Social Workers and Suicidality in Jail: Evidence from Travis County's Mental Health Court

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Abstract
Suicide is the leading cause of deaths in jails partly due to the high prevalence of mental illness within correctional facilities. The mental health court in Travis County, Texas assigns people with mental illness to one of two types of indigent defense attorneys within its mental health court: lawyers who employ social workers or those who do not. We instrument for lawyers-with-social-workers using randomized clinician assessments of inmate functioning at booking with a leniency design. We find that lawyers-with-social-workers reduce suicide attempts by 9-22%, self reported suicidal ideation by 1-2%, and improve subsequent functioning scores by 0.5 to 1 points on a 4 point scale for those who reoffend. Our results only appear in a sample of inmates without evidence of prior mental illness diagnosis suggesting that social workers improve inmate mental health by moving resources and care to individuals with undiagnosed mental illness. Marginal treatment effect analysis suggests that the impact is larger for those with higher unobserved mental illness.