The Evolution of Psychological and Emotional Effects of Visitation on Families of People Incarcerated in the United States

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Abstract: *Purpose*: Recent research has explored the collateral effects of incarceration on families. This study extends this research by exploring the psychological and emotional effects of visitation on family members of people incarcerated.

Design: Data come from in-depth interviews with 35 participants who experienced an immediate family member's incarceration. Transcripts of these interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Findings: Results of a thematic content analysis show complex harms families suffer before, during, and after visitation and identify their sources. Findings further show how families became accustomed to a custodial environment and gradually draw on informal peer support networks developed over repeated visits to prison to mitigate the negative effects of visitation.

Conclusions: Policy interventions should focus on enhancing connections between incarcerated persons and their families. Policies should also prioritize respect, privacy, and meaningful engagement during visitation. Additionally, standardizing and improving the communication of rules that visitors must follow, the processes they must traverse, and the correctional officers who manage both would mitigate the psychological and emotional suffering of family members. Finally, family reunification programs should begin during incarceration to prepare individuals to engage with their families in healthy ways prior to their release and return home

Keywords: Familial Incarceration, Visitation, Prisons, Well-being, Qualitative, Thematic Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

No Western liberal democracy has parallelled the punitive rise in punishment the U.S. has undergone since the 1970s (Clear & Frost, 2014). The U.S. is home to one of the world's highest incarceration rates and a prison population approaching 1.8 million (Fair & Walmsley, 2024). Twenty-five percent of the world's prisoners are housed in U.S. prisons, despite the U.S. only making up five percent of the world's population (Pfaff, 2017). The effects of such a carceral state are far-reaching. Seventy-nine million U.S. citizens currently live with a criminal record and the U.S. correctional system monitors 5.7 million people between probation, correctional facilities, and parole (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). The impact of incarceration extends beyond the individuals who are confined, as those entering the prison system often leave family behind on the outside. One hundred thirteen million adults, or (45%) of all U.S. adults, have had an immediate family member incarcerated (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020).

The hardships that individuals with an incarcerated family member experienced exceed the mere absence of the family member. Families must cope with every stage of the legal system from arrest through incarceration, with unique hardships faced both in adjusting to life with an incarcerated family member and navigating the process of visitation in a prison (Comfort, 2016). The experiences of individuals with a family member in the prison system are unique and vary in hardship, but adults who have an incarcerated family member face a higher likelihood of stress, financial difficulties, social stigma, and challenges accessing resources, which can increase depression, anxiety, and poor health among these individuals (Wildeman *et al*., 2019). Similar challenges have been observed in England (Dixey & Woodall, 2012), Wales (McCarthy & Adams, 2017), Denmark (Anker & Wildeman, 2021), and Kashmir (Nisa,2024).

This study extends earlier research by exploring the psychological and emotional effects that family members of incarcerated individuals experience during visitation. Prison visitation has positive effects on the incarcerated, lowering recidivism rates for all forms of offending and lowering depressive symptoms in both women and adolescent prisoners (De Claire & Dixon, 2017; Mears *et al*., 2011; Tasca, Mulvey, & Rodriguez, 2016; Turanovic & Tasca, 2019). However, there are also inherent challenges faced by individuals in their efforts to visit an incarcerated family member. Due to financial and time-related burdens to stress from strict rules and regulations, the processes and procedures

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that need to be followed to visit a family member have the potential to overshadow the visit (Boppre *et al*., 2022; Woodall & Kinsella, 2018). By exploring the feelings and experiences of individuals during visits to their incarcerated family members, we seek to better understand how prison visitation affects the emotional and psychological wellbeing of families.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Involvement in the legal system can create a ripple effect on the lives of individuals as well as their families, with increasing consequences as individuals pass deeper into the system. If an individual is sentenced to prison, the effects on their family could last beyond the duration of the sentence and negatively affect not only the wellbeing but the life expectancy of family members (Sundaresh *et al*., 2021). Research on the impacts of incarceration on family members, which started to take shape in the 1970s, has repeatedly found that those with an incarcerated family member are broadly impacted but largely overlooked by the legal system and society. Early research referred to them as "hidden victims" and described the challenges they face after losing a family member to incarceration, including greater risk of poverty, difficulty finding or maintaining stable housing, social stigmatization and isolation, and being forced to deal with loneliness, depression, and relationship breakdowns (Bakker *et al*., 1978). More recent studies report similar findings, with families of someone who is incarcerated continuing to endure financial difficulties, emotional distress, stigma and social exclusion, limited outside support, and stressful visitation experiences due to complex procedures, poor treatment, and unpredictable changes in prison policies (Besemer & Dennison, 2018; Bradshaw & Muldoon, 2020; Dyches, 2009). Acknowledging these harms is necessary to understand incarceration as more than an individual punishment, but a system that upends entire families.

Incarceration is the most oppressive outcome resulting from legal system involvement, with far-reaching consequences for family stability whether fathers, mothers, siblings, children, or romantic partners are incarcerated. A family member's incarceration affects finances, physical and mental health, and social dynamics. Individuals may struggle financially due to the loss of their family member's income because of their incarceration. Financial debt could increase due to utility and credit card bills, legal fines and fees accrued before incarceration, costs associated with arrest and court processing, and debts from predatory loans (Harper *et al*., 2021). The difficulty of repaying debt with compounding interest prevents them from entirely resolving their family member's legal system obligations (Evans, 2014; Martin *et al*., 2017). Individuals also face the decision of whether to add money to a family member's jail or prison spending (i.e., commissary) account, paying for public transportation to and from the jail, and the added costs of supporting an individual upon re-entry with items such as food, clothing, and shelter. The financial destabilization from even a short stint in jail brings another challenge, as it could lead to eviction for not paying rent or denial of government aid such as food stamps and housing assistance, which could place families in an unceasing state of crisis management (Comfort, 2016).

Turney and Schneider (2016) studied the relationship between incarceration and household asset ownership using data sourced from the longitudinal Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (Waldfogel *et al*., 2010). The authors found that recently incarcerated fathers were less likely to have a bank account (22% vs 65.2%) and own a vehicle (45.3% vs 79.5%) or home (5.6% vs 33.8%) in comparison to fathers who had not been incarcerated. These results transferred to the romantic partners of formerly incarcerated fathers, where women partnered with formerly incarcerated males were less likely to possess a bank account (43.5% vs 62.2%), vehicle (49.6% vs 69.5%), and home (4.6% vs 28.6%) when compared to their female counterparts not partnered with formerly incarcerated individuals. The monetary consequences of incarceration extend to material ownership in addition to disrupting the balance between financial resources and unpaid debt.

Incarceration leads to adverse physical and mental health outcomes for family members. A quantitative study by Wildeman *et al*. (2012) explored the relationship between paternal incarceration and maternal mental health. Results showed that the recent incarceration of a father significantly increases the mother's risk of a depressive episode and decreases life satisfaction. A study examining the complex relationship between family incarceration and the mental health of African American men revealed significant levels of psychological distress from familial incarceration for men who were never incarcerated (Brown *et al*., 2016). There is also a correlation between household member incarceration and riskier sexual behaviour, as youth with an incarcerated household member may have an increased likelihood

of engaging in sexual intercourse with a stranger or IV drug user without protection (McCauley, 2021).

Incarceration also has a multitude of effects on social dynamics within families. Among parents living together before a criminal sentence, the incarceration of a father is significantly correlated to the dissolution of the relationship due to the length of the sentence and decreased quality of the relationship (Turney, 2015). For incarcerated mothers and their children, 63 percent of children aged 2.5 to 7.5 years old among a sample of 54 had an insecure relationship with their mother (Poehlmann, 2005). The mother's absence was found to delay their child's development, cause sleep problems, and create negative emotional affects such as feelings of sadness, confusion, and anger. Research by Correa *et al*., (2020) further extends literature surrounding the effects of incarceration on social dynamics. Their findings show paternal incarceration brings hardship on most families, with barriers to communication making it difficult to maintain relationships with family members.

Visitation

One of the most impactful experiences individuals undergo during a family member's incarceration is visiting them in prison. There are several benefits to prison visitations, both for facilities and individuals who are incarcerated. Visits reduce recidivism, with pronounced effects for inmates who receive visits from their spouses or significant others (Mears *et al*., 2011). Other benefits include reductions in rule-breaking behavior and reduced depressive symptoms for women and adolescents (De Claire & Dixon, 2017). While researchers have found benefits for inmates who receive visits, every experience is different and shaped by factors such as who is visiting, how often they visit, and the inmate's life experiences both before and during incarceration (Turanovic & Tasca, 2019).

Families undergo significant burdens during the process of visiting their incarcerated kin. Qualitative research by Boppre *et al*. (2022) highlighted major themes experienced by family members throughout the entire visitation process. Interviews with 77 incarcerated individuals and 21 family members on their visitation experiences revealed financial and time-related burdens, stress from rules and regulations, and altered familial interactions. The costs of transportation and food add up quickly with each visit, especially for those living on a low income. There is also a time burden on families, where they may have to take time off or visit around their work schedules, with some needing to drive up to 16 hours to visit their incarcerated family members. The rules and regulations of the facility, which require visitors to abide by clothing restrictions, are especially stressful for female visitors. There is additional stress from the application to visit, searches, and arbitrary cancellation of visits. The authors did note positive themes associated with visitation, primarily related to the moment they were reunited with their family members. The face-to-face interaction was beneficial for both and helped simulate dynamics outside the prison.

In-person visits can be overshadowed by restricting prison environments, with family members experiencing secondary prisonization during their visitations (Boppre *et al*., 2022). Prisonization was first used by Clemmer (1940) to refer to the process incarcerated individuals undergo as they adopt "the folkways, mores, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary" (p. 270). Secondary prisonization refers to the process where "free" people interacting with the correctional system become "quasi-inmates" due to their relationship with an incarcerated person, subjecting them to regulation regarding their conduct, physical appearance, emotions, and strict adherence to the facility rules needed to visit (Comfort, 2003). It is not uncommon for individuals to undergo secondary prisonization when visiting their incarcerated family members. Drawing upon interviews with women who have incarcerated partners in California's San Quentin State Prison and in-depth field observations in the visitor waiting area, Comfort (2003) details how rules for visiting an incarcerated individual are unclear, confusing, and unhelpful in preparing visitors for the process of seeing their family member. Visitors also encounter long waiting times before seeing their family members and strict rules on apparel for both regular garments and undergarments, such as the need for women to replace bras that have underwires. The entire experience is stigmatizing and humiliating, where they feel that they begin to resemble inmates.

Additional research supports the challenges of visiting an incarcerated family member. Clark and Duwe (2016) assessed the notion that the further away an incarcerated individual is from family members, the fewer visits they receive. Data was sourced from all adults on their first release from a Minnesota prison in 2013 who had been incarcerated for longer than 30 days. A list of inmates who had received visitors was obtained from the state correctional database, where the visitors' residential addresses were compared to

the prison's distance. The analysis revealed that distance from the prison significantly reduced the frequency of visits. For every 100 miles that separated visitors from the prison, visitation decreased by 20 percent. Acevedo and Bakken (2001) similarly found that among incarcerated women at a maximum-security prison, distance between the family's home and the prison determines whether an inmate will receive visits from family members.

Christian *et al*. (2006) examined the financial burdens associated with having a family member incarcerated. They found that when traveling from the Bronx to an upstate New York facility, the cost to visit a family member in prison was $80 (nearly $130 in 2025 adjusted for inflation), which included food and transportation costs. This cost did not include lost wages associated with taking the time from work for the visit or the added costs already associated with supporting an incarcerated family member. Along with the cost of visitation, individuals may also be paying for the costs of phone calls to maintain more regular contact than prison visitation schedules allow. As of 2018, in four states (AR, MI, MO, WI) the cost of a 15-minute phone call was more than $20 (Wagner & Jones, 2019).

Trahan and Evans (2020) examined the intricate processes involved in visiting a family member in prison and found that those who visit family members in prison are often confused by rules and regulations that govern visitation. Moreover, correctional officers who oversee visitation often mistreated visitors and provided little-to-no guidance concerning these processes. In response, visitors regularly formed informal helping communities wherein they would work together to share information concerning facility restrictions and provide resources that were in compliance with rules and regulations. They also provided socioemotional support to help mitigate mistreatment by officers. The finding that family members have their visit burdened by negative experiences with correctional officers has been supported in previous literature, as individuals visiting an incarcerated family member often view the experience as difficult, primarily due to rules concerning physical contact and the harsh and disrespectful treatment by staff (Arditti, 2003).

The current research explores the psychological and emotional effects of visiting incarcerated family members, focusing on how these visits influence both the psychological well-being of visitors and the impact on family bonds over time. The purpose is to understand how these visits affect the emotional state of family members of someone incarcerated while also considering how visiting conditions affect their psychological reactions to prison visitation. This study uses in-depth interviews to gather qualitative insights from family members about the psychological and emotional toll of visiting an incarcerated family member.

DATA AND METHODS

Sample and Procedure

Data for the current study were collected from a purposive sample of 35 participants who experienced an immediate family member's arrest, prosecution, incarceration, and, for some, release from prison. Participants were recruited through various support groups for family members of justice-involved persons in Texas, New York, and surrounding states. Any immediate family member was invited to participate in the study except for children of justice-involved persons. Children were excluded for two primary reasons. First, there exists a relatively well-developed body of research documenting the effects of justice-involvement on children. There is less research on the effects of justice-involvement on other family members, such as parents, siblings, and spouses. Second, the effects of justice-involvement on children are likely different in a host of ways than the effects experienced by other kin, which would threaten the internal homogeneity of the sample and results.

The final sample includes 23 parents, 9 intimate partners,[1] and 3 siblings. All participants were interviewed over the telephone for one-and-a-half to two hours. Participants were asked open and close-ended questions about their experiences during their kins' arrest, adjudication, incarceration, and, if applicable, release and return from prison. All interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed.[2]

Instrument

An interview guide was designed based on information gathered from extant research on the

[1]These include 8 spouses and 1 long-term, live-in partner.
[2]The Mercy College Institutional Review Board approved the study (Protocol No: 15-62) and provided consent forms that were signed by all participants prior to data collection. Participants were not compensated.

collateral effects of incarceration and prior informal conversations between the authors and family members of incarcerated persons. The instrument was organized around six broad categories – i.e., background information; family dynamics before, during, and after incarceration; psychological and emotional consequences; visitation experiences and effects; financial impacts; and experiences after re-entry from prison. Before finalizing the instrument, seven research assistants conducted pilot interviews with participants who experienced a family member's justice-involvement. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed using a six-phase model of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) developed by Braun and Clarke (see 2006; 2014; 2019; 2020; 2021; Braun *et al*., 2016).

Analytic Procedure

The current study was designed to identify and describe the psychological and emotional effects of visitation on family members of people justice-involved. The Braun and Clarke model of RTA involve following a six-phase analytic procedure. The first phase is for researchers to familiarize themselves with the data. All interviews were conducted over the phone. We made notes whenever possible when participants described their experiences before, during, and after visitation. Each transcript was also read multiple times prior to subsequent phases of the analysis.

The second phase is coding the data. We first extracted all talk of psychological and emotional effects of visitation and collated them in a separate file. We then began coding each comment for their basic features, such as what emotion they experienced and what caused their reaction.

The third phase is to review the coded data and identify patterns, or themes, in the participants talk. We reviewed the coded excerpts until an initial set of themes were identified.

The fourth phase involves reviewing the accuracy and reliability of the initial themes. The two most common criteria for determining the accuracy and reliability of themes in RTA are internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (see Patton, 1990). Internal homogeneity indicates that data contained within each theme cohere together in consistent and meaningful ways. External heterogeneity is achieved when there are clear and substantive differences across themes. Thus, phase four thus essentially represents testing the themes for construct validity. We reviewed the data within and across themes and revised codes until it was clear a coherent pattern had formed.

The fifth phase requires labelling and defining the themes in a way that captures their meaning and what is unique about each. We revised labels and definitions until each conveyed the psychological and emotional effects of visitation, how the participants were affected, and what factors triggered their experiences.

The sixth phase is generating the report or manuscript. The proposition of this phase is to maintain the organization of the themes and convey the results in a way that is a rich yet accurate representation of the participants' experiences. Direct quotes from participants are provided throughout that best illustrate each theme.

RESULTS

Table **1** provides basic descriptive statistics for the sample.

All 35 participants discussed psychological effects they experienced from visiting their kin in prison. Results of the RTA show two thematic levels. In the first level, primary themes identify the stimuli that affected the participants' emotional well-being. In the second level, subthemes illustrate the emotional reactions participants experienced in reaction to each stimulus. Taken together, these themes identify and describe *what* affected the participants (primary themes) and *how* they were affected (subthemes). The results further show that the participants' emotional reactions to stimuli were dynamic. That is, each stimulus initially triggered deleterious emotional responses, but, over time, the participants' responses to the same stimuli transformed into positive emotional experiences. Figure **1** provides a thematic map of these results.

Primary themes and their constituent subthemes are described in detail below. How and why the participants' emotional responses changed over time is illustrated throughout. Quotes from participants are included to provide evidence and rich detail for each (sub)theme. A pseudonym and the age, race, and relationship to their incarcerated kin are included with each quote.

Anticipation

Participants commonly discussed anticipating visits as the dates approached as having a major effect on

Table 1: Sample Characteristics (n = 35)

	f	$\bar{x}$	Range
Age	---	55	23-71
Race			
African-American	3	---	---
Hispanic	6	---	---
Caucasian	26	---	---
Education			
High school	6	---	---
Some college	16	---	---
College	8	---	---
Post-graduate	5	---	---
Perceived Social class			
Lower	3	---	---
Lower middle	5	---	---
Middle	15	---	---
Upper middle	8	---	---
No answer	4	---	---
Length of incarceration*	---	6.5 years	6 months – 31 years
Time since release* (n = 19)	---	3.9 years	1 month – 15 years
Time left on sentence* (n = 16)	---	10.8 years	3 years – 31 years

*At the time of the interview.

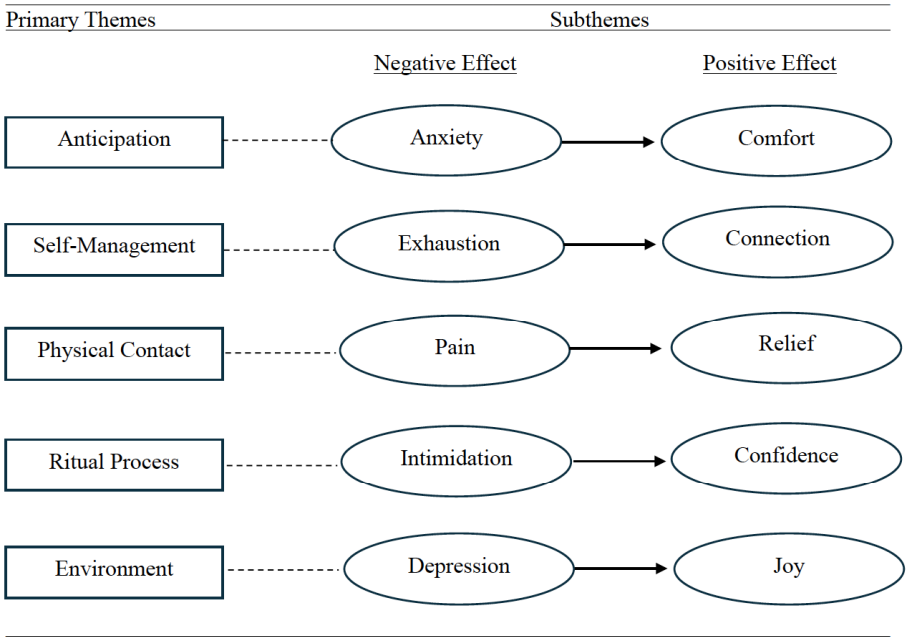

Figure 1: Thematic map of psychological and emotional effects of visitation on families.

their psychological well-being. Subthemes show that anticipating visits initially triggered extreme anxiety, but their emotional reactions to anticipating visits transitioned into feelings of comfort over time.

Anxiety

When the participants first began visiting their kin in prisons, they worried about what they might find when they saw their kin. Specifically, they were apprehensive

that their kin might show signs of having been assaulted, malnourished, or otherwise unwell.

> [*Donna,* 60, White, mother] *How does it affect you emotionally to visit your son in prison?* Horrible! When you get there, you don't know what you're going to find. I don't know if I'm going to find him with a black eye, or if he's been beat up. I go see him the third Saturday of every month, and that Friday night I can't sleep because I don't know what I'm going to find when I get there.

The basis of the participants' anxiety was not necessarily hypothetical. Their kin often appeared malnourished or depressed during those early visits. On some occasions, their kin exhibited signs they had been assaulted or injured.

> [*Mary,* 54, White, mother] The first time I saw him on Monday; then I saw him on Wednesday; and then I saw him on Saturday, and he was covered in the same blood. I had this crying meltdown because my child who had been roughed up while they played basketball had a broken finger and they would not attend to it, and it was covered in blood.

Comfort

The participants' kin ultimately assimilated to life in prison. Their ability to remain safe and their physical and psychological health normalized with experience. As a result, the participants' anxiety waned and anticipating visits became a source of emotional comfort. They looked forward to visits and described them as opportunities to see that their kin were okay.

> [*Nina,* 52, White, wife] Initially, [it] was very, very hard to see him and see how much weight he had lost. As time goes on and he got more equilibrated in the system, where he could start going outside and get some sun and that sort of thing, it had a lot to do with making sure he's okay. He could tell me he's okay on the phone, but when I can see what he looks like, that helps me a lot.

Self-Management

Participants felt the need to manage their presentation of self and topics of conversation during visits. Subthemes show that managing these interactions was emotionally exhausting initially. However, their management of visits increasingly became a way to maintain emotional connections with their kin.

Exhaustion

The anxiety participants initially experienced while anticipating visits carried over into their interactions with their kin. For fear of upsetting their kin, they intentionally avoided discussing their kins' cases and experiences in prison. They also made concerted efforts to mask their own emotional pain. Instead, they talked about mundane topics and tried to appear happy. Attempting to manage and mitigate their kins' pain was exhausting and compounded the stress they were already experiencing.

> [*Tara,* 36, White, live-in partner] I guess I try to keep it light-hearted. We talk about TV shows, work, my daughter, [and] how things are here. I just know if I was in that situation, I would have been getting depressed. So, I do everything I can to try to put a smile on his face to take him out of the situation he is stuck in at the moment. We're exhausted by the time the visit's over because it's very stressful.

Connection

As time progressed, participants came to realize that hearing about friends and family on the outside was a way they and their kin could stay emotionally connected to each other. Appearing happy also became easier. Time thus translated an exercise in stressful self-management into a method for maintaining positive socio-emotional connections.

> [*Lisa,* 67, White, mother] They want to know what everybody's doing. So, it takes a while for you to realize that it really isn't hurting them to hear what's going on with everybody else. They really do need that to stay connected.

Physical Contact

Whether or not the participants could make physical contact with their kin during visits had uniquely powerful psychological effects. Subthemes show that contact prohibitions early in their kins' sentences caused tremendous emotional pain. As prohibitions were eventually lifted, participants experienced

extreme emotional relief from being able to touch their kin.

Pain

Participants initially had "no-contact" visits with their kin. Their kin were typically in high security prisons early in their sentence and some were under protective custody. Contact prohibitions were unequivocally described as emotionally painful. They were in the same space at the same time as their kin and they could not do the primary thing they felt they both needed – touch their loved ones.

> [*Cindy,* 65, White, mother] He was behind glass and I couldn't touch him or kiss him or nothing and it was heartbreaking.

Relief

Over time, their incarcerated kin tended to "get their points down"[3] through good behavior and were thus transferred to lower security prisons, particularly as they approached the end of their incarceration. These prisons generally allowed contact visits. Being able to touch, hug, and hold hands with their kin was described with singularly effusive language.

> [*Clyde,* 67, White, father] We're exhausted by the time the visit's over, but there is an element of joy in all of this too. I cannot overemphasize the value of being able to touch and hug him.

Ritual Process

Participants described arbitrary rules and ritualistic processes they had to negotiate to visit their kin. Subthemes show these processes caused early feelings of intimidation that transformed into sources of confidence over time as they gained experience and became lay experts.

Intimidation

The rules and screening processes participants had to traverse often varied across prisons[4] and were up to the discretion of correctional officers. Visitors were not permitted to wear certain colors, dress "seductively," and were frisked for contraband. Participants described being mistreated by officers. These ritual processes were intimidating and dehumanizing for participants.

> [*Ryan,* 68, White, father] The process of getting in was just awful. We were treated like crap, everybody in line. [The correctional officers] made sure of it. For example, a baby who was in a dress, if it didn't cover her knees, they wouldn't let them go in. So, kind of a horrible way of treating people and [it] depended on who was at the door whether they treated you like a human being or a piece of dirt. And you never knew for sure if you might pass all this scrutiny to get in.

Confidence

Over time, the participants became experts at traversing these processes, and they gained a sense of confidence as a result. Several even explained that they started helping new visitors by explaining rules or providing resources, like quarters or wireless bras, and emotional support.

> [*Wanda,* 61, White, mother] It's very intimidating. As years went on, we became pros, and you could see the fear in other people coming in and we would try to help. [We] made sure that they had the right clothes and the right shoes and money in the right form and what they can and can't do. There was a lot we learned as we went through the process, and we would see other folks coming in for their first time that had that fear and apprehension that we had years and years ago.

Environment

Participants described being affected by the characteristics of the spaces they had to navigate to visit their kin. Subthemes show these prison environments were depressive at first, but participants progressively learned to associate them with joy.

Depression

The spatial characteristics of prisons and visitation rooms were intimidating, depressing, and anxiety-inducing to the participants. Upon arrival, they were confronted with the fortress-like characteristics of prisons. Once inside, the rooms and spaces they moved through were dirty, harsh, and designed for control.

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[3]Many states, as well as the Federal Bureau of Prisons, use a point system to determine inmates' security levels. Higher scores typically indicate inmates will be placed in higher security prisons.

[4]Participants explained their family members were often transferred to multiple prisons during their incarceration

> [*Gloria,* 53, Black, wife] All these places are always dilapidated. They are always absolutely wretched. The most wretched place you can ever imagine. The restrooms, the common area, it's all just absolutely ridiculous. I mean, animals are treated better than these people are treated.

Joy

These spaces did not change over time. How the participants related to them did, however. They began to associate these spaces with joy. This was where they were able to see and connect with their kin. Seeing other families visit with their loved ones became joyful. They began to form relationships with other people in these spaces who they would see and interact with. The spaces became a place for community.

> [*Clyde,* 67, White, father] Since we've been going back for a couple years now, it doesn't have the same impact. After a while, you begin to realize how good it is to be there. It's not intimidating anymore, and it becomes a happy place because you get to see the guys with their kids. You get to see them having some kind of family moment. And the guys, the inmates, are so happy to see you.

In summary, these findings show that stimuli do not have static effects on the psychological well-being of families visiting kin in prison. The effects of the stimuli they encounter before and during visitation change with time and experience. The same factors that cause emotional suffering early in their experiences with visitation transition into sources of happiness. Moreover, we observed after completing the analysis that the initial states of distress participants experienced often changed over time into their antithesis. That is, anticipating visits first caused anxiety, but later caused comfort; traversing the ritual process was intimidating at first, but lent a sense of confidence over time; the prison and visitation environments that caused feelings of depression at first later became places of joy.

That families have improved psychological and emotional experiences with visitation over time should not be taken for granted, however. Prisons can and should implement practices to facilitate both the time to emotional healing and the extent of this healing. The following section discussed the implications of the findings reported.

DISCUSSION

Individuals who visit an incarcerated family member in prison experience a range of psychological and emotional impacts that evolve over time and depend on their experience of the environment within the prison. Psychological effects emerged before the initial visitation to prison and changed if repeated visits became routine. Reactions to the visitation experience were markedly distinct pre-visitation, when many respondents expressed anxiety and dread, and post-visitation, which instigated feelings of sadness and loss. Time, and specifically the duration of their family members' incarceration and frequency of their visits, influenced all aspects of participants' experiences. Over time, emotions transformed from anticipatory anxiety and distress into eventual adjustment and even moments of joy interacting with one's own family member and observing other familial engagements in the visitation space. These themes reveal how time moderates the emotional and psychological tolls of visitation, particularly as participants and their incarcerated family members adapt to the process and constraints of visiting a prison environment.

Participants initially described anxiety and apprehension before visits, fearing what they might encounter, such as signs of physical harm or emotional deterioration to their family members. However, over time, as their family members adapted to prison life, their anticipation shifted to reassurance, allowing participants to look forward to visitations. Similarly, parting from their family members was emotionally devastating in early visits, but as release dates neared, preparing to leave the prison visiting room became less emotionally burdensome, marking progress towards eventual reunion.

During visits, participants initially managed conversations carefully to avoid distressing their family members, though they later learned that sharing positive news allowed them to feel connected to the outside world. The setting itself, while initially dehumanizing and intimidating, transformed into a communal space as participants navigated prison rules and regulations and formed bonds with other visitors. These findings underscore how time and adaptation can reshape the emotional and psychological dimensions of prison visitation, providing both challenges and opportunities for resilience.

The psychological and emotional impacts of prison visitation on individuals with an incarcerated family member reflect broader patterns of "symbiotic harms" caused by incarceration's separation of families (Condry & Minson, 2020). Prior research has noted that having an incarcerated family member triggers a range of emotional and psychological challenges, including shame, fear, and social isolation, the possibility of harassment and property damage (Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009), and the visitation experience adds to these consequences. The separation caused by incarceration exacerbates these harms over time, particularly for spouses and partners left to manage child-rearing, financial burdens, and emotional upheaval alone (Comfort *et al*., 2016). Research underscores how these challenges can intensify as the duration of incarceration increases, making support systems crucial for mitigating long-term impacts (Taylor, 2016). The multifarious consequences of an incarcerated family member are made highly salient by the expectation of and engagement in visitation to a prison.

These impacts are not limited to emotional hardships, as they also shape how families perceive the legal system. The consequences of incarceration and the legal processes that precede it extend beyond family wellbeing, influencing the extent to which family members trust and believe in the effectiveness of the legal system, as their ongoing experiences in each stage of the system shape their views of its fairness and legitimacy (Trahan & Evans, 2024). When families experience procedural confusion, unfair treatment, or a lack of communication from prison administrators or officers, this can reinforce perceptions of distrust, which can have wider impacts of the legal system's ability to function effectively.

To address the challenges faced during visitation by families of individuals convicted and incarcerated, policy interventions should focus on enhancing connections between incarcerated persons and their families and/or support systems on the outside. Programs that provide family counselling and mental health services could alleviate psychological hardships and strengthen familial bonds, particularly for parents who may experience suffering from deteriorating mental health due to their incarcerated kin. These policies should focus on the early stages of visitation when family hardships are at their worst. Policies should also prioritize respect, privacy, and meaningful engagement during visitation. The findings reported here suggest that allowing contact visits whenever possible would markedly improve the wellbeing of both incarcerated people and their families. Additionally, standardizing and improving the communication of rules that visitors must follow, the processes they must traverse, and the correctional officers who manage both would mitigate the psychological and emotional suffering of family members. Some prisons have established "visitors' centers" to disseminate information and advise visitors. Finally, family reunification programs should begin during incarceration to prepare individuals to engage with their families in healthy ways prior to their release and return home.

There are several limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. First, the timing of incarceration varied among participants, with some having a family member currently incarcerated and others living with a relative who had been previously incarcerated and released. This variation likely influenced the depth and immediacy of emotional responses, as participants with a family member actively incarcerated may report more distress, while those reflecting on past events may be more detached and thus experience emotional recall differently.

Additionally, the sample was predominantly composed of Caucasian participants, parents, and intimate partners, and the participants' kin were incarcerated for sexual offenses. The overrepresentation of parents and intimate partners (to the exclusion of siblings) and the lack of variation in offense type threatens the generalizability of the findings. Parents, partners, and families of persons incarcerated for sex offenses may have unique experiences not shared by other groups. However, other than fearing that their family members could be assaulted during early visits, it does not appear that any of their experiences were unique to their conviction. All visitors navigate similar processes depending on whether their family member is allowed to have in-person contact, and they all ultimately experience a range of joyful and morose emotions before, during, and after visitation. Still, the lack of diversity in race and offense type limits the generalizability of the findings, as cultural and contextual factors likely shape how families experience and navigate the psychological and emotional impacts of incarceration. Parents in particular may face heightened psychological hardship due to a greater sense of responsibility for their child's fate, which may not be representative of the experiences of siblings, romantic partners, or other family members.

These limitations underscore the need for future research to include more racially, ethnically, and relationally diverse populations to capture a broader range of experiences and provide more comprehensive insights into the multifaceted impacts of incarceration on families. Moreover, exploring how the type of offense and duration of incarceration influence family dynamics could deepen understanding and improve the development of interventions. To further enrich the discussion, it would be valuable to explore the familial and structural factors that amplify the psychological and emotional burdens on family members of incarcerated individuals. For instance, the dehumanizing visitation processes and intimidating prison environments described by participants reflect broader issues within the penal system that prioritize control and punishment over fostering reunification and rehabilitation. Addressing these barriers through implementing more family-friendly visitation policies and improving the physical conditions of visitation spaces could lessen some of the distress that family members experience. Additionally, incorporating community-based support systems, such as counselling services and peer support networks, may help families navigate the complex emotional terrain of visitation and maintain their well-being over time.

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