

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND HEALTH IN A PRISON UNIT

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RESEARCH PROBLEM & DATA

How do the social conditions of confinement affect prisoner health while incarcerated? What role does peer social integration play in structuring health behaviors among people confined in a prison unit?

Although a growing body of research documents the lasting health consequences of incarceration, less is known about inmates' health behaviors while incarcerated. Previous research has linked serving time in a prison to infectious disease transmission, stress-related health problems, mortality, and mental health problems, but few studies explore how confinement experiences shape health while incarcerated or provide convincing accounts of the mechanisms that may produce adverse health outcomes. We provide evidence on both in our study.

Drawing on a sample of 132 inmates in a "good behavior" unit of a medium security men's prison, respondents were asked to report on health behaviors (smoking, exercise, health changes, and depression, among others), and social network data were gathered by asking inmates "Who do you get along with most in the unit?" Respondents nominated as many individuals as they wished from a roster of inmates residing on the unit. Using exponential random graph models and cluster analyses, we examined the relationship between social integration and health and identified clusters of health behaviors within the unit.

KEY FINDINGS

- In prison, is it healthier to become friends with other prisoners or keep your head down and "do your own time"? We find that social integration is associated with better health outcomes among prisoners confined together in the same unit (see Figure 1).
- Better health also clusters together within inmate social groups. In our unit, race-ethnicity, religious identity, and exercise intensity emerged as key factors sorting inmates into social groups, thus shaping the distribution of health behaviors observed in the unit.

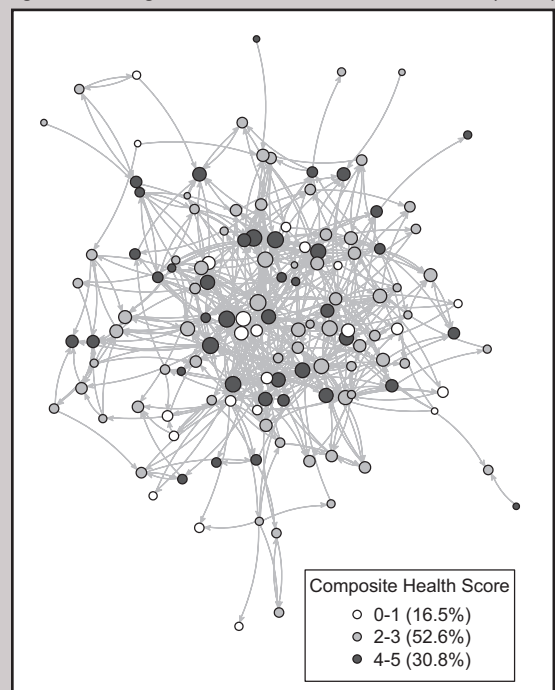
POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Prisons are stressful places that necessarily concentrate inmates with high-risk peers and are associated with a host of long-term consequences. Yet our research shows that under certain conditions, prisons can foster positive peer contexts where social integration and group embeddedness promote healthy behaviors.

Prison policies that support positive peer groups—or at least allow them to exist—may benefit inmate health within prison and facilitate healthier long-term outcomes upon community reentry.

Much of correctional policy is designed to isolate prisoners from one another—but such policies may come at a cost, especially for inmate health and adjustment while confined.

Figure 1. "Get Along with" Network and Prisoner Health, PINS data (N = 132)



Note: Circles represent prisoners. Arrows represent "get along with" nominations. The size of the circle corresponds to how many nominations the prisoner received, with larger circles indicating higher levels of social integration. Circle color refers to prisoner health scores, with higher scores representing better health.

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For full text of the paper go to: <http://www.asanet.org/journals/jhsb>

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