

ARTUR VAZ: (Speaking Portuguese).

MANN: Artur Vaz heads the national police unit in Portugal that targets drug trafficking. In the beginning, he tells me, most policemen were very, very skeptical about this policy. In the U.S., this kind of approach has also been controversial. In Oregon, for example, where small amounts of drugs have been decriminalized, police regularly hand out information cards referring people to a drug counseling hotline. Court data shows drug users rarely call. In Portugal, it's very different. National data in Portugal shows roughly 90% of people referred by police for counseling turn up.

VAZ: (Speaking Portuguese).

MANN: "Most police have come to believe this is a balanced approach," Vaz says. "People who consume drugs should be treated by the health system, not the criminal system."

Police referrals are only one pathway to treatment. Portugal's national system nudges drug users constantly toward recovery programs - all voluntary, all free of charge. Dr. Joao Goulao is Portugal's national drug czar. He says one reason the system works is there's no stigma in the process - no threat of punishment or prosecution.

JOAO GOULAO: It's not fair to treat this disease in a different way from what we do with other diseases.

MANN: The results are striking. Over the last 20 years, U.S. drug deaths kept surging, first with heroin, crack cocaine and prescription pain pills, now with methamphetamines and fentanyl. During that same period, Portugal cut drug-related HIV/AIDS cases in half. People here now are 45 times less likely to die from a drug overdose compared with the U.S.

GOULAO: We are happy that most of them are there, alive.

MANN: Things aren't perfect in Portugal. Like everywhere in the world, addiction is often wrenching. During the COVID pandemic, drug use in Portugal got worse - nothing like the U.S., but there was an uptick of overdoses. People here also worry about the arrival of fentanyl, which, so far, hasn't gained popularity on Portugal's streets. In part to prepare for the threat of fentanyl, the government is once again spending more money on health care and addiction programs.

Back on the street in Lisbon, I encounter one more big difference in the way Portugal treats people who use drugs. Elda Coimbra is a neatly dressed, middle-aged woman who recently started using drugs again.

ELDA COIMBRA: (Speaking Portuguese).

MANN: And have you also used heroin?

COIMBRA: Yeah.

MANN: In the U.S., where addiction care is often abstinence-based, this kind of relapse often means people are kicked out of treatment. They lose housing and

other support. Portugal's system, by contrast, views Coimbra's struggle as a painful but normal part of addiction.

COIMBRA: (Speaking Portuguese).

MANN: Coimbra tells me she is getting help, including housing and a job. "I can get my life back together," she says.

Again, no one here thinks Portugal's model is perfect. Drugs still cause a lot of suffering. But two decades of data shows Portugal's approach helps a lot more people stay alive, keeps them out of prison and offers chances to recover when they stumble.

Brian Mann, NPR News, Lisbon, Portugal.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

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