

# Addicted

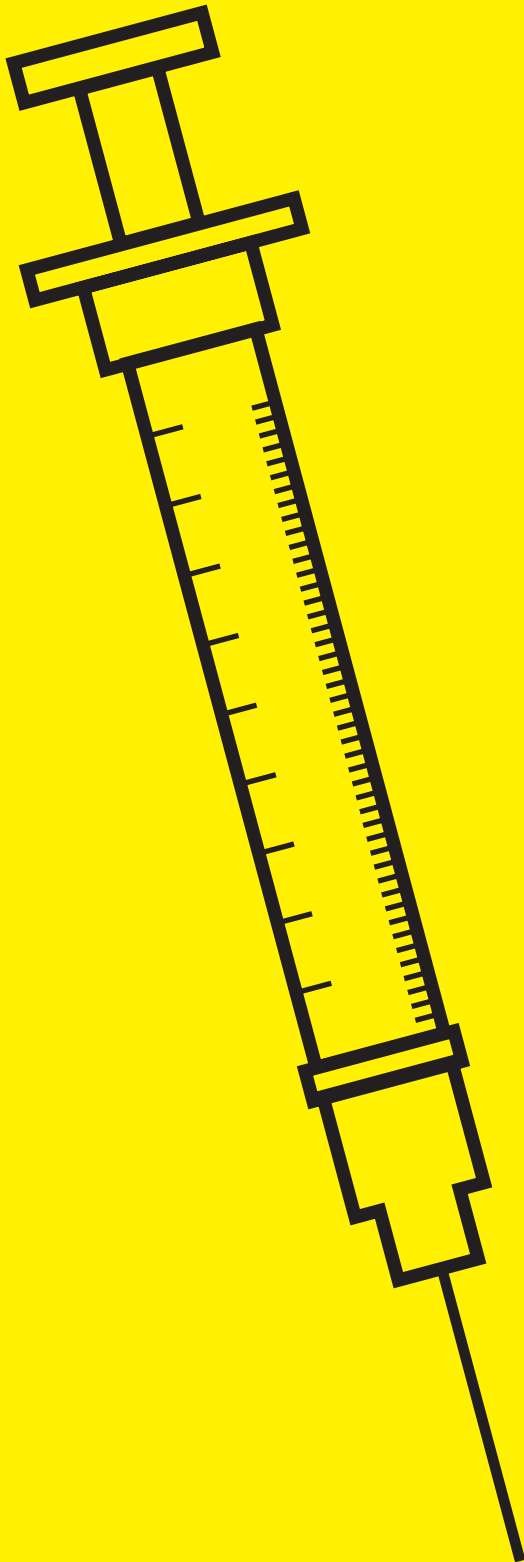
BY KATIE ADDLEMAN

**S**HORTLY AFTER VANCOUVER was named the host of the 2010 Olympics, Naomi Klein was seething about injustice again. “The Vancouver-Whistler Olympic bid presented the province of British Columbia as a model of harmonious, sustainable living, a place where everyone gets along,” she wrote in 2003. After 9-11, the city had sold itself to the International Olympic Committee as the “Safety and Security Candidate...a place where nothing ever happens.” It was a false image, and Klein feared that the darker realities of life in B.C. would remain unexposed to the international community. She needn’t have worried. Six years later, just as the world was turning an eye on Vancouver in advance of the coming Olympic carnival, the city was full of guns. The murder rate between January and March was unprecedented: 47 shootings, 19 of them fatal—twice as many as five years previous. The U.K.’s *Sunday Times* ran an article calling Vancouver “Murder City.” Vancouver police chief Jim Chu summed up the situation for a panicking public: “There is a gang war, and it’s brutal.”

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime released its 2009 World Drug Report in late June, naming the west coast of Canada as a hub of the international drug trade and B.C.’s organized crime groups as largely responsible. By this time, the violence had died down and not much attention was paid to connecting this new information about B.C.’s pivotal role in world drug traffic and the war that Chu had identified three months earlier. The link between gang warfare, the manufacture and export of illicit drugs, and the fact of those drugs’ very illegality was, meanwhile, barely mentioned at all.

After years of attacking the symptoms of the (increasingly ludicrously named) “war on drugs,” it’s time to stop and consider what would actually end the murders, gang wars, smuggling, petty arrests, and drug-related deaths that afflict us. The answer is to attack the root of the problem: prohibition itself.

**IN OCTOBER 2007**, six men were found dead in an apartment in the Vancouver neighbourhood of Surrey. The 48 investigators charged with solving the crime appealed to the public and the victims’ families, asking for any information that could



# to failure

The War On Drugs has funnelled billions into the pockets of criminals, and drug use is higher than ever. Time to kick our bad habit

lead to arrests. It was obvious to everyone that four of these six murders weren't random. The two remaining victims had been caught in the crossfire and killed accidentally. These were executions. Vancouver had long supported a substantial criminal economy, but the case of the Surrey Six marked the beginning of a precipitous rise in gang-related violence. In the months that followed, the headlines of local papers became increasingly macabre; by the time I arrived in Vancouver at the end of 2008, I felt I'd landed in Gotham City: Three Slayings Within 24 Hours, the papers screamed; Man Gunned Down in East Vancouver; Grieving Mom Begs for Public's Help; Four Fatal Shootings Lead Cops to Expect More. At the beginning of 2009, one year before the Olympics would make Vancouver the focus of every news outlet in the world, people were being shot on a nearly daily basis.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper responded with the hard-line approach typical of conservative politics: more convictions, longer sentences. The proposed legislation called for more of the same, its *coup de grâce* being a mandate that all gang-related killings be called first-degree murder and carry minimum jail terms of 25 years. Harper announced his proposal in Vancouver at the end of February, affecting a "we'll take care of it" demeanour that aimed to calm the public and the international media, who were now swarming on the story of Gangland Vancouver. There was nothing to worry about, he said. The escalating violence shouldn't concern those planning to attend the 2010 Olympic Games. (They'd install 15,000 police officers, working morning to night!) Later that day, Cory Stephen Konkin, 30, was shot in his car in Maple Ridge. He was followed by four more murder victims in the five days that followed.

"They have to appear to be doing something," says Jerry Paradis of the Harper government's fledgling recourse. "They can't just admit they are at a loss on how to deal with the issue." Paradis, who served as a judge on the Provincial Court of British Columbia between 1975 and 2003, has become an outspoken critic of governments' law and order policies, and particularly their proven ineffectiveness in preventing gang violence. He points to the various "task forces" that have been

created and re-created over the years as examples of this failure—when one proves ineffectual, it is replaced by another that looks remarkably similar: the Integrated Gang Task Force, implemented in 2004, was followed in 2007 by the Violence Suppression Team. The violence not having been suppressed, Premier Gordon Campbell is now allocating funds to identical squads in Kelowna and Prince George, to be developed over the next three years at a cost of \$23 million per year.

Paradis points to the failed anti-gang measures of the United States, which bear a strong resemblance to those our own government would adopt. "The federal and many state penal systems that adopted mandatory minimums are withdrawing from that approach," he says. "In California, devotion to quick-fix measures like three-strikes laws and widespread minimums have nearly bankrupted the government, while having no perceptible effect on crime."

Why do we continually fall back on tactics that don't work? Aside from the share of votes garnered through "tough on crime" posturing, gangs are exceedingly problematic to combat. "Their airtight culture, their shifting alliances, and, most important, the fear they spread make gangs exceedingly difficult to successfully investigate and prosecute," says Paradis. "Surveillance, infiltration, and intelligence seem to be the keys—and those can be extremely delicate and costly." No government in the world has the resources necessary to quash gang activity through these conventional means. Policy makers need to put on their creative thinking caps, and then ready themselves for a revolution. The solution to the problem—legalization—is nothing if not divisive.

**THE CONCENTRATION OF VIOLENCE** was unprecedented in Vancouver. But gang violence is nothing new; gangs are volatile entities, their hierarchies often disrupted by death or imprisonment, their members sensitive to power fluctuations occurring in like organizations all over the globe. When a cartel boss flaps his wings in Mexico City, a typhoon of violence can erupt in Surrey, B.C. According to a study on organized crime in British Columbia prepared by the RCMP's Criminal Analysis Section in 2005, as of that year there were 108 street

gangs operating in B.C. Today's estimates place the number higher, at 160. And it will continue to rise; there's money enough to support hundreds of these organizations. It's not hard to turn a dime when you're invested in the world's most lucrative market.

Michael C. Chettleburgh, a criminal policy consultant in Ottawa and Canada's foremost authority on street gangs, posits that gang life offers various attractions—camaraderie, protection, a shared sense of identity, power—but that the opportunity to make vast amounts of money is undoubtedly its primary allure. "The desire for money and the desire to make money quickly, by whatever means possible, are the combined drivers of street-gang activity," he writes. Street gangs derive their income from myriad illegal activities, but selling drugs is far and away their greatest profit source. (Studies conducted by the RCMP, CSIS, and the Fraser Institute, among others, consistently produce findings to this effect.) Though the worth of any black market is impossible to calculate exactly, the UN puts the yearly value of the worldwide drug trade at somewhere between US\$150 and US\$400 billion. That's one-eighth of the world's international trade, according to UN studies. Only the textile industry yields similar gains.

"This kind of gang violence is always very cyclical," Const. David Bratzer told me in the measured, helpful tone of a schoolteacher, when I reached him at his home in Victoria and asked for his take on the current crisis. "It's related to control of the black market for drugs. A lot of times, when you see this kind of violence, it's because something has been destabilized: a leader's been arrested or shot, and now his subordinates or other groups are fighting to control that black market and all those tax-free profits." Whether violence is up or down at a given moment is inconsequential; it will continue to rise and abate in endless waves as long as there are gangs, and there will be gangs as long as organized crime is profitable.

Still, in the early months of 2009, politicians and police were compelled to offer more pointed explanations for the latest explosion. Most spoke broadly of internal power struggles or disruptions to the drug supply, while some, like RCMP Supt. Pat Fogarty, placed the blame squarely on the ongoing Mexican drug war. None of this reasoning is invalid, but it skirts the larger truth: people were dying, and killing, for money. Or, more accurately, enough money to buy a country.

Ounce for ounce, marijuana is worth more than gold, and heroin more than uranium. Yet it's only as a direct result of international policy that drugs are so valuable; if they weren't illegal, they'd be worthless. Prohibition floats the drug trade by raising potential profits to astronomical levels, and the drug trade in turn floats the gangs who control it. "Because of ... their illegality and associated criminal sanctions," writes Chettleburgh, "those willing to trade in them—drug cartels, organized crime syndicates, so-called narcoterrorist groups and street gangs—can demand high prices and derive great profits."

Great profits is an understatement. Everything in the drug trade is profit. Manufacturers, who buy from farmers, incur virtually no overhead. They're buying plants—weeds, in fact—that will grow nearly anywhere. From the point of produc-

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tion to the point of purchase, the value of their product can increase by as much as 17,000 percent. By contrast, the markup on retail goods is generally closer to 100 percent. This is

what Canada, and all other governments who support prohibition policy, fail to grasp: drug dealing is a profession, and its potential earnings guarantee an endless supply of hopeful employees. Harsher criminal penalties haven't stopped it, and won't stop it, because the number of dealers will never diminish. Locking up one doesn't remove one from the street; it creates a job opening that hundreds of people are waiting to fill. In his wildest imaginings, Stephen Harper could not envision an effective deterrent to this fact.

"You're talking about a profession where people accept a risk of being murdered, execution-style, as an occupational hazard," said Bratzer. "How is a mandatory minimum sentence going to deter a person who already accepts the risk of being shot and having their body dumped in a car?"

In British Columbia, the marijuana trade alone accounts for five percent of the GDP, placing it alongside forestry and mining in economic significance. It employs 250,000 people and is worth \$7 billion annually. Police have busted thousands of grow-ops in eradication campaigns over the past 10 years, finding particular success with the Electric Fire Safety Initiative, a four-year-old project that partners B.C. Hydro with the fire department and the RCMP to track down grow-ops through notable spikes in private electricity usage. Yet the industry continues to thrive. The number of plants in B.C. is actually proliferating; the RCMP estimates there are currently 20,000 province-wide. The webpage of the City of Richmond, B.C., includes helpful hints for landlords wishing to prevent their properties from becoming marijuana farms.

The Criminal Intelligence Service of British Columbia confirms "marijuana cultivation is the most pervasive and lucrative organized crime activity" in the province, but goes on to remind us that local methamphetamine production is nothing to pooh-pooh; it's making a strong push to the top, "expanding at a rate similar to the early growth of the marijuana industry." It's little wonder that the province can support so many gangs. And while, in Chettleburgh's words, Canadians demonstrate a "robust interest" in consuming illicit drugs (a 2004 study by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse leaves little room for interpretation), it must be noted that 90 to 95 percent of the illegal drugs produced in Canada are eventually sold in external markets. This is not unique to Canada, but representative of the trade. The drug market is borderless, and links every crime ring in the world to every other: grow-ops in Canada

are guarded by American guns, which are sold to Canadians to finance purchases of cocaine, which is sold to Mexicans by Colombian manufacturers, and then ferried across the border by American importers, who trade it with Canadians for B.C.-grown marijuana, who sell it for guns to protect their grow-ops, ad infinitum. Variations on the model are unlimited; supply lines and products traded change along with profit margins, power structures, and government patrol barriers. What remains constant is a competitive economic system, controlled by people under immense pressure and concerned only with profit potential. Violence is the natural by-product of such a system—in Vancouver, in Phoenix, in Ciudad Juarez. It is a global problem.

**JACK COLE** is the executive director of Law Enforcement Against Prohibition, an international organization comprised of police chiefs and officers, former mayors and governors, criminal justice policy experts, MPs, retired senators and judges, and the former attorney general of Colombia, among others. Its mandate is to legitimize a fringe position on drug policy: legalize. Legalize everything.

“I’d say this is about business as usual,” Cole said of the violence raging from Mexico to Canada. We had finally gotten the chance to speak; Cole travels endlessly for LEAP, within the U.S. and internationally, presenting to professional, civic, religious, and governing bodies, including the UN, on the proven dangers of prohibition and the necessity of ending it. He estimates that he has given his speech, “End Prohibition Now,” more than 800 times. The International Harm Reduction Association selected it as one of the world’s finest documents on policing and harm reduction. Our conversation had been preceded by numerous emails. The last one, genial as always, concluded, “Attached are some of the things that would not exist if we had legalized regulation of drugs.” I opened the attachment. It was an article from a recent issue of the *London Telegraph*. “Henchman of Mexican Drug Lord Dissolved 300 Bodies in Acid,” read the headline. I didn’t read any further. Cole’s position was clear enough.

When we spoke the next day I was surprised by his tone: warm, patient, patently American. It made his pro-legalization talk all the more intriguing. “It was worse than this at given times in the past,” he said. “In Colombia, for instance. Most people weren’t following it, but when you look at the number of people murdered in Colombia back in late ‘80s and early ‘90s ... I mean, the drug cartels actually attacked the federal courthouse, and for several days held hostages there. They killed a whole bunch of judges.” For all of the apocalyptic talk at the beginning of the year, gang violence was not, internationally, the worst it had been—just the closest to home. “The fact of the matter is, that all this would end, it would all be over within a day, if we legalized and regulated these drugs,” Cole said.

Not everyone agrees. Darryl Plecas, a professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Fraser Valley and the RCMP Research Chair in Crime Reduction, argues widely for continued prohibition and prosecution of producers and traffickers. “Things are changing, thanks very much, without a change in policy on prohibition,” he told me

when I reached him on the ferry from Vancouver Island to the mainland. “Cocaine, crystal meth—we wiped that problem off the planet. It’s vanished. There were all kinds of people using meth, then there was an all-out assault [by government and law enforcement agencies]. What it takes is clever education.” The UN World Drug Report naming Canada as one of the largest exporters of crystal meth had not yet been released at the time of our conversation.

Plecas, who has twice participated in the prestigious Oxford Round Table, an annual forum on public policy at Oxford University, also takes a moral stance against legalization, arguing the harmful effects of drugs on users and their communities. “Do we want to facilitate, condone that?” he asks. When I put forward the standard argument that marijuana has proven less harmful than alcohol, he responds that there is “mounting medical evidence of the harms of marijuana use. Nobody’s getting schizophrenia from drinking. You can backtrack from alcoholism. You’re not returning from schizophrenia.”

This, in effect, is the centre of the prohibitionists’ argument. Drugs are not just dangerous, but demonic; if they weren’t, it would be very hard to justify their illegality. “People have, to some extent, been hoodwinked by the misinformation put out there by the prohibitionists,” says Jeffrey Miron, a Harvard economist who has been studying the unintended consequences of prohibition for 15 years. “This is the claim that drug use is very, very horribly bad for you, the implication that it’s always and necessarily bad for you, as opposed to the more accurate view that, like alcohol, dose makes a difference and lots of people can use in moderation and use responsibly,” he says. “They don’t seem to want to think about the fact that some people misuse alcohol and do stupid things, but millions of people don’t misuse alcohol and use it in moderation. And they assume that somehow drugs would be different, that we would only get the extreme cases. But the evidence doesn’t suggest that. I don’t know why more people don’t recognize that.”

So while Plecas says prohibitionists “should get their moral compass out,” Miron, Cole, and a growing number of politicians, economists, criminologists and police officers (particularly in the wake of President Obama’s election to the White House, as the new administration is seen as more amenable to logic) are putting forward the idea that legalization represents the most ethical solution to the drug problem. It is founded on a singular fact, irrefutable in the face of a century of gathered evidence: prohibition has made everything worse. From crime to corruption to instances of overdose, prohibition has left us less safe, sicker, and poorer than before, and all at tremendous expense. Governments everywhere have essentially spent billions ramping up social ills. It is one of the hideous ironies of our age.

**AS DRUGS AND THEIR USE** predate prohibition, the social implications of the policy can be easily traced. The first instance of anti-drug legislation in Canada was the Anti-Opium Act, passed in 1908. British Columbia was then roughly 20 percent Chinese. One year earlier, an anti-Asian riot had torn through Vancouver, and the practice of placing head taxes on Chinese

immigrants, first instituted in 1884, was at its peak. The Anti-Opium Act was plainly born of racist sentiment masquerading as a public safety initiative, as drug use in general was hardly stigmatized during this period. Throughout the Victorian era, one could dabble in cocaine, morphine, and heroin, whether instructed to do so by a doctor or no (physicians regularly prescribed all three), without wandering outside the border of mainstream practice.

In his book *Chasing Dragons: Security, Identity, and Illicit Drugs in Canada*, author Kyle Grayson writes that “public disapproval of opium arose not from the effects of the drug itself, but rather from its association with a group perceived as biologically and culturally inferior.” Opium was identified with Chinese immigrants and labourers, and, worse than that, with the corruption of white women at the hands of Chinese opium merchants. While other drugs were an acceptable good time, opium was foreign, un-Christian, and threatening. “It is important to remember that the publicly stated rationale for the Opium Act, the legislation that made further acts possible, did not have to do with the potentially harmful effects of opium. Rather, it was based on reports of the narcotic’s ‘dire influence’—specifically, on reports that young white women had been found in an opium den.”

By 1911, as Canadians were first starting to carve out a cultural identity, drug use of all kinds had begun to be seen as “improper,” not “Canadian,” and a symptom of moral deterioration. This new conception, spearheaded by culturally conservative journalists and politicians, led to the Opium and Narcotic Drug Act, a broader version of its predecessor, which included a clause permitting for the later addition of other drugs. In 1923, marijuana made the list. No reason was given. The trend continued, and the production, sale, and consumption of opium, cocaine, heroin, and marijuana were all eventually entirely criminalized, with other narcotics similarly banned as they appeared. The result? Just over 100 years after the misinformed creation of Canada’s first drug law, production is up, usage is up, crime is up, prices and ill-gotten profits are up. Prohibition has had none of its intended effects, and has instead served its targets. There is a kind of poetic justice here: we’ve seen that prohibition was based on a bogus theory, and as befits all ill-founded practices, it failed demonstrably.

The solution is to end it. We’ve lost much to fear campaigns (“Drugs kill!”) and plain delusion (“We can achieve a drug-free world!”), but the population can be re-educated. The majority of the Canadian public already supports legalized marijuana, but a 2009 Angus Reid Strategies poll indicates that only eight percent favour legalization of hard drugs. We are uneasy with the idea of the government supplying the public with drugs; there are too many attendant moral questions. But legalization, though not ideal, remains what the *Economist* calls the “least bad policy.” The trouble will be getting the public to vocally support it, and finding politicians willing to stand for it. “There has to be some fundamental change in people’s attitudes toward drugs,” says Miron. “It’s not obvious where that change will come from, unless a mainstream politician or a mainstream figure, a respected

figure, stands up and says, ‘This policy’s idiotic.’”

**NOWHERE IS THE SALE** and production of drugs a legal activity. Prohibition remains a fact of life in every country in the world, but the decriminalization policies of some places—most notably Switzerland, Portugal, and the Netherlands—are so comprehensive as to give us an idea of what life in a drug-law-free zone might look like. The Swiss have been treating heroin as a health problem since 1994. There were 23 clinics in the country where addicts could go up to three times a day to inject government-supplied heroin in 2007. The drug is provided on a sliding monetary scale. If an addict can pay for it, he or she does; if not, it’s free. The crime rate went down by 60 percent. Portugal shocked the international community and its own citizens when it decriminalized the possession of all drugs in 2001, becoming the first country in Europe to do so. A report published earlier this year by the Cato Institute, a U.S.-based think tank, concluded that the policy change had led to lowered instances of drug trafficking, sexually transmitted diseases, and overdose deaths, and an increase in the number of adults registered in addiction treatment programs. In the Netherlands, where soft drugs have been all but legal since 1976, the per capita usage of marijuana and hash is half what it is the U.S. Studies also suggest that the Netherlands per capita usage of hard drugs and homicide rates are one-quarter less than those of the U.S.

While we don’t have examples of successful legalization to look to, most policy makers, researchers, consultants, and activists envision it as combination of governmental drug production and distribution and harm-reduction initiatives. The government would manufacture the products, standardizing them for purity; supply them to the public in government-operated stores like the LCBO or B.C. Liquor. and use the profits from taxation to treat and ease addiction through rehabilitation programs and safe-injection sites. “There are lots of different ways it could be implemented,” says Miron. “It could be implemented by medicalizing it, meaning change the rules so that medical provision was not much supervised, so doctors could prescribe relatively freely, in which case just as many people can go and get Prozac; if they go to a psychiatrist and act as though they need it, people will be able to go to doctors and say, ‘My back hurts,’ or ‘I have anxiety,’ and be able to get prescriptions for morphine or methadone or marijuana or whatever. But it would still be open to the views of the enforcers about whether or not to allow wide-scale medical distribution. I think the better model is alcohol—sold by private companies, advertised, subject to age restrictions and some taxes, but just a legal commodity like anything else. There’s no reason it has to be treated any differently than Starbucks or Budweiser.”

Whatever the model we choose, drugs cannot continue to be treated as they are. We’ve avoided it as long as possible, but it’s time to look the ethical maze in the mouth and navigate our way through it, because to continue to pretend that we can extricate ourselves from this war through the traditional crime-and-punishment avenues of the Canadian justice system is to continue to line the pockets of those who would slay us in Surrey, if only by accident. 📌