

"US needs to follow Sweden's lead in Drug Policy"



 **After two U.S. states have legalized marijuana Sweden needs to take the leadership on drug policy in the world, writes Robert L. DuPont, MD, Bertha Madras, Ph.D. and Per Johansson, WFAD, in this article.**

Two states within the United States (Colorado and Washington State) have become the first governments in the world to legalize the production, sale and use of marijuana. This is disturbing to many Swedes, especially because for over a century the US has led world efforts to reduce drug trafficking and drug use.

What has changed so dramatically over the past few years in the US and what lessons can other nations learn from the American experience?

In this defining moment in the history of US drug policy, well-funded marijuana advocates have convinced millions of Americans that marijuana is safe for personal and medical uses. Changes in public opinion, laws, regulations and public policy reflect this view. The people behind this shift see marijuana legalization as the first step to legalize all drugs. It is paradoxical that as this radical change is occurring, the scientific evidence that marijuana is harmful to public health and safety is escalating. And yet, the tide of American public opinion and law are encouraging marijuana use.

This American story has unique resonance in Sweden because in the late 19th century Swedes who emigrated to the US brought back to Sweden the alcohol Temperance movement. This movement teamed with the fledgling Labor Movement to save lives, families and productivity by dramatically reducing excessive alcohol use. These events were central in the creation of modern Swedish drug policy.

In 1965 when Sweden faced a sudden epidemic of intravenous stimulant and opiate abuse, the first attempted solution, a de facto human experiment, was to "medicalize" drug use in the hope of weaning addicts off drugs while keeping them away from drug traffickers. The inspiration for this movement was a book, *"The Addict and the Law"*, written by American sociologist Alfred Lindesmith. He rejected the role of law enforcement in drug policy and defined "prohibition" as the primary cause of the drug problem. Countering this view was Nils Bejerot, a Swedish psychiatrist then working for the Stockholm police, who observed and documented the consequences of physician-prescribed drugs to Swedish addicts. Not only did this population continue to use drugs, but they spread the drug epidemic by selling much of their medically-provided drugs to others. In 1968, Bejerot outlined his observations and perspective in his book *"Narkotikafrågan och samhället"*. He advised keeping drugs illegal and insisted that addicts be encouraged to stop drug use. Reflecting the traditions of the long-standing Temperance movement in Sweden, Bejerot's analysis and new perspective gradually won widespread support.

The modern Swedish drug policy was born in this crucible. The policy uses the criminal justice system to prohibit both the sale and the use of drugs, including marijuana. It offers drug users help through social and medical services. Instead of long prison sentences, drug users are urged to get treatment and to become and to stay drug-free while remaining in the community.

This approach resembles the 2,700 drug courts in the US that offer treatment for a small percentage of convicted persons. In the US long prison sentences for drug crimes are almost invariably limited to drug sellers or those possessing drugs in quantities that exceed amounts for personal use. As in Sweden, simple drug possession, especially marijuana possession, does not lead to imprisonment

Now is the time for Sweden to reciprocate for the leadership the US provided to Swedish alcohol policy at the end of the 19th century. Today it is "un-Swedish" to use drugs.

Swedish drug policy, which is supported across Sweden's broad political spectrum, works.

Sweden has one of the lowest levels of youth drug use in the developed world. It is time for President Obama and other leaders from both major political parties to look to Sweden for the

future of American drug policy. The future of an improved drug policy – in the US and elsewhere around the world – is not to legalize intoxicating, abusable drugs, including marijuana. It is in the development of a balanced, restrictive drug policy that prevents drug use, and that intervenes with drug users to provide them with a path to life-long recovery. Instead of legalizing drugs, an enlightened drug policy can harness the criminal justice system to thwart drug markets, facilitate entry into treatment and restrict incarceration to egregious offenders. These are the elements of today's successful Swedish drug policy. We are working to make them the foundation of the US drug policy of tomorrow.

The Swedish experience over the past five decades proves that it is possible to have a restrictive drug policy that is compassionate, effective and affordable.

This drug policy makes clear that drug use is unacceptable. We hope that Maria Larsson, the minister in charge of drug policy within the Swedish Government, will play a leading role in international forums where drug policy is created. The March 2014 meeting in Vienna of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs is particularly important. In 2016 there will be a United Nations General Assembly Special Session in New York where the future of the world's drug policy will be debated. Sweden must play a leading role in these meetings. It is time for Sweden to lead on drug policy based on the unique and hard-won success of its drug policy.

by

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