

# The Changing Landscape for **Drug Policy Reform** in the U. S.

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Drug Policy Alliance  
SALIS Conference  
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**We are  
the Drug  
Policy  
Alliance.**

# Drug Policy Alliance

- The Drug Policy Alliance **envisions** a just society in which the use and regulation of drugs are grounded in science, compassion, health and human rights, in which people are no longer punished for what they put into their own bodies but only for crimes committed against others, and in which the fears, prejudices and punitive prohibitions of today are no more.
- Our **mission** is to advance those policies and attitudes that best reduce the harms of both drug use and drug prohibition, and to promote the sovereignty of individuals over their minds and bodies.

# Drug policy reform victories

- Greater public support for drug policy reform
- New voices in support
- Increased positive media coverage
- Legislative and ballot victories
- New movement internationally

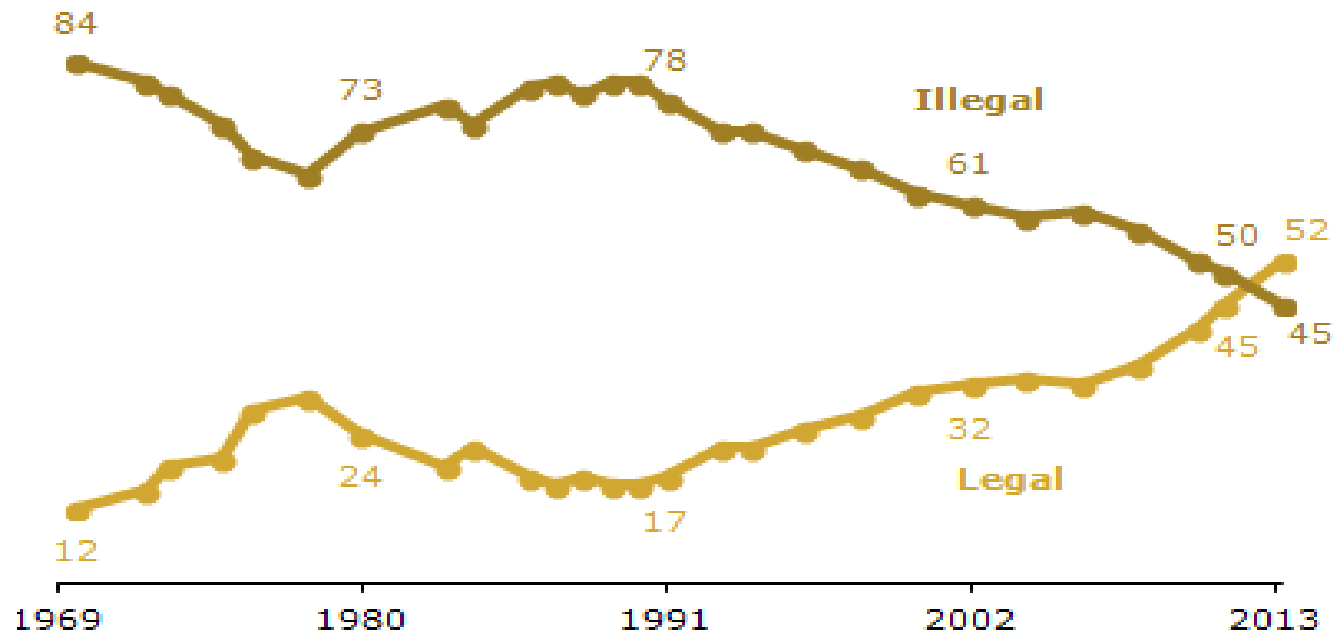
# Marijuana legalization passed

- **Adult recreational use of marijuana is now legal in two states**
- Washington and Colorado voters passed ballot initiatives in 2012
  - Diverse coalitions that included traditional drug policy reformers, law enforcement, organized labor, advocates for fiscal responsibility, mainstream civil rights organizations, advocates for children, and people from across the political spectrum.
  - Sophisticated media campaigns
- Implementation still in process in both states
- Uncertain federal response
- Inspired wave of legislation and initiatives in other states

# Popular opinion is changing

## Views of Legalizing Marijuana: 1969-2013

*% saying marijuana should be ...*



PEW RESEARCH CENTER March 13-17, 2013.  
1973-2008 data from General Social Survey; 1969 and 1972 data from Gallup.

# New voices against the war on drugs

- Right on Crime
- NAACP
- President Clinton
- Gavin Newsom
- *The New Jim Crow*
- *The House I Live In*
- Faith organizations
- Russell Simmon's celebrity letter (and Justin Bieber's tweet)



**Justin Bieber** @justinbieber  
shoutout to @UncleRUSH . gotta support him to #EndTheWarOnDrugs and show that we the youth have a voice. hashtag and support the cause

Hide conversation Reply Retweet Favorite More

14,546  
RETWEETS

11,006  
FAVORITES



1:39 PM - 9 Apr 13 · Details

# The drug czar says that the war on drugs is over

"We can't arrest or incarcerate our way out of the nation's drug problem and we must balance law enforcement efforts with drug prevention, treatment and recovery support," he said. "That means treating the root cause of many drug offenses, which all too often is a substance abuse disorder."

-- Gil Kerlikowske

April 25, 2013

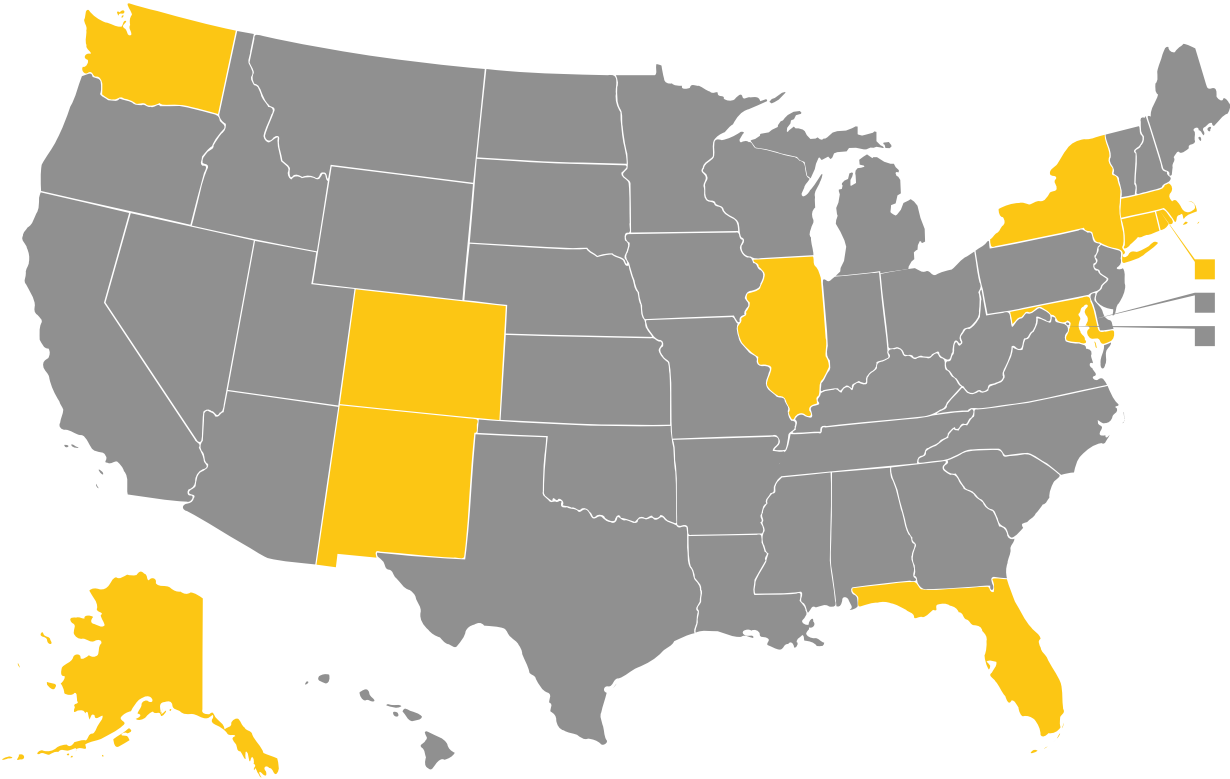


# Reducing racial disparities in drug enforcement and sentencing

- Rolled back crack/powder cocaine sentencing disparity to 18:1 in the 2010 Fair Sentencing Act. Previously federal crack cocaine sentencing penalties were 100 times the penalties for powder cocaine
- Repealed a federal mandatory minimum sentence for the first time since 1970
- NYPD ordered to stop racially-biased “stop and frisk” practices, which were causing arrest of tens of thousands of young men of color in New York City



# States with 911 Good Sam laws 2012



# Unprecedented debate in Latin America

- In February, 2012, Guatemalan President Otto Perez Molina called for a debate on alternatives to the war on drugs, including decriminalization and regulation.
- His proposal received support from other leaders in Latin America, including the presidents of Colombia and Costa Rica.
- This is the first time that sitting presidents are discussing the problems of prohibition and the merits of less repressive approaches.
- President Obama acknowledged the legitimacy of the debate at the Summit of the Americas and said **“it is entirely legitimate to have a conversation about whether the laws in place are doing more harm than good”**.

# And yet...

- **And yet we still arrest over 1.5 million people for drugs every year, almost half for marijuana.**
- Number of people arrested for a marijuana law violation in 2011: **757,969**
- Number of those charged with marijuana law violations who were arrested for possession only: **663,032 (87 percent)**

# Incarceration nation

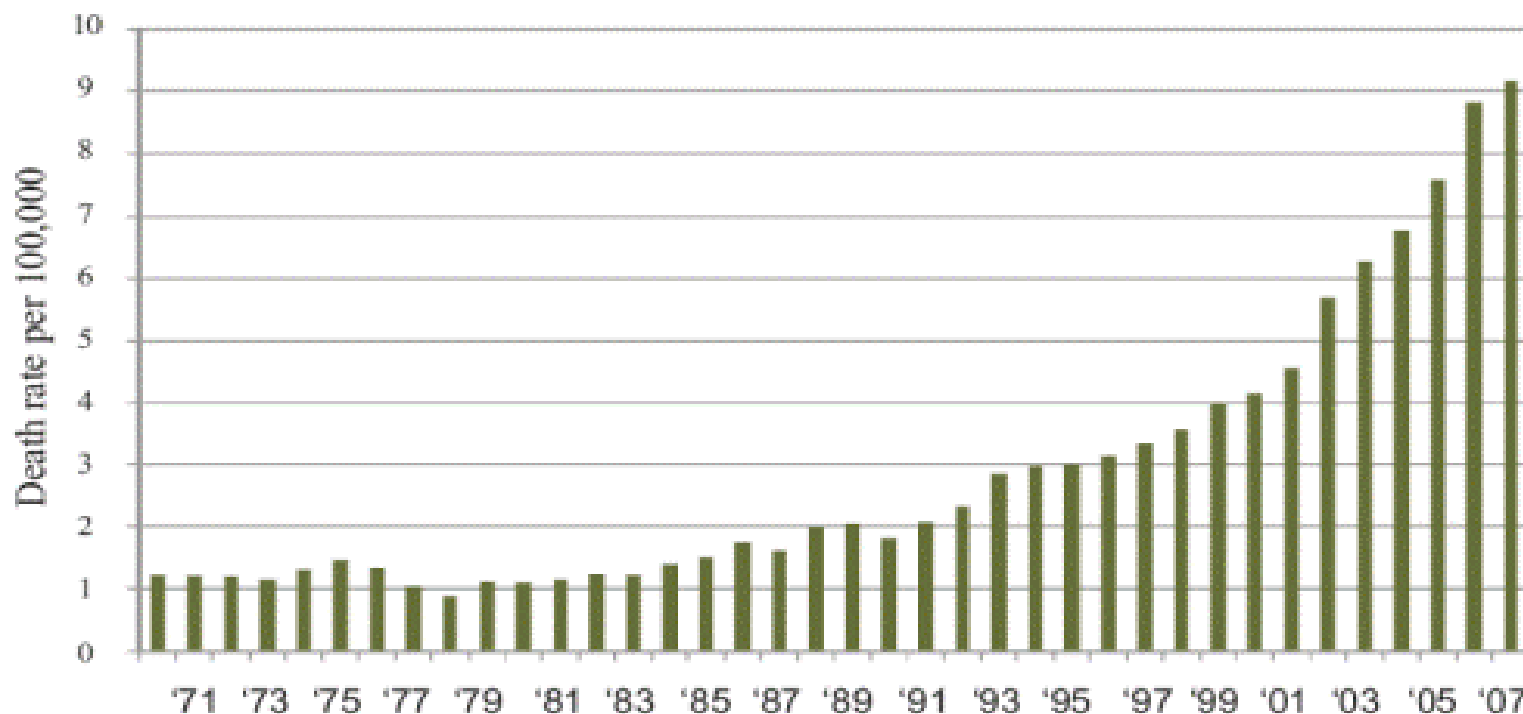
- We still incarcerate a larger proportion of our population than any other country, with African Americans bearing the heaviest burden of incarceration and its collateral consequences.
- Number of Americans incarcerated in 2011 in federal, state and local prisons and jails: **2,266,800** or 1 in every 99.1 adults, the highest incarceration rate in the world
- Fraction of people incarcerated for a drug offense in state prison that are black or Latino, although these groups use and sell drugs at similar rates as whites: **2/3**

# No federal funding for syringe access

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that syringe access programs lower HIV incidence among people who inject drugs by: **80 percent**
- One-third of all AIDS cases in the U.S. have been caused by syringe sharing: **354,000 people**
- Congress refuses to fund sterile syringe access to prevent HIV and hepatitis C transmission, thanks to a federal ban reinstated by Congress in 2011
- Existing syringe access programs run on volunteers, donations, and local and state health department funds
- We can't end AIDS until we end the war on drugs.

# Accidental drug overdose kills more people than motor vehicle accidents

**Rate of Unintentional Drug Overdose Deaths  
in the United States, 1970- 2007**



# Drug czar's rhetoric not matched by action

- 2013 National Drug Control Strategy is more of the same
- More funding for criminal justice approaches than public health
- Promotes drug courts
- “Until the Drug Czar says it is time to stop arresting people for drug use, he is not treating drug use as a health issue no matter what he says. I know of no other health issue in which people are thrown in jail if they don't get better.” Bill Piper, DPA

# Drug war violence kills thousands

- Number of people killed in Mexico's drug war since 2006:  
**70,000+**





# What exactly has changed and what does it mean for drug policy reform in the U. S.?

- We still rely primarily on our criminal justice system to respond to drug use, rather than seeing drug use as a health issue.
- Popular opinion ahead of elected officials
- Need legislative change – laws are the problem
- Build health response
- Danger of the disease model of addiction
- Is legalization the answer?

# Stigma

- **Drug use**
- Mental health
- Poverty and homelessness
- Incarceration and conviction status
- HIV
- Intersects with institutional racism

# Points to watch

- Federal response to Washington and Colorado
- Changing rhetoric from Obama Administration
- Increased activity in Latin American – Uruguay & marijuana
- Polling data
- The next voice
- Ballot initiatives: Oregon, California...
- Affordable Care Act implementation
- Supervised injection services

# Portugal model

- Health-based, social inclusion approach
- Decriminalized possession for personal use
- Increased treatment capacity
- Dissuasion Commissions
- Positive results:
  - Lower HIV rates
  - Fewer overdose deaths
  - Reduced drug use
  - Reduced crime

**What more is needed to end the criminalization and stigmatization of people who use drugs, provide treatment for those who need it, and reframe our approach to one based in science, compassion, health, and human rights?**

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