The Prison Inmate Networks Study

This study will advance our understanding of incarceration and its consequences by focusing on prison social systems and their informal network structures.  The project will answer three related research questions: (1) What is the informal social structure within prison? (2) What are the processes through which informal social structure is created and sustained? and (3) What are the consequences of informal social structure and inmates’ positions within it for inmate-level and prison-level outcomes? Understanding the prison social system and its connections with risk and rehabilitative behaviors will improve inmate and ex-inmate health, thereby reducing the costs associated with recidivism and underemployment.  Study results will also contribute to our understanding of the collateral consequences of mass incarceration on vulnerable communities (e.g., disadvantaged and minority communities) that receive the majority of released inmates.

The project will take a network perspective and collect longitudinal data in a single prison to reveal the informal network structure and correlate this with inmate health, safety, and rehabilitative outcomes. The investigators will design and field a network survey measuring ties of friendship, respect, communication, and support for all inmates in one prison unit (150-200 inmates) of a Pennsylvania medium security men’s prison. Survey administration will be conducted via three Computer-Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI) repeated at 3-month intervals. Drawing on network and social influence theories, the study will analyze how the prison’s informal network structure relates to the distribution and diffusion of inmate behavioral and rehabilitative outcomes—including misconduct, schooling, prison employment, and prison program completion. These analyses will be conducted using sophisticated methods for cross-sectional and longitudinal networks. Behavioral data will be assessed from multiple sources, including inmate surveys, prison work records, misconduct records, drug tests, visitation lists, and gang classification data. Inmate prison network surveys will be accompanied by retrospective accounts of pre-prison conventional and criminal social ties. These data will be combined with visitation records to analyze how prison affects social capital accumulation, family cohesion and social support, and the balance of conventional and criminal ties over time, including after prison release.