The use of narcotics and alcohol represent a vexing problem to law enforcement. A substantial percentage of crimes involve the use of drugs or alcohol; either the offender was under the influence or the offender committed the crime to allow the purchase of drugs. In 2000, almost 25% of inmates in federal and state prisons reported that they were under the influence at the time of the offense.

The drug culture has overwhelmed law enforcement for several decades. Today, crystal methamphetamine (commonly called crystal meth or meth) is the most prevalent drug of choice. This narcotic is cooked by individuals and is highly addictive; long-term use can lead to devastating long-term effects. Law enforcement must face this trend from several levels. First, there is the obvious impact this drug activity has on criminal activity. Second, the enforcement of drug laws can be dangerous, as the production of crystal meth is dangerous; it uses chemicals that are highly toxic and explosive. Third, users can hallucinate, making an interaction with someone under the influence a dangerous situation.

So how does the criminal justice system confront narcotics and alcohol abuse? The answer is found in community-based corrections and the implementation of alternative programs. Simple incarceration is not the answer to facing this type of problem.

First, intervention techniques can be successful. In the justice system, many pretrial diversion programs attempt to gain ground with individual offenders. The deeper and more frequent a person’s interaction with the justice system, the higher the likelihood that they will become recidivists and alternative programs will fail. A person who is facing the justice system with a first time charge of a narcotics violation might encounter a pretrial diversion program. In this instance, drug treatments and counseling are provided, and if the offender completes the program successfully, he or she will face no criminal penalties. These pretrial diversion programs are most often found in drug courts or courts that are established to only deal with drug offenses.

Second, social services interact with the courts to intervene and assist with treatments. A typical offender who is allowed an alternative to incarceration will be required to undergo a certain program. In this program, there are meetings with counselors, and the offender will pay a small fee for each meeting, much like reporting to a probation officer. The majority of the program is tax-payer funded, and these programs work very closely with
courts in an attempt to make the programs successful.

For those who are incarcerated, there are drug and alcohol treatment programs available in prison as well. While in theory incarceration provides an opportunity to totally withdraw from encounters with narcotics, the reality is that inmates have access to narcotics through trafficking in prison. Counseling and treatments are provided as well and are funded by the Department of Corrections.

As with any addiction, treatment programs are successful in the short term, but long-term success is difficult. The criminal justice system must continue to find innovative approaches and remain committed to alternatives to incarceration to make as much progress as possible.