

# U.S. Faulted on Approach To Drugs and AIDS Link

## Commission Charges 'Myopic' Response

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The National Commission on AIDS yesterday sharply criticized the federal government for what it said was a failure to address the "twin epidemics" of drug abuse and HIV infection, and for ignoring the close link between the two that is now producing one-third of all new AIDS cases.

The commission said the government's "myopic" response to the drug abuse problem was "imprisonment and increased jail sentences, often ignoring drug/HIV relationships."

The commission said opportunities to limit the spread of HIV were often lost because drug treatment programs had too few places for patients.

An estimated 107,000 people are on waiting lists but while the government has increased the number of prison beds, it has not increased treatment slots, which the commission said puts thousands of people at risk of acquiring the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) that causes AIDS.

June E. Osborn, chairman of the commission, said yesterday that federal plans were "woefully insufficient" for dealing with the links between AIDS and intravenous drug abuse. "The flash fire potential of HIV transmission through injection drug use has been demonstrated repeatedly around the world and is an issue of greatest urgency," Osborn said.

The report, "The Twin Epidemics of Substance Use and HIV," calls for lifting restrictions on sale and possession of needles and syringes, and for drug treatment programs to be expanded in line with stated federal policy to provide treatment on demand.

"The failure of the federal government to recognize and confront the twin epidemics of substance use and HIV infection has become glaringly apparent to the commission.

[A] strategy of interdiction and increased prison sentences has done nothing to change the stark statistics," the report said.

It said that while the link between the spread of HIV and IV-drug use is "insidious and indisputable," the Office of the National Drug Control Policy and other federal agencies continue to ignore it when developing policy.

A third of AIDS cases are the result of intravenous (IV) drug use. In New York City, for example, 50 percent of IV drug abusers are now HIV positive.

More than 70 percent of AIDS cases in women are linked directly or indirectly to IV drug use, the report said. Among children with AIDS, 70 percent of cases are directly related to maternal exposure to HIV through drug use or sex with an IV drug user.

In men, about a fifth of AIDS cases are linked to IV drug use and an additional 7 percent are associated with homosexual/bisexual contact and IV drug use, according to the commission report.

Don C. Desjarlais, director of research for the Chemical Dependency Institute of Beth Israel Medical Center in New York and a member of the commission, said existing laws that ban sale or possession of injecting equipment are obsolete and dangerous to public health because they encourage sharing of needles but do nothing to limit illicit drug use.

In addition to lifting restrictions on needles and syringes and expanding drug treatment programs, the commission, which reports to Congress and the White House, recommended government support for programs to teach children how IV drug use spreads HIV.

It also called for further funding for epidemiological studies. Social problems, such as homelessness and poverty that are at the root of drug abuse, must be subjected to a "sustained attack" by the government and private sector, it said.