

# DRUG ENFORCEMENT AND POLICY CENTER

## **ISSUE 1: EXPERT COMMENTARIES**

### **Issue 1: Addressing Past Injustices and Harms to Communities of Color**

**Dr. Marcus Board Jr., Ph.D.**

Whether it passes or fails, Ohio Issue 1 will have a heavy impact on Ohioans in general and Black Ohioans specifically. As a political scientist studying political behavior, public opinion, and histories of oppression, the war on drugs – at both the federal level and in the state of Ohio – is among the more obvious ways that the state reinforces racial and gender forms of domination. The issue of mass incarceration is no longer considered a conspiracy theory or speculative hyperbole. All evidence points to the use of the criminal justice system – from policing, to probation, to bail, to courts, to lawyers, to prisons – as a means to create jobs. Moreover, targeting of communities of color means these communities won't have access to these jobs. Furthermore, targeting more vulnerable community members means they won't have access to jobs, and won't have the means to defend themselves against this form of domination.

With the majority of my extended family being born and raised in Ohio, I know a considerable amount about how race and employment has had a significant impact on drug addiction over the past thirty or so years. What we know now is that the current opioid epidemic is affecting white communities more than ever – and people with addiction, of course, deserve support and care. And while we may not yet be able to recover all that has been lost in the war on drugs, this is a great first step in that direction.

The specifics of Issue 1 include key changes to 1) drug possession charges; 2) non-violent probation violations; 3) rehabilitation; 4) reinvestment. Rather than speaking to the specific language of the initiative, I'll focus instead on its implications. These changes signal very important changes to the way the criminal justice process works, but also represents a fundamental shift in the ways that the government will interact with non-white communities. We know that these practices have dispossessed and disenfranchised people of color, but fewer recognize the ways that these oppressive practices have reinforced an institutionalized mindset across communities. This mindset views the world through a lens of domination and control. Institutionalization doesn't push forward creativity, individuality, or hope; instead, people are trained to fall in line, to abandon those in need, and to encourage conformity rather than conviction. Ohio Issue 1 gives communities a chance to reclaim these losses, and do so – like every other American community has had – with the expressed support of its government and elected officials. At least, this is how it should work.

However, again, the issue of mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex are no longer considered conspiracy theories or speculative hyperbole. So we must ask: why is this a ballot initiative, rather than legislation being supported by elected officials? What that tells us is that even with popular support, elected officials will have to be pushed to enforce these statutes. Consider the history of school desegregation as an example. *Brown vs. the Board of Education* was settled by the Supreme Court of the United States of America in 1954. My parents were still integrating their high schools in Ohio in the late 1970s and 1980s. And while nobody has enough time or money to spend advocating for things that elected officials are being paid very well to do, we should take that realization as a testament to the need for political reform that increases representation for all groups – but particularly those who are more vulnerable.

*Marcus Board Jr., Ph.D., is an assistant professor of African American Studies at Georgetown University. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in the Department of Political Science, where he also earned an MA in 2011, and has a second MA in Social Sciences.*