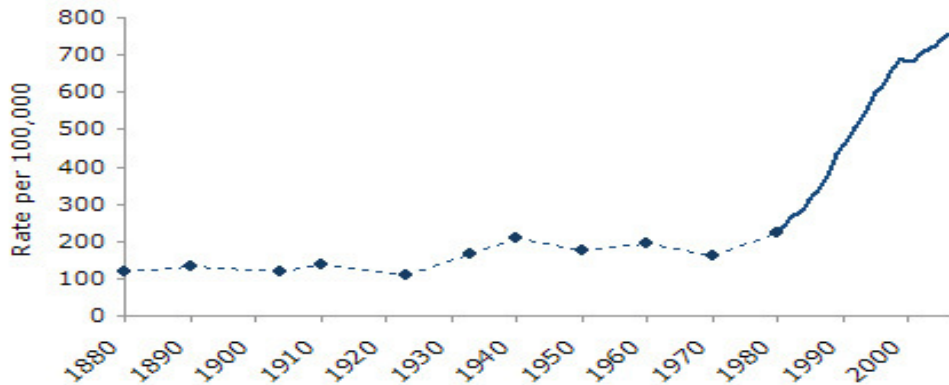


Endless 'war on (some) drugs' fills our prisons, wrecks lives and wounds society

By Meteor Blades for Daily Kos

U.S. Incarceration Rate, 1880-2008



CEPR analysis of data from BJS, Census, and Cahalan (1986).

Graph created by the Center for Economic and Policy Research.

"It is hard for me to see how anyone who knows anything about history, about pharmacology, and about the fundamental human struggle for self-discipline and the seemingly equally intense human need to reject it and replace it with submission to a coercively paternalistic authority—how any such person could escape the conclusion that the war on drugs is simply another chapter in the natural history of human stupidity."

—Dr. Thomas S. Szasz in *A Plea for the Cessation of the Longest War in the Twentieth Century: The War on Drugs*

That book was written in 1988. The *official* "war on drugs," begun in a **special message to Congress** by Richard Nixon in June 1971, was only 17 years old then. This month, it turned 40. The anniversary coincided with yet another report in a long series of reports compiling evidence that the drug war has failed miserably. This latest report came from the **Global Commission on Drug Policy**. Among its recommendations: Legalize marijuana.

The commission's efforts generated the predictable firestorm of controversy and got a **predictable** response from the current U.S. drug "czar," Gil Kerlikowske. And, predictably, we can expect a gutless response from most politicians, incumbents and candidates alike. All but a few will not confront the awful impacts of this disastrous so-called war, a war on *some* drugs. The war didn't really begin in 1971, but decades earlier. It picked up steam under Nixon, was heightened under the first President Bush, and continues not only to consume vast resources, but also to cause profound and lasting harm without achieving what would be taken as the most elementary measure of success: reducing the use of drugs. In fact, the World Health Organization's 2008 **survey** of 17 countries found that United States has the highest illegal drug use in the world.

So what *has* it done besides gobbling up **trillions of public dollars** better spent on, well, just about anything else? It's curbed personal liberty, given felony records to millions of people not otherwise disposed to crime, broken up families by creating "drug orphans" who wind up in foster care, penalized hundreds of thousands by taking away their right to vote and their access

to government-backed college loans, spurred real drug wars with inevitable bystander casualties in cities across the nation and in other nations as dealers try to seize and maintain market share, developed a forfeiture system that feeds arrests, diverted police from more important work and filled our prisons with non-violent convicts, sparking a prison-building industry and putting tremendous pressure on state budgets.

Take a look at just one aspect of what the drug war has accomplished. According to the most recent edition of an annual report from the Bureau of Justice, **Prisoners in 2009**, about half of federal prisoners are serving time for drug offenses and about a fifth of state prisoners are. An earlier report put the drug inmate figure for local jails at about one-fourth. All in all, more than half a million of the 2.3 million convicts in the United States are in the slam for drug offenses.

The overall prison figures are revealing for what they say about America. A year ago, the Center for Economic and Policy Research **noted** how vastly out of whack the U.S. incarceration rate is with the rest of the world. Between 1880 and 1970, the rate ran from a low of 100 to a high of 200 prisoners per 100,000 people. Since 1980, however, the rate has soared. Twenty years ago, it had risen to 458. By 2008, it was 753. America is No. 1. In France, the rate is 96; in Canada, it's 116; in England and Wales, it's 153; in Mexico, it's 209; and even in Russia, the next highest, it's 629. At the state level, this is costing the nation about \$52 billion annually, one out of every 14 tax dollars collected by the states.

Is that because violent crime has risen? No. A large amount of the increase comes from the drug war. Since 1980, thanks in part to minimum mandatory sentencing guidelines, drug incarcerations have not doubled, or tripled or quadrupled. They have grown 12-fold.

Few of the billions spent on prisoners of the war on drugs go to helping them beat the addiction many of them suffer from. And when they emerge from the slam, there's little help for them in readjusting to life outside or in getting a job. In fact, a recent **study** by the National Employment Law Project found that there is an active effort to keep them from getting a job. Sixty-five million Americans with criminal backgrounds (misdemeanors and felonies) are told upfront (and illegally) by many potential employers, including some of the largest companies, that their applications will be rejected because of their records. That number includes 15 million or so with nothing but drug convictions on their tab.

Ignoring the findings and recommendations of the Global Commission on Drug Policy will be the tried-and-true route taken by most politicians. It doesn't make a difference to them that the war on some drugs has failed in what was declared to be its primary mission of curtailing drug use, wasted vast sums of money in the process and overflowed our prisons with people who should not ever have been there. Those facts won't budge more than a few incumbents and candidates to step up and say: "My fellow Coloradans (or Kentuckyians or Pennsylvanians), this just isn't working and we have to change it." Instead, after nearly a century of this lethal ineffectiveness, most of our leaders seem determined to stay the course on the war on drugs no matter what.

If they won't listen to commissions and think-tanks, you would think they would listen to those who have actually tried to enforce these laws. For instance, Jack Cole, formerly a narcotics officer with the New Jersey state police. He now **leads** Law Enforcement Against Prohibition:

...Cole argues that the violence inherent in prohibition inflates the black market all by itself. The math is simple, he says. When a drug is "dangerous to supply" under prohibition, "that creates an artificially inflated value that makes it worthwhile for this war to go on," he told a journalist for Danish TV. ...

“Nothing worked,” says Cole. “When I was a young trooper, in 1970, at the start of the war, we considered an ounce of cocaine or maybe 7 grams of heroin a large drug seizure. What do we get today? We get individual seizures of 10 tons of heroin? Twenty tons of cocaine? One seizure each. And nothing changes on the street, except drugs keep getting cheaper, more potent, and far easier for our children to access. Now that’s a failed policy, any way you look at it.”

A failed policy. Except for the prison industry. And the drug cartels. “[A]nother chapter in the natural history of human stupidity.” Could Dr. Szasz have nailed it any better?

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