In 2001, when they were experiencing their own opioid epidemic, Portugal decriminalized the use of all drugs. Portugal became the first country to decriminalize the possession and consumption of illicit substances. Instead of a focus on criminalizing drug users, the new policies emphasized treatment, harm reduction, and support services. Research suggests that decriminalization has stabilized the opioid crisis (Hughes & Stevens, 2007). Problematic drug use, HIV and hepatitis infection rates, overdose death, drug-related crime and incarceration rates have declined in Portugal since decriminalization (Greenwald, 2009). Moreover, in a 2015 report Portugal was shown to have the lowest rate of drug induced death in Western Europe, with 6 deaths per million people (Mühlberger, et al., 2009). In contrast, the United States had 312 drug induced deaths per million people (Rudd, et al., 2016). Portugal has shown that by instituting progressive policies on drug use that they were able to mitigate their opioid crises while decreasing incarceration.

After completing an in depth literature review I met with mental health and policy experts in Lisbon, Portugal including Dr. Nuno Capaz, Vice President of the Lisbon Disscussion Committee. Under the Ministry of Health to better understand drug policies and implementation. I also toured Lisbon and met with community members. The themes that were drawn out from these meetings were used to construct semi structured interviews that were administered to Lisbon residents using convenient sampling.

## Results

### Outcomes and explanation of decriminalization

- **Decriminalization does not make drugs legal.**
- Similar to a civil offense or seat belt violation.
- Drug users are given a summons to the Disscussion Committee and may have to pay a fine or can access treatment.

- **Users seek help, have access to treatment and do not have a criminal record.**

- **Sellers go to jail**.
- **Police do not target drug users**.

- **Addiction is a public health issue.**

Using this law, it is in the public’s best interest to increase accessibility to treatment, harm reduction services such as Methadone clinics and increase options for treatment and prevention.

- **Portugal has a Universal Health Care system that has a “tax” for usage but all drug treatment services are exempt from this “tax”**.

- **Targeted prevention and educational services decrease drug usage while abstinence and incarceration do not**.

### Community Perceptions of Drug Policy Outcomes in Portugal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Substance use is a chronic disease that is treatable</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese drug policies have been effective</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was more likely to try drugs because they were decriminalized</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Discussion

Our criminal justice system historically has taken a stance that being tough on drug crime will keep communities safe and decrease recidivism. This simplifies a complex problem and has shown to be false. For this project, I relied on consistent sampling, and was hindered by time constraints both in the assembling of the surveys and conducting interviews. As a result, I had a relatively low sample size that may not be a representative sample of the population of Lisbon. However, the data from the population that was surveyed, as well as the key informant interviews with health professionals, made clear that the decriminalization of drugs has been effective.

Furthermore, the evidence suggests that drug policy that decriminalizes drug use, and focuses on accessing treatment and harm reduction, increases treatment seeking behavior and provides an institutional control to prevent criminal justice systems from targeting already marginalized populations.

Finally, treating drug use as a public health issue acknowledges that substance use is a mental health condition that is treatable and that moralizing and/or criminalizing substance use disorders is not effective at either the individual, community or societal level. More research needs to be done to understand how the United States could adopt Portuguese drug policies and the potential impact on population outcomes (e.g., incarceration rates, overdose deaths, access and utilization of care, etc.).