



Friends in locked places: An investigation of prison inmate network structure



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ABSTRACT

The current study investigates informal social structure among prison inmates. Data come from the Prison Inmate Network Study (PINS), a project focused on a unit of a Pennsylvania medium security men's prison. We focus on 205 inmates and their "get along with" network – an approximation of friendship in other settings. We find a weak subgroup structure dominated by two groups of "old heads" and characterized by moderate (non gang-based) race/ethnic clustering. Structurally, the network resembles adolescents in schools, suggesting that prison inmates are capable of successfully building peer associations. We conclude that under the right conditions self-organizing inmate society can foster social integration reminiscent of other social settings.

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1. Introduction

The US currently houses over 2.2 million inmates in prisons and jails (Kaeble et al., 2016) and has the highest incarceration rate in the world (Walmsley, 2015). At current rates, an estimated 6.6% of the US population born in 2001 will be incarcerated at some point during their lifetime (Bonczar, 2003). The costs of incarceration are multifold, and include negative physical and mental health outcomes (Massoglia, 2008; Wildeman, 2010), high recidivism risk, and collateral consequences for families, communities, and racial and economic stratification (Clear and Frost, 2013). Despite these far-reaching effects, little is known about the mechanisms through which incarceration affects social outcomes (National Academy of Science, 2014). Outside of prison, many of these outcomes are driven, at least in part, by social processes that began behind bars. Understanding prison social conditions from a network perspective

can offer insights to improve inmate well-being (Moreno, 1934) and inform prison policy (Schrag, 1954).

From a network perspective, prisons offer a fascinating contrast to other social network contexts. Incarceration represents one of the most extreme shocks to the web of social affiliations that people accumulate over their lifetimes. Prisons are total institutions that instantaneously disconnect inmates from their network members who remain in the community, with some relationships never recovering (Bui and Morash, 2010; Lopoo and Western, 2005; Volker et al., 2016). Though visitation and other communications (e.g., phone calls and mail) are possible, such modes are unsuitable for addressing day-to-day needs for companionship, support, and material resources that friends inside prison can provide (Bronson, 2008). Thus, inmates' daily interactions and the fulfillment of social needs fall primarily to similarly-situated peers.

Unlike most other foci that filter network connections (Feld, 1981), membership in prison is involuntary. Inmates enter prison against their will, with only a general sense of when they will be released (i.e., minimum and maximum release dates), and oftentimes knowing no one in the prison. The composition of the prison population means that inmates' choices are limited to criminally-sanctioned peers, many of whom may have violent histories, making social affiliation risky. Trusting the wrong person can lead to victimization or even death. The riskiness inherent to the prison setting creates stress and makes it imperative for inmates to quickly ascertain how to maintain their security and with whom

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they can and cannot establish a modicum of trust. Adding to this stress is the constant flux of the prison population as inmates are released or transferred to other facilities and new inmates enter (de Viggiani, 2006). The prison social context is a highly fluid environment where inmates are simultaneously dependent upon others, yet may place limited trust in one another. Surviving in such an environment requires constant monitoring of others and assessments of one's relationships (Crewe, 2009). Overall, this represents a unique, understudied, and valuable context in which to examine how patterns of social affiliations develop.

The current study follows a line of research investigating informal structure among prison inmates. In particular, we study and map the network of inmates who “get along with” one another – which is an approximation of friendship in other settings. As we outline below, recent prison research has underscored the importance of race during inmate interactions. We thus pay particular attention to how race and ethnicity structure inmate peer relations. Data come from the Prison Inmate Network Study (PINS), a project focused on a unit of a Pennsylvania men's medium security prison. Analysis of this unit serves as a conservative test of whether prisons necessarily differ from the outside world because the unit houses Custody Level 2 (minimum security, “good behavior”) inmates. We give context to our findings by comparing them to prior prison studies. However because these are so few in number we also compare our results to school-based networks. Results from this project offer a richer depiction of the complex social world inside the prison walls and how their structure differs from networks of informal associations outside prison.

2. Background

Though several studies have examined the network structure of delinquent populations, often gangs (Grund and Densley, 2014; Hughes, 2013; McCuish et al., 2015; Papachristos, 2006, 2013; Sarnecki, 2001), these tend to focus outside the prison. Only a limited set of researchers have entered the prison to investigate social structure with formal network methods. In the ensuing pages we draw upon a wider array of literature, not just network-based, to begin answering the question of how prison networks are structured.

2.1. Relationship quality among delinquent/criminal individuals

Prisons differ markedly from conventional sites for social network research (e.g., schools, workplaces) in several ways that have the potential to impact network processes – whether they do or not is an open question. Beyond the contextual factors noted above, the composition of prisons is unique. Prison inmates more often possess attributes strongly correlated with crime and arrest, such as low socioeconomic status, substance abuse, low self-control, racial minority status, and poor mental health – all of which have been shown to affect relationship processes (Schaefer, 2016; Schaefer et al., 2011; Steglich et al., 2011). Indeed, there is a long-standing debate over potential differences in the quality of ties for delinquents and criminals in comparison to their non-offending peers. This debate is defined by two polar approaches: the *social ability* and *social disability* models (Hansell and Wiatrowski, 1981). The social disability model, derived from social control theory (Hirschi, 1969), posits that the friendships of delinquents and criminals are “cold and brittle” relative to their non-delinquent counterparts. The social skills of those who engage in crime are said to be immature, yielding network structures that are unstable and high in relationship turnover, lacking in reciprocal exchange, and exploitative in nature. By contrast, the social ability model views delinquents as having similar social skills as their non-delinquent peers. Con-

sistent with the underlying causal logic of differential association theory (Sutherland, 1947), subcultural theories (e.g. Cohen, 1955), and the more general social learning theory (Akers, 2009), the social ability model posits that criminal friendships parallel non-criminal friendships, as both are shaped by normative influence and the reproduction of criminal attitudes and behavior. Those who engage in crime can be popular with their peers, have strong and meaningful friendship ties, be mutually liked by nominated friends, and belong to cohesive cliques or small groups (i.e. group solidarity).

Research testing these competing claims has typically focused on adolescence. In one of the earliest studies to address this issue, Hirschi (1969) found a negative association between attachment to friends and delinquency. Similar findings are echoed by Marcus (1996), who noted that compared to those who do not engage in delinquency, delinquent youth report greater conflict and less cohesion with parents, greater conflict in friendship relationships, more impulsivity, lower social competence, and poorer social skills. Giordano et al. (1986) also found that delinquent youth report relationships somewhat more prone to conflict, however, their relationships are otherwise as stable and trusting as youth who do not engage in delinquency. More recent work has moved beyond individual reports of peer relationships to study delinquents within complete networks. In a study actually focused on incarcerated youth, Clarke-McLean (1996) found that delinquent youth formed groups that were nearly as stable as in a comparable public school, with part of the difference likely attributable to the greater population turnover within the training school. Moreover, she found no differences in relationship quality (e.g., care, trust) between the most and least delinquent youth within the setting. Studying adolescents in Dutch schools, Baerveldt et al. (2004) found a positive correlation between delinquency and being named as a best friend, suggesting such youth were more popular among their peers. In addition, although delinquents named as many best friends as non-delinquent youth, they also tended to avoid more of their peers (i.e., were more selective). Using a more sophisticated SABM approach, Snijders and Baerveldt (2003) found no differences in the tendency for delinquent youth to send or receive friendship ties, nor that delinquent youth friendships turned over more rapidly.¹ Finally, several studies suggest that being popular, versus marginalized or isolated, is *positively* associated with delinquency among adolescents (Agnew and Brezina, 1997; Demuth, 2004; Gallupe et al., 2015; Kreager, 2004).

In sum, research has found that networks of delinquent youth more often than not exhibit many of the same structural properties as non-delinquent youth, though they may also be marked by more turmoil and conflict. Thus, the majority of research is consistent with the social ability model, but notable departures exist. Part of the explanation for these mixed findings likely stems from the heterogeneous composition of youth networks in naturalistic contexts. Prior research has primarily drawn upon *school-based* networks of adolescents, where the range of delinquency is wide and includes less serious levels. In addition, many youth in schools have a mixture of delinquent and non-delinquent friends (Haynie, 2002; Weerman and Bijleveld, 2007), which would obscure differences in their networks. It may be that the social inability model applies only to individuals who are engaged in more serious forms of delinquency. If this is the case, then networks among prison inmates – settings composed entirely of serious offenders – would be most likely to reflect the social disability model and exhibit a structure that departs from networks outside prison. The current study aims to shed light on this supposition.

¹ Snijders and Baerveldt (2003) also report finding that friendships homophilous on delinquency form and dissolve more quickly – which is consistent with the inability model for delinquents, but perplexing for non-delinquents.

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