

The Changing Nature of Correctional Visitation

Can Video Visitation Provide the Same Benefits as In-Person Visits?

By Eric Martin

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visitation may overcome some of those barriers, and the goals of the Vera study.

Visits have been shown to also reduce recidivism at an estimated reduction of around 3.5 percent per visit.³ As inmates are released from prison, family contacts tend to provide the greatest source of support for the inmate,⁴ and as indicated by Cochran, a visit during the incarceration period can be used to keep those relationships strong and reduce recidivism.

Benefits of Visitation

Custodial Behavior and Recidivism

Research by Joshua Cochran² has shown that inmates who received consistent visits throughout their incarcerations had fewer instances of misconduct when compared to inmates who received no visits or only had visits early in their incarcerations. Cochran also found that when an inmate received regular visits, the probability of that inmate never having a violation increased by around 8 percent. These findings indicate that visits can benefit both the inmate and the correctional staff by producing a lowered rate of violations for the inmate, which could lead to early parole, thus saving on correctional costs while creating a less disruptive environment for correctional staff.

Strengthening Familial Bonds

Frequent visits benefit the inmates' families and friends as well. Children whose parents have been incarcerated often exhibit emotional and mental problems, including school disciplinary problems.⁵ Visitation is one of the few options caregivers have to try to lessen the impact of parental incarceration. Melinda Tasca's research found that when the inmate had a positive relationship with the child prior to incarceration, frequent visits produced better behavior in school and at home for some children.⁶ Tasca's research also found

Video-visitation technology has the promise to expand inmates' access to and frequency of visits with family and friends during the incarceration period, and research has shown such visits to be beneficial in several respects. Although many states and counties are implementing video-visitation technology at their facilities, there is little evidence of this technology's effectiveness in replicating an in-person visit. To address this research deficit, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) has funded the Vera Institute of Justice to study the potential of this technology in replicating a conventional, in-facility visit; its impact on the facility, inmates, and their families; and the implementation issues and cost of deploying this technology.¹ This article will discuss evidence-based findings on correctional visitations regarding the benefits, the common barriers, how video

that primary caregivers, such as mothers and grandmothers, use visits to maintain a strong relationship between an inmate and child so that the inmate will resume his or her care of the child when they reenter the community.

Barriers to Visiting

Distance

Although there is a strong desire to keep the inmate connected to the family, not all family members can make visits. Tasca also found that while mothers often tackled long distances to visit an incarcerated father, grandmothers usually could not endure such long trips to visit an incarcerated mother. Travel to the facility can become even more problematic if the family has to rely on public transportation. Moreover, if distance inhibits frequent visits, this may translate into greater misconduct, on average, for those inmates who experience only sporadic visits as was pointed out earlier in Cochran's research. Cochran called for future research to examine the role of distance in inhibiting visits.

Stigma of Entering the Facility

The stigma of entering the facility and waiting to be processed through security can be difficult and confusing for the children and caregivers of children with incarcerated parents. As stated above, these caregivers have a vested interest in encouraging contact between the child and their incarcerated parent, but to do this means exposing the child to the difficulty and unease of entering the correctional facility.

However, Tasca's research found that not all children reacted to the visits the same. Instead, the child's reaction largely



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depended on the strength of the relationship between the parent and child prior to incarceration. If the relationship was weak and the parent was not a part of the child's life prior to incarceration, then the impact on the child was likely to be extremely negative. Thus, in such cases, using in-facility visitation as a way to strengthen the bonds between an incarcerated parent and the child would likely not be productive. Given that around two-thirds of the children in Tasca's sample did not report a strong relationship with the incarcerated parent, this may further act to inhibit visits if the child exhibits negative behaviors after the visit. The difficulties surrounding visiting with a child may depress a large number of visits, given that over half of all inmates incarcerated in state facilities and around two-thirds of all federal

inmates have a dependent child.⁷ This signals that there is a need to develop and test for effective alternative forms of visitation, such as video visitation.

Potential for Video Visiting

Video visitation may have the ability to lower the impact of the two barriers discussed above — travel hardships and stigma of the facility — on the frequency of visits. If the video visit can effectively mimic an in-person visit in the correctional facility, inmates, their family and friends, and the facility will be able to experience the same benefits of a visit without the cost of travel time and the stress of being processed into the facility. If proven to be cost-effective, video

visitation could increase visits for all inmates and ultimately, according to Cochran, reduce inmate violations, create better inmate-child relationships, and possibly reduce tensions in the facility. Conversely, if the video visits are not qualitatively similar, correctional facilities run the risk of frustrating the inmate by decreasing quality contact, which may in turn increase misconduct.

Vera Institute of Justice Study

It is important to understand the quality of performance and costs of video visitation technology so correctional practitioners and policymakers can make informed decisions about adopting or expanding this technology and providing it as an additional option or alternative to in-facility visits. To help address these issues, NIJ funded the Vera Institute to study the experience of the Washington State Department of Corrections as they implemented the technology statewide.

The Vera Institute is systematically investigating the effectiveness of this technology in four separate studies. In the first study, Vera will track the implementation of video visitation technology by interviewing correctional staff and administrators, and reviewing policy documents to determine the implementation challenges and staffing and resource costs of deploying this technology. Vera will also conduct an outcome study to determine the difference, if any, between video visits and in-person visits. It will interview inmates who have access to the technology and their families who visit them. Additionally, Vera will conduct an impact study to analyze the effect that access and use of the technology has on inmate conduct. Finally, Vera will conduct a cost-effectiveness study using the outcomes

from the previous studies to determine if the technology is more cost-effective than in-person visits.

While the final results of the study are not expected until December 2016, Vera has received mixed reactions to the technology through qualitative open-ended interviews with inmates. Some were unsatisfied with the audio and visual quality of the visit to the extent that they did not want to continue using the technology. Other inmates stated that it provided the only viable option to see their loved ones, so despite the difficulties with the technology, they expected to continue to use the service.⁸ Given the relationship between frequency and quality of visits and misconduct, a clear understanding of the quality of this technology and inmates' satisfaction with it is critical.

Conclusion

Video visitation holds the potential to greatly expand inmates' access to visits from their families and friends. NIJ has funded the Vera Institute to test the effectiveness of this technology in providing frequent and quality visits. This study will also help contribute to

the theoretical understanding of how access to quality visits may help decrease inmates' misconduct; strengthen ties between the inmates and their friends and family, especially dependent children; and lead to reduced recidivism.

ENDNOTES

¹ NIJ funded Vera to conduct an evaluation of video visitation in 2012 under grant number 2012-IJ-CX-0035, entitled "A New Role for Technology: The Impact of Video Visitation on Corrections Staff, Inmates, and Their Families." The study is ongoing and is expected to finish in December 2016.

² Cochran, J. 2012. The ties that bind or the ties that break: Examining the relationship between visitation and prisoner misconduct. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 40(5):433-448. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

³ Bales, W. and D. Mears. 2008. Inmate social ties and the transition to society: Does visitation reduce recidivism? *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 45(3):287-321. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

⁴ Visher, C. and S. Courtney. 2007. *One year out: Experiences of prisoners returning to Cleveland*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.

⁵ Miller, K. 2006. The impact of parental incarceration on children: An emerging need for effective interventions. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 23(4):472-486. New York: Springer US.

⁶ Tasca, M. 2014. *It's not all cupcakes and lollipops: An investigation of predictors and effects of prison visitation for children during maternal and parental incarceration*. Tempe, Arizona: Arizona State University.

⁷ Glaze, L. and L. Maruschak. 2010. *Special Report: Parents in prison and their minor children*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

⁸ This information was gathered from email correspondence with the Vera Institute's principal investigator, Leon Digard, on Apr. 12, 2016.



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