

# War on drugs and the effects on communities of color



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## The War on Drugs and the Effects on Communities of Color

Ava DuVernay's documentary *13<sup>th</sup>* was written about the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment, "which abolished slavery in the United States, and granted freedom to all Americans ( 13<sup>th</sup> )". This documentary explored the history of slavery and post-Civil War racist legislation to current day politics. DuVernay took us on a journey through time for communities of color and how they were affected by slavery, segregation, violence, drugs, mass incarceration, and eventually second-class status. These minority poor communities of color have been demonized over several decades to serve political agendas, and these agendas have created unrealistic fears in America about minority groups. These fears have ultimately led to police brutality against communities of color which is still a problem in America today. The mass incarceration of communities of color has essentially replaced slavery. The war on crime in America has become a war on drugs. Political agendas have changed focus from fighting wars to fighting drugs and minority groups are the first targeted. The " War on Drugs" has affected communities of color for decades, from mass incarceration, to the criminalization of poverty, and ultimately reducing these minorities to second-class citizens in America today.

The " War on Drugs" has had a significant impact on communities of color in America. Communities of color, especially African Americans and Latinos have seen some of the worst impacts of drug and law enforcement in America. " Higher arrest and incarceration rates for these communities are not reflective of increased prevalence of drug use, but rather of law enforcement's focus on urban areas lower income communities and <https://assignbuster.com/war-on-drugs-and-the-effects-on-communities-of-color/>

communities of color" (drugpolicy. org). These poor minority groups are being targeted by law enforcement because they are communities of color and not because they are actually using drugs. " People of color will experience discrimination at every stage of the criminal justice system and are more likely to be stopped, searched, arrested, convicted, harshly sentenced and saddled with a lifelong criminal record" (drugpolicy. org). These facts are shocking! The U. S. prison population has risen from 357, 292 in 1970 to 2, 306, 200 in 2014 according to the documentary *13<sup>th</sup>*. President Obama is shown at the beginning of *13<sup>th</sup>* documentary and reminds us " that this country is home to five percent of the world's population and 25 percent of the world's prisoners. Around 2. 3 million Americans are incarcerated and of that number, 40. 2 percent are African American men ( *13<sup>th</sup>* )". That fact is astounding, considering that African-American men make up 6. 5 percent of the U. S. population. " Right now, we have more African-Americans under criminal supervision than all the slaves back in the 1850's, said New Jersey Senator Cory Booker" (Felsenthal 2). A person could conclude that African-American men are still being criminalized today as they were over 100 years ago, and the problem has just gotten worse. President Bill Clinton said " 90 percent of the people in prison too long are in state prisons and local jails, and not federal prisons ( *13<sup>th</sup>* )". He wanted Americans to believe that his 1994 crime bill was responsible for decreasing crime in America and to deflect responsibility for the increase in mass incarceration. " So, while it may go too far to blame the 1994 crime bill for mass incarceration, it did create incentives for states to build prisons and increase sentences, and thereby contributed to increased incarceration"

(Farley 6). Basically, states were given incentives to incarcerate and increase sentences which led to an increase in incarceration in communities of color. This was just one example of how the “ War on Drugs” had a huge impact on communities of color.

Criminalization of poverty and race has increased in the U. S. throughout the decades due to law enforcement targeting minority poor groups. “ Poor and low-income people, especially people of color face a far greater risk of being targeted, profiled, fined, arrested, harassed, violated and incarcerated for minor offenses than other Americans” (“ Criminalization of Race and Poverty”). For communities of color, an unpaid parking ticket, minor drug offense can both result in jail time. In the U. S., there is a huge gap between the rich and the poor. It is not unheard of for entire communities to be subjected to racial profiling and suspension of basic rights. “ Roundups targeting communities of color, such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids or drift-net arrests (this refers to police sweeps within a specific community and arrests without a probable cause designed to catch potential criminals) sweep up large numbers of people without probable cause often for nonviolent offenses” (“ Stop Criminalizing Communities of Color”). This type of raid seems very unfair. In the documentary *13<sup>th</sup>*, President Richard Nixon was shown stating that drug abuse was “ public enemy number one ( *13<sup>th</sup>* )”. Nixon’s political agenda was to stop drugs which had become a huge epidemic in America. President Nixon’s domestic chief John Ehrlichman said in *13<sup>th</sup>* “ 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

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criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities ( 13<sup>th</sup> )”.

Essentially, the government tried to influence the American public to associate the hippies with marijuana and the blacks with heroin, and then would justify criminalizing these groups by disrupting their communities and targeting them heavily. The war on drugs has had a huge effect on the criminalization of poverty on communities of color.

The war on drugs has had effects on communities of color after incarceration and has basically reduced these minorities to second-class citizens. Michelle Alexander in 13<sup>th</sup> touched upon this topic and said “ Rather upon their release from prison, people with a felony conviction begin a lifelong sentence of second-class citizenship, stripped of their right to vote, facing legal discrimination in employment and housing and banned from accessing government services such as tuition, assistance, food stamps, housing and more (13<sup>th</sup> )”. However, the impact of criminalization on communities of color does not end after incarceration. There needs to be some way to restore full citizenship rights to U. S. citizens with felony charges or convictions and some program that is put into place to help them obtain a job so they can rejoin society. The ongoing drug war produces lifelong consequences for communities of color. “ Punishment for a drug law violation is not only meted out by the criminal justice system, but is also perpetuated by policies denying child custody, voting rights, employment, business loan, licensing, student aid, public housing, and other public assistance to people with criminal convictions. Exclusions to this mentioned policy creates second-class status for millions of Americans. Like drug war enforcement itself, they fall disproportionately on people of color” (drugpolicy. org).

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Discrimination is seen at every stage of the criminal justice system, which definitely seems to be the case for drug law violations. How much progress is it really? Michelle Alexander in *13<sup>th</sup>*, “if communities of color are still under perpetual surveillance and control by the government even if they are not in jail ( *13<sup>th</sup>* )”. They are essentially still a slave and are criminalized as a result and reduced to a second-class citizen. The war on drugs has had a huge impact on communities of color. African American and Latinos have seen some of the worst impacts of drug and law enforcement in America. Poor and low-income people, people of color will face a greater risk of being targeted for minor offenses than other Americans citizens. Finally, after incarceration communities of color are being reduced to second-class citizens who are basically being stripped of their basic rights. The war on drugs has significantly had an impact on communities of color and will continue to in the future unless some program, law, or legislation is put into place to change it.

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