

Portugal's approach to drug decriminalisation: A model for the rest of the world?

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In 2001, Portugal embarked on an unprecedented shift in its drug policy, one that would attract global attention. Two decades on, the country's experience continues to raise important questions about the possibilities and limits of such a radical transformation.



Is decriminalisation the solution? © ENTR

It's a Wednesday afternoon in the outskirts of Lisbon, Portugal. Just like any other day of the week, the outreach team of the NGO Crescer is getting ready to go around the neighbourhood to distribute food and clean supplies.

“Normally in the streets, we take out this kit, it's an injection kit. Sometimes, with this kind of job, the people and the community don't understand because it looks like we are promoting the use of drugs,” says Nuno Maneta, 54, a peer worker at Crescer. After spending a decade using heroin and cocaine, he turned his life around and has since been working with harm reduction organisations.

A job like Nuno's can only exist due to Portugal's radical drug policy.

In 2001, the country decriminalised all drugs, becoming the first one in Europe to adopt a public health approach to drug use. The law marked a radical break from traditional punitive drug policies. Instead of punishing users, the country offered therapeutic treatment and long-term support.

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to the Fentanyl drug sweeping across the country together and the impact of the Covid pandemic, rather than the policy itself.

The question remains: why hasn't the world followed Portugal's lead? Watch the full story of Portugal's drug policy in the video, where ENTR dives deeper into the successes, challenges, and lessons from one of Europe's most ambitious drug policy experiments.

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