

PERFORMANCE EVALUATION OF POLICE OFFICERS AS AN INCENTIVE TO CHEAT: Evidence from drug crimes in Russia

New research finds evidence that police officers in Russia are likely to overstate the amount of drugs seized when making arrests in order to present as many prosecutions of serious and most serious crimes as possible.

The study by **Ekaterina Travova**, to be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Manchester in August 2019, suggests that while demographics and low socio-economic status of offenders do not have a significant effect on a police officer's decision to manipulate, having a criminal history increases the probability of becoming the victim of such a manipulation.

The overall estimated effect of the manipulation on sentence length is around one additional year of incarceration, and the magnitude of this effect is not dependent on a guilty plea.

Using the estimates obtained, and information on the annual budget of a prison authority per convict, the study calculates an additional pressure on the overall country budget of around \$13.5 million. But this is a lower bound of the total social cost induced by manipulations, since it does not take account of the fact that longer incarceration strengthens barriers to reintegration after release, increases the probability of recidivism and amplifies the spillover effect.

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The likely failure of a war on drugs has been widely acknowledged, yet in many countries anti-drug policies are still based on harsh law enforcement and even militarisation. This leads to inefficient budget spending and unequal treatment of different groups of drug offenders, with a strong focus on drug users.

Russia is a particularly notable example in this context, as according to the Federal Penitentiary Service, at the end of 2018 almost a quarter of all prisoners were convicted of drug-related crimes. Moreover, 70% of these drug offenders were imprisoned for drug possession without the purpose of sale. At the same time, the total amount of drugs seized and the number of drug users have been steadily decreasing over the past several years.

One of the explanations for this phenomenon could be manipulations of drug quantities seized by the police, which so far have only been alleged by various media reports. This study presents a rigorous analysis of possible manipulations and driving force behind it.

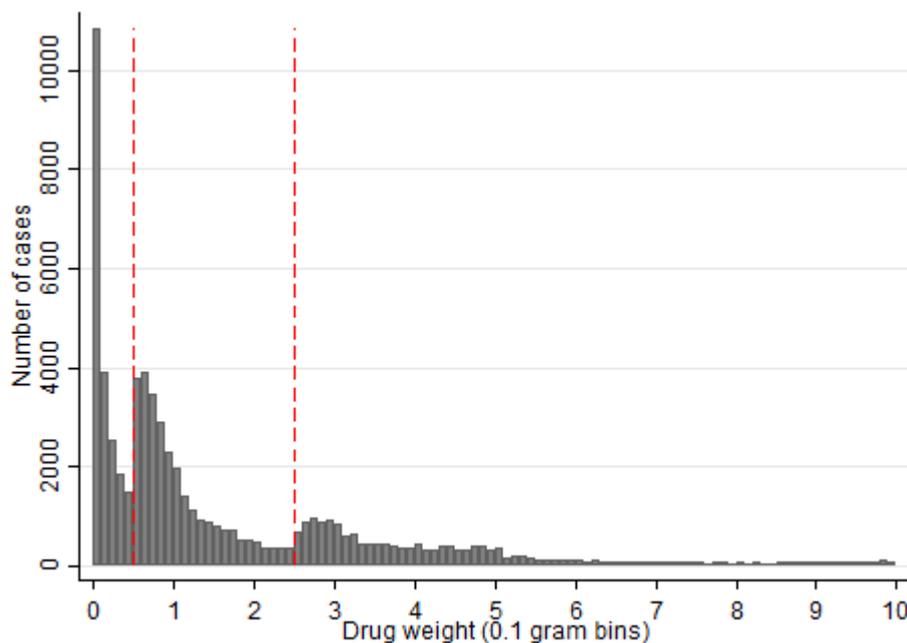
Figure 1 shows the distribution of drug-related cases across quantities of heroin seized in Russia during the period 2013-2014. The thresholds determine the scales of seizures that, in turn, define the severity of crime and punishment.

It seems suspicious that, at the moment of arrest, many people apparently possess a drug amount just above a threshold beyond which they will be convicted of a more serious crime. In addition, there is a missing mass of cases just below the defined thresholds.

Thus, the graph suggests that there could be some manipulations of drug amounts seized by the police. This might be driven by a rational response of police officers to performance evaluation requirements that, in the context of tough anti-drug laws, establish a strong motivation to present as many prosecutions of serious and most serious crimes as possible.

The new study provides evidence in favour of this hypothesis, exploiting changes in punishment across thresholds and differences in the evaluation approaches of the two law enforcement agencies, which were responsible for drug control during the period studied.

Figure 1: Distribution of cases across quantities of heroin seized in Russia during 2013-2014



In addition, the author identifies the mean characteristics of victims of manipulation of seized drug amounts, and the effect of the manipulation on sentence length. The results suggest that while demographics and low socio-economic status of offenders do not have a significant effect on a police officer's decision to manipulate, having a criminal history increases the probability of becoming the victim of such a manipulation.

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