

DECADES OF DOMESTIC WAR

Monroe Newman

Professor Emeritus of Economics, Pennsylvania State University

Fifty years ago, President Johnson committed the United States to a War on Poverty. Seven years later, President Nixon committed the country to a War on Drugs. How close is the country to winning those wars?

It is estimated that close to 50 million American families have annual incomes below the official poverty line. There are about 17 million American children who live with food insecurity. They lack confidence that they will not experience hunger or are already enduring it. Income inequality has significantly increased and, it is estimated, that for most American families, real incomes have not increased in at least two decades.

The chance of a child rising above her or his family's relative income position is about unchanged and overall, the U.S. is outranked in this mobility measure by 16 other developed countries.

The distribution of wealth is markedly and shockingly more unequal than the distribution of income. Moreover, it is far more unequal than it was 50 years ago.

Clearly, the War on Poverty has not been won but it is unknown if its battles have all been lost. We do not know if poverty and inequality would be greater in the absence of the policies of the War. We do not know which policies worked or might have worked had they been combined, administered or financed differently. We do not know if any policies were counter-productive. We do not know if the declaration of the War precipitated

stronger opposition to ameliorative policies than might have otherwise been the case.

Discussions of poverty -- its causes, effects, remedies, and alternative policy approaches -- have become more prevalent and prominent of late. Would that when this War was declared 50 years ago, it included an organized, funded program of assessments. Had it, the country might be able to renew its attacks on this social evil with better knowledge and weapons. As it is, the conversations of today seem to consist of reprises on those of 50 years ago.

The War on Drugs is also on the American public agenda these days, frequently with acknowledgements of its ineffectiveness, social costs, and maladministration.

Legislatively, some cities and states have taken a variety of steps to decriminalize and normalize the use of marijuana. Congress includes it among the list of illegal drugs so its status is ambiguous both geographically and administratively, with the Federal Department of Justice signaling that its efforts will focus on either large quantities or on other illegal substances. Concessions of this nature have not been made for these other drugs. However, the ones that have been made signal the social unease with what has been accomplished.

In the course of this War on Drugs, literally million of lives have been blighted by arrests, convictions and incarcerations costing billions of dollars. The blight has disproportionately been visited on minorities and particularly, their male members. The penalties imposed have been disproportionately heavy on drugs favored by minorities. Policing has been disproportionately focused on minority communities.

It is no wonder that the argument can be made that prohibition fosters criminality when there is a substantial social desire in a free society for what is prohibited.

This should be no surprise to Americans. After all, the country tried to prohibit alcohol consumption by Constitutional amendment and created a situation of widespread violation, violence, and criminality. The only time the country ever undid a Constitutional amendment was to remedy the disaster it had created.

Another widely accepted and utilized practice is abortion. Attempts to prohibit or closely limit its availability will not end it. Our experience with making alcohol and drugs illegal confirms this. The practice will continue to be prevalent, as it was in the past when it was banned. Prohibition will result in fewer safe and sanitary abortions, not fewer abortions.

The overarching moral to all of this is the necessity to recognize the power of public preferences in a free society and to learn from experience by subjecting it to dispassionate, well-structured and funded analysis.