Teen Drug Abuse

A Nine Inch Nails album *The Downward Spiral* features a song "My Self Destruct" with the lyrics: "I am the needle in your vein and I control you, I am the high you can't sustain and I control you." Another song, "Hurt," explores drugs as a means of escape with lyrics like, "The needle tears a hole, the old familiar sting, try to kill it all away."

Five Dodge City, Kansas teenagers, high on marijuana, killed a stranger for no obvious reason. Three West Palm Beach, Florida teenagers mixed beer, rum, marijuana and cocaine. They then kidnapped and set ablaze a tourist from Brooklyn.

Nearly everywhere we look, the consequences of drug abuse can be seen. Violent street gangs, family violence, train crashes, the spread of AIDS, and babies born with cocaine dependency all testify to the pervasive influence of drugs in our world.

The statistics are staggering. The average age of first alcohol use is 12 and the average age of first drug use is 13. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 93 percent of all teenagers have some experience with alcohol by the end of their senior year of high school and 6 percent drink daily. Almost two-thirds of all American young people try illicit drugs before they finish high school. One out of sixteen seniors smokes marijuana daily and 20 percent have done so for at least a month sometime in their lives. A recent poll found that adolescents listed drugs as the most important problem facing people their age, followed by crime and violence in school and social pressures.

Drugs have changed the social landscape of America. Street gangs spring up nearly overnight looking for the enormous profits drugs can bring. Organized crime is also involved in setting up franchises that would make McDonald's envious. But these are not hamburgers. In the world of drugs, homicidally

vicious gangs compete for market share with murderous results. Many gang members outgun the police with their weapons of choice: semi-automatic pistols, AK-47s, and Uzis. Drug dealers have also gone high tech using cellular phones and computers to keep track of deals, while their teenage runners wear phone beepers in school.

The Parents' Resource Institute for Drug Education (PRIDE) reports that children who abuse illicit drugs are significantly more likely to carry a gun to school, take part in gang activities, think of suicide, threaten harm to others, and get in trouble with the police than children who abstain.

One survey released by the University of Colorado shows that the problem of drug use is not just outside the church. The study involved nearly 14,000 junior high and high school youth and compared churched young people with unchurched young people and found very little difference. For example, 88 percent of the unchurched young people reported drinking beer as compared to 80 percent of churched young people. When asked how many had tried marijuana, 47 percent of the unchurched young people had done so compared to 38 percent of the churched youth. For amphetamines and barbiturates, 28 percent of the unchurched had tried them while 22 percent of the church young people had tried them. And for cocaine use, the percentage was 14 percent for unchurched youths and 11 percent for churched youths.

Fighting drugs often seems futile. When drug dealers are arrested, they are often released prematurely because court dockets are overloaded. Plea bargaining and paroles are standard fare as the revolving doors of justice spin faster. As the casualties mount in this war against drugs, some commentators have begun to suggest that the best solution is to legalize drugs. But you don't win a war by surrendering. If drugs were legalized, addiction would increase, health costs would increase, and government would once again capitulate to societal pressures and shirk its responsibility to establish

moral law.

But if legalization is not the answer, then something must be done about the abuse of drugs like alcohol, cocaine, marijuana, heroin, and PCP. Just the medical cost of drug abuse was estimated by the National Center for Health Statistics to be nearly $60 billion, and the medical bill for alcohol was nearly $100 billion.

How to Fight the Drug Battle

Society must fight America’s drug epidemic on five major fronts. The first battlefront is at the border.Federal agents must patrol the 8426 miles of deeply indented Florida coastline and a 2067 mile border with Mexico. This is a formidable task, but vast distances are not the only problem.

The smugglers they are up against have almost unlimited funds and some of the best equipment available. Fortunately, the federal interdiction forces (namely Customs, DEA, and INS) are improving their capability. Customs forces have been given an increase in officers and all are getting more sophisticated equipment.

The second battlefront is law enforcement at home. Police must crack down with more arrests, more convictions, longer sentences, and more seizures of drug dealers’ assets. Unfortunately, law enforcement successes pale when compared to the volume of drug traffic. Even the most effective crackdowns seem to do little more than move drugs from one location to another.

An effective weapon on this battlefront is a 1984 law that makes it easier to seize the assets of drug dealers before conviction. In some cities, police have even confiscated the cars of suburbanites who drive into the city to buy crack.

But attempts to deter drug dealing have been limited by flaws in the criminal justice system. A lack of jail cells prevents

significant prosecution of drug dealers. And even if this problem were alleviated, the shortage of judges would still result in the quick release of drug pushers.

A third battlefront is drug testing. Many government and business organizations are implementing testing on a routine basis in order to reduce the demand for drugs.

The theory is simple. Drug testing is a greater deterrent to drug use than the remote possibility of going to jail. People who know they will have to pass a urine test in order to get a job are going to be much less likely to dabble in drugs. In 1980, 27 percent of some 20,000 military personnel admitted to using drugs in the previous 30 days. Five years later when drug testing was implemented, the proportion dropped to 9 percent.

But drug testing is not without its opponents. Civil libertarians feel this deterrent is not worth the loss of personal privacy. Some unions believe that random testing in the workplace would violate the Fourth Amendment’s prohibition against unreasonable searches. A fourth battleground is drug treatment. Those who are addicted to drugs need help. But the major question is, Who should provide the treatment and who should foot the bill? Private hospital programs are now a $4 billion-a-year business with a daily cost of as much as $500 per bed per day. This is clearly out of the reach of many addicts who do not have employers or insurance companies who can pick up the costs.

A fifth battleground is education. Teaching children the dangers of drugs can be an important step in helping them to learn to say no to drugs. The National Institute on Drug Abuse estimates that 72 percent of the nation’s elementary and secondary-school children are being given some kind of drug education.

Should We Legalize Drugs?

Those weary of the war on drugs have suggested that we should decriminalize drugs. Former Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders suggested we study the impact of legalizing drugs. For years, an alliance of liberals and libertarians have promoted the idea that legalizing drugs would reduce drug costs and drug crimes in this country. But would it? Let’s look at some of the arguments for drug legalization.

1. Legalization will take the profit out of the drug business.

As surprising as it may sound, relatively few drug dealers actually earn huge sums of money. Most in the crack business are low-level runners who make very little money. Many crack dealers smoke more crack than they sell. Drug cartels are the ones making the big profits.

Would legalizing drugs really affect large drug dealers or drug cartels in any appreciable way? Drug cartels would still control price and supply even if drugs were legalized in this country. If government set the price for legalized drugs, criminals could undercut the price and supply whatever the government did not supply.

Addicts would not be significantly affected by legalization. Does anyone seriously believe that their behavior would change just because they are now using legal drugs instead of illegal drugs? They would still use theft and prostitution to support their habits.

Proponents also argue that legalizing drugs would reduce the cost of drugs and thus reduce the supply of drugs flowing to this country. Recent history suggests that just the opposite will take place. When cocaine first hit the United States, it was expensive and difficult to obtain. But when more was dumped into this country and readily available in less expensive vials of crack, drug addiction rose and drug-related

crimes rose.

2. Drug legalization will reduce drug use.

Proponents argue that legalizing drugs will make them less appealing they will no longer be “forbidden fruit.” However, logic and social statistics suggest that decriminalizing drugs will actually increase drug use.

Those arguing for the legalization of drugs often point to Prohibition as a failed social experiment. But was it? When Prohibition was in effect, alcohol consumption declined by 30 to 50 percent and death from cirrhosis of the liver fell dramatically. One study found that suicides and drug-related arrests also declined by 50 percent. After the repeal of the 18th amendment in 1933, alcoholism rose. So did alcohol-related crimes and accidents. If anything, Prohibition proves the point. Decriminalization increases drug use.

Comparing alcohol and drugs actually strengthens the argument against legalization since many drugs are even more addictive than alcohol. Consider, for example, the difference between alcohol and cocaine. Alcohol has an addiction rate of approximately 10 percent, while cocaine has an addiction rate as high as 75 percent.

Many drugs are actually “gateway drugs” to other drugs. A 1992 article in The Journal of Primary Prevention found that marijuana is essentially a “necessary” condition for the occurrence of cocaine use. Other research shows that involvement with illicit drugs is a developmental phenomenon, age correlates with use, and cigarette and alcohol use precedes marijuana use.

Dr. Robert DuPont, former head of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, argues that the potential market for legal drugs can be compared to the number of Americans who now use alcohol

(140 million persons). If his analysis is correct, then approximately 50 million Americans would eventually use cocaine if it were a legal drug.

But the real question is not, Which is worse: alcohol or drugs? The question is whether we can accept both legalized alcohol and legalized drugs. Legalized alcohol currently leads to 100,000 deaths/year and costs us $99 billion/year. We don't need to legalize drugs too.

3. Legalizing drugs will reduce social costs.

"We are losing the war on drugs," say drug legalization proponents, "so let's cut the costs of drug enforcement by decriminalizing drugs."

Currently the U.S. spends $11 billion/year to combat drug-related crime.If drugs were made legal, some crime-fighting costs might drop but many social costs would certainly increase: other forms of crime (to support habits), drug-related accidents, and welfare costs.

Statistics from states that have decriminalized marijuana demonstrate this concern. In California, within the first six months of decriminalization, arrests for driving under the influence of drugs rose 46 percent for adults and 71.4 percent for juveniles. The use of marijuana doubled in Alaska and Oregon when it was decriminalized in those states.

Crime would certainly increase. Justice Department figures show that approximately one-third of inmates used drugs prior to committing their crimes.

And juvenile crime would no doubt increase as well. A 1990 study published in the Journal of Drug Issues found a strong association between the severity of the crime and the type of substance used the more intoxicating the substance, the more serious the incident.

Meanwhile, worker productivity would decrease and student productivity would decrease.

The Drug Enforcement Administration estimates that drug decriminalization will cost society more than alcohol and tobacco combined, perhaps $140-210 billion a year in lost productivity and job-related accidents.

Government services would no doubt have to be expanded to pay for additional drug education and treatment for those addicted to legal drugs. And child protective services would no doubt have to expand to deal with child abuse. Patrick Murphy, a court-appointed lawyer for 31,000 abused and neglected children in Chicago, says that more than 80 percent of the cases of physical and sexual abuse of children now involve drugs. Legalizing drugs will not reduce these crimes; it would make the problem worse.

And is it accurate to say we are losing the war on drugs? Drug use in this country was on the decline in the 1980s due to a strong anti-drug campaign. Casual cocaine use, for example, dropped from 12 million in 1985 to 6 million in 1991. You don’t win a war by surrender. Legalizing drugs in this country would constitute surrender in the drug war at a time when we have substantial evidence we can win this battle on a number of fronts.

4. Government should not dictate moral policy on drugs.

Libertarians who promote drug legalization value personal freedom. They believe that government should not dictate morals and fear that our civil liberties may be threatened by a tougher policy against drugs.

The true threat to our freedoms comes from the drug cartels in foreign countries, drug lords in this country, and drug dealers in our streets. Legalizing drugs would send the wrong message to society. Those involved in drug use eventually see that drugs ultimately lead to prison or death, so they begin

to seek help.

Obviously some people are going to use drugs whether they are legal or illegal. Keeping drugs illegal maintains criminal sanctions that persuade most people their life is best lived without drugs. Legalization, on the other hand, removes the incentive to stay away from drugs and increases drug use.

William Bennett has said, “I didn’t have to become drug czar to be opposed to legalized marijuana. As Secretary of Education I realized that, given the state of American education, the last thing we needed was a policy that made widely available a substance that impairs memory, concentration, and attention span. Why in God’s name foster the use of a drug that makes you stupid?”

Biblical Perspective

Some people may believe that the Bible has little to say about drugs, but this is not so. First, the Bible has a great deal to say about the most common and most abused drug: alcohol. Ephesians 5:18 admonishes Christians not to be drunk with wine. In many places in Scripture drunkenness is called a sin (Deut. 21:20-21, Amos 6:1, 1 Cor.6:9-10, Gal. 5:19-20). The Bible also warns of the dangers of drinking alcohol in Proverbs 20:1, Isaiah 5:11, Habakkuk 2:15-16. If the Bible warns of the danger of alcohol, then by implication it is also warning of the dangers of taking other kinds of drugs.

Second, drugs were an integral part of many ancient near East societies. For example, the pagan cultures surrounding the nation of Israel used drugs as part of their religious ceremonies. Both the Old Testament and New Testament condemn sorcery and witchcraft. The word translated “sorcery” comes from the Greek word from which we get the English words “pharmacy” and “pharmaceutical.” In ancient time, drugs were prepared by a witch or shaman.

Drugs were used to enter into the spiritual world by inducing an altered state of consciousness that allowed demons to take over the mind of the user. In that day, drug use was tied to sorcery. In our day, many use drugs merely for so-called "recreational" purposes, but we cannot discount the occult connection.

Galatians 5:19-21 says: "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft [which includes the use of drugs]; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." The word witchcraft here is also translated "sorcery" and refers to the use of drugs. The Apostle Paul calls witchcraft that was associated with drug use a sin. The non-medical use of drugs is considered one of the acts of a sinful nature. Using drugs, whether to "get a high" or to tap into the occult, is one of the acts of a sinful nature where users demonstrate their depraved and carnal nature.

The psychic effects of drugs should not be discounted. A questionnaire designed by Charles Tate and sent to users of marijuana documented some disturbing findings. In his article in *Psychology Today* he noted that one fourth of the marijuana users who responded to his questionnaire reported that they were taken over and controlled by an evil person or power during their drug induced experience. And over half of those questioned said they have experienced religious or "spiritual" sensations in which they meet spiritual beings.

Many proponents of the drug culture have linked drug use to spiritual values. During the 1960s, Timothy Leary and Alan Watts referred to the "religious" and "mystical" experience gained through the use of LSD (along with other drugs) as a prime reason for taking drugs.

No doubt drugs are dangerous, not only to our body but to our spirit. As Christians, we must warn our children and our society of the dangers of drugs.

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