

Black History Month: The Overlooked History Linking Cannabis, Policy, and Race in the U.S.

By Naomi Abrams

As Black History Month is observed across the United States, conversations around the legacy of cannabis policy are drawing renewed attention to the intersection of race, law, and culture.

Historians and policy experts point to a long and complex relationship between cannabis and African American communities—one that spans from early agricultural labor to modern criminal justice reform efforts.

Early American Hemp Production Tied to Enslaved Labor

In the early years of the United States, hemp was considered a critical crop. Colonists were often encouraged or required to grow it, as it was used to produce rope, sails, textiles, and other essential goods.

Much of that labor was carried out by enslaved people. Historians note that without forced labor, large-scale hemp production would not have been possible during that period. Despite its importance, hemp's role in early American industry is often overlooked in broader historical discussions.

Shifting Perceptions in the Early 20th Century

By the early 1900s, cannabis remained present in American society, but public perception began to change. As recreational use increased, particularly in connection with immigrant communities, anti-cannabis sentiment grew.

Media portrayals during that time, including the 1936 film *Reefer Madness*, depicted exaggerated and often misleading accounts of cannabis use. Public officials, including federal drug policy leaders of the era, promoted narratives linking cannabis to crime and minority communities.

Those efforts contributed to the passage of the Marihuana Tax Act of 1937, which imposed federal restrictions and marked a turning point in cannabis regulation.

The War on Drugs and Disproportionate Impact

Cannabis policy tightened further in the 1970s with the passage of the Controlled Substances Act, which classified marijuana as a Schedule I drug. The legislation became a cornerstone of the broader War on Drugs.

Decades of enforcement led to widespread arrests and incarceration related to marijuana offenses. Studies and advocacy groups have consistently reported that communities of color, particularly Black Americans, were disproportionately affected, despite similar usage rates across racial groups.

Many individuals remain incarcerated for marijuana-related offenses, even as laws have shifted in parts of the country.

Changing Laws and Ongoing Debate

In recent years, public attitudes toward cannabis have shifted significantly. Medical marijuana is now legal in a majority of U.S. states, and recreational use has been legalized in several.

Advocates say the evolving legal landscape reflects growing awareness of past inequities, while policymakers continue to debate how to address the long-term consequences of earlier enforcement policies.

Looking Ahead

As legalization expands and the cannabis industry continues to grow, discussions around equity, access, and justice remain central to the national conversation.

For many, Black History Month serves as an opportunity to examine not only the past, but also the ongoing impact of policy decisions and the path forward.