

By The Professionals At Evolve Indy

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3. Addiction Should Be Treated As A Disease, Not Penalized

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted a number of issues in the healthcare sector. But one of the most prominent areas of care, apart from the pandemic itself, is in the nature of addiction. There have been more damaging outcomes for black Americans and ethnic minorities in substance use and substance abuse disorders. Information has shown that communities of color have been harmed by addressing drug use as a crime rather than a public health issue. Addiction should be treated as a disease and not penalized. It is important for us to understand how the government and public health organizations can help change the perspective, and we need to understand this by looking at the imbalances.

Unfair Enforcement

Specifically, in the context of race, the legal consequences of drug use are different between white and black people. Black people were almost four times more likely to be arrested for cannabis possession than white people. During the crack cocaine epidemic in the 1980s, there were harsher penalties for freebase or crack cocaine, which was found in urban communities of people of color.

Lack of Effective Punishment

Drug use is a condition that continues to be penalized. One of the most common punishments was imprisonment. However, there is no relationship between drug imprisonment rates and the three key indicators of drug problems: arrests, self-reported drug use, and deaths from a drug overdose. Imprisonment actually leads to a higher risk of overdose upon being released, and over 50% of people in prison increased their drug use after imprisonment because they were, in fact, experiencing untreated substance abuse disorder while they were in prison.

Unfair Access to Treatment

The opioid crisis during the early part of the 21st century yielded higher arrests for heroin use than prescription opioids, and the crisis has triggered some efforts to move away from punishment and addressing addiction as a health concern. However, the issue still appears to be one of race. Hispanic and black people are more likely to be imprisoned after using drugs than actually going into treatment programs. It could be argued that these stem from socioeconomic issues, but a study conducted in 2018 found that African Americans experienced significant delays to their treatment, taking between four and five years. As a result, this led to a wider misuse of substances and increased rates of overdose, as well as ineffective or poorer outcomes of treatment.

The Damaging Nature of Punishments

The ongoing nature of sidestepping treatment in favor of penalization has raised a number of risks, not just in terms of drug misuse and early death, but the effect of incarceration can lead to mental health problems such as isolation, but can also have a long-lasting impact on their lives. It is far more common for a black youth to be arrested for possession of a small amount of drugs such as cannabis, in comparison to a white youth. In addition, the fact that they have a criminal record can hinder their future opportunities to improve their lives, such as getting an education or employment. It also has a wide-ranging effect on black families. For example, if a parent was imprisoned for drug use, this can cause that family to slip into poverty, meaning families and children are entered into the welfare system.

What Is the Solution?

Addiction should be treated as a disease and not a crime. It's important to note that there are measures being taken to identify substance abuse as a public health issue rather than a criminal offence. In 2016, the 193 member nations of the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs unanimously voted to recognize this. While research is needed to establish the effectiveness of public health alternatives to imprisonment and arrest, such as drug courts. Individuals who have gone through the drug court approach are less likely to experience arrests.

Additionally, diversion programs to decriminalize drug possession need wider research. However, the feeling that addiction should be treated as a disease and not a crime is nothing new. The American Medical Association declared alcoholism an illness in 1956, and in 1987 it was officially declared that addiction was a disease. By this very simple notion, if someone has an illness, they aren't punished, they are treated and are taken to hospital. So why are we penalizing addictions? Because of the disparities between black and white, it is important to provide an equal footing of treatment. People with substance abuse disorders need appropriate treatment and should be conducted with compassion and with equality, despite the color of the skin. It should not be an issue of race, but rather an issue of societal change.

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