

Increasing number of countries decriminalising drugs ahead of UN debate on global drug policy

Report finds decriminalisation improves public health and social outcomes, saves governments money, and does *not* increase drug use

LONDON (14 March, 2016) – Release, the UK centre for expertise on drugs and drug laws, launched a new report today highlighting the enormous benefits that decriminalising the possession of drugs for personal use brings to individuals, society and governments.

The report, '[A Quiet Revolution: Drug Decriminalisation Across the Globe](#),' analyses over 25 jurisdictions around the world that have decriminalised drugs, finding a surge toward this drug policy model in the past 15 years. Among the positive outcomes identified as a result of decriminalisation are:

- Reduced rates of HIV transmission and fewer drug-related deaths (Portugal);
- Improved education, housing and employment opportunities for people who use drugs (Australia);
- Savings to the state of close to \$1 billion over 10 years (California).

Furthermore, the report shows that despite critics' fears that decriminalisation will lead to a surge in drug use this has simply not been borne out in the evidence, with drug laws revealed to have a negligible effect on drug use levels.

Niamh Eastwood, the Executive Director of Release, says: "Governments can no longer ignore the irrefutable evidence -- ending the needless criminalisation of people who use drugs brings tremendously positive outcomes for society as a whole. In England and Wales 70,000-80,000 people are criminalised annually for simple possession, despite the UK government admitting in 2014 the futility of this approach, noting it doesn't impact on use levels. Never has drug law reform been more pressing."

The report comes one month prior to the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on drugs, set to be held April 19-21. It will mark the biggest debate on global drug policy in nearly two decades. As the UNGASS approaches, clear fractures have appeared in the historic consensus on punitive approaches to drug control, both in rhetoric and in practice, as the report underscores.

As it stands, 83 per cent of all drug-related offences globally are low-level, nonviolent possession offences, with governments collectively spending \$100 billion annually on tackling drugs. Criminalising people who use drugs has caused public health crises in the form of HIV and hepatitis C epidemics among vulnerable populations, and resulted in a litany of human rights abuses committed in the name of drug control, including arbitrary detention, restricted access to healthcare services and executions.

In recent years, an increasing number of high-profile figures and organisations have advocated the decriminalisation of possession and use of drugs, including several UN agencies such as the World Health Organisation, UNAIDS, the United Nations Development Programme, and even the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

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Notes to the editor:

1. Journalists wanting to see an advanced copy of the report should contact Edward Fox (edwardfox@release.org.uk). Embargoed copies are available from late Thursday, March 10.
2. [Release](#) is the UK national centre of expertise on drugs and drug laws, providing free and confidential specialist services to professionals, the public, and people who use drugs. Release also campaigns for the reform of UK drug policy, particularly the removal of criminal sanctions for possession offences, in order to bring about a fairer and more compassionate legal framework to managing drug use in our society.
3. Release will be presenting the report on Monday March 14, 2016, at the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in Vienna. This is the last key meeting prior to April's UNGASS on drugs in New York.