

It wasn't until the Great Depression that the federal government formalized its role. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation, created in 1932 to spur investment and lending, was also tasked with disbursing federal money for disaster relief. But it was the Cold War that really drew Washington into dealing with the aftermath of disasters. Agencies such as the Federal Civil Defense Administration were created to help the country in case of nuclear war, but, in part thanks to pressure from state and local governments, they soon became key instruments in responding to natural disasters.

In 1979, Congress created the

Federal Emergency Management Agency, consolidating the various disaster-response programs spread throughout the government. In 2003, FEMA was brought under the aegis of the Department of Homeland Security. Even so, FEMA is not chiefly a hands-on agency; 90 percent of its \$10 billion budget is consumed by grants to state and local governments and to individuals.

The money pot, along with increased media coverage, has changed the politics of disaster. In the past, localities tried to downplay the damage they suffered because they feared driving away potential investors and residents. Today, state and local governments have every

reason to hope that hurricanes, fires, and floods look terrible on television. The 1988 Stafford Act guarantees that the federal government will cover a minimum of 75 percent of the response and recovery costs in presidentially declared disaster areas. Presidents have made more than a thousand such declarations.

It's time for the White House to back off from disaster management, Roberts argues. The federal government should focus on preventing disasters in the first place by redirecting subsidies to steer development away from flood-prone areas, for example, and should encourage state and local officials to ramp up their disaster-prevention efforts.

## SOCIETY

# Getting High in Portugal

**THE SOURCE:** "What Can We Learn From the Portuguese Decriminalization of Illicit Drugs?" by Caitlin Elizabeth Hughes and Alex Stevens, in *The British Journal of Criminology*, Nov. 2010.

DRUG DECRIMINALIZATION IS a topic almost too hot to handle in the United States, but Portugal quietly took the plunge 10 years ago. Since then, overall drug use has increased slightly, but the prevalence of "problematic" (e.g., intravenous) drug use is estimated to have declined, report Australian drug policy researchers Caitlin Elizabeth Hughes and Alex Stevens.

Portugal's decriminalization policy was a response to growing concern in the 1980s and '90s about the spread

of diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and hepatitis B and C among users of heroin and other intravenous drugs. Drug use rates in Portugal, a land of 11 million people, have historically been pretty low. In 2001, fewer than eight percent of Portuguese 15-to-64-year-olds admitted to ever having used an illegal drug, compared with about a third of Britons. Yet by 1999 Portugal's rate of drug-related AIDS was the highest in the European Union. Since the policy went into effect, the prevalence of drug users thought to be injecting drugs has declined from 3.5 per 1,000 people to 2.0.

Because of the concern about drug-related diseases, a key

rationale for decriminalization was to provide "a more health-oriented response." The number of users enrolled in drug treatment programs increased by around 60 percent between 1998 and 2008, from a little under 24,000 to more than 38,000.

The greatest success has been in reductions in drug-related mortality, HIV, hepatitis C, and tuberculosis. In particular, there has been a large reduction in opiate-related (i.e., heroin-related) deaths, likely because more heroin addicts are receiving treatment. And the number of HIV/AIDS diagnoses among drug users has declined substantially, from 1,413 in 2000 to just 375 in 2008.

Portugal stands out not because of decriminalization—other nations have done that—but because of its emphasis on treating addiction, which seems to have produced an Iberian success story.