

Drug policy reform must look to the future, and the past

This past November, a clear majority of Oregonian voters agreed to take formal action on what had been a fairly accepted social norm: That marijuana use shouldn't be illegal. Its use shouldn't result in being arrested, serving time and a criminal record. It shouldn't be used to target minorities. And it shouldn't cost anyone their jobs, their education, their housing or financial security.

So we legalized it.

Still, the decades of prohibition means thousands of Oregonians are still saddled by past convictions for something the people of this state have deemed unworthy of punishment.

A comprehensive 2013 nationwide study by the American Civil Liberties Union reports that more than 8.2 million marijuana arrests between 2001 and 2010 — the vast majority simply for possessing marijuana. The ACLU study breaks that down to a marijuana bust by cops every 37 seconds. And despite usage rates being relatively the same, the report found that blacks were nearly 4 times more likely to be arrested on marijuana charges than whites.

These records — so often accrued as young adults — can be costly for a lifetime.

That's why we support the Fresh Start Oregon campaign by The Bus Project. The campaign supports the proposal by Rep. Lew Frederick to expunge all

nonviolent marijuana-related convictions now on Oregonian's records. The reason echoes the mandate from voters back in November: To reduce the barriers to economic opportunity, and approach drug policy with "comprehensive, pragmatic, moral and sensible reform."

Both government and business are lining up to consider how Oregon's new law will make them money. And it is intended to do just that.

But it is an injustice that well-healed interests will soon be reaping profits for what continues to socially and economically oppress so many lower-income families.

Opponents of expungement say people should obey the law as it is, and should have done so when marijuana was illegal. And indeed, it is not a simple job to unravel years of bad policy and legal entanglements, but with a legacy of nonviolent offenses, racial injustice and costly incarceration, it is worth the effort necessary to at least set those records straight.

Fresh Start Oregon is working to galvanize statewide support for this effort and to encourage lawmakers to pass HB 3372. It is important for all of us who supported Measure 91 to follow through and continue with larger social reforms around drug policy. You can learn more at busproject.org, or head over to Twitter and check out #Freshstartoregon.

EDITORIAL

Oregon moves forward while other states bottom out

Legislation in Kansas this week is looking to ban those who receive government assistance from spending it on the movies, swimming pools, spas, lingerie and tobacco among other things. The law would only allow people receiving benefits to access \$25 a day from an ATM in the land of Jayhawks. Seriously.

More than 65,000 Indiana residents will be dumped this spring from food stamp rolls after a draconian law was passed targeting the poor. In Missouri, legislators are hoping to ban poor people who receive government aid from buying seafood and steak.

That's not all. According to the National Coalition of the Homeless, 33 cities banned or restricted feeding the homeless. Houston, a city some politicians have said is an example of how to work with the homeless, passed legislation forcing any group of people feeding the homeless to gain permission from the city or face a \$2,000 fine.

People experiencing homelessness and advocates have been fighting legislation around the country for years to simply access public spaces — like sitting or lying on a sidewalk, or having a legal right to rest or sleep on public and private property.

Unfortunately, for the poor, there are no athletes or celebrities calling for a boycott of Kansas or Missouri because of the war on the poor. To my knowledge we have no Fortune 500 companies or business leaders pressuring local governments asking legislators to reverse their actions when creating laws that discriminate against people for not having a home.

In fact, in many cases these corporations are exacerbating poverty with low wages while benefiting from tax breaks that do little to support the poor.

Imagine for a minute if legislators created language today that banned people of color, the elderly, the disabled, and members of the LGBTQ community from accessing certain public spaces.

You may not know it, but that's exactly what's happening. After all, in many communities two or more black kids hanging out on a street corner can be considered a gang. The elderly and people experiencing disabilities are forced to sleep, at their own risk, under bridges and in city parks.

The LGBTQ community makes up an estimated 40 percent of all homeless youth — you know, those kids we want to run out of town, because they are bad for business.

In a local environment where we target homeless people for activities in public spaces without providing adequate housing — we shouldn't be surprised that legislation arrives at the state level to keep people from enjoying steak and seafood, going to the movies or a spa or swimming. Unfortunately, I don't think it ends there. There is a war on the poor in our country and the battle outside is raging.

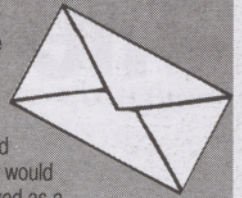
In the end, for most government leaders, both liberal and conservative, poverty is an issue that must be dealt with through political calculations and tradeoffs — not with moral obligations. Never mind that access to housing and a good education strengthens our community.

In Oregon we have the chance to buck national trends and support everyday Oregonians to have an opportunity at a better life. First, there's the Right to Rest Bill that protects people on the streets from being criminalized for their housing statutes. We also have the opportunity to increase rent assistance statewide by \$10 million and pass an inclusionary zoning bill that would give local governments greater opportunities to create affordable housing. There's also \$100 million on the table to support land acquisition and building of critical affordable housing units statewide.

Instead of abandoning the poor, we have the chance to support Oregonians to access a better life. It's not nearly enough, but it's a start. It's also a far cry from humiliating our own neighbors and punishing people for the systematic failures of a nation.

Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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