Wrongful Drug Arrests in Northampton: What Are The Implications?

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Last June, a Northampton resident was charged with two and a half years in jail for drug possession. His name is Travis Albano, and his case was one of the 44 drug arrests in Northampton in 2022. Out of those arrests, 77% were cleared as false charges. Albano was one in the small percentage of those who were arrested and charged.

In 2023, 87% of individuals falsely arrested on drug crimes in Northampton. Similar to the year before, 47 people were cleared of drug crimes out of the 54 Northampton police arrested. With this pattern of majority wrongful arrests and limited convictions, police are investing time and resources into crimes that did not occur.

There are similar trends around the country, where legal enforcement is utilizing field drug tests, and only convicting a small percentage of those arrested. According to a UPenn study, they found field drug testing is one of largest known factors to wrongful arrests and convictions, falsely accusing 30,000 Americans yearly. “Presumptive field drug test kits are known to produce ‘false positive’ errors and were never designed or intended to provide conclusive evidence of the presence of drugs,” says Ross Miller, author of the report.

The report found a 32% false positive rate in cannabis field testing in the Massachusetts state department, and the Department of Corrections themselves noted a 38% rate. The National Institute of Standards and Technology argues presumptive field tests provide an efficient way for police to quickly and safely test suspicious contents without doing so directly. However, how much money is Northampton spending on erroneous field testing?

In 2018, the John Hopkins School of Public Health did a study investigating the costs of simple drug possession crimes in Baltimore City. They found the cost per individual ranged from arrest to case was an average of $3,600, and with trial, the cost was an average of $6,000. While overall spending may vary in Massachusetts and based on population, Northampton is investing thousands of dollars into each individual’s arrests. From the data in the crime overview of 2023, the city could have spent up to an average of $174,000 in the year for wrongful drug arrests.

Northampton police receive majority funding from local taxes paid for by residents in the city, meaning resident income is going towards the false arrests and accusations for drug possession crimes.

Inaccurate incarceration and large errors in field testing has large implications. The UPenn study on drug field testing found Black Americans experience these drug arrests at a rate 3x higher than White Americans. The continuous wrongful accusations are fueling disparities in low-income and Black communities, causing an overrepresentation of minorities in the state prison system for crimes they did not commit.

The 87% of false drug arrests tells a larger story about the waste of money and resources in the city police department and its implications of fueling inequities in the Northampton community. A push towards reforming drug fielding techniques could bridge these large errors and ensure funds are directed towards necessary efforts, instead of inaccurate ones.