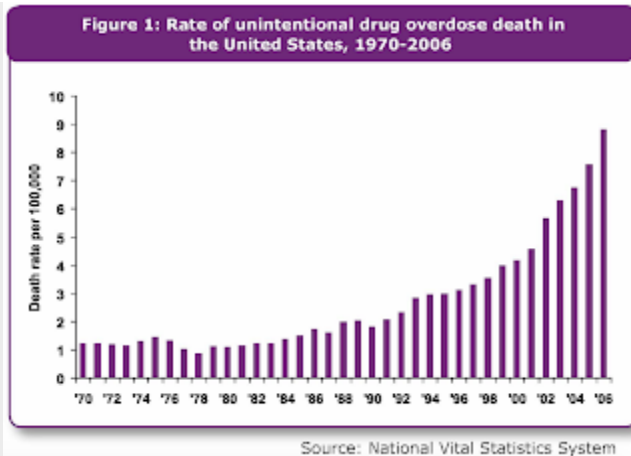


The War that Backfired

By [Hannah Peters](#) [November 24, 2021](#)

It's no secret that there is a problem with drugs. I mean, America even declared a war on them at one time. In fact, when you google "War on Drugs" Wikipedia lists its status as "Ongoing." This "War on Drugs" in America originated after a press conference led by President Nixon in 1971 when he said "America's public enemy number one in the United States is drug abuse. In order to fight and defeat this enemy, it is necessary to wage a new, all-out offensive." So did we "fight and defeat" this enemy? Well, we certainly fought. According to [History's](#) timeline of the War on Drugs, "As part of the War on Drugs initiative, Nixon increased federal funding for drug-control agencies and proposed strict measures, such as mandatory prison sentencing, for drug crimes... Nixon went on to create the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in 1973. This agency is a special police force committed to targeting illegal drug use and smuggling in the United States." To put things in perspective, a study done by Yale Professor Steven Duke found that, "Drug arrests have increased 380 percent since 1973" and "Drug offenders in prisons and jails have increased 1100 percent since 1980." Not only that, but drug crimes account for the most prison admissions in the United States. With numbers like that, surely we must have won the war. I mean, the "all-out offensive" worked, right? Well, if you count having a record number of imprisonments, sure. But drug abuse has not declined. In fact, a study done by the [CDC](#) "Drug overdose death rates have risen steadily in the United States since 1970." So even with the large increase in drug crime-related imprisonments, drug abuse has also increased since the start of the war. The numbers speak for themselves, this war has been targeting the wrong thing all along.



“What most Americans don’t know is that our War on Drugs isn’t just a failed war; it’s one that was never designed to be won,” says another [History](#) article. We could blame Nixon for using aggressive, war-like language and action to begin this war. But, in truth, the blame for this war reaches farther than just one man. It takes effort from society at large to fix a problem as extensive as drug abuse. So how do we fix this issue? The first steps are a lot simpler than you might think. I’ll give you a clue, it’s not more arrests, and it’s not more violence. By looking at the history of this issue, we can see that those actions largely backfired. That’s because this war did a much better job at targeting the people associated with drug use than the actual drugs themselves. When we place the blame on the people who abuse drugs and throw them in prison and look at them merely as criminals, we are overlooking the heart of this issue. Society has painted a picture of low-lifes that wander the street, crazed people that turn to violence, miscreants only interested in crime, slackers that have nothing better to do in life, the list goes on. And this is where we find the root of the issue, the stigma that surrounds drug abuse. Likely because it’s a lot easier to write them off as bad people that need to be locked up and shamed for their behavior than to find alternative solutions. But this causes people to use prejudice and fear when dealing with substance use disorder. In fact, using the terms ‘druggie,’ ‘dopehead’, ‘junkie’, ‘crackhead’, and even the word ‘addict’ when describing those that suffer from drug abuse is harmful and contributes to the stigma. To accurately define these individuals, use the

term person with a 'substance use disorder.' Many view drug use as simply a choice, which explains the pressure to imprison those that suffer from substance use disorder. But in actuality, according to the [Mayo Clinic](#), "Drug addiction, also called substance use disorder, is a disease that affects a person's brain and behavior and leads to an inability to control the use of a legal or illegal drug or medication." This is why efforts to stop drug abuse through strict imprisonment methods have failed. When people with substance use disorder are criminalized and shamed, it creates an environment that reflects a desire to shame instead of help. It makes it painful to come forward and seek help. It leads to the creation of laws and mandates that inhibit those from receiving the help they need. It excludes people from employment opportunities. It leads to broken families. It leads to discrimination, shame, and hate. And from what I know, that never solves an issue.

This stigma has made it extremely difficult to make the necessary steps towards decreasing substance use. Rocky Schwartz, a family support coordinator at Prevention Resources Inc., has dealt with the difficulties that this stigma presents in society. She has also testified before the New Jersey Assembly, Capitol Hill, met with the NJ Attorney General's staff, and testified to the President's Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis. "We've known for many many years that most people that are in jail are there for drugs and alcohol-related issues. But they're finally learning and we still have a long ways to go, that we don't need to punish people, we need to give those people treatment." Shwartz explains. This is not a criminal justice issue but a public health issue. This war was "never designed to be won" because those who abuse drugs need to be treated the same as those who have cancer, diabetes, or the flu. Shwartz uses the analogy of cancer treatment to show the difference in the way society treats substance use disorder. "When someone has breast cancer you get 5 years of treatment including a nutritionist, all kinds of support groups in addition to the chemo and surgery and everything else. There are dimensions of wellness to help a person heal which include things that go way beyond the physical aspect. But with substance use disorder, even if

you're lucky enough to get 28 days of treatment, you don't receive the extensive treatment that you see with other medical conditions. And we know that if you stay abstinent for 3-5 years, the odds are that you will have a very successful and long-term recovery," Shwartz reveals. Due to the popularly perceived idea that substance use disorder is a choice, there are limited options for those seeking long-term treatment.

This stigma affects many aspects of the recovery process and one of the most significant is the legal and insurance aspect. Schwartz is also a member of the New Jersey Parity Coalition. "We've been fighting for ten years to get insurance companies to pay for behavioral health treatment the same as medical treatment," Schwartz says. In this way, Parity refers to the goal of achieving equal standards for the medical treatment required for people with substance use disorder. Schwartz goes on to explain that, "There was a law passed by President Bush, so a very old law, that requires equal standards, but no one is enforcing it. Insurance companies routinely deny in-patient treatment, residential treatment or people may get treatment and five days later they are told insurance won't pay anymore and they have to leave when really, they need 30 days of treatment." Imagine how frustrating it would be to be looking for treatment for a disease that you can't control only to have to go back to where you started because insurance won't recognize the legitimacy of the disease. Imagine if insurance only covered cancer treatment for stage 1 or stage 4 but nothing in between. Or type 2 diabetes coverage only included nutrition counseling but no other treatments until the disease progressed to the point of catastrophic medical complications. If this was reality, it's not hard to predict the outcome- a significant amount of people would succumb to the effects of the disease, and mortality rates would rise. And that is exactly what is happening with substance use disorder. [Health Affairs](#) reports that "A recent review of the federal public health insurance program found that Medicare's coverage of substance use disorder care is effectively limited to the bookends of the continuum of care—the least and most intensive services. Medicare's limited coverage of SUD not only defies clinical recommendations of medical associations and

federal health agencies, but it is also costly from a human and economic perspective and discriminatory from a civil rights perspective." Unfortunately, "this is all related to stigma," Shwartz relays.

Although there is still a need for reform, it is always helpful to look on the bright side, for there has been progress and improvements have been made. For instance, implementing the use of drug courts has shown to be a much more effective solution to substance use disorder than prison. According to the [National Drug Court Resource Center](#), "These court programs offer individuals the opportunity to enter long-term drug treatment and agree to court supervision rather than receiving a jail sentence. The intensive program requires participants to maintain recovery, take on responsibilities, and work towards lifestyle changes. Under the supervision and authority of the court, their progress is monitored." Schwartz adds that, "This is where we have come a long ways. It's 3-5 years of accountability and treatment. It's not being in a prison but being out in the community." An important way to continue progress in society is through becoming educated. One way this can be done is by visiting the website of the [National Center for Advocacy and Recovery for Behavioral Health](#). Their vision is to "help lead efforts to ensure the establishment of an integrated recovery-oriented system of care that provides needed evidence-based behavioral health prevention and recovery services." They hold webinars, post informational blogs, report on and analyze legislation, and provide resources concerning COVID-19. Additionally, they present information on how people can get involved through volunteering, job opportunities, or donating. You do not need to be directly affected by substance use disorder to get involved, for this issue is more far-reaching than one may think. [Recovery Research Institute](#) reports that, "1 in 10 Americans report having **resolved** a significant substance use problem" and "There are approximately 20 million individuals in the US **with** a substance use disorder." In fact, Schwartz mentions that "Everybody used to think that there was only a problem in bad neighborhoods. Well, it's happening everywhere. Our prosecutor actually said that this is no longer an inner-city problem, but a culdesac problem."

With an issue that is so widespread, it becomes all the more important to become educated and take action to reduce stigma. “If the stigma continues to be reduced and people fight for things like treatment instead of incarceration, that would make a huge difference in our society,” Schwartz says.

There is still much to be done if we want to diminish substance use and create a society where overdoses and drug crimes are rare. But it’s not impossible and we already see improvements. Changing the stigma falls into the hands of society. We need to adjust the way substance use disorder is thought and talked about so that it becomes a treatable condition instead of a problem that is locked away. This way, treatment can come to be something that is available, accessible, and standard for people suffering from substance use disorder. If it were up to me, it would no longer be called the War on Drugs but the War on Stigma.