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Economic Conditions, Illicit Drug Use, and Substance Use Disorders in the United States

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ABSTRACT

We provide the first analysis of the relationship between economic conditions and the use of illicit drugs other than marijuana. Drawing on US data from 2002-2015, we find mixed evidence on the cyclicality of illicit drug use. However, we find robust evidence that economic downturns lead to increases in the intensity of prescription pain reliever use as well as increases in clinically relevant substance use disorders involving opioids. These effects are concentrated among workingage white males with low educational attainment. We conclude that policymakers should consider devoting more, not fewer, resources to treating substance use disorders during economic downturns.

Keywords: economic conditions, drug use, substance use disorders

JEL Codes: I12; E32

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