

PPE Seminar Series



Panka Bencsik, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Research
Fellow, University of Chicago.

Policing Substance Use: Chicago's Treatment Program for Narcotics Arrests

Abstract: In the United States, law enforcement officers serve as first responders to most health crises. As a result, hundreds of police departments across the country have signed up to divert individuals that possess narcotics away from arrest towards treatment and recovery, especially with the increasing focus due to the opioid epidemic. Evidence on whether these programs are able to engender meaningful change - initially by increasing enrollment and participation in substance use programs, and eventually by reducing the likelihood of continued drug use and criminal justice involvement - remains limited. This paper aims to shed light on the potential of these programs by exploiting the eligibility criteria for and staggered rollout of narcotics arrest diversion in Chicago between 2018 and 2020 using a difference-in-differences framework. We find that substance use treatment engagement sharply increases among the eligible, while subsequent arrests decrease. We conclude that Chicago's drug diversion program is able to simultaneously reduce the reach of the criminal justice system, connect individuals with substance use disorders with treatment, and improve public safety.

The Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (PPE) Research Seminar Series provides a forum for eminent scholars across these disciplines to present their work in a flexible format with faculty and students.

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For questions or information: darwyn.deyo@sjsu.edu

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