

OSTROM WORKSHOP COLLOQUIUM SERIES

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“When Prison Officials Fail to Govern:
Self-Governance in Mexico, Brazil,
and Bolivia”



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12:00–1:00 PM • Ostrom Workshop, 513 N. Park

How does prison social order vary across time and place? This paper examines prison systems in Latin America, where officials typically provide few resources and limited amenities. Administrators are also absent, overwhelmed, or inept, and the quality of governance provided by the state is poor. In response to this state failure, prisoners play an important role in managing their own confinement and in governing their social and economic interactions. This paper uses existing qualitative evidence to identify and describe the self-governing mechanisms that emerged and operate in prisons in Mexico, Brazil, and Bolivia. These cases show that prisoners do not passively accept the consequences of state failure, but instead can play a substantial and positive role in prison operations.



[David Skarbek](#) is associate professor of political science at Brown University. His research examines how extralegal governance institutions form, operate, and evolve. He has published extensively on the informal institutions that govern life in prisons in California and around the globe. He received a PhD in Economics from George Mason University.

Presentations are open to the public and are live streamed (see our website for URL and papers). You are welcome to bring your lunch. For questions, contact Allison Sturgeon (sturgeon@iu.edu; 812/855–3151).