

Referee report

on Harald Tauchmann

“West-East Convergence in the Prevalence of Illicit Drugs: Socioeconomics or Culture“

The paper attempts to decompose the prevalence of illicit drug use between East and West parts of Germany into one part that is explained by socio-economic factors and the other explained by other factors using Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition. The results suggest that the observed convergence is weakly related to socioeconomic characteristics and therefore remains mainly unexplained. The author then argues that both the East and West parts of Germany have converged in terms of the culture of drug consumption.

I think the question is certainly worthy of studying, but the author does a poor job convincing the reader about the attractiveness of this study. There is really no discussion of motivation and the implications of the results. The paper could be strengthened considerably with a discussion of how this study could advance our knowledge and benefit policy-makers. It should not be difficult to do so given the significance of the problem.

The data set has a number of weaknesses, but there is really nothing that can be done other than acknowledging them. The author does a good job being upfront about the problems of his data set and the other shortcomings of his analyses.

Potential reverse causality is a real problem for the analyses. Many of the control variables are likely to be determined in part by drug use. This would bias the estimates, which would then affect the construction of explained and unexplained differences. At the very least, the author can discuss this possibility and comment on the direction of the bias this may cause.

The author refers anything that is unexplained to “culture”. Culture is a multi-dimensional concept, which is also closely related to socio-economic differences between the two societies. The current analysis assumes that cultural differences are not influenced by socio-economic differences and vice versa. Also it is likely to be incorrect to refer all the unexplained differences to culture. Similarly, the explained part is due to socio-economic factors only to the extent that observables do a good job controlling for socio-economic factors. In a cross-sectional setting, it is almost impossible to accomplish this.

Minor comments:

1. The author uses the word "data" as singular. However, it is the plural for “datum”.
2. Footnote 6: ”hight” should be spelled as “height”.
3. There are too many other minor typos/awkward sounding statements. It would be good to have the paper edited for the next round.