



E-ISSN 2332-886X

Available online at

<https://scholasticahq.com/criminology-criminal-justice-law-society/>

Essay/Research Commentary

Moving Visitation Research Forward: The Arizona Prison Visitation Project¹

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ABSTRACT AND ARTICLE INFORMATION

Although the prison visitation literature is advancing in significant ways, it remains slowed by a reliance on a limited methodological approach. Here, we advocate for a new way to study visitation through the use of a mixed-method design. We discuss what knowledge can be gleaned by examining visitation differently and describe our efforts to do so by introducing a new data source: the Arizona Prison Visitation Project (APVP). This article outlines the methodology of the APVP and details the data collection process. We conclude with a discussion on how the APVP can be useful for guiding future research and policy.

Article History:

Received 30 August 2015

Accepted 8 September 2015

Keywords:

prison visitation; prisoners; mixed methods; data collection

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As mass imprisonment continues to dominate American crime policy, prison visitation has received increased scholarly attention (Cochran & Mears 2013; Comfort, 2008; Siennick, Mears, & Bales, 2013; Tasca, 2014). As a key source of social support, prison visitation allows inmates to interact and communicate with their loved ones over significant periods of time (Christian, 2005; Visser,

2013). Such meaningful contact can help to minimize the pains of imprisonment by providing prisoners with an important coping resource (Hairston, 1991; Jiang & Winfree 2006; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005). Visits also provide inmates and their visitors a chance to maintain or rebuild relationships and an opportunity to plan for release with respect to housing, employment, and other critical reintegration

needs (Arditti, 2003; 2012; Christian & Kennedy, 2011). Given this, it is unsurprising that research largely indicates that visitation is beneficial for prisoners.

At the same time, however, there are major gaps in our understanding of visitation experiences. There are many factors which we know little about that might contribute to the quality of a visit from conditions of confinement and type of contact (i.e. face-to-face, noncontact) to the relationship status of inmates and visitors. The familial and romantic ties of prisoners are often strained before incarceration given prisoners' high rates of drug use, mental illness, and lengthy histories of system involvement (Owen, 1998; Turanovic, Rodriguez, & Pratt, 2012). Moreover, the majority of visitors—like the inmates they visit—are a vulnerable population with complex needs of their own (Christian, 2005; Comfort, 2008). The support capacities of inmates' interpersonal networks, then, may be limited, placing further stress on already fragile relationships. To that end, visits may be particularly stressful experiences for some prisoners.

What remains unclear is for whom—and under what circumstances—visitation is positive, negative, or has no effect on prisoners. Hairston (1991) described the ideal data for moving research forward:

The data should be comprehensive to allow comparisons among racial groups, age groups, institutional security levels, nature of the crime committed and length of sentence.... These studies would assess the quality and meaning of family relationships as well as the quantity of family contacts. Additionally, they would explore the relationship between pre-prison, in-prison, and post-prison family environment and relationships. (p. 101)

To date, prior work has relied almost exclusively on quantitative administrative data that do not contain these dynamic measures vital to improving our understanding of the relationship between visitation and inmate behaviors (e.g., misconduct and recidivism).² And although quantitative data are certainly needed to establish broad patterns in the effects of prison visitation on inmate behaviors, the use of administrative data alone cannot explain why prison visitation influences particular outcomes. There is a need to pair these types of administrative data with rich, qualitative data (such as data collected from in-depth interviews with inmates) that can broaden what we know about the nature of visitation experiences and identify mechanisms underlying the

relationships established in the larger prison population.

Advancing knowledge on prison visitation, then, requires a fresh methodological approach. As part of our initial efforts to meet this goal, the purpose of this paper is to introduce a new data source: the Arizona Prison Visitation Project (APVP). The APVP is a mixed-method study designed to broaden our understanding of visitation experiences and their effects on inmate outcomes such as recidivism, misconduct and self-harm. This two-phase study is comprised of 1) administrative records on a population of Arizona prisoners released between July 1st, 2010 and June 30th, 2013 along with 2) semi-structured interviews on visitation experiences collected from a subsample of visited male and female offenders incarcerated in the Arizona Department of Corrections (ADC) in the summer of 2014. These data are particularly unique in that they include White, Black, Latino/a, and American Indian prisoners, across all security levels, experiencing different types of visitation (i.e. contact versus non-contact). The interviews tap into the complex nature of visits between each inmate and multiple visitors while the administrative data can establish broader patterns between various forms of visitation on recidivism, misconduct, and self-harm. Thus, the APVP provides a prime opportunity for scholars to examine untested facets of visitation.

We begin below with a discussion of what could be learned by studying prison visitation using a mixed-method approach. Next, we outline both phases of the APVP including study setting, methodology, and data elements. We also provide interviewers' reflections on the data collection process to highlight the complexity of prison visitation experiences and the depth of the data. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of the APVP for future research, policy, and practice. In doing so, our broader purpose is to introduce scholars and practitioners to a new data resource that can be used to advance research on prison visitation.

The Empirical Status of Prison Visitation Research

Prison visitation has been associated with institutional misconduct, recidivism, and psychological outcomes (Cochran, 2012; Duwe & Clarke, 2013; Hairston, 1988; Jiang & Winfree, 2006; Mears, Cochran, Siennick, & Bales, 2012; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005). Prison visitation has also been found to increase the likelihood of family support and reduce family conflict following incarceration (Mowen & Visser, 2015; Visser, 2013). While the majority of research suggests that visitation

is positive for inmates, some studies show that under certain circumstances, visitation can have adverse effects (see Bales & Mears, 2008; Siennick et al., 2013). As such, we know that visitation is influential; what remains poorly understood is why.

To extend this body of work, it is first necessary to investigate the nature of visits themselves. During visitation, prisoners may receive affection, support, and a temporary reprieve from the pressures of prison life while sharing food, stories, and interacting with loved ones (Christian, 2005; Comfort, 2008). Alternatively, visitation can give visitors a forum to confront prisoners about prior wrongdoings and make future demands, which may lead to arguments, heightened tension, and stress (Arditti, 2012; Christian & Kennedy, 2011). Prisoners, then, may have both positive and negative visitation experiences given the complexity of their interpersonal relationships and circumstances. To fully tap into dynamics that can shed light on visitation effects requires interviews with a diverse, representative sample of men and women inmates that cover the content of visitation discussions; perceptions of these interactions as beneficial, harmful, or non-significant; and the emotions that arise following contact.

Further research is also needed on how type of visitor influences inmate behavior. Prior studies have identified positive effects of visitation with spouses, family, and friends on recidivism—with spousal visits producing the most favorable outcomes (Bales & Mears, 2008; Cochran & Mears, 2013). On the other hand, visitation from children has been linked to increased recidivism (Bales & Mears, 2008). What accounts for these disparate findings is likely rooted in the quality of these relationships before and during incarceration as well as variation in the support capabilities and expectations of prisoners among different visitors. Nevertheless, without insight into these relationship dynamics, we are left to merely speculate on what explains the linkages between visitor type and inmate behavior. Moreover, the impact of visitor type on inmate outcomes is potentially tied to visitation experiences. A visit with a spouse likely involves different discussions and interactions than a visit with children, or with individuals whom the prisoner shares weaker ties (e.g., distant relative, acquaintance). This underscores the need for mixed-method research to uncover the role of relationship quality and visitation experiences across visitor types.

The conditions under which contact occurs may also produce varied visitation effects (Arditti, 2012; Comfort, 2008). Indeed, prisoners are subject to different visitation policies which can affect the length and quality of their contact with visitors. Visits

may involve physical contact over extended periods of time in some cases, whereas for others, visitation may involve speaking to visitors through plexiglass barriers over monitored phones during shortened visiting hours. Since prison visitation has been deemed by the U.S. Supreme Court as a privilege and not a right (see *Overton v. Bazzetta*, 2003), prison administrators often restrict the nature and frequency of visits of higher security inmates and those inmates who have been disruptive to prison order. That is, maximum custody or administratively segregated prisoners—who represent a significant portion of the inmate population—may only experience noncontact visitation (Toch, 2001). The extent to which the type of visit influences inmate behavior is unknown as existing datasets do not differentiate between contact and noncontact visitation in the prisoner population.

Of similar importance in advancing prison visitation research is identifying the ways in which visitation effects may vary across inmate characteristics (Cochran & Mears, 2013). Of course, existing studies control for a host of factors including prisoner demographics, offense characteristics, and prior convictions and/or incarcerations (Cochran, 2012; Duwe & Clarke, 2013; Siennick et al., 2013). Yet, there are a multitude of inmate characteristics that may shape visitation experiences and effects that have yet to be fully explored. We know very little about how the impact of visitation may vary across gender, race/ethnicity (i.e. White, African American, Latino/a, American Indian), citizenship status, or security classification. Other important controls in the context of visitation include substance abuse and mental health needs as these factors arguably play a key role in inmates' interpersonal relationships, prison experiences, and reentry success. We also do not know how visitation effects may be conditioned by factors such as marital status, gang membership, or parenthood. Thus, to tap into the variability inherent in prison visitation, data are needed that capture a broader array of inmate characteristics and experiences.

Extending existing knowledge on prison visitation requires a mixed-method approach through the use of both administrative records and interview data. Our study—the Arizona Prison Visitation Project—will be able to identify connections between visitation and prisoner outcomes in the inmate population and begin to explain the mechanisms that underlie these relationships. These data will provide nuanced insight into the nature of prison visitation experiences and how these experiences may vary by type of visitor, conditions of confinement, and inmate characteristics. The racial and ethnic diversity of the Arizona prison population is a particular strength of the APVP in that these data include a high number of

Latino/as—including those of Mexican descent specifically, which is the largest and fastest growing segment of the Hispanic population—and American Indian men and women. Importantly, these data provide a unique opportunity to address unanswered questions surrounding prison visitation. In the following sections, we detail the contours of the Arizona Prison Visitation Project.

The Arizona Prison Visitation Project

Data for the Arizona Prison Visitation Project were collected in collaboration with the Arizona Department of Corrections (ADC) for the purpose of advancing research on prison visitation. Consistent with a mixed-methods approach, the data were collected in two phases. The first phase entailed obtaining detailed administrative records on all inmates released from ADC over a period of three fiscal years (2010 to 2013). These data were originally compiled and maintained by ADC personnel, and they contain a variety of inmate- and institutional-level factors that can be used to advance the research on prison visitation, recidivism, misconduct, and well-being. The second phase of data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews with visited men and women incarcerated in ADC. A random sample of inmates across varying security levels (i.e., minimum, medium, and maximum custody prisoners) were interviewed during the summer of 2014, and a wealth of in-depth information was captured directly from prisoners that could not be gleaned from administrative records (e.g., inmates' experiences with visitation and the quality of their relationships with visitors). Data from Phase 2 were collected in order to identify the various mechanisms underlying why and how prison visitation impacts the lives of prisoners. Greater detail on these two phases of data collection, information on the study setting, and an overview of Arizona's prison visitation policies are provided in the following sections.

In addition to collecting data from inmates during Phase 2 of the project, researchers were also given the opportunity to observe prison visitation on the weekends. The insights gleaned through these observations were not recorded systematically as part of the data, but rather are field notes that can be used to better contextualize and understand interview responses. To highlight this complexity, some of the researchers' experiences with prison visitation are also detailed below.

Study Setting

The Arizona Department of Corrections is a unique setting in a number of ways. First, Arizona is

one of the few states in the U.S. where prison populations are on the rise. Between 2013 and 2014, when many states experienced a "leveling off" in their correctional populations, the number of inmates incarcerated in Arizona increased by 2.6%—one of the highest growth rates in the country (Carson, 2015). Across 15 institutions (14 male facilities and 1 female facility), the Arizona Department of Corrections currently houses more than 42,000 prisoners (Arizona Department of Corrections, 2015a). This population has increased more than 50% since 2001, and it is projected to grow even more over the next several years (Arizona Department of Corrections, 2015b).

Second, due to Arizona's multicultural landscape, the Arizona Department of Corrections is one of the most racially and ethnically diverse prison systems in the nation. Arizona is a large state that is home to over 6.7 million people, many of whom are Latino (30%), American Indian (5%), and African American (4%; State of Arizona, 2014). The diversity of Arizona is a benefit in that much of the literature on prison visitation relies heavily on African American samples. Data from Arizona thus provides valuable opportunities to study racial and ethnic differences in prison visitation, since approximately 39% of prisoners are White, 13% are African American, 41% are Latino/a (11% of which are Latino/a immigrants), and 5% are American Indian (Arizona Department of Corrections, 2015a).

Third, Arizona prison sentences are among the toughest in the nation, particularly for non-violent crimes (Lynch, 2009; Tonry, 2013). Prisoners in Arizona undergo especially long periods of time away from their families and friends, making prison visitation a critically important part of the incarceration experience. Arizona also uses a truth-in-sentencing model in which inmates are released on supervision after serving 85% of their sentence behind bars. Despite these sentencing practices, Arizona's recidivism rate is quite high. According to recent estimates, approximately 40% of prisoners released from ADC are reincarcerated within three years after release (Fischer, 2011). Within this context, there is much to be gained by examining the effects of prison visitation on inmates' experiences.

Arizona's Prison Visitation Policies

Prisoners are allowed to receive visits from a maximum of 10 persons who must first be approved by the Arizona Department of Corrections. The approval process entails a \$25 fee and a complete criminal history background check that can take up to 60 days. Typically, the Department will deny approval to those with active charges pending or prior convictions (unless that person is deemed to be

no security threat to the institution) and to victims of crimes perpetrated by the inmate. Unless visitors are immediate family members to multiple inmates, visitors can be approved on only one inmate's visitation list at a time (Arizona Department of Corrections, 2011a).

For approved visitors to enter prison, they must first adhere to strict dress codes, present accepted forms of identification, clear metal detectors, and successfully pass sniff tests by drug alert dogs. On typical visitation days, each adult visitor is limited to bringing in a maximum of \$30 worth of coins in a clear plastic bag to purchase items from the visitation room vending machines (but visitors must ensure inmates do not touch the coins), one pack of unopened cigarettes, and a car key.³ Upon their entry to prison, all visitors are notified that their belongings and their vehicles are subject to searches at any time. Inmates are pat-searched by officers before they enter the visitation room, and then they are mandatorily strip-searched before returning to their unit.

Regular visitation occurs in four-hour blocks each weekend, starting at 8:00 am to 12:00 pm, and 12:00 pm to 4:00 pm. Generally, inmates are not permitted to have very much physical contact with their visitors, even when visits do not occur behind glass. For instance, a brief kiss or embrace between an inmate and a visitor is permitted at the beginning and end of visitation, and inmates can hold one hand of a visitor while walking or sitting at a table, as long as hands remain above the table and visible to staff at all times. Any cuddling activities, laying heads on the shoulders of one another, or hugging or kissing during visitation is not permitted. Inmates are allowed to hold small children on their lap so long as the child is six years of age or under. These visitation policies are strictly enforced by the Arizona Department of Corrections and are similar to those found in many other states across the United States (e.g., California, Texas, and Florida).⁴

It is important to note that Arizona inmates are eligible for different types of visits (e.g., contact visits versus non-contact visits behind glass) and in varying frequencies depending on their custody level and their ADC "Earned Incentive Program Phase" (Arizona Department of Corrections, 2011b). Specifically, inmates in ADC have "program phase" levels that range from 1 to 3 in which prisoners in higher phases have the greatest privileges for their particular security level. Prisoners in higher phases, such as in phase 3, have the greatest visitation privileges for their security level. For example, minimum and medium custody inmates at phase 1 are allowed visitors for one, 4-hour block per week, whereas those at phase 3 are allowed visits for four, 4-hour blocks per week and food visitation on up to

four holidays (where visitors to prison bring home-cooked or family purchased food). Some maximum security inmates in particular units also qualify for this program, where those in phase 1 are allowed visitors for one, non-contact 2-hour block per week (i.e., on a telephone behind glass), and those at phase 3 are allowed one, 2-hour block per week of contact visitation.

Inmates move up to higher program phases by remaining free of disciplinary violations (major and minor) for a period of six consecutive months and by completing required programming (e.g., anger management, substance abuse education, and domestic violence classes). Some inmates, such as those in detention status, do not receive phase level privileges, and inmates on death row are never eligible to receive contact visits. Inmates at phase 2 or 3 can lose their privileges by receiving three minor disciplinary violations in a 90 day period or by receiving a major disciplinary violation. These policies are important to recognize given that not all prisoners are eligible to receive similar numbers and types of visits.⁵

Population Data: Phase I

In Phase I of the project, population data on all inmates in the Arizona Department of Corrections released between July 1st, 2010 and June 30th, 2013 were compiled. Specifically, data were obtained from the Arizona Department of Corrections Adult Inmate Management System (AIMS), which contains information on all movements in and out of prison, offenders' demographic characteristics, institutional and community risk scores, disciplinary actions, security level classification, and detailed imprisonment events before and after incarceration. Rearrest and reconviction data for each prisoner were also obtained from the Arizona Department of Public Safety and merged with the AIMS data. Over 15,000 inmates are included in the population data.

In addition, and unique among most correctional data sources, the AIMS data includes detailed information on every prison visitation event, including the date of the visit and the relationship between the prisoner and each visitor (e.g., romantic partner, parent, child, friend, relative). A key strength of the AIMS data is that it allows for prison visitation to be examined in several ways. In particular, the number of visits a prisoner receives can be assessed, as can the type of visit (e.g., contact, noncontact) and the recency of visitation (Bales & Mears, 2008; Cochran & Mears, 2013).

These data also contain a variety of inmate- and institutional-level factors that are important to take into account when assessing the impact of prison visitation. For example, the data include information

on inmates' citizenship status, mental health problems, substance abuse treatment needs, medical needs, involvement in street and prison gangs, and detailed information on the offense for which inmates are serving time (e.g., crime type, whether the crime was committed under the influence of drugs and alcohol, or whether it was committed to support a bad habit). In addition, the institutional factors include detailed indicators of inmates' conditions of confinement, such as the complex in which they are located, the type of unit in which they are housed (e.g., in protective custody, in a medical or mental health unit), the length of time served in each unit, and detailed information on their security classifications and earned incentive phase levels.

Perhaps most importantly, these data also provide the opportunity to study the impact of prison visitation on multiple outcomes, including recidivism, prison misconduct, and self-harm. Recidivism, for instance, can be examined in a few different ways in the data. Because the AIMS data are linked with each inmate's record of arrest and prosecution, recidivism can be assessed during a 24-month follow up period using rearrest, reconviction, or return to prison. According to King and Elderbroom (2014), "Recidivism reduction is the responsibility of multiple agencies and many different actors, and the definition of success must allow for a range of outcome measures that are responsive to this fact" (p. 2). It is thus beneficial in these data that recidivism can be measured more ways than one.

Moreover, since the data also contain detailed information on prison misconduct, there are many opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of prison visitation on disciplinary infractions. Prison misconduct can be assessed by type, severity, or frequency, and patterns of misconduct over time can be established as a function of visitation. The impact of visitation on misconduct can also be examined by type of visitor, frequency of visits, and recency of visits, and proper time ordering can be ensured given that dates of visits and misconduct are recorded in the data.

And lastly, inmate self-harm, which can include intentional self-poisoning, serious self-injury, and other forms of attempted suicide, is an important outcome in the data that is rarely examined in the prison visitation literature. Prisoners are known to be at high risk for suicide attempts (Hawton, Linsell, Adeniji, Sariaslan, & Fazel, 2014), yet information on how prison visitation can affect this phenomenon is scant. Few state correctional systems reliably record or release data on inmate self-harm, and rarely is this information captured alongside visitation data. Suicide is the most common unnatural cause of death

among state prisoners in the U.S. (Noonan, 2014), and the risk of self-harm is generally assumed to be higher among inmates who are more socially isolated (Liebling, 1993). The APVP dataset is among few that allow for the advancement of research on prison visitation and inmate self-harm.

Interview Data: Phase II

The second phase of data collection took place during the summer of 2014 and involved semi-structured interviews with 231 visited inmates incarcerated in ADC (110 men and 121 women) and were subsequently merged with administrative records. Data collection took place in minimum, medium, and maximum-security units in both the Florence State Prison Complex (for men) and the Perryville State Prison Complex (for women). Each day, researchers were provided with an up-to-date visitation log that listed all prisoners who had received at least one visit within the past month. From that list, prisoners were randomly identified to be approached for participation in the study by a member of the research team. Correctional staff would locate and escort each prisoner to the designated interview location (e.g., an empty visitation room or classroom) where a researcher would obtain consent prior to conducting the interview. The research team included men and women of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds who had extensive experience conducting interviews with vulnerable populations. It is important to note that ADC staff did not screen or recruit prisoners for participation in the project, and prisoners were not informed of the project prior to speaking to the interviewers. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

A total of 277 inmates were selected to participate in the study. Of the 277 inmates selected, 15 were ineligible to participate because they were working off-yard or in the medical unit. Among the 262 eligible inmates selected, only 12 men and 19 women declined to take part in the study. This resulted in a cooperation rate of 88.2% (231/262). The inmates were not offered an incentive to participate in interviews.

Despite the personal nature of some of the interview questions, the vast majority of inmates felt comfortable sharing details about their relationships with family members, information on what goes on at visits, and some of the more intimate aspects of prison life. Although a few inmates expressed to researchers that their visits were private and "none of our business," these instances were rare. Overall, inmates shared many unique experiences that provided a great amount of insight on prison visitation.

The interview instrument developed for this phase of the project was composed of close-ended questions and open-ended response items. Interviews covered broad domains including inmate's visitation experiences, levels of stress, perceptions of social support, quality of relationships, and reentry expectations. Thus, detailed information on key dimensions of prisoners' lives before and during incarceration was captured.

The first section of the interview was devoted to children of inmates, a distinct and understudied population of visitors. Since the majority of prisoners are parents (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), inmates were asked whether they had any children under the age 18 and if so, how many. We wanted to capture the relationships inmates had with each of their children by asking such things as whether they were living with their children and whether they were the primary source of financial support or provided most of their daily care in the month before incarceration. We also asked about the level of contact they have with their children while in prison—whether they talked on the phone, exchanged mail or were personally visited by each child, and how often. Finally, we asked about any negative issues or experiences the children may have encountered before and during the prisoner's incarceration, such as problems in school, exposure to violence, drugs and/or alcohol abuse, and victimization. These questions allow us to examine the effect of incarceration on the relationships between inmates and children, on child well-being, and whether having a child visit versus other types of visitors differentially impacts prisoners.

The second section focused on social support prior to incarceration. In particular, prisoners were asked whether romantic partners, family members, and friends in their lives provided instrumental and emotional support the year before they were incarcerated. Instrumental support included items such as, "In the year before your incarceration, did you need money to help pay your bills?" and "Did you need help getting a job?" If inmates responded yes to any of these questions, we asked who helped them (e.g. current romantic partner, mother, friend, etc.) and whether the inmate had to give anything in return for this support. Questions pertaining to emotional support included whether the inmate felt that he or she had family or friends to "talk to talk about private matters," "felt very close to," and "turn to for help or advice for a personal problem."

Next, the primary component of the interview was dedicated to visitation and the incarceration experience. Among this sample of visited inmates, we captured who visited, how often, and the content of visitation encounters. Specifically, what was

talked about during visitation? How did visits make them feel? How has incarceration affected their relationships, and what did they expect from these relationships when released? These questions provided insight into the relationship dynamics between prisoners and multiple visitors.

Prisoners began this section by identifying their relationship to their five most recent visitors (e.g., current romantic partner, mother, friend, etc.). We then proceeded with questions on the frequency and pattern of visits, how consistent the visits have been during the current incarceration term (e.g., remained the same, visited more often in the beginning, visited less often in the beginning), and whether inmates are satisfied with the number of visits, or would like fewer visits or more visits. This was followed by a number of questions to gauge the quality of relationship with each individual visitor prior to incarceration, whether the quality of the relationship had changed since being incarcerated (e.g., closer than before, more strained than before, no change), and what expectations inmates had for each relationship upon release.

With respect to the actual visitation experience, we asked a number of open-ended questions about what took place during the visits with each visitor. To begin, we asked about the activities that inmates and visitors engaged in such as playing games or taking walks outside, as well as topics the inmate and visitor discussed. Specific items included, "What do these individuals talk to you about during visits?" as well as topics raised by inmates (e.g. "What do you talk to these individuals about during visits?") The key points of discussion ranged from more trivial topics, such as sports and the weather, to more imperative topics like staying out of trouble while in prison and plans for release. Inmates were also asked about the guidance and advice they received from visitors and whether they ever provided guidance and advice to their visitors. We further probed on the type of guidance given or received. Prisoners were also asked if they had any conflicts or arguments during visits and the nature of such disputes with each visitor. Finally, we inquired about how visits with each individual visitor made the inmate feel, with possible responses including depressed, guilty, hopeless, comforted, supported, happy, and loved.

The final section of the interview was focused on inmates' expectations upon release from prison. The questions mirrored the same items about emotional support (e.g. someone they could talk to about private matter) and instrumental support (e.g. money for bills or help getting a job) that were asked in regard to support prior to incarceration in the first section of the instrument. We wanted to capture the type of support and from whom the inmate expected to

receive that support when released from prison, as well as challenges they expected to face when released such as finding a place to live and obtaining employment. We also asked a series of questions about the community inmates expected to move to in order to tap into neighborhood context, support, and resources pertaining to their future reentry.

Lastly, a series of questions captured information on inmates' experiences with stressful life events prior to and during incarceration. These events included experiencing a close friend or family member die, a breakup, separation or divorce, having a serious illness, having increased arguments with someone close, or being victimized. Relatedly, questions were asked about whether problems or conflicts were experienced in any close relationships in the year before prison and the nature of those problems. To provide information on inmates' more recent emotional well-being, survey items assessing depressive symptoms in the past two weeks were also included.

In sum, we captured key dimensions of prisoners' lives through in-depth semi-structured interviews that build upon existing knowledge on prison visitation. Types of visitors, including children, romantic partners, family, and friends and the specifics of visitation with each of these visitors were central to the interview, but we also asked about social support, stress, and expectations for reentry. Overall, the interviews provided a rather complicated and in-depth picture of the lives of inmates before and during incarceration, the nature of their relationships, and how visitation fits within these broader contexts. In the section that follows, we provide unique insights gleaned from interviewers' observations and experiences in the data collection process to more explicitly demonstrate the nuances of visitation.

Interviewers' Insights on the Complexity of Visitation

As scholars, we say that there is "heterogeneity in visits," and we caution against broad claims regarding the effects of visitation on inmate outcomes. But what does this truly mean? It means that a pregnant inmate meets the future adoptive parents of her child for the first time. It means that a mother tells her son, an inmate in his early 20s, that his grandfather (and hero) has died. It means that high school classmates, who never talked while they were in school together, become best friends when one reaches out upon hearing that the other is incarcerated. It means a young man is torn between maintaining a tough exterior and displaying how much he misses his older, incarcerated sister. It means that a mother brings her young son to

maximum-security prison so that his father may discipline him—on a telephone from behind glass. And it means that a sister visits her cancer-stricken brother every Saturday as he lies on an infirmary bed.

Every inmate in the APVP shared a common characteristic in that they all had been visited in prison within the past 30 days. Beyond that, the variation among inmates was striking. We interviewed a 20 year old who said that prison itself was not bad, but that being away from his family was the worst. We interviewed a 75 year old who has been visited by her daughter in prison for the last 19 years. We talked with inmates who had been fashion consultants, carpenters, registered nurses, baristas, lawyers, jewelers, truckers, teachers, dental assistants, phlebotomists, plumbers, paralegals, research analysts, and electricians. They had owned businesses including a cake decorating operation, a paint and body shop, a party rental company, and an outfit that provided and managed residential homes for the elderly. Inmates were racially and ethnically diverse, and we interviewed those who were in prison for the first time and others who had been in five times before. We interviewed inmates who had just experienced their first visit and inmates who counted 35 adult visitors who had come to see them.

Visitors were romantic partners, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, sons, daughters, grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles. But they were also next-door neighbors, co-workers, members of the church, old friends, and plenty of in-laws. Some visitors maintained a consistent pattern of visitation over the incarceration period while others visited more often early on or were just now beginning to visit more frequently. In talking with inmates it became clear that often their visitors would have addictions and lifestyles quite similar to their own. Usually visitors would come together, but others would visit their inmate alone. Visitors were young children and older grandparents. Some visitors were new to the visitation experience and had difficulty following visitation policies while others were quite familiar with the prison setting.

Most visits involved food and drinks from the vending machines in the visitation room but beyond that they were as varied as the inmates and visitors themselves. Some inmates played games and read to children. Others sat and quietly listened to updates from friends and family. Discussions at visits included topics ranging from kayaking to the deteriorating health of a loved one, from a child's performance in school to drama on the prison yard, and from poor decisions ending in incarceration to promising plans for the future. Advice was given—and received—from both visitors and inmates on managing romantic relationships, child-raising,

money, drug and alcohol addictions, and staying crime-free. Arguments during visitation happened over accusations of infidelity, bringing other men (or women) around their children, parenting of children in general, religion, drug and alcohol abuse, money, and “stupid, random things.” Perhaps most importantly, visits left inmates feeling happy and sad, comforted and stressed, and loved and hopeless.

We have belabored the point that with visitation there is no one typical inmate, visitor, or visitation experience. But it is not until we begin to observe or talk about visitation that the true meaning of this statement becomes apparent. Before turning to our discussion, we conclude with one final anecdote regarding the complexity of the nature of visitation: At a maximum security prison in Florence, Arizona an inmate in his late 20s is being visited by three individuals: a current or former female romantic partner, an older daughter that appears to be around 12 years of age, and a younger daughter that appears to be around 5 years of age. The 5 year old is thrilled to see her daddy, bouncing around and smiling and laughing as if they were on a playground and not the prison visitation room. The 12 year old sits silently, with her arms crossed and a look of extreme displeasure on her face; she would rather be anywhere in the world than right here. The 5 year old stops bouncing around just long enough to ask her father a question, “What is this place anyway?” He jokes and deflects the question aside, uncomfortably repeating it back to her. The 12 year old breaks her silence for the first time all visit and angrily (and loudly) blurts out, “Prison! We’re in prison....”

After observing this encounter, we had the opportunity to talk to this inmate and two others before they were taken back to their cells. One said that repeatedly thinking of his visit will help him get through the week. One said that he will replay his visit a couple of times in his head and then “put it away.” The inmate visited by his two daughters was visibly upset, and he said, “You don’t know what it’s like to be in here and have your daughter call someone else ‘Dad.’” No two visits are the same, and neither are their effects on inmates.

Discussion

Over the last several decades an evidence-based, “what works” movement has significantly advanced correctional research (Andrews et al., 1990; Drake, Aos, & Miller, 2009; Wright & Cesar, 2013). A critical component to this movement is the recognition that a focus on certain characteristics of programs (e.g., the risk level of the target population)—rather than on types of programs (e.g.,

vocational training)—is most appropriate for assessing the efficacy of existing correctional interventions (Andrews et al., 1990). Based on this research, programs that are said to be high in integrity produce sizeable treatment effects when it comes to measures of offender outcomes such as future reoffending (Lowenkamp, Latessa, & Smith, 2006). Prison visitation is largely absent from this literature. This comes as no surprise given that visitation is not necessarily a planned correctional intervention with a targeted goal of inmate behavior change. Nevertheless, the concepts of appropriate correctional treatment (Andrews et al., 1990) and the principles of effective correctional intervention (Gendreau, Smith, & French, 2006) suggest a promising approach for the future of prison visitation research. This approach asks what works best for whom under what conditions. The existing visitation literature documents encouraging effects on in-prison and post-prison inmate behavior. It is entirely possible, however, that these often modest (and sometimes conflicting) effects are masking a much larger effect that may be achieved through identifying the principles of effective visitation. We need to ask under what conditions is visitation effective and for whom.

The problem is that, up until this point, we have not had the necessary data to better understand the visitation experience. The ideal dataset would combine administrative data detailing visitation, misconduct, self-harm, and recidivism among a large and diverse correctional population with rich, detailed qualitative data about the actual visitation experience. This mixed-method approach would allow for a process by which the qualitative information could begin to contextualize the larger patterns observed within the administrative data to suggest the processes by which visitation affects inmate outcomes (Brent & Kraska, 2010; Maruna, 2010; Wright & Bouffard, 2014). In this regard, the Arizona Prison Visitation Project may provide a significant step forward for visitation research. Our mixed methods approach allows us to ask new questions regarding prison visitation. What are the similarities and differences in the nature of visitation across gender or race and ethnicity? How do institutional and inmate characteristics such as security level and in-prison stress impact the visitation experience? What are the factors (e.g., time spent incarcerated, drug use prior to incarceration) that may impact whether a visit results in positive or negative emotions experienced by inmates? Does visitation contribute to a change in the inmate’s perceived quality of relationship with the visitors? Do visits provide an opportunity for inmates to receive social support from visitors?

What is talked about during visits—are relationships mended? Are plans for release discussed? What leads to arguments? Do inmates share details of their incarceration experience with visitors? How do these visitation experiences vary across visitors? Finally, how do the answers to all of these questions relate to the outcomes of self-harm, misconduct, and recidivism? These are just a few of the many questions that can be answered using data collected as part of the APVP.

These questions highlight the potential for visitation research to provide an opportunity to examine criminological theories from a different lens (see especially Cochran & Mears, 2013). Informal social control, social support, social capital, social ties, strain, procedural justice, operant conditioning, and even deterrence are just a few of the many theoretical concepts that are often implicated in the existing literature. Without the proper data to assess these concepts, they will remain implications, and this presents a missed opportunity to identify the theoretical mechanisms that may underlie the principles of effective visitation (Sampson, Winship, & Knight, 2013). More broadly, though, this presents a missed opportunity for criminologists who wish to breathe new life into theory testing using a unique population. If social relationships are critical toward explaining deviant behavior, then prison visitation represents a largely untapped resource to better understand the relevance of others to individual behavior change.

Theoretical contributions notwithstanding, the true promise of continued visitation research lies in its policy implications. It is difficult to think of another program or policy that has as much potential as visitation when it comes to managing correctional populations, improving inmate mental health and reducing misconduct, and lowering recidivism rates once ex-offenders return to society. To the general public, visitation is a supported policy that stops short of more controversial treatment and vocational/educational opportunities afforded to those convicted of a crime (Applegate, 2001). To correctional administrators and staff, visitation is a tool that can help to manage inmate behavior, and the correctional officers that we interacted with confirmed the value of visitation as an incentive for inmates. Perhaps most importantly, to the families and friends of inmates, visitation provides an opportunity for them to maintain contact with their brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, and sons and daughters, and an improvement in the visitation experience could potentially also improve the well-being of the significant portion of society that is affected by incarceration. Given the complexity of visitation, it does not necessarily follow that this

improvement can be achieved by merely increasing the number of visits or the number of inmates visited. What it does mean is that we have much to learn before we can suggest improvements to the visitation experience, and we hope that the Arizona Prison Visitation Project—and the works that come out of it—might take scholars and practitioners one step closer toward making these improvements.

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Endnotes

- ¹ This article is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant Number 1535351. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation. The APVP data are available for research purposes by contacting either of the first two authors of this article.
- ² For a detailed discussion of specific studies published on prison visitation since 1991, see De Claire and Dixon (2015).
- ³ Visitors with babies or small children can bring in more things, such as one diaper for each hour of visitation, a clear plastic baby bottle with an unopened package of milk or formula, and a handheld baby carrier.
- ⁴ More information on visitation policies can be found at <https://corrections.az.gov/sites/default/files/0911.pdf>.
- ⁵ More details on ADC's Earned Incentive Program can be found at <https://corrections.az.gov/sites/default/files/policies/800/0809.pdf>.