

2019RhodesJalyn-abstract

Abstract

As of 2019, thousands of Americans have lost their lives to opioid addiction and this number is quickly growing. The current devastation that stems from the opioid crisis mirrors the devastation that occurred in the crack epidemic during the 1980s and 1990s. While the two drug epidemics parallel each other in terms of the depredation caused by addiction, they differ in how they were treated by the government – humanization vs. criminalization. To explore this disparity, this research examines the ways in which the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Justice show bias in their treatment of opioid users and crack users. Specifically, this study reviews documents and statements released by these departments from the 1980s to the present about the opioid crisis and the crack epidemic. It also examines passed and proposed legislation, such as the Antidrug Act of 1986 and the Opioid Crisis Response Act of 2018. Qualitative analysis is used to find patterns and reoccurring themes in the reviewed documents. What was found from this analysis was used to determine how the crack epidemic and opioid crisis were addressed by the Department of Justice and the Department of Health and Human Services and if the agencies made any differences in approaching these crises. The results of the analysis display that both the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Justice utilized a more humanizing approach with the opioid crisis than they did with the crack epidemic. The data also shows that there has been a shift in the roles that the agencies played in the crises.

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