

DECRIMINALIZE AND REGULATE NON-MEDICAL USE OF ALL DRUGS

ISSUE

COVID-19 has laid bare the inadequacies of our healthcare system. It has shown that worker's rights and compensation is grossly inadequate when in times of crisis. It has also shown that there are other pandemics that have been largely ignored by many – the Opioid Crisis.

The societal and economic toll the opioid pandemic has caused must be rectified. It is the duty of organizations such as the Chambers of Commerce and Boards of Trade to urge the government to ensure that everything is being done to alleviate the loss in life and losses to the economy that is caused by the addiction pandemic. One such way is to ensure that addictions are not met with punitive punishments but rather with treatment, through the decriminalization and regulation of non-medical use of all drugs.

BACKGROUND

The ineffective war on drugs initiated in the 1970s by United States President Richard Nixon has resulted in a monumental waste in resources. It has caused large numbers of unnecessary incarcerations, caused pandemics and has initiated the stigma associated with addiction that we as a society are grappling with today.

COVID-19 has exposed the shortcomings of our healthcare system. Ranging from inadequate worker's rights and compensation when in times of crisis to the revelation of the impact a pandemic can have on an economy and our governance system. COVID-19 is not the only pandemic that is impacting our healthcare system – the addiction and war on drugs has led to incredibly negative implications for our workforce, our economy, and our society.

Efforts are being made to combat 40 years of failure. Many countries have decriminalized and regulated non-medical use of drugs. In 2001, Portugal became the first European country to abolish all criminal penalties for personal drug possession, under Law 30/2000.¹ In addition, drug users were to be provided with therapy rather than prison sentences. Research commissioned by the Cato Institute and led by Glenn Greenwald found that in the five years after the start of decriminalization, illegal drug use by teenagers had declined, the rate of HIV infections among drug users had dropped, deaths related to heroin and similar drugs had been cut by more than half, and the number of people seeking treatment for drug addiction had doubled².

A ballot measure in Oregon to decriminalize drugs passed in November's U.S. election with strong support³. Norway is also proceeding to roll back penal sanctions for consumption of substances⁴. It's time for Canada to follow suit and decriminalize drugs now.

¹<https://www.drugpolicyfacts.org/region/portugal#:~:text=Law%2030%2F2000%2C%20adopted%20in,required%20for%2010%20days'%20consumption.>

² http://www.cato.org/pubs/wtpapers/greenwald_whitepaper.pdf

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/09/politics/oregon-decriminalize-drugs-trnd/index.html>

⁴ <https://idpc.net/alerts/2020/01/norwegian-drug-reform-committee-report-remove-penalties-for-use-and-possession>

Canada has legalized the cultivation, personal use, and possession of cannabis⁵. Although the cannabis industry has been met with many regulatory burdens, we still do not know whether legalization has met its policy objectives. Legalization has increased tax revenue, provided for more business to open, and has led to more associations calling for the decriminalization of other drugs⁶. The Canadian Associations of Police Chiefs⁷, the Premier of British Columbia John Horgan, Dr. Bonnie Henry, and other officials have all indicated their support. Vancouver Council has sought exemption from the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act from federal officials⁸.

The Business Case

The criminal justice system is overburdened. Our healthcare system is at capacity. Our labor force is in short supply. Decriminalization and regulation of non-medical drugs can alleviate these pressures and more. By decriminalizing and regulating the illicit drug supply, overdoses can be managed. By ensuring that possession of non-medical drugs and being under the influence does not result in criminal charges, our workforce is not reduced. But there must be a rehabilitation aspect included in decriminalization and regulation. Rehabilitation coupled with work placing programs will increase our labour supply, reduce the toll on our healthcare system in the long run, and lead to fewer deaths.

THE CHAMBER RECOMMENDS

That the Federal Government work with Provinces and Territories to:

1. Decriminalize and regulate all non-medical drugs;
2. Create rehabilitation programs by working with relevant not-for-profit organizations to build their capacity; and,
3. Work with businesses to create work-placement programs for those that have completed rehabilitation programs by subsidizing a portion of the wages.

Submitted by the Surrey Board of Trade

⁵ <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/cj-jp/cannabis/>

⁶ <https://policinginsight.com/features/opinion/canadian-police-chiefs-want-drugs-decriminalised-and-there-has-been-a-reaction/>

⁷ <https://globalnews.ca/news/7158404/drug-decriminalization-canada-police-chiefs/#:~:text=The%20head%20of%20the%20Canadian,heads%20the%20CACP%2C%20said%20Thursday.>

⁸ <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/vancouver-council-unanimously-endorses-drug-decriminalization-seeks-federal-approval>