

THE DECONSTRUCTION OF A DRUG CRISIS: MEDIA COVERAGE OF DRUG ISSUES DURING THE 1996 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

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The 1996 U.S. presidential campaign represents an unusual and important case for research on the social construction of drug problems. Presidential candidate Robert Dole and other prominent politicians made dramatic claims about a growing teenage "drug crisis" based on supportive evidence from several national surveys. However, these claims were often ignored and even criticized by the news media. This paper examines how and why journalists responded so differently to this putative crisis than they did to earlier drug crises, such as the media "feeding frenzy" about crack cocaine in the 1980s. An analysis of news stories, political statements, and editorial commentary that appeared in major news outlets during 1995 and 1996 reveals a number of tactics that media workers employed to deconstruct politicians' claims and to frame the drug issue as an election-year strategy rather than as an authentic crisis.

INTRODUCTION

Anti-drug campaigns in the United States have been fertile terrain for theoretical and empirical work on the social construction of public problems. Starting with Becker's (1963) account of Harry Anslinger's entrepreneurial role in the passage of the Marihuana Tax Act and Gusfield's (1963) analysis of the symbolic politics of the Prohibition Movement, numerous studies have shown how claims-makers in government, in social movements, and in the mass media collaborated in the

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construction of a series of “drug crises” over the past century (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Musto, 1999; Reinerman, 2006).

The mid-to-late 1980s was an especially fruitful period for constructionist research on drug problems. Even though national surveys indicated that most forms of drug use were declining during this period, these years were marked by unprecedented levels of public and political concern over an “epidemic” of cocaine use among American adolescents. Subsequently, researchers and commentators focused on how media “hype”—intense and sensationalistic claims-making activity by journalists—created the conditions for a moral panic about teenage drug use (Diamond, Accosta, & Thornton, 1987; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Jensen, Gerber, & Babcock, 1991; Orcutt & Turner, 1993; Reinerman & Levine, 1989a, 1989b). Beginning in 1986, press coverage of drug issues increased dramatically with news articles and broadcasts routinely characterizing the crack cocaine problem as a “crisis,” “epidemic,” or “plague” (Chiricos, 1996; Reinerman & Levine, 1989a; Shoemaker, 1989). Politicians capitalized on heightened concerns about drug issues, and the “War on Drugs” became a dominant theme in election campaigns and in federal legislation through the rest of the decade. In general, constructionist analyses of this period have reinforced a view of drug crises as collaborative claims-making activity in which political leaders and, “media organizations [work] in unison to promote fears of drug abuse” (Glassner, 1999, p. 131; also see Best, 1999; Reinerman, 2006).

However, in this paper we examine a subsequent episode of claims-making activity that contrasts in important ways with the cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and leads to quite a different view of political and media work on drug crises. Over the course of the 1996 U.S. presidential campaign, a number of prominent politicians—most notably, Republican nominee Robert Dole—engaged in a well-financed and widely-publicized effort to define teenage drug use as a serious national crisis. Furthermore, significant increases in survey estimates of drug use during the early 1990s provided a rich empirical resource for claims about a growing teenage drug problem. Yet, as we will show in our analysis of national news stories about drug issues during the mid-1990s, the intense “hype” and sensationalism of a decade earlier was virtually absent from media coverage of this putative crisis. Instead, the news media employed a variety of critical techniques to deconstruct politicians’ claims and to frame the drug issue as a political strategy rather than as an authentic crisis. In positioning themselves outside of the claims-making arena as analysts rather than as collaborators, many journalists adopted, in effect, a constructionist stance toward politicians’ claims and counter-claims about the drug problem.

Thus, the ill-fated anti-drug campaign of 1996 serves as a useful negative case to gain theoretical insight into organizational, political, and historical conditions

that promote or discourage the development of drug crises. Similar to Best's (1999) examination of "short-lived" social problems, such as "wilding" and freeway violence, we attempt to determine why neither empirical evidence of increasing drug use nor sponsorship by powerful political interests was sufficient to generate more than short-lived media coverage of the alleged crisis. By identifying factors that set this episode apart from previous instances of intense and sustained media work on drug epidemics, we hope to arrive at a fuller understanding of variations and contingencies in processes of claims-making about illegal drug use and other public problems.

METHODS

We analyze claims about teenage drug use made by politicians, government officials, journalists, and drug researchers that appeared in four major newspapers, two weekly news magazines, and one television news program from September 1995 to October 1996. For newspaper evidence, we systematically searched the Nexis® database to find articles on teenage drug use from the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today*.¹ In addition, we examined articles on teenage drug use from two weekly news magazines, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report*, and transcripts from the Public Broadcasting System's *NewsHour*, which devoted two broadcasts to the issue of teenage drug use. Political claims were taken from speeches by Senator Dole, President Clinton, and other politicians that were cited in news articles and often available on the Internet. Both Dole and Clinton ran campaign ads mentioning drug use that were transcribed in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Finally, we examined the results and press reports of two national surveys: the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Monitoring the Future survey conducted by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research (ISR) under grants from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA).

Media coverage of teenage drug use peaked during three months immediately preceding the 1996 presidential election, but the basic themes in claims-making activity and media framing of the drug issue were established in 1995. Two nationwide surveys released in late 1995 showed significant increases in estimates of teenage drug use beginning in 1992, the year Bill Clinton won the United States presidential election. We begin by showing how politicians' and media workers' responses to these survey results served as a foundation for their respective stances toward the election-year drug crisis. Then, we focus on the intensification of claims-making activity in August 1996, when results were released from the 1995 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse. We show how politicians used these results to bolster claims about a growing and serious teenage drug problem in campaign speeches, television advertising, and talk show appearances. Finally, we examine

the techniques that media workers used to deconstruct these crisis-claims and to frame the drug issue as a calculated political strategy.

SEPTEMBER 1995: THE BEGINNING OF THE DEBATE

One of the first indications of increased teenage drug use was provided by the 1994 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Released in September 1995, the survey showed that estimates of monthly rates of teenage drug use had increased from 6.1% in 1992 to 9.5% in 1994.² Much of this increase was attributable to marijuana use, which increased from an estimate of 4.0% in 1992 to 7.3% in 1994 (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 1995). In the press conference, HHS Secretary Donna Shalala summarized these results and offered some interpretations of the increases. She noted that, “while most types of illicit drug use have *not* increased—and casual cocaine use continues to decline—marijuana use among 12 to 17 year olds has *nearly doubled* since 1992” (Shalala, 1995a, emphasis in original). She suggested a causal sequence of events, referring to statistics showing a relationship between attitudes toward drug use and the prevalence of drug use: “When teenagers’ perception of the harm caused by marijuana goes down, marijuana use goes up. It’s that simple.” Discussing some of the implications of the findings, she stated the need for a “steady drumbeat” of anti-drug messages to youths.

While the press conference focused on the dangers of teenage drug use, both Shalala and Lee Brown, the White House drug policy advisor, made several direct references to the political climate surrounding the survey findings. Shalala (1995a) took an overtly partisan stance in her speech and attacked a proposed budget passed by the Republican-majority House of Representatives that would affect the funding of HHS:

The 1994 Household Survey confirms the wisdom of the Clinton Administration’s comprehensive anti-drug strategy. It also confirms the folly...of the House Republicans’ budget proposal to slash drug prevention and treatment funds and leave our children to fend for themselves in the midst of a resurgence of marijuana.

After Shalala’s speech, Brown (1995) also criticized the Republican Congress: “Drug use is up, yet Congress is cutting the funds for the prevention activities for kids that we know work.”

Republican politicians were quick to respond by asserting that the results were evidence of ineffective leadership by President Clinton. Senator Dole, who had not yet been nominated as the Republican presidential candidate, was one of the first politicians to attribute responsibility for the rise in teenage drug use to the Clinton administration. On the same day as the press conference, Dole denounced Clinton’s drug policies from the Senate floor: “While drug use has gone up during the last two

and a half years, the Clinton administration has sat on the sidelines, transforming the war on drugs into a full-scale retreat” (*Washington Post*, 1995). While politicians and government officials were issuing grave warnings about neglect of a growing drug problem, the media devoted little coverage to the results of the Household survey. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* ran brief articles mentioning the findings and highlighting the increase in marijuana use among teenagers.³ Both articles focused on statistics from the survey rather than on the emerging debate between the Clinton administration and the Republican opposition.

On December 15, 1995 the results of another major drug survey were released, providing further evidence of increases in teenage drug use. The Monitoring the Future survey of high-school students, conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research (ISR), showed an increase in teenage drug use starting in 1992. According to the survey results, the percentage of high school seniors who reported past-month use of any illicit drug rose from 14.4% in 1992 to 23.8% in 1995. At the press conference, Shalala again portrayed the increases in a dramatic fashion: “We have sounded alarm bells about rising levels of substance abuse by American teenagers. Today, I want to ring that alarm bell faster and louder and send a message to every parent in this country: your children are at risk” (Shalala, 1995b). Again, she defended the administration and attacked the Republican budget initiatives:

Our bold approach [to dealing with drug use] is the right way—the common sense way—to help families and save futures... This is not the time to pull back—as the Republican budget is doing—when the monsters of drugs, tobacco, and alcohol are reaching out their long arms to snatch away our young people, their health, and their lives (1995b).

Unlike the Household survey, the ISR survey received a large amount of media coverage the day after the press conference. However, the coverage focused on the political environment in which the survey was released instead of the social ramifications of teenage substance abuse. Both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* featured lengthy articles detailing the findings and the political debate surrounding teenage drug use. According to the December 16 front page article in the *Washington Post*, the survey, “stoked an already heated partisan debate over the Clinton administration’s anti-drug efforts” (Thomas, 1995). This debate was also noted by the *New York Times*: “The Clinton administration and Republican Congressional leaders blamed each other for making the problem of drug use among young people worse” (*New York Times*, 1995). The article quoted Bob Dole, who was still campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination: “[F]rom day

one, this [Clinton] administration has regrettably failed to make the war on drugs the top priority it should be.”

On December 19, only four days after the 1995 ISR press release, Republican Senator Orrin Hatch released a lengthy report for Congress entitled “Losing Ground Against Drugs: A Report on Increasing Illicit Drug Use and National Drug Policy.” Highly critical of the drug policies of the Clinton administration, he argued for a renewed focus on the problem of teenage drug use: “Drug use has in fact experienced a dramatic resurgence among our youth, a disturbing trend that could quickly return the United States to the epidemic of drug use that characterized the decade of the 1970s” (Hatch, 1995, pp. 1-2). In the report, Hatch referred to a survey from the December 1995 *Gallup Poll Monthly* (Saad, 1995), in which the respondents ranked drug abuse second, below violent crime, as “the most serious domestic issue facing the country today.”

Whereas politicians used drug use and public opinion data to make broad claims about the seriousness of the drug problem and to assert their leadership on the issue, journalists began to adopt a more analytical approach to these survey data. In a February 20, 1996 *New York Times* article, “Marijuana Use by Youth Continues to Rise,” Christopher Wren (1996a) closely examined data from both the Household and ISR surveys. His article discussed the increases in teenage drug use as well as changes in attitudes, and included two graphs that illustrated these trends. One of these graphs was an unusually sophisticated presentation of 16 years of data on marijuana use and disapproval of drug use from the Monitoring the Future Study. In addition to highlighting key historical events (e.g., “June 1986: Basketball star Len Bias died from an overdose of cocaine”), the graph also revealed that the annual prevalence of marijuana use among high school seniors began to increase during George Bush’s presidency in 1992, a year before Clinton took office. The analytical approach of this article—and its use of graphics that placed time-series data in historical context—differed markedly from the dramatic and often distorted use of drug statistics by media workers during the mid-1980s (see Orcutt & Turner, 1993). Later in 1996, as political claims-making intensified, this analytical approach to data on teenage drug use became even more apparent in media coverage of the drug issue.

A CRISIS IN THE MAKING? THE 1995 NATIONAL HOUSEHOLD SURVEY ON DRUG ABUSE

Although it was mentioned occasionally in campaign speeches and news articles throughout the summer, teenage drug use remained a dormant issue until the release of the 1995 Household survey on August 20, 1996. The 1995 Household survey showed that estimates of past month illicit drug use by youth aged 12-17 increased from 8.2% in 1994 to 10.9% in 1995 (SAMHSA, 1996a). Again, marijuana use accounted for much of this increase, rising from 6.0% in 1994 to 8.2% in 1995. Past month cocaine use by teenagers rose from 0.3% to 0.8%, an increase of 166%.

While the increases from 1994 to 1995 were only moderate, they extended an upward trend in drug use statistics since 1992. After declining steadily between 1979 and 1991, estimates of overall drug use among teenagers increased 105% from 1992 to 1995, with marijuana use increasing by 141%.

In this press conference, HHS Secretary Shalala highlighted the importance of the community rather than the government in reducing drug use: “None of us can afford to forget that youth substance abuse is an American problem—not a government problem—and it’s going to take the leadership of citizens and communities all across the country, from every region and every walk of life, and especially from parents, to save our children” (SAMHSA, 1996b). She claimed that drug use should be seen as a threat to children rather than as a campaign issue, and offered three interpretations of the findings that dissociated teenage drug use from its immediate political context: (1) the increases began in 1992, whereas Clinton was inaugurated in 1993: “What we’re seeing is something very serious, a multi-year trend that began before [the Clinton administration] came to office”; (2) the level of drug use among teenagers was still relatively low, “far below the peak years of the late 1970s and early 1980s”; and (3) debate over teenage drug use should not be mediated by political partisanship: “The kids do not know whether they are Republicans or Democrats yet.... This is a bipartisan issue” (Public Broadcasting System [PBS], 1996a). In another press conference later that day, White House press secretary Mike McCurry re-emphasized Shalala’s final point: “The one thing we can’t do is to turn drug use among young people into a political football because that is the wrong message for kids” (Nichols, 1996).

On August 21, 1996, the results of the 1995 Household survey made front page headlines in almost every major newspaper. However, in each of the initial articles, reportage of the increases in teenage drug use was counterbalanced with observations about their impact on the presidential campaign. For example, the *Washington Post* headline read, “Teens’ Use of Drugs Still Rising: GOP Seizes on Survey Showing a Doubling to 10.9 % Since 1992” (Suro, 1996a). The *New York Times*, after noting that, “marijuana smoking among teenagers had jumped 141 % from 1992 to 1995 and overall teenage drug use more than doubled,” stated that, “[t]he figures were immediately pounced upon as campaign ammunition by Republicans” (Goldberg, 1996).

The media’s dual focus on social and political ramifications of the drug survey was exemplified by the front page of the August 21 *USA Today*, which included two different articles: “Teens and Drugs: Today’s Youth Just Don’t See the Dangers” (Friend, 1996) and, “White House, GOP Spar on Drug Report” (Nichols, 1996). The first article reported that, “the USA could lose a decade of progress against drug abuse unless the recent rapid increase in use among teenagers can be halted....

[D]rugs have become so widespread among teens that in a classroom of 25, three are drug users.” After citing several statistics from the Household survey to illustrate the increases in drug use, the article included excerpts from interviews with high school students. “[M]embers of USA Today’s teen panel say the use of marijuana is so widespread that teens don’t really even consider it a drug.” In contrast, the second article focused solely on drug use as a campaign issue. It began by stating that, “teenage drug use became the latest hot-button issue of the presidential campaign Tuesday after release of a report showing drug use up sharply.” The article went on to cite conflicting claims made by Democrats and Republicans concerning the increases.

POLITICAL CLAIMS-MAKING

In the months following the August 20 press release, Republican politicians used both the Household survey data and the media coverage of the issue to support their claims about a teenage drug epidemic. Only five days after the press release, Bob Dole stated in a campaign speech: “You saw it shouting from banner headlines in the papers just this last week. Drug use among teenagers has more than doubled in America. It’s up 105%. And it’s not just marijuana, it’s hard stuff. It’s cocaine. It’s heroin. It’s LSD” (Seelye, 1996a). During the week of the Democratic National Convention, Dole continued to attack Clinton’s drug policies, claiming, “the terrible truth is this new drug epidemic never had to happen. The lives lost need not have been lost.... [T]he Clinton administration surrendered, they raised the white flag in the war on drugs” (Walsh, 1996). The Dole campaign featured a list of increases in drug use in their homepage on the Internet (Dole/Kemp ‘96 Online Campaign, 1996):

- Marijuana use soared 141% from 1992 to 1995 among America’s youth.
- Cocaine use by young people rose 166% from 1994 to 1995.
- Heroin-related overdoses increased to record levels, jumping from 48,003 in 1992 to 76,023 in 1995.
- Methamphetamine-related deaths have increased nationally by 145% over the past two years.

Dramatic increases were also reported by Republican Senator Orrin Hatch, who referred to the statistics from the Household survey on Public Television’s *NewsHour*: “I’ve accused the President of being AWOL or absent without leadership on drugs since 1992; marijuana usage has jumped 141%, cocaine usage has jumped 166%. Methamphetamine has jumped 310%—320% actually. LSD is at the highest level ever in the history of our country. It’s jumped a dramatic percentage of 183%” (PBS, 1996b).

Claims about increases in drug use were also made on the Senate floor. On September 4 several members of Congress delivered statements for a Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing entitled, “Teen Drug Use—Recent Upward Trends.”

Senator Hatch, after summarizing the statistical evidence of increasing drug use from several national surveys, directly attributed the increases to the Clinton administration: "Many of us believe that President Clinton has not provided the kind of leadership the American people deserve on this issue" (Hatch, 1996). Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy countered the statement by noting that Republicans have cut funds for drug treatment programs and have been negligent about reducing tobacco use among youth: "Tobacco is a gateway drug. If we do more to prevent smoking by teenagers, we will also be taking a great step to halt abuse of other drugs" (Kennedy, 1996).

Dole's campaign ran two television advertisements that featured claims about teenage drug use. The first advertisement—which began airing only seven days after the Household survey—was the most dramatic, equating the drug problem with the threat of nuclear war. It was patterned after a well-known advertisement from Lyndon Johnson's 1964 presidential campaign, which showed a nuclear explosion obliterating a scene of a little girl picking daisy petals. In Dole's advertisement, a similar girl is picking daisies, but the script stated: "Thirty years ago, the biggest threat to her was nuclear war. Today, the threat is drugs. Teenage drug use has doubled in the last four years" (Seelye, 1996b). The second advertisement, one of the most memorable of the campaign, begins with an announcer stating: "Teenage drug use has doubled since 1992. And Bill Clinton? He cut the White House drug office 83%. His own surgeon general even considered legalizing drugs. And in front of our children, on MTV, the president himself..." The commercial then showed footage of Clinton on an MTV program saying he would inhale marijuana if given a second chance: "Sure, if I could; I tried before." (Nagourney, 1996).

The Clinton campaign soon began airing an advertisement in response to Dole's claims. In the ad, an announcer stated: "President Clinton expanded the death penalty for drug kingpins. Nearly 40% more border agents to stop drugs. Record number of drug felons in federal prisons. President Clinton expanded school anti-drug programs. Dole and Gingrich tried to cut them and voted against 100,000 police" (Kurtz, 1996).

DECONSTRUCTING THE CRISIS

As the political debate intensified, Dole's attacks on Clinton and Clinton's responses became a newsworthy topic in itself. A *New York Times* article entitled, "Parties Try to Exploit Teen-Age Drug Rise" noted that, "the issue was quickly and thoroughly politicized" (Toner, 1996). The author argued that Dole and the Republicans were, "using the drug report to buttress [their] indictment of the Clinton administration as permissive baby-boomers with questionable values." Several newspaper editorials and opinion columns expressed disapproval with the politicization of teenage drug use. An editorial in the August 23 *New York Times* (1996a) clearly illustrates this critical posture toward the political debate:

Unfortunately, [teenage drug use] was immediately politicized in a manner that clouded rational discussion. Republicans blamed the increases on a failure of leadership by President Clinton and an allegedly permissive attitude toward drugs in the White House. Democrats pointed to signs that the upsurge actually started before Mr. Clinton took office, and blamed Congressional Republicans for indifference...It is appropriate to make drugs a campaign issue, but the problem needs solutions, not finger-pointing.

In addition to critiquing "politicized" claims about the drug problem, the media called upon a variety of "drug experts" for alternative explanations of upward trends in drug use. News articles and television broadcasts featured analyses by scholars such as Mark Kleiman, UCLA professor of policy studies (Toner, 1996), Herbert Kleber of the Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (Witkin, 1996), Lloyd Johnston, director of the Monitoring the Future Survey (Leland, 1996), and Ethan Nadelmann of the Lindesmith Center in New York (Wren, 1996b). These and other experts cited in news articles advanced three general explanations for the increases in teenage drug use: (1) parents who used drugs in their youth feel hypocritical about telling their children not to use drugs (*New York Times*, 1996b; Suro, 1996b); (2) teenagers do not have first-hand knowledge of the damaging effects of drug use that previous generations had, a phenomenon referred to as "intergenerational forgetting" (Goldberg, 1996; Savage, 1996); (3) drug use has been glamorized in popular culture (Rosenthal, 1996; Witkin, 1996). In citing these and other alternative explanations in the months following the release of the Household survey results, journalists distinguished their neutral viewpoint from politicians' contentious causal focus on opponents' drug policies.

In addition, news articles and editorials employed a wide array of analytical tools and resources (e.g., comparative and longitudinal methods, quasi-experimental arguments, sampling theory) to question the validity of politicians' claims about a growing crisis. For example, in a *Washington Post* op-ed piece, Yale medical historian David Musto (1996) argued that, "the increase in pot use among young people can't be pinned on the president." He made three comparative observations about teenage drug use that countered Dole's claims by placing the issue in a broad social and historical context. First, while Clinton led an unprecedented attack on the tobacco industry, teenage smoking still increased during his administration. As Musto observed, "no slackening of anti-tobacco effort can be blamed for the rising appeal of tobacco." Second, he pointed out that drug use patterns in Canada and the United States were very similar, indicating that an international phenomenon was taking place. Third, he cited evidence that the increases began when President

Bush was in office, suggesting that Clinton, and the role of president in general, had no direct effect on the rate of teenage drug use.

Other articles questioned the magnitude of the increases in teenage drug use by examining the statistics cited by Dole. In one *Los Angeles Times* article, a “drug expert” described how political claims were distorting statistical evidence:

While the Republican challenger [Bob Dole] has correctly highlighted the recent trend in teenage drug use, his use of percentages may exaggerate the problem.... ‘They are talking about cocaine use “doubling,” but it doesn’t sound as extreme if you say that 8 in 1,000 are using it, up from 3 per 1,000,’ said John P. Morgan, a pharmacologist and drug expert at the City University of New York Medical School (Savage, 1996).

The article also quoted Eric Sterling, president of the Criminal Justice Policy Foundation, who said, “everybody ought to be concerned about this steep and sudden rise [in drug use], but it doesn’t make any sense to blame this president than it does to blame Richard Nixon or Gerald Ford for the high levels of drug abuse in the early 1970s.” A *U.S. News & World Report* article stated that, “the recent rise in youthful narcotics abuse is disturbing, but overall drug use in America is holding steady and remains well under its recent high-water mark of the late 1970s” (Gest, 1996). *Newsweek* ran an article entitled, “Here’s the Straight Dope: Making Sense Out of the Candidates’ Claims About Drugs” (Klaidman, 1996b). It noted that, while the 1996 Household survey showed that 8.2% of teenagers used marijuana in the past month, the 1979 survey showed 11% used marijuana every day. Similar to the *Los Angeles Times* article (Savage, 1996), the author mentioned that the 166% increase in cocaine use was actually only from 0.3% to 0.8%: “experts in survey methodology say that the changes Dole cites are too small to be statistically significant in a study of this size” (Klaidman, 1996b, p. 37). The *New York Times*, in a September 17 article entitled, “Drug Policy Surges as a Campaign Issue,” stated: “Some Republican campaign charges seem outdated, if not misleading.... The statistics...suggest that the drug problem, while dire, is not the disaster that the campaign rhetoric implies” (Wren, 1996b). Other writers more directly questioned the validity of drug surveys. Walter Shapiro, in an editorial for *USA Today*, decried the, “phony precision of the government’s statistics,” and argued that the numbers from the survey are, “inherently dubious” because of false reporting by respondents (Shapiro, 1996).

One of the few articles published during the final months of the presidential campaign that explicitly portrayed drug use as a legitimate social problem was featured in the August 26 *Newsweek*. The cover story, entitled, “The Fear of Heroin is Shooting Up,” cited the 1995 Household survey, which showed that lifetime

heroin use among eighth-graders increased 92% from 1991 to 1995—from 1.2% to 2.3% (Leland, 1996).⁴ While acknowledging that these percentages are quite low, the author claimed that the use of heroin is very hard to track, and the extent of the problem is unknowable. “Since heroin is illegal, no one knows just how many people use it. But by rough government estimates, U.S. heroin consumption has doubled since the mid-’80s, to about 10 to 15 metric tons per year” (Leland, 1996, p. 55). The author quoted Wayne Wiebel, an epidemiologist, who asserted heroin use is, “going to unfold like the crack epidemic” (p. 56).

However, the same issue of *Newsweek* also featured an article entitled, “The Politics of Drugs: Back to War,” which stated that, “the war on drugs is back—even if it’s only election-year politics” (Klaidman, 1996a, p. 57). The author of this article argued that, while Clinton had been negligent about discouraging teenage drug use, the current rate of drug use was still relatively low as compared to the late-1970s: “while the trend is worrisome, no one should read it as a disaster in the making.” Contrary to the strong claims made in the cover story on heroin, the author asserted, “it is equally important to note that marijuana use remains the overwhelming drug choice of young people and that cocaine or heroin use is still relatively rare” (Klaidman, 1996a, p. 58). Much like the two front page articles from the August 21 *USA Today*, the *Newsweek* article countered the image of drugs as a threat to society by depicting the issue as, “only election year politics.”

DISCUSSION

Researchers examining the mid-1980s drug crisis have emphasized how the media and politicians combined to legitimate drug use as a social problem. According to Reinerman & Levine (1989a, p. 543), politicians and media workers collaborated in constructing a crisis in which, “drugs, especially crack, were destroying virtually every institution in American life—jobs, schools, families, national sovereignty, community, law enforcement, and business.” In contrast, we found little evidence of dramatized claims issuing from the media during the 1996 campaign about the epidemic proportions and dire consequences of increases in teenage drug use. Especially when attention to the drug issue peaked late in 1996, many media workers distanced themselves from the issue per se and critically examined politicians’ claims and counter-claims about the nature and origins of the drug crisis. While Republicans and Democrats were attributing responsibility for the drug problem to one another, journalists and drug experts discounted this “political finger-pointing” and offered more analytical, societal-level accounts for changing patterns of drug use. Moreover, in many stories, the “crisis” itself was interpreted and covered as a claims-making process—i.e., to paraphrase Spector & Kitsuse (1977, p. 75), “as the activities of [Dole and other politicians] making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions.” Clearly, there are some significant differences between

this case and the mid-1980s drug crisis that provide useful insights into the role of the media in the construction (and deconstruction) of social problems.

First, this case extends the evidence against the hypothesis that the, “greater the empirical support for its claims, the more success [a] claims-making group will have in legitimizing its claims” (Randall & Short, 1983). If anything, there appears to be an inverse relationship between media legitimization of drug crises and empirical documentation based on drug surveys. A number of previous studies observed that the epidemic of media coverage during the drug crisis of the mid-1980s coincided with a broad decline in survey estimates of teenage drug use (e.g., Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Jensen et al., 1991; Orcutt & Turner, 1993; Reinerman & Levine, 1989a, 1989b). As we have shown, an opposite set of circumstances was obtained during 1995 and 1996. Despite several years of steady increase in survey estimates of drug use and highly visible claims about those estimates by Dole and other influential parties, we found few examples of media “hype” or journalistic legitimization of this putative epidemic. These contrasting cases suggest that the viability of claims about drug problems has relatively little to do with the sheer weight of quantitative evidence that is marshaled in their support.

However, we would not rule out the possibility that qualitative attributes of crisis-claims during the 1980s and the 1996 campaign account, in part, for the differential response of the media. Claims about drug problems during the mid-1980s centered on a relatively dynamic and previously undefined threat—the rapid emergence and spread of crack cocaine. As Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994, p. 213) point out, “the drama of a new, previously almost unknown, and potentially destructive drug type on the drug abuse stage...helped generate the [drug] panic.” This image of a new and ominous condition meshed well with the media “problem frame” (Altheide, 1997), a dramatic form of news story-telling that emphasizes themes of danger, fear, and “crisis-and-emergency response” (Weaver, 1994; also see Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). In addition, the deaths of star athletes in 1986 from drug-related causes fueled the crisis by providing the media with “horror stories” that personalized the threat of “crack” and other drugs (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Orcutt & Turner, 1993). However, during the 1996 campaign, claims-making groups served up less suitable material for media framing as a drug crisis. In particular, claims about long-term trends in teenage use of marijuana lacked the qualities of urgency and danger that media workers emphasized in coverage of the “crack” problem. Even though the Dole campaign equated increasing drug use with the threat of nuclear Holocaust, neither they nor other claims-making groups were resourceful or bold enough to produce marijuana “horror stories” like those of the 1930s (Becker, 1963; Kaplan, 1970). Furthermore, the element of racial threat that was prominent in media and political reactions to the “crack” problem in the 1980s and in earlier drug crises

(Reinarman, 2006; Reinarman & Levine, 1989a) was rarely apparent in politicians' claims about teenage drug use in the mid-1990s. In fact, the 1996 presidential campaign was noteworthy for a lack of attention to racial issues by either party (Mayer, 2002). In sum, key symbolic elements of earlier drug crises were missing from the picture in the 1996 campaign.

Another important difference between the drug epidemic of the 1980s and teenage drug use in the 1990s revolves around the question of ownership—i.e., “the authority to name [a putative] condition a ‘problem’ and to suggest what might be done about it” (Gusfield, 1989, p. 433). *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, and other media organizations explicitly took credit for discovering the cocaine “epidemic” in the mid-1980s, framing it as a national crisis, and, consequently, placing the problem high on political agendas during the fall congressional elections (Kerr, 1986; Orcutt & Turner, 1993; Shoemaker, 1989). On the other hand, the media showed little initial interest in ownership of the drug problem in 1995, whereas Democrats and Republicans aggressively vied for control of the drug issue immediately after the September release of the 1994 Household Survey results. When new figures on teenage drug use appeared in subsequent months, the media largely remained in a bystander role while political contenders escalated their exchange of claims and counter-claims about opponents' mismanagement of the growing crisis. After Dole strengthened his proprietary stake in the drug problem in late summer of 1996, he invited journalists to become active partners in his enterprise in a speech before the Associated Press Managing Editors association: “I believe that some in the news media are missing an important story...the stories of countless personal tragedies that have become a social crisis.... It is my view that soaring teenage drug abuse and resurgence of a drug culture is one of the most important news stories of our times” (Harden, 1996). However, media workers not only declined Dole's offer, but many of them went on to question the fundamental legitimacy of the story he was selling.

The readiness of media organizations to relinquish ownership of the drug problem to Dole and other politicians may have been due to their own experience in “over-selling” the drug crisis of the 1980s. Media workers read and have memories, and many were undoubtedly aware of critical commentary on the media “feeding frenzy” and journalistic “hype” in coverage of drug problems less than a decade earlier. This history of journalistic excess not only served as a reflexive, cautionary tale against involvement in a new frenzy of claims-making activity about teenage drug use, but it also provided media workers with analytical tools and illustrative material for framing crisis-claims by Dole et al. as another case of “hype.” Similar to critical analyses of the earlier drug crisis by social scientists, journalists used longitudinal data and comparative techniques to question the validity and illuminate the methodic construction of politicians' claims about “soaring teenage drug abuse.”⁵

As is suggested by the title of a story in *Newsweek* (Klaidman, 1996a), “The Politics of Drugs: Back to War,” many media workers recognized parallels between the political environment of claims-making activity about teenage drug use during the 1996 campaign and earlier periods of political competition for ownership of drug problems. As Reinerman and Levine (1989b) point out, candidates for election during the fall of 1986 and again in the 1988 elections saw considerable symbolic value and political utility in the cocaine issue and competed intensely to define themselves as “tough” and their opponents as “soft” on drugs. Significantly, at the peak of this political competition in September 1986, some news stories and editorials began to frame politicians’ claims as campaign rhetoric and the crack crisis as media hype (e.g., Duffy, 1986; Safire, 1986; Thomas, 1986; also see Orcutt & Turner, 1993). By the time of the 1988 presidential campaign, competitive anti-drug claims were even more widely defined by the media and politicians alike as a transparent election-year strategy (Reinerman & Levine, 1989b). Thus, since the mid-1980s, election-year political competition for ownership of drug problems has been practiced and increasingly defined as a ritualized form of claims-making activity—as a periodic and culturally recognizable exchange of proprietary claims and counter-claims about putative crises. As our evidence shows, the Clinton administration made initial moves in this ritual in September and December of 1995 by sounding, “alarm bells about rising levels of substance abuse by American teenagers,” staking a claim as responsible managers of the putative problem, and preemptively defining the Republicans’ stance on the drug issue as “folly.” Over the following year, the competing parties played out a familiar sequence of escalating claims and counter-claims while the media knowingly stepped back as non-partisan observers and analyzed how the performers constructed their moves in this political ritual.

Thus, we conclude that media coverage of the teenage drug problem of 1995-96 differed from the media epidemic of the mid-1980s because of the legacy of that earlier episode of intense claims-making activity. Just as social constructionist theory has been informed and influenced by the history of drug crises, so too has journalistic practice.

NOTES

1. The database was initially queried for articles between July 1, 1995 and November 5, 1996 that included the terms “teenage” (and its variants) and/or “drugs.” After screening articles for relevance, they were arrayed for analysis on a timeline that included major events, such as the release of results from national drug surveys.
2. These figures were later adjusted, “to improve their comparability with estimates based on the new version of the NHSDA instruments” (SAMHSA, 1996a).
3. Neither *USA Today* nor the *Los Angeles Times* mentioned the survey results.

4. The article notes that, "eighth graders always show higher rates than high-schoolers, because heroin users tend to drop out of school" (Leland, 1996, p. 55).
5. Journalists also benefited directly from the expertise of researchers and policy analysts such as Mark Kleiman (Toner, 1996), David Musto (1996), and Ethan Nadelman (Wren, 1996b), who were knowledgeable about the social construction of the 1986 cocaine epidemic and earlier drug crises. These historically-informed scholars were quite different from the "drug experts" from law enforcement or drug treatment programs who were typically quoted in the media in 1986.

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