

Your Tax Dollars at Work

"Your tax dollars at work." Remember those road signs that mark road construction projects in an attempt to show taxpayers that they are getting their money's worth?

As you are calculating your tax return and perhaps writing checks to the taxman, the state treasury, or your local municipality, we thought we'd pull a few numbers together from our 180,000 article collection about drug policy, and ask this simple question: are you getting your money's worth?

While reading this list, please keep these important points in mind:

- **Drug prohibition costs far more than harm reduction alternatives.** The per-person price of treatment is about one third of incarceration: <http://www.mapinc.org/drugnews/v06/n1353/a02.html>
- **Listing these costs ignores the revenue that might be generated by taxing what are now illegal drugs, especially marijuana.** Not only would governmental bodies not incur the prohibition-related expenditures of arresting non-violent marijuana users, they would also benefit from the revenue boost that results from sales and other taxes. <http://www.mapinc.org/drugnews/v06/n1632/a11.html>

Now, here's our dubious list of drug war expenditures from the last two tax years. **Your tax dollars at work:**

- **Executing the War on Drugs.** According to White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), the official cost of the drug war in the United States is \$148.62 BILLION per year. <http://www.mapinc.org/drugnews/v07/n435/a09.html>
- **Eradicating Colombian Cocaine.** Designed to eradicate Colombia's coca crop before it is processed into cocaine, the \$4.7 BILLION Plan Colombia has made the U.S. Embassy in Bogota the second largest US diplomatic mission in the world. It employs 2,000 people, fields 20 aircraft to carry out daily spray missions, and utilizes 71 US helicopters to protect the army and police units as they clear the target areas of coca farmers, guerilla forces, and traffickers. <http://www.mapinc.org/drugnews/v06/n1295/a05.html>
- **Eradicating Afghanistan Opium.** The U.S. government spends about \$3 BILLION per year attempting to eradicate the poppy crop in Afghanistan even though the Kennedy School of Government concluded that annual purchases of wheat from these same fields at triple the world price would cost less. <http://www.mapinc.org/drugnews/v06/n038/a08.html>
- **Imprisoning Cannabis Users.** Currently, one in eight inmates incarcerated for drug crimes is behind bars for marijuana, at a cost to taxpayers of more than \$1 BILLION per year. <http://www.mapinc.org/drugnews/v07/n360/a07.html>
- **Building Prisons.** Texas Department of Criminal Justice has proposed the construction of three new prisons to house a total of 5,000 prisoners, incurring \$440 MILLION in building costs, plus an additional \$72 MILLION a year to operate the facilities. <http://www.mapinc.org/drugnews/v06/n1621/a06.html>
- **Influencing the Media.** The \$25 MILLION "Above the Influence" anti-drug media campaign represents the latest rendition of the \$120 MILLION in advertising spent annually by the Office of National Drug Control Policy. <http://www.mapinc.org/drugnews/v05/n921/a07.html> and <http://www.mapinc.org/drugnews/v05/n1722/a05.html>
- **Incarcerating Women.** The number of incarcerated women has grown an astounding 592 percent since 1997 to over 85,000 prisoners in 2001, with more convicted for drug-related crimes than for any other offense. The cost of incarcerating one woman equals about \$30,000 a year, with an additional \$30,000 to place her children in foster care. All told, this sums to about \$5.1 BILLION per year. <http://www.mapinc.org/drugnews/v06/n1731/a06.html>

If we keep condemning the enormous costs associated with the drug war, eventually public officials will "get it" and demand sensible, compassionate, AND cost-effective solutions. If you think that your tax dollars could be better spent, then perhaps its time to change drug policy.

DrugSense is a 501(c)(3) educational non-profit dedicated to accuracy in the media concerning drug policy topics.