

# ‘Crack’: Immigration, national security, and the war on drugs in the USA

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates how the crack cocaine epidemic and the legislation it provoked reshaped American governance, particularly at the intersection of criminal justice, immigration policy, and national security. It argues that the Anti-Drug Abuse Acts of 1986 and 1988 did more than escalate punitive drug enforcement; they reimagined the relationship between citizenship and the state. Drawing on a rich archive of congressional records, federal reports, and media accounts, the article shows how policymakers constructed racialized narratives around ‘criminal aliens’—especially Jamaican and Dominican traffickers—to justify aggressive policing, surveillance, and deportation. These figures served as political instruments, collapsing the boundaries between domestic crime and foreign threat. By embedding immigration enforcement within drug interdiction efforts and domestic policing, lawmakers institutionalized a legal framework that yoked criminal and immigration systems together with American foreign policy.

## INTRODUCTION

In December 1989, a federal judge sentenced Delroy ‘Uzi’ Edwards—a Jamaican-born ‘kingpin’ based in Brooklyn—to seven consecutive life terms, plus an additional 15 years and a \$1 million fine. The allegations read like a dossier of horror: six murders, 17 assaults, and kidnapping. He acquired his ignominious moniker by sporting a trench coat with a machine gun tucked underneath and rolling through the neighbourhood in a Mercedes. Edwards personally executed two of his dealers for stealing. In another case, he ordered the torture of a 17-year-old boy accused of theft. Beaten with bats, doused in boiling water, chained to the ceiling of a crack house, and left overnight, the boy’s body turned up on the street, stuffed in garbage bags. The *New York Times* dubbed Edwards ‘one of the pioneers of the crack trade’ in Bedford–Stuyvesant and ‘one of the most feared crack organization enforcers in the nation’. Prosecutors called him a ‘coldhearted, brutal, vicious killer’. Urging the judge to rule

out any chance of parole, one prosecutor proclaimed, 'No country deserves the risk of his ever being on the streets'.

But Edwards did not operate alone. He commanded what authorities nicknamed a 'Jamaican posse'. By the late 1980s, federal officials had begun to regard such groups as a matter of national urgency, with implications for internal security and public order. Robert Stutman, head of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)'s New York office, warned that Jamaican posses were 'wreaking havoc across the nation'. 'They are constantly seeking out new weapons or tactics', he claimed. 'More and more, especially the Jamaicans, are starting to shoot back at police'. Testifying for the government, Edwards's second-in-command confirmed the purported scale and coordination of their enterprise. The organization—roughly 50 members, most of them Jamaican nationals—trafficked in crack, cocaine, and marijuana throughout Brooklyn neighbourhoods like Bedford–Stuyvesant, Crown Heights, and Flatbush, extending their reach into Washington, Baltimore, and Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup>

Edwards and his posse stood out for their ruthlessness and the wreckage they left behind, but they were outliers. Their actions were neither representative of most Jamaican immigrants nor reflective of the more complicated realities facing co-ethnics or citizens entangled in the US drug trade. Take the case of Trevor Ellis. According to his attorney, Ellis arrived in the United States in 1981, a young man propelled by the hope of a better life. He graduated from high school and had begun to carve out a modicum of stability. But to his chagrin, an addiction to crack cocaine festered, a vulnerability more seasoned dealers quickly exploited. On 13 August 1987, the 25-year-old Jamaican national was indicted alongside two others on federal drug offences. Ellis was accused of possession with intent to distribute crack. The indictment followed a 13 July police raid on an apartment in Washington, DC, triggered by neighbourhood complaints about suspected drug activity. Officers found Ellis at the scene, along with a significant quantity of crack cocaine. Ellis ultimately pleaded guilty to a single count of conspiracy. He admitted to participating in drug sales but insisted he 'had no alternative'. Though he acknowledged associating with dealers, Ellis maintained he had 'never previously sold drugs'. In court, he expressed deep remorse and vowed that he would 'never become involved in such a situation again'. His arrest, he said, had been a turning point. He ruminated on drug use as 'a disease' and dismissed the substances as 'no good for anybody'.

Despite Ellis's visible remorse, the supervising probation officer offered no quarter in the pre-sentence report:

Drug use in this community has reached epidemic proportions. Persons outside this area, as well as those residing here, must be given the message that the distribution of illegal drugs will not be tolerated. Until such time as this defendant, and others who may become involved in distribution, come to accept this, there is little hope of solving this serious social problem.

Ellis's attorney appealed for mercy. 'Since this incident represented his first arrest', defence counsel argued, 'we ask the Court not to make an example of him merely because he is identified as a "New York Jamaican"'. Instead, he urged the court to consider supervised probation with drug counselling, noting 'a substantial likelihood of deportation once

<sup>1</sup> Leonard Buder, 'A Drug Dealer Gets a Sentence of 7 Life Terms' *New York Times* (2 December 1989); Vera Haller, 'Arrests Break Up Violent Crack Ring' *Associated Press* (11 March 1988); Leonard Buder, 'Jury Convicts Man as Chief of Drug Ring' *New York Times* (26 July 1989); Roy H Campbell, 'From Kingston to Crack' *Philadelphia Inquirer* (20 August 1989).

the U.S. and New York authorities complete supervision of him'. He was sentenced to no more than five years in prison. It is unclear whether he was ever deported.<sup>2</sup>

The contrasting stories of Delroy (Uzi) Edwards and Trevor Ellis expose some of the more overlooked, yet deeply intertwined, dimensions of the American 'war on drugs'. On one side stand Edwards and the Jamaican 'posses'—positioned as a foreign, hyper-violent plague imperilling the moral and social fabric of American life. On the other is Ellis, a Jamaican immigrant whose path into the drug economy mirrors that of many Americans, caught in the throes of addiction, exploitation, and desperation: more victim than villain. Edwards fuelled a pernicious narrative that not only ignited a wave of hysteria but also legitimized draconian drug control laws, ones that ensnared people like Ellis and countless others, immigrant and native-born alike.

By tracing the development of the Anti-Drug Abuse Acts of 1986 and 1988, we uncover how domestic narcotics enforcement became enmeshed in a racialized security regime—one that coalesced immigration control, international interdiction, and domestic policing. This history revises conventional narratives which characterize the 'war on drugs' solely as an assault on urban Black communities carried out to shield white middle-class youth or to recalibrate the American racial order.<sup>3</sup> While inner-city neighbourhoods unquestionably suffered the most indelible scars, this punitive campaign also targeted immigrant populations—especially Jamaicans and Dominicans—under the guise of protecting both Black communities and white suburbia. By portraying these groups as uniquely dangerous, policymakers leveraged anxieties about racialized foreignness to justify heavy-handed enforcement. This construction also redirected attention away from the deeper, demand-side factors and the structural forces that fuelled them. Instead, policymakers pursued the illusion of an external scourge—locating the problem in foreign cartels and migrant bodies—thereby legitimizing carceral responses at home, hardening immigration enforcement, and rationalizing US intervention across Latin America and the Caribbean.

Employing a 'critical security lens', we build on existing scholarship by examining how policymakers paired migration and drugs to advance political interests both domestically and internationally. As political scientist Jean-Pierre Murray states, this framework 'challenges the assumption that security threats are objective, asserting instead that they are socially constructed and reinforced through corresponding security responses'. He further explains that 'migration becomes a security problem' only when it is 'dramatically framed as threatening the host community', prompting 'state agencies and security/migration professionals to respond to it accordingly'.<sup>4</sup> Using this lens, we show how policymakers deployed a domestic social problem—'crack'—to justify a security agenda that ultimately reoriented US immigration policy. They soldered 'law and order' and citizenship, rendering certain migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean emblems of bloodshed and ruin—targets not just of suspicion, but of state power and domestic policing.

First, we trace the development of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986. We begin by inspecting congressional hearings, especially law enforcement testimony, which assessed crack not only as a risk to public safety but also to national sovereignty. Officials concocted an association between urban crime and migration, laying the ideological foundation for the convergence of drug laws and immigration enforcement. We then turn to the Reagan administration—most notably Attorney General Edwin Meese III—whose rhetoric and policy proposals

<sup>2</sup> US District Court for the District of Columbia, *Presentence Report for Trevor Anthony Ellis*. Docket no 87-0337-02, 21 November 1988. Box 135, Folder 1, Gerhard Alden Gesell Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Tonry, *Punishing Race: A Continuing American Dilemma* (OUP, New York 2012); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New Press, New York 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Pierre Murray, 'Contesting the Securitization of Migration: NGOs, IGOs, and the Security Backlash' (2024) 68 ISQ 2.

pushed Congress to craft legislation which elevated immigration enforcement as a central component of the drug war. Next, we analyse how assumptions about immigrant criminality imbued the text of the final bill.

Second, we turn to the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, which did not simply build on the foundations of the 1986 law—it entrenched its rationale and expanded its scope, welding drug interdiction, immigration enforcement, and national security into a single, robust, operational regime. We begin by tracing how opprobrious depictions of immigrants, particularly Jamaicans and Dominicans, as vicious foes to both the nation and Black urban communities moulded the collective mindset of lawmakers and law enforcement. We then examine how the media absorbed and exaggerated these narratives, cementing their legitimacy and broadening their reach. We then show how these ideas were codified in the 1988 Act. We conclude by arguing that the war on crack laid the foundation for both the modern prison boom and a punitive immigration system.

Although focused on the development of congressional drug control legislation in the mid- to late 1980s, this history bears directly on contemporary ‘crimmigration’ enforcement by revealing its roots in a governance strategy forged during the crack era. The fusion of drug interdiction, racialized policing, and immigration control institutionalized in the Anti-Drug Abuse Acts anticipated today’s reliance on criminal convictions—especially low-level drug offences—as triggers for detention and deportation. In this sense, the modern crimmigration regime represents the durable afterlife of crack-era drug policy. At a moment of renewed border militarization, expanding interior enforcement, and persistent racial disparities in policing, recovering these origins is essential to understanding why drug law continues to function as a central mechanism of migration control and American security strategy.

## BACKGROUND AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This article bridges two often disconnected bodies of scholarship on drug policy: one that scrutinizes the foreign policy implications of American anti-drug strategies and another that interrogates the invidious origins of mass incarceration in the United States. Regarding the former, Historian Katherine Frydl observes that, while drug enforcement in the 1950s primarily served to indict external enemies, by the 1960s, it had evolved into a tool for shaping alliances, reflecting the evolution of US foreign policy amid economic decline and military setbacks. According to Frydl and others, the ‘war on drugs’ emerged as a strategic mechanism for managing relations with the developing world, transforming drug policy from a discrete domestic concern into a dynamic instrument for advancing American geopolitical interests.<sup>5</sup>

Substantial scholarship has illuminated the role of the American ‘war on drugs’ in producing and perpetuating racial inequality. Matthew Lassiter, for example, provides a rich historical analysis of the narcotics scare from the 1950s to the 1980s, tracing how drug policy evolved to shield white middle-class youth from the repercussions of their drug use. Initially, the government punished both users and dealers of heroin and marijuana. But as marijuana use spread among white, middle- and upper-class youth, it intensified crackdowns on dealers while granting users greater leniency. Lassiter shows how racialized language seeped into social and political discourse, with white users repeatedly described as the brood of ‘good families’, a ‘good environment’, and as ‘law-abiding citizens’. Their drug use became a

<sup>5</sup> Alfred W McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (Lawrence Hill Books, Chicago 2003); Ko-lin Chin, *The Golden Triangle: Inside Southeast Asia’s Drug Trade* (Cornell UP, Ithaca, NY 2009); Aileen Teague, ‘The United States, Mexico, and the Mutual Securitization of Drug Enforcement, 1969–1985’ (2019) 43 *Diplomatic History* 785–812; Ryan Gingeras, *Heroin, Organized Crime, and the Making of Modern Turkey* (OUP, New York 2014).

temporary misstep—not a crime but a forgivable lapse. Meanwhile, the media painted Black and brown bodies as the real culprits: rapacious pushers corrupting innocent white youth.<sup>6</sup>

Scholars examining drug policy formation in the 1980s reached similar conclusions, especially in tracing how race animated the political narrative around ‘crack’. Doris Marie Provine’s study of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 shows how policymakers contrived an emergency, pursued a punitive federal response, and generated racially disparate outcomes—all according to the imperatives of a ‘racialized social system’. While acknowledging that ‘the public record reveals no crude racial stereotypes or slurs’ and that ‘the effort was bipartisan and the legislation passed by wide margins’, she argues that ‘suspicions linger’ due to the law’s devastating impact on Black communities. Recognizing the difficulty of proving legislative intent, she concedes that ‘an inquiry into the emotional state of a legislative body is bound to be risky and filled with imprecision’. Yet, drawing mainly on speeches and articles entered into the *Congressional Record*, she discerns ‘a shared frame of mind’ which inflated ‘the dangers of crack in the strongest terms’ while fully recognizing the law’s disproportionate impact on African Americans.<sup>7</sup>

Building on and refining existing accounts of post-war American crime policy and applying a critical security lens, we foreground the figure of the migrant to complicate prevailing interpretations of the ‘othering’ discourse at the heart of the drug war. In doing so, we extend a historical insight long recognized by scholars: that drug policy has often been intertwined with anxieties about immigration. Historians have shown, for example, that opium use in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became closely associated with Chinese immigration, fuelling racial fears and strengthening demands to exclude Chinese immigrants from American civic life.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, our analysis builds on the work of crimmigration scholars who demonstrate how drug enforcement operates as a central mechanism through which racialized policing is translated into immigration punishment.<sup>9</sup> Kevin R. Johnson demonstrates that the war on drugs (legitimized by Supreme Court doctrines tolerating race-conscious policing) produces racially skewed criminal contact that immigration law then amplifies by prioritizing the removal of so-called criminal aliens. Framed as a matter of public safety, this convergence renders deportations politically palatable to the public.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Yates, Collins, and Chin show that, in the context of the war on drugs, immigration authorities and courts dramatically expanded the definition of ‘drug trafficking’ by treating low-level state drug offences as aggravated felonies, thereby triggering mandatory deportation. This doctrinal expansion, they argue, imposed severe collateral consequences on non-citizens and disproportionately encumbered already marginalized populations.<sup>11</sup>

By widening the analytical aperture to include migrants and foreign policy in the story of the mid- to late-1980s war on drugs, we uncover a more complex set of origins for both drug control strategy and immigration policy. Reading familiar sources alongside previously untapped archival materials reveals how concerns about migration and crime shaped congressional

<sup>6</sup> Matthew D Lassiter, ‘Impossible Criminals: The Suburban Imperatives of America’s War on Drugs’ (2015) 102 *Journal of American History* 126–40.

<sup>7</sup> Doris Marie Provine, *Unequal Under Law: Race in the War on Drugs* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Diana L Ahmad, *The Opium Debate and Chinese Exclusion Laws in the Nineteenth-Century American West* (University of Nevada Press, Reno 2007); David T Courtwright, *Dark Paradise: A History of Opiate Addiction in America* (Harvard UP, Cambridge, MA 2009).

<sup>9</sup> David Brotherton and Luis Barrios, *Banished to the Homeland: Dominican Deportees and Their Stories of Exile* (Columbia UP, New York 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Kevin R Johnson, ‘Doubling Down on Racial Discrimination: The Racially Disparate Impacts of Crime-Based Removals’ (2016) 66 *Case W Res L Rev* 993.

<sup>11</sup> Jeff Yates and others, ‘A War on Drugs or a War on Immigrants? Expanding the Definition of “Drug Trafficking” in Determining Aggravated Felon Status for Noncitizens’ (2005) 64 *Mar L Rev* 875.

thinking in ways that have been largely overlooked. While the *Congressional Record* may lack the ‘crude racial stereotypes’ typically associated with what Khalil Gibran Muhammad termed the ‘condemnation of blackness’, it—and other official sources and private papers—is saturated with calumnious caricatures of immigrant gangs and traffickers: baleful forces poised to dupe and spoil the children of white, middle-class America and sagacious predators set to pillage poor and working-class Black communities. We demonstrate how this xenophobia collapsed distinctions between immigration control, urban policing, and national defence.

This article draws on recent scholarship that foregrounds the real harm that crack inflicted on Black urban communities.<sup>12</sup> The impending catastrophe was genuine: destructive, urgent, and resistant to easy solutions, especially those aimed at structural origins. In the absence of a viable remedy, lawmakers sought out scapegoats. It is no coincidence that 1986 also saw the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which extended a pathway to citizenship for some undocumented immigrants.<sup>13</sup> That same year, public officials rhetorically juxtaposed drugs and immigration as intertwined hazards that demanded coordinated action. We argue that this moment marked a turning point: policymakers and law enforcement reimagined immigrant drug dealers as foreign invaders, and they retooled narcotics enforcement into a mechanism for managing migration and policing foreign-born populations under the guise of national security. This retooling emerged as a structurally produced outcome of the war on drugs, generated by racialized enforcement practices and punitive legal frameworks rather than by a demonstrable rise in immigrant criminality. Tanya Golash-Boza, for example, demonstrates the downstream effects of this structure, showing that punitive drug laws and hyper-policing in Black neighbourhoods funnel Black immigrant men into deportation regardless of their social incorporation.<sup>14</sup>

To excavate the racial ideologies nestled within these strategies, we draw on a wide array of sources. These include newspaper accounts, government reports, and pertinent documents from federal agencies such as the DEA, Department of Justice, and Congressional Research Service. We analyse documents entered into the *Congressional Record* and plumb testimony from major hearings. Our research also draws on extensive archival material—from the Reagan Library and the Edwin Meese papers at the Hoover Institution to records of the House Judiciary Committee and the Select Committee on Narcotics at the National Archives. Additionally, we comb the personal papers of more than 20 members of Congress, including party leaders and key legislators in this policy arena.

This analysis carries an East Coast emphasis, not by design but because the policymakers who shaped the text and enforcement priorities of the 1986 and 1988 bills were themselves concentrated in that region. As the prosecution of Delroy ‘Uzi’ Edwards and the case of Trevor Ellis illustrate, lawmakers and law enforcement officials repeatedly highlighted Jamaican traffickers—and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Dominican networks—in their discussions of crack distribution. This emphasis reflected both a perceived connection between these groups and the emerging crack trade and the outsized role that politicians of the New York City area played in advancing the legislation.

Our focus on these cases should not be read as suggesting that these migrant populations were uniquely central to the broader linkage of national security, anti-drug strategies, and

<sup>12</sup> David Farber, *Crack: Rock Cocaine, Street Capitalism, and the Decade of Greed* (CUP, New York 2019); James Forman Jr, *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2017); Donovan X Ramsey, *When Crack Was King: A People’s History of a Misunderstood Era* (Random House, New York 2024).

<sup>13</sup> Immigration Reform reply form letter. Circa 1986. Box 95, Folder 27. Lee H Hamilton Congressional Papers, Modern Political Papers Collection, Indiana University Libraries, Bloomington, IN.

<sup>14</sup> Tanya Golash-Boza, ‘Structural Racism, Criminalization, and Pathways to Deportation for Dominican and Jamaican Men in the United States’ (2017) 44 *Social Justice* 137–62.

immigration policy. Many of the sources cited here connect other drugs and trafficking networks to different immigrant groups, particularly those from Latin America. In South Florida and along the Southwest border, local activists, policymakers, and officials likewise framed drug enforcement through the lens of migration, associating marijuana, cocaine, and other narcotics flows with particular Latin American populations.<sup>15</sup> These regional narratives formed part of the broader cultural and political context in which the drug control legislation of 1986 and 1988 emerged.

It is beyond the scope of this article to catalogue every regional variation of xenophobic discourse operating in this moment. More importantly, our argument does not hinge on which immigrant groups were invoked in particular locales. Rather, we show how the institutional capacities, legal tools, and enforcement logics forged during the Northeast crack crisis were subsequently generalized and redeployed. The urban policing, immigration enforcement, and national security apparatus constructed in response to the perceived threat of Caribbean drug traffickers would later expand to encompass a far wider range of immigrant populations. In this sense, the regional particularities of the 1980s helped produce and validate a national narrative and enforcement apparatus that still shapes debates over drugs, crime, migration, and national security—from the fixation on Jamaican traffickers in the 1980s to contemporary anxieties surrounding groups like MS-13 and even the early-2026 US military operations in Venezuela.

### ANTI-DRUG ABUSE ACT OF 1986

For many in urban neighbourhoods, the devastation wrought by crack transcended media invention or political fabrication. It was a harsh, lived experience. One Bronx resident recalled, ‘Crack hit ... the communities of Harlem, South Bronx, South Jamaica, Bed-Stuy, [Brownsville] like no other drug before’.<sup>16</sup> A mother from Brooklyn testified that her daughter, who began using in 1985, had gone from ‘a nice lovely person to a monster’. A welder put it plainly: ‘During the time of my druggin’, I was unable to perform my job. I had like a \$400 a day habit for crack.’<sup>17</sup> Azie Faison, a prominent Harlem dealer, lamented the moment cocaine’s ‘less expensive cousin, crack, took over’, bringing with it ‘a flood of drug-related crime and violence’.<sup>18</sup> One long-time Harlem resident meditated on the speed and scale of the havoc:

The problem was that it happened so fast. Crack was something else ... what it did to the community, to the family. People couldn’t trust their own kids. It was like prison. Nobody wanted to let their children leave the house because you never knew what was gonna be waiting outside.

An elderly woman was even more direct: ‘Crack was the worst. Those that could get [out], did ... Crackheads would steal everything. You wouldn’t even go outside when it got

<sup>15</sup> Jill Jonnes, *Hep-Cats, Narcs, and Pipe Dreams: A History of America’s Romance with Illegal Drugs* (Scribner, New York 1996); Matthew D Lassiter, *The Suburban Crisis: White America and the War on Drugs* (Princeton UP, Princeton, NJ 2023).

<sup>16</sup> Bronx African American History Project, *Interview with Willie Thomas*. Interview by Mark Naison and others, 9 March 2018. Bronx African American History Project Oral Histories, Fordham University.

<sup>17</sup> New York State Senate, *In the Matter of a Public Hearing on the Capacity of New York City to Deal with a Spreading ‘Crack’ Epidemic: Room 2400, 270 Broadway, New York, September 29, 1988, 10:00 a.m.* Albany, NY: Investigation, Taxation and Government Operations Committee: Baron Data Systems, 1988.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Bruce D Johnson and others, *Drug Abuse in the Inner City: Impact on Hard-Drug Users and the Community* (Narcotic and Drug Research, New York 1989) 8.

dark ... Seemed like every other person, or their children, or somebody they know was on crack'.<sup>19</sup>

An early 1986 field report on drug activity in US Representative Charles Rangel's Harlem district, authored by Ronald LeGrand, counsel to the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, affirmed the dismay. LeGrand, a former DEA officer and no stranger to urban drug markets, made clear just how brazen the trade had become:

I must say that I have never seen such unrestrained street level drug trafficking. In every neighborhood, I was approached by numerous dealers and offered 'smoke', 'blow', and 'crack'. This occurred regardless of how I was dressed and with clear disregard for the possibility that I might be law enforcement.

His account of a single evening in Harlem underscored the point:

During the evening of February 19th, as I walked a distance of two (2) blocks from the Harlem State Office Building, I received five (5) offers of 'crack' and another five (5) or six (6) offers of 'smoke', each offer coming from a different individual who I believe witnessed me declining an earlier offer. The sidewalks have become an obstacle course, particularly during the after-work hours ... The same is true of the side streets which I found impossible to drive through without being approached with similar offers.

The situation, he noted, was demoralizing. Based on one meeting with residents, LeGrand wrote:

The persons in attendance at this meeting came to share with you their experiences with drug trafficking in their respective buildings. They have been dealing with this problem for a very long time and they are feeling quite frustrated, angry, desperate, fearful, bewildered, and at times abandoned by the police, the courts, and their elected officials. Yet they refuse to give up.<sup>20</sup>

Although the actual problem itself did not oblige elite invention and media construction, the solution certainly did. The death of college basketball star Len Bias elevated crack from an urban public health and safety challenge to a full-blown national emergency.<sup>21</sup> That July, Rangel, chair of the House Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, circulated a 'dear colleague' letter invoking Chief Justice Warren Burger's claim that drug abuse posed 'a greater threat to our national security than communism'.<sup>22</sup> Speaking before the US Conference of Mayors, Rangel drew a blunt equivalence: 'I see no distinction between a terrorist bomb that kills Americans in Athens, Greece or Rome, Italy and a vial of crack that destroys the mind of an American child in Athens, Georgia or Rome, New York'.<sup>23</sup> By early

<sup>19</sup> Beverly Xaviera and Mindy Thompson Fullilove, 'Crack Cocaine and Harlem's Health' in Manning Marable (ed), *Dispatches from the Ebony Tower: Intellectuals Confront the African American Experience* (Columbia UP, New York 2000) 121–37.

<sup>20</sup> Ronald LeGrand, memorandum to Charles B Rangel, 28 February 1986, 'Drug Trafficking in the 16th Congressional District' Box COM12, Folder 10, Charles B Rangel Papers, Archives & Special Collections, City College of New York.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph McDade, *Drug Abuse Form Letter*, Box 232, Folder 6, Joseph M McDade Papers, Special Collections, University of Scranton. Frank, Barney. Letter to Eileen Thayer, 11 June 1986. Barney Frank Papers. Claire T Carney Library Archives and Special Collections, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Charles B. Rangel to Congressional Colleagues, July 14, 1986. Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control. Box 16, Records of the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, Center for Legislative Archives, National Archives, Washington, DC.

<sup>23</sup> Charles B Rangel, *Statement of the Honorable Charles B Rangel, Chairman, Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, to the US Conference of Mayors*, Box 154, Folder 8, John Glenn Papers, Ohio State University.

September, GOP talking points affirmed what August polls had already made clear: drugs had ‘captured the public’s mind and heart’, topping the list of voter concerns. ‘House Republicans have heard that message’, the memo professed—and so had Democrats.<sup>24</sup> Even before the polling data landed, Speaker Tip O’Neill had sounded his own alarm, warning that drug abuse had ‘spread like wildfire’ and compromised ‘our domestic peace and security’.<sup>25</sup> In response, O’Neill mobilized every House committee with jurisdiction over drug policy to devise what would become pivotal federal anti-drug legislation—and a largely unnoticed act of immigration reform.<sup>26</sup>

Well before Len Bias’s death pushed crack cocaine into the national spotlight, residents and lawmakers were already viewing the drug trade as an immigrant-driven assault on public safety. At a December 1985 hearing before the House Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, a Manhattan Community Board representative painted a grim picture of Harlem, describing it as ‘under siege’—a neighbourhood caught in a ‘battle’ between residents and foreign drug traffickers. He pointed to 158th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue, where, he claimed, ‘Dominican-controlled cocaine and heroin trafficking has flourished over the past four years, in spite of [police] Commissioner Ward’s crack-down’. The threat, he insisted, was well known to locals: ‘Everyone in the neighborhood in which I live, a few blocks from 158th Street, knows that that is one block you do not go down’. He then turned his attention south, warning that just eight blocks away, ‘Jamaican-controlled marijuana trafficking has also ruled that block for the past few years’.<sup>27</sup> As crack began to ravage the Bronx, Black Bronx City Councilman Wendell Foster distributed ‘drug report forms’ to residents, allowing them to anonymously report suspected drug dealers. The responses highlighted ethnic differences: residents repeatedly identified ‘young Spanish people’, ‘Dominican people with Black people’, ‘Puerto Ricans’, and ‘Hispanic and Dominican’ individuals as the main sellers.<sup>28</sup>

More than a year before the Act’s passage, political leaders and law enforcement were already deploying the immigration system as an instrument in the ‘war on drugs’. In March 1985, Rangel wrote to the Commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) following a conversation with an NYPD captain overseeing Manhattan North Narcotics. The captain reported that his unit made roughly 350 drug-related arrests annually, ‘many of them from Latin America’, and suspected that a significant number were ‘illegals or had overstayed their visitor visa period’. The congressman asked whether their immigration status could be verified through INS records to expedite removal and urged the agency to take immediate action. ‘Narcotic violators who are illegally in this country’, he insisted, should be ‘promptly deported’.<sup>29</sup>

A report from counsel to the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control embellished this account, describing the crack trade in Rangel’s district as an international enterprise rooted in foreign actors. It identified a cluster of buildings in Harlem, stating that ‘drug dealers, mostly Colombians and Dominicans, have occupied this street and these buildings

<sup>24</sup> House Republican Research Committee, *Omnibus Anti-Drug Talking Points*, 8 September 1986. Box 93, Folder 18, Chalmers P Wylie Papers, Ohio Congressional Archives.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas P O’Neill, Jr, ‘Statement of Speaker Thomas P O’Neill, Jr’ 23 July 1986, Box 22, Folder ‘Drugs, 1986’, Frank McCloskey Congressional Papers, Indiana University Libraries, Bloomington, IN.

<sup>26</sup> Democratic Study Group, *Fact Sheet No 99-36: The Drug Abuse Bill*, 5 September 1986. Tim Wirth Papers, Box 971, Folder 7, University of Colorado Boulder Libraries, Special Collections, Archives, and Preservation.

<sup>27</sup> *Heroin and Cocaine Trafficking and the Relationship between Intravenous Drug Use and AIDS (New York) Hearing*. Hearing before the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, House of Representatives, 99th Cong, 1st sess, 26 November 1985 (US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 1986).

<sup>28</sup> ‘Drug Report Form’, circa 1986. Box 2, MS–Foster Collection, Bronx County Historical Society, Bronx, New York.

<sup>29</sup> Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, Letter to Commissioner Alan C Nelson, Immigration and Naturalization Service, 5 March 1985. Box 136, SCNAC Records.

for over 10 years'. One apartment, allegedly owned by a 'very wealthy' Dominican who was 'a very prominent drug dealer himself', was now controlled by another Dominican, 'a major dealer who controls the building and regulates the flow of drugs'. One constituent urged mobilizing INS to detain 'the "large" numbers of illegal aliens involved in criminal activity, particularly drug trafficking', rather than releasing them under the 'ridiculous and naive belief they would appear for deportation hearings'.<sup>30</sup>

By the summer of 1986, New York City officials were drawing a direct line between immigration and narcotics enforcement. In a pointed 31 July letter, Mayor Edward I. Koch blasted INS for failing to combat a dire predicament 'fueled by undocumented immigrants'. The city, he warned, was 'inundated with illegal narcotics', and despite the 'massive efforts of local authorities', there was 'no abatement in sight'. Koch charged that INS had 'abandoned its most important present function in New York City: detection and deportation of convicted drug offenders', and demanded a 'full-scale restructuring of priorities', declaring, 'It's up to you to act by arresting, detaining and deporting all convicted narcotics offenders'.<sup>31</sup> Around the same time, Rangel flagged New York as ground zero in the drug war. His committee's upcoming hearing, he explained, would examine 'narcotics trafficking organizations, youth gangs, and illegal aliens in New York City', with a focus on 'crime, violence, and other problems resulting from the widespread distribution of drugs, particularly "crack" by these groups'. Testifying before the committee, Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau echoed the alarm, describing a city 'literally being overwhelmed' by drugs and asserting that the trade was 'being fueled, in large part, by undocumented immigrants'. He accused INS of becoming a 'negligent bystander', failing to act against repeat offenders operating with near-total impunity.<sup>32</sup>

New York officials were hardly the only ones eliding drug enforcement and immigration control. At an April congressional hearing on drug trafficking in New Jersey, lawmakers fixated on 'illegal aliens'. Democratic Congressman Frank Guarini pressed a US Customs official for clarity on the immigration status of suspected traffickers, asking whether they were 'coming in mostly as aliens, becoming citizens, or are they coming in illegally through the Mexican border?'. He requested granular data: 'Can you tell by the arrests, and by the observations that have been made whether or not these are illegal aliens that are coming in, or green card holders, whether they're eligible for citizenship, dealing with this kind of substance?' Arthur Stiffel, Special Agent-in-Charge of the Newark US Customs Service, explained that many traffickers initially entered the country legally but overstayed their visas. He pointed to glaring gaps in immigration enforcement: 'We call them when we get one of these persons, and they come and they'll take them, and they have to give them an appointment to come back, which means he's never coming back'. Rangel amplified these fears. 'In New York', he asserted, 'we've got a lot of illegal Dominicans that have taken over from the illegal Colombians'.<sup>33</sup>

Dominicans were not the only group under scrutiny. East Orange Police Chief George J. Daher warned lawmakers about Rastafarians, 'a radical Jamaican group', engaged in 'bank robberies and drug selling to fund their radical endeavors'. According to Daher, the group

<sup>30</sup> Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, Memorandum, 'Drug Trafficking in the 16th Congressional District'. Box 136, SCNAC Records.

<sup>31</sup> Edward I Koch to Charles C Sava, 31 July 1986, Edwin Meese Papers, Box 119, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>32</sup> *Trafficking and Abuse of 'Crack' in New York City*: Hearing before the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, House of Representatives, 99th Cong, 2nd sess, 18 July 1986 (US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 1987).

<sup>33</sup> *Issues Relating to Drug Trafficking in the New Jersey Area: Hearing before the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, House of Representatives, Ninety-ninth Congress, Second Session, Friday, April 11, 1986* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 1987).

had ‘established several bases in East Orange’, turning the city into a key hub for their drug operations. Daher painted the Rastafarians as a highly organized, well-financed network with ‘an unlimited supply of drugs’ flowing through ‘Jamaica, West Indies, and New York City, particularly the Brooklyn area’. Their reach, he claimed, extended beyond marijuana, as their drug trade also included ‘cocaine and pills called HITS (Empirin with codeine), also in large or small quantities’. Intelligence from the East Orange Police Vice Squad supported his claims, tying the group to international narcotics pipelines.<sup>34</sup>

At a late August 1986 Town Hall on the crack epidemic in Tampa, Florida, Senator Lawton Chiles encountered familiar frustrations and representations. One county sheriff criticized INS for ‘bonding out illegal aliens caught with drugs’ and argued that local drug enforcement efforts were being ‘hampered in drug cases against illegal aliens by INS policies’. Tampa’s Chief of Police, Don Newberger, voiced similar frustrations, lamenting that a rising number of arrests were being undermined by the ‘leniency’ of Florida’s sentencing guidelines and the federal government’s immigration practices. The Lakeland Chief of Police added to the critique, noting that INS officials repeatedly told him they had ‘no money to deport illegal aliens’.<sup>35</sup>

As the 1986 immigration legislation advanced through the House, Attorney General Edwin Meese III made explicit what had long been bubbling beneath political discourse: the fusion of immigration control and drug enforcement into a singular national security project. In a late July 1986 letter to Speaker Thomas P. O’Neill outlining the administration’s drug enforcement priorities, Meese emphasized that the Department of Justice—including US Attorneys, the Bureau of Prisons, the US Marshals Service, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service—functioned collectively ‘as necessary parts of the criminal justice system as it is applied to the effort against drug trafficking’.<sup>36</sup> At a September 1986 press conference, Meese asserted, ‘The reality is that illegal immigration is contributing to the drug problem’, arguing that the porous US–Mexico border not only facilitated unauthorized migration but also allowed drug traffickers to exploit the chaos. According to Meese, smugglers ‘get lost in the crowd’ of migrants, slipping undetected into the country alongside labourers and asylum seekers. He even suggested that some undocumented immigrants were being coerced into drug trafficking.<sup>37</sup>

These anxieties suffused key provisions of the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act. The legislation is now infamous for enshrining the 100:1 sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine, but the racial notions animating this inequity were also interwoven with xenophobic preoccupations. Handwritten notes from Eric Sterling, then counsel to the House Judiciary Committee, composed during deliberations over sentencing, indicate as much. On a yellow legal notepad, he scribbled: ‘Crack–inner city black drug [distribution] linked with Caribbean connection’.<sup>38</sup> This brief entry is revealing for two reasons. First, it substantiates claims that policymakers were fully cognizant of the racial implications of sentencing disparities between crack and powder cocaine. To them, crack was an ‘inner city black drug’. Second, they attributed culpability for the spread of this ‘black drug’ to Caribbean gangs.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Memorandum, ‘Eleanore Hill/Crack Cocaine Forums’ 29 August 1986. Box 334, Folder ‘Crack Cocaine’, Sam Nunn papers, Stuart A Rose MS, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>36</sup> Edwin Meese III to Thomas P O’Neill, 29 July 1986, Series III, Subseries 6, Sub-subseries 3, Box 245, Legislative Files, Democratic Steering & Policy Committee, Thomas P O’Neill Papers, John J Burns Library, Boston College.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Meese Links Illegal Aliens, Drugs: Calls on Congress to Approve Immigration Reform Bill’ *Los Angeles Times* (7 September 1986).

<sup>38</sup> ‘Penalty Bill’ circa 1986. US House of Representatives, Judiciary Committee. Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986: General (Eric Sterling’s Files), 99th Cong. Records of the United States House of Representatives, RG 233, Box 6.62. National Archives.

Given this fascination with immigrant traffickers, it is no surprise that the final bill included two provisions that revised both foreign policy and immigration enforcement: the repeal of the Mansfield Amendment and the enactment of the Narcotics Traffickers Deportation Act. Although some lawmakers pushed for more aggressive proposals—calling for the direct deployment of US military forces or equipment in anti-drug operations at the border or overseas—Congress ultimately settled on revising the Mansfield Amendment.<sup>39</sup> For over a decade, that provision had sharply limited the role of US drug agents abroad, prohibiting their involvement in arrests, interrogations, or even their presence during the questioning of American citizens. Its repeal in 1986 dismantled those constraints. While the final bill stopped short of authorizing direct involvement in interrogations, it lifted the ban on US agents being present at arrests. It signalled a deliberate expansion of American influence, giving federal drug agents a more hands-on role in steering how foreign governments carried out their own crackdowns.

While the repeal of the Mansfield Amendment extended the international arm of US drug enforcement, the Narcotics Traffickers Deportation Act of 1986 turned immigration policy into a domestic weapon in the ‘war on drugs’. Its passage reflected rare bipartisan agreement: as the omnibus bill moved through Congress, the Reagan administration, Senate Republicans, and House Democrats all backed punitive provisions ‘regarding aliens in the drug traffic’.<sup>40</sup> The Act broadened the state’s authority to deport non-citizens convicted of drug crimes by streamlining removal procedures. More troublingly, it made violations of foreign narcotics laws grounds for deportation—regardless of whether those jurisdictions met basic American standards of due process. But the real teeth of the law lay in section 1751. The law mandated that when authorities detained someone on drug charges and had ‘reason to believe’ they lacked legal status, they notify INS immediately. INS would then issue a detainer, fast-tracking the person into deportation proceedings. That low ‘reason to believe’ threshold gave local police broad latitude to judge immigration status on the spot, fuelling racial profiling and selective enforcement.<sup>41</sup>

Even before the 1986 legislation, the federal government had begun prioritizing ‘criminal aliens’. In the spring, an INS supplemental appropriations bill directed the Attorney General, via INS, to develop and implement an aggressive strategy to identify, arrest, and deport ‘criminal aliens’, with a comprehensive plan due by early September.<sup>42</sup> INS Commissioner Alan C. Nelson moved quickly. Testifying before the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, he announced the December launch of the Alien Criminal Apprehension Program—an ‘aggressive pilot project’ to ‘remove alien criminals from the street, from the community, and ultimately, from the United States in as expeditious a manner as is possible, consistent with due process requirements’. Unlike earlier efforts that delayed deportation until after sentencing, ACAP would remove individuals pre-emptively, including those on probation, parole, or in diversion programmes. Nelson assured members that he would not tolerate ‘The presence of criminal aliens in the community’ and pledged to use ‘the full force of the agency’.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Charles E Bennett, *We Can Win the War on Drugs*, letter to members of the US House of Representatives, 8 September 1986, Box 31, Folder 673, Robert A Young Papers, State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center—St. Louis.

<sup>40</sup> *Side by Side Comparison of Omnibus Drug Bills*. Page 1. Box 16, Folder ‘Bill Comparisons’ Mack F Mattingly Papers, Richard B Russell Library for Political Research and Studies, University of Georgia Libraries.

<sup>41</sup> Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, Pub L No 99-570, § 1751, 100 Stat 3207–46 (1986). *Subtitle C, Section-by-Section Analysis*, 40. Drug Abuse—1986, Assistant Leader Files, Box 75, Robert J Dole Senate Papers, Dole Institute of Politics, University of Kansas.

<sup>42</sup> Congress of the United States. Congressional Budget Office. *Supplemental Appropriations in the 1980s* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 1990).

<sup>43</sup> United States House of Representatives, Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control. *Federal Drug Enforcement and Interdiction Provisions of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986: Hearing Before the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, House of Representatives, One Hundredth Congress, First Session, March 18, 1987* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 1997).

Just weeks after the passage of the 1986 Act, INS was officially brought into the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) programme. Though OCDETF had been created in 1982, INS had played only a minor role, contributing sporadically when resources allowed. That changed in December 1986, when the Attorney General made INS a fully fledged OCDETF member to counteract ‘the dramatic rise in serious crimes committed by foreign-born individuals’.<sup>44</sup> With this move, the administration reoriented immigration enforcement—shifting its focus from guarding against unauthorized entry to criminalizing, apprehending, and removing non-citizens as part of a large-scale system of domestic policing.

The hearings, letters, legislative provisions, and administrative actions expose a decisive deviation in American governance and drug laws. The 1986 Act did not merely criminalize a substance: it reconceptualized the demands of citizenship. What had once been separate policy domains—criminal justice and immigration—were now bound together by a shared logic of exclusion and domination. The figure of the ‘criminal alien’ had become central to the American security imaginary, and the war on drugs had evolved into something much larger: a war on migration, fuelled by exaggeration, institutionalized through law, and disproportionately waged against Black and Latino immigrants in urban centres.

### THE ANTI-DRUG ABUSE ACT OF 1988

The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 did little to stem the crack epidemic. Addiction deepened, violence persisted, and the calls for action grew louder. Moreover, this distress was not confined to urban centres. Driven by media coverage, drugs also shot to the top of the national agenda by 1988—surpassing even Cold War fears in the public imagination. An April 1988 survey by the Public Agenda Foundation found that 22 per cent of Americans saw ‘combating international drug trafficking’ as the country’s foremost national security priority, outpacing apprehension about nuclear proliferation, trade deficits, and Soviet influence. Polling from the Wirthlin Group that February captured the intensity of this moment: 85 per cent of respondents favoured using US troops not just at the border but inside foreign countries willing to collaborate, and 60 per cent supported the death penalty for dealers who sold to minors.<sup>45</sup>

Crack’s intractability in cities and overwrought perturbation about it elsewhere raised an urgent political question: how would public officials respond to this mounting dread? Ultimately, they attached narcotics enforcement ever more tightly to national security. As the Reagan presidency wound down and George H. W. Bush launched his own campaign for the White House, one campaign memo boasted, ‘The Reagan/Bush Administration was the first to declare illegal drugs a threat to our National Security’.<sup>46</sup> That same year, a bipartisan group of 75 House members urged Secretary of State George Shultz to issue more ‘dramatic public statements’ about international drug trafficking, calling it ‘one of the most serious national security problems faced by the nation’.<sup>47</sup>

It was immigration—particularly the spectre of the Black and brown migrant—that shackled an urban travesty to the imperatives of national security. By 1988, the conceptual

<sup>44</sup> United States General Accounting Office, *INS Drug Task Force Activities: Federal Agencies Supportive of INS Efforts* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 1994).

<sup>45</sup> Market Opinion Research and others, *Drugs: Some Polling Results*. April 1988. Box 1, Robert Michel Papers, Dirksen Congressional Center.

<sup>46</sup> *Issues ‘88: A Comparison of the Policies of Vice President Bush and Governor Dukakis* (Draft), 19 September 1988, Box 118, Folder 6, Jack Kemp Congressional Papers, Legislative Files, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>47</sup> *Letter from the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control to Secretary of State George P Shultz*. Washington, DC, Box 49, Folder 6, Peter W Rodino Papers, Seton Hall University School of Law, Newark, NJ.

scaffolding built in 1986—joining domestic drug policy, immigration enforcement, global security—had hardened into a governing doctrine. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, which Speaker Jim Wright hailed as ‘the most important drug bill in the history of America’,<sup>48</sup> simply reinforced the conceit that curing addiction necessitated the policing of migrants at the nation’s borders and in its cities.

To accomplish this political work, federal officials continued to depict Jamaican dealers as a foreign menace. One report from Attorney General Meese’s files identified Jamaican posés as the most ‘organized and violent gangs operating in the United States today’. It alleged that these groups first took root in Jamaican enclaves along the East Coast but soon expanded nationwide, reaching as far as Anchorage, Alaska. One Florida-based posse was ‘reputed to be expert in guerrilla-warfare tactics’, with members allegedly trained in Cuba.<sup>49</sup>

A Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control’s 1987 report redirected responsibility for drug addiction from domestic demand to foreign-born drug traffickers. It claimed that Jamaicans controlled marijuana trafficking in parts of Philadelphia and labelled them ‘the principal traffickers of crack’ in Kansas City. The report asserted Jamaicans ‘control a large corner of the crack market’ in Dallas, linking them to 14 homicides in 1986, and accused them of being ‘the principal traffickers on [Houston’s] the south side, where marijuana is heavily trafficked’. The section on Newark widened the pool of suspects, naming Rastafarians, Cubans, and South Americans as major suppliers of cocaine, heroin, and marijuana.

The report also pulled Latino migrants into this dragnet. In Cleveland, it suggested that ‘members of the Hispanic and Cuban communities ... are known merchants in the heroin market’. In Jersey City, police ‘target[ed] factions of the Colombian, White, Egyptian and Hispanic populace’ as key players in the cocaine trade. Meanwhile, it accused ‘factions of the Dominican population’ of ‘being responsible for the drugs supplied to the Washington Heights area’.<sup>50</sup> While it undoubtedly captured certain objective realities of the drug trade, the report, instead of precisely identifying individual offenders or specific organizations, smeared entire immigrant communities—portraying large ‘factions’ as complicit.

Truth be told, law enforcement officials accurately captured the ethnic dimensions of the narcotics trade. One DEA agent recalled that crack ‘really just flourished’ in Washington Heights, one of the neighbourhoods hardest hit early on. Jamaicans initially operated out of Queens, but over time, ‘the Dominicans [were] taking over distribution’ in Washington Heights. Meanwhile, Jamaican crews adopted a franchise model—‘training people to run the business here in New York’ before sending them to cities like Houston, Kansas City, and Dallas. By then, the DEA saw the crack trade as ‘divided up between the Dominicans and the Jamaicans’.<sup>51</sup>

The factual foundations of these assessments notwithstanding, many portrayals of drug traffickers were steeped in racial essentialism.<sup>52</sup> In his master’s thesis, John W. Featherly—then a DEA special agent and later Staff Coordinator for the Cocaine Investigations Section

<sup>48</sup> Press Release, ‘Most Important Drug Bill in History to Be Signed by Speaker Jim Wright’ 4 November 1988, Group 2, Series II, Box 1171, Jim Wright Papers, Special Collections, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX.

<sup>49</sup> ‘Epidemic of Youth Gang Crime: Business Must Brace for Tough Times’ *Lipman Report* (15 May 1988). Box 626, Folder 7, Edwin Meese Papers.

<sup>50</sup> US Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, *Hearing before the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, House of Representatives, Ninety-Ninth Congress, Second Session, 1987* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 1987).

<sup>51</sup> Richard Wagner, Interview by Larry Collins. New York Office of the DEA, 5 April 1990. Box 19, Folder 75, Larry Collins Papers, Georgetown University MSs.

<sup>52</sup> Congressional Research Service, ‘The Drug Problem’ *CRS Review* 10, no 16 (November–December 1989): 1–20. Box 323, Folder 10296, Thomas S Foley Congressional Papers, Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections, Washington State University Libraries, Pullman, WA.

at DEA Headquarters—offered an unvarnished glimpse into the agency’s worldview: ‘When you think of Jamaicans, you immediately think drugs and guns which equate with violence’.<sup>53</sup> In 1989, Featherly co-authored an official DEA report that institutionalized this image, listing supposed hallmarks of the Jamaican posse:

- 1) Black males of Jamaican descent, typically aged 17 to 35
- 2) Often recruited directly from Jamaica
- 3) Known for indiscriminate use of high-powered firearms
- 4) Exhibit extreme and frequent violence
- 5) Commonly use rental or leased vehicles—Volvos reportedly preferred
- 6) Routinely operate under false identities
- 7) Frequently base operations out of local Jamaican clubs and restaurants<sup>54</sup>

Featherly’s list crystallized how law enforcement fused nationality, criminality, and violence into a single racialized type. While Dominican and Jamaican organizations were certainly involved in the US drug trade, their depiction as *uniquely* barbaric ‘outsiders’ served a far more consequential political function. It transformed a domestic public health and safety calamity into a foreign incursion.

Law enforcement officials not only attributed the nation’s misfortunes to immigrant dealers but also characterized them as a blight on already vulnerable Black communities. One of the most incendiary testimonies at a 1988 congressional hearing came from ‘Brother X’, an incarcerated drug dealer who claimed that Jamaican traffickers were targeting Black neighbourhoods. According to his account, Jamaicans ran ‘base houses’ or ‘crack houses’—residences where cocaine was both sold and consumed—describing them as ‘habitats’ in public housing developments, where struggling welfare mothers allegedly exchanged shelter for cash or drugs. Brother X alleged that Jamaicans enlisted young Black men, some as young as 16, to serve as lookouts, runners, and enforcers. He outlined a hierarchy: the ‘pistol man’ kept order in the house, while the welfare mother helped prepare the cocaine. This disturbing framing presented the epidemic as an imported cataclysm rather than a home-grown tragedy.<sup>55</sup>

By 1989, crack-related narratives had become routine—and so had the racial caricatures that came with them. That year, Texas’s Governor’s Task Force on Drug Abuse warned that ‘traditional drug enforcement strategies are less effective against crack because of the methods by which it is distributed’, emphasizing that the trade had shifted to ‘a mid-level operation organized by interstate gangs of ethnic groups, particularly Jamaicans, Cubans, and Black Americans’.<sup>56</sup> Jamaicans figured prominently—and disproportionately—in Pennsylvania’s official account of its drug plight.<sup>57</sup> In 1989, the Pennsylvania Crime

<sup>53</sup> John W Featherly, ‘Crack/Cocaine’ (master’s thesis, CW Post Graduate School, Long Island University, 1989). Box 19, Folder 1, Larry Collins Papers.

<sup>54</sup> Drug Enforcement Administration, US Department of Justice, *Crack/Cocaine Overview 1989*. Written by John W Featherly and Eddie B Hill under the direction of Charles Gutensohn and Michael Mullen. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, 1989. Box 19, Folder 1, Larry Collins Papers.

<sup>55</sup> US Congress, Joint Oversight Hearing before the Subcommittee on Fiscal Affairs and Health of the Committee on the District of Columbia and the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, House of Representatives, 100th Cong, 2nd sess, *Interstate Drug Trafficking in the Metropolitan Area*, Washington, 20 April 1988. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1988.

<sup>56</sup> Governor’s Task Force on Drug Abuse, Drug Policy Subcommittee, *Statewide Strategy for Drug and Violent Crime Control* (Office of the Governor, Criminal Justice Division, Austin 1989).

<sup>57</sup> *Philadelphia News Conference at Coast Guard Memorandum*. 9 December 1988. Box 24, Folder 21. Papers of John Heinz, Carnegie Mellon University Archives. *Editorial Boards Memorandum* 5 August 1990. Box 186, Folder 6. Papers of John Heinz, Carnegie Mellon University Archives. Senator Specter Introduces Comprehensive Anti-Crime Bill Aimed at Drug Gangs and Career Criminals. Press release, 11 April 1989. Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers, Box 1223, Folder 2. University of Pittsburgh.

Commission identified the Junior Black Mafia (JBM), Jamaican Posses, and Hispanic/Colombian networks as key players in the state's cocaine trade. But it was the Jamaicans who bore the brunt of this frenzy. The report classified 'Jamaican criminals' as a 'significant criminal element in the Philadelphia area', notorious for their 'cold-blooded ruthlessness'. According to the commission, their typical strategy involved 'infiltrating a community' by seducing Black women with 'gifts, money, cocaine or crack' in exchange for access to their homes for drug distribution.<sup>58</sup>

Parrotting the same law enforcement sources shaping policy debates in Washington and beyond, the media magnified racialized representations of 'illegal aliens'—particularly Jamaicans and Dominicans—as exceptionally savage, tightly networked, and unscrupulous. Two 1988 *Newsweek* pieces, 'The Drug Gangs' and 'A Jamaican Invasion in West Virginia', crystallized this framing. In one story, Thomas Repetto, president of the Citizens Crime Commission of New York, fanned the flames, warning that 'today's ghetto gangs, especially the Jamaican posses, are far more violent than the Mafia'. *Newsweek* heightened the disquiet by accentuating their access to assault rifles, a cultural disregard for human life, and a knack for luring American teens into gang life. The West Virginia story hit every note: 'In a region where one or two murders per year was the norm, 20 homicides, all drug related, occurred in 18 months as rival dealers fought for control'. It alleged a surge in venereal disease, sex work tied to Jamaican dealers, and school kids recruited as couriers, 'strutt[ing] around in expensive Nike jogging suits and gold chains, intimidating classmates and teachers'. It ended with a lurid flourish: 'A police raid of a Jamaican dealer's house turned up crude photographs of a former homecoming queen posing half nude, pieces of crack lying about her ... [She] later gave birth to a baby fathered by the dealer'.<sup>59</sup>

The following year, the *New York Times* published 'Crack's Destructive Sprint across America'. The article sketched a portrait of Washington Heights, a Dominican-majority neighbourhood, as 'a giant Caribbean bazaar' and 'the nation's crack capital', populated by a 'substantial pool of users' and 'most enterprising drug dealers'. While acknowledging that only 'a small percentage' of Dominicans were involved in trafficking, the piece suggested the community was uniquely equipped for the drug trade, attributing their success to 'marketing talent' and 'entrepreneurial values' rooted in Caribbean mercantile culture. The narrative extended across racial and geographic lines, claiming Dominicans 'fanned southward into Harlem and eastward into the South Bronx' to supply cocaine to 'poor young blacks—jobless, uneducated and desperate'. It framed Black Americans as hapless consumers and Dominican immigrants as the Machiavellian impresarios. The article also revived unease about Jamaican posses, referring to them as 'illegal immigrants' who 'radically transform[ed] the way crack was distributed'. One federal agent even likened their operational acumen to elite schooling: 'New York is their training school, like going to Wharton'.<sup>60</sup>

Nowhere was the nexus of this discourse and enforcement more apparent than in Operation Rum Punch—a multi-state crackdown launched in 1987 that stretched across 13 states and reached from Los Angeles to Boston.<sup>61</sup> In Boston, where raids hit neighbourhoods like Mattapan and Dorchester, federal agents and local police made 15 arrests as part of a nationwide sweep that netted over 100. Authorities claimed the operation targeted a 'very, very vicious and significant group', including alleged members of the Shower and Jungle

<sup>58</sup> Pennsylvania Crime Commission. 1989. *Pennsylvania Crime Commission Report*. Conshohocken, PA: The Commission.

<sup>59</sup> 'The Drug Gangs' *Newsweek* (28 March 1988); Mark Miller, 'A Jamaican Invasion in West Virginia' *Newsweek* (28 March 1988).

<sup>60</sup> Michael Massing, 'Crack's Destructive Sprint Across America' *New York Times Magazine* (1 October 1989).

<sup>61</sup> National Drug Policy Board, *National Drug Policy: Federal Drug Control Accomplishments for Fiscal Year 1987* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 1988) 'Chapter V: Investigation', circa 1987. CFA 1315, Folder 'Drugs', Phillip D Brady Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

(formerly Dog) Posses. They styled them—almost cartoonishly—modern-day versions of old-school mobsters—‘the Al Capones of the 1920s and 1930s’. Acting US Attorney Frank McNamara denounced the groups for possessing both a ‘high degree of invisibility and armament’, while DEA agents pointed to their direct access to ‘large supplies of cocaine and potent marijuana from Jamaica’. One official defended the operation this way: ‘These people are prone to violence and use heavy armament to achieve their goal, which is the distribution of narcotics’.<sup>62</sup>

In October 1988, agents launched a multi-city takedown of Jamaican drug gangs, arresting roughly 220 people across 20 cities. Marketed as a decisive strike against a syndicate allegedly responsible for 40 per cent of the nation’s crack trade and some 700 drug-related murders that year, the raids targeted neighbourhoods in Miami, New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, Dallas, and DC. Attorney General Dick Thornburgh, leading the announcement of the operation, admitted there was ‘no evidence of coordination’ among the different posses but justified the synchronized raids ‘to let them know we mean business’. His remarks came flanked by a media-ready arsenal of ‘semi-automatic pistols, machine guns and other weapons’. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) officials claimed there were some 40 Jamaican posses operating nationwide, with as many as 10,000 members. According to one agent, many of those arrested had ‘fake names and no fixed addresses’, prompting a BATF spokesperson to characterize them as ‘like gypsies. But they’re vicious’.<sup>63</sup>

Given mounting public anger and the pressure of an approaching presidential election, Washington’s political class zeroed in on crack cocaine. In a late spring commencement address at the US Coast Guard Academy, President Reagan referred to drugs as ‘the foremost concern in our country’ before saluting the Coast Guard’s role in the ‘stormy seas’ of narcotics interdiction. To avoid a ‘disaster for our future and that of our children’, Reagan proposed an executive–legislative task force to spearhead ‘America’s unified response’.<sup>64</sup> In June 1988, following the president’s directive, the National Drug Policy Board released ‘Toward a Drug-Free America’, a comprehensive national strategy that positioned illegal narcotics as a national security issue and placed immigration enforcement at the heart of the domestic anti-drug campaign. Under the heading ‘Vital National Interest Threatened by Drug Abuse’, it noted that Jamaican drug organizations were suspected in over 800 murders in just three years. The strategy targeted explicitly prioritized ‘emerging ethnic drug organizations’. The report implored the federal government to ‘make full use of immigration statutes against drug traffickers’ and proposed the expansion of the ACAP and the hiring of new agents.

In the appraisal of the House Republican Task Force on Drugs, this domestic scourge constituted a national security conundrum requiring extraterritorial solutions. Under the heading ‘Bold International Operations and Control’, the Task Force proposed the formation of a ‘multinational Latin American strike force’ and ‘lethal assistance to certain foreign countries’. Their strategy prioritized ‘increased intelligence capabilities’ and the ‘authorization for covert operations on narco-terrorist matters’.<sup>65</sup> For their part, Rangel and members of the House Democratic Caucus Task Force on Drugs linked a domestic quagmire to an external enemy. Drug trafficking, ‘a threat to national security’, obligated a ‘total’ approach and a full-scale military mobilization. Democrats endorsed a far-reaching strategy to ‘combat international drug production’, ‘protect our borders against drug smuggling’, and ‘enhance drug law enforcement’,

<sup>62</sup> Richard J Connolly, ‘15 Are Netted in Gang Roundup Jamaican Posses Blamed for Violence’ *Boston Globe* (21 October 1987).

<sup>63</sup> Michael Isikoff and Nancy Lewis, ‘Simultaneous Raids Aimed at Jamaican Drug Gangs Result in 220 Arrests’ *Washington Post* (14 October 1988).

<sup>64</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks at the United States Coast Guard Academy Commencement Ceremony in New London, Connecticut’ 18 May 1988, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

<sup>65</sup> House Republican Task Force on Drugs, ‘Key Themes and Ideas’ [nd] Box 564, Edwin Meese Papers.

while simultaneously investing in ‘effective drug abuse treatment, prevention and education programs’. They advised that traffickers should be handled like foreign enemies and that the military should ‘interdict smugglers just as the military would be used to repel any other foreign enemy’.<sup>66</sup>

The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 responded directly to these concerns. It enhanced criminal penalties—mandating life sentences for repeat offenders, enhancing punishments for crack-related offences, and boosting enforcement near schools and public housing. It allocated \$80 million to local law enforcement and authorized the eviction of public housing tenants if they or their guests engaged in drug activity ‘on or near’ the premises.<sup>67</sup> It also impacted immigration policy. As the omnibus legislation advanced through Congress, INS Commissioner Alan Nelson lobbied forcefully for more resources. In a letter to Senator Alan K. Simpson, Chair of the Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee Affairs, Nelson argued that INS had earned ‘an appropriate amount in order to continue its important role, at the borders and in the interior, in dealing with the criminal aliens’ involvement in narcotics’. He underscored the scale of the issue, claiming ‘70 per cent of all drug arrests relate to illegal aliens’.<sup>68</sup>

But not everyone was convinced. One Simpson aide quietly criticized Nelson’s push: ‘I have always had the feeling that he has an untoward concern about not getting his share of the drug enforcement pie’. The aide stated that INS already had ‘a full plate with border enforcement, employer sanctions enforcement, and continuing with the second stage of the legalization program’, and questioned whether the agency was even fulfilling its basic duties: ‘They have a tremendous service job which they aren’t performing as well as they could, if you can believe the calls and letters which we get citing horror stories about INS offices’. While the memo conceded that INS should seize drugs encountered during enforcement, it concluded: ‘their primary mission is to deter illegal entry and to enforce the immigration laws’.<sup>69</sup> Other staffers voiced similar scepticism. One, reviewing a Republican draft of the bill, raised an eyebrow at the harshness of new provisions targeting undocumented immigrants. ‘Although some of these are a little “more” than we would have proposed’, he observed, ‘they are in line with the current atmosphere around here regarding “doing something about drugs”’.<sup>70</sup>

The political winds were turning, and immigration was being swept into the storm. One of the most consequential provisions of the 1988 Act was the introduction of the term *aggravated felony* into the Immigration and Nationality Act, marking a turning point in how the US government classified and punished non-citizens convicted of certain crimes. The law explicitly defined an aggravated felony as ‘murder, any drug trafficking crime ... or any illicit trafficking in any firearms or destructive devices’. This new classification carried severe consequences, including mandatory detention and deportation without a hearing and ineligibility for relief such as asylum or cancellation of removal. In one bold move, the bill not only multiplied the legal mechanisms for expelling non-citizens but also eliminated most avenues for legal reprieve.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Democratic Caucus Task Force on Drugs, ‘Report from the Democratic Caucus Task Force on Drugs to the Task Force on the National Platform’ 25 May 1988, Charles B Rangel Press Release. Box 1, Robert Michel Papers, Dirksen Congressional Center; Democratic Caucus Task Force on Drugs, ‘Report from the Democratic Caucus Task Force on Drugs to the Task Force on the National Platform’ 25 May 1988, Press Release. Box 636, Folder 9, Edwin Meese Papers.

<sup>67</sup> Democratic Study Group, *Fact Sheet No. 100-55: Drug Bill Compromise*. Washington, DC: US House of Representatives, 21 October 1988. Box 36. Thomas Foley Congressional Papers.

<sup>68</sup> Alan C Nelson to Alan K Simpson, 16 June 1988. Box 400, Folder 4, Alan K Simpson papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

<sup>69</sup> Dick to Alan K Simpson, memorandum, 7 June 1988, Alan K Simpson Papers, Box 400, Folder 4.

<sup>70</sup> Carl to Alan K Simpson, ‘Republican Drug Bill’ 7 July 1988, Box 400, Folder 4, Simpson papers.

<sup>71</sup> Democratic Study Group, *Fact Sheet No. 100-55: Drug Bill Compromise*. Washington, DC: US House of Representatives, 21 October 1988. Box 535, Folder 14, Daniel Patrick Moynihan Papers.

Simultaneously, the INS intensified enforcement. By late 1989, the agency had increased its presence on a joint task force with the LAPD, bolstered by a fresh infusion of federal funding. Though the official target was immigrant gang members, the sweep extended far beyond that. Under the programme, federal agents worked alongside local police and sheriff's deputies to identify undocumented individuals suspected of gang affiliation—whether or not they had been charged with a crime. In many cases, deportation proceeded without any formal charges, underscoring how suspicion alone had become grounds for removal. This fusion of immigration control and criminal enforcement, coupled with a growing list of deportable offences, contributed to a dramatic surge in expulsions. In just six months, nearly 9000 non-citizens with felony convictions were deported from the INS's Western Region alone.<sup>72</sup>

While it may be tempting to separate the 'domestic' provisions of the 1988 legislation from its 'international' or immigration-related measures, they were cut from the same cloth—rooted in a racialized discourse that vilified immigrant dealers. In an April 1988 floor speech, Senator Arlen Specter pushed for more BATF funding by invoking Jamaican posses as 'perhaps the most feared drug gangs', allegedly behind over 350 deaths in one year and 800 in two. He described 30 to 40 tightly organized crews operating nationwide 'with a penchant for violence and torture' and used these claims to defend BATF's Repeat Offender Program targeting 'the most violent, vicious organized criminal groups to emerge in the United States since Prohibition'.<sup>73</sup>

After Senator DeConcini introduced the Omnibus Antidrug Abuse Act of 1988, Senator Graham rose in support and entered three articles into the Congressional Record—'Crack Fuels Fire of Illicit Activity', 'The Drug Gangs', and 'A Jamaican Invasion in West Virginia'. Though set in cities from Jacksonville to Los Angeles to Martinsburg, their message was consistent: the crack trade was hyper-local in its violence and foreign in its perceived origins.<sup>74</sup> In backing a resolution for an international narcotics summit, Senator Tribble invoked a familiar foe: headlines filled with 'drug-related violence and death, of addicted children and Jamaican gangs'. He warned that 'Jamaican posses ... have set up shop in city after city', including Martinsburg, WV, and cited their role in 'roughly half' of DC's drug-related murders. What began as a call for cooperation quickly slid into a racialized script of foreign gangs invading American streets.<sup>75</sup>

During debate over the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, Senator Jesse Helms defended his amendment for mandatory crack possession sentences, arguing that 'crack has escalated violent crime and has imposed incalculable physical and psychological damage on our nation's youth'. He blamed a 'Jamaican "posse"' for flooding Kansas City with crack, linking it to rising homicides and echoing a police captain's warning: 'Crack is destroying the inner cities of America'.<sup>76</sup> Supporting the Omnibus Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan backed a pilot programme offering non-citizen drug offenders a choice: stand trial at taxpayer expense or face immediate deportation. The goal, he said, was to 'clean ... our streets of drug dealers, like the Jamaican gangs we have heard so much of'.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Braun, Stephen. 'US-LA Task Force Deports 175 with Ties to Drug, Gang Activity' *Los Angeles Times* (12 April 1989).

<sup>73</sup> Congressional Record Daily Edition—Senate. *Congressional Budget Resolution for 1989*. 134 Cong Rec S3878 (13 April 1988), vol 134, no 46, S3878.

<sup>74</sup> US Senate, *Statements on Introduced Bills and Joint Resolutions*. Congressional Record, vol 134, pt 10, 23 June 1988.

<sup>75</sup> Congressional Record, Daily Edition—Senate. 'International Conference of Combating Illegal Drug Production, Trafficking, and Use in the Western Hemisphere'. 134 Cong Rec S8447 (23 June 1988) (statement in the Senate, 100th Cong, 2nd sess, vol 134, no 94).

<sup>76</sup> Congressional Record Daily Edition – Senate. *The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988*. 134 Cong Rec S17301 (21 October 1988), 100th Cong, 2nd sess, vol 134, no 151.

<sup>77</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Statement on the Omnibus Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988*. US Senate, Legislative File, Crime—Drug Legislation, Box 975, Folder 1, Moynihan Papers.

The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 was not merely a response to addiction or crime: it was a political blueprint for incrimination amid a sprawling social crisis. Two years after the rise of crack and the passage of the 1986 Act, the problem had not abated. If anything, media coverage suggested it had worsened. Yet rather than address the deeper, structural causes of drug use—or the demand driving it—lawmakers reached for familiar racial scripts. The crack epidemic was never acknowledged as a domestic health emergency or a broader social policy failure. Policymakers deemed it an invasion. At the centre of this narrative was a corrosive conflation: immigration blurred with Blackness, and foreignness with crime. Jamaicans and Dominicans became symbols of urban collapse, invoked to rationalize aggressive policing, sweeping immigration raids, and the dismantling of legal protections.

## CONCLUSION

The stories of Delroy ‘Uzi’ Edwards and Trevor Ellis capture insidious intentions and the far-reaching ramifications of America’s war on drugs. Edwards, presented as the archetypal Jamaican posse leader, reinforced fears of transnational, deadly criminal syndicates. Ellis, by contrast, represented the thousands ensnared by addiction and low-level dealing—minor figures in the drug economy, yet targeted with the same aggressive tactics designed for alleged national security risks. Despite their differences in scale, both men were deployed to tell a singular story: that immigrant drug traffickers—particularly Black and Latino—were responsible for urban disorder, and their removal was essential to restoring American public safety and national security. Furthermore, the racialized and transnational construction of Jamaican posses in the 1980s set a template for later law enforcement portrayals of groups such as MS-13. Both were depicted as foreign, hyper-violent networks whose reach threatened American communities, justifying heightened policing, immigration enforcement, and surveillance. In each case, the focus on immigrant criminality eclipsed structural drivers of crime, enabling the state to consolidate authority over both urban populations and non-citizens.

Events like Len Bias’s death, the 1986 midterms, and the 1988 presidential election—amplified by sensational media coverage—pressured lawmakers to act. Lacking a quick fix, Congress fell back on familiar tropes to explain the problem and justify the solution. Dorothy Provine has observed that overtly racist language was largely scrubbed from the Congressional Record, just as many scholars, despite linking media narratives to policy outcomes, stop short of drawing causal conclusions.<sup>78</sup> But the animus was never buried. Refracted through the lens of foreignness, racism is made visible—its causal force unmistakable.

Rhetoric excavated from congressional hearings, agency reports, internal memos, and correspondence from Reagan-era officials and members of Congress reveals a malignant purpose both pervasive and precise when it came to Black and brown immigrants. Foreignness was condemned. The groups were burdened with a noxious constellation of stereotypes: amoral, extravagant, hyper-violent, hypersexual. Black Americans and middle-class whites figured as the casualties—sometimes complicit, more often defenceless—undone by the cunning and cruelty of foreign dealers.

The gendered dimension also shaped the construction of immigrant gangs, with Black women repeatedly framed as victims of Jamaican and Dominican traffickers; seduced, bullied, exploited, coerced, and fleeced by immigrant traffickers operating in the shadows of public housing and welfare dependency. This portrayal reinforced the narrative of women as endangered figures warranting state intervention and their communities as sites of criminality requiring surveillance and control. In doing so, the state could justify its invasive policing

<sup>78</sup> Keesha Middlemass, *Convicted and Condemned: The Politics and Policies of Prisoner Reentry* (New York UP, New York 2017); Drew Humphries, *Crack Mothers: Pregnancy, Drugs, and the Media* (Ohio State UP, Columbus 1999).

in domestic spaces. Further, it could naturalize women's vulnerability as a central rationale for punitive responses, linking the regulation of female bodies to broader projects of economic exclusion and racialized social control.

Anti-drug bills of the late 1980s encoded a racialized vision of the enemy that occasioned where and how the drug war would be fought. Campaigns like 'Operation Rum Punch' were not merely about dismantling cartels. Indeed, the operation's name signalled its principle: brute force, tropical menace, and the spectacle of control. Thus, the drug war was never just about addiction. It was about drawing boundaries—both literal and symbolic—around imagined alien adversaries. It criminalized substances and mobility alike. No longer a peripheral figure but a central antagonist, the legislation envisaged the migrant as the source of urban chaos and a foreign torment requiring surveillance, containment, and expulsion.

Over the past decade, scholars have situated immigration detention within the history of mass incarceration.<sup>79</sup> 'Crimmigration' theorists have highlighted the entanglement of criminal and immigration law.<sup>80</sup> Our own work has traced this convergence to a pivotal moment: the crack era, and specifically the Anti-Drug Abuse Acts of 1986 and 1988. These laws consolidated drug control and immigration policy. The 'aggravated felony' category, introduced in the 1988 legislation, quickly expanded. The Immigration Act of 1990 added offences like money laundering and violent crimes. The 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act and the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act stretched the category even further, pulling in sexual abuse, trafficking, and lowering thresholds for existing offences. By 1996, the list had grown to 35 distinct crimes—none ever removed—solidifying aggravated felonies as a core mechanism of immigration enforcement. The Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 widened the net still more, pulling in document fraud and gambling. As the list grew, so did the state's capacity to deport, fuelling a staggering 400 per cent rise in removals between 1981 and 1996.

In this way, the 'war on drugs' became an innovative vehicle for binding crime and immigration into a single legal framework that provided capacity as well as the political will and moral basis for the prison boom and immigrant detention. By tracing how these policies were born and what they set in motion, this article underscores the enduring impact of a war that, under the banner of public safety and national security, fundamentally reshaped American governance—and its relationship to race, migration, punishment, and foreign policy.

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<sup>79</sup> Emily Ryo, 'Understanding Immigration Detention: Causes, Conditions, and Consequences' (2019) 15 *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 97–115; César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández, 'Immigration Detention as Punishment' (2014) 61 *UCLA L Rev* 1346; Stephen H Legomsky, 'The Detention of Aliens: Theories, Rules, and Discretion' (1999) 30 *U Miami Inter-Am L Rev* 531.

<sup>80</sup> Juliet Stumpf, 'The Process Is the Punishment in Crimmigration Law' in Katja Franko and Mary Bosworth (eds), *The Borders of Punishment: Migration, Citizenship, and Social Exclusion* (OUP, Oxford 2013) 58–75; Cecilia Menjivar and others, 'The Expansion of "Crimmigration", Mass Detention, and Deportation' (2018) 12 *Sociology Compass* e12573; César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández, 'Creating Crimmigration' [2013] *BYU L Rev* 1457–1506.

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