

Take the violence out of the drug trade

By PETER MOSKOS

U.S. ATTORNEY Thomas M. DiBiagio recently announced the indictment of seven members of the North Avenue Boys. He said the bad guys are "finished."

That's great. They should be in jail. But it won't help the community. Other drug dealers have already taken their place. North Avenue is no better off.

Three years ago, I was a police officer at the scene on East North Avenue when 12 people were shot at an "RIP party" for a North Avenue Boys drug dealer who had himself been murdered. I saw the blood mixed with spaghetti. With a cigar in hand, I jokingly pointed fellow police officers toward the buffet spread. Callous? Perhaps. But I know what anybody who lives or works in the ghetto knows: No amount of arrests or federal prosecution will change the culture of violence among drug dealers in the ghetto. Surrounded by poverty and despair, drug-dealing "gangstas" glamorize a "thug life" and flaunt money, women and even time-served for felony convictions.

We've quintupled our prison population since the war on drugs began in 1970. Last year, Baltimore police made one arrest for every six people in the city. In 1999, in the high-crime Eastern District alone, with 45,000 residents, there were more than 25,000 arrests.

Police can make things better. In a city with high levels of violent crime, arrests can be a good thing. But arrests won't change the culture of drug dealers. And police can't win the war on drugs. Drug addicts have to buy because they're addicted. But drug users destroy mostly themselves. They are not destroying the city. Addicts want to be left alone to enjoy their high. They rarely shoot anybody.

Drug dealers are literally killing the city. Almost all drug-related murders involve one drug dealer shooting another.

Drug dealers will sell. There's little choice. There's money to be made. And drug dealers aren't employable in the legitimate job market. Nobody will hire a convicted felon with attitude and more gold teeth than education.

Drug dealers are doubly bad because they hurt legitimate businesses. Dealers want to control the corner. Business owners call police; vacant buildings never do. Dealers will break windows, harass customers and otherwise make life difficult for the few legitimate businesses that remain in the ghetto.

Just as Al Capone's gang killed other bootleggers, drug dealers are violent because they have to be. How else can you run an illegal business with quick cash profits and no re-



PEDRO X. MOLINA

The only way to disarm the drug culture is to take the profit out of street-level drug-dealing. Drug legalization and regulation are the answer.

course to police, law or the courts?

Nobody doubts there is a serious drug problem in the city. The question is whether drug prohibition helps or hurts.

Prohibition prevents regulation. We as a society can choose the way in which addicts obtain drugs. Most of the violence in Baltimore is caused not by drugs alone but rather the criminal way in which drugs are sold. Drug prohibition is a bad choice because it leads to armed thugs hawking their wares on the corner.

The only way to disarm the drug culture is to take the profit out of street-level drug-dealing. Drug legalization and regulation are the answer. Why leave the profits to those who perpetuate violent culture?

Drug manufacturing and distribution shouldn't be in the hands of the North Avenue Boys, or any other group of criminals. As with alcohol, tobacco or prescription medication, selling drugs should be the combined re-

sponsibility of doctors, the government and the legal free market.

In the Netherlands, drugs are decriminalized. Customers can walk into certain cafés and legally buy marijuana, hashish and hallucinogenic mushrooms. The result? Fewer murders, fewer drug deaths, much less money wasted trying to arrest the entire drug-using population, and — because education is more effective than prohibition — lower levels of drug use.

Legalizing drugs would not be a silver bullet. But drug prohibition must be recognized as a good intention gone terribly wrong. The war on drugs destroys neighborhoods, enriches drug dealers and promotes a culture ruining the lives of our cities' youths. Drug prohibition is a failure. It's time to try something else.

Peter Moskos, a former Baltimore police officer, is a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City.