

The importance of rigorous policy evaluation: Two tales of unintended consequences

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JUSTICE
TECH LAB

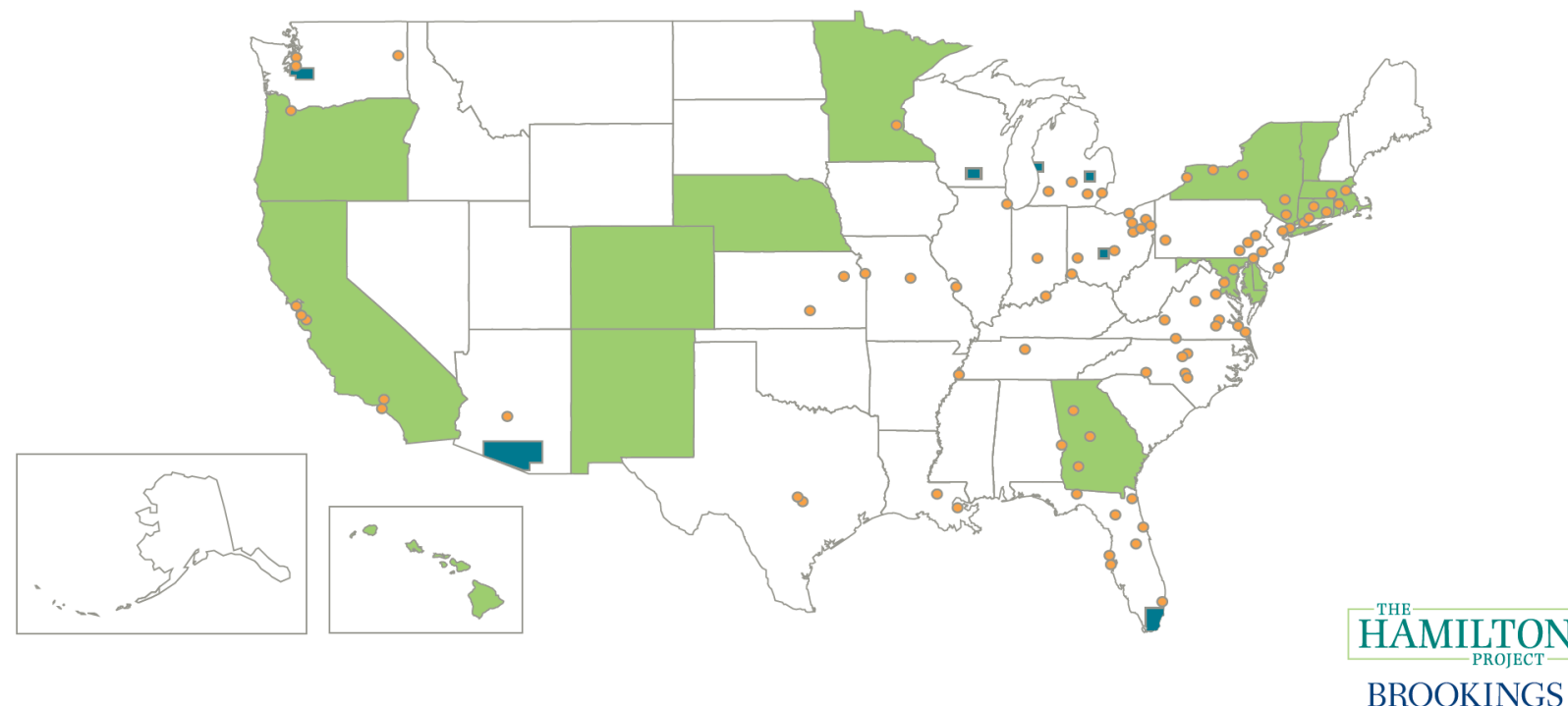
The importance of rigorous policy evaluation

- Our most pressing policy problems are usually problems because they're tough to solve
 - There are rarely easy or obvious solutions — especially when it comes to social policy
 - Humans respond to policy interventions in all kinds of inconvenient ways
- Two tales of unintended consequences:
 - Ban the Box
 - Naloxone

Tale I: Ban the Box

- Cities, counties, and states across the country have implemented “ban the box” policies
 - Prohibit employers from asking about a criminal record until late in the hiring process
 - Goal is to help some applicants with criminal records to get their foot in the door, and signal their work-readiness in a job interview
- As of December 2015, over 100 BTB policies were in effect across 34 states
 - By summer of 2018, BTB had reached 150 counties & cities

Map of Cities, Counties, and States That Have Enacted BTB Policies,
as of December 2015



Source: Doleac and Hansen 2016.

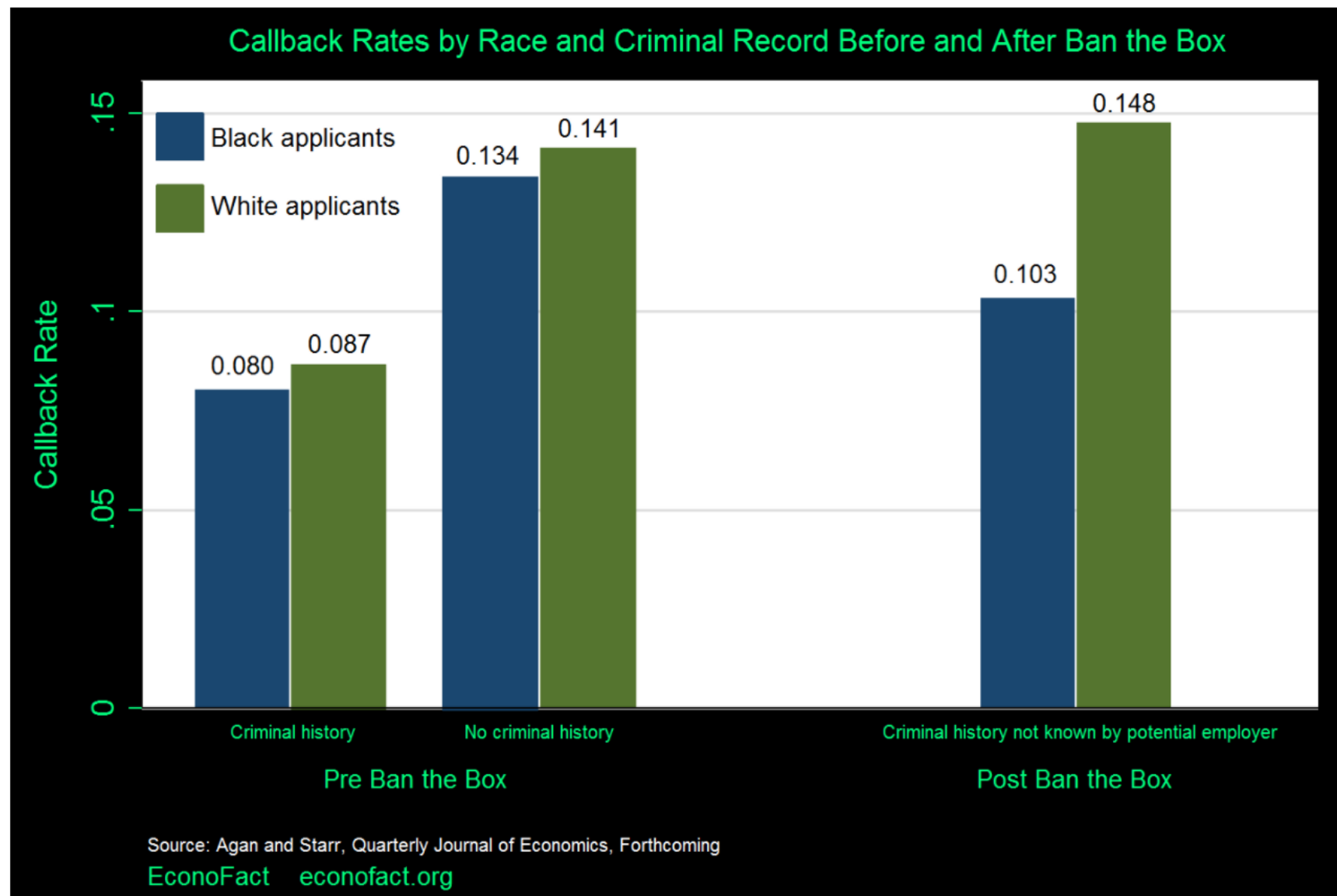
Note: Jurisdictions with BTB policies at the state, county, and city level are indicated in green, blue, and orange, respectively.

‘Ban the Box’ may increase discrimination based on race

- Ban the Box does not address employers’ concerns about hiring people with criminal records, and so employers may still want to avoid hiring applicants from this group
- Hiding criminal histories may lead employers to **guess** who is likely to have a criminal record, when they can’t ask directly
 - They may avoid hiring people from groups more likely to have recent convictions (e.g., young black men)
 - Effectively broadens discrimination to the entire group, instead of reducing it
- Economists warned of this potential consequence but were dismissed
 - “Don’t worry, racial discrimination is illegal”

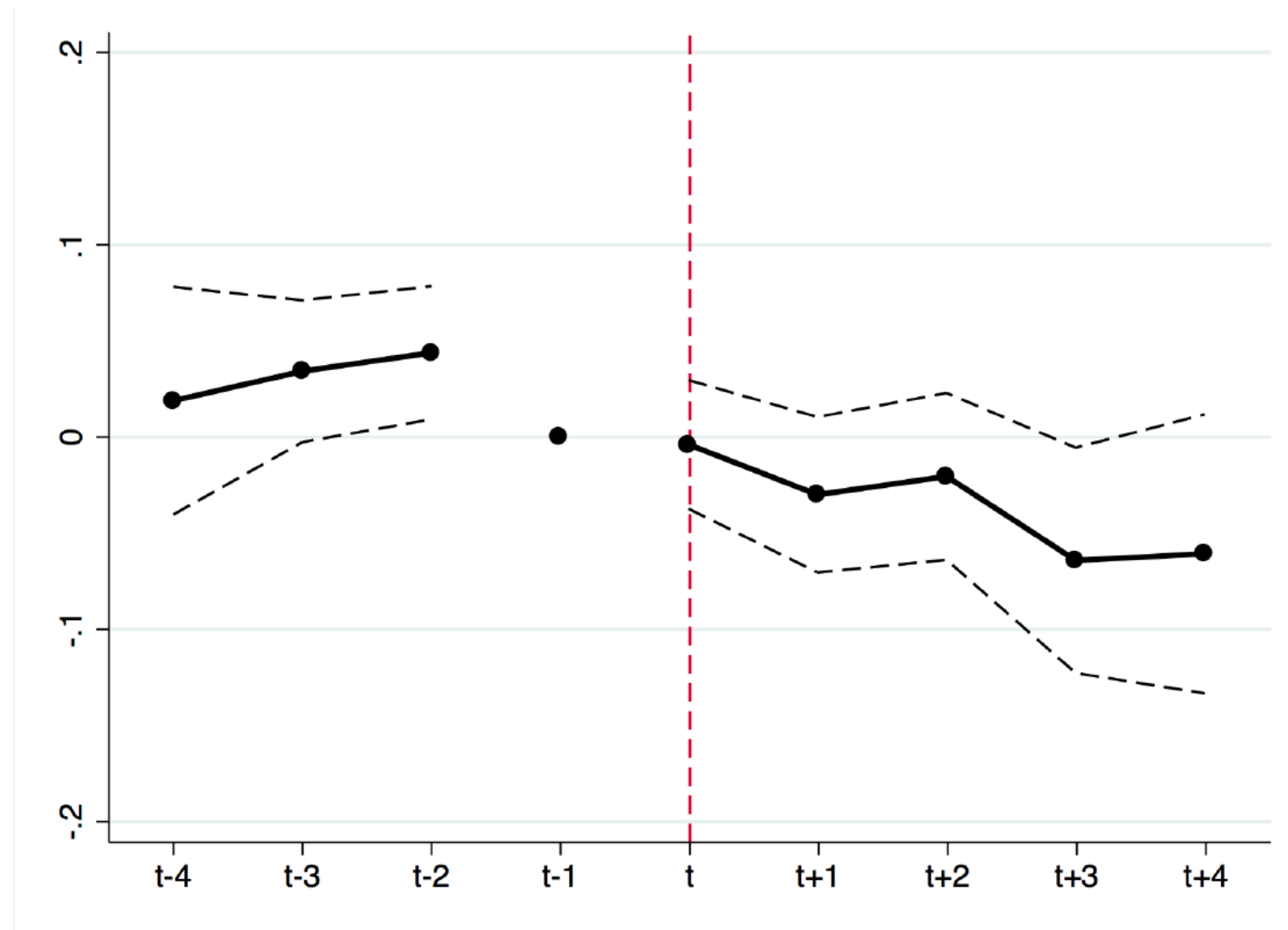
Recent research show Ban the Box does more harm than good (1/2)

- Agan and Starr (2018)
 - Field experiment in NJ and NYC: Submitted thousands of job applications from fictitious applicants before and after BTB, randomly varying race and criminal history
 - Found BTB increased racial disparities in callbacks six-fold; big increase in callbacks for white applicants with records



Recent research show Ban the Box does more harm than good (2/2)

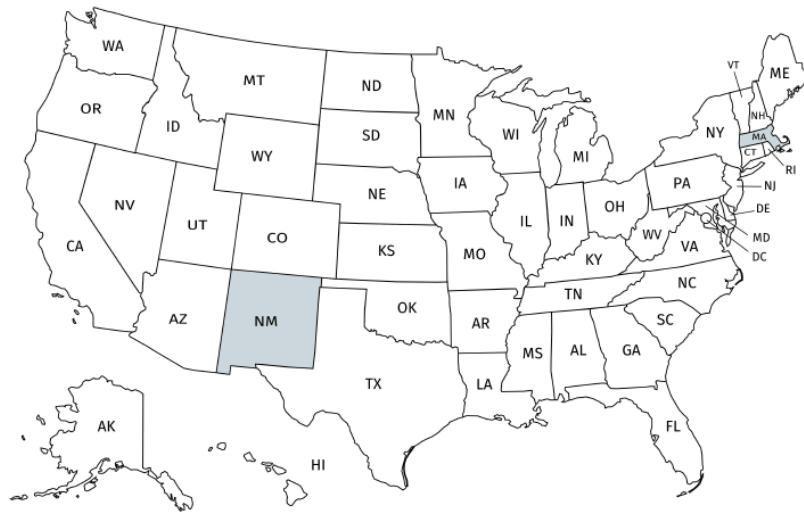
- Doleac and Hansen (forthcoming)
 - Used gradual rollout of Ban the Box across the country as a natural experiment
 - Main result:
 - BTB reduces employment for young black men by 3.4 percentage points (5.1%, $p < 0.05$)
 - This effect is large and grows over time (not a short-term shock)



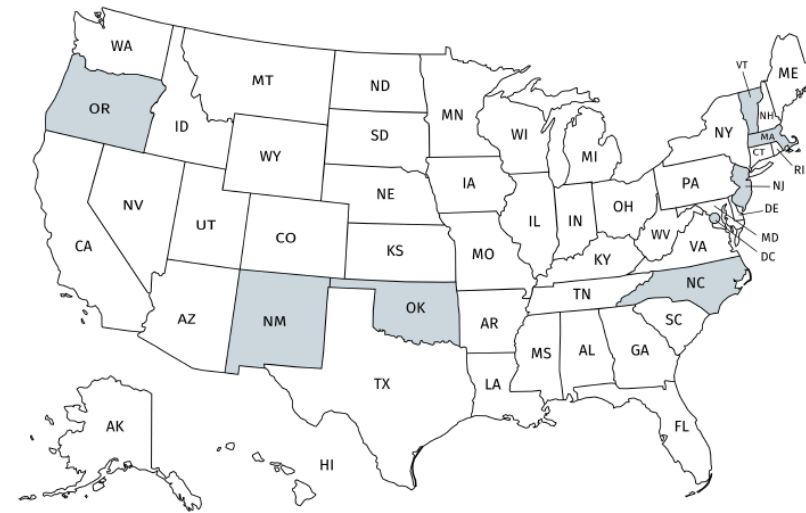
Tale 2: Broadening naloxone access

- As opioid-related mortality climbs, many states have broadened access to naloxone to mitigate the deadly consequences of opioid abuse

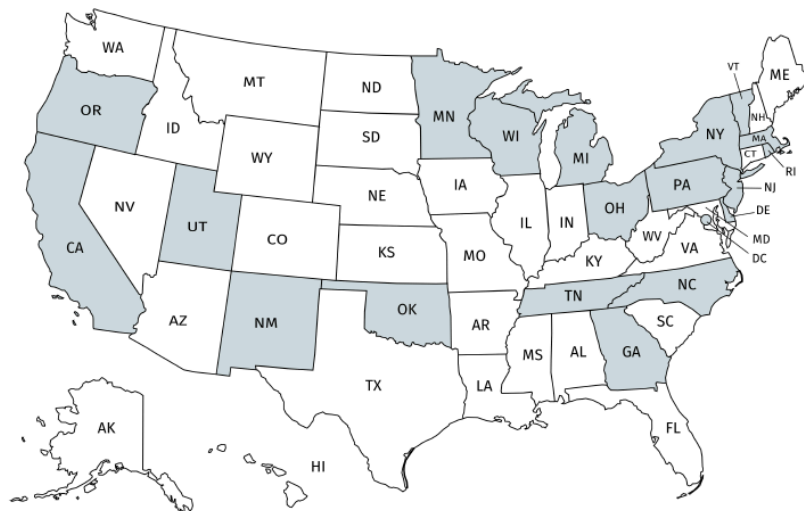
2012



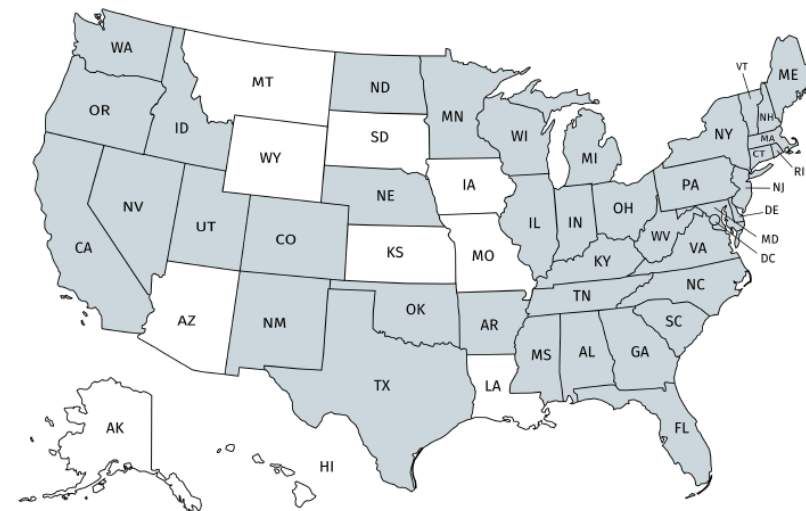
2013



2014



2015



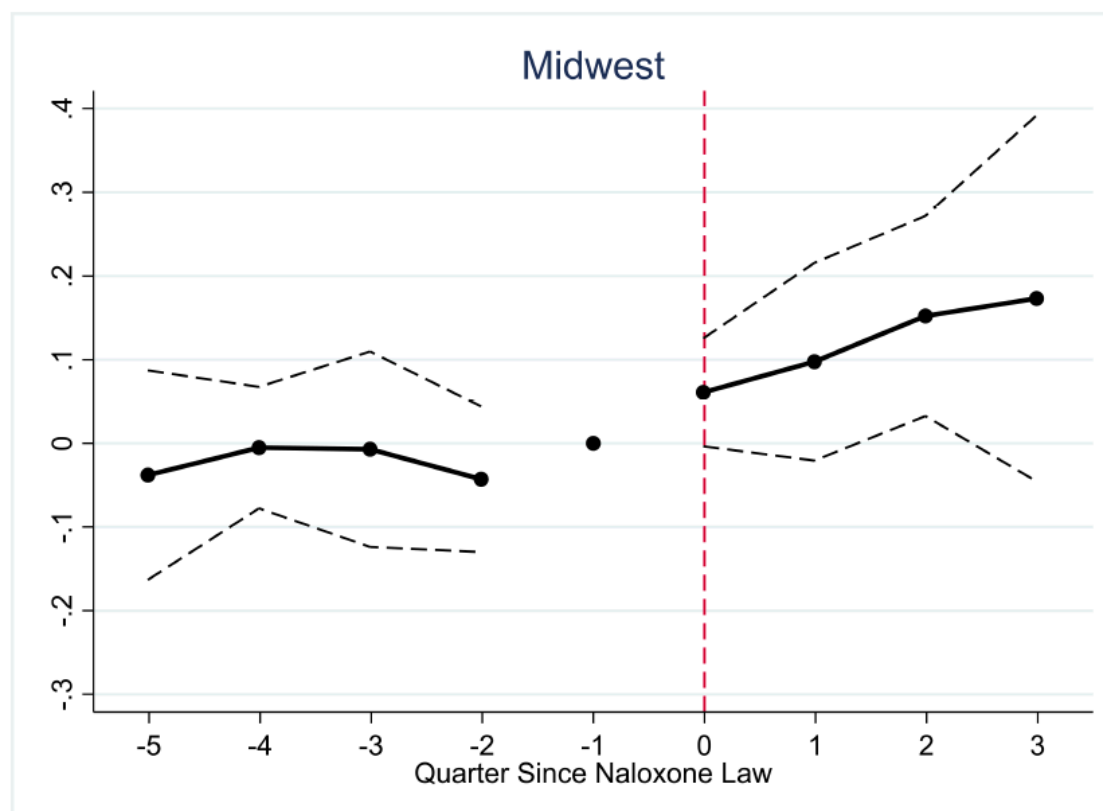
Naloxone reduces the risk of death, which may increase opioid use

- On the margin, a reduction in risk associated with some behavior will increase the frequency of that behavior
 - Classic example: seat belts and car insurance may increase unsafe driving
 - Another public health example: Life-saving HIV medication increased risky sex
- In this case: broad access to naloxone may lead to more opioid abuse and/or to use of more potent opioids (e.g. fentanyl)
 - This will cancel out some of the beneficial effects of the medication
 - If users miscalculate, being less careful about the source/content of heroin could easily lead to more deaths rather than fewer

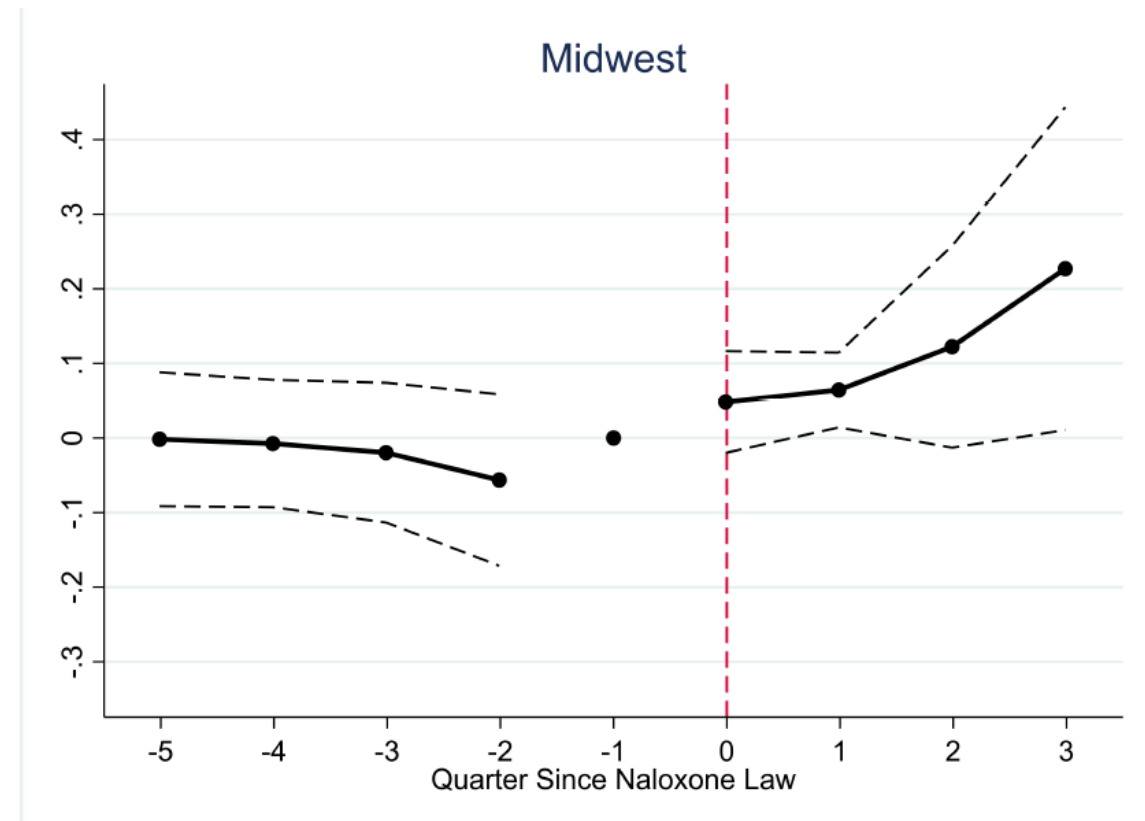
Effects in the Midwest were particularly deadly

- Doleac and Mukerjee (2018)
 - Used gradual rollout of naloxone access laws across the country to measure effects of a variety of outcomes related to opioid abuse

Opioid-related mortality



Fentanyl-related mortality



Challenge of doing rigorous policy work: No one likes bad news



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RACIAL PROFILING IN HIRING: A CRITIQUE OF NEW “BAN THE BOX” STUDIES

The Atlantic

Why a Study on Opioids Ignited a Twitter Firestorm

A paper on overdose-reversal drugs reached a conclusion no one liked. The pushback raised questions about sexism and scientific methods.



Are We Reviving Too Many Opioid Overdoses? Is This Really a Question?

A new paper suggests the overdose-reversing drug naloxone presents a “moral hazard.” The economists’ case is built on an immoral premise.

People might say your research is immoral

“Until now, I had not realized that economists and public policy experts were in the habit of advocating, if obliquely, for de facto death sentences for opioid-related crimes. While the term **‘moral genocide’** seems extreme, it certainly comes to mind.”

You'll get lots of feedback (good and bad) on Twitter



Chris Auld
@Chris_Auld

Following

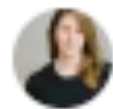


Replying to [@jenniferdoleac](#) [@olgakhazan](#) [@anita_mukherjee](#)

So, it turns out correlation doesn't equal causation. Who knew? Microeconometrics to be revolutionized. Big thanks to Jermaine Jones of [@ColumbiaPsych](#) for both the tip and for the evidently very careful reading of [@jenniferdoleac](#) and [@anita_mukherjee](#)'s paper.

Several critics of the study claimed it is yet another example of the classic problem of confusing correlation with causation. “The first problem is that they seem to be making the big mistake of assuming that correlation equals causation,” says Jermaine Jones, a Columbia University neurobiologist [whose study](#) found naloxone *didn't* increase heroin use. “This misinterpretation of data is one of the first things we are taught in psychology.” Jones went on to tell me about the classic example of ice-cream sales and murder rates. Of course, the sugar high doesn't spark killing rampages; the hidden variable there is summertime.

Trolls abound (mute or block!)



Jennifer Doleac @jenniferdoleac · Mar 6, 2018



Replying to @jenniferdoleac

Saving lives is good. But the potential downside of easy access to Naloxone is that reducing the risk associated with abusing opioids could increase opioid abuse.



Moth Hiss Gristle 🎃

@spookperson

just say you hate poor people it's a thousand times easier than arguing against basic safety measures

7:57 PM - Mar 6, 2018



48



See



Moth Hiss Gristle 🎃's other Tweets



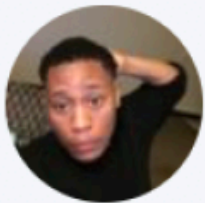
Some fear policymakers will closely follow research recommendations



Patrick Doyle @PatrickDoyle_35 · Mar 8

Replying to [@jenniferdoleac](#) [@anita_mukherjee](#)

Regardless of the scientific methodology used, this study will be used by policy makers to limit naloxone and many more will die as a result; regardless of whether the authors recommend that or not, as PM do not follow scientific evidence; not w/drug policy, criminal justice, etc



Atang Mahlomaholo @rele35 · Mar 24

That too will be an unfortunate unintended consequence of a good thing.



Researchers don't exist to support advocates!

IZA Newsroom

“[Many] suggested we should never have written a paper that could be easily **‘weaponized’** by opponents of their preferred policy. We agree that academics have a responsibility to facilitate accurate interpretations of their research; we’ve tried to do that. **But we don’t agree that academics should quash research results that don’t fit the narrative of one advocacy group or another.**”

“In subsequent conversations with policymakers and practitioners, we’ve been gratified that they recognize that even worthwhile policies involve costs as well as benefits. In our experience, decision-makers are thinking responsibly about what to do next... **Perhaps our critics should give them more credit.**”

Moving forward: Commit to rigorous evaluation even when it's uncomfortable

- Not all policies have benefits
 - We need to get serious about rigorously evaluating what we try
 - **We should assume that most things we try will fail**
 - Be humble and aim to fail quickly
 - Keep trying until we figure out what works
- Even worthwhile policies involve tradeoffs
 - It's absurd to pretend costs don't exist
 - Rigorous evaluation tells us (1) whether the benefits exceed the costs, and (2) whether other policies could have larger net benefits
 - **Understanding the costs gives us a chance to mitigate them**
- If a policy problem is important, don't rush implementation!
 - Plan for rigorous evaluation up front so you can be sure you're doing more good than harm

Thank you!

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