



Leading Health Experts: Decriminalize Drugs

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On the same day Hawaii lawmakers are set to consider moves that could lead to making their state the first in the U.S. to decriminalize all drugs, a panel of health experts has endorsed doing so globally.

Decriminalizing drugs can lead to “significant financial savings, less incarceration, significant public health benefits and no significant increase in drug use,” says a new report released Thursday from a commission set up by leading British medical journal The Lancet and top U.S. medical school Johns Hopkins University.

The 26-member commission is comprised of scientists and researchers from countries around the world, including Malaysia, Switzerland, Hungary, Nigeria and India.

“The harms of prohibition far outweigh the benefits,” their 54-page report concludes.

“Policies that pursue drug prohibition or heavy suppression do not represent the least harmful way to address drugs, the aim they pursue is not well defined or realistic, their interventions are not proportionate to the problem, they destabilize democratic societies and people harmed by them often have no recourse to remedies to mitigate those harms,” the commissioners write.

In addition to recommending a removal of criminal penalties for drug possession and low-level sales, the report also endorses moves toward legalizing and regulating drugs.

“Regulated legal markets for drugs that have long been harshly criminalized are clearly not politically possible in the short term in many countries,” it reads. “But we believe that the weight of evidence for the health and other harms of criminal markets and other consequences of prohibition catalogued in this Commission is likely to lead more countries (and more US states) to move gradually towards regulated drug markets—a direction we endorse.”

The report’s release comes on the same day that lawmakers in Hawaii will hold a hearing on a resolution requesting that the state’s Legislative Reference Bureau conduct a study on the feasibility of ending the criminalization of drugs in the state.

The resolution cites the example of Portugal, which in 2001 decriminalized all drugs, including marijuana, heroin and cocaine. While use and possession remain technically illegal, people caught with small amounts of drugs are not arrested or sent to prison. Rather, they are brought before three-member commissions that can recommend treatment or assign fines and other administrative remedies. Drug trafficking and sales are still punishable as crimes.

A 2009 Cato Institute report found that since decriminalization went into effect, drug use by Portuguese teenagers has dropped, as have drug-related deaths and HIV/AIDS rates among drug users. Enrollment in drug treatment is up.

It is unknown whether or when the Hawaii House Judiciary Committee will vote on the decriminalization study resolution following Thursday's hearing, but drug policy reform advocates are already pushing to broaden its scope.

"We would suggest adding a twin study to this resolution, requesting that the LRB also study the effects of legalization of marijuana for adult use," Carl Bergquist, executive director of the Drug Policy Forum of Hawaii, says in testimony obtained by Marijuana.com.

"This seems like a most opportune time to conduct this twin study," he wrote, citing the growing number of states considering and enacting marijuana legalization policies.