Reasons Why Addiction Should Be Treated Not Punished

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For years, drug use has been treated as a crime rather than a medical condition, in spite of medics and other professionals having stated that addiction and substance abuse is something that needs to be treated as opposed to penalized. On top of this, it has become apparent that the penalization of drug use is inequitable across individuals of different races. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted all sorts of societal issues, including societal issues regarding disparities in the treatment of health and wellbeing between different races. Black Americans have experienced notably worse consequences of the virus during the pandemic and have continued to die at a greater rate than White Americans in regards to the illness. Alongside this, they have also suffered disproportionately from a whole variety of associated acute and chronic illnesses. An area in which these disparities are particularly apparent is the aforementioned area of substance use and substance use disorders. It is apparent that social stigma and punitive approaches have resulted in Black individuals not being able to find the appropriate medical care to treat their condition. Though addiction is a medical condition that can be treated, a mass of data has shown that Black people and other communities of color have struggled with this condition being seen as a character flaw or as a form of social deviance. Sadly, drug addiction continues to be criminalized and treatment and recovery are suffering as a result of this.

Inequitable Enforcement

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the enforcement of drug use laws against White individuals and Black individuals is inequitable. While levels of drug use don't really differ between White and Black people, the legal consequences that are placed upon these individuals are very different. A 2018 study showed that while cannabis use tends to be similar between Black and White people, Black people were nearly four times more likely to be arrested for possession. While African American and Latino individuals only account for one quarter of the US population, of the 277,000 people imprisoned nationwide for a drug offense in 2013, more than half (56 percent) were individuals of these races.
Drug misuse follows a similar pattern. If we take a look at the opioid crisis, arrests for heroin massively exceeded the number of arrests for prescription opioids. Something to note? Prescription opioids were more widely misused, but were more commonly used by White people. During the 1980s, more harsh penalties were given to those found using crack cocaine (more commonly used in communities of colour) than powder cocaine (more commonly used by White individuals), despite both being the same form of drug.

Ineffective Punishment

While it's becoming increasingly apparent that penalising drug use doesn't reduce drug use or prevent drug use, the government still implements laws to criminalise those with substance abuse issues, disorders and related problems. The nonsensical nature of this is highlighted by a stud carried out by the Pew Charitable Trusts, which found that there is absolutely no statistically significant relationship between state drug imprisonment rates and the three main indicators of state drug problems. These indicators are self-reported drug use, drug overdose deaths and drug arrests.
Imprisonment of any kind, whether it was originally a charge for drug use or a charge for any other unrelated offense, has also been found to result in an individual engaging with drugs and they also gain a significantly increased risk of experiencing drug overdose upon their release. Believe it or not, more than half of all people in prison have been found to have some sort of untreated substance use disorder. As well as this, misuse of medication and use of illegal drugs is also seen to increase when people leave prison. As we can see, imprisonment only worsens the problem, rather than rectifying it.

An Alternative Approach To Addiction

So, how should we treat drug use and prescription drug misuse within our societies? The answer is to stop penalising addiction and to start treating it medically instead! Seeing as it is a medical condition, this is only logical. While people say that this may take a long time, seeing as the process would require the decriminalisation of drug use, which is a legal process, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted just how quickly governing bodies can implement legal change if they want to. The drug crisis is just that – a crisis. So, there's no reason that changes can't be made quickly in a bid to save people's lives and increase public health.
Of course, there's a whole lot more to know on this subject. But hopefully, some of the information highlighted above has helped to show the seriousness of the drug problem within this country, the negative effects its treatment is having on citizens – particularly those of minority communities – and the ineffectiveness of the current process, which involves criminalisation and punishment as opposed to effective treatment.

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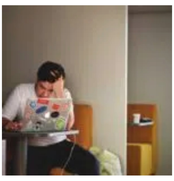

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