

The Lessons of Legalization

The city is gaining a surprising number of cannabis dispensaries recently. But maybe that shouldn't be a surprise.

The wisdom of the drug war is finally coming under intense scrutiny, for good reason. Current policy has led to imprisonment, marginalization and needless deaths, including over 300 illicit drug-related deaths in B.C. in just these first months of 2016, in part due to toxic additives. Add to this the heavy social and economic costs of illegal activities and law enforcement. We've spent decades assisting too few to lift themselves out of addiction and too many to ill-gained wealth.

On the other hand, our misgivings about decriminalization may result from a fear that it would lead to increased recreational use among all ages, particularly youth. It's a legitimate concern. Alcohol is currently the most widely used and abused drug by a wide margin. [Health Canada](#) reports that 78% of the population consumed alcohol in the last year surveyed. Of those, almost 20% exceeded Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines. Consequences of abuse range from disruption in family life to safety issues. "In Canada, alcohol has been a factor in 30% - 40% of road deaths for the past 15 years," says the public education group [Change the Conversation](#). No doubt people wonder what would happen if a large increase in drugged driving were added to these figures, if street drugs were as freely available and accepted as alcohol.

There are lessons to be learned here from Portugal, where use of all drugs was decriminalized in 2001. The UK's [Transform Drug Policy Institute](#) reports, "HIV infections and drug-related deaths have decreased, while the dramatic rise in use feared by some has failed to materialise. However, such improvements are not solely the result of the decriminalisation policy; Portugal's shift towards a more health-centred approach to drugs, as well as wider health and social policy changes, are equally, if not more, responsible for the positive changes observed."

Without successful public education and social programs the transition could be disastrous. As necessary as leisure and recreation are to our mental health, pursuing them as ends in themselves is counterproductive. The most important piece of public education may be the value of an unclouded mind to our mental health, our relationships and our development as spiritual beings. As numerous sources have pointed out, including the incredible [75-year Harvard Grant Study](#), our greatest happiness derives from finding love and connection in our lives.

Portugal's experience also demonstrates the wisdom of providing adequate social services for abuse and addiction, as opposed to leaving individuals to their own devices. Addiction has many causes, of which harm, inadequate support and bad decisions rank high on the list. For those needing or wanting escape, supportive programs are far more effective than judgement or punishment. As the author of *Chasing the Scream: the First and Last Days of the War on Drugs* discovered, happier environments will cause both rats and human beings to freely forego a drug habit. ([Johann Hari article](#))

There is also a solid body of evidence that legal, medical uses of currently illicit drugs would reap enormous health and social rewards. The uses of marijuana in treating conditions such as chronic pain and epilepsy are fairly well-known. Less well-known are the benefits of the supervised use of

psychotropic drugs in treating disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder and alcoholism. CBC Radio's 3-part series [High Culture](#) describes astounding results in this area, with success rates far surpassing current methods of treatment. These, too, give strong economic as well as human incentives for changes in policy and attitude.

The good news is that rather than simply decriminalizing marijuana, Canada is [due to legalize](#) it in the Spring of next year, bringing it under strict regulations designed to keep it out of the hands of underage teenagers and organized crime. The need will then be for effective public education and social programs to allow us to deal with all psychoactive drugs within the holistic context of human health and well-being.

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