

# Why we ignore thousands of killings in the Philippines: The victims were drug users

The many ways we dehumanize people with addiction.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/10/06/why-we-ignore-thousands-of-killings-in-the-philippines-the-victims-were-drug-users/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.a9e1ff15421c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/10/06/why-we-ignore-thousands-of-killings-in-the-philippines-the-victims-were-drug-users/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.a9e1ff15421c)

By **Maia Szalavitz** October 6, 2016

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Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte recently admitted what has been plain since he took office and the killings started: He’s committing genocide. “Hitler massacred 3 million Jews,” he said. (The actual number is 6 million). “Now ... there’s 3 million drug addicts ... I’d be happy to slaughter them,” to “finish the problem of my country and save the next generation from perdition.”

Nearly [3,000 people](#) have already been gunned down, either by police or vigilante death squads, encouraged by Duterte, who has promised immunity. About 600,000 have also [turned themselves in](#), many now caged in [hideously crowded prisons](#) that already look like concentration camps.

But most of the world has remained silent. President Obama has not publicly condemned these actions, and the United States actually [pledged](#) \$32 million in aid to support Philippine law enforcement — and not only for the usual political reasons. Instead, this genocide is being ignored because, for too long, the

dehumanization of people who use drugs and calls for their death have been an acceptable part of the “drug war.”

Indeed, while human rights organizations have condemned Duterte, many felt the need to explicitly reject any connection between Duterte’s victims and Hitler’s. “The comparison of drug users and dealers to Holocaust victims is inappropriate and deeply offensive,” Todd Gutnick, the communications director for the Anti-Defamation League, [told](#) Reuters.

I disagree. I am both a child of a Holocaust survivor and a person who has struggled with addiction. I do not believe anyone deserves to be murdered either for their religion or because they have a substance that governments have declared illegal coursing through their veins. Until we recognize that killing people for taking drugs we dislike is no more acceptable than murdering them for blasphemy, practicing the wrong religion or witchcraft, we will not have decent — let alone effective — drug policy.

The reasons become clear when the history of world drug policy is understood. The United States has long been a shameful leader in this area. In the New York Times, for example, a 1914 article written by a doctor was headlined “[Negro Cocaine Fiends Are a New Southern Menace](#).” It claimed that cocaine made black people more resistant to bullets and turned them into better marksmen, producing a “race menace.” That is the kind of logic that supported the first state laws prohibiting the drug — and then federal prohibition.

In fact, our drug laws — with the exception of those involved in the creation of the Food and Drug Administration — were passed on the [basis](#) of racist myths related to fears about minority groups, not accurate health data. The first anti-opium laws were pushed with stories of police finding “white women and Chinamen side by side under the effects of the drug — a humiliating sight to anyone who has anything left of manhood,” according to a source cited in one respected history.

Alcohol prohibition was [heavily favored](#) by the Ku Klux Klan — and also linked to fears about German and Irish immigrant drinkers. Marijuana, according to Harry Anslinger, the man who promoted and secured its prohibition, needed to be stopped [because](#) it “makes darkies think they’re as good as white men.”

Drug criminalization has never been about protecting people from the ill effects of substances — there is no medical reason as to why marijuana is illegal while tobacco is legal. There is only this racist history. Instead, the purpose is to suppress feared minorities. Or as

Nixon aide John Ehrlichman [told](#) reporter Dan Baum in a 1992 interview, “By getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them. ... Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.”

And unfortunately, the dehumanization of drug users is not just a thing of the distant past. In the 1980s and '90s, crack-cocaine users were routinely described as “fiends” — and police described routing users and dealers as a way to “[sanitize](#)” a community. In 1990, Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates, the founder of the DARE anti-drug program, [said](#) that users should be “taken out and shot.” Crack was said to “destroy the core of what it is to be human.”

Even today, language used in drug stories itself is stigmatizing and dehumanizing, rarely using the “[person first](#)” wording that is now typically used to describe people with other psychiatric disorders and often describing formerly addicted people as “clean,” which implies that active users are “dirty.” Indeed, just this summer, the New York Times’s public editor had to mediate a controversy over an [article](#) about the overdose antidote naloxone, which originally bore a headline that implied that saving the lives of people with opioid addictions had negative consequences — a headline that is hard to imagine regarding any other group of people.

Duterte’s genocide is the logical conclusion of the brutal rhetoric of the drug war. And history shows that such dehumanization doesn’t stop crime or drug use — it simply enables it.

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