



The House I Live In Discussion Guide

Director: Eugene Jarecki
Year: 2012
Time: 108 min

You might know this director from:

Reagan (2011)
Freakonomics (2010)
Why We Fight (2005)
The Trials of Henry Kissinger (2002)

FILM SUMMARY

Dissecting America's history of drug use and subsequent legislation, *THE HOUSE I LIVE IN* reveals that the U.S. is losing miserably at the War on Drugs, and that the most unequipped Americans are suffering the greatest blow.

When Director Eugene Jarecki first embarked on filming, he asked Americans what the War on Drugs meant to them. Most had never given it much thought. Others imagined the war happening far away from their everyday lives. One woman admitted that she hadn't heard the term since the 1980s. *THE HOUSE I LIVE IN* proves that this War on Drugs is waging fervently right on U.S. soil, swatting down destitute communities across the nation. Funds are haemorrhaged into the policing and punishment of drug abusers, when they could be used for the research and remediation of drug addiction. Ultimately, the U.S. government fuels its own battle, subverting its citizens who need the most help.

In this fearless, masterfully crafted film, we meet those who are damned in the face of the War on Drugs. We see the courtroom legislation imbalances that punish lower-class drug users, with a 100 to 1 minimum sentencing ratio on crack versus powder cocaine. And we witness real footage of law enforcement agents being awarded for the quantity, rather than quality, of arrests. *THE HOUSE I LIVE IN* exposes the War on Drugs, and its far-reaching implications paint a disturbing picture of the present-day, drug-torn America.

FILM THEMES

Endless evidence reveals that the U.S. is losing its War on Drugs in a major way. Still, there's no end in sight. True reformation would mean political suicide for candidates, but that is exactly what's needed to rescue thousands of communities corroded by drug dependence. *THE HOUSE I LIVE IN* cries out for a remedy to aid a hurting nation.

CLASS AND RACE AS AMMUNITION

A nation that feels threatened armours itself against the perceived threat. In the words of a New Mexico sheriff, "Everybody's gotta have an enemy." First the opium-smoking Chinese, then the cocaine-snorting Blacks, and eventually the marijuana'ed Mexicans. These hard-working people became perceived as enemies of the state who stole jobs from their white counterparts. Rather than imprisoning them because of their skin color, the U.S. government slyly banned the drugs they were using, then imprisoned and removed them from society. With the downfall of the manufacturing industry, the War on Drugs hit blue-collared whites of middle America, broadening its bias to include class. Now color-blind, the War on Drugs feeds on the lowest rungs of society.

THE CREATION OF USERS AND ABUSERS

"Why are these people turning to drugs?" is a pertinent question that no one in power is asking. Drugs provide hope in times of despair, a sensation of light and joy and ease in the midst of the dark everyday struggle so many endure. Drugs provide purpose to the purposeless, reason amidst the irrational, love amongst the despised. Take away employment, strip a community of opportunity, and they will scrap around for answers. The thing that keeps coming up roses? Drugs.

DRUGS, THE ONLY EMPLOYER

In the words of Dennis Whidbee, a delinquent father and drug abuser and dealer in the black ghetto, "I didn't know how to stop doing what I was doing." The only viable employer, the only job that puts food on the table and keeps the community active is drugs. Children are not encouraged to attend school. Above-board jobs are non-existent. And drugs are everywhere... on street corners, in playgrounds, in kitchen cabinets. Human instinct is rooted in the will to survive, and in the poorest, most desperate American communities, drugs equate to survival.

THE FARCE OF MANDATORY MINIMUMS

When a new drug enters the market, a campaign of fear and propaganda is unleashed by the government in order to pass laws that, in normal circumstances, wouldn't make it past the drawing board. Such was the case of crack cocaine, chemically identical to the powder variant but used primarily by poor blacks. Seen as an opportunity to further marginalize and subjugate an entire community, the U.S. instigated mandatory minimum jail sentences 100 times greater than for the more upper-class powdery form of the drug. Racism in its most blatant guise.

"The drug war is a holocaust in slow motion."

David Simon of *The Wire*

"What drugs haven't destroyed, the war against them has."

David Simon

"I don't understand the War on Drugs. All I know is I miss my son."

Nannie Jeter

FILM FACTS:

- THE HOUSE I LIVE IN won 4 awards, including the Grand Jury Prize: Doc at Sundance Film Festival in 2012, and a Peabody Award in 2014.
- The title, THE HOUSE I LIVE IN, came from a 1943 song with lyrics by Abel Meeropol and music by Earl Robinson. Meeropol had liberal views of America and mixed feelings about the glories of the nation, especially concerning how people of different races, religions, and political views were treated. The “house” is a metaphor for the country, and the song, covered by Frank Sinatra, became a patriotic anthem during WWII.
- The overall Federal Drug Control Budget for 2014 was \$25.2 billion. The budget was authorized accordingly: 37% to domestic law enforcement, 35% to treatment, 16% to interdiction (interception of illegal drugs), 7% to international law enforcement, and 5% to prevention.
- Drug users in the U.S. spend an annual \$100 billion on cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin, and marijuana. Total consumption and expenditure is driven by the minority, the heavy users who consume 21 or more days each month.
- Only 2.4% of total federal and state substance-related spending in 2005 was for prevention, treatment, or research. For every \$1 federal and state governments spend to prevent and treat substance abuse and addiction, they spend \$59.83 in public programs cleaning up the wreckage from drug abuse and the drug trade.
- The U.S. has the most incarcerated citizens of any nation in the world, with 2 million people currently being held in American prisons. Approximately 25% of those have been convicted of a drug offense, making the U.S. the nation to incarcerate more people for drug offenses than any other country.
- 18% of prisoners committed their crime to obtain money for drugs.
- In 1968, President Johnson decided that in order to halt social unrest, efforts would need to be focused on illegal drug use. In the 1960s, it was believed that at least half of the crime in the U.S. was drug related. Johnson set up the Reorganization Plan of 1968, merging the Bureau of Narcotics and the Bureau of Drug Abuse to form the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs.
- President Nixon followed in Johnson’s footsteps, orchestrating nationwide drug raids. In 1971 Nixon declared “America’s public enemy number one in the U.S. is drug abuse. It is necessary to wage a new all-out offensive.” Thus the War on Drugs was born. This political rhetoric continues to the present day.
- The first Drug Court in the U.S. was established in Miami, Florida, in 1989, in response to the city’s growing crack-cocaine problem. The court was designed to offer treatment to non-violent offenders. All 50 states now have Drug Courts.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Go to TheHouseILiveIn.org and enter your zip code in the Community Action section to find out how to take direct action in your area.
2. Visit SupportDontPunish.org for ways to get involved in the international drug awareness campaign.
3. Urge your senators to support the Smarter Sentencing Act, which reforms mandatory sentencing policies.
4. Learn how to become a Federal Activist, pressing the government to instigate essential changes to outdated laws. You can find an activist toolkit at DrugPolicy.org.

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They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.