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Opting Out: The Role of Identity, Capital, and Agency in Prison Visitation

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An emerging body of research suggests that prison visitation has implications for better understanding inmate institutional and post-release behavior, but not all inmates receive visits. The goal of the current study is to document barriers to visitation from the inmate perspective and describe the perspectives of those who receive very few or no visits. We also describe how inmate perceptions of visits impacts the way one does time and negotiates subsequent visitation. Using data from qualitative interviews, we find evidence that inmates make willful decisions when negotiating prison visits that are guided by one's sense of self and further colored by the perceived social and economic strain on families. Our results challenge the perception of a universally positive visitation experience, and introduce the role of inmate choice in selecting into and out of prison visits.

Keywords prison; social capital; identity; agency; visitation

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Introduction

Prisons hold more than 1.5 million individuals in the United States (Carson & Anderson, 2016) and nearly all inmates will eventually return to the community. Experiences during imprisonment have important implications for buffering potentially challenging transitions post-incarceration (Duwe & Clark, 2013; Visher, 2011), and there is evidence that prison visits may benefit inmates and institutions (Bales & Mears, 2008; Cochran, 2013; Duwe & Clark, 2013; Siennick, Mears, & Bales, 2013). Visitation during incarceration can produce a variety of modest, positive results including: bolstering social support, reducing recidivism, and increasing internal order and safety within the institution (Arditti, 2005; Berg & Huebner, 2011; Cochran & Mears, 2013; Dixey & Woodall, 2012; Mears, Cochran, Siennick, & Bales, 2012).

Visits are also consequential for the families and the support systems of inmates. Qualitative studies provide a more nuanced description of the visitation experience, typically from the viewpoint of the visitor. Researchers have culled qualitative data studies from interviews with institution visitors (Arditti, 2005; Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Christian, 2005; Christian, Mellow, & Thomas, 2006; Comfort, 2003; Fishman, 1990) and records from prison visitation logs (Fuller, 1993; Schafer, 1994; Tewksbury & Connor, 2012). Qualitative narratives generally highlight the economic and emotional strain felt by families when coordinating trips to correctional institutions, yet, the work also centers around the necessity of prison visits for maintaining familial social bonds. Together, the extant research highlights the complexity of the visitation experience and the necessity of studying all involved.

In this study, we consider visitation from the inmate standpoint. The emphasis on the inmate experience is ideal as little work has considered how visitation may affect doing time, particularly in terms of potential negative impacts (but see Dixey & Woodall, 2012; Owen, 1998). We also describe the distinct experiences of men who received infrequent or no visitation, a population that has been largely overlooked in prior research. We first focus our analysis on inmate perceptions of visitation, with an emphasis on documenting the nature of the visitation experience itself. We then describe how inmates negotiate future visits based on their perceptions of the visitation experience. Existing research has assumed that inmates have little power in determining the nature and frequency of visits. The insights from the qualitative interviews underscore how inmates handle the challenges of visitation from a pragmatic perspective, but also how the visitation experience can have negative implications for one's sense of self.

For our study, we use data culled from qualitative interviews with a sample of men released from prison in Missouri. We draw on existing theoretical work on agency, identity, and social capital to document the visitation experience from an inmate perspective. By considering inmate perceptions of visitation,

and querying individuals about variation in the frequency of visits, we provide a thorough assessment of the nuances and challenges of the visit experience.

Background

Research on visitation experiences varies in terms of measurement, methodology, sample, and outcome. We briefly provide an overview of existing research below including the theoretical foundation of these works.

Visitation Outcomes

Extant research suggests that prison visitation can enhance outcomes for inmates and institutions alike. Several theoretical perspectives provide explanations for the benefits of visitation such as informal social control through the strengthening of social bonds (Hirschi, 1969) and the promotion and preservation of social capital (Sampson & Laub, 1993). In general, most theoretical approaches predict positive outcomes from visitation, which has been substantiated in some empirical investigations. Consistent with the theoretical literature, the existing quantitative research on visitation suggests that visits can have modest effects on recidivism and institutional behavior. Researchers found that visitation can inhibit institutional misconduct (Cochran, 2012; Lindsey et al., 2015; Siennick et al., 2013), particularly when it is consistent over time (Cochran, 2012). Visitation also has modest post-incarceration benefits (Bales & Mears, 2008; Cochran, 2013; Duwe & Clark, 2013). For example, Bales and Mears (2008) found that receiving any visitation decreased recidivism by nearly one-third, and that more frequent visitation had a large, negative effect on reoffending.

Several factors can inhibit visitation, with transportation and lack of economic capital cited as the most prominent barriers (Christian, 2005; Monahan, Goldweber, & Cauffman, 2011; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005). Prisons are typically built in rural areas, yet offenders often reside in urban areas prior to incarceration (Duwe & Clark, 2013; Mills, 2005). Clark and Duwe (2017) found an average distance of about 130 miles between the institution and visitor. Research suggests more distal placement inhibits visitation as greater geographical separation increases travel costs for gasoline, food, and hotels (Clark & Duwe, 2017; Cochran, Mears, Bales, & Stewart, 2016; Tasca, 2015). Additionally, reliable transportation is not always available to potential visitors, public transportation systems rarely include far-away prisons, and potential visitors may not possess a vehicle (Christian, 2005). In order to arrange a visit, family and friends may have to take time off from work, pay for childcare, and incur travel expenses (Christian, 2005; Christian et al., 2006; Dixey & Woodall, 2012).

Further, visitation experiences are not always perceived as a positive experience and can be linked to increased levels of strain for the inmate and visitor (Arditti, 2003; Christian, 2005; Dixey & Woodall, 2012; Fishman, 1990). Recent scholarship suggests that the strain of visitation can affect inmate behavior. For example, Siennick and colleagues (2013) draw upon tenets of strain theory to explain inmate misconduct post-visitation (Agnew, 1992). Utilizing longitudinal data to examine behavior patterns leading up to and following visits, they found that misconduct decreased preceding a visit but increased immediately following. While a visit may have had some anticipation benefit, they hypothesize that continual separation increases strain and can produce negative behavioral outcomes.

Visitors also experience strain during the visitation process. By nature, prisons are heavily regulated institutions characterized by a somewhat unwelcoming atmosphere. It is inevitable that visitors face institutional barriers or hardship as the visitation process includes efforts by the prison to maintain institutional safety. Visitors are required to adhere to wardrobe conditions, pass through metal detectors, and must conform to institutional rules and regulations of conduct that can be intimidating and vague (Arditti, 2003; Braman, 2004; Christian, 2005; Comfort, 2003; Dixey & Woodall, 2012; Duwe & Clark, 2013; Fishman, 1990; Mills, 2005). Comfort (2003) specifically characterizes these events as "secondary prisonization" of the visiting party, which may limit the appeal of visitation. If the visitors are unable to adhere to institutional rules, they may be denied entrance, yet, visitation rules vary over time and by institution and changes may not be communicated to visitors (Arditti, 2003; Comfort, 2003; Duwe & Clark, 2013).

Exchanges between visitor and inmate can also be stress inducing rather than comforting. Fishman (1990) argued that visitation lacks "authentic communication," as privacy for the parties is non-existent and time is often short. Visitors detailed the emotional hardship of the interaction through their descriptions of anxiety, worry, and exhaustion, and the quality of the visit was denoted as artificial and emotionally draining (Christian, 2005; Comfort, 2003; Dixey & Woodall, 2012). In addition, the end of a visit can introduce stress as re-separation can be a reminder of the loss and estrangement caused by incarceration (Christian, 2005; Fishman, 1990). These accounts have been almost exclusively documented from the perspective of the visitor, though it stands to reason inmates may have similar negative feelings regarding visitation.

Despite the challenges of prison visitation, many families continue to overcome both material and emotional barriers, and scholars have highlighted the mechanisms by which individuals make the active choice to visit (Christian, 2005). However, inmates have largely been portrayed as if they are passive actors who have little control over visits. There are several theoretical mechanisms that may explain inmate responses to prison visits. Early prison work was centered on an understanding of the pains of imprisonment and the effect of prison life on one's sense of self, social role, and related behavior (Clemmer, 1958; Sykes, 1958). This work suggests that inmates willfully make decisions

about their behaviors and actively engage in identity management within the constraints and often in response to the institutional environment. Impression management is particularly important within a very rigid and hyper-masculine prison environment (Wacquant, 2000). Some inmates may encourage visits to mitigate the pains of institutional life, yet, contact with outside family may also upset the solitary process of "doing time" for others.

More recent theoretical work on desistance also highlights the potential powerful role that personal agency can play in identity management and behavioral patterns (Giordano, Schroeder, & Cernkovich, 2007; Laub & Sampson, 2003; LeBel, Burnett, Maruna, & Bushway, 2008; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Paternoster, Bachman, Bushway, Kerrison, & O'Connell, 2015), and this work may provide insight inmate institutional behavior. In particular, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) present an identity theory that posits that offenders take an active and intentional role in behavioral change. They suggest that individuals who desist keenly work toward positive goals while actively steering away from negative outcomes. Little existing empirical work has considered if identity theory can be applied to inmate choice and behavior in prison. There is initial evidence from qualitative work that suggests that the strain of visits can result in individuals withdrawing from families (Owen, 1998; Schmid & Jones, 1993). Using qualitative data on a sample of men incarcerated in a prison in England and their families, Dixey and Woodall (2012) found that perceptions of visits varied widely for visitors and inmates. Most perceived the visit to be positive, but several inmates opted out of visits to make their time in prison easier to manage and even more dissuaded their children from visiting. The authors argue that sample members made conscious decisions about visits, yet little empirical evidence lends credence to this claim. Research has primarily been anecdotal in describing the negative experiences of visitation, and offers little theoretical guidance for understanding how inmates perceive and respond to visits. The goal of the current study is to continue to unpack the relationship between visits, agency, and identity from the inmate perspective.

Data and Methods

The current research draws on a series of qualitative interviews conducted with inmates paroled to Missouri. Missouri Department of Corrections is responsible for supervising approximately 30,000 inmates in prison and 18,000 individuals on parole. The Missouri Department of Corrections publishes a standardized visitation policy for all institutions, and potential visitors must complete an application which includes questions on current residence, relationship to inmate, criminal history, and any prior association with the

department of corrections.[1] Institutional staff review and conduct a background check on all applicants; the warden has discretion in approving visitation lists. Institutions typically allow visitors on weekends in two, four-hour blocks, but changes can be made depending on institutional capacity and staffing. Inmates are normally allowed up to 20 approved visitors. Standard practice allows a maximum of eight visits per month (two visits per weekend). During the intake process, visitation opportunities are further restricted.

This research uses a subsample of men (n = 83) from a larger study examining offender reentry experiences.[2] Researchers conducted in-depth interviews in the community. All participants spent time in prison and were asked about their experiences regarding their most recent term of incarceration.[3] A non-probability quota sampling strategy was used to recruit a relatively equal number of respondents from each location (Bachman & Schutt, 2007). Interviews were held on client reporting days, and individuals were invited to participate in the study at the end of their appointment.[4] Interviews were conducted in private offices at each location and lasted approximately 90 min. The interviewers utilized a semi-structured interview guide modeled after prior research

1. The Missouri Department of Corrections publishes a web document that outlines visitation policies for interested parties (Missouri Department of Corrections, 2017). Potential visitors who have a criminal record can be denied visitation privileges, and decisions are made by institutional staff and based on the nature of their criminal history. Individuals on probation and parole may be approved for a visit if they have approval from their probation and parole officers. Individuals can only be listed on one incarcerated individual's visitor list unless they are a verified family member. Placing limits on eligible visitors may color incarcerated individuals perceptions of visitation and this theme should be explored further in future research. The visitor application is also posted on the official department website—http://doc.mo.gov/Documents/visitor-application.pdf

2. The study sample was drawn from a broader investigation designed specifically to investigate the efficacy of sex offender residency restrictions (Huebner et al., 2014). The study sample included a sample of sex offenders and non-sex offenders, and individuals were queried about a number of different domains of reentry. In the larger study, 98 individuals were interviewed between May and August of 2010. The current analysis does not include probationers (n = 11), women (n = 3), and an individual who did not describe their prison visitation experiences (n = 1). Participants were offered a $20 incentive for their participation, and the recruitment and incentive protocols were approved by the university IRB and the Missouri Department of Corrections.

3. Care was taken to interview participants as close to their release as possible to reduce recall bias. In total, 69% of the sample was interviewed within a year of release with the majority occurring within six months of release and 27% within the first month.

4. Although a randomized sampling design is ideal in quantitative research studies, in field research this is often not possible, nor desirable (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Miller, 2005). The study sample included individuals under correctional supervision. We scheduled interview attempts on monthly reporting days in order to access a more complete and diverse sample of clients, and offered a small monetary incentive to facilitate greater participation. All individuals convicted of a sex offense who had an appointment on the study day were approached to participate. We did not collect information on refusal rates. We did not observe any systematic biases in client refusal that may have biased the sample; however, the non-random nature of the sample should be denoted when making generalizations to other institutional populations.

of this type (see Visher, LaVigne, & Travis, 2004), which included a range of topics including employment, housing, and family experiences.[5]

The interview guide included questions about visitation experiences during the interviewee's term of incarceration, as well as follow-up inquiries detailing the frequency and the nature of visits. Semi-structured interview techniques allow for extensive probing and for the participants to describe events in their own words (Charmaz, 2006). In the case of visitation experiences, details surrounding motivations for and against visitation, in addition to detailing who came to visit and how often emerged.

Data from the qualitative interviews were analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Silverman, 2006) with the aid of NVivo, a qualitative data software program (QSR International Software NVivo 10). A grounded theory approach allows the researcher to analyze the data without preconceived themes or ideas and relies on simultaneous data coding and analyses. Based on prior research, researchers had some expectation of material barriers, though remained open to additional themes and results.[6] Through open coding procedures researchers identified broader themes that included descriptions of visitation (e.g. *who visits* and *frequency of visitation*) as well as preventative factors to visitation (e.g. *distance, coping* and *familial conflict*).[7]

Sample

Table 1 presents the demographic makeup of the sample. The total sample was primarily white (63.4%), of middle age (39.9 years), and had obtained a high school diploma or equivalency (77.8%). Approximately one third of respondents were convicted of a personal or non-sexual violent offense (30.1%), 16.9% were convicted of a nonviolent or drug offense, and about one-half were convicted of a violent or child-related sexual offense (53.0%). In their most recent incarceration, respondents had served an average of over five years in prison, and most (59.9%) had experienced multiple incarcerations over their lifetime. The majority of the sample had biological children (77.1%) though

5. The interview process yielded both qualitative and quantitative data. We numerically coded a variety of close-ended responses within the interview guide into a database for statistical analysis. For example, offenders were asked to record their level of agreement on a Likert based scale on a variety of family support questions.

6. The preliminary coding process started by sorting the data into categories including employment, housing experiences, and prison visitation. Although 83 participants responded to close-ended inquiries about receiving visitation, only 71 participants followed up with additional explanation or description. The qualitative analysis centers on the 71 extended narratives, but the total sample provides data for Table 1.

7. In open coding processes, portions of the narrative are assigned a descriptive word from which themes develop. To enhance reliability, the data were independently coded by two researchers. The coders had very high agreement on the major emergent themes and specific sub-themes and patterns.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics

	Total sample (n = 83)	Visited (n = 52)	Non-visited (n = 31)
Dependent Variable	Frequency/Mean (S.D)		
Any Visit	62.7%	100.0%	—
Family VisitΩ	96.2%	67.2%	—
Kids VisitΩ	39.5%	48.9%	—
Friends VisitΩ	72.5%	20.3%	—
Criminal History and Background			
Offense Type:			
*Sex Offender**	74.7%	82.7%	61.3%
Other Violent	8.4%	7.7	9.7%
Nonviolent/Drug	16.8%	9.6	29.0%
Sentence Length (*in months*)†	65.27 (71.20)	74.78 (78.03)	49.08 (55.29)
Multiple Incarcerations*	59.8%	50.0%	76.7%
Age at First Incarceration	26.07 (11.26)	25.48 (11.45)	26.91 (11.22)
Number of Prior Incarcerations	1.98 (1.12)	1.85 (1.11)	2.19 (1.11)
Family History of Incarceration	39.1%	37.2%	42.3%
Offender Characteristics			
Substance Abuse History†	79.5%	73.1%	90.3%
Mental Illness Diagnosis	39.0%	38.0%	40.7%
Has Children	77.1%	76.9%	77.4%
Number of Children	2.83 (1.52)	2.80 (1.47)	2.88 (1.65)
Race (*nonwhite*)	36.6%	33.3%	41.9%
Age	39.88 (12.20)	39.85 (12.65)	39.94 (11.60)
Education (*has high school diploma*)	77.8%	82.4%	70.0%
Intimate Partner Relationship*	40.7%	49.0%	26.7%

Note: Ω = The percentages represent only those individuals who reported at least one visit (n = 52).
†p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001 (two-tailed test).

less than one-half were in an intimate partner relationship at the time of the interview (40.7%).[8] The vast majority reported a history of substance abuse (79.5%), and nearly one-half reported a previous or current mental health diagnosis (39.0%).

8. Relationship status is dynamic. We inquired about relationship status post-incarceration, which is a post hoc description. We were unable to systematically capture these changes in relationship status over time, although several men described life changes at different points in the interview.

Most members of the sample (62.4%) received at least one visit during their term of incarceration, but the frequency and regularity of visits varied considerably. Table 1 presents bivariate statistics for individuals who received visits and those who did not.[9] Inmates reported that family members and intimate partners visited most often. We found that sex offenders and persons serving a longer term of incarceration were more likely to receive visitors, while those with a more extensive criminal record and a history of substance abuse were less likely to receive a visit.[10]

The sample does vary from a traditional institutional or parolee sample. Sex offenders are overrepresented in the current study. Sex offenders represent 15.7 percent of the total institutionalized population in Missouri (Missouri Department of Corrections, 2016). Three-quarters of the total sample had a sexual offense in their conviction history, but less than half were incarcerated solely for a sex offense. Most members of the sample had a heterogeneous criminal history that included drug and property crimes. The study sample also had a higher rate of high school or GED completion; 78% of the study sample had a high school diploma or completed their GRE compared with 70% of the total male Missouri institutional sample. The study sample was also older with an average age of 39.88; nearly half (45.4%) of the institutional population in Missouri is below the age of 35. The study sample reflects the general racial composition of Missouri prisons; black males represent 36 percent of the study and Missouri correctional population.

Quantitatively, there were few differences between the sexual and non-sex offender sample, with the exception that non-sex offenders reported more prior incarcerations and had a higher proportion of nonwhite respondents than sexual offenders. We took under consideration that sex offenders may have qualitatively different visitation experiences, given possible enhanced legal barriers and greater social stigma. Subsequently, the analysis carefully examined differences by offense type, comparing sex offender visitation experiences to non-sex offenders. The results note any specific distinctions, though overall there were few qualitative differences.

Results

Most members of the sample received at least one visit during their term of incarceration, and respondents oft described visits as a positive experience.

9. The interview questionnaire included an item that queried individuals about their most recent incarceration event, but some respondents reflected on prior incarceration terms to describe and compare visitation events. We were unable to systematically code for prior visitation experiences given the variation in narratives.

10. We ran a logistic regression model (not shown) to predict any visitation during the most recent prison term (1 = Yes; 0 = No). When controlling for other factors, sex offenders and individuals who had served a longer sentence were more likely to receive visits. Older inmates were less likely to receive visits.

Several respondents noted that visits helped them pass the time in prison, and Kevin exclaimed that he "don't know how others handle incarceration without that support." Sample members frequently noted deep appreciation for visits, even when they were infrequent. Raymond mentions a visit from a spiritual advisor. "He came to visit me, twice as a matter of fact. He's 86 years old. Drove up on a really stormy, snowy weekend to see me, and boy I really appreciate that." Visits also helped maintain relationships with family and children. Martin described,

> Every time my wife came up, my son came up and I think it was more beneficial that I was able to see him because within five months of me being incarcerated, he was born so I wasn't there for any of that. But through the years, I was able to see him he was able to acknowledge who I was and everything like that so I think it was more beneficial that way.

Respondents also appreciated when visitors brought reminders of home to the prison. In Missouri, inmates are allowed to earn longer food visits on designated weekends. Visitors were able to bring in approved food from the outside and share a longer meal with their family member or friend. Inmates had to earn visits by staying infraction free; therefore, visits served as an incentive for inmates to abide by institutional rules. Earl mentions one such rare visit, "So we had a four hour visit or something like that. It was awesome. To be able to sit there with my kids." George also warmly remembered when his family brought in bacon cheeseburgers. Many inmates thought fondly on the time when friends and family visited the institution. Reminders of home broke the monotony of imprisonment, and visits were an incentive to follow the rules. Although beyond the scope of the current study, it may be that individuals who had more visits had less misconduct because visits are only allowed for men who stay infraction free. In Missouri, visit privileges can be waived if an individual has committed infractions or if the individual is in protective custody or solitary confinement.

Although visits conjured fond memories for many participants, there was substantial variation in frequency and consistency of visits among participants and across the prison term. Nearly two-thirds of respondents received a visit at some point during incarceration, but almost half of those individuals who had a visit noted that visitation was infrequent (typically less than monthly) and varied over time. One inmate indicated that he received a single visit during his seven-year incarceration; whereas several men noted that they initially received monthly visits during the early periods of incarceration but visits dwindled to once or twice a year as the sentence progressed. These results comport with the work of quantitative scholars who have acknowledged fluctuation in visitation over a prison term (see Cochran, Mears, & Bales, 2017; Duwe & Clark, 2013), and the qualitative results contextualize the factors that underlie such variation.

Several key themes emerged when respondents were queried about barriers to visitation (see Figure 1 for a graphical display). In total, 59 members of the

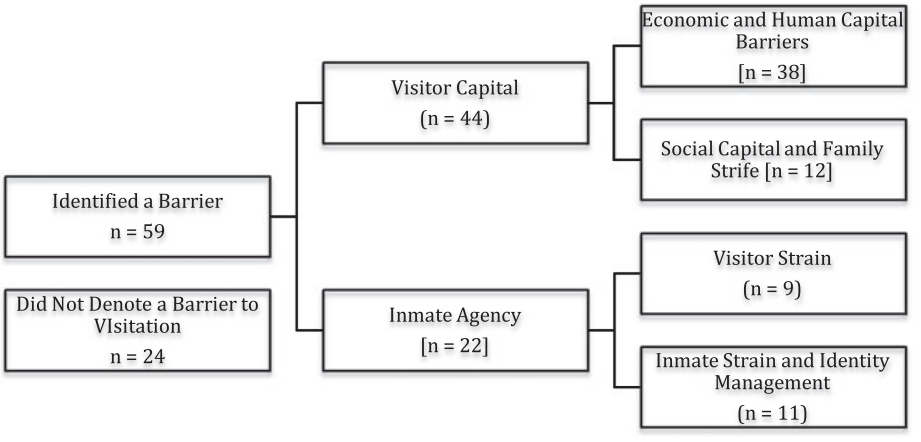

Figure 1 Pathways restricting visitation.
Notes: These pathways reflect the two broad barriers identified from the narratives. Categories are not mutually exclusive, and the table only reflects the 59 people who noted a barrier to visitation. The categories are not mutually exclusive; 11 respondents denoted multiple barriers, reporting both practical and choice-related barriers, as well as multiple categories within each of the broad themes. In the case of agency, three respondents indicated they discouraged visitation with no further elaboration given (therefore no appropriate subcategory could be assigned).

sample identified at least one factor that precluded or made visitation more difficult or less frequent.[11] Respondents were most likely to cite economic barriers to visitation, such as lacking financial means for transport or ability to miss work (n = 38), which was exacerbated when individuals were incarcerated further distances from their home. In addition, inmates reported that they had deficits in social capital that precluded or reduced visits (n = 12) which included shallow social networks and familial conflict. Others described agentic explanations of lack of visitation (n = 22), including wanting to avoid the visitation for their visitor (n = 9) as well as relating to concerns about inmate strain and identity (n = 11). Greater detail on each of the themes is provided below.

11. Each member of the sample was queried about visitation, and all completed the close-ended questions about visits (visitation (yes/no) and number of visits), which is represented in Table 1. Both those receiving and not receiving a visit noted barriers to visitation and the qualitative analyses focused on those narratives. In total, 24 sample members did not identify any barriers to visitation and are not included in Figure 1. The numbers in Figure 1 do not total the individual case summary as some participants fell into multiple categories (e.g. both familial conflict and distance prevented visitation).

Capital and Visitation

Lack of economic and social capital can preclude or reduce the frequency of visitation. Over one-half of the sample (n = 38) denoted practical barriers to visitation including: distance, financial hardship, inaccessible transportation, and health-related impediments. Distance was the most frequently cited practical impediment. That noted, distance usually reduced visits but rarely prohibited them in their entirety. Nearly one-half of respondents identified proximity as a barrier, but only a few (n = 7) reported no visitation as a result. Daniel, a drug offender whose family lived out of state was one of those exceptions. He indicated that he "Never [had a visit], I've been way too far away."

More often, distance limited the regularity of visits, as remote placement magnified other challenges such as health problems, financial hardship, and lack of discretionary time. Inmates who were housed closer to family or friends reported more frequent visits when compared to those who were placed, or were moved to, more distal institutions. Howard's narrative displays the interplay between economic hardship, travel distance, and visit frequency throughout his four-year sentence. He noted, "In Laketown (facility), since it was only 45 minutes away from my dad's, he came once a month. We don't have a lot of money, so at Newton, the two years I was down there, I got two visits." He continued by explaining that the Newton correctional facility was more than two hours from his home, and his family was unable to afford rising gas prices that more frequent visitation would require.

Jack had similar experiences. When incarcerated in closer vicinity to his home (within approximately one hour's driving time), Jack, who was serving his first 12-month prison sentence for 2nd degree statutory rape, recalled that initially his relatives made several visits per month. However, after being relocated four hours away, he explained "now I'm this far away, so they don't come at all." This was a pattern echoed by most men who denoted distance as a barrier. For instance, during his eleven-year sentence for arson, Jonathan served time in multiple institutions and explained when he was closer to his family he received visits every other week. Visits declined when he was serving time further away, on the opposite side of the state from his home. He cited that one single short visit necessitated that his relatives make a seven-hour round trip drive to the institution. A trip to prison would cost his family at least one night in the hotel and related costs, and his family had to take time off of work to accomplish the visit, not an easy task.

Overall, the economic costs of visitation increased with distance, heightening gas and transportation costs. If their loved one was housed across the state, a visit could necessitate a hotel stay and related costs. Increased distance and subsequent travel time requires visitors to take more time off of work and secure reliable transportation, often challenges for visiting populations.

Older respondents were particularly likely to report that familial health challenges precluded travel and related visits as quite difficult.[12] Willie, age 49, had one visit during his four year incarceration, explained,

> When they sent me to my camp, you know it was so far away and like I said, my parents are sick. You know my dad; he can't drive real far when he does drive. So you know, I didn't get a lot of [visits]. I had a brother who came and seen me when he could you know. He's the one that actually brought my parents to see me, but yeah, I got one visit.

Elderly parents were often living on fixed incomes and did not have the resources or social linkages to arrange a ride with others. Similarly, Peter was visited early on in his 14-year prison sentence, but his parents "got to where they couldn't travel anymore, so they couldn't come see me anymore." Aging parents was a consistent theme as the study sample was older than a traditional institutional sample. Together these narratives illustrate how practical barriers intertwine to hinder regular, consistent visitation, particularly over a long period of incarceration. When distance is coupled with unreliable or inaccessible transportation, the likelihood of a visit is further reduced. Older offenders in particular described additional hardship given the unstable health and lack of financial resources of their parents.

In addition to the practical challenges of prison visits, several inmates cited poor social relationships as an impediment to visitation. As noted, many sample members indicated that they had very small social networks. Family and friends were not able to lean on others for a ride to prison or to ask for help in garnering the funds needed for a visit. As documented, health issues made visitation particularly difficult for some respondents. In another example, Fred, who was convicted of statutory sodomy, accounted for a single visit from his mother and stated, "She did once. But it wasn't her choice. Her health was never that good." During his early incarceration term, Fred reported frequent visits from his father, but he passed away during Fred's six-year prison term. Fred subsequently received no additional visits.

Family members most often opted out of visits because of interpersonal strife and conflict (n = 12), some of which was caused by involvement in criminal activity. In some cases, mothers of inmate's children restricted familial visitation because of discord. As Carl explained, his children no longer visited because "my ex-wife and I divorced [during his 13-year term of imprisonment] and we did not get along." Carl had been convicted of forcible sodomy, and the nature of his offense may have also contributed to the marital strife. Jeffrey, convicted of statutory sodomy, described that his visits with his

12. Inmates reported that family members, particularly parents, were their most frequent visitor. Sex offenders were, on average, older than non-sex offenders; subsequently, their visitors were more likely to be older and in failing health. Sex offenders were particularly likely to report that ailing health of family members restricted visitation. That noted, sex offenders still received more visits overall.

daughter ceased after his divorce. He explains, "my wife divorced me and I never saw my daughter again." Pre-existing interpersonal strife can also be imported into the prison environment. Jonathan described a serious emotional conflict with his father prior to prison and his dad "taking himself away from the picture for a little while," ultimately precluded visitation.

Familial strain was particularly prominent for individuals who had served multiple prior prison terms. For example, Ralph had been in an out of prison throughout his adult life, and at the time of the interview had recently completed a four-year sentence. He explained,

> My brother, man, he's never even answered a damn phone call. He just said, this is your third. He answered this one time. He said this is your third time in prison, I ain't talking to you, you know, don't write me, don't talk to me, you get out, come by, do whatever you want to do, but why do I gotta do time with you.

Eric also reported a long history of criminal behavior, including substance use, DWIs, and forcible rape. He recounted occasional family visits during his first incarceration term. He had since been incarcerated twice and received no visits. He explained, "I was locked up approximately 15 years. I seen them three times". In sum, lack of financial capital or poor physical health among family members is frequently cited as the primary barrier to visitation both here and in other research. However, the results from this research suggest that inmates also did not have deep familial ties to draw upon for help. Instead, some relationships were characterized by familial conflict, either pre-existing or resultant from incarceration, which had similar deleterious effects on visitation patterns as the lack of economic resources.

Agency, Identity, and Visitation

Beyond lack of capital, the results describe the perceptions inmates have of visitation and how these experiences affect subsequent visitation. The results suggest that some inmates take an active role in negotiating visitation. In fact, the costs and associated strain of visits led some inmates to dissuade visitation (n = 22). Inmates indicated that they weigh the desire for maintaining physical contact and social support with the strain on themselves and the visiting party. Joseph, who had a few visits early on during his most recent five-year sentence but discouraged visitors as his prison term waned, explained, "It's hard to visit somebody that's in prison, you know," referencing the difficulty of navigating security, substantial time commitment, and the basic emotional drain of visiting the institution. In response, he took the initiative to deter visitation to allay potential strains of visitation for his family.

Shawn also recognized his family wanted to see him, but he felt it was unnecessary. He noted, "I told them not to come cause it was too much of a drive. And in the process of getting in, go through this, go through that, so I

just told them don't worry about it." Although Shawn initially went through the process of getting visitor approval, he perceived that the cost of visitation for his family was too high and the length of his imprisonment too short and completed his most recent seven-month prison sentence without a visit.

Similarly, Charles described, "I told nobody to visit me … I didn't really care for my mom to visit me. I didn't mind every once in a blue moon, but it's just rough on her, hard, you know?" Charles had several friends and family members who wanted to visit, but he explained that each visit required air travel. He encouraged alternative forms of communication as opposed to frequent physical visitation, unwilling to have his loved ones invest the time and money for a short visit. Echoing a practical cost concern, Lance was particularly worried about the safety and difficulty of his visiting parties, despite his mother and children initially planning to visit. He explained,

> I recommended not to, cause I was like three-and-a-half hours away, and she wasn't for driving … I worried about her getting lost, her and the kids. She wanted to bad, but I don't wish for ya'll to get lost or anything like that.

Lance wanted to see his family, but he discouraged visitation because he perceived that the visit would be difficult for his family. He received no visits during his two-year sentence for multiple DWI convictions.

Others discouraged visits because they had taken responsibility for the circumstances that led to imprisonment and wanted to mitigate any additional harm to their family.[13] For example, Edward asked his ex-wife and family not to undertake the long drive, and received no visitors in his 30-month sentence for statutory rape. He explained, "I couldn't ask her to do that, I put myself in there." Edward reflected on the material challenges of visitation and voiced acceptance of his role in the carceral circumstance. He perceived that requesting visits was "putting someone out." Edward was unwilling to inconvenience his family, and he felt he should be held accountable for being in prison. Similarly, Roy's daughter wanted to visit during his twelve-month incarceration, but he asked that she forgo trips to the prison. He described,

> Since she been getting her life together, she goes to school now … I would rather for her to just get her life to where it need to be at first, than try to take time out to stop what she's doing to come help me, *which I put myself in here* [emphasis added]. She been asking me do I want her to come visit and I tell her no.

13. Sex offenders were more likely to cite personal responsibility for their crime as their primary reason for discouraging visitation. Sex offenders in the study state are mandated to treatment, and taking personal responsibility is one key element of the programming. Hence, participation in treatment likely has some impact on visitation patterns more specifically and family interactions more broadly.

The participants who identified this theme generally received at least one visit, usually early in their sentence. Material barriers alone did not preclude or reduce visitation. Instead, inmates like Roy actively dissuaded visitation because they felt that the costs of visitation were too high for family. These narratives, in many ways, reflect the ways in which inmates internalize the potential consequences of incarceration for family and friends.

Inmates also dissuaded visits to buffer potential emotional challenges of visitation (n = 11) including strain of repeated separation and stigma of incarceration. The results suggest that visitors and inmates carefully weigh the emotional value and cost of visits, and it was not uncommon for respondents to describe actively self-selecting out of some or all visits to mitigate strain.

Carl, like a number of sample members, appreciated the potential benefits of visitation, but he felt the emotional distress of the visit outweighed the temporary social connection. He noted,

> At first it was very hard, you get the feelings of rejection or abandonment maybe, but once you're able to set aside all that drama, other people's drama, it makes it easier to cope with what you're dealing with in prison. When you try to stay attached to the outside and with the ups and downs that come with it, and being incarcerated where you can't do anything about it, it adds a whole lot of stress to your life.

This account characterizes the evolution of the visitation experience. Carl, early in his incarceration, received visits from his family and ex-wife. He eventually realized it was easier to do his time without staying connected to the outside world. In other words, visitation was recognized not as a method to relieve institutional strain, but a way to introduce stress. Scott, who had served multiple prison terms, summarized, "Once they come there and then they start leaving it just gets me down." Subsequently, respondents discouraged repeat visitation as a coping mechanism to maintain a stable emotional state. Visitation events reinforced the deprivation of liberty in prison, and the continual re-separation from family led to feelings of depression. Daniel, who recently completed a one-year sentence for drug related crimes, but reported three prior incarceration terms, explained, "It adds to the hurt. To see them here and to walk away from them, it's like coming back to prison all over again each time. It's hard." The expression that visits would "get them down" echoed among the narratives. Robert described, "It hurt me seeing 'em walk away and I know I can't leave with them. So I just did it on my own." Robert had served three separate prison sentences, most recently a two and half year term for burglary without receiving any visitation. Jeremy, also having served multiple terms of incarceration, summed up, "It's too stressful on me. I don't want someone to come up here and visit me, and then me having to watch them walk out the gate to go home. And I can't go with 'em." Jeremy immediately told his family and friends he did not want them to visit, even though his most recent sentence was five years. Ronald had relatively infrequent visitation throughout his two years in prison, by his own design. He explained,

"I asked him [brother] not to, because it was hard enough to be there, and then having him coming and leaving was tough so, I didn't want that."

Individuals also discouraged visitation because they didn't want to alter their loved ones perception of themselves. In several cases, offenders indicated that they discouraged visitation so their loved ones did not have to see them in the institution as an inmate; they viewed the physical interaction in a prison setting as cementing the offender identity. Ronald had an intimate partner who was willing to relocate in order to increase the frequency of visitation, but he dissuaded her relocation because of emotional distress and stigma avoidance. He explained although his brother had visited him previously, he "would not allow [girlfriend] Jane to come. I told her, absolutely not. I don't want you to see me in this suit, I don't want you to see me in this position." Ronald feared his girlfriend would perceive him differently if she saw him in prison and felt alternative methods of communication would be more beneficial.

Respondents were most likely to discourage visits from their children and intimate partners to maintain a non-inmate identity. Many individuals in this group identified shame as a powerful deterrent to visits and dissuaded visits to assuage this emotion and to manage their reflected identity to family and friends. Respondents did not universally discourage visitation instead making decisions based on the individual and the nature of the relationship which reflects a complex understanding and negotiation of the inmate identity. For example, Shawn denoted the shame he felt over his incarceration, and he describes that he wanted to shield his children from potential stress and himself from future strife from having to explain imprisonment to his children.

> I didn't want them to see me in this position. I used to tell them [children] that I was out of town. Then I finally did tell them that I was incarcerated. They knew what prison meant too. They really didn't know what it was for me; they knew it was a place where bad people go. So I had to sit down and explain to them what it was.

Few actively engaged in lying to their children about their incarceration, although many echoed the sentiment of wanting to avoid being seen as a prisoner and enacted techniques of impression management.

Family members also abstained from visits because they didn't want to see their loved one in prison which they felt might concretize the inmate identity. In the case of Jim, it was difficult for the family to see him in the institutional environment as that would transform their perception of their family member into an inmate serving time for a first-degree molestation charge. He explained why some members of his family opted out of visitation,

> I had a brother in law that visited, it's really, families handle things differently, sisters wanted to still think of me as Jimmy, instead of Jim that committed a crime. And I can't make them do anything, you know. It's their choice. And I can't make them do anything you know. It's their choice, if it's easier for them, it's okay, I know that you love me.

Although Jim received visits during his six-year sentence, they were infrequent and limited to one family member. Carl, who discouraged visitation, noted it was a two-way street. He explained, "it's easier for a lot of people that you're not really close to, to just avoid you." Carl reported his own emotional distress from visitation, but explained his own father had been incarcerated and had witnessed visitor avoidance practices. He proposed it was because visitors, "they feel guilty, maybe because they don't see you enough … they don't want to tell you how bad life sucks or how great life is because they're afraid that might affect you some way." From the inmate and visitor perspective, Carl was able to describe negative emotions that visitation can produce.

In summary, Jim, who had limited, infrequent visitation, illustrates the emotional toll of visits. He argued that he was acutely aware that his family has other responsibilities that often precluded visitation. He wanted more frequent visits, but he felt that he couldn't express his needs and he struggled with feelings of frustration and regret. In response to not receiving consistent visitation, Jim summarized,

> Which is tough, which is tough for the guy that's in prison. Because like I said it's a forgotten community, even family members. Of course, their lives go on. You see everybody moving on, and having kids, and you can't be there, and you know. And you're like well what about me? Still here. But it's ok, it's ok. I'm not bitter about that at all.

Discussion

Visits serve an important role in prison and can be one way in which to buffer the pains of imprisonment and to mitigate some of the long-term collateral consequences of incarceration. The goal of the current study is to explore the role of visitation from the inmate perspective, and to better understand how perceptions of the visit color subsequent visitation. Prior research has documented the decline in prison visitation over the incarceration term, and researchers have hypothesized that structural barriers, familial strain, and low social capital are responsible for the decay (Bales & Mears, 2008; Christian, 2005; Cochran, 2012; Siennick et al., 2013). We further this research by documenting barriers to visitation from the inmate perspective, and unique to this work, include the perspectives of individuals who had less frequent or no visitation.

Consistent with extant research, inmates frequently cited lack of economic capital as a barrier to visitation. Visits, particularly to rural prisons, require transportation and often time off from work, all which can be difficult to negotiate for many families. In addition, respondents reported that they had very small social networks to draw from; reducing the likelihood that family and friends could work together to overcome the financial and practical challenges of visits. Finally, several familial relationships were marked by strife,

further reducing the resources and social support available to members of the sample.

Additional analyses suggest that inmates take active roles in negotiating the occurrence and frequency of visits, based on their perceptions of the visitation experience. That is, nearly one third of the sample requested that visits cease because of the emotional strain of the experience or the implications for one's sense of self. Consistent with extant work, inmates cited emotional strain as one of the primary deterrents of prison visitation (Dixey & Woodall, 2012; Liu, Pickett, & Baker, 2014). The reminder of the semi-permanent removal from society and concomitant emotional distress is congruent with Gresham Sykes (1958) seminal work documenting prison experiences. Rather than experiencing a singular separation and visitation acting as a relief for the pain of imprisonment (specifically deprivation of liberty and social relationships), visitation reinforced those losses and became too difficult to manage. Others opted out of visitation so they would not be seen as inmates, avoiding the visible assignment of offender status. Dixey and Woodall (2012) similarly identified an emotional conflict in response to visitation, particularly in the cases of parent/child relationships.

Unique to this work is the centrality given by inmates to identity management, both as a reflection of self as well as impression management for others. Most current work in this area has focused primarily on the role of social support in linking visitation to lower rates of recidivism. Although our work also highlights the centrality of social support in understanding prison visitation, in interviewing individuals who did not receive visits, we learned that several inmates dissuaded visits because it was easier to do time without outside stressors. Although it is beyond the scope of the current study, is may be that inmates who abstain from prison visits also have a stronger attachment to an offender identity. Consistent with identity theory (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), individuals who have stronger attachments to a criminal sense of self during the prison term may be less likely to have visits (see also Paternoster et al., 2015). Therefore, inmate identity may be an important mediator of the prison visitation-recidivism relationship. Overall, the results suggest that visits are a result of a complex interplay between inmate and visitor, and visitation is a dynamic event that can vary throughout a prison term. It is essential to move beyond dichotomous measures of visitation and to understand the role of inmate agency in visitation patterns.

The findings also have implications for policy. Despite the many challenges to visits, most inmates expressed some satisfaction with visits and a desire to increase communication with their loved one. Correctional managers should continue to encourage familial contact through several means. Many respondents felt that phone calls and letters were nearly as beneficial as physical visits. Virtual visitation programs, often through video chats, have been implemented by correctional institutions and private vendors in several states (Boudin, Stutz, & Littman, 2013). The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections piloted a virtual prison visitation program, and initial results suggest a high

level of satisfaction among inmates and families, and improved behavior from inmates (Crabbe, 2002).

However, phone calls and video communication often come at great financial cost to the visitor or inmates. The Federal Communications Commission (2015) recently took steps to minimize the historically high costs of phone calls. Previously, a single fifteen minute phone call could cost up to $14; limits on per-minute charges and ancillary costs aim to reduce phone costs by approximately 50%. Even with reduced costs, the base rate of telecommunications quickly adds up for both inmate and family, particularly given the lack of limits on commissions which can account for over half of the cost of a call. States that have eliminated commissions, where the prison receives a financial benefit from calls, have seen phone call volume dramatically increase (Rose, 2015). If future research is able to quantify that calls are associated with a reduction in recidivism, it might be best to reduce the cost of calls instead of developing a barrier that will be more costly in the long term.

Although the current research has important implications for the study of prison visitation, several limitations should be noted. First, the results are based on a sample of formerly incarcerated men who were asked to reflect on visitation as a whole. Recall biases could have altered the narratives, and researchers suggest that the centrality and perceptions of visitation may vary over time (Adams, 1992; Cochran & Mears, 2013; Visher & O'Connell, 2012). In addition, the participants who have been out on prison successfully, even for several months, may reflect differently about their experiences with visitation. It may be that individuals use techniques of neutralization to explain a lack of visiting *post hoc*. Finally, participants in the current study did not describe agenic actions that could have encouraged increased visits. We appreciate that agency and identity are complex constructs and describing all of the potential nuances of the visitation decision and experience are beyond the scope of the current work.

Second, the study was conducted in a single state: visiting policies, experiences, and challenges may vary geographically and institutionally, limiting the potential application of the results. This study was conducted during an economic downturn (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). The timing of the interviews was characterized by a struggling economy where rising hotel costs, gas prices, and food expenses all notably limited visitation from long distances. Therefore, some of the material challenges may have been particularly exaggerated during this time frame. In addition, the Missouri Department of Corrections leverages special visitation opportunities, like food visits, as an incentive for good behavior. Similar incentive structures may not be available in all states and could potentially color perceptions of visitation for those eligible for these opportunities. Conversely, individuals with prior convictions may be barred from visitation in Missouri, and prison staff has substantial discretion in approving visitor lists. A prior conviction could be a substantial barrier to visitation for some family members and friends.

Finally, the sample includes a higher percentage of sex offenders when compared to the total institutional population. Sex offenders, overall, were more likely to receive visits, likely due to greater opportunities given their longer incarceration sentences. At the same time, the personal nature of the crime may have dissuaded family and friends from participating, particularly if the victim was a family member. It is likely that the sample members were unable to fully appreciate or give voice to how their crime affected family and friendship networks. Further, sex offenders in the current sample were more likely to be white, had fewer prior incarceration stays, and self-reported greater economic means than the non-sex offender sample. The sample as a whole is older and more educated than the Missouri correctional population. Subsequently, sex offenders may have more material advantage and access to visitation and results should be considered in this light. In addition, sex offenders, by nature of their offense, are likely eschewed from the hyper-masculine inmate culture. As such, they may be less likely to self-identify with the inmate culture; thereby decreasing the chances that they might decline or discourage visits with friends and family to maintain entrenchment in the prison subculture. Understanding that sex offenders may have different backgrounds and pathways to crime, we took care during the analysis to note differences between offense types. Overall, our analysis suggest that there were very few qualitative differences in the visitation experiences of sexual and non-sexual offenders; however, very little is known about how sex offenders as a group self-identify within the prison milieu. It is important to continue to understand the unique visitation and imprisonment experiences of individuals serving time for different crime types.

In conclusion, research often suggests visitation can be productive and valuable; however, the current research suggests that the visitation experience can introduce strain for visitors and inmates alike. Continued research should further explore the emotional dynamics of visitation, from both the offender and visitor perspective, and include more expansive and diverse samples. We should continue to encourage not only visitation but also as scholars work to identify ways in which emotional trauma may be reduced on both sides of the glass.

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