

Protocol having been established, Good Morning. It is a pleasure to be here with you today for the release of the National Household Drug Survey and the Rapid Situational Assessment of Drug Use and Drug Treatment in The Bahamas.

These studies were conducted by the Ministry of Health, in collaboration with the National Anti- Drug Secretariat (NADS) of the Ministry of National Security, the Organization of American States, Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD), and the U.S. Embassy.

The timing of these surveys' release, and our discussions here today, can contribute to the new government's efforts to define its agenda with respect to reducing crime and improving the health and safety of the citizens of The Bahamas.

To me, one of the most striking parts of the survey results, which you will hear about shortly, was the cultural attitude among young people towards marijuana. Young people do not believe that marijuana is a drug. Also, they do not associate marijuana use, sales, or possession with violent crime, or with addiction, in spite of ample evidence to the contrary. This attitude contributes to higher levels of marijuana use among young people and earlier experimentation.

Marijuana is known by law enforcement and health treatment professionals as a gateway drug. In the short term, marijuana can impair memory, cognitive function, ability to learn, and decision-making.

According to the American Psychology Association, 'frequent or heavy marijuana use in adolescence or young adulthood has been associated with a dismal set of life outcomes, including poor school performance, higher dropout rates, increased welfare dependence, greater unemployment, and lower life satisfaction.' All of these factors contribute to a higher likelihood of involvement in criminal activity.

As you discuss these surveys' findings and plan a response, I would ask that you consider ways to work together to reshape the youth narrative about marijuana and alcohol abuse. By correlating the most serious effects of these drugs - from the loss of opportunities in the future, to the violent crime being perpetrated in people's neighborhoods - we can impart the seriousness of the use of these substances on the younger generations.

Education about the dangers of marijuana, alcohol, and other substances needs to take place early -- as early as elementary school -- and often to have an effect on young people.

You do not need to look further than the survey results regarding cocaine to see how perception about the danger of a substance can dramatically change the likelihood that young people will experiment with it.

Reactions toward cocaine and cocaine use in the study were very negative. Young people associate cocaine with violent crime and look down on people for using it. This correlates with extremely low cocaine use rates in The Bahamas. An outreach campaign that created this same sort of stigma attached to marijuana and alcohol could help decrease their abuse among young people.

As the National Anti-Drug Secretariat and the Ministries of Health and Education formulate plans for addressing these issues within Bahamian schools, the U.S. Embassy's Office of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement stands ready to partner with you. As we grapple with issues of addiction and drug abuse in each of our countries, it is important that we work together to tackle these difficult issues, and we stand ready to do so.