

A Review of
Lies, Damned Lies, and Drug War Statistics:
A Critical Analysis of Claims Made by the Office of National Drug Control Policy

By

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Book: *Lies, Damned Lies, and Drug War Statistics*
Author: Matthew B. Robinson and Renee G. Scherlen
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“There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics” (Twain, 1907, p. 471).

In the above quote Mark Twain was not suggesting an anti-statistical movement; rather he was candidly conveying how statistical information can be presented in such a way to support any view. Matthew B. Robinson and Renee G. Scherlen set out to understand the misuses of statistical information concerning the ongoing drug problem in the United States. In *Lies, Damned Lies, and Drug War Statistics*, the authors analyze the Office of National Drug Control Policy’s (ONDCP) use of statistics when supporting or creating drug policy. Throughout the book, the reader is exposed to many statistical manipulations that created public sentiment, consequently assisting in the enactment of many drug policies still in use today.

Established in 1988 by the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, the ONDCP’s purpose was to create policies, priorities, and objectives for the nation’s War on Drugs. In the book, the first chapter attempts to grasp the reader’s attention by presenting numerous accounts of statistical misrepresentations. The authors claim that the ONDCP secretly set objectives that induced mass hysteria or moral panic by taking a negative approach when presenting statistical information. The panic that was created by misrepresentation served as the driving force behind their purposed drug policies.

After recognizing many of the ONDCP’s statistical flaws, Robinson and Scherlen effectively demonstrate how the drug war developed over the course of the country’s history. This next section of the book provides a statistical overview of drug use in America, highlighting a decrease in drug use prior to the inception of the ONDCP in 1988. Interestingly, during this time the authors indicate that there was a high negative public perception of the drug use in America, which was largely in part due to the crack epidemic in the 1980s. Conversely, statistics show that drug use was actually decreasing at a rapid rate during the same time period. The authors offer information claiming it is likely that the ONDCP created mass hysteria to promote drug policy and increase funding.

Beyond the historical scope of America's drug war, the authors comprehensively examine the ONDCP's budget to better understand how federal tax dollars were being spent on the War on Drugs. Sticking to their *modus operandi*, the ONDCP continually shuffled their methodology when collecting budgetary information. Prior to 2003, the ONDCP included the entire costs of drug war (e.g. prevention, enforcement, arrests, prosecutions, incarceration, etc.). The ONDCP decided to take a different budgetary approach in 2003, only reporting specific cost of the drug war, leaving out information such as the costs subsequent to arrest. The authors systematically address these inconsistencies within the budget, raising significant questions concerning the integrity of the ONDCP.

The true bulk of the authors' arguments lie within the ONDCP's various drug surveys. The ONDCP continually left their methods open for scrutiny by constantly shifting survey methodology without explanation. Robinson and Scherlen maintain that the ONDCP incessant changes to the formatting of their surveys was not only peculiar in nature, but was also intentional. Constant rearrangement of survey methods creates ambiguity when attempting to conduct a comparative analysis of the various studies. Did the ONDCP intentionally create such ambiguity, with the intent of sidestepping any future comparative analysis? The authors present the facts, allowing the reader to decide for themselves. To combat the countless variations, the authors analyze the surveys and policies of each year, producing a responsible critique that exemplifies the misconceptions created by the ONDCP. In doing so, three questions are raised during each evaluation: 1) has the ONDCP reduced drug use? 2) has there been any success in rehabilitating drug abusers? and 3) is there a decrease in the availability of the drugs in the American market? Each year was evaluated, applying these three questions for a better understanding of the overall status of America's drug environment. The authors' results return with a different outcome than what was originally claimed by the ONDCP.

The ONDCP publishes a strategy each year to explain the agency's approach to the ongoing drug problem in the United States. The strategies contain new and continued policies that reflect the current statistical drug trends. The authors realize that a qualitative review of how each year's statistics influenced the subsequent strategy was the most constructive way to analyze the productivity of the ONDCP. The authors present many inconsistencies with this yearly approach.

One limitation to this study was created by examining each year's strategy individually. Instead of presenting similar inconsistencies for every year in one section, the authors instead chose to present their findings with no identifiable form or manner. For example, the authors report marijuana use has been steadily rising since 1988, but then move on to cocaine use, and its effects on the 2001 strategy in the very next paragraph, which could cause confusion for the reader. A systematic review of each year's strategy, separated by drug type, would present the reader with a better account of the author's findings.

If there was a constant theme to the way in which the ONDCP's operates, Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign would be an impeccable example. The authors

eloquently presented the misrepresentations of this program, which is currently still in use. The authors report that from 1979 to 1985 adolescent drug use (ages 12-17) was on the decline. In 1985, the “Just Say No” campaign was implemented, which was also the same time period where society had a strong negative perception of drug use in the United States. Starting before the campaign and up until the late 1990s, drug use was steadily declining. During the late 1990s, statistics began to show an increase in drug use among adolescents, figures that almost reach the same level as in the early 1980s. So what exactly does this mean for the infamous “Just Say No” program? The authors suggest that since drug use was already declining five years prior to the implementation of this program and then subsequently increasing in the late 1990s, adolescent drug use is not directly affected by this particular program. Consequently, the “Just Say No” program should not continue to be operational, freeing large amounts of federal tax dollars that could be utilized for more productive means.

Strengthening the arguments made, the authors devoted an entire section to the statistical information reported by the ONDCP. While researchers could utilize this information for various studies, the authors were careful not to exclusively convey raw statistical data to the reader. Instead, the information was presented in a manner in which the reader could easily understand. A comprehensive summary was presented at the end of this section, which encapsulated the authors’ interpretations of the statistical information reported.

The book concludes with a section that summarizes the entire study in a non-partisan fashion. Instead of criticizing the ONDCP for their action or inaction by presenting possible solutions, the authors decided not to offer any policy implications. The authors claim that America’s drug problem could possibly be much worse if it was not for the ONDCP, but there is no empirical validity to support this claim. Thus, the purpose of this book is to educate the reader of the various statistical misrepresentations asserted by the ONDCP. Considering the countless inconsistencies reported by this study, the authors seem to insinuate that governmental oversight is needed to prevent any further reporting of this kind.

Robinson and Scherlen thoroughly present the material in a meticulous fashion, which could easily be used in a classroom setting or for research purposes. The authors’ incorporation of methodology, policy, and statistical terminology makes it ideal for a senior level or graduate course. Including public perception, funding, and government objectives, this book would provide the student with a complete realistic view of the drug problem in America. Additionally, the statistics presented would provide an alternative to government drug reporting. The authors not only offer different figures, but also different perspectives of the statistics reported by the ONDCP. This information could be of value to any research related to this topic.

When measuring the success of this book, one should consider the depth at which the authors researched the ONDCP. The authors maintain that this book is intended to provide the statistical truths of America’s War on Drugs, while supplying the reader with contradictions related to the ONDCP’s policies and claims. Though a complex issue, the

authors were successful in creating a comprehensive review of the ONDCP's approach to America's drug problem. *Lies, Damned Lies, and Drug War Statistics* also presents deficiencies in the ONDCP's methodology, which could easily be remedied with governmental support and would only further the War on Drug's chances of success.

References

Twain, Mark (1907). Chapters from My Autobiography. *North American Review*: Vol. CLXXXVI. No. DCXVIII. Pg 471.