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Minnesota's Drug Problem

TONY BOUZA

Although charged with discussing the drug problem in Minnesota, I believe it is no easier to separate the state from the national context than it is to understand the national problem while ignoring the various regional issues. Drugs are a global problem and they are a local problem. They are also a rapidly changing problem whose face alters even as our attitudes and suspicions harden into shibboleths. The people who use drugs change, the drugs change, and the reasons for using change.

The dilemma is rooted in the Prohibition Era question of supply and demand, refined, by some wags, as the law of supply and be damned. It is an inescapable fact of American life that a supply will come into being for every significant demand. When the risks are raised the price goes up. In this scenario, successful interdictions become little more than inducements to street panics and escalating criminality to feed the habit as scarcity drives the price upward.

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Minnesota will inevitably be dragged into the problem despite its relatively isolated state. The nation's rhythms may take a bit longer to get here, but get here they do. The drug problem in America has tended to be cyclical, with intermittent waves occurring throughout our history. The rhythm of the onsets and abatements has so far eluded analysis. In the beginning of the century, many millions were addicted through the presence of unregulated opiates in patent medicines. Even Coca Cola, as its name implies, was not exempt.

The drug of current choice constantly shifts as users search for the miracle that will not produce horrendous after effects. The fact that the most abused drug, alcohol, is legal, and that the country finally rejected efforts to prohibit its use earlier in this century, has inspired ill-advised calls for the legalization of hard drugs. Yet no major figure in law enforcement in America has advocated this position. What is clear is that the drug problem is a social and health, as well as a criminal issue. If any headway is to be made against this menace, a comprehensive strategy involving prevention, treatment, and law enforcement must be implemented.

Tony Bouza served in the New York Police Department for 24 years, the last four as commander of Bronx forces. He headed the Minneapolis Police Department for nine years and is currently Minnesota State Gaming Commissioner.

The National Problem

A 1985 Gallup Poll reported that only 21 percent of Americans considered drug abuse the nation's most important problem. By May 1988, a N.Y. Times - CBS survey found that the figure had exploded to 61 percent. The nation's 27 largest metropolitan areas revealed that deaths involving cocaine use had gone from 153 in 1976 to 615 in 1985, a four-fold increase. By 1988, many cities, including New York, Washington, D.C., and Minneapolis, were experiencing record murder rates attributable to drug trafficking and use. Perhaps the most telling anecdotal evidence leaped at us from the sports and entertainment pages, where many of our heroes and heroines were regularly reported to be involved in drugs, sometimes resulting in their deaths.

America's cities display a sense of decay that has produced tremendous fear among the general populace and deep concern for the fate of the Republic among thoughtful observers who are asked to cope with the problems produced by the increased numbers of addicts populating downtown streets. Crime and violence are increasing rapidly, although we know that enormous volumes, perhaps more than half, go unreported altogether. The high levels of fear are actually reactions to the fraction known and officially described. Clearly we are dealing with an iceberg whose dimensions suggest even greater reasons for concern.

More than half of those arrested for serious street crimes (murder, rape, assault, robbery, burglary, theft, auto theft and arson) in our major cities tested positive for drug use, according to a National Institute of Justice study. Moreover, the greater the use of drugs, the more crimes likely to be committed by the user. Ten percent of the criminal repeaters were found to commit so many offenses as to constitute a much higher order threat to society, yet we have no name for these menaces beyond the label "recidivist," which also applies to the much less dangerous repeater. The challenge has been to identify the true menaces reliably and target them for selective incapacitation.

Pressured by the rampant growth in criminality, the nation's police responded with massive numbers of arrests, which overwhelmed a system already creaking under the strain of rising crime and arrest rates. The nation's capital city possesses the highest number of cops per capita of any city in the country. When they netted more than 40,000 drug-related arrests in two years, the city's criminal justice system was paralyzed. The chief demanded still more cops and when he failed to get them, his successor put the force on ruinously costly overtime, which added yet another wave to the flood of arrests washing into the system.

Although the crisis extends to having too few prosecutors, judges, defense lawyers, court rooms, and probation officers, too little jail space, and too many cops, the politicians' answer

usually has been to throw more blue at the problem. Another has been the creation of a national drug czar to lead us out of the wilderness of this epidemic.

Actually, we do not know very much about drug use in America and we are repeatedly overtaken by the latest surprise developments. Drug use changes over time. Surveys now appear to indicate that educational programs are working, at least on middle-class America, and high school seniors report a decline in their experiments with illegal drugs. As comforting as these data are, they describe mostly students from establishment type backgrounds. The drop-outs are not there to be surveyed.

Enforcement is the star of the apocalypse's Four horsemen, only it has not worked. No single strategy can. It is as much a public health and human services problem as an enforcement one.

The use of drugs may well be related to a shifting value system that pegs us as an increasingly hedonistic people. The national crime rate has roughly followed the divorce rate. The American family has come a long way since "Father Knows Best." We love our pleasures, as captured in the label of the "me generation." Materialism, consumerism and "carpe diem-ism" are the ruling -isms of the day. Brilliant commercials tempt us to feel better through this drug or that nostrum.

Growing class divisions are bringing a new culture of poverty, mixed with racism, that consign a large percentage of our people to lives of exclusion and despair. Their only escape from lives of hopelessness is alcohol and drugs. That is their trip. Traffic in drugs becomes an important economic pillar in the ghetto and serves as a model for kids eager for a bit of glitz and glamour in their lives. Even the drugs we discuss shift and change. The issues slip and slide beneath our feet. It used to be marijuana, then came heroin, next was cocaine, then crack, and now something called ice. Intertwined are the designer drugs produced by ingenious chemists, like LSD, amphetamines, Angel Dust, and other exotic concoctions. The intense, quick, and incredible high of crack, a cocaine-based stimulant which is smoked, has proven to be devastatingly addictive. Now some addicts are mixing it with a smokable form of heroin in order to prolong the high, from about ten minutes to several hours, and to reduce the impact of the "crash" or sobering. And then there is a doubling back, as occurred with the rediscovery of smokable heroin. And the attraction of grass continues. Alcohol may be one of the few constants in this world of searching for the perfect escape hatch. So far, nature has thwarted the search for ecstasy without consequence.

What has been missing in all the frenetic activity against drugs is thought. While the panic produced instant, mass action, by the cops especially, this has not been accompanied by substantial analysis, research, or even informed debate. The few findings reported here are the dribs and drabs produced through the isolated efforts of individuals or small groups. No one in the field speaks very optimistically of the plan unfurled by President Bush on September 5, 1989.

Treatment of the country's drug problem has many facets. It is frequently described as a mosaic involving prevention, education, treatment, and enforcement, yet our attention is rivetted on the last factor. No one even really speaks about the life-modification and social-engineering implications or possibilities inherent in adopting a prevention strategy. Much

is said about the DARE program (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) and its impact on pre-high schoolers, and rightly so. Started in Los Angeles, the program has spread rapidly. Minneapolis adopted it in September, 1987. The former First Lady's "Just say no to drugs" dictum, for all its derided simplicity, seems to be working, at least on the reachable and included segments of our society.

Enforcement is the star of the apocalypse's Four horsemen, only it has not worked. No single strategy can. It is as much a public health and human services problem as an enforcement one. A few years after everyone went to more and more arrests, we continue to observe the overwhelming of the court system and the bursting overflowing of our prisons, but no decrease in violence or addiction. Similarly, we have seen no rise in drug price or evidence of panic on the streets, despite enormous seizures. The police chiefs praise education, acknowledge their defeats and ask for more cops, and get them. The federal government furnishes "aid to local law enforcement" in the form of money used to pay time-and-a-half overtime rates to tired cops who flood the system with still more arrests. The Republicans, with law and order rhetoric and jingoist urges, like to throw money at crime and defense with the same enthusiasm Democrats reserve for poverty, welfare, and education.

The Minnesota Problem

How is our state doing? What is our state doing? The answers are mixed, fragmented, and offered with the caveat that they may well be off the mark.

The number one drug problem in America is cocaine and it is the number one problem in this state. Ranking second nationally is heroin, however because of Minnesota's heavy involvement in marijuana as a crop, that drug outranks heroin in this state. Although Minnesota does not "have any activity that amounts to anything close to a first and second level distribution" (testimony of Special Agent in Charge of the local FBI office before a committee studying drugs in the state, in 1989), it does have a drug problem, primarily in the state's urban centers. At the same time, outstate sheriffs and police chiefs, testifying before that same body, remarked about the growing seriousness of the problem in rural areas in the state.

The head of the Federal Drug Enforcement Agency supported the FBI view by citing Minneapolis as a "consumer city" as opposed to a "source city" like Miami or Los Angeles. He buttressed the impression of a smaller-than-average drug problem in the state by noting the effort expended on marijuana eradication, which, in the context of the times, seemed to afford genuine comfort.

Minnesota's organizational approach to law enforcement has been eclectic, usually favoring mixed force units composed of feds, state, and local enforcers working together. The law enforcement community's efforts have been characterized by policies that aimed the arrest pressures at mid and high level operators, as opposed to "buy and bust" street operations, sweeps, round-ups, and massive numbers of "collars." Elsewhere, the cops succumbed to the public's fears and pressures and flooded the system with arrests. Despite a measured and discriminating effort, and despite enlightened policies that have kept our prisons from bursting, our local jails are crammed to overflowing, and the problem is far from being solved.

Overall, the efforts in Minnesota to combat drugs have tended to include more treatment and non-incarceration measures (probation, restitution, treatment, fines, etc.) than

other locales. Minnesota has long been a national leader in its approach to the treatment of addictions and chemical dependency problems. The use of Sentencing Guidelines, which illustrates the state's commitment to complicated, and perhaps even unpopular, long-term solutions, is another example of the state's commitment to more sophisticated, longer term attacks on complex problems.

A simpleminded get-tough approach will fail, as it has failed elsewhere, as surely as a soft-headed liberal approach would fail.

Typical of this approach to problems was the state's recent response to the current drugs and violence plaguing our communities. Instead of endorsing the hysterical solutions of the demagogues—usually involving more cops, tougher judges, and bigger jails—Minnesota appointed the Governor's Select Committee on the Impact of Drugs on Crime, Education and Social Welfare, in January, 1989. Its long and eagerly awaited report, issued in October, 1989, constitutes a road map guiding the state's efforts in the years ahead.

The report immediately acknowledges the contributions of poverty, racism, and the vicissitudes visited upon the underclass to the spectacular growth of drug abuse among the disenfranchised and excluded. Recognizing the intractability of this aspect of the problem, and the subject's lack of relevance to the committee's immediate task, the group moved to a series of specific findings in areas amenable to intervention, and included recommended approaches.

The committee mixed toughness and compassion well. It recognizes the need for law and order ("If you sell drugs in

Minnesota, you will do time") but has the foresight to see the need for prevention, education, and treatment as well. The committee's recommendations build on or expand already existing programs. The central involvement of schools, communities, media, churches, and families is recognized and addressed. The report recommended approaches used successfully elsewhere. This serves the commendable purpose of saving reformers the need of reinventing wheels already being driven.

The report serves the useful purpose of reminding us that the drug problem shifts even as we heatedly debate its ravagings. It is now centering more on the underclass. Abuse, generally declining in other classes, rages among the poor, as evidenced by the record numbers of murders and rising levels of danger in the ghetto. The report is, in a word, Minnesotan. It is thoughtful and deliberate. It provides a plan of action for the nineties.

A simpleminded get-tough approach will fail, as it has failed elsewhere, as surely as a soft-headed liberal approach would fail. What is needed, and what the report makes clear, is an approach that engages employers, parents, teachers, cops, ministers, legislators, neighbors, reporters, doctors, students, and judges in the struggle.

Minnesota has not yet been struck with the full force of the drug scourge, but is clearly a serious and growing problem here. The only hope for a solution is to face the varied and complex forces creating our grotesque appetite for illegal drugs and to confront the social and economic injustices feeding the epidemic growth of addiction and the consequent explosion of crime and violence. Resisting the quick fix is typical of a Minnesota approach which eschews the blandishments of the demagogue, while insisting on what may be more immediately painful, but ultimately more promising, long term solutions.