

Recommendations on drug policies and services for young people in Portugal

After an analysis of drug services, policies and legislation that regulates drug use in Portugal, it has become clear that there is a lack of focus on the needs of young people who use drugs. When it comes to drug use, this group has a range of specific vulnerabilities and characteristics leading us to conclude that drug policies should be made more tolerant and targeted to this age group. As such, we propose a revision to the Portuguese national drug policy, in order to bring it in line with core human rights standards and individual freedoms, with there being a clear distinction between drug policies targeted at young people and drug policies targeted towards the adult population.

This revision should take into account the following points:

1. Decriminalize drug use and create alternative services for young drug users: We believe that the current approach through the 'Commissions for the Dissuasion of Drug Addiction' fails by punishing individuals who do not commit criminal offences. Although consumption is decriminalized, there are still penalties for those who use drugs. We believe that the more appropriate approach would be the elimination of these penalties and challenging the stigmatization associated with drug use. Attractive and appropriate responses to the drug users should address the type of use involved (whether problematic or not) and that these responses should directly aim to improve the individuals' quality of life.

There shouldn't be any penalty (including financial) in recreational drug use cases patterns of use aren't harmful to the individual (even they are recurrent). Instead, the individual should have access to updated information and be voluntarily referred to services adequate to young people.

2. Establish youth specific policies and services: There aren't currently specific procedures that are adopted when addressing young people who use drugs. The consumption of drugs by young people should be perceived in the same light as other similar behavioral issues. Young people who do present with

issues around problematic drug use should be referred to specific services that are appropriate to their context without punitive or traumatic measures being used against them.

For recreational drug users, or those with more controlled patterns of use, there should be accessible information services which are informative and awareness-raising. These services should be in places where they feel safe and are encouraged to participate. Too often, young people avoid being associated with services that provide drug treatment and information services and don't want to associate with older, more problematic drug users, with whom they have little in common.

3. Services for young people who use drugs should provide basic healthcare, social and education services: These services should be free, confidential and shouldn't have restrictions on the minimum age required to engage services, or require parental consent and should take into consideration the following:

a. Creation of social centers/daycare centers are essential, with specialist staff who are trained to work with on young people, sexual health and drugs. These centers should be adequately advertised and young people should want to go to them.

b. Harm reduction services should be designed and made available for young people and their specific vulnerabilities problems (for example, alcohol use, polydrug use, high-risk sexual behaviors, recreational drug use, etc.)

c. There needs to be an increase in the reach of awareness raising campaigns and Harm Reduction training programs for young people youngsters. These should be available in schools, universities, party-scenes and healthcare centers as well as among staff at bars and medical personnel

d. Consider the possibility of allowing minors to enroll in Opioid Replacement Therapy Programs and Needle Exchange Programs (where

appropriate). These Programs should be adapted to the younger individuals and non-concurrent to Programs focused on other age groups.

e. A stronger investment is needed in peer education programs that address drug use among young people

f. Creation of responses strictly dedicated to voluntary, coercive free drug rehabilitation for young people, with specialist personnel who can deal with the issues associated with this age group in particular.

Other important recommendations include:

4. The creation of a certification mark for the business establishments that comply with a series of harm reduction and safety rules, with tax and marketing advantages for certified business establishments.

5. Increasing anonymous and confidential drug-checking services with no minimum age restrictions they should raise awareness regarding drug use and the adulteration of substances in the black market, in order to help users make the right decision.

6. Creation of an online intervention platform to address the increasing size and accessibility of the online drug marketplace.

7. Finally, we believe there should be a strong monitoring process in overseeing the application of drug policies and drug services with fundamental human rights standards as a central tool in creating a more desirable and effective drug policy framework.

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