






Prison visits

Giving prisoners the chance to preserve and make social connections through visits.

First published

6 May 2020

| Effect scale | Quality of evidence | | | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| | Effect Impact on crime | Mechanism How it works | Moderator Where it works | Implementation How to do it | Economic cost What it costs |
|  Overall reduction, some rises |  Strong |  Strong |  Moderate |  Low | No information |

Focus of the intervention

Prison visits provide prisoners with an opportunity to preserve or develop connections with family, friends, community and social support networks.

By encouraging, maintaining or strengthening such networks, these visits may provide protective mechanisms that function to prevent criminal relapse after release from prison.

The type of visit may take different forms, including:

- face-to-face meetings in prison
- spending time in private, including conjugal visits
- brief, temporary release

This narrative is based on one meta-analytic review of 16 studies. The crime outcome measured was reoffending. Within the individual studies, reoffending was either measured as arrest, a new conviction, reimprisonment or a combination of these.

Of the primary studies included in the review, one study was based on evidence from the UK, one from Canada, and eight studies from the USA. The geographical location of six of the primary studies was not reported in the review.

Effect – how effective is it?

Overall, the evidence suggests that prison visits have reduced reoffending, but there is some evidence that they have increased reoffending.

A meta-analysis of 16 studies showed a statistically significant reduction in reoffending for prisoners who received visits compared to prisoners who did not. Overall, prison visits resulted in a 26% decrease in reoffending.

Twelve primary studies found that prison visits led to a reduction in reoffending of between 3% and 62%. One primary study found that in-person visits increased the likelihood of arrest by 2% following release from prison. The three remaining primary studies had non-significant findings.

Additional analyses of the 16 studies included length of follow-up. Prison visitation was found to reduce reoffending by 53% for studies measuring offending up to one year after the intervention. An 8% reduction was reported for studies measuring offending between one and three years post-intervention, and a 30% reduction for studies measuring offending after three to five years.

The review also looked at the type of reoffending measure and found that the effect of the intervention varied according to the type of measure used. Prison visits had an overall mean effect reducing new convictions by 28%, reimprisonment by 4% and multiple measures of reoffending by 56%.

How strong is the evidence?

The review was sufficiently systematic that many forms of bias that could influence the study conclusions can be ruled out.

The evidence is taken from a systematic review covering 16 studies. The review demonstrated a thorough analysis of variation and consideration of the potential issues of dependency and publication bias.

However, the statistical techniques used to summarise the effects did not account for variations in study design.

Additionally, the review did not describe the extent to which each included primary study was reviewed or analysed.

Mechanism – how does it work?

The review suggested a number of mechanisms by which prison visits might have an effect on crime.

- Prison visits can maintain or strengthen positive social bonds which in turn may act as controls for preventing criminal behaviour during and after imprisonment.
- Additionally, the review mentions that face-to-face contact may help offenders cope with strain resulting from feelings of loss, anger or frustration in prison and after release. By maintaining or establishing ties through visits, the intervention may assist prisoners in accessing resources necessary immediately after release, such as employment, behavioural health and substance abuse treatment, housing opportunities, social welfare services and transportation assistance.
- Prison visits can allow offenders to associate with people not currently in prison. This could contribute to the development of a pro-social rather than criminal identity. This could also reduce the risk of antisocial relationships influencing their reoffending.

While the review provides a full theory of change, the mechanisms were not empirically tested as the primary studies did not provide the necessary information to do so.

Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?

There is good evidence that prison visits vary considerably by context, including offender gender and type of visit.

- Offender gender – it was observed that visits reduced reoffending by 53% for the male-only samples and also samples including both males and females. While a reduction in reoffending was also observed in the female-only sample group, the results were non-significant. However, because only two studies had female-only samples, the authors recommend caution when interpreting the statistical power of this relationship.
- Visit type – visits were categorised as either in-person, involving face-to-face meetings in prison, or conjugal visits and temporary release, which both allow extended private time for individuals. Reoffending was reduced by 36% in studies that evaluated conjugal visits and temporary release and by 25% in studies that evaluated face-to-face visits. However, it is noted by the authors that the seemingly large effect of conjugal visits should be interpreted with caution due to possible selection effects of those who were eligible for such visits, the small number of studies and age of the presented studies being 20 to 40 years old.

Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

The review noted several factors that should be considered when implementing prison visit programmes.

The more positive results for temporary release and conjugal visits (see the moderator section) could, the authors suggest, be due to the extra intimacy or closeness which extended visits and privacy allow. They recommend more research to explore this theory. With more evidence, they suggest, there could be a case for facilitating more closeness in prison visits.

The review also noted that prison facilities should consider making visits more accessible to all inmates and their visitors. For example, families and friends could be encouraged to visit if visiting hours are posted on the building and prison websites, if visiting fees (where applicable) are reduced or eliminated, or if amenities were improved, which could include developing a more child-friendly environment or constructing facilities for extended stay visits.

Placing offenders in facilities that are closer to their homes was suggested as a theoretically helpful option, but may be difficult to put into practice for offenders who have moved around or do not have a specific area where their friends and family are located.

Implementation should also protect the safety of visitors and prison staff.

Where there is a history of abuse between offenders and potential visitors, visits should be supervised and staff provided training to recognise and respond to violent or abusive incidents.

Economic considerations – how much might it cost?

The review did not mention the costs or benefits of prison visits. No formal economic analysis was provided.

General considerations

- While the review suggests that overall, prison visits can lead to a reduction in reoffending, some caution is required due to the range of reoffending measures used and a lack of detail from the individual studies on post-intervention measurement periods.
- The meta-analysis is concerned with whether a prisoner was visited or not. However, the interaction taking place during a visit can be complex and potentially influenced by who visits, the duration, frequency and time point within the sentence, as well as which prisoners are eligible.
- The moderators identified in the review need to be interpreted carefully due to the small sample size for females and the age of the data.

Summary

Overall, the evidence suggests that prison visits led to a reduction in crime, although one study reported a small increase in rearrest.

Prison visits proved most successful up to a year after the intervention. Visits were found to be more effective in studies with multiple measures of reoffending.

Reductions in reoffending were observed across the male and mixed-gender sample groups, but the authors advise caution in interpreting the evidence on female-only groups due to the small samples.

Conjugal and private visits with temporary release from prison were found to be more effective (in older studies) in reducing reoffending than in-person visits to prison.

In implementing prison visits, prison facilities are advised to offer concessions in visiting fees in jurisdictions where this applies, as well as providing more public information about visit options.

Reviews

Review one

Reference

- M.M., Mitchell, K., Spooner, D., Jia, Y., Zhang. 2106. [The effect of prison visitation on reentry success: A meta-analysis](#). Journal of Criminal Justice, 47, pp. 74–83.

Summary prepared by

The coding for this narrative was carried out by University College London and the narrative was written by the College of Policing. ESRC grant title: 'University Consortium for Evidence-Based Crime Reduction'. Grant reference: ES/L007223/1.

[Return to the toolkit](#)

Tags

- [Crime reduction](#)