

Social networks in prisons impact prisoner health and re-entry

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Aside from the occasional brush with "Orange is the New Black" on Netflix, many are unfamiliar with the intricacies of the American prison system and the day-to-day lives of the inmates within it. Penn State professor of sociology and criminology Derek Kreager is researching inmate networks to demystify the connections that inmates make in

prison in order to help them lead healthier, more positive lives within and outside of the system.

"We know a lot about schools, we know a lot about organizations—even gangs—but we don't know a lot about prisons," said Kreager, who hopes to shine a light on this understudied population with three separate studies analyzing inmate relationships.

Kreager's first study—the Prison Inmate Networks Study, also known as PINS—was a longitudinal survey of 140 inmates in a local [prison's](#) "honor" unit. Funded by the National Science Foundation and in collaboration with the Penn State Justice Center for Research and a multidisciplinary team of investigators from Ohio State University, Arizona State University, Rutgers University, Simon Fraser University, and the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, PINS aimed to understand social connections, attitudes and hierarchies within the observed unit over time.

"The intent is to use that information to get a sense of how friendship and status are organized within the unit, and how they relate to outcomes like health, misconduct and preparation for re-entry," said Kreager.

Kreager and his team asked the inmates a series of questions regarding who they got along with best, which fellow inmates they believed were the most influential, which inmates shared information with them and which inmates they traded with most. Kreager said the responses to these questions create a kind of social "map" that was then compared to participants' health and current behaviors.

According to Kreager, this is the first time an inmate study has been done at this level of sophistication and, in general, there is unanimity among inmates as to who the leaders and social outliers of the group are.

"What we're finding so far is that the people who are at the center of this unit—leaders, people who have the most friends, those who get along with the most people—tend to be the healthiest," said Kreager, noting that many of the men in these leadership positions have longer sentences and have made more of their current situation by focusing on hobbies, health and other pro-social activities.

"The people who are on the edge of this unit tend to be those who have shorter sentences, who are younger," he said. "They tend to show poorer health, and tend to smoke more. Prison for them is temporary."

The next step for Kreager and his team begins this summer as they track the re-entry process for many of the PINS subjects as they are paroled. With this re-entry PINS study, Kreager expects to follow 50-75 of his PINS participants as they exit prison and re-assimilate into society at large. Kreager is looking to monitor the ties that inmates have in prison with family and friends and whether or not those ties meet inmate expectations outside of prison.

The PINS team has already begun monitoring five released inmates and expects to track the rest as they exit over the course of the summer, but for Kreager this is merely the beginning of what he hopes will be a variety of prison inmate network studies.

Since the original PINS unit was a men's honor unit—meaning that nonviolence was a condition for living in the space—Kreager anticipates that future studies of different types of populations will lead to drastically different results. He is currently in the process of applying for funding to recreate the PINS study in three women's prisons in Pennsylvania and Ohio. Kreager already has permission from the two state's departments of corrections to study three women's units—one minimum, one medium, and one high security.

"There's likely to be many differences," he said. "The way women organize within prison is very different than the way men organize."

According to prior research, Kreager said, women in prison are more likely than their male counterparts to connect and form family, group and romantic relationships. Women's prisons may also have higher instances of violence, but fewer fatalities, than men's prisons. Kreager hypothesizes that higher levels of social connectivity and grouping could be the cause of conflict within these units, and hopes that his network methodology will test and clarify that theory. With proper funding, Kreager is looking to launch the project in the summer of 2017 or 2018.

In the meantime, starting this year and running until May 2017, Kreager and his team—with funding from the National Institutes of Health—will again be analyzing inmate communication networks, this time regarding therapeutic substance abuse treatment communities within prison. According to Kreager, these peer communities function much like Alcoholics Anonymous and other similar groups in that inmates will rely on their peers as a support system as they fight to overcome addiction.

Kreager hopes to evaluate how an inmate's connectedness to the group impacts the recovery process, program completion and chances of relapse.

"The people who are most willing to change should engage more and become central to the network," Kreager said. "They're going to be the leaders. We expect the people who really engage with the therapeutic community and who graduate to do best."

In learning how inmate connectedness affects program success, Kreager believes positive change can be brought to inmate substance abuse programs. "This is directly relevant to policy because what we learn can help design better treatment," he said.

Prison betterment and greater understanding is, overall, Kreager's goal with each of the PINS studies. He believes that his work can begin to shine light on prison life and get inmate stories into the public eye.

"There is a huge way to go, I don't think we know enough and—because prisons have been isolated for so long—it's too easy to not provide resources and to let inmates fend for themselves." Kreager said. "In general, what this kind of research does is it removes some of the mystery of what it's like to be in prison, and it brings back the humanity of [inmates](#)."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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