

Could Canada follow Oregon's lead on drug decriminalization?

University of Guelph professor calls the state's drug reform measures "a monumental shift."

Sam Riches

November 6, 2020

Oregon residents made history this week, with nearly 60 per cent of voters saying 'yes' to Oregon Measure 110, the Drug Decriminalization and Addiction Treatment Initiative.

The measure reclassifies simple drug possession as a Class E violation. Rather than face jail time, individuals found in possession of Schedule I-IV drugs, including heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine, will need to complete a health assessment and pay a US\$100 fine.

Kassandra Frederique, executive director of the Drug Policy Alliance, called the win "paradigm-shifting" and "arguably the biggest blow to the War on Drugs to date."

The Oregon Criminal Justice Commission has estimated that convictions for possession of a controlled substance could decrease by more than 90 per cent.

"Drug possession is the most arrested offence in the United States, with one arrest every 23 seconds," Frederique said in a statement earlier this week. "Last night, Oregon showed the world that a more humane, compassionate approach is possible. Measure 110 will serve as a model and starting point for states across the country to decriminalize drug use," she added.

Andrew Hathaway, a professor at the University of Guelph's Department of Sociology and Anthropology, thinks it's possible that Canada could follow Oregon's lead.

"Something that was unthinkable is now officially thinkable because someone has gone ahead and done it in North America," Hathaway said in an interview with *The GrowthOp*.

And though it's a first for North America, it's been almost 20 years since Portugal became the first European country to decriminalize personal drug possession.

Research published by the Cato Institute found that decriminalization in Portugal led to a drop in teenage drug use, a reduction in the spread of HIV among drug users, and deaths related to heroin had been cut by more than half. The number of people seeking treatment for drug addiction also doubled.

Earlier this year, after British Columbia set a record for the number of overdose deaths recorded in a single month, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police (CACCP) called for the decriminalization of simple drug possession.

"Arresting individuals for simple possession of illicit drugs has proven to be ineffective. It does not save lives," CACCP's president, Chief Constable Adam Palmer, said at a July 9 press

conference. “The CACP recognizes substance use and addiction as a public health issue. Being addicted to a controlled substance is not a crime and should not be treated as such,” Palmer said.

A report from the CACP found that treating drug use as a public health issue would lower crime rates, overdoses and blood-borne diseases. The recommendation also follows the advice of top public health officials, like Dr. Bonnie Henry, who called on B.C. to decriminalize simple possession last year in a special report.

“There is widespread global recognition that the failed ‘War on Drugs’ and the resulting criminalization and stigmatization of people who use drugs has not reduced drug use, but, instead, has increased health harms,” the report reads.

Canada took the lead on cannabis legalization and made history again earlier this year by granting four Canadians with terminal cancer exemptions to the *Canadian Drugs and Substances Act*, allowing them to legally pursue psilocybin therapy.

Now Hathaway believes Oregon’s decriminalization measure could cause ripples north of the border, as well.

“It certainly has the potential to have implications for Canada,” he said. “The U.S. is definitely knocking down doors.”

In addition to Oregon’s measures, five U.S. states approved cannabis reforms, including New Jersey, which is now set to become one of the largest recreational cannabis markets in the U.S. Additionally, voters in Montana and South Dakota said ‘yes’ to legalizing recreational cannabis, despite a history of hard-line drug stances and the South Dakota Chamber of Commerce and Industry actively campaigning against the measure.

“It’s an indication that the door is opening,” Hathaway says. “Even in those places where previously it would have been particularly unthinkable.”