

The Solution to our Drug Epidemic

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Mac Miller. Tom Petty. José Fernández. All three of these people have something unique in common, and no it is not their fame. Each of these three were notable celebrities, arguably in the prime of their careers, whose lives were stripped away from them at the hands of drug use. Whenever celebrities overdose, you see their stories plastered all over the news; ‘in memoriam’ posts all over social media, and their music and highlights playing on television and radio. But what about the individual who has no one? No friends or family to help them fight their battle with addiction? The person who became addicted at a young age and has no one but themselves to turn to in order to break his habitual use cycle? Protecting those in our society who are disproportionately disadvantaged is just as important as protecting the celebrities whose names are known by millions. The fact of the matter is, drug addiction and overdoses are indiscriminate. They can and will take anyone at any time, regardless of race, social status, or economic standing, leaving loved ones devastated and wondering what they could have done differently to help. We will never be able to do enough to console grieving families, though there is a more feasible option that can and should be implemented more widespread in our society aimed at preventing the drug-related deaths that have impacted so many families. This solution is none other than implementing safe injection spaces. These spaces will not only save lives, but taxpayer money, and reduce stigma on drug consumption.

But what exactly are these “safe injection spaces”? If you have not heard of these locations before, the idea of them may sound absurd and outlandish, however, the data is overwhelmingly in support of these places. In a safe injection site, one can expect to walk into a clean facility, almost like a dentist or doctor’s office. Immediately inside there is a reception desk staffed with a medical professional, usually a nurse. Once checked in, the user is taken to the next available space where a doctor with sterilized equipment administers a measured amount of the drug desired and leaves the individual to ride out their high in a safe area while being medically supervised. Part of medical supervision is the overdose ‘cure’ in Naloxone. Once they ride out their high, they are then offered addiction and counseling services to try and beat their addiction. These places may be either state or privately funded or paid for by tax dollars or donations. At first glance, many would not be in favor of their tax money going to drug use and would dismiss this idea as a waste of taxpayer money. However, one study on the safe injection space recently implemented in San Francisco finds a staggering 3.5 million dollars in healthcare savings because of how few overdoses and other drug related medical emergencies occurred (Integrative Life Center). While there is a small sample size of these sites in the United States, this site was responsible for the decrease in cost on its own,. The addition of more sites would further save taxpayers’ money.

It is no secret there is an epidemic of drug use in our nation. The idea of legalizing marijuana has been a controversial topic over the past couple of decades, with legalized recreational use finally becoming more and more popular in the public's eyes. This acceptance may very well be the stepping stone needed for protecting our citizens from the harder drugs that claim so many lives. According to data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there were an astounding 70,630 deaths from drug overdoses alone, over half of which came from synthetic opioids (CDC, 2021). This comes down to over 193 overdoses daily in our country, all of which are preventable with some effort through the use of these safe spaces. One study found, "Where coverage is adequate, drug consumption rooms may contribute to reducing drug-related deaths at a city level" (EMCDDA).

Whenever I read or talk about these safe injection spaces, I am drawn to first-hand stories from people who have personally used these safe injection spaces in other countries where they are in use. One story I am drawn to is about a man in Barcelona by the name of Juan Carlos. Juan is a 47-year-old man who regularly attends one of these safe injection spaces. One day he was interviewed about his thoughts on the site, and he said, "If I couldn't come here, I would be dead on the street or robbed" (Tabachnick, 2019). This quote highlights not only the dangers of unsupervised and unsafe drug usage, but also the danger users are in from others who are desperate for any money they can get to feed their addiction.

Safe injection spaces are a safe, useful, and cost-effective solution to the drug epidemic that plagues our nation. Others may argue that stricter regulations on drugs are the way to slow the usage, or that arresting and locking up higher-level dealers would prevent the spread of more drugs on our streets. Despite concerns, these ideas have been disproven, and they disproportionately target minority groups, and promote crime while reducing safety. Safe injection spaces give individuals who are fighting a battle with addiction a safe, judgement free environment to use, while receiving information about counseling and addiction services that can help them in their fight to stop using. Support these spaces, vote for politicians who believe in them and all the good they can do. These spaces have been proven to reduce overdoses and deaths while being cost effective and are enormously helpful in combating addiction. State and local officials need to be aware that these spaces are nothing both humane and cost-effective so that more can open, and countless lives can be saved.

References

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