



PHOTO BY GRAHAM CASE/CANADIAN DRUG POLICY COALITION

Carl Hart spoke in June at Simon Fraser University near Vancouver, B.C., about reworking an approach to drug addiction.

## *Most users are responsible, says researcher Carl Hart, who wants to change attitudes and policies about drugs*

**BY KATIE HYSLOP**  
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**C**arl Hart wants us to think differently about drugs.

A neuropsychopharmacologist from Columbia University — meaning he's a researcher and teacher on the effects of drugs on human brains — Hart has dedicated his work to dispelling myths about illegal drug use.

He thinks all drugs should be legal, and he's spent the past year and a half sharing his views on a worldwide book tour promoting his part-memoir and part-neuroscience text "High Price."

"Eighty to 90 percent of the people who use drugs are like me," Hart said during a June talk at Simon Fraser University's Goldcorp Centre for the Arts in British Columbia.

"They pay taxes; they take care of their families; they are responsible members of our society."

Gesturing to the screen behind him, which displayed images of U.S. Presidents Barack Obama, George W. Bush, and Bill Clinton, he said, "In some cases, they even become president of the United States."

Addiction rates do vary; 9 percent of marijuana users, 15 to 20 percent of cocaine and crack users and roughly one-quarter of heroin users will become addicted. Yet legal

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COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR

drugs like alcohol and cigarettes have addiction rates of 10 to 15 percent and 33 percent, respectively.

So why do we hand down harsh criminal penalties for using crack when legal cigarettes have a greater risk of dependency? Hart boils it down to racism.

"Selective enforcement of these drugs' laws, in effect, serve as a tool to marginalize black males, especially, and keep them in this vicious cycle of incarceration and isolation from mainstream society," he told the audience.

### **A discriminatory system**

Hart didn't come by this knowledge solely

from his research in Columbia's labs. He grew up poor in a Miami ghetto and as a youth carried a gun, sold drugs, used drugs and watched as the same life path he was fixed to follow led so many of his loved ones to ruin.

"Eventually I decided to get serious about my education. Earning a Ph.D. in neuroscience kind of changed my trajectory," he said wryly.

Hart focuses his research on U.S. drug crime statistics, including that sentencing for crack possession is 18 times the sentencing for cocaine, even though they're the same drug.

It used to be worse. From 1986 until the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010, sentencing for crack in the United States was 100 times sentencing for cocaine possession. If you were caught with 5 milligrams of crack, you received the same sentence as someone caught with 500 milligrams of powder cocaine.

"We have enforced this law such that black people in the United States represent 80 percent of those people arrested under those laws," said Hart, noting there is no difference in cocaine use between black and white U.S. populations.

Canada, where Hart was recently speaking, has a similar problem. More than a quarter of prisoners are members of the indigenous communities, yet they make up less than 5

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