

# Busting drug law fears

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Portugal's decision to decriminalise all drug use did not lead to dramatic increases in drug abuse or drug-related harm, a joint Australian and UK study has found.

The study, by UNSW's Dr Caitlin Hughes, from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC), and Professor Alex Stevens, of the University of Kent, is the first independent, academic investigation to assess the effects of the Portuguese policy.

“Contrary to predictions, the Portuguese decriminalisation did not lead to major increases in [drug use](#),” Dr Hughes and Professor Stevens wrote. “Indeed, evidence indicates reductions in problematic use, drug-related harms and criminal justice overcrowding.”

In July 2001, Portugal decriminalised the possession of up to 10 days' supply of all types of illicit drugs. Instead of being arrested, people found in possession of these substances were referred to regional 'committees for the dissuasion of addiction'. Simultaneously, Portugal increased its investment in treatment and harm reduction services, for example methadone substitution treatment for people who are dependent on heroin.

Since 2001, there has been only a modest increase in adult drug use (in line with other southern European countries), a reduction in drug-related deaths and HIV infections, a reduction in the burden of drug offenders on the prison system, and an increase in the quantity of drugs seized by the authorities.

“Given the frequent speculation about drug law reform, this provides much needed evidence that decriminalisation will not inevitably lead to catastrophic consequences for the reform country and that it may even aid the ability of health and law enforcement agencies to treat users and to detect and prosecute the traffickers of illicit drugs,” Dr Hughes said.

The study, "What can we learn from the Portuguese decriminalisation of [illicit drugs](#)", is published in the *British Journal of Criminology*.

**More information:** To read the full media release go to the [NDARC website](#).

Provided by University of New South Wales

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