

Canada's war on drugs bucks the global trend

By [Carlito Pablo](#)

Since founding the Vancouver Island Compassion Society 10 years ago, Philippe Lucas has seen changes in the way countries around the world deal with drug users. As recently as August 20, for example, Mexico decriminalized the possession for personal use of substances like marijuana, cocaine, heroin, LSD, and methamphetamine. Five days later, Argentina's Supreme Court declared unconstitutional legislation that punishes possessors of marijuana with prison sentences ranging from one month to two years.

Elsewhere in Latin America, according to Lucas, a first-term Victoria city councillor, countries like Colombia and Peru have set aside policies that regard drug use as a criminal offence.

"We're seeing Canada and the U.S. increasingly isolated in the maintenance of a prohibition-based policy," Lucas told the *Georgia Straight* in a phone interview. "Within the western world, we see examples of very successful alternatives to a law-and-order approach to substance abuse. The best recent examples are Portugal and Spain."

Lucas recently retired as executive director of the Vancouver Island Compassion Society, a nonprofit organization that provides cannabis to terminally and chronically ill people.

Lucas, a graduate student in UVic's policy-and-practice program and a research fellow with the Centre for Addictions Research of B.C., noted that prohibitionist policies persist in North America despite the absence of evidence of success, particularly in terms of public health.

This is in sharp contrast to the experience in Portugal, which the Washington, D.C.-based Cato Institute examined in a detailed report released last April. Since decriminalization in 2001, lifetime prevalence rates, which measure how many people have consumed a particular drug or drugs in their lifetime, have decreased among youth, the think tank noted in *Drug Decriminalization in Portugal: Lessons for Creating Fair and Successful Drug Policies*. For Portuguese aged 13 to 15 years, the rate fell from 14.1 percent in 2001 to 10.6 percent in 2006. Among those aged 16 to 18, the rate dropped from 27.6 percent to 21.6 percent.

With the fear of criminal punishment gone, more addicts have availed themselves of drug-substitution treatments. The number of people accessing these services rose from 6,040 in 1999 to 14,877 in 2003, an increase of 147 percent.

Drug-related deaths declined, from about 400 in 1999 to 290 in 2006, while newly reported HIV cases among drug users in Portugal diminished from nearly 1,400 in 2000 to about 400 six years later. New AIDS cases among the same group dropped from about 600 in 2000 to approximately 200 in 2006.

The percentage of drug addicts among newly diagnosed HIV and AIDS patients decreased over the same time. In 2001, HIV-positive drug users accounted for more than 50 percent of new HIV cases; this fell to 30 percent in 2006. Addicts diagnosed



Philippe Lucas notes that addicts seek help if they don't fear arrest.

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with AIDS made up almost 60 percent of AIDS patients in 2001; their percentage was cut to less than 40 percent in 2006.

The Cato Institute report notes that decriminalization in Portugal applies to purchase and possession for personal consumption. The allowable personal-use amount is defined as the average quantity sufficient for 10 days' usage by one person.

In conversation, Lucas noted that although B.C., and Vancouver in particular, have a reputation for being liberal on drug use, they have the highest rate of drug-related arrests in Canada. "Out of those high rates of drug arrests, 80 percent are for personal possession—they're not for trafficking—and 60 percent of the overall arrests are cannabis-related," he said.

Lucas will speak at a drug-policy conference to be held at the SFU Burnaby campus from Friday to Sunday (October 23 to October 25). Organized by Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy, the event will also feature presentations from harm-reduction activist Mark Haden, UVic professor Susan Boyd, Victoria police officer and antiprohibition activist David Bratzer, author and physician Gabor Maté, medical-marijuana activist Rielle Capler, lawyer Kirk Tousaw, and Insite researcher Dr. Evan Wood.

The conference is being held in the shadow of Bill C-15, a controversial piece of drug legislation passed by the House of Commons in June. Currently awaiting concurrence from the Senate, the proposed law seeks to impose mandatory prison sentences on people caught with illicit substances.

CSSDP director Caleb Chepesiuk is one of the organizers of the conference. A graduate student of legal studies at Ottawa's Carleton University, he noted that although U.S. federal policy remains firmly rooted in prohibition, a number of American states, such as Massachusetts and California, are looking at ways to legally regulate marijuana.

"What it says about Canada is that we're totally ignoring these trends," Chepesiuk told the *Straight* by phone. "We're doing things like imposing mandatory minimum sentences. We're increasing prison budgets for more prisoners while other countries are looking at ways to decrease spending on prisons."

This weekend's conference would have had a place for marijuana activist Marc Emery. On September 28, however, Vancouver's so-called Prince of Pot [turned himself in to Canadian authorities](#) to await extradition to the U.S., where he will serve up to five years in prison for selling cannabis seeds.

Emery is being held at the North Fraser Pretrial Centre, where he will spend time until Conservative justice minister Rob Nicholson signs the extradition order, Emery's wife, Jodie, informed the *Straight*.