

Should the US Consider Decriminalizing Drugs?

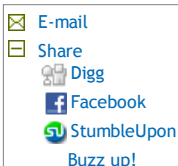
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by [Kate Davey](#)

Deciding to relax drug laws worked for Portugal; it apparently failed in the U.K. Could looser drug laws reduce crime in the United States?

Portugal Sees Success in Decriminalizing Drugs

In 2001, Portugal became the first country in Europe to decriminalize personal possession of drugs; instead of sentencing someone to jail for drug use, [citizens are offered drug therapy](#) from a social worker, a psychologist and a lawyer. A recent report by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, found that drug use among Portugal's teens and new HIV infections among drug users have dropped. In addition, more people are seeking help for drug addiction.



British Courts Regret Loosening Pot Laws

Portugal is not the only European country to have tried easing up on its drug laws. In 2004, the [United Kingdom lessened the legal punishment for possessing marijuana](#). Unfortunately, the new legislation was followed by an increase in use of drugs and youth crimes, and a corresponding decrease in arrests. Counter to government expectations that marijuana use was an unlikely motivation for crime, one study of the English city of Sheffield found that 25 percent of young offenders turn to crime to pay for their cannabis habit.

Deeming the experiment a failure, the British government toughened the cannabis laws again in January 2009, [imposing a longer prison sentence for possession](#).

Sources in this Story

- [Time: Drugs in Portugal: Did Decriminalization Work?](#)
- [The Guardian: It's curtains for bad 70s drug laws](#)
- [findingDulcinea: British Courts Regret New Leniency of U.K. Cannabis Laws](#)
- [The BBC: Debate over cannabis classification](#)
- [The Wall Street Journal: Drugs: To Legalize or Not by John P. Walters](#)
- [The Wall Street Journal: Drugs: To Legalize or Not by Steven B. Duke](#)

New York Repeals Rockefeller Drug Laws

Portugal's success may have to do with the fact that Portugal is a small and relatively homogeneous society, unlike the United States or the United Kingdom. Decriminalization of drugs is not likely to happen in the United States anytime soon. However, as Mexican drug wars spill over the border, U.S. authorities at various levels are discussing new approaches to drug use.

For example, in late March, the New York State Assembly agreed to [repeal most of its Rockefeller drug laws](#), which included "rigid mandatory sentences for relatively low-end drug crimes," and resulted in decade-long sentences. Prisoners serving time for drug use will be able to apply for reductions in their sentences and state officials will offer treatment for nonviolent drug offenders.

Opinion & Analysis: Would decriminalizing drugs reduce violent crime?

In a recent series, The Wall Street Journal covered opposing opinions concerning whether to legalize drugs in the United States.

John P. Walters, the former director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy from 2001 to 2009 under President George W. Bush, argued that decriminalizing drugs [would be the worst thing the United States could do for Mexico](#), and would not help the United States either. Walters writes, "Just as ending Prohibition did not destroy