

Box 1. Effects of reduced sentencing for drug use offences in Portugal

Drug use has been decriminalized in Portugal since 2001. Possession and sale of proscribed drugs remain illegal in the country but people in possession of drugs for “personal use” (up to a 10-day supply of any drug) are not prosecuted criminally but redirected to a Commission for Dissuasion of Drug Addiction. These committees are composed of a social worker, a doctor and a legal adviser, who assess the level of substance abuse or dependence of the drug user and direct them to appropriate treatment. This measure was accompanied by a greater allocation of resources to treatment (e.g. methadone substitution), harm reduction (e.g. needle and syringe programmes) and prevention interventions.

During the first 6 years of the programme, the committees dealt with approximately 500 cases a month. The number of people undergoing substitution treatment increased from 6040 in 1999 to 14 877 in 2003. Lifetime prevalence of substance use increased from 8% to 12% between 2001 and 2007. However, there was a reduction in recent or current use, particularly in the age group 15–24, consistent with a pattern of experimentation and with data showing higher rates of discontinuation. In terms of public health effects, there was a sharp decline in the number of new HIV-positive cases among people who inject drugs (from 1400 in 2000 to 400 in 2006) and a reduction in the number of drug-induced deaths (from around 80 in 2001 to 20 in 2008). In terms of effects on crime, the number of convictions for drug trafficking remained stable in the period of 2001–2005 (around 5000 per year); at the same time, there was a significantly reduced burden on the courts (in 2000 there had been 7592 drug use charges) and on the prison system (prison overcrowding decreased from 119 prisoners per available place down to 101.5 in 2005).