

Dissecting the Issue of Child Prison Visitation

By Eric Martin and Doris Wells

Authors' Note: *Opinions or points of view expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.*

A substantial number of children in the U.S. experience negative effects from having a parent who is incarcerated. These effects range from mental and emotional problems to difficulty in school, substance abuse and even criminal activity.¹ Promising results of prior research have shown that having children visit their incarcerated parent, despite the stigma or unpleasant atmosphere of the correctional setting, may be one way to help alleviate negative effects on children. The research is not clear, however, whether prison visitation works for all children and if the benefits of contact with an incarcerated parent outweigh the challenges of the visit. To gain further insight on the issue, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) recently funded an Arizona State University doctoral research study by Melinda Tasca, *It's Not all Cupcakes and Lollipops: An Investigation of the Predictors and Effects of Prison Visitation for Children During Maternal and Paternal Incarceration*.² Tasca's study dissected child prison visitation: who visits, why they visit and how the visits impact children. Findings show that mothers and grandmothers are the main facilitators of child prison visitations and that

prison visitations have harmful but also beneficial effects, depending largely on the strength of the parent-child relationship prior to incarceration.

The Study

The goal of the study was to explore the reasons why certain children, unlike other children, visit their incarcerated parents and what factors determine a positive or negative impact for the child. The study was based on surveys of 600 incarcerated parents in the Arizona Department of Corrections and on in-depth interviews with 100 caregivers who facilitated the visits of 218 children from Maricopa County. Tasca collected data from 143 fathers concerning the visitation patterns of the 300 dependent children among them, and 279 mothers provided data on the visitation experiences of the 684 dependent children among them. Data on emotional responses were based on a subsample of 40 of the 218 children whose caregivers participated in the interviews.³

Who Visits and Why

Tasca found that mother and grandmother caretakers were the most likely to encourage visitation because they have a vested interest in seeing the incarcerated parent return to a supportive role in the child's life upon reentry, especially if that parent was involved with the child's life

prior to incarceration. Foster parents, on the other hand, may not have the same incentive for familial reunification and thus may not be motivated to arrange in-facility visitation. They also may be more inclined to shield the child from the negative aspects of the institution as much as possible.

Patterns also differed for visits to mothers and fathers depending on the security level and distance to the facility. Visits to incarcerated mothers were more likely to occur if the facility had low-level security and was close to the child's home. Long trips that could be tiresome for children and financially costly, stringent security rules and searches that could scare the child were deterrents for visits to mothers. However, these were not significant factors for visits to fathers.⁴ Factors such as a parent's mental illness and drug abuse also affected the likelihood of parental visitation.

Impact of Visits

The research showed that about two-thirds of the children had a difficult time visiting with their parent, as evidenced by their reactions after the visits. Reactions included fear, anger, anxiety, crying, depression, emotional outbursts and problems in school. On the other hand, about one-third of the sample of children had positive experiences, such as excitement and improved attitudes and behavior during the visit, and even looked forward to future visits.⁵

According to the data, two factors had the greatest impact on a child's prison visitation experience:

Family dynamics. Similar to the findings regarding who is likely to visit, the strength of the relationship between the child and parent largely determined the impact of the visit on the child. Children who did not have strong familial bonds with the incarcerated parent were likely to demonstrate negative behavior (e.g., crying, depression, developmental regression) as a result of the visit. Children who had stronger bonds with the parent prior to incarceration were likely to display positive signs (e.g., increased self-esteem and improved behavior; less likely to drop out of school; reduced fear for a parent's well-being).⁶

Daunting prison atmosphere. Results also show that the harsh, unfriendly environment of the prison facility could have negative effects on children, evoking crying, emotional outbursts and fear. Strict visiting policies and the obstacles associated with visiting a prisoner can make family members feel like "quasi-inmates." Visitors can feel like "intruders" who have to be "controlled through degradation and intimidation." For example, wait times can be extremely long, and little forewarning about changes in rules could abruptly end a visit. Overcrowded waiting areas surrounded by electric fences, metal doors and gates could be frightening scenes for children. Also, being frisked and patted down as part of security screening can intimidate children. Moreover, being denied human contact, such as hugging or holding, could be upsetting to small children especially.⁷

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Implications

Correctional staff cannot influence the dynamic between a parent and child before the parent is incarcerated or influence the bond between parent and child during the incarceration period; however, Tasca's research suggests that correctional departments can build on the positive aspects of prison visitation by enhancing the atmosphere and environment where visits take place. Prisons can, for example, provide age-appropriate books and games in the visitation rooms and create a friendly atmosphere.⁸ Beyond modifications to the visitation environment, Tasca recommends expansion of video visitation, but notes issues with this technology. One issue is its cost effectiveness; another is its capability (or lack thereof) to effectively replicate the quality of in-facility visits in terms of reinforcing parent-child bonds. An ongoing NIJ-funded study of video visitation technology at the Washington State Department of Corrections will address these issues.

Conclusion

Tasca's research has shown the difficulty of caregivers' decisions regarding whether they should encourage visitation with a parent in a correctional facility. She has provided a richer understanding of which children are more likely to benefit or suffer from a visit. Her study is another building block in

prison visitation research, helping determine how best to lessen the detrimental effects of prison incarceration on children by understanding the complexities (mental health, lack of finances, drug abuse) of different family situations. This will help provide a more coordinated, "family-centric" response to their needs.

ENDNOTES

¹ 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.

² Tasca, M. 2014. *It's not all cupcakes and lollipops: An investigation of the predictors and effects of prison visitation for children during maternal and paternal incarceration*. Tempe, Ariz.: Arizona State University. Retrieved from www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/248650.pdf.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.



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