

Abstract:

Military veterans are at ground zero of the U.S. opioid epidemic, facing an overdose rate twice that of civilians. Post-9/11 deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq have exposed servicemembers to injury-related chronic pain, psychological trauma, and cheap opium, all of which may fuel opioid addiction. This study is the first to estimate the impact of military deployments in the Global War on Terrorism on opioid abuse. We exploit a natural experiment in overseas deployment assignments and find that combat service substantially increased the risk of prescription painkiller abuse and illicit heroin use among active duty servicemen. War-related physical injuries, death-related battlefield trauma, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder emerge as important mechanisms. The magnitudes of our estimates imply lower bound combat-induced health care costs of \$1.2 to \$1.7 billion per year for prescription painkiller abuse and \$800 million per year for heroin use.