



Is the War on Drugs Racist?

Media & General Quotes: 1900-1994

- 1897** "In Southern Arizona the jail and prison officials have their hands full in trying to prevent the smuggling into their institution of the seductive mariguana. [sic] This is a kind of loco weed more powerful than opium. It is a dangerous thing for the uninitiated to handle, but those who know its users say it produces more raising dreams than opium. The Mexicans mix it with tobacco and smoke it with cigarettes, inhaling the smoke. When used in this way it produces a hilarious sprit in the smoker that cannot be equaled by any other form of dissipation..." *San Francisco Call*
- 1900** "Negroes in the South are reported as being addicted to a new form of vice – that of 'cocaine sniffing' or the 'coke habit.'" Editorial, [Journal of the American Medical Association](#).
- 1906** "Mariahuana [sic] is one of the most dangerous drugs found in Mexico. The weed grows wild in many localities of the southern part of that country. Its wonderful powers as a[n] intoxicant have long been known to the natives and many are the wild orgies it has produced. The habitual user of mariahuana finally loses his mind and becomes a raving maniac. There are scores and scores of such instances in Mexico. It is said that those who smoke mariahuana frequently die suddenly." *Pacific Drug Review*
- 1909** "Marihuana is a weed used only by people of the lower class and sometimes by soldiers, but those who make larger use of it are prisoners sentenced in long terms..." *Los Angeles Times*
- 1909** "It has been authoritatively stated that cocaine is often the direct incentive to the crime of rape by the negroes of the South and other sections of the country." Dr. [Hamilton Wright](#), first United States Opium Commissioner.
- 1909** "One of the most unfortunate phases of smoking opium in this country is the large number of women who have become involved and were living as common-law wives or cohabitating with Chinese in the Chinatowns of our various cities." Dr. Hamilton Wright
- 1911** "Within the last year we in California have been getting a large influx of Hindoos and they have in turn started quite a demand for cannabis indica; they are a very undesirable lot and the habit is growing in California very fast; the fear is now that it is not being confined to the Hindoos alone but that they are initiating our whites into this habit." Henry Finger, California Board of Pharmacy
- 1911** "Several years ago this plant became so great a public menace in Mexico that drastic laws were passed to govern the production, sale and use of the narcotic; whilst these laws have had some good effect, more than one-third of the people of Mexico are believed to be more or less addicted to the use of the drug. Much of it is brought into California by the Mexican laborers, who are greatly addicted to it... [T]he loco narcotic destroys body, soul and mind." *Washington Post, American Practitioner, and Pacific Medical Journal*
- 1912** "In passing a Federal law that will prevent undesirable drugs, it will be necessary to look well into the future. I would not be at all surprised if, when we get rid of the opium danger, the chloral peril and the other now known drug evils, we shall encounter new ones. The habitués will feel that they must adopt something to take the place of the 'dope' they have lost through legal enactment. Hasheesh, of which we know very little in this country, will doubtless be adopted by many of the unfortunates if they can get it." Dr. Hamilton Wright
- 1912** "I anticipated some time ago that in event of our securing Federal control of the sale and distribution of morphine and cocaine, the fiends would turn to Indian hemp, and for that reason incorporated that drug in the proposed act for the control of the interstate traffic in narcotics. In addition to this use by Hindus in this country, I have learned on good authority that it is commonly used by the Syrian element in our population. You certainly should have your legislature do something in regard to the control of Indian hemp. The Conference will deal with it, for the Italian Government has informed us that it will bring the matter up in the Conference." Hamilton Wright, 1912
- 1914** "Negro Cocaine 'Fiends' Are a New Southern Menace: Murder and Insanity Increasing Among Lower Class Blacks Because They Have Taken to 'Sniffing' Since Deprived of Whisky by Prohibition" [Edward Huntington Williams for the New York Times](#)
- 1917** "Mexicans and sometimes Negroes and lower class whites" who smoked marijuana might assault upper-class white women while under the influence. [U.S. Treasury Department report, 1917](#).
- 1919** "Marijuana is the weed which is to a certain element of Mexicans what opium is to the Chinaman. The leaves are dried and smoked." *Los Angeles Times*



Is the War on Drugs Racist?

Media & General Quotes: 1900-1994, Cont.

1938 "I am surprised to learn that certain police officers have been inclined to minimize the effects of the use of marihuana. These officers should review some of the cases that are reported to the Bureau. They would, I am sure, be convinced that the drug is adhering to its old world traditions of murder, assault, rape, physical demoralization and mental breakdown. A study of the effects of marihuana shows clearly that it is a dangerous drug, and Bureau records prove that its use is associated with insanity and crime. Therefore, from the standpoint of police work, it is a more dangerous drug than heroin or cocaine." J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI

1971 "America's public enemy No. 1 in the United States is drug abuse. In order to fight and defeat this enemy, it is necessary to wage a new, all-out offensive." Former President Richard Nixon declaring War on Drugs.

1994 "The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana 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." Former Nixon Administration domestic policy chief, John Ehrlichman to *Harper* magazine
<https://www.civilized.life/articles/war-on-drugs-racist/>

Harry. J. Anslinger, Bureau of Narcotics Commissioner, 1930-1962

1920 "Marijuana makes darkies think they're as good as white men."

1936 ". . . Sometime ago Florida had a horrible tragedy. A young boy butchered his entire family while under the influence of the drug. Florida acted. It hastily passed the Uniform State Narcotic Act which covers cannabis or marihuana; and peddlers there have been sent up for as long as 5 years. Florida is ruthlessly stumping out use of the drug ..."

1937 "How many murders, suicides, robberies, criminal assaults, hold-ups, burglaries, and deeds of maniacal insanity it causes each year, especially among the young, can only be conjectured"

1937 "Marijuana is the most violent drug in the history of mankind."

1937 "[Marijuana users] follow errors of sense, false convictions and the predominance of extravagant ideas where all sense of value seems to disappear."

1937 "The deleterious, even vicious, qualities of the drug [marijuana] render it highly dangerous to the mind and body upon which it operates to destroy the will, cause one to lose the power of connected thought, producing imaginary delectable situations and gradually weakening the physical powers. Its use frequently leads to insanity."

1937 "Negro entertainers with their jazz and swing music are declared an outgrowth of marijuana use which possesses white women to tap their feet."

1937 "I wish I could show you what a small marihuana cigaret can do to one of our degenerate Spanish-speaking residents. That's why our problem is so great; the greatest percentage of our population is composed of Spanish-speaking persons, most of who [*sic*] are low mentally, because of social and racial conditions." [*Daily Courier*, 1937](#)

1937 "Marijuana is more dangerous than heroin or cocaine."

1938 "If the hideous monster Frankenstein came face to face with marijuana, he would drop dead of fright."

1948 "Marijuana leads to pacifism and communist brainwashing."

Sources: [Reefer Madness Revisited](#), [Time Magazine](#), [Reefer Madness Museum](#), Wikipedia, [Dale Gieringer](#)



Is the War on Drugs Racist?

Racial disparities in arrest and incarceration

- ◆ Every 25 seconds, someone in America is arrested for drug possession. The number of Americans arrested for possession has tripled since 1980, reaching 1.3 million arrests per year in 2015—six times the number of arrests for drug sales.
- ◆ One-fifth of the incarcerated population—or 456,000 individuals—is serving time for a drug charge. Another 1.15 million people are on probation and parole for drug-related offenses.
- ◆ Black Americans are four times more likely to be arrested for marijuana charges than their white peers. In fact, Black Americans make up nearly 30 percent of all drug-related arrests, despite accounting for only 12.5 percent of all substance users.
- ◆ Black Americans are nearly six times more likely to be incarcerated for drug-related offenses than their white counterparts, despite equal substance usage rates. Almost 80 percent of people serving time for a federal drug offense are black or Latino. In state prisons, people of color make up 60 percent of those serving time for drug charges.
- ◆ In the federal system, the average black defendant convicted of a drug offense will serve nearly the same amount of time (58.7 months) as a white defendant would for a violent crime (61.7 months).
- ◆ People of color account for 70 percent of all defendants convicted of charges with a mandatory minimum sentence. Prosecutors are twice as likely to pursue a mandatory minimum sentence for a black defendant than a white defendant charged with the same offense, and black defendants are less likely to receive relief from mandatory minimums. On average, defendants subject to mandatory minimums spend five times longer in prison than those convicted of other offenses.
- ◆ State governments spent another \$7 billion in 2015 to incarcerate individuals for drug-related charges. North Carolina, for example, spent more than \$70 million incarcerating people for drug possession. And Georgia spent \$78.6 million just to lock up people of color for drug offenses—1.6 times more than the state's budget current for substance use treatment services.
- ◆ In contrast, marijuana legalization would save roughly \$7.7 billion per year in averted enforcement costs and would yield an additional \$6 billion in tax revenue. The net total—\$13.7 billion—could send more than 650,000 students to public universities every year.

Source: [Center for American Progress: Ending the Drug War by the Numbers](#)

- ◆ Overall, the policies led to a rapid rise in incarcerations for nonviolent drug offenses, from 50,000 in 1980 to 400,000 in 1997. In 2014, nearly half of the 186,000 people serving time in federal prisons in the United States had been incarcerated on drug-related charges, according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons. <https://www.history.com/topics/crime/the-war-on-drugs>
- ◆ Black and white Americans appear to be similarly likely to use or sell illicit substances, but blacks are currently about two-and-half times more likely to be arrested and about six times more likely to be serving a prison sentence for drugs. <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-war-drugs-war-black-americans>
- ◆ During the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s-90s, for instance, policy responses rested on demonizing black and Latino crack users, while leaving relatively untouched white powder cocaine users. The resulting policy was harsh minimum sentencing for crack possession: the amount of crack cocaine and powder cocaine needed to trigger certain U.S. federal criminal penalties was set at a disparity of 100:1, even though crack and powder cocaine have essentially the same chemical make up. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5121004/>
- ◆ The estimated \$321 billion illicit drug trade clearly dominates illicit international trade, representing almost half (49.7%) of its total estimated \$646 billion value. At an approximate global retail value of \$141 billion in 2003, removing cannabis and cannabis resin from the illicit market place would reduce the overall value of the market by almost one quarter (21.8%). [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\)](#)
- ◆ “The United States has sought to control the use and trade of drugs since the adoption of the Harrison Act in 1914, which confined the distribution of heroin and cocaine to physicians. Drug policy focused on public health issues until the 1920s when the Temperance movement, in conjunction with “attitudes of nationalism, nativism, fear of anarchy and of communism” shifted public perception to view drug abuse as a national security threat.” Drug War Facts. <https://www.drugwarfacts.org/node/2066>



Is the War on Drugs Racist?

Words from Michelle Alexander

[The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#)

“Racial attitudes—not crime rates or likelihood of victimization—are an important determinant of white support for 'get tough on crime' and antiwelfare measures.”

“The war has become institutionalized. It is no longer a special program or politicized project; it is simply the way things are done.”

“The shift to a general attitude of 'toughness' toward problems associated with communities of color began in the 1960s, when the gains and goals of the Civil Rights movement began to require real sacrifices on the part of white Americans, and conservative politicians found they could mobilize white racial resentment by vowing to crack down on crime.”

Prohibitionist Themes

In 1979, historian William L. White identified the ideas and images used keep drugs illegal:

1. "The drug is associated with a hated subgroup of the society or a foreign enemy."
2. "The drug is identified as solely responsible for many problems in the culture, i.e., crime, violence, and insanity."
3. "The survival of the culture is pictured as being dependent on the prohibition of the drug."
4. "The concept of 'controlled' usage is destroyed and replaced by a 'domino theory' of chemical progression."
5. "The drug is associated with the corruption of young children, particularly their sexual corruption."
6. "Both the user and supplier of the drug are defined as fiends, always in search of new victims; usage of the drug is considered 'contagious.'"
7. "Policy options are presented as total prohibition or total access."
8. "Anyone questioning any of the above assumptions is bitterly attacked and characterized as part of the problem that needs to be eliminated."

Source: [Reefer Madness Revisited](#)

Other Links

Mary Jane's Guide: Is the War on Drugs Racist? July 2020 Columbus Free Press article on which the talk was based.

<https://columbusfreepress.com/article/mary-jane%E2%80%99s-guide-war-drugs-racist>

Is the War on Drugs Racist? List of 30 drug policy laws, amendments and treaties enacted in the 1900s, fully linked.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sau0dHVsszYBctUy2vibB0loLV-UPCNI/view?usp=sharing>

The War on Drugs That Wasn't: Wasted Whiteness, "Dirty Doctors," and Race in Media Coverage of Prescription Opioid Misuse: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5121004/>

Chemical Bigotry by Mary Jane Borden for Columbus Free Press, Spring 2002. <https://freepress.org/article/chemical-bigotry>

Ohio State Medical Board approved adding cachexia, or wasting syndrome, to the list of qualifying conditions for the OMMCP. Autism and anxiety were rejected. (June 2020)

<https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2020/06/10/ohio-medical-marijuana-panel-recommends-one-new-qualifying-medical-condition/5336697002/>

Ohio Senate votes to expand marijuana decriminalization – SB 3 (June 2020)

<https://www.marijuanamoment.net/ohio-senate-votes-to-expand-marijuana-decriminalization-to-cover-200-grams/>

Rep. Juanita Brent introduced decriminalization bill in Ohio House, along with a bill to add autism to the list OMMCP qualifying conditions. (May 2020)

<https://patch.com/ohio/cleveland/cannabis-decriminalization-bill-proposed-ohio-house>