

Drug Policy Alliance

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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The drug war has impacted nearly every aspect of our lives and its time to uproot it. The Drug Policy Alliance has been working closely with other advocacy organizations to create Uprooting the Drug War, a project that shines a spotlight on the insidious ways the drug war has spread into the systems of child welfare, public benefits, employment, immigration, housing, and education. This episode is the third in our monthly podcast series featuring a DPA partner sharing their experiences fighting the drug war in one of those six systems. [The Brotherhood Sister Sols](#) Dr. Marsha Jean-Charles and DPAs Gabriella Miyares discuss how the drug war has manifested itself into our education system, including but not limited to mass surveillance, poor drug education, and lasting yet ineffective punishments for drug use.

DPA is proud to partner with The Brotherhood Sister Sol through our Advocacy Grants Program. To learn more about grants opportunities, visit drugpolicy.org/grants.

Special thanks to our intern Jake Samieske for his help on this episode.

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Intro (0:02)

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

Gabriella Miyares (0:08)

Hello everyone and welcome to another episode of Drugs and Stuff. I'm your host, Gabriella Miyares. Today's episode is the third in our series highlighting DPA's project 'Uprooting the Drug War', which highlights the ways the war on drugs has harshly impacted the systems of child welfare, public benefits, employment, immigration, housing and education. If you're checking out this series for the first time, you can learn more by visiting uprootingthedrugwar.org. This episode focuses on the drug war's infiltration of our education system.

Today I'm joined by Dr. Marsha Jean-Charles, lead organizer and program facilitator of the liberation program at the Brotherhood Sister Sol or Bro-Sis, a nonprofit that provides comprehensive, holistic, and long term support services for young people from economically poor communities between the ages of eight to 22. Marsha has taken the lead on BroSis's 2020 campaign, which advocates for divesting from NYPD officers in New York City public schools in favor of much needed students support staff, including career counselors, college counselors, therapists and social workers. We are delighted to have Marsha join us today as a leader in the fight to transform our education system. Thanks so much for joining us, Marsha.

Dr. Marsha Jean-Charles (1:35)

No problem. Thanks for having me.

Gabriella Miyares (1:37)

First, could you start by telling us a little bit about yourself and the work that you do with BroSis and the Liberation Program?

Dr. Marsha Jean-Charles (1:44)

Yeah, so I am the Lead Organizer and Coordinator [of the] Liberation Program as you said. I am an alumna of the Brotherhood Sister Sol. I joined actually as a member in the Liberation Program in 2004. So I've been here on and off in between school and in college and grad school and now have been back as a full time staff person for like five years. And so you know, BroSis has been here for more than 25 years and the Brotherhood Sister Sol has been at the forefront of social justice educating, organizing and training to challenge inequity and to create opportunity for all. We focus on Black and Latinx youth. And we try to create a space and successfully I believe, create a space where young people claim their power of their history, identity and community to build the future they want to see. And I say all that because as a member, when I joined Liberation Program, again, in 2004, it was effectively a summer liberation school training on youth organizing and activism. And in that you learn about, you know, the various social justice issues of the world, and also the various organizers who are working to address those issues to end oppression, if you will, and that was a pivotal moment. And since then have gone on to school, clearly, but also come back to support our organizing work. And so while I am the lead organizer, the 2020 campaign is a youth campaign, it's from the Liberation Program, it took about 12 to 15 months to pull it together back in 2017. It's been something that we've been working on in this form, since then, but clearly have been doing education justice work for as long as we've been around.

And so excited about some of the wins, even though they're small and excited also to continue supporting young organizers in amplifying their voice and nurturing their power and just building youth power overall.

Gabriella Miyares (3:45)

That's so amazing that you've kind of come full circle from being an alumna of the program all the way to where you are today. And I really admire the way your organization does really amplify youth voices. I was on your website, looking at the kind of video that you put together for the program, and it's really all youth, you know, kind of speaking their truth, and seeing what they observe day to day and what they want to see change, and that's really cool. I think that's really unique.

Dr. Marsha Jean-Charles (4:14)

Yeah, I think...we....I think there are a lot of ways that young people are phenomenal leaders of our movement, but there are also a variety of ways that people.. whether they're umm, you know, the right center or the left, minimize the role of youth in movements and movement building. And that's definitely not something that we want to do or, or even support. And so even something as small as saying like youth are the leaders of tomorrow when in reality youth are leading today. They're alongside us, they're in front of us, you know, and we're just supporting in many ways, and if not, at least, you know, cultivating a space, curating a space where we can catalyze power and amplify the power that already exists.

Gabriella Miyares (4:56)

Absolutely. So one of the things we're going to focus on today is obviously the connection between drug policy reform and the reform work that you guys are doing. So for the past decade, BroSis has engaged in drug policy reform through a couple of projects: your Fair Policing Project, and the Decarceral Education Project. And those both involve education, media and organizing. So can you.. you know, from your work on the ground and kind of experiencing it firsthand, can you explain the impact of the drug war in education and the work that BroSis is doing in response to these harms?

Dr. Marsha Jean-Charles (5:34)

Yeah, I mean, how long do we have now? So with the Decarceral Education Project, and in particular, we, you know, we endeavor to like expand our curricula, to deepen our involvement in the work of various organizations in New York City who are pursuing various criminal justice campaigns. We want to tell fans, our internal campaigns, specifically the 2020 campaign, and the newly created Build Youth Power campaign, and we want to continue educating and, and supporting the advancement of a cohort of organizers, right, leaving high school students or alumni. And we wanted to do that because I think often when people think of youth organizers, they think of only education justice. And while we can understand that everything is interconnected, that systems of oppression have multi layered impact on people's lives, and that people live at intersections of identity and therefore experience intersectional oppression, we sometimes pretend that young people can only be in the adjusted space. And in reality, because of the intersecting realities that marginalized people face, we have to also see that when our communities, when our government in particular (who are definitely not in my community), choose to fund carcerality, when they choose to fund prisons, when they choose to fund jails, when they choose to fund police, when they choose to fund punishment and punishment cultures, they're necessarily choosing to defund the very things that matter to us, be they health, in health care, be they housing, and specifically education. And so it is important to note that as we continue to fund the drug war, as we continue to fund the militarization of our police, as we continue to over fund police, as opposed to defunding and abolishing them and other carceral system, we're choosing to not fund education to the fullest capacity. And so a number of our campaigns, specifically the 2020 campaign, is about, you know, increasing the budget for New York City public schools, so as to hire students support staff, because there is more interest in hiring school safety agents, and in policing our young people. And whether that be because they have you know, metal detectors or because they have an inordinate amount of school safety agents and officers, quite honestly, in their schools, or because they are forced to learn a curriculum that that in which they don't feel seen, or because their schools don't have the proper support staff funding. Every time that happens, it is directly related to the belief that young people, especially Black and Brown young people, are criminal. And that belief comes from a variety of places, but it is definitely made more prevalent, made more common, made more commonplace and common practice as a result of the drug war.

Gabriella Miyares (8:31)

Absolutely. I also think a lot of people, maybe not people that you're working with closely, but many people are unaware of just how much money is invested into law enforcement in schools, especially when compared to support staff like counselors. So can you dig a little more into why you think that discrepancy exists and talk about, you know, in what ways school administrators have been kind of enlisted into enforcing these drug war policies?

Dr. Marsha Jean-Charles (9:00)

Yeah, I think there's, there are a couple approaches to take to this one. Right. We can start with what happened last year. But before we even get there, I think it's important to note that Communities United for Police Reform put together a report earlier this year (early I mean, like literally last month since it's July 1st). But [they] put together a report called path to safe, healthy and just recovery, cut NYPD's budget and invest in communities. And they start the report by actually talking about NYPD... the budget itself. And starting literally by saying, yes, the budget on paper is \$6 billion as of last year, but when we're taking into account a variety of other expenses, the budget for New York police and the New York Police Department rather, is around like \$11 billion, and this is taking into account settlements, expenses hidden in other agency budgets because of partnerships, discretionary funds that are given by city council folks, capital expenses, right, and expenses directed to the New York City Police Foundation. And so that's \$11 billion that could have been spent elsewhere - offer it. But then you take into account that right now in New York City public schools, we have to fight for student support staff, and when I'm saying student support staff, I'm saying like, guidance counselors, social workers, nurses, librarians, career counselors, college counselors, like things that we all know belong in schools, and things that I cannot, I have never encountered a person who does not believe that these kinds of people with these roles belong in schools. But we have to fight for that, because there's no money in the budget, according to City Council folks, to fund these kinds of staff positions in our schools. And so we have 1.1 million New York City public school student about 1800 schools. And yet, we have more school safety agents than guidance counselors and social workers combined. And so when you look at the problem, the problem of the drug war and the problems that it causes in our communities, and let's be clear, right, like the problems of the drug war, are what we should be talking about, right? Not just people like to pretend that the problem is drugs, and in reality, like it's the drug war, and the drug war, has pulled out resources, and, of course, also pulled out community members in the very neighborhoods that we are talking about, right. And so the discrepancy exists, because people refuse to see marginalized folks as human beings deserving of support, and deserving of resource communities and deserving of actual

paths to success, despite, and in opposition to historical oppression that has necessarily made it hard and harder for people of color to achieve any kind of success in this world. Clearly not impossible, but definitely harder. And so people are more likely to fund what they think is a priority. And so our budgets indicate that it is a priority to fund the policing and over criminalization of Black and Brown young people and people more than it is to fund their success.

Gabriella Miyares (12:07)

That is, yeah, that's a very real and a very powerful observation. And yes, as you said, the drug war was never about drugs, it was always about people and oppression of people. And, you know, I want to talk a little bit about, you know, the young people that are affected by this. So one change that you're fighting for with the 2020 campaign, is ending student arrests, as well as ending the issuance of juvenile summonses and reports for non criminal, nonviolent violations and misdemeanors, and these are often a result of drug possession. So how are students affected by intense surveillance that they're experiencing at schools?

Dr. Marsha Jean-Charles (12:53)

Yeah, and most of the students who are in our programming and Liberation Programs specifically, who indicate any negative feeling about school and school climate, say something to the effect of my school feels like a prison, say something to the effect of I'm punished just for being, say something to the effect of the rules and regulations that I'm required to follow at my school don't necessarily make me feel safe, and make me feel as though the normal, normative way that I am, is wrong. And that's deplorable. And so when we look at schools, and when we look at the culture of criminality, and the ways that students are forced to imbibe that and to believe that and to also, you know, on the contrary, believe that professionalism is something that isn't naturally me, is something that I have to work to be, something that I have to be and I get access to only when I am controlled are ways that are deeply also white supremacist. When we are saying that to young people, it impacts their identity formation, it impacts how they understand themselves in the world, it impacts how they understand their communities in the world, and it denigrates a lot of things that culturally are beautiful, and awesome. Like when we see, you know, various schools having dictates around like hair and hair styling, and you know, the length of your skirt, or like it's just the policing of bodies. And it's the policing of bodies named deviant, by way of American government and most white supremacist governments in the world. And it's not the actions that are problematic, it's the person and so you're telling people that they are problems. And you're telling people that if they want to be less problematic, because they can never not be a problem. But if they want to be less problematic, they have to give up things that are that are innate to themselves that are actually like beautiful of themselves. And that is the only way that they will succeed. And so, young people, people, families, communities are affected by over policing, are affected by hyper surveillance. Because also, it leads to a controlling of ourselves based on standards set by people who are not us, and that also has an impact on psyche, it has an impact on your well being, especially our mental health. And we're seeing the rise also in these moments, clearly the COVID era, but also a pre COVID era, in rates of anxiety and depression in young communities and young communities of color too. And they're all related. Because when you police someone's body and way of being or telling them that they are never welcome in this world as they naturally are. And that impacts them.

Gabriella Miyares (15:24)

Absolutely. So you do a lot of work with kids, and students teaching them how to be kind of advocates for themselves and agents of change. Can you talk a little bit about how you kind of, you know, when students are coming to you with these feelings? Like what is what is the work that you do to kind of channel that into changemaking?

Dr. Marsha Jean-Charles (15:48)

Yeah, it's funny that you asked because we're also formulating formalizing, rather, the curriculum for our summer programming, our summer liberation school and our summer program called power. And we start a lot of it with talking about identity and oppression, talking about how for every identity factor that exists, there is an oppression that is associated with it, talking about the ways that that structural and institutional, and not about who they are as people, right. And so if you can see that white supremacy has absolutely nothing to do with your person, but with what the assessment is that people who are not white, deserve less than, are inferior, then there's space for you to see that actually isn't about me, as a person, it's a structural thing. And so a lot of things that I have encountered, or I'm encountering because of this system, not because of who I am, and therefore who I am, there's space for you to imagine who you are as someone who is phenomenal. Someone who is capable beyond measure, someone who has power, and isn't in a disempowered situation, even if disenfranchised. And then we start talking about movements and various movements, and various social justice efforts. And talking about the wins, because the wins sometimes feel few and far between, but they're glorious. And we have done so much. Even if the bulk of the issue remains, we are chipping away at many of the problems. And we're doing that together, I would talk about organizing as something that is innately about, you know, catalyzing and nurturing and amplifying people power to shift people in power. Right, and that, in order to do that, you need to build leaders. In order to do that you need to build community. In order to do that, you need to elevate all the things that have kept us on this world or in this world for time here before, right, so, so we talk about all of that. And then we also start talking about the work of, of allied organizations, partner organizations, the wins the strategies, and ending with, you know, vision projects, their vision for a better world based on some of the things that we've discussed, ending with commitment, I was like, what are you committed to, regarding this struggle as you understand it, and also, a number of young people who are coming into our programming have already identified a problem that they want to focus on, they are already change agents, right? Like, we already have a wealth of leaders in our communities, and some people just need language to identify and communicate the issues that they face. Some people need someone to listen to them, to be like "you're not crazy! It is really that fucked up!" Like, some people need direction, especially direction of their anger, their riotous anger that is so righteous and so valid, and so real and so honest. They need somewhere to take it, somewhere to direct it, right? And so when we're building our movement, and we're building young people, we're really talking about building youth power, which starts with building up young people, which starts with, you know, telling them and reminding them, that they are amazing young, and that they are worthy of a better world. And quite honestly, the world isn't worthy of them at this moment, right. And so when we think through our programming, we also necessarily think through, like what it means to affect change in this world right now. And we think through all the ways that all the things that young people need, right, and so, you know, we're not just thinking through that the fact that they need a space to these days and educated and trained and loved and cared about, we're thinking about the educational needs or thinking about the organizing needs, so that we can help them create a better world and, and work alongside them to do so. We're thinking about the training that other people need in order to not be obstacles to the progress that needs to happen. And so when we talk about our theory of change and the Brotherhood sister, so it is definitely that, like, you know, we have to provide multilayered support, guidance, education and love to our membership, and teach them to have self discipline and form order in their lives. And then to offer opportunities and access so that they may develop agency. I would take it even further, because once they develop agency, we support them in, in whatever that takes wherever that takes them. Right. And so in the

Liberation Program, it's around campaigns and campaign building, and movement building largely and being a part of a larger struggle for education justice, that is necessarily tied to criminal justice, and immigrant justice and gender justice and reproductive justice, like all all the justice, because justice is justice and we can't leave anybody behind if we're really seeking true meaningful justice. And that is important to our work, too. And so when I think about the work that we do with young people, it's about all of that, which is impossible, but it definitely is always a thought.

Gabriella Miyares (20:42)

That's so exciting. And if we were on video right now, you'd see me kind of beaming about a lot of the things you were talking about. It's, yeah, it's something that really gives you a lot of hope for the future generations. And one of the things that you were saying about kind of empowering young people really ties into my next question, which is, you know, at DPA, we've been developing a drug education curriculum that's very different from the ones of the past. I myself went through the D.A.R.E. program, along with so many other students. And, you know, as we know now, those those programs that are abstinence-based are utter failures, for many reasons. But I wanted to ask, you know, why you think those have been unsuccessful, and what a strong drug education program would look like to you?

Dr. Marsha Jean-Charles (21:35)

Yeah, it's a great, it's a great question. Largely, because we don't have one in our schools, at least not, I don't know, one that exists right now. I think abstinence only programs do not work because they offer no options for people who like choice. And for people who know is not the end of the conversation. Abstinence only doesn't work, because it's never worked, and so we probably should stop pretending. But also, because it's like a one size fits all strategy is never a good strategy for diverse populations of people. And the reality is that the DPA curriculum, and specifically like the Safety First curriculum, which is something that we engage in, in the Liberation Program, and what I appreciate about it is that it's about harm reduction. And it's about the fact that people are going to do things like they were going to do things, whether or not we like them, because they're a people. And because they have the capacity to choose. And because people have different needs. And because there are various factors and why people choose or don't choose a variety of things. And until you make the world better, most of those factors will actually be things that are catalyzed things that are put in place because of systemic oppression. So if the world is not going to change, like we can't expect people to not want to seek support in a variety of ways, including drug use. And so I appreciate the harm reductive lens, I think that it should always be about reducing harm. And I think that often when we talk about harm reduction, we talk about it in reference to drug use, but it actually is just a good approach for life, like, what do we do, knowing that people are going to make decisions that we don't necessarily agree or disagree with? Right? Like, how do we accept people for who they are? How do we not throw people away? How do we understand that drug use, like any other supposedly listed activity for young people are a continuum of behaviors that are put into place and that are set into action by a variety of other things in people's environments and in their lives? And that it's actually just safer for us to ensure a safe use, than it is for us to pretend that it doesn't. Right? Like how do we create quality of life for everyone? And not just for the people who have access? Who have power, who have money? How do we do things and care for people in a way that is non judgmental, and non coercive? Most of the things that happened in school that are related to punishment culture, our course it was fucked, like, like this whole grading system, like you are pursuing a grade to theoretically indicate that you have mastery in a subject, but the reality is you're also at a school that has deemed what curriculum is important to you and you don't actually think that this curriculum is important. So you're not even, you're not even encouraged to pursue the things that matter to you. You're encouraged to explore...to do the things and learn the things that have no relevance to your life whatsoever. And even if you don't feel seen in it, the only way to be successful is to get A's and B's. So you know, like, what does it look like to have a non judgmental non coercive practice of giving people the resources that they need and assisting them in reducing the harms in their lives, including when it comes to systems of oppression and not just when it comes to drug use, or things that I am intrigued by and so... so yeah, I don't know if that answers the question.

Gabriella Miyares (25:04)

That's, oh, it absolutely does. And I think it actually rolls into one of my final questions for you, which is kind of continuing down that path of like, the the ideal, you know, or a more ideal drug education curriculum. Like what would a school environment look like to you? And kind of that ideal world, like a pie in the sky vision?

Dr. Marsha Jean-Charles (25:27)

Yeah, I'm laughing because I'm like, how do we -- what? Where is that? I think at the beginning, right at the foundation, every school should have all the people necessary for all the students who are going to that school to be successful. And if that's a nurse, great, and that varies (I hope it's a nurse), but if it's a variety of other staff, or a variety of other personnel, then that's great, too, right. And we should, they should be connected to the community enough to know what the community needs and ensure that the resources are available to students, all students of all need in the school. It would be a situation in which students were centered, right, and classrooms were designed to classrooms and school culture, were designed to empower learners, and to build leaders. It would be a school system, centered around restorative transformative and loving justice. It would be a school system designed to help learners create a better world, in addition to learning the things that make them feel, feel whole... it will teach all the truths, and not just the ones that are actually not true (but nonetheless, the ones that we'd like to teach). People will feel seen in the curriculum would be culturally sponsored, it would be trauma informed. It would be a space in which all the community felt welcome families, and felt as though their needs were met. And like, you know, first generation children who, whose family aren't native English speakers didn't have to be translators; It would be a system that was entirely free, that was also about like teaching young people about their power, and therefore empower young people in like a structural sense, right. So a school leadership team, for example, the students on a school leadership team had more votes than the adults, the school leadership team and the students would by consensus, or some other actually useful democratic process, decide what their curriculum is, and also be part of a peer learning peer teaching popular education strategy. It would also be about social justice education that we can learn from history, and not just not repeat it, but do better than what has been done. Yeah, it would, it would do a lot of things. And it would be never ending, right? It wouldn't...the expectation wouldn't be that you went through school from K through 12. Only so that you can go out in the world and get a job. And if you didn't, you go to grad school and then get a job like, that wouldn't be the structure, there would just be a lifelong learning process inspired by schools, right? Because young people went in there to be transformed, to be liberated, to be empowered. And it would be a school designed to be abolitionist in intent. So that again, when they're creating their vision of a better world, it would be a world that was without systemic oppression, and that everyone would be engaged in the creation of that world and not just the ideation of it. Yeah, that's a start.

Gabriella Miyares (28:35)

Yeah, that's a... that's a beautiful vision. I love especially what you said about, you know, these places, being places of community, places of acceptance and compassion, places of empowerment, and kind of moving away from that one size fits all. And we're towards, you know, support and love. We're all here fighting that fight with you. And hopefully, one day we see more. I mean, your fight at BroSis is really the movement towards that. So thank you for that. And thank you for all of your work. My final question for you is, we would love for our listeners to be able to learn more about and support your work. So where can folks find more information?

Dr. Marsha Jean-Charles (29:19)

Yeah, our website is the first place I would say so www.brotherhood-sistersol.org S.O.L. ("sun" in spanish) .org. If websites are not your thing, more social media, follow us @brosis512 on Instagram or Twitter. And if you're into learning more about our Liberation Program, it would be brosis.youthpower, which is our youth run page that we are we are evolving and growing and nurturing as we speak.

Gabriella Miyares (29:54)

That's great. Well, I look forward to you know, seeing more of of what you do and what you build together with with the youth. And I want to thank you again truly for for taking the time to speak with us. It was really wonderful. And yeah, thanks again.

Dr. Marsha Jean-Charles (30:12)

Yeah, and thank you and thank you all at DPA honestly, for helping to open the frame. And what I mean by that is that I came into this work, thinking a lot about mass incarceration. And it was at a conversation with other folks with other DPA partners that we started.... that DPA staff presented the frame of mass criminalization, a frame that actually allows you to think through all the ways that people are impacted by over policing, hyper surveillance, the drug war, and all of its tentacles, in ways that allow you to also to see like what's happening in communities and not just people who are confined to prisons and jails and, and how the impact that it has on communities is exponential. Right, and that people are experiencing collateral consequences as a result of the drug war that we don't see if we only focus on incarceration. So, thank you.

Gabriella Miyares (31:06)

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, it's so interconnected. And one thing that I find so exciting about education is, you know, it really is it starts with young people. It starts with changing attitudes, for, you know, the younger generation and kind of moving forward from that. So, you know, I'm just excited to see, you know, in the coming decades, like how things shift.

Dr. Marsha Jean-Charles (31:28)

Yeah, especially when adults in particular, get the fuck out of the way.

Gabriella Miyares (31:34)

That's the perfect quote to close with. Thanks again, Marsha.

A huge thank you to Marsha for joining us and for sharing her vision of what education can and should look like without the insidious effects of the war on drugs. You can learn more about her work and the other amazing work being done by the Brotherhood Sister Sol by visiting brotherhood-sistersol.org. To learn more about the ways the drug war is harming our education system, and many other systems, visit uprootingthedrugwar.org. Thanks again for tuning in, and hope to see you next time.

Outro (32:19)

Drugs and Stuff is brought to you by the Drug Policy Alliance. If you like what you hear in the podcast, do us a favor and rate the show on iTunes, give it five stars and a nice review. Also, we'd love to hear from you. Tweet at us @DrugsnstuffDPA, use the #drugsandstuff, and check out our website drugpolicy.org to see the other work we do, sign up for our emails, and donate. Special thanks to our producer Katharine Heller and to the hard working staff of the Drug Policy Alliance for all of their work. Thanks for listening.

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