



ARE WE LOSING THE WAR ON DRUGS?

**AN ANALYTIC ASSESSMENT OF
U.S. DRUG POLICY**

By David Boyum and Peter Reuter

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The war on drugs continues, although it no longer makes headlines. Government spending on drug control in the United States totals \$35 billion per year, and almost half a million dealers and users are currently in prisons and jails on drug charges. Yet, despite this massive investment of tax dollars and government authority, the United States still has the worst drug problem among Western nations.

In *An Analytic Assessment of U.S. Drug Policy* (AEI Press, March 2005)—a survey and analysis of U.S. drug policy—experts David Boyum and Peter Reuter present a brief history of America's drug control efforts, an examination of current patterns of drug use and abuse, a description and evaluation of drug control policies, and a discussion of how drug policy could be improved.

Boyum and Reuter principally argue that tough enforcement, the centerpiece of American drug policy in terms of rhetoric, budget, and substance, has little to show by way of success. The number of drug offenders under incarceration has grown tenfold since 1980, but as the authors show, there is strikingly little evidence that increased punishment has, or will, significantly reduce drug use. Drugs are as accessible as ever as inflation-adjusted prices for cocaine and heroin have fallen by more than half. Evaluations of programs designed to prevent drug use among children and adolescents also appear to demonstrate that both school-based and mass-media efforts have failed.

By contrast, more effective or promising drug control policies remain underfunded. Most significantly, drug treatment services remain in short supply, even though research indicates that treatment expenditures easily pay for themselves in terms of reduced crime and improved productivity.

Boyum and Reuter conclude that America's drug policy should be reoriented in several ways to be more effective:

- Domestic enforcement should be directed toward reducing drug-related problems, such as violence around drug markets, rather than locking up large numbers of low-level dealers.
- Eradication of drug crops in source countries should not necessarily be a routine aspect of international programs, especially where it may conflict with other foreign policy objectives. In fact, evidence shows that such control is very unlikely to reduce America's drug problem.
- Criminal punishment of marijuana use does not appear to be justified.
- Treatment services for heavy users, particularly methadone and other opiate maintenance therapies, need more money and fewer regulations.
- Programs that coerce convicted drug addicts to enter treatment and maintain abstinence as a condition of continued freedom should be augmented.

David Boyum is an independent public policy consultant who has studied and written about various aspects of the war on drugs. He has also served as a board member of the *Drug Policy Analysis Bulletin* for the Federation of American Scientists. Peter Reuter is a professor in the School of Public Policy and the department of criminology at the University of Maryland. He founded and directed RAND's Drug Policy Research Center and served as editor of the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*.

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