

## **Two Years of the Race and Social Justice Seminar Series**

In 2023, our Department piloted the Race and Social Justice Seminar Series to create space for frank, research- and experience-informed conversations about how law, policy and social structures can produce and reproduce criminalisation, inequality, violence, and trauma. The 2024-25 brought two events—one each semester. Both sessions were designed to deepen classroom learning and to illustrate the human consequences of policy, highlighting the University of Manchester’s commitment to embedding social responsibility and inclusion in its teaching and learning philosophy.

We opened the season in November 2024 with an afternoon devoted to psychedelic medicine in Scotland. The event was organised by Dr Lisa Williams, Senior Lecturer in Criminology. Around thirty students and staff gathered for a screening of *Psychedelics in Scotland*, a 45-minute documentary by Drugreporter that follows campaigners seeking to legalise the therapeutic use of these substances. The film’s emphasis on lived experience, with patients recounting personal journeys from trauma to recovery, provided the springboard for a lively, student-led panel discussion.

Dr Anna Ross (University of Edinburgh), Fiona Gilbertson (Recovering Justice), Dr Jake Hawthorn (Scottish Psychedelic Research Group) and Karen Llewellyn (Families Campaign for Change) fielded questions on therapeutic evidence, regulatory obstacles and community activism. The session was chaired by undergraduates from Drugs and Society, and audience questions showed clear engagement with course material on harm reduction and policy reform.

Our second event, held in February 2025, brought former undercover detective sergeant Neil Woods (LEAP UK) into conversation with Dr Felipe Neis Araujo (Lecturer in Criminology). Woods drew on fourteen years spent infiltrating drug gangs to argue that prohibition fuels violence, embeds organised crime and inflicts moral injury on police officers themselves. Speaking candidly about his own PTSD to circa forty attendants, he challenged the audience to consider the need for legally regulating currently banned substances, adopting public-health models and exploring restorative approaches. Current students, alumni and community stakeholders engaged with Woods in a lively Q&A session, discussing practical pathways to reform and how criminological research can inform campaigning.

Both events exemplified research-led teaching and learning in action. They were advertised across undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, reached roughly 350 potential participants, and were situated within broader departmental and public discussions on evidence-based policy and social harm. By foregrounding the experiences of people directly affected by drug laws, we translated abstract criminological theory into tangible social-justice questions, aligning closely with the University's strategic priority on social inclusion.

Students' active roles were integral: Drugs and Society volunteers chaired the first panel, and criminology ambassadors handled logistics and social-media coverage for both events. This peer-to-peer model not only built confidence and public-engagement skills but also strengthened the seminar series' community ethos.

Scaling back from four events in 2023-24 to two this year proved prudent; attendance held steady while scheduling pressures eased. With the proof of concept firmly established, our next step is succession, as we expect to pass the baton to colleagues interested in curating the 2025-26 series. Handing over organisational duties will broaden ownership, ensure fresh thematic perspectives and embed the series as a permanent fixture in the School's public-engagement calendar.

The Race and Social Justice Seminar Series shows that when universities connect rigorous scholarship with lived experience, they enable and encourage dialogue that resonates far beyond campus, equipping students to turn criminological insight into social action.