



Families for Sensible Drug Policy

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Families for Sensible Drug Policy (FSDP) is a nonprofit organization representing a global coalition of families, professionals, organizations and drug policy reform advocates dedicated to implementing innovative public health initiatives with the goal of empowering families to increase access to effective substance use disorder treatment and reduce the harmful consequences of oppressive drug policies.

Subject Areas and Keywords

Subject areas: Drugs and Human Rights, Youth, Women, Children and Communities

Keywords: families, harm reduction, public health, human rights, substance use disorder, addiction

ISSUE SUMMARY

People use substances for many reasons. They can help us relax, be creative, focus, sleep, and improve mood. Human beings are hard-wired as a species for survival to move towards pleasurable activities and away from painful ones, increasing the likelihood for productivity in all areas of living. Some cultures use substances as medicine and incorporate them into spiritual practices. Most people use substances without causing significant harm to themselves or others. However, some people use them in ways that cause harms ranging from minor to fatal.

Current prohibition-based drug policies themselves contribute to, and can even cause, harms. Sometimes these harms are worse than the drugs themselves, by interfering with people's human rights as well as individual and family safety. This is recognized globally by organizations such as [Drug Policy Alliance](#) and the [International Drug Policy Consortium](#), and bodies such as UNAIDS and UNODC.

Existing prohibition-based drug policies also create barriers to demand reduction because they inform treatment approaches for substance use disorders, preventing treatment from being targeted uniquely to the needs of each individual and family and therefore limit the effectiveness of treatment.

Globally, individual countries have been experimenting with alternative drug policies. While there have been differences in individual approaches and varied responses from the international community, it is well documented that many of these policies have reduced the levels of harm to both individual drug users and broader communities.

Harm Reduction and the Role of the Family In Drug Policy

The urgency of the HIV/AIDS epidemic shifted the perception of this problem to one of human rights and public health. Once viewed this way, harm reduction interventions were introduced which provided promising data to support the idea that [alternative non-prohibitionist policies can significantly reduce the harms associated with drug use](#) without increasing the numbers of those who develop substance use disorders.

Substance use is also a human rights and public health issue, and as such, harm reduction interventions are a natural fit. Harm reduction approaches have been successfully implemented at national program levels but have rarely found their way into family settings.

The role of the family is what is missing from much of the drug policy debate. Substance use doesn't take place in a vacuum but in the normal context of family life and relationships as well as the wider culture that the family resides in. Families are in a unique position to directly influence the development or resolution of substance use problems. We know that problematic substance use is a complex interaction of psychological, biological and sociocultural variables. Drug policy that criminalizes substance use, is prohibition-based, and views addiction as a disease, informs the cultural narrative that unjustly blames, stigmatizes, and disempowers families.

Traditional drug policies directly contribute to a cultural narrative that views the substance as the primary problem, ignoring the uniqueness of each family, the culture it exists in, as well as the family's strengths and resources. This often unwittingly moves a family member's use along the continuum of use from safer use to problematic use. This can also damage family relationships that persists long after the resolution of the substance use disorder.

As long as this belief is held by families, communities will continue to embrace the prohibitionist policies around drug use, and large scale policy change will be difficult. By changing these attitudes within families, however, a grass-roots level of support for progressive drug policies can evolve and provide the motivation for change. We see this in organizations like ours where families with knowledge about harm reduction strategies are empowered to educate peers and communities as well as advocate for, and implement, change.

We don't have to reinvent the wheel--harm reduction approaches are already in place for other conditions. We can use this knowledge to extend these benefits to implement family-friendly drug policies. Harm reduction can be a matter of life and death for people who use drugs: To reject harm reduction, is to reject life.

Public health issues need supporting drug policies that are comprehensive and systemic for them to filter down and have an effective impact on families. They need to productively influence all levels along the system continuum from macro to micro levels. This includes legislation and law enforcement (macro level); healthcare, research and school-based education (mid-level); and prevention, family education and treatment (micro level).

Drug policies that bring communities together will impact public health at a systemic level and increase the likelihood for families to be empowered, health to be restored and lives saved.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Families have a unique, powerful, and direct impact on the nature and course of substance use disorder. Enlightening drug policy by making proven harm reduction interventions easily accessible to families will save lives.
2. Families intersect with drug policy at all levels of a system. Science-based, sensible, compassionate drug policies will empower families to be agents of change by influencing family interactions at all levels--legislation, law enforcement, healthcare, research, schools, prevention and treatment