

Heroin and pot use way down in Portugal after decriminalization

After ten years of a controversial policy to treat rather than punish drug addicts, Portugal reports success in reducing the number of users in the country.

Along with that bit of good news, there has also been a significant drop in the number of HIV patients who are drug users. The report on the policy's achievements include these statistics:

[Ireland's Independent](#) recently reported drug addicts now account for only 20% of all new cases of HIV, down from 56% before. In 2001 there were 3,000 new cases of HIV reported each year. Now, it's down to fewer than 2,000 in the latest year studied. The share of heroin users who inject the drug has also fallen -- from 45% to 17% today.

The UK's Telegraph reported that Portuguese policy does not consider a possession of small amounts of any drug to be a criminal offense. Offenders can be put before a panel consisting of a psychologist, social worker and legal adviser, who will decide appropriate treatment. They are ominously called "dissuasion panels." The laws have not changed for those caught trafficking in and distributing large quantities of illegal drugs.

At the commencement of the new policy, Portugal had what media at that time called the worst "drug ghettos" on the continent of Europe. Not so today. There is evidence that petty street crime committed by addicts has significantly decreased as have deaths of users from accidental overdoses.

Another downstream effect is the more effective deployment of police and law enforcement authorities. Rather than busting street addicts and small time users, there is high level work being done to chase down huge suppliers and sources of the substances, according to the [The Telegraph](#).

At the five year mark, the good news was already streaming in according to a report by the [Cato Institute](#), a libertarian think tank. Using any measuring device, the statistics demonstrated that the right decision had been made.

The same results were reported after studies by the World Health Organization and one published in 2010 by the [British Medical Journal](#). Despite the published reports, there has not been a clamor to follow Portugal's path down the drug decriminalization route.

The European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction published the results gathered about the success of Portugal's attempt at reducing drug use and effects of that

use. In their conclusion, they cautioned that the debt crisis in the country might change things.

"After implementing several austerity plans, which had already had an impact on drug services. The recent change in government that may translate into new orientations in public policy and security measures." As always, in tough economic times, it's easy to pick off what are considered non-essential portions of social policies. Whether Portugal looks at this as a permanent change in thinking on the abuse of drugs and the money spent in useless enforcement remains to be seen.