



An Analytic Assessment of U.S. Drug Policy (AEI Evaluative Studies)

David Boyum, Peter Reuter

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In its efforts to control the use of cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and other illegal drugs, the United States spends about \$35 billion per year in public funds. Almost half a million dealers and users are under incarceration. In this book, David Boyum and Peter Reuter provide an assessment of how well this massive investment of tax dollars and government authority is working.

Boyum and Reuter show that America's drug problem is mainly a legacy of the epidemics of heroin, cocaine, and crack use during the 1970s and 1980s, which left us with aging cohorts of criminally active and increasingly sick users. Newer drugs, such as Ecstasy and methamphetamine, perennially threaten to become comparable problems, but so far have not.

Using a market framework, the book discusses the nature and effectiveness of efforts to tackle the nation's drug problems. Drug policy has become increasingly punitive, with the number of drug offenders in jail and prison growing tenfold between 1980 and 2003. Nevertheless, there is strikingly little evidence that tougher law enforcement can materially reduce drug use. By contrast, 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. Enforcement should focus on reducing drug-related problems, such as violence associated with drug markets, rather than on locking up large numbers of low-level dealers. Treatment services for heavy users, particularly methadone and other opiate maintenance therapies, need more money and fewer regulations. And programs that coerce convicted drug addicts to enter treatment and maintain abstinence as a condition of continued freedom should be expanded.

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