

Nevada Pot Policy a Bust

A just-released study by the Justice Policy Institute (JPI) in Washington, DC concluded that our policies toward marijuana have not succeeded in a decline in overall use. The study (Efficacy and Impact: The Criminal Justice Response to Marijuana Policy in the United States) highlights the impact of policies in terms of monetary costs and the impact on the use of marijuana and other drugs. The findings should come as no surprise for those of use who follow this issue closely. However, some specific findings are revealing and particularly relevant to Nevada, as the study covers some specific states.

National figures show that the federal government is spending about 300 times what we spent 35 years ago on the drug war, rising from \$65 million in 1969 to \$19 billion in 2003. The report focuses more specifically on matching spending with marijuana use between 1988 and 2003. The data reveal that while expenditures on drug control increased by 307%, marijuana use remained about the same, and in fact showed some increases among youth (according to the annual Monitoring the Future Survey). During the same period, arrests for other illegal drugs like heroin and cocaine fell.

In other words, the policy has shifted to pot smokers. In fact, in 7 out of 10 states, more than half of all drug arrests were for marijuana and in almost 3 of 10 states pot arrests constitute more than 60%. Not surprisingly, there are an estimated 27,900 people in prison for pot alone and another 4,600 in jail for pot.

The costs of this policy are staggering. A Harvard economist estimated that total criminal justice responses (police, courts, corrections) came to around \$5.1 billion per year for arresting pot smokers.

Looking at the state of Nevada, the costs for marijuana busts came to about \$42 million in 2003. This was for arresting 4,620 people (an arrest rate of 210 per 100,000); in 2003, marijuana arrests accounted for 48% of all arrests in Nevada). The National Survey on Drug Abuse and Health estimated that about 313,000 Nevadans used pot during the past 30 days, which comes to a rate of 6,065 per 100,000. In contrast, in New Mexico, the arrest rate was only 132 and the use rate was 5,909. Utah's arrest rate for pot stood at 173, with a use rate of 3,104. Colorado's pot arrest rate was the same as Nevada (210) and their use rate was slightly higher at 6,883. California's arrest rate for pot was 171 and the use rate stood at 5,217. In general, the detailed study of ten states revealed a clear pattern: the higher the arrest rate, the higher the use rate.

What many fail to understand are what researchers are calling the "collateral damages" of our drug control policies. Among these damages are the loss of jobs, barriers to finding both jobs and housing upon release from prison (one study found that among those between the ages of 16 and 24, the time spent in jail "reduced work time over the next decade by 25-30 percent when compared with arrested youth who were not incarcerated"), the loss of the vote (about 13 million former prisoners cannot vote), the denial of public assistance and food stamps, denial of public housing, suspension of drivers' licenses, the ability to take care of their families, the impact on children (nationally, there are more than 2 million children with a parent in prison and at least 6 million with a parent somewhere in the criminal justice system on any given day).

Over the past several years I have written at length about the drug war, pointing to the futility of addressing what is essentially a public health problem via the criminal justice system. Literally thousands of research reports have been produced during the past 30 years showing the failure of this policy to curb drug use and documenting the "collateral damages." Those in the position to change these policies are fully aware of these reports. Yet the policies continue. It is as if they don't care what the research shows. I have often concluded that they ignore the research because the drug war is "successful" in that it has targeted the poor in general and racial minorities in particular and, in effect, disposed of them in jails and prisons, while the huge "crime control industry" grows and grows, with many benefits in terms of corporate profits and well-paying careers.

Acknowledgments

The author of this report was Randall G. Shelden.