



## Discussion

# The benefits and challenges of visitation practices in correctional settings: Will video visitation assist incarcerated fathers and their children?

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## ABSTRACT

Increased incarceration over the last thirty years has dismantled family structures, leaving many low-income African-American fathers physically separated from their children. Jails, in particular, serve as the gateway to imprisonment, holding one-third of the adult incarcerated population, and have grown nearly as rapidly as the state prison population. As the gateway to imprisonment, jails can serve a crucial role in facilitating or impeding communication among fathers and their children if facilities' visitation policies and practices are family-focused. In this article, we find that early and frequent visitation benefits incarcerated fathers (e.g. fathers' role identity, reduced misconduct, and positive reentry outcomes) and their children (e.g. maintain familial structure, family reunification, and reduced trauma from separation). We discuss that visitation policies vary across facility types and within states. Additionally, we find that family-focused visitation practices are diminishing and that a new form of visitation through video technology has emerged, which is often less-regulated in jails. Finally, we conclude with existing and proposed policy implications at the local, state, and federal levels.

## 1. Introduction

Nationally, the rate of incarceration has quintupled over the last forty years from 500,000 to 2.2 million adult prisoners (The Sentencing Project, 2015). For African American males between 17 and 34 years old, time spent in prison exceeds any involvement in military service or advancement towards college degree for this same population (Petit & Western, 2004). Jails, in particular, serve as the gateway to imprisonment, holding one-third of the adult incarcerated population, and have grown nearly as rapidly as the state prison population (Pierce, Freiburger, Chapin, Epling, & Madden, 2018; Travis, Western, & Redburn, 2014). As the gateway to imprisonment, jails can serve a crucial role in facilitating or impeding communication among incarcerated fathers and their families. This point is salient, as the majority of inmates are parents of minor children. In fact, in 2007, 1.7 million children had an incarcerated parent in state or federal prison in the United States (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). And, more than three-fifths of fathers who are incarcerated with children younger than age 6 lived with their parents prior to imprisonment (Geller, 2013).

Infrequent physical contact and engagement of fathers' triggered by incarceration perpetuates social and economic disadvantage among their children (Wakefield, 2015; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2011). The disparity in incarceration rates among African American fathers and

their children is well-documented (Brown, Bell, & Patterson, 2016; Browning, Miller, & Spruance, 2001; Cooper, 2013; Keefe et al., 2017), as one in four African American children born in 1990 had a parent who experienced incarceration by the time they reached adolescence (Roettger & Swisher, 2011; Wildeman, 2009). The effects of incarceration can be even more damaging for young children separated from their parents at a time when child-parenting attachment is most critical (Fasah, 2018; Geller, Cooper, Garfinkel, Schwartz-Soicher, & Mincy, 2012; Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). Parental incarceration has been identified as one of nine adverse childhood experiences (or ACEs), which are often interrelated and traumatizing for youth (Baglivio & Epps, 2016). Visitation could assist in maintaining the familial structure (Fasah, 2018). For parents who are incarcerated, visitation may serve as a fundamental social support function, in the short-term, by reducing isolation among incarcerated parents (Bales & Mears, 2008; Christian, 2005; Duwe & Clark, 2013; Jiang & Winfree, 2006), re-acclimating them with their parental identity (Greif, 2014; Kazura, 2001), while, reunifying children with their parents (D'Andrade & Valdez, 2012; Hairston, 1988).

Visitation also comes in various forms and dimensions (Cochran & Mears, 2013). While most forms of visitation are known to enhance social ties among those who are detained and their support systems (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Cochran, 2012; Duwe & Clark, 2013), people

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may experience the incarceration of a loved one differently due to strain it places on some relationships (Browning et al., 2001; Cochran & Mears, 2013; Massoglia, Remster, & King, 2012; Ross & Richards, 2009; Siennick, Stewart, & Staff, 2014). Continuing with the theme of longer-term effects of visitation, some research suggests that it reduces recidivism (Bales & Mears, 2008; Cochran & Mears, 2013) and institutional-based misconduct (Pierce et al., 2018). It can also serve as a vital tool to facilitate successful reentry from correctional setting to the community (Bales & Mears, 2008; Berg & Huebner, 2011; Visser & O'Connell, 2012; Wolff & Draine, 2004). While we acknowledge these important findings within existing research, the purpose of this manuscript is to draw attention to a fairly new form of visitation that has generated healthy debate regarding ways to connect incarcerated people with their loved ones (Hoihan & Potlock, 2014; Rabuy & Wagner, 2015). Specifically, visitation through video technology has emerged over the past few years as the latest form of contact in prisons and jails. Herein, we highlight current research related to correctional institution-based visitation, in general in preparation for the implications of visitation policies within local jails—namely video visitation. In so doing, we discuss the impact of visitation on families, incarcerated individuals, and correctional facilities.

## 2. Literature review

Existing literature brings about several themes related to visitation among incarcerated parents. First, the practice of visitation seems to provide mutual benefits to both incarcerated parents and their families, which strengthen familial bonds. Second, although there are benefits related to visitation, relational, institutional, and financial barriers exist, which often reduce the likelihood or preclude visits from taking place. Third, we noticed that most data on visitation focuses on prisons and less attention is dedicated to jail visitation policies. Fourth, the advent of new visitation technology appear to create both benefits and challenges for families attempting to maintain social bonds. We find that though literature on this latter point is emergent, additional research is needed to fully understand its implications for those who are incarcerated and their families.

## 3. Maintaining social bonds and reducing misconduct among incarcerated parents

Strong social bonds facilitate an important self-control function (Hirschi, 2004). As such, visits from the family of inmates reduces subsequent recidivism conjecturing that criminogenic behavior may be neutralized through social bonds (Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998), through familial social supports and resources (i.e. accessing housing and obtaining employment), while fulfilling a social control function (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Hairston, 1988).

Maintaining family bonds and social support while incarcerated is critical, as it impacts inmate behavior within the correctional facility and is critical to reducing recidivism following release. For example, one study found that visits from family members (e.g. siblings, in-laws, and other relatives) matter the most when it comes to reducing recidivism (Duwe & Clark, 2013). Visitation is also associated with reductions in various forms of misconduct. For example, Benning and Lahm (2014) study of detainees in state and correctional facilities found that contacts with children, in the form of face-to-face visits, mail, and telephone calls, affected inmate behavior. They found that face-to-face visits from children reduced write ups for misconduct for both male and female detainees, while sending or receiving mail from children significantly increased the odds of misconduct for female inmates (though mail had no significant effect on male detainees' misconduct).

Relatedly, Mears, Cochran, Siennick, and Bales (2012) found visitation caused small to modest effects in reducing recidivism; particularly, if they are visited early during the incarceration process and receive visits more frequently (Cochran, 2013). Earlier research indicated

that visits do appear to improve inmates' post-release family relationships (La Vigne, Naser, Brooks, & Castro, 2005) and offer in inmates, perhaps, the “only face-to-face opportunities they have to preserve or restore relationships that have been severed by imprisonment” (Maruna & Toch, 2005). Bales and Mears (2008) analyses suggests that visitation could delay reincarceration, and seminal research on this topic suggested that higher frequency of visits from spouses is even more effective at also delaying criminal behavior (Adams & Fischer, 1976). Of note, empirical evidence remains mixed, as to the extent which inmate visitation is a vehicle to reduce recidivism. For example, recent research has found that visitation did not influence minor infractions among those who are incarcerated, but did significantly influenced their participation in incidences of serious misconduct (Pierce et al., 2018). Despite mixed results related to visitation and recidivism, from families' perspective, visitation provides moral support to their incarcerated family member and offsets the negative psychological effects of carceral life (Christian, 2005).

## 4. Incarceration and visitation: Their effects on incarcerated parents and their families

The extant literature explores the impact of visitation on incarcerated individuals and their family members (Braman, 2004; Christian & Kennedy, 2011; Christian, Mellow, & Thomas, 2006; Comfort, 2008). Physical contact visits have been known to influence detainees' behavior. For example, D'Alessio, Flexon, and Stolzenberg (2013) found that sexual violence rates are substantially lower in states that allow conjugal visitation relative to states that do not, suggesting that conjugal visits can be a means to attenuate sexual violence in prison. These private and extended visits are not just about romantic relationships, they are family visits and children are also allowed to participate (Goldstein, 2015). Most importantly, many family-friendly and flexible visitation practices are becoming less prevalent in state prisons than they were twenty years with only four states (i.e. California, Connecticut, New York, and Washington) offering private, extended visits to children and families (Goldstein, 2015). Major family adjustments occur when families experience the incarceration of a household member (Arditti, 2005). Demonstrably, the wives or partners of prisoners often rearrange their lives to cope with the imprisonment of their partner (Comfort, 2008). Individuals who commit low-level offenses often cycle in and out of jail, leaving minimal time for their family members emotionally recuperate and rebuild or financial resources. Generally a constructive and supportive experience, there are instances when visitation is not necessarily appropriate. For example, at times, visits may actually result in stress and emotional strain for some incarcerated parents (Dixey & Woodall, 2012; Liu, Pickett, & Baker, 2014) – leading to incarcerated individuals withdrawing from their families (Owen, 1998; Schmid & Jones, 1993). Liu et al. (2014) explained that visits from significant others could result in internalizing feelings of distress and despair, as well as externalizing behaviors resulting in misconduct. Similarly, a study by Siennick, Mears, and Bales (2013) found that misconduct decreased preceding a visit, but increased immediately following. Their study suggested that although a visit may have initial benefits, separation increased strain and can produce negative behaviors among inmates.

Similar to Liu et al.'s (2014) study, Dixey and Woodall (2012) found that while most inmates perceived the visit to be positive, several inmates in their study in England opted out of visits, as they believed that not having visits would better help them cope with serving their time and even more deterred their children from visiting. Additionally, for some inmates the centrality and perceptions of visitation may vacillate through the duration of incarceration (Adams, 1992; Cochran & Mears, 2013; Visser & O'Connell, 2012). Such findings suggests that further research is needed to examine varied visitation experiences.

However, there are a myriad of reasons why visitation is often not possible for some families due to financial difficulties of traveling long

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