Games behind Bars: A Longitudinal Study of Inmates Pro-Social Preferences

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Abstract : The paper presents the results of a Longitudinal Randomized Control Trial implemented in 2016 two State Prisons in California (USA). The subjects were randomly assigned to a 10-months program (GRIP, Guiding Rage Into Power) aiming at undoing the destructive behavioral patterns that lead to criminal actions by raising the individual's 'mindfulness'. This study tests whether the participation to this program (treatment), based on strong relationships and mutual help, affects pro-social behavior of participants, in particular with reference to trust and inequality aversion. The research protocol entails the administration of two questionnaires including a set of behavioral situations ('games') - widely used in the relevant literature in the field - to 80 inmates, 42 treated (enrolled in the program) and 38 controls. The first questionnaire has been administered before treatment and randomization took place; the second questionnaire at the end of the program. The results of a Difference-in-Differences estimation procedure, show that trust significantly increases GRIP participants to compared to the control group. The result is robust to alternative estimation techniques and to the inclusion of a set of covariates to further control for idiosyncratic characteristics of the prisoners.