

## Teens and Drug Policy

The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy has been mismanaging the media anti-drug campaign since its inception under Gen. Barry McCaffrey who served as President Clinton's Drug Czar. Under ONDCP Director John Walters, the campaign's themes have taken on extreme dimensions, even suggesting that those Americans who buy marijuana are financing international terrorism. (Indisputably, a very small fraction of the money spent to purchase cocaine goes into the coffers of Colombian terrorist organizations, but no one has shown any cannabis connection.) Such claims are ludicrous and invite skeptical and satiric responses such as this recent one on the Daily Show with Jon Stewart on Comedy Central.

Exaggerated claims of the harmfulness of various drugs invite in response exaggerated claims of harmlessness. The people we wish to protect end up being less protected. Such exaggerations undermine the credibility of government messages generally across issues. Researchers of school-based alcohol, tobacco and other drug prevention programs in California found that exaggerated assertions about drugs confuse young people. Teenagers feel that drug issues are important. "Why, in this important area, are teachers and police telling us things that are false?" say teenagers. Such educational falsehoods, the researchers found, undermined learning in traditional academic areas. I think truthful and effective anti-drug education is being sacrificed for political objectives. Public support of the idea that drug dependent persons need treatment instead of imprisonment is strong and growing. Where proposed, for example, in California's Proposition 36, law enforcement opponents claimed that this idea was designed to legalize drugs. In a cynical, post 9/11 tactic to meet the policy challenge of treatment in lieu of incarceration, DEA and ONDCP are now disseminating the impression that drug consumers are deliberately aiding and abetting murderous terrorists. This claim and those images are designed to stigmatize those who need drug treatment.

Government anti-drug ads may fail to reach the audience of young people, but they have been very effective with the most important demographic - the mostly middle aged men in bureaucracies and in Congress who order payment for them.

## ANTI-DRUG PITCH GOES WIDE

When Congress launched the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign five years ago, it explicitly tied future funding to hard evidence of success. Today, there is anything but that. Teenagers are increasingly using the illicit drugs the campaign has most often railed against, according to a recently released, congressionally mandated study. The Pride Survey found that from 2001 to 2002, for instance, marijuana use was up among all grades studied (sixth through 12th) except for the 10th grade, which showed a 0.1% decline.

Marijuana use nearly doubled, from 2.9% to 5.2%, among sixth-graders and rose from 7.2% to 10.2% among eighth-graders.

Congress should at least cast a skeptical eye on the Bush administration's request to expand the media campaign with \$170 million in funding next year, \$20 million more than it received last year. The media campaign's concerns have often been legitimate. It is quite reasonable trying to reach the one in six high school seniors in the United States who report driving under the influence of pot, more than half of whom say, alarmingly, that being stoned does not compromise their driving ability.

However, the way in which the campaign has tried to get its messages across is stodgy and unlikely to connect with kids. "There has always been a lot of talk about drunk driving, but another problem is Drugged Driving," one new ad reads. "Just like alcohol, if you are driving under the influence of drugs, your response times are slow and you could be distracted. Have you ever been in a car where someone wanted to drive drugged?

What did you do? What would you do?" Drug czar John P. Walters has mismanaged the media campaign in other ways - using taxpayer dollars to directly attack state medical marijuana programs and ballot initiatives, for instance. This spring, Walters boasted to Congress about a study conducted by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America (which, in a blatant conflict of interest, helps produce the campaign's ads). The "good news," he said, was the study's conclusion that "40% of teens said that anti-drug advertising made them less likely to try or use drugs." A more independent study released by the University of Pennsylvania this year not only found "no evidence of a positive effect," it concluded that teens who saw the ads "tended to move more markedly in a 'pro-drug' direction in their attitudes over time." Sermons to teens can often have a boomerang effect, leading them to dismiss the real dangers the sermons are railing against. That, however, is not the lesson Walters took home from the Pennsylvania study. When its skeptical results came in, he opted not to renew the university's contract. Turning a blind eye to unwelcome facts is no way to run an effective anti-drug campaign.