



RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY FOR REFORM



Video Visits for Children Whose Parents Are Incarcerated:

In Whose Best Interest?

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“If video visits are an addition [to in-person visits] they will be a help to all and a God-send to many. But, if video visits are a replacement for the current visitation, their implementation would be a painful unwelcomed change that would be impersonal and dehumanizing.”¹

On any given day, approximately 2.6 million children (or about 1 in every 33) have a parent in jail or prison.² Until relatively recently, few people paid attention to what happens to children when their parents are incarcerated, but as the number of parents in jails and prisons grew during the 1980s and 1990s there began to be an appreciation that incarcerating parents can have a profound and enduring effect on their children.³

The circumstances and experiences of individual children whose parents are sent to jail or prison differ markedly,⁴ but collectively this group of children experience greater childhood adversity on average than other children. The causes of that adversity are varied, including parental (e.g., addiction, mental illness), familial (e.g., poverty, violence, disrupted ties), and community problems (e.g., community violence, exposure to drug markets, inadequate schools, delinquent peers).^{5,6,7}

Sending parents to jail or prison can exacerbate the adversity in children’s lives and negatively affect their well-being independent of other factors. For example, the arrest and incarceration of parents can affect children’s ability to form relationships with other people, precipitate feelings of grief and anxiety, and spawn symptoms of post-traumatic stress.^{8,9,10} A parent’s incarceration can also result in children being socially isolated from peers, contribute to disruptive behaviors, reduce school performance, and exacerbate poverty and instability within families and communities.^{11,12,13}

As a society, we recognize the need for children who are separated from their parents to maintain personal relations and have direct contact with their parents on a regular basis unless compelling evidence indicates that doing so is contrary to a child’s best interests.¹⁴ But children whose parents are sent to jail or prison are treated differently than children who are separated from their parents for other reasons such as divorce, hospitalization, death, adoption, foster care placement, or military deployment. The loss of a parent to jail or prison is often overlooked,

unacknowledged, and dismissed. There are no rituals to mark the child's loss and no outpouring of community concern when a parent is incarcerated.¹⁵

In the last 20 years, there have been growing efforts to support and nurture children when their parents are incarcerated. Those efforts include, among other things, facilitating opportunities for children to visit their parents in jails and prisons, increasing opportunities for children to have physical contact with their parents during visits, and instituting programs that allow children to take part in normal parent-child activities with their parents during visits.^{16,17,18}

BARRIERS TO CHILDREN VISITING THEIR PARENTS

It is not easy for children to visit their incarcerated parents, particularly if their parents are in prison rather than in local jails. A majority of parents in prison are housed more than 100 miles from their children.¹⁹ Distance, along with the high costs of transportation, food, lodging, and the time involved make it difficult for families to take children to visit their parents.^{20,21} Roughly half of all parents in prison (59% of those in state prison and 45% in federal prison) have never had a visit from any of their children.²²

Security procedures can make visiting stressful. Visitation procedures are often strict, arbitrarily enforced, and include subjecting children to searches. In some facilities, children can only communicate with their parents through a glass barrier. In others, they meet with their parents in crowded, noisy visiting rooms. Interactions between children and their parents are strictly regulated, with watchful correctional officers close by causing parents concern that their children's normal behaviors might unintentionally violate rules.^{23,24} Some facilities have special programs for a limited number of parents that allow children and parents to visit together in child-friendly environments and engage in normal parent-child activities, but these are not the norm.²⁵

The opportunity for children to visit their parents is further limited by facility visiting hours. Many facilities only have daytime visiting hours, making it difficult for school-age children and people who are employed to visit their family members.²⁶

“Growing Up with a Father in Prison: Part II”

Emani Davis, <http://youtube/8DlfwLRtmjQ>

“You never get used to it and you always know you don't have any control over anything so there's just a level of anxiety that's always going to be there. Are they going to give me a hard time about these shoes? Am I allowed to do this? Is there going to be a problem if I wear this? Even though you know what the rules are, they can be interpreted however they want depending on the day and the officer at the front.”

THE ADVENT OF VIDEO VISITATION

Even as advocacy groups and community organizations are pushing to remove barriers to children visiting their incarcerated parents, changes are occurring in correctional visitation practices: jails and prisons are shifting to video visitation – visitation using real-time video conferencing technology similar to Skype. Correctional facilities have been using video systems since the 1990s. Based on interviews with system vendors, criminal justice officials, legal experts, and news reports, the *New York Times* estimates that correctional facilities in at least 20 states already have video capability or have plans to adopt the technology.²⁷

The benefits of video visitation for correctional facilities are described as reducing the risk of contraband entering facilities, cost savings because fewer staff are needed to oversee visits and, in some cases, increased revenue from fees paid by inmates or visitors.^{28,29} In Idaho, Sheriff Gary Raney of the Ada County Sheriff's Office claims that the virtual visitation system put in place there will have produced over \$2 million in revenue over the course of two years.³⁰ The companies that provide the equipment and software that correctional facilities need to retool for and manage video visitation are also benefiting. In fact, these companies have been referred to as “the newest player in the prison-industrial complex.”³¹

But, what about the 2.6 million children whose parents are in jail or prison? Are they benefiting?

Possibly.

Children may benefit from video visitation if it increases opportunities for them to communicate with their parents. But video visitation is not a substitute for in-person contact visits, particularly for infants and young children.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND LIMITING FACTORS OF VIDEO VISITATION FOR CHILDREN

To the best of our knowledge, children's experiences visiting their incarcerated parents via video have not yet been studied, but video visitation has been used to help children maintain relations with parents who are absent under other circumstances. Military families, for example, use video calls and other forms of e-communication to help children stay connected with their parents when they are deployed.³² Family courts also sometimes include virtual visitation in divorce decrees as a way for children to maintain relations with their absent noncustodial parents.^{33,34} Experience in these areas suggests that video visitation may make separation from a

parent who is incarcerated more tolerable by reducing family stress and helping parents and children stay connected,³⁵ but that it is not a substitute for face-to-face contact.³⁶

Children stand to benefit from correctional facilities transitioning to video visitation if such visitation increases the frequency with which they can communicate with their parents. Video visitation policies, however, vary markedly with respect to whether visitors are required to travel to facilities to visit via video or can visit from their homes or communities, the frequency and duration of visits, and costs.

Facility versus community based visits

In some instances (typically jails) families have to take children to correctional facilities to visit via video. Rather than parents being brought to a visiting area to meet with their children, parents remain on their units and children see and speak to them via video.^{37,38,39}

In other jurisdictions, families are able to visit via computers in their homes⁴⁰ or other community locations.^{41,42} Some jurisdictions make arrangements with community organizations (e.g., churches, not-for-profit organizations, bail bond companies) to host computer stations so families without internet access are not excluded from video visitation.⁴³ In Pinellas County, Florida, the Sheriff's Office outfitted a bus with video visitation equipment, which travels to four cities.⁴⁴ Some community organizations that host video visitation couple visits with other

“Visiting a Detainee in DC is Now Done by Video”

P. Hermann, July 28, 2012, *The Washington Post*

“When Ciara Jackson visited her boyfriend at the D.C. jail three weeks ago, her 5-year-old daughter Talia reached out and touched the glass partition separating her from her father. He pressed back from the other side.

‘It seemed real,’ said Jackson, 20.

That intimacy, though restricted is now gone. Jackson and other visitors must chat by video, with cameras aimed at detainees in the jail and at their loved ones a few hundred yards away in a building attached to the former D.C. General Hospital Complex in Southeast D.C.

Prisoner rights groups complain that the video visits – a growing trend at jails across the country – deprive the detained of interacting with flesh-and-blood people and contradict a long-held philosophy that family visits are vital to rehabilitation and morale.”

programming for children and their incarcerated parents so that the visit becomes a supportive, therapeutic intervention to improve parent-child relationships.^{45,46}

Fees

Anyone with a computer or cell phone with a camera and an internet connection can make video calls at no cost using readily available free software such as Skype, but some correctional facilities and community sites charge fees for video visitation.^{47,48} In some cases the fees go to the correctional facility and in others they go to the community organizations that host remote visitation sites.⁴⁹

Fees vary widely. The Ada County Jail in Idaho allows visitors to register for two free 25-minute video visits per week and charges a small fee for additional visits.⁵⁰ In contrast, Indiana's Rockville Correctional Facility charges families \$12.50 for 30 minutes of virtual visitation, which is only slightly less than the \$15 charge for a 30-minute local phone call.⁵¹

The Virtual Visitation Program in Pennsylvania allows one 55-minute virtual visit a month for \$15, with the fee going to the not-for-profit hosting the program. Priority for virtual visitation is given to inmates who participate in parenting skills classes and other family-oriented programs.⁵² In Virginia, the Department of Corrections recently expanded its virtual visitation program and charges \$15 for a 30-minute and \$30 for a 60-minute visit with the fees going to community churches that host visiting sites.⁵³

SUMMARY

Jail and prison administrators are often attracted to video visitation for its potential cost savings and profits as well as security benefits. Video visitation can be managed with fewer personnel than regular visitation and the risk of contraband entering facilities is reduced. Video visitation is also a potential source of revenue for facilities and for the companies that provide video visitation equipment and software. Renovo Software, a company that specializes in video communication software, frames the use of virtual visitation as a profitable business venture complete with the potential to use advertisements on the computer stations.⁵⁴

The potential for video visitation to benefit children will largely depend on the policies of the facilities in which their parents are housed. Video visitation can be expected to have the greatest benefits when:

- used as an adjunct to rather than a replacement for other modes of communication, particularly contact visits;
- children can visit from their homes or nearby sites;

- facility policies allow for frequent visits; and
- fees are not cost prohibitive.

The Vermont Legislative Research Services office cut to the heart of the matter when it concluded:

Corrections administrators should be cognizant that traditional contact visitation is the best means of communication between children and their incarcerated parent; however, in many circumstances it is impractical for families to visit their loved ones in prison. Virtual visitation helps if the prison is too far, transportation is too expensive, or the prison environment is inappropriate for a child. In-person visitation is regarded as the most effective form of child-incarcerated parent visitation.⁵⁵

¹ Beazar, C. (2008) *Video Visitation*. The Real Cost of Prisons Project.

http://realcostofprisons.org/writing/beazar_video.html

² Estimate uses data published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Glaze, L.E. & Maruschak, L.M. [2008], *Parents in prison and their minor children*, and Glaze, L.E. [2011], *Correctional populations, 2010*). An estimated 53% of all people in prison are parents with an average of 2.1 children. The total number of children with incarcerated parents (2.6 million) was derived by applying these estimates to the total number of people in jails and prisons in 2010 (2.3 million). That number was then divided by the number of children under age 18 based on 2010 Census estimates (74.1 million) to arrive at the estimated percentage of children with parents in jail or prison (3.1%).

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FURTHER READING AVAILABLE AT www.sentencingproject.org:

Fact Sheet: Parents in Prison

Incarcerated Parents and Their Children: Trends 1991-2007

Women in the Criminal Justice System



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