

Dems' bill would end 'war on drugs,' legalize possession of everything from weed to heroin



In this Aug. 5, 2020, file photo, Activist Cori Bush speaks during a news conference Wednesday, Aug. 5, 2020, in St. Louis. Bush is a racial justice activist running for Missouri's 1st Congressional seat in the Nov. 3, 2020, general ... more >

By Kery Murakami - *The Washington Times* - Tuesday, June 15, 2021

Two House Democrats on Tuesday introduced legislation to make drug possession no longer a federal crime and clear the records of those convicted of drug crimes.

One of the bill's authors, Rep. Cori Bush, said it would right the wrongs for victims of America's 50-year-old war on drugs.

"I lived through a malicious marijuana war that saw Black people arrested for possession at three times the rate of their White counterparts, even though usage rates are similar," said Ms. Bush, Missouri Democrat. "As a nurse, I've watched Black families criminalized for heroin use while White families are treated for opioid use."

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The bill was introduced in advance of the 50th anniversary on Thursday of President Nixon declaring a war on drugs.

On June 17, 1971, Nixon called drug abuse "public enemy number one," and launched what has become a decades-long crackdown that lasted through Republican and Democratic administrations, leading to a dramatic and expensive increase in the country's prison population.





Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman, New Jersey Democrat and co-author of the bill, said the criminalization of drug use “stands as a stain on our national conscience since its very inception.”

“The War on Drugs has destroyed the lives of countless Americans and their families,” she said. “As we work to solve this issue, it is essential that we change tactics in how we address drug use away from the failed punitive approach and towards a health-based and evidence-based approach.”

The bill faces long odds in Congress but adds to a growing movement to roll back the drug laws. So far, 17 states and the District of Columbia have legalized marijuana and many more decriminalized it or allow medical marijuana.

Opponents of the legalization of drugs argue that it won’t cure the ill effects of drug abuse on society and in many ways threaten to make the damage worse.

During a drug legalization debate in the 1990s, the Connecticut General Assembly's legislative research office outlined some of the chief arguments against decriminalizing drug use:

- Legalization would increase the number of drug users.
- The adverse physical effects of drugs destroy families and cause drug abusers to engage in criminal activity.
- Legalization sends the wrong message to children.
- Drug abuse causes increased costs to business.
- Legalization jeopardizes the safety of society because drug use diminishes the ability to think and react quickly and thereby causes job- and travel-related accidents.

Still, the head of a national organization representing alcohol and drug counselors backed the idea of decriminalizing drug possession.

The idea of sending addicts to jail defies the science of addiction as a medical condition, said Cynthia Moreno Tuohy, executive director of the National Association for Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counselors.

"Do we send diabetics to jail?" she asked.

Criminalizing drug offenses, she said has disproportionately jailed Black people and other people of color more than White people, and it has meant their children have been robbed of having parents.

However, she said that if decriminalizing efforts succeed, the nation would have to dramatically increase what it spends on preventing and treating addiction.

Associations representing the nation's police chiefs and sheriffs had no immediate comment.

A spokeswoman for Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa, the top Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee, didn't return an inquiry. Neither did a spokesman for Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio, Mr. Grassley's counterpart on the House judiciary committee.

A half-century after Nixon declared a drug war, the effort has drawn criticism from the political right. Mark J. Perry, a scholar with the conservative American Enterprise Institute, called it a "failed, costly and inhumane federal war on Americans that continues to today" in a blog post this week.

Mr. Perry wrote that John Ehrlichman, Nixon's counsel and Assistant for Domestic Affairs, revealed in a 1994 interview with *The Atlantic* that "the real public enemy in 1971 wasn't really drugs or drug abuse. Rather the real enemies of the Nixon administration were the anti-war left and blacks, and the War on Drugs was designed as an evil, deceptive and sinister policy to wage a war on those two groups."

Mr. Perry quoted Mr. Ehrlichman from the article: “‘You want to know what this was really all about?’ he asked with the bluntness of a man who, after public disgrace and a stretch in federal prison, had little left to protect. We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or blacks, 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.”

Mr. Perry wrote, “If the real goal of the War on Drugs was to target, convict and incarcerate subversive anti-war ‘hippies’ and black Americans, as Ehrlichman describes it, it sure worked.”

He noted that between 1926 and the early 1970s, about 200 men out of every 100,000 were incarcerated. “By 1986, about a decade after the War on Drugs started locking up drug users and dealers in cages, the male incarceration rate doubled to 400 per 100,000 population. Then within another decade, the male incarceration rate doubled again to more than 800 by 1996 before reaching a historic peak of 956 in 2008 (about one in 100) that was almost five times higher than the stable rate before the War on Drugs,” he wrote.

“The arrest and incarceration data show that the War on Drugs had a significantly much greater negative effect on blacks and Hispanics than whites, making the Drug War even more shameful for its devastating and

disproportionately adverse effects on America's most vulnerable and disadvantaged populations," Mr. Perry wrote.

• *S.A. Miller contributed to this story.*

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