

BUSINESS INSIDER

Jeff Sessions 'appears intent on taking us back to the 1980s' and the 'War on Drugs'



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MAR. 16, 2017, 4:20 PM

- **Sessions wants to crack down on drug offenders**
- **Says violent crime is rising nationwide**
- **Experts say Sessions wants to take us back to '80s and '90s style punishments**
- **His comments about marijuana may be the most impactful**

Attorney General Jeff Sessions vowed on Wednesday to ramp up enforcement of drug crimes to combat what he says is a nationwide increase in violent crime, a move some experts say channels the "drug war" era of the 1980s.

Sessions delivered a speech to law enforcement officers in Richmond, Virginia, where he touted the effectiveness of Project Exile, a two-decade old program that enforced mandatory minimum sentences on felons caught carrying firearms.

"All of us who work in law enforcement want to keep people safe," Sessions said, [according to prepared remarks](#). "That is the heart of our jobs; it is what drives us every day. So we are all disturbed to learn that violent crime is on the rise in America, especially in our cities."

While Sessions admitted that crime rates in the US were at "historic" lows, he pointed out that, according to the FBI, incidents of [violent crime rose by more than 3%](#) between 2014 and 2015. Sessions tied this increase in violence to the "unprecedented epidemic" of heroin and opioid abuse.

"My fear is that this surge in violent crime is not a 'blip,' but the start of a dangerous new trend," Sessions said. "I worry that we risk losing the hard-won gains that have made America a safer and more prosperous place."

Sessions outlined three main ways to fight the "scourge" of drugs: criminal enforcement, treatment, and prevention. He highlighted prevention campaigns — including Nancy Reagan's "[Just say No](#)" efforts — as effective tools for bringing down rates of drug use.

The results of "Just Say No," and similar abstinence-oriented prevention campaigns like D.A.R.E, are mixed. [A 2007 study](#) from the University of Missouri, St. Louis found that the programs are mostly over-funded and ineffective.



Attorney General Jeff Sessions.

Associated Press/Susan Walsh

However, a 2011 study, [cited by Scientific American](#), from the University of Texas School of Public Health found that certain abstinence programs can be effective, provided they reinforce the lessons over a multi-year time period.

Taking it back to the '80's



A Drug Enforcement Administration officer patrols outside of a medical clinic in Little Rock, Ark., Wednesday, May 20, 2015.

AP Photo/Danny Johnston

Criminal justice and drug policy experts say that Sessions' focus on cracking down on drug offenders is an unwise strategy borne out of the "War on Drugs" era of the '80s and '90s.

Michael Collins, the deputy director of the Drug Policy Alliance, called Sessions' emphasis on sentencing and enforcement as a response to the opioid epidemic "deeply disconcerting."

"He appears intent on taking us back to the 1980's with his drug war rhetoric," Collins told Business Insider. "Locking up more people exacerbates the problem."

Marc Schindler, the executive director of the Justice Policy Institute, criticized Sessions support of Project Exile, which he called "political will" to remove black and brown people from communities. The program heavily penalizes gun offenders, according to Schindler, but does nothing to stem the flow of guns into cities and neighborhoods.

"The approach to addressing violence in our communities being put forth by AG Sessions is not based on research, and lacks the context that should be considered to inform sound policy decisions," Schindler told Business Insider in an email.

The research on Project Exile is far from clear. [FiveThirtyEight has the rundown](#): A 2003 study found that in Richmond, Virginia — where Sessions gave his speech — the city would have experienced a similar reduction in homicide rates with or without Exile.

But, a [2009 study](#) found evidence supporting Exile's efficacy. Among the sample group, cities with high levels of federal prosecution for federal gun crimes experienced a 13% decrease in violent crimes, compared to an 8% increase in cities that didn't, even when controlling for other factors like incarceration rates and poverty.

However, "none of this stuff is as neat as even the peer-reviewed publications put it," John Klofas, a professor of criminal justice at the Rochester Institute of Technology told FiveThirtyEight.

John Pfaff, a law professor at Fordham University in New York who recently [published a book on the causes of mass incarceration](#), told Business Insider in an email that Sessions is probably not trying to specifically revive the "War on Drugs," but rather looking to justify "harsh punitive responses to crime more broadly." Incarceration would be an easy sell politically for Sessions and the Trump Administration, even if its an inefficient way of controlling crime, he added.

"Sessions' insistence that the recent uptick in violent crime is not just a blip but the start of a longer trend (which, to be fair, could be the case — but also may not be so at all) seems to be part of a rhetorical push to make non-prison reforms riskier to adopt," Pfaff said.



A variety of medicinal marijuana buds in jars are pictured at Los Angeles Patients & Caregivers Group dispensary in West Hollywood.

Thomson Reuters

Sessions vs. marijuana

Sessions honed in on [his opposition to legalizing marijuana](#) on Wednesday, saying that he "realizes this may be unfashionable in a time of growing tolerance of drug use."

Pfaff suggested that Session's comment on marijuana may have "the biggest short-run impact."

Sessions railed against medical marijuana, and the notion that increasing access to the drug can be a tool to help counter opioid and heroin addiction. Research has shown that in states that have legalized medical marijuana, addiction and opioid overdose rates have dropped, reports [Business Insider Kevin Loria](#).

Though he's opposed to marijuana legalization, Sessions did tell reporters after his remarks that he may keep the Obama-era Cole Memo — which directs the Justice Department to place a low priority on prosecuting legal marijuana businesses that comply with state laws — though with some modifications, reports [MassRoots' Tom Angell](#).

Sessions indicated that the federal government may not have the ability to enforce federal marijuana laws in states that have legalized.

Mason Tvert, the communications director for the Marijuana Policy Project, told Business Insider in an email that Sessions' comments do not seem like a "call to shut down" licensed and regulated marijuana businesses.

"It sounds more like a call to go after unregulated marijuana producers and dealers who are operating in the illicit market," Tvert said.