

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/fifty-years-ago-today-president-nixon-declared-the-war-on-drugs>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Fifty years after then-President Richard Nixon declared a war on drugs, the United States is still mired in the implications of this wrongheaded, racist policy decision.

Today, police make [more than 1.5 million drug arrests each year](#), and about 550,000 of those are for cannabis offenses alone. Almost 500,000 people are incarcerated for nothing more than a drug law violation, and [Black and brown people are disproportionately impacted](#) by drug enforcement and sentencing practices. Rates of drug use and sales are similar across racial and ethnic lines, but [Black and Latinx people are far more likely than white people](#) to be stopped, searched, arrested, convicted, harshly sentenced, and saddled with a lifelong criminal record.

The wide-ranging consequences of a drug law violation aren't limited to senseless incarceration: [people with low incomes are denied food stamps and public assistance](#) for past drug convictions; states including [Texas](#) and [Florida](#) suspend drivers licenses for drug offenses totally unrelated to driving; and numerous other policies deny child custody, voting rights, employment, loans, and financial aid to people with criminal records.

But it's clear that most U.S. voters are ready to abandon this approach.

A [new poll by the American Civil Liberties Union](#) shows that 65 percent of voters support ending the war on drugs. They recognize that current drug policies have led to the incarceration of millions while doing nothing to make the country safer or healthier. Furthermore, 66 percent support eliminating all criminal penalties for drug possession and investing the resources saved in treatment and addiction services.

While the war on drugs was officially inaugurated by Nixon in June 1971, the United States has used drug laws to selectively target specific communities for more than a century. In the 1870s, [anti-opium laws were aimed at Chinese immigrants](#). In the 1910s and 1920s, anti-cannabis laws introduced in the Midwest and Southwest [targeted Mexican Americans and migrants](#). As John Ehrlichman, a top Nixon aide, revealed in a 1994 interview [that was published in 2016](#), the war on drugs itself was [designed to target Black people and hippies](#):

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.

Their plan set the country on the misguided, punitive, and counterproductive path it pursues today, as administrations since have carried it forward. Incarceration rates skyrocketed during Ronald Reagan's presidency, [surging from 50,000 in 1980 to over 400,000 by 1997](#), and Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump made their own damaging contributions to escalating the drug war.

But there are some wins worth mentioning. A growing number of states are decriminalizing cannabis [and, so far, 17 have legalized it](#) while earlier this year, New York [passed the most progressive cannabis legalization legislation](#) in the country. Notably, [Oregon became the first state to decriminalize all drugs](#) a measure passed last November and effective since February. Known as Measure 110, it ends the enforcement of drug laws and shifts resources to drug treatment, housing, and harm reduction services, without raising taxes. And this week, [Democratic lawmakers introduced the Drug Policy Reform Act](#), which would decriminalize all drugs, expunge existing records and allow for resentencing, and invest in health-centered measures to take on drug addiction.

The United States has been embroiled in a drug war that has yielded much misery, especially for Black and brown people who have been disproportionately targeted, and trillions in wasted tax dollars. It hasn't made us safer, but it has devastated communities. We are finally beginning to acknowledge that drug use is a public health issue, not a criminal problem. To address it, we must invest in support services such as peer support and recovery programs for those who need or want them, and end this decades-long war.

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