

Comment on “The Effects of Education on In-Prison Conflict: Evidence from Argentina

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I think this is very interesting and relevant paper for policy analysis either for the Argentine authorities or to extrapolate the experience to other countries.

According to the authors there is a positive and statistically significant relation between the good behaviour (or rather not participating in violent episodes or not being punished) of an inmate and the education he receives in prison. This goes along with intuition but it's good to get the numbers right through the econometrics. The authors work well the obvious endogeneity problem in a way that numbers are robust to take economic and policy conclusions out of them.

The authors recognise a serious difficulty in gathering the data and this, while completely true in the context of the Argentine prison management, may shed some doubts over the good coefficients they get in this paper. Keeping good quality data in Argentine jails is kind of sophistication in Argentina and possibly this is the first paper of this kind, so administrative staff of the penitentiary system can only get better.

In any case, for the usefulness of this comment we have to assume that the data supporting the coefficients is the best possible set we can get. In this context there are a number of policy implications to bear in mind using these figures.

First and foremost, the Argentine prison system needs more teachers if it wants to fulfil one of its main goals: people with less incentives to engage in crime once they are released, not the likeliest outcome nowadays. Getting teachers to work in prison is not easy. There is already a big selection bias in teachers in the public school system that means that good teachers work in safe and reasonably rich environments and the opposite is also true, naturally with lots of exceptions. So, the prison system should consider options to supplement teacher's salaries and make in-prison classrooms more attractive for education workers be it through salary differentials or other perks. This should be a good investment for the taxpayer. And this even without counting all the positive externalities that education produces.

Second, the results lead to think that the policy of making education mandatory to some inmates but not to all is sub-optimal. With such good coefficients lawmakers should not doubt in making education widespread. Of course there are limitations to imposed education on remanded prisoners but any attempt should be valued.

Third, the coefficients are also significant and positive (albeit lower than in education) for other activities such as sports. This may mean that the Prison

system could invest in sport facilities, coaches, etc producing a similar effect. Given that inmates could prefer sports to classrooms and it is hard to get teachers, this sounds as a not-so-bad alternative.

A not so-positive related comment is that perhaps what makes prisoners to behave well is to keep them busy. The analogy with teenage children is interesting. If one wants inmates not to take parts in Mafia, fighting, or some other misbehaviours, it is good to keep them busy. This would explain why education, sports or perhaps any other alternative to kill time in prison are good alternatives.

Another factor that might play a role is that penitentiary officers may decide not to punish those receiving education. It is worth to bear in mind that the education level of "jail authorities" is also quite low, so there might be a so-called "respect effect" to those engage in education.

Overall I think it is a great paper and also think there is scope for more research, enlarging the sample and educating the data keepers to ensure an immaculate set where perhaps more conclusions could be drawn.