

This November, Oregon can spark a withdrawal from the War on Drugs

Jeffrey Singer

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If voters approve it, Measure 110 - the Drug Decriminalization and Addiction Treatment Initiative - will reduce possession of all Schedule I through IV controlled substances to Class E violations, punished by a \$100 fine.

To qualify as a Class E violation, the amount of a drug an individual may possess cannot be greater than for personal use. Drug dealing or manufacturing would still be punishable.

This is a good start, but Oregonians should look to Portugal for an even better example.

In 2001, Portugal led the European Union in drug overdose deaths. Realizing that treating substance use as a crime was filling jails, fueling corruption, and failing to stop overdose deaths and disease spread, Portugal decriminalized all drugs. Resources for law enforcement were redirected toward harm reduction while drug dealing and manufacturing remain criminal offenses.

In the years since Portugal's rate of HIV plunged, drug-related crimes plummeted, and Portugal's drug overdose rate is among the lowest in the developed world. Today, a country that decriminalized all drugs nearly 20 years ago reports overdose deaths per million at less than one-thirtieth that of the United States. And while overall drug use by adults mirrors most of the European continent, teen drug use in Portugal has decreased relative to other EU countries.

Speaking before the Rhode Island General Assembly this past January, Dr. Jaoa Goulao, the architect of Portugal's drug policy, explained that the program works because people with substance use disorder are not treated as criminals: "If I smoke cigarettes and I get lung cancer, no one puts me in jail. I'll be offered treatment. I'll be treated with dignity even if it comes from my wrong behavior."

He also noted that law enforcement efficiency improved as police were freed from tasks that were not reducing drug use. Drug users on the street now seek help from officers, who refer them to treatment programs.

Of course, not every illicit drug user has a substance use disorder. In fact, only 10 to 20% of adults over age 25 who use addictive drugs get hooked. It is perhaps with this insight that Initiative Petition 44 provides the option of a "completed health assessment" in lieu of a fine. This provides those who want help with an incentive to obtain it. What's more, it directs expected taxpayer savings resulting from prisons no longer being filled with drug offenders to help fund treatment programs.

There is reason, however, to worry about what kind of programs will be offered.

Policymakers often overemphasize abstinence-based programs, which have a disappointing track record and don't prioritize treatment with methadone and buprenorphine, which are much more effective.

Oregon has a history of sparking nationwide changes. The "Oregon Plan" led to the 17th Amendment to the Constitution and the direct election of senators. Voting by mail began in Oregon in 1981. And while a small step in the right direction, this initiative may trigger the end of the destructive War on Drugs.

Jeffrey A. Singer, MD practices general surgery in Phoenix, Arizona, and is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. He can be reached at jsinger@cato.org