

# Drugs in America: Trafficking, Policy, & Sentencing

## Symposium Background and Overview

The United States has experienced a sharp increase in its prison population in the past thirty years. With only 5 percent of the world's reported population, the United States has 25 percent of the world's prison population. There are 2.3 million Americans in federal, state, and local prisons and jails, more than in any other country in the world. All told, more than 7 million Americans are under some form of correction supervision, including probation and parole.

In light of these astounding figures, during this past year, Senator Jim Webb has chaired two hearings before the Joint Economic Committee (JEC) to determine the causes of these alarming trends and the resulting impact on American society.

It is evident from those hearings that U.S. drug policy has a tremendous influence on the criminal justice system. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 created mandatory minimum sentences for the possession of drugs. Since mandatory sentencing guidelines were introduced in 1986, more than 100,000 people have received mandatory five-year sentences. Unfortunately, many arrests have primarily affected low-level drug dealers and users rather than drug kingpins, and we are still witnessing the devastating impacts on many American communities.

Our current combination of interdiction, enforcement, diversion, treatment, and prevention is not working the way we need it to. And, despite the ease with which drugs can be obtained, the decreasing price of some drugs, the number of people in prison, and violence at the border, there has been little effort to take a comprehensive look at the relationship between the many interlocking pieces of drug policy.

Today's symposium, hosted by Senator Jim Webb and the George Mason University Administration of Justice Department, will serve to re-examine our responses to the health effects, economic and social impact, violence, and crime associated with illegal drug use. The central challenge for today's panelists is to help us, and all Americans, to understand the full dynamics of this problem, and to assist in pointing the way toward effective solutions.