

*Assessing the impact of laws and policies regulating  
illicit drugs on health and society: some insights*  
Discussant Comments

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# Contribution of These Papers

- Leximetric analysis attempts to integrate changes in law into quantitative policy evaluation
- Supply side indicators provides logic models for understanding role of specific indicators
  - Taxonomy of challenges to strengthening them
- Market size estimates: is progress feasible?
- Criminal justice costs: first systematic comparison of full costs by country
- Most comprehensive assessment of characteristics of hospitalization associated with opioid use

# Many Challenges to Drug Policy Evaluation

- Conceptual
  - Should prevalence or harms be principal outcome measure?
  - What factors other than drug policy need to be controlled for?
  - ....
- Theoretical
  - Drug supply models crude
  - Epidemiological models no better
  - ....
- Measurement
  - General population surveys substantially underestimate frequent use of heroin, cocaine etc.
  - Purity adjusted price data unavailable
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- **Policy Research Agenda needs focus**

# What is a useful policy research agenda?

- Grounded in understanding the policy process
  - Avoid focus on researchers' view of what policy makers ought to consider
- Identify the important decisions and decision makers
  - Varies by country and level of policy
- Assess what data are likely to be available now or in the near future

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- Example: Is Market Size Estimation (MSE) feasible or important?

# In Theory: MSE an input to evaluate enforcement effectiveness

- Enables assessment of whether a 100 kilo seizure of heroin in Milan a major market disturbance
- Also assessment performance of police over time: are seizure increases driven by rising size of market?
  - Has enforcement increased the share of heroin supply seized?
- Could influence decisions about how much to invest in enforcement vs other kinds of drug policy interventions

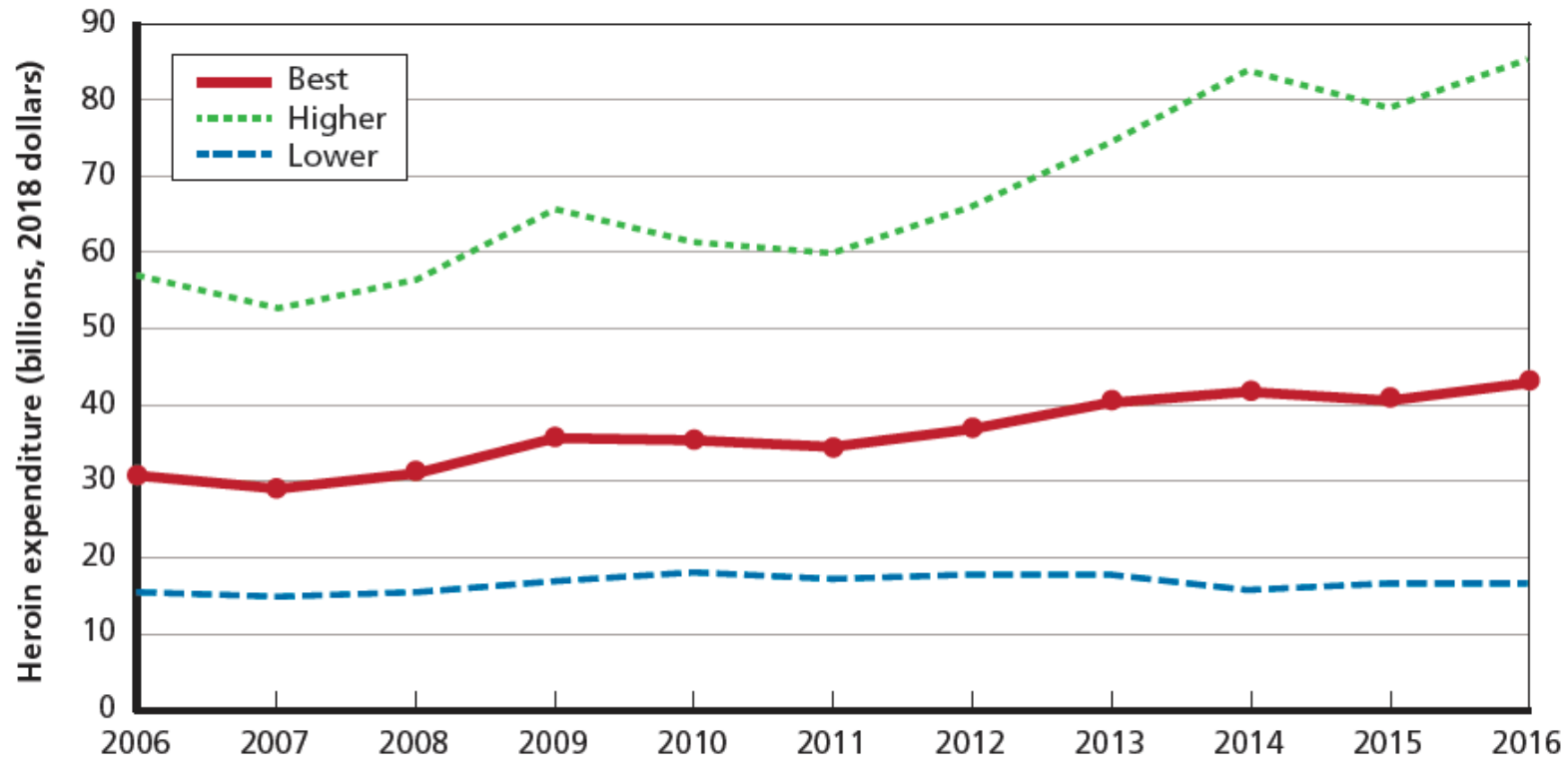
# In practice: Not so clear

- Is drug enforcement budget a discrete decision?
- Much of drug enforcement is just another police activity
  - Drug seizures are made both by drug enforcement agents and by multi-function police
- The “production function” relating police expenditures to quantity seized is unknown



# Can MSE be made precise enough to be of policy value?

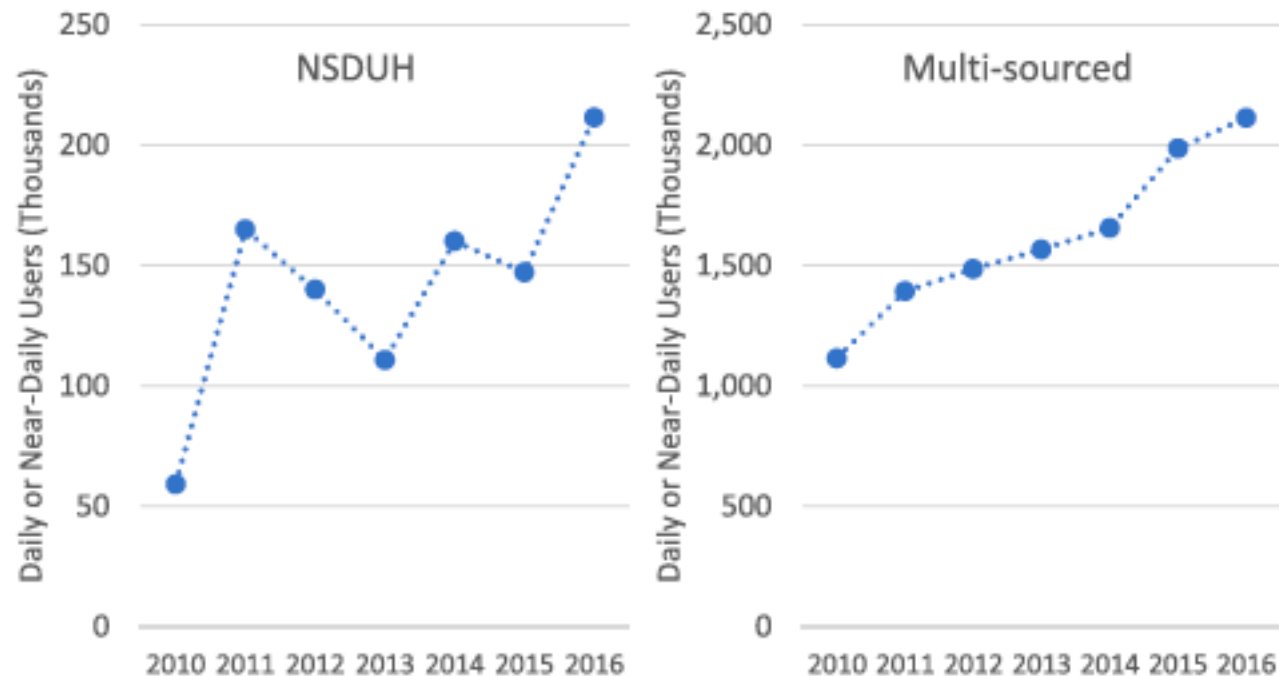
Figure 3.3  
Heroin Expenditure Estimates



# MSE components all problematic

- Prevalence \* average consumption \* price
  - Waste Water Analysis might provide quantity estimates at local level
- Prevalence of frequent drug use poorly measured in household surveys
- In addition to non-response and under-reporting, sampling frame exclusions can also be important for prevalence
  - E.g. incarcerated in the US

# NSDUH underestimates frequent heroin use by an order of magnitude



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- Prevalence \*average consumption\*price
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- In addition to non-response and under-reporting, sampling frame exclusions can also be important for prevalence
- European estimates of prevalence of dependent/problematic use typically capture/recapture
  - Implausible claims of precision
- Respondents do not know quantity of pure drug purchased
  - Purity highly variable
- Price measures require transaction level data
  - Rarely available

# The path forward: the realist view

- Identify the principal policy decisions that affect drug problems
  - Consider both intended and unintended effects
  - Include non-targeted policies that are influential e.g. programs aimed at individuals who are unsheltered
- How are these decisions framed by the policy makers?
- What can research provide to improve those decisions?
  - Take account of data limitations

# Challenges to the realist view

- What if decision makers are incurious?
  - Alison Ritter's research on Australian policy makers in early 2000s
- Might stronger research itself educate policy makers to reframe the policy questions?
  - Examples in US income support programs (Bane and Ellwood, 1983)