

Introduction

In the American system, how drug use will be defined and discussed generally depends on the race, class, and location of the people involved in the drug use. Typically, people belonging to all the races and economic backgrounds use drugs. Still, society is prone to being sympathetic to some groups of people for their drug use, while they are prone to punishing others for the same. More noticeably, the middle-class individuals and those of the white race living in suburban neighborhoods are mostly represented as the victims of drug use, and society wants to support and give proper treatment to them. Though people living in urban communities, or Black and brown people, are mostly perceived as criminals if they use drugs, they are portrayed as a threat to society. These distinctive points of view, known as drug narratives, shape public opinion, media coverage, law enforcement practices, and public policy. This essay delves deeper and criticizes the racialized drug narratives in suburban America that support stereotypes, safeguard privileges for white people, and induce unequal treatment under the law.

Key Concepts

One central theme is “white drug exceptionalism”, which exposes how white drug users are mostly treated as exceptions who justify empathy and assistance, but not punishment (Netherland & Hansen, 2016). For instance, at the time of the opioid crisis in the white suburban communities, the media mostly forecast these issues as trauma, issues regarding mental health, and they portrayed the necessity of treatment. They do not consider the white people from suburban communities as criminals. Contrariwise, history shows that during the 1980s crack cocaine epidemic, the Black urban neighborhood was highly affected through news channels and media. They portrayed these black urban people as a danger, threats of crime, and showcased their moral failure. Instead of showing empathy to them, unlike the while suburban people, they

used terms like “crack babies” or “super-predators” against the Black people, which further instilled fear in society (Saksa, 2022). This building block of fiction demonstrates that race has a major role in shaping the viewpoints of society to understand and respond to drug use.

Another key determinant is the research about suburban drug markets, in which it has been discovered that most of the residents from suburban neighborhoods take place in private spaces. Mostly they use such drugs in the cars, homes, and basements of their house (Jacques & Wright, 2015). Suburban drug users mostly rely on social connections, money, and transportation to conceal their activities from getting noticed by law enforcement. Privacy and available resources to suburban users mostly allow them to avoid being labeled as criminals, and they have more opportunities to showcase their pretended innocence (Jacques & Wright, 2015).

Another key idea that needs attention about the issue is the racial threat. According to this concept, white people living in suburban areas have a suspicious understanding of black and brown people. They consider black and brown people as dangerous criminals who can easily conceal the evidence of their misdeeds, which may lead to a possibility of rising against them (Singer & Drakulich, 2020). Here, the police also tend to consider non-white people as the offenders of drug crime. Racial threats have an impact on the policing practices and assist in racial profiling. Whereas, people staying in suburban areas of having white race are mostly ignored and considered harmless instead of committing the same misdeeds as those committed by black or brown urban residents.

In the long run, the concept of moral panic also needs attention. Moral panic takes place when a community showcases amplified fear towards a social problem. In the suburban neighborhoods, community safety and moral order are generated mostly by drug use (Berger *et al*, 2019). Residents may push for severe policing, oppose building treatment centers, or call for

severe discipline policies. Moral panic frequently depends on social and racial stereotypes, but not the actual levels of drug use.

The basic themes shown by various research portray that drug narratives are not neutral. Rather, they are shaped by class, race, and cultural perceptions. They even have a core role in tailoring the policy and public opinion.

Critical Analysis and Examples

Drug narratives in the U.S. have been racialized for a long time, as we can notice from different representations of the crack cocaine epidemic and the opioid crisis. Crack cocaine use was a prevalent practice for Black residents from the urban communities during the period of 1980, which afterward led to severe policies like mandatory minimum sentences. Courts enforced long-term prison sentences for possession of crack and powdered cocaine, which were mostly used by white people. Despite the black and brown people mostly being sentenced to these harsh sentences, the white individuals received easier penalties. Media coverage supplemented these racialized perceptions, reflecting the images of urban decline, dangerous individuals from the violent neighborhoods (Netherland & Hansen, 2016). Mostly, the black community people are criminalized for no reason, and their moral failures have been reflected strongly, which further shows the public support towards the punitive policies.

Meanwhile, the opioid epidemic inordinately burdened the white suburban communities, which received a very different response. The stories covered by the media concentrated on humanizing users, stressing the personal struggles, trauma, and the necessity for medical treatment. Legislators facilitated access to rehabilitation programs, mental health services, and harm reduction (Netherland & Hansen, 2016). Frequently, the families and the communities used

social and financial resources to safeguard the white suburban users from strong legal outcomes, pointing to the privileges that shape the consequences (Jacques & Wright, 2015).

Drug use by the suburban residents is mostly private and hidden. Sometimes they use the drugs in basements, cars, or in bedrooms, and law enforcement cannot always get to notice. Contrarily, the drug activity in the urban neighborhood is more visible and public. Thus, the residents of the urban community encounter overzealous policing. The visibility strengthens stereotypes regarding the danger and criminality in minority communities. Over and above that, racial threat and moral panic have a distinctive role here. White suburban people consider the non-white people to be dangerous and suspicious, which further induces close police scrutiny and generates heightened public fear. Though the same actions are done by the white individuals and ignored (Singer & Drakulich, 2020).

This biased social outlook reflects that race, class, and visibility have a strong influence on the information, who is getting punished, and to whom the society should be empathetic. Though the black and brown users undergo strong criminalization, the white suburban users likely obtain fair treatment, showcasing the ingrained racial and social biases in drug narratives and policy decisions.

How Race, Gender, Media, and Privilege Affect Public Perception and Policy

To shape the drug narratives, the most nuanced factor behind the topic is race. The black and brown drug users are mostly labeled as dangerous, suspicious, and criminals. While the white suburban individuals are treated with empathy for using similar drugs. To society, the white suburban residents are mostly the victims of drug use, and they need strong support and medical assistance to come out of this perilous situation. The law also gets impacted through

these racialized narratives, and the policing practices and sentencing strategies are shaped differently according to the racialized labels as well.

To shape the drug narratives, gender is also a strong determinant. For example, suburban women sometimes get addicted to prescription opioids. Mostly, they are shown to be overwhelmed mothers who have a strong demand for compassion and emotional assistance. In contrast, Black women are labeled as "immoral" or "bad mothers" when they struggle with a similar addiction, the addiction of prescription opioids. This hybrid approach of race and gender further generated deeper inequalities in public opinions and policy turnouts.

Media coverage strongly affects molding public perception. The language and images used through the news channels and the media platforms showcase how the addiction should be discerned by society. Smiling white teenagers, family interviews, and recoveries often mould the understanding and empathy towards white people. Though the mugshots, deterioration of urban society, and the tragic stories of Black residents give rise to terror and clarify the punitive responses (Netherland & Hansen, 2016). Thus, the media supports racial stereotypes and influences policymaking.

Privilege is also an essential element that shows the families having ample wealth and monetary resources also have the opportunity to access the resources that safeguard them from legal outcomes of drug abuse. They can pay the attorneys to fight the case for them, access private treatment, and be protected through supportive school interventions. This privilege ultimately demonstrates who to consider the victim and who should be convicted of a similar offense, further sustaining inequality and bias.

Drug policies showcase all these narratives. At the time of the crack epidemic, it was seen that Black users were disproportionately sentenced under the mandatory minimum sentencing laws. Also, at the time of the opioid crisis, treatment programs primarily multiplied in white suburban areas, fundraising for mental health services, rehabilitation, and prevention of overdose. Suburban residents mostly get access to resources and political influence, which help in shaping the policies, while minority communities do not get many options for rehabilitation and societal support.

Final Argument

Till today, the drug narratives in society are getting majorly influenced by racial politics. Synthetic opioids like Fentanyl have caused the deaths of many people in urban and suburban areas. Nonetheless, the public opinion and policy response still have not changed. They are equally biased from the class views and racial points of view. While the deaths of suburban residents are considered individual tragedies, the deaths of urban residents mostly show the evidence and statistics of extensive social problems. These biased narratives continue shaping policing budgets, school programs, the availability of treatment, and sentencing structures.

Addressing these issues is highly in demand now. It necessitates confronting the racialized stories that affect the public understanding. The policies should concentrate on equality in access to fair treatment and consistent sentencing to set aside the racial biases in policing. Media must compile a record of addiction in a factual, neutral, and empathetic manner, setting the stereotypes aside. Schools and courts must manage all students and offenders in a similar vision, irrespective of their class, race, or neighborhood.

Conclusion

The drug narratives in the suburban part of the United States showcase the dominance of race, gender, media, and privilege on public opinion and policy. While the white suburban drug users are depicted as the victims, society assists them with emotional, medical, and cognitive support. Black and brown drug users mostly get penalized and criminalized for using drugs at the same rate as white individuals. Some themes, like drug exceptionalism, suburban drug markets, racial threat, and moral panic, demonstrate how the narratives have been generated and maintained. Media coverage and societal privilege magnify these biases, adjusting who obtains empathy and who undergoes punishment. Without changing these narratives, drug policy will continue to safeguard some communities while injuring others. To accomplish further fairness, society must confront racial stigmas, provide equal treatment options, and guarantee that drug policy is based on evidence instead of race or location.

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