

Kings of Unintended Consequences

Guest post by Nicholas Hooton.

In a turn of events that has surprised all but those who learn from history, San Francisco's ban on Happy Meals is resulting in the opposite of the intended effect: an increase in "unhealthy" food sales.

The legislation prohibits the inclusion of a toy with any meal that does not meet the nutrition standards set by legislators. In response to this, McDonald's began simply selling the toy separately for an extra ten cents. Previously, parents had been able to buy a toy separately for a couple of dollars, but now they must purchase a meal in order to receive the toy.

It still baffles me that policy makers, media and the general public are surprised when the State attempts to force someone's concept of good living fails. This is known as unintended consequences. It is almost inevitable that every State attempt to either prevent voluntary associations or force involuntary associations results in what is known as "perverse incentive"; that is, it has the opposite of the intended effect.

Take marijuana prohibition, for example. In the known history of mankind, there has never been a death caused by marijuana. It is, as far as we know, physically impossible to overdose on it. With prohibition came an economic movement to produce and distribute synthetic cannabinoid products. Rather than regulate these new products for safety, more prohibition came, driving innovators to develop new and different derivatives as rapidly as possible to keep ahead of the legislation. Some of these products have been very dangerous and led to deaths. Instead of seeing this as a reason to regulate, the State has continued its prohibition drive, and the cycle of death and destruction goes on.

Also consider polygamy. Prior to its outlaw in the mid-19th century, the practice of polygamy amongst the Mormon religious movement was a veritable model of voluntaryist living. There was no sexual manipulation of children. Consent of all parties involved was strictly required. Divorces were readily granted to those who requested them.

This contrasts sharply with what has been associated with the practice since prohibition. Although the LDS Church ceased practicing, some smaller sects continued, taking their activities underground for fear of legal action. This underground activity, outside the light of law and the accountability of regulation, has yielded the unsavory and repugnant abuses associated with the practice in our modern age.

History has shown, time and again, that the freedom enjoyed by societies based on mutual consent has been instrumental in the greatest prosperity and technological innovations the

world has known, while State prohibition, bans and criminalization have ended in grave atrocities, suffering and poverty. Respecting each individual's autonomy is not only right, it benefits us all.