What if the US Legalized All Drugs?

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With Featured Speakers
Glenn Greenwald
John P. Walters

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IN JULY 2001, PORTUGAL DECRIMINALIZED ALL DRUGS, ADOPTING A POLICY THAT HAS SINCE BECOME INCREASINGLY POPULAR. SHOULD THE US ADOPT A SIMILAR POLICY?

Since 2001 the number of young people using illegal drugs has dropped by 900,000 to about 2.7 million. This drop is an important development for all the obvious reasons, plus one. Substance abuse is a disease. Until recently, we failed to grasp the nature of this disease and how to reduce the suffering it causes.

We can prevent and successfully treat this disease. There are millions of Americans in recovery who are staying clean and sober each day. The rate of drug use among high-school seniors has been cut nearly in half since its peak years of 1978 and 1979, to 22.3% in 2008. Prevention and treatment have been producing steady results.

The policies that drive down drug use attack both demand and supply. Controlling supply reduces consumption as it chokes off access to all types of drugs. No nation that has tried to avoid controlling supply ... it is today, only to pay a huge price for the mistake. The predictable costs in addiction and disease are unsustainable.

John P. Walters, Wall Street Journal

By any metric, Portugal’s drug-decriminalization scheme has been a resounding success. Drug usage in many categories has decreased in absolute terms, including for key demographic groups, like 15-to-19-year-olds. Where usage rates have increased, the increases have been modest — far less than in most other European Union nations, which continue to use a criminalization approach.

Portugal, whose drug problems were among the worst in Europe, now has the lowest usage rate for marijuana and one of the lowest for cocaine. Drug-related pathologies, including HIV transmission, hepatitis transmission and drug-related deaths, have declined significantly.

Many politicians insisted that a vast parade of horribles would be unleashed, including massive increases in drug use among youth and the conversion of Lisbon into a “drug haven for tourists.” But none of those scary scenarios occurred. Portuguese citizens, able to compare the out-of-control drug problems of the 1990s with the vastly improved situation now, have little desire to return to the days of criminalization. No influential politician advocates doing so.

Whatever one’s views on liberalizing drug laws, our debate should be grounded in empirical evidence — not speculation and fear-mongering.

Glenn Greenwald, Politico