

[PP198 / Wednesday - 9 April 2008]

UC Berkeley Professor David Presti - "Drugs, Policy and Brain Behavior"

- Prison reform is highly related to drug policy because drug offenses are highly correlated with prison sentencing
- American public has lost touch reality, when it comes to prisons
  - o Oppressive regimes are not only abroad
  - o US = Highest (per capita) incarceration rate in the world
- Drug information is the key to informed decisions about drug policy

EROWID - Get a sense of the drug information out there (on the Internet)

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- Most comprehensive collection of drug information and data available
- The Definition of a "drug:" A chemical, where in small amounts, has a significant effect of physiology
  - o Anything, in a large enough quantity (even water and food), can become toxic
  - o Difference between a "drug" and a "psychological drug" (depends on the therapeutic agents) and its ability to alter not only one's physiology but their state-of-mind

A Drug Narrative - Crack/Cocaine's History and Criminal Justice Policies

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[Early History - Chemical Isolation]

- Cocaine originates from the Cocoa Plant and grows on the eastern slopes of the Andee Mountains
- Natives have always used the plant as a stimulant in various Cocoa Teas (not entirely different how Westerners use caffeine today)
- Cocoa Plants became culturally embraced by South Americans
- The chemicals (with the plant) were isolated by a German chemist and were found to create feelings of euphoria (with rapid administration)

[1960's and 1970's - Crack and the Epidemic Arrives]

- Reports of cocaine smoking soon led to an epidemic
- Fastest administrations: Smoking, injecting, snorting (or insufflation)
- What is "crack?" Free based cocaine, in which the cocaine lacks the salt and is mixed with baking soda (or something similar), so it will vaporize
- Crack hit street big in inner-cities (in the 1980's)
- Crack was found to be highly addictive and cheap (in short run)

[US Sentencing Guidelines Weights Down Heavily on Crack]

- Due to the crack epidemic, the US Sentencing Commission feels "smokable crack" is such a threat that sentences should be more strict/heavy

- Result: Only 1/100 of equal amount of crack (to powder cocaine) needed for same sentence (despite both are the same drug)
- Sentencing disparity disproportionately hits urban minorities and the poor

### Drug Policy Alliance

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- Studies find that affluent white suburbanites are just as addicted and abuse drugs as the poor urban demographic BUT spend far less time in prison
  - o Result: Prison sentencing disparity
- The Drug Policy Alliance aims to equalize prison sentencing and mitigate the effects of mandatory minimum sentencing mandated by the US Sentencing Commission
- Judges once were bound by such minimum guidelines but are now allowed their own discretion
  - o May not be the "silver bullet" to the problem but does allow compassionate judges (to the problem) to augment their sentencing

### Who's Against such Policies? The Alliance for a Drug Free America

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- Leads anti-drug campaign blitzes and is funded by the pharmaceutical, alcohol and tobacco industries (to run out any possibility of de-criminalization)
- While a responsible gradient of drug de-criminalization exists (such as medical marijuana in California or legalized marijuana in Holland), perhaps educating policy makers about the taboo realities of drugs (via such groups as EROWID) is the first step to better policy in the future)