

Craig Jones, PhD | Guns, Gangs & Drugs: Can We Learn? | The Mark News

Warren Buffet says it's good to learn from your own mistakes, but it's preferable to learn from the mistakes of others. Can Canadians learn from American experience where guns, gangs, and drugs are concerned? That depends on political decisions at the highest levels, and the indicators are not promising.

Gangs are so difficult to eliminate because we cannot completely eliminate the circumstances – including the opportunity for fast money – that calls them into being and sustains them. This is particularly true of inner-city street gangs. The possibility of economic gain, persistent poverty, racism, lack of opportunity, and social dislocation are the catalysts and drug prohibition is the fuel.

What our political and police leaders seem blind to is that street gangs are an adaptive, even rational response to circumstances that none of us would choose but which we seem unable or unwilling to address.

Street gangs, their rise and proliferation, can be understood through the lens of supply and demand. Adolescent males demand identity, solidarity, excitement, a role, and a purpose. As they transition through their risk-taking years – historically when we sent them to war – gangs substitute for the kind of pack experience that armed combat used to supply. What is a military unit but a disciplined, armed, and centrally directed gang?

Street gangs in the inner cities supply the opportunity to form identity, to gain approval of peers, to generate meaning, to feel solidarity, to experience danger, to flash around cash, to appear relevant and tough to outsiders, and to know the experience of brotherhood. They also provide protection from the predations of other gangs.

As the gang culture takes hold, gangs become “normal” and young men and women come to view them as part of the soil in which they take root. Street gangs, then, can be a rationally adaptive market-driven response to circumstances in which other forms of social advancement -- a university education for example -- are impeded.

In this way, gang membership has benefits that are undersupplied in ordinary life. Hence their appeal – and our difficulty in responding to them intelligently. Ironically, police pressure may actually solidify the gang's internal sense of identity, purpose, and mission, especially if the gang is comprised of minority youth who already perceive the cops and the establishment to be adversarial or indifferent to their circumstances. What police pressure supplies is what the gangs demand: a common adversary to unify against.

Since gangs, like all human institutions, seek to grow and enlarge their influence, it is particularly counter-productive to incarcerate gang members as we have been doing, particularly on the prairies, since our jails and detention facilities become recruiting centres for the next generation of at-risk minority youth.

Then there is the issue of illicit drugs: the oxygen that fuels the fire of street gangs.

Defenders of prohibition claim that, were Canada to end drug prohibition, gangs would migrate to other activities. Actually, gangs already have multiple sources of illicit income – it's just that nothing else comes close to the profits made from drug dealing under prohibition. Cracking down on drug suppliers eliminates only the gang members stupid or careless enough to get caught and provokes a lethal contest over the remaining market share. It is a form of natural selection – the surviving drug traffickers have proven themselves more deadly, more flexible, and more adept at evading police. So we have gangs controlling drug markets with violence and turning neighbourhoods into “no go” zones. What is to be done?

The federal government has a one-size-fits-all solution: “get tough.” That sounds like what our American neighbours have been doing since the early 1970s. What can we learn from their experience?

A systematic review by the Urban Health Research Initiative at UBC recently concluded that “the existing scientific evidence strongly suggests that drug prohibition likely contributes to drug market violence and higher homicide rates [and] that increasingly sophisticated methods of disrupting drug distribution networks may increase levels of drug-related violence.” That conclusion is based on a review of studies conducted mostly in the United States. The lesson is clear: When police go to war with traffickers, traffickers go to war with each other, and citizens get caught in the crossfire.

Why might this be true? Because drug markets operate like markets for any other commodity. When one large market actor is removed, others attempt to fill the vacuum. What is different about the drug market, however, is the context of criminal prohibition. Market participants shoot it out in the streets rather than in courts. Prohibition, re-enshrined in Canada's (<http://www.nationalantidrugstrategy.gc.ca/>) National Anti-Drug Strategy, guarantees the high profits from drug trafficking.

Bottom line, drug prohibition creates and sustains criminal gangs, just as alcohol prohibition created and sustained Al Capone, Bugsy Moran, and Lucky Luciano. Drug prohibition is currently tearing apart northern Mexico, fuelling a civil war between traffickers and the Mexican army. Drug prohibition finances the killing of Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan and gang violence in Vancouver. The bodies are piling up everywhere, but no one is learning.

So, can Canadians learn? The evidence is not encouraging. Like generals from the First World War, the government claims that all that is needed is more of the same, only harder and tougher. The federal government's agenda promises “truth in sentencing” and “serious time for serious crime” but fails to acknowledge that none of these strategies, or any combination of “get tough” approaches, worked in the U.S. Nor can any degree of toughness repeal the iron law of supply and demand that drives the drug trade under conditions of prohibition. Drug markets restabilize after temporary spasms of dealer-on-dealer violence and business proceeds as usual.

Today, across North America, prices for street drugs continue to fall as accessibly and

purity of product continues to rise. It is precisely the opposite of what proponents of prohibition have promised since Richard Nixon declared his “war on drugs” in the early 1970s. Drugs are everywhere and so are the gangs that provide them.

Should Canada follow the American example? Can we succeed where the U.S. failed? The evidence says we cannot. Perhaps Canadians are doomed to ignore Warren Buffet’s lesson. Perhaps we must learn from our own mistakes because we refuse to learn from the mistakes of others.

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