

The war on drugs failed. It's time for a war on abuse

By Natalie Schreyer and Jessica Klein

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(CNN)Two days before she was found dead of a gunshot wound to the head on May 3 of this year, Anako Lumumba told police that her ex-boyfriend was stalking and threatening her. This wasn't the first time Leroy Headley had been accused of domestic abuse. Lumumba had said he pushed her when she was pregnant in 2005, the Burlington Free Press reports. Late last year, he threatened to "blow my head off," she told police.

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Despite 160 encounters with police in 15 years, according to the Free Press, Headley has never been convicted of a crime. He is now at large -- an alleged abuser roaming free.

Meanwhile, President Donald Trump granted clemency to Alice Johnson, a grandmother who was serving a life sentence for a first-time, nonviolent drug offense. She had been living behind bars for over 20 years.

Had Headley's crime been drug use, instead of violent abuse, his fate -- and Lumumba's -- could have been very different. The government has vigorously pursued a flawed "war on drugs." It's time to devote those efforts to a fight that can really make a difference: a war on abuse.

Lumumba is just one of many domestic violence victims whose abusers remain free to continue to threaten lives while the government spends more than \$50 billion each year on a decades-long "war on drugs" that has contributed to mass incarceration and millions of arrests of nonviolent offenders for drug possession.

Thousands of Americans are locked up in state prisons for drug possession. But strangling, punching or slamming your partner into a wall? Often that means a suspended sentence, probation, or case dismissed.

The pandemic that threatens women globally

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In 2015, 1,686 women were murdered by men in the United States, and the vast majority of them were killed by someone they knew, according to the Violence Policy Center, a research and advocacy group working to end gun death and injury. That same year, there were over 800,000 incidents of intimate partner violence, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

While there are only around 200 domestic violence courts in the country, the United States is, according to the DOJ's Office of Justice Programs, home to more than 3,100 drug courts, many of which focus on nonviolent, low-level offenders -- addicts who need medical treatment more than criminal punishment.

Unlike most courtrooms, domestic violence courts employ judges, prosecutors, and victim advocates who specialize in intimate partner abuse. They are largely concentrated in New York and California, with multiple courts in Florida, Michigan, and North Carolina, according to a 2009 report from the Center for Court Innovation. A mentor court initiative announced by the DOJ in 2013 cites three domestic violence courts in New York, Idaho, and Texas as models.

Domestic violence cases are notoriously difficult to prosecute, often because it's daunting for victims who live in fear of their abusers to testify. It takes trained judges, prosecutors, and advocates to address the unique circumstances presented by domestic violence, making dedicated courts a key part of protecting victims and stopping abusers.

Why men like John Kelly do nothing when abuse allegations surface

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Since President Richard Nixon declared drug abuse "public enemy number one" in 1971, the US state and federal prison population has ballooned over 600% to about 1.5 million incarcerated people as of 2016. At the end of 2015, nearly 45,000 Americans sat behind bars in state prisons for drug possession,

according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The number of arrests for possessing marijuana, while down over the past few years, was still higher than arrests for all violent crimes combined in 2015, according to a report by Human Rights Watch and the ACLU.

"What the drug war has encouraged for law enforcement is to increase the number of arrests, and they're rewarded for the number of people they arrested -- but there are no real returns on public safety," Theshia Naidoo, legal director of criminal justice at the Drug Policy Alliance, a nonprofit organization that advocates for drug reform, told us.

Instead of incentivizing police to go after the money and property of people they merely suspect of having drugs, they should be incentivized to pursue dangerous abusers.

Texas shooting shows risk of ignoring relationship violence

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Over 70% of sheriff's offices serving 25,000 or more residents participated in a drug task force in 2007, the most recent year for which data was available. Imagine if those sheriff's deputies were assigned to a domestic violence team, investigating abusers, serving protective orders, and following up with the most dangerous repeat offenders.

"You can't arrest yourself out of addiction, but you can stop a murder by holding an offender accountable for domestic violence," Mark Wynn, a retired lieutenant detective for the Nashville Police Department, told us. He now trains law enforcement, health care providers, and advocates on intervention and prevention of domestic violence, child abuse and sexual assault.

When law enforcement takes domestic abuse seriously, it can yield results. High Point, North Carolina, has seen a reduction in intimate partner homicides since implementing a new approach to domestic violence in 2012. The initiative, pioneered by the National Network for Safe Communities at John Jay College, focuses on deterrence. Police inform low level offenders they are on notice, will be monitored, and will suffer more severe consequences if they continue to abuse their partners. The more they repeatedly abuse, the harsher the penalties they face. Between 2004 and 2011, there were 17 intimate partner murders in High Point. From 2012 to 2014, there was only one, according to a report by researchers from The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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Judge Elizabeth Hines, who presides over a domestic violence court in Ann Arbor, Michigan, says she's noticed an improvement in victim safety when more "time, energy, and commitment" go toward

domestic violence prosecution. "Really looking at people closely and their individual concerns, we have the opportunity to make a difference," Hines said in an interview.

Last week, President Trump told reporters he will "probably" support a bipartisan bill that would empower the states to decide how to handle marijuana without interference by the federal government. This would be a step in the right direction. The resources drained into nonviolent marijuana offenses could be directed where they belong -- to protecting America's battered women from the abusers who have dominated, controlled and endangered their lives.

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