

Rethinking Our Drugs Problem

Kevin Hargaden is Director of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice. Here he addresses the challenges, outcomes and sometime snags of dealing with the problem of drugs.

In Spring this year, the government convened a citizens' assembly on drug use. Meeting over the course of six months, the ninety-nine members drawn from a carefully randomised selection process to represent the breadth of Irish society will make proposals about how we might reduce the harmful impacts of the use of illicit drugs on individuals, families and our communities.

Many of us will know from much too close experience how addiction can swallow a life. I cannot be alone in regularly feeling heartbroken as I encounter addicts on the streets of Dublin. When we see the effect of an addiction to heroin or cocaine or crystal meth, we can be in no doubt that this is a grave social evil with a terrifying individual cost.

Surely the only sane path would be to criminalise the use and sale and distribution of such substances and punish those found guilty with severe prison sentences?

This is a common opinion that I meet regularly. But I am regularly surprised that those who are most closely affected or experienced with addiction often take a different approach. They tend to favour decriminalisation. When we listen to this alternative

view, we quickly discover that there is a sanity in what they argue, and we should not be surprised if, when the citizens' assembly finishes their reflection, they propose a change in how we handle drug use.

Many prison chaplains, after a few years in the same prison, see the same young men coming in, again and again, for the same sets of largely petty crimes. There is no doubt that these lads are guilty. But the chaplains report that when we really think about it, their crime is that they are addicted. If they were free of heroin, they would neither have the need nor the desire to steal.

Now if your response is, 'They did the crime; they should do the time!', I understand where you are coming from. But conservatively it costs us €80,000 a year to keep someone in prison. Would it not be better to spend less than that to help a person get clean of their addiction and allow them to find a job and become someone who gives back to society? Is a society that offers chances for redemption instead of leaving people lost in addiction not better?

This is the position taken by my colleague, Fr Peter McVerry SJ, who knows more about the harms of drug



addiction than many. Peter has called for a change in our approach to drug use for years. He is strongly opposed to illicit drug use. But because of that, he is in favour of decriminalisation. Having these things out in the open makes treatment more possible. It cuts off the profits for the drug gangs and reduces the risk of violence and crime because the problem is taken from the underground out into the open.

Decriminalisation doesn't mean legalisation. But there are more strong arguments for why we should change our retribution-first approach. For one thing, it is deeply unfair. The prisons of Ireland are full of young people convicted of drug crimes from certain disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Our policing is disproportionately geared towards punishing some (already

impoverished) people while turning a blind eye to other (privileged) people.

Fundamentally, the best reason we should consider decriminalisation is that the only solution to addiction is treatment. Punishment does not work. Those of us who have been addicted to cigarettes or alcohol or even coffee know this in our bones. Addicts need support, not sanction.

Would this lead us to the most important element of any reform? If decriminalisation goes ahead without an increase in funding and services for the health and social care required to treat those who are addicted and want to get well again, it will be a futile exercise. The conversation we could have about drugs is really a conversation about having a healthy society where people are given the best chance to succeed.