

What does it take to challenge a racist criminal justice system

“There’s never been a drug law that wasn’t tied to race.” - asha bandele organiser, author of *When they Call you a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*

Right now, Aotearoa New Zealand is on the cusp of significant change. The argument that we should treat drug use as a health issue has largely been won. What we have yet to do is consider what a just and equitable approach to drugs looks like, and how drug reform fits within the wider context of the whole criminal justice system.

NZ can get drug law reform right. But it means facing up to the injustice suffered by Māori who have been disproportionately criminalised.

In the USA, racial discrimination and the War on Drugs have seen too many African and Latino Americans unfairly incarcerated. Opponents are fighting to end this injustice.

It’s widely known that Māori are unfairly carrying the burden of our own War on Drugs. Māori are more likely to be stopped, arrested, convicted and jailed for drug offences. Police have acknowledged their own unconscious bias, and there is evidence of discrimination across the entire criminal justice system.

We’re getting there. The Mental Health and Addictions Inquiry and Hāpaitia te Organga Tangata both point to the need for change. And next year’s cannabis referendum will be an unprecedented opportunity to right past wrongs.

We can build a better system. But it won’t happen by itself.

Deborah will discuss what it takes to challenge a racist criminal justice system, and what New Zealand can learn from the fight for peace to end the US drug war.