Multimedia Primary Source Discussion Set
War on Drugs

URL: https://americanarchive.org/primary_source_sets/war-on-drugs

Teaching Tips
As a collection, this set of sources provides a broad history of how federal and state authorities have tried to curtail drug use, abuse, and trafficking. These audio and video clips document the circumstances that led President Nixon to launch the war on drugs, which law enforcement took up at every level of government. These sources demonstrate a range of opinions about the measures used in the war on drugs, and they provide testimonies about how enforcement of anti-drug policies affected different populations, especially along lines of race and class.

Background Information
Before engaging with this resource set, students should be familiar with the following:
- The growing economic prosperity of the United States in the 1950s and Forms of political dissent and counterculture movements of the 1960s, including various people’s rights movements (civil rights, gay rights, women’s liberation, Black Power), the student movement, anti-war movement, the rise of beat culture and hippies, and the rise of suburbs and resulting urban decay
- U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War

Essential Question
How has the war on drugs shaped U.S. society?

General Discussion Questions
- What circumstances prompted the war on drugs?
- How was the war on drugs enforced?
- In what ways did the war on drugs perpetuate racial and class disparities in American society?
Classroom Activities

1) Ask students to watch and listen to the following sources:
   - Clinton Administration Drug Czar Lee Brown Discusses Drug Problem and Policies (1996)
   - Judge James Gray Criticizes Drug Laws (2001)
   - A Major Shift in Drug Policy (2018)

These sources reveal different views about drug use and its societal significance. How do these views relate to the war on drugs? What accounts for the difference between them? How and why did ideas about enforcing drug policies change over time?

2) Ask students to watch the following sources:
   - The War on Drugs at the State Level (1989)
   - The War on Drugs in Chicago (1993)

According to these sources, how did the war on drugs operate in different communities? How did location affect the enforcement of anti-drug policies? How did location affect people’s experience of anti-drug policies? What challenges did law enforcement on the local level face in relation to the war on drugs? What do these sources reveal about drug use?

3) Ask students to watch the following source:
   - The War on Drugs in Chicago (1993)

According to these sources, how has race figured into the war on drugs? What impact have anti-drug policies had on people of color and poor people? How have government officials and law authorities responded to bias in anti-drug policies and their enforcement? What’s the relationship between anti-drug policies and incarceration?

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