

[A Lib Dem from Camden](#)

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[Why drugs should stay illegal](#)

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I seem to be falling into the habit of writing whole articles purely in response to an article someone else wrote that I happened to find interesting. This time, it was the recent article [“should we decriminalise drugs”](#) that got me interested. The first point that is important to make is the de-criminalisation of drugs is often confused with legalisation. Under de-criminalisation, the law would not change, it would simply no longer be enforced, with the aim of reducing the burden on the criminal justice system by not forcing the police to arrest every guy they catch with a spliff. Only legalisation would lead to the wholesale reforms that advocates say would create a new regulated market, taking power away from drug dealers and curing the social ills normally associated with the use of narcotic substances.

So, why don't we legalise drugs? I think one point that has been consistently missed in this debate is that drug habits cause crime because drugs cost money – not because they are illegal. Their addictive properties result in what economists call ‘inelastic’ demand. In other words people will pay through the nose to get hold of them regardless of how much money they actually have available to spend on them. Taking drugs out of the hands of gangsters working out of a crack den and placing them with the likes of Glaxo Smith Kline, therefore, would have next to no effect on the root cause of all their associated social problems, their price. This is because, legal or not, the laws of free market economics still apply.

This leads us on to the issue of supply. Most of the hard drugs feeding users' habits over here come from somewhere else; Cocaine from South America, for example, and Heroin from Afghanistan. The cultivation of poppy and coca bush fields is a violent business. Many innocent people are drawn into the industry as their only means of escaping poverty, fast becoming dependent on international drug trafficking gangs and paramilitary groups for their livelihoods. Drug farming also has a lot of nasty side effects including massive damage to the environment, as acres of forests are demolished to make way for new farms, and the displacement of other farmers trying to make a living out of useful products...like food. Of course, the laws of economics apply just as readily here and as legalisation would have no effect on demand, it would do nothing to halt the supply of drugs, and all the devastating consequences that come with it, either.

So, what about de-criminalisation? The case of Portugal who, de-criminalised drugs in 2001, is interesting, but needs to be taken with a pinch of salt. Much has been made of a

recent Cato Institute study which sung the praises of the Portuguese government's approach to drugs. Yet, as an outspoken libertarian think tank and proponent of liberalising drugs laws, their impartiality is questionable. Indeed, several critiques of the study have led to accusations that the institute 'cherry picked' the start and end years of the various age groups at the centre of their analysis in order to get more favourable results.

However, it is impossible to dismiss all their findings, especially those that clearly indicate a drop in drug related deaths and an increase in the number of people seeking treatment, since the introduction of the laws. In this respect, governments such as our own who go to the other extreme, throwing anyone with a drug problem in jail should take note; addicts need treatment, not jail time. Nevertheless, it is important that drugs remain illegal because the only way to reverse their ruinous effects on society is to take users off the streets until drugs are no longer a viable commercial product, depriving the dealers of their profits. This can only happen by making treatment compulsory under pain of prosecution. In the long term though, we will need more than simple domestic reforms to deal with the supply of drugs, but tackling demand is a good start.