

“Before, They Came to us With Bruises”

An Anthropological Perspective on Portugal’s Human Rights-Based Addiction Policy

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Introduction

Background

- In 2001 Portugal followed the recommendation of a coalition of mental health and legal experts and decriminalized drug use, shifting drug use from a criminal to an administrative offense.
- Individuals caught with under the allowed 10 days’ worth of daily doses of each substance are referred to the **Commission for Dissuasion of Drug Use** which determines the extent of drug dependence and educates/refers to other services including treatment, mobile methadone units, employment, housing, therapeutic communities.
- Since 2001, Portugal has seen trends of drug use and injection drug-related infections opposite of those in the United States:
 - 1% of Portugal’s population (100,000 people) had been problematic heroin users; in 2017 it is around 32,000.
 - Decrease in # of problematic users, overdose deaths, and infectious diseases associated with IV drug use, mg per capita of opiates (+113% in US, -33% in Portugal since 2001)

Purpose

- To characterize Portugal’s drug use decriminalization policy’s social and health impact on drug use, treatment seeking, and stigma among stakeholders in Portugal’s treatment and law enforcement services.

Methods

Procedure

- 20 qualitative interviews conducted in Lisbon, Portugal, summer 2017
- Reputational case sampling in purposively-selected stakeholder categories
- Participants: Director of National Drug Treatment; Director of Criminal Justice of Portugal; police chief; psychiatrists (in and out of addiction treatment centers); mobile methadone clinic staff; general practitioners; anthropologist studying addiction in Portugal; anthropologist at treatment center coalition; social workers, psychologists, and sociologists at the Dissuasion Commission; and other professionals involved in policy change.

Analysis

- Analysis is ongoing involving immersion/crystallization processes to elucidate patterns and themes. Data will be revisited to check for alternative interpretations and triangulated with epidemiological data.

Police



“Initially there was some doubt among the police about the law. After 16 years I think there are no doubts. This person, we must face these people like it is a disease. They must be helped by our health system, not our judicial system.”—Coordinator of Criminal Investigation of Portugal

“People are much more informed now. And that also changed. If you have more health literacy then you could more easily understand how addiction is a disease.”—Psychiatrist, on propaganda campaigns



Addiction Treatment Centers

Preliminary Results

Coordination of Treatment Entities and Evaluation



“We had the feeling that the common citizen would accept it very well, exactly because it was cross cutting all social classes. Every family in Portugal had some problem with drugs. And people tended to say ‘my boy is not a bad guy. He is not a criminal. He is someone in need of help.’”—Director of Drug Treatment of Portugal

Dissuasion by Education, Prevention



“It helps in a way that people think a little bit about what they are doing, and about the consequences after they see us. If you’re only getting information from people that are selling it or using it with you, no one will tell you, ‘be careful because you might have a glycolysis attack.’”—Sociologist at Dissuasion Commission

“Before they came to us with bruises, now the police help us”—Mobile Methadone Clinic Physician



Harm Reduction Services

“We do not force or even ask them to go to treatment. The moment you do that, you lose them. Instead we develop trust and tell them about what resources we have.”—Mobile Methadone Social Worker

Emerging Themes

- Visibility/ubiquity of drug abuse necessitated change (“Everyone knew someone affected by drugs”)
- Imprisonment does little to deter drug use
- Humanization of “drug-dependent” individuals
- Improvement in health literacy; reduction in stigma
- Police as allies
- Addiction is no longer a top social issue

Discussion

While the epidemic of addiction in Portugal and in the US shares historical similarities, the trajectories of drug use and abuse have gone in opposite directions. This can be attributed to increased access to treatment and the top-down change in how Portugal views addicts. Preliminary findings suggest that the legal change set the standard from formerly labeling the addict as acriminal to recognizing addiction as an illness, leading to increased treatment-seeking and improved harm reduction. Future studies should include surveys of lay people’ and to study the impact on rural populations.

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