

THE OFFICIAL RESPONSE TO DRUG USE PATTERNS: WHEN POLITICS TRUMPS SCIENCE

By Marsha Rosenbaum, PhD

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My National Institute on Drug Abuse-funded research began in 1976, when I was approached after a presentation at an American Sociological Association convention by Louise Richards—a NIDA project officer who many of you, I’m sure, remember. Louise encouraged me to write a grant proposal to conduct the first-of-its kind ethnographic study of women heroin addicts. Naturally I followed her advice, and for the next 20 years, Sheigla Murphy and I completed ethnographic studies of women on heroin, women on methadone, women on crack, women who used heroin, crack and methamphetamine use during pregnancy, men and women who used Ecstasy, and the impact of de-funding on methadone maintenance clients.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my project officers, Louise Richards, George Beshner, Elizabeth Lampert, Jag Khalsa, and Bennett Fletcher, who guided me through the arduous grant process. Special thanks to sweet, shy Bennett, who had to deal with the fallout created by a disgruntled employee who absconded in the middle of the night with *all* our project data *and* equipment, spun out of control, disappeared for a decade, and then re-surfaced recently, making headlines as a Baltimore madam with a PhD and support from NIDA.

A decade ago, I “kicked” research, went into grantee recovery, and defected to drug policy reform, where I remain as director of the San Francisco office of the Drug Policy Alliance, a national organization advocating alternatives to the failed War on Drugs. Special thanks go to Zili Sloboda and Jim (the Don) Inciardi for inviting me to be part of this conference despite my outspoken critique of the federal government.

Thirty years ago, as a young researcher I had hoped that my work would have a positive impact on American drug policy. I truly believed that a deeper understanding of drug use patterns, both on the individual and societal level, would help policy-makers and legislators make rational, pragmatic, just, and even compassionate decisions.

Since we’re “letting our hair down,” I will tell you frankly that after 20 years of research plus 10 years of (shall we say?) non-governmental policy work, it has become difficult for me to see a constructive relationship between research and policy. Instead, in this political climate, policy seems almost “data proof.” Instead, I see a disturbing trajectory: from research to MEDIA to policy, with media playing a larger role than ever.

I had many clues about the importance of the (government-controlled) media in shaping policy, even before 2001, when the Bush administration went over the top in its dismissal of science in policy decisions.

Politicians couldn’t scramble fast enough after the death of Len Bias in 1986. Without taking a breath, they created the long mandatory minimum sentences that have resulted in our ever-increasing, 2 million-strong prison population and 1 in 3 young African American males involved in some form of criminal justice supervision.

Meanwhile, back at the proverbial research ranch, Sheigla and I were studying *women* who used heroin and crack, and reporting in scholarly articles, books, and presentations that motherhood was the primary motivation for women's desire to get out of the drug world.

We advised increased accessibility to pre-natal care and drug treatment. But the media had found a hot issue and was busy running story after story with titles like, "the instinct of parenthood become part of crack's toll" (New York Times, 1990), resulting, in five years, in an 828% increase in the number of African American women incarcerated for drug-related offenses.

Ecstasy was next in line as the drug scare du jour. After completing the first federally funded sociological study of MDMA, Jerry Beck and I, in our 1994 book, Pursuit of Ecstasy, emphasized the importance of context and user education for that tiny fraction of users who might be vulnerable to abuse. We had, in fact, found very little problem use in our 100-person study population—a very unpopular finding that ensured we wouldn't get another penny of funding to study Ecstasy.

Just a few years later Ecstasy use in the RAVE scene provided a fear-producing angle, and a prominent researcher released data suggesting permanent changes in the brain function of users. The media sounded the alarm, and produced more than 1,000 terrifying stories in just one year (2000). The result was increases in mandatory minimum sentences for MDMA, such as in Illinois, where an individual caught with 15 doses of Ecstasy will serve a minimum of four years in state prison. Meanwhile the "one-hit-of-Ecstasy-can-kill-you" study was subsequently retracted when it turned out to be fatally flawed (the substance administered to the monkeys and baboons was

methamphetamine, not MDMA), but the damage was already done and the media was already on to something else.

Perhaps nothing in my research career produced more frustration than methadone maintenance. Despite 15 years of joining other researchers in the consistent documentation of the psycho-social benefits of MMT, along with the pitfalls of cutting off treatment prematurely, I watched in horror as federal funding decreased steadily. When I started looking at MMT in 1980, 90% was publicly funded and 10% was private. By the time I retired that figure had inverted and the appropriateness of substitution therapy versus abstinence continue today.

Let's face it and say it out loud, our government doesn't like the concept of "harm reduction", which flies in the face of the current abstinence-only approach to drugs (and sex). MMT, as drug substitution, was the very first form of harm reduction—pre-dating needle exchange by nearly two decades. NIDA itself was all-too-quiet about the value of harm reduction in the RAVE context at its own Ecstasy conference in 2001. It was "just say no" or nothing at all.

I know many of you share my frustrations as a research scientist hoping to shape drug policy. Weren't we all disappointed by the FDA's position on medical marijuana that was so transparently political that even the most conservative editorial boards attacked it publicly?

I must say I admire you for sticking it out, and don't mean to discourage those of you just getting started in drug research. Perhaps in a future administration, one in which research is honored and taken seriously, science will guide policy and drug users will be treated with reason, compassion and justice.

