



The influence of inmate visitation on the decision to grant parole: An exploratory study☆



E. Rely Vîlcică

Temple University, Department of Criminal Justice, 556 Gladfelter Hall, 5th Floor, 1115 W. Polett Walk, Philadelphia, PA 19122, United States

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies highlight the positive influence that visitation of inmates can have on in-prison and post-release behavior. Less is known, however, about the effect that visitation has on the decision to release inmates *via* discretionary parole.

Purpose: This study fills in this gap. It addresses the question of whether visitation of inmates influences parole decision outcomes (denial or granting of release). The study adds both to the literature on parole decisionmaking and on prison visitation.

Methods: The study relies on a recent 1000+ random sample of parole decisions from Pennsylvania. The analyses test for effects of various measures of prison visitation, including visitation intensity, visitor pool size, and visitor type, after controlling for other determinants of parole decisions.

Results: Inmate visitation contributes strongly to explaining variation in parole decisions. Inmates who receive any visit are almost three times more likely to be released compared with their non-visited counterparts. There is also variation in impacts based on the number and type of visitors.

Conclusions: The findings, while suggestive of decisionmakers attuned to empirical research on reentry, also raise serious questions about the fairness of the parole decisionmaking process, especially when considering that the majority of inmates are never visited.

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Introduction

The decades-long mass incarceration in the US, with its wide implications for American communities (Alexander, 2010; Barker, 2011; Clear, 2007; Clear & Frost, 2013; Lynch & Sabol, 2004; Petersilia, 2003, 2008; Uggen, Behrens, & Manza, 2005; Useem & Piehl, 2008), has prompted a great deal of thinking and innovation focusing on prisoner reentry and reintegration (e.g., Berg & Huebner, 2011; Gunnison & Helfgott, 2011; Maruna & Immarigeon, 2004; Naser & Vigne, 2006; Petersilia, 2003; Thompson, 2008; Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001; Vishner & Travis, 2003). At the same time, the large volume of returning prisoners (more than 630,000 in 2012, see Carson, 2014) and their high rate of return to incarceration (40 to 60% within three years, see Langan & Levin, 2002; PEW Center on the States, 2011) have led to reexamination of parole and other versions of supervised release in order to develop improved capacity for supporting and supervising those released (Campbell, 2008; Grattet, Petersilia, & Lin, 2008; Travis & Lawrence, 2002). Further, these and related challenges facing corrections and parole systems have been exacerbated by the recent dramatic economic recession, forcing serious consideration of the fiscal sustainability and

implications of large-scale incarceration in contrast to community corrections alternatives (McGarry, 2010; Scott-Hayward, 2009; Stephan, 2004). Thus, although the issues surrounding prisoner reentry and public safety have been at the heart of correctional and parole strategies for decades (e.g., Glaser, 1964; Ohlin, 1951) most recently they have taken on added urgency in American jurisdictions, with a renewed emphasis for policymakers to devise approaches that promote successful reintegration of individuals released from prisons and prevent their return to incarceration.

In this vein, one area of research that is receiving increasing attention in the reentry literature is the influence that family ties and other social bonds can have on the reintegration process of the recently released individuals (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Cobbina, Huebner, & Berg, 2012; Cochran, 2014; Naser & Vigne, 2006; Taylor, 2015; Vishner & Travis, 2003; Vishner, 2013; Wallace et al., 2014). In particular, scholars have emphasized the salience of maintaining such ties during the incarceration period and the generally positive effect that visitation of inmates—as the main means by which incarcerated individuals can maintain social ties outside of the prison walls—can have both on in-prison behavior and subsequent reentry outcomes. Thus, prison visitation¹ has been linked with less institutional misconduct (Cochran, 2012; Jiang & Winfree, 2006; Lahm, 2008; Monahan, Goldweber, & Cauffman, 2011; Siennick, Mears, & Bales, 2013), lower likelihood of recidivism (Bales & Mears, 2008; Barrick, Lattimore, &

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E-mail address: rvilcica@temple.edu.

Visher, 2014; Berg & Huebner, 2011; Cobbina et al., 2012; Cochran, 2014; Duwe & Clark, 2013), as well as positive influences on other [re]-adjustment outcomes, including inmate psychological well-being (Wooldredge, 1999) and their personal relationships (La Vigne, Naser, Brooks, & Castro, 2005; Visher, 2013). There are, to be certain, exceptions, with some studies reporting either null effects or negative influences (Casey-Acevedo, Bakken, & Karle, 2004; Hensley, Koscheski, & Tewksbury, 2002; Wallace et al., 2014). But by and large the main theme emerging from the recent investigations of prison visitation effects is consistent with the conventional wisdom that maintaining social bonds, especially family ties, is important for both in-prison and post-release experiences (Ohlin, 1954; Glaser, 1964).

Given this growing body of work and the policy implications and recommendations it suggests—*i.e.*, that correctional policies adjust to better facilitate prison visitation in order to improve both prison social order and the chances of successful prisoner reentry—it is surprising that this line of inquiry into visitation of inmates has not expanded into studies of the decision to grant release from prison (aka the parole decision). No study was found that investigated the influence that prison visitation may have on the decision to grant or deny release, a decision that arguably should consider factors known or thought to be associated with offender rehabilitation and successful reintegration. Indeed, considering the broader reentry literature it is intriguing that very little contemporary research investigates the parole decisionmaking process itself, prison visitation effects aside. A review of the inquiries into the nature of the parole decisionmaking process and the determinants of the parole decision identified only a handful of studies in the past few years: a couple focused on testing for influences of demographics as extra-legal factors, such as race or ethnicity (Huebner & Bynum, 2008; Morgan & Smith, 2008); another study looked at the effect of inmates' mental health status (Matejkowski, Caplan, & Wiesel Cullen, 2010), while the remainder analyzed the role of victim input in parole hearings (Caplan, 2011; Morgan & Smith, 2005; Roberts, 2009). A separate line of inquiry, again with only a handful of studies, has looked into a related but different decision, that to revoke parole (Jones & Kerbs, 2007; Lin, Grattet, & Petersilia, 2010; Steen & Opsal, 2007; Travis, 2007).

The current study fills in this gap in the literature on both parole decisionmaking and prison visitation. The study examines recent parole decisions drawing on a random sample of more than 1000 cases from Pennsylvania and seeks to determine whether various measures of visitation of inmates have an impact on the parole decision above and beyond other parole determinants ostensibly related to the achievement of crime prevention and successful reentry (the decision's main goals). Although exploratory, by drawing on available research on prison visitation effects on offender behavior, the study tests for impacts of several dimensions of prison visitation on the decision to grant release, including visitation intensity, the size and nature of the pool of visitors, and the type of relationships between inmates and visitors. As for the rationale underlying the expectation that prison visitation affects parole decisions, the study draws on the extant theoretical work on decisionmaking in criminal justice, especially the focal concerns perspective, most prevalent in research on punishment-related decisions.

Before proceeding to the discussion of the study hypotheses the article discusses the nature of the parole decision and its critical role for the reentry process.

The parole decision: its nature and implications for reentry

The parole decision—the decision to grant conditional release from a prison sentence before the expiration of the maximum term, to be completed under supervision in the community—is one of the most critical liberty decisions in criminal justice. It has great implications for the parole candidate, the public, and the criminal justice system alike. To start with, the decision carries serious life-altering consequences for the individual freedom of those incarcerated individuals eligible for parole and

their families. Although individuals who are granted parole will continue to be for a certain period under the supervision of the justice system in the community, for most parole-eligible candidates, gaining their freedom from prison confinement will most likely be seen as worthy of the strings attached upon release. Candidates denied release, despite having earned eligibility to sit for parole (by serving the minimum time), face instead the consequences of having to spend more time in prison, contemplation that can dash hopes for later release, which in turn can influence negatively subsequent institutional behavior (Marquez-Lewis et al., 2013; West-Smith, Pogrebin, & Poole, 2000). On the other hand, the decision's high stakes include the safety of the communities in which prospective parolees would be released. If recently released individuals commit more crimes while under supervision then questions arise about the system's ability to control crime through community corrections. Lastly, when balanced against the reality of limited budgets, the parole decisions and related release practices have significant resource implications: for prison capacity, community supervision, and reentry services (McGarry, 2010; Scott-Hayward, 2009).

Although several US jurisdictions including the federal system rely on mandatory release mechanisms (Hughes, Wilson, & Beck, 2001), the parole decision, as the traditional method of release, continues to affect a sizable proportion of incarcerated individuals nationwide, currently significantly surpassing mandatory releases (Maruschak & Bonczar, 2013; Herberman & Bonczar, 2014). Yet the parole decision itself has received little scrutiny in the recent literature. As an increasing number of discretionary parole jurisdictions have introduced the right for the victims or their families to participate directly in the parole hearing process (Caplan, 2011; Roberts, 2009), the most recent investigations have focused on assessing the impact of such policies, and specifically of victim input, on parole decisions (Caplan, 2011; Morgan & Smith, 2005; Roberts, 2009). Arguably, these policies, couched under concerns for retributive justice and the desire to ensure accountability to victims, may conflict with the reentry narrative that emphasizes the need for offender rehabilitation and reintegration. In this regard, the current study is particularly timely, as it investigates themes that have been shown to be associated with successful reentry (*i.e.*, prison visitation), by looking into whether such themes equally affect parole decisionmakers tasked with the prison release decisions, after controlling for other factors shown to predict them.

To summarize, the parole decision is a critical precursor to the reentry process in those jurisdictions retaining parole. In authorizing the release of incarcerated offenders on parole, the decision predicts that once released, given appropriate supervision conditions and support services, the parolee will not engage in future crime, at least not for the duration of the parole supervision. Thus, the parole decision sets the terms of the experience that an individual's reentry into society represents both for the parolee and the community. In those jurisdictions, such as Pennsylvania, that continue to rely on parole—because of continued reliance on indeterminate sentencing or a combination of determinate and indeterminate sentencing—the parole decision remains a highly discretionary decision, with important implications for the inmates, prison, and community alike. An inquiry into the determinants of the parole decision with a focus on how prison visitation, a major contributor to successful reintegration, affects it, if at all, seems warranted at this time.

Prison visitation research, parole decisionmaking research, and the current study

Prison visitation research

A growing body of research documents the importance of prison visitation in understanding institutional behavior (Casey-Acevedo et al., 2004; Cochran, 2012; Hensley et al., 2002; Jiang & Winfree, 2006; Lahm, 2008; Monahan et al., 2011; Siennick et al., 2013) and reoffending upon release (Bales & Mears, 2008; Barrick et al., 2014; Berg & Huebner,

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