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Introduction

PHILLIP WAS FIFTEEN when he bought the heroin that sent three Black male “pushers” to prison in the first mandatory-minimum sentences handed down under Illinois’s punitive new narcotics law in 1951. Jeanne, a twenty-year-old showgirl, was confined in a narcotics hospital when Congress and the national media reconfigured her testimony of seeking out dealers in urban slums into a parable of the inevitable progression from marijuana experimentation to heroin addiction and the tragic fate of prostitution across the color line, the tropes that justified the first federal mandatory-minimum penalties for sale and possession of both drugs in the Boggs Act of 1951. Patricia was sixteen and had recovered in a suburban Los Angeles rehabilitation facility when the media saga of her spiral from marijuana to heroin as a victim of “Mexican pushers” helped propel California’s escalating war on narcotics during the early-to-mid 1950s. Linda was an eighteen-year-old from a wealthy Connecticut suburb who frequented the “hippie” drug scene in the East Village when her murder played a key role in redefining the 1967 “Summer of Love” as an urban crisis of runaway daughters and hopeless narcotics addiction. A few years later, an anonymous nineteen-year-old female from a “good family” in San Diego, “hooked on heroin” after smoking pot, became President Richard Nixon’s rationale for why the 1970 federal drug legislation needed to toughen punishment for traffickers but reduce marijuana possession to a misdemeanor as leverage to coerce victims into rehabilitation. Lee Ann was a twenty-year-old former cocaine dealer in a New York City addiction center when she became the most prominent casualty of the crack “epidemic” to testify to Congress for the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which imposed harsh and inflexible trafficking penalties aimed at inner-city Black areas that corrupted entire metropolitan regions. All of these felony lawbreakers were white, transformed into addict-victims and the poster children for each stage of the escalation of the

2 INTRODUCTION

American war on drugs through a consensus process that united elected officials, mainstream media, and the discretionary criminal justice system as well.¹

The millions of white youth who consciously broke the drug laws generally viewed themselves as autonomous actors and as victims primarily of the carceral state and criminal prohibition itself, not as the innocent prey of so-called pushers and the apocryphal marijuana-gateway syndrome. Mary Ann was twenty-three and admitted to smuggling heroin across the Texas-Mexico border when she demanded legalization of all drugs and condemned forcible medical institutionalization, refusing to follow the predetermined racial and gender script of her victim status in testimony as the U.S. Senate toughened mandatory-minimum penalties in the Narcotic Control Act of 1956. Joe was seventeen and adamantly defended the freedom to smoke pot, undeterred by multiple arrests, when the *Los Angeles Times* labeled him a “dope addict” in a 1959 series about Mexican pushers defiling white youth that inspired yet another legislative crusade against marijuana and heroin in California. Paula and Eve were young bohemians in the East Village when they told the U.S. Senate in 1966 that a proposed LSD ban would make “criminals of otherwise law-abiding people” and that their generation would never comply. Frank was nineteen when he received a twenty-year prison sentence for marijuana possession in 1969, and his college classmates forecast a “revolution” if the law enforcement crackdown on the youth counterculture continued. Robert was a high school senior from suburban Virginia in 1970 when he informed a dismayed congressional committee that marijuana and LSD should be legalized immediately as a right of personal freedom, that criminal law could never suppress the teenage market, and that the youth generation violated drug laws as part of a broader political rebellion against the hypocrisy and meaningless of middle-class society. Nicole was a college-bound student from an affluent white suburb speaking on national television when she defended the right of teenagers to break underage drinking laws and engage in harmless recreational use of marijuana and even cocaine, part of the widespread youth rejection of zero-tolerance politics during the 1980s.²

State institutions and American political culture have consistently waged the war on drugs through the framework of suburban crisis and positioned white middle-class youth as impossible criminals who must be protected from the illegal drug markets and then shielded from the consequences of their criminalized activities. As a racialized political and cultural category, the white middle-class suburban victim has been as foundational to America’s long war on drugs and crime as the nonwhite threats of the foreign trafficker, urban

gangster/pusher, and predatory ghetto addict. In drug control politics and in discretionary law enforcement operations, these racial binaries have separated the entangled metropolitan and global drug markets into distinct sectors of innocent and “otherwise law-abiding” victims to be arrested and diverted into rehabilitation, and the “real” criminal villains, who should be targeted through saturation policing and incarcerated for a long time. The modern war on drugs has operated through the reciprocal decriminalization of whiteness and criminalization of blackness and foreignness, grounded in selectively deployed law enforcement and in the discursive framing of idealized suburban spaces and pathologized urban slums and border towns. This racial state-building project escalated through a politics of consensus in modern American history, with bipartisan and overwhelming legislative majorities for every landmark federal policy shift and usually at the state level as well. Liberal and conservative regimes alike have mobilized to subdue narcotics traffickers in urban and international markets, defend middle-class suburban communities from external threats, and figure out how to keep white youth out of prison when they continuously refuse to comply with laws and policies designed for their protection and social control. The racial and spatial logics of the war on drugs reflect not only the bipartisan mandate for urban crime suppression and border interdiction but also the balancing act required to resolve the impossible public policy of criminalizing the social practices of tens of millions of white middle-class Americans.³

The imperatives of suburban political culture transformed cyclical “epidemics” of illegal drug use by white middle-class youth into crucial foundations of the American war on drugs and the expansion of the carceral state at three key stages between the 1950s and the 1980s. Each of these developments involved the grassroots mobilization of white suburban networks and interest groups—stories largely untold in the existing scholarship about the war on drugs—and the immediate responsiveness of government officials to their political demands and racial anxieties. Each escalation responded to increasing rates of marijuana smoking among white youth by portraying this criminalized leisure practice as a nationwide emergency, magnified by broader forces perceived to be causing once utopian suburbs to descend into dystopian nightmares. During the 1950s, as mass automobile-based suburbanization intensified mainstream fears about an epidemic of juvenile delinquency among affluent teenagers, the news media hyped a marijuana-to-heroin gateway narrative and middle-class women’s groups demanded severe penalties to prevent urban and foreign “pushers” from corrupting white youth who were supposed to be safe

in their racially segregated neighborhoods. The U.S. Congress unanimously enacted a series of mandatory-minimum drug control laws that explicitly targeted nonwhite villains while recycling the racist tropes of white female addict-prostitute victims popularized by Commissioner Harry J. Anslinger of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN). In California, the epicenter of the 1950s war on narcotics, lawmakers under pressure from a sustained grassroots suburban crusade repeatedly toughened mandatory-minimum penalties while carving out discretionary loopholes for “good” youth from “good families.” This futile effort to eradicate the middle-class market, by arresting and diverting a subset of lawbreakers into rehabilitation, exacerbated racial and economic inequalities without stemming the steady increase in circulation of both marijuana and illicit pharmaceuticals in LA’s white suburbs.⁴

The second key stage of the white suburban front in the war on drugs began in the mid-1960s when the “generation gap” revolt on college campuses embraced marijuana and LSD in the context of the anti-Vietnam War movement and the emergence of a “hippie” counterculture in urban bohemian enclaves. By decade’s end, this psychedelic drug revolution had become a widespread phenomenon in the urban and suburban high schools of coastal states and major metropolitan areas, where around half of older teenagers had violated the felony marijuana laws (alongside one-fifth of high school seniors nationwide). The generation gap framework placed these high school and college lawbreakers, many of whom righteously advocated marijuana and LSD legalization, into a political rather than a criminal category—even as law enforcement arrested an unprecedented number of white middle-class youth through a strategy of deterring their recreational drug use while diverting them from prosecution to avoid the stigma of a permanent criminal record. The total failure of this approach led to a bipartisan consensus for drug law reform at the federal and state levels, most notably through the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970, a collaboration between Democratic leaders and the Nixon administration that Congress passed with near unanimity. In addition to escalating penalties for “professional traffickers,” justified through sordid tales of suburban teenagers taking the marijuana gateway to heroin addiction, the federal law reduced possession and casual sale of all illegal drugs to a misdemeanor in order to use probation to force violators into rehab. This coercive public health policy led to an extraordinary surge in arrests of white marijuana smokers in the early-to-mid 1970s, which in turn produced vibrant grassroots political movements for legalization or decriminalization in order to protect these “otherwise law-abiding” youth from any

encounter with the carceral state. The marijuana decriminalization campaign conspicuously insisted that law enforcement should focus only on the “real criminals” in urban heroin markets.⁵

The third and by far the most racially inequitable phase in the modern drug war began not with crack cocaine in the mid-1980s but eight years earlier, when “parent power” groups started forming in upper-middle-class white suburbs to sound the alarm that marijuana smoking and illegal drinking were skyrocketing among younger teenagers and even middle schoolers. This “parents’ movement” portrayed itself as a nonpartisan awakening to save suburban children from the permissive effects of marijuana decriminalization and an alleged mass outbreak of “amotivational syndrome,” the unscientific and racialized diagnosis that smoking pot turned college-bound white youth into unproductive slackers emulating ghetto pathologies. The parent power campaign placed the twelve-to-fourteen-year-old stoner at the center of its moral crusade, which resonated during an era of economic recession and pervasive concern about white middle-class family breakdown with mothers working and latchkey children unsupervised. The suburban network coalesced into the National Federation of Parents for Drug-Free Youth (NFP) and powerfully shaped the embrace of zero-tolerance policies by the Carter and Reagan administrations, leading to the federal government’s prioritization of the white middle-class “gateway” drugs of marijuana as well as underage drinking even as the urban crack cocaine crisis emerged. In 1986, as the Democratic leaders in Congress engineered passage of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act with near unanimity, the national media and the political system continually highlighted white suburban victims of the new marijuana-to-cocaine gateway scourge in direct juxtaposition with the Black inner-city gangsters who sold the poison. As with the invading pusher, runaway daughter, and gateway-to-heroin tropes of previous decades, the zero-tolerance “Just Say No” campaign of the late 1970s and 1980s played a key role in institutionalizing two interlinked but spatially distinct approaches in the drug war: coercive public health campaigns in white middle-class suburbs and militarized interdiction in nonwhite urban centers, at the border, and in the international arena.⁶

The Suburban Crisis utilizes a comparative case study approach to analyze the dynamic interplay among the local, state, and national levels as well as the real and symbolic interrelationship between cities and suburbs in metropolitan regions. The book integrates the areas of politics, culture, and public policy formation by analyzing the circulation of discourses and meanings that constructed the racialized drug crisis alongside social history investigations of

how illegal drug markets, law enforcement, criminalized youth practices, and grassroots activism actually played out on the ground. The goal is to bring together the methods of the “new political history” (linking grassroots political culture and metropolitan political economy to state formation at all levels), a capacious approach to urban history (moving beyond the city-suburb binary for a comprehensive assessment of metropolitan regions), and the insights of cultural studies (tracing how discourse, symbolism, meaning, and imagery circulate and shape popular attitudes, political ideologies, and policy outcomes).⁷ The chapters that explore the workings of suburban drug markets and criminal law enforcement include case studies of multiple metropolitan regions and emphasize the ways in which these local processes flowed upward to reshape law, politics, and policy in the state capitals and in the legislative and executive branches of the national government. The chapters that revolve around the major federal escalations of drug control legislation between the 1950s and the 1980s connect the action in Washington to the influence of suburban political formations and interest groups, the circulation of crisis discourses about white middle-class victims in the mass media, and not least the criminalized social practices and resistance politics of youth themselves. This comparative methodology documents the racially and economically divergent outcomes for youth who broke the same laws but lived in different parts of metropolitan regions and also reveals that the escalation, and selective de-escalation, of the war on drugs was a bottom-up and not simply a top-down political process.

The centrality of Southern California to this history and the problem of defining American suburbia with precision are interrelated. California’s recurring role as the pacesetter for national drug-war trends rested on a spatial foundation in terms of how law and political culture intersected with the built environment. The sprawling and racially segregated suburbs of metropolitan Los Angeles were close enough to the border for white middle-class youth to drive their cars to Mexico to acquire illegal drugs, and even closer to the unincorporated Mexican American area of East LA that grassroots coalitions and law enforcement blamed for causing the problem. Los Angeles County alone produced more than one-third of all drug arrests nationwide through the mid-1960s, as both the LAPD and the county sheriff’s department policed diverse metropolitan landscapes with many white suburban-style neighborhoods inside the city limits and significant nonwhite enclaves in the outlying areas. California enacted its first mandatory-minimum drug law in 1951, before the U.S. Congress passed similar legislation. The state’s commitment to tough

enforcement and coercive rehabilitation provided the template for subsequent federal drug-war crackdowns and also galvanized the nation's most vibrant marijuana legalization movement.⁸ Metropolitan Los Angeles also serves as a microcosm for how "the suburbs" functioned as real and imagined places of normative middle-class whiteness in American political culture, obscuring the considerable heterogeneity of the many diverse communities located outside major U.S. cities. This book's equation of the racialized category of "suburban" with the demographic and sociological category of "white middle-class America" involves both a commitment to exploring the politics of drug and crime control in affluent and segregated suburban areas, and an emphasis on how political culture and public policy conflated and constructed these imagined communities through discourses of crisis and epidemics, pushers and victims, utopia and dystopia, white innocence and its racial and spatial opposites.⁹

The Drug-War Consensus and the Carceral State

The Suburban Crisis reassesses the political history of modern America by analyzing the escalation of the war on drugs from the 1950s onward as a consensus project of racial and carceral state-building shaped by the intertwined policies of punitive law enforcement and coercive public health. The consensus framework illuminates the broadly shared commitment to protecting the white middle-class victim and incapacitating the nonwhite urban and foreign predator through drug control laws and crime control strategies that merged punitive policies of incarceration and involuntary rehabilitation into a comprehensive, discretionary, and inequitable system for the social control of teenagers and young adults. Conventional wisdom and much of the scholarship portrays law enforcement and public health as competing if not opposite approaches—the punitive incarceration crackdown spearheaded by conservative Republicans versus the compassionate rehabilitation agenda championed by liberal Democrats. This book demonstrates that the bipartisan architects of the war on drugs always envisioned the operation of both policies in tandem as coercive mechanisms to control youth subcultures through the broader legal umbrella of criminalization. Liberal and conservative policymakers generally agreed that some combination of criminal sanctions and compulsory rehabilitation should regulate the illicit drug market. Criminalization guaranteed that police, prosecutors, and delinquency agencies would largely manage access to the allegedly benevolent alternative of rehabilitation through a discretionary arrest-and-divert process that utilized the threat of incarceration to coerce

select illegal drug users, invariably labeled “addicts” or “abusers.” The criminalization consensus marginalized the genuine civil liberties alternative that the state should not arrest citizens for “victimless crimes” and that prohibition itself generated criminogenic outcomes. Almost no elected officials or influential policymakers endorsed the position of millions of Americans, and a subset of medical experts, that government should not harass citizens for drug use at all.¹⁰

The bipartisan politics of drug-war consensus is clearly evident in the overwhelming and often unanimous congressional support for every major escalation. Landmarks include the federal laws targeting Black and Mexican “pushers” in 1951 and 1956, the misdemeanor reforms designed for white marijuana violators in the 1970 omnibus package, and the arms race of harsher penalties for inner-city crack markets in 1986 and 1988. The common thread is race, not partisanship. The shared ideological commitment was to the project of “political whiteness,” defined by scholar Daniel HoSang as a hegemonic framework in American political culture where “no large gulf existed between so-called racial liberalism and racial conservatism.”¹¹ While elected officials often sought partisan advantage by maneuvering to claim credit for “tough” policies, this dynamic should not mask the underlying racial consensus that shaped drug control policymaking.¹² The priorities of federal lawmakers at each stage aligned with the dominant racial tropes circulating in the news media, the political demands of white middle-class constituents, and parallel developments in the state legislatures and the nation’s vast criminal justice and juvenile control apparatus. This constellation of forces repeatedly transformed the latest drug crisis into a white middle-class “epidemic” that always “spread” outward from urban centers to invade previously placid suburbs and turn “otherwise law-abiding” teenagers and young adults into addict-victims or impossible criminals. Policing agencies and public health authorities then collaborated on strategies to arrest and redirect these innocent casualties or misguided youth into the rehabilitative arm of the carceral state. While affluent white drug criminals rarely experienced incarceration, a consequence disproportionately imposed on lower-income and nonwhite counterparts, these divergent outcomes resulted not only from the inherently discretionary mechanisms of the criminal legal system but also from the racially discriminatory provisions and loopholes built into crime and drug control policies by design.

A main agenda of *The Suburban Crisis* is to bring the carceral studies scholarship on policing, criminalization, and incarceration into dialogue with the urban/suburban history literature on racial and class inequality, which has

generally focused on the relationship between state policies and grassroots politics in housing, education, and urban redevelopment. Historians have extensively documented the federal and municipal programs that created racially segregated metropolitan regions throughout the United States during the post–World War II decades and the recurring mobilization of white homeowners and parents to defend these privileges and boundaries against civil rights challenges. This is a story of the broad middle ground in American political culture and policy formation, not primarily a saga of suburban conservatism and the “rise of the Right,” anchored in the construction and reproduction of white racial and class power through the interplay among social movements, bipartisan state actors, and constitutional law.¹³ The racialized wars on crime, drugs, and delinquency during the second half of the twentieth century accelerated as part of these larger state processes of inequitable metropolitan development and aggressive white suburban defenses of racial and class segregation. State institutions and both political parties proved as responsive to white middle-class fears and demands regarding drug and crime control policies as they were to the parallel movements to protect affluent suburbs from meaningful civil rights remedies to dismantle metropolitan structures of segregation and inequality in housing and education. In recent years, scholars have produced powerful case studies of how policing and criminalization shaped racial inequality in nonwhite urban neighborhoods—but very little equivalent work on how these processes and state-building projects unfolded in segregated white suburbs.¹⁴ This book demonstrates that suburban interest groups and local political formations decisively shaped the trajectory of the drug war and that its enforcement agenda operated in white areas as well.

My investigation of the racialized consensus at the center of the government wars on drugs, crime, and juvenile delinquency challenges the red versus blue polarization thesis and the liberal-conservative binaries that have distorted understandings of modern U.S. political history writ large. The story told in this book, of the continuous racial and spatial inequalities in the nation’s escalating drug war, is definitively not a trajectory of the purported “right turn” or “triumph of conservatism” in American politics. In recent years, the burgeoning literature on the carceral state and its crime and drug control projects has moved beyond the traditional overemphasis on conservative “frontlash” and Republican law-and-order campaigns as the driving forces behind mass incarceration and modern forms of racial inequality.¹⁵ Urban and political historians have demonstrated that liberal policymakers in post-1945 America played pivotal and leading roles in the development of punitive and discriminatory

policies, as they did during the Progressive and New Deal eras as well, wielding the power and authority of the state in racialized projects that targeted juvenile delinquency, street crime, narcotics addiction, drug traffickers, and many other socially constructed and criminalized problems.¹⁶ This historiographical focus on the bipartisan origins of the drug and crime wars is a necessary correction to scholarship that fixates principally on the racial backlash projects of law-and-order Republicans during the Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan eras, depicting liberal policymakers and Democratic politicians as reluctant accomplices who were afraid to seem “soft” when boxed in by right-wing maneuvering and inflamed public opinion. The historical distortion arises, most of all, from imposition of an artificial red-blue binary drawn from the discourses of the two-party system that predesignates policy outcomes as liberal or conservative based on factors such as punitiveness and racial inequality, rather than analyzing them as hybrid political processes shaped by diverse groups of actors from across the spectrum and deep structural forces in the national political culture.¹⁷

Between the 1950s and the 1980s, the most influential policymakers in the expansion of the war on drugs were white liberals who combined a law-and-order commitment to tough enforcement against urban and border traffickers with an empathetic yet coercive approach that all illegal drug users were “sick people” who suffered from the disease of addiction and other forms of psychological maladjustment. This category of historical actors, designated as “public health liberals” in this book, was not just equally as important as racial conservatives in the development of drug control policy; they were most often the predominant voices, especially because they controlled Congress and key states. “The user is usually the victim, a sick person,” believed Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut, the Democratic chair of the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency and lead author of the omnibus 1970 federal drug legislation. “And whether he be a heroin user or a marijuana user, he should be treated as a sick person, not subject to harsh imprisonment.” The most prominent public health liberals and Democratic drug warriors—Governor Pat Brown during California’s early antinarcotics crusade; the leaders of the Juvenile Delinquency Subcommittee during the 1950s and 1960s; Senator Joseph Biden and urban Black politicians such as Representative Charles Rangel during the heroin and crack cocaine crises—championed get-tough crack-downs against the supply side of the market and advocated mandatory rehabilitation for all illegal drug users, whether they lived in upscale suburbs or urban slums. White liberal lawmakers collaborated closely on crime control

with the hardliners in the Federal Bureau of Narcotics and later the Drug Enforcement Administration and subscribed to the prevailing psychiatric interpretation that addiction was part of the “culture of pathology” in poor Black neighborhoods. They differed from racial conservatives mainly in their advocacy of far greater funding for urban social welfare programs and their sympathetic view that nonwhite addicts were also victims who deserved compulsory medicalization rather than imprisonment.¹⁸

The most striking feature of the drug-war consensus from the 1950s through the 1980s involves the almost complete absence of concern for, or even acknowledgment of, racial discrimination in policing and other aspects of the criminal legal system. Scholars have noted that the arbitrary distinction between crack and powder cocaine in the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, now infamous for its racist consequences, generated no legislative debate at the time. This only continued the bipartisan pattern established during the first federal and state mandatory-minimum narcotics laws of the 1950s, which urban civil rights organizations and liberal antidelinquency coalitions supported to protect Black communities from “dope pushers.” Almost no one with any political influence questioned the statistical “truths” about drug crime that the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and their state-level counterparts produced—based on arrest records alone—to demonstrate that a large majority of felons in the illegal market were African American, Mexican American, and Puerto Rican. Except for a few dissident scholars and marginalized radicals, there was virtually no discussion during the passage of any landmark law across these four decades about whether the government statistics on drug-related crime revealed not racial criminality but discriminatory police enforcement in targeted geographic areas. Public health liberals and mainstream civil rights organizations portrayed what everyone (falsely) believed to be much higher rates of drug crime and addiction in poor urban Black neighborhoods as a consequence of racial inequality as well as psychopathology, but they also demanded a get-tough war on traffickers and street dealers and rarely addressed either discretionary law enforcement or the extensive corruption among narcotics police that allowed illegal markets to flourish in certain areas. Scholars have recently debated the policy impact of such punitive “law-and-order” politics in urban Black communities, but the most important takeaway is that white victims just mattered more to the white elected officials in power.¹⁹

The most structurally racist feature of drug control policy during the 1950s and 1960s, however, was not selective enforcement of marijuana and heroin

crimes but rather the statutory exemption of the licit and illicit circulation of corporate-manufactured pharmaceuticals from felony laws. Policymakers in Congress worked closely with federal agencies and the pharmaceutical lobby to create an illegal drug economy that was racially contrived, segregationist in its boundaries, and designed to enhance corporate profits through arbitrary criminalization. Commissioner Harry Anslinger, the powerful director of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics from the 1930s through the early 1960s, consistently claimed that almost all illegal drug felons in the United States were “Negro pushers” and “hoodlum addicts,” whereas “normal” white Americans were not susceptible to the criminal culture of this racially demarcated market. Anslinger simultaneously denied that prescription barbiturates and amphetamines were addictive, even though they circulated illicitly in massive quantities and posed far greater public health threats than heroin or marijuana. He promoted corporate self-regulation rather than criminal enforcement for this “medical market,” explicitly imagined to be populated by white middle-class Americans. The segregationist agenda of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics had a lasting impact on the racially inequitable structures of drug-war enforcement in metropolitan regions, paralleling the much more well-known apartheid policies of urban redlining and racially restrictive suburban development promoted by the Federal Housing Administration in postwar America. Every major federal and state drug control law during the second half of the twentieth century also had three and not just two purposes: incarceration for racialized suppliers of illegal drugs, protection and rehabilitation of certain consumers recast as their helpless victims, and preservation of the pharmaceutical industry monopoly to sell therapeutic and often addictive pills to a global market while the U.S. government pledged in vain to eliminate illicit competition.²⁰

It is crucial to highlight how fundamentally the terminology of the American war on drugs distorted both the social practices of sellers and consumers and the scientific properties of controlled substances, since it is impossible to tell this story without reproducing the loaded language utilized by state actors and profit-seeking media corporations to characterize and criminalize the illegal drug marketplace. The “pusher,” the principal villain of the American drug war between the 1950s and the 1980s, was a racialized fiction that transformed market suppliers into evil predators who seduced and destroyed their helpless victims, often through absurd tropes such as handing out free marijuana samples or jabbing needles in the arms of youth to induce heroin addiction. The “addict,” a potentially more sympathetic category, often applied

indiscriminately to all illegal drug consumers in ways that ignored medical research, conflated recreational users with serious substance abusers, lumped marijuana smokers with heroin “junkies,” made wildly inaccurate claims about narcotics-fueled violence and other predatory crimes, and justified police crackdowns on everyone in the criminalized market. “Narcotics” was an unscientific category in federal and state law that encompassed not only heroin and other illegal opioids (sedatives with addictive potential) but also marijuana (a mildly psychoactive and nonaddictive drug) and cocaine (a nonnarcotic stimulant that the FBI combined with heroin in its crime data)—all while drawing artificial legal distinctions that downplayed the hazards of narcotic “medicine” that pharmaceutical companies marketed as nonaddictive miracle drugs and deliberately overproduced to profit from the massive illicit market. “Epidemic” transformed the public health concept of rapid community spread of an infectious disease into the racialized and sensationalized “spread” of any degree of illegal drug use associated with nonwhite urban centers into victimized white middle-class neighborhoods and previously placid suburbs, or the hyped “waves” of violent gang crime and predatory addiction in the ghettos and barrios.

White Drug Crime: Hidden in Plain Sight

The Suburban Crisis explores the trajectory of the war on drugs and the expansion of the carceral state from the essential and atypical vantage point of the tens of millions of impossible criminals in white middle-class America. Most scholarship has focused on how the drug war has long operated as a racial system of social control of African Americans and other nonwhite populations, an extension of the federal and municipal wars on urban street crime and the linchpin of the “new Jim Crow” of mass incarceration. Many studies have convincingly documented the systemic disparities produced by racially and geographically targeted enforcement, with African Americans and Latinos representing two-thirds of incarcerated drug offenders by the end of the twentieth century, even though white Americans constituted a large majority of illegal drug users and dealers and broke the law at identical or often higher rates than nonwhite groups.²¹ My excavation of the deep historical roots and broader metropolitan foundations of these contemporary disparities reveals that the exemptions created for white middle-class participants in the criminalized underground drug markets were not merely epiphenomenal but rather constitutive of the expansion of the carceral state. Situated on the real and

imagined landscapes of affluent suburbia, white youth have long represented the most sympathetic and innocent victims of the narcotics trade, the most resonant justification for punitive legislation against suppliers, the distinctively illegitimate targets of law enforcement crackdowns, and the chief beneficiaries of public health prevention and rehabilitation programs. The war on drugs has continually flourished and intensified as a bipartisan crusade because politics and culture consistently combine to reproduce the intertwined categories of the racialized urban pusher and foreign trafficker and to elevate the equally racialized suburban victim.

The book begins in the 1950s with enactment of a series of mandatory-minimum narcotics laws in the bellwether state of California and in the U.S. Congress. This starting point provides a longer chronological view and a broader ideological dimension to a national antidrug crusade that expanded rather than emerged with Nixon's 1971 declaration of war on "public enemy number one" and the 1973 Rockefeller Drug Laws targeting Black heroin dealers and addicts in New York City. California's early war on narcotics escalated because of grassroots suburban pressure, not simply top-down elite machinations, and also targeted the "foreign" Mexican threat as much as the urban Black pusher during the postwar decades. White suburban organizations representing more than one million residents mobilized to demand this crackdown on "dope pushers" who allegedly supplied marijuana and heroin to innocent teenagers. The state produced more than half of all drug arrests nationwide from the 1950s through the mid-1960s, and then the number of white middle-class youth detained on marijuana charges began to skyrocket. The close attention to metropolitan Los Angeles and the Southern California region throughout the book provides an unprecedented window into how white suburban drug markets actually operated. White teenagers and young adults in automobile-based suburbs usually acquired illegal drugs by crossing the Mexican border themselves. They distributed and consumed marijuana as well as illicit amphetamines and barbiturates through casual networks based in beachfront areas and other centers of the autonomous youth subculture. The political system and its criminal justice arm responded by devising a complex array of formal and informal policies, building on the total statutory discretion and deep racial and class inequalities of juvenile delinquency controls, to arrest and then channel these white middle-class youth into rehabilitative programs. But California's escalating war on narcotics had negligible effect on either supply or demand, and by the late 1960s between one-third and one-half

of white college students and older teenagers in affluent suburbs had broken the felony marijuana law.²²

The most remarkable and underappreciated feature of the war on drugs in white middle-class America is hidden in plain sight in the annual crime reports published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the California Department of Justice. Between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s, the proportion of white Americans arrested on drug charges reached historically high levels and the percentage of apprehensions in the suburbs quadrupled, primarily because of targeted enforcement against surging recreational marijuana use among teenagers and young adults (fig. I.1). By 1973, white Americans accounted for 81 percent of all drug arrests nationwide and 89 percent of juvenile apprehensions, which approximated their population share. This represented an unprecedented intervention by the carceral state as it scaled upward and geographically outward in the quixotic mission to criminalize and control the youth subculture through an enormous increase in marijuana arrests (fig. I.2). The crackdown represented both an interregnum in the longer history of the American war on drugs and an exceptional political experiment, exceeding the scope of alcohol Prohibition enforcement in the 1920s, to utilize criminal law in an attempt to deter white youth from smoking pot and as leverage to coerce their rehabilitation when they refused to comply. Only a small subset of white middle-class lawbreakers ultimately served sentences in prison or jail, and racial disproportionality in drug-war policing and especially incarceration rates of African Americans remained pronounced even during this era, although the combined share of heroin and cocaine arrests did plummet to an all-time low. The need to exercise caution in utilizing the FBI's unreliable and politicized crime data definitely applies, especially because the arrest category illustrates criminalization and discretionary enforcement rather than actual "crime," much less convictions, and also because the white category encompasses most Hispanics. Even still, the mass criminalization of white middle-class marijuana users was an extraordinary development in the U.S. war on drugs.²³

What actually happened to the millions of white teenagers and young adults arrested for drug violations during the 1960s and 1970s by a criminal legal system designed to leave few official traces of their illegal activities? Excavating the answers to this puzzle is a central goal of *The Suburban Crisis* and a social history investigation that provides insight into the discretionary and discriminatory operations of the criminal justice system and the racial state writ large. In recent years, the "new political history" has been invigorated by

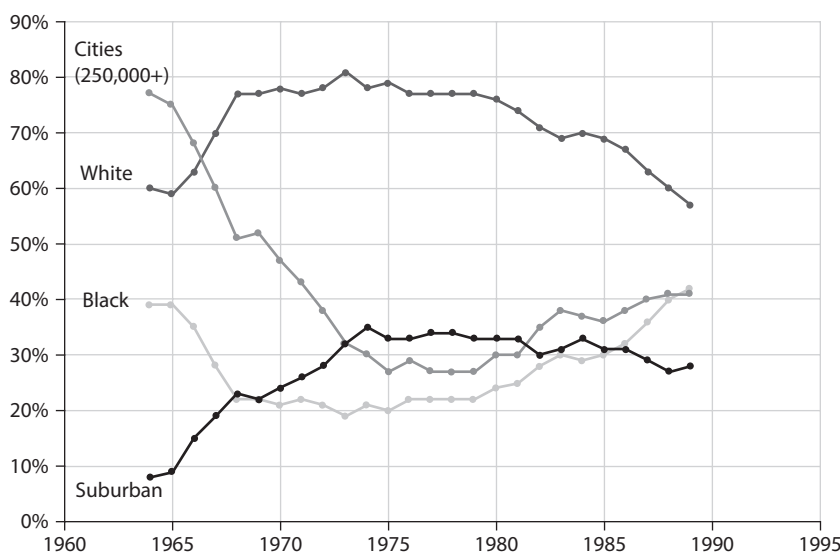


FIGURE 1.1. Racial and select geographic characteristics of the population arrested on drug charges in the United States, 1964–89, as a percentage of total arrests in each category. The proportion of white drug arrests rose rapidly during the second half of the 1960s and reached its modern peak, 81% of total drug arrests, in 1973. Suburban drug arrests simultaneously increased from 8% in 1964 to 32% by 1973, while the proportion of drug arrests in the largest cities plummeted. Most of the increase involved marijuana possession arrests of white teenagers and young adults during a ten-year period when the number of drug arrests nationwide increased by 12.7 times (see fig. 1.2). The percentage of white arrests remained at a historically high level throughout the 1970s before steadily declining in the 1980s during the racially targeted war on urban crime and crack cocaine. African American drug arrests remained disproportionate relative to population share throughout this era, but at much lower levels during the late 1960s and early 1970s compared to the 1980s, when the percentage of Black arrests nearly doubled. (FBI, *Uniform Crime Reports*, 1964–1989.)

Note: The FBI reported crime data for cities of various sizes, some of which could be classified as “suburbs,” and used a different measurement than the U.S. census for the “suburban” category included here. Therefore, this data is not an accurate indicator of the total percentage of drug arrests in the “suburbs” per se, but rather a comparative and rough portrait of the changing percentage of national drug arrests that took place in the largest cities versus the areas that the FBI classified as suburban. Urban or suburban categories also estimated for three years of incomplete data (1978, 1979, 1984). The FBI did not report data on Hispanics separately during this period, except for “ethnic origin” estimates between 1980 and 1986 (see figs. 6.8 and 7.2 for details). The majority of Hispanic arrests are presumably included in the “white” category. The FBI’s “racial” data on drug arrests of American Indians and variously defined Asian groups remained below 1% of the total through the 1980s and is not included in this and subsequent graphs for clarity of presentation. The racial breakdown of the U.S. population in the 1970 census was 87.6% white, 11.1% Black, and an estimated 4.5% Hispanic (with overlap between the white and Hispanic categories). The racial breakdown of the U.S. population in the 1980 census was 79.6% white (non-Hispanic), 11.5% Black, and 6.5% Hispanic (when the census began tabulating Hispanics separately). The 1990 census totals were 75.6% white non-Hispanic, 11.8% Black, and 9.0% Hispanic.

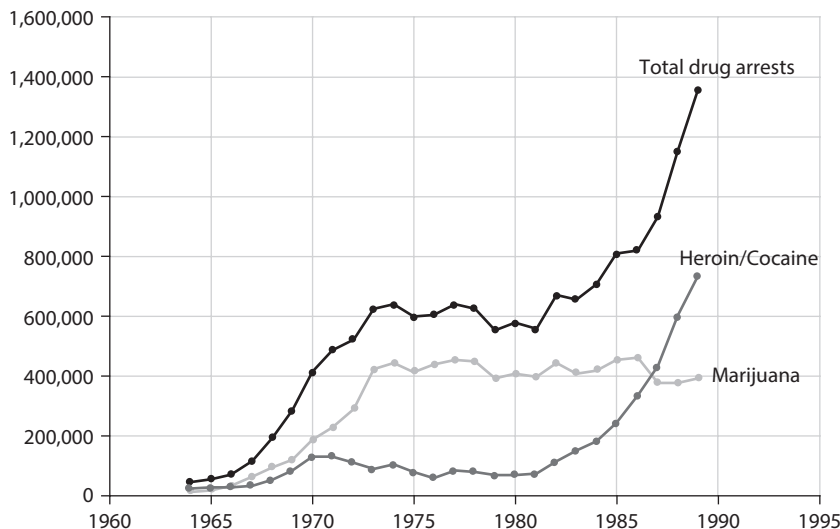


FIGURE 1.2. Marijuana and heroin/cocaine arrests as a proportion of total drug arrests in the United States, 1964–89. Marijuana arrests surpassed combined heroin/cocaine arrests in 1966 and nearly tripled as a percentage of total drug arrests between 1964 (26%) and the modern peak in 1976 (72%). The number of marijuana arrests increased by thirty-four times during this thirteen-year period. Annual marijuana arrest totals stabilized in the mid-1970s even as total drug arrests kept climbing, from 49,700 in 1964 to 609,700 in 1976 to 1.36 million by 1989. The proportion of marijuana arrests declined rapidly in the 1980s, from 71% in 1981 to 29% in 1989. During the same decade, combined heroin/cocaine arrests escalated from 12% to 54% of total drug arrests, disproportionately involving African Americans. (FBI, *Uniform Crime Reports*, 1964–1989.)

Note: Heroin/cocaine total approximate for 1965 due to incomplete data. The FBI combined heroin and cocaine arrests in its crime reports because law enforcement agencies historically grouped them together, a legacy of the unscientific “narcotics” category in federal and state laws. Arrest data is also not an indication of actual “crime” but of criminalization, and a substantial percentage of drug arrests did not result in convictions.

exploration of processes of bureaucratic discretion by the state’s most local agents. This has broadened state-centered scholarship through engagement with the racial formation–inspired and interdisciplinary cultural studies literature on identity construction and policing of normative boundaries of rights and citizenship. Every scale of governance and regulatory encounter—including border guards, police on the street, juvenile probation officers, prosecutors and judges, immigration agents, health officials—involves the discretionary application of law, the discriminatory distribution of rights and penalties, and the reproduction of categories of normal/deviant and criminalized/decriminalized

based on race, gender, sexuality, class, citizenship status, and other variables.²⁴ In drug and crime control policy, these dynamics illuminate the broader ways in which state institutions, law enforcement agencies, and discourses in media and political culture criminalized nonwhite youth collectively while seeking to control and rehabilitate white middle-class youth. By explicit design, the modern war on drugs updated the Progressive Era outcome that Khalil Muhammad labels the “masking of crime among whites.” Close attention to the local level also reveals striking similarities in how discretion operated under both indeterminate (“rehabilitative”) and mandatory-minimum (“punitive”) sentencing regimes—because constitutional law provided little check on police autonomy, delinquency law authorized almost anything, and prosecutors held nearly absolute power at their bottleneck point.²⁵

The heart of this book combines case studies of metropolitan regions with quantitative crime data and evidence scattered across more than seventy-five government and organizational archives to overcome the extensive and deliberate silences regarding how illegal drug markets and discretionary law enforcement actually operated in white middle-class suburbs. White youth who broke the law had every incentive to cover their tracks, but many still gave accounts to academic ethnographers, public health researchers, and journalists who mobilized to explain the shocking phenomenon of mass illegal drug use in American middle-class suburbia and in urban countercultural enclaves. Radicalized teenagers and young adults told their stories as they advocated for drug legalization in underground newspapers, political manifestos, and legislative hearings. Affluent parents of arrested youth often left a paper trail by filing complaints with the ACLU, demanding intervention by elected officials, or fighting charges in the courts. Although law enforcement records are generally closed, police and probation departments frequently provided governors and legislative committees with summaries of enforcement operations as well as detailed internal studies of the discretionary processes of diversion and disposition following arrest. Agencies such as the California Department of Justice published extensive annual reports breaking down aggregate data on drug and delinquency arrests, probation, diversion to rehab, prosecution, and incarceration by categories such as race, gender, and geographic location. Federal agencies funded academic surveys of illegal drug activity among college and high school students as well as multiyear studies of “Drug Abuse in Suburbia” by probation departments that tracked the discretionary disposition process following arrest. These sources reveal the broader patterns for white middle-class youth who encountered a drug-war apparatus that sought to deter, rehabilitate,

occasionally confine, and most of all to protect them from their own actions without the stigma of a criminal record.²⁶

A fusion of race, class, gender, and geography fundamentally shaped disparate outcomes for youth arrested on drug charges in metropolitan centers. The campaign against teenage use of marijuana initially utilized the existing mechanisms of total statutory discretion in the delinquency control system, which expanded alongside mass suburbanization during the postwar decades. In affluent suburbs, police and delinquency authorities almost always released college-bound youth to the custody of their parents, leaving no official record, in exchange for informal commitments to internal family discipline and often private psychiatric counseling. When this strategy failed to stem the illegal drug culture, police departments intensified profiling of white marijuana users based on age, male gender, and most notably “hippie” appearance. Surging arrests created a quandary for prosecutors and juvenile judges who wanted to deter their felony activities without inconveniencing middle-class futures with a permanent criminal record. Many white youths pled down to alcohol-related violations such as public intoxication or disorderly conduct, and others agreed to enter treatment programs under threat of prosecution, but the criminal justice system simply dismissed a majority of marijuana possession cases by the late 1960s. The futility of this approach of scaring white youth into obeying the law through felony arrests without consequences led to the federal- and state-level misdemeanor possession reforms of the early 1970s. This approach still involved discretionary justice but had considerably harsher outcomes for tens of thousands of recreational pot smokers defined as “sick people” and “drug abusers” and forced through probation into mandatory rehabilitation programs. Growing anger about the carceral state’s crackdown on marijuana crimes by “otherwise law-abiding” youth inspired popular campaigns for legalization and decriminalization supported by the ACLU and the interest group NORML, which each operated within “political whiteness” by reserving true victim status in the drug war for these middle-class and suburban Americans.²⁷

The suburban zero-tolerance movement that reinvigorated the federal war on marijuana during the late 1970s and 1980s blamed the increase in pot smoking among younger teenagers on the “permissiveness” of decriminalization. But the Carter and Reagan administrations also remained within its racial and spatial boundaries by prioritizing public health policies of prevention and private-sector rehab for white middle-class suburbs while intensifying crime control enforcement against heroin and later cocaine markets in nonwhite

urban centers. As the FBI data reveals, the drug-war interregnum came to an end during the militarized assault on urban crack markets following passage of the bipartisan Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, and the arrest proportion of African Americans returned to the level of the early 1960s though at an exponentially greater scale. The illegal use and sale of marijuana by white Americans remained relatively constant throughout the 1980s, and their cocaine law violations increased dramatically, but targeted enforcement in “high-crime” urban areas resulted in proportionately fewer arrests of suburban teenagers and white middle-class adults. At the same time, the embrace of zero-tolerance drug and underage alcohol policies by the federal government and many state and local officials, under pressure from suburban coalitions, including the National Federation of Parents for Drug-Free Youth and Mothers Against Drunk Driving, meant that tens of thousands of white youth continued to be arrested and coerced into rehabilitation for participating in criminalized recreational practices in a mood-altering culture and a drug-dependent society. These white suburban lawbreakers—arbitrarily harassed and often inconvenienced and sometimes institutionalized as the presumed victims of illegal drug markets that they had willingly and often enthusiastically sought out—were certainly not the primary casualties of the carceral state on its road to mass incarceration. But their fates were still intertwined with their urban and nonwhite counterparts as the racially divergent targets of the drug-war consensus in American politics.²⁸

Drug control policies and politics in the United States never underwent a macro-level shift from liberal/rehabilitative to conservative/punitive during the second half of the twentieth century, because the consensus framework of criminalization and coercive medicalization always encompassed both. The most fundamental transformation wrought by the bipartisan war on drugs involved the dramatic increase in the scale and punitive capacity of the carceral state and its intertwined apparatus of law enforcement agencies, jails and prisons, and rehabilitation programs. In 1964, the FBI reported fewer than 50,000 drug arrests across the United States; in 1989, the total exceeded 1.3 million. The federal government alone spent \$3.8 billion in direct drug-war funding in 1989, more than seventeen times its expenditure in 1969 (adjusted for inflation). Around 66 percent of the 1969 total went to public health and treatment programs, compared to 74 percent for law enforcement after the mid-1980s mobilization against urban cocaine markets. There is no question that U.S. drug control policies became more oriented toward the punishment and incarceration of African Americans in particular during the selective escalation

against heroin and cocaine in the 1970s and 1980s, compared to the agenda of public health liberals to arrest and divert nonwhite as well as white “addicts” into involuntary treatment programs during the early stages of the antinarcotics crusade. But deep continuities remained—especially for the impossible drug criminals in white middle-class America—in the discretionary mechanisms through which the criminal legal system sorted its targets into incarceration or rehabilitation based on discriminatory variables of race, class, gender, age, geography, and related categories. After the white arrest share ascended rapidly during the drug-war interregnum, from 59 percent in 1965 to an average of 78 percent throughout the 1970s, it sharply declined to 57 percent by the end of the 1980s. Yet the drug-war escalation meant that the number of white Americans arrested still continued to rise: from around 30,000 in 1964, to 510,000 in 1973, to 776,000 in 1989.²⁹

Youth Politics and Social Control

In 1954, a young adult white male incarcerated in the San Quentin prison for a heroin offense wrote a letter informing Governor Goodwin Knight of California that every aspect of the war on narcotics was not only repressive but irrational and counterproductive. The state government had recently declared all-out war on “dope pushers” in the context of media sensationalism about Mexican gangsters supplying marijuana and heroin to white teenagers and an outpouring of demands by middle-class suburban groups for a law enforcement crackdown to protect their children. The governor’s imprisoned critic instead insisted that “narcotics should be legalized” and argued that California had embarked on a crusade as unjust and unwinnable as the 18th Amendment that ushered in Prohibition of alcohol in 1920. He defined drug addiction as a symptom of psychological illness, denounced his prior involuntary commitment to the federal narcotics hospital as well as his current confinement, and insisted that “we do not behave any differently than other law-abiding people.” He called FBN Commissioner Harry Anslinger a liar and asked why politicians enacted drug laws based on the advice of police agencies rather than medical experts. He said that everyone in the underground market knew that heroin was a sedative painkiller that did not cause violent crimes and that marijuana was a mild drug, neither addictive nor dangerous. He laid out the obvious truth that prohibition itself, not narcotics traffickers, had turned heroin into the most lucrative and “vicious contraband in the world.” He described an illegal drug market that flourished because of systemic police corruption

even as the U.S. government spent millions of dollars “to make our lives a nightmare” while deceiving the public that the war could be won. The young man concluded: “Is there no humanitarian sensibility of justice left?” It is striking to read a letter from seven decades ago, so far outside the political consensus at the time, that captures almost every critique (except for race) that scholars and activists have subsequently made about the futility and inequity of the war on drugs.³⁰

The inability to deter and suppress the criminalized social practices and recreational drug subcultures of white middle-class youth turned out to be an unsolvable problem for the carceral state. The social control and depoliticization of teenagers under the guise of protecting them from danger is deeply embedded in American political culture and public policy, but it does not seem like an exaggeration to conclude that the average juvenile with any experience in the illegal drug scene understood how market supply and demand actually operated with more sophistication than the public rhetoric of almost every elected official in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century. “You can buy heroin almost anywhere,” a nineteen-year-old white female from Los Angeles named Barbara explained to the California state legislature in 1958. She proposed legalization through a medically regulated system, similar to prescription painkillers, which would “put the dope peddlers out of business, but no one seems to see it that way.” When asked at a 1966 Senate hearing how the “LSD pushers” targeted them, a group of young countercultural activists openly mocked their inquisitors and said that “it is a social thing, really” and “you will have a very hard time finding out.” In 1974, a petition from 120 suburban high school students in Orange County, California, informed the state government that “there is no difference” between alcohol and marijuana, and so eighteen-year-olds with the legal right to vote should have the freedom to consume both. By what right did the police “handcuff me, take me to jail and book me as a felon,” a young white woman busted for marijuana possession asked Governor Jerry Brown in 1975. She expressed anger and not gratitude that the state of California had diverted her to probation and a six-month treatment program—“making themselves feel good about ‘rehabilitating’ hardened criminals like myself.” Only rarely did political discourse in Washington and the state capitals depict these illegal drug users as they saw themselves, as citizens responsible for their own choices in a wrongly criminalized market.³¹

The overlapping wars on suburban juvenile delinquency and teenage narcotics addiction emerged simultaneously during the 1950s as racialized state

projects designed for the social control of all white middle-class youth. The Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, which is mainly remembered for its campaign against violent imagery in comic books and Hollywood films, played a central role in constructing the crisis of a white middle-class “epidemic” of lawbreaking and dope addiction, and its public health liberals crafted most major federal drug control laws through the early 1970s. Politicians and experts blamed the juvenile delinquency outbreak in white middle-class suburbs on outside invader “dope pushers” as well as the new catch-all explanation of psychological maladjustment, generally attributed to permissive parenting practices and corruptive mass media. Both the external and the internal causes explained how juvenile delinquency and illegal drug markets could have jumped the tracks from the nonwhite urban slums, long pathologized as the socioeconomic locations and racial groups primarily susceptible to criminality. The twin crises then served to justify and reinforce the prevailing racial patterns of comprehensive housing segregation throughout metropolitan America, with state governments and antidelinquency agencies advocating “homogeneous” single-family suburbs as the most effective way to protect “normal” middle-class children from dangerous outside influences. This solution, premised on maternal supervision and community consensus in a suburban utopia of compliant and depoliticized teenagers, inevitably failed because of the autonomous and adventurous actions of adolescents themselves on the automobile-centered metropolitan landscape. In response, state and local agencies expanded the juvenile justice system originally designed to criminalize and “reform” Black and immigrant youth in urban centers in an ambitious law enforcement project to regulate and control white suburban teenagers without formally adjudicating them as delinquents.³²

The juvenile delinquency system in postwar America was a vast apparatus with a social control agenda based on complete statutory discretion and no fundamental due process rights until the 1967 *Gault* ruling. Its liberal ideology of coercive rehabilitation sorted youth into categories of criminality and non-criminality based on discriminatory risk assessment factors that included race and gender, grades and college aspirations, church attendance, parental income and (perceived) level of involvement, social class, and geographic residence. Police officers, juvenile probation officials, and juvenile court judges made these discretionary assessments at every stage of the process from point of arrest to formal adjudication. A substantial majority of juvenile arrests were for status offenses rather than actual criminal conduct—leading reasons

included underage alcohol mischief, “delinquent tendencies,” curfew violations, and lack of parental supervision. The juvenile delinquency laws by design were so capacious that almost every adolescent in the United States technically violated them almost every day. The inevitably discretionary and discriminatory enforcement therefore reproduced and intensified the racial and socioeconomic inequalities of the metropolitan landscape and broader society. In affluent white suburbs, police departments and delinquency authorities reprimanded and released most detained youth to the custody of parents and perhaps the promise of private counseling, often even for serious crimes of violence. This system of discretionary criminalization sought to regulate the adolescent subculture of alcohol-related and automobile-based “thrill seeking” without compromising their futures with an official record or committing them to juvenile facilities that overwhelmingly incarcerated lower-income and nonwhite youth. The delinquency control system largely absorbed the first small-scale “epidemic” of white teenage marijuana “addiction” that emerged in the mid-1950s, but the arrival of a mass illegal drug culture in the middle-class suburbs by the late 1960s posed a much more difficult challenge.³³

The criminal legal system responded to the millions of white teenage rebels who enthusiastically broke drug laws with discretionary procedures that operated differently based on the racial geography of the metropolitan landscape but also discriminated against certain types of youth within segregated suburbs. Between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, police arrested several million white teenagers and young adults for recreational drug crimes. Law enforcement agencies, first through ad hoc processes and then via statutory revisions, devised an array of strategies inspired by the delinquency control system and the compulsory drug rehabilitation regime to reform many, but not all, of these offenders without the stigma of a permanent record. Suburban jurisdictions punished some youth more harshly based on a combination of gender, political ideology, countercultural style, and economic status. Police generally arrested males but released females without processing, except for “runaways.” They profiled longhaired “hippies” and retaliated against political activists, especially students who joined antiwar protests and openly embraced radical causes. They apprehended possession violators in stop-and-search traffic operations and then entrapped their friends and acquaintances in order to catch dealers who were often only casual providers. Undercover squads infiltrated public schools and staked out rock concerts to make mass busts of “narcotics pushers” who typically were either just sharing their stash or were low-level

suppliers of marijuana and sometimes LSD and illicit pharmaceuticals. Police departments then subjectively assessed criminality and released many juveniles to their parents, turned a subset over to delinquency agencies that released even more and placed some on informal probation, and adjudicated a fairly small fraction into formal rehabilitation or confinement. Prosecutors and judges often placed young white felony-level dealers on misdemeanor probation, downgraded marijuana possession to public intoxication, and dismissed many charges outright and others pending successful rehabilitation.³⁴

The criminalization and interdiction of marijuana moved to the epicenter of the national war on drugs in the late 1960s and remained the most urgent priority for almost two decades because its illegal use by white middle-class teenagers, college students, and young adults posed the greatest symbolic threat to normative suburban values and capitalist ideologies. Why would the United States spend billions of dollars and arrest millions of “otherwise law-abiding” young people for smoking a relatively mild social intoxicant that did not cause addiction or crime (beyond that related to prohibitionist policies) and was demonstrably far less hazardous in a public health sense than legal regulated products such as alcohol, tobacco, and pharmaceuticals? Politically conscious youth constantly demanded to know the answers to these questions, and the reasons are evident enough, even if the explanations provided by authorities were unscientific, contrived, even preposterous. During the 1950s, the Federal Bureau of Narcotics and its political and media allies began to supplant the traditional “reefer madness” mythology, that marijuana triggered violent crimes and sexual depravity by nonwhite hoodlums, with the gateway-to-heroin and pusher-victim tropes that fundamentally mischaracterized how the market operated but proved very effective in generating public and legislative outrage. The gateway-progression thesis also universalized the racial crisis represented by the relatively contained urban narcotics market and, as the Nixon administration understood well, there were not nearly enough heroin addicts alone to mobilize popular support for a nationwide drug war. The direct link between marijuana and the political and countercultural revolts of the 1960s transformed the drug into a symbol of generational rebellion and an alarming explanation for why white middle-class youth were adopting perceived “ghetto” values and behaviors. The diagnosis of mass “amotivational syndrome” that climaxed in the 1980s portrayed marijuana as a direct cause of adolescent insubordination, family breakdown, capitalist non-productivity, even national decline.³⁵

The Power and Permanence of Suburban Crisis

The suburban crisis is a deeply embedded and seemingly permanent structural force in the political culture, state processes, policy formations, and media productions of modern America. My conceptual model of suburban crisis begins with the juxtaposition of the political and cultural discourses surrounding the mythology of the American Dream and reveals that the utopian and dystopian visions of white middle-class suburbia are really flip sides of the same coin. Since the 1950s, the U.S. political system has celebrated—and promised to protect and defend—white suburban families as the heart and soul of the nation, the hardworking and tax-paying and law-abiding heroes of Middle America. For just as long, popular culture has taken a much darker view of what goes on behind the white picket fences and inside the private suburban homes of the idealized nuclear family—a pathological landscape of repression and distress and conflict, of dysfunctional children and shockingly unexpected youth criminality. These powerful and pervasive images and discourses in politics and mass culture have operated to erase the structural forces of metropolitan racial and class segregation by recasting affluent white suburbanites as the innocent victims of their landscapes of psychological trauma and cookie-cutter conformity. Consider the dominant tropes of white suburban victimization—through the framework of male Baby Boomer pseudo-rebellion, illegal alcohol or drug escapism, and psychological repression—that connect Jim Stark drunk and alienated in the middle-class teen delinquency drama *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), Ben Braddock drunk and drifting through a plastic society in the generation gap touchstone *The Graduate* (1967), culminating in Lester Burnham stoned and miserable amid the affluence and suburban superficiality of *American Beauty* (1999). This ongoing suburban crisis is an evasion of the historical and contemporary policies that created and have reproduced racial segregation and class inequality in modern America, making affluent white families the nation's heroes and victims all at the same time.³⁶

The utopian/dystopian framework in the political culture of suburban crisis is recurring and structural, generating policy outcomes through the tropes of white innocence lost, racialized external invasions, and the cyclical “spread” of drug and crime “epidemics” from the inner cities to the middle-class sanctuaries. When the news media and the political system sensationalize the threat of violent predators—a perceived “wave” of drug pusher infiltrations or gang-related crimes or child kidnappings or school shootings—the utopian assurance that “it can’t happen here,” meaning in a safe and segregated white

suburb, collapses into the dystopian nightmare that “it can happen anywhere” and no one in America is safe. In the tragic murder of Polly Klaas, for example, the framework of innocence lost extended not only to the twelve-year-old victim but to the entire suburban town of Petaluma (“where people once believed they were safe”) and by extension to all of white middle-class America—directly inspiring the passage of California’s “Three Strikes” referendum in 1994 and serving as the Clinton administration’s most urgent rationale for the extraordinarily punitive Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. When the suburban crisis involves the criminal actions of white middle-class teenagers, from the marijuana and delinquency outbreaks of the 1950s through the Columbine school massacre of 1999, the most politically resonant response blames the mass media and other outside villains for corrupting innocent youth by exposing them to drugs and violence, blackness and urban vices. For white females, the most symbolic victim role is the runaway daughter of the suburban crisis, lured from domestic safety into the urban underworld of drugs, prostitution, and racial boundary crossings. There is a direct line from the racist Federal Bureau of Narcotics propaganda about white addict-prostitutes and “Negro pushers” in the 1950s to the war on drugs epic *Traffic* (2000), where the desperate white father rescues sixteen-year-old Caroline from the Black dealer who turned his daughter into a “crack whore,” ultimately to be saved in a private rehab center.³⁷

The consistent depiction of white suburban youth as the primary victims of the criminal drug markets served simultaneously to politicize them as a moral and racial weapon in American law and culture and to depoliticize them collectively as citizens and autonomous actors deserving of rights, freedoms, and responsibilities. Scholars have produced a rich literature analyzing the racial ideologies and boundaries of “innocent childhood” and the pernicious ways in which crusades to protect “our children” from socially constructed threats and external enemies have advanced punitive policies and propelled the expansion of policing regimes and carceral institutions. Childhood and youth are inherently political categories, deployed constantly by social movements and institutional actors from all across the spectrum, but the dynamic that historically gained the most traction in American culture and policy formation revolves around an endangered innocence that is generally inaccessible to non-white counterparts both marginalized and criminalized.³⁸ It is myopic to view the political and cultural campaigns to protect innocent white childhood as primarily the province of conservative activists, Republican administrations, and the “culture wars” provoked by the religious right. The history of the drug

and crime wars in modern America clearly reveals that the discursive and political production of the innocent white child-victim and the endangered white suburb is a structural feature of American political culture—constantly reproduced by state institutions, the corporate media, nonpartisan social formations such as the National Federation of Parents for Drug-Free Youth and the victims' rights movement, and a bipartisan consensus of elected officials competing to lead the way. It is also important to emphasize that while the politics of innocent and victimized childhood has created massive racial and social inequalities and justified punitive policies of selective crime control, the framework of suburban crisis also promotes the depoliticization and social control of white middle-class youth under the guise of their safety and protection.

Despite the drug-war consensus in public policy and the ubiquity of suburban crisis in media and political culture, a large majority of the families in white middle-class American communities were not participants in a mass “moral panic” about dope pushers, urban gangs, or internal outbreaks of drug addiction and teenage delinquency. *The Suburban Crisis* deliberately does not deploy the sociological concept of “moral panic” that many historians have embraced to explain political mobilizations and policy outcomes that are not based in rational fears and statistically likely threats, such as crime “waves” and drug or kidnapping “epidemics” inflamed by media hype and the instrumentalist agendas of law enforcement, elected officials, and interest groups.³⁹ There is no doubt that state agencies and the mainstream media circulated, and the majority of American adults at various points believed, unscientific nonsense about the properties and health hazards and criminogenic effects of various illegal drugs, as well as racialized mythologies about “pushers” targeting innocent youth and the gateway progression from marijuana experimentation to hopeless addiction. But most white suburban parents were not “panicking” about these threats because most of their teenage children were not participating in any illegal drug market except for marijuana and the normative violation of underage alcohol laws by around 90 percent of juveniles. Instead, the grassroots political crusades and interest groups that escalated the drug war in a series of feedback loops with state and media actors emerged from specific spatial contexts, particularly affluent inner-ring white suburbs located near urban centers. These “moral entrepreneurs” claimed to speak on behalf of all American parents but did not even clearly represent the majority view in their own neighborhoods, which repeatedly led them to decry the “permissiveness” of other middle-class families that seemed tolerant or resigned to the illegal recreational market. Most white parents primarily did not

want their children to encounter the criminal justice system, and almost all youth certainly agreed.⁴⁰

The recurring mobilization of public officials and media corporations in response to white middle-class pressure and peril reveals the structural power and political potency of the framework of suburban crisis. The preponderance of evidence in this book about the grassroots activism of suburban antidrug movements and the political resistance of white teenagers and young adults comes from traditional state archives such as the papers of gubernatorial and presidential administrations and the hearings and files of legislative committees. The prominence of white middle-class voices in these sources provides valuable insights into how activist groups and ordinary parents influenced the development of the war on drugs, confirming which American citizens mattered most to lawmakers and policymakers. The correspondence files of California governors contain thousands of letters and petitions from white parents and suburban groups that demanded a tougher war on marijuana and heroin traffickers during the 1950s and 1960s, and hundreds of others who protested the arrest and prosecution of their children or called for addiction treatment instead of incarceration. Between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s, many white teenagers and young adults (and some of their parents) denounced the marijuana enforcement crackdown and urged governors of states such as California, Oregon, and New York to enact legalization or decriminalization. The files of White House officials during the late 1970s and 1980s include extensive records of suburban “parent power” coalitions from across the nation, which they closely tracked. The Carter administration helped create the National Federation of Parents for Drug-Free Youth, and the Reagan White House consulted its leadership constantly while appointing both of his “drug czars” directly from its ranks. Congressional hearings and investigations likewise privileged white suburban activist groups and also provide extensive records of how law enforcement operated in middle-class areas, in addition to the often-silenced perspectives of criminalized youth occasionally given a platform to testify.⁴¹

The book’s opening sections explore the original eruption of suburban crisis through the juvenile narcotics and delinquency epidemics in racially segregated white communities during the 1950s and early 1960s, culminating in the political and generational youth revolt on the college and high school campuses and in the counterculture. The prologue and first chapter, “Pushers and Victims,” move back and forth between the state of California and the U.S. Congress to reveal how this racialized binary emerged as a consensus framework that shaped the passage of mandatory-minimum laws against

heroin and marijuana and launched discretionary law enforcement campaigns to incapacitate or forcibly rehabilitate participants in the criminalized market. The second chapter, “Suburban Rebels,” explores the war on juvenile delinquency and alcohol-related status offenses in the white middle-class suburbs and its direct connections to the campaign to eradicate the illegal adolescent drug subculture of marijuana and illicit pharmaceuticals. This story continues with the emergence of a mass “psychedelic drug culture” of marijuana and LSD use on the college campuses during the mid-to-late 1960s, politically linked to anti-Vietnam War activism and the bohemian counterculture, and its subsequent depoliticization as an urban crisis of runaway white daughters in dangerous “hippie” slums. “Generation Gap,” the third chapter, investigates how white suburban drug markets really operated and how local and state law enforcement agencies responded to mass violations of the felony marijuana laws by white middle-class high school students during the second half of the 1960s. This comparative analysis is based on contemporary ethnographic studies of the youth subculture and the records of law enforcement and juvenile delinquency agencies, enabling a multiple case study approach that illuminates the discretionary and discriminatory processes of criminalization and decriminalization in the metropolitan regions of Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay Area, the New York City suburbs, and greater Washington, DC.

The Nixon administration and public health liberals in Congress nationalized the law enforcement strategies forged in these coastal suburbs in the omnibus federal legislation of 1970, part of the broader consensus behind the racial state-building project to launch a full-blown drug war against urban and border traffickers while arresting and coercing their alleged victims into involuntary treatment programs. Chapter 4, “Public Enemy Number One,” reveals how and why the white suburban marijuana crisis moved to the center of the national war on drugs, based not only on the traditional pusher-victim and gateway-to-heroin tropes but also the belief that escalating enforcement would save middle-class youth from “amotivational” lifestyles associated with hippies, ghettos, and capitalist nonproductivity. “Impossible Criminals,” the fifth chapter, returns to the local and state levels to explore the explosion of marijuana arrests of white youth in the 1970s and the political rise of legalization and decriminalization crusades to rescue these “otherwise law-abiding” Americans from drug-war jeopardy. Case studies of California, Texas, Oregon, and New York in the era of the Rockefeller Drug Laws demonstrate that the partial decriminalization compromise of the mid-1970s involved a legislative tradeoff that intensified the war on heroin and the “real criminals” in nonwhite urban centers. The final two chapters, “Parent Power” and “Zero Tolerance,” chart the

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