

Facilitating Children's Relationships with Incarcerated Parents: A Pandemic-Driven Policy Recommendation¹

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Executive Summary

The United States has the highest incarcerated population in the world, with 2.1 million people.² In addition, **54% of the incarcerated population have one or more minor children representing 2.7 million or 1 in 28 children with an incarcerated parent.**³ These children often suffer significant adverse effects from parental incarceration, including (1) financial hardship, (2) housing instability, (3) social and emotional challenges, (4) negative educational outcomes, (5) changing caregivers, and (6) increased health issues.

Pre-pandemic policies and structural factors created significant barriers to children maintaining relationships with their incarcerated parents through traditional channels. For in-person prison visits, these barriers included (1) geographic distance, (2) transportation costs, (3) child unfriendly and restrictive prison policies, and (4) hostile prison environments that could be traumatic for the children. As a result, **more than 50% of incarcerated parents in federal and state prisons have no contact with their children.**⁴

Barriers to prison video visits for families included (1) technical issues, (2) poor quality, (3) high costs, and (4) lack of access to the Internet. In addition, many prisons eliminated in-person visits in favor of video visits because of the potential costs savings. As a result, pre-pandemic video prison visits were not a viable alternative to in-person visits.

Research shows that an ongoing relationship during imprisonment benefits the child and parent (if the relationship was productive before incarceration). Prisoners who are visited regularly showed better behavior in prison and lower re-incarceration rates. Children benefit by (1) knowing their parent is safe, (2) asking questions of the parent, (3) expressing emotions to the parent, (3) better understanding the parent's situation, and (4) having realistic expectations about the parent's future.

The pandemic has created a policy opportunity for jails and prisons to adopt a new video visitation model. Video conferencing platforms, such as Zoom, have become widely used, reliable and include a free option. The pandemic eliminated most in-person prison visits and accelerated the adoption of video visitation.

Policymakers should (1) offer at least one free weekly prison video visit enabled by minimizing vendor costs, (2) adopt a high-quality video conferencing solution that minimizes technical issues, and (3) increase access for families through partnering with community-based organizations and educating low-income families about subsidized or discounted pricing for home internet.

The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections offers five free video visits per month to all prisoners and logged 130,000 Zoom prison visits during the first six months of the pandemic.⁵ In addition, the Vermont Department of Corrections renegotiated its video conference contract and now provides prisoners with two free phone calls and one free video visit per week through the use of a tablet.⁶

These states have a video visitation model that works and facilitates children maintaining relationships with their incarcerated parents. Other prison policymakers should adopt this new video visitation model while ensuring it remains free long-term and does not replace in-person visits, where appropriate and when they are safe to resume.

The Problem: Parental Incarceration

The United States has 2.1 million people in prison, and even more concerning than the size is that the majority of them are parents.⁷ There are 1.2 million parents of children under 18, representing 54% of the U.S. incarcerated population.⁸ As a result, there are 2.7 million or 1 in 28 children with an incarcerated parent.⁹ In addition, more than 10 million children live with a parent who has come under some form of criminal supervision at some point in the child's life.¹⁰

From a socioeconomic perspective, children living in poverty are three times more likely to experience parental incarceration than children living at least two times the poverty level.¹¹ From an educational perspective, children who have no parent in the home with more than a high school education are 41% more likely to experience parental incarceration than are children with one or more parents who have education beyond high school (8.2% vs. 5.8%).¹²

Why It Matters: Impact on The Children

After incarceration, children and remaining family members are more likely to experience financial hardship. Before imprisonment, more than 50% of all prisoners were the primary wage earner for the family; however, they earn little or no money during incarceration.¹³ As a result, there is often a significant decline in income for the remaining family.

As a result of reduced income, disruption in the children's housing and caregiver situation often follows. The non-incarcerated parent is often forced to move to more inexpensive housing as they cannot afford the existing housing arrangement. In addition, if the children do not remain with another parent, there is a change in caregiver, with 7% of children entering the foster care system because of parental incarceration.¹⁴

One study showed that children with an incarcerated parent are more likely to experience (1) parental divorce, separation or death, (2) domestic abuse, (3) neighborhood violence, (4) mental illness, and (5) substance abuse (Appendix – Table 1).¹⁵ Another study showed that the children are also more likely to experience health and emotional issues such as (1) PTSD, (2) anxiety, (3) depression, (4) attention deficit disorders, (5) developmental delays, (6) marijuana use, and (7) behavioral problems (Appendix – Table 2).¹⁶

Children of incarcerated parents are also more likely to experience problems at school than children without an incarcerated parent (58.4% vs. 34%) and more likely to be expelled from school (23% vs. 4% overall).¹⁷ The potential for educational success is also reduced, with children of an incarcerated parent less likely to graduate college (15% vs. 40% overall).¹⁸

Pre-Pandemic Policies: Barriers to Children-Incarcerated Parent Relationships

Pre-pandemic policies and structural factors created significant barriers to children maintaining a relationship with their incarcerated parent through traditional methods such as in-person visits, phone calls, and video visits.

Historically, the primary method to maintain the relationship was in-person visits; however, these visits are often impossible. Structural challenges include (1) unaffordable transportation costs to the prison and (2) geographic distance. Most parents housed in state prisons are more than 100 miles from their children, and those housed in federal prisons are more than 500 miles away.¹⁹ Policy-driven barriers include (1) complicated scheduling logistics, (2) restrictive visitation policies, and (3) invasive security procedures.

In addition, prison waiting and visiting rooms and visiting policies can create a hostile environment that can be traumatic for children visiting an incarcerated parent. Children are searched and can wait hours to visit the parent in a crowded, noisy room while being monitored by correctional employees. Many prisons are allowed to terminate visits based on the children's behavior, and some even prohibit toys in the visiting room. Some prisons only allow visitation during the day, making it more difficult for children in school and caregivers who work. Some policies do not allow contact with the incarcerated person, and a few do not allow children under age 16 to enter the prison. Thus, it is not surprising that more than 50% of incarcerated parents in state and federal prisons have no visits from their children.²⁰

Phone calls eliminate many of the in-person prison visit barriers; however, the high price of the calls is also unaffordable for many families. According to Prison Phone Justice, prison calls typically cost significantly more than non-prison calls because the prison has contracted out to phone service providers who pay the prisons a commission from the money collected from the prisoners and their families.²¹

Video visits also eliminate in-person barriers and are more personal than phone calls. However, many families were unhappy because pre-pandemic prison video visits suffered from technical problems and poor video quality. In addition, many families did not have access to the Internet.

Like phone calls, prison video visits were expensive and unaffordable for many families despite the availability of free services such as FaceTime and Google Hangout. According to a Marshall Project study, video visits could cost families up to \$500 per month, with rates costing more than \$1 per minute.²² In addition, prisoners were often unable to get refunds for video visits they could not complete due to technical problems.

Many prisons eliminated in-person visits to save costs because fewer employees are needed for video visits, and in some cases, prisons received fees paid by the prisoners and families. A Prison Policy Initiative study found that 74% of jails eliminated in-person visits after offering video visitation.²³

Why Policies That Facilitate Children's Relationships with Incarcerated Parents are Important

Research has demonstrated that prisoners who are visited regularly, especially by family members, showed better prisoner behavior than those who were not visited because the expectation of being visited provided an incentive for them to behave.²⁴ Research also showed that prisoners who are

visited have lower re-incarceration rates because the visits improve their transition from prison to the community. For example, a Minnesota Department of Corrections study showed that visiting reduced re-incarceration risk by 13% for felony reconvictions and 25% for technical violations.²⁵

For children who had a productive relationship with the incarcerated parent, benefits of maintaining a relationship for the children include: (1) knowing their parent is safe, (2) being able to ask them questions about their situation, (3) being able to express their emotions, (3) having a better understanding the parent's situation, and (4) having realistic expectations about the parent's future. The separation of children and incarcerated parents often produces feelings of guilt and shame and the inability to cope with future stress and trauma. Children maintaining a relationship with the parent can substantially decrease these adverse effects and ensure the child's well-being.

A Pandemic Driven Policy Recommendation – A New Prison Video Visit Model

The pandemic has created a policy opportunity for a new video visitation model to capture the benefits of maintaining the children-incarcerated parent relationship while addressing the barriers of the pre-pandemic channels. The pandemic mostly eliminated in-person prison visits and accelerated the adoption of video conferencing technology for video visits as video conferencing platforms, such as Zoom, became widely used, reliable, and included a free option. As a result, new video visit policies and solutions should address many of the problems of pre-pandemic video visits.

Prisons should offer a minimum number of free video visits, with no hidden costs, to ensure all families have the opportunity to maintain a relationship with the prisoner regardless of their financial situation. The cost of visitation for families already struggling financially can be overwhelming. In a survey of families with an incarcerated member, one out of three families were in debt, and two out of three families had difficulty meeting basic needs because of these costs.²⁶

Prisons should minimize video conferencing costs by renegotiating current contracts or conducting a request-for-proposal (RFP) process with new vendors. The prevalence of free video conferencing solutions has given prisons additional leverage in price negotiations with the vendors. In addition, prisons should bundle video conferencing with other services such as phone and e-mail and can often be added at no cost. If funding is still necessary, prisons can consider sources such as government funding or grants, foundations, prisoner general welfare fund, and community-based partnerships.²⁷

Video conferencing platforms can be leveraged to potentially reduced other prison costs and provide new benefits for prisoners. These include using the platform: (1) for medical visits that eliminate trips to the infirmary, (2) to offer video mental health services not otherwise available, (3) to assist child welfare agencies in meeting court-ordered required communications with the incarcerated parents and visits with their children, and (4) for court hearings and probation interviews that would eliminate transportation costs, and (5) for attorney-client visits to reduce congestion in prisons.

Prisons should ensure adopting a highly reliable video conferencing solution that minimizes technology problems. Zoom has set the standard with high-quality audio and video designed to work well on unstable or weak networks. In addition, prisons should work with their video conferencing vendor to simplify the process of scheduling video conferences and adopting

technology-friendly policies. For example, prisons should allow families to log into the waiting room 20 minutes before a video visit so they have time to resolve any technology issues.

Prisons should form partnerships with community-based organizations, such as churches and nonprofit organizations, to provide technology and internet access to families who do not have them at home. Prisons should also educate families about organizations and programs that provide subsidized or discounted Internet for qualifying low-income consumers. Examples of these include [EveryoneOn](#), FCC's [Emergency Broadband Benefit](#), and the FCC's [Lifeline Program](#).

The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections started offering free video visits via Zoom in March 2020 when in-person visits were suspended, and they logged 130,000 prison video visits by August 2020.²⁸ The agency then switched to a new, more user-friendly solution with an integrated scheduling component for visitors without requiring correctional employee's assistance. Prisoners are currently allowed five free video visits per month, and the agency has announced that video visits will remain after in-person visits are safe to resume.²⁹

The Vermont Department of Corrections renegotiated their contract with their video conferencing vendor that resulted in prisoners being able to make two free five-minute calls and one free 30-minute video visit per week via a prison-provided tablet.³⁰ Al Cormier, chief of operations with Vermont's Department of Corrections, said, "Now we're providing that at the cost of the department. The prisoners are not having to pay for this, and their families are not having to pay for this."³¹

Conclusion

The United States has a problem with 1.6 million incarcerated parents and over 50% of them having no relationship with their children. **This problem is important because the 2.6 million children of incarcerated parents suffer adverse family, housing, psychological, health, and educational outcomes.** Research has shown that if there was an existing productive children-parent bond, then children maintaining a relationship with their incarcerated parents produce improved outcomes for both the children and the parents.

The pre-pandemic in-person visits, phone calls, and video visits had many policy-driven and structural challenges that prevented children from maintaining those relationships. However, the pandemic has created a policy opportunity for prisons to adopt a new video visitation model that can facilitate children maintaining relationships with their incarcerated parents while removing the past barriers.

The new video visitation model includes: (1) improved video conferencing technology, (2) free prison video visitation through reduced or eliminated prison video conferencing costs, and (3) increased access for low-income families at community-based organizations and home through subsidized and discounted internet pricing.

Pennsylvania and Vermont Departments of Corrections successfully launched a new video visitation model. Other prison policymakers should adopt this new video visitation model while ensuring it is adopted long-term and does not replace in-person visits, where appropriate and when they are safe to resume.

About the Author

Corey Huebner lives in Los Angeles and is the child of an incarcerated parent. Corey is the Founder and President of the nonprofit organization, Advocates for Children of Incarcerated Parents (AFCOIP), which advocates for better outcomes for the children and parents. Their website (www.AFCOIP.org) serves as a resource guide and knowledge base for families impacted by parental incarceration.

Corey is the Co-founder and President of another nonprofit organization, International Support for the Impacted, Inc., which provides food aid grants to individuals in developing countries struggling to feed their families due to pandemic-related loss of work. Corey is also the author of a published environmental conservation research-based book, Finding A Sustainable Path.

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Appendix

Table 1:

Adverse Impact	% Children with an incarcerated parent	% Children without an incarcerated parent
Frequent socioeconomic hardship	46.8%	24.1%
Parental divorce or separation	57.0%	17.3%
Parental death	9.8%	2.6%
Domestic abuse	36.9%	5.1%
Neighborhood violence	32.7%	6.8%
Mentally ill or suicidal person	27.8%	7.2%
Substance abuse problem	54.7%	7.4%
Racial discrimination	8.1%	3.8%

Table 2:

Health Condition	% Increase in likelihood relative to other children (father incarcerated)
Post-traumatic stress syndrome	72%
Anxiety	51%
High cholesterol	31%
Asthma	30%
Migraines	26%

Table 3:

Health Condition	% Increase in likelihood relative to other children (either parent incarcerated)
ADD / ADHD	48%
Marijuana use	43%
Depression	43%
Behavioral problems	43%
Developmental delays	23%
Learning disabilities	22%
Delinquency	10%

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¹ In this brief, prisons collectively refer to all jails, state prisons and federal prisons and prisoners collectively refer to all incarcerated people in jails, state prisons and federal prisons;

² Zhen Zeng and Todd D. Minton, "Jail Inmates in 2019," *Jail Inmates in 2019* § (2021), p. 1; E. Ann Carson, "Prisoners in 2019," *Prisoners in 2019* § (2020), p. 1.

³ The Pew Charitable Trusts, "Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effect on Economic Mobility" (Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010), p. 4.

⁴ Susan D. Phillips, "Video Visits for Children Whose Parents Are Incarcerated: In Whose Best Interest?" (Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project, 2012), p. 2.

⁵ Elliot Davis, "California to Offer Virtual Visits for Prisoners after Thanksgiving," *U.S. News & World Report* (U.S. News & World Report, November 25, 2020), <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2020-11-25/california-to-offer-virtual-visits-for-prisoners-after-thanksgiving>.

⁶ Jane Lindholm and Ruby Smith, "Virtual Visits in Prison: Incarcerated Parents Support Their Children from a Distance," *Vermont Public Radio*, November 18, 2020, <https://www.vpr.org/programs/2020-11-18/virtual-visits-in-prison-incarcerated-parents-support-their-children-from-a-distance>.

⁷ Zeng and Minton, *Jail Inmates in 2019*, p 1; Carson, *Prisoners in 2019*, p 1.

⁸ The Pew Charitable Trusts, *Collateral Costs*, p 4.

⁹ The Pew Charitable Trusts, *Collateral Costs*, p 4.

¹⁰ Stacey M. Bouchet, "CHILDREN AND FAMILIES WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS Exploring Development in the Field and Opportunities for Growth" (Baltimore, MD, 2008), p. 3.

¹¹ David Murphy and P. Mae Cooper, "Parents Behind Bars: What Happens to Their Children?" (Bethesda, MD: Child TRENDS, 2015), p. 4.

¹² Murphy and Cooper, p 4.

¹³ Leila Morsy, "Mass Incarceration and the Achievement Gap," *The American Prospect*, May 8, 2017, <https://prospect.org/education/mass-incarceration-achievement-gap/>.

¹⁴ "The AFCARS Report #27," *The AFCARS Report #27* § (2020), p. 2.

¹⁵ Murphey and Cooper, *Parents Behind Bars*, p.6.

¹⁶ Morsy, *Mass Incarceration*.

¹⁷ Murphy and Cooper, *Parents Behind Bars*, p. 18; The Pew Charitable Trusts, *Collateral Costs*, p. 5.

¹⁸ Christopher Zoukis, " Legacy of Mass Incarceration: Parental Incarceration Impacts One in Fourteen Children ," *Prison Legal News*, February 7, 2017, <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2017/feb/7/legacy-mass-incarceration-parental-incarceration-impacts-one-fourteen-children/>.

¹⁹ Jaime Joyce, “Let's Make It Easier for Kids to Visit Incarcerated Parents,” The Marshall Project (The Marshall Project, May 10, 2019), <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2019/05/10/let-s-make-it-easier-for-kids-to-visit-incarcerated-parents>.

²⁰ Phillips, Video Visits for Children, p. 2.

²¹ “Rates and Kickbacks,” Prison Phone Justice, accessed September 6, 2021, <https://www.prisonphonejustice.org/>.

²² Nicole Lewis and Beatrix Lockwood, “Can You Hear Me Now?,” The Marshall Project (The Marshall Project, December 19, 2019), <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2019/12/19/can-you-hear-me-now>.

²³ Bernadette Rabuy and Peter Wagner, “Screening Out Family Time,” Prison Policy Initiative, January 2015, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/visitation/report.html>.

²⁴ Joshua C. Cochran, “The Ties That Bind or the Ties That Break: Examining the Relationship between Visitation and Prisoner Misconduct,” *Journal of Criminal Justice* 40, no. 5 (October 2012): pp. 433-440, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2012.06.001>.

²⁵ Minnesota Department of Corrections, “The Effects of Prison Visitation on Offender Recidivism,” *The effects of prison visitation on offender recidivism* § (2011), p. 27.

²⁶ Saneta deVuono-powell et al., “Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families” (Oakland, CA: Ella Baker Center, Forward Together, Research Action Design, 2015), pp. 7, 9.

²⁷ Allison Holihan and Michelle Portlock, “Video Visiting in Corrections: Benefits, Limitations, and Implementation Considerations,” *Video Visiting in Corrections: Benefits, Limitations, and Implementation Considerations* § (2014), p. 29.

²⁸ Davis, California to Offer.

²⁹ Davis, California to Offer.

³⁰ Lindholm and Smith, Virtual Visits in Prison

³¹ Lindholm and Smith, Virtual Visits in Prison

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