

Mexico Wants to Decriminalize All Drugs and Negotiate With the U.S. to Do the Same

By [Jason Lemon](#) On 5/9/19 at 4:10 PM EDT

Mexico's president released a new plan last week that called for radical reform to the nation's drug laws and negotiating with the United States to take similar steps.

The plan put forward by the administration of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, often referred to by his initials as AMLO, calls for decriminalizing illegal drugs and transferring funding for combating the illicit substances to pay for treatment programs instead. It points to the failure of the decades-long international war on drugs, and calls for negotiating with the international community, and specifically the U.S., to ensure the new strategy's success.

"The 'war on drugs' has escalated the public health problem posed by currently banned substances to a public safety crisis," the policy proposal, which came as part of AMLO's [National Development Plan](#) for 2019-2024, read. Mexico's current "prohibitionist strategy is unsustainable," it argued.



Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador delivers a speech at the Santa Lucia Air Force Base in Zumpango, near Mexico City, on April 29. The plan put forward by the president's administration calls for decriminalizing illegal drugs and transferring funding for combating the illicit substances to pay for treatment programs instead. PEDRO PARDO/AFP/Getty Images

The document says that ending prohibition is "the only real possibility" to address the problem. "This should be pursued in a negotiated manner, both in the bilateral relationship with the United States and in the multilateral sphere, within the [United Nations] U.N.," it explained.

Drug reform advocates have welcomed AMLO's plan. Steve Hawkins, executive director of the Marijuana Policy Project, told *Newsweek* that the Mexican president's plan "reflects a shift in thinking on drug policy that is taking place around the world, including here in the U.S."

"The war on drugs has been extremely costly, not just in terms of government resources, but also human lives, and it has failed to accomplish its objective," he explained. "Prohibition policies have, by and large, caused more harm to

End child marriage in the U.S.? You might be surprised at who's opposed

Conservatives have found some surprising allies as they fight efforts to raise the marriage age.

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A bill that would have ended child marriage in Idaho — which has no minimum age for couples who want to wed — died in the Statehouse this year.

Republican lawmakers, who control the Legislature, opposed it, including state Rep. Bryan Zollinger, who said it "went too far."

"Obviously, I'm against child marriage," the GOP lawmaker told NBC News. "But basically marriage is a contract between people that shouldn't require government permission."

Even as more [states take action to end child marriage](#), concerns about government overreach, along with scant data about the extent of the problem, have driven skepticism to reform across the country. The divide has sometimes created unlikely alliances between conservative politicians and liberal-leaning groups, including the ACLU and Planned Parenthood.

In California and Louisiana, opponents of change have argued that raising the minimum marriage age is an ineffective solution since other child welfare laws already can prevent young girls from being exploited. And other states, such as Massachusetts, have raised doubts about the extent of the problem,

even as experts note that survivors are often reluctant to come forward.

Idaho has the highest rate of child marriages in the U.S., [according to a national report](#) from Unchained at Last, an organization dedicated to ending the practice in the U.S. The Democratic sponsor of the Idaho legislation, which would have set the marriage age at 16, said that she thought her bill was ["a modest compromise."](#)

Rep. Bryan Zollinger details legislative proposals in Boise, Idaho, on Feb. 9, 2018. Kimberlee Kruesi / AP file

However, Idaho state Rep. Christy Zito, who voted alongside Zollinger against the measure, said she was concerned about protecting the "sanctity of family." She added that there are sufficient safeguards in state law — such as a judicial review of underage marriages — to prevent older men from exploiting young girls, an issue she said she has not seen evidence of in Idaho.

[Opposition to reform in California, New Hampshire](#)

In California, a bill to set the minimum marriage age at 18 — the state's age of consent — [failed in 2017](#) after objections from lawmakers and liberal groups such as the state's American Civil Liberties Union. The state currently has no minimum marriage age and collects little to no data on child marriages.

The ACLU argued that the bill "unnecessarily and unduly intrudes on the fundamental rights of marriage without sufficient cause," adding that "largely banning marriage under 18, before we have evidence regarding the nature and severity of the problem, however, puts the cart before the horse."

Other groups, like Planned Parenthood and The National Center for Youth Law, a youth advocacy organization, agreed.

Cassandra Levesque, 19, at Southern New Hampshire University in Manchester on June 21, 2018. Erin Clark / Boston Globe via Getty Images file

In New Hampshire, it took Cassandra Levesque and other advocates several tries to raise the minimum marriage age to 16.

After Levesque learned that the state's minimum marriage age was 14 for boys and 13 for girls, she made the issue a focus of a Girl Scout project, compiling research, contacting her state representatives and reaching out to advocacy groups. In 2017, a bill was introduced in the state House to raise the marriage age to 16 — the state's statutory age of consent.

“I was just trying to get as many people behind this as possible,” Levesque, now 20, told NBC News.

But a legislative maneuver killed the bill indefinitely after state GOP Rep. David Bates and others raised concerns about whether teens could marry while one was deployed for military service. Bates [lambasted Levesque and scolded his colleagues](#) in a speech on the state House floor at the time.

“We're asking the Legislature to repeal a law that's been on the books for over a century, that's been working without difficulty, on the basis of a request from a minor doing a Girl Scout project,” he said.

Despite the opposition Levesque faced, she was able to work with representatives to draft a new bill setting the age limit at 16, which later passed. And last year, at age 19, she decided more needed to be done on the issue and ran for a House seat in the state. She won and is now working to raise the minimum marriage age to 18.

“This time, I had all my bases covered,” Levesque said. “It's definitely a big issue I'm trying to fight.”

[Louisiana's compromise](#)

Idaho and California are not alone in not having a minimum marriage age. A majority of states, which issue marriage licenses, allow 16- and 17-year-olds to marry, a few allow 14-year-olds, and 13 states have no minimum marriage age as of September. Before 2016 — when Virginia became the first state to put its marriage age into law — more than half of the states had no minimum marriage age fixed by statute.

Fraidy Reiss, a survivor of forced marriage and the founder of Unchained at Last, told NBC News that she finds some of the rationales against raising the minimum marriage age in all states to 18 baffling because the federal government considers marriage under 18 in foreign countries a [human rights abuse](#).

[According to the group](#), nearly a quarter of a million children were married in the U.S. from 2000 to 2010 — the majority of whom were young girls marrying older men.

"This is happening, and it's happening at an alarming rate," she said.

In Louisiana, a heated debate erupted in the Legislature [this year](#) as lawmakers haggled over whether to set a minimum marriage age in the state. Republicans — and a handful of Democrats — argued that teens should be allowed to marry in certain instances, such as pregnancy or military service.

“If they’re both 16 years old, and they both consent to sexual relations, and they’re about to have a baby, why wouldn’t we want them to be married?” state Rep. Nancy Landry, a Republican, [said at the time](#).

Kathleen Benfield, the legislative director for the Louisiana Family Forum, an influential conservative nonprofit in the state, said that her organization was also concerned about forcing a teen mother to give birth out of wedlock if the age was set at 18 with no exceptions.

“We would oppose any exploitation of young girls by older men — that's the bottom line,” Benfield said. “But we just wanted to make sure that the value of marriage as a cherished institution was supported.”

In the end, the group gave the bill lukewarm support thanks to provisions such as requiring that the age difference between a minor and an adult be no more than three years, placing stringent guidelines for judges to review each case and mandating the collection of marriage data in the state to study the extent of child marriage.

The bill passed in June, setting the minimum marriage age at 16, and the [law was set to take effect in August](#).

Roadblocks for activists

Reiss, who lobbies lawmakers as part of her group's advocacy work against child and forced marriage, said she has seen some success in direct outreach.

"Where we have less luck is legislators who say: 'I don't care. I don't care. A girl gets pregnant, she's got to get married,'" she added. "Or the ones who look at me and say — I've had this in multiple states — 'Well, Joseph married Mary when she was 8. If it was good enough for God, why shouldn't it be good enough for us?'"

She believes lawmakers often conflate the maturity of some teens with the legal capacity to enter a marriage, which is considered a legal contract that many laws specify only adults can enter into or annul.

"For someone to say if you're 17 and you're mature and in love that it's somehow OK for you to marry. No, it's not because you're still not an adult," she said. “You cannot be allowed to marry before you were allowed to file for divorce. That's just so obvious.”

people and communities than the drugs they were intended to eliminate, and they haven't come anywhere close to eliminating the supply or the demand."

Last October, the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC), a global coalition of 170 nongovernmental organizations working on drug policy issues, [released a report](#) that highlighted the "spectacular" failure and global increase in violence that has been caused by the war on drugs. Instead of curbing the problem, "consumption and illegal trafficking of drugs have reached record levels," Helen Clark, former prime minister of New Zealand and a member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, wrote in the document's foreword.



A couple attends a rally in support of the legalization of marijuana at the Alameda Central Park in Mexico City, on May 4. One in five prisoners globally are incarcerated due to drug-related crimes, often for simply possessing cannabis or other illicit substances. PEDRO PARDO/AFP/Getty Images

The IDPC report found that there had been a 145 percent increase in drug-related deaths over the previous 10 years. The number of deaths reached an

estimated 450,000 in 2015 alone. Drug overdose deaths have also skyrocketed, with 71,000 overdose deaths in the U.S. alone in 2017. Additionally, one in five prisoners globally are incarcerated due to drug-related crimes, often for simply possessing cannabis or other illicit substances.

"Mexico's president is rightly identifying one of the major drivers of violence and corruption in his country: the prohibition of drugs," Maria McFarland Sánchez-Moreno, the executive director of the Drug Policy Alliance, a nonprofit that advocates for ending the war on drugs, said in an emailed statement to *Newsweek*. "The next step is to translate words into action, by pursuing both a domestic and international agenda of drug policy reform, grounded in respect for human rights."

Will All Drugs Become Legal?



AMLO's policy plan shouldn't have come as a surprise to Mexican voters. During his campaign and after winning election, he has consistently called for

major reforms to his country's prohibition on drugs. Mexico's Supreme Court also [issued its fifth ruling](#) on cannabis prohibition at the end of last October, determining that punishing people for using the drug violated the constitution. Mexican lawmakers have since worked to push forward legislation to regulate the use of recreational marijuana.

"More and more countries are developing programs for regulating cannabis for medical and adult use, and there is a growing sentiment that drug use should be treated more like a public health matter than a criminal justice issue," Hawkins told *Newsweek* .



A woman waves a flag with a marijuana leaf to celebrate National Marijuana Day in Ottawa, Ontario, on April 20, 2016. With Canada's decision to legalize and Mexico pushing to decriminalize all drugs, the U.S. may soon find itself isolated by its neighbors when it comes to drug policy. CHRIS ROUSSAKIS/AFP/Getty Images

Canada became the first major major economic power to legalize and regulate the sale of recreational cannabis last year. With Canada's decision to legalize and Mexico pushing to decriminalize all drugs, the U.S. may soon find itself

isolated by its neighbors when it comes to drug policy. Although 10 states and Washington, D.C., have legalized recreational marijuana, and more than 30 have legalized some form of cannabis for medicinal use, it remains classified as a Schedule 1 illegal drug by the federal government.

Polls have shown that legalizing marijuana nationwide enjoys bipartisan support. Republicans and Democrats have come together in Congress to support legalization as well as protecting states that have already legalized at the local level. President Donald Trump has previously suggested he is supportive of easing laws surrounding marijuana, although his administration has given mixed messages.

Attorney General William Barr [said last month](#) during testimony before a Senate Appropriations subcommittee that he would "still favor one uniform federal rule against marijuana." However, he added that he thought the "way to go is to permit a more federal approach so states can, you know, make their own decisions within the framework of the federal law."

Decriminalizing all drugs is not a perspective that is widely advocated or discussed in Washington. This week though, Denver became the first city in the country to pass a ballot measure to fully decriminalize psilocybin mushrooms, commonly known as magic mushrooms or simply shrooms.

"The vote [in Denver] shows again that the public is ahead of politicians on drug law reform—and shows the power and potential of public action in demanding it!," the drug policy foundation Transform said in an email to supporters.



Posters in support of Ordinance 301, which decriminalized psilocybin mushrooms, adorn an election night watch party, in Denver, on May 7. Michael Ciaglo/Getty Images

How the U.S. would respond to AMLO's plan remains to be seen. Globally, however, it's clear the conversation around drugs has shifted. Countries from Uruguay to South Africa to Georgia to Thailand have been reforming their drug laws, specifically when it comes to cannabis. Meanwhile, momentum has increased in the past few years within the U.S. as state after state has pushed through medical or recreational marijuana legalization.

Congressman Earl Blumenauer, a Democrat from Oregon, who co-founded the bipartisan Congressional Cannabis Caucus in 2017, told *Newsweek* last summer that he envisions marijuana will soon be traded across North American borders. "In the course of the next decade, I think there will be a North American cannabis market," he said. If AMLO's plan succeeds, that cross-border cannabis market could more likely come to fruition.

"Governments are increasingly finding they can neither justify nor afford

maintaining the war on drugs," Hawkins pointed out. "Leaders are looking for exit strategies, as we are now seeing in Mexico."