in 6 years, and Central America, a region which now has the highest murder rate in the world.⁹ As the world's largest market for illicit drugs—valued at some US\$40–60 billion annually, with imports from Mexico of cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamines accounting for perhaps \$20 billion of that amount¹⁰—Americans are complicit in this violence. Murder rates peaked in the USA during the most violent period of the war on drugs between 1975 and 1995, during which time the national homicide rate doubled.¹¹ US homicide rates have since fallen, while the multibillion dollar illicit drug market has survived. And now tens of thousands of drug-war homicides that used to occur in the USA are Mexico's problem.

The violence associated with the illicit trade in drugs has produced a clamour for change. At the Summit of the Americas, held in Cartagena, Colombia, in April, 2012, 15 Latin American heads of state identified this violence as the core problem with drugs and asked US President Barack Obama to consider legalisation of some drugs.¹² Anticipating these requests before the meeting, the Obama administration made it clear that the USA would not legalise or decriminalise drugs, and so the issue was not discussed with the Latin American leaders at the meeting.¹³

Another important issue in the USA is the use of medical marijuana, which is approved in 16 states with more than 1000 dispensaries, 200 000 users, and wide public support. This approach to marijuana (the largest

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illicit drug market in the USA) represents a crucial step towards creating sound regulatory alternatives to drug prohibition.¹⁴ Yet the issue of marijuana is absent from Presidential debates, even as federal officials recently closed hundreds of outlets for medical marijuana in Los Angeles, which now faces a legal fight to sustain its programmes.¹⁵ President Obama previously supported medical marijuana, but now declines comment,¹⁶ even as three key election states—Colorado, Oregon, and Washington—have cannabis legalisation bills on their ballots.

Despite these potent reasons for open discussion and argument about drug policies, there is a deafening silence on this issue from US politicians. As political fears continue to trump health concerns about both licit and illicit drugs, deaths from drug overdoses increase—there were more than 40 000 such deaths in 2010.¹⁷ These are vital social and public health matters for the USA, as measured by morbidity and mortality alone, yet are ignored in our Presidential politics. As the candidates look away, the deadly medical and social toll accumulates.

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