Drug traffic is public enemy number one domestically in the United States today and we must wage a total offensive, worldwide, nationwide, government-wide, and, if I might say so, media-wide.

-PRESIDENT NIXON, in remarks before media executives at the Flagship Hotel, Rochester, N. Y., June 18, 1971

The mobilization of public fears and anxieties to support the president's offensive was based not on the damage heroin addicts inflicted on themselves but on the damage they presumably inflicted on innocent members of society. "The real problem is that heroin addicts steal, rob, and commit every other kind of crime," Ambrose told U.S. News & World Report in 1971, "so we have this terrible problem of crime in the cities, much of which is related to heroin addiction." (This image was reinforced by the antidrug messages in television programming and commercials which depicted addicts as glassy-eyed fiends compulsively driven to commit violent crimes.) Nixon also postulated, in a speech to Congress, "Narcotics addiction is a major contributor to crime. The cost of supplying a narcotics habit can run from thirty dollars a day to one hundred dollars a day. This is two hundred ten to seven hundred dollars a week, or over ten thousand dollars to over thirty-six thousand dollars a year." The president went on to explain that since "addicts do not ordinarily hold jobs ... they often turn to shoplifting, mugging, burglary, armed robbery, and so on." Administration officials then calculated that "the total annual crime cost of the country—largely crime on the streets—is roughly 18 billion dollars." This staggering figure of $18 billion—which was based on a series of assumptions about what fraction of the value of stolen goods addicts receive from "fences"—was then released to the press and to Congress as the official estimate of crime caused by heroin, and was included in the government's "briefing book" used to inform reporters writing about the problem of drug abuse.

While such authoritative-sounding figures were widely reported in the press and no doubt added to public anxieties about crime and narcotics, they were not in fact related to any actual statistics compiled by the government. Indeed, the $18 billion Worth of crime which government spokesmen claimed addicts were committing to buy their supply of heroin was actually more than 25 times greater than the total sum of property that was stolen and unrecovered throughout the United States in 1971 (including hijackings, embezzlements, automobile, fur, and jewelry thefts), according to the Uniform Crime Reports published by the FBI. (In New York City alone, where more than half of all of the nation's addicts were presumed to reside, addicts would have to steal goods worth more than $9 billion, if one used the calculus of the Nixon administration; yet the total value of property stolen that year according to police-department records was only $225 million—or one fortieth the amount that addicts alone were presumed to have stolen.) To be sure, not all theft is reported to the police—though the dollar value of stolen property is more often exaggerated, or overreported, than it is underreported. However, a study commissioned by the Law Enforcement Administration Agency in 1972, using census-taking techniques to poll the citizenry about crime, estimated that no more than one half the crimes in
New York City and other urban areas with major addiction programs go unreported. Even if the total amount of crime was doubled in 1971, addicts would still be stealing more than twelve times all the property actually stolen in America in 1971. This 1200-percent discrepancy between the claims of the Nixon administration and government statistics was further compounded by the fact that the sorts of crimes which accounted for the bulk of stolen and unrecovered property—such as car theft, hijacking, bank robbery, embezzlement, and fraud—were not normally attributed to addicts by law-enforcement officials.

The $18-billion figure did not correspond to reported or even actual crime in America; it was merely another datum in the campaign to brief the press and thereby better organize public fears about heroin addicts. Though journalists widely reported such billion-dollar hyperbole as fact, Egil Krogh and the White House strategists fully realized that the "magic numbers," as Krogh put it, were based on very dubious assumptions about the relation Of crime and drug addiction. For one thing, the multibillion-dollar estimates were based on the BNDD's projection of 559,000 addicts. This projection, in turn, was based on a statistical artifact which was later revised downward (when no evidence was found of the 400,000 or so unknown addicts). Moreover, the $18-billion calculus assumed arbitrarily that each addict required $16,750 worth of heroin every year to sustain his habit; yet there was no hard evidence that the average heroin user purchased even one tenth that amount of the drug. More important, there was no reason to assume that all heroin users were compelled to support their habit through crime rather than through part- or full-time employment (or through support provided by friends, relatives, or welfare programs). As Krogh readily admitted, the government had no empirical basis for estimating the proportion of addicts who supported themselves through theft. If all the projected 559,000 addicts committed two or three burglaries a day, as President Nixon postulated, they would have to commit at least 365 million burglaries a year. This sum would be two hundred times more than all the burglaries committed in 1971 in America. (Nixon's speech writers apparently borrowed this particular hyperbole from the rhetoric of Governor Rockefeller in New York State.)

In computing the costs of addiction to the rest of society, the administration's sharp departure from reality proceeded from the myth of the vampire-addict that had been developed almost a half century before by Captain Hobson. So long as it was assumed that all heroin users were ultimately transformed into fiends who were driven by their insatiable appetite for the drug to commit any crime or take any risk to obtain enough money to satisfy their habit, it followed that the total cost of their crimes could be computed simply by multiplying the cost of their drug consumption by the number of addicts. Although such a model of addict behavior became an integral part of television dramas depicting themes of drugs and crime (partly owing to the efforts of the Nixon administration), such dramatic stereotypes grossly oversimplified the behavior of most heroin users. For example, a study prepared for the State of New York by the Hudson Institute on "The Economics of Heroin Distribution" concluded that 39 percent of those classified as addicts were either "joy poppers," "intermittent users," "apprentices," or addicts with otherwise "small habits." Less than one quarter of those classified as addicts used more...
than $25 a day worth of heroin and were considered to have "large habits. Moreover, the assumption that heroin users cannot work at legitimate jobs is questionable. Findings of the United States Army in Vietnam showed that hundreds of thousands of soldiers were able to perform their normal duties while using heroin (which is why the problem was not detected for three years). To be sure, a large number of addicts are engaged in illegal occupations, but even addicts engaged in theft tend to avoid the more risky crimes of robbery, mugging, and other crimes against persons. Instead they tend to concentrate on such low-risk crimes as shoplifting, boosting (that is, stealing from parked trucks), or burglarizing abandoned buildings. In a study of sixty-five active heroin users in New York City, Heather L. Ruth found that less than 10 percent of her sample ever engaged in robbery or mugging. Presumably, the reason why criminal addicts avoid high-risk crimes against persons is not that they have higher morals than other criminals but that the costs of being imprisoned and denied their drug are higher than for nonaddicted criminals. Since from the available data there is no way of knowing what proportion of heroin users support themselves through regular or part-time work, welfare, or dependence on other persons, any crime nexus or calculation of the amount of crime that addicts commit must be ultimately problematic.

The White House staff itself had little confidence in the huge crime numbers that were being supplied to the press through briefing officers in the various agencies. For instance, a 1970 Domestic Council staff report in Egil Krogh's file explains, "The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that addicts in the United States commit up to five billion dollars worth of crime in the country." Krogh's staff estimated that in fact the figure was "closer to one billion dollars," but explained that "the high figure of the National Institute of Mental Health can be attributed to their desire to evidence need for treatment programs, thereby aggrandizing their territory." In other words, Krogh and his staff presumed that the multibillion-dollar numbers attached to drug crimes were simply a product of bureaucracy's attempting to excite the public. Nor was the Domestic Council staff unaware of the fragile nature of the connection between heroin and crime. On March 19, 1971, the Domestic Council decision paper, "Narcotic Addiction and Drug Abuse Program," drawn up by Krogh and Donfeld, stated, "Even if all drug abuse were eradicated, there might not be a dramatic drop in crime statistics on a national level, since much crime is not related to drug abuse."