

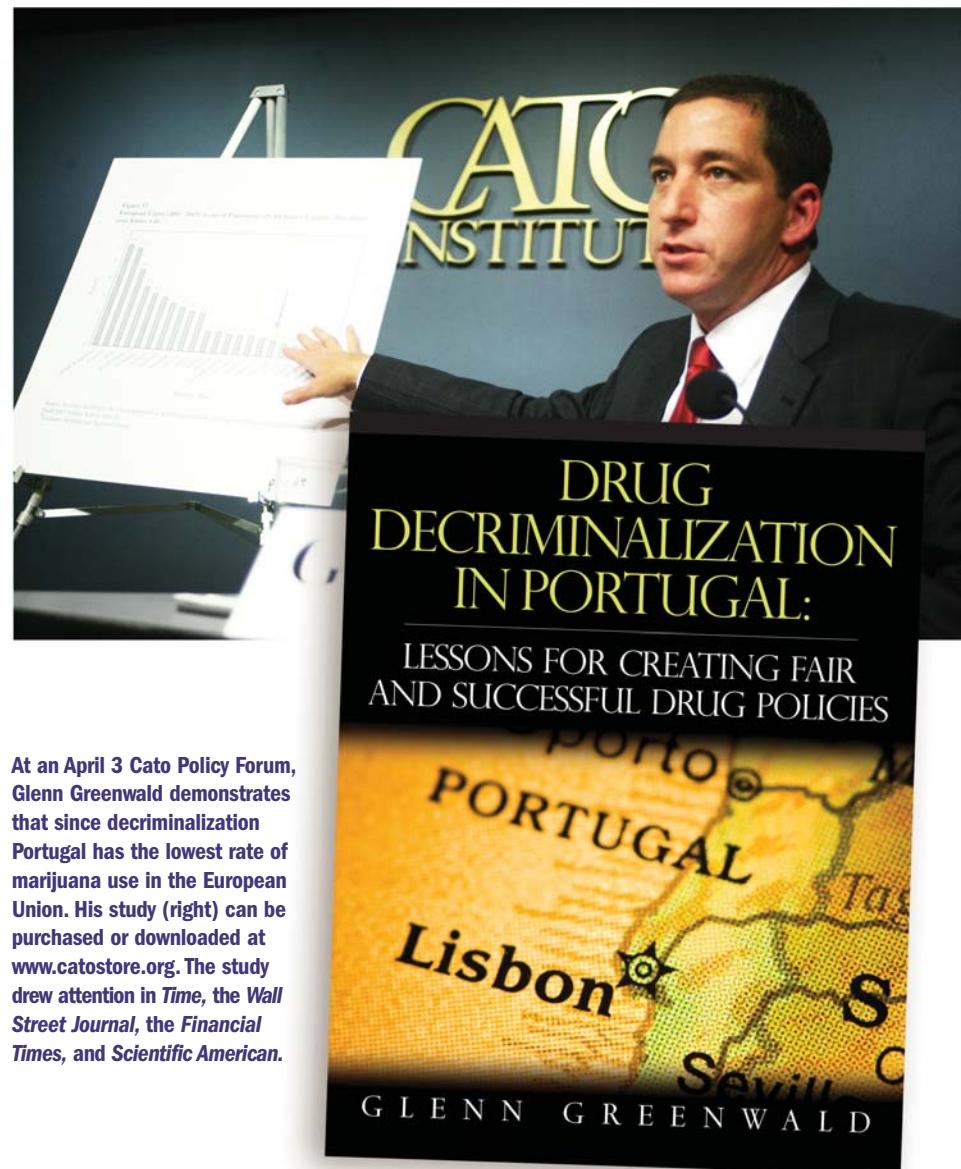
Study one of first to look at little-known success story

## Report: Drug Decriminalization Works in Portugal

In 2001, Portugal took the dramatic step of decriminalizing all drugs, including heroin and cocaine. Although it did not receive a lot of attention at the time, Tim Lynch, who directs Cato's Project on Criminal Justice, decided it would be a good idea to commission a study on the Portuguese policy experiment after it had been given a fair chance to work over several years. In 2007, when Lynch met best-selling author and lawyer Glenn Greenwald and discovered that Greenwald was fluent in Portuguese, Lynch's search for the right author was finally over. Greenwald readily agreed to the idea of traveling to Portugal to interview key lawmakers and health officials. Upon his return, Greenwald began to prepare the most exhaustive study on the Portuguese experiment.

On April 2, Cato released *Drug Decriminalization in Portugal: Lessons for Creating Fair and Successful Drug Policies*. The study notes that while other states in the European Union have developed various forms of de facto decriminalization—whereby substances perceived to be less serious (such as cannabis) rarely lead to criminal prosecution—Portugal remains the only EU member state with a law explicitly declaring drugs to be “decriminalized.” (Portugal has stopped short of “legalization” because drug dealing remains a criminal offense.) The shift in policy was controversial. Conservatives in Portugal argued that the move to decriminalize would only worsen that country’s drug problems.

With more than seven years of experience under the decriminalization regime, Greenwald reports that the policy has been quite successful. One of the key findings of the study is that none of the nightmare scenarios predicted by decriminalization opponents—from rampant increases in drug usage among the young to the transformation of Lisbon into a haven for “drug tourists”—has occurred. As a result, Greenwald reports that the political climate in Portugal has changed: there is no longer any serious debate about whether drugs should once again be criminalized.



At an April 3 Cato Policy Forum, Glenn Greenwald demonstrates that since decriminalization Portugal has the lowest rate of marijuana use in the European Union. His study (right) can be purchased or downloaded at [www.catostore.org](http://www.catostore.org). The study drew attention in *Time*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, and *Scientific American*.

Drug policy experts have seven years of relevant empirical information to examine. Those data indicate that decriminalization has had no adverse effect on drug usage rates in Portugal, which, in numerous categories, are now among the lowest in the EU, particularly when compared with states with stringent criminalization regimes. Although post-decriminalization usage rates have remained roughly the same or even decreased slightly when compared with other EU states, drug-related pathologies—such as sexually transmitted diseases and deaths due to drug usage—have de-

creased dramatically. Greenwald says drug policy experts in Portugal attribute those positive trends to the enhanced ability of the government to offer treatment programs to its citizens—enhancements made possible, for numerous reasons, by decriminalization.

Greenwald’s study has garnered plenty of media attention since it was released in April. *Time Magazine*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, and the *Scientific American* are among the numerous publications that have cited the findings of this Cato report.