



## **The Wrong Approach to Drugs**

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**In June of 1971, President Richard Nixon declared that drug abuse was “public enemy number one” and increased federal funding for drug-control agencies to sweep the streets and for drug-treatment efforts. This led to the creation of the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) in 1973.**

**Nixon’s War on Drugs was relatively small when compared to that of the Reagan Administration which favored criminal punishment of drug users, over treatment. This led to a massive increase in the American incarceration rate especially for non-violent offenders, 50,000 in 1980 and 400,000 in 1997. The media also played a huge role in the “war” with its constant coverage and its love affair with Nancy Reagan’s privately funded “Just say No” campaign. The media was also a key player in the paranoia of the crack epidemic of the early 1980’s. The increased concern pushed by the Administration and the media led to Congressional backing of Reagan’s Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 which allocated \$1.7 billion to continue the War on Drugs and also established “mandatory minimum” prison sentences for various types of drug offenses. No drug offense was more heavily punished than crack-cocaine and because 80% of crack users at the time were African-American, an unapportionable number of black drug offenders were locked away which led many to believe that the War on Drugs was a racist institution.**

**There were a few rollbacks of the harsh federal laws dictating drug use, but mandatory sentencing of non-violent drug users would remain the same for the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup>. It was President Barack Obama who worked to reverse the trend.**

**Obama's approach focused on drug intervention programs in the classrooms of America's youth and reforming the criminal justice system as to not to simply incarcerate non-violent drug offenders but instead use specialized courts which would not imprison a drug user but instead refer them to community health services for treatment.**

**Enter the Trump Administration and we have gone backward. Early in his time in office, President Trump announced that we must "get tough" on drugs in America and hinted at the idea of mandatory sentencing which many believe would harm communities of color much more than those of white neighborhoods. Trump has also pushed for the death penalty for drug dealers, even though federal death penalty cases may be rare, if this policy were to be enforced, billions more would be spent on a failed "war" and would do little to stop dealers from supplying people. The president has also tried to appear tough on the opioid epidemic that has killed thousands of Americans, but instead of focusing on the pharmaceutical companies that load their medications down with the deadly ingredients, he has instead blamed it on Mexican drug cartels and has used this a way to racially divide the American public and push his immigration policy. Many believe that the funds the Administration is willing to provide for treatment and some type of reform would be mostly allocated to white communities which would leave blacks and Latinos subject to further unbiased policing, arrests, and incarceration.**

**Drug use is not a crime, addiction is not something that can be done away with by locking somebody up like a violent criminal. If our society from the president on down is serious about treating addiction as the disease that it is, then we would be spending more money on intervention and treatment programs, not overloading our prisons and continuing to spend billions of dollars on a racially-biased policy that has, according to all of the evidence, failed. The more we lock non-violent drug users up, the more violent criminals we create by exposing them to the most horrible of offenders. Prisons are not free of drugs, there is a hefty supply. If we're going to help people beat addiction then we must provide the programs to do so, otherwise, we will never make progress.**

Resources:

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/war-on-drugs>

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/node/287066>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/03/killing-drug-dealers-opioid-epidemic/555782/>