

The Weakness of Strong Ties: Re-examining Challenges and Assumptions of Ex-Offenders' Social Networks

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Abstract

Scholarship on incarceration and recidivism posits that the close, personal "strong" social ties of ex-offenders, such as family members and close friends, play a significant role in connecting individuals to economic opportunities after release, garnering increased attention in recent years among policymakers and social entrepreneurs. This focus on strong ties has been maintained because ex-offenders' "weak ties," or non-intimate friendships and acquaintances, are particularly weakened by incarceration, leaving individuals with little other options. However, social network theory contrarily argues that rather than strong ties, it is precisely these weak ties that are crucial for helping individuals become knowledgeable of and pursue opportunities, suggesting current expectations of the actual strength and reliability of ex-offenders' strong ties may be flawed. To explore the role that neighborhood organizations can play to ameliorate this mismatch, this case study focuses on Culinary Concepts AB, a Charlottesville, Virginia-based social enterprise that assists both traditional jobseekers and ex-offenders find gainful employment and develop long-term skills for career advancement. This study adds to the literature on evidence-based recidivism interventions by identifying the challenges and opportunities faced by social entrepreneurs leveraging social networks to help ex-offenders. We conclude by suggesting that future interventions using a network-based approach to assist exoffenders can act as "surrogate" social networks, providing outcomes traditionally associated with a rich social network – mainly economic opportunities, group identity, and positive personal growth – to individuals lacking such organic social ties.

