



Ten Years Ago Portugal Made All Drugs Legal. What Happened Next?

When the drug-drenched nation legalized all drugs within its borders, most critics predicted disaster. Instead drug use has plunged dramatically.

By [Tony O'Neill](#)

07/13/11

The government in Portugal has no plans to back down. Although the Netherlands is the European country most associated with liberal drug laws, it has already been ten years since Portugal became the first European nation to take the brave step of decriminalizing possession of all drugs within its borders—from marijuana to heroin, and everything in between. This controversial move went into effect in June of 2001, in response to the country's spiraling HIV/AIDS statistics. While many critics in the poor and largely conservative country attacked the sea change in drug policy, fearing it would lead to drug tourism while simultaneously worsening the country's already shockingly high rate of hard drug use, a report published in 2009 by the Cato Institute [tells](#) a different story. **Glenn Greenwald**, the attorney and author who conducted the research, told *Time*: "Judging by every metric, drug decriminalization in Portugal has been a resounding success. It has enabled the Portuguese government to manage and control the drug problem far better than virtually every other Western country."

Back in 2001, Portugal had the highest rate of HIV among injecting drug users in the European Union—an incredible 2,000 new cases a year, in a country with a population of just 10 million. Despite the predictable controversy the move stirred

up at home and abroad, the Portuguese government felt there was no other way they could effectively quell this ballooning problem. While here in the U.S. calls for full drug decriminalization are still dismissed as something of a fringe concern, the Portuguese decided to do it, and have been quietly getting on with it now for a decade. Surprisingly, most credible reports **appear to show** that decriminalization has been a staggering success.

The DEA sees it a bit differently. Portugal, they say, was a disaster, with heroin and HIV rates out of control. "Portugal's addict population and the problems that go along with addiction continue to increase," the DEA maintains. "In an effort to reduce the number of addicts in the prison system, the Portuguese government has enacted some radical policies in the last few years with the eventual decriminalization of all illicit drugs in July of 2001."

However, as **Glenn Greenwald**, the author of the **Cato study**, concludes: "By freeing its citizens from the fear of prosecution and imprisonment for drug usage, Portugal has dramatically improved its ability to encourage drug addicts to avail themselves of treatment. The resources that were previously devoted to prosecuting and imprisoning drug addicts are now available to provide treatment programs to addicts." Under the perfect system, treatment would also be voluntary, but as an alternative to jail, mandatory treatment save money. But for now, "the majority of EU states have rates that are double and triple the rate for post-decriminalization Portugal," Greenwald says.

For those looking for clues about how the U.S. government can tackle its domestic drug problem, the figures are enticing. Following decriminalization, Portugal eventually found itself with the lowest rates of marijuana usage in people over 15 in the EU: about 10%. Compare this to the 40% of people over 12 who regularly smoke pot in the U.S., a country with some of the most punitive drugs laws in the developed world. Drug use of all kinds has declined in Portugal: Lifetime use among seventh to ninth graders fell from 14.01% to 10.6%. Lifetime heroin use among 16-18 year olds fell from 2.5% to 1.8%. And what about those horrific HIV infection rates that prompted the move in the first place? HIV infection rates among drug users fell by an incredible 17%, while drug related deaths were reduced by more than half. "There is no doubt that the phenomenon of addiction is in decline in Portugal," **said Joao Goulao**, President of the

Institute of Drugs and Drugs Addiction, at a press conference to mark the 10th anniversary of the law.

We're not holding our breath that the Portuguese example will lead to any kind of abrupt about-face in America's own sputtering drug war, which is still sputtering steadily along at a cost of trillions a year. However, with the medical marijuana movement so far refusing to be strangled out of existence by the DEA, Senators **Jim Webb** and **Arlen Specter** recently made a **proposal** to create a blue ribbon commission to look at prison and drug sentencing reform. And for any pro-legalization presidential hopefuls in 2012, the movement for a common sense drug policy in the United States may be finally moving into the mainstream.