



Seminar on the role of police in prevention

Organized by the Pompidou Group of the Council of Europe

in cooperation with the Hungarian National Police

Budapest, 20-21 October 2021

Speech

Police cooperation with treatment centers and emergency response services

Let me thank the Pompidou Group for giving me the opportunity to address the issue of humanitarian drug approach to a police officer audience, which is a key actor for us that can really make the difference in reducing the harm and the suffering of people who have a problematic relation with substances.

Substance abuse remains a major cause of suffering across the world, and among those who suffer the most, drug users are certainly the most discriminated. Drug users remain too often excluded from society, face social stigma, and in some countries, are punished and imprisoned rather than treated. For a very long time, we have been calling for a more humane approach to fighting drugs. This call was based on a strong sense of humanity, but most importantly, it was based on well-documented evidence.

First it's important if we all agree that drug disorders are a chronic relapsing disease.

A person with drug addiction is a sick person who cannot survive without drugs for a certain period of life, and must be treated above all because represents a danger to himself and to others. A person who is not treated is twice dangerous for its own life and for others.

There is no one solution therapy. And there is no fast solution of therapy. Treatment must be flexible and adapted to the person. The first fundamental goal is to avoid the point of non-return, that means to avoid the death or a pathological condition that will lead to death over time.

I'd like to report you the words used by the former Director of UNODC, Antonio Costa more than 10 years ago:

"Although drugs kill, I don't believe we need to kill because of drugs"

Public health is the first principle of drug control. Public health is the antidote for a better security of our community. Currently, the amount of resources and political support dedicated to public security and the maintenance of order exceeds that of resources directed to public health. This relationship must be rebalanced. Drug addiction is a disease that should be treated as many others. It is in the interest of every State to open the doors of health services in order to know all the drug users and to avoid relapse, harm, suffering and I would add also to avoid the frustration of Police Officers to deal with people that should be under treatment regime and not under justice regime!

Humanity has done a lot of mistakes in the fight against drugs. The big illusion that lead the approach of many governments, supported by

public opinion, has been mostly paternalistic, punitive, with a wide use of prisons and tribunals. The great illusion behind this still dominant strategy is that if people who use drug realizes that drug use carries punitive consequences, this is the best way to let them stop.

This apparently logical prejudice, however, is contradicted by reality. Those who suffer from the consequences of drug use will suffer even more from a punitive measures against them, and drugs will still appear to be the only viable solution. The more we treat badly the people with drug disorders, the more they will gladly return to drugs, which never say no to their request of help.

For a very long time, we (the Red Cross) have been calling for a more humane approach to address the issue—one which does not rely on punishment of people who use drugs, but is based instead on support, access to care and treatment.

We believe that treatment and punishment can't work together. Treating people with drug disorders is a common interest for all humanity, for all the government and for each community in order to have healthier, peaceful and safety communities.

We need to build a new dialogue among all the actors involved in the drug problems: medical and health professionals, psychologists, educators, police officers, prisons staff, courts, policy makers, in order to better know the role of each other, learn and combat together all the obstacles that impede people with drug problems to get cured in their communities!

Those countries and policy makers that keep ignoring the contradiction between punishment and treatment go against their own interest.

The humanitarian perspective is the milestone to increase good results in the fight against drug. The war on drugs and the slogan of the past like the “Just say NO” didn’t work. On the contrary they showed all the weaknesses of a violent and very expensive response against drug, that become very soon a war against drug users, that are the people that pay the highest price of this very old problem of drug consumption in our society.

In some other countries, governments continue to ignore the health consequences of those who are affected by drugs by considering them just as criminals and therefore are punished and incarcerated instead of being treated. Indeed, 1 out of 4 of the inmates in the world are in prison for drugs reasons, and they are forced to live in a pathological and pathogenic environment where their disease is not treated at all.

Across the globe, local law enforcement agencies are seeking new ways to better serve and protect communities confronting the consequences of drug addiction and overdose.

I know that you all face unprecedented pressures as first responders in these complex times. You all daily facing the impact of mental health and substance use problems of people in the streets, and in most of the cases Police has no other tools than arrest those who attempt the security and the order when they consume the drugs in the parks, streets, close to our child schools.

In the last 5-6 years, especially in the US, the police officers that work in street are facing an unprecedented crisis, the opioid epidemic that cause more than 80.000 death per year for overdose. This is a dramatic pandemic, and it’s tough to solve just with punitive approach in order to decrease the drug demand, since many people are dying because they get drugs in the grey market, or thanks to medical prescription of the so called pain killers.

This warning trend could reach us in Europe very soon, that's why now is an opportune time for law enforcement to make a reflection and partner with health responders with health facilities. And let me thank the Council of Europe for giving us this opportunity to contribute to this common debate.

Indeed, law enforcement can focus their resources on fighting the more dangerous crimes, as opposed to what often are "annoying" and repeat offenses driven by people with drug addiction problems that use to make the same mistakes especially because they are untreated, marginalize, and discriminated against.

I would like to show you how Humanitarian Drug Policy can be the best ally also for Law Enforcement sector. Humanitarian Drug Policy takes a realistic and non-judgmental approach to drug consumption: it takes care of people who use substances through treatment and public health measures. Therefore, alternative measures in the criminal justice field like the pre-arrest deflection and diversion, represents an effective solution for engaging police officer on one side and those who need help and care for their addiction on the other side. Prison and concentration camps won't work to solve people sickness.

Evidence showed us that Harm Reduction programs are crucial, governments need to make clear and urgent moves towards health and right-based approaches, for example by providing alternative measures in the criminal justice field like the pre-arrest deflection and diversion.

Pre-arrest diversion strategies – also known as deflection – hold the promise of addressing the opioid crisis, in particular, and drug use more generally, on a practical level while also contributing to more positive, human and effective attitudes toward police, instead of just punish and arrest someone who use drugs. When implemented, deflection can

literally save lives, reduce drug use and re-build community trust while promoting public safety.

Instead of utilizing traditional police interventions (i.e., arrest, punish, and charging), deflection relies on law enforcement to be the referral source to community-based drug treatment and mental health services prior to potential crises/violence. In this way, law enforcement opens up new treatment access points not previously available to those in need. Law Enforcement and First responders can help in bridging the gap between key population and health services. The goal of deflection is to refer people to the help they need before such a crisis occurs. This timing is an important factor of deflection.

The pathway to Treatment should be considered as a Continuum of Care. This is a long path in which many actors have a role and might intervene.

One of the first step that is vital to save people lives is the engagement of first responders, Police officers above all, for the overdose response in the streets.

The engagement of Police forces for overdose response team in the street can be the first step to make the difference between the life and the death with the use of the Naloxone.

I am proud to have been the first in the world, 30 years ago, to propose a concrete solution that nowadays is becoming a best practice, especially in countries most affected by mass consumption of new synthetic drugs such as Fentanyl. Naloxone is perhaps the only molecule of the pharmacopoeia without contra-indications. Naloxone is the drug of miracle, because is able to give back life to people are about to die for opioid overdose.

Other good practice beyond the Naloxone distribution to Police Officers, Ambulances, Fire Man, and families, it is important to train all first responder to better understand the problem of substance abuse by training course that allow them all to intervene properly. The first responders could really have a role by actively contacts them and motivates them to engage in treatment. Together with experts of treatment service is possible to play an active role in the outreach activities, by identifying people that can be included in treatment path. This is the best prevention activity: initiate engagement in the streets with law enforcement avoiding fear of arrest, and providing an immediate treatment referral.

I have some doubts that going in the school to make prevention to the kids and check drug in the pocket improve alone the drug problem in our communities.

In any case just after my intervention, my colleague Mauro Patti, will show you some good practice on the ground are run by my anti-drug center, Villa Maraini, to go more in depth with some pragmatic service that hopefully can inspire our work in the field.

To conclude, people who use drugs and those with drug use disorders are some of the first to be left behind in almost all circumstances. Therefore we must ensure full access to services and human dignity to people who use drugs, that are excluded from the society and ultimately moving them out of harm's way by rethinking the public role and responsibility we all have in improving the well-being of our society, in all of our connected countries.

Thank you.

Massimo Barra
& Mauro Patti