

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

<p><b>Institution:</b> University of Kent</p>
<p><b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 22, Social Work and Social Policy</p>
<p><b>Title of case study:</b> Improving illicit drug policy</p>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>This research has had impact on two linked areas of illicit drug policy. Firstly, pioneering research on the effects of drug decriminalisation in Portugal has shifted the debate on this issue in the UK, US and elsewhere towards an acceptance that decriminalisation is a viable and not harmful approach. Secondly, research on alternatives to imprisonment for drug-dependent offenders has moved debate towards supporting the expansion of treatment for such offenders in the UK and US. These impacts are evidenced in the citation of the research by policy-makers and NGOs (including the British Sentencing Advisory Panel; The All Party Parliamentary Group on Drugs; the Home Affairs Select Committee; UK NGOs, Release and Transform; the US Drug Policy Alliance and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime), demonstrating a significant influence on policy-making as well as public debate.</p> <p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>The underpinning research has been a critical and comparative analysis of drug treatment and drug policy in different national jurisdictions undertaken by Alex <b>Stevens</b> (who joined Kent in 2001 as a Research Fellow and became Professor of Criminology in 2010).</p> <p>The research included a series of linked studies of drug decriminalisation, quasi-compulsory treatment (QCT) alternatives to imprisonment for drug users, and the effects of drug, crime, health and welfare policies on drug problems. This included analysis of the effects of national drug policies on national drug problems in Portugal (where drug use was decriminalised in 2001). Research was based on interviews with key stakeholders [see <i>references 3.1, 3.2</i>] and a multi-national evaluation of QCT for drug-dependent offenders using the European Addiction Severity Index [ref 3.5] led by Stevens from 2001 to 2004 (the ‘QCT Europe’ project). The key findings have been that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decriminalisation does not necessarily lead to increased rates of illicit drug use.</li> <li>• Decriminalisation facilitates the implementation of a public health approach, which has reduced deaths and HIV infections in Portugal.</li> <li>• Ethically sound drug treatment motivated by the criminal justice system can be effective in treating drug dependence among offenders.</li> <li>• Risks of net-widening must be considered in policy development and implementation, with the aim of policy to reduce the number of individuals who come into contact with the criminal justice system.</li> </ul> <p>These findings are important because drug policy is often decided on the basis of ideological bias and power inequalities, as shown by Stevens’ systematic and comparative reviews of drug policy [ref 3.3]: without Stevens’ work on Portuguese decriminalisation, there would be no peer-reviewed evidence available to refute widely disseminated suggestions that the policy has either been an uncomplicated ‘resounding success’ or a ‘disastrous failure’ [ref 3.1].</p> <p>Stevens’ research has hence provided a basis for evidence-based policy in this contentious area of policy-making. By considering the relative efficacy of criminal justice, health and welfare policies in reducing drug problems [ref 3.3 and 3.6], it has demonstrated that the potential effects of a punitive criminal justice approach are limited, but that health and – in particular – welfare policy approaches are more promising in terms of harm reduction.</p>

### 3. References to the research

3.1- Hughes, C. and Stevens, A. (2010) 'What can we learn from the Portuguese decriminalisation of illicit drugs?' *British Journal of Criminology*, 50(6), 999-1022 [submitted to REF2, output ID SSPSSR159].

3.2 - Hughes, C., and Stevens, A. (2012) 'A "resounding success" or a "disastrous failure": Re-examining the interpretation of evidence on the Portuguese decriminalisation of illicit drugs' *Drug and Alcohol Review* 31(1): 101-113

3.3 - Reuter, P. and Stevens, A. (2007) *An Analysis of UK Drug Policy*. London: UK Drug Policy Commission.

3.4 – Reuter, P. and Stevens, A. (2008) 'Assessing UK Drug Policy from a Crime Control Perspective' *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 8 (4): 461-482.

3.5 - Schaub, M., Stevens, A., Berto, D., Hunt, N., Kersch, V., McSweeney, T., Oeuvray K., Puppo, I., Santa Maria, A., Trinkl, B., Werdenich, W. and Uchtenhagen, A. (2010) 'Comparing Outcomes of 'Voluntary' and 'Quasi-Compulsory' Treatment of Substance Dependence in Europe' *European Addiction Research* 16: 53-60 [submitted to REF2, output ID SSPSSR160].

3.6 - Stevens, A. (2011) *Drugs, Crime and Public Health: The Political Economy of Drug Policy*. Abingdon: Routledge.

#### Research funding:

Stevens' research has been funded by grants exceeding £1.5 million, including the following:

- £35,000 from **ESRC** for a fellowship in the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit (April 2009).
- £87,297 from **Kent County Council** for the development and evaluation of a multi-component programme to reduce adolescent risk behaviours (November 2008).
- €492,683 from the **European Commission's Public Health Executive Agency** for the *Connections* project (research and dissemination on illicit drugs and infectious disease in European criminal justice systems (September 2007).
- £12,000 from **Release** (on behalf of the Beckley Foundation) for research and policy reviews (February 2007).
- £10,000 from the **UK Drug Policy Commission** for an analysis of UK drug policy (2006).
- £95,979 from the **Department of Health** for project "Early Exit: estimating and explaining early exit from drug treatment" (2005).
- €855,007 from **European Commission** (Fifth Framework RTD Programme) for project "QCT Europe" (2002).

### 4. Details of the impact

Stevens' research has provided unique evidence concerning the effects of 'progressive decriminalisation'. The research has transformed policy and public debates by challenging existing punitive models. Using Stevens' work, politicians and campaigners in the UK, US and elsewhere have been able to propose moves towards decriminalisation on the basis of rigorous evidence. The main beneficiaries of Stevens' research are therefore policy-makers and campaigners who debate the best means to reduce the harms associated with the consumption of illicit drugs through criminal sanctions or alternatives based on voluntary treatment and decriminalisation.

#### Impact on policy debate:

The research on Portuguese drugs policy has shifted drugs policy debate in the UK, US and elsewhere, in the direction of considering decriminalisation as a feasible and potentially effective

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policy. This impact has been made possible by widespread citations in the media, in policy reports and in 'grey' literature. For example, the research has been featured in *The Observer* (5 September 2010), in *Time* magazine (article by Maia Szalavitz, 23 November 2010), in the *Wall Street Journal* (article by Gary Becker and Kevin Murphy, 13 January 2013) and in many other news articles. The research has been cited in policy reports both by campaigning NGOs (e.g. in the reports [A Quiet Revolution](#) by Release [2012] and [The Alternative World Drug Report](#) [2012] by Count the Costs) and other NGOs in this field (e.g. [A Fresh Approach to Drugs](#) by the UK Drug Policy Commission [2013] and [Drugs of Dependence](#) by the British Medical Association [2013]). The international impact of Stevens' research on Portugal is also evidenced by citations in the US and Australia in media and policy reports. In addition to the articles in *Time* and the *Wall Street Journal* referenced above, this includes a report on [Alternatives to Prohibition](#) by the think-tank *Australia 21*. Stevens was interviewed on his research on Portuguese decriminalisation on Radio 4's *Today* programme on 10 December 2012. The media profile achieved by this research [see *corroboration 5.1*] has led to it also being used by politicians in policy debates. For example, at its 2011 annual conference, the Liberal Democrat Party passed a motion specifically referring to the Portuguese example in its call to re-examine drug policy [*corrob 5.2*].

**Impact on government policy:**

The UK government embarked on a major expansion of quasi-compulsory treatment from 2001 (in the form of the drug treatment and testing order) without evidence on its effects. In this period, the US has also expanded QCT through the creation of drug courts. Stevens' work has provided data that support the assertion that this type of quasi-coerced treatment of drug users can be as effective as voluntary programmes. His research outputs have provided politicians with an impartial evidence base from which future policies are being driven, and have moved the debate to consider issues of the ethical limits of QCT and the issue of penal net-widening.

These impacts have been attested to by politicians from both Houses of Parliament. The Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Drug Policy Reform [*corrob 5.3*] has written, 'Professor Stevens has been one of the few reliable sources of research evidence for politicians and opinion formers. His work on Portugal, in particular, has made considerable impact upon political debate in this country and internationally'. One of the MP members of the Home Affairs Select Committee confirms this, writing that, 'The Committee leaned on aspects of your work in reaching our conclusions and your research helped us to reach a cross-party consensus within our Committee when assessing the Portuguese model' [*corrob 5.4*]. Stevens' research has been cited in reports from all these parliamentary bodies [*corrob 5.5*], with specific reference to the Portuguese decriminalisation research made in the Home Affairs Select Committee report [Drugs: Breaking the Cycle](#). Stevens' research was also cited in the 2008 national drug strategy and in 2009 by the Sentencing Advisory Panel in a consultation which led to the reduction of prison sentence length for some drug offences, in line with the recommendations from Stevens' research.

Internationally, this research has been cited by the Global Commission on Drug Policy in its report *War on Drugs* (2011) [*corrob 5.6*]. This organisation is committed to developing an informed, science-based discussion on effective ways to reduce the harm caused by drugs, and includes among its commissioners a number of former presidents, prime ministers and foreign secretaries from an international arena including the US. Stevens' research findings provided evidence-based support of their argument towards decriminalisation. Significantly, Stevens was invited to discuss his work on Portugal with staff of the US Senate and the House of Representatives while in Washington in March 2011. Stevens' research on alternatives to imprisonment has also been cited in policy guidance to national governments from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [*corrob 5.7*], further evidencing its impact on an international level.

**Impact on the work of campaigning organisations:**

Stevens' research has influenced the work of a prominent movement for drug policy reform in the US (the Drug Policy Alliance) that has taken up his recommendations to avoid net-widening in QCT [*corrob 5.8*]. Stevens was consulted by the NGO Release in preparing the open letter that it published in *The Guardian* to mark the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Misuse of Drugs Act. The Director of Release, has written, 'Professor Stevens is seen within the drug policy field as the leading expert

on issues where drug policy, criminal justice and public health intersect. His work is often cited by advocates and has been hugely influential in Release's strategic campaigning plan' [corrob 5.9]. Another leading NGO that is working on this issue is *Transform*. Its Senior Policy Analyst wrote, 'in a debate frequently dominated by emotive and polarised opinion, and historically characterised by a lack of coherent evidence based analysis, Professor Stevens' work on the intersection of criminal justice and public health policy in the drugs field has made a significant contribution to building the growing momentum towards more just and effective drug policies, both in the UK and internationally' [corrob 5.10]. These statements by prominent national and international organisations working in the area of drug policy underline the impact that Stevens' work is having in shifting drugs policy away from punitive regulation towards alternative models of regulation.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (All links correct at time of submission to REF2014)

5.1 - Key press articles citing the Portugal *BJC* article, 2010-2013:

- '[Britain looks at Portugal's success story over decriminalising personal drug use](#)', The Observer.
- '[Can lessons be learned from Portugal's drug laws?](#)', BBC.
- '[Portugal's Drug Experience: New Study Confirms Decriminalization Was a Success](#)', Time.
- '[Importing the Portuguese Model of Drug Reform](#)', The Nation.
- '[Have We Lost the War on Drugs?](#)', Wall Street Journal.
- '[Getting High in Portugal](#)', The Wilson Quarterly.
- '[Drug experiment: What happens when an entire country legalizes drug use](#)', Boston Globe.

These media citations - among others - evidence the influence of Stevens' work on the public debate nationally and internationally.

5.2 - The Liberal Democrat motion, 2011: <http://www.libdemvoice.org/libdem-conference-passes-drugs-motion-25314.html> This motion translated Stevens' findings on Portuguese decriminalisation into Liberal Democrat policy.

5.3 – Statement provided by ID 1 (Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Drug Policy Reform) corroborating value of research in informing UK drug policy.

5.4 – Statement provided by ID 2 (Member of the Home Affairs Select Committee) corroborating value of research in informing UK drug policy.

5.5 – A number of reports demonstrate the impact of Stevens' research on Portuguese decriminalisation on UK policy-making. For example, Parliamentary debates mentioning the research include [House of Lords March 2011](#) and [House of Commons September 2011](#); the UK Government's [The 2008 Drug Strategy](#) and the [National Drug Strategy 2010](#).

5.6 – See references to the research in the [Report of the Global Commission on Drug Policy 2011](#). This report was endorsed by ex-US President Carter and has been influential in promoting an international move towards decriminalisation.

5.7 – The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2009) [From Coercion to Cohesion](#). This report shows the international impact of Stevens' research on the lack of effect of punitive sanctions and the potential benefits of QCT alternatives, which it cites.

5.8 - Drug Policy Alliance, 2011: [Drug Courts Are Not the Answer: Toward a Health-Centred Approach to Drug Use](#). This report shows how the DPA took up Stevens' recommendation to focus on the issue of net-widening in campaigning on drug courts.

5.9 - Statement provided by ID 3 (Director of Release) corroborating value of research in informing campaign work. There was also [Press coverage of the Release open letter, 2011](#).

5.10 - Statement provided by ID 4 (Senior Policy Analyst, Transform) corroborating value of research in informing advocacy work.