

Oregon Wants to Defelonize All the Drugs

Over the last several years, ending drug prohibition has steadily become an idea whose time has come. After spending decades and billions of tax dollars policing what individuals can and cannot put into their own bodies, the government has absolutely nothing to show for its “war on drugs,” aside from a swelling prison population.

The staunchest supporters of prohibition, like Attorney General Jeff Sessions, may still be clinging stubbornly to their archaic views, but there are virtually no grounds on which the continuation of drug prohibition can be justified. In fact, just as with alcohol prohibition, outlawing the use of drugs has resulted in more drug use, not less. It has also made drug use more unsafe as the sale and distribution of drugs is driven underground to avoid government intervention. And when it comes to popular opinion on the issue, most of the country now understands that banning the use of illicit substances just doesn't work.

And while the complete legalization of marijuana is now only a matter of *when* and not *if*, ending the prohibition of all other illicit substances is not likely to happen anytime soon: that is, unless you live in Oregon where a new bill to decriminalize “hard drugs” has just passed state house and will make its way to the state senate.

The Opiate Epidemic

One of the most devastating consequences of the war on drugs has been the opiate epidemic it helped create. After years spent demonizing marijuana, the government, in its infinite wisdom, began approving opiate-based drugs for the treatment of pain.

To fully put this into perspective, weed was being passed off as a dangerous substance while derivatives of heroin were simultaneously and readily being prescribed by doctors. Opiates, as we now know, are extremely addictive. For those with health insurance, opiates are a relatively inexpensive drug as well, making them all the more ripe for abuse.

Over the years, the overprescription of opiates like Oxycontin, Percocet, and Codeine have created a plethora of addicts who, once cut off from their prescription, find themselves desperate for the drug. These addicts are willing to pay for lower quality versions of their prescription medications. This is, of course, risky as street drugs are often made in questionable circumstances and cut with other substances to keep production costs low. As a result, users become extremely vulnerable to overdosing as they are accustomed to taking their prescribed medication, and not the street versions. In 2016 alone, the death rates even spiked to historical levels as opiate overdoses soared above 59,000.

But as more states have moved towards marijuana legalization, opiate use within those states has actually decreased. While this in itself is a powerful testament to the potential of legalized marijuana, until other drugs are at least decriminalized, the casualties associated with prohibition will continue to be a problem.

Luckily, Oregon is leading the way on this issue in the United States.

Legalize All the Drugs

Last week, the news was full of headlines commenting on Oregon's new legislation which, if passed by the state senate, will allow for the defelonization of small amounts of "hard drugs." Under the new law, first-time offenders caught in possession of meth, heroin, or cocaine will be charged with a misdemeanor instead of a felony. This means they would also be

subject to smaller fees and most importantly, less time behind bars.

Additionally, by reclassifying these offenses as misdemeanors, first-time offenders avoid having to check the “felon” box on housing and job applications. The small “check if you are a felon” box has been one of the largest barriers former offenders encounter after they are released from incarceration. Already dealing with a gap in their professional resume and often without any housing secured, this box prevents former offenders from full rehabilitation.

The Governor of Oregon, Kate Brown, commented on the new law saying it was “an important step towards creating a more equitable justice system to better serve all Oregonians.”

Governor Brown and other supporters of the new legislation are hoping that by giving these first-time offenders a better chance at post-incarceration success, they will lower recidivism, especially in the most vulnerable neighborhoods. Oregon House Speaker Tina Kotek touched on this particular aspect stating, “Felony sentences for small, user quantity amounts often carry heavy consequences including barriers to housing and employment which have a disparate impact on minority communities.”

Additionally, by removing the associated felony charges for first-time offenders, the new law encourages those suffering from addiction to seek help without fear of legal retribution.

Policy Alliance’s director of communications strategy, Jag Davies addressed this particular benefit saying, “Defelonizing possession could make it easier for people who would otherwise be too scared of punishment to get help seek needed medical attention...”

For anyone skeptical that decriminalization could actually result in decreased drug use and therefore, decreased addiction, it’s already happened in the Netherlands and

Portugal.

There Are Better Ways

In Amsterdam and elsewhere in the Netherlands, it is not uncommon to see large signs donning the words, "You will not be arrested for using drugs." A few years ago, the Netherlands altered its drug policy and allowed for the possession of both soft drugs like marijuana and harder drugs like cocaine and heroin. Of course, this doesn't mean that tourists and residents are free to shoot up as often as they please. Instead, the law allows for residents to possess up to five grams of cannabis and one gram of heroin or cocaine without the fear of punishment.

The fliers and signs advertising the legality of drugs throughout Amsterdam are actually used for educational purposes. When, for example, a batch of heroin masked as cocaine began causing hospitalizations and even deaths throughout the city, signs were put up making both residents and tourists aware of the situation and letting them know what medical treatment they should seek should they fall victim to this drug rouse.

Since many addicts often avoid treatment due to the fear of getting caught and ending up behind bars, the Netherlands' approach has helped calm this fear and encouraged drug users to medical assistance without the fear of arrest. Oddly enough, even though the Netherlands would be viewed by advocates of prohibition as a haven for moral ambiguity, drug use is actually lower than in the United States.

When asked specifically about marijuana, 44 percent of Americans and 26 percent of the Dutch admitted to trying the drug. Americans also had a higher rate of cocaine use with 26 percent of respondents answering that they had tried the drug as opposed to the 14 percent reported by the Dutch.

When Portugal decided to decriminalize drug use it saw similar

success as the Netherlands. In 1991, over one percent of Portugal's population was said to be hooked on heroin. In fact, the epidemic was said to be one of the worst in the world and it was difficult to find a family in Portugal who had not been negatively impacted by heroin use in some capacity.

In 2001, Portugal decriminalized drug use, choosing to go after sellers rather than users. Without criminal penalties associated with drug use, those suffering from addiction were able to be treated as patients suffering from a disease instead of as criminals.

The law isn't perfect since it still mandates drug treatment for those caught with drugs. But state-mandated treatment is still far superior to state-mandated prison sentences. Since the law was implemented, the number of drug cases per year has decreased by 75 percent. The number of drug-induced HIV cases has also dropped by 95 percent since decriminalization standards have been in place.

This change in policy has also helped to de-stigmatize drug use and has helped societies become more sympathetic towards the plight of addiction.

The Oregon bill still needs to pass the state senate before it can make its way to the governor's desk to be signed. However, Governor Brown's strong support of the bill is extremely encouraging and signals a changing of the times. Not only is the country beginning to see that legalizing marijuana has a plethora of benefits, they are also beginning to understand that prohibition as a whole is harming society, rather than helping it.

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This article was originally published on FEE.org. Read the [original article](#).

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