

STUDY EXAMINES SUPPORT FOR MANDATORY MINIMUM SENTENCES FOR COCAINE

Survey of White Americans Finds Choice of Prison over Treatment Related to Attitudes on Race and Morality

Washington , DC , June 9 -- A nationally representative survey has found that three quarters of White Americans prefer drug treatment or probation for persons caught for the first time with 5 grams of cocaine, while one quarter prefer a prison sentence.

The same survey also found that those who supported a prison sentence were more likely to make moral judgments about the addict and were more likely to blame the addict for the addiction. Those who made moral judgments were also more likely to deny that racism is a problem in this country and to believe that Blacks were more likely to use cocaine than Whites.

Drs. Rosalyn Lee and Kenneth Rasinski of the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago conducted the study to examine reasons why some Americans support prison sentences for drug use and to assess whether public opinion was aligned with current policy and practice which favors incarceration over treatment for drug offenders. The study found that 51% of Whites favored treatment while 26% favored probation for first time cocaine possession. The study's results are based on a sample of 783 White respondents, with a 3.5 percent margin of error.

"Scholars have suggested that racism and moralism have influenced American attitudes on addressing drug problems and we believe that this is the first study to empirically test whether these factors are related," Rasinski said.

"Our study shows that racial attitudes were related to the tendency to blame and make moral judgments about addicts for addiction; and those with a tendency to blame and moralize were more likely to support prison sentences," Lee said. Racism and moralism are complicated concepts and this study does not claim to have covered either of them completely. Nonetheless, these limited measures were significantly related to support for prison terms for first time offenders.

The results of their study were published in the June issue of the *International Journal of Drug Policy*, a peer-reviewed journal, under the title: "Five Grams of Coke: Racism, Moralism and White Public Opinion on Sanctions for First Time Possession." The study was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Substance Abuse Policy Research Program (SAPRP). Five grams of coke is enough for three or four individuals to use in one evening.

In the study respondents were asked to identify an appropriate sanction for first time possession of 5 grams of cocaine. Respondents were not asked to distinguish sanction by type of cocaine. Under federal law, possession of five grams of crack cocaine triggers a mandatory five year prison sentence, while there is no mandatory minimum trigger for possession of powder cocaine. Laws at the federal and state level which differentiate

sentencing by type of cocaine have lead to disparities in sentencing for drug offenses because Blacks tend to use crack cocaine while Whites tend to use powder cocaine.

Drugs Survey/ add one

Citing the work of other social scientists and researchers, Lee and Rasinski wrote in their paper that moral and racial sentiments have been a major factor in the U.S. approach to drug policy. The moral elements of US drug policy are related to the Puritan roots of American culture that have resulted in opposition to drug use and opposition to those who become addicted to drugs. Other experts have suggested that the association of a drug with a different and stigmatized group leads to exaggeration of the potential dangers of the drug. Additionally, it is thought that linkages between fear of drugs and racial/ethnic minorities have made adoption of effective non-punitive drug policies more difficult in the United States.

Results of this study showed that substance abuse treatment for first time offenders is greatly supported by Whites, who according to cocaine use data from the federal government, consume more cocaine than Blacks. In 2001, 14.7% of Whites and 9.7% of Blacks, aged 18 and older, reported lifetime use of cocaine. Federal data also shows that 1.9% of whites and 1.7% of Blacks reported using cocaine during the past year.

Dr. Lee stated, “The findings of this study provide both a challenge and hope for the future. The challenge is overcoming the public misperception that drug use disorders are a moral problem associated with race. The hope is that that the gap between public support for substance abuse treatment and current public policy will close”.

The researchers looked at moral values by asking respondents how strongly they agreed or disagreed with two statements: Drug users are evil; and if people took their religion more seriously they would not become addicted to drugs.

Racial beliefs about drugs were measured by asking respondents whether or not they believed that Whites used more cocaine than Blacks, Blacks used more than Whites, or Whites and Blacks used the same. Racism was measured by asking respondents to rate their agreement or disagreement with two statements: Discrimination against African-Americans is no longer a problem in the United States; and over the past few years, African-Americans have gotten more economically than they deserve.

Respondents were also asked if they were conservative or liberal, if they felt that law enforcement was effective in reducing the demand for and supply of drugs in America; and whether or not they believed that drug addicts have only themselves to blame for their addiction.

The Substance Abuse Policy Research Program (www.saprp.org) of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is a \$66 million program that funds research into policies related to alcohol, tobacco and illegal drugs.

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