

# Drug Policy Alliance

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://drugpolicy.org/resource/dpa-podcast-episode-36-puff-or-pass-what-law-order-svu-has-say-about-drugs-and-policing>

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On the latest edition of our Puff or Pass series examining how drugs and people who use drugs are portrayed in pop culture, DPAs marketing coordinator Ifetayo Harvey digs into a recent episode of Law & Order: Special Victims Unit. In a dramatic episode that covers many angles from problematic drug use to corrupt medical providers, from the intersection of drug policy with other systems to opioid overdose one question ties it all together: are the cops portrayed in SVU an accurate reflection of the cops we see in reality?

*Note that the opinions on Puff or Pass are the guest's own, and don't necessarily represent the official position of DPA.*

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Welcome to Drugs and Stuff, a podcast from the Drug Policy Alliance.

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### **Gabriella Miyares (0:09)**

Hello to our listeners, and welcome to another episode. I'm your host, Gabriella Miyares. So if you're a regular listener to Drugs and Stuff, you may have heard a previous episode where our intern Brian Hackel talked about a cannabis-centered episode of The Simpsons. That was part of our series called Puff or Pass, where we examine how drugs and drug use are portrayed in pop culture, for better or for worse. Today, we're presenting you with another entry in that series, as my colleague Ife Harvey, DPA's marketing coordinator, analyzes an episode of the long running fan favorite Law and Order SVU. Now, you don't have to know SVU to enjoy this episode. But if you're trying to avoid spoilers, we'll be discussing Season 21 Episode 16. Take it away, Ife.

### **Ifetayo Harvey (1:00)**

Hey everyone, my name is Ifetayo Harvey. I'm the marketing coordinator here at DPA. I'm also a longtime Law and Order SVU fan. I've seen just about every episode. I got into SVU when I was a college student. And it was just always one of the shows that was always on TV, and something that me and my friends got into when we weren't busy studying. So today I'm going to talk to you all about one of the more recent episodes from Season 21 Episode 16, titled "Eternal Relief from Pain." So this entire episode is filled with drug-related content. There's actually a lot going on, multiple stories. There's one subplot with vaping. And then the other subplot focuses on a corrupt pharmaceutical company that's getting doctors to prescribe painkillers in exchange for sex. And then there's another subplot. So today, I'm just gonna focus on one of these subplots, and that is Amanda Rollins and her family. So detective Amanda Rollins is somewhat new to SVU, she is a detective from Georgia. She's been with the team a few years, and she came in a few seasons ago and she has a history of gambling addiction. And she has a sister named Kim and they're recently estranged from each other. Kim has a history of drug addiction and, and a whole host of other issues. And they, they haven't seen each other for about two or three years. So one of the early scenes in the, in this episode is showing Kim with her son, pushing him in a stroller in a 99-cent pizza shop. She's on the phone calling Amanda, because she recently got in trouble by failing her drug test while she's on parole. Amanda doesn't answer, but she hangs up, leaves a voicemail hangs up. And then they show her doing a quick drug sale in the pizza shop. She spots a guy out in the corner, this white guy and they just like exchange the money and the little baggie really fast. You barely see it. So then, she's kind of acting a little frantic. But she calls out to another patron of this pizza shop. And says hey, hey, can you watch my kid while I go to the bathroom? And the woman kind of hesitates and is like, um, okay. So Kim goes downstairs to the bathroom and they show her grabbing a bunch of paper towels and grabbing a few straws earlier. So, when she goes down to the bathroom, she turns on the faucet and stuffs the drain with a bunch of paper towels. And then she sits on the toilet and grabs the trash can top to use as like a smooth surface. And you just see her pulling this white powder in a baggie out and grabbing her straws. So it's, it's implied that she's going to be snorting this powder. They never say in the episode what drug she was using. It could be cocaine. It could be some crushed up pills. Who knows. But later in that scene, the woman who's watching Kim's son alerts one of the pizza staff workers and says like hey, this woman asked me to watch her kid, and it's been a while, she hasn't been back. I don't know what to do. And so the staff person goes downstairs to check on her, and he hears the water running and just kind of knocks down the door, and they show Kim unconscious on the bathroom floor with all this water from the faucet pouring all over her. So they rush her to the hospital. Amanda meets her there and she's totally thrown off by the whole situation because she hasn't seen her sister in two years. And so she's very upset, saying why would you do something like that? Why? Why can't you be more responsible? And, and Kim goes well, I left the water faucet on just so people could rescue me, just in case

anything happened. And Amanda still is very upset with her and not really understanding why she would do something like this. But then Kim later confesses that she had an infection with her c-section. And she got a prescription for oxy but the doctor who she's getting this prescription from is extorting her for sex. And so obviously this fits in with the SVU squad's work. She, Amanda takes us back to Olivia, the lieutenant, and they have a discussion about how to move forward. In this discussion with Amanda, Olivia and Finn, Finn uses the word junkie and says like, Oh, she's a junkie like, how do you know she's telling the truth? So they decide to set up a undercover operation on this doctor. So basically what happens next is that Amanda, being Kim's sister, goes to the doctor under the guise of like, Oh, my sister referred you. I heard great things, and I'm looking to get a prescription for painkillers, and the doctor is all for it. He's an older gentleman. And he's like, Oh, you're just as pretty as your sister -- and he's telling her to lift her dress up, and it's basically implied that he's gonna give her the prescription in exchange for sex. And as soon as that's stated in their conversation, the squad, again, knocks down the door and arrests the doctor. So Kim goes to court because obviously, she loses custody of her son. Amanda, being the, being a detective helps her out, and says that she will take custody of the son. The judge shows mercy on Kim and agrees to return her son back into her custody. And after they're talking in the lobby of the courthouse with detective Tutoula, and he makes it known that the reason that she got custody is because Amanda, her sister, is a cop and she is very lucky. Which is true. So later they're going home. And right as they're walking up to Amanda's apartment, their dad surprises them. He drove all the way up from Georgia to come see and check up on Kim. Kim is excited. She's ecstatic to see her dad, while Amanda on the other hand, is very standoffish. At first, she doesn't want to have him over at her place, because he has also struggled with drug and alcohol addiction, but he assures her that: Oh, don't worry, I haven't used alcohol or drugs in, in a long time, so don't worry about me. So later in the episode, they were out -- Amanda, her sister Kim, along with their kids, they're out having a little play date, and they come home to find their father ODing on the couch. He's sitting at the, at the couch, and he's clutching his chest. He's coughing. And they show a bottle of whiskey and some prescription bottle pills kind of spilled all over. And Amanda is trying to to resuscitate him, but also call an ambulance. So the next scene basically shows their dad in the hospital. He's unconscious. They did mention Narcan, that he was revived with Narcan. And eventually he wakes up and he's like, oh, man, I'm so lucky. It must have been that meatball sub. And Amanda is just not impressed. Whereas Kim is much more sweet to him. And eventually he ends up leaving the hospital without telling anyone without selling his daughters, without telling the hospital staff even. He leaves them a letter, basically saying that Papa was a Rolling Stone. And Amanda, of course, is disappointed again, like she has always been with him. And Kim believes that this whole ordeal was a wake up call for him. And it also seems like it's a wake up call for her because she insists that she needs to go to prison upstate in order to stay clean. And those are the words that she used -- "clean." And so for this portion of the storyline, of course, overdose is a big topic right now. Because we just have so many people dying from overdose and, and dealing with that. So I think that some of this portrayal was problematic. Showing that, okay, Kim would leave her son with a random stranger in a pizza shop. To go use drugs in the bathroom and odd. To me that was problematic because I, I personally don't believe that's realistic for a lot of parents who use drugs, I don't believe that they would sacrifice their child's safety in, in that way. That's not to say it never happens, but to me it was, it seemed like they were playing up on a stereotype that parents who use drugs are all irresponsible. And to me, that's not the case. I also thought that it was interesting. You know, when Kim got her kids taken away, but then she regained custody. I like that Tutuola pointed out that, because you're the family of a cop, that carries a lot of weight. And it's true, not only is she a cop, but she, she's white. And, you know, being a cop and being white, that -- those are two privileged positions in this situation. And in other episodes of the show, when there are black or brown folks featured, you know, it's it's nothing for their kids to get taken away. Like, that's just normalized. Whereas, like, Kim was shown a lot more sympathy in this situation. And to me that, that was an illustration of her privilege. So the portrayal of Kim's father ODing was was scary, and I think that the producers or the writers of this show were intentional in portraying it that way, because in real life overdoses are scary. And it's not something to take lightly. So that's something that I thought was important for folks to understand. And also, the fact that they did drop Narcan in episode shows that, you know, this, like the availability of Narcan is something that's really important, and we should also increase its accessibility all over the country. So I thought that was important. You know, it -- would I do anything differently with this? I think maybe I would have not given Kim her kids back. Just to prove a point. That, to just to show how often it happens. But at the same time, their portrayal of, you know, how easy it is to get custody back, shows that we don't have to necessarily separate these kids from their parents. You know, it's -- there's other avenues for us to go to. And we have to remember that separation is trauma in a lot of ways. So the court system kind of exacerbates that. So I think it could have gone a lot of different ways, maybe, you know, in an alternate universe, they could have showed Kim getting her kids placed in foster care, and then having to fight to get them back, even though her sister's a cop. I think that this also shows that cops -- in these TV shows and police procedurals, cops are are kind of, they almost expect for the system to privilege them. Because they're cops. Right? And that, to me is problematic. And this also speaks to a larger issue of police procedural shows. Like, there's a lot of crime shows, and Law and Order's one of the oldest ones, but overall, in police procedurals, black people, brown people, are shown to be, they're perpetrators, and never the victims, right? And this, this is a problem because it feeds into these narratives and these stereotypes that black people are always committing crimes, or doing this, doing that. Color of Change recently came out with a report titled "Normalizing Injustice: The Dangerous Misrepresentations That Define Television Scripted Crime Genre." So they revealed that a lot of these shows don't really interrogate racial bias. They kind of gloss over it in some ways, or they kind of parrot different talking points from various political perspectives, and Law and Order is notorious for doing that. So the question is now, would I puff or pass? And I think, ultimately, because this is a police procedural, I don't think that it's realistic. Not in terms of what happened in the story. Obviously, people OD all the time, people, you know, trade sex for drugs all the time, but in terms of police departments acting with that level of care, it's not realistic. And that's the problem with a lot of police procedural shows, is that cops in real life aren't actually like this. So, you know, in a perfect world, we wouldn't need cops. But even in an imperfect world, cops are not this fair or caring or anything like that. And I think that's a problem with a lot of the shows, is that they show cops or portray cops as always being the good guys versus the bad guys who are the criminals, when in reality, a lot of times cops can be the bad guys too. So I would say this is a pass for me. Will I continue to watch Law and Order? Of course. But do I understand that these shows are problematic? Yes, but you can still enjoy something that's problematic. So I hope you enjoyed me talking about this episode of Law and Order, and I hope you'll come back for more episodes of Puff or Pass.

#### **Gabriella Miyares (18:08)**

Huge thanks to Ife for that in-depth examination of SVU and for the amazing work she does at DPA. Just wanted to note that the opinions on Puff or Pass are the guest's own and don't necessarily represent the official position of the Drug Policy Alliance. That does it for today's episode. If you have an idea for a new episode of Puff or Pass, tweet us! We're @drugsnstuffDPA. Thanks for listening, and until next time, be safe and be well.

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