In defence of the neighbourhood: understanding micro-business entrepreneurship, embeddedness and social capital as a means to community well-being

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Abstract: The research here examines the relationship between embeddedness, social capital, and micro-business entrepreneurship in a somewhat worn, yet still active urban neighbourhood of Northern New Jersey. Drawing on observations and in-depth interviews with micro-business owners, we focus on the ways in which connectedness to the neighbourhood shapes business opportunities, decision-making, and longevity. Our findings challenge individual-level explanations of business behaviour and contribute to a growing body of literature concerned with embeddedness and social capital in three ways: We elaborate on the concepts over-embedded and under-embedded to better specify the positions from which owners may be operating. We elaborate on the significance of integrated networks, where there is embeddedness, complemented by external, or arms-length ties. And in a context where the success of micro-businesses is vital to the well-being of the existing community, we conclude with a set of recommendations that call on policy makers, universities and other stakeholders to engage in bolstering the connectedness and social capital of current owners, especially those who are vulnerable to ongoing neighbourhood changes.

Keywords: community; entrepreneurship; micro-business; social capital; social embeddedness; social networks; urban entrepreneurship.

In defence of the neighbourhood

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This paper is a revised and expanded version of a paper entitled ‘Impact of social and cultural forces on decision-making by urban entrepreneurs’ presented at World Forum meeting of International Association of Jesuit Business Schools (IAJBS) and John Cooke School of Business of Saint Louis University, St. Louis, MO, 15 July 2013.

1 Introduction

Micro-businesses can play an integral role in community well-being (Schnell, 2013; Moreno, 2014). This is especially true in low-income, urban communities where they can generate much-needed employment opportunities and provide services to local residents (Sriram et al., 2007). Given the vulnerability of most small and micro-business ventures, understanding the circumstances that foster or prevent their success is important for owners, neighbourhood residents and municipalities alike.

This research examines micro-business entrepreneurship in an urban, working class neighbourhood of Northern New Jersey, USA. The community is a somewhat worn, but still active enclave that is home to a mix of newer immigrants, older white ethnics, and a growing population of economically mobile newcomers, signalling a neighbourhood transition. At the centre is The Strip, a one-mile stretch of more than 200 very small or micro-businesses where we have observed vibrancy, but also a high turnover rate, redundancy in services, numerous vacancies, and a disjuncture between old and new residents. Given these circumstances, we sought to understand neighbourhood micro-entrepreneurial strategies with an eye for helping existing owners endure the coming changes and even thrive amidst them.

We employed a team of student-researchers from our undergraduate summer scholars program to help conduct a community-based study of how owners came to their businesses and the strategies they use to operate them. Drawing on insights from business and sociology, we use the concepts social structure, embeddedness, social capital, and social networks as tools for thinking about how owners negotiate this particular business environment (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993; Portes, 1995; Ndofor and Priem, 2011). We also draw on claims that qualitative research is an underutilised method in business studies, especially for understanding the relationship between entrepreneurship and context (Dana and Dana, 2005; Lowder, 2009). Our approach thus included ethnographic observations, in-depth interviews with some quantifiable information, and the local
expertise of our research team members, many of whom were connected to the area, or neighbourhoods like it.

The findings challenge individualistic explanations of economic behaviour that are usually concerned with larger firms and actors with greater means and financial capacity, and contribute to a growing body of research on social capital, embeddedness and micro-business entrepreneurial success. In brief, we found that starting a micro-business in a working class context is an organic process that, along with staying afloat, is related to the ways in which owners are situated in the neighbourhood and the kinds of social capital available to them; being embedded in the neighbourhood can create opportunities and foster systems of meaning that are not obvious to outsiders and run counter to generic notions of rational behaviour. We also found that variations in embeddedness matter, looking more carefully at what it means to be under-embedded in the community, over-embedded, and at the virtues of having an integrated network for micro-business success. Varying arrangements have the potential to help or hinder owners, and the most optimal configuration appears to be a well-balanced mixture that contains closeknit connections for immediate support and stability on one end, and sparse, loosely connected ones that tend to yield a broader range of opportunities at the other. The paper concludes with recommendations that build on our knowledge of embeddedness and social capital in the entrepreneurial realm.

2 Entrepreneurship, economic behaviour, and social embeddedness

Research on the establishment and persistence of small, micro-businesses reveals a continuum with individual-level explanations on one end, and social-structural ones at the other. The former tend to be grounded in a rational choice approach in which all decision-making is made from careful evaluation of options and in an effort maximise returns (e.g., Opp, 1999). Individual level analyses also emphasise variables such as personal interests, skills, and motivation as important factors in determining who is likely to go into business and how well they do. Some have proposed incorporating the ideas of intuition and improvisation as complementary to the rational decision-making process, though these concepts are hard to operationalise and deserve more theoretical attention (Cunha, 2007). And a related strand of this research is based on push and pull factors that motivate individuals to become entrepreneurs and shape the decision-making and practices that keep them viable (e.g., Basu and Altinay, 2002; Manev et al., 2005). Pull factors include the desire for independence, family, autonomy, improved social status, a tradition of family business, previous knowledge and experience or identification of a profitable business opportunity (Alistair et al., 2005). Push factors tend to be more reactive and include lack of opportunity in the traditional job market, lack of education, family hardship or dissatisfaction with previous employment (Islam, 2012).

Similar works elaborate by focusing on demographic characteristics such as gender, race, and ethnicity, sometimes described as culture. Marlow et al. (2008) find that women are less likely to become entrepreneurs, or may be more likely to under-capitalise their businesses and be more risk-averse when they do. They also find that women feel pressured to subvert their more feminine traits and adopt more male characteristics in order to be successful or be perceived by others to be successful. Interestingly, however, Shinnar et al. (2009) find that Mexican-American females are twice as likely to become entrepreneurs as their white counterparts.
Ethnicity and race can shape entrepreneurship in other ways, as well. A study using data from the 2005 National Minority Business Owner Survey identified differences in motivation for startup, management practices, and degree of reliance on ethnic enclaves between recent immigrants and American-born Mexican Americans (Shinnar et al., 2009). While newly arrived immigrant entrepreneurs are more motivated by serving society and their co-ethnic community, American-born Mexican Americans are more motivated by the individualistic financial benefits of being an entrepreneur. This difference reflects Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions, with the Mexican immigrant-owned businesses displaying more collectivist and risk-averse elements and American-born owners more likely to subscribe to individualism and low uncertainty avoidance in decision-making and management. Meanwhile, in a study of mainly African-American business owners in Baltimore et al. (2007) propose that specific variables may work differently for different subcultures in an urban entrepreneurial environment, where resources are scarce.

Fittingly, this same research points to the importance of social and cultural embeddedness, and the kinds of support it can yield for negotiating contextual issues such as limited resources that minority groups face in starting and running a business. In the next section, we further explain a more structurally oriented perspective, including the concepts embeddedness, the social capital that can be elicited from being embedded, and social networks as the mechanism through which capital functions.

2.1 Embeddedness, social capital, and social networks as a basis for economic action

Literature examining the social structural influences on economic action dates back at least to Max Weber’s Economy and Society, which outlined the importance of values, competing goals and social expectations in transactional behaviour. A more recent reformulation of these ideas is captured in economic sociology and sociology of business with the concepts social embeddedness, social capital, and social networks, all of which help to explain some of the ways different systems of meaning are harboured and transmitted through business communities and business behaviour (see Granovetter, 1985; Portes and Sussenbrenner, 1993; Uzzi, 1997).

Embeddedness generally refers to being enmeshed in and operating within specific social structures, cultures, and even set patterns of cognitive processing (Zukin and DiMaggio, 1990; DeQuech, 2003). In brief, embeddedness captures the range of human affiliations and correlating interests, which can lead to greater variation in ideas, meaning and definitions of success than neo-classic, rational choice models account for in individual actors. According to Portes (1995), Uzzi (1997), and DeQuech (2003), the idea of social embeddedness appears in early market behaviour analyses such as Polanyi (1957) and Geertz (1979). But, the idea was catapulted when Granovetter (1985) made the link to economic behaviour, inspiring a host of business-related research, including entrepreneurship (Larson, 1992; Jack and Anderson, 2002; McKeever et al., 2014), including immigrant enterprises (Portes, 1995).

In the field of economic action, where individuals may try their hand at opening and running a business, this entrenchment can yield social capital, or benefits:
“Social capital refers to the capacity of individuals to command scarce resources by virtue of their membership in networks or broader social structures. Such resources may include economic tangibles like price discounts and interest-free loans, or intangibles like information about business conditions, employment tips and generalized ‘goodwill’ market transactions.” [Portes, (1995), p.12]

Research in economic sociology and the sociology of business often measures embeddedness and access to social capital as a matter of connections to other individuals and groupings of actors called social networks:

“Social networks are among the most important types of structures in which economic transactions are embedded. These are sets of recurrent associations between groups of people linked by occupational, familial, cultural and affective ties. Networks are important in economic life because they are resources for the acquisition of scarce means, such as capital and information, and because they simultaneously impose effective constraints on the unrestricted pursuit of personal gain.” [Portes, (1995), p.8]

Networks are thus a salient connection between individuals and social structures, including the communities that entrepreneurs may or may not belong to. But also, networks are independent structural things with social capital-like properties that can enhance or inhibit entrepreneurial behaviour (Burt, 2005).

Some important points arise here: First, embeddedness is generally an organic process grounded in social relations. As with the case of Mexican immigrant entrepreneurs described above, this kind of group behaviour becomes important among minorities where resources and access to conventional means of entrepreneurship are often less accessible. As Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993) would argue, it is this marginalisation that lends itself to the structural solidarity that minority groups experience and that gives life to alternative strategies, logics and perceptions. Second, the effects of embeddedness are not unidirectional or without contradictions. Embeddedness can create access, but can also have costs in the sense that members may face excessive expectations from other group members who may not even reciprocate, or to the extent that they are cut off from outside opportunities. Third, following Granovetter (e.g., 1973, 1974, 1985) not all network connections and network structures have the same properties. His concern was with the benefits of social network members called weak ties, which are more likely to be removed from the immediate circle and serve as bridges to outside communities, information, and opportunities. Uzzi (1996, 1997) however, focuses on the overall cohesion, or density of the group an actor is embedded in, to highlight the benefits afforded to members of a tightly knit group in terms of stability. Fourth, these ideas do not inherently contradict each other and point to the virtue of network complementarity. Uzzi and others are critical of the potential for over-embeddedness, where actors operate in networks that are overly insular and cut off from what they call arms-length ties (weak ties) that can reveal new ideas and opportunities (see also Sriram et al., 2007). In doing so, he proposes that economic actors benefit most when there is a healthy integration of embeddedness and arm’s length ties, allowing actors to maximise on the benefits of both (1997). In different, but related contexts, sociological analyses of economic behaviour among economically poor actors have raised this point (e.g., Briggs, 1998; Dominguez and Watkins, 2003; Dominguez, 2011), and the same for white-collar job searches (e.g., Aral and Van Alstyne, 2011; Latora et al., 2013).
2.2 Embeddedness and micro-business entrepreneurship research

Newer studies in business literature draw on these longstanding ideas in sociology to highlight how embeddedness and the local context shape opportunities, constraints and even the definition of what is rational when it comes to decision-making and strategising in entrepreneurship (e.g., Seelos et al., 2010). Notably, only a few address the experiences of very small businesses in a geographically bound community (McKeever et al., 2014; Sriram et al., 2007). To our knowledge, these studies find that cultural and structural embeddedness are an important determinant of business establishment and longevity.

However, these studies take embedding as part of a broader business strategy that owners engage in to become part of the (usually new) community. In contrast, the research here assumes embeddedness to be something more organic, grounded in long-standing community and social relations such as economic, racial and ethnic segregation, and other factors that facilitate a-priori ties to and within the community. This is not to say that new business owners (and others) cannot build connections and become more organically embedded. But our starting point allows us to take a more holistic view of how getting into business happens for most businesses in this unique neighbourhood space.

Drawing from these ideas, we propose the following:

“Small business opportunities in insular, economically challenged neighborhoods are more likely the result of organic processes, facilitated by embeddedness in the community.”

“Embeddedness in the local community is an advantage for longevity in that owners will have access to insider opportunities and information on how to get things done.”

“However, imbalances in embeddedness can compromise the benefits of embeddedness and its impact on a business’s longevity: while under-embeddedness, the state of having little or no connection to the immediate community, can limit internal opportunities and stability, overembeddedness, the state of being too attached to the extent that outside contacts are minimal or non-existent, can be very limiting and stifle innovation.”

“The optimal network for business longevity would be one where business owners are embedded enough to promote knowledge and stability, but also have external connections to facilitate new ideas.”

3 Data and methods

Our research takes place in the commercial centre of a working class, urban neighbourhood in Northern New Jersey. The Strip is about one mile long and is home to approximately 200 micro-businesses where residents can find an array of services from real estate to tax preparation to pest control and products that range from pets and hardware to food and bicycles. While there are a few high quality, higher-priced options in some sectors, many of the businesses offer low cost and bargain items aimed at the neighbourhood economy. Some of the most popular businesses are clothing and dollar stores, restaurants, and pharmacies.
The Strip is an important part of the neighbourhood’s economic and social well-being for owners, employees, consumers and residents. On an average day, there is a hustle and bustle on the Avenue, with sidewalks full of pedestrians, active bus stops shuttling passengers to a nearby train stop in one direction, and New York City in the other. The streets are usually filled with traffic and a consistent stream of delivery trucks dropping off supplies. Along with two small urban-style grocery stores, residents can acquire basic living needs and participate in daily social rituals such as talking on a public bench, meeting for coffee or a meal, or just taking a stroll amongst friendly faces.

To learn more about this business community and the inner-workings of individual stores, we employed multiple research strategies: first, in the summer of 2011 we simultaneously conducted a simple census of all businesses and several months of ethnographic observations in which student researchers worked to build relations with owners and other employees as a segue to asking for an interview. Our census revealed that in 2011 there were 212 businesses on the strip, 11 of which were franchises that we will omit from the analysis; another 14 locations were empty or under renovation. Of the 187, 20 were apparel stores, including two for children, three shoe stores and a dress shop specialising in bridal gowns. Twenty-six were restaurants, 16 were small-scale food stores such as delis, produce stands and bodegas. Seventeen were medical offices, ten were salons, nine were electronics related, there were eight jewellery stores and seven dollar stores.

Ethnographic efforts helped build relationships with owners. These efforts eventually led to a handful of exploratory interviews in which students asked a battery of closed-ended questions on demographics, how owners came to their businesses, the strategies and individuals they relied on to help run the business, and relations with people and organisations in the community.

Over time, we realised that while we were learning a lot with the closed-ended surveys, the better interviews were those in which the respondents complemented survey answers with background stories. The following summer we converted the interviews to a qualitative format, in such a way that allowed us to more systematically collect these rich stories, but also so that key questions could easily be quantified to match the previously collected data.

Most relevant to the research here are the open-ended questions that ask about
1. the decision to choose this business and location
2. current and past connections to people, businesses and organisations in the immediate neighbourhood
3. connections to citywide organisations, such as city hall or the chamber of commerce, and professional groups that are specific to their respective industries.

These data allow us to create a portrait of business and community-related social networks that individual owners operate within with an ability to differentiate between the ties that represent the immediate business and community, versus outside connections that facilitate broader kinds of support. As Table 1 demonstrates in the beginning of the next section, we conducted in-depth interviews with a total of 35 business owners. Each store and owner was coded in the following manner:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business name and network type</th>
<th>Prior neighbourhood connection</th>
<th>Active with neighbourhood organisations, other businesses</th>
<th>Relations with government city hall</th>
<th>Active with professional orgs, outside consulting, etc.</th>
<th>Embeddedness</th>
<th>Current status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LG Beverages</td>
<td>G, L, I</td>
<td>N**</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jersey RE and Multi-Service</td>
<td>L, W, P</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ada’s Multi-Service Agency</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike’s Home Maintenance</td>
<td>G, L, W, I</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Pet Store</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barro’s Pizza Restaurant</td>
<td>L, W, I</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furniture Stop</td>
<td>K, W</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>H&amp;N Home Goods</td>
<td>L, W, I</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avenue Pharmacy</td>
<td>G, L, W, P</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hair Stop</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura’s Sweets</td>
<td>L, W, P</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paladar</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avenue Dentist</td>
<td>W, P</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hudson Gym</td>
<td>L, W</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Open</td>
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<tr>
<td>City Media and Electronics</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese #1</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Open</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second Hand Heaven</td>
<td>G, L</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boulevard Bikes</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artesano Restaurant</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europa Pizza Restaurant</td>
<td>W, P</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Open</td>
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<tr>
<td>Annie’s Salon</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NK Home Goods</td>
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<td>Y</td>
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<td>NA</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jersey Tattoo</td>
<td>L, K, W</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Apparel</td>
<td>G, L</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaska Convenience Store</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lin’s Meat, Fish and Produce</td>
<td>N*</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *Has another store nearby.
**Technically outside CABID.
1Had to rebuild staff with outside workers.
2Open more than 40 years.
G = grew up; L = lived; W = worked; I = inherited; K = knew someone; P = purchased from employer-owner; N = no connection;
Y = Yes; N = no; I = integrated M = mixed O = over; U = under.
Table 1

The relationship between over/under-embeddedness in the community and longevity
under/over-embedded = low social capital vs. mixed/integrated = high social capital

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business name and network type</th>
<th>Prior neighbourhood connection</th>
<th>Active with neighbourhood organisations, other businesses</th>
<th>Relations with government city hall</th>
<th>Active with professional orgs., outside consulting, etc.</th>
<th>Embeddedness</th>
<th>Current status</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over-embedded</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lety’s</td>
<td>L, W</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry’s Video Store</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dress Shop</td>
<td>L, I</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearty and Healthy</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avenue Apparel</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Closed*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda’s Toy Shop</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dollarama</td>
<td>G, L</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town Furniture</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Sold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao’s Restaurant</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>50% downsize</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
*Has another store nearby.
**Technically outside CABID.
1Had to rebuild staff with outside workers.
2Open more than 40 years.
3G = grew up; L = lived; W = worked; I = inherited; K = knew someone; P = purchased from employer-owner; N = no connection;
Y = Yes; N = no; I = integrated M = mixed O = over; U = under.
4 Results and analysis

As Table 1 summarises, the in-depth interviews revealed several interesting themes about the importance of embeddedness as a source of social capital in the avenue’s business community. A-priori connections to the neighbourhood shaped the path to starting a business and securing a location on the avenue. These processes, including property rental, often happened in the course of informal or chance interactions. We also learned that there were variations in embeddedness and that this, too, shaped the long-term practices and outcomes for many businesses. Stores that ultimately closed down overwhelmingly those at extremes; that is, they were either over or under-embedded in the neighbourhood. In contrast, those with integrated or at least very mixed networks overwhelmingly remained open. Here we provide a more in-depth description and analysis of the examples followed by an overall assessment of our analysis.

4.1 Connections to the neighbourhood and starting a business

The most direct example of how embeddedness shaped micro-business ownership was captured by the fact that for many longtime residents and employees, going into business on the avenue was an extension of their existence in the neighbourhood. In a few cases, the impact of relations with people and organisations was very direct. This included family businesses and other successions of ownership. Many of the owners had grown up on or near the strip, or had at least lived there for an extended period of time. Some worked in the area before becoming business owners, and a notable portion worked for the owners of the stores they eventually took over. In a few cases, it was something subtle such as a business acquaintance or some kind of connection to people in the building where the business was started that facilitated a link to the opportunity. In others, however, we observed that the influence of embeddedness was even subtler, grounded in the happenstance of everyday life.

Longtime residents and happenstance: Twenty-seven of the 35 owners we talked to either grew up, lived or worked in the neighbourhood before opening a business on the avenue. The owner of Second Hand was a good example of proprietors having grown up in the neighbourhood and even socially stumbling into their business opportunities. The owner claims to have had a basement and garage cleaning service where he essentially helped people get rid of old things. After some time, he realised that he was collecting too much on his own and had no more space in his garage to store it. One day while talking with a neighbourhood friend, he was informed of a small shop that was for rent. At first, he says he could not take the idea seriously. But eventually, he learned of other second-hand stores in the area, and realised that it could be that kind of business with a shop, employees and other usual amenities.

Mailroom to management: sentimental ties between longtime employees and employers: Another kind of connection was the transmission of businesses via sentimental ties, which directly challenges the rational behaviour model for both the old owner and the new. For several of our respondents, past owners opted to forego open market and instead arrange a sale to one of their existing employees, even where that worker may not have all the traditional means to qualify for the purchase. And rather than scour the market looking for the best opportunity, the respondents often took advantage of these deals without much comparison. Laura’s Sweets and Ice Cream, and Jersey Real
Estate were both good examples of this generational transmission. In both cases, the owners had begun as immigrant, low-wage, helpers that stayed with the business for more than a decade. When it came time for the owners to retire and sell, both decided to forego an open market sale that likely would have garner more money, and instead helped the existing employee purchase the business.

Another example that captured the effects of growing up in the neighbourhood, the mailroom-to-manager dynamic, and sentimental ties was Avenue Pharmacy. The current owner had grown up cleaning and stocking the shelves for the previous owners. During that time, they would talk to him about going to pharmacy school, providing him with the sense and outlook of how to accomplish such a lofty goal for many kids in this working class neighbourhood. And when he finished, they suggested he take over the business and that they would help arrange a sale to make it feasible.

Contrary to an approach that maximises profits above all, familiarity, insider access, affinity for the neighbourhood, and sentimental connections on the part of both sellers and buyers often played a significant role in the decision to sell and buy existing businesses. The implications of these connections reared up in the flow of everyday life, such that many owners literally described it as something that ‘fell into my lap’. This is not to say that the business venture did not require skills or involves hard work, but simply that these are not the only mechanisms that matter when it comes to business opportunities. And, to make it work, both parties facilitated creative financing arrangements that further reduced the amount of money that could have ultimately been had or even saved on the open market.

In both cases, neither employee expected to be able to make this kind of purchase and could do only with some creative arrangement that essentially required the original owners to sacrifice some gains. Still further, when the opportunity arose to take over, they decided to do so, not because they rationally evaluated all of the alternative employment opportunities from the perspective of financial self-interest, but because they ‘knew the business’, felt comfortable there, and wanted continue in a similar role. Hence, existing social relations on both sides facilitated the process of becoming a business owner.

As these examples demonstrate, several owners came to their businesses by virtue of direct connections to the previous owners, which facilitated acquisitions that were not necessarily available to the open market, and most likely were not financially obtainable. These cases and many others like them highlight the importance of having access to information via pre-existing connections, coupled with sentimental motivations and the flow of information in everyday life.

4.2 Insider information and understanding neighbourhood niches

Connections to the neighbourhood and insider flows also appeared to be responsible for what might have seemed like counterintuitive ventures and alternative strategies that might not make sense to the casual observer, but did to those with an insider understanding. For example, in 2009 the only video store on the strip closed down at a time when it seemed video stores would become fairly extinct due to the internet and the low-budget Red Box video rental system, which was already available at the neighbourhood grocery store. Several other business owners commented that it was unlikely that another one would return. Within days, however, another video store did open up across the street from the old one.
Perplexed, our research team ventured over to the store to talk with the new owner of Harry’s Videos. They learned that he was a former employee of the old store and that this status allowed him to know that the main reason for the store closing was personal, rather than economic. It also allowed him early access the store’s liquidation process. After some time reflecting on how the old store was run, where video rental industry was headed and the neighbourhood, he decided there were enough non-internet engaged people still in the area that he could survive. Even though videos are becoming less popular and the neighbourhood is not all that affluent, he reasoned:

“Netflix and Redbox have hurt the business, but, all said and done, there is still some life left because even though there are bootlegs and all, the studios have some restrictions and people spend thousands of bucks on their home entertainment system so they don’t wanna’ watch a bootleg. And once a movie is out, they don’t wanna wait 30 or 60 days for Redbox or Netflix.”

This kind of local knowledge also lent to the development sub-niches and alternative strategies. As reported earlier, upon first glance, many businesses are replicated, often right next door to each other, and an observer might assume this duplication is irrational or unnecessary. However, early findings from personal interviews and observational research have revealed that while some product or service categories seem the same on the surface, that stores often differed inside and sometimes even served different segments of the neighbourhood population.

One example of this is in the many small produce stands that also function as small ethnic grocery stores. On the surface, each appears to be homogenous, with fruits, vegetables, and a simple mix of bread, dairy and canned goods. Inside, however, you might find one that specialises in Mexican and Central American groceries – fresh tortillas, specialty cheeses and various kinds of chorizo. Another is more suited to Southeast Asian and Spanish-speaking Caribbean products, which are quite different from Central America. And a third stand comes replete with a deli, including fresh poultry and beef.

We found similar situations in 99 cent stores and pharmacies, including Avenue. In some cases, it is merely language and perhaps a steady stream of home-country products that carry a stores unique identity and clientele. Of the two pharmacies that are side-by-side and not far from two more, including a large Rite-Aid, one is operated by a person from Pakistan and the other from India. And while Avenue Pharmacy did not have a dominant ethnic niche, it instead claimed to have maintained generations of older neighbourhoods residents that had always shopped for prescriptions there. So in this case, varied ethnic backgrounds of owners and residents drove a localised perception of what is rational and how to run the business. On the outside, these duplicate stores appeared irrational. Yet, each dollar store and grocery store may be catering to a different cultural community and offer unique imported products that meet a specific group’s consumer needs.

While these nuances became apparent after careful observation and in-depth interviews with owners and managers, they are not at all defined on the surface in the businesses’ names, appearances or any other manner that would be obvious to a casual observer. Since so many owners are from the local neighbourhood, and many of the businesses have been passed down from one generation to the next or from previous owner to an employee, the authors believe many owners simply take it for granted that customers would automatically know which generically-named store carries unique
products from their home countries. This is probably because the tendency to specialise emerges out of informal flows and the range of other, non-business contexts in which the owners are embedded. Many times it is about ethnic niches; the produce store that specialises in Central American products is owned by a Puerto Rican woman and her Spanish-speaking, Korean husband, while it was their Mexican employees that began requesting they carry the products.

4.3 Under-embedded networks

If existing connections to the neighbourhood facilitated access to logistical opportunities, provided support for running the businesses and access to insider information on ways to stay afloat, then not having these connections should have negative implications. In fact, we interviewed respondents who claimed to not know anyone in the neighbourhood, not have tangible connections to people or organisations, and who struggled to run their businesses on their own. As of the writing of this paper, most if not all of these stores are now shut down.

One was Linda’s Bike and Toy Store, started by a Puerto Rican woman from downtown. She acknowledged that her biggest struggle was getting people to come into the store and that she sometimes generated interest by getting out into the strip and talking with residents and other owners. Another was Town Furniture, owned by an Indian man from Queens who, as he was preparing to close down, said, “I learned later that food was the best neighborhood business option here” and that “furniture wasn’t a great idea”. He said this despite the fact that many residents opine about the redundant food selections.

Two additional cases demonstrate the struggles associated with under-embeddedness by people whose business ideas were quite sound. Avenue Apparel seemingly catered to young men and some women in the neighbourhood. The owner grew up in a nearby suburb and said that he chose The Strip because of the high degree of foot traffic. He did not know anyone in the area and sought out the location on his own via news ads. He also took a very isolated approach to running the business, which could be related to the fact that a business partner bailed three months into the venture. Like the toy shop, he said getting people to be familiar and comfortable with him and the store was one of his biggest challenges.

Avenue did try to make some adjustments to match the neighbourhood spending patterns. As he put it, he tried by “adapting to the customers needs, listening to the customers demands for more affordable clothing, and introducing lower priced brands to the store to cater to customers who can no longer spend $100 on clothing…” But, he claimed to have virtually no affiliations with other owners or community organisations and this proved to work against him most when he started having problems with the landlord over a robbery in which the landlord seemed to accuse him of being part of the operation. Ultimately, he claimed to want to be more involved with the community but was not sure how to go about it.

Another peculiar case of under-embeddedness was Hearty and Healthy’s owner Don, who took over the spot as an outsider saying that he wanted to provide a healthier alternative to fast food and the overwhelming number of pizza places. But the small semi-health conscious restaurant might have been a bit ahead of its time leading to added detachment. It was decorated like something from a chic neighbourhood with exposed brick walls, aluminium flashing, and track lighting. The menu had things like burgers,
fries and an Atkins plate that seemed to fit the mix of old and new in the area. But Don was not from the area and immediately felt a disconnect. When asked about setting up shop on the avenue, he seemed to have shifted his focus saying that his interest “wasn’t really in the area, but that he saw this shop as a base to serve other sections of the city”. “I didn’t care about the neighborhood, I cared about the business…” he said. “So I’m using this as a launching pad for Hoboken, Downtown, and Journal Square”. This theme was reinforced later when we asked again about neighbourhood dynamics and he reasserted his outsider-ness: “I don’t know it well enough…I’m from Downtown”. While he did say that his partner was helpful in getting started and could help if needed, he also suggested that he was running the business alone. He said it was a challenge finding good help. In fact, at one point he had to shut down and take a break. “I got really tired because I had to do too much by myself”. And he flirted with getting into CABID and other neighbourhood organisations, but ultimately seemed to be involved with downtown instead of the avenue. And ultimately, his relationship to the neighbourhood seemed to be one of disdain. When asked what he might suggest to anyone else thinking about opening a business in the neighbourhood, he said:

“Think long and hard about it because it’s very challenging with these people… If you’re gonna’ depend on these people you’re gonna starve, unless you’re gonna do something really dirt cheap you’re gonna starve…you have to have a bigger business plan or model than that.”

Don might be right thus far, but his tone and outward focus seem to demonstrate at the very least a disconnect from the immediate neighbourhood that will not change any time soon and that seems to work against him, given other perspectives that food is probably the most lucrative business on the strip. Hearty and Healthy closed in early 2014, as did the toy and bike shop. Avenue Apparel closed for the first time in 2013, but has since tried to reopen in another property on the strip. This time the owner seems to be making a stronger effort to work with local entities, and even hired some workers from the neighbourhood.

4.4 Over-embeddedness

In the context of local micro-business establishment patterns indicating that opportunities tend to emerge out of connectedness and happenstance, a challenge for some owners was being too embedded and without meaningful ties to people and institutions beyond the immediate neighbourhood. Uzzi (1997) outlines many of the issues associated with over-embeddedness, including the absence of new ideas and information, but also vulnerability to internal dynamics of the more tightly knit group such as sudden disruptions that more easily reverberate through all members. On The Strip, it was apparent that many business owners were (and still are) constrained by economic resources, but also from an isolation that manifests in limited new ideas and even demoralisation. This translated into a kind of stagnation that was difficult to disrupt and left owners vulnerable to economic declines and a changing neighbourhood.

Concern for over-embeddedness first emerged when respondents described their pre-ownership experiences and qualifications. When asked, virtually none of the respondents reported doing any kind of research associated with textbook understandings of how to open a business, while most qualified themselves in terms of past experiences and a general reference to common sense. That is, when asked if they studied the
neighbourhood, their particular industry, or made a business plan, most said that it was personal experience that prepared them. While such experiences can be invaluable, especially when garnered from a variety of contexts, it turns out that most experiences were gleaned locally, in the neighbourhood. This has some advantages, but also implies a disconnect from outside resources.

One example of over-embeddedness and the constraints it can place on morale and ideas was Leo’s, a restaurant that doubled as a Cuban breakfast café by day, and an Italian pizza spot by night. The owner of Leo’s seemed to have adopted the multi-purpose strategy that was popular in the neighbourhood long before many of the others. He also owned the building, so he was able to turn two spaces on the first floor into separate dining areas that shared one kitchen. The connection was subtle and not obvious to most.

The owner had lived in the neighbourhood since the early 1970s, when things were rough and people with lesser means could buy an entire building and sustaining it by carving it into multiple units and renting them to other families and businesses. He had a lot of friends in the area, but no real connection to other business owners, neighbourhood organisations such as CABID, City Hall or other professional organisations.

One of the things that stood out about Leo’s was that it looked very worn and non-descript. From the street, it was not clear to many that it was a restaurant: The hours are not posted and an awning hangs low over the window obscuring small bits of signage. When closed, the signs are not lit and the property is too dark inside to make out what it is. Inside, the paint was faded, the linoleum floors were old and scuffed, and since there are no windows, it is dark inside when closed. When it is open, the customers appear to be a small collection of friends from the neighbourhood, creating a cozy, but somewhat stagnant feeling. In fact, while, a few stores were reinvigorating themselves with redone dining rooms, bright signs, new menus and décor, it was common for businesses on the strip to be run down this way.

During one of our visits, the owner of Leo’s talked about a recent decline in business and not knowing what to do about it. He said a lot of his customers had moved away, or passed on. We asked if he had ever worked with the CABID or anyone at City Hall and he said he was not sure how that might work. Ultimately, the owner decided to forego the evening spot so he could rent it out to another business. A few of the newer places turned out to be restaurants located a few doors over from his. That was his best answer under the circumstances.

Another example of over-embeddedness and vulnerability to local dynamics was Dollarama, one of the many dollar stores on the strip. The owner was a 40-something Puerto Rican man who grew up in the neighbourhood and was close with many residents. His interactions tended to be friendly, rarely focusing on business issues; he was known for giving away balloons to neighbourhood kids. And while he did have limited contact with CABID, he reported having no family support, no connections to community groups, city hall or other professional organisations.

Among other things, this meant he had no one to help him run the store, which he claimed affected his ability to do a lot of administrative work, or share new ideas. Also, while other dollar store owners appeared to work in conjunction with ethnic or product niches, Dollarama proceeded outside of such a niche, void of an added connection that some of the other owners of dollar stores and pharmacies were able to exploit. When the economy went bad, this detached position really hurt the store by robbing him of a consistent clientele. Meanwhile, his insider status and connections to neighbourhood residents worked against him because he ended up giving a lot of people necessities on
credit that was never paid back. “Times are tough and people come looking for toothpaste, soap…” Clearly, the decline in customers coupled with excessive lending became too much for Dollarama to handle. In early 2012 Dollarama closed up, while five other dollar stores on the strip remained lucrative and known to pay the best rents on the strip.

4.5 Integrated networks

As we outlined above, studies in economic sociology and the sociology of mobility suggest that any debate between the virtues of strong ties vs. weak ones, or embeddedness vs. arm’s length connections results in somewhat of a false dichotomy and that, in the flow of everyday life, both serve useful functions and often work in tandem (Briggs, 1998; Dominguez and Watkins, 2003; Dominguez, 2011). These works suggest that optimal network has a balance of both that can work together to stabilise, supportive, and empowering empower actors. In this scenario, there is a continuum of logistical, moral and exemplary support that facilitates the pursuit of stability and progress.

One example of how integrated networks function would bring us back to Avenue Pharmacy. As we outlined in the section on how owners come to their businesses, the current owner (Hal) benefited from multiple kinds of connections that work together to create his grounding in multiple communities. He grew up in the neighbourhood and, as a kid, worked for the original owners. During those teen years, the original owners supported Hal in going to pharmacy school; indeed, they provided him with a coherent reference for doing so that most first generation college students do not have. Going to college also connected Hal to broader professional organisations, which is not the case for most owners without this kind of educational experience. And when it came time for the original owners to retire, the Hal benefited from his relations with them and the mutual respect and trust they had developed over the years. The original owners opted for a more sentimental route and sold to Hal, even if it meant a smaller profit margin because H did not necessarily have the means to make the purchase on his own. H also benefited by taking over a unique niche on the strip as a pharmacy specialising in medical supplies that most competitors do not carry.

Another example that demonstrates a similar flow of contiguous support from embeddedness, close support networks and arm’s-length ties was Sara, a local realtor, who had just purchased her business from a long-time employer. After being in the neighbourhood for some time, Sara experienced a chain of events that emanated from her connections to neighbours, family, an art teacher, and a local political official. Prior to working for the real estate office, she had been living in the neighbourhood with her husband and children, working part-time before deciding to pursue a full-time situation, or a second part-time job. Until then, as she described it, she was “living a private life, taking art classes and teaching in the church…” Her art teacher had been encouraging her to get out and volunteer as a way of making more connections in the neighbourhood. One day the art teacher informed her that she was doing an event and asked her to come along to help out. “…I’m going to be doing my show at City Hall…and this year we’re gonna’ present the mayor a self-portrait…why don’t you come help me…” she said.
Once there, the art teacher pointed out a well-known official with whom she had been friends for years: “…she has a real estate business on the strip…why don’t you introduce yourself… You may never see these people again…you may never be in their presence…why don’t you stop being a chicken…it could lead to something…”

Indeed, she got the job. And although she entered with minimal knowledge of the profession, she says the official/owner “taught her the ropes”. The part time led to full time when other secretary had to take care of her son during summer, and then she started managing properties. When it was time for the owner to retire, she wanted to honour her workers and neighbours by doing her best to keep all the employees on board. And through some creative financing that included an extended period to pay, help from her parents, and the electrical knowledge of her husband, Sara was able to make the acquisition.

At this point, Sara says she has been learning how to make [her business] work. She admits it is a ‘team effort’ (her words), but also it is clear that local connections continue to be a part of the process. For example, when money got tight, she stumbled into an opportunity for a tax reassessment that lowered her property taxes. Apparently, all owners can apply for this break, but few seem to know about it or pursue it. In Sara’s case, she was at work one day when a local accountant-friend passed by to say hello. The accountant mentioned that he was working on another stores application for reassessment, prompting her to inquire about her own chances at doing the same. Eventually, she did and ended up saving a good chunk of money. She also claims to have made use of other resources such as bank loans and internet advertising.

Sara told us that she currently participates in local festivals and was affiliated with and even served as a board member to multiple organisations in the neighbourhood. She’s also been able to rely on income from a second home she stumbled into, as well: A former neighbour wanted her to buy his apartment, though she initially refused for lack of resources to do so. When the apartment owner became to ill to live alone, his relatives found Sara’s information on a piece of paper under a lamp with strict instructions to make the sale to her possible. In order to abide by the apartment owner’s wishes, the family sold it well below market value. Again, sentimental sale that then gave her more capital to buy the business including the building. And this apartment has become an important source of capital to maintain the business.

5 Discussion, conclusions and recommendations

This research set out to understand the dynamics of micro-businesses in an economically struggling, but still vibrant, evolving neighbourhood that relies on local shops for employment and the unique services they provide. Following other recent works in sociology and business, we focused on how embeddedness, social capital and networks shape how owners come to their business and their capacity to stay afloat. This is not to disregard classical economics or assert that actors do not often operate in a manner that is consistent with trying to maximise returns. However, going back to Weber, Granovetter and contemporary scholars expanding on their work, we see that opportunities are very much shaped by context, and that what it means to pursue interests is not universal, and that social relationships can affect the process.

The results tell us much about the relationship between micro-business entrepreneurial activity and the context in which it occurs. In this particular case, it tells
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us something about how the old neighbourhood can remain on the strip, even as the transition sets in. Embeddedness is an important factor in determining how business opportunities become available to people. Furthermore, embeddedness is not a uniform concept, and the kinds of capital and constraints that derived from connections degrees of embeddedness. In general, embeddedness is helpful in that it resolves the matter of entre
to the community and insider awareness. Such connections can also provide immediate mechanisms of support and modelling. Even entrepreneurs who have more monetary resources are vulnerable to not having on the ground support that translates into logistical support running the business, client relations and awareness, or insider strategies that keep folks afloat in this quirky collage of businesses. But it is also possible to be over-embedded – that is, so entrenched in local networks that one becomes vulnerable to sudden changes, or is cut off from the external world of possibilities, whether it be information on a tax reduction, ideas on how to improve business (including décor), or how to get financial help.

The research here also makes a theoretical contribution by advancing ideas that many have speculated in the sociology of business, or demonstrated in other types of economic behaviour and social mobility. The most recent studies propose that different kinds of connections and network arrangements can work in tandem. Strong ties and embeddedness can provide immediate forms of support for doing business or just getting through the day, while bridges that usually, though not always, come in the form of arm’s length, or weak ties add diversity and new information.

Other researchers have written about the dynamics between entrepreneurship, community, and the impact on community well-being. Some of these works focus on entrepreneurs as outsiders and the ways they become embedded into a community quite literally as part of the business strategy. The subjects generally appear to be middle and upper middle class people making career moves, for whom becoming part of the community is part of a more privileged process. By contrast, most of our respondents begin in the community and even are there prior to opening their businesses, often with little or no resources and less formal education. While there may be some business advantages to their insider statuses, what is unique here is the web of constraints under which most of our respondents are operating and how being limited to this particular neighbourhood appears to be an extension of those constraints for many of our respondents. Here the nature and impact of embeddedness for many of the owners was not about making a conscious choice to be involved in the community as part of a business strategy, but about opportunities that happen within a limited social and economic world. In that sense, this process represents both something more social structural on two bases: One is about maintaining effectual connections to the communities they were already submerged in, but also it is a clear outcome of structural limitations. Hence, they begin this journey from a position of less privilege and mobility.

Our initial conclusion is that while there are many blighted urban spaces in the USA that could benefit from economic development and an influx of new businesses, the reality is that there are probably more communities that look like The Strip. That is, they are not necessarily filled with contemporary versions of all the amenities all residents would like, but that there are important shops that sustain a portion of the neighbourhood. Moreover, not supporting these existing businesses could lead to community disruption and the displacement of vulnerable residents. Hence, we think it is important to use the insights here to propose a set of interventions.
5.1 Recommendations

As the study’s findings point out, the degree to which small business owners are embedded through social ties to the communities in which they are located can contribute to the starting of a business and its success over time. But these processes are not without limitations. Thus, community organisations and social policy that support economic development and business could take these findings into account and create programming that:

1. Promote micro-business as an economic strategy for community residents, reinforced with greater business knowledge and mechanisms of support, even for those who come to their opportunities through happenstance. This includes neighbourhood internships and employment for youth who might consider opening their own neighbourhood business, or taking over an existing one. As the example of Avenue Pharmacy shows, access, experience and reinforcement can translate into broader imagined opportunities.

2. Promote events that foster greater connections between owners, other businesses and community organisations that can provide information and access to resources, markets and other mechanisms of support. These events should consider the day-to-day constraints of micro-business owners, including language and other cultural barriers.

3. Promote events that foster greater connection between owners and city government, especially offices that can provide direct support to businesses.

4. Promote events that foster greater connections between businesses and professional organisations.

5. While the concept of social and cultural embeddedness is not commonly covered in business training and education, it is worthwhile to explore how to conceptualise our findings regarding embeddedness as a practical tool for owners and managers to use to evaluate their current status and address any imbalance that may be hindering business performance.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the Saint Peter’s University/US Department of Education Title V Grant administrators for supporting our summer research program and the following student team members for their contributions to this work: Giancarlo Antigua, Karla Flores, Yeimy Fuentes, Joshua Gochiz, Alberto Groves, Julio Herrera, Katherine Jimenez, Karla Mendez, Jonathan Pitre, Clint Sevilla, and Alexander Torres.

References

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Notes

1 All respondent and business names are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.