

## Comment

# A 'Helping Hand' — Not Jail — for Drug Users

By George Crockett Jr.

Several weeks ago, I told a Detroit News reporter I favored decriminalizing the private use of drugs. My statement became headline news — mostly because, as I understand it, I am the first member of Congress to publicly advocate decriminalization. I hope I'm not the last.

Don't get me wrong. I'm talking about the private use and possession of drugs, not the sale and transfer of drugs.

When I was a judge of the Recorder's Court in Detroit for 12 years (1966-78), I saw hundreds of men and women come before me, charged with using drugs. The "drug of choice" at that time was heroin. The "criminals" were mostly poor, mostly black and mostly shut out of the "American dream." In most cases their privacy had been invaded by an illegal stop, search and seizure. The system compounded their affliction by putting them in jail.

I SAID then — and it is still true — that if drug use were mostly a white, middle-class problem, addicts would be in treatment centers and hospitals instead of jail.

I also said then I didn't think our criminal justice system could handle the burgeoning caseload of drug-related crimes ... and that bigger, better prisons and longer, stiffer prison sentences were not the answer.

Today, other judges (and lawyers, law enforcement officials and politicians) are saying the same thing: Our system of justice is on the verge of collapse from the pressure of drug-related prosecutions — the bulk of them being possession cases — and we are making no headway in reducing the problem.

The "drug of choice" has changed — it's mostly crack cocaine. The users are still mostly disadvantaged; and they still mostly get sent to jail. The only things that have changed are the numbers ... and the cost to our society.

DURING THE past few years, our policy has involved a massive shifting of consciousness and effort away from a "helping hand" focus and toward a "lock them up and throw away the key" focus.

The Justice Department says in 1968, arrests for drug abuse violations in the United States were 162,777 — or about 112 for each 100,000 population. In 1988, arrests for drug-related crimes were 850,034 — up to 450 per 100,000 population.

Since 1981, our total federal expenditures on the drug control effort

exceed \$21 billion. State and local jurisdictions' costs have been equally staggering.

Government expenditures on law enforcement of drug-related crimes more than tripled between 1981 and 1987. The fiscal year (FY) 1990 effort is estimated to be 94 percent higher than the amount for FY 1988. And the drug-related expenditures for criminal justice have risen four times faster than for education and two times faster than for health.

ACCORDING TO the New York Times, narcotics prosecutions in the federal courts have gone up by 229 percent in the last decade. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that convictions for federal drug offenses rose by 161 percent from 1980 to 1987; jail sentences were up 177 percent. Today, narcotics prosecutions make up 44 percent of all federal criminal trials.

In Detroit, 69 percent of men arrested for serious offenses between October and December 1988 tested positive for the use of illicit drugs. A study of 14 major U.S. cities of the same period showed that between 54 and 82 percent of those arrested tested positive.

The courts are overwhelmed with these cases. And more judges and courts are not the answer.

The prison situation is also becoming intolerable. Forty-six states have record-high inmate populations, and courts are having to turn

criminals loose because of overcrowding and inhumane conditions in the prisons.

THE DEPARTMENT of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics estimated that 44 percent of the 49,925 federal prisoners incarcerated in 1989 were charged with drug violations. More than 10 percent of the more than 550,000 persons in state facilities are there for drug-related crimes.

According to D.A.W.N., a publication put out by the inmates of Michigan's women's prison:

"By the end of Ronald Reagan's presidency, there were two-thirds of a million Americans behind bars — plus nearly half a million workers paid to keep them there. ... This is about 1 percent of our total work force. ... Only two industrialized nations exceed our proportion in the clink: the Soviet Union and South Africa."

If present trends in criminal justice prosecution continue, the article

says, "the inmate population (in 1992) will be larger than the populations of Alaska, Wyoming, Vermont, Delaware, Montana or Nevada."

IN 1966, when I took my seat on Detroit's Recorder's Court, there were a total of 13 judges to handle all criminal cases — felony and misdemeanor — in a city whose population was about 1.67 million.

In 1978, when I left the court, the number of judges had been raised to 19 — a rise of 46 percent, even though the population had fallen to about 1.45 million. The increase was necessary because of the greater number of drug-related cases.

Today, the population of Detroit is only about one million; Recorder's Court has 29 judges; they only handle felonies; and the docket of every judge is still overloaded with drug-related cases.

So President Bush's proposal to add another 75 federal judgeships (plus attendant courtrooms, staffs and prisons to accommodate those convicted) seems yet another step down this unworkable path. If we follow the Bush administration's FY 1991 budget, we're going to waste more than \$10 billion; and the drug cartel will continue to siphon off tens of billions in our productivity and destroy thousands of lives in their quest for illicit profits.

DRUG "CZAR" William Bennett — whose background and training are in education, not criminal justice — thinks any questioning of our policies is dangerous and defeats his grand scheme to use the criminal law to control drug usage and abuse.

But free speech on this subject can only serve to open a much-needed discussion of where we are, and where we want to go, in addressing the use of drugs in our society.

Our present drug policy is wrong on three fundamental fronts:

First, it seeks to legislate and regulate personal private behavior, in direct violation of constitutional freedoms.

SECOND, IT fails to recognize drug abuse as a health problem and focuses far too much of its efforts on punishing rather than rehabilitating those who are addicted to drugs.

Third, it deters our attention and resources from the real problems that lead to drug use: inadequate education, housing and family life resulting from lack of job opportunities.

On the the constitutional question, the Fourth Amendment guaranteeing privacy was intended to keep the government out of the personal private behavior of individuals — even when the majority of the people might think such intrusion is

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"justified" in the "public interest." It's supposed to keep our government out of our private lives. Instead, the federal government is increasing surveillance, mandatory testing and tracking of possible drug users.

The government's hypocrisy on private drug usage is clear when we contrast our position on the use of cigarettes, alcohol and other substances known to be addictive and dangerous to individual health and vitality. The federal government doesn't make their private use criminal; indeed, until recently the Congress gave enormous price supports to tobacco producers so they could continue to produce and sell this highly addictive, potentially lethal substance.

**WE'RE MOVING** toward a more enlightened approach slowly, by cutting subsidies, regulating the advertising of tobacco products and seeking to inhibit young people from beginning smoking. But no one is talking about making cigarette use illegal — even though 60 million Americans use tobacco and 390,000 Americans die each year from cigarette-related illnesses — a rate of 650 per 100,000 users.

Similarly, alcohol claims an enormous toll. The Fifth Special Report of the U.S. Congress on Alcoholism and Health from the secretary of Health and Human Services puts the death toll from alcohol at 200,000, out of the 100 million Americans using alcohol products. The death rate from alcohol is 150 per 100,000 — or one in every 10 deaths in the United States, the study says.

Contrast this with heroin death rates (400 per year out of 500,000 users nationwide, or 80 out of 100,000) and cocaine (200 deaths out

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of five million cocaine users or four per 100,000).

If we were really serious about helping those addicted to drugs, the U.S. government would not be spending more than 72 percent of its total "anti-drug" effort on criminal law enforcement — including \$1 billion for new prison construction — and less than 30 percent on drug treatment, prevention and education. This apportionment of federal funding contrasts starkly with a decade ago (1979) when the federal government allocated 56 percent of its drug-control budget to treatment, education and prevention programs.

The FY 1991 Bush budget asks for \$10.6 billion for its anti-drug effort. Of that, \$7.6 billion would go for more DEA agents, more prosecutors, more judges and more prisons. Drug treatment programs would receive \$1.7 billion; and \$1.4 billion for drug prevention and education.

**WE'RE NOT** treating drug use or abuse as a health problem. Our present policy doesn't — can't — control the composition of street drugs, or the cleanliness of needles. We can't control the crippling drug abscesses, bone infections and frequently lethal infections of the heart and brain that drug users suffer. We're not effectively addressing the

spread of AIDS among intravenous drug users, their partners and children.

The administration's budget allocation doesn't have anywhere near enough money available to offer treatment facilities to those who want to get clean of drugs. Indeed, in many areas, addicts who want to get off drugs are placed on waiting lists for months before they can get help.

Finally, I can't help but think what this nation could do if the billions we use for the jailing of drug users were instead spent on other needs. What if we spent the money on rebuilding our inner cities and eliminating the ghettos, so people would have a decent place to live and not need the escape that drugs provide? How about making a full employment economy, so men and women could build a sense of self-worth? How about spending it on quality education, so young people will

have the intellectual and judgment skills to make intelligent choices for themselves?

I know many people aren't going to want to listen to the arguments for decriminalization of drug use. It's tough to face the fact that our energies are misdirected.

But I am confident that, if we allow ourselves to see all alternatives, we can make better decisions on this issue — and help to find a solution.

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