

The Washington Post

On drug use, Portugal should stay the course on harm reduction

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July 12, 2023

The July 7 front-page article “Portugal grapples with drug decriminalization doubts” reported that Portuguese policymakers are questioning the country’s landmark drug decriminalization program that began in 2001. I inferred from the article that policymakers expected decriminalization would lead to a drop in illicit drug use. Though there was a decline, that was always a secondary goal. The primary goal was to reduce fatal overdoses by directing resources from incarceration to harm-reduction programs. On that, Portugal has succeeded immensely.

Portugal still has one of the lowest overdose rates in the developed world and a lower usage rate among adults of illicit drugs than the European average. Overdose deaths have increased since 2019. Still, in that time, increases in anxiety, despair and isolation resulting from pandemic-related policies caused a worldwide increase in drug use, including alcohol consumption, and sparked fatal overdoses. The Portuguese were not immune to this trend.

The worldwide increase in drug use has psychosocial and sociocultural origins. Portugal’s drug-policy makers were right to recognize this reality in 2001 when they shifted the emphasis to harm reduction. The result is fewer cases of HIV, hepatitis and fatal overdoses. Reverting to the old, failed prohibitionist approach would be a mistake. The ultimate form of harm reduction would be to end prohibition, which would make us safer because the drugs would be legal and regulated.

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