



The author(s) shown below used Federal funding provided by the U.S. Department of Justice to prepare the following resource:

Document Title: A New Role for Technology: The Impact of Video Visitation

Author(s): Léon Digard, Ph.D.

Document Number: 251582

Date Received: March 2018

Award Number: 2012-IJ-CX-0035

This resource has not been published by the U.S. Department of Justice. This resource is being made publically available through the Office of Justice Programs' National Criminal Justice Reference Service.

Opinions or points of view expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

A New Role for Technology: The Impact of Video Visitation

Summary Overview

Purpose of the study

Research shows that prison visitation is integral to the success of incarcerated people, reducing recidivism, facilitating their reentry into the community, and promoting positive parent-child relationships.ⁱ However, people are often incarcerated long distances from their home communities in areas that are difficult to reach by public transport, creating significant barriers to in-person visitation.ⁱⁱ Video visitation, which has the potential to provide opportunities for incarcerated people to see their families and friends without the costs and time associated with travel to corrections facilities, has increased across the country. However, little research has been conducted on the impact of video visitation and how it compares to other forms of real-time contact. To further the knowledge of video visitation in prisons and its potential to connect incarcerated people with their families and communities, researchers at the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) conducted implementation and outcome/impact analyses in Washington State Department of Corrections (WADOC), where video visitation was introduced to state prison facilities during 2013 and 2014. Video visits in WADOC are operated by a private vendor – JPay.

This project was supported by Award No. 2012-IJ-CX-0035, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

This resource was prepared by the author(s) using Federal funds provided by the U.S. Department of Justice. Opinions or points of view expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Key Findings

Vera's analysis found that use of the video visit service led to a significant increase in the number of in-person visits that incarcerated people received. However, use of the service was low.

- 11.5 percent of the study sample used the video visit service at least once during the study period.
- Interviews and surveys suggested that the low rate of use was due, at least in part, to the cost of the service and dissatisfaction with its quality.
- Regular and high users of the service saw a statistically significant increase (between 40 and 49 percent increase) in the number of in-person visits they received.
- No significant impact on in-prison behavior (measured through rule violations) was found.

Methodology

The implementation study sought to understand the need, process and cost of introducing a video visit service into WADOC, and to describe the availability and types of video-visit services in state prison systems across the country. The outcome and impact evaluation tested two hypotheses: (1) providing inmates with access to video visitation will improve the nature and frequency of incarcerated people's contacts with their families and friends, and (2) an increase in contact with family and friends will improve in-prison behavior.

Implementation study:

Vera sought to understand the landscape of video visitation nationwide. In November, 2014, Vera conducted a 50 state survey of department of corrections administrators. The survey asked respondents about their agency's intention to implement, or their experience of implementing, a video visit system. The survey further sought to identify the number of prisons video visits were available in, details on the service provider, the cost of using the service for incarcerated people and visitors, and other questions related to implementation and delivery. All 50 states departments of corrections responded to the survey. Respondents included bureau chiefs, program coordinators, staff from budget departments, and research and planning officers.

In Washington, Vera conducted a study of the department's implementation of the video visit service, and analyzed the associated costs. Vera conducted interviews and focus groups with WADOC staff to understand the experience of implementing and operating the service, policy development, and challenges they had encountered. Data relating to the costs incurred by WADOC in implementing and operating the video visit service were collected through a review of policies and agreements, interviews with administrative staff from WADOC and JPay, and a survey of administrators from each of the 12 state-prison facilities.

In addition to analyzing the departments' perspective on video visitation, Vera studied how incarcerated people experienced the service. A self-administered pen-and-paper survey was completed by 211 incarcerated people at three Washington State Prisons – a women's prison and two men's prisons. The survey asked about the reasons people did or did not use video visitation, other ways they stayed in touch with family

and friends, and their satisfaction with the video visit service. Respondents were recruited using a combination of random and opportunity sampling.

Outcome and Impact study:

Vera conducted a variety of analyses to understand who used the video visit service, how often they used it, and whether this use was associated with changes to their in-person visitation rates or the frequency or severity of in-prison rule violations. Vera used administrative data from WADOC including demographic information, home zip codes, information on in-person visits (date of visit and number of visitors), and misconduct information (including the severity and date of the infraction) for anyone incarcerated at any point between January 1, 2012 and November 30, 2015. From JPay, Vera obtained data on video visits held between February 2013 (when video visits were first made available) and November 30, 2015. The data included the identity of the incarcerated person, and the date and time of the video visit.

Vera sought to understand who received video visits and whether this type of visitation affected in-person visits and in-prison behavior. From the full dataset, researchers identified the date on which video visitation was first made available to each incarcerated person. To be able to compare pre- and post- video visitation outcomes, Vera selected all people who were in WADOC custody for at least one year prior to and one year following implementation (N=9,217). The sample was divided into three groups: non-users, users, and high users of video visitation (those in the 95th percentile of users). Very low users of the service (those who averaged less than 1.5 video visits a year) were omitted from the analysis, resulting in a total sample of 8,758 people. Two analytic methods were used to determine whether service use affected the number of in-

person visits that people received: Bayesian Additive Regression Trees and Inverse Probability of Treatment Weighting with Difference in Differences. The same sample and methods were used to determine whether using the service affected the number of rule violations people committed in custody, the number of serious infractions they committed, and the number of infractions resulting in disciplinary segregation.

The researchers supplemented this analysis with semi-structured interviews with twenty incarcerated people – 10 men and 10 women – who had used the service within the previous month. Participants were asked open-ended questions about the impact they believed video visits had on their lives. They were asked questions about why they chose to use the service, the experience of video visits, and their perception of the benefits and challenges associated with using the service. Researchers conducted thematic coding of the interview data to identify patterns of experience.

Lastly, to understand the landscape of in-person visitation since implementing video visits in Washington State, Vera analyzed the frequency of in-person visits and the characteristics of those receiving them using administrative data from WADOC. From a larger dataset, Vera selected all people who were incarcerated during the entirety of a one-year period (November 30, 2014 to November 30, 2015, N=11,524). Vera analyzed in-person visit rates, disaggregated by demographic information including race, gender, age, length of incarceration, and mental health need. For each person, Vera also calculated the distance between their prison facility and their home, using ZIP codes. To account for movements between facilities, Vera created an average weighted distance from home. This adjusted the distance from home for each person, depending on the length of time they spent in each facility during the year. Vera then tested the strength of

the association between individual characteristics and the number of in-person visits people received using negative binomial regression.

Results

Implementation Study

At the time of Vera's study, both the availability and accessibility of video visits were limited nationally, though set to expand. Findings from the national survey showed that as of November 2014, 15 states (30 percent) were using video visitation. Accessibility within these states varied – some states were using it in all of their facilities, while others were using it in less than 20 percent of state facilities. An additional nine states reported they were in the process of implementing video visits, and seven more intended to offer it in the future.

Some states reported that they had no intention of implementing video visitation due, at least in part, to the anticipated cost of the service. However, Vera's analysis found that WADOC incurred minimal costs in implementing and operating the system. In Washington State, the implementation of video visitation had virtually no impact on the state's budget because WADOC used a full-service provider (JPay). JPay paid for the system's infrastructure and maintains the computer kiosks that support video visitation and other services. WADOC reported minimal costs for upgrades to the already-installed kiosks to enable video visitation, totaling \$25,249. The ongoing cost to WADOC was found to be \$67,793 for operational oversight, contract management, and corrections officers' time to monitor the visits.

The cost not covered by WADOC is passed on to the users. WADOC visitors pay \$12.95 for a 30-minute video visit. Although this cost is in line with national averages, nearly half (47 percent) of all respondents to Vera's survey of incarcerated people said that the cost of video visitation prevented them from using the service or from using it more often. Additionally, fewer than half of surveyed people felt that the kiosks were easy to access within the facility, and 21 percent of people reported that a loved one's lack of internet access prevented them from making more use of the service. Aside from cost and accessibility, the quality of the service was reported to be inconsistent and a source of frustration. However, despite these challenges, the survey results showed that incarcerated people still valued the service.

Outcome and Impact Study

Video visit rates were low. Only 11.5 percent of people in the sample ever used video visits, and many people tried the service once and did not use it again within the year. People who used the service tended to be younger, were less likely to have mental health disorders, and tended to already receive more in-person visits. Thus, some of the most vulnerable groups of incarcerated people and those who already receive fewer in-person visits do not seem to benefit from the service.

Vera's analysis found that using the video visit service had a statistically significant positive impact on the number of in-person visits that people received. Users of the service saw a 40 percent increase in in-person visits, while very high use resulted in a 49 percent increase, as compared to nonusers ($p < 0.05$). No statistically significant impact was found on the frequency or severity of prison rule violations committed by incarcerated people. During interviews, service users reported that video visits provided

a space for them to re-establish and strengthen relationships with people in the community, which may have accounted for the subsequent increase in in-person visits that they received.

In-person visitation rates

Despite the positive impact of video visits on the likelihood of receiving in-person visits, rates of in-person visits were generally low across the state. During the year ending November 2015, 45 percent of people did not receive any in-person visits. Vera's analysis found that men, older people, people with mental health disorders, and people whose home communities were further from the prison facilities in which they were held received significantly fewer in-person visits ($p < 0.001$). The analysis found that, for both men and women, the number of in-person visits people received decreased by about 1 percent for every additional mile in distance from home they were incarcerated ($p < 0.001$).

Conclusion

Vera's study showed that video visitation can be introduced to a prison system with minimal cost to the department. The quality and cost of service for users may, however, deter uptake. In Washington State, those that were able to make use of the service saw a positive impact on the number of in-person visits that they subsequently received. No impact was found on their in-prison behavior, as measured through rule violations. Use of the service was low and was concentrated among those who had already demonstrated a greater ability to remain in contact with people in the community. Furthermore, users repeatedly expressed frustration with the cost and quality of the

service. As such, Vera recommends that video visitation, while a positive supplement to the services available to incarcerated people, should never replace in-person visits, as has been seen in some local jails. The low levels of in-person visitation that Vera found in Washington State more generally suggest that even more needs to be done to support contact between incarcerated people and their communities. In particular, the distance that people are held from their homes is a significant and substantial barrier to in-person visits. Departments of corrections will need to address this specific issue if more substantial improvements are to be realized.

Reports and upcoming scholarly products

- 1) Digard, L., diZerega, M., Yaroni, A., and Rinaldi, J. (February 2016). *A New Role for Technology? Implementing Video Visitation in Prison*. Vera Institute of Justice: New York, NY.
- 2) Digard, L., LaChance, J., and Hill, J. (August 2017). *Closing the Distance: The Impact of Video Visits in Washington State Prison*. Vera Institute of Justice: New York, NY.
- 3) Kang-Brown, J. and LaChance, J. (forthcoming). *Lag effects of infractions and disciplinary segregation on in-person and video visits*. Manuscript being drafted for submission to peer-reviewed journal.

ⁱ E.g., John D. Wooldredge, "Inmate experiences and psychological well-being." *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 26, 2 (1999): 235-250.; Grant Duwe and Valerie Clark, "Blessed be the social tie that bind them: The effects of prison visitation on offender recidivism." *Criminal Justice Policy Review* 24, 3 (2011): 271-296.; William D. Bales and Daniel P. Mears, "Inmate social ties and the transition to society: Does visitation reduce recidivism?" *The Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 45, 3 (2008): 287-321.

ⁱⁱ Johnna Christian, "Riding the bus: Barriers to prison visitation and family management strategies," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 21, 1 (2005): 31-48