

# What Pot Legalization Looks Like

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*Portugal shows the best way to keep kids away from pot is to make it legal for everyone else*

It's two-thirty in the morning and techno music blares onto the crowded street outside a packed club in the heart of Lisbon.

The road is dark, and the only light emanates from a corner street lamp on the cobblestone sidewalk. The air is cool despite it being the end of May, but that doesn't stop hundreds of young people from gathering outside, a drink in one hand, a cigarette in the other. These club goers are very young. As in thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years old.

Welcome to the Saturday nightclub scene in Lisbon, Portugal, where drugs have been decriminalized.

A [study](#) commissioned by the libertarian think tank the Cato Institute in 2006 found that in the first five years since the country decriminalized drugs, usage rates among teens in Portugal actually declined. In addition, the rates of new HIV infections caused by the sharing of dirty needles plunged. Although overall usage rates among the rest of the population increased, they did so only slightly. As a result, the study's author, Glenn Greenwald, concluded that the country's decriminalization policy "has enabled the Portuguese government to manage and control the drug problem far better than virtually every other Western country does."

As I talk with a group of the teens on the dimly lit street corner outside the popular club, it's clear that although there may be an alcohol problem among Portugal's youth, most young people seem to draw the line when it comes to drugs, including marijuana -- or hashish, as it's more commonly called in Lisbon.

"You've never tried it?" I skeptically ask a fifteen-year-old girl.

"Never. Never ." She's emphatic, her voice rising over the pulsating beat of the music. "Drinking?" she asks me, laughing and shaking her big, red plastic cup filled with beer in the air, "Yes, I do plenty of that. But smoking hashish..." She grows serious. Scowling, she shakes her head, her long, dark hair moving from side to side. "I would never."

Her ardent dismissal of marijuana -- as though it were heroin -- is a common theme among her peers. I receive similar responses from the majority of young people I talk to outside the club. Drinking is okay, marijuana is not. (I do spot one group of teenage boys, however, sectioned off on a nearby street bench, drinking beer and rolling joints. They tell me it's only a weekend activity.)

According to the Cato Institute case study, which cites state research from the Instituto da Droga e da Toxicodependencia de Portugal's (the Institute on Drugs and Drug Addiction of Portugal's) annual report, since decriminalization took effect in 2001, lifetime drug usage rates -- which measure how many people have consumed a certain drug (or drugs) over the course of their lifetime -- in the country has decreased among several age groups, primarily among young teens. The most significant finding shows that for students in the seventh to ninth grades (between the ages of thirteen and fifteen years old), the usage rate decreased dramatically from 14.1 percent in 2001 to 10.6 percent in 2006. For young people in the tenth to twelfth grades (between the ages of sixteen and eighteen years old), the lifetime prevalence rate fell from 27.6 percent in 2011 to 21.6 percent in 2006. As expected, for some older groups (beginning with nineteen- to twenty-four-year-olds) there has been what Greenwald defines as "a slight to mild increase" in drug usage. The slight increase, Harvard economist Jeffrey Miron tells me, is to be expected, because a group of people might be willing to use drugs if there is no risk of major penalties.

However, "this is a small group, essentially on the margin," he points out, and indeed, the study confirms it. Regardless, Portuguese officials are clearly pleased with the country's progress. Here's why: for drug policy specialists, a demonstrated decline in drug use among adolescents is considered to be critical. That's because the behavior of individuals in their early years tends to have a major effect on drug-related behavior in later years. In other words, if you can influence behavior in the formative teenage years, studies suggest those same teens, once grown, will be far less likely to try drugs. They have essentially missed the window of opportunity when it might be considered most interesting and are therefore less likely to seek out recreational drugs as adults.

Greenwald points to "[Toward a Global View of Alcohol, Tobacco, Cannabis, and Cocaine Use: Findings from the WHO World Mental Health Surveys](#)" from Public Library of Science Medicine, a 2008 study detailing drug usage trends in seventeen countries on five continents in which researchers concluded that the late adolescent years are critical in determining future, lifelong drug use: "In most countries, the period of risk for initiation of use was heavily concentrated in the period from the mid to late teenage years; there was a slightly older and more extended period of risk for illegal drugs compared to legal drugs."

This conclusion lends some credence to the gateway theory that suggests that the use of lesser drugs may lead to the use of more dangerous, hard drugs in the future. While the theory is controversial, Portuguese policy makers theorize that by decriminalizing drugs, they are taking away the appeal and the allure of drugs -- marijuana, for example, is no longer a "dangerous" forbidden fruit and may even be considered a little boring. Miron tells me that prohibitions often have the opposite effect of what is intended. By increasing the idea of the "forbidden fruit," they can create desire, as consumers sometimes want what had been forbidden.

Consider the Netherlands, where marijuana has been tolerated in pot "coffee" shops for years. Per government statistics, Dutch youth are actually less likely to smoke pot than Americans are. For example, 38 percent of American teens have smoked pot compared to 20 percent of Dutch teens. In fact, according to the 2010 U.S.-government-endorsed "Monitoring the Future" survey, which is conducted yearly and includes students from the eighth, tenth, and twelfth grades, marijuana use in the prior twelve months was reported by about 12 percent of the nation's eighth graders, 27 percent of tenth graders,

and a third of the country's twelfth graders.

If you believe in the gateway theory, you would be encouraged by Portugal's declining marijuana usage and the Netherlands' smaller percentages of drug use among the youth. If young people are more likely to abuse hard drugs in the future by starting with soft drugs like marijuana early in life, then Portugal and the Netherlands are success stories.

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