

SunSentinel

Drug sentences: Reducing penalties a step backward

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We should not be so quick to celebrate the reduction of prison sentences for crack dealers ("Cocaine Sentences Being Cut for Some," Sun-Sentinel, Sept. 21).

The enhanced penalties for selling crack cocaine were enacted in response to legitimate factors that still exist today. Law abiding citizens, especially in African-American communities, who have been victimized the most by this drug and its dealers sent a loud and clear message to law enforcement and lawmakers that crack dealing was an extraordinary problem that required extraordinary measures.

One of the most vocal leaders promoting those enhanced penalties was a special narcotics prosecutor and now federal judge in New York named Sterling Johnson. Judge Johnson, a respected leader in the community, had extensive experience prosecuting crack cases and serves on the Commission of U.S. Sentencing Guidelines.

While true that both crack and powder are different forms of the same drug, smokeable crack is recognized as having a significantly higher risk for addiction and danger to the community.

Few would question the rationale of enhanced penalties for trafficking nuclear bombs over conventional bombs, the very comparison Judge Johnson used when he declared crack was the nuclear version of cocaine and therefore justified enhanced penalties.

We find objectionable any attempt to present convicted drug distributors and manufacturers such as Anthea Harris and Sean Johnson (both of South Florida), as victims, wrongly imprisoned and now being liberated.

They are not. They are, as chairman of the U.S. House Select Committee on Narcotics Charles Rangel once declared, "dealers in death on the installment plan". Many lives are destroyed and many more are at risk by someone caught selling crack, 550 at a time.

Because someone's crime may not be classified as "violent" does not mean they are not a danger. Driving under the influence of alcohol is not a violent crime, until someone is killed.

Comparing 50 grams of crack to a "Snickers" bar was misleading. Crack, with a much lower density, would generate a far greater volume and number of dosages than the candy bar comparison represented. Fifty grams of crack would provide hundreds of dosages of a drug in which a single use has been compared to playing "Russian Roulette."

Reduced sentences with alternate use of probation for even first time high level drug distributors is not a responsible way to save tax dollars.

Our community will bear a much higher financial and human cost by putting dealers back on our streets. Keeping them incarcerated as long as possible is a good investment in our children and community.

The article failed to adequately take into consideration the innocent victims of Ms. Harris's crime, such as families victimized by addiction or overdose, residents victimized by fear of crack related crime or businesses owners victimized because customers were afraid to patronize them. Harris created the very kind of place that she was herself afraid to be in.

Fixing bad sentencing guidelines is good public policy. Putting more than 19,000 drug dealers back on our streets is not.

The better solution would have been to raise penalties for trafficking in cocaine powder to match those of crack or to consider enhanced penalties for other similar higher risk drugs.

That would have been a step forward instead of backward. That would have been a victory for the good guys instead of the bad guys.

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