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# Linking Inequalities of Race and Class to Drug Abuse

**Asuzena Flores**

## INTRODUCTION

Drug abuse is an ongoing problem in the U.S. as it affects millions of individuals and often results in negative consequences such as addiction, incarceration, and death. Although no one is immune to addiction, higher rates of drug abuse and addiction are found among marginalized populations such as the working class and people of color. Non-White racial groups such as African Americans, who have been historically marginalized in our society, are linked with higher rates of drug addiction and drug abuse (“Race and the drug war”). This article reviews the literature on the intersectional relationship of race and class involving drug abuse. First, I talk about intersectionality theory as it is relevant to understanding the relationship between race and class. Then, I will discuss race and class as they are associated with criminalization of drugs, and approaches to rehabilitation.

## INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY

We live in a stratified society, in which some groups receive higher status than others. Among the characteristics by which our society is stratified are race and class. The concept of intersectionality refers to the fact that every person holds multiple social identities, such as race and class, and receives social advantages or disadvantages due to their combination of identities (Gopaldas, 2013). Additionally, intersectionality theory is a framework for understanding how multiple social identities like race, class, and gender intersect at an individual level to

reflect systems of privilege and oppression such as racism, classism, and sexism on a larger social-structural level (Bowleg, 2012). This theory explains the connection between overlapping identities, but more importantly, it identifies sociopolitical barriers that uniquely impact an individual’s life chances. Intersectionality theory can provide a deeper understanding between race and class as these categories are often used to exclude lower-class individuals from societal benefits thus resulting in drug abuse.

## CRIMINALIZATION

Since the 1970’s America’s mission for drug reform has repeatedly failed as its flawed policies consist of fines, incarceration, and probation rather than helping individuals overcome addiction (Kim et al., 2020). The war on drugs consisted of tough punishment directed at lower-status individuals and the campaign was undeniably racially targeted. As a result, today we have a justice system that hyper-criminalizes minority groups. Before 2010, there existed unjustifiable sentencing of individuals for possession of crack cocaine compared to powder cocaine at a 100:1 ratio, meaning individuals faced longer sentences for crack cocaine offenses than powder cocaine

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(Small, 2001). Consequently, African Americans experienced the highest rates of federal crack cocaine offenses (Small, 2001).

African Americans and Hispanics use more crack cocaine, while Whites use more powder cocaine (Fryer et al., 2013). The form of cocaine that is associated with crack cocaine is poor people of color, while powder cocaine is associated with affluent status (Kim et al., 2020). This has led to decades of negative stereotypes for African Americans and minority populations who are labeled as threats to society, therefore are subjected to increased rates of policing. Stereotyping of minority groups has resulted in criminal punishment for abusing crack cocaine, however, there is less severe punishment for whites that abuse powder cocaine. This prevents individuals from improving their lives and climbing the social ladder.

Issues of class inequalities relate to drug abuse as lower-class individuals are placed at an economic disadvantage, increasing the likelihood of drug abuse as a result of the lack of resources. One of the reasons why drug use may be higher for minority populations is because they are more concentrated in lower socioeconomic statuses which expose them to higher levels of crime, higher levels of poverty, higher levels of single-parent homes, and fewer or worse educational opportunities (Houschen and Lo, 2020).

Drug abuse may also be linked to individuals who lack the basic necessities and those lacking legitimate coping resources. Formal legitimate coping resources such as medical care, substance treatment centers, and mental health services are less accessible to poor minority populations (Akins et al., 2010). In turn, this makes minority populations more susceptible to illegal drug use as a means of coping.

Finally, punishments for drug use vary by race and class. Minority groups suffering from drug problems are more likely to be

viewed as responsible for their own vices, rather than met with an understanding of their position due to lacking resources (Dollar, 2019). Because minorities have been stereotyped as criminals, uncontrollable, and a threat to dominant groups, legal penalties for their drug use are seen as socially acceptable. Poor White drug users are also excluded from resources, but they receive less extensive punishment for using illegal drugs (Dollar, 2019). Lower-class Whites are more likely to be arrested, imprisoned, and fined than their wealthier counterparts for using drugs (Dollar, 2019).

### REHABILITATION

In general drug abuse problems relating to users of higher socioeconomic status are treated more just than those of lower socioeconomic status. Prescription opiates are usually associated with White middle-class populations who are considered a non-threatening population. Also, prescription opiates are more abused than illegal opiates (Dollar, 2019). Drug-related policy concerning the opioid crisis is more treatment-oriented than punishment-driven (Kim et al., 2020). The opioid crisis has largely been associated with white individuals, thus suggesting more of a compassionate response by policymakers and society (Kim et al., 2020).

Since the opioid crisis, legislators' response to drug abuse problems has mostly been treatment-oriented rather than punishment-oriented (Kim et al., 2020). Solutions for drug abuse should include a policy that favors drug treatment programs, education, and access to health care. It is important to note that these resources are often scarce for lower socioeconomic status populations (Akins et al., 2010). These types of progressive policies should be extended to all, including people of color and lower-class individuals.

Issues of classism are observed within drug abuse by labeling some drugs as medical

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as opposed to problematic, such as abusing prescription opioids compared to abusing methamphetamine. Middle-class individuals who suffer from drug abuse are considered outcasts but met with sympathy. Narratives for these populations often include hard-working individuals who misused stimulants to improve their work performance (Netherland & Hansen, 2016). The response to drug abuse for the middle class is aimed to assist individuals overcome drug abuse rather than to criminalize them. As opposed to marginalized populations, suburban middle-class populations are privileged due to their wealthier status.

### CONCLUSION

Furthermore, patterns of inequality exist at higher rates for minority populations, which increase the rate of drug abuse. Applying the framework of intersectionality theory, we can understand why specific populations

are more likely to be affected by drug abuse and treated by disadvantaged consequences. The lack of adequate resources such as healthcare, education, and food may cause lower socioeconomic status populations to abuse drugs. Our social policies deter individuals from drug use to some degree, however, it would be more effective to view drug abuse as a health issue rather than criminalizing folks. Drug abusers in society are negatively perceived but what people fail to recognize, is that these individuals require medical treatment and rehabilitation. One solution for our nation's drug crisis should be to provide marginalized populations with equitable access to resources. Another solution can be to provide healthcare for all to ensure citizens can receive adequate treatment for their health including drug-related diseases.

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