

Realistic and effective solutions for the opioid crisis

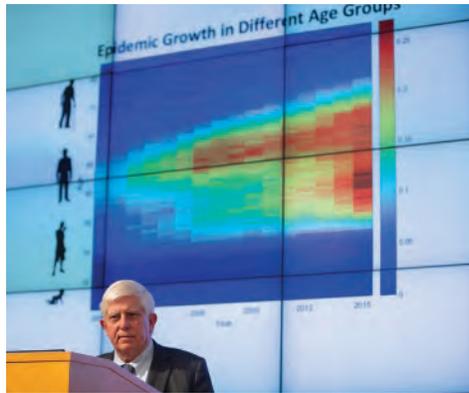
The War on Drug-Related Deaths

The opioid addiction crisis continues to be a hot-button political topic as presidential candidates hit the campaign trail in hard-hit states such as Iowa and New Hampshire. Even as Americans move away from the failed model of prohibition for the relatively innocuous marijuana, the response to far more lethal drugs like opioids still tends to focus on traditional approaches involving interdiction and incarceration. In addition to being harmful and counterproductive, this war-on-drugs mentality precludes many effective harm-reduction measures that could reduce both the lethality and the frequency of overdoses as well as the violence associated with black markets, gangs, and cartels.

Although government efforts have succeeded in reducing both the amount of legally manufactured prescription opioids and the number of opioid prescriptions, deaths from opioid-related overdoses are nevertheless accelerating. Research shows that the increase is due, in large part, to the substitution of illegal heroin and fentanyl for the now harder-to-get prescription opioids. Attempting to decrease overdose deaths by doubling down on this approach will not produce better results.

In contrast, harm reduction has a success record that prohibition cannot match. Unlike prohibition, harm-reduction strategies begin with the realistic and nonjudgmental premise that there has never been, and will never be, a drug-free society. Akin to the credo of the medical profession—“First, do no harm”—harm reduction avoids measures that exacerbate the harm that prohibition has already inflicted on nonmedical users and focuses on reducing deaths and the spread of disease from drug use.

In March, the Cato Institute brought



Top left: DONALD S. BURKE, dean of the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health, presents the conference's keynote address. Top right: MAIA SZALAVITZ, author of *Unbroken Brains*. Bottom: ED RENDELL (left), former governor of Pennsylvania, and CLARK NEILY, Cato vice president for criminal justice.

together clinical and research experts in epidemiology, public health, and addiction treatment to examine various harm-reduction policies and their track records. Among the presenters and panelists was former governor Ed Rendell (D-PA), who talked about his experience with safe-injection facilities and needle-exchange programs. These measures have proven to be greatly effective but are often opposed by the Drug Enforcement Agency, which sees them as flouting prohibition.

Other presenters included Jeffrey Miron, director of economic studies for the Cato Institute and director of undergraduate studies in the Department of Economics at Harvard University, and Maia Szalavitz, neuroscience journalist and the award-winning author of *Unbroken Brain: A Revolutionary New Way of Under-*

standing Addiction. The two discussed Miron's research into the ways that prohibition increases death and disease.

Speakers from universities and safe-injection sites in Vancouver, Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Pittsburgh discussed medication-assisted addiction treatment, expanded roles for the overdose inhibitor naloxone, medicinal cannabis, and the changing dynamics of the drug overdose epidemic from 1979 through 2016.

By highlighting these policies and their potential to reduce death, disease, crime, and corruption, the conference helped move forward the goal of its title: “Shifting from a War on Drugs to a War on Drug-Related Deaths.” ■

VIDEO AND AUDIO RECORDINGS OF THE HARM-REDUCTION CONFERENCE ARE AVAILABLE AT CATO.ORG.