

UPHNS HUB Video Call Minutes June 3, 2021

Topic:

Cannabis Talks by Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy (CSSDP): Think of the Children! The Role of Youth in Drug Policy, Harm Reduction and Cannabis Education

Attendance: 34

Opening:

Land Acknowledgement from Clem Fong, closed captioning description by Gabrielle and Clem invited everyone to introduce themselves into the chat box. Invitation to learn more about the lands on which you are situated: <https://native-land.ca/>

Presenters:

Heath D'Alessio and Sean Bristowe, CSSDP
About CSSDP and speakers

- CSSDP is a grassroots organization comprised of a network of young people across Canada primarily in postsecondary institutions, trying to broaden reach
- “Students” encompasses anyone under the age of 30
- Advocating for end of war on drugs, human rights, and drug policies
- CSSDP takes a peer-to-peer approach to drug activism and drug education
- Sean and Heath are leading the Get Sensible Campaign: <https://getsensible.org/>
- Recommendation: [Drug Buds Podcast](#) and get involved by following us on [social media](#)

Discussion:

Why do you think youth are the future of drug policy

- Youth are the future of a lot of movements – they are the innovators, have fresh ideas, they haven’t been indoctrinated into the stigma and propaganda that surrounds substance use
- Young people are uniquely positioned and are often the pawn that justifies the war on drugs (e.g., “think about the children!” but don’t ask them or talk to them)
- Many young people use drugs, their voice is valuable when it comes to drug policy
- Concerned mothers state that we need to continue these prohibited drug policies, while criminalization is destroying the families of youth, and getting them kicked out housing
- Youth are beginning to recognize that they are being tokenized to uphold these oppressive systems
- People are often uncomfortable talking about drug use for young people
- Youth are excluded from policy or not included in meaningful way

How did the cannabis impact you and what can we do about it?

- Before we had the Get Sensible Campaign, I was a consultant for youth speak held in Toronto. This was a dialogue for youth to share their concerns about current and future policies and what they wanted to see implemented, that’s why we created our toolkit
- One priority topic was legal age to access cannabis. Are we going to have wait in order to buy cannabis? Are you going to be criminalized if you are 18 or 19 and buy for someone younger?
- Young people can hold less than adults, still a form of criminalization. Crime disproportionately affects young people.

- How do we include the diverse perspectives of youth in these conversations?
- We need to ensure youth understand their power and the validity of their ideas and how often they are dismissed by policymakers - policymakers don't always want to tell them that their voice is powerful in a way that isn't tokenistic
- One main guiding principle of our toolkit is meaningful inclusion and what this looks like from a youth perspective
- How can we extend our perspectives to all youth, including youth who engage in other forms of drug use. We are not just talking about cannabis or legal drugs

How do you think family services and child protection impacts youth involvement in policy change?

- Within a cannabis context – laws provide some protection and safety for those 18+
- From the literature, the average age for initiation is about 14 years of age
- That is very young, how do we get those youth at the table?
- This is another way larger systems make it hard for people to engage and hold institutions accountable
- Young people are well positioned to say that war on drugs isn't helping them – and can speak to the harm of child welfare services who are supposed to be helping children but ruining families
- Often it is people who have already been impacted by these things who speak up because they are in a safer position to hold systems accountable
- Kids passing around a joint is considered trafficking – schools have to expel that student if they hear about this is happening
- It is important to have these open conversations – not sure how many youth are willing to have these conversations because of that risk
- Reframing the narrative – youth are not at risk all the time. How can we support them?

How can cannabis advocacy inform policy for other drugs?

- Learnings from cannabis activism that can be translated to other spaces where we need to bridge that gap (e.g., opioids, meth, crack)
- Some parallels can be drawn such as medical access before recreational access as a push for safe supply
- Cannabis advocacy was led by people who use drugs, many used cannabis for medical purposes and experienced criminalization at disproportionate rates
- As soon as there was enough public interest in legalization – there was a drastic change in capital intent – ruined the grassroots foundation and the industry is now led by white men who were advocating for prohibition to begin with
- Cannabis and psychedelic exceptionalism (e.g., natural drugs are superior). We are in a great position to dispel some of those myths – teach youth from the beginning that all drug use should be considered in a similar lens – don't want to alienate people who use other drugs
- There needs to be accountability within the cannabis space where certain privileges are held and how framing of using particular drugs may serve to stigmatize others
- Harm reduction principles can also be centered in cannabis education and used as a strategy to get people on board in a broader sense (e.g., safer consumption, safe smoking)

Mental health, youth, and drug use

- May was Mental Health Awareness Month – when it comes to mental health and youth – we are often hyper focused on health and brain development and the impact of cannabis – we should be equipping youth with information to make choices about cannabis use
- The narrative of protecting brains at all costs – this perspective is ableist – brains are impacted by much more than substances, brains are impacted by poverty, racism and we are not actually talking about that

- Just because you use drugs doesn't mean that your brain is fried and that it's worthless
- Shame is often more harmful than the effects of drugs
- We should be investing in self esteem so youth will care to protect themselves from the harm of drug use.

Where do we go from here?

- Cannabis policy is flawed and not protecting youth in a way that is meaningful
- We have to recognize what is missing here right now and that is the inclusion of certain voices – we need to recognize who has been left out of policy consultations
- The Cannabis Act is going to be revised on a number of points that need to be improved upon – we are advocating to talk about youth inclusion
- Youth don't have anywhere to use cannabis. As youth, we don't own property – where are we supposed to use if they are saying not in public and not in our apartment? How are youth excluded in this current revision of the Cannabis Act? We need to consider the intersections and center the voices of more than just the white voices in the room
- Ava will be speaking to these issues in greater depth at the call on June 24
- If you know young people, please get them to come!

Questions and Comments:

Q: Drug advocacy is centered around harm reduction currently, do you feel we are lacking in regards to talking about drugs in a positive way – advocating that there are positives to drug use – proud of our drug use and potential benefits

- There are a lot of benefits to drug use, we have a poisoning epidemic on our hands and need to prioritize that in a lot of ways – it is often more palatable and respectable to talk about decriminalization than to say I like using drugs – we want to get seats at the table and sometimes we have to pander
- Something that we are always trying to do now is talk about the multiple reasons for using drugs - and sometimes it is for fun – social bonding, curiosity – these are healthy behaviours. We often talk about peer pressure and conforming when it comes to youth, this approach can be infantilizing.