

It's Not Just Marijuana, It's Racism

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The “War on Drugs” has been a long and endless battle between the government and a majority of non-violent offenders caught with small amounts of marijuana. Over the past forty years there have been over forty million arrests and over one trillion dollars spent according to the ACLU.

“In 2010, there was one marijuana arrest every 37 seconds, and states spent combined over \$3.6 billion enforcing marijuana possession laws,” stated the ACLU.

Let’s put aside the personal feelings for a moment on whether or not marijuana is a gateway drug or leads to violence. Let’s look at the facts on what the real issue is here. It is not marijuana, but rather racial discrimination and discrepancies on how the criminal justice system treats minority groups.

According to the ACLU’s, *The War on Marijuana in Black and White*, Pennsylvania is one of the highest states to have racial disparities in arrest rates between African Americans and Caucasian regarding marijuana possession. The ACLU also reported that, “Pennsylvania: racial disparities in marijuana possession arrest rates per 100,000 are: black arrest rate (606) white arrest rate (117) and (5.19) times more likely that blacks are arrested.”

According to drugpolicy.org, “Although rates of drug use and selling are comparable across racial lines, people of color are far more likely to be stopped, searched, arrested, prosecuted, convicted and incarcerated for drug law violations than are whites.”

Data also concludes that there are no discrepancies between minority groups and Caucasian's using marijuana. Some data even concluded that Caucasians use either just as much marijuana or if not more in some cases.

According to the 2003 NSDUH, “38.2% of White young adults 18 to 25 years of age in the U.S. reported any illicit drug use in the past year, followed by African-American (30.6%) and Hispanic (27.5%) young adults.”

So what needs to change? Is it really that there is more drug use in lower-class communities or is it that the law enforcement is targeting these communities with color more often? Data shows us that marijuana use between races is comparable. However, a

white person is simply not going to be stopped, frisked and thrown in prison as often as a person with color.

One suggestion of why this happens in law enforcement is due to the, “broken windows” theory. The broken window theory was introduced to the criminal justice system by criminologists, James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling. This theory was taken to practice in the 1990s and suggests that the appearance of disorder begets actual disorder. According to the ACLU, “Broken windows reframed visual cues traditionally associated with economic and social disadvantage as signs of crime and disorder.”

Being racially biased in lower-class communities rather than upper-class communities for marijuana enforcement puts minority groups at a disadvantage. It is not only racially discriminating, but case study after case study reports that the impacts of the consequences are far greater than the drug itself.

One drug possession charge will affect that individual for the rest of their life. Living in the digital age, anyone can get a hold of criminal records. According to the Nation, writer Harry Levine said, “Employers, landlords, schools, banks and credit card companies rule out applicants on the basis of these now universally available records, which have been aptly described as a “scarlet letter” and a “new Jim Crow.”

Former President, Jimmy Carter stated, "Penalties against possession of a drug should not be more damaging than the use of the drug itself; and where they are, they should be changed."

Whatever your stance is on marijuana, the bigger problem here is the discrepancies and treatment of minority groups in the criminal justice system. It's more than just weed.

Sources:

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