

# Obama's Drug Past Isn't Hurting Him -- But Thousands Aren't So Lucky

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[Barack Obama](#) is about to make history by becoming the first major party's presidential nominee with an identifying trait that once would have automatically disqualified him for the job. No, I'm not talking about his African American heritage -- I'm taking about his past illegal drug use. Not just of who-cares marijuana, but of cocaine, a drug that carries a felony penalty in many states. It's both encouraging and appalling that he's getting a pass for doing something that has gotten thousands of other Americans thrown in jail.

As Obama blithely acknowledges in his autobiography, he used drugs for a while, didn't like them, quit and moved on. No harm done -- not to himself, anyone around him nor, obviously, his career prospects. Same goes for newly-installed New York Governor David Paterson, who has also admitted to smoking weed and sniffing blow.

Neither case seems like a big deal in a country where, according to the federal government's own figures, more than 35 million Americans have tried cocaine at least once and nearly 98 million have sampled marijuana or hashish. Once, confessing to toking was enough to scuttle Douglas Ginsberg's nomination for a Reagan-era US Supreme Court seat. Things had clearly loosened up by the time Bill Clinton's hilarious claim that he "didn't inhale" was considered an adequate fig leaf. By George W. Bush's candidacy we were ready to excuse his past pot use; the only issue was whether he had done cocaine. Now, we give such indulgences a wink and a shrug.

Except, that is, for that minority of drug users who get caught. Thanks to harsh mandatory minimum sentencing and "Three Strikes" type laws, the number of Americans locked up for narcotics offenses has exploded in the last 20 years. There are now an estimated 500,000 people locked up for drug crimes -- more than the total of ALL prisoners in 1980.

Most of them aren't exactly kingpins, either. A federal survey found that more than half of all state prisoners doing time for drug offenses had no record of violence or high-level drug involvement; 43% were convicted of simple possession. Over 40,000 people nationwide are locked up on marijuana charges.

And as much as Obama's ascendancy shows how far we have come as a nation toward genuine racial equality, the way we're waging the War on Drugs shows how far we still have to go. The recent roundup of San Diego State students made headlines not because it's shocking that college kids take drugs, but because it was so exceptional for middle-class white kids to be arrested for doing so. Study after study has shown that blacks are more likely than whites to be arrested, convicted, and given longer sentences for drug offenses. Most recently, a report released in April by the Washington, DC-based Sentencing Project found that since 1980, the rate of drug arrests in the nation's largest cities increased by 225% for African Americans, while that for whites grew by only 70 percent. A Human Rights Watch report the same month found that African Americans are more than ten times as likely to be sent to prison on drug charges than whites. All this, even though federal government surveys show that whites use drugs at the same rate as blacks do.

Of course, many drug offenders have committed other crimes. Many are dealers. Many deserve to be locked up. But many, many others are no different than the young Barack Obama, or millions of other Americans like him -- curious kids experimenting with intoxicants for kicks. They just had the bad luck to get arrested and charged.

If an undercover cop had happened to be among Obama's party buddies back in his wild days, it's a safe bet he wouldn't be where he is now. Who knows what other potential activists, teachers and leaders we have derailed by throwing so many people in jail? Obama's example proves that by locking up so many petty drug users, we all lose.