Drug Scares

The social construction of drugs (& crime sort of) as a social problem

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Brief Introduction To Social Construction of Social Problems

• The study of how certain issues become to be viewed as a “problem” while others do not.
  - Drugs became a social problem in the 1980’s while many other issues did not. Same is true today. “Why do some “problems” get ignored while others are broadcast into our homes every day?”
  - 1 Billion have no safe drinking water, 2 B no electricity, 3 B never made a phone call from their home…(MichaelMoore.com 9/19/02)
• The study focuses more upon the social process that “creates” the problem rather than the actual “problem” itself. “How does the issue come to be seen as a problem?”

Brief History of US Drug Scares

• US has has many drug scares, not just the “War on Drugs”
• Use of some drugs by some people
• We had had drug scares against:
  - Alcohol
  - Marijuana (approx. 3 times)
  - Opiates
  - Cocaine (at least twice)
  - Ice (in Hawai’i)
  - are we starting on “Ecstasy” and “club drugs”
  - 1970’s to ~2002 we’ve had a sort of “Crime scare”

Six Components to a Drug Scare


1. The Notion of a New Public Menace
2. Drug Wars Serve Hidden Agendas
3. Increased Criminal Justice Involvement
4. Dramatic Increase in Media Coverage
5. Undefined Notions of “Addiction” and “Disease
6. Youth and Women are Portrayed as Victims

New Public Menace

• Drug a “new threat to the established social order”
• Can be a new drug, old drug “epidemic”
• This drug creates a “new breed” of drug user, drug dealer, and/or criminal
• Drug must be stopped or it will irreparably damage society’s traditional way of life.

Drug Wars Serve Hidden Agendas

• Serve ulterior political, social, economic, moral, and/or economic agendas of individuals, public bureaucracies, industries, and/or political alliances
• Actually serve many agendas (even competing ones) simultaneously
• Drug wars are not “just about” drugs
Increased Criminal Justice Involvement

- Public health solutions always take a back seat to criminal justice solutions
- *Harsher* criminal justice penalties than the present laws are typically suggested
  - (If no existing law, then the drug needs to be outlawed.)
  - Example: “mandatory death penalty for drug kingpins”

Dramatic Increase in Media Coverage

- During a drug scare the amount of media stories about the drug in question *increase dramatically*. All of sudden there are *more and more* stories about the drug in the news.
  - Example: Crack in the summer of 1986
- Media coverage helps create a new social agenda.
  - Media may not tell us “what to think,” but it *tells us “what to think about”*

Undefined Notions of “Addiction” and “Disease”

- Disease based etiology
- The “Infectious Plague” idea
- Those with weakest morals most susceptible to the disease
- Term “addiction” used very broadly and very imprecisely.

Youth and Women Portrayed as Victims

- Youth and Females need to be “protected”
  - In fact they need special protection
- Drug dealers lurking around school yards
  - Federal Drug Law Penalty Enhancement for dealing drugs within 100 or 200 yards of a school yard. (Don’t quote me on the exact distance)
- Women (typically white women) are raped or otherwise sexually debased by (typically dark skinned) drug using men

Chinese Opium Smoking in San Francisco in the late 1800’s

Reefer Madness
Crack in 1986