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# Fighting drugs: A better way

Monday, April 27, 2009

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Portugal's success with decriminalization, which makes starkly obvious the abject failure of America's war on drugs, should be a model for U.S. reform.

Portugal decriminalized all drugs, even cocaine and heroin, in 2001. Drug trafficking remains a crime but possession and use of small amounts are administrative violations, not crimes, with the emphasis on prevention and treatment.

As detailed by Glenn Greenwald in a new Cato Institute (*cato.org*) white paper, Portugal has remedied societal ills that stem from handling drug users as criminals while avoiding pitfalls predicted by drug-war advocates.

Since 2001, annual overdose deaths have fallen from about 400 to 290. New HIV cases related to injecting drugs have fallen from about 1,400 in 2000 to about 400 in 2006. Drug usage hasn't spiked, Lisbon hasn't become a "drug tourist" magnet and by almost every measure, the drug situation in Portugal is better than it is in other European nations that still criminalize personal usage.

Former Seattle Police Chief Gil Kerlikowske, President Obama's choice to head the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy, has spoken of emphasizing prevention and treatment but should go further once he's confirmed by the Senate. He should use Portugal as a powerful example in urging an end to the U.S. drug war that's a losing effort for all concerned.

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