The Imagery and Reality of the War on Drugs

You've seen the photos. Flaming mountains of marijuana. Heroin hidden in car parts. Tables laid out with a devil's spread of drugs, cash and guns.

And most recently, a 20-year-old Panamanian woman was caught trying to smuggle cocaine into Spain by surgically implanting it in her breasts.

Since the beginning of the so-called war on drugs, and possibly longer, law enforcement agencies have taken photos of drug bounties or invited news agencies to shoot their own pics. You could call it a sort of pornography: like war porn, torture porn or the standard naked-people porn, drug porn offers up a taste of the illicit.

"Let's face it, before terrorism, there wasn't anything that excited the media more than drugs, whether it was a show like Miami Vice or a movie like Scarface," said Richard Mangan, a professor at Florida Atlantic University who spent 25 years as an agent with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). "It's going to lead the evening news and it has for 30 or 40 years, and agencies are very cognizant of that."

From a practical standpoint, photos of drug spreads can serve as evidence in court. But the media events serve a different purpose. They help agencies like the DEA or Customs and Border Protection (CBP) promote their work and "show that they're spending the taxpayer's money in a prudent manner," Mangan said. "So both sides are getting something out of it."

For its part, CBP agrees. "We are charged by the American people to enforce U.S. law and we want to share the results of those efforts," said Michael Friel, a spokesperson for the agency.

So does the DEA, according to spokesperson Barbara Carreno. "You have a budget to operate and you want to show that you're doing your job," she said. "This is about letting communities know what you're finding." Photos aren't limited to drugs, she added. They also show guns and money that have been seized.

However, in recent years the public has grown desensitized to the typical drug bust photo-op, according to Mangan. As a result, the images that you see now tend to be more outlandish (cocaine-filled breasts, for example) than in the past.

More importantly, public enthusiasm for the drug war has declined significantly in the last decade. A November poll by Rasmussen Reports found that only 7 percent of Americans thought
the U.S. was winning the war on drugs.

In particular, the perception of marijuana has changed dramatically since the drug war began. A November Gallup poll found 48 percent of Americans in support of legalization. That's up from 12 percent in 1969; 25 percent in 1979, and 31 percent in 2000. Voters in Colorado and Washington have spoken at the ballot box: both states legalized recreational marijuana last month. Other states across the country are talking about similar paths to legalization.

The shifting public opinion on marijuana could have a drastic impact on how federal agencies do business since, pound for pound, marijuana accounts for the vast majority of seizures. In 2011, for example, CBP seized 4.5 million pounds of marijuana. The cumulative amount of cocaine, heroin and methamphetamines seized added up to roughly 240,000 pounds -- 5 percent of the total haul for that year among the four major drug types.

The percentages from the DEA were roughly the same, with marijuana making up 94 percent of seizures by weight among those drugs in 2011.

When law enforcement agencies make marijuana busts, they're just doing their job, according to the DEA's Carreno. "If indeed the public does not want this, they can tell their congressman and Congress can change the law," she said. "We do what the law says."

Public opinion about the drug war may be checkered, but there are still financial reasons to hold a press conference after a bust, according to Art Benavie, the author of Drugs: America's Holy War, and an economics professor at the University of North Carolina.

"The purpose is [for law enforcement] to show you that they're doing a good job so that they can get more money for their budgets and a better attitude toward them in general," Benavie said.

Mangan echoed that sentiment saying that seizures that get media attention are useful when enforcement officials are working on getting a budget.

Big busts can amount to a lot of money. The drugs on the table usually only speak to a small portion of what can be seized after a drug bust. Federal law allows the government to sue for possession of assets related to drug crimes, and the windfall can be enormous. The total amount of assets taken by the U.S. Attorneys’ Office for drug violations and crimes such as money laundering, racketeering and fraud went from roughly $314 million in 2005 to $1.8 billion in 2010.

The gains in assets don't necessarily translate into more success, according to reform advocates like Ethan Nadelmann, the founder and executive director of the Drug Policy Alliance.

"We know these photos don't mean anything in the bigger picture," he said. "There's a tremendous history of having ever-greater seizures...without it having any effect on price or availability in the United States."

Research published in 2011 by professors at the University of Chicago shows that even though
the likelihood of a dealer getting arrested has increased fivefold over the past 25 years, the street value of cocaine and heroin, with the value adjusted to account for the purity of the drug, has dropped substantially since the 1980s. The lower price suggests that the drugs are actually more plentiful, according to a 2005 report by the Rand Drug Policy Research Center.

According to Nadelmann, the photos give the impression that the drug war is working, even while drugs are actually getting cheaper and possibly more plentiful.

The pics allow law enforcement to "feel good about themselves," Nadelmann said. "The best possible thing to happen would be if the media did not show up at those press conferences."