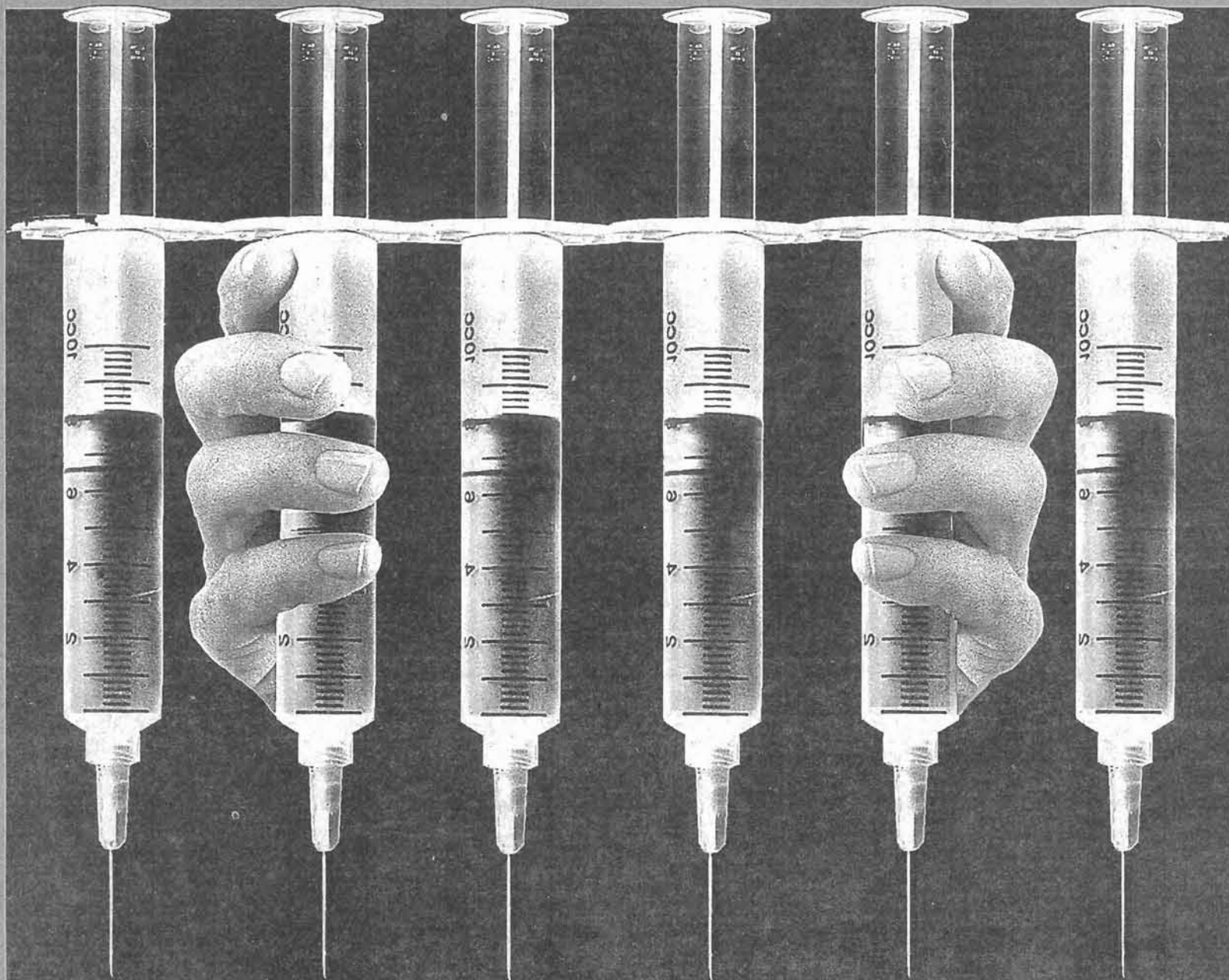


## NEWS FROM FRONT LINES ON THE WAR ON DRUGS



MIKE MINER/TRIBUNE

# Are we winning yet?

By Leonard C. Goodman

I represent indigent defendants in federal drug "conspiracy" cases. In a typical case, federal authorities round up 10 to 20 young men and women, often residents of a housing project, always black or Hispanic, and charge them in a single drug conspiracy indictment.

I just finished the trial of Brian, a 30-year-old man from Cabrini-Green, one of 15 Cabrini residents or former residents charged with drug conspiracy and related charges.

A dozen Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives agents spent more than two years investigating these young men, most of whom were selling \$5 bags of crack and heroin in the stairwells of one of the remaining Cabrini buildings, located near North Halsted and Division Streets. The agents used informants to make drug buys. They set up video and audio surveillance in an apartment frequently used by the defendants. They recorded thousands of hours of telephone calls from seven wiretapped phones.

The trial of my client and four of his co-defendants lasted five weeks. The

prosecution called dozens of witnesses—informants, federal agents, police officers and chemists—and played hours and hours of video and audio surveillance tapes. Of course, the taxpayers paid for it all: three federal prosecutors, a small army of law enforcement officers, five court-appointed defense lawyers, a federal judge and her staff.

We spent five weeks trying this case, plus we put in hundreds of hours preparing for the trial. Taxpayers paid for all that.

Now that the trial is over, taxpayers will pay to incarcerate the defendants. Four of the five were convicted and face at least 20 years in prison. The cost of prison is around \$40,000 annually per inmate.

What a waste.

By the way, until his conviction last

month, Brian was working in a barbershop, taking care of his children and attending his court-ordered drug counseling three days a week. Unless his conviction is overturned, his kids will be in their 20s or 30s by the time their father is released from prison.

And it is statistically likely that taxpayers will also pay some day to incarcerate Brian's kids, who will grow up poor and fatherless.

There is another way. Many European countries have found that treating their societal drug problems as primarily a criminal matter aggravates the problem because it increases the profitability of drug trafficking and the violence associated with black markets. These countries have found that a taxpayer dollar spent instead on drug treatment and education is far more effective than a dollar spent on drug cops, drug prosecutors and jail cells.

The United States should have learned its lesson from its failed experiment with alcohol prohibition in the 1920s. We also might have learned from the "war on drugs" over the past 25 years. In that time, illegal drugs have become more available, the vio-

lence associated with black markets has claimed countless lives, and the temptation to take bribes has corrupted countless drug cops. In short, the war has proved more harmful than the drugs themselves.

Yet we continue to pursue such a costly and ineffective policy because many politicians position themselves as tough on drugs and many law enforcement agencies depend on the drug war to justify their bloated budgets.

In 1929, President Herbert Hoover assembled a panel of experts, the Wickersham Commission, to see how Prohibition could be saved. Instead, the commission cataloged the failure of Prohibition and set the stage for repeal.

We need another Wickersham Commission. I have seen firsthand that the war on drugs consumes precious resources, promotes violence, takes thousands of lives and does nothing to make us safer.

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