50 Years of Drug Tolerance: What Has It Achieved for the Netherlands?

An appeal from parents

Fifty years of drug tolerance. Fifty years in which drug use has become increasingly normalised. But has this made our children and our society any better off?

In 1976, the Dutch Opium Act was amended. A distinction was introduced between drugs posing an unacceptable risk and drugs considered to pose a lower risk. This distinction gave rise to the familiar terms hard drugs and soft drugs. At the same time, the prohibition on drug use was removed.

This created a policy with a fundamental contradiction: the cannabis trade remained illegal, while sales through coffee shops were tolerated under certain conditions. The well-known problem of the illegal supply through the back door and the tolerated sales through the front door was born.

What began as a pragmatic policy choice has contributed to a society in which drug use has become increasingly commonplace for many people. Coffee shops became part of the streetscape, and cannabis acquired the image of a harmless recreational substance.

But drugs are not harmless. And tolerating drug use is not the same as protecting people.

1. The Government Is Sending the Wrong Message

How can parents convincingly explain to their children that drug use carries risks when the government simultaneously gives the impression that certain drugs are acceptable? How can schools warn young people when government policy undermines that message?

You cannot credibly warn people about drugs while simultaneously contributing to their normalisation. This is the contradiction parents have faced for years. Prevention requires clear boundaries and an unambiguous message. Tolerating and regulating drugs can send precisely the opposite signal: that drug use is socially acceptable.

The consequences are not abstract. Families face addiction, conflict, aggression, financial problems and a loss of trust. Parents watch their children change and often no longer know how to reach them. Behind drug-related tragedies are real people and families who have to live with the consequences every day.

Drug use is not merely an individual issue. Its consequences affect families, communities and society as a whole.

2. A Joint Is Not Risk-Free

The image of cannabis as a harmless soft drug is outdated. THC levels in many cannabis products are considerably higher than they used to be. Whereas cannabis once often contained around 1.3% THC, some contemporary products contain approximately 15–20% THC or more. The precise potency varies by product.

Higher THC levels can increase the risk of mental health problems, particularly among vulnerable young
people and people who use cannabis regularly. Because the brain continues to develop during adolescence, young people deserve additional protection.

Experimenting is not without risk either. Once you try it, it may create a desire to do it again. What begins out of curiosity, for relaxation or under peer pressure can develop into repeated use and, for some, dependence. No one can predict with certainty in advance who will go on to develop serious problems.

For parents, therefore, coffee shops are not a harmless feature of the streetscape. They contribute to the visibility and social acceptance of cannabis.

Meanwhile, there is growing discussion about further regulation of drugs, including ecstasy and cocaine.

This raises a fundamental question: must we really normalise and legalise even more substances before we are willing to confront the consequences?

We are firmly opposed to the legalisation of narcotic drugs. Legalisation is not a solution to the drug problem. The answer must lie in prevention, restricting availability, law enforcement and supporting people struggling with addiction by providing access to treatment and opportunities to overcome their dependence.

3. Who Pays the Price for Fifty Years of Drug Tolerance?
The government can make rules, change policies and conduct experiments. But the consequences do not disappear when an experiment ends.

The Dutch cannabis experiment raises important questions about the direction of drug policy. Parents do not want an experiment designed to examine a regulated cannabis supply chain to become an automatic argument for further legalisation. The findings must be assessed critically and independently, with particular attention to the health and safety of young people. Parents must also have a voice in this process.

Parents, families, care professionals and society bear the consequences of the harm. Addiction services face long waiting lists, and support for people experiencing addiction and their loved ones is often inadequate.

Meanwhile, drug use risks becoming an increasingly accepted part of everyday life for young people.
Parents who object to this can feel as though they are swimming against the tide.

Is this the future we want to offer our children?
Fifty years ago, many people in the Netherlands were building a future with greater prosperity, education, employment and opportunities. We cannot simply assume that future generations will enjoy the same prospects. A society that wants to protect its young people must take their health, freedom and future seriously.

It Is Time to Turn the Tide
OVOM and Moedige Moeders Nederland call on the government to critically evaluate fifty years of drug tolerance, honour its international commitments and put the protection of children and young people first.

Article 33 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires States Parties to protect children from the illicit use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances and from their involvement in the illicit production and trafficking of such substances.

We want to go further by setting a clear societal ambition: every child has the right to grow up safely, healthily and drug-free.

This ambition is at the heart of the Eindhoven Declaration, which calls for the right to grow up in a safe, drug-free environment. You, too, can make your voice heard by signing the declaration.

Sign the Eindhoven Declaration:
here

This means:
Prevention and early intervention must come first. Protect young people before they start using drugs.
Actively tackle the illegal sale of drugs in local communities and through websites.
Clear boundaries. The government must not send contradictory signals that normalise drug use.
Enforcement of protective legislation. Laws and regulations must not merely exist; they must be properly enforced.
Support for families. Parents and loved ones must be taken seriously and have access to appropriate support.
Stop the normalisation of drugs. Exercise restraint in adopting policies that increase the availability and social acceptance of drugs.
Support recovery and reintegration into society. Do not abandon people struggling with addiction to fend for themselves on the streets. Offer them a path towards recovery, a drug-free life and full reintegration into society. A criminal record should not create unnecessary barriers to that process.

This is not a call to condemn people struggling with addiction. It is a call to protect people, support families and prevent future generations from facing the same problems.

Parents are not asking to be patronised or for their children's lives to be controlled. They are asking the government to take responsibility.

What Do Drugs Give You, and What Do They Take Away?
A high. An escape. A moment of relaxation.
But what could you lose in return?
Your freedom. Your self-confidence. Your relationships. Your health. Your future.

What begins out of curiosity, as a choice or under peer pressure can develop into dependence. What seems to offer temporary relief or a sense of belonging can ultimately create new problems instead.

Fifty years of drug tolerance are reason enough to take stock. Not to continue down the same path, but to change course.
Our children deserve more than a society in which drug use becomes increasingly normalised. They deserve a safe environment in which they can grow up healthy, develop their talents and pursue their future without having it put at risk by drugs.

Protect our young people. Strengthen prevention. Enforce the law. Stop the normalisation of drugs.
Because genuine care does not mean learning to accept drug use. It means doing everything we can to prevent our children from being harmed by it.

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