

Riding the Bus

Barriers to Prison Visitation and Family Management Strategies

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Geographic separation from family is one consequence of imprisonment. Depending on the state, prisons are often located in remote, rural areas that are far from the urban cores many prisoners come from. Although scholars frequently cite the distance of prison facilities from prisoners' families' residences, scant research has addressed whether this is in fact an impediment to visiting or how families who do visit manage this process. It is an exhausting, resource intensive process for a family member to make one visit at a prison. Understanding how families decide how much of their resources to devote to maintaining their relationship with the prisoner is important. Using data collected through ethnographic observation and interviews, this article explores family management of prison visiting as one of the collateral consequences of incarceration.

Keywords: *prisoners; families; prison visiting; prisoner connections to family*

As the nation's incarceration rates rise, researchers and policy makers have begun to highlight several gaps in our understanding of and approach to studying incarceration. A growing body of research considers that incarceration has unintended consequences (Clear, 1996) or collateral consequences (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999) that reach far beyond the prisoner and in fact extend to families and communities. The role of prisoners' families has taken on added significance as scholars have highlighted the geographic concentration of incarceration and release, making some neighborhoods and communities particularly vulnerable to the collateral consequences of incarceration and the subsequent challenges of reintegrating large numbers of former prisoners (Travis & Waul, 2003). Little, however, is known about what it is like for families to bridge the gap between their lives outside and the life of their incarcerated loved one. Examining potential

barriers to family connections and bonds with prisoners is one contribution to our understanding of the broader effects of incarceration.

This article draws from an ethnographic study of how families' lives are affected by incarceration to look at some barriers to prisoner ties to family that stem from the challenges of visiting at prisons. Data come from observation on bus rides families take from New York City to prisons throughout New York to visit incarcerated male family members and in depth, open-ended interviews with prisoners' family members. The study illustrates that staying connected to a prisoner is a time, resource, and labor intensive process, which may create barriers to prisoners' maintenance of family ties. In addition to describing what the process of getting to a prison visit is like, highlighting the barriers to visiting and ways that families manage this process are the foci of the article.

LITERATURE ABOUT FAMILY TIES TO PRISONERS

Connectedness to Family

Surveys of prison inmates show that 55% of state and 63% of federal prison inmates have children younger than age 18, and 46% of those parents were living with their children at the time they were admitted to prison (Mumola, 2000). When fathers are incarcerated, in 90% of cases the children's mother is the primary caregiver. In addition, Mumola found that 57% of male, state prison inmates had never had a personal visit with their children since their admission to prison. Of the prisoners who did have contact with their children in 1997, 42% had phone contact, 50% mail contact, and 21% visits. These figures indicate that the majority of male prisoners are not connected to their children at the most basic level. Such contact could be the starting point for the development of deeper bonds and attachments that facilitate the prisoner's integration into the family unit while incarcerated, which provides the basis for a strong support system fostering successful reentry into the family and community upon release (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Petersilia, 2003).

A recent report issued by the National Institute of Corrections (2002) detailed the types of services that departments of correction in various states provide to facilitate family contact with prisoners. Slightly more than half of the responding departments of correction reported that proximity to family is one criterion for facility assignment. Of the 54 department of corrections that responded to the survey, 37% reported providing some type of visitation assistance, such as transportation services, to families in at least one facility in their jurisdiction. Moreover, 78% of the departments had some type of pol-

icy or program to encourage prisoners to maintain family contacts. This type of study provides a strong basis for shaping institutional policy that may make it easier for families to maintain contact with prisoners, and it speaks to recognition of the importance of family contacts and relationships.

Role of Family

Although current policy and research about prisoners cites benefits of ties to family such as institutional adjustment and successful reintegration to communities (Hairston, 2003; Petersilia, 2003), little is known about the extent of prisoners' family connections while incarcerated, the quality of these relationships, how and whether they are sustained upon release, and how they influence the prisoners' experience of reentry. If, as Sabol and Lynch (1997) propose, criminal justice policies have led to the incarceration of more "socially integrated offenders," we would expect to see a continuum in various dimensions of men's involvement in family life prior to, during, and after incarceration. For example, Edin, Nelson, and Paranal (2004) found that incarceration's effect on families depends on the nature of men's involvement in family life prior to their imprisonment.

Incarceration's Effect on Families

Carlson and Cervera (1992) found that wives of incarcerated men experience a great deal of strain, including feelings of guilt and stress because of pressure to fulfill the multiple roles of the incarcerated man. Some of the problems children face, related to parents' incarceration, include behavioral problems at home and in school, difficulty sleeping, mistrust, and fear of abandonment (Carlson & Cervera, 1992; Lowenstein, 1986; Shaw, 1987, 1992). In addition, children without family members to take care of them are placed in foster care, further disrupting their lives.

Raising children alone and dealing with financial problems are two of the most prominent problems. In addition to the hardships related to incarceration, planning for visits to the prison and trying to maintain a relationship with the incarcerated individual become an integral part of life and coping mechanisms are often developed (Fishman, 1990; Girshick, 1996). Prison visits may bring feelings of excitement, anticipation, joy, and yet sadness (Carlson & Cervera, 1992; Fishman, 1990; Girshick, 1996). The literature suggests that the prison experience becomes an integral part of life for the wives and girlfriends of prisoners and that incarceration affects the family at many levels.

This literature, however, provides inconsistent findings about specific effects of incarceration on families (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999). If an inmate

has been abusive to his partner or children, incarceration is likely to be beneficial. Substance abusers may significantly drain already limited family resources. Dominant themes in the family literature, however, highlight substantial negative effects on the family unit when a member is incarcerated (Carlson & Cervera, 1992; Fishman, 1990; Girshick, 1996; Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Shaw, 1987) and that more research in this area is warranted (Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001).

For example, Braman and Wood (2003) conclude that incarceration's negative consequences reach far beyond the prisoner and that their family members suffer as much as, if not more, than the incarcerated individual. They discovered that the stigma related to incarceration was so great that many family members isolated themselves from the people in their lives who could help form a support system. Another recent addition to the research is Comfort's (2003) ethnographic study of the "secondary prisonization" of women visiting inmates at San Quentin State Prison in California. She makes a compelling argument that "women whose loved ones and close acquaintances are caught in the revolving door of 'corrections' experience restricted rights, diminished resources, social marginalization, and other consequences of penal confinement, even though they are legally innocent and reside outside of the prison's boundaries" (p. 79). Her work contributes greatly to the understanding of what it is like for family members to go through the process of visiting an incarcerated individual, and she critiques the degradation ceremonies visitors are subjected to.

This literature highlights potential benefits to prisoners maintaining contact with families, broader ways family life may be affected by incarceration, as well as family experiences visiting at prisons. Drawing from these findings in the existing literature, the article will focus on barriers to families visiting at prisons and the ways families manage these barriers.

METHOD

Sample and Data

According to New York Department of Corrections data, of the 71,466 inmates under custody on January 1, 2000, 66% were committed from New York City counties. Fifty-one percent of the inmates are African American and 31% are Hispanic (Bernstein & Davis, 2000). There is a small cluster of facilities relatively close to New York City, with the closest maximum-security prison, Sing Sing, only 34 miles away—about a 50-minute drive. There is, in fact, a commuter train that goes from New York to the city of Ossining.

Some of the other closer facilities are Woodbourne, a medium-security prison 100 miles from New York—a 2-hour drive. Attica is 350 miles from New York, a 6 ½-hour drive, and Upstate prison, located near the Canadian border in Malone, New York, is 383 miles from New York. The distance of the prisons makes visiting a very costly and time-consuming process.

Data come from a qualitative study of how social capital development in families and communities is affected by incarceration. The family-focused portion of the study included 200 hours of observation at prison family support group meetings, attendance at activities aimed at prison families, and observation on five bus rides, each covering a 24-hour period, to two upstate New York prisons. In addition, open-ended in depth interviews were conducted with 19 family members of prisoners such as wives, girlfriends, mothers, and one brother. The race and ethnicity of the sample was African American and Latino, 18 females and 1 male, with an age range from the early 20s to mid-60s. These demographic characteristics of the sample closely parallel the demographic composition of the riders on the buses.

Before observation bus rides began, community sponsors were used to introduce the researcher into the setting. Permission was obtained from the owner of the bus company Operation Prison Gap to ride buses taking families for visits to prisons in upstate New York. Two prisons were chosen because they include a population representative of prisoners throughout the state, and they were located between 250 and 300 miles from New York City. The families of male inmates were chosen for this study, recognizing that the processes highlighted would likely be different when studying the experiences of women's families (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002). During the bus rides, the researcher approached family members and explained the study, and any willing person was interviewed. Eventually, participants were chosen to include individuals residing in two high-incarceration neighborhoods in New York.

One limitation of this data collection method is that it only identifies the family members who are connected to an incarcerated individual through visiting at prisons. Data suggest that more than half of prisoners do not receive in-person visits from family members (Mumola, 2000). There are a myriad of explanations for why families may not visit, including distance of the prison, financial burdens, problems with the prison bureaucracy, and strained or severed relationships with the prisoner (Hairston, 2003). As later sections of the article will explain, there is also reason to believe that family relationships with prisoners are actually rather fluid and dynamic and that cross-sectional studies of family relationships may underestimate the extent to which families are connected to prisoners at different points in their incarceration.

Data Analysis

Processes of data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously and interactively following a grounded theory approach. Data were analyzed continually to identify emerging concepts and themes and to determine directions for data collection. Memos and analytic notes were written during data collection and analysis to document the theoretical decision-making process (Maxwell, 1996). Field notes from observation periods included both a description of what was happening in the setting and theoretical or reflective note sections. Analysis followed the processes outlined for grounded theory studies, including open and axial coding (Creswell, 1998).

THE PRISON VISIT

Describing the Journey

One component of understanding the family perspective of incarceration is examining what the process of getting to a prison visit is like. The main bus company in New York, which transports families to visits, is Operation Prison Gap, a privately operated bus service started in 1973 by a former prisoner. On a typical weekend, approximately 800 people use the service to get to a prison visit (Schlosser, 1998), with buses leaving throughout the night. In addition to Operation Prison Gap, there are many smaller bus and van services that transport people to prisons from New York City, some only leaving from specific neighborhoods. The companies compete for business, handing out discount coupons at visiting centers and mailing them to inmates to pass along to family members.

The majority of the individuals on the buses are women traveling alone. Some have children with them, ranging from infants to teenagers. There are also some men on the bus, but they are usually traveling with a woman. The people on the bus are prisoners' wives, girlfriends, mothers, sisters, fathers, brothers, and friends. Most of the riders I spoke with came from neighborhoods in New York already identified as having high concentrations of incarceration, and riders must take the subway or cabs into Manhattan to get the bus.

Cost and Timeline

The cost of bus tickets averages \$40, more or less depending on the distance of the facility. Tickets for children are half price. There are other costs in addition to the price of the bus ticket. A low estimate of additional costs is \$20 for food and drinks during the 24-hour period of the trip and \$20 for food

from the vending machines inside of the prison (visitors are not allowed to bring food into the visiting room). In addition, many families bring packaged food and snacks, clothing items, and cash. These additional items can easily cost \$50 or more. On one visit, a woman had \$40 worth of candy with her. Another said her husband ate \$50 worth of food during the visit because he was so hungry. The costs associated with one visit are a minimum of \$80 and could easily be twice that amount. This is assuming that there is only one family member visiting and does not include other expenses such as child-care. In addition to these monetary costs, the journey to a visit is extremely tiring and time consuming. The process involves a tremendous amount of waiting, as the timeline in Figure 1 illustrates. The timeline of a visit varies, depending on which facility an individual is going to. Buses to the farthest facilities leave New York around 9:00 PM to arrive in time for visiting hours at 9:00 AM the next morning. The timeline presented in Figure 1 was generated from the rides the researcher took to a maximum-security prison 263 miles from New York City.

The timeline illustrates that the first potential barrier to visiting is the amount of time, energy, and money required merely to get to the visit. As families engage in this process, other aspects of their lives, such as spending time with and supervising children, or involvement with community or neighborhood organizations necessarily suffer. Maintaining a connection with a prisoner at the most basic level of going on a visit could jeopardize the family well-being in areas outside of the involvement with the incarcerated individual. Families recognize that they must make choices about the resources they devote to the prisoner. The following sections illustrate that only a portion of the time devoted to the process is actually spent with the prisoner, and one consequence of this is that families going on visits form relationships with each other.

Waiting for the Visit

Some facilities have hospitality or visitor centers that are a resource for families when visiting at the prison. One prison I went to had a center that was on state property but operated by a nonprofit organization. The center provides a comfortable place for families to wait for the visit, as well as a coordinator who has very good rapport with family members. The center coordinator helps visitors fill out the paperwork necessary to get into the prison and drop off packages. She also helps explain the prison rules, sometimes counseling people about the likelihood that they will be refused entrance to the prison because of the clothes they are wearing. For example, the prison rules at one facility specify that clothing cannot be skimpy, including no short skirts or low cut tops, shirts cannot show more than half of the back, and

9:00 PM Friday Night
 Bus riders begin congregating at Columbus Circle in New York City, waiting for bus boarding time
 11:00 PM
 Riders board the bus and wait for departure
 11:45 PM
 Bus leaves Columbus Circle
 12:00 Midnight
 Bus makes a dinner stop at a deli several blocks away from Columbus Circle
 12:15 AM
 Bus stops at a facility in New York City for gas
 12:30 AM
 Bus leaves New York City traveling to the prison
 Bus coordinator plays a movie
 Most riders finish eating and begin to go to sleep
 3:00 AM
 Bus stops for a restroom break. Riders get off bus to smoke cigarettes, buy snacks, and/or use restroom
 5:15 AM
 Bus arrives at supermarket several blocks from prison. Passengers are given 30 minutes to do grocery shopping
 5:45 AM
 Bus leaves supermarket and arrives at prison Hospitality Center
 Bus drops off some passengers and then takes remainder to a second facility
 6:00 AM
 Visitors wait at the prison Hospitality Center for the visit to begin. Immediately upon arrival the paperwork for packages and visitors' entrance to the prison is completed and taken to the prison by the bus coordinator. During this period visitors sleep, drink coffee and eat breakfast, fix their hair and makeup, iron clothes, and change clothes.
 9:00 AM
 Prison visit begins. Families going on trailer visits wait at the visiting center. Some individuals have a problem getting in to the prison and return to the center to wait until the bus returns to New York City.
 1:00 PM
 The van taking families to trailer visits arrives
 3:30 PM
 Prison visit ends. Families return to Hospitality Center for a snack before boarding the bus back to New York City.
 4:00 PM
 The bus leaves the first prison and travels to the second prison facility to pick up remaining riders
 4:30 PM
 Bus begins trip back to New York City
 5:00 PM
 Bus stops at a location with several fast food restaurants so riders can buy dinner
 5:30 PM
 Riders eat dinner on the bus during the trip back to New York City
 Another movie is shown
 Some riders go to sleep
 9:00 PM Saturday Night
 Bus arrives back at Columbus Circle, letting passengers off. The bus is prepared to make the same trip with new passengers, arriving at the prison for the Sunday morning visit.

Figure 1 Prison Visit Timeline

sleeveless tops are not allowed. The hospitality center coordinator also helps people who have a problem getting into the prison, sometimes calling the prison to speak to someone on their behalf.

The center provides a supportive environment for families and tries to mitigate some of the hardships created by visiting. There is coffee for families when they arrive in the morning. The center is set up like a small house with a dining area; a living room area with a TV and VCR, a coffee table with a basket of magazines on it, a sofa, love seat, and a couple of soft chairs; a children's area, which has a small table and chairs, books, and toys; and a kitchen

with a fridge, microwave, and toaster. It also has restrooms, an iron and ironing board, and two small changing rooms. The hospitality center coordinator said that the families are “spending money from the time they leave their homes,” so the center attempts to cut some of their expenses by providing coffee, snacks, and sometimes meals.

Based on what people who had been to other prisons said, as well as my observation at another prison, this center was one of the best as far as what it offered family members. Some prisons had no center, requiring families to wait outside until the visit starts, and others are less comfortable and provide fewer amenities. Winter presents a special challenge when families visit at a prison without a waiting area.

A number of the women are regular riders who have been coming to the prison together for some time and interact with each other throughout the journey. They buy each other coffee, sit together, watch over their belongings, and just spend time chatting. Part of the bond between the bus riders centers around commiseration about the difficulties of making the visit, such as the cost, and the amount of time and energy required. In some instances, they complain about the excess demands the incarcerated man places on them and they discuss things that occurred between them and their partners during the visit. The shared experiences are one means of managing the barriers to maintaining family contact.

The hours at the hospitality center before the visit starts bring out the sense of community among the women. Grooming for the prison visit is the primary focus of the hours before the visit starts. Children’s faces are washed, their hair is brushed, and their clothes changed. The women paint their fingernails and fix their hair. They also sign up for turns to use the iron and ironing board and the changing rooms in the visiting center. Some of them have favorite diners and coffee shops in town where they go for breakfast. Many stand outside smoking and talking. Before one visit, a few women discussed a local store back in their neighborhood where they could buy items for prisoners, which the store shipped to the facilities directly. They were very happy with the convenience, eliminating the step of having to take items home to box them and then wait in line at the post office.

There is a motel a few blocks from the prison that allows the women to pay \$10 each to take a shower in a room. I once went and inquired about the cost of renting the room for a few hours (thinking it would be a private and comfortable place to conduct interviews) and was told I would have to pay the full daily rate. Each woman using the room for a shower is required to pay \$10 with the expectation that they will be out of the room within about an hour. Three or four women sometimes go together to use one room.

During the hours before the visit, the women sometimes share their concerns about news they may be getting during the visit, especially about parole

hearing outcomes. They wish each other luck, offer encouragement based on successful hearings they have heard about, and share their own anticipation about pending hearings, even if they are several months to a year away.

On at least two of the visits I have been on, family members have made the trip to the prison to discover that they cannot get in to the facility, which means that their wait is prolonged until the bus returns to New York. After September 11, the prison instituted a policy that photo identification was necessary to get in to the prison. One woman brought her 14-year-old sister with her to visit their brother. Because the older sister did not have identification and was denied access to the prison, the younger sister could not get in either. In the other instance, a woman had been told by one prison official that she could visit her brother, even though it was not on the regularly designated day. In both of these cases, the family members were disappointed that they had made the long and costly trip for no reason, but they were even more distressed that their brothers had been expecting them and would not receive a visit they had depended on.

Barriers to Visiting and Maintenance of Connections

Several explanations exist for why families fail to stay connected with prisoners. These include the financial difficulties of visiting and accepting collect phone calls, the emotional demands, and the other demands of life that prevent visiting (Hairston, 2003). In some instances, families are tired of the prisoner's cycling in and out of the system and essentially experience a last straw incident that leads them to cut the person off. When substance abuse or mental illness has been a factor, families may be particularly weary of such patterns. In addition, prisoners sometimes tell their families not to visit them in order to spare them the hardship and trouble. When families do visit, it is in the face of significant obstacles and barriers that they must navigate and manage.

Several themes emerged with regard to the families' rationale for visiting despite these problems. Paradoxically, many express an attitude of, I don't like it, but I do it anyway. During an interview with a woman waiting to go on a bus ride, she said that she didn't want to go on the 8-hour ride, pointing out that she could be going on a vacation to Virginia Beach in that period of time. Families realize that they must make tradeoffs to stay connected to a prisoner. The following field note excerpt describes part of a telephone conversation overhead on a bus:

While the bus was still in Manhattan a young African American female in her late teens to early twenties with a headscarf on made a phone call. She was talking to someone and said I don't know what it's like on your bus, but

I just want to know how you do this. I hate this, I can't stand it. How do you do it? She said that the bus was so crowded you would think it was Easter or something. She said that when she gets to the visit she's so tired and mad they just fight. She said, "I do o.k. when I'm on my own. But I just can't take this." She sounded very annoyed and kind of desperate. She told the person that she just called because she needed someone to talk to. (March 22, 2002)

Other women talked about the fact that they were so tired from the process of getting to the visit, once they met with the prisoner they could not truly enjoy the visit, and the quality of the time with the prisoner suffered. The following sections discuss reasons families give for visiting despite the sentiment that the visits present hardships.

Watching the System

A prominent feeling among families is that visiting provides them a means of monitoring the prison system. They believe that when a prisoner does not receive visits, it is a sign that no one cares about him, which gives prison personnel free license to treat him however they wish. Further, when no one visits a prisoner, no one knows what is happening to him, and the system is not accountable to anyone. The following quote illustrates this perspective:

I mean the person could die today or tomorrow, you would never know. These prison officers ain't gonna tell you. They'll tell you like a year later. Oh we couldn't get in contact with nobody. And when that person don't have no mail, or they don't have no contact with the outside world, they say well they don't have a family. So they meaningless to them, so we gonna do whatever we want to do to them. And they do. And they do. You sit here for a whole year and have not seen one letter for him. You have not had one visit, so we gonna do whatever we want to you. You know, and that's bad, that's really, really bad. (Family 2)

Families may see themselves as protectors of their incarcerated relatives and feel they at least have a chance of generating a response from the system if they have stayed involved in the prisoner's life. One mother whose son has mental health problems, requiring injections of an antipsychotic drug prior to his incarceration, expressed concern that he was not receiving medication in prison. She tried to visit monthly to determine whether he was getting the medication and to "keep an eye on things." She called his counselor and asked her son directly if he was getting his medication. In addition, family members knew of prisoners who did not receive visits and had stories about

abuse that went unchecked and prisoners with no recourse because they had no family to defend them.

Watching the system also entails making up for some of the deficits in the level of care the prison provides the inmate. One family member described his brother as one of the fortunate inmates because he provided some of the “basic necessities” the prison allows inmates to receive from family members. He made sure his brother had books, underwear, and money for commissary, which allowed him to cook his own food rather than rely on the facility’s meals. He explained,

They give you the basic necessities of food and what not, but there’s a lot of things that you don’t get unless you have someone to provide for you. And for those who are less fortunate, it’s really tough, you know because they have to settle for whatever meals they have. [Brother’s name] on the other hand has the opportunity to cook his meals. He has his own cell, and with the money I give him he goes food shopping in the commissary, and he cooks his meals. Makes rice and chicken. So he has options. He doesn’t have to settle for the food that the facility gives him. And so I know that gives him a totally different feeling as opposed to. You know, he has an option. It’s not like others that are less fortunate, we’re not. He can go to commissary and buy a bag of chips, or soda, or any little munchies, whereas others may not be able to do so. (Family 19)

Providing food also extends beyond a mere preference for better food, as when prisoners have been in solitary confinement and received “the loaf,” they are ravenous during visits with family members and eat a great deal.

Moral Support

Families also see a role in providing moral support for the prisoner to counter some of the psychological damage resulting from the incarceration. One wife counseled her husband about how to deal with challenges brought on by other prisoners and corrections officers. She explained,

I mean these people put them through so much. And, if they don’t have nobody there, that’s the main reason they lose self-control, and they start to do things. Because nobody’s behind them. And they feel well I don’t have no family behind me, and I’m dealing with this all by myself. But that’s why I let my husband see, you’re not going through this alone, and you never forget that. You’ve been in here and I’ve, I mean I may be out in the world, but I’m still here with you. (Family 2)

There is a feeling that the family is also serving the sentence as a show of support to the inmate. Similarly, another family member summarized the different kinds of support he offers his brother by visiting him regularly, and why he is so strongly compelled to do so.

I just felt the need to give him that companionship, you know? To be honest with you, I've never been incarcerated, and this is the first time I've ever set foot in a correctional facility, but I can imagine how terrible it must be to be locked up in four walls and not have any companionship. Even though I'm in the free world, I know what it's like to go without. I can only imagine what it must feel like for them, you know. (Family 19)

The need to monitor the prison system and provide support for the offender may foster a sense of devotion that overrides other demands in the family's life. One wife who has several children, one of them severely disabled, visited her husband every other week. There was a chance he would be transferred to a facility even farther away than the one he was already in. When I asked if she would maintain the same visiting schedule even if he were so far away, she replied, "I have to, he's my life." She also expressed a belief that if someone is committed to their marriage, they will stick by that person and visit them regardless of the personal sacrifices. This suggests that the people who go on the visits may be the ones who are already tightly bonded to the prisoner. As stated in the Method section, the families who visit are not representative of prisoners' families, and the individuals who do maintain bonds through visiting may have stronger motivation to overcome the barriers presented by visiting.

Hope/Parole

One way that families seem to keep themselves going on visits, assisting the prisoner with legal matters, and sending money and packages is their hope for a different future. This hope is expressed through the chance that there will be a legal change in the prisoner's status through an appeal or parole release. Most common is that when a prisoner is going up for parole, families are very hopeful it will be granted. Visitors tend to be apprehensive when they know they will be hearing news about a parole-hearing outcome. They share stories about people they know who were successful at their parole hearing and hope the person they are visiting will have similar fortune. There is always an assumption on their part that there is at least a chance of success. When a parole hearing was not successful, family members find themselves playing a supportive role for the prisoner and then experiencing

their own frustration and sadness after the visit is over. Other family members often provide consolation at this point, understanding why someone may hide her disappointment from the prisoner. One prisoner's wife said that she would cry on the ride back home because she had to be strong for her husband during the visit.

Visiting Cycles and the Fluid Nature of Connections to Prisoners

Despite the sense of devotion that compels some family members to make the visit, families also describe cycles in which the frequency of visiting changes for a number of reasons. This article has illustrated that going on one visit entails a major expenditure in time, money, and energy. We may be quick to assume that the relatively low levels of family contact with prisoners are because families do not want to maintain contact or visit, but evidence indicates that the maintenance of familial relationships is more complex. Whether a family visits may have nothing to do with a desire to maintain connections with the inmate but rather the difficulties of getting to the visit, as recorded in the following field note:

I stood next to a short Latina female about 50 years old, who was wearing a skimpy tank top and tight, short black pants. She had a lot of exposed skin, showing tattoos on her neck, upper arms, and legs. Her black hair was pinned up with bobby pins all over her head. There was a bus in front of us being loaded with people. I ask her where she's going, and when she says [prison name] I'm excited and say me too. She doesn't say anything at first, but somehow we start talking. I think I asked if she has been taking the bus for a long time and she nods and says four years. She said that she goes to the facility every two weeks to visit her husband. She says that [prison name] is a short ride, and when I ask how long she says four or five hours. At one point her husband was in [prison name], which is an 11-hour ride, and it was really hard to visit. She says that her husband is in the box right now, so he can't have phone calls, only letters and visits every 7 days. He'll be there 18 months, and might get transferred. She says that she hopes he doesn't get sent somewhere far away because "that will kill me." She says the rides are so tiring, once you get to the visit you don't want to talk. You just sit there and let him do all the talking. (August 17, 2001)

Families may go through cycles of visiting that are partly determined by the strain that visiting puts on the family's economic and emotional resources. One interview participant explained,

And a lot of people can not afford to come up here on these buses. . . . And I don't blame them for charging. That's a long ride. But you know. A lot of

people can not afford it. And a lot of people just forget about 'em. Because you know that's money coming out they pocket. They kids gotta eat. That \$50 break people's back. That's bill money. (Family 1)

One result of the strain of visiting is that family members are forced to make choices about how scarce resources will be spent. One wife described how her mother's and sisters' criticism led to her decision to sever contact with her incarcerated husband for a 3-year period. She said,

And then they got to the point where that three-year gap they kept jumpin' on me because it was like oh, the kids, they had no shoes at one point because I was runnin' up there, spending my money to go and see him, commissary things he needed, cause, you know, it's cold in the jails, he needed blankets, you know, all kinda things. I mean, when you get to a point you just forget that you have children. You forget you have kids, you forget you have another life, you know, you have to take care of the kids just as well. My whole life was just focused on him. I didn't even realize that my daughters needed shoes, you know, cause I was so much worrying about him, you know, is he all right. And then also, he was callin' me, oh I need you to go to the courts, I need you to do this, I need you to get that, I need you to go to Albany. So, I was like I was like, I felt I was like just losin' my mind. And then there was a time that I just shut down and I was like I can't do it no more. And that was that three-year gap. (Family 14)

This woman had recently resumed contact with her husband, including letters, phone calls, and visits. She was concerned that the old patterns would repeat themselves and was trying to make an extra effort to prevent that. Her situation was not unique, as the frequency of family members' visiting varied considerably, from weekly to every 6 months. Moreover, families reported changes in patterns that varied because of other factors in the family's life. Findings suggest that research using cross-sectional data about familial contact with prisoners may miss some of the long-term trends in the maintenance of relationships and could therefore underestimate families' willingness to be involved with prisoners depending on their life circumstances.

Families may vary on several dimensions, including the frequency of visits, the intensity of the connection to the incarcerated individual, the stage of visiting and connection, as well as the different family members' histories of relationships to the incarcerated individual. Whereas some families set clear boundaries with the prisoner (i.e., refusing to accept collect telephone calls or limiting the number of visits), others become completely engrossed in caring for and sustaining the prisoner as other aspects of their lives suffer. These relationships are complex, changing for reasons both directly and indirectly related to the incarceration. Families must make decisions about the extent of

energies to devote to the person who is incarcerated. They realize that the family's welfare may suffer in other ways as they give more time to the incarcerated person. This may lead to periods of time when the family doesn't visit the prisoner at all or completely severs communication including by phone and mail.

Considering the previous review of research about the potential benefits of family ties to prisoners, more research exploring the fluid nature of prisoner ties to family is called for. The findings in this article suggest that families face a number of barriers in attempting to maintain contact with prisoners despite the myriad of reasons they desire to visit and have connections. The process of managing ties with prisoners may place families in a position in which they are forced to make decisions about the extent of ties they can afford to have with the prisoner.

DISCUSSION

This research indicates that prisoners' relationships with family are complex, fluid, and dynamic, in part because of the demands of visiting at prisons and maintaining contact with prisoners. This study highlights the collateral consequences of incarceration, especially what is required for families to maintain contact with prisoners. Some families may deliberately sever their ties with a prisoner. At the same time, many families who wish to maintain bonds with prisoners may be deterred from doing so because of the demands of visiting.

Whereas traditionally, family connections to prisoners have been studied with cross-sectional data, this study proposes that there is a great deal of fluidity in family/prisoner relationships and that a variety of factors may explain the degree of connectedness and the reasons that relationships change over time. The changing nature of these relationships may in part be due to the demands of visiting at prisons and maintaining contact with prisoners. Further research in this area may apply the life history approach to prisoners' relationships with family, including both the period before the incarceration and the period after. Five specific domains that could be relevant in understanding how and why families stay connected to prisoners over time are (a) the prisoner's relationship with the family prior to the incarceration, (b) the prisoner's efforts to improve or rehabilitate himself while incarcerated, (c) the strain (emotional, economic, stigma) the incarceration has placed on the family, (d) the economic resources available to the family to maintain the prisoner, and (e) the family's social support system.

Although the existing body of scholarship examines different ways that prisoners' families are affected by their incarceration, as well as the importance of prisoner ties to family, further empirical investigation of the collat-

eral consequences of incarceration related to prisoners' families is needed. Such information is crucial from a policy standpoint, particularly with increasing attention to prisoner reentry. Families may be caught in a double bind as they prepare to be the primary avenue for successful prisoner reentry. Maintaining close ties with prisoners necessarily takes away from their abilities to connect with the social networks and resources they need to have a strong foundation of support for the prisoner upon his release. Research focused on understanding the life course of a prisoner's connection to family, and the role the barriers to visiting play in the trajectory of that life course, is needed.

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