Crack Cocaine Criminalization and Racial Disparities

The pre-1980s cocaine habit in the United States remained dominated by powder cocaine, which was an expensive drug mostly used by wealthy, recreational users who ingested it in secretive locations. In the early 1980s, however, a new smokable crack cocaine was introduced, which was less expensive and spread quickly across low-income urban neighborhoods experiencing economic downturn. With this turn of events, the Reagan government became more vigilant in the War on Drugs, treating the use of substances not as a social problem but a criminal one. These circumstances helped to provoke the multifaceted and political reactions that triggered the main question: How did criminalizing crack cocaine in the 1980s contribute to racial inequalities in the U.S. criminal justice system? This research paper explores the role played by the criminalization of 1980s crack cocaine, a punitive attack on the federal legislature, sentencing imbalance, and racially biased policing, in creating the enduring racial inequality within the U.S. criminal justice system.

Crack cocaine originated in American inner cities in the mid-1980s as a smokable form of the more expensive powder cocaine, and proliferated quickly in economically ruined urban areas in the process of deindustrialization. Its affordability and high intensity, but limited duration of high, turned it into a drug available to the poor and became a drug preferred by African Americans and Latinos. In contrast, powder cocaine remained a common drug among more wealthy Whites (Caliman and Berryessa, 2025). Goulian et al. (2022) assert that media reporting sensationalized the fact that crack is more predominant in Black neighborhoods, portraying users through racist frames of violence, crime, and the long-debunked crack baby phenomenon that provoked moral panic among the masses. This racialized depiction came even after the scientific proof that neither crack nor powder cocaine showed any pharmacological

difference, as both drugs generated the same physiological results, but were significantly differentiated in the policy debate.

The horrific murder of basketball star Len Bias at the University of Maryland in June 1986, which was largely blamed on a cocaine overdose, prompted rapid action in Congress, leading to the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986. This historic law created a mandatory minimum sentence that caused a historical 100:1 ratio of penalizing offense between crack and powder cocaine, with five grams of crack leading to the same five-year compulsory minimum as 500 grams of powder cocaine (Keyes, Bing, and Keyes 2021; Goulian et al., 2022). According to Ades and Mishra (2021), a congressional allocation of three-quarters of $ 9.7 billion of federal investments in law enforcement and incarceration over constitutes treatment programs indicates a punitive strategy over a recreational one. This difference was not scientifically justified because pharmaceutical studies had found that crack and powder cocaine have the same effect, meaning that the difference in treatment was not about actual health issues in society, but about targeting certain communities.

From a conflict theory perspective, crack cocaine laws are a good example of how the elites can use a facially neutral law in terms of social control and in a discriminatory way against members of marginalized racial groups. Although the government has always established the rate of drug usage to be statistically equal among all races, 2019 federal statistics showed that 81.1 percent of the offenders caught trafficking crack cocaine were Black, and powder cocaine offenders mostly were White (Goulian et al., 2022). This imbalance indicates that there is systematic targeting of behaviors of poor communities of color by aggressive policing in urban spaces, and through suburban powder cocaine use was left very invisible to police. The act thereby served as a system of social racism, making it criminal to be poor and live in the city

instead of tackling addiction by providing evidence-based treatment options, and further strengthening structural inequalities within the criminal justice apparatus of America (Goulian et al., 2022).

The implementation of laws on crack cocaine led to exceptionally disproportionate arrest trajectories, indicating systematic racial targeting in drug enforcement. Although there were no major differences in the rates of cocaine use among racial groups, African Americans were arrested at much higher rates of crack offenses over the 1980s and after. African Americans made up 53.2 percent of those incarcerated due to drug offenses in state prisons in the 1990s, whereas whites constituted 38.2 percent (Keyes et al., 2021). As of 2012, African Americans had eight times more chances to be defendants on the charges of crack cocaine, although they represented a minor percentage of actual users (Keyes et al., 2021). This sharp contrast was maintained, although those who were selling and consuming drugs, including crack cocaine, were white and were selling drugs at the same rate or even more than the African Americans on an absolute scale.

The systematic herding of law enforcement resources into largely Black urban communities due to aggressive surveillance policies helped to amplify racial differences in the number of arrests for crack cocaine. Officers deliberately ignored the relationship of known public drug use by white people and focused regulation actions specifically on Black neighborhoods (Thompkins, 2021). Crack markets in open air in minority neighborhoods led to saturation patrols and undercover actions, whilst transactions of powder cocaine in the privacy of suburban white households were virtually unknown to law-enforcement agents. This trend means that inequalities were not only an echo of varying drug behaviors, but they were shaped by structural and institutional decisions that increased the exposure of black drug activity. By

tracing these patterns of enforcement, it is possible to see the ways the systemic bias in policing operationalized social inequality so that Black communities received unequal exposure to the legal risks they experienced, and white users stayed in a position of relative impunity.

Mandatory minimum sentences established gross sentencing disparities, with black defendants serving significant longer time sentences compared to white defendants of pharmacologically equal substances. According to the fiscal year 2020, federal offenders of crack cocaine were sentenced in an average of seventy-four months, versus sixty-six months for powder cocaine offenders, even though crack cocaine causes longer sentences, it is one-eighteenth of the amount of powder cocaine (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021). Crack cocaine sentencing was harsher to Black individuals, and more frequently, White defendants were linked to powder cocaine crimes due to a systematic racialized attack, as opposed to the comparable rate of offending. These imbalances also held despite the Fair Sentencing Act, which slashed the ratio to 18:1, showing that facially neutral mandatory minimums were racialized mass incarceration tools (Caliman and Berryessa 2025).

The criminalization of crack cocaine led to an unprecedented surge in the number of prisons in the United States, with drug offenses representing almost half of the total federal incarcerations by the late 1980s, and the percentage of state prisons rose to twenty. In the 1980s-2015, the incarcerated population in America increased to an unprecedented peak of 2.2 million people (about 500,000 of whom were assisted by drug enforcement) (Ades and Mishra, 2021). To reveal an example, black incarceration rates, despite steadily decreasing over the past decades, are still disproportionate, and one out of five Black men born in 2001 has a high probability of being incarcerated during their lifetime- four times higher than that of white men of the same age (Ghandnoosh, 2023). Therefore, the federal compulsory minimum sentences on

crack cocaine concentrated punishment in African American neighborhoods, where the incidence of drug violations was still disproportionately high even with similar rates of use between the races.

Mass incarceration produced horrific long-term sociological effects that went way beyond the individual inmate to destabilize whole communities and spiral generations of ill fortunes. The drug war embedded adults in a vicious cycle of unemployment and recidivism since individuals with criminal histories were marginalized in jobs, housing, and family stability on a systematic basis (Caliman & Berryessa, 2025). These hidden sentences had an impact on sectors in the lives of individuals, even many years after they stopped being involved with the criminal justice system, creating barriers that were particularly impossible to overcome by the black communities. Young offenders whose charges were related to drugs became increasingly incarcerated in federal and state correctional institutions, and their educational opportunities and career trajectories were shattered. These impacts were intergenerational because the children of parents arrested had a high likelihood of being involved in criminal justice.

One of the biggest revisions, but not the exclusive ones, of the federal crack cocaine laws through the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 was the sentencing ratio of 100:1 to 18:1, which had been reduced, and also the simple possession mandatory minimums were abolished. For instance, the reforms that were not retroactive, and by the time they arrived, those who had been held by the old regime and received new and severe penalties were still too many (Caliman and Berryessa, 2025). Therefore, the Black defendants continued to have a disproportionate share of federal sentences compared to Whites, and this is what proves the point that systemic inequities do not go away even when legislation is amended (Thompkins 2021). This biased aspect of these reforms highlights how hard it is to eradicate embedded structural bias in criminal justice policy,

and how such efforts should be accompanied by other actions in prosecutorial discretion, a sentencing policy, and post-release assistance.

Despite the changes in legislation, the problem of racial disparity in federal drug sentencing remains of utmost national concern, which is why advocacy of a comprehensive-scale strategy, the planned EQUAL Act, is justified. In the sociological context, these transformations upset the long-standing role of race in driving the criminal justice outcome, and they demonstrate how the past policy choices remain active in creating inequities (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021). Moreover, the shift in the drug policy means the enhanced concern of the public health systems, i.e., in the actions against the opioid crisis, which are often more treatment-oriented than penitentiary-based. Such lessons indicate that the extreme treatment is only possible with explicit clearance on the issues of systemic inequality that surpasses the simple adoption of sentencing policy to accommodate systemic social and economic harm that is determined on those marginalized groups who have always been victims of punitive drug enforcement.

The severe laws against cocaine, which were enacted in the 1980s, led to the criminalization of crack cocaine, disadvantaged racial enforcement, and inequitable sentencing, all contributed greatly to racial disparity in the American criminal justice system. The laws, such as the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, in conjunction with the high minimum sentences and aggressive policing of minorities, were focused on blacks, and the crime types that the Whites and Hispanics typically committed, such as powder cocaine, were not so harshly treated. Criminologically and sociologically, these policies served as the means of social control that continued inequality instead of dealing with the underlying causes of inequality, poverty, unemployment, and substance dependence. These disparities provide a sense of urgency in the equity of reform. Therefore, there is a necessity for drug policies that focus on equity,

community health, and the eradication of entrenched racism in order to create trust and fairness in the subject of criminal justice.

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