

[The cost of the War on Drugs](#) [1]

Written by [Sam Bowman](#) [2] | Tuesday 17 January 2012



Marking Martin Luther King day in the US yesterday, Russell Simmons and Dylan Ratigan have an [article on the Huffington Post](#) [3] on the new government persecution of blacks ? the War on Drugs. I?m not entirely convinced by the article?s thesis about business support for the Drug War, but the statistics it gives are startling:

? Since 1971, there have been more than 40 million arrests for drug-related offenses. Even though blacks and whites have similar levels of drug use, blacks are ten times as likely to be incarcerated for drug crimes.

? There are more blacks under correctional control today -- in prison or jail, on probation or parole -- than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began.

? As of 2004, more African American men were disenfranchised (due to felon disenfranchisement laws) than in 1870, the year the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified prohibiting laws that explicitly deny the right to vote on the basis of race.

? In 2005, 4 out of 5 drug arrests were for possession not trafficking, and 80% of the increase in drug arrests in the 1990s was for marijuana.

? There are 50,000 arrests for low-level pot possession a year in New York City, representing one out of every seven cases that turn up in criminal courts. Most of these arrested are black and hispanic men.

Fifty years after the end of segregation, black Americans have the highest rates of poverty and, by far, the highest rates of incarceration for drug-related crimes. America?s prisons are violent, gang-infested hell-holes. It isn?t surprising that many young men imprisoned for the ?crime? of getting high become sucked into much worse. That these young men are usually black helps to explain why poverty, family breakdown and crime are so endemic in black communities there, and why their situation is so desperate and stagnant compared to other racial minorities. And by making conventional narcotics more expensive, drug prohibitions are also [probably to blame](#) [4] for the rise of highly potent new drugs like crack and crystal meth, a depressing example of unintended consequences of government legislation.

Tom has written about the horrendous [impact of the Drug War on Latin America](#) [5], but statistics like those above show how bad it is for the US as well. Just as many people once turned a blind eye to the evils of slavery and segregation, today many otherwise-decent people are ignoring the consequences of drug prohibition. That has to change.

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