

Uruguayan Marijuana Decriminalization: Crime Rates, Support Levels, and Implications for the United States

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The issue of marijuana legalization is coming to a turning point in American society, and it is clear that we are trending toward a total policy change. It is crucial to look internationally at different systems of legalization and decriminalization to determine which system would be the most successful here in the United States. I want our society to be governed by a set of laws that is fair and rational, a set of laws that at least the majority of citizens can believe in—laws that do more good than harm. Although I do feel strongly about the need for drug policy reform, I believe with the utmost concern that this change needs to be careful, calculated, accurate, and well researched for the good of all citizens. To contribute to this research base, I chose to explore this topic with the support of a Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) grant the summer after my first year at the University of New Hampshire (UNH).

I first learned of alternatives to the drug war when I was in high school. I chose drug policy as a debate topic for my AP English Language class in junior year, and I have been engrossed ever since. The Portugal model of total decriminalization of personal possession and use of all drugs, introduced in 2001, was the first foreign model I researched heavily. Ever since, I have known that I wanted to research the drug policy of as many countries as possible. As an economics and political science double major at UNH, I got my opportunity through REAP to work with Dr. Mary Malone, associate professor of political science, to research a country I previously did not know much about: Uruguay.

In 2013, the small Latin American country of Uruguay enacted new laws that legalized both medical and recreational marijuana. It was the first country to do so on a national level—previous countries, like Portugal, had only decriminalized it. Decriminalization removes all criminal penalties for an action, but the action itself is still not legal (similar to speeding). Legalization removes criminal penalties and also allows the activity to be regulated under law, making it a formal part of society. Despite the fact that the Uruguayan law went into effect in May 2014, it took another three years for the recreational marijuana market to begin selling products to consumers, in large part because of how much caution came built into the policy. Unlike in the United States, where marijuana legalization was motivated primarily by public desire to use cannabis products, marijuana legalization in Uruguay came from a plan among government officials to undermine the drug trafficking operations that have brought violence into the country. The new marijuana industry is state run, and the policy also created a new regulatory body: the Institute for the Regulation and Control of Cannabis, which is in charge of the heavy regulation of the market.

Importantly, the Uruguayan system differs significantly from the system that is burgeoning in the United States. The free market approach taken by Colorado, California, and other states that have legalized recreational marijuana has been criticized for being unsafe, glorifying marijuana use, and moving too quickly for science and related laws to catch up. By looking internationally and observing other methods of legalization, we can address and satisfy many of these concerns. If a state-run system like the one in Uruguay (whose system resembles liquor sales in the United States) appeals to those who are apprehensive about the free market system, marijuana legalization might expand to states that previously did not favor such a change. With my research, I wanted to see if the Uruguayan system is operating as intended, as reported by Uruguayan citizens in a survey by the Latin American Public Opinion Project. Conducting this sort of research is the first step in evaluating whether a similar system would be effective in the United States.

The Data

For
my

The small country of Uruguay is highlighted on this map of South America. *Source: The World Factbook of the CIA: Uruguay.*



study I used existing data collected by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) in 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016/17. The survey is designed to analyze public opinions on governance throughout Latin America and is conducted every two years by Vanderbilt University. The data consisted of a coded spreadsheet of answers to hundreds of survey questions, collected through in-person interviews with

people in Uruguay. It was provided to me by my research mentor, Mary Malone, the chair of the political science department at UNH. I analyzed this data with a software program called SPSS, a statistical analysis program used primarily within the social sciences. Its basic layout and features look a lot like Excel, but it handles data in a way that is better suited to massive datasets like the one with which I worked. The LAPOP dataset had responses from almost nine thousand different Uruguayan citizens whom LAPOP had polled over the years. A large part of my time was spent sifting through and translating these questions (all the surveys were originally in Spanish) to figure out which data I was going to analyze.

Analysis

My data analysis consisted of three phases. First, I looked at the relationship between new marijuana laws and crime. One of the main arguments used by those against marijuana legalization is that marijuana use correlates to crime. My study aimed to investigate not only whether there was a rise in reported crime rates in Uruguay after marijuana use was legalized, but also whether people perceived themselves as being more or less safe. To do this, I selected data that dealt with crime victimization, neighborhood safety, and perceptions of the police.

Second, I examined whether different demographic groups might have varying opinions about the effects of decriminalization. My hypothesis was that, based on several demographic variables, answers to questions about crime would vary. To evaluate this, I chose the following independent variables: age, education level, social class, political leaning, frequency of internet usage, and personal experience with marijuana. The answers to the crime-related questions were split up by these variables and then compared over the years.

Finally, I examined the data to reveal any differences that may have come about from 2012, before legalization, to 2014 or 2016, after legalization, to determine whether new marijuana laws may have been a factor. In 2014 and 2016, the LAPOP survey included a host of questions about respondents' opinions about the new marijuana laws. I split the data from those questions by the same independent demographic variables used in the first part of my study. I then compared the variables to see whether respondents were more or less likely to approve of marijuana legalization based on demographic information.

Selected Results

I spent about five weeks testing relationships and making tables, charts, and graphs to show those relationships clearly. Overall, I drew the following conclusions: The decriminalization of marijuana in Uruguay had no effect on the measures of crime that I analyzed. Level of trust in police, reported levels of crime, and level of safety that people felt within their neighborhoods were about the same before and after the decriminalization process. In addition, the average supporter of the new marijuana policy is a young, well-educated, left-leaning person who frequently uses the internet and has some type of personal experience with marijuana use.

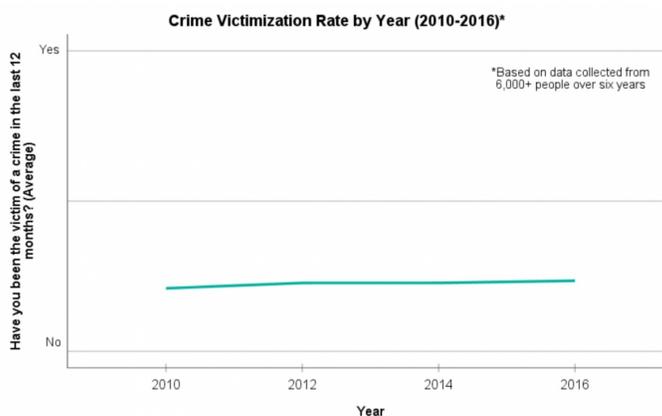


Figure 1. This line graph represents the number of people who reported being the victim of a crime in the preceding twelve months. Translated from Spanish, the question respondents were asked was, “Have you been the victim of a crime in the past twelve months?”

For all of the years studied (2010–2016), the majority of respondents reported not having been the victim of a crime (see Figure 1). Over the years the question was asked, there was no significant change in the rate of crime victimization reported by the average participant. This means that, over the period of decriminalization in 2013 and for three years afterward, there was no change in crime victimization rates.

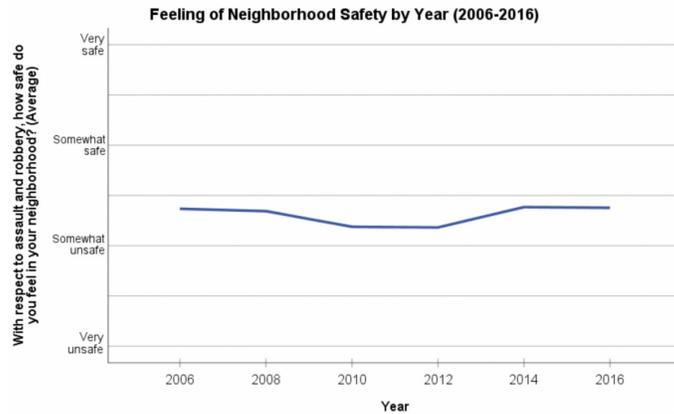


Figure 2. This graph displays changes in how safe respondents felt in their neighborhoods over time. In this context, “safety” was specified in terms of assault and robbery. Translated from Spanish, the exact question asked of respondents was, “With respect to assault and robbery, how safe do you feel in your neighborhood?”

In all years, participants (on average) reported feeling somewhere between “somewhat unsafe” and “neutral” in their neighborhoods (see Figure 2). Starting in 2008, the average participant began reporting that they felt closer to “somewhat unsafe.” This trend continued, with 2010 and 2012 yielding the lowest report of average perception of safety. However, 2014 saw feelings of safety return to the same level as they were in 2006. The line begins and ends at about the same level, indicating that people felt about as safe in 2006 as they did in 2014 and 2016, all of which represent the highest reported feelings of safety of the years studied. This means that feelings of safety increased on average after the 2013 decriminalization of marijuana.

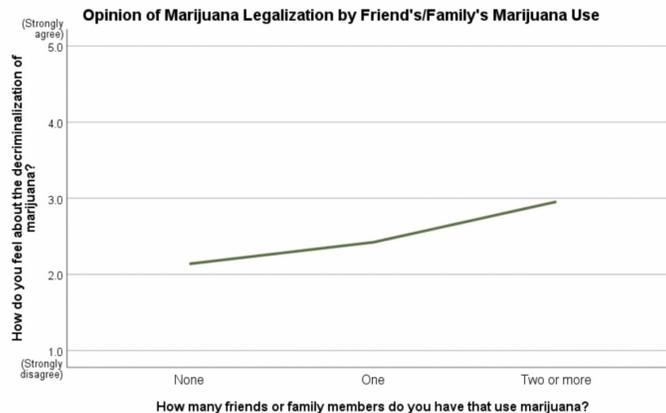


Figure 3. Translated from Spanish, respondents were asked, “How many friends or family members do you have that use marijuana?” and “How do you feel about the decriminalization of marijuana?” Those who reported having no friends or family members that use marijuana had an average support level of 2.1 out of 5. Those with one family member or friend that used marijuana averaged at 2.5 out of 5. Respondents with two or more such friends or family members had an average support level of 3.9 out of 5.

Figure 3 shows the relationship between opinion of marijuana legalization and whether a given respondent has a close friend or family member who uses marijuana. This question, like other marijuana-related questions, was asked only twice: in 2014 and in 2016. I found that the demographic group of people who have loved ones who use marijuana tend to have a significantly higher level of support for decriminalization. This indicates that those with personal experience with marijuana do not perceive these experiences as negative—that is, knowing someone who uses marijuana does not turn people away from the idea of decriminalization.

It’s obvious that more extensive research needs to be done on the Uruguay model before we implement something similar in the United States. But the results of my research point in the same direction as other research on this topic: decriminalizing marijuana does not increase levels of criminal activity (Maier, Mannes, and Koppenhofer 2017). By this metric, the Uruguayan system has been a success, but it is too soon to tell if

the changes will decrease crime rates in the long term. In addition, my research revealed that a supporter of decriminalization in Uruguay has a lot in common with the typical American decriminalization supporter—all of the demographic groups that the average Uruguayan supporter belongs to are also characteristic of American supporters, according to a 2018 Pew Research Center trend panel (Daniller 2019). This system, then, might find support in the United States similar to its support in Uruguay.

Reflection

From this project, I formed and developed a whole host of skills. Soft skills, such as time management and formal writing, will help me in all future endeavors. Since my career goal is to be a lawyer and to be involved in politics, these abilities are essential. However, the hard skills applicable mostly to research or similar academic pursuits are also beneficial. Using statistical analysis software (SPSS), performing statistical analysis, formulating a researchable question, interpreting data, formatting a research paper, and supporting my assertions with reliable sources will all help with my future research. I would like to do research in Portugal someday to analyze their system and compare it with Uruguay's system.

One of my goals in life is to contribute meaningfully to the end of the war on drugs. The aforementioned "future research" will be my contribution. This project was a huge step toward that goal, one I did not think I would be able to take so early in my educational career. All my time working on this project was spent sitting at my desk or kitchen table, poring over my laptop, trying to make sense out of thousands of data points. It shocked me how tedious and overwhelming this process became—was this really the research I had been dreaming about? It would take until after the end of the writing process for me to appreciate my work; the joy came in full force the first time I was able to clearly explain my findings to someone who wasn't already familiar with this area of study. Now that I have completed my first research experience of this kind, I will be able to go into my next research project with some wisdom—my methods will be more thorough, my writing will be clearer, my graphs will be better structured. I can now make the difference that I want to make much sooner than I would have been able to otherwise.

First, I'd like to thank my mentor, Dr. Mary Malone, for spending her summer seeing me through all the steps of this process. Next, the people whose donations funded my project: Ms. Gina Occhipinti and Mr. Dana Hamel, thank you both for your generosity. In addition, thank you to everyone at the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research who works to run the Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program, with special thanks to Paul Tsang for allaying my nerves. On a more personal note: thank you to my mom for encouraging me to take this risk and to my friend Cristina Friese for guiding me through the application process. Lastly, thank you to my support network of friends and advisers, who made it possible for me to do this in the first place. You have all been invaluable to my success on this project, and I am endlessly grateful.

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Author and Mentor Bios

Emily Soule is an economics and political science double major, with minors in justice studies and communication. She is enrolled in the University Honors Program and the Paul Scholars program at the University of New Hampshire (UNH). Emily came to UNH knowing that she wanted to pursue research on drug decriminalization, so she applied for the Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) after finding a mentor in Dr. Mary Malone, who has some similar research interests. Emily's passion for researching drug policy helped her through the challenges of her first academic research experience as an undergraduate. Those challenges included self-motivation and setting her own deadlines and also working through the tedium of analyzing large amounts of data. In the end, her passion for drug decriminalization was reinforced and she discovered the rewards of sharing the hard-won results of her research. Emily plans to graduate in 2022 and then embark on a career in law, politics, or academia working to end the war on drugs.

Mary Fran T. Malone, associate professor in the Department of Political Science, has been teaching at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) since 2003. She specializes in Latin American politics, democratization, crime and policing, and public opinion. Because of Dr. Malone's expertise in Latin American politics and drug policy in the region, Emily contacted her about the possibility of conducting research under her mentorship. Of working with Emily, she said, "It was great to see a student so excited to start a new research project, conduct research in a second language, and learn new skills like statistical analysis in SPSS." Dr. Malone is an experienced mentor of undergraduate researchers, including several past authors for *Inquiry*. She was featured in *Inquiry's* Mentor Highlights section in 2014.