**Report for Policymakers**

**Estimate the Impact of Opioid Control Policies**

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**Motivation**

For more than 30 years, the United States has suffered a widespread crisis of opioid addiction and overdose deaths. As a result, there have been significant policy efforts to address the opioid crisis. Led by the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy [1], federal agencies such as the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) have taken several initiatives to combat it [2].

In addition to these efforts at the federal level, there has been enforcement of state-level opioid control policies in various parts of the US. For instance, the Texas Medical Board adopted regulations concerning treating pain with controlled substances in 2007. The Florida legislature also began to require that pain clinics treating pain with controlled substances register with the state in 2010, and the Washington Department of Health adopted a rule regulating prescribing opioids for pain treatment in 2012.

Evaluating the impact of these state-level policies on public health outcomes matters in health policy. It is because their geographic and temporal variation in policy adoption can offer an insight into a better understanding of the policy effects. In this project, the effects of opioid drug prescription regulations enforced in three states (Texas, Florida, and Washington) will be examined by focusing on their effects on 1) the volume of opioid shipments and 2) drug overdose deaths.

Furthermore, two approaches will be mainly used in the analysis. The first approach is a pre-post comparison focusing on the difference between pre-policy and post-policy outcomes. The other is a difference-in-difference method which compares the changes in outcomes over time between a state with a policy change and other states without the policy change.

**Overview of the Data**

In this analysis, three kinds of datasets will be used to examine the effectiveness of opioid control policies implemented in Texas, Florida, and Washington.

1. Opioid Drug Shipment Data: Provided by the Washington Post, this dataset offers county-level information about drug transactions from 2006 to 2014 that are sourced by the Drug Enforcement Administration's database, which tracks the path of every single pain pill sold in the United States. The dataset has records mainly about oxycodone and hydrocodone pills, which are known to consist of three-quarters of the total opioid shipments to pharmacies in the country.
2. Vital Statistics Mortality Data: This dataset, provided by the US Vital Statistics, contains data on every drug overdose death in the US from 2003 to 2015, and it also includes county-level information.
3. US Population Data: This dataset has population estimates for each county in the US from 2000 to 2020.

**Analysis**

The expectation is that the trend in opioid shipments and overdose deaths is lower in the states where regulations were implemented compared to the period before implementation and against jurisdictions where no policies were implemented. To analyze the effectiveness of the policy, it is expected that the trend for each of these quantities should be substantially less after the policies were implemented than before and that the trend should be substantially less for the treated states when compared to the control states.

**Effect of regulation policy on opioid shipments**

**Florida**

Below is the plot comparing the trend of the average annual per capita opioid shipments in Florida before and after policy implementation. Before the policy went into effect in January 2010, the trend of average per capita opioid shipments in Florida was positive, but after 2010, the trend turned negative. This substantial change in trend supports that the policy reduced the amount of opioids shipped to Florida.

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*Fig 1: Opioids per capita for the intervention state Florida*

The plot below compares the trend of the per capita opioid shipments for Florida against Florida’s control states before and after policy implementation. When comparing these two trends, Florida’s trend after the policy was implemented was substantially less than their control states’ and had a much more significant reduction than the control states when comparing the periods before and after policy implementation. This substantial reduction compared to the control states further supports that the policy reduced the quantity of opioids shipped to Florida. Therefore, with respect to the reduction of opioids distributed to Florida, this suggests that Florida’s policy has been effective.

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*Fig 2. Average opioids per capita for Florida and its control states*

**Washington**

Below is the plot comparing the trend of opioid shipments before and after policy implementation in Washington. Before the policy went into effect in January 2012, the trend of per capita opioid shipments in Washington was positive, but after 2012, the trend appeared flat. While the trend has reduced when comparing the period before and after policy implementation, this reduction seems moderate and insignificant. This slight reduction in trend warrants further analysis before supporting the hypothesis that the policy reduced the amount of opioids shipped to Washington.

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*Fig 3: Opioids per capita for the intervention state Washington*

The following plot below compares the trend of the per capita opioid shipments for Washington against Washington’s control states before and after policy implementation. When comparing these two trends, Washington’s trend after the policy was implemented was substantially less negative than its control states’ and had a much smaller reduction in trend than its control states when comparing against before the policy implementation. Compared to the control states, this limited reduction in trend does not support the expectation that the policy reduced the quantity of opioids shipped to Washington. Therefore, with respect to the reduction of opioids distributed to Washington, this suggests that Washington’s policy has been ineffective.

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*Fig 4. Average opioids per capita for Washington and its control states*

**Effect of regulation policy on the mortality ratio of opioid overdose**

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*Figure 5: After the regulation policy was effective in Florida in February 2010, the chart presents the averages of the mortality ratio of opioid overdose per 100000 from the raw data for states in each county between the pre-policy (before 2009) and post-policy periods (after 2010). The treatment state is Florida, and its control states include Michigan (MI), North Carolina (NC), and Ohio (OH). The solid lines that represent the averages of the mortality ratio are local polynomial fits (bandwidth = 2), and the blue shadow parts indicate the 95% confidence intervals.*

Above are the plots comparing the trends of the average annual per 100000 opioid-induced death ratios in Florida and its control states (MI, OH, NC) before and after policy implementation in Florida. Before the policy was enacted in February 2010, the trend of opioid-induced deaths in Florida was increasing. After 2010, the trend became decreasing. This substantial change in trend supports the hypothesis that the policy reduced the quantity of opioid-induced deaths in Florida. When comparing Florida’s trend against its control states, the variation of trends between Florida and its control states on pre-policy periods (before 2009) was relatively small, while the variation of trends between Florida and its control states on post-policy (after 2010) periods became very large because these states did not publish a regulation policy for opioid drugs thus continued to have rising tendencies of opioid-induced deaths. In general, after Florida implemented policies for opioid drugs in 2010, the mortality ratio per 100000 of opioid overdose in FL dropped immediately and maintained a downward tendency from 2010. This might not happen if the regulation policy was not implemented. Therefore, we conclude that the policy of opioid regulations had a positive impact on decreasing the mortality ratio of opioid overdose in Florida.

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*Figure 6: After the regulation policy was effective in Texas in January 2007, the chart presents the averages of the mortality ratio of opioid overdose per 100000 from the raw data for states in each county between the pre-policy (before 2006) and post-policy periods (after 2007). The treatment state is Texas, and its control states include Pennsylvania (PA), Massachusetts (MA), and Virginia (VA). The solid lines that represent the averages of the mortality ratio are local polynomial fits (bandwidth = 2), and the green shadow parts indicate the 95% confidence intervals.*

Above are the plots comparing the trends of the average annual per 100000 opioid-induced death ratios in Texas and its control states (MA, PA, VA) before and after policy implementation in Texas. Before the policy went into effect in January 2007, the trend of opioid-induced deaths in Texas was increasing. After 20007, the trend became decreasing. While the decreasing degree was not apparent as in Florida, this change in trend supports the hypothesis that the policy reduced the quantity of opioid-induced deaths in Texas. When comparing Texas’s trend against its control states, the variation of trends between Texas and its control states on pre-policy periods (before 2006) was relatively small, while the variation of trends between Texas and its control states on post-policy (after 2007) periods became very large because these states did not publish regulation policies for opioid drugs thus continued to have rising tendencies of opioid-induced deaths. In general, after Texas implemented a policy for opioids in 2007, the mortality ratio per 100000 of opioid overdose in TX dropped immediately and maintained a downward tendency from 2007. This might not happen if the regulation policy was not implemented. Hence, we conclude that the policy of opioid regulations had a positive impact on decreasing the mortality ratio of opioid overdose in Texas.

*Chart, line chart

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*Figure 7: After the regulation policy was effective in Washington in January 2012, the chart presents the averages of the mortality ratio of opioid overdose per 100000 from the raw data for states in each county between the pre-policy (before 2011) and post-policy periods (after 2012). The treatment state is Washington, and its control states include Missouri (MO), Georgia (GA), and Arizona (AZ). The solid lines that represent the averages of the mortality ratio are local polynomial fits (bandwidth = 2), and the red shadow parts indicate the 95% confidence intervals.*

Below are the plots comparing the trends of the average annual per 100000 opioid-induced death ratios in Washington and its control states (MO, GA, AZ) before and after policy implementation in Washington. Before the policy went into effect in January 2012, the trend of opioid-induced deaths in Washington was increasing. However, after implementing the regulation policy for opioid drugs in 2012 at WA, the mortality ratio of opioid overdose in WA did not drop, it continued to keep an upward, but lesser degree tendency from 2012. Consequently, this change in trend does not support the hypothesis that the policy reduced the quantity of opioid-induced deaths in Washington. When comparing Washington’s trend against its control states, the variation of trends between Washington and its control states in pre-policy periods (before 2011) and the variation of trends between Washington and its control states in post-policy (after 2012) periods was not different, so much because all states continued to have rising tendencies of opioid-induced deaths. Therefore, although the mortality ratios in Washington were lower than other control states on average after implementing the policy; because Washington still had a rising trend of mortality ratios of opioid overdose after 2012, we conclude that the policy of opioid regulations did not have a positive impact on decreasing the mortality ratio of opioid overdose in Washington.

**Interpretation of the Analysis**

The two main strengths of this analysis are that when evaluating the impacts of the regulation policy of opioid drugs in three states (FL, TX, WA), we use the pre-post comparison and the difference in difference analysis. First, to determine whether the regulation policies of opioid drugs had a positive impact on drug overdose deaths or opioid shipments, the pre-post comparison focuses on examining changes over time for each policy-implemented state. If the policies had no effect, after introducing the policies, the plots would depict an ongoing rise or relatively constant tendencies in opioid shipments and overdose deaths. If the policy had a positive influence, after implementing the policies, the plots would indicate a gradual decline trend in opioid shipments and drug overdose deaths. Second, a difference-in-difference analysis is used to explore whether there were more significant variations in opioid shipments or drug overdose deaths between pre- and post-policy periods in each state that had adopted the regulation policy of opioids than in other states that had not. Specifically, we compare the policy-implemented states with states without related policies by choosing three control states based on similar population sizes and opioid dispense ratios for each treatment state. Finally, we evaluate the impacts of regulatory policy by recalling a pre-post analysis to compare the tendencies of average mortality ratios with related control states.

**Limitations**

First, to protect personal privacy, if the number of people in a given category (i.e. one county/year/cause of death category) is less than 10, the US Vital Statistics agency will not record such data. Hence, the actual values of total deaths of opioid overdose will be higher than the data we used in this case, so the actual average mortality ratios of opioid overdose per capita will also be higher than the mortality ratios we calculated. Second, since the U.S. census is conducted every ten years, the population data for all years except for 2010, which is determined, are estimated rather than statistical. In addition, there are numerous ways that the population from census inquiry goes wrong, including non-response, measurement, inaccurate statistical unit definitions, and even the investigators' prejudice [3]. Therefore, the actual population may differ from the data we used here, but we can't get the most realistic data, so these analyses may not fully reflect the real situation. Third, our control states were selected based on similar population sizes and opioid dispense rates. Still, we did not consider other similar factors, such as income and education levels, so our analysis may be somewhat one-sided. Last but not least, most states have generally enacted multiple opioid control policies as the opioid crisis has evolved for decades. For example, many states implemented some combination of naloxone laws, Good Samaritan laws, and medical marijuana laws during 2015-2017. In addition to pre-existing prescription drug monitoring program (PDMP) laws, by 2017, most states had implemented at least 3 of these four categories of policies [4]. Therefore, it will be unreasonable to put too much emphasis on specific time points, namely the years 2007 (Texas), 2010 (Florida), and 2012 (Washington). For the same reason, it is almost impossible to identify perfect comparison states which were not impacted by the policy of interest at all. These factors serve to complicate the accurate evaluation of opioid policy effectiveness. In general, despite key takeaways from this analysis, extracting causal information from drug policy analysis is still challenging. Many states have enacted multiple opioid control policies as the opioid crisis has evolved over the decades. For example, several states implemented a combination of naloxone laws, Good Samaritan laws, and medical marijuana laws during 2015-2017. Furthermore, in addition to pre-existing prescription drug monitoring program (PDMP) laws, by 2017, most states had implemented at least 3 of these four categories of policies [5]. Therefore, it is challenging to ascertain appropriate control groups and ensure all confounding variables are accounted for. These factors complicate valid inferences on the causal effects of opioid control policies.

**Conclusion**

Based on the above analysis, the regulation policy of Florida was successful, it played an important role in dramatically lowering the average rate of opioid shipments per capita and significantly reversing the general upward trend in the average mortality ratio of opioid overdose per capita. While we did not analyze the effects of Texas's regulation policy on opioid shipments and only focused on researching the effects of Texas's regulation policy on the mortality ratio of opioid overdose, it was still obvious that Texas was also able to implement effective policies to reduce the average mortality ratio of opioid overdose per capita. However, compared with Florida, the effect of Texas's regulation policy in this respect was not as evident as that of Florida's policy. In general, although both states had reduced the mortality ratio of opioid overdose after implementing their policies, Florida's mortality ratio was greatly reduced, while the rate reduction of the mortality ratio of opioid overdose in Texas was not a huge degree. Conversely, Washington’s policy in 2012 is relatively ineffective at combating the opioid epidemic because the regulation policy of Washington did not result in declining trends of the average rate of opioid shipments per capita and the average mortality ratio of opioid overdose per capita.

The different results between the three states are mainly due to their different policies. Specifically, Florida's policies were very strict, mainly manifested in the direct arrest of opioid traffickers, seizures of assets, and pain clinic closures. The legislature of Florida also prohibited physicians from dispensing opioid drugs from their offices, expanded regulation of wholesale drug distributors, and created the Statewide Task Force on Prescription Drug Abuse and Newborns. These policies eliminated the potential for opioid flooding at the source of sales and prescribing so that dramatically declining the average rate of opioid shipments and mortality ratio of opioid overdose per capita. Texas's policy was mainly focused on obtaining informed consent from the patient for opioid treatment, conducting periodic reviews of the opioid treatment, and maintaining a complete medical record of the patient’s treatment. However, such a policy was moderate. Although it could reduce the possibility of opioid drug abuse, it did not cut off the flood of opioid drugs from the source of sales and prescriptions. Individuals might still buy opioid drugs through some gray channels, which was the main reason the average mortality ratio of opioid overdose per capita in Texas was not dropped dramatically as in Florida. Almost all of Washington's policies were advisory rather than compulsory, such as calling for regular patient reviews, giving daily recommended dosages, recommending doctor's prescription dosages, and consulting patients. Since not all doctors and patients could maintain the voluntary implementation of the above principles, it was obviously not a very effective control method for opioid shipments and deaths from opioid overdose.

To conclude, in order to ensure the effective control of opioid shipments and deaths of opioid overdose, other states should follow Florida’s policies which had been shown to have significant effects on reducing both the average rate of opioid shipments and the death ratio of opioid overdose per capita.

**References**

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