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078911

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**What Has Happened to Prison Visiting?  
Current Use of a Rehabilitative Tool**

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**Paper presented at the annual meeting  
American Society of Criminology  
Montreal, Canada  
November 1987**

**NCJRS**

**APR 25 1989**

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What Has Happened to Prison Visiting?:  
Current Use of a Rehabilitative Tool

In his book, The Future of Imprisonment, (1974) Norval Morris noted that participation in prison treatment and training programs showed lower association with the avoidance of criminal behavior following release than did family ties, availability of a residence and a job, and related social aspects outside the prison (emphasis added). When we get through lamenting that "nothing works" (Lipton, et al 1967) we see that there are a few conditions or programs associated with favorable outcomes following release from prison. Those strongest tend to be: 1) social ties (Holt and Miller, 1972); 2) self-esteem (Bennett, 1974); and 3) employment (sometimes, with some release groups). Thus we see support from the family during incarceration being related to more positive outcomes where the individual is returned to society. But how has inmate visiting survived in the face of crowded facilities and limited correctional budgets? Have correctional administrators recognized the value of visiting? Have facilities been expanded to meet the visiting needs of the burgeoning number of inmates filling our prisons? The concern of this study was that visiting is an easy program to curtail when resources are limited and curtailment does not result in an immediate danger such as might happen if custody positions are eliminated.

How important is the matter of inmate visits? A current review of the literature produced results very similar to past efforts - there are very few studies available about inmate visits and the relationships of such visits to institutional adjustment, program participation, continuation of the marriage or general post-institutional adjustment. Most articles available tend to be descriptive and deal with either the assumed positive effects of visiting on inmate adjustment (Morris, 1965; Cobean & Power, 1978; Fox, 1981), the problems of the suffering of family as the result of incarceration of the male breadwinner (Bradsky, 1975; Schneller, 1975; Hinds, 1981), or the difficulties encountered by families in obtaining services, especially visiting assistance (Fishman and Cassin, 1981). A now famous study, that of Holt and Miller (1972), found that those who consistently received visits from relatives or friends tended to have a more favorable parole outcome. In fact, based on outcome during the first year following release, six times as many prisoners who had had no visitors had failed as compared to those who had frequent visits from at least three different relatives or friends. Similar findings had been reported earlier by Glaser (1964) which indicated parole success rate of 74 percent for those with active

and sustained visits from family vs. 43 percent for those without visits. Parole violation rates were inversely related to the number of family visits in a study of 17,000 men paroled over a 20 year period (Ohlin, 1954), with the parole violation rate at 66% for those with no visits compared with 26% for those who had 2 or 3 visits per month.

All of these studies suggest a strong relationship between no visits and poor postinstitutional adjustment but, while showing a consistent trend, still only depict a correlational relationship. Causality cannot be determined from these studies. However, the work of "M-2" presents somewhat stronger evidence because they approached the problem with the predictive hypothesis that providing visitors would have a positive impact. They started with the question, "Can anything be done about visits for those who would ordinarily not receive any?" "M-2" sponsors seemed to think so. Over a number of years, that organization has managed a program of recruiting and training volunteers to match with inmates who have limited social ties.

In the most recent study of their program (EMT, 1987), 622 inmates released to parole in California between July 1983 and June 1985 were evaluated at the 6-, 12- and 24 month follow-up periods. At each follow-up period the relationship between some visits vs. none and parole success was statistically significant. In addition, it was found that the number of visits played a vital role (at 12 months, for example, of those who had received 12 or more visits 68.5% had satisfactory outcomes as compared to 38.7% for those who had received no visits). Thus, it seems clear that there is a strong relationship visits and parole outcome and between the degree of contact and parole success.

In the area of private family visiting (often referred to as "conjugal visiting") not much has been written in recent years. One gains the impression that there has been a general expansion of the program but little clear evidence could be located to document the current state of such a visiting program. McMahon, in a recent presentation (1987) describes the New York State Family Reunion Program and notes that such programs have become more common in recent years.

Then there is the problem of transportation. Many of the families interested in visiting inmates are on welfare. With most of the institutions located in rural areas, just bus fare works a hardship. And taking the bus will only get you to the small town near the prison. Usually a taxi is the only alternative to a very long walk. These barriers are outlined in a study sponsored by the National Institute of Corrections (Fishman & Cassin, 1981). Thus transportation along with other considerations - baby sitting, comfort stops after a long trip, etc - has become more and more recognized (Bloom, 1987; McMahon, 1987). But what is the situation nation-wide?

## Methodology

To gain at least summary and preliminary answers to some of the questions raised, a request for information was sent to the departments of corrections in the fifty states, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the District of Columbia Department of Corrections and the four U.S. territories.

The request covered the areas of extent to which length of time available for visits had changed since 1980; how the number of visits permitted per inmate had changed; whether the department had been able to expand visiting space to meet the pressures of increased inmate populations; whether transportation assistance was provided either directly or indirectly or if there were outside groups working on this problem; whether special programs or groups addressed the issue of the inmates without visits; the presence or absence of Private Family Visiting and problems and advantages associated with such a program; and a general rating of 1 to 10 as to importance of inmate visiting with 10 being "very important."

## FINDINGS

Responses were received from all the state departments of corrections, and other jurisdictions resulting in fifty-six responses represented some 895 institutions.

### Length, Frequency of Visits and Space Available

Length of visiting time per week had increased since 1980 in roughly 30 percent of the cases (28.6%) (16 jurisdictions) while decreasing in only 6 departments (11%). The number of visits allowable per month per inmate also increased for 30 percent of the jurisdictions while decreasing in one jurisdiction (2% of the cases).

How about visiting space? Did it grow to accommodate expanding inmate populations? Roughly seventy percent or 37 of the jurisdictions reporting indicated that they had managed to increase space as their populations grew. That also means that for seventeen of the jurisdictions (31.5%) space available was deemed less than adequate to meet visiting needs.

### Transportation Assistance

How many jurisdictions provide assistance for transportation for families or other visiting inmates? Six out of the fifty-six jurisdictions indicated that they provided transportation directly for prison visitors. A total of ten indicated that the department or some other governmental agency assisted in providing such transportation for visitors. Nearly half (45.5%) indicated that outside organizations made arrangements for low

cost transportation for inmate families. As can be imagined, especially by those who have worked with volunteer groups around correctional institutions, it is likely that the results of all these efforts combined means that while for nearly half of the departments some transportation assistance is available, over half (54.5%) the departments have no help available to assist in getting families together with prison inmates. This is particularly important when one remembers that most institutions are far removed from population centers where the families tend to live.

#### Help for those Without Visits

A side issue explored dealt with those inmates who, under ordinary circumstances, would not receive any visits during their incarceration. Either they had few friends or family ties or potential visitors live in some other state too far away for visits to be practical. While over half (51.8%) indicated that they made special provisions for visitors for those without close family ties, from the comments the impression was gained that only a few organizations (about 29%) are dealing with the issue in any systematic way.

#### Private Family Visiting

Another piece of information is that nine jurisdictions have a program of private family visiting someplace in their department. "Private family visiting" as used here was defined as a man and a woman being along with their family for a period of time, usually including overnight. It includes conjugal visits but might also include, in addition to children, other significant family members such as parents, aunts and uncles, etc. The level reported marks a major expansion over the level of a few years ago (some of these programs are in early start-up phases) but falls considerably below the level suggested by the information in the Directory published by the American Correctional Association (1987). From a quick review of that document one would conclude that 18 jurisdictions (16 states and 2 territories) had private family visits in at least one of their adult institutions. The difference would seem to be related to definitions of the program. Even with the seeming clarity of the definition presented above there were some ambiguous responses. Of particular interest in this regard were two jurisdictions who did not have private family visits as defined but did provide an opportunity for children to reside with their inmate mothers over a several day period.

Few jurisdictions who did not have private family visiting indicated any interest in exploring the development. One organization had proposed a plan for the legislature but the issue was not pushed for budgetary reasons.

Respondents were also asked to rate their view of the importance of inmate visiting. Of the 54 reacting to the item, the ratings ranged from 5 through 10 with the median and mode at 10, with a mean of slightly over 9. Judging by the manner in which two respondents marked their questionnaire, some seemed to want to rate visiting at about 12 on a scale from 1 to 10.

## Conclusions

Inmate visiting continues to be of special concern to the correctional field with almost all respondents rating this program at the high end of a value scale. Reflecting this commitment, the vast majority of the jurisdictions have managed to maintain a fairly high level of support for inmate visiting, with length of time per week available for visits remaining the same or increasing in over 89% (50) of the jurisdictions responding. This was achieved despite tight budgets and ever increasing prison populations. Along similar lines most of the jurisdictions were able to increase the number of visits per month allowable per inmate over 1980 levels. However, since only 70% of the correctional systems were able to increase the space available for visiting at a pace matching the increase in inmate populations, one can only speculate that the increased number of visits are taking place in a somewhat more cramped situation. Support for this view is provided by the finding that of the 17 jurisdictions unable to keep up with space demands, 14 or 82% managed to maintain 1980 levels of length and frequency of visits.

It takes little research to realize that it is difficult for families to visit inmates when one considers that most prisons are built in isolated sections of the state while inmates and their families tend to live in large metropolitan areas. Thus it is noteworthy that only a few states either provide transportation to families for visits or provide support to assist in getting families to the institutions for visits. While the finding that nearly half the institutions reporting have outside groups that provide family transportation sounds quite encouraging, it seems likely that such service, in many cases, is quite sporadic and limited to special institutions. Of concern, however, is the fact that nearly half of the departments have no service either direct or indirect to assist with the transportation problem.

Another problem explored was that of the inmate without visitors. Studies by the M-2 program have clearly established the desirability of providing visitors for inmates of this type with findings that significantly more positive post-institutional outcomes are associated with such visits. Higher numbers of contacts between visitor and inmate is also associated with a higher percentage of positive outcomes. While it is encouraging that over fifty percent of the jurisdictions indicated that special provisions are made for visitors without close family ties, few seem to have a systematic or organized approach to the problem. It is suspected that even where there are well organized agencies involved in attempting to provide suitable



visitors for inmates without strong social ties, their efforts often fall short of meeting the needs. Thus, there apparently is an unknown but not insignificant number of inmates who do not have visits or who receive visits only infrequently. The number is designated as "not insignificant" because outcome measures with this group often reveal a high rate of recidivism. In view of this, there seems to be fertile ground for increasing correctional programming at relatively modest cost that might prove to be quite cost beneficial. It seems likely that the problem will only get worse with further increases in inmate populations and the accumulation within those populations of inmates serving longer and longer periods of incarceration. It is noteworthy that two jurisdictions indicated they were in the planning process of developing special programs to provide special assistance in locating visitors for this group.

In the area of private family (conjugal) visiting an interesting picture emerges. Quite a number of jurisdictions (16 states and 2 territories) would seem to be operating such programs in at least one of their institutions, according to their listing in the most recent American Correctional Association Directory of Institutions. In fact only nine states have a program of this type and some of these permit so few individuals to participate as to hardly qualify as having a program at all. The difference seems to be in definition. While the number of jurisdictions involved seems small it must be remembered that this represents a major expansion over past periods, for just ten years ago only two state departments of corrections had such programs. (Burstein 1977; Markley, 1972). It would appear that the informational campaign of the American Correctional Association about Mexican and Latin American prison colonies (ACA, 1981) had little effect, either in systems adopting the colony approach or increasing private family visiting. The attitudes about conjugal visiting exhibit some strange turns. The positive view of such programs was early presented by Hopper (1969) while Johns (1971) felt that even the positive attitudes would not result in action and outlined the reasons for his belief. These includes: 1) the negative attitudes of inmates who would be unable to participate; 2) facilities are not available and not likely to be made available; 3) practical problems of administration - security, abuse of power, common-law relationships - would be too severe; 4) administrative support is not really very strong; 5) sexual nature of conjugal visits not in tune with the culture of the times - too degrading for the wife; and 6) possible additional children born to "inadequate families," requiring support from public welfare. Balough surveyed 52 wardens (1964) and found that only 13 percent approved. At an intermediate stage Haynor (1972) reported that at the time of his contact two jurisdictions were in the planning stage in addition to the two which were operational. Shortly thereafter Vedder and Kind (1965) found nearly twice the percentage of positive responses from 49 directors of state or federal correctional operations. If

percentages are applied to the present study we see action (either the operation of a private family visiting program or planning related to one) on the part of some 16 percent of the respondents. Perhaps some of the differences can be accounted for in terms of "being in favor of..." vs. operating such a program. More recently the Federal of Prisons investigated private family visiting (1981) via a task force. They looked at the operation of such programs in Minnesota, New York and California. They felt the program, despite the statements about the family, placed too great an emphasis on sex, failed to serve long termers and that a furlough program would serve to meet the needs of those serving short periods of incarceration. The final recommendation from that study was that private family visiting not replace nor supplement the home furlough of the Bureau, but suggested that family visiting might be tested on a well researched basis for those serving longer periods in prison.

However, the strengthening of family ties has been expanding in other interesting ways. Two states have programs providing an opportunity for inmate mothers to have private family visiting with their children and several jurisdictions have programs of special visiting between parents and incarcerated juvenile offenders.

In terms of policy implications, the area where greatest gains could be made would be in the area of developing systems so that families interested in visiting could have affordable transportation available. Nearly fifty percent of the states have no such programs now. While some of these jurisdictions may be small enough that transportation is not a major problem it seems likely that several could make use of such programs.

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