

The war on drugs needs a big rethink

Gang Town, the City Press Tafelberg Nonfiction Award-winning book by **Don Pinnock**, is being released this month and is a comprehensive and relatable look at gangsterism on the Cape Flats. This edited extract looks at how the international 'war on drugs' means a war on our youth that need not be happening

Gang Town by Don Pinnock

Tafelberg

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Cape Town has a youth drug problem that's out of control. It's possible to fix it, but it will need a government with both insight and guts.

Drugs largely drive Cape Town's stratospheric levels of interpersonal violent crime. Users rob and steal to get them, gangs murder to retain their sales turf and drug lords hold neighbourhoods in thrall by violence. There is a solution to this, but it would take a brave and resolute government to implement it.

First, though, here's a necessary backstory about the so-called War on Drugs involving Harry Anslinger, the former head of the US Federal Bureau of Narcotics who started the war in the 1930s.

Anslinger became obsessed first with the Mafia and then with opium. He claimed China was smuggling it into America to undermine the country and soften up teenage girls for sex with Chinese dealers. He considered all African-Americans a criminal threat.

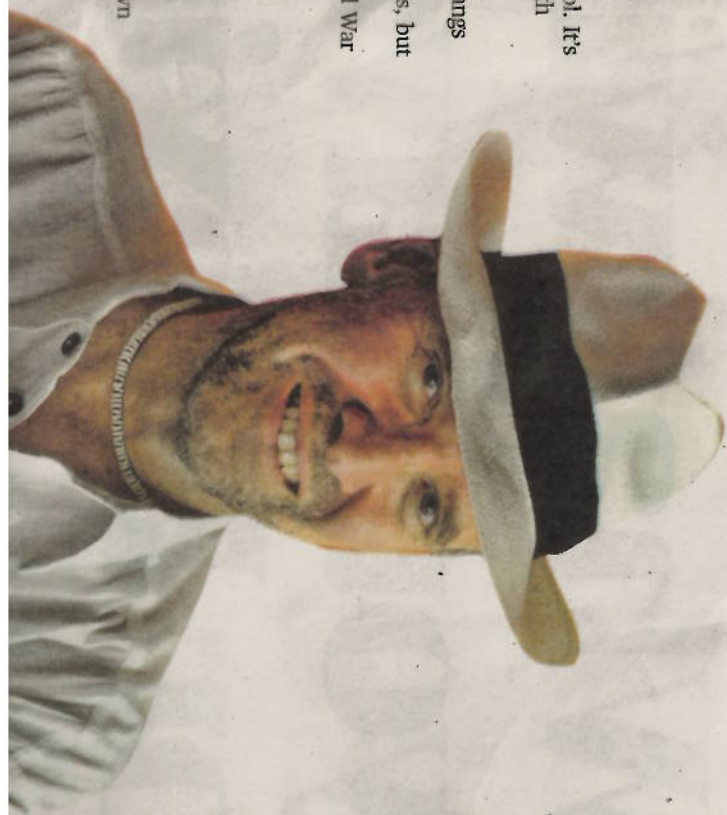
In the 1950s, after befriending Senator Joseph McCarthy, known for his 'Reds' witch-hunt that led to crippling smear campaigns against thousands of Americans, Anslinger widened his attention to communism. His primary tool was the Harrison Act of 1914 and he dramatically expanded the size and reach

treatment. The law did not make it legal to sell or traffic drugs; it simply no longer considered possession to be criminal. Drug use did not skyrocket as predicted. Instead, addiction stabilised, the prison population dropped and the police are now able to attend to serious crime.

The Portuguese accepted that drugs and drug use were not going 'to go away'. They recognised that people at risk of entering the drug world should be given internal tools - confidence, knowledge and support - to make the right decisions for themselves. Street crime and violence have declined. The country now has one of the lowest levels of drug use out of 28 European countries and is the only country in Europe to have exhibited declines in problematic drug use.

In the United States, 90 per cent of the money spent on the drug policy goes to policing and punishment, with 10 per cent going to treatment and prevention. In Portugal, the ratio is the exact opposite. The Netherlands decriminalised the use of cannabis in 1976. The possession of a maximum amount of five grams for personal use is not prosecuted and cultivation is treated in a similar way (cultivation of five plants or less is usually not prosecuted). Uruguay legalised the growing and sale of cannabis in 2013 and eight other South American countries are considering loosening their drug policies.

These moves to decriminalise drug use are way stations on the road to a solution. The bigger step is to legalise drugs and treat their use as a health problem not a crime problem. Given the hysteria and propaganda around the War on Drugs, despite its



Advocate Esthina. He Affirms to Drink this through water.