



RESEARCH REPORT

# Parent-Child Visiting Practices in Prisons and Jails

## A Synthesis of Research and Practice

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# Introduction

Recent estimates indicate that 2.7 million children in the United States have a parent incarcerated, and more than 5 million—7 percent of all children in the United States—have had a parent incarcerated at some point in their life (Murphey and Cooper 2015; The Pew Charitable Trusts 2010).<sup>1</sup> Black children and children from economically disadvantaged families are more likely to experience parental incarceration (figures 1.A and 1.B). In fact, nearly twice as many black children (11.5 percent) have had a parent who lived with them go to jail or prison compared to white children (6 percent). And a child living in poverty is three times more likely (12.5 percent) to have experienced parental incarceration than a child whose household income is at least twice the federal poverty level (3.9 percent) (Murphey and Cooper 2015).

FIGURE 1.A

## Minor Children with an Incarcerated Parent, by Race

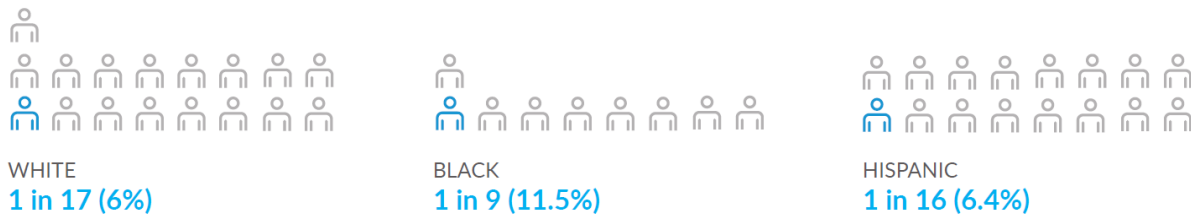
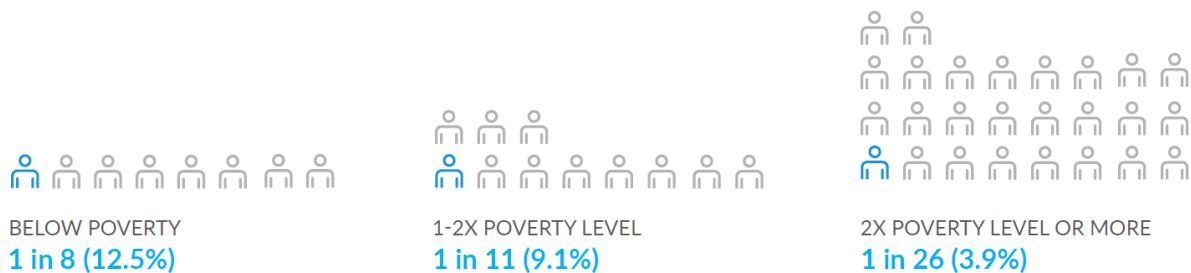


FIGURE 1.B

## Minor Children with an Incarcerated Parent, by Income



Source: 2011–12 National Survey of Children’s Health, as analyzed in David Murphey and P. Mae Cooper, *Parents Behind Bars: What Happens to their Children?* (Bethesda, MD, Child Trends, 2015).

Despite these statistics, research on the true scope and nature of parental incarceration remains lacking for several reasons:

- Most studies have focused on measuring the number of parents in *prison*, but less is known about how many parents have spent time in *jail*. Therefore, it is likely that many more children are affected by parental incarceration than what researchers have estimated.
- Prior research has been unable to accurately quantify how many children have incarcerated mothers compared to incarcerated fathers, resulting in a limited understanding of the differential effects of paternal versus maternal incarceration.
- Finally, there has been little research on how parental incarceration affects children over their life course or how length of incarceration affects a parent's ability to communicate with their children and maintain contact after release.

Still, it is clear that the millions of children affected by parental incarceration are a vulnerable population. Losing a parent to incarceration is traumatic, and the disruption of the parent-child relationship and attachment is considered an adverse childhood experience. Adverse childhood experiences are associated with an increased risk of trauma and the potential for lasting effects such as risky health behaviors, chronic health conditions, and early death.<sup>2</sup> Parental incarceration has also been associated with children who exhibit antisocial behavior and poor school performance (Murray, Farrington, and Sekol 2012). The negative effects of parental incarceration are often compounded by other adverse experiences these children are more likely to experience, including poverty, parental divorce or separation, and exposure to violence (Murphey and Cooper 2015).

To mitigate these risks, some correctional agencies offer parent-child visits in prisons or jails, often with the help of community-based organizations. Parent-child visits are consistent with one of the central tenets of the Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights, specifically that children have the right to speak with, see, and touch their parents (see box 1). Developed by the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership in 2003 and based on young people's experiences with parental incarceration, the bill of rights identifies a child's need for and right to a relationship with their parent involved in the justice system. The bill of rights has been widely accepted and used by several organizations working with children of incarcerated parents and their families.

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## BOX 1

### Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights

1. I have the right to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent's arrest.
2. I have the right to be heard when decisions are made about me.
3. I have the right to be considered when decisions are made about my parent.
4. I have the right to be well cared for in my parent's absence.
5. I have the right to speak with, see, and touch my parent.
6. I have the right to support as I face my parent's incarceration.
7. I have the right not to be judged, blamed or labeled because my parent is incarcerated.
8. I have the right to a lifelong relationship with my parent.

**Source:** San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership (2003).

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Correctional agencies typically offer different types of parent-child visits, including video visits, in-person visits with or without contact, and extended family visits. Video visits allow visitors to communicate with loved ones through video conferencing. Some jurisdictions require visitors to drive to the facility, but others offer video visits in central, off-site locations or even in the family's own home through a web-based application similar to Skype. In-person, noncontact visits place a barrier, such as Plexiglass, between incarcerated parents and their children. Contact visits allow children and parents to physically interact with each other, often in a designated visiting room. Some facilities offer contact visits as the standard form of visiting for all incarcerated people, but it is more commonly offered specifically to parents as part of a larger family strengthening program. Extended family visits allow children and immediate family members longer visits, which may last overnight in facilities designated for this purpose.

Research on the effectiveness of different types of visits is limited, but many experts believe that contact visits conducted in supportive, safe, and child-friendly environments are likely the best option to help most families mitigate the harmful effects of parental incarceration. Further, a growing body of research supports the use of contact visits, which allow children to see that parents are safe and healthy while in prison or jail (Tasca et al. 2016). Spending time together as a family through play, conversation, or sharing a meal can also help mitigate children's feelings of abandonment and anxiety (Hairston 2007). Parents and children can use these activities to work on existing relationships, establish new bonds, or repair strained relationships (Hairston 2007; Tasca et al. 2016). This type of relationship building can help children feel more attached to their parents and benefit their well-being, emotional adjustment, self-esteem, and school behavior (Arditti 2008; Fraser 2011; Poehlmann et al. 2010; Sack and Seidler 1978).

In short, there is some evidence that contact visits and other visiting practices might provide opportunities for family interaction, help heal parent-child relationships, and mitigate the trauma associated with parental incarceration. But the full effects of visiting remain understudied (Peterson et al. 2015; Poehlmann et al. 2010). Thus, this paper has three primary goals:

1. Inform researchers and practitioners about what is known—and unknown—regarding visiting practices.
2. Identify and describe visiting practices deemed important by the literature and subject matter experts.
3. Offer recommendations to advance research and practice in this area.

Our approach to developing this paper was twofold. We first conducted a comprehensive review of the extant literature on visiting practices and the associated outcomes for children and adults. We identified and synthesized findings from studies that examined the characteristics and quality of visits. Very few systematic studies have evaluated visiting programs and tested their causal impacts on children or families. Because of these limitations, we supplemented our literature review with a series of semistructured interviews with eight experts in the field:

- **Joyce Arditti**, professor, Human Development and Family Studies, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
- **Amy Kroll**, administrator of reentry services, Allegheny County Jail
- **Tanya Krupat**, director, Center for Justice Policy and Practice, The Osborne Association
- **Dee Ann Newell**, founder and director, Arkansas Voices for the Children Left Behind
- **Julie Poehlmann-Tynan**, Dorothy A. O'Brien Professorship in Human Ecology, School of Human Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- **Will Sanchez-Roy**, education director for One Family, Community Works West
- **Rebecca Schlafer**, assistant professor, Division of General Pediatrics and Adolescent Health, University of Minnesota
- **Melinda Tasca**, assistant professor, Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology, Sam Houston State University

We selected some of these experts because of their experience implementing family-focused programs and parent-child visits in correctional settings; others we selected because of their research



expertise. These interviews gathered perspectives on why visiting is important and what makes it beneficial. Interviewees also highlighted additional areas of research or practice that would benefit from further study. We then synthesized our notes and identified key takeaways from each conversation. We incorporate insights from the interviews throughout the paper to help supplement findings from the literature and fill gaps that remained after our review.

This paper presents key findings on what is known about the design, implementation, and effectiveness of parent-child visits. Though we use terms such as “effective” and “effectiveness” to describe aspects of parent-child visits, these terms only reflect the perspectives we heard from the subject matter experts and the information we gathered from our literature review. We did not collect any new data or conduct any new research to measure the effects of any visiting practices. It is also worth noting that we use the terms “visits” or “visiting” in this paper rather than “visitation.” The experts informed us that “visitation” has negative connotations among families affected by incarceration because of its association with government systems and agencies. By using “visits” and “visiting,” we hope to foster a more natural dialogue around parent-child visiting.

We begin with an overview of the importance of parent-child visiting and the known effects of visits on children and parents. We then discuss six key components of designing and implementing parent-child visiting programs in correctional settings and propose a set of recommendations for practitioners. We conclude with a proposed agenda that identifies areas warranting further research.

# Background

## Importance of Parent-Child Relationships

To fully understand the harmful effects of incarceration on the parent-child relationship, we must first recognize the importance of that relationship to a child's healthy development, which is underscored by attachment theory. Attachment theory is rooted in the idea that children should experience warm, intimate, and continuous connections with their parents or parental figures in a way that elicits satisfaction and enjoyment (Bowlby 1951). These relationships are crucial to a child's lifelong physical and psychological well-being. Attachment theory positions the parent-child relationship as the foundation on which children learn how to form and sustain healthy relationships with others: when a child's caregiver is warm and responsive to their needs, they learn to trust and depend on others.

Supportive relationships with adult caregivers help buffer children from environmental stressors, such as poverty, neighborhood violence, and unstable housing. When those relationships are disrupted, children are less likely to trust and feel strongly connected to their parents and caregivers (Bowlby 1960). This lack of attachment can have long-term, potentially devastating effects. When children are too young to fully understand why they are separated from an incarcerated parent, feelings of abandonment and rejection are often magnified (Flynn 2014). Without an opportunity to maintain a relationship with their parents, children will continue to experience harsh consequences (Gjelsvik, Dumont, and Nunn 2013). Some research suggests that, as a result, children of incarcerated parents are more likely to have insecure attachments to their incarcerated parents and primary caregivers (Poehlmann 2005; Poehlmann-Tynan 2015).

Parental incarceration is more than a temporary separation of child and parent, and incarceration affects children differently than other forms of parental loss (e.g., death, divorce, military deployment) because of the associated social stigma and the uncertainty surrounding the length of the separation (Arditti 2012; Murray, Farrington, and Sekol 2012; Phillips and Gates 2011). Caregivers and children affected by parental incarceration experience more trauma than other families (Arditti and Salva 2015), which can manifest as depression, anxiety, irritability, aggression, social isolation, difficulty sleeping, behavioral regression (especially in younger children), and an inability to regulate emotions and behaviors (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest 2013; Poehlmann 2005; Sack and Seidler 1978).

## Role of Parent-Child Visits

Parent-child visits can help mitigate the effects of parental incarceration (Arditti 2012; Fraser 2011; Johnston 1995; Poehlmann et al. 2010; Sack and Seidler 1978). Experts we interviewed indicated that many parents with substance abuse or mental health issues can receive treatment while in prison that allows them to better connect with their family members. This offers a clean slate for incarcerated parents and their families to work through the past and begin to move forward. Family members can also help the incarcerated parent plan for their future after release.

In-person, noncontact visits allow parents to speak to their children or other visitors behind a barrier that prevents physical contact. Experts maintain that noncontact visits make it difficult for family members to see or hear their loved ones, which combine with the general lack of privacy to create a poor experience. Further, a child might not understand why they cannot touch their parent, leading them to cry or otherwise misbehave in a way that prevents them from engaging with their parent. Children may also be exposed to negative interactions through visits occurring beside them.

Noncontact visits are stressful and potentially traumatic for children. Beckmeyer and Arditti (2014) conducted structured interviews with 69 incarcerated parents enrolled in a family strengthening program who received visits from a child between the ages of 5 and 18. They found that child misbehavior during visits led to parents reporting lower ratings of parent-child closeness, negating the potential benefits of the visits. This can be doubly harmful to children because many state correctional policies stipulate that children whose behavior cannot be controlled during visits may lose visiting privileges (Boudin, Stutz, and Littman 2013).

Contact visits allow parents to physically interact with their children (and possibly other family members). Research indicates that parent-child visits are most beneficial when they allow for physical contact, are offered in a child-friendly setting, are part of a family strengthening program, and provide proper emotional preparation and debriefing before and after (Arditti 2012; Fraser 2011; Johnston 1995; Peterson et al. 2015; Poehlmann et al. 2010; Sack and Seidler 1978). Experts also find that physical contact and privacy during visits benefit both children and parents and help them cope emotionally and reconnect with each other. For children specifically, contact visits can reduce feelings of abandonment and anxiety and promote emotional security by letting children know their parents are okay (Hairston 2007). This can benefit children's overall well-being and social adjustment by letting them express their feelings about being separated from their parent while receiving reassurance they are still wanted and loved (Arditti 2008; Poehlmann et al. 2010; Sack and Seidler 1978). Experts also report that children who participate in contact visits behave better in school.

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*We forget about the opportunity costs to children and their families and going to these places to go to a visit. I think the more we can build in opportunity, it's not just reducing risk. In what way, for example, is enhanced visitation an opportunity for youth?*  
—Joyce Arditti, professor, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

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But if implemented improperly, parent-child visits can harm or retraumatize children (Arditti 2008; Fraser 2011; Hairston 2007). For example, visits to high-security facilities, where children are often subjected to invasive search procedures, can be a traumatic experience (Arditti 2008; Fraser 2011; Hairston 2007). Experts noted that some visits may not provide a setting or amount of time conducive to addressing underlying issues between parents and children, negating any potential benefits. Frequent visits may also set unrealistic expectations for a parent's level of involvement after release. Experts also said that the more children visit a prison or jail, the more normalized the experience of incarceration becomes, which can be potentially harmful.

Parent-child visits can also have differential effects on parents. Experts noted that opportunities for parents to see their children while incarcerated can support parental attachment and promote a continued bond after release. They also explained that visits can motivate parents to comply with facility rules, leading to fewer disciplinary reports, and participate in correctional programming. Extant research shows that parents who receive more visits from their children have lower rates of recidivism after release (Cochran 2012, 2013; Duwe and Clark 2013; Hairston 1991; Pierce 2015; Poehlmann-Tynan 2015). Cochran (2013) examined the visiting patterns of over 2,000 people convicted of felonies serving at least 12 months in Florida state prisons between November 2000 and April 2002. He identified four patterns of visiting that had disparate effects on recidivism: (1) no visits (the person did not receive any visits while incarcerated), (2) near-entry visiting (visits were most frequent when someone was first incarcerated then tapered off), (3) near-release visiting (visits increased in the months before release), and (4) sustained visiting (visits occurred regularly throughout incarceration). Though most incarcerated people received no visits at all, people who received sustained visits were least likely to recidivate. Given the promising correlations between regular parent-child visits and reduced institutional misconduct and recidivism, visits could be an important motivator for improving parent outcomes during and after incarceration.

Conversely, experts indicated that some parents do not welcome visits and view them as potentially harmful to their relationship with their children. Parents may not want their children to see them in a correctional setting and might prefer to avoid in-person visits or to sever communication with their children entirely while incarcerated. Visits may cause them to feel shame for being incarcerated, and they may also have concerns about exposing their children to the stressful prison environment and the trauma of repeated separation. Programs can address these concerns by incorporating parent-child visits into a comprehensive family strengthening program, discussed in more detail below, that instructs parents, their children, and primary caregivers on the importance of visits and offers a therapeutic visiting environment for contact visits.

In sum, previous research and our interviews with experts suggest that parent-child visiting is neither innately harmful nor therapeutic. A confluence of family dynamics and systematic issues determines whether visits mitigate or exacerbate the separation and trauma a child experiences when their parent is incarcerated.

# Key Components of Visiting

Our literature review and expert interviews helped us identify several key components that can determine whether a visit will benefit incarcerated parents, children, and correctional practices or exacerbate the trauma already associated with incarceration. These include the type, structure, and frequency of the visit; collaboration with correctional agencies, administrators, and staff; the role of primary caregivers; respect for family dynamics; and use of gender-specific programming. The nature and components of visits may also vary between jail and prison settings. See box 2 for a discussion of visiting practices in jails versus prisons.

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## BOX 2

### Differences between Visits in Jails and Prisons

The structure, availability, and content of parent-child visits vary considerably between jails and prisons. Prisons typically offer more contact visits than jails, partly because of the different security and population factors of jails versus prisons. Prisons typically house people convicted of a felony and serving a sentence of one year or longer, but jails have more transient populations of people awaiting sentencing or serving short sentences. Thus, prisons are more suited to long-term services, which include comprehensive visiting and family strengthening programs.

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## Visit Type

Contact visits are one of the most beneficial types of visits for strengthening family relationships and allowing incarcerated parents and their children to interact in a developmentally appropriate and healthy way. These visits and the associated physical contact can improve parent-child attachment as well as a child's self-esteem and their behavior in school. Young children in particular may not understand the perceived withholding of affection during noncontact visits and may express themselves through problem behaviors (Boudin, Stutz, and Littman 2013; Poehlmann-Tynan 2015).

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*Many family members would talk about how punitive visitation policies, including having minimal opportunity to touch, was challenging...some young children found it difficult to see their parent in prison, particularly if they had to visit behind glass and use a phone to communicate. Caregivers described it being hard to keep their children still and complete a visit like that.*

*—Melinda Tasca, assistant professor, Sam Houston State University*

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Extended family visits allow children to visit their incarcerated parents and stay with them for a longer period of time and potentially overnight. Some facilities offer these visits through agency programming or in partnership with local community- or faith-based organizations. These programs are uncommon and vary in terms of which family members are allowed to visit, for how long, and where they stay. Sometimes there are costs associated with these visits in addition to costs for transportation and food (Boudin, Stutz, and Littman 2013; Herman-Stahl, Kan, and McKay 2008; Holt and Miller 1972; Howser, Grossman, and Macdonald 1984). The Family Reunion Program, which has operated in New York State for decades, allows eligible parents (i.e., those with lower security designations who are not assigned to a special housing unit and have not demonstrated a pattern of disruptive behavior) to receive extended visits from immediate family members in on-site, private mobile homes. An evaluation of this program in the 1980s showed lower recidivism rates among participating parents (7 percent lower than the general population released from the same facility). These parents were also more likely to live with family members after release and demonstrate increased closeness to their partners and children (Howser, Grossman, and Macdonald 1984).

In some facilities, overnight visits are restricted to preadolescent children. One example is the Minnesota Correctional Facility–Shakopee, a women’s facility that offers one overnight weekend visit each month for children under 11 years old. These visits are highly structured and situated within the Anthony Parenting Program, which requires mothers to attend parenting classes. But this program is only offered to women in the Anthony Living Unit, limiting enrollment to 12 mothers and their children. Once children age out of overnight visits, they can participate in the teen group, which offers a support group for incarcerated mothers with children between the ages of 12 and 17 and one all-day visit for their children each month. These visits are also highly structured with age-appropriate activities (Shlafer and Poehlmann 2010). See box 3 for a discussion of nursery programs in several women’s facilities.

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### BOX 3

#### Correctional Nursery Programs

Some women's correctional facilities have nursery programs that allow infants to spend the first several months or early years of their life with their incarcerated mothers. One such institution, Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women in New York, allows some mothers to live with their infants through their first 18 months. Many of these nursery programs also include wraparound services for mothers and infants. Evaluations of these programs, not typically seen as a type of visit, show infants who lived with their mothers during their first year demonstrated higher levels of attachment than infants who did not (Boudin, Stutz, and Littman 2013; Christian 2009; Fraser 2011).<sup>a</sup> Though these types of programs are rare and found almost exclusively in prisons, the Rose M. Singer Center on Rikers Island offers a nursery program for mothers jailed in New York City.

<sup>a</sup>"A Look at Prison Nurseries Worldwide," Associated Press, May 25, 2016, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/b98167faa4944029a1a194269a7b6d7b/look-prison-nurseries-nationwide>.

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Video visiting is a new, web-based method families use to communicate with their incarcerated loved ones. Video visits can eliminate some challenges of conventional visiting, such as the distance and cost of travel, and may be less stressful and traumatic for children. Experts suggested that younger children may be less confused by video visits given the widespread use of video technology such as Skype and FaceTime. Video visits also offer an accessible means of communication for people who are deaf or hearing impaired and cannot communicate via telephone.<sup>3</sup> Video visiting may be a solution for families who cannot visit in person and for caregivers who wish to hide a parent's incarceration from their children.

But video visits can be expensive and suffer from unreliable, low-quality video connections. In some jails and prisons, video visits must still take place inside the facility, and families must spend the time and resources traveling to the facility without the benefit of a face-to-face visit. Some reports show video visits are shorter, on average, than in-person visits and can end abruptly with no warning before families have a chance to say goodbye (Poehlmann-Tynan 2015).<sup>4</sup> Experts have seen families grow frustrated with poor Internet connections or computers that do not work properly. Video feeds during these visits can be unclear because of low-quality images or poor camera positioning. Thus, video visits may be a viable supplement and useful option for some families but they should not replace in-person visits entirely (Council on Crime and Justice 2006; Folk et al. 2012; Fulcher 2013;). Experts agree and



recommend that video visits are most effective when they involve the whole family and are used in tandem with therapeutic support.

## Visit Structure

Parent-child visits are often unstructured and allow time for general conversation between parents and children. But according to experts, visits are an underused opportunity for therapeutic intervention, and certain structural components should be included to maximize their potential effectiveness (Beyer, Blumenthal-Guigui, and Krupat 2010). Parent-child visits appear to be most effective when part of a larger family strengthening program rather than a stand-alone activity. In particular, therapy and coaching offered in parallel with recurring visits can help parents prepare themselves mentally and emotionally for visits (Beyer, Blumenthal-Guigui, and Krupat 2010). Services may include parenting classes, coached telephone calls, letter writing, and case management for parents, children, and family members. Research shows visits included as part of a suite of services can lead to improved parental attachment and child self-esteem, better school behavior, and lower dropout rates (Fraser 2011).

Including visits in a parenting or family-focused program allows program staff to build rapport with parents, get to know their situation, and offer guidance and solutions. This helps parents feel comfortable asking questions and debriefing with program staff after visits. Experts noted that building relationships with parents encourages practitioners to give parents feedback on how to improve their interactions with their children and helps parents be open to receiving that feedback. Visits offered alongside parenting classes can also be used to practice concepts and skills parents learn in class.

Incorporating visits into a larger family strengthening program also allows staff to tailor services to each parent's level of readiness to reunify with their family. Experts in the child welfare field familiar with the parent-child reunification process noted that families may not immediately be ready for visits and reunification. Parents may complete a parenting class or receive treatment for substance abuse issues but still be unable to demonstrate what they can do differently to protect and care for their own children. Visit coaching can help parents articulate their children's unique developmental needs, recognize their own parenting strengths, and develop coping strategies to better handle their emotions as well as empower them to plan and prepare for visits, (Beyer 2008).

An example of this approach is the Family Support program in the Allegheny County Jail in Pennsylvania. Family Support embeds its contact visits in a responsible parenting program that includes six weeks of gender-specific parenting classes with a structured curriculum. After parents complete

their classes, they make at least two coached telephone calls to their children or families. Parents are then eligible to participate in monthly contact visits. These hour-long visits take place in a child-friendly room with play rugs, children's books, toys, games, and other age-appropriate materials.

Experts emphasized that visits should offer developmentally appropriate activities for children of all relevant age groups, including playing with toys and games, reading books, and making art and crafts. Several experts discussed the therapeutic benefits of art activities. Experts also said that having a therapeutic component for the child or having a child therapist or licensed social worker present in the visiting room may help parents and children realize the full benefits of the visit. These trained staff members can help answer questions and intervene in family interactions as necessary.

Experts echoed the idea that correctional agencies should also think critically about physical spaces and settings (Peterson et al. 2015). Correctional facilities are typically not designed to accommodate contact visits that are developmentally appropriate for children. But research suggests that visits held in a "non-institutional," child-friendly setting help mitigate the potentially negative effects of visiting (Arditti 2008). Sturges and Al-Khattar (2009) interviewed families visiting loved ones in jail and found they were generally dissatisfied with visiting room areas, a sentiment often reflected or magnified in children's behavior. To improve visiting experiences, families recommended longer, more frequent visits, more "humane" treatment from correctional staff, and more designated visiting space (Sturges and Al-Khattar 2009).

Visiting rooms can generally be made more welcoming and child friendly if the walls are painted and decorated and toys, books, play mats, and crafts are made available (though facilities vary widely in terms of what they will allow). Prison or jail lobbies equipped with children's books and toys make the facility feel more inviting to children and caregivers as they wait. As an example, Lutheran Social Services, a nonprofit organization in South Dakota, worked collaboratively with the South Dakota Department of Corrections to paint murals on visiting room walls in state correctional facilities. Organization staff members also brought in books and toys for children to use during visits.

Experts noted that security policies should be developmentally appropriate and have children's best interests in mind. Prisons and jails primarily focus on institutional safety and order, not strengthening families, and extensive and invasive search procedures before a visit can be confusing and stressful for children. Facility and program staff members must work together to develop appropriate policies that still satisfy the facility's security concerns. Community Works West, a community-based service provider that operates the One Family program in the San Francisco County Jail, has its family counselors search children before visits. Counselors greet children and pat them

down in a way that adheres to the jail's security policies while minimizing potential stress. Trained staff members are also present during visits to observe and provide support as needed. According to several experts, the presence of program staff members rather than uniformed correctional officers, who may be more intimidating to children, helps create an atmosphere that encourages more natural and less stressful parent-child interaction.

A final key element of parent-child visits is how parents and children say "goodbye." Experts highlighted the importance of ending visits using carefully designed practices that help families and children mentally transition out of the visit and prepare for what comes next. Likewise, it is important to give advance warning of the visit ending and to make the exit as efficient as possible, not allowing children or family members to go back into the visiting room. Some programs allow families to develop their own goodbye ritual, and others partner with community-based organizations or service providers to read to children, sing songs, or play music at the end of visits. Other practices include giving the child a toy or photograph taken during the visit and ending the visit with a kiss, hug, and wave goodbye.

## Frequency and Length of Visits

Experts noted that the frequency and length of parent-child visits can vary from program to program. Some facilities allow multiple visits a week, but others only allow one or two visits each month. Visits can last up to several hours, again varying by program. One Family, for example, grants fathers a single one-and-a-half-hour visit each week and mothers a single two-hour visit (because there are fewer mothers in the facility). However, the actual frequency of visits typically depends on a family's proximity to the facility. A parent might receive several visits a month if their family is within driving distance of the jail or prison, but parents in facilities several hours away—or in another state entirely—may only receive one or two visits a year, if any.

Some experts said that longer, more frequent visits in supportive, child-friendly environments create opportunities for sober and attentive parents to repair potentially damaged relationships with their children. Still, there is little empirical evidence about the benefits of specific lengths or frequency of visits.

Experts suggested that more frequent visits can also result in the *secondary prisonization experience*, in which the correctional environment and culture become normalized for children and families of incarcerated people. If a child internalizes their parent's punishment as their own, they may encounter significant difficulties at home and in school. Likewise, a child who spends a significant amount of free time visiting an incarcerated parent has fewer opportunities to engage in other developmentally

appropriate and beneficial activities, such as sports, extracurricular activities, and meaningful friendships with peers.

The length and frequency of visits may depend on the specifics of the parent-child relationship. Some of the behaviors or circumstances that led to the parent's incarceration may make frequent visits difficult or even detrimental. This is especially true in cases of domestic abuse or other complex relationships between parents and their children. Experts recommended that correctional staff members work with parents and children to provide appropriate opportunities for visits while remaining attentive to the needs of each family. Correctional staff members should also try to ensure that the visiting schedule is predictable, allowing parents and children to plan and prepare for visits ahead of time. This reduces potential ambiguity and anxiety for children because they know when they will see their parents again.

## Collaboration with Correctional Administrators and Staff

To help parents and children realize the full benefit of visits, visiting program staff members, such as community-based service providers and other practitioners, must collaborate with correctional facility administrators and staff. According to the experts we interviewed, securing the buy-in and support of staff and demonstrating the benefits of parent-child visiting is perhaps the most important element of partnering with correctional departments. Though correctional departments largely focus on ensuring safety and order, administrators are also concerned with reducing misbehavior in facilities and recidivism in the reentry population. Some correctional administrators recognize the benefits of parent-child visiting and want to improve their current environments to be more family-friendly and provide greater opportunities for visiting. But experts also highlighted the challenges of changing prison or jail culture among officers and administrators, particularly when a correctional agency has not completely bought into the benefits of visiting or when officers are not trained to properly communicate and interact with families. Service providers who understand the perspectives of correctional staff members should work alongside them to address these challenges and shift the culture in prisons and jails.

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*I think the culture change is a key success, when you think about a jail that has never allowed inmates to touch each other and to know we've broken through the barrier of fear of contraband, fear of some incident, to correctional officers actually relaxing on visits. ...Through literature and evidence, you can make the culture change. We had the deputy warden and the captains read about the trauma and separation, read about the importance of touch...education, information is the most important tool to make this culture change.*

—Amy Kroll, administrator of reentry services, Allegheny County Jail

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Experts also said that correctional agencies should be adaptive and willing to change policies to accommodate families. For example, agencies might be better served working with their community-based partners to help families navigate the sometimes cumbersome approval process. Service providers can ensure families know what to expect during a visit and help correctional agencies create age-appropriate and minimally invasive search and security protocols to reduce the stress children and caregivers may experience.

## Role of Primary Caregivers

Another essential component of parent-child visiting is the role of primary caregivers, who can be biological parents, stepparents, other relatives, or foster parents. Primary caregivers have guardianship over a child during parental incarceration and must make choices to protect the child's health and well-being. They serve as both surrogate parents (either stepping in to fill one parental role or to be both mother and father) and gatekeepers to the parent-child relationship. It often falls to the primary caregiver to explain to a child why they are separated from their incarcerated parent. Some caregivers provide simple explanations (e.g., "Mommy is in a time-out"), but others provide an alternative explanation (e.g., their parent is attending college, being hospitalized, or serving in the military) or simply offer no explanation at all (Murray, Farrington, and Sekol 2012; Poehlmann 2005). Incarceration can be difficult for children to understand, and children who do not appropriately understand their parent's incarceration are unlikely to ever visit (Murray, Farrington, and Sekol 2012).

Each family has its own history and unique circumstances surrounding the parent's incarceration. Parent-child visits are not an appropriate option for some families, and some parents may not

immediately be ready for visits. Primary caregivers must sometimes make the difficult choice of keeping children from visiting because of the trauma and stress involved or to protect their health and safety.

Researchers note the parent-caregiver relationship is one of the greatest barriers to parent-child visits (Arditti and Savla 2015; Christian 2009; Council on Crime and Justice 2006; Fraser 2011; Murray, Farrington, and Sekol 2012; Swanson et al. 2013). Children are more likely to visit an parent when caregivers are supportive and have a strong coparenting relationship with the incarcerated parent (Council on Crime and Justice 2006; Herman-Stahl, Kan, and McKay 2008; Swanson et al. 2013; Tasca 2016). A strained parent-caregiver relationship or history of violence between the parent and the caregiver often preclude any potential visits; if visits do occur, this strained relationship can negate any potential therapeutic benefits (Arditti 2008).

Practitioners differ in how they approach including caregivers in parent-child visits. Our interviews revealed two viewpoints. When caregivers are present, the entire family can reconnect and interact with the parent. But visits limited to just the parent and child allow for more one-on-one time together. Experts noted that even in cohesive families, children still want one-on-one time with their parents. One-on-one visits might also be a less stressful option if the parent-caregiver relationship is strained.

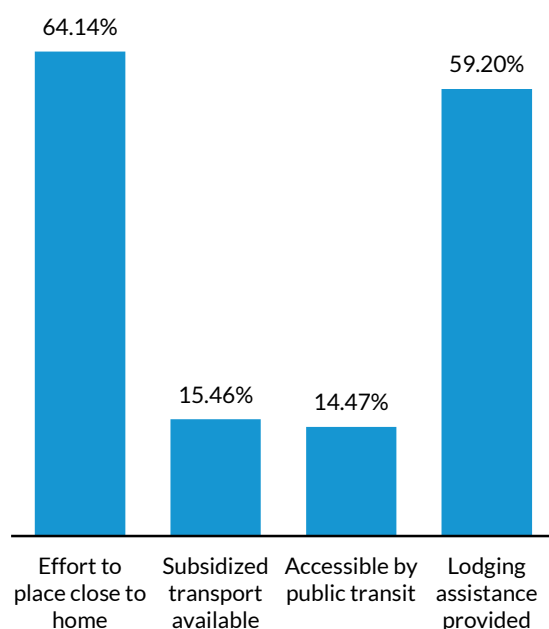
Experts said that regardless of whether the caregiver is present, it is important to reduce their stress level and provide support before, during, and after a visit. Experts suggested facility administrators post their visiting policies online and inside the building, address any questions, and inform family members in advance if a parent is unable or not allowed to participate in a visit on a particular day (e.g., as a result of a disciplinary, medical, security, or other issue). Experts also recommended that correctional agencies train staff members to interact with caregivers in a respectful manner, which may lead them to be more open and willing to participate in visits.

Parent-child visiting programs are more effective when they support caregivers and reduce their barriers to visiting (Poehlmann et al. 2010). Enhanced support for caregivers might be material (e.g., transportation assistance or child care) or psychological (e.g., coaching or debriefing). Caregivers often spend a lot of time and money traveling to correctional facilities far from their homes or in rural areas not accessible by public transportation (Cochran 2013; Cochran and Mears 2013; Council on Crime and Justice 2006). Further, caregivers often already have strained emotional and financial resources even before assuming responsibility for a child, and children can become sad, irritable, or misbehave when separated from their parent after visits, making parenting difficult (Hairston 2007). If caregivers find the visiting experience difficult and dissatisfying, they—and the children they care for—might be less willing to return.

Support services and programming can help primary caregivers learn how to better support children at home and during visits. Studies have shown that caregivers who attend support groups experience a decrease in depression and depressive symptoms, which results in increased family organization and cohesion (Fraser 2011; Miller et al. 2013; Shlafer and Poehlmann 2010). Some experts also pointed to the benefits of incarcerated parents forming informal support networks among themselves. Primary caregivers can do this as well. These groups provide communities in which parents or caregivers help each other process and debrief after visits.

Figure 2 shows the share of correctional facilities that provided different types of support to caregivers and families, based on a national survey conducted in 2006. Though the survey does not reflect broader changes in correctional practices over the past decade, these numbers indicate that most state correctional agencies made an effort to place incarcerated parents in facilities close to home and provide lodging assistance to visiting families. Fewer facilities provided financial support to families to offset travel expenses (Hoffman, Byrd, and Kightlinger 2010).

**FIGURE 2**  
**Support Offered to Families in State Correctional Facilities**



**Source:** Heath Hoffman, Amy Byrd, and Alex Kightlinger, “Prison Programs and Services for Incarcerated Parents and their Underage Children: Results of a National Survey of Correctional Facilities,” *Prison Journal* 90, no. 4 (2010): 397–416.

**Notes:** Values reflect share of reporting facilities. The authors of the study collected these data by mailing surveys to the wardens or superintendents of 999 state-run adult correctional facilities between February and June of 2006 with a response rate of 39 percent. All states are represented except Florida, Illinois, and New York.

## Respecting Family Dynamics

Our literature review and interviews identified several barriers related to family dynamics that may undermine the potential benefits of parent-child visiting (Poehlmann-Tynan 2015). Families can be complex, and defining the family unit for the purpose of service provision can be challenging in the case of blended families or stepfamilies, multigenerational families, foster families, or families in which the primary caregiver is not a parent. Children also often react differently depending on whether their father or mother is incarcerated.

Children of incarcerated fathers are likely to live with their mothers and often experience a significant decrease in financial stability (Foster and Hagan 2007; The Pew Charitable Trusts 2010). In these situations, the mother's attitude toward the incarcerated father may affect whether the child can visit the father (Swanson et al. 2013). Because mothers are often the gatekeepers of the father-child relationship, a positive attitude can result in more frequent visits and greater overall paternal involvement during and after incarceration (Swanson et al. 2013).

On the other hand, children of incarcerated mothers often live with family members other than their fathers or are placed in foster care, which can lead to greater instability (Glaze and Maruschak 2008; The Pew Charitable Trusts 2010). These arrangements present unique barriers to visiting. For example, many facilities require that children be accompanied by a legal guardian; if a child is in the care of grandparents, other extended family, or family friends, they may be unable to visit (Boudin, Stutz, and Littman 2013). Likewise, a child in foster care may not have case workers or foster parents who support visiting, especially if the child was neglected or abused by the parent or otherwise a victim of the crime that led to incarceration. Children in foster care are also kept from visiting their parents when the child protection agency has moved to sever parental rights. Finally, state and federal welfare policies such as the Adoption and Safe Families Act create obstacles to reunifying children in foster care with their mothers (Christian 2009; Wallace 2012).



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*I would still say that [incarcerated mothers] need a lot of support. The things that led to their incarceration also interfere with their ability to be an effective parent. So how do we take advantage of this safe space when they're sober to learn how to be an effective parent? And it's more than just, "Let's have contact with our children," because there's a lot of hurt, and those bonds need to be repaired in the context of [the visit].*

*—Rebecca Shlafer, assistant professor, University of Minnesota*

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Experts stressed that these underlying family dynamics can affect whether visits can improve parent-child relationships. Families are often dysfunctional, and many parents have poor relationships with their children even before incarceration. A father who did not take an active role in his child's life before prison may have a hard time building a strong relationship with his child once incarcerated, especially without a strong family strengthening program in the facility. Thus, it is critical that visiting programs be flexible enough to meet specific family needs, which may include varying levels of contact, communication, or support. Program staff members must be trained to deal with family trauma and mental health concerns and to know how and when to intervene appropriately.

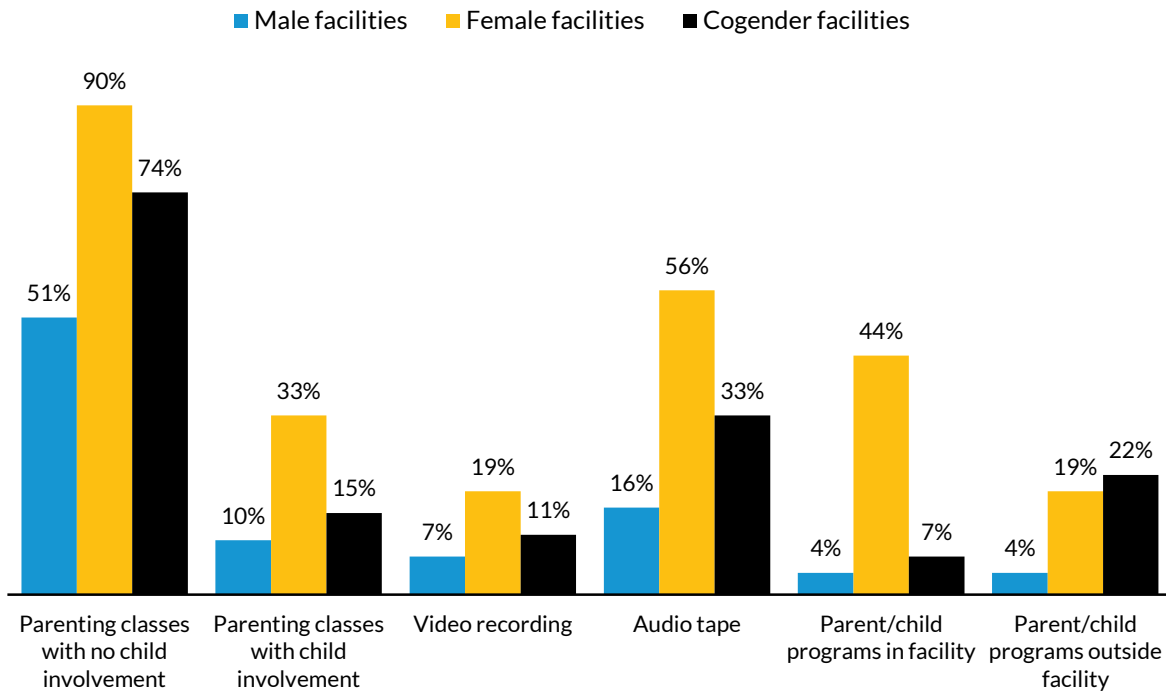
Because family visits are often short and infrequent, parents and children may idealize their time together and neglect to work on underlying issues or prepare for a relationship after the parent returns home. Parents and children may develop unrealistic expectations for a parent's ability to communicate and relate with their children after release. In reality, children may not see their parent after release or may be disappointed if family reunification does not meet their expectations. Experts explained that program staff members should work with parents to unearth and address underlying issues, work on these issues to strengthen parent-child relationships, and set realistic short- and long-term goals.

## Gender-Specific Programming

Another key component of parent-child visiting is the gender of the incarcerated parent. Studies show the parent's gender affects their proximity to family, their access to parenting programs in jails and prisons, the frequency of visits, and parental involvement after release (Hoffman, Byrd, and Kightlinger 2010; Swanson et al. 2013). Women's facilities are more likely to have programming for parents. As shown in figure 3, a 2006 survey of state prisons found that, relative to male facilities, women's facilities

offer more parent-child programs inside and outside the facility, programs involving audio and video recordings, and parenting classes as well as more transportation subsidies and separate family visiting areas (Hoffman, Byrd, and Kightlinger 2010). Though mothers may have more access to programming, there are fewer women’s correctional facilities, so it is less likely a mother will be placed in a facility close to her family.

**FIGURE 3**  
**Programs Offered in State Correctional Facilities, by Gender**



**Source:** Heath Hoffman, Amy Byrd, and Alex Kightlinger, “Prison Programs and Services for Incarcerated Parents and their Underage Children: Results of a National Survey of Correctional Facilities,” *Prison Journal* 90, no. 4 (2010): 397–416.

**Notes:** Values reflect share of reporting facilities. The authors of the study collected these data by mailing surveys to the wardens or superintendents of 999 state-run adult correctional facilities between February and June of 2006 with a response rate of 39 percent. All states are represented except Florida, Illinois, and New York.

Other research has shown that incarcerated women are more likely than incarcerated men to receive any visits from children, family, and friends (Connor and Tewskbury 2015). Studies attribute this difference to mothers’ more common role as primary caregivers who may have more intimate relationships with their children. Estimates indicate that 80 percent of incarcerated mothers nationwide have some level of contact with their children in the form of letters, phone calls, or visits, and 27 percent of mothers receive visits from their children at least once a month (Mignon and

Ransford 2012). Experts echoed this sentiment, commenting that mothers and their children interact more and show more affection during visits compared to fathers. Some attributed this to mothers being more motivated to repair relationships with their children and families.

In contrast, incarcerated fathers are far less likely to have access to parenting programs. As shown in figure 3, Hoffman, Byrd, and Kightlinger (2010) found parenting classes that did not involve child participation were the most common form of programming available to fathers, but even these programs were offered in only 51 percent of male-only facilities. Though availability remains limited, there is an increasing focus on implementing responsible fatherhood programs in prisons and jails.

One such program is the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood initiative, spearheaded by the Office of Family Assistance in the US Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families. Since 2006, the Administration for Children and Families has supported an array of nonprofit and community- and faith-based organizations to provide fathers, couples, and families with services designed to help build strong relationships and healthy parenting skills. A group of these organizations has focused on providing a suite of services to currently and formerly incarcerated fathers and their families. These services include classes on responsible parenting, healthy relationships, and economic stability as well as parent-child visits, support groups, and case management among others. Their goal is to help stabilize fathers and their families, support family reunification, help fathers reach economic self-sufficiency, and reduce recidivism (Fontaine, Rossman, and Cramer 2015).

# Recommendations for Practice

Based on our literature review and conversations with experts in the field, we identified several recommendations for implementing parent-child visiting. Experts largely agreed that although more visiting opportunities are needed in correctional facilities, we must also improve how visiting is implemented.

**Facilities should offer more opportunities for parent-child visits, especially contact visits.**

Because of the potential of parent-child visiting to affect positive outcomes, experts cited a need to offer contact visits more frequently in jails and prisons and to make these visits available to more parents. Practitioners and correctional staff should work together to create more welcoming environments for parents and children through child-friendly visiting rooms and search procedures, clearly communicated visiting policies, and family-focused and developmentally appropriate activities.

**Programs should offer more support to children and caregivers.** A significant gap still exists in the support offered to children and caregivers before, during, and after visits. Experts urged programs to offer more therapeutic support for family members alongside material support such as transportation assistance and child care. This would help reduce the stress children and caregivers experience when visiting incarcerated family members and would help maximize the benefits of visits. Experts also encouraged programs to provide more services to families in the community rather than in program offices to make services more accessible to families.

**To improve visiting practices, listen to incarcerated parents and their families about their needs and what types of services they find helpful.** Programs may want to consider interviewing family members and tailoring their services accordingly. However, experts noted that visits can be improved simply by making them more therapeutic and natural. This can be done by providing professional health or psychological resources during visits to coach families through the experience and help them address trauma or stress, improve communication, and set realistic expectations for reunification.

**Practitioners and correctional agencies should provide ongoing staff training.** Correctional staff members should be trained to appropriately communicate and engage with incarcerated parents, their children, and the children's caregivers. For example, staff members should be cognizant of the confusion many families face when trying to navigate visiting policies and work with them to help them understand the rules and procedures. Program staff members should also be trained to interact with children in an age-appropriate manner.

**Practitioners and correctional agencies should understand how families function and be prepared to work with families experiencing trauma and stress.** All families are different and experience different levels of dysfunction, and programs should understand that visits may not always be the best intervention. Therefore, staff members should be trained in alternative interventions. If visits are deemed helpful, staff members should know how to intervene and provide appropriate support.

**Practitioners should engage with research and evidence to help inform and guide implementation and continuous quality improvement of parent-child visiting.** This can be done by reading the extant literature on parent-child visits and through program evaluations or assessments. Programs should always be improving their data collection and evaluation efforts to better document outcomes. This will help practitioners continuously adapt and modify their services to help strengthen family relationships, improve parent-child communication, and provide opportunities for appropriate interaction.

# Recommendations for Research

Based on our literature review and our interviews with experts in the field, we propose the following research agenda to help expand the knowledge base on parent-child visiting practices.

**Research the prevalence of and variance in visiting practices.** The term “visit” is used in different contexts to mean different things, and the field would benefit from a better working definition of parent-child visiting, including the components that make up a visit. Specifying what a visit entails in different contexts will help practitioners exchange ideas and build support for better programs. Future research should assess visiting practices in all 50 states to document the prevalence of different visiting methods and the variance across facilities.

**Examine features of parent-child visits and evaluate their impacts.** This paper describes different types of visiting and the structure and components that make visits beneficial. But existing studies on visiting practices are small and not generalizable, and few empirical studies identify the features that make visits effective. More research is needed on the effects of different visiting approaches on parent and child outcomes before implementing or scaling interventions. The resulting evidence could demonstrate what works and for whom. Potential research questions for future examination include the following:

- What are the quality and nature of different types of visiting practices?
- How does implementation vary across facilities?
- What are the experiences of children and caregivers?
- What types of visits and visiting components produce the best outcomes?
- What subgroup differences exist?
- What contextual and institutional factors facilitate or impede effective visiting experiences?

Future studies could examine repeated trauma patterns among children and determine what aspects of visits contribute to children’s resiliency and family reunification. These findings would help develop a set of best or promising practices.

**Generate new knowledge to show the measurable impact of parental incarceration on children’s development, school achievement, and adult success.** Parental incarceration is not one-dimensional. The context surrounding the parent’s arrest, the judicial process, and the length of separation are unique in every case. Additional factors such as the child’s age and gender, the quality of the parent-

child relationship before incarceration, the presence of a supportive caregiver, and the stability and quality of the child's support network all play a role in how incarceration affects children. More research is needed to account for these and other influential factors that may exacerbate separation effects or buffer children from the stress associated with parental incarceration. Though rigorous quantitative studies can test hypothesized effects, qualitative data are particularly important for capturing the nuances of individual circumstances and underlying themes, such as resiliency and coping mechanisms, that can offer explanations for variations in quantitative results. Given the complexity of these issues, we see the value of interdisciplinary research and evaluation teams that bridge the fields of justice policy, child welfare, social work, psychology, and child development.

**Develop additional measures and improve data collection.** The complexity of studying parent-child visits in correctional facilities presents a challenge to rigorous data collection. More evaluation studies are needed to build the evidence base, but the field would also benefit from developing additional measurements. Identifying best practices regarding data collection measures and methods, such as use of an observational tool to measure the quality of parent-child interactions and the visiting setting, could also help advance the field.

**Strengthen relationships between practitioners and researchers.** Collaboration with practitioners and correctional staff will be important for any future research efforts. Securing their buy in and gathering their perspectives will help researchers design effective studies. Research findings should be disseminated more broadly and strategically communicated to key stakeholders, including policymakers and practitioners. Studies published in academic journals and in books often do not reach practitioners responsible for implementing programs and policy changes, so collaboration among researchers and practitioners is a critical step in developing best practices.

# Notes

1. This number only includes parents who were living with their children at the time of their arrest, and is therefore an underrepresentation of the issue.
2. “About Adverse Childhood Experiences,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last modified April 1, 2016, [https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about\\_ace.html](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about_ace.html).
3. Mike Ludwig, “No Way to Call Home: Incarcerated Deaf People Are Locked in a Prison Inside a Prison,” *Truthout*, August 22, 2016, <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/37308-no-way-to-call-home-incarcerated-deaf-people-are-locked-in-a-prison-inside-a-prison>.
4. Jack Smith IV, “The End of Prison Visitation,” *Mic*, May 5, 2016, <https://mic.com/articles/142779/the-end-of-prison-visitation>.



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## STATEMENT OF INDEPENDENCE

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