

Constructive Speech Fundamentals of Argumentation

I am Sidney Parker and I will be presenting my affirmative constructive speech on why the US Federal Government should decriminalize all presently illicit drugs.

In 2012 Colorado and Washington State became the first two states to legalize the recreational use of cannabis, and finally broke the mold of a 50 to 60 year aggressive war on drugs within the United States (Mikoley, 2021). Prior to this and even still today at the federal level, drug policy has been unsuccessfully striving for a drug free America in hopes that a society without drugs will be a healthier, financially better and safer place for all. Yet, despite their illegality, people in the US continue to buy, sell, use and become incarcerated for drugs at unsafe rates for social health, criminal systems and the increasingly burdensome financial implications of drug prohibition policies. With data published by the Center for Disease control “The age-adjusted rate of drug overdose deaths increased from 8.2 deaths per 100,000 standard population in 2002 to 32.6 in 2022” (Spencer, Garnett and Miniño 2024). This sharp increase in overdoses occurred from drugs that over these two decades remained illegal and criminalized, which are often increasingly containing mixed and dangerous potencies that lead to easier overdose, disproving current drug policy is preventing drug use and overdose and creating a safe society. Current drug policy also harms people beyond overdose; Children have become pawns within the drug world and large racial disparities exist within drug criminalization. Children are victims of drug trafficking and drug violence due to drug illegality resulting in underground and dangerous drug markets, and if children are not suffering the effects of being within the drug market, children's futures and “child wellbeing can be seriously affected by parental drug dependence” (Barret, 2015). Many of these children are already victims of poverty and highly susceptible to never leaving the cycle, especially if they get incarcerated or are a “street-involved child selling drugs to survive or a child working her family’s opium plantation” (Barret, 2015). The illegality and criminalization of drugs creates and fuels violent, “illicit markets: specifically, unregulated markets that result in the production of drugs of unknown and inconsistent purity, and, in many cases, dangerous bulking agents and toxic additives, thus increasing rather than reducing the potential for harm” (Earp, Lewis, and Hart 2021). Decriminalizing drugs would reduce the demand for these underground systems, reduce violence and give rise to better regulated and

consistent drug purities with people no longer going to extreme lengths to avoid the law. Criminalization practices also heavily penalize people of color, in comparison to white people. While overall drug overdose and usage rates between Black and White Americans are extremely similar, the rate in which Black people are searched, arrested, prosecuted, convicted and incarcerated is disproportionately higher than White people, and they also typically receive longer sentences (Earp, Lewis, and Hart 2021). Additionally, drug use leading to treatment and the completion of treatment is racially divided. “Black and Hispanic people, who make up approximately 40 percent of the admissions to programs in the U.S., are roughly 4 to 8 percentage points less likely than White people to complete treatment for substance-related disorders largely due to socio-economic reasons” (Earp, Lewis, and Hart 2021). Having current policies criminalizing drugs and without programs to help publicly fund the costs of treatment, harms social health and feeds further systemic racism. Since prohibition and criminalization at the federal level of drugs past and presently is not working for creating a comprehensively healthy society, a path forward is the decriminalization of all drugs. However, there have been many political and social barriers that have prevented anything other than current prohibition policies. Social stigma has been one of the biggest contributors to this, alongside the governmental push that drug use and possession equates to being a criminal. This is a socially and politically constructed idea and as philosopher Husak (2003) points out “We cannot decide whether we have a good reason to punish persons who use drugs in particular unless we know what would count as a good reason to punish anyone for anything”. This subjective view on punishable offenses opens the door against social and political stigma and precedence towards defining drugs as criminal. If drug decriminalization of all currently illicit drugs were to occur it would need to be on a federal level and come from the federal government and elected officials of the general public. It would allow a set limit of drug possession quantities and should follow Portugal's model of alongside decriminalizing, expanding treatment facilities and resources. A significant portion of the funding that currently is used in the United states for arresting, prosecuting, and incarcerating drug offenders could shift with a significantly reduced need for criminal drug funding and instead fund programs similar to what Portugal implemented like “expand[sion] of its treatment and harm reduction services, including access to sterile syringes, methadone maintenance therapy and other medication-assisted treatments.” (Drug Policy Alliance 2015). Portugal also showed promise in drug decriminalization as they have shown,

according to Drug Alliance Policy 2015, that since “adopting less punitive policies toward drug possession [they] have not experienced any significant increases in drug use, drug-related harm or crime relative to more punitive countries.” These changes would help reduce harms on children, racial minorities and public health, all of who currently suffer tremendously under drug criminalization. This gives promise to these initiatives and policy changes being capable of providing a better landscape of social health than what is currently present and has been worsening. In the two decades since Portugal decriminalized drugs they showed much better social health than the United States did in the same time period under drug prohibition, suggesting the United States is in need of a drug policy change, and that a decriminalization of all currently illicit drugs is a viable option to do so.

Thank you