

What do prostitution, drugs, alcohol, and nicotine addiction have in common? They all demoralize and harm society. Since they cause harm, strict regulation is absolutely necessary.

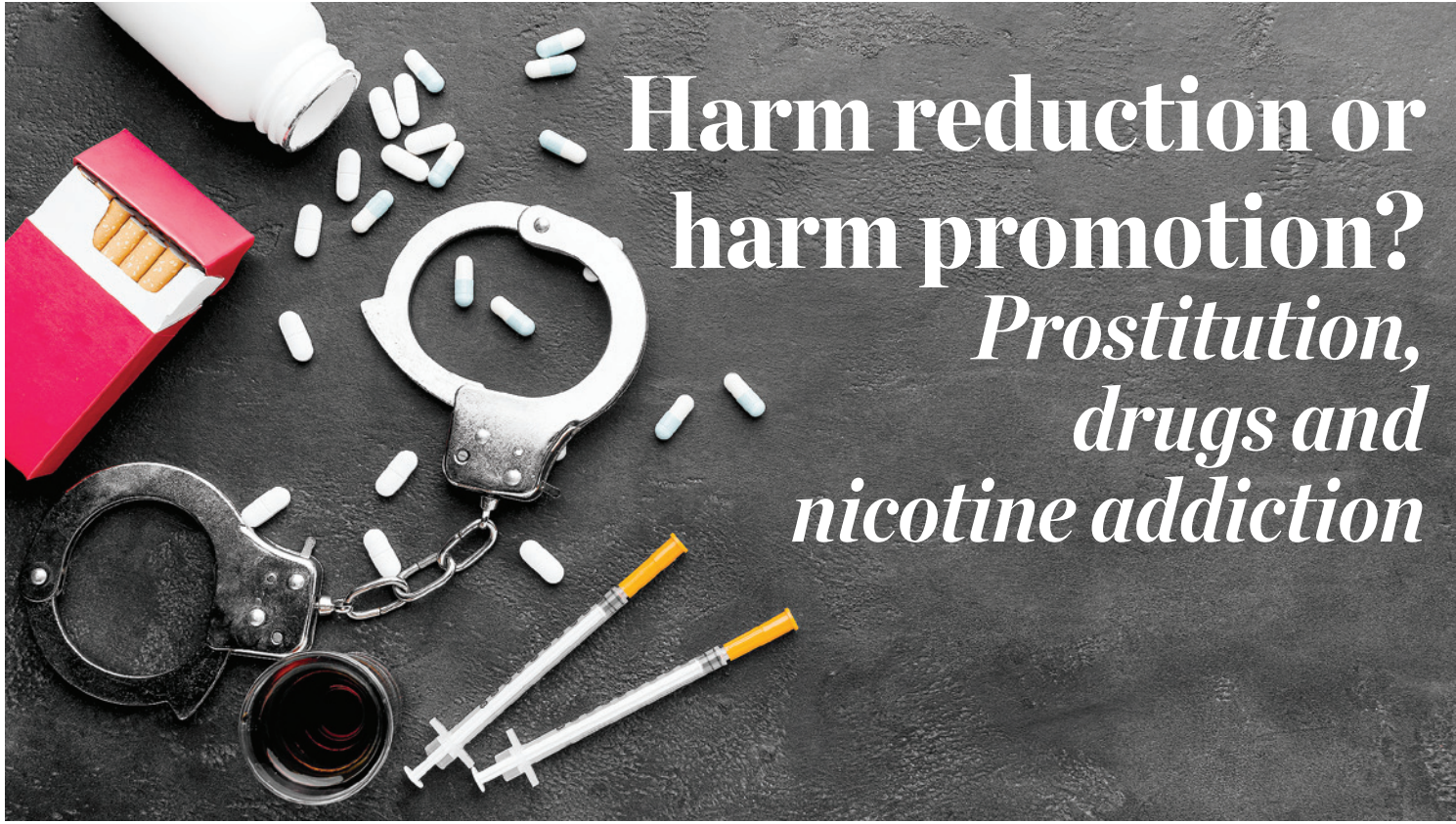
Strict regulation, however, can take different forms. A persistent difficult behavior like engaging in prostitution, drugs, binge drinking or smoking may cause a government to use threats or coercion. Worse, the government resorts to criminalizing some activities like prostitution and drug use.

Criminalization of certain activities deemed harmful to society, however, can do more harm than good. The case of prohibition of alcohol in the United States in the last century stands out as a negative example of criminalizing an activity. The Prohibition may have discouraged alcohol drinking but did not eliminate it. Worse, it deepened criminality and violence, and made otherwise harmless people into criminals. The Prohibition was eventually lifted, an acknowledgement of a failed policy.

The appropriate policy is very contextual. In many cases, instead of criminalization, a better benign approach is harm reduction. But the concept of harm reduction can also be manipulated and distorted.

I first learned about harm reduction as an essential political tool during my college thesis writing class. A controversial topic got my interest after watching a Jay Taruc documentary regarding prostitution in the country. The current policy focusing on criminalizing and penalizing prostitutes is so anti-poor and discriminatory. Most of the victims are women from poor or hard-up families. Yet, making prostitution a crime has not ended the oldest profession in the world. Unfavorable economic conditions like the rise of unemployment make prostitution viable.

Having a progressive mindset, I thought: "Oo nga no, sex work is work." So, for my political science thesis paper, I wrote about a harm reduction strategy to decriminalize adult prostitution, and at the same time combat the rising abuse cases, human trafficking, and prostitution of minors. I



Harm reduction or harm promotion?

Prostitution, drugs and nicotine addiction

YELLOW PAD ELLA IELLAMO

pushed for strict regulations that protected the rights and welfare of sex workers, not criminalization, which punished them.

Harm reduction is both a principle and practice with the aim of improving the safety of people who engage in potentially risky behavior. It is a strategy that is directed toward individuals or groups to mitigate or minimize the negative impact or effects associated with certain behaviors.

Sweden is one country that leads the way in harm reduction as applied to prostitution. Sweden introduced a law in 1995 that says that the "seller" of sexual services (or the prostitute) should not be punished. The result was a decline in unsafe, risky street prostitution by 50% since the law's implementation until 2014. Violence against both female and male prostitutes also decreased by 20% and 25%, respectively, during the same period.

In the Philippine policy environment, harm reduction can also be used as an approach to prevent teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, and nicotine abuse, among others. But authorities prefer

an iron-fist policy, and sideline harm reduction for some risky behaviors like prostitution and drug use.

Further, in some areas where harm reduction is ostensibly done, its use is superficial, or even deceptive. What happens then in this case is not harm reduction but harm promotion.

Take the case of President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs. Its violent nature, leading to thousands being killed, contradicts the harm reduction objective. Moreover, the war against drugs has turned into a war against the poor. Most of the civilians killed or targeted in the anti-drug operations come from poor families and impoverished areas.

Near the end of his term, the President has acknowledged that his administration has not solved the drug menace. Recall that his campaign promise was to end the drug problem within the first year of his term.

A harm reduction strategy would have recognized that drug use could not be eliminated, and the important and realistic goal would have been substantially reducing the harm from drug abuse. This could have been done through having good healthcare and treatment facilities, having access to safer alternatives (for

example, giving clean and safe needles to those already hooked on opioids), providing counseling and establishing support groups, etc.

A bolder harm reduction policy is to decriminalize drug use. The fact is, many of those using drugs are not habitual users. But when caught, they are sent to jail, making their lives more miserable. The majority of prison inmates are users of drugs, but they do not pose a threat to society. Why jail them? Such an iron-fist policy is ineffective to deal with drug abuse, and it actually results in harm promotion.

But the term "harm reduction" is also being used as a camouflage for harm promotion. Take the case of the Vape Bill, which Congress recently approved. It is packaged as a harm reduction strategy for nicotine abuse.

The proponents claim that vapes and e-cigarettes, most commonly known as electronic nicotine and non-nicotine delivery systems (ENDS/ENNDS) and heated tobacco products (HTPs), are a substitute for harmful cigarettes. The vape proponents say that vape use is harm reduction since vape products are less harmful than cigarettes. That can be true for smokers, even though the jury is out whether

vaping is an effective smoking cessation tool.

But here's the rub. The said bill relaxes the provisions of RA 11467. The existing law strictly regulates vapes, e-cigarettes, and heated tobacco products. It is thus deceptive to say that the new bill introduces harm reduction. There is already a law on vaping that is consistent with harm reduction, but the bill that intends to supplant the current rules will be a deregulation of vaping.

The vape bill, lowers the age of access to vapes and e-cigarettes from 21 years old to 18 years old; transfers regulatory jurisdiction from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI); and reverses the ban on multiple flavors.

A Vera Files study says that these provisions in the bill have the intention of enticing the non-smokers, especially the youth, to purchase and use vape products. For instance, e-juices for vapes sold online are categorized under the "toys, games, and collectibles" section on e-commerce websites. Another indication that vaping is mainly targeted to non-smokers is the fact that some of the e-juice flavors, such as bubblegum, marshmallow, and "Yakult," are being advertised as "beginner-friendly."

Recall that harm reduction is meant to minimize adverse effects, in this case those associated with nicotine addiction. Introducing vaping to non-smokers or enticing them to do so cannot be called harm reduction. Vaping-related injuries are well-documented; yet legislators endorse vape use by relaxing the regulations. The vape bill is far from being a harm reduction strategy. It is for this reason that the medical associations (except for a handful of doctors defying their associations) want the President to veto the vape bill.

To conclude, much still has to be done for policy-makers, politicians and the public at large to understand and appreciate what harm reduction is.

Since harm reduction is principally a health issue, the health organizations, including the Department of Health (DoH), assume a leading role in the promotion of harm reduction. We must acknowledge the centrality of health practitioners in the decision-making process to shape public health policies, including those on harm reduction. That is why it does not make sense that the regulation of vape products is removed from DoH and transferred to the Department of Trade and Industry.

That said, harm reduction is a whole-of-society approach. The harm inflicted on prostitutes can be minimized by having institutions and policies that generate quality jobs and that provide robust social welfare programs. The harm suffered by drug users can be reduced by making social conditions less stressful, by creating civic spaces, and by giving communities and stakeholders ownership of local programs regarding drug and crime control.

Sadly, at present, we are far from the principle and practice of harm reduction. If it is used, it is done wrongly and even deceptively. What we have is not harm reduction but harm promotion. ■

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Are billionaires making out like bandits?

By Paul Krugman

DID YOU HEAR about Jeff Bezos and the bridge? The Amazon billionaire's new superyacht, under construction in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, is so big that the city might have to partially take down a historic bridge so that it can reach open water. The story has quickly become a metaphor for soaring inequality, and it feeds the perception that billionaires have done very well during the COVID-19 pandemic while ordinary people have suffered.

But is this perception accurate? It's actually a bit complicated. Obviously we don't need to shed any tears for Bezos, and who among us is immune to schadenfreude over Mark Zuckerberg's recent losses? Furthermore, I still believe that substantial increases in taxes on the rich would be a very good idea.

When you ask how different groups have done during the pandemic, however, it's important to distinguish between wealth — which is strongly affected by, among other things, fluctuations in the stock market — and income. I've written about this before but can now say quite a bit more thanks to a terrific new statistical tool — Realtime Inequality — developed by economists at Berkeley. It lets us track changes in the distribution of both wealth and income in, well, real time, and it's hugely illuminating.

Let's start by talking about wealth. The rich have, in fact, gotten considerably richer over the past two years; so, actually, have most Americans, but the gains have been especially big at the top.

Underlying these gains have been rising asset prices. Faster growth at the top probably reflects especially large gains in the stock market; stocks are held disproportionately by the wealthy, while much middle-class wealth is in housing.

But here's the thing about asset prices: While they're driven in part by the income people receive from the assets they own — dividends, rent, and so on — they're also affected by the returns investors expect on alternatives. As I tried to explain in a newsletter a few months ago, a lot of the rise in asset prices actually reflects bad news, a decline in the expected rate of return on new investments.

And if, say, the value of your stocks has gone up because of low interest rates, but the dividends you receive have stagnated or gone down, have you really come out ahead? It's not that easy of a question to answer.

So, what has been happening to the income of the very wealthy? It's up, but not nearly as much as their wealth — and in fact, their gains have lagged behind those of the bottom half of the population.

Why have lower-income Americans seen relatively large income gains (from a low base; we're still an incredibly unequal society)? Part of the answer is government aid during the pandemic. The spikes in income when stimulus checks went out and from other programs like the expanded child tax credit — which I still hope can be brought back — made a big difference.

But that's not the whole story. Lately we've been experiencing a tight labor market, which has led to rising

wages — with wages increasing much faster for lower-paid workers.

Yes, inflation has eroded these gains in real terms, although gains for workers at the bottom appear to have outpaced price increases. The point for now, however, is that a tight labor market seems to be reducing pay inequality.

So the simple story that the pandemic has been great for the wealthy and bad for the working class doesn't hold up. There are, of course, other ways in which the pandemic has had a hugely unequal impact; the past two years have been very different for those Americans — mostly highly educated and well paid — who could work from home than for those who couldn't. But that's another story.

Is there a policy moral in all this? It's pretty much a given that the Federal Reserve will be raising interest rates in the months ahead, in an effort to cool inflation. And it will be right to do so. Some people will, however, also be cheering on interest hikes because they tend to reduce stock prices, which makes the wealthy less wealthy — and this, they imagine, reduces economic inequality.

Well, that's a bad take, confusing wealth and income inequality. And if you care about the incomes of working-class Americans, you should want the Fed to be cautious about rate hikes, lest they hurt the job market. Full employment, it turns out, is a very good thing for less-well-paid workers, and we don't want to endanger that good thing merely because we'd like to reduce the paper wealth of billionaires. ■

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