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Comment Andrés Borenstein

I think this is a very interesting and relevant chapter 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 behavior (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 is good to get the numbers right through the econometrics. The authors work well with the obvious endogeneity problem in such a way that the numbers are robust to take economic and policy conclusions out of them.

The authors recognize 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 report in this chapter. Keeping good quality data in Argentine jails is a kind of sophistication in Argentina, and possibly this is the first analysis 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 fulfill one of its main goals: to provide people with less incentives to engage in crime once they are released, which is 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, which means that good teachers work in safe and reasonably rich environments; the opposite is also true, naturally with lots of exceptions. Thus, 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, even without counting all the positive externalities that education produces.

Second, the results lead us to think that the policy of making education mandatory to some inmates but not to all is suboptimal. With such good coefficients, lawmakers should not doubt making education widespread. Of course, there are limitations to impose 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; and so forth, producing a similar effect. Given that inmates could prefer sports to classrooms and that it is hard to obtain teachers, this seems like a fairly positive alternative.

A less positive related comment is that perhaps what makes prisoners behave well is keeping them busy. The analogy with teenage children is interesting. If one wants inmates not to take part in Mafia, fighting, or some other misbehaviors, 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 bearing in mind that the education level of “jail authorities” is also quite low, so there might be a so-called “respect effect” to those who engage in education.

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