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Recent Increases in Drug Arrests Were for Possession, Not Sales

by Jeffrey A. Butts

The number of drug-related arrests reported by U.S. law enforcement agencies increased sharply between 1980 and 2010, with the largest growth occurring between 1991 and 2006. During that time, drug arrests jumped 87 percent nationwide, from just over 1.1 million to nearly 1.9 million arrests annually.

The increase was restricted, however, to drug possession offenses rather than sales and manufacturing. Between 1991 and 2006, arrests for drug sales and manufacturing actually dropped 6 percent while arrests for possession climbed 139 percent, from 650,600 to 1.55 million per year.

When calculated as a rate (arrests per 100,000), drug possession arrests doubled (up 102%) between 1991 and 2006, while arrests for sales and manufacturing declined 21 percent.

The same pattern is observed for arrests involving offenders of different ages, although the growth in drug possession arrests was sharpest among juveniles, or youth under age 18.

Moreover, all of the growth in the juvenile arrest rate for drug possession offenses occurred between 1991 and 1997.

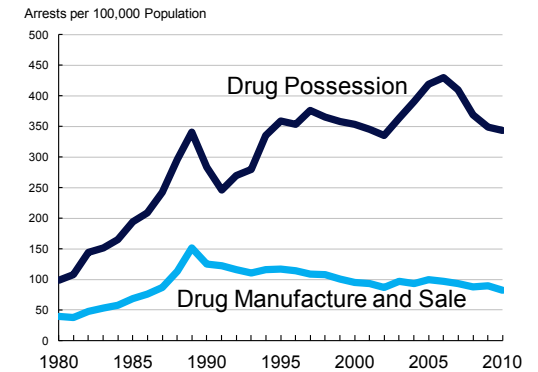
In 1991, law enforcement agencies nationwide reported a total of 80,200 drug-related arrests involving juvenile offenders. Between 1991 and 1997, juvenile drug arrests grew 169 percent to just over 216,700 arrests.

Measured as the rate of arrests per 100,000 and using the ages of 10-17 as the denominator, juvenile drug arrests grew 138% between 1991 and 1997, from 288 to 686 arrests per 100,000.

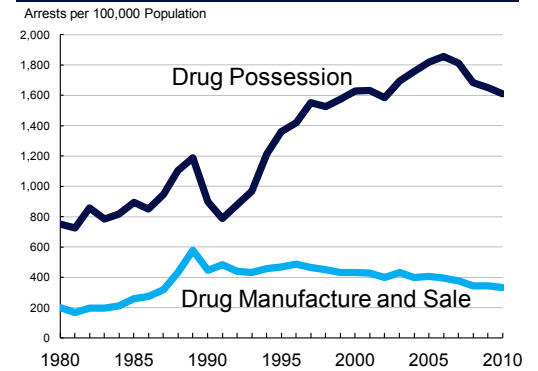
During the same period, the juvenile arrest rate for drug sales and manufacturing grew just 8 percent (124 to 134 per 100,000) while the arrest rate for possession climbed 237 percent, from 164 to 552 arrests per 100,000 juveniles.

Drug possession arrests grew for all ages, but the increase was sharpest for juveniles

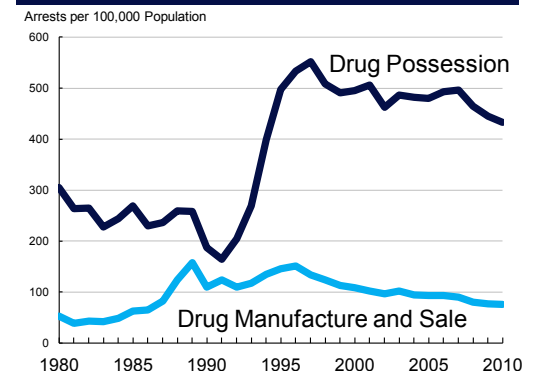
AGE 25 AND OLDER



AGES 18 – 24



UNDER AGE 18



Data source: Snyder, Howard and Mulako-Wangota, J., Arrest Data Analysis Tool at www.bjs.gov. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice (1980-2009). Estimates for 2010 calculated directly using data from *Crime in the United States 2010*, Federal Bureau of Investigation.



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