

Reflections on Concrete Next Steps

**Harm Reduction Services for People Who Use Drugs: Exploring Data Collection,
Evidence Gaps, and Research Needs – A Workshop**

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January 31, 2024

The “War on Drugs” is a war on people.

- » Since the 1970’s the US has pursued a “War on Drugs” that directs the massive power of the state not towards reducing drug-related harm, but to criminalization and stigmatization of (some) people who use (some) drugs
- » 350,000 people are currently incarcerated for drug crimes
- » 20% of everyone incarcerated
- » Over one million drug arrests every year
 - More than for every other type of crime
 - Nearly 9 in 10 for simple possession

What are we trying to do here?

- » Every system is perfectly designed to produce the results it's producing
- » The “War on Drugs” is a machine for producing human suffering
- » Criminalization increases harm
- » The “War” targets members of already stigmatized groups, particularly non-white people and economically disadvantaged people
- » Also has huge negative external externalities: lost employment, destroyed families, traumatized children, etc.
- » The War makes everything more difficult – including research

Aren't things getting better?

- » There have been some policy changes, particularly to make some laws regulating MOUD less racist, classist, and harmful, to incrementally increase access to naloxone and syringes, etc.
- » But these are too little, too late. Policy at all levels is still directed towards the creation and maintenance of a permanent underclass of criminalized, stigmatized people who use or used drugs
- » Many examples, including some presented at this workshop, of health professionals, community advocates, state and local officials, community-based researchers, etc. doing great work in the face of opposition
- » But they are everywhere swimming against the tide

Just a few specific examples

- » Dr. Volkow mentioned supervised consumption facilities.. Which the US Department of Justice is in federal court arguing are illegal
- » Dr. Gupta talked about syringe services programs... which are barred in many places because the federal government pushed states to criminalize drug paraphernalia – and has done nothing to push them to repeal those laws
- » HHS and ONDCP raced to announce that federal funds can not be used for smoking supplies
- » Federal agencies continually refer to, and treat, agencies and individuals who are actively engaged in arresting people who use drugs as “partners”

What does this have to do with research?

- » As many of the speakers have noted, important to strengthen the evidence base
- » After all, we want to know what works!
- » However, we already know a lot – and, as Dr. Davidson noted, harm reduction research is held to a standard not applied to law enforcement
- » Research and researchers are continually hampered the fact that people who use drugs are criminalized
- » As Dr. Russell noted, “more information about people who use drugs places them at risk for violence”
- » Much of the research that is generated is applicable largely only to the absurd situation in which we exist

Changing law and policy is necessary to improving research

- » Law and policy is the water in which we swim
- » The US remains alone among peer countries in choosing to inflict harm on huge numbers of people for using the wrong drugs, and making impactful research much more difficult
- » Change is not a given – it is contingent on the actions of people
- » The war the US has been waging on its own people can be stopped, but it's not going to end on its own

Concrete next steps

- » Whether humans should be forced into cages and held there against their will is primarily a *moral* question, not a research question
- » Funders and researchers should explicitly acknowledge that harming people who use drugs is *wrong* – and act on that knowledge
- » Federal government can, and should, force states to change laws that harm people who use drugs
- » ...and that makes research designed to benefit them much more difficult
- » In the meantime, private funders must step in to fund research that government agencies will not
- » And researchers should continue to make the case for laws that lead to a more healthy and just society