

The Washington Post

Drug war coverage is still filtered through race

By: Radley Balko
June 19, 2014

[Over at Substance](#), Maia Szalavitz makes a good point about the recent boom in media stories about the alleged heroin epidemic:

[W]hat I'm furious about is not the supposed new class of heroin users. It's that the media still assumes that the face of American addiction is poor and black—and that heroin ever went away.

While there certainly has been an increase in overdose deaths and opioid addiction in recent years, the white American middle class has been involved with this class of narcotics for [more than a century](#).

According to the major government survey on the issue, "[Monitoring the Future](#)," the percentage of the population that takes heroin doesn't vary all that much over time. For example, between 1975 and 2012, the proportion of high school seniors who took heroin in the past month has *never* measured more than 0.1%; the proportion who take it daily has never even been high enough to measure accurately. Prevalence of past month heroin use by adults aged 19 to 28—the group most likely to take *any* drug—is 0.2%

Szalavitz emphasizes the point with a series of headlines from the New York Times spanning several decades that are remarkably similar. Stephen Lerner and Nelini Stamp [argued the same point here at The Post last month](#), as did Jeffrey Miron [in the Philadelphia Inquirer last week](#):

"It's a return of 'white women in peril,' " a phenomenon that goes back to the opium scares of the late 19th century, said [Jeffrey Miron](#), an economist at Harvard University and the Cato Institute who specializes in the economies of illegal drugs.

The history of the United States is studded with scares about new epidemics, said Miron. He cites the cocaine scares of the early 20th century, heroin scares of the 1960s, the bouts of Reefer Madness in the 1930s and 1970s, and the more recent battles against methamphetamine, as examples.

Miron's skepticism, some might call it cynicism, targets those who are sounding the warnings.

“The business of the those who enforce this prohibition is to convince people that there’s an evil to combat,” Miron said. “They give it free advertising, people hear about it a lot more, it drives interest.”

The flip side of “white women in peril” coverage is coverage that dehumanizes black drug users. There are patterns here, too. [Here are a few I found last year](#) for the Huffington Post:

NEGRO COCAINE “FIENDS” ARE A NEW SOUTHERN MENACE – [February 8, 1914](#).

NEGRO COCAINE EVIL – [March, 20, 1905](#).

COCAINE EVIL AMONG NEGROES – [November 3, 1902](#).

Drug-Crazed Negroes Start a Reign of Terror and Defy Whole Mississippi Town. – [September 29, 1913](#).

PINING FOR THEIR POISON.; TWO CHINESE PRISONERS YEARNING FOR OPIUM. HOW A TIMES REPORTER GOT SOME FOR THEM AT AH QUE’S BAZAAR IN BAXTER-STREET–THE MERCHANT, HIS HOME, HIS WIFE, AND HIS PIPE. – [August 11, 1878](#). (Lede includes the phrase *wretched and dirty Chinamen*.)

NIP PLOT TO BRING STRONG OPIUM HERE – [March 4, 1914](#).

I found a particularly striking 1972 article in the Times while researching [my book](#). Most of the passage below didn’t make the final edit, but it’s worth running here. The setup here is Nixon strategists were trying to find a way to maximize fear of drugs and crime to benefit them in the 1972 election.

To effectively gather the masses for war, you must first dehumanize your enemy. Though they were running successful treatment programs in D.C. at the time, the Nixonians also went out of their way to avoid projecting any sympathy for addicts, such as when the Justice Department strongly opposed Sen. Hughes bill because it implied addiction was more of an illness than a crime. They had also already pushed the idea that drug use was connected to crime. They’d step up the effort on all fronts now, with some help from the media.

First, they circulated more preposterous statistics, this time on how much money addicts cost the country each year in theft. They took their already absurd estimate of heroin addicts, then multiplied it by another absurd figure—the amount of money the administration estimated the typical heroin junkie spent each year to get high. (By their count, somewhere between \$10,000 and \$17,000, or between \$57,000 and \$97,000 in 2012.) They then capped off the equation with a third faulty assumption: that heroin addicts steal all of the money they use to purchase heroin. The resulting figures, which seemed to increase with each reiteration of them, were several times larger than the total amount of property stolen in the entire country. The uptick in heroin use was still fairly young, so there hadn’t yet been any major studies. But what research had been done showed the administration’s figures were nowhere close to reality. One small study in New York

City for example, found that less than 10 percent of heroin users committed crimes to support their habit.

But more importantly, Nixon's top aides themselves didn't believe their own bull—. In 1971, [Nixon aide Egil] Krogh and his assistant Jeffrey Donfeld wrote a policy paper for internal use only that looked at the drugs-crime connection. Its conclusion: "Even if all drugs were eradicated, there might not be a dramatic drop in crime statistics on a national level, since much crime is not related to drug abuse." They were knowingly lying to bring the country along on a drug war.

The press jumped in with sensational stories to help dehumanize the drug offenders. In January 1972, [the *New York Times* published a report](#) about an alleged "epidemic" of heroin babies. Of course addicted newborns do need more treatment and care. And few would argue that infant addicts are anything other than a tragedy. But such stories are inevitably overly sensational, opting for shock and worst-case scenarios over a sober assessment of the problem. That leads to bad policies.

The *Times* article described in lurid detail a trembling, clenching newborn—"a tiny rat of a thing"—who scratches and claws at his own skin. It included a illustration of an alien-looking fetus getting a fix, with the caption, "An artist's conception of the elements in a growing form of urban tragedy: a newborn child, and a glassine bag of heroin." Not a photo, mind you. But an artist's rendering.

The *Times* painted the mothers as indifferent, zombified monsters who "have no joy of motherhood." Without even a sourced anecdote, much less any empirical data, the *Times* reported that some mothers inject their babies with heroin to stop them from crying and that, "It is apparently not even uncommon for an addict to sell her children for drug money." Most importantly, the article noted that "Almost always the mothers are from the black, Puerto Rican, and slum areas of town." The *Times* also lent some support to the Nixon administration's depiction of heroin addiction as a contagious virus, again with racial implications. "Addiction multiples," the article read. "Harlem is an area where heroin is legal tender. It pays the painter, plumber, and the police lawyer defending a man on charges of drug possession." Were there any long-term effects? The author couldn't say. It was impossible to follow up because of the "fractured" and "disorganized" nature of "for example, some areas of Harlem."

It was unlikely that many at the *Times* endorsed Nixon's war on drugs or his methods of enforcing the drug laws. But the media has always loved a scary drug story. And so if unwittingly, the *Times* gave the Nixon campaign an election year gift. Here Nixon's hated liberal *New York Times* had wrapped drugs, crime, and blacks up in a single, terrifying, six-page package. The article's kicker: "Some of the women are so badly disturbed that their behavior resembles that of the famous motherless monkeys of Dr. Harry F. Harlow's study." The author then describes Harlow's study, in which monkeys raised without mothers would sometimes "throw the baby against the wall or beat its head on the floor until the staff feared for the infant monkey's life."

There was no scientific reason to compare the mostly black mothers of heroin-addicted newborns to Harlow's studies, which had nothing to do with drugs. Yet for some reason, the heroin-using moms of Harlem simply caused the author to recall studies of orphaned monkeys.

We've seen the addicted newborn trope return with the "crack baby" stories of the 1990s, then with "Oxy babies" and "meth babies" over the past decade or so. All of these sensationalist panics [have inspired new rounds of draconian laws](#), from new rounds of mandatory minimum sentences, to mandatory drug testing of new mothers, to, most recently, laws allowing for criminal child abuse, neglect or even homicide charges to be brought against expectant mothers caught using illicit drugs while pregnant.

But that's all consistent with the larger problems with drug coverage: It's too sensational. It too often lacks skepticism. And it's too often driven by a tendency to dehumanize black addicts by portraying addiction as part of their nature and culture, while painting white addicts as victims.