

## OPINION

# Drug decriminalization is not to blame for all of our social woes

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Decriminalization is taking a beating in the court of public opinion.

Oregon has rolled back its high-profile initiative and recriminalized drug possession. And the B.C. decriminalization pilot project is being blamed for all manner of social ills.

Yet, decriminalization remains a sound public policy.

It makes no sense to arrest, prosecute and imprison people for possessing small quantities of drugs that they put into their own bodies. But we need to be clear about what decriminalization is – and isn't.

Decriminalization is the removal of criminal sanctions for the use or possession of drugs. Specifically, B.C. allows the possession of up to 2.5 grams in total of any of the following drugs: opioids (heroin, morphine, fentanyl); crack and powder cocaine; methamphetamine; and MDMA (ecstasy). Oregon allowed drug users to possess up to one gram of certain drugs such as heroin, cocaine or meth, or up to 40 oxycodone pills. And they could still be fined \$100.

That's it. That's all. It's not a free-for-all.

Decriminalization of drugs does not mean drug users are exempt from all other bylaws and laws. They have rights, but they have responsibilities too, like other citizens.

Decriminalization doesn't mean people can sell, buy and use drugs openly wherever

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not okay.

The law doesn't mean drug users can camp on city streets, in parks, in merchants' doorways or any place they choose. Drug users can't defecate or urinate openly, or shoplift with impunity.

Decriminalization doesn't mean we turn a blind eye to people being assaulted or threatened.

The crime and public disorder that has become all too common on city streets is unacceptable, and the public is right to be angry and demand action.

But recriminalizing drug use and possession is not going to make any of those challenges disappear.

The horrific scenes playing out daily on our streets are occurring at the nexus of untreated addiction, mental illness and homelessness, made all the worse by a drug supply more toxic than ever.

Yes, overdose rates have continued to climb since decriminalization programs were introduced. In Oregon, fatal overdoses soared from 280 in 2019 to an estimated 1,268 in 2023. In B.C., there were 983 overdose deaths in 2019, and 2,511 last year.

Would overdoses have increased without decriminalization? Almost certainly. Deaths are increasing because the drug supply is poisoned, not because it's no longer a crime to possess.

There's no evidence that recriminalizing drug use and possession will save a single life. But going back to our catch-and-release approach to drug users would be an enormous strain on police, the courts and the prison system.

Tough talk is in vogue. But we know that the war on drugs has never worked.

If we want to reduce or eliminate open drug use and related public disorder, then we need to embrace all four pillars of a comprehensive drug strategy: prevention, harm reduction, treatment and enforcement.

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Streets will continue to become a combination of open-air drug markets, encampments and garbage dumps until we provide alternatives to that dangerous way of living, including targeted safer supply programs, supervised consumption sites, housing, public bathrooms and more.

The same goes for hospitals. If you don't want patients with substance-use disorder using those substances in hospital rooms and bathrooms (which is clearly intolerable), you have to provide a safe space. You can't realistically expect addicts to go cold turkey.

The most urgent need is more addiction treatment. It's all well and good to say treatment will be a priority. But where are the treatment beds? And what kind of treatment is on offer? (There is an incredible amount of grifting in the addiction field, where more moralism than medicine is on offer.)

There is also a growing chorus of voices demanding forced treatment. There is a place for involuntary treatment, but it has to be more than jail by another name.

Enforcement is not a dirty word, but it has to be done smartly. Criminalizing possession isn't necessary; there are plenty of other laws to be enforced to make cities safer and more liveable. We need to use arrests and probations to leverage drug users into treatment – again, with incarceration as a last resort.

Toxic politics won't resolve this raging crisis.

It's a multidimensional problem that requires everyone – community groups, clinicians, police, politicians and more – to work in tandem and find solutions that improve both public health and public order.

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