

"An insightful, deeply moving work." —Bryan Stevenson, author of Just Mercy

WHEN CRACK

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF A MISUNDERSTOOD ERA

WAS KING

DONOVAN X. RAMSEY

DISCUSSION GUIDE



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Donovan X. Ramsey likens those who lived through the crack epidemic to survivors of war and other catastrophic events, mentioning trauma, memory, and postmemory. Discuss this comparison and whether it applies.
2. What socioeconomic conditions and individual decisions facilitated the crack era?
3. How would you describe crack as a substance and how does it compare to other drugs?
4. Why might Ramsey have chosen to write about four individuals who survived the crack era, in addition to the drug's rise and fall?
5. How did being raised by an addict impact Elgin's life?
6. What distinguished Kurt's approach to drug policy from those of his peers?
7. Are there any politicians or public figures you see carrying on Kurt Schmoke's legacy? Explain.
8. One person could look at Lennie's story and see weakness and victimhood; another could see a story of incredible strength, resilience, and self-sufficiency in the face of a series of horrific circumstances. What did you take away from Lennie's story?
9. Discuss how crack factored into the cycle of abuse and trauma in which many addicts—especially those who were Black women—became trapped.
10. What made Shawn want to sell crack despite his promising basketball career?
11. Describe the relationship between the crack era and hip hop.
12. What role did the media play in perpetuating lies and misconceptions about crack? What role did politicians play? Compare and contrast these with the roles of those closer to the epidemic, like community leaders and rappers.
13. Ramsey outlines and debunks several myths about crack and its users. Which was the most surprising or salient to you? Why?
14. How did the crack era change the U.S. criminal legal system?
15. Could the United States government have ended the crack epidemic earlier? Discuss.
16. Do you believe the war on drugs, Just Say No, and other anti-drug campaigns were effective? Why or why not?
17. Do you believe the crack epidemic was the result of a government conspiracy to disrupt Black and Latino communities? Why or why not?
18. What similarities, if any, do you see between historical events covered in the book and current events?
19. What are some of the consequences of the crack era? What lasting effects did it have on our society?
20. How do you think we—as a nation, a public, and a culture—should make amends for the harm done during the crack era? How can we apply the lessons from *When Crack Was King* to events happening today?

A comprehensive examination of crack-related articles in *The New York Times*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* from 1985 through 1995 found “an insidious bias in news coverage through its focus on the inner city, in spite of broader use of crack.” It’s time we excavate the real stories of the individuals, families, and communities who were swept up in the crack epidemic. A part of that work is putting ideas like “crackhead,” “crack baby,” and “superpredator” to rest.

MYTH

“Crackheads” were a special class of addicts. **Crackheads were supposed to be from some netherworld**—their main activity was begging for money and disrupting community life. Then they were supposed to return to wherever they came from . . . **wherever the trash went after we threw it out.**

Cocaine-exposed infants, “**crack babies,**” were doomed to lives of deficit. Crack babies were, as the stories went . . . deformed, brain dead, and expected to overwhelm taxpayer-funded public services.

Crack was a special class of drug—different from powder cocaine.

Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No” campaign and policing ended the crack epidemic.

The crack epidemic continues.

Hip-Hop glamorized the drug trade.

REALITY

I’ve interviewed hundreds of people whose lives were touched by crack, but **I’ve never met a “crackhead.”** I met *people*. **Their stories were buried by that word.**

Hallam Hurt, former chair of neonatology at Philadelphia’s Albert Einstein Medical Center, researched the effects of prenatal cocaine exposure on developmental outcomes from 1988 to 2015. **The results were astounding: There were no significant differences** in the development between children exposed to cocaine in utero and those who were not.

Though ingested differently, crack and powder cocaine are **the same on a molecular level**. But they weren’t treated the same: The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 established a mandatory minimum sentence of five years without parole for possession of **5 grams of crack cocaine**—the same minimum sentence mandated for possession of ***500 grams of the exact same drug in powder form**.

A new generation of young people simply refused to pick up crack. Government researchers found that these young people—self-directed—**saw the devastation crack wrought and swore off the substance**. In a way that Nancy Reagan could never, it appears the community and culture surrounding the most vulnerable young people taught them—rather than told them—to just say no.

Rates of crack use in most cities hit their peak around 1989, plateaued, and started to decline soon after. Some still use the substance in America today, but they’re a small cohort of mostly veteran users, with fewer people opting for crack each year.

As crack use increased throughout the ’80s, so did the release of rap songs **warning users of its consequences**. These songs **did not glamorize drugs**—they were practically uniform in their opposition.