

LGBT Communities and Drug Policy Reform

Toward a Public Health and Safety-Based Approach



The war on drugs is a war on families, a war on communities, and a war on our constitutional rights. Millions of people have been incarcerated for low-level violations, trillions of dollars have been wasted, and hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost because cost-effective and life-saving interventions are not sufficiently available. We need drug policies that move away from the criminal justice system, and address drug overdose, addiction, and misuse through a health-oriented framework.

What Does Drug Policy Reform Have To Do With the LGBT Movement?

Personal sovereignty informs both the LGBT liberation and drug policy reform movements. Both are rooted in a core principle that our body belongs to us, yet we both find our bodies a battleground for competing political and cultural ideologies. We often face the same enemies and have some of the same weapons arrayed against us. Police surveillance and repression, along with stigma and moral panic, are used to great effect against both LGBT individuals and drug users. The LGBT movement has a proud history as a voice for freedom, liberation, social change, and social justice. Certainly not all LGBT individuals are progressive or even liberal, nor do they all need to be, but as a community, we have spoken out against harmful social policies. We need to join the fight against prohibition.

Why Should I Care?

- Drugs, including alcohol, have played a huge cultural and historical role for us: liberation, celebration, socialization, self-medication, comfort, sex. Bars have often been our

churches and cultural institutions. Drugs have played central roles in our social lives, our sex lives and our communities.

- Drugs have been part of how we coped with oppression and hatred, numbing ourselves to handle the homophobia, hatred and discrimination thrown at us – and how we managed the social stigma and isolation.
- Drugs have not always been good for us. LGBT individuals have significantly higher vulnerability to problematic substance use. Every study done has shown higher rates of drug use and misuse compared to our heterosexual peers. The reasons cited in the research include: less resilience/family support; greater rates of mental health issues; a response to social oppression; targeted advertising; and reliance on bars for socializing.
- The war on drugs in combination with LGBT invisibility has led to fewer culturally competent resources, services, programs or therapists for those of us struggling with problematic substance use. Residential programs are structured by gender, with few places for those of us who don't fit binary gender boxes. Many treatment programs are based in religious ideology and are not accepting of LGBT communities.
- The war on drugs has encouraged police surveillance of LGBT spaces, along with control of social and sexual behaviors: drugs or suspected drug use are often used as reasons for increased police surveillance of LGBT spaces, both public and private.

- The war on drugs exacerbates other oppressions. Low-income LGBT individuals, especially those of color, are subjected to the injustices of the war on drugs because of their race and class. People of color are disproportionately punished by the war on drugs, with higher rates of arrest, conviction and imprisonment, despite equal or lower rates of drug use. One reason that gay men of color have higher rates of HIV infection is because of the intersecting oppressions of the war on drugs, racism and homophobia.

“The movement for drug policy reform stands in the footsteps of other movements for individual freedom and social justice – it currently stands where the gay rights movement stood in the 1970s, or where the civil rights movement stood in the 1950s, or where the women’s rights movement stood in the early part of the 20th century.”
- Ethan Nadelmann, Executive Director, Drug Policy Alliance

- *The war on drugs has made the HIV epidemic worse.* Substance use is one of the drivers of HIV transmission in our communities, whether alcohol, crystal meth or opiates. The lack of treatment options is directly attributable to the war on drugs and the “just say no” mentality. It has prevented us from fully implementing one of the most effective HIV prevention methods we know of: access to sterile syringes. Rates of HIV infection among men who have sex with men (MSM) who also use injection drugs are significantly higher than among other MSM. Transgender individuals who use syringes for hormones and body modification are also at higher risk. The war on drugs has stopped many of our friends, lovers and family members with HIV/AIDS from using medical cannabis, although we know that it can help reduce suffering and improve appetite.
- The war on drugs has kept us from the information we need to make our drug use safer. Inaccurate drug war propaganda lies about what is and isn’t safe, leaving us vulnerable to preventable overdoses, side effects and dangerous drug interactions.

- The war on drugs has sent LGBT individuals to prisons and jails for their drug use, punishing them instead of giving them health care. It has taken its toll on LGBT sex workers, who are vulnerable to drug use, violence, and arrest, especially if they are transgender or people of color. Incarceration is not healthy for anyone, but prisons and jails are particularly dangerous for LGBT individuals – who are disproportionately subject to violence, rape and discrimination, and for transgender individuals, denial of their very identity.

What Can I Do To End the War on Drugs?

- Come out of the closet about your drug use. Drug war propaganda demonizes and dehumanizes people who use drugs. Let your fellow citizens – your colleagues, your friends and your family – know the real face of the American drug user.
- Tell your elected representatives that ending the war on drugs is important to you. Don’t let them get away with touting “tough on crime” measures that don’t make our communities any safer, but cost money that could be better spent on health or education. Support politicians who speak out against prohibition, especially our LGBT elected officials, such as U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin, New York Senator Tom Duane, and California Assemblymember Tom Ammiano.
- Learn more about the war on drugs and the harm that it has caused to individuals, families, and communities across the world. The Drug Policy Alliance website is a good place to start: www.drugpolicy.org
- Work within the progressive LGBT movement to fight against prohibition and change drug-related policies, laws and attitudes to ensure community safety, liberty and well-being.
- Support drug policy reform organizations. There are local, state, and national groups doing very good, very hard work. Pick one (or more) and contribute, in whatever way you can.