

February 8, 2024

RE: Testimony in Opposition of Recriminalizing Drug possession and a Brief History Behind the War on Drugs.

Chair Lieber, Chair Kropf, and members of the Committee,

My name is Lorena Ambriz and I am testifying in opposition of recriminalizing drug possession in our state. First, I would like to provide some background on the war on drugs, specifically relating to race, using my Master of Science in Criminology and Criminal Justice from Portland State University.

We have been fighting drug use in the United States with criminalization since President Nixon declared illegal drugs “public enemy number one” in the 1970s. President Reagan’s administration officially announced the fight on illegal drugs through the creation of the Sentencing Reform Act of 1984 and the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which brought severe penalties for drug related offenses (Clear & Frost, 2014). In the 1990s, President Clinton continued this tough-on-crime attitude addressing repeat offenders as ‘super-predators’, which was coded language towards young Black men. During this era, the term “welfare queen” was also popularized, referring to “drug-addicted” Black mothers relying on food stamps to feed their families. The war on drugs and the tough on crime policies were intentionally created to suppress the social and economic growth of the Black community. By 1991, one in four young Black men were in the hands of the criminal justice system (Alexander, 2012), leaving more and more Black women to single parent.

It is important to note that the ‘law and order’ platform first emerged in the late 1950s when southern officials publicly opposed the Civil Rights Movement. Civil rights protests were deemed criminal rather than political. The riots that took place after the Martin Luther King assassination further pushed the narrative of the lawlessness of civil rights. Barry Goldwater’s presidential campaign condemned these riots and pushed the fear of ‘black crime’ which set the foundation for the tough-on-crime movement (Alexander, 2012).

Today we see Black, Brown, and poor communities overrepresented in our incarceration system. Oregonian voted in to decriminalize drugs in 2020, through Measure 110. Measure 110 also helped lessen the fiscal and social burden on our prison system and it would be a mistake to reverse this measure.

We have been using criminalization as a means to stop drug use in the United State since the 1970s and unfortunately, we have failed. In the 1970s the death rate for drug overdose was roughly three out of 100,000 people, by the end of the 1990s, that number was seven, by 2010 it was 13, and in 2020 it rose to 29 people overdosing out of every 100,000 individuals. Under tough-on-crime laws against drug use, drug overdose rose by nearly tenfold. We gave criminalization a 50 year trial and it failed. We must allow community programs, peer sponsors, and healthcare providers to continue the work they have been doing since the implementation of Measure 110.

I understand the nation, including Oregon, is facing a drug use crisis. I understand we are scared and want to see immediate results for this public health crisis. Putting people behind bars for their drug use, would ensure we don’t see the problem on our streets, but it does not solve the issue of addiction. However, **recriminalization is NOT the way forward. Vote NO on HB 4002, and any other bill that is pushing the recriminalization narrative.**

**Thank you,  
Lorena Ambriz  
Oregonian**