

Myth 4 – Punishing drug users will help to tackle the world drug problem

When looking what kind of response societies have on drug use, punishing drug users seems often to be a commonly adopted strategy for tackling with the multiple negative consequences that problematic drug use is causing for societies.

Drug use has a serious impact on individual lives, not to mention the influence on security or economic development at the country level. Drug use is listed on the top of 20 risk factors compromising public health worldwide, and in the top 10 within the developed countries. To best protect the health of its citizens, the United Nations always encourage governments to see drug use as a public health issue.

Other public health issues such as diabetes or mental health conditions are also not tackled by punishing the patients or blaming their parents. Similar to drug use, these health conditions are also affected by individuals own lifestyle choices among a broad range of other factors, such as genetics, family environment or the choices available to an individual in a given society and community. Why should drug use related disorders be any different from this?

Preventing drug use, and offering treatment and rehabilitation to all those wishing to receive it, can bring considerable savings in terms of saving future health, social care and crime related costs, and increase the productivity in work life. Good quality evidence shows that people who use drugs and are imprisoned, and do not receive accurate treatment, have significant likelihood to return to their addiction upon release. Furthermore, drug users, including problematic drug users, often represent a large part of the prison population, and consequently drug use is one of the main problems facing prison systems. It is well-established that good drug treatment for prisoners could reduce both drug use and the rates of re-offending.¹ The social exclusion and stigma related to punishment compromises the mental and physical health of drug users further, weakening their possibilities to lead healthy and productive lives.

Treatment as an alternative to criminal justice sanctions has been found to be effective in reducing future drug use and crime, thus benefitting the public health situation and saving money. Processing drug related crime sanctions in specific drug courts have found to reduce crime by as much as 35 percent compared to imprisonment and save up

¹ Prisons and Health. WHO – UNODC 2014. http://www.unodc.org/documents/hiv-aids/publications/Prisons_and_other_closed_settings/2014_WHO_UNODC_Prisons_and_Health_eng.pdf



to \$12.00 (per \$1.00 invested) on the reduced emergency room visits and other medical care, foster care and victimization costs such as property loss.² Similar studies on prevention show an average of 10\$ return on every dollar spent for prevention of drug use, for example via supporting families in parenting skills programs or via supporting the growth of personal and social skills in school settings³.

A health-oriented approach signals a clear ‘no’ to punishment

A health-oriented approach focuses on supporting the healthy and safe development of children and youth, ensuring they will grow safely in to adulthood becoming productive members of the society. It also means meeting the needs of people suffering from drug use related disorders, and creating a drug control system that protects the health and safety of both the individuals and the community, placing people at the centre of all related policies, recognizing their rights and freedoms while protecting their health. This is the most effective way for protecting the health and wellbeing of all people, including those using drugs, as well as for reducing the illicit use of drugs and the related health and social harm.

What does a health-oriented approach mean?

- Providing education on health consequences of drug use as well as evidence based prevention to all members of the society, including those already experimenting with or using harmful substances, across all policies and in different settings, including health care, educational institutions, families, entertainment venues and work settings.
- Offering treatment and rehabilitation for people suffering from drug use related disorders as part of the mainstream health care system, including also as an alternative to criminal justice sanctions, based on the best scientific standards, as for any other disease, whilst keeping in mind that not all people who use drugs are in the need of treatment.
- Reintegrating drug users in to the society, and reducing stigma related to drug dependence.
- Ensuring access to controlled medications, for all in need, complying with high medical and scientific standards for guaranteeing that patients receive the appropriate medication with effective results and low level of side effects⁴

A health-oriented approach is most effective way to mitigate the negative consequences of drug use.

² From Coercion to cohesion. UNODC 2009. http://www.unodc.org/docs/treatment/Coercion_Ebook.pdf

³ International Standards on Drug Use Prevention http://www.unodc.org/documents/prevention/prevention_standards.pdf

⁴ "Ensuring availability of controlled medications for the relief of pain and preventing diversion and abuse" UNODC discussion paper. http://www.unodc.org/docs/treatment/Pain/Ensuring_availability_of_controlled_medications_FINAL_15_March_CND_version.pdf