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Drug War: What Prohibition Cost Us

By Stephen Downing

Drug prohibitionists like former White House drug czar staffer Kevin A. Sabet seem to be in a panic over Ken Burns' PBS documentary broadcast "Prohibition" because of its clear and convincing parallel to today's equally disastrous war on drugs. The earlier experiment lasted less than 14 years, but today's failed prohibition was declared by President Nixon 40 years ago and has cost our country more than \$1 trillion in cash and much more in immeasurable social harm.

As a student of history and a retired deputy chief of police with the Los Angeles Police Department, I can attest that the damage that came from the prohibition of alcohol pales in comparison to the harm wrought by drug prohibition. In the last 40 years drug money has fueled the growth of violent street gangs in Los Angeles, from two (Bloods and Crips) with a membership of less than 50 people before the drug war to 20,000 gangs with a membership of about 1 million across the U.S., according to the U.S. Department of Justice. These gangs serve as the distributors, collection agents and enforcers for the Mexican cartels that the Justice Department says occupy more than 1,000 U.S. cities.

Sabet, a former advisor to the White House drug policy advisor, ignores these prohibition-created harms, making no mention of the nearly 50,000 people killed in Mexico over the last five years as cartels have battled it out to control drug routes, territories and enforce collections. When one cartel leader is arrested or killed, it makes no impact on the drug trade and only serves to create more violence, as lower-level traffickers fight for the newly open top spot.

U.S. law enforcement officials report that as much as 70% of cartel profits come from marijuana alone. There's no question that ending today's prohibition on drugs -- starting with marijuana -- would do more to hurt the cartels than any level of law enforcement skill or dedication ever can.

Worse than being ineffective, though, the war on drugs creates dangerous distractions for police officers who would rather focus on improving public safety. For example, the LAPD announced this week that it will take 150 police officers off the streets to accommodate the state's shuffling of prisoners to the county level. The state must do this to comply with the U.S. Supreme Court's order to cut our drug-war-induced overcrowded prison population by 30,000 -- and our state has already laid off thousands of teachers thanks in part to funding diverted to building more prisons and hiring more guards.

This follows on the heels of another reallocation of police resources in Los Angeles when the LAPD and the L.A. Sheriff's Department woke up to a three-year backlog of rape kits. Police labs have only a finite amount of resources, and drug testing often takes priority over other cases that demand attention. Detectives (and victims) waiting for lab results related to rape and other serious crimes stood in line for months while tests for custody-related possession of pot and other drugs took precedence.

There's no doubt that the violence, the growth of cartels and gangs, the overpopulation of our prisons and the squandering of our police resources would not occur if we eliminated illegal drug profits and implemented a non-criminal approach to regulating drugs. We did this once with alcohol, and there's no reason we can't do it with other drugs today.