

The Racist History of Drugs in America

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George Jung once stated, “The war on drugs was an ideology the government came up with, and there never really was a war on drugs. I mean, to stop the importation of drugs into the United States of America is an impossibility.” The war on drugs, which began in 1971, never aimed to reduce the illegal drug trade in the United States. Instead, it became an excuse to systematically disrupt communities of race who are associated with certain drugs without any proof. Racism became a huge factor for not only the creation of the war of drugs, but the number of minorities that have been put in mass incarceration. Throughout American history, there has been a war on drugs on Mexicans for marijuana use, African Americans for cocaine use, and the Chinese for opium use.

Though not a part of the 1970’s war on drugs, Chinese immigrants were subject to a separate war on drugs that occurred in the late 1800’s. Like cocaine and marijuana in America, opiates were not a new drug that was exposed to Americans when the Chinese came to America. Opiates were widely used and legally available without prescriptions in hundreds of medicines, but neither opiate use nor addiction was made into a political issue (Adler). The reason Chinese immigrants came to America, specifically California, was to help build the first transcontinental railroad and to dig the gold mines during California’s gold rush. Opiates didn’t come from the Chinese; they were introduced to China by British and American traders in the 19th century (Adler). Americans only turned against the Chinese when no more gold was found and therefore, a depression ensued throughout the country; the Chinese became scapegoats for Americans. Americans had to compete with the Chinese for jobs and they didn’t want that to happen because they believed they were entitled to jobs because they were born in America. This dispute led to

the first real drug law, which was San Francisco's anti-opium den ordinance of 1875, which was an excuse to harass and control Chinese workers during economic hardships (Adler). As a result, Chinese immigrants were arrested for opium possession and they became associated with the drug, which created an erasure for every other race that used it in America. Opium smoking's initial criminalization in San Francisco in 1875 was not only a result of racism in this case, but also a result of class conflict and recession.

In the 1930s, marijuana became widely demonized due to its associations with Mexicans, and this connection created a fear within the public. Humans have been using marijuana for millennia and around 8,000 years ago, they started growing it as a crop (Ordish). For many years in America, marijuana was available in over-the-counter medications. No one had a problem or even questioned marijuana throughout history, but the influx of Mexicans in America changed all that in 1930. Henry Anslinger, the commissioner for the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, had his funding cut and was under the threat of being shut down (Booth). He had to demonize a new drug or chemical, so he thought, "What are people scared of for no good reason?" Many Americans were scared of Mexicans and Mexicans smoked marijuana, so he used racism to fuel a propaganda campaign against the drug. He even testified before Congress and said that marijuana was an addictive drug that produced insanity, criminality, and death. Anslinger also worked with Congress to pass the first mandatory minimum sentencing law, which made someone's first time being caught smoking to be put away for two to ten years (Booth). When scientists tested the Anslinger's claims, they found no connection of marijuana causing insanity and criminality in the 1940's. These scientists shared their studies with the government, but they did nothing to stop it and the result was the incarceration of Mexicans decades after the study. In 1973, a bipartisan government wanted Nixon to decriminalize it, but

he didn't because he wanted to use it for his own purpose ("The Report of the National Commission on Marihuana and Drug Abuse").

In addition, the war on drugs was stated to have racist roots by a government official. Nixon's aid, John Ehrlichman said:

"We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or blacks, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with drugs and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course, we did." (Baum)

This shows that the war on drugs was an excuse to infiltrate communities of minorities and arrest them for little to no evidence of drug possession. What's worse is that marijuana is not harmful, let alone addicting. For most people, marijuana is essentially harmless because it kills absolutely no one, compared to alcohol which kills 88,000 people a year and tobacco which kills 480,000 people a year (CDC). It is not a gateway drug because most people who try it don't even continue smoking it (SAMHSA). If someone is under 25, smoking marijuana can lead to memory problems and poor cognitive functioning, but if someone is an adult and their brain is finished developing, it's their choice to smoke marijuana or not (Fleming). So, the demonization of a drug based on other people's fear of another race was put into action and made into a law, but it was also a way to incarcerate minorities. It helped the government gain power and control over minorities and even though recently some laws have been loosened in some states, marijuana still accounts for nearly half of all drug arrests.

Similarly, cocaine has been tied to African Americans and therefore has been used to infiltrate these communities and perpetuate African American stereotypes. The drug war began in the early 20th century and was not a way to control the production or use of cocaine in America, but it was a way to infiltrate African Americans communities. In fact, cocaine at this time had been widely used for years and was first criminalized when the addict population began to shift from predominantly white, middle class, middle-aged women to young, working-class males, African Americans in particular (Adler). This turn for action was simply based on the color of someone's skin and as a result, false and unproved statements were released to the American public. State Department officials and other crusaders spread unsubstantiated suspicions, repeated in the press, that, e.g., cocaine induced African American men to rape white women (Adler). This then perpetuated the belief that African Americans were criminals and perpetuated the racist image they were given as super predators, which was a word that targeted black youths who committed crime.

Furthermore, the crack scare was not a threat to communities or societies, but Americans used it as an excuse to incarcerate African Americans. The war on cocaine didn't begin when cocaine use quadrupled in the late 1970's and many individuals died of a result, nor when thousands of users began to smoke it in the more potent and dangerous form of free-base (Adler). When the crack scare and war began, crack cocaine was unknown outside of a few neighborhoods in a handful of major cities and the prevalence of illicit drug use had been dropping for several years (Adler). Crack cocaine wasn't being widely used nor was it killing a multitude of people like it was in the 1970's, but became a product of racism because cocaine was being sold on ghetto street corners in black communities when the war on this drug began. As a result of this war on drugs, the African American population has suffered greatly. Today, a

number of African Americans have been behind bars for decades because of drug use, while white Americans who are caught with these drugs get significantly less time than their counterparts. Instead of giving African Americans rehabilitation treatment or creating programs that can help them make a living without selling drugs, the government just incarcerates them. The system certainly failed this minority even to this day as they are suffering from not only being subject to arrest for drugs, but for police brutality as well.

Ultimately, the war on drugs originated as a result of racism and was connected to Mexicans' use of marijuana, African Americans' use of cocaine, and the Chinese use of opium. The war on drugs has always targeted minorities or people who go against government policies and it can be proved through the fact that there has never been a war on white Americans for their drug use in America. These drug wars have wreaked havoc amongst minorities and rendered them unable to escape certain stereotypes and have mitigated their ability to be open to opportunities to escape their poverty because of their so-called associations. The war on drugs has only hurt communities because instead of focusing on the war on poverty, they focus on pursuing racist policies to maintain control of societies.

Citations

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