



Statement

For immediate release

LEGAL REGULATION OF CANNABIS A WELCOME STEP FORWARD ***Canada must now take steps to definitively end the war on drugs and the criminalization of people who use them***

The following statement is issued by the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (“Legal Network”). Comments can be attributed to Richard Elliott, Executive Director.

October 17, 2018 — Today marks an important step forward in Canada’s drug policy, as the legal regulation of cannabis for non-medical purposes takes effect. The Legal Network welcomes this important development toward sensible drug policy, but more must be done to uphold the health and human rights of people who use drugs in this country.

Canada must undertake a deeper rethinking of its drug laws and policies.

The mounting evidence shows that the continued emphasis on drug prohibition is failing in all aspects. Prohibition is not meeting the stated public health and safety goals, but is wasting public resources while contributing to lasting damage to people’s lives. Instead of costly, ineffective and harmful prohibition, Canada must move toward a forward-thinking regulatory approach. A first, immediate step is to decriminalize simple possession of all drugs, which has been done in law or in practice to varying degrees in other countries with great success. Canada should also explore various options for responsibly regulating the supply of currently criminalized substances, as it does with other risky products and behaviours; this would enable a greater focus on protecting public health than the blunt tool of criminal prohibition that leaves the market unregulated and in the hands of organized crime.

Criminalization makes it harder to connect people with health services and contributes to new HIV and hepatitis C infections, among other harms. In 2014, 11 per cent of new HIV infections in Canada were a result of injection drug use. Incarcerating people for minor drug offences leads to even greater risk of HIV and hepatitis C infection, given the inadequacy of harm reduction measures behind bars. In the midst of the growing opioid overdose crisis—4,000 people died from overdose in 2017 and that number continues to grow—lives are at risk under the status quo. Imposing a criminal record on people who use drugs merely exacerbates their vulnerability. The decriminalization of all minor drug offences, and the responsible regulation of supply, would reduce overdose deaths, reduce new HIV and hepatitis C infections, and address problematic drug use as a health—rather than criminal—issue.

Today, Canada took an important step forward, 95 years after cannabis was first criminalized. But there’s much more that can—and must—be done to protect the health and human rights of all people in Canada who use drugs. The Legal Network calls on the federal government to take further action by decriminalizing and regulating small quantities of all drugs for personal use in Canada.

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