

Is it possible that the War on Drugs ending?

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Is the War on Drugs Ending?

Recently, there has been quite a buzz in the criminal justice reform community across the nation. Attorney General Eric Holder, who heads our nation's Department of Justice, announced earlier this month that the DOJ will be taking steps to reform and transform our legal system to "better advance the cause of justice for all Americans."

His speech is a gigantic step forward, coming from the America's top law enforcement leader.

For decades, our country has battled over the "tough on crime" rhetoric that has come at a price tag of one trillion dollars and countless human lives. We've seen the rise in prison spending skyrocket out of control, and, in many

cases, with voter consent. The tides are changing and Attorney General Holder's recent speech is a clear example of that. America has received a sobering wake-up call: that a decades-long focus on punishment, rather than prevention, has not only done little to break the cycle of crime, but, in fact, left many state budgets damaged by unsustainable and unhelpful prison systems.

In many states, including Oregon, polling has demonstrated a new willingness among the public to support prevention and intervention strategies that address crime, rather than incarceration as a solution.

In his speech to the American Bar Association, Holder stated that "too many Americans go to too many prisons for far too long, and for no truly good law enforcement reason." Partnership for Safety and Justice (PSJ) overwhelmingly agrees. In fact, we've been calling for more effective and less expensive ways to address public safety since our founding in 1999. More recently, PSJ helped pass a public safety reform package

that would save Oregon over \$300 million dollars and flatline prison growth for the next five years. This is an incredible step forward, and is in line with national strategies to improve our criminal justice system for all people involved, including people convicted of crime, crime survivors, and the families of both.

Holder's speech was ground-breaking for acknowledging a broken public safety system that has not made us any safer, but in fact, weakened many communities. He said: "As the so-called 'War on Drugs' enters its fifth decade, we need to ask whether it, and the approaches that comprise it, have been truly effective...Today, a vicious cycle of poverty, criminality, and incarceration traps too many Americans and weakens too many communities. And many aspects of our criminal justice system may actually exacerbate these problems, rather than alleviate them."

In far too many communities throughout the U.S., we have seen a defunding of social safety nets and education systems which has essentially crumbled the very infrastructure it takes to make a community healthy and safe. When people don't have access to jobs, affordable housing, healthcare and quality education in our schools, an increase in crime rates soon follows. Once a person comes into contact with the criminal or juvenile justice system, the cycle begins. This problem becomes even further compounded by adding tough sentencing laws that lock people up for long periods of time with limited access to critical rehabilitation programs. This is a very high cost for communities, given that the majority of people who go into prison will eventually return. Further, with the cost of incarceration significantly higher than community-based treatment, we end up with broken, defunded communities multiplied by broken people while new prisons are built at the drop of a dime. In his speech, Holder outlined a strong critique of the status quo but also a plan for

making America's approach to public safety more effective and more just. Some of the issues and strategies Holder identified were:

- Re-thinking and reforming drug-related mandatory minimum sentencing
- Strengthening and modernizing victim services for domestic and sexual violence.
- Supporting transition programs for people returning home from prison.
- Supporting compassionate release for prisoners who have medical reasons and pose no threat to the public.

This type of forward thinking is more holistic than initiatives we've seen in the past. We appreciate the thoughtful inclusion of crime survivors and their access to critical lifesaving services when thinking about ways to improve our public safety system. All of this is very big news and a sign that the political landscape is shifting in the right direction.

Efforts to educate the public and lawmakers about how to deal with crime, violence, and the underlying causes are resonating with the masses. We are starting to see successful changes in public policy. More than ever before, America is on the verge of witnessing provocative and progressive change aided by political leaders like Holder who are proactively stepping into what was once deemed deeply controversial territory. This is significant, but it is important to note that public opinion is almost always ahead of politicians. So Holder is making these statements not only because he and President Obama think it is the right thing to do, but because they realize that public opinion supports a more thoughtful, progressive and prevention-oriented approach to crime and safety. While the implementation of these proposed policies are yet to be seen, we are hopeful the tide will continue to shift towards smart on crime policies and that we begin to see an end to the 42-year-long War on Drugs.

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PSJ is a statewide, non-
profit advocacy organization
dedicated to making
Oregon's approach to crime
and public safety more
effective and just.

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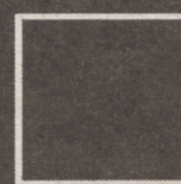
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