Migration Restrictions and Criminal Behavior: Evidence from a Natural Experiment*

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Abstract

We estimate the causal effect of immigrants' legal status on criminal behavior exploiting exogenous variation in migration restrictions across nationalities driven by the last round of the European Union enlargement. Unique individual-level data on a collective clemency bill enacted in Italy five months before the enlargement allow us to compare the post-release criminal record of immigrants from new member countries with a matched control group of pardoned inmates from candidate member countries. Difference-in-differences in the hazard rate of rearrest between the two groups before and after the enlargement show that obtaining legal status lowers the recidivism of economically motivated offenders, but only in areas that provide relatively better labor market opportunities to legal immigrants. We provide a search-theoretic model of criminal behavior that is consistent with these results.

Keywords: immigration, crime, legal status
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