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The Efficacy of Extreme Spectrum Drug Policies and their Applications to Modern Nations

Abstract

This paper examines the efficacy of extremely stringent and extremely relaxed drug enforcement policies by comparing various countries where each are practiced around the world. Most of the examples used to set the stage and tell of various political climates and major events are sourced directly from major media outlets and news agencies, while statistical information is largely taken from websites which source the information from official databases. The conclusions drawn from this paper regard drug usage and crime as being unusually disparate. In first world nations, crime usually increases drug prevalence rather than the other way around. Therefore, it would seem hardcore drug enforcement would not be entirely profitable unless crime overall is included in such harsh crackdowns. The research also indicated that such drastic measures would likely do little good in first world nations where crime and corruption are already low.

Keywords: Drug policy, war on drugs, Duterte, death penalty, drug use, crime rates.

The streets of the Philippines are running red with the blood of its citizens. Over 7,000 souls have been slain since Rodrigo Duterte became president of the archipelago nation, and shockingly enough, the masses seem to love him for it. A February 2017 rally in his support garnered over 200,000 citizens out on the streets of Manila to make an unlikely plea to the President: to reignite the drug war that had been put on hold since the discovery of a high-profile murder that had been perpetrated by corrupt drug cops exploiting the political climate (Manila Times). The crowd was over ten times the size of any of American President, Donald Trump's, own "huge" campaign rallies, and Rodrigo Duterte was not even expected to make an appearance.

The nation of the Philippines' new President-elect is exactly what citizens had expected; an extremely hardline "law and order" politician who has even bragged about personally killing criminals during his previous roles in law enforcement (Westcott 2016). Along with the man's crude language, obscene insults, and utter disregard for proper decorum, also came brutal tactics and undeniably effective results. As mayor of the city of Davao, Duterte all but cleansed the streets of crime and corruption. In 2015, the city was even listed as the 9th safest in the world. But as Davao became a safe haven, crime in the rest of the nation still climbed, particularly in the years prior to the election (Ranada 2016). Muslim radicals in the South of the country, an increasingly territorial China in the South China Sea, and already high crime rates served to create a climate in the nation that exasperated its citizens. Duterte's methods were extreme but they had a track record of effectiveness and the brash man himself came as a breath of fresh air from the typical "big picture" civic leaders and commonplace corruption that had come to be expected from many career politicians (Isidro, 2016). On a ticket of cleaning the nation up and taking issues on directly from the trenches, Duterte won the election in a landslide victory.

While the rest of the world quickly became shocked by the ferocity of his methods, Filipino nationals saw the results they had asked for. As the bodies of drug users and pushers piled up, most of them killed extra-judiciously by the citizens themselves, so too did the arrests. As of March 1, 2017, nearly 100,000 drug users and dealers had surrendered themselves into police custody. “Drug personalities” arrested through police operations numbered over 10,000 (Bueza, 2017). Although effective, the cost of human life proved to be high; too high for many western nations to stomach. European and American governments were quick to condemn the unorthodox and brutal war, not only for its unaccountable methods but also for the low price the police had put on the lives of drug dealers and users. Local cops often encouraged fed up citizens to take matters into their own hands (Gomez, 2016). But the international condemnations did little good. Duterte only doubled down on his policy. He threatened severing the century long bond between his country and the US over Obama’s criticisms, threatening to turn to rising China for the role of big brother, a position that the US had held since acquiring the Philippines as colony in the late 19th century (BBC, 2016).

The conflict and mutual condemnation demonstrate a clear schism between two worlds and a culture clash that has caught many in the crossfire over the years. While the massive onset of extra-judicial, no-trial killings are something of a recent Filipino phenomenon, Duterte’s harsh policies reviling drug peddlers are not unique. Such lethal and brutal anti-narcotics strategies are utilized widely throughout many Southeast Asian countries where those found guilty of drug peddling or trafficking are sentenced to death. Perhaps the only reason Duterte’s reign has attracted such infamy is due to the rapid onset of the enforcement and the resulting blood-bath, which both came as a sudden jolt to the nation and the international community as a whole. That, combined with the general encouragement of civilian vigilantism and itchy trigger fingers on

cops, produced a hellish environment for law breakers, but also one in which collateral damage would become inevitable (Fernando, 2017).

Nevertheless, in neighboring nation's like Singapore and Malaysia, drug traffickers are regularly sentenced and executed without much ado, besides the protests of foreign governments when one of their own citizens happens to be the one in the firing line. Western nations and human rights groups greatly criticize such practices (New Straits Times, 2016). For western nations, who seem to be inching ever further in the opposite direction, towards drug decriminalization, such practices come off as barbarous and unnecessary losses of human life.

Regardless of why the Philippines' war on crime was thrown into the spotlight, it dragged the controversial issue of drug policy into the light with it, and it was at the heart of Duterte's attempt to clean up the streets of his nation. Drug enforcement has grown and evolved drastically over the last century. Today, its applications are as varied in method as they are by location. While addicts are shot dead by vigilantes in Manila, users walk free without so much as a slap on the wrist in Portugal and supporters of both forms of enforcement, or lack thereof, remain zealous in their devotion to each's efficacy. The debate has raged for years.

Surprisingly enough, the data doesn't show that much disparity within crime rates of similar nations with lethal drug enforcement, and those with lax policies (NationMaster, 2016). Then why are citizens in East Asia and the Muslim world paying the ultimate price for drug use and trafficking? Do these types of policies have their place in the world, or could they be just as well off with an approach like Portugal's or the Netherlands'? Unsurprisingly, there is no one solution to fit every situation, and whether or not a nation could benefit from such brutal or relaxed drug enforcement relies heavily on the country's cultural, political, and legal climate but the most important factor is fighting crime itself, rather than just drug prevalence.

In the United States of America, the issue is hot. For decades, the nation has waged its own, albeit much more tame, war on drugs. Ever since Nancy Reagan officially made the declaration, America has become famous for its seemingly love-hate relationship with narcotics and illegal intoxicants. Over the decades, millions have been arrested and billions have been spent trying to combat the illegal drug use and flow of them into the country (Cooper, 2000). Critics argue that the men, women, and children affected by this war have largely been unfortunate victims of an ineffective and unrighteous war fighting targets that should never have been enemies in the first place (Issues and Controversies, 2012). The prohibition of the 1920's is often brought up and painted as an over-zealous fight against vice that only served to bolster organized crime and violence, while turning otherwise good citizens into law breaking criminals. The resemblance to today's war on narcotics is certainly not lost.

In recent times, such cries seem to have resonated with the populace, especially when it comes to marijuana, commonly viewed as one of the most benign and demonized substances to be targeted in the war. As of 2017, one in five Americans now live in a state where it is legal to get high on pot (Robinson, 2017). Drug decriminalization activists would seem to be gaining ground, or at the very least, are becoming successful in encouraging people to reevaluate the war's effectiveness, impact, and its necessity. Many argue that treatment and recovery among drug offenders is much more important than condemnation and punishment, a claim that is backed up with hard stats. Data shows that every dollar spent on rehab and treatment is usually recovered through positive externalities like lower recidivism, which can be lowered to rates as small as one in five through proper treatment and rehab.

On the other side of the fence, proponents for keeping narcotics illegal and offenders locked behind bars remain adamant. While certain states relax their drug enforcement

regulations, others double down, and they claim with good reason. Despite the claimed harmlessness of recreational drug use, US studies concluded that illicit drug use cost an estimated \$66.9 billion in 1990 in terms of costs in medical care, productivity, death, crime, and AIDS treatment in the United States alone (Roleff, 1998). Opposition to drug legalization is often reinforced with simple economics: the claim that such easy access to narcotics would see a massive increase in users, overdoses, and crime, in order fund the addicts' habits, not to mention the societal cost of lost productivity.

The debate certainly paints a conflicting picture and answers are made even foggier by examples of countries which allow drug use to be conducted without reprimand, and others that reward it with a state sanctioned death. And to top it all off, both systems would seem to work well in their respective environments. While both methods do appear to work soundly for some of the countries that implement them, the debate continues whether they each really need to exist.

In the pristine city-state of Singapore, crime is practically non-existent. Extremely stringent laws, that even include a ban on chewing gum, ensure that the crime rates are among the lowest in the Asian, and the international, world (NationMaster, 2017). Such laws also happen to include those requiring the execution of anyone found to be transporting more than a personal amount of hard narcotics. The sentences are rarely negotiable and Singapore has developed a somewhat infamous reputation for rarely heeding the pleas of foreign governments when their own citizens are the ones found in police hand-cuffs. The result is an almost non-existent level of drug use. Public support for the unforgiving consequences consistently remains very high (Teo, 2010).

The system revolves around a support and rehabilitation network for addicts, the “victims” of the drug trade, and a ruthless devotion to unyielding punishment for the drug pushers, dealers, and smugglers; those who would exploit their community members and prey on addicts. The key to the system’s success is “strong community support” according to Michael Teo, a Singapore high commissioner. The results are impressive. Less than one in five users relapse within two years and drug usage rates among all illegal substances are all a fraction of a percent. In the UK, the percentage of users for cannabis alone is over eight percent. Whether it’s marijuana or methamphetamine, usage is nearly stamped out in the Asian city-state. Singaporean parents rarely lose their children to drug overdoses or see their family members turn to crime and prostitution to maintain their crippling habits. As Teo puts it, Singapore’s harsh policies have “saved tens of thousands of lives from the drug menace,” (Teo, 2010). But what exactly does that menace really entail?

The low drug and crime rates are unsurprising to be sure, but what is startling are the numbers when compared to other countries, in particular, Hong Kong, another East Asian city-state similar in both culture, size, wealth, and affluence. Hong Kong is an enclave city-state belonging to Beijing. While China’s own drug policies are far closer to those of Singapore than the US, and certainly not Portugal who’s laws are extremely relaxed, they are more moderate, especially in Hong Kong. The city operates under its own jurisdiction as a separate legal entity from the mainland.

Bizarrely, the only stark contrasts in the numbers are reflected in the number of drug users and dealers. Most of the other forms of crime are quite similar to those of Singapore, rather than quite higher. Singapore even finds itself with higher rates of crime than Hong Kong when it comes to a handful of specific fields (NationMaster, 2017). So, while it’s true that Singapore has

to worry far less about drug overdoses, lives ruined by addiction, and general loss of productivity due to doped up citizens, that would seem to be the major extent of it. According to the crime statistics of both countries, the drug users in Hong Kong don't appear to have a significant impact on crime, and any economic impact caused by negative externalities would seem to be rather minimal considering the city's impressive wealth.

Crime rates in the two cities are extremely low. Both have nearly non-existent murder rates, 17 and 16 per 100,000 people in Hong Kong and Singapore respectively. Rapes, violent crime, and theft are all extremely low as well, and citizens of both nations say that their safety and satisfaction regarding crime levels are perfectly acceptable (NationMaster, 2017). And yet the rigid support for Singapore's own hardline enforcement remains firm, at levels as high as seventy percent (Chelvan, 2016). What is persuading the citizens to sustain such measures? With crime levels appearing to be such a minimal factor, it would seem the cultural repulsion of drug use and abuse in the country would be the larger influence. In addition, Singapore's less successful neighbors are a constant reminder of what awaits a country that does not stay vigilant against criminality and corruption. The more lawless and corrupt state of affairs just across the borders likely play a role in securing the support of the extreme policy in the psyche of the Singaporean citizen. Keep the laws harsh and unforgiving, lest the nation fall prey to the miseries that plague many nations like the Philippines and Malaysia, despite their own best efforts and strict laws.

But are these reservations unfounded or justified? The data shows that Singapore is likely too rich, honest, and prosperous of a nation to see its fate suffer drastically from a relaxation of its policy (NationMaster, 2016). But how relaxed could it become? While it's unlikely Singapore will decriminalize drugs like Portugal has done in the near future, adopting policies similar to

those of Hong Kong would likely save lives and do little to increase crime. It all begs the question of how important drug policy really is to crime reduction. Are narcotics the harbinger of poverty and crime as has been espoused for decades, or simply a byproduct of them?

We look now to the other side of the globe, to the small Iberian nation that completely decriminalized all drugs in 2001, as we examine the other side of the coin. Extreme enforcement proved to be remarkable only in reducing drug use and trafficking rates in Singapore. Most of the other forms of crime remained on par with other wealthy, first-world rates. So what about decriminalization? Is it equally benign to Portugal's rates of crime as the death penalty is to Singapore's? To contrast Portugal in this analysis is the Czech Republic, another European nation extremely similar in both size and wealth. Both nations hover at about 10.5 million people and have GDP's just under \$200 billion USD. Once again, the more moderate yet culturally and economically similar nation, this time the Czech Republic, will be contrasted against the nation of extreme drug policies; Portugal, which falls on the opposite end of the spectrum when compared to Singapore. While Singapore was hardline, Portugal is relaxed

Similar to the comparison of Hong Kong and Singapore, the results of the analysis between these two European countries are startling to say the least, particularly among the rates of drug users. The Czech republic actually boasts *more* users of certain drugs than Portugal does. Various other crime rates are also the opposite of what one would typically expect. Although the crime rates are very low in both countries, the Czech Republic typically has more of it than Portugal does. The pattern among drug use is similar as well (NationMaster, 2017). Instead of allowing drug use, crime, and poverty to skyrocket, drug legalization in Portugal seems to have had a very miniscule effect the state's wellbeing as a whole. On the other hand, a nation that practices "typical" drug enforcement actually has more drug usage and crime.

It's a strange anomaly and one that sends many who claim "drug decriminalization will see user rates skyrocketing" back to the drawing board. After over a decade, Portugal's rates of drug use remain largely the same as they were when decriminalization first took effect (Ingraham, 2015). The system in Portugal is complicated to navigate however. Drugs remain illegal and police do frequently seize large amounts, a fairly common occurrence considering Portugal is right in the middle of one of the largest smuggling routes of narcotics into Europe. But for small time users, getting busted means getting a slap on the wrist, or less. It's no longer considered a crime but an "administrative violation" that can incur fines, community service, or drug treatment. These recommended penalties are rarely enforced, however. In most cases, offenders receive no punishment, or they may be advised to enter into a state rehabilitation program of their own free will (Transform, 2014). Forced sentences for drug users are mostly a thing of the past. The strategy largely throws the conventional drug enforcement textbook out the window, and yet it still supplies successful results. As in Singapore, Hong Kong, and the Czech Republic, citizens in Portugal find the low crime rates acceptable (NationMaster, 2017).

So what kind of picture does this puzzle seem to reveal as the pieces come together? One of a large disconnect between the traditional way of looking at drug use and crime. It shows crime rates leading drug abuse rates rather than the other way around. Even in Portugal, where a stagnating economy created great poverty, drug use remained low despite their being few laws to discourage citizens from using them. While the harsh policies regarding drug enforcement had a direct role on the prevalence of drug use in Singapore, they affected only that. Other forms of crime remained largely unchanged (NationMaster, 2017). Rates of abuse, addiction, and death related to drug abuse in Singapore are indeed far below average, but the drug policies utilized there do not serve as a catch all for all other, or even many other, forms of crime. In fact it would

seem that in wealthy, first-world countries where crime and corruption are already low, drug enforcement has little to do with keeping drug prevalence within “acceptable” levels. In areas plagued by higher crime rates, however, drug enforcement can and does contribute to lowering the crime rates substantially, but largely in fields directly relating to drugs. High overall crime levels are still indicative of broader issues that still need to be tackled to effectively reduce all crime in a community or region. Drug prevalence is only one product to thrive in an environment that breeds criminality. Law enforcement must focus on destroying the environment in which it thrives if it seeks to see lasting change and disappearing drug use.

So where does this leave the Philippines? The research has shown that the scourge of drugs is not so much the problem. It is rampant crime, corruption, and crippling poverty that are present in the first place that would seem to create an environment ripe for drug lords to peddle their products and cause greater misery within the community in general. In this regard, the Philippines current tactic of eliminating all criminality with prejudice would seem to be an effective strategy, so long as the drug lords are recognized as symptoms of the overall disease of rampant criminality and corruption, rather than the cause of it. The data shows that while such strict enforcement does little to reduce overall crime *below* “acceptable” first-world levels, the tactics can be effective in reducing *above* average crime levels, like those in the Philippines and other poor nations (ABS-CBN, 2016). Past studies have demonstrated that such rapid onset tactics are also effective in bringing about a drastic decrease in crime on a regional basis, even in first-world nations, but the results are usually only attained through combatting or lowering already rising crime levels and therefore do not translate into long term figures or big picture reductions. In a 1997 “zero-tolerance” anti-drug policy in Australia, for example, crime rates were able to drop an incredible 60% in five weeks in a troubled suburb. The implementation of

the tactics gave police more authority to search citizens and engage those they deemed to be exhibiting suspicious behavior (Age, 1997).

The statistics coming out of the Philippines right now show similar trends. Official statistics reveal national crime levels dropping over 30% when compared to time frames from the previous year (ABS-CBN, 2016). Whether or not the nation will be able to heal the environments in which drug dealers are allowed to flourish remains to be seen. For now, stamping out the drug dealers has led to a reduction in crime, but unless the severe war continues indefinitely or the environment is altered drastically, the symptom of the nation's troubled societal structure will likely continue to return. If drug lords and dealers are viewed as the only enemies in Duterte's war, the issues of crime and corruption will prevail.

Regardless, the current tactics are seeing results on paper; tens of thousands have been arrested and over a hundred-thousand have turned themselves over to police custody (Bueza, 2017). Evidently, a palpable change is in the wind. The new administration seems to have put drugs as only one item on a very long cleaning list for the country.

Would legalization or decriminalization be effective in such vulnerable nations though? The statistics demonstrate that wealthy, first-world countries likely have little to fear from relaxing their restrictions on drugs, but would it spell disaster for less prosperous countries? Whether or not such policies would bring about further usage in such poor nations, or put drug dealers out of business and help elevate the poor and serve as salvation for the otherwise law abiding drug users remains to be seen. No such scenario has yet come to fruition in the real world when it comes to drug policy in these at-risk third-world nations. Mexico recently inched closer however with their reconsideration of legalizing medical marijuana (Livni, 2016). If we

have any direct samples to go off of though, they would be those of nations like Portugal and the Netherlands, whose unorthodox policies seem to be doing little harm.

In the end, the data would seem to demonstrate that drug prevalence is a symptom that is both caused by, and contributes to criminality overall. Thus, nations concerned with such issues should focus on reducing broad crime and corruption and recognize drugs as a symptom of such environments in which they flourish, rather than the cause themselves. Bearing this in mind, one can contend that in countries secure enough to do so, decriminalizing drugs would likely be benign. The collateral cost incurred by state-run rehabilitation programs may be preferable to those incurred by incarceration and death penalties, depending on various cultural values. Many nations and societies have demonstrated their willingness to trade human lives for a drug free community.

For the Philippines, the question should be more about how crime reduction is implemented overall rather than just how to deal with the drug lords and drug peddlers. If current measures being taken are sufficient to reduce the overall criminal environment, then decreased drug prevalence is likely to follow. Whether or not such a vulnerable country would benefit or suffer from simply adopting a Portugal strategy, is still an unclear mystery however. Until such a policy change is made, those involved in the Philippine's drug trade will likely continue to receive no second chances.

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