

The War on Drugs at the Mall:
Anti-Drug Campaigns in Shopping Centers during the Reagan Administration

Jessica M. Krueger

30th Annual James A. Barnes Graduate Student History Conference

March 15, 2025

Introduction

In the preface to her 2013 monograph *The Drug Wars in America*, historian Kathleen Frydl writes that "There is no issue where government policy diverges from American popular opinion—let alone popular American practice—as drastically as it does in the handling of illicit drugs."¹ Historian Matthew Lassiter argues similarly in his 2023 monograph *The Suburban Crisis*, writing that the war on drugs was, and remains today, an impossible public policy which criminalizes the social practices of the majority of Americans.² Setting aside contemporary debates concerning the legalization or decriminalization of illicit drugs and drug-related offenses,³ it is not difficult to comprehend the tensions which exist throughout the history of drug policy in the United States (U.S.), a history framed first and foremost by racist ideologies, moral crusades, and governmental inconsistencies—but also real people and genuine if not misplaced concerns.

Public consensus holds that the "war on drugs" began in June 1971 when Richard Nixon declared drug abuse to be "public enemy number one," but the war on drugs, broadly construed, began long before Nixon's presidency and has continued long since after.⁴ Historians of drug policy in the U.S. argue that this is because there are other factors, beyond general concern for the trafficking and use of illicit drugs, which have motivated the U.S. government to sustain its anti-drug campaign. An extensive body of research demonstrates that the war on drugs has operated as part of the nation's racial state building project through the criminalization and mass incarceration of minority groups. As author of *The New Jim Crow* Michelle Alexander notes, the war on drugs "has been waged almost exclusively in poor communities of color, even though studies consistently show that people of all colors use and sell illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates."⁵ As a result, scholars of drug policy and the carceral state have tended to focus on the

impacts of punitive legislation and targeted law enforcement in their drug war analyses. A new branch of scholarship adds nuance to this prevailing narrative by examining how anti-drug campaigns, or what historian Max Felker-Kantor refers to as the "soft sides of the drug war," have reinforced the law-and-order approach to the purported drug crisis by racializing drug users and drug pushers.⁶

I contribute to this recent scholarship by examining the use and support of anti-drug campaigns in shopping centers during the late 1980s.⁷ While the Reagan Administration revived and expanded the country's war on drugs with increased funding, harsher sentencing, and community-based preventative measures, shopping centers proliferated across the U.S.⁸ As news outlets warned of nonwhite drug pushers and urban "blight," white middle-class populations flocked to shopping centers, protected as they were alleged to be from the supposed ills of modern society. Whether simply to shop, to meet up with friends, or to keep out of the rain on cold, stormy days, shopping centers were the hub of white suburban community life. Examining the use and support of anti-drug campaigns in shopping centers during the Reagan Administration, a period during which the shopping center industry flourished and the war on drugs intensified, highlights the racial and economic motivations underpinning U.S. drug policy as well as the function of shopping centers as purveyors of ongoing political rhetoric.

I base my research in the files of Ronald Reagan's first drug abuse policy advisor Carlton Turner and in the office records of First Lady Nancy Reagan. Melvin Sembler, president of the International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC) from 1986 to 1987, was in regular contact with Reagan's drug abuse policy office. Turner's files contain a typed speech that Sembler delivered as president of the ICSC which proclaims the importance of shopping centers to society and warns against the dangers of drug use to the shopping center industry and to the

American public. The office records of Nancy Reagan contain White House staff correspondence which documents the planning and development of the ICSC's "Kids Say Know" program, an anti-drug campaign which was held in shopping centers across the U.S. and in Canada in 1987.

I argue that, in collaboration with the Reagan Administration and under the chief directive of Sembler, the ICSC endorsed shopping centers as a heroic enterprise against, and the activity of shopping as a moral alternative to, drug use. I argue further that the ICSC's Kids Say Know anti-drug campaign functioned to reinforce shopping centers as a white, segregated space. Lastly, I contend that the decision of Sembler and the ICSC to involve the shopping center industry in the ongoing anti-drug crusade was motivated at least in part by concerns over revenue loss.

Part 1: Melvin Sembler's "Basic Idea Exchange Speech"

Melvin Sembler was active in the shopping center industry and in the crusade against drugs long before his appointment as president of the International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC) in May 1986. In 1962, he founded the Sembler Company which specializes in the development and management of shopping centers in the southeastern states. In 1976, Sembler and his wife Betty Sembler founded Straight Inc., a controversial drug-rehabilitation program with locations across the U.S until the shutdown of its facilities in 1993.⁹ Records show that Straight Inc. executive staff were in frequent contact with Turner's drug abuse policy office. Nancy Reagan herself visited a Straight Inc. rehabilitation facility in 1982 and was impressed by its operations.¹⁰ The Reagan Administration never formally endorsed Straight Inc., however, likely due to a string of lawsuits and allegations of abuse which trailed the program throughout the 1980s.¹¹ This did not stifle Sembler's political career: prior to Reagan's inauguration and until his death in 2023, Sembler funded various Republican campaigns and served as U.S.

ambassador, respectively, to Australia and Italy under the presidencies of George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush.¹²

The ICSC was founded in 1957 as the global trade association for the shopping center industry.¹³ Outside of regulating the operations of shopping centers across the world, the ICSC hosts various professional development opportunities, industry conferences, and community relations programs. In the spring of 1986, the ICSC sponsored a "Kids Safety Week" program at shopping centers across the U.S. and in Canada where parents could have their children fingerprinted in case of future kidnapping or abduction.¹⁴ Under Sembler's presidency and in collaboration with the Reagan Administration, the ICSC turned its attention to the ongoing drug crisis.

That the ICSC began its anti-drug campaign in the latter half of 1986 is no coincidence. In June 1986, the cocaine overdoses of Len Bias and Don Rogers heightened public concern over the ongoing crack epidemic. News media greatly expanded coverage of the drug crisis and warned against the dangers of crack, generating loud, if not widespread, moral panic across white suburban America. As the November midterm congressional elections neared, politicians sensationalized the crack epidemic further by leveraging fears to gain support for their campaigns.¹⁵ The Reagan Administration also passed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 during this time which, as many scholars have noted, disproportionately targeted black Americans. Sembler's influence notwithstanding, The ICSC's decision to engage in the anti-drug crusade should be treated as a response to the political climate of 1986.

Sembler announced the ICSC's newfound role in the drug epidemic with an Idea Exchange conference speech he delivered to members of the ICSC throughout his presidency.¹⁶ Full of grandiose rhetoric, Sembler begins his speech by asserting the importance of shopping

centers to American society. "Shopping in our centers has become more than a habit, more than a convenient and pleasurable experience," he states. "Shopping has become a national past-time." Further highlighting this fact, Sembler continues: "When you look at some of the headlines in today's papers, it is not surprising that many find shopping centers a safe and pleasant place to fulfill their dreams...maybe even more so than home, workplace...or school [underlines original]." Employing language not unlike that of which had been used previously to articulate the dangers of drug use,¹⁷ Sembler proclaims with great pride that the shopping center industry has "captured the hearts, the minds, and the pocketbooks of the American consumer" [underlines original].¹⁸

Sembler portrays customers, and the American public more generally, as gullible and in desperate need for entertainment. Given the busy and hectic life of the average consumer, Sembler purports, customers seek a hassle-free shopping experience which distracts them from the mundane realities of their everyday lives. Relative to the customer, the story Sembler tells of shopping center executives is one of heroism and duty: the shopping center industry must meet the demands of the consumer, he maintains; in fact, it is crucial that they do, not only for the well-being of the customer but for the health of the nation. "We devised programs and promotions primarily to attract people to our centers; to encourage their habit of shopping with us rather than elsewhere...and they certainly did develop that habit, thank goodness! And it has been a meaningful one...for shoppers...and for us," Sembler affirms.¹⁹

In the second half of his speech, Sembler discusses the responsibility of the shopping center industry to a "higher goal," to help eradicate what he calls "the plague of the 20th century—the \$110 billion-a-year national drug habit."²⁰ Sembler's use of the word "habit" is important to note here. Recall that in describing shoppers and their activity, Sembler uses "habit"

frequently and in a positive manner; he implies to his audience that customers' shopping habits are something to be encouraged, even praised. The connotation of "habit" in Sembler's representation of drug use is clearly more negative and on par with such evocative terms as "junkie" or "addict." This, alongside Sembler's reference to the high costs of drug use, positions shopping as a moral activity worthy of expenditure. Sembler portrays drug use, in contrast, as immoral and as a threat to the U.S. economy.

Sembler's greatest concern appears to be the loss of profits which drug use purportedly causes. Drug use, he says, "bleeds billions from the economy while paying no taxes."²¹ To drive home the issue, Sembler asks his audience to imagine how much more merchandise might be sold and profits gained were not so many Americans spending their money on drugs. In this way, he frames the shopping center industry as a "victim" of the ongoing drug crisis. Expressing a sense of community and mutual responsibility, Sembler rallies his audience to increase security measures, discourage drug use, and hold anyone caught with drug paraphernalia accountable. It seems unlikely that Sembler means to include black Americans in his vision of drug-free shopping centers. As art historian Alexandra Lange writes, "The shopping mall...has to be seen as a racist form, born from speculation that a whites-only version...would prove to be a better return on investment."²² I do not think it far-fetched to assume that insofar as Sembler viewed the drug epidemic as a threat to revenue, he also viewed the drug epidemic as a threat to the historicized segregation of shopping center space.

Part 2: International Council of Shopping Center's "Kids Say Know" Campaign

In May 1987 the International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC), in collaboration with President Reagan's drug abuse policy office, sponsored a week-long anti-drug campaign called "Kids Say Know" at shopping centers across the United States (U.S.). At Melvin Sembler's

request, First Lady Nancy Reagan served as the program's Honorary Chairman.²³ Participating centers displayed posters, passed out flyers, offered souvenir photographs, and assembled table-stations—complete with a life-size cut-out of Nancy Reagan—where children could pledge their commitment to staying drug-free.²⁴ Other activities included surveys, guided artwork, and rap singing contests. Prizes might include a Walkman, a shopping center-branded beach towel, or a Kids Say Know sticker. Children were also given the opportunity to have their name published in the local newspaper, affirming to the public which individuals had "promise[d] to live a drug-free life."²⁵ This incentivized children to participate in the Kids Say Know campaign. More importantly, it advertised the shopping center industry's involvement in the ongoing anti-drug crusade and marketed shopping centers as "developers of a better life."²⁶

The ICSC hired public relations consulting company Hill and Knowlton to develop their Kids Say Know program in the fall of 1986.²⁷ The company's preliminary proposal begins by outlining the need for an anti-drug campaign in shopping centers. "Malls have become so popular with an undesirable element of the youth population that their community image has suffered—as well as their profitability," the proposal reads. "Mall management must cope with littering, heavy shoplifting, vandalism, and more serious crimes, such as drug dealing," it continues, implying that an anti-drug campaign in shopping centers would function to prevent, or at least alleviate, such problems. Interestingly, reports of drug use or trafficking at shopping centers in the late 1980s are relatively difficult to find in newspaper databases, suggesting either that drug-related offenses did not occur more often than any other minor crime, or that drug-related offenses *did* happen with more regularity and were not reported for fear that mentioning the presence of drugs in shopping centers would drive business away. Shopping centers, after all, were advertised as safe places to be, free from urban street crime—and what Hill and Knowlton

referred to in their proposal as the "undesirable element of the youth population."²⁸ In a 1982 episode of documentary news series *CBS Reports* titled "After the Dream Comes True," a security officer for Oak Park Mall in Topeka, Kansas remarks that "A lot of people go to malls to keep away from certain racial backgrounds,"²⁹ likely putting to words what Hill and Knowlton preferred to say in a more discrete way, that minority groups were not overtly welcome in shopping center spaces. There is no doubt that the ICSC's Kids Say Know campaign was designed to educate participants on the dangers of drug use, but the campaign must also be viewed as an effort to reinforce the white, segregated nature of shopping center space.

Hill and Knowlton's preliminary proposal also suggests that the Kids Say Know campaign was intended to position the activity of shopping as a heroic endeavor in the war against drugs. Not unlike run-of-the-mill wartime propaganda, the proposal's program overview reads: "This country is fighting a war against drugs today, and American shoppers are our infantry." As historian Lizabeth Cohen notes in her 2003 monograph *A Consumer's Republic*, the conflation of shopping with heroic duty is not new. "Wherever one looked in the aftermath of [World War II]," she writes, "one found a vision of postwar America where the general good would be best served not by frugality or even moderation, but by individuals pursuing personal wants in a flourishing mass consumption marketplace."³⁰ By depicting shoppers as infantry, Hill and Knowlton, and the ICSC by association, capitalized on this historical precedent to position the shopping center as a heroic enterprise in the crusade against drugs.

An early draft of the Kids Say Know pledge further demonstrates the ICSC's intentions for their anti-drug campaign. In January 1987, ICSC coordinator Tracey Hall wrote to the Director of Projects and Officer of the First Lady Martin Coyne to request permission to use Nancy Reagan's signature on a pledge which was titled "Certificate of Heroism."³¹ Coyne denied

Hall's request. No evidence exists to suggest that the Certificate of Heroism pledge was ever used in the Kids Say Know campaign, even without Nancy Reagan's signature. The pledge that was later approved to be used with Nancy Reagan's signature is more typical of drug pledges of the era. No mention of heroism is made, though the pledge's inclusion of the ICSC's name and logo at the bottom demonstrates the ICSC's intent to associate the shopping center industry with the ongoing anti-drug effort. No information is provided as to why the drafted Certificate of Heroism pledge was rejected by Coyne, but its mere existence suggests that the ICSC believed it to be appropriate for their Kids Say Know campaign and, more importantly, befitting of the broader image the ICSC was attempting to cultivate of the shopping center as a heroic enterprise against drug use. The contextual significance of space and place cannot be discounted here.³² Children would have signed these certificates as their parents shopped and as fluorescent lights shined down upon glimmering stores fronts and retail displays designed to appeal. Relative to these idyllic, utopian façades were stark, moralistic warnings against drug use and the opportunity to pledge your allegiance with the side of good—a fueled juxtaposition that would only have bolstered the public's opinion of shopping centers and the industry's role in the anti-drug crusade.

Conclusion

As historian Samuel Roberts notes, the Reagan Administration's war on drugs diverged from prior administrations' platforms in that it "reframed all aspects of the drug question within binaries such as good versus evil, and morally pure abstinence versus abject addiction."³³ Any legitimate effort to probe this dichotomy must wrestle with the use and support of anti-drug campaigns during the Reagan era. Examining the International Council of Shopping Center's (ICSC) "Kids Say Know" campaign is valuable, in particular, because it addresses an important

question which generally remains without an explicit response: just what activities and diversions were encouraged in lieu of drug use? Archival records of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library demonstrate, as I have argued, that Melvin Sembler and the ICSC endorsed shopping, and shopping centers more generally, as the drug epidemic's moral and heroic alternatives.

Economics and race have been a central theme throughout my study. Sembler and the ICSC viewed the drug epidemic as a legitimate threat to retail profits and to the white segregated nature of shopping center space, and it was these concerns which drove the shopping center industry's involvement in the crusade against drugs. This should not be all that surprising. Historians of drug policy in the United States (U.S.) have long conceded that the war on drugs is a project of the racial state. Other scholars have emphasized the States' enforcement of drug policy for revenue purposes, arguing that the U.S. government has waged its war on drugs to prevent the diversion of capital to underground pathways. Examining the use and support of anti-drug campaigns in shopping centers under the Reagan administration demonstrates that these branches of drug war scholarship which focus on the intersections of race and economics, respectively, are not as distinct as they might appear. The ICSC, under Sembler's directive and with the Reagan Administration's support, rallied to advertise the shopping center industry as the ultimate good against the evils of drug use, motivated by the industry's bottom line and the expectation of suburban white America that shopping centers remain segregated—two incentives that, if the racist history of shopping centers is any evidence, were deeply intertwined and reciprocal.

¹ Kathleen J. Frydl, *The Drug Wars in America, 1940-1973* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), ix.

² Matthew Lassiter, *The Suburban Crisis: White America and the War on Drugs* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2023), 3.

³ Anthony Faiola and Catarina Fernandes Martins, "Once Hailed for Decriminalizing Drugs, Portugal is Now Having Doubts," *The Washington Post*, July 7, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/07/07/portugal-drugs-decriminalization-heroin-crack/>; Mike Baker, "Oregon is Recriminalizing Drugs, Dealing Setback to Reform Movement," *The New York Times*, March 1, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/01/us/oregon-drug-decriminalization-rollback-measure-110.html>; Vjosa Isai, "Bold Experiment or Safety Risk? Canada is Divided on How to Stop Drug Deaths," *The New York Times*, July 11, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/11/world/canada/canada-opioid-crisis-decriminalization.html?searchResultPosition=3>.

⁴ David Farber, "The Advent of the War on Drugs," in *The War on Drugs: A History*, ed. David Farber (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 17-18.

⁵ Michelle Alexander, "The War on Drugs and the New Jim Crow," *Race, Poverty, & the Environment* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 76.

⁶ Max Felker-Kantor, *DARE To Say No: Policing and the War on Drugs in Schools* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2024), 4. See also: Joseph Moreau, "'I Learned it by Watching YOU' The Partnership for a Drug-Free America and the Attack on 'Responsible Use' Education in the 1980s," *Journal of Social History* 49, no. 3 (Spring 2016): 710-737; Lassiter, *The Suburban Crisis*.

⁷ I refer to "shopping center" as an enclosed, climate-controlled space with a carefully designed layout and retail stores throughout, as in the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota or the Lloyd Center in Portland, Oregon. The archival sources on which I base my research use "shopping center" rather than "mall" or "retail center." For the sake of consistency, I do the same.

⁸ "Forecast for Shop Malls Optimistic," *Los Angeles Times*, August 26, 1984.

⁹ More information about Straight Inc., which now operates as the Drug Free America Foundation, can be found at <https://www.survivingstraightinc.com>.

¹⁰ Lassiter, *The Suburban Crisis*, 493.

¹¹ "Panel to Investigate Charges Teens Forcibly Held at Drug Center," *The Atlanta Journal*, February 5, 1982; Eve Zibart, "Three Testify Against Straight Inc.," *The Washington Post*, May 24, 1983, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1983/05/25/three-testify-against-straight-inc/b5779872-ff86-4760-b64a-4891406c0e53/>; Ben L. Kaufman, "Drug-Treatment Group Sued; Parents Say Son was Abused," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, July 14, 1986.

¹² I speculate that Sembler leveraged his anti-drug efforts with Straight Inc. and the ICSC to bolster his political career after the end of Reagan's presidential term in 1989.

¹³ In 2021, the International Council of Shopping Centers rebranded; it now operates under the acronym ICSC and has developed a new tagline, "Innovating Commerce Serving Communities," to better reflect the retail industry as it exists today.

¹⁴ "For Immediate Release: 1.5 Million Children Fingerprinted During Kids Safety Week At Shopping Centers, Tally Shows," Kids Safety Week, folder "ICSC's (International Council of Shopping Centers) 'Kids Say Know' Campaign (1)," box OA 18731, Office of First Lady: Projects Office Records, Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, California.

¹⁵ Samuel K. Roberts, "The Impact of the US Drug War on People of Color" in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Drug History*, ed. Paul Gootenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 476.

¹⁶ Sembler's speech was also featured in the December 1986 issue of *Shopping Centers Today*, a monthly journal published by the ICSC. "'Part of Our Maturity': The Motivation to Kids: A Leader's View," *Shopping Centers Today*, December 1986, folder "ICSC's (International Council of Shopping Centers) 'Kids Say Know' Campaign (2)," box OA 18731, Office of First Lady: Projects Office Records, Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, California.

¹⁷ In a speech for the 11th Annual Conference on Youth and Drugs for the Parents Resources Institute Drug Education (PRIDE), Nancy Reagan warns her audience of the dangers of drugs: "They aren't content with destroying the body, they want the heart and the spirit and the mind—the whole individual." "PRIDE Conference Speech, Nancy Reagan, March 20, 1986, folder "Chron File March 1985-July 1986 (6)," box 2, Carlton E. Turner Files, Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, California.

¹⁸ "Basic Idea Exchange Speech," Mel Sembler, folder "[Chron File] August 1986-September 1986 (5)," box 2, Carlton E. Turner Files, Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, California.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Alexandra Lange, *Meet Me by the Fountain: An Inside History of the Mall* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), 22.

²³ Memo, Martin J. Coyne to Melvin Sembler, November 19, 1986, folder "ICSC's (International Council of Shopping Centers) 'Kids Say Know' Campaign (2)," box OA 18731, Office of First Lady: Projects Office Records, Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, California.

²⁴ Memo, Melvin Sembler to Martin J. Coyne, February 18, 1987, folder "ICSC's (International Council of Shopping Centers) 'Kids Say Know' Campaign (2)," box OA 18731, Office of First Lady: Projects Office Records, Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, California.

²⁵ Kids Say Know Plan Book, International Council of Shopping Centers, folder "ICSC's (International Council of Shopping Centers) 'Kids Say Know' Campaign (3)," box OA 18731, Office of First Lady: Projects Office Records, Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, California.

²⁷ Records show that in October 1986, Senior Vice President of Hill and Knowlton Penny Peters supplied Melvin Sembler a preliminary campaign proposal which suggested a whole other title for the event; instead of "Kids Say Know," the proposal recommended "Shoppers Take Action: Nix Drugs," or S.T.A.N.D. It is obvious that Sembler declined this portion of Hill and Knowlton's proposal, though subsequent news releases from the company verify its continued involvement in the project and suggest that fundamental components of Hill and Knowlton's original proposal endured. It seems likely that the anti-drug campaign's name was changed to Kids Say Know in order to coordinate with the previous year's "Kids Safety Week" program which Hill and Knowlton also helped to develop.

²⁸ "A Community Relations Program: International Council of Shopping Centers," Hill and Knowlton, folder "ICSC's (International Council of Shopping Centers) 'Kids Say Know' Campaign (1)," box OA 18731, Office of First Lady: Projects Office Records, Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, California.

²⁹ Craig Leake, director, *CBS Reports*, "After the Dream Comes True," aired August 4, 1982.

³⁰ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 121.

³¹ "Certificate of Heroism," International Council of Shopping Centers, folder "ICSC's (International Council of Shopping Centers) 'Kids Say Know' Campaign (3)," box OA 18731, Office of First Lady: Projects Office Records, Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, California.

³² I follow historian Leif Jerram in defining space as "the proximate physical disposition of things in relation to one another and to humans," and place as "the values, beliefs, codes, and practices that surround a particular location." Leif Jerram, "Space: A Useless Category for Historical Analysis?" *History and Theory* 52, no. 3 (2013): 400-419.

³³ Roberts, "The Impact of the US Drug War on People of Color," 475.