



Does War Cause Addiction?

Reviewing the arguments

Debates over this question – by historians, healthcare workers and politicians – have been influencing North America’s ever-evolving drug policies since the start of the 20th Century.

For many people, it makes sense that a surge of drug addiction follows the return of soldiers who’ve been physically and mentally traumatized by war. The idea is that, during war, soldiers are often exposed to powerful substances, and once they start using them, to relieve pain or stress, they can’t stop. When they return home, they bring their drug problems with them and spread them among ordinary citizens, causing social decay and disorder. But a growing number of people insist there is a lack of actual evidence to support such claims, suggesting there are political reasons for exaggerating the “war and drugs” relationship.

The idea that war causes drug addiction blossomed in the early 1900s in the United States. In the lead up to the passing of a national drug law, some politicians claimed the Civil War was responsible for widespread opium use in America and that action was needed to address this.

Historians of the day picked up on the idea and began using the term “soldiers disease” to describe what they claimed had been rampant morphine addiction after the US Civil War. They explained that opium and its derivative, morphine, were widely used to ease the suffering of thousands of traumatized and wounded soldiers on both sides of the conflict, many of whom required surgery or amputation in the field. It made sense, they argued, that in the years following the Civil War, traumatized soldiers struggled with continued dependence on opium or morphine.

The only problem was the lack of evidence. Besides a few letters from former soldiers, there was almost no mention of morphine addiction among veterans in the post-Civil War period. Some historians have claimed the lack of evidence is understandable given that it wasn’t until decades after the Civil War that the idea of “addiction” as a medical disease requiring treatment (as opposed to a moral weakness) emerged and became a mainstream way of understanding drug use problems. For this reason, drug addiction doesn’t appear in the hospital and prison records after the war.

But other historians wonder if there’s a simpler reason. Is it possible that drug addiction was not in fact a significant social worry among ex-soldiers, now safe in their home environment, away from the battlefield and daily threat of death? And, if battle trauma caused addiction, why was it that women—who never participated in battle—struggled with opium dependency more than men?

Or, is it possible that various factors were involved? One historian, for instance, suggests widespread chronic diseases (e.g., malaria and dysentery) and despair among Southerners over the destruction of their way of life after the Civil War contributed to opium use. With respect to the latter motive, an opium dealer in 1877 commented: “men once wealthy, but impoverished by the rebellion, have taken to eating and drinking opium to drown their sorrows” (New York Tribune, 10 July 1877 cited in Courtwright, 1983).

By the 1970s, opium-based drugs such as heroin were widely believed to be highly and immediately addictive, and it was considered next to impossible to quit using heroin for very long, even after intensive treatment on “narcotics farms.” So, news of widespread heroin use among soldiers in the Vietnam War sent a new wave of fear over North America. US President Nixon officially declared a “war on drugs,” in line with other initiatives to stamp out what he called permissive attitudes and behaviours that had been steadily eroding America values and pride throughout the 1960s. The Nixon administration also blamed heroin for the troops’ poor performance on the battlefield (and, ultimately, for losing the war itself). The President braced his

nation for the return of thousands of drugged-out soldiers by stepping up drug enforcement initiatives and setting up addiction treatment programs, vowing to clean up America.

But, according to a study conducted in the early 1970s, the droves of “drug-enslaved” soldiers never materialized. When they returned to the United States, nearly all of the soldiers who had used heroin in Vietnam quit on their own and without treatment. Moreover, one argument contends the notion of an “an addicted army” and the anti-drug measures initiated by the Nixon administration were intended to help divert attention away from the many factors that contributed to the failure of the war in Vietnam and the unpopularity of the war at home in America. Likewise, the anti-drug laws of the early 20th century may have had more to do with addressing social fears about various minorities than about drug addicted veterans.

Instructional strategies

1. Invite students to read and reflect on the handout, [Does War Cause Drug Addiction?](#) Suggest each student write a question they would like to ask and then have the students discuss the questions as a class or in small groups. Or use questions such as:
 - a. What factors contribute to drug use during war? Are these factors similar or different than those that contribute to drug use in other contexts?
 - b. How come some drugs widely used in war, such as alcohol and tobacco, are considered acceptable while others are vilified?
 - c. Nixon’s “war on drugs” continues to this day. Who has benefitted the most from this war? Who has lost the most?
 - d. What’s the best way to address problems related to drugs?
2. After having students read and reflect on the handout, [Does War Cause Drug Addiction?](#) play one or more songs that address the links between war, drug use and social conditions. And then facilitate a discussion about the complex relationship between the three. Some potential songs include:
 - a. **The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down**, by The Band [lyrics video](#)
Robbie Robertson wrote this song, which is about the long-term impact of the American Civil War on the old American South (Dixie), which was defeated by the Union army. Opium use among the white population in the American South does seem to have been much higher than in other parts of the country following the Civil War. Robertson is half-Mohawk Indian, half-Jewish Canadian.
 - b. **Goodnight Saigon**, by Billy Joel [lyrics video](#)
Joel did not often write political songs, and he never served in the military. He composed this song when asked to write a song for a veterans' group. At first he was reticent, but the group told him that they would tell him what to write. Joel remembered how Stephen Crane wrote *The Red Badge of Courage* based on personal accounts of veterans from the Civil War and agreed to do the same.
 - c. **Fortunate Son**, by Credence Clearwater Revival [lyrics video](#)
Written by John Fogerty, this is an antiestablishment song of defiance and blue-collar pride, both anti-Washington and against the Vietnam War. "The song speaks more to the unfairness of class than war itself," Fogerty said. "It's the old saying about rich men making war and poor men having to fight them."

Sources

Courtwright, D. T. (1983). The Hidden Epidemic: Opiate Addiction and Cocaine Use in the South, 1860-1920. *The Journal of Southern History*, 49(1), 57–72.

Courtwright, D. T. (2001). *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World*. Harvard University Press.

Lewy, J. (2014). The Army Disease: Drug Addiction and the Civil War. *War in History*, 21(1), 102–119.

Drug Literacy

Big ideas

- People have been using drugs for thousands of years and in almost every human culture
- Drugs can be tremendously helpful and also very harmful
- As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage the drugs in our lives
- We can learn how to control our drug use by reflecting on the different ways people have thought about drugs, exploring stories from various cultures and listening to each other

Competencies

- Assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, communities and societies
- Explore and appreciate diversity related to the reasons people use drugs, the impact of drug use and the social attitudes toward various drugs
- Recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use
- Recognize how official reactions to drugs often have less to do with the drug than with other factors
- Develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs

Links to Curriculum

First Peoples' principles of learning

- Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors
- Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)
- Learning is embedded in memory, history and story

Social Studies 10

- Big Idea: Global and regional conflicts have been a powerful force in shaping our contemporary world and identities
- Global and regional conflicts have been a powerful force in shaping our contemporary world and identities

Competencies

- Use social studies inquiry processes and skills to: ask; gather; interpret; and analyze ideas; and communicate findings and decisions.
- Assess the significance of people, places, events, or developments, and compare varying perspectives on their significance at particular times and places, and from group to group (significance)
- Compare and contrast continuities and changes for different groups during this period (continuity and change)



- Explain and infer different perspectives on past or present people, places, issues, or events by considering prevailing norms, values, worldviews, and beliefs (perspective)
- Recognize implicit and explicit ethical judgments in a variety of sources (ethical judgment)
- Make reasoned ethical judgments about actions in the past and present, and determine appropriate ways to remember and respond (ethical judgment)

Social Justice 12

Big Ideas

- Social justice issues are interconnected
- Individual worldviews shape and inform the understanding of social justice issues
- The causes of social injustice are complex and have lasting impacts on society

Competencies

- Use social studies inquiry processes and skills to: ask; gather; interpret; and analyze ideas; and communicate findings and decisions
- Assess and compare the significance of people, events, and developments at particular times and places, and examine what it reveals about social justice issues (significance)
- Ask questions and corroborate inferences about the content, origins, purposes and context of multiple sources and multiple perspectives (evidence)
- Compare and contrast continuities and changes for different groups and individuals in different times and places (continuity and change)
- Determine and assess the long and short term causes and consequences of an event, legislative and judicial decision, development, policy, and movement (cause and consequence)
- Explain different perspective on past and present people, places, issues and events (perspective)
- Recognize implicit and explicit ethical judgments in a variety of sources (ethical judgment)
- Make reasoned ethical judgments about controversial actions in the past and present after considering the historical context and standards of right and wrong at the time (ethical judgment)