

# 'THE BIGGEST MORAL ISSUE ABOUT THE WAR ON DRUGS'

*Violence is inevitable when the drug market is controlled by criminals rather than regulators, author Johann Hari argues in 'Chasing the Scream'*

BY EMILY GREEN  
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After spending a hundred years and a trillion dollars fighting the war on drugs, there's one thing we know for certain: Prohibition isn't working.

In his captivating new book, "Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs," London-based journalist Johann Hari argues that the very problems the war on drugs aims to eradicate — cartels, gangs, drug-related violence and addiction — are only exacerbated by drug prohibition.

Inspired by addicts in his personal life, Hari set out to answer what he says are some very basic questions about the drug war and addiction.

His three-year journey took him across 30,000 miles and into 12 countries. Critics are calling the resulting book an entertaining and powerfully compelling argument for drug policy reform.

**Emily Green:** Can you explain how the War on Drugs started what you refer to in your book as the war for drugs?

**Johann Hari:** If you and me decided after this interview that we wanted to go and steal a bottle of vodka and went to the local liquor store and they caught us, that liquor store would call the police. That liquor store doesn't need to be violent or intimidating; they have the power and the force of the law backing them up. If you or I decided we wanted to steal some cocaine and your local seller of that substance caught us, obviously they can't call the police. The police would arrest them, so they have to be violent and intimidating toward us. They would have to attack us to protect their property rights. Now, obviously, if you're a drug dealer, you don't want to be having a fight every day, so what you have to do is establish a reputation for being so terrifying that no one will dare to take you on.

Milton Friedman calculated there are 10,000 additional murders every year in the United States as the result of this dynamic.

If you want to understand what happens to that violence after the drug war ends, ask yourself, "Where are the violent alcohol dealers today?" Does the head of Smirnoff go and shoot the head of Heineken in the face? Of course not, but under alcohol prohibition, that's exactly what happened. We went from having it controlled by criminals and in the illegal market to having it controlled by licensed and regulated sellers in the current market, and the violence went away.

This is the biggest moral issue about the war on drugs. One hundred and sixty thousand people have been killed or

disappeared in Mexico over the past eight years as the result of this dynamic.

**E.G.:** From your interviews with members of Law Enforcement Against Prohibition, who are all either current or former law enforcement officials, what did you find to be the prevailing reason they came to the conclusion that the way we're fighting drugs right now is not the right way?

**J.H.:** One of the people I most admire is this cop in Maryland called Leigh Maddox. Her best friend, Lisa, was murdered by what Leigh believed was a drug gang. So she signed up to destroy the drug gangs. She went after everyone she could. She would bust people just for smoking a single joint. She was like the drug war dream girl. And yet Leigh started to notice a couple of things. One is that they only ever went and arrested African Americans.

One of her colleagues, Matthew Fogg, went to his boss and — I'm paraphrasing — he said, "Hey boss, how come we only ever go to black neighborhoods to do drug busts? I'm pretty sure white people use drugs as well." And his boss said something like, "Well of course they do, but white people get lawyers, and white people know journalists and judges, and they make a fuss, so we'll go for the low-hanging fruit."

Leigh isn't a racist, so she was disturbed by that, to say the least. Also Leigh noticed if you're a cop and you arrest a pedophile, the next week there will be less children being abused in your neighborhood. If you arrest a rapist, the next week the rate of rape will go down. If you arrest a drug dealer, Leigh noticed two things: Firstly, there's no fall in drug dealing, but even more than that, she noticed there is actually an increase in violence — the murder rate would go up.

Drug dealers establish a patch by violence, and they control it through violence, right? If you come along and knock out that dealer, what you do is you (start) a war for control of that patch in which there's going to be a lot of violence.

That doesn't mean that we should leave drug dealers to do what they want to do. What we should do is bankrupt them. When drugs are restored to the legal market, where they used to be in the United States until they were banned a century ago, you bankrupt the criminal gangs.

**E.G.:** How is the war on drugs affecting drug addicts?

**J.H.:** It turns out that addiction is not what we've been told it is. We think that if you and



Chalk outlines were drawn for a 2011 protest against the war on drug cartels in Cuernavaca, Mexico, to represent people killed. In "Chasing the Scream," Johann Hari tells the stories of a woman who paid with her life for speaking out against cartels and a man who turned himself in after years of working as a cartel hit man. In the past eight years, 160,000 have been killed or have disappeared in Mexico as a result drug war, Hari says.

me and the next 20 people that walked past your office all used heroin together for 20 days, on day 21, we'd all be heroin addicts because there are chemical hooks in heroin that our bodies would start to physically need, and at the end we'd have this ravenous craving, and that's what addiction is.

If I stepped out of this interview now and I get hit by a truck and I break a hip, I'll be taken to hospital (in the U.K.) and I'll be given loads of a drug called diamorphine, a medical term for heroin. It's much stronger than the heroin you get from a drug dealer on the street because what the dealer sells is very heavily contaminated.

You'll be given that heroin in hospital for quite a long time, and if what we think about addiction is right, what should happen? Some of those people, at least, should become addicts, exposed to all the same chemical hooks as your addicts on the street.

This has been studied very closely, and it doesn't happen. Your grandmother was not turned into a junkie by her hip replacement operation.

I only really began to understand it when I went to Vancouver (B.C.) and interviewed Bruce Alexander, a professor of psychology. He explained the theory of addiction we have in our heads comes, in part, from a series of experiments that were done earlier in the 20th century. You get a rat, and you put it in a cage, and you give it two water bottles. One is just water, and the other is water laced with either heroin or cocaine. If you do that, the

rat will almost always prefer the drugged water and almost always kill itself. So there you go — there's our theory of addiction.

But in the '70s, Professor Alexander comes along and he says, "Well wait a minute, we're putting these rats in an empty cage. They've got nothing to do except use these drugs!" So he built a cage that he called "Rat Park," which is basically heaven for rats. It's got loads of friends, (the rats) can have loads of sex, and it's got both the water bottles: the normal water and the drugged water.

But this is the fascinating thing: In Rat Park, they don't like the drugged water. They almost never use it. None of them ever use it compulsively. None of them ever overdose. There's loads of human examples I talk about in the book, but I think the core insight from this is that we've been thinking about addiction in the wrong way.

Human beings have an innate need to bond and connect, and when we're happy and healthy, we'll bond and connect with each other, but if we can't do that because we're isolated or traumatized or beaten down by life, we'll bond and connect with something that gives us a sense of relief. That might be heroin; that might be alcohol; that might be gambling; that might be pornography.

The war on drugs is based on the idea that the way that you stop people from becoming addicted is you take addicts and you punish them and you make them suffer in order to make them stop. Suddenly, when you

understand that pain and suffering are the causes of addiction, the idea of imposing more pain ceases to make sense.

A doctor called Gabor Maté said to me, "If you want to design a system that would make addiction worse, you design the war on drugs."

**E.G.:** What are some of the ingredients for making a drug addict in the first place?

**J.H.:** The large element is isolation, pain and trauma.

Totally legally, I could be drinking vodka now — you could be drinking vodka now. You and I probably have enough money in the bank that we could both drink vodka for the next month.

You're not going to do that, and I'm not going to do that because we want to be present in our lives. We've got jobs we love; we've got people we love; we've got books we want to read; we've got TV shows we want to watch.

The core of addiction is about not being able to bear to be present in your life. Now there's lots of different things that can make your life so painful that you can't bear to be present. One example where we have very strong evidence that it has a huge causal relationship with drug addiction is childhood trauma.

"The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study" looks at a whole range of terrible things that can happen to a kid, from being

severely neglected to being molested to losing a parent.

What it found is that for every one of these terrible things that happens to you when you are a child, you are two to four times more likely to grow up to be an injecting drug user. And if six of those things happen to you as a kid, you are 4,600 percent more likely to grow up to be an adult injecting drug user than someone who had none of those traumatic experiences.

**E.G.:** What are some examples of approaches to drug use that have proven to be more effective than criminalization?

**J.H.:** In 2000, Portugal had one of the worst drug problems in the developed world. They arrested and imprisoned more people, and every year the problem got worse.

They decided to set up a panel of scientists and doctors to look at the best evidence, and they agreed in advance they would do whatever these scientists and doctors recommended. So they went away and looked at all the evidence, which included Rat Park, and they came back and they said: "Decriminalize all drugs from cannabis to crack — but take all the money we used to spend on arresting and imprisoning and shaming addicts and punishing users, and spend it instead on turning their lives around."

They did do some residential rehab and psychological support, but the biggest things they did had nothing to do with that. They set up a huge program of job creation for addicts. The goal was to make sure that every addict in Portugal had something to get out of bed for in the morning, and what they found is that as they got back into meaningful work and had a bit of control over their lives, they were much more likely to rebuild connections.

It's now been 15 years since this experiment began, and the results are in. Injecting drug use is down in Portugal by 50 percent. Deaths from overdose are massively down. HIV transmission among drug addicts is massively down, street crime is massively down, and one of the ways you know this has worked so well is that virtually nobody in Portugal wants to go back. There are six big political parties; none of them want to reverse this policy.

**E.G.:** In your book you talk about some clinics where doctors are prescribing heroin to heroin addicts. Can you explain how this practice actually helps drug addicts?

**J.H.:** Switzerland's had a huge heroin problem, and they tried American-style crackdowns, and the problem just got worse and worse. Bear in mind, this is a very conservative country; they decided to start

clinics, where if you were an addict, you could go to the clinic and you're given your heroin legally. You have to use it in the clinic.

I went to this clinic in Geneva. The addicts don't look anything like any addicts you've ever seen in the United States. Most of them have jobs, they don't look sick in any way; they don't have any wounds or abscesses.



**"I would say to anyone reading this, who thinks the drug war is a catastrophe but thinks, 'What can I do?' You can't think of a more powerless person in our culture than a homeless street addict, and because of what Bud started, thousands of people who would have died lived."**

JOHANN HARI

A lot of the things we associate with heroin addiction are in fact the result of the prohibition of heroin addiction. For example, abscesses and wounds — they don't happen when you give people heroin legally; those are just the result of the impurities that are put in it by drug dealers.

Do you know how many deaths from overdose they've had in these heroin clinics in Switzerland since they began this experiment 10 years ago? Not a single one.

The most striking thing is, when you're a heroin addict and you go to these clinics, you can stay on that heroin program for your whole life if you want to, and you set your own dose. But the vast majority of addicts chose, over time, to reduce their dose and eventually stop.

Because as the chaos of being a street user ends — the constant scramble to get your drug. Because you're given a safe, legal prescription, the women stop prostituting themselves, the men stop committing property crime, they start to get back to a normal life, and as they become more connected to the society, they don't need their connection to their drug as much.

**E.G.:** And what would you say to people who say they don't want their tax dollars going to supply addicts with drugs?

**J.H.:** When you prescribe heroin to people who have very serious addiction problems, the crime rate massively falls. (In Switzerland), it was a 93 percent fall in burglary. That frees up all those police hours and all that time. It's expensive to deal with property crime. If your only concern is your tax dollars, this saves loads of money.

I also would say, because addicts are human beings and they need our love and compassion. And someone who looks at heroin addicts and thinks, "Well I wouldn't do that; what a fool," to me that's a bit like looking at someone who's had their legs cut off because they were in a terrible car crash, and saying, "Well, what an idiot, I would never have my legs cut off." Well no, you weren't in a car crash. Addicts have been in car crashes of the soul, and they need our love and

support.

**E.G.:** What are some of the things we've learned from alcohol prohibition that support the argument for legalizing drugs?

**J.H.:** Look at the murder rate in the United States in the 20th century. It massively goes up when alcohol prohibition is introduced, and it massively falls when alcohol is legalized again, and it massively rises again with the big intensification of drug prohibition in the 1970s.

When you ban a drug, whether it's alcohol, marijuana or cocaine, obviously you can't do any health and safety inspections on criminals. One of the results is the product becomes radically more dangerous. Alcohol poisoning was absolutely endemic during alcohol prohibition. For example, on one occasion, 500 people died of alcohol poisoning in Wichita, Kan.

A significant number of the drug-related deaths in the United States are the result — particularly drugs like Ecstasy — (of) the contamination

in the drug because of prohibition. And clearly those deaths cease when you have a legal and regulated product, and we know that from all the evidence in places that have legalized.

At the moment, we don't have a choice about whether drugs exist; we have a choice between whether they're controlled by violent, murderous, criminal cartels and gangs, who pay no taxes and who sell to children and cause all sorts of chaos and sell us shitty, contaminated products, or they could be controlled by doctors and pharmacists who pay a large amount of tax, sell the cleanest possible product, don't carry out any acts of violence or aggression.

**E.G.:** Your book makes a solid argument for legalizing drugs such as marijuana, heroin and cocaine. But when it comes to drugs such as meth and crack, I felt like the solutions weren't quite as obvious. Since writing this book, have you developed your thoughts on the question of what to do with meth and crack any further?

**J.H.:** Fifteen percent of the people who use meth become meth addicts, according to the research by Carl Hart at Columbia University. You have to ask yourself, what's happening with that 15 percent that become addicted? It's not that they use the drug more; it's pain, isolation and disconnection.

It's an important question about what regulatory structure we can put in place for meth and crack. No one believes, and I certainly don't, that they should be legal the way that marijuana or alcohol are legal. No one thinks there should be a crack aisle at CVS. That would be grotesque.

As recently as the 1950s, housewives used to be prescribed meth as a diet aid. Now I'm not in favor of going back to that system, but if you think that meth is this drug that