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On Reuter's Contribution to Drug Policy Debate

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Abstract

Peter Reuter's scholarship reshaped drug policy analysis by treating drugs as commodities traded by rational actors. He showed how prohibition creates a risk–price premium and urged analytic humility, warning that hidden-market opacity and cross-context variation make universal policy claims fragile. This paper maps Reuter's intellectual trajectory and his systematic approach to evaluation. It highlights his shift away from single metrics (seizures, prevalence) toward a portfolio of outcomes: public health harms, market-generated harms (violence, corruption), and control harms (incarceration, inequality), and explains why causal inference is especially tenuous when indicators are noisy. Drawing on evidence across eras and substances, it describes mechanisms behind diminishing returns to supply-side control: upstream costs are small relative to retail markups, enforcement functions as a stochastic tax, and traffickers adapt in ways that blunt effects on price and availability. The paper derives practical implications for reform and concludes with Reuter's roles in institution-building and mentorship.

Keywords

Drug war; Harm Reduction; Prohibition and legalization; Drug trafficking; Supply-side control policies

Introduction

Peter Reuter's work spans a wide range of topics. His studies on organized crime has introduced groundbreaking insights into the role of organized crime in both illegal and legal markets, as well as, on the very nature of criminal organization (Varese 2025). His contributions to the economic modeling of drug markets have provided an original and sophisticated understanding of how markets for psychoactive substances operate at both the local and the international level (Moeller 2025). Peter has also pioneered the study of money laundering and of the effectiveness of anti-laundering measures (Kleemans 2026). These contributions have established Peter Reuter as a key figure across a singularly wide array of research areas in criminology and beyond.

While Peter has contributed to these many fields—and others, from cigarette trafficking to gun control and illicit financial flows (Koper and Reuter 1996; Reuter and Majmundar 2015; Reuter 2017)—the primary focus of his research has arguably been on understanding the consequences of drug policies and the mechanisms through which they affect prices, purity, prevalence, and violence in drug markets. In doing so, he has also provided unique insights into the broader societal impacts of these policies, particularly in terms of monetary costs, justice, and equity. As he put it, "I have spent much of my career studying the harmful consequences of prohibition" (Reuter 2019).

From the global War on Drugs, to the crack epidemic of the 1980s, to cannabis legalization across the world, and the opioid crisis in the 2010s and 2020s, Peter has made unparalleled contributions to the debate on managing markets for psychoactive substances (e.g., MacCoun and Reuter 2001b; 2010; Reuter 2014b; Reuter, Pardo, and Taylor 2021). His research has laid the foundation for drug policy studies, making him a leading figure in the field—a true "Michael Jordan" of drug policy.

In examining a context where the repression of drug markets was particularly harsh, Peter uncovered a series of pathways through which prohibition and its enforcement affect crime and health, ultimately identifying opportunities to improve the outcomes of prohibition policies themselves (e.g., Caulkins and Reuter 2006b, 2010, 2017, 2021; MacCoun and Reuter 2001a; Reuter 1992, 2013; Reuter and Caulkins 1995; Reuter and Kleiman 1986). Notably, Peter's studies on the effects of enforcement on drug prices and availability in the U.S. and around the world revealed that many of the intended benefits of prohibition can be achieved with lighter enforcement, while aggressive enforcement often increases the harms of crime without significantly reducing drug abuse.

In this respect, a series of studies by Peter and his colleagues modeled the dynamics of drug smuggling markets, focusing on cocaine trafficking from Latin America (e.g., Cave and Reuter 1988; M. Kennedy et al. 1993; Reuter 1988). These studies revealed that even significant increases in drug seizure rates would likely have only a minimal impact on destination markets where cocaine is ultimately consumed, underscoring the limited effectiveness of interdiction efforts near the source of the drugs. These findings were pivotal in redirecting drug control resources away from interdiction-focused strategies. Then, over the years, Peter has consistently emphasized the limitations of supply-side control measures, such as crop eradication and alternative development programs, questioning their ability to meaningfully address global drug issues (e.g., Pollack and Reuter 2014). Instead, he has advocated for a more comprehensive approach, including micro and macro harm reduction strategies, demand-side interventions such as prevention and treatment, and policies aimed at reducing the harms caused by prohibition itself (e.g., Caulkins and Reuter 2009; Strang et al. 2012). These insights have laid the foundation for a new generation of drug policy strategies.

Thirty-something years later, Peter's research still exposes the flaws in existing drug policy programs, this time on the opposite side of police options. Indeed, over the years he has critically examined cannabis depenalization experiences and the commercialization of cannabis markets in the U.S., raising concerns about

the distortions introduced by certain forms of commercial promotion and sales in terms of public health and safety (Caulkins et al. 2012; MacCoun and Reuter 2001b, 2010). Indeed, the analyses Peter and his colleagues conducted show that legalizing cannabis for profit has led to a substantial increase in production and potency, lower prices, and a rise in consumption amongst the older users—outcomes that contradict the belief that legalization would primarily reduce arrests and incarceration without other major consequences (Caulkins and Reuter 2021).

The importance of this work is especially relevant today, as Peter himself observed in 2023: "we are in a time of particular ferment with respect to drug policy" (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2023, 3). The legalization of cannabis across a growing number of countries including the U.S., the lasting prescription opioid crisis, the rise of fentanyl-related deaths, the 2023 ban on opium growing in Afghanistan and ongoing global challenges with drug production and trafficking all highlight the continued significance of studying drug policies—and the value of Peter's contributions. In this rapidly changing landscape, Peter's work remains as timely and crucial as ever. In this context, the opportunity is the translation into practice of innovative approaches already on the table—paradigms that embed drug markets in their broader social and cultural contexts and that shift the evaluative focus from the sole "use reduction" to harm minimization across drugs, markets, and control strategies. Peter and his research will certainly continue to play an active role in exploring how best to regulate drug markets.

Having admired his work since I left my economic studies under the fascination of the study of illegal markets, I feel honored and privileged to have been given this opportunity to reflect on Peter's contribution to the regulation of drug markets. I take a position on what, in my view, is most enduring in that contribution: not a single policy prescription, but a way of reasoning about drug markets under deep uncertainty. Reuter's work repeatedly invites us to separate regime questions from within-regime design choices, to avoid over-interpreting weak indicators, and to treat harm containment as a central policy objective rather than a second-best. The sections that follow are interpretive: they synthesize Reuter's writings (and those with key co-authors) around recurring themes—risk and price mechanisms, adaptive responses to enforcement, limits of available evidence, and the political economy of legalization—and draw out what these imply for evaluating evidence and policy proposals today. Peter began his inquiry into the functioning of drug policies in the mid-1980s and has since been a prolific scholar; evidently matching his fresh writing style with remarkable industriousness. As a result, his Google Scholar profile lists over five hundred entries, and not every study is included there. Inevitably, writing this paper required making numerous choices, leaving many of Peter's ideas available for further exploration.

This paper is structured to move through some of the key research areas to which Reuter has contributed most significantly. The first section outlines the critical issues associated with drug production, trafficking, and consumption that drug policies aim to address. The second explores the challenges in making informed decisions regarding drug policies because of conflicting interests matched with the paucity of data

on illegal markets. The third section examines Reuter's seminal work on the role of enforcement in drug markets and its connections to violence, prices, and prevalence in drug use. The fourth section discusses the insights from Reuter's studies on designing optimal drug policies to address the most pressing contemporary drug problems. Finally, the paper turns to Reuter's broader contributions beyond his substantive theoretical and empirical findings, and examines his legacy as a model of policy-relevant social science. Reuter is widely recognized for extraordinary "knowledge building". But an equally consequential legacy lies in institution-building and mentorship. He helped construct the field itself by creating durable research infrastructure, consolidating a multidisciplinary scholarly community, translating evidence into policy venues, and mentoring successive generations of scholars.

Drug Problem(s)

The appeals of drugs are diverse, offering—among other things—pleasure, relief, and a sense of connection. As such, people turn to drug use for a variety of reasons, such as managing stress, enhancing social experiences, or seeking personal growth. Unfortunately, along with the enjoyment, drugs might also bring distinct types of harm, ranging from direct health consequences to broader social and market-generated externalities (Caulkins and Reuter 2009; Kleiman et al. 2011).

The most obvious type of harm is the one directly related to the physical consequences of drug abuse. Prolonged use of large quantities of most psychoactive substances can cause significant long-term damage to the human body, leading to issues such as liver damage, heart disease, cognitive impairment, and an increased risk of mental health disorders (Newcomb and Locke 2005). Aside long-term consequences, drug abuse can also have dramatic short-term ones, such as an overdose, which can result in sudden death. In line with this, morbidity and mortality rates among users of cocaine, methamphetamines, and heroin are significantly higher compared to nonusers.

This is far from a minor issue. In the U.S., fatal drug overdoses from any drug have reached alarmingly high levels in the 21st century, following an exponential increase that has been observe since the late 1970s and has continued into the 2020s. As a result, annual overdose deaths exceeded 100,000 in the early 2020s, prior to a decrease in 2024 (Jalal et al. 2018; Jalal and Burke 2021; Reuter 2022; Vangelov et al. 2026). While research in other contexts has not found such stable growth, other countries like Australia, Canada, the U.K., and Sweden have also been experiencing alarming increases in overdose rates since the early to mid-2000s (Aziani and Caulkins 2023; Ho 2019).

The likelihood of a fatal overdose depends on several factors, including the quantity consumed, the individual user's characteristics, the occasion of use, and the drug's toxicity level. A major contributor to high mortality rates is the frequent consumption of drugs with unknown purity—a risk that is not merely theoretical. Retail-level purity—for heroin, as an example—can fluctuate dramatically within the same city over short periods. Contrary to fictional representations, neither traffickers nor consumers can reliably determine the

purity of the drugs they handle (Reuter and Caulkins 2011). Consequently, users who expect low-purity substances are at particular risk of fatal overdose, as they are more likely to consume larger quantities to achieve the desired effect, only to unknowingly ingest a lethal dose when purity spikes (Kleiman and Caulkins 1992; Reuter and Caulkins 2011).

A second use-related harm—central to why addiction-inducing psychoactive substances such as opioids, or stimulants warrant distinctive policy attention—is the risk of physiological and psychological dependence. Repeated consumption may lead to a "hedonic deficit," as the brain's reward system adapts and continued use becomes increasingly motivated by the desire to avoid negative emotional states rather than the pursuit of euphoria (Koob and Le Moal 2001). Dependence can also create an intertemporal tension in which immediate relief or reward dominates decision-making, even as users incur substantial long-term health, legal, and social costs (Gruber and Köszegi 2001; MacCoun and Reuter 2001a).

Aside from physical harm, drug abuse impacts also on users' interpersonal relationships and life-course outcomes. Youth involved in drug use are more likely to drop out of school and disengage from positive social networks, which increases isolation and reduces their access to support systems than if they did not use drugs. Drug abuse also affects workplace involvement, contributing to absenteeism, reduced job satisfaction, and decreased job stability and ineffective job searching (Reuter 2006). Additionally, continued drug use can fuel criminal behaviors over time (Goldstein 1985). While criminal activity may precede drug misuse, there is evidence showing that prolonged substance abuse can exacerbate criminal behaviors (Bennett et al. 2008; Chaiken and Chaiken 1990). This creates a vicious cycle where drug misuse intensifies criminality while it erodes the quality of personal relationships, leading to higher rates of unemployment, marital dissatisfaction, divorce, and poor parenting practices.

While, drug abuse may cause severe harm, it is very central for Peter's research the fact that much of the observed damage relates to the functioning of drug markets and stems from drug trafficking and drug production. In destination markets, where drug is consumed, the noxious consequences of drug trafficking are particularly severe in inner-city environments, and they disproportionately affect ethnic minorities, migrant communities, and economically disadvantaged urban areas. The spread of drug selling in these communities results in high incarceration rates, economic instability, and social breakdown. Many young men are pulled into the drug trade, where they face a high risk of arrest and imprisonment, disrupting their chances for employment and family life. This cycle of drug dealing and incarceration reduces the presence of positive role models and further fosters a culture of crime and violence within these communities (MacCoun and Reuter 2001a).

A further market-generated harm is systemic violence driven by the aggressive interactions among those involved in selling and distributing illegal drugs (Goldstein 1985; Goldstein et al. 1989; Reuter 2009). This violence stems from the nature of black markets, where participants lack access to legal systems for resolving disputes, rather than from drug use itself (Caulkins and Reuter 1998; MacCoun et al. 2003). As

Reuter famously showed, where the state is absent as an arbiter, force substitutes for contract law. In the absence of formal protections, violence—or its credible threat—serves to enforce agreements, secure territory, and contest hierarchies within and between illicit enterprises (Reuter 1983, 2009). Turf wars, retaliation against informants, and disputes over drug transactions are all common examples.

These dynamics are intensified by the limited competitive tools available to illegal entrepreneurs. Because they cannot openly advertise, brand, or use formal reputation systems to stabilize market share, market position is more often defended through intimidation, retaliation, and reputational capital built around toughness (Aziani 2020; Che and Benson 2014). The combination of contested control and chronic self-protection pressures can produce self-reinforcing cycles of aggression that destabilize communities and sustain elevated levels of violence (Bourgois 1995; Topalli et al. 2002). This tight linkage between drugs and violence has, in turn, played a major role in the political and policy rationale for punitive approaches targeting both drug consumption and sale (Reuter 2009).

Beyond destination markets, throughout his studies, Peter highlights that production and transit of illegal drugs generates their own set of harms, distinct from those associated with trafficking and selling in final destination markets. In trafficking corridors and hub countries, moving shipments requires clandestine infrastructure, local recruitment, and sometimes accommodation or capture of state institutions. Mexico, Honduras, and Tajikistan illustrate this "transit logic": traffickers depend on local recruitment and coercion, while evidence points to collusive relations involving politicians and police, including officials' participation in facilitating shipments in exchange for bribes (Altamirano Rayo 2021; Paoli et al. 2007; Reuter 2014a; Ziosi 2025). Corruption pressures can become systemic because the trade generates large, mobile rents that can purchase protection across agencies and jurisdictions. A classic illustration of how deep such protection can run is Mexico's mid-1980s case surrounding the torture and murder of DEA agent Enrique Camarena, which highlighted organized crime's ability to penetrate and corrupt state institutions (MacCoun and Reuter 2001a).

In places where coca, opium poppy, or cannabis are cultivated and/or processed—drug economies can destabilize local governance and reorder territorial control because armed entrepreneurs and brokers compete for protection, rents, and political and judicial influence (Thoumi 2002). Colombia is the paradigmatic example: the escalation of cartel power into national politics is captured by episodes such as the Medellín cartel's 1989 assassination of presidential candidate Carlos Luis Galán (MacCoun and Reuter 2001a). Production can also create place-specific environmental externalities. Clearing land for coca or cannabis plantations often involves "clearcutting" and "slash and burn" practices, which are directly linked to deforestation and subsequent erosion and soil loss (Burns-Edel 2016).

Reuter's central contribution is not only to map the harms associated with drugs and drug markets, but to show why learning our way out of them is so difficult. Because key behaviors are hidden, indicators are noisy, and enforcement and market dynamics coevolve, even well-intentioned policies often cannot be cleanly

evaluated. The next section turns to these epistemic constraints and to Reuter's argument for analytic humility in drug policy.

The Limits of What We Can Know: Difficulties in Evaluating Policies

Given the breadth of harms associated with drugs, it might seem obvious that drug policy design should be rooted in comprehensive data and empirical evidence. However, reality often falls short of this ideal as drug policy operates under severe informational constraints. Before analyzing the policy mechanisms and implications discussed in the next sections, this section clarifies what Reuter's work contributes to understanding the analytical fog in which drug policy operates.

Since the late-1960s, when drugs and crime became major national and international concerns in the U.S. and beyond, the inefficacy of many programs shows that ideological biases and regulatory capture have frequently hindered progress. Reflecting on this, in 1985, Peter critically assessed America's international narcotics programs in his aptly titled work, 'Eternal Hope: America's International Narcotics Efforts,' highlighting how these initiatives were driven more by institutional optimism than by solid evidence (Reuter 1985a). As Kleiman, Caulkins, and Hawken (2011) did before me, I reference this work not to emphasize Peter's irony or his knack for highlighting paradoxes, but to highlight his commitment to a data-driven approach to drug policy. Throughout his career, Peter has advocated for the rigorous testing of theories in real-world settings. His work serves as a reminder of the dangers of allowing political agendas and economic interests to overshadow public health concerns, while also stressing the critical roles of problem construction, politics, ideology, and power in the policy process.

This is easier said than done. Even with the push for evidence-based approaches, evaluating drug policies often lacks the expected rigor. This gap arises not only from biases and ideological influences but also from the inherent challenges in obtaining reliable data, extrapolating general principles from specific observable experiences, and balancing conflicting interests among social groups both within and across countries. Three obstacles recur in Reuter's account: difficulties in collecting valid data on hidden markets, difficulties in extrapolating effects across substances and regimes, and difficulties in balancing heterogeneous interests when policy goals are incommensurable.

Challenges in Collecting Valuable Data

The illegality of the drug trade presents significant barriers to data collection, making it notoriously difficult to estimate, for instance, the size and value of illegal drug markets (Reuter and Greenfield 2001). Participants in these markets are motivated to stay hidden, evading law enforcement and public scrutiny to avoid legal consequences as well as the stigma associated with drug use (Kilmer et al. 2014; Reuter, Caulkins, et al. 2021).

It follows that the data we rely on are often sparse, imprecise, and inconsistent. Peter's work has been crucial in highlighting these limitations and the difficulties they create for policymakers. For instance, he has

frequently pointed out that even the best-designed surveys are not immune to problems such as nonresponse and inconsistent data collection practices. These issues are particularly troubling when it comes to accurately assessing the scope of drug problems, especially among marginalized populations, who are often underrepresented in such surveys (Haaga and Reuter 1991; Reuter, Caulkins, et al. 2021). The challenges become even more pronounced when attempting cross-national comparisons, as differences in methodology between countries further complicate the task of gathering reliable data (Kilmer et al. 2015).

Data limitations are not just an issue for drug market indicators like prices, purity, and quantities; they also concern drug enforcement itself. Peter's research points out that traditional measures like arrests and seizures often fail to capture the complexity of enforcement efforts. For example, a spike in drug seizures is not a clean measure of enforcement effectiveness: it could reflect greater enforcement effort and effectiveness, but also simply higher underlying drug flow; without knowing total flow, seizure counts are hard to interpret (Reuter 1995). Then, even with respect to enforcement data, cross-national comparisons add another layer of difficulty. For instance, differences in legal thresholds for drug possession and trafficking between countries make it tough to draw any clear conclusion on the impact of any strategy from international arrest data alone (Kilmer et al. 2015).

Compounding these challenges and because of them, discussions on the topic are often plagued by the emergence of "mythical numbers"—figures that gain credibility despite being based on flimsy evidence— as Peter pointed out in his first published paper on drug policy (Reuter 1984). "Numbers play a critical role in discussions about drug policy, both domestically and internationally. The numbers usually cited are impressively large" (Reuter 1985a, 80). This is particularly problematic when such figures are championed by organizations with political agendas, muddying the waters of drug policy evaluation.

A classic illustration, detailed in 'The (Continued) Vitality of Mythical Numbers' (1984), centers on the official estimates of the U.S. heroin-addicted population. By the early 1970s, government agencies estimated there were 200,000 addicts in New York City alone, each purportedly needing $30 per day to support their habit. As Peter noted, simple arithmetic revealed the impossibility of these claims: if true, these addicts would have had to steal roughly ten times the total value of all property actually reported stolen in the city (Reuter 1984; Singer 1971). This blatant arithmetic inconsistency did not lead to the rejection of the data. Instead, the figures continued to circulate unchallenged, serving as an administrative convenience for agencies seeking to mobilize congressional support. As Reuter observed, these figures persist because their actual size is less important to officials than the perception of a big problem that justifies substantial enforcement expenditures.

The scarcity of reliable data also hampers the use of traditional quantitative techniques for analyzing drug markets and policy impacts on them. To compensate for this, Peter and his colleagues have often turned to simulation models (e.g., Caulkins, Crawford, and Reuter 1993; Cave and Reuter 1988; Kennedy, Reuter, and Riley 1993). However, while valuable, these models come with their own limitations. Peter himself has

commented on the need to approach these models with a sense of humor, recognizing that while they can provide useful insights, they are no substitute for robust, empirical data describing local markets: "simulation studies are a nice illustration of one of my favorite Mark Twain's statements which is: *There is something fascinating about science. One gets such wholesale returns of conjecture out of such a trifling investment of fact*" (Reuter 2019).

Challenges in Extrapolating Policy Outcomes

A central pillar of Reuter's "agnosticism" is the recognition that we cannot accurately predict the outcomes of a qualitative regime change (legalization) based on data gathered under a prohibition regime. Assessing the effectiveness of drug policies is further complicated by the difficulty of extrapolating outcomes from the management of one substance to another. Experiences with alcohol and cannabis legalization offer some insights, such as decreases in price and increases in quality and accessibility. For instance, evidence on crime impacts of cannabis legalization is mixed and outcome-specific. While decriminalization often leads to a significant decrease in drug-possession arrests (see, Scheim et al. 2020), the impact on broader social harms remains less certain. State-level analyses often find little to no long-run change in major violent/property crime trends (e.g., Lu et al. 2021), whereas other studies identify localized effects, including reductions around dispensary entry or declines in selected offenses in particular geographic settings (Brinkman and Mok-Lamme 2019; Dragone et al. 2019). At the same time, the extent to which cannabis legalization displaces organized crime revenues appears context-dependent and remains empirically uncertain (Aziani 2021; Bouchard et al. 2025). However, these cases have limited applicability when considering policies for substances like cocaine, methamphetamine, or heroin. Unlike cannabis and alcohol, which have widespread use and social acceptance in many societies, these other drugs have significantly lower usage rates and are associated with higher levels of harm and stigma.

For instance, cannabis use has become a relatively normal part of adolescent development in many Western countries. In regions like the U.S. and parts of Europe, more than 50% of individuals in their twenties have tried cannabis at least once, whereas experimentation rates for drugs like cocaine or heroin remain below 10% (Reuter 2019). Legalizing cannabis has largely provided easier and cheaper access to a substance that was already readily available, making its policy outcomes distinct from what might be expected with the legalization of less prevalent and more harmful drugs.

The lack of comprehensive data on how legalization would affect use patterns, addiction rates, and health outcomes for these other substances adds another layer of uncertainty. We cannot accurately predict whether making drugs like heroin or methamphetamine legal would lead to increased consumption or whether it might reduce some associated harms by regulating quality and access. Additionally, it is challenging to measure potential reductions in addiction and health-related issues that could result from removing the black-market elements and integrating these substances into controlled, legal frameworks.

Legalization's impact on crime is equally ambiguous. On one hand, removing the illicit status of certain drugs could decrease drug-related offenses, reduce the power of criminal organizations, and alleviate burdens on the criminal justice system. On the other hand, new forms of crime could emerge, and without proper regulatory structures, legalization might not lead to the intended reductions in violence and corruption, especially in regions that serve as key trafficking corridors where drug trade has historically fueled extensive criminal activity and systemic corruption.

Challenges in Balancing Interests

Complicating matters further is the inherently heterogeneous and often conflicting array of interests involved in drug policy debates. Health outcomes, crime rates, civil liberties, tax revenues, and the efficiency of the judiciary system are all affected by drug policies, but these factors are difficult to assess on a common scale. Balancing these diverse and sometimes competing interests requires political judgment and value-based decisions, as there are no objective metrics to neatly reconcile the trade-offs between, say, the reduction of the prison population incarcerated for drug offenses and potential increases in substance misuse.

The disparity in how drug policies affect different social groups further underscores the complexity of designing policies that are both equitable and effective. Finally, and no less importantly, strict drug regulations have disproportionately placed a heavier burden on racial and ethnic minorities, as well as on low-income urban populations, exacerbating existing disparities within the criminal justice system (Beckett et al. 2006; Caulkins and Reuter 2016). Even today in the U.S., for example, as Peter noted during a keynote speech at the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2023, 8), "there's no question that the burden of the current policies is borne disproportionately by populations of color." These groups experience higher rates of arrests, convictions, and incarceration for drug-related offenses, leading to long-term social and economic consequences (Blumstein 1993; Fellner 2009). Although research and debate in regions outside North America is less active, drug enforcement is also known to have uneven impacts across racial and ethnic groups in Western Europe (Aziani 2021; Tonry 1997).

Tough regulations on psychoactive substances often disproportionately impact certain segments of society also in terms of drug consumption. Factors such as socioeconomic status, belonging to racial and ethnic minorities, and geographic location all influence access to legal and safer alternatives, as well as the likelihood of negative consequences (Ezell et al. 2024).

Legalization could potentially redistribute these harms by reducing the violence and social costs associated with the drug trade in urban areas. However, this shift may also introduce new risks, particularly for middle-class populations, who might see an increase in drug availability and use within their communities.

Enforcement and Price Dynamics

In the U.S.—as in many other countries—punitive drug policy has softened at the margins since the early 2010s, yet supply-side enforcement remains the backbone of drug control, especially for "hard" drugs. The durability of this approach is longstanding: Reuter and Kleiman (1986, 290) noted that "the primary response to the problem has been, particularly since 1981, greatly to increase efforts at reducing the supply." Decades later, Caulkins and Reuter (2010, 213) similarly observed that "enforcement against drug selling remains the principal tool of drug control in the U.S. and many other countries." The effects of this strategy on prices, consumption, and harm, however, are neither automatic nor reliably beneficial—and Reuter's work is central to explaining why.

As Kim Moeller (2025) emphasizes in this issue, a key insight from Peter's work is the seemingly obvious but actually crucial understanding that drugs are primarily sold in markets—markets that are operated by self-interested agents. This recognition established a before and after in the study of illicit economies. By importing tools from industrial organization into illegal settings, Peter opened drug-market analysis to systematic inquiry into institutions, organizational forms, and strategic behavior (Reuter 1983, 1985b). The result was a decisive move beyond two limiting lenses: medicalized accounts that often abstracted from supply, and moralized narratives that portrayed suppliers as uniquely malevolent. Instead, Peter treated drug distribution as economic activity carried out by entrepreneurs and employees operating within an illegal industry (Reuter 1983; Reuter et al. 1990).

This perspective has two core implications. First, many economic principles that govern legal industries also apply to illegal ones; supply and demand, roles of buyers and sellers, substitution, costs, and entry and exit all matter for understanding illicit markets (Caulkins and Reuter 2006a, 2016; Reuter 1983; Reuter and Kleiman 1986). Second, drug-market participants respond to incentives in ways that are broadly similar to actors in legal markets, even though illegality alters the constraints and risks under which they operate (Reuter 1983, 1985b). At the same time, Peter and colleagues caution against naïve applications of elementary market models: drug markets exhibit idiosyncrasies that can generate counterintuitive outcomes, including unusual supply responses to enforcement pressure and nonlinear—sometimes perverse—demand responses in particular settings (Caulkins and Reuter 2006a).

Supply-side enforcement is typically justified through a simple "raise-the-price-to-reduce-use" logic: by targeting production, trafficking, and selling, the state aims to shift the supply curve inward so drugs become less available and—crucially—more expensive; since consumption responds (at least somewhat) to price, higher retail prices are treated as the key transmission mechanism from enforcement to lower use. As Caulkins and Reuter (2010, 229) summarize: "Supply control drives up prices. Higher prices reduce consumption [and] determines the change in drug-related social costs." A recurring theme in Peter's work, however, is that the enforcement–price–consumption chain is mediated by market structure, price transmission, and demand responsiveness—and therefore often departs from textbook expectations.

Crucially, Peter and colleagues demonstrated that policy leverage differs sharply across segments of the distribution chain. Raising risks and costs at production, export, or importation often translates only weakly into retail prices, since upstream costs are a small fraction of the final consumer price (Caulkins 1990; Caulkins and Reuter 2010; Crawford et al. 1988; Reuter and Kleiman 1986). In cocaine and heroin markets, for example, upstream costs have historically been orders of magnitude lower than the retail revenue generated from the same kilogram once subdivided. With this roughly additive price structure, even a large upstream shock (e.g., doubling an export price from $1,500 to $3,000 per kilogram) produces only a small percentage change at retail. Because of this additive price structure, the empirical link between higher risks of seizure/arrest and sustained retail price increases is limited (Caulkins and Reuter 2010; Pollack and Reuter 2014; Reuter and Kleiman 1986). As Reuter (2009, 511) summarizes, "higher seizure rates make little difference to price in Europe and the U.S., because when seized near the production countries the drugs are cheap to replace."

This weak price transmission clarifies why interdiction often works less as a classic supply restriction than as a probabilistic cost of delivery—a "stochastic tax" (Reuter and Kleiman 1986). When the upstream commodity is cheap relative to the retail markup, seizures are treated as an expected loss rate rather than a binding capacity constraint, so organizations may respond to higher seizure probabilities not by contracting supply but by grossing up shipments—over-producing and over-shipping so that expected losses still leave the desired quantity arriving (Crawford et al. 1988; Reuter et al. 1988). Because enforcement bites at the point of seizure rather than at retail valuation, interdiction "raises price" mainly by forcing the system to ship more than one kilo for every kilo that reaches consumers—producing the paradox that more effective interdiction can increase total production and exports (Mejia and Restrepo 2016; Reuter et al. 1988).

RAND work explicitly flagged this counterintuitive possibility: if seizure risk rises, traffickers may ship more to ensure a desired quantity gets through, potentially increasing upstream production and exports (see, Crawford et al. 1988; Reuter et al. 1988). Paradoxically, this suggests that more effective interdiction could lead to an overall increase in cocaine production and exports (Reuter et al. 1988). The logic is not universal. As mathematically derived by Donald Henry's appendix, this perverse outcome is not a certainty but depends on specific market parameters, such as the price elasticity of demand and the supply elasticity in source countries (Reuter et al. 1988). In 1988, "[t]oo little [was] known about many of the parameters in the drug markets to produce more concrete results" (Reuter et al. 1988, 133). Subsequent empirical research has increasingly confirmed that the cocaine market operates in a way that forces an expansion of total production to offset interdiction losses (e.g., Becker et al. 2006; Mejia and Restrepo 2016; Rydell and Sohler Everingham 1994).

Even when enforcement does raise retail prices, demand responses may be soft. In many hard-drug markets dominated by heavy users, demand can be relatively price-inelastic, so a given percentage increase in price produces a smaller percentage decline in quantity (Caulkins and Reuter 1998; Payne et al. 2020; Reuter et al. 1988; Reuter and Kleiman 1986). This is not neutral with respect to harm: because dependent users are

least able to reduce consumption, higher prices can impose disproportionate burdens on those at greatest risk (MacCoun and Reuter 2001a). To sustain use, some may shift time and effort toward risky income-generating activities—property crime, sex work, or deeper involvement in drug markets—potentially increasing certain forms of victimization and social disruption even as aggregate consumption falls (Caulkins et al. 1993; Goldstein 1985; MacCoun and Reuter 2001a; Reuter and Kleiman 1986).

A complementary strand of Reuter's work clarifies what retail "price" is largely pricing: not the upstream commodity, but the costs of transacting under prohibition. In the "risks and prices" framework, enforcement operates by increasing the expected costs of doing business—expected seizure losses, expected punishment, and avoidance expenditures—and these expected costs are largely translated into higher retail prices as compensation for hazard (Reuter and Kleiman 1986; Caulkins and Reuter 2010). Crucially, "risk" is not only state risk. Illegality embeds physical risk and violence (predation, retaliation, territorial disputes), and enforcement pressure can intensify those hazards and the costly routines required to manage them; in that sense, retail price is usefully read as a premium for operating under threat from both government and other traffickers (Reuter and Kleiman 1986; Caulkins and Reuter 2016).

This reframing also helps interpret the revenue effects of enforcement in markets with relatively inelastic demand. When prices rise more than quantities fall, total spending can increase even as use declines modestly; but the added cash flow often functions mainly as risk compensation rather than as an increase in risk-adjusted economic profit (Caulkins and Reuter 2010; Reuter and Kleiman 1986). Tougher enforcement may raise accounting profits (observed cash flow) by increasing the risk premium embedded in price, while leaving economic profits (risk-adjusted expected returns) unchanged once seizure losses, punishment risk, and avoidance expenditures are accounted for. Because exit can be slow and negative accounting profits are rare, observed revenues may rise without implying higher expected returns net of seizure loss, punishment risk, and avoidance overhead (Caulkins and Reuter 2010).

The organizational implication is that these burdens are partly fixed and unevenly distributed across suppliers. As the risk environment intensifies, minimum requirements for participation rise—embedded access, tacit know-how, secure transactions, and protection capacity—raising entry costs disproportionately for newcomers and concentrating activity among incumbents and better-equipped suppliers (Caulkins and Reuter 2010; Reuter and Kleiman 1986). However, these effects are not monotonic: depending on enforcement tactics and local opportunity structures, the same increase in pressure can either raise entry barriers and stabilize incumbent advantage or fragment organizations and accelerate turnover by disrupting coordination and leadership (as in the Mexico "kingpin strategy" case discussed below). In either case, enforcement can reduce headcounts without producing a gentler market, because the remaining or newly formed actors may be those most capable of managing enforcement risk and predation.

A brief clarification is useful here. In Reuter's "risks and prices" approach, the need for protection is typically treated as part of the costs and capacities required to distribute drugs under prohibition (violence risk,

corruption, concealment, security), rather than as a sharply distinct sector separate from distribution. Building on that baseline, where illegality raises transaction hazards, illegal markets may also generate substitutes for legal governance. Organized crime groups may emerge to supply the "private protection" required for market stability (Campana and Varese 2018; Gambetta 1993; Varese 2001). In this context, toughness and a reputation for force function as a form of social capital, underwriting the credible commitments necessary to sustain exchange among actors lacking legal recourse (Aziani 2020; Varese et al. 2019; Reuter 2016). Rather than merely exploiting disorder, these actors can produce a resilient informal order by enforcing property claims and resolving disputes that the state remains unable or unwilling to mediate (Aziani et al. 2020; Lessing 2021; Shortland and Varese 2016).

Finally, by disrupting established routines and raising the stakes of participation, intensified enforcement can increase violent self-protection, retaliation, and territorial enforcement among market participants. In many settings, a substantial share of drug-market violence originates in conflicts among participants rather than direct confrontations with police, while aggressive policing can also heighten tensions between law enforcement and communities where markets operate (Caulkins and Reuter 2016; Reuter and Kleiman 1986).

The escalation of violence in Mexico in the 2000s illustrates how enforcement can generate destabilization rather than suppression. The surge in killings between 2006 and 2012 is widely attributed not to drug markets as such, but to organizational and territorial volatility triggered by intensified state enforcement and the "kingpin strategy." By targeting top leaders, this approach fractured larger organizations into smaller, more aggressive, competing cells, intensifying violent competition over routes and local markets (Calderón et al. 2015; Felbab-Brown 2009; Reuter 2009; Rios 2015).

This connects to the "balloon effect": enforcement that intensifies in one place or targets a dominant organization often displaces production and trafficking to alternative routes, locales, or groups as traffickers adapt to changing risks (Felbab-Brown 2009; Guerette and Aziani 2022; MacCoun and Reuter 2001a; Reuter 2008, 2014b). Again, interdiction operates like a "stochastic tax" that encourages substitution across routes and jurisdictions, so the long-run effect on availability and user prices may be limited even when disruption is substantial (Reuter 2008, 2014b). On the other hand, fragmentation can further weaken informal governance and increase reliance on coercion for contract enforcement, credibility signaling, and deterring defection where legal enforcement is unavailable (Felbab-Brown 2009; MacCoun and Reuter 2001a).

Taken together, these dynamics support Reuter's argument that, once prohibition is sufficiently enforced to preserve the structural consequences of product illegality, marginal increases in enforcement intensity have diminishing effects on retail availability and price, while amplifying collateral harms—sharpening the policy trade-off between improving harm-containment within prohibition and the discrete regime shift implied by permitting at-scale private supply.

Insights for Contemporary Drug Policy(ies)

Designing effective drug policies requires operating in a domain where causal inference is intrinsically difficult, market adaptation is strategic, and policy objectives are in tension (e.g., suppressing markets vs. limiting violence and control harms). As highlighted in the preceding discussion of measurement problems in illegal markets (Section 3) and the counter-intuitive dynamics linking risk, price, and harm (Section 4), policymakers face genuine predictive uncertainty about the consequences of intervention. Peter captured this epistemic constraint in reflecting on his decade-long collaboration with Robert MacCoun (2001a) on the legalization debate: "Robert MacCoun and I spent ten years trying to assess the evidence and arguments for drug legalization. [...] We ended up agnostic on drug legalization, satisfying my own instinctual preference for intellectual ambiguity and irony, but not making policymakers' lives any easier" (Reuter 2019). They expected legalization to increase use while reducing harm per use, but stressed that the magnitudes were not reliably predictable—and that, even if they were, the trade-offs span incommensurable domains and are unevenly distributed across groups. In that sense, their "agnosticism" is not a claim that nothing can be known, but a warning that the hardest questions—especially regime shifts—are least tractable to strong inference.

A central implication of Reuter's work is that the canonical opposition between "legalization" and "prohibition" is analytically blunt. Instead, drug policy should be decomposed into two distinct questions: first, the institutional regime governing supply, namely whether private—typically for-profit—supply for non-medical use is legally permitted; second, the design of enforcement under prohibition, including its intensity, targeting, and objectives. Reflecting the influence of Nelson and Winter's (1982) evolutionary economics on Peter's training, this choice is best understood as setting a path-dependent trajectory. In fact, this decomposition provides the organizing logic for the analysis that follows. This framing also shifts evaluation away from whether a policy "works" in the abstract and toward a comparative assessment of harm allocations—how policies redistribute health and consumption harms (dependence, morbidity, mortality), market harms (violence, corruption, disorder), and control harms (incarceration, rights violations, inequity).

The regime question is discontinuous rather than incremental. If a society permits commercial supply, it moves into a qualitatively different political economy—closer to alcohol, tobacco, and in some jurisdictions cannabis—in which marketing, product innovation, economies of scale, and industry lobbying can be mobilized to expand demand and normalize use (Caulkins and Reuter 2021). Because legalization fundamentally reshapes the political economy of supply, regulation, and consumption, evidence generated under prohibition is a weak guide to commercialization's effects. This regime discontinuity—rather than rhetorical caution—grounds Reuter's skepticism about confident forecasts and supports his "agnosticism" about net impacts: dynamics observed under illegality do not extrapolate cleanly to a legal industry.

If private supply remains prohibited, the central design problem becomes how prohibition is enforced. The previous section showed why, once the "illegality tax" equilibrium is maintained, additional toughness tends to have low marginal impact on retail availability and price while risking substantial collateral harms.

The analytic implication is that policy should treat enforcement not as a single intensity parameter, but as a set of choices about objectives, targets, and tactics.

Accordingly, Reuter and colleagues emphasize that enforcement is heterogeneous and can serve distinct—and sometimes competing—functions. Policy-relevant analysis must distinguish between enforcement aimed at reducing supply (and thus affecting prices and availability) and enforcement aimed at ameliorating market harms, including violence and disorder (Caulkins and Reuter 2009; Reuter 2019). This distinction provides the bridge to the analysis that follows: if marginal supply suppression yields diminishing returns and can generate substantial control harms, the design problem within prohibition becomes one of portfolio calibration—selecting and combining levers (e.g., targeting facilitators versus low-level actors; prioritizing violence and disorder reduction over volume metrics; coordinating with services) to minimize aggregate harm (Caulkins and Reuter 1997). On that basis, the next subsection begins with a prohibition-consistent option: targeted enforcement paired with harm reduction.

Targeted Enforcement and Harm Reduction

Against the background described above, the relevant question in established markets is not whether tougher enforcement can "solve" drug use by raising prices, but how enforcement can be redesigned to reduce the harms generated by illegal markets and by enforcement itself. For that reason, enforcement should not be evaluated solely by whether it reduces drug use. It has a distinct—and often more plausible—role in reducing and containing the harms generated by drug markets and by enforcement itself. Alongside supply reduction, policing can explicitly target violence, corruption, intimidation, and overt disorder, and it can shape market behavior by making the most destructive forms of dealing less competitive than less harmful alternatives (Caulkins and Reuter 2009). As confidence wanes in the capacity of marginal enforcement intensity to durably suppress consumption, policy should shift toward harm-focused strategies: interventions that de-escalate conflicts around high-value transactions and turf, reduce open-air disorder, and protect communities, rather than broad, indiscriminate crackdowns (Caulkins and Reuter 2016; Kleiman 2007, 2009; Reuter 2016; Reuter and Caulkins 1995).

Empirical work suggests that targeted, problem-oriented approaches can reduce violence and disorder in specific settings, particularly when implemented through partnership-based strategies rather than enforcement-only sweeps. Place-based interventions focused on overt markets can reduce violence and disorder in targeted micro-places when organized as focused deterrence and related "pulling levers" approaches—typically combining clear communication to identified dealers, a credible promise of swift sanctions for continued dealing, and coordinated support from community and service partners (Braga and Weisburd 2012; Braga et al. 2018; Corsaro et al. 2012; D. M. Kennedy 2009).

At the same time, the literature cautions against treating these results as evidence that "more enforcement" in general will reduce harm. This caution is consistent with Reuter's distinction between supply

suppression and harm containment: many supply-reduction tactics can increase violence by destabilizing illegal markets (e.g., through fragmentation, vacancy/replacement dynamics, and intensified competition). Reviews of the enforcement–violence relationship frequently report a positive association between more intensive enforcement (arrests, seizures, police pressure) and higher levels of violence in drug markets, consistent with these mechanisms (Werb et al. 2011). The design implication is not to abandon enforcement, but to differentiate enforcement objectives and select tactics accordingly.

Consequently, as Greenfield and Paoli argue, the evidence supports a policy orientation toward systematic harm prioritization and harm reduction rather than maximalist ambitions to eliminate mature markets (Greenfield and Paoli 2013; Paoli et al. 2013). Complementing this, reviews of street-level drug enforcement emphasize that partnership-based, problem-oriented, and geographically focused approaches tend to outperform law-enforcement-only tactics, and that one-size-fits-all hotspot crackdowns often disappoint (Mazerolle et al. 2006, 2020).

Sustainable drug-control policy therefore requires realistic objectives. Where markets are established and demand is persistent, routine enforcement against widely used drugs often faces diminishing returns—doing little to reduce availability or raise prices—while generating substantial collateral damage, especially via incarceration and concentrated surveillance (Pollack and Reuter 2014). In these contexts, enforcement is likely to be more effective when it focuses on: maintaining boundaries between areas where drugs are easily accessible and areas where they are not; preventing the emergence of new drug problems; and suppressing the most damaging forms of market activity (e.g., predation, coercion, visible disorder), rather than maximizing enforcement volume.

The case for harm-focused enforcement is even stronger in drug-producing and transit countries such as Mexico and Colombia, where intensified crackdowns can exacerbate violence and corruption and enrich illegal armed actors, without reliably reducing production or exports (Mejia and Restrepo 2016). In such settings, enforcement priorities should center on protecting residents from the harms of illicit markets—violence, intimidation, corruption—rather than treating reductions in flows as the sole metric of success. The Honduras recruitment example also makes clear that, in transit and production settings, policy cannot rely on interdiction and arrests alone. Indirect policies—public services, local state capacity, and livelihood opportunities—are complementary levers that reduce vulnerability to recruitment and dependence on trafficking rents, and they should be paired with harm-focused enforcement aimed at community protection.

Yet the limits of marginal enforcement within prohibition do not imply that legalization is automatically the next best step. Legalization—especially for-profit legalization—removes the illegality tax and introduces commercial incentives, constituting a regime discontinuity with a different, and in some respects more predictable, risk profile.

Caution Against For-Profit Legalization

On the other hand, research suggests skepticism about legalization's ability to fully address the problems associated with drug use and drug markets, even for substances with relatively low immediate harm as cannabis is (MacCoun and Reuter 2001a). Legalization often leads to lower drug prices, increased accessibility, and greater use, especially if the legal market becomes commercialized and heavily promoted, as seen with alcohol, tobacco, and prescription opioids (Caulkins and Reuter 2021; Harlow et al. 2026).

Furthermore, the "alcohol" model of legalization, involving regulation and taxation, poses significant risks. This model can create powerful commercial interests that may promote expanded use, particularly among heavy users. While it allows for product regulation and quality assurance, it also carries the risk of regulatory capture, where industries influence the agencies meant to regulate them. This phenomenon has been observed in various sectors, including alcohol, tobacco, and prescription opioids, and could potentially undermine public health goals if applied to current illegal drugs (Caulkins and Reuter 2016). Alternatives, such as allowing individuals to grow their own cannabis, could reduce the illicit market without encouraging widespread commercial exploitation.

Differentiated Approaches for Different Drugs in Different Contexts

Reuter's work also highlights the necessity of differentiated strategies for different drugs; the unique characteristics of each drug, and of their markets, demand differentiated strategies to manage them. What works for a widely used, culturally embedded substance like cannabis may not be appropriate for substances with lower prevalence but more severe health risks, like harder drugs like cocaine, heroin, and amphetamines (Caulkins and Reuter 2016; Reuter 2019). Policymakers must therefore design targeted interventions that address the specific risks and behaviors associated with each substance.

For instance, the opioid crisis, particularly with the rise of illegally produced synthetic opioids, underscores the urgent need to complement enforcement with innovative public health interventions. Alongside traditional measures like treatment, education, and harm reduction services—including needle exchange programs, overdose prevention training, and access to naloxone—there is a pressing need for new policy and technological innovations. Potential interventions worth exploring include supervised drug use, proactive deterrence of online distribution, and advanced technologies like point-of-use drug content testing to improve transparency (Pardo et al. 2021).

Similarly, the violence and criminality associated with stimulant markets, like those for cocaine and methamphetamine, require enforcement and regulatory strategies, which should be specific to the country and context being targeted (Reuter 2016). In the U.S. crack markets, violence has largely stemmed from disputes between dealers, often over the amount of money owed or the quality of crack delivered (Fagan and Chin 1990). In Mexico, cartel dynamics have been a primary driver of violence. Internal leadership struggles, the fragmentation of criminal organizations, and territorial disputes over drug trafficking routes have led to

significant violence, primarily at the trafficking level rather than at the retail level (Reuter 2009). These examples demonstrate that the drivers of violence vary significantly depending on the region and drug market, and thus, any effective enforcement strategy must be tailored to the specific social, political, and economic dynamics of the area.

Incommensurability of Harms

The debate over drug legalization and drug policies more in general has been deeply rooted in competing philosophical frameworks. These range from libertarian arguments for individual autonomy and conservative emphasis on social order and moral tradition, to progressive critiques focused on social justice, racial equity, and the systemic harms of mass incarceration. Additionally, paternalistic views—often central to public health discourse—argue for state intervention to protect the collective well-being from the "commercial determinants of health" and the risks of addiction. The political connotation of the drug discourse complicates a full consideration of the interplay of social, economic, and health-related consequences, as policies should not be driven solely by ideology. Yet, there is another intrinsic aspect of the drug issue which force political aspects into the policy design.

Throughout his work, Peter has highlighted the inherent challenges in comparing the harms of drug use under prohibition versus legalization. Legalization may increase the number of users and the intensity of use, but it could also decrease harm per use by regulating quality and access. However, these harms are multifaceted and affect various aspects of social well-being, such as crime, public health, and civil liberties, which are often "incommensurable." This means there is no common metric to weigh, for example, the harm of an increase in addiction rates against the harm of a decrease in systemic state violence or the loss of privacy. The effectiveness of any drug policy depends heavily on cultural, social, and economic contexts. This complexity, or incommensurability, makes it difficult for policymakers to directly compare the outcomes of prohibition and legalization. As a result, there is a need for a nuanced, context-sensitive approach to drug policy that acknowledges the diverse impacts of each option.

Redistribution of Harms

A final takeaway from Peter's work is the sad evidence that the harms associated with drug prohibition are unevenly distributed across society, with low-income minority communities disproportionately bearing the brunt. These communities often face higher levels of violence, social disorder, and police scrutiny because of prohibition mediated by the fact that drug markets in these areas are more visible than they ae in other contexts. This disparity leads to higher arrest and incarceration rates for members of minorities and marginalized segments of society.

To address this issue, policymakers should prioritize the reduction of racial disparities in policing and sentencing by reforming the criminal justice system to address institutional biases. Second, they should

decrease reliance on purely repressive strategies. Finally, they should reduce the average severity of sentences for drug offenses, especially for low-level functionaries. Harsh sentences have limited effectiveness in disrupting the drug trade and disproportionately impact marginalized communities. By reducing these sentences, policymakers can mitigate the long-term social and economic damage caused by mass incarceration.

Beyond Knowledge Building

It is understood that Peter's legacy goes far beyond the extensive knowledge he built; he has been, and still is, a driving force in shaping the broader field of drug policy through his leadership, public service, and mentorship.

Indeed, a standout aspect of Peter's contributions is his role in founding and leading research institutions that consistently produce groundbreaking work. In the late 1980s, as the principal founder and co-director with the sociologist Barbara R. Williams of the Drug Policy Research Center (DPRC) at RAND, Peter helped create a multidisciplinary program that tackled drug-related issues with comprehensive, evidence-based research. At a time when very few non-governmental organizations globally possessed a dedicated drug data center, he recognized that data and empirical analysis were key to objective policy. To this end, Patricia Ebener played a pivotal role in establishing the necessary infrastructure, synthesizing fragmented data to support the center's work. Under Peter's leadership, the DPRC quickly gained recognition as a leading institution in the field, offering objective analysis during a time of intense drug policy debates, bringing together experts from diverse fields to explore complex questions from multiple angles.

After Peter transitioned from his leadership role, the DPRC continued to thrive under several co-directors from Audrey Burnam and Jonathan P. Caulkins to Martin Iguchi, Rosalie Liccardo Pacula, Beau Kilmer and Rosanna Smart. Each brought their unique perspectives, solidifying the center's reputation as a global authority on drug research and policy insights. The DPRC's ability to maintain its clear identity and focus, while evolving to address new challenges in drug policy, stands as a testament to the strong foundation Peter established. The DPRC's research has not only informed U.S. policy but also shaped discussions and strategies on a global scale, making it a resource for governments and organizations around the world.

Aside from his role at RAND, Peter's leadership helped consolidate the global community of drug policy scholars. Most notably, he was a driving force behind the creation of the International Society for the Study of Drug Policy (ISSDP). Recognizing that the field suffered from a lack of academic cohesion and a formal venue for multidisciplinary exchange, Peter led the transition of an informal network of researchers into a professional international society. He served as ISSDP's founding president, helping make it a leading forum where economists, sociologists, criminologists, and public health scholars share rigorous, evidence-based research and debate policy trade-offs. Under his leadership, ISSDP became a central hub for the field, reinforcing a culture of critical inquiry and intellectual openness. Over time, it has been widely recognized as

a key venue for advancing harm reduction, comparative policy analysis, and nuanced assessments of enforcement, treatment, and prevention across diverse institutional contexts.

His commitment to international cooperation is further evidenced by his service as a member of the Scientific Advisory Committee for multiple editions of the World Drug Report at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and through his work with the National Academy of Sciences, he has contributed to inform policy decisions that impact many lives (e.g., Rettig and Yarmolinsky 1995; UNODC 2024). These roles, combined with his leadership of the ISSDP, underscore his dedication to ensuring that research informs humane and practical drug policies.

Reflecting on Peter's career, it becomes clear that his ability to collaborate with individuals from diverse disciplinary and cultural backgrounds has been essential in advancing the field of drug policy, both in the U.S. and globally. Each of the brilliant minds he has worked with could undoubtedly speak to the influence Peter has had on their way of thinking about drug policy and research in general. As far as I know Peter, I am certain these individuals did not collaborate with Peter solely because of his sharp intellect, undeniable skills, or his deep passion for research. Peter is, above all, a sensitive person, genuinely open to listening and engaging in dialogue.

Like it is for all of us, time is certainly a precious resource for Peter. Yet, I have always seen him make time to discuss research with young colleagues or students eager for his valuable insights. During his months visiting [ANONYMIZED], I cannot recall him missing a single meeting where someone was presenting a project or a working paper they were working on. Peter listens attentively and then engages sincerely in the discussion, offering vivid yet constructive critiques, encouraging others to delve deeper into the true meaning of what they are studying. He pushes people to continuously reflect on what their results truly reveal and offers insights on the genuine knowledge their research is generating.

It was my first day as an intern at UNODC in Vienna; I was expected to support Angela Me's team in analyzing correlations between prices of coca leaves and prices of cocaine, various precursors, and the cost of commodities in Peru. I was a complete stranger to illegal markets and drug policies, and I recall my supervisor Martin Raithelhuber handing me a small stack of printouts and suggesting I read them to get a sense of the themes we would be exploring together. Those pages, a series of studies by Peter, marked the beginning of my journey. As I progressed through my doctoral years, my initial curiosity transformed into a profound admiration for his work—an admiration that only deepened as I grew to know the man himself. Over time, our relationship evolved beyond the purely academic; today, I deeply treasure his insights following a conference, his guidance on career paths, his tips on must-see exhibitions, or even his reflections on the character of a particular neighborhood. He is a truly kind person, and kindness is a virtue that is all too often in short supply.

Peter has been, and continues to be, a mentor to multiple generations of scholars, leaving an indelible mark on the field through his teaching and guidance. Whether in the classrooms of the University of Maryland

or during his lectures and presentations around the world, he has influenced students and researchers, sharing his expertise and promoting a deep, critical understanding of drug policy. For all of this and despite the incredible merits of Peter's research, his legacy extends far beyond his pioneering studies.

Conclusions

Peter Reuter's contributions to the field of drug policy are nothing short of transformative. His work has strongly influenced how we understand the complex dynamics of drug markets and the far-reaching impacts of prohibition, enforcement, and legalization. From his early inquiries into the consequences of drug policies to his continued contributions on debates surrounding drug trafficking, harm reduction, and market regulation, Peter's insights have provided policymakers and scholars with invaluable tools for navigating one of society's most contentious issues.

The enduring legacy of Peter's work lies in its profound analytical modesty—a sober insistence on what policy can and cannot realistically achieve. By demonstrating that when prohibition 'binds,' marginal increases in enforcement rarely yield stable reductions in supply, Reuter effectively shifted the goalposts of the global debate. The most defensible objective of drug policy, in his view, is not the impossible eradication of a market, but the mitigation of the harms that market imposes on communities. This shift is not a retreat from ambition; it is an essential analytical correction. Reuter's contribution was to recalibrate the very standards of success, moving us away from symbolic victories toward a more humane, evidence-based pragmatism.

This pragmatic framework allowed Peter to consistently champion evidence-based, data-driven approaches to policy, challenging both ideological and oversimplified views. His work highlights the importance of differentiated strategies for different drugs, acknowledging that policies must be tailored to the unique risks, behaviors, and market structures associated with each substance. Whether exploring the unintended consequences of aggressive enforcement, the public health risks of commercialization, or the global impacts of drug trafficking, Peter's research emphasizes the need for nuanced, context-specific approaches to drug control.

Finally, Peter's legacy goes beyond the body of knowledge he has built. His leadership, mentorship, and collaboration with scholars from diverse backgrounds have created a lasting impact on the field. He has cultivated a new generation of researchers, fostering critical thinking and encouraging them to challenge assumptions while deepening their understanding of drug policy. His influence has shaped not only academic discussions but also practical policy decisions. In a rapidly evolving landscape of drug legalization, opioid crises, and global drug trade challenges, Peter's work remains as relevant and vital as ever. His contributions will continue to guide future research and policy developments.

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AI Statement

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools, specifically OpenAI's ChatGPT, were utilized to improve fluency and minimize typographical errors in the English language of this manuscript.

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