



APSC AAO 2025 Essay Solution: Use of banned substances: a health problem or a criminal offence

The use of banned substances has been a contentious issue across the world, with debates centering on whether it should be treated primarily as a health problem or a criminal offence. While some argue that punitive measures are necessary to deter drug abuse, others believe that addiction should be addressed as a public health crisis requiring medical intervention and rehabilitation. The approach adopted by governments and societies in addressing this issue significantly impacts public health, crime rates, and social well-being.

Understanding Banned Substances

Banned substances refer to drugs and chemicals that are prohibited by law due to their potential for abuse, health hazards, and negative social consequences. These include narcotics such as heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, and synthetic opioids, as well as performance-enhancing drugs used in sports. The reasons for banning these substances vary, ranging from their addictive properties and harmful physiological effects to their association with organized crime and violence.

A Health Problem: Addiction and Its Consequences

From a medical standpoint, drug abuse is primarily a health issue. Substance addiction is recognized as a mental health disorder that alters brain function, leading to dependency, withdrawal symptoms, and an inability to control usage. The World Health Organization (WHO) and leading medical institutions emphasize that addiction requires treatment rather than punishment.

Health risks associated with banned substances include:



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- **Physical Health Issues:** Prolonged use can result in organ damage, cardiovascular problems, and neurological disorders.
- **Mental Health Disorders:** Many drug users suffer from depression, anxiety, and psychosis due to prolonged substance abuse.
- **Infectious Diseases:** Intravenous drug use is a major factor in the spread of diseases such as HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis B and C.
- **Overdose and Death:** Synthetic opioids like fentanyl have caused a surge in overdose-related fatalities worldwide.

Given these consequences, a health-centric approach advocates for decriminalization, rehabilitation centers, and harm reduction strategies such as needle exchange programs and medically supervised drug use sites. Countries like Portugal have decriminalized drug use, focusing on rehabilitation rather than punishment, leading to a significant decline in drug-related deaths and infections.

A Criminal Offence: The Legal and Social Perspective

Despite the health concerns, many nations continue to treat drug use as a criminal offence. The rationale behind this approach includes:

- **Public Safety:** Drug use is linked to criminal activities, including trafficking, organized crime, and violence.
- **Deterrence:** Strict laws are believed to prevent individuals from engaging in drug abuse.
- **Social Order:** Substance abuse can contribute to societal instability, affecting families, employment, and community cohesion.

The criminal justice approach includes penalties such as imprisonment, fines, and mandatory



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rehabilitation programs. However, critics argue that punitive measures often disproportionately affect marginalized communities, leading to overcrowded prisons without addressing the root causes of addiction.

Balancing Both Approaches

A purely punitive approach has proven ineffective in reducing drug abuse, while a purely health-based approach may not address issues like drug trafficking and crime. A balanced strategy could include:

1. **Decriminalization of Drug Use:** Treating drug users as patients rather than criminals can encourage them to seek medical help without fear of prosecution.
2. **Strict Laws Against Drug Trafficking:** While users may require help, traffickers should face stringent legal action to curb supply chains.
3. **Investment in Rehabilitation:** Expanding access to medical treatment, counseling, and reintegration programs can help individuals recover and reintegrate into society.
4. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Educating the public about the dangers of banned substances can prevent drug abuse from an early stage.

Conclusion

The use of banned substances straddles the line between a health problem and a criminal offence. While addiction requires medical intervention and rehabilitation, the illegal drug trade and its associated crimes necessitate legal enforcement. A balanced approach, integrating law enforcement with public health measures, is crucial in effectively addressing drug abuse and its societal impact. By shifting the focus from punishment to prevention and treatment, societies can better manage the challenges posed by banned substances while



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ensuring justice and public safety.
