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Regional

Oberweis studies drug problems in society

For decades now, Americans have been hearing about a so-called “war on drugs” being waged by both law enforcement and politicians. Yet, this “war” does not seem to have an end in sight. Someone who has an idea of why efforts to eradicate drugs have failed is Trish Oberweis, an associate professor in the department of sociology and criminal justice at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

“As someone who has looked at the available research, we are never going to be able to deal with our appetite for drugs if criminalization is the only tool that we use,” said Oberweis, who teaches a class on drug policy. “We spend a good deal of time looking at the way that drug education in America shapes and defines our ideas about drug use without necessarily sticking with just the facts. We lump things together that perhaps shouldn’t be lumped together. We paint a picture of drugs as all one big bad thing, without taking time to sort of peel apart some of the important distinctions. Marijuana is not the same as heroin, alcohol or tobacco. But in our drug education we tend to categorize all of those things together.”

Born in Aurora, Ill., Oberweis received her bachelor’s degree in sociology from North Central College of Illinois, and her master’s degree and doctorate from the school of justice studies at Arizona State University. It was while growing up in Aurora that she witnessed firsthand how the drug problem – and its relationship to crime – affected her community. Her interest in criminal justice, she said, started in the hallways of her high school. There are data to suggest, she said, that for some drugs there is a pretty



Dr. Trish Oberweis at her office.

clear connection between drug use and violence.

“Interestingly though, the highest on the list is alcohol, and we do not criminalize it. So clearly there are connec-

tions between alcohol, cocaine, methamphetamines, possibly heroin and violent crime,” she explained. “But the connection between drug use and other kinds of crimes is more difficult to

establish. The research is just ambiguous.” So what is the answer to the drug problem? As Oberweis explained, it will require efforts beyond the mere criminalization of drugs. Such an approach,

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she said, can be found in Western Europe, where rehabilitation is a key component to drug policies.

“I think it is difficult to argue that criminalization works better at dealing with drug problems than rehabilitation does,” she said. “There is a lot of emotion behind the issue. People who look at addicts are frequently fearful of doing something other than punish them, afraid that if we do not send a strong punishment message that we are not doing what we could be doing to keep people from going down that path in the first place.” But incarceration, Oberweis said, will by itself never be an effective policy.

And what about our society’s permissive attitude toward nicotine and alcohol? “Every year half a million people die because of tobacco related cancers and other similar diseases, whereas the number of people who die as a result of consuming marijuana does not register on a statistical scale,” she explained. “Even alcohol is substantially more risky, even Tylenol is substantially more risky when you look at the national statistics of causes of death. The fact that our policy allows one and not the other raises all sorts of questions about the political nature of our policy.”

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, “Segue,” can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@

Photo courtesy of Shan Lu