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### **Summary**

Based on empirical evidence that visiting is significantly related to parole success, correctional administrators have begun to view family visits as one component of the rehabilitation process. Several authorities have encouraged correctional institutions to maximize visiting opportunities. Previous studies have noted geographical and architectural limits to such maximization. This paper reports the results of a national survey of visiting policies and draws comparisons with surveys reported in 1978 and 1954 to determine the extent to which prisons have increased efforts to make visiting a priority.

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**PRISON VISITING POLICIES AND PRACTICES**

by

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## PRISON VISITING POLICIES AND PRACTICES

### Abstract

Based on empirical evidence that visiting is significantly related to parole success, correctional administrators have begun to view family visits as one component of the rehabilitation process. Several authorities have encouraged correctional institutions to maximize visiting opportunities. Previous studies have noted geographical and architectural limits to such maximization. This paper reports the results of a national survey of visiting policies and draws comparisons with surveys reported in 1978 and 1954 to determine the extent to which prisons have increased efforts to make visiting a priority.

## PRISON VISITING POLICIES AND PRACTICES

### Introduction

Until quite recently prison officials tended to view visits as privileges to be granted or denied the prisoner on the basis of his or her behavior. Today they are more often perceived as an integral part of the process of prisoner rehabilitation. There is some empirical evidence to support the notion that visits are rehabilitative in and of themselves. Glaser (1964) found that federal prisoners whose families demonstrated "active" interest were significantly more successful on parole than were prisoners with no family interest. Holt and Miller (1972) reported that "loners" in California prisons were six times more likely to return to prison during their first year of release than were prisoners with three or more visits. At least one study suggests that visits not only increase chances of parole success but contribute to improved institutional behavior, at least among juveniles (Borgman, 1985).

It is therefore not surprising that more and more corrections professionals subscribe to the National Advisory Commission's recommendation that correctional authorities "encourage visitors rather than merely tolerating them" (1973:68). The Commission and several subsequent observers have suggested that prison visitors should be assisted as well as encouraged, noting that prisoners' families often find visiting a financial hardship (Fenlon, 1972; Weintraub, 1976; Homer, 1979; and others).

Studies of the families of incarcerated men have focused on the prisoner's wife who has been described as living with her minor children in an urban area and in

marginal poverty (Schwartz and Weintraub, 1974; Schneller, 1975; Lowenstein, 1986; Herrmann-Keeling, 1988). Morris (1965) found that the primary reason that wives of English prisoners did not visit their husbands was the expense involved. Homer (1979) estimated that transportation costs to Attica Prison from New York City constituted approximately "176.25%" of a welfare wife's total weekly income (p. 50). Subsidization of family visits by the Department of Corrections is one frequently made recommendation, since the family is a "natural support system" (Fishman & Alissi, 1979) whose involvement can improve the prisoner's release success. The girlfriends of prisoners are also an important potential source of release support according to Schwartz and Zeisel (1976), and their relationships with the prisoners might also be sympathetically encouraged.

Efforts to strengthen prisoner-family relationships have been described in the literature (Fenton, 1959; Neussendorfer, 1969; Schwartz and Weintraub, 1975; Boudouris, 1985), and these efforts have included opportunities for extended family visits (Hopper, 1965, 1985; Esposito, 1980).

In 1973 the National Advisory included conjugal visits as well as subsidization in Standard 2.17:

**VISITATION.** Offenders should have the right to communicate in person with individuals of their own choosing. The following additional guidelines should apply:

1. Correctional authorities should not limit the number of visitors an offender may receive or the length of such visits except in accordance with regular institutional schedules and requirements.
2. Correctional authorities should facilitate and promote visitation of offenders by the following acts:
  - a. Providing transportation for visitors from terminal points of public transportation. In some instances, the correctional agency may

wish to pay the entire transportation costs of family members when the offender and the family are indigent.

- b. Providing appropriate rooms for visitation that allow ease and informality of communication in a natural environment as free from institutional or custodial attributes as possible.
  - c. Making provisions for family visits in private surrounding conducive to maintaining and strengthening family ties.
3. The correctional agency may supervise the visiting area in an unobtrusive manner but should not eavesdrop on conversations or otherwise interfere with the participants' privacy. (p 66)

More recent standards, developed by the Commission on Accreditation for Corrections (1981) iterate many of the same goals. For accreditation purposes contact visits are essential "except in instances of substantiated security risk" (p 98) and "extended visits" in private surroundings are deemed essential where state statutes permit (p 99). Neither visit length nor number of visitors permitted should be limited except by schedule, personnel or space restraints. These standards also address the importance of assisting visitors and seem to be designed to encourage prisons to maximize opportunities for prisoners and their visitors to maintain and strengthen family relationships.

While the importance of family relationships to rehabilitation efforts has been widely recognized, there have been no recent attempts to examine on a national basis the extent to which prisons encourage visits through visiting policies and practices. The maximization of opportunities to maintain family ties bears a direct relationship to the institution's understanding of, and commitment to, the rehabilitative effect of maintaining a "natural support system" which the prisoner can rely on upon release. This paper reports the results of a new national survey of visiting policies and practices designed to determine to what extent prison officials have put into practice their new view of visiting as rehabilitative in and of itself.

## **Background of the Study**

The most recent prior national survey of prison visiting was conducted by the author in 1976 (Schafer, 1978). That survey found that visiting opportunities as indicated by visiting schedules had expanded considerably since earlier research had reported that the dominant visiting pattern was twice a month for no more than four hours (Zemans and Cavan, 1956). The 1976 survey, which was broader in scope, found the dominant visiting pattern nationally was once a week for more than four hours.

A decade ago there was wide variation in the number of hours per week available for visiting: the range was from a low of three and one-half hours to a high of eighty-nine hours. A number of factors were associated with this variation including: overcrowding, location, type of facility, and visiting room capacity. The study found a high correlation between visiting room capacity and the age of the facility, with older facilities tending to have visiting rooms that were quite small relative to the prison's total population.

Since the last decade has seen a major increase in prison construction it was thought that visiting room capacities and visiting rules and regulations might also have undergone a change.

In the summer of 1987 a survey was mailed to 370 institutions from the American Correctional Association's list of state-operated adult long-term facilities. Federal facilities were not included for geographical reasons; each of these may draw its population from any state in the Union, making comparisons difficult. Local and

county facilities were excluded from the survey because they are so numerous and varied. Surveys were mailed to individual institutions rather than to "headquarters" because schedules tend to vary within states. By September, 237 responses had been received from 46 states, a response rate of 64 per cent. Two states, Illinois and New York, required the researcher to get clearance from the state Departments of Corrections before surveys could be completed, but prisons in other states either completed the surveys or settled the permission issue internally without correspondence from the researcher.

Of the 237 surveys returned, 24 were not processed either because they had been mistakenly included on the mailing list (i.e., were not adult long-term facilities) or because they did not include the most important information. The sample, therefore, consisted of 213 institutions located in 45 states.

The survey asked for standard information related to visiting: visiting schedule, institutional population, visit length. It also included a request for information probably only available where records are computerized. Such information was rarely known by the 1976 respondents but was reported by a substantial number of 1987 respondents.

### **The 1987 Survey**

For comparison purposes visiting schedules were converted to total hours available for visiting per week. The data show an increase in the number of visiting hours per week by state. In 1976, 20 of the 45 states represented in the survey (44.4%) had at least one responding institution with forty or more visiting hours per week; in 1987, 31 of the 45 states had at least one facility with such a schedule. The



range by state is presented in Table 1, which illustrates considerable variation within most states. State policy is evident in both Florida and Texas . In Florida all responding institutions had visiting schedules of 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays, exactly the same schedule as was reported in 1976. The Texas Department of Corrections responded for all institutions that visiting hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekends only. This, too, represents no change since 1976. In most states the range in total hours is considerable; even the number of days the visiting area is open is not set by state policy.

Where visiting rooms are open more than seventy hours a week the prisons tend to have small visiting rooms relative to their populations, generous rules regarding number of visits and visit length, and they tend to be located near large cities from which much of their population is drawn. Their location makes evening hours practical since families who live close to their prisoner are likely to take advantage of evening visiting hours. The State Correctional Institution at Graterford (Pennsylvania), for example, has a visiting room capacity of 100, with a population of nearly 2500 and is less than a half-hour's drive from much of Philadelphia. The visiting room is open from 9 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. every day. Nationally, the total hours available per week range from a low of three hours per week to a high of 89, and represent no change since the 1976 survey. The number of states with higher maxima has increased so it does appear that more opportunities for visiting are available now than were ten years ago. This indicates a growing tendency to make visiting a priority.

The 1976 survey found a relationship between schedule and age with older prisons tending to have more generous schedules. Older prisons were more likely than new ones to be located close to population centers<sup>1</sup> and to have smaller visiting room

Table 1: Schedule of Visiting Hours

State <sup>1</sup>	Number of Institutions Responding	Hrs/wk (range) <sup>2</sup>	Days/wk (range)	State <sup>1</sup>	Number of Institutions Responding	Hrs/wk (range) <sup>2</sup>	Days/wk (range)
Alabama	5	10-42	2-7	Missouri	5	42-49	7
Alaska	8	26-42	5-7	Montana	1	28	7
Arizona	3	8-48	2-7	Nebraska	1	12	4
Arkansas	4	8-48	2-7	Nevada	4	30-49	4-7
California	4	26-58	5-7	New Hampshire	1	63	7
Colorado	1	35	7	New Jersey	1	21	7
Connecticut	2	20-42	4-7	New Mexico	5	16-49	3-7
Delaware	2	20-35	3-7	New York	18	34-56	7
Florida	19	12	2	North Carolina	4	8-21	2-7
Georgia	4	10-51	2-7	North Dakota	1	42	7
Hawaii	3	3-6	1-2	Ohio	5	42-56	7
Idaho	1	NA <sup>3</sup>	5	Oklahoma	5	14-40	2-7
Illinois	4	56-84	7	Oregon	1	42	7
Indiana	3	28-56	7	Pennsylvania	7	41-89	7
Iowa	6	40-59	5-7	Rhode Island	3	28-79	7
Kansas	1	49	7	South Carolina	5	21-49	7
Kentucky	5	12-35	5-7	Tennessee	2	13.5-16	2-5
Louisiana	5	16-56	2-7	Texas	5 <sup>4</sup>	14	2
Maine	3	6-42	2-7	Virginia	11	4-49	2-7
Maryland	6	26-84	6-7	Washington	8	8-49	2-7
Massachusetts	5	23-78	5-7	West Virginia	2	16-37	2-7
Michigan	10	18-84	7	Wisconsin	3	39-56	5-7
Minnesota	3	28-54	2-7				

1. Five states are excluded, either because no responses were received or because surveys were incomplete. These states are: Mississippi, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, and Wyoming.
2. Conjugal visits are not included.
3. Information not available from this respondent.
4. The Texas Department of Corrections responded for all facilities. Only five institutional responses were received.

capacities. Their schedules accommodated both the capacity of the visiting room and the large visitor volume. The new survey was undertaken because changes were expected in the opportunities available for prisoners to maintain their natural support systems. Facilities constructed since 1975 constituted 44.1 percent of the responding institutions. In order to determine whether these “new” facilities were more likely than “old” ones to incorporate maximum visiting opportunities into their

design we used a measure of visiting room capacity to compare opportunities by age of prison.

The survey requested the number of persons who could be accommodated in the visiting area at any one time. In order to make comparisons possible this number was computed as a percentage of the total prison population to arrive at a visiting room capacity, i.e., a capacity of 10 per cent means that the area will hold 10 per cent of the prison's population. In point of fact this percentage would accommodate only 5 per cent of prisoners since one must assume at least one visitor per prisoner. Table 2 does show a trend toward greater visiting capacities in newly constructed prisons but it is not a definitive one. The majority of prisons built before 1950 had visiting room

**Table 2: Visiting Room Capacity\* by Date of Prison Opening**

YEAR	0 - 10%		11 - 20%		21 - 30%		31 - 40%		41 - 50%		51% up		TOTAL N
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
pre-1900	10	28.6	15	42.9	7	20.0	2	5.7	1	2.9	0	0.0	35
1900-1950	14	36.8	6	15.8	6	15.8	5	13.2	4	10.5	3	7.9	38
1951-1975	8	17.4	14	30.4	10	21.7	3	6.5	5	10.9	6	13.0	46
1976-present	7	7.4	27	28.7	25	26.6	10	10.6	12	12.8	13	13.8	94
<b>TOTAL N</b>	<b>39</b>		<b>62</b>		<b>48</b>		<b>20</b>		<b>22</b>		<b>22</b>		<b>213</b>

\* Visiting room capacity was computed as a percentage of total prison population.

capacities of 20 per cent or less of their total populations (61.6% of 73 prisons). The majority of prisons opened after 1950 had visiting room capacities of 10 to 30 per cent of their populations (54.2% of 140 prisons), a pattern which held for those built since 1975 (55.3%). However, some "old" prisons had very generous visiting room capacities and some "new" prisons very niggardly ones. Auburn, a very famous "old"

prison constructed in the 1820s, had recently remodeled its visiting facilities, greatly expanding visiting capacity.

The measures used to determine capacities are not precise, nor were they precise in the previous survey. One factor which may affect the measure of capacity is that now, as ten years ago, some prisons do not have designated visiting rooms and use for visiting facilities used for other purposes during the week. Respondents from 151 prisons indicated that the visiting area was used for other purposes on weekdays. While one might expect the multi-use nature of even visiting rooms to affect visiting schedules, only a third (N = 51) of these prisons did not schedule visits on weekdays. Many prisons which do not have rooms used exclusively for visiting schedule evening visiting hours, and some schedule for mornings or afternoons or for fewer than five days. Sixty-seven of the responding institutions schedule visits seven days a week even though the visiting area is used for other purposes weekdays. More than half of all responding institutions (N = 117) have seven-day visiting schedules.

Unless visitor volume requires it, most of the prisons surveyed permit the visitor to remain in the visiting area until it closes. This means that the first visitor processed at the start of the day's visiting hours may remain until hours end. This hypothetical visitor might visit anywhere from one to thirteen hours depending on the institution's schedule. In some facilities the day's schedule is broken into two to three hour time blocks, which means that although the visiting room is open for a total of six to nine hours per day, the visitor may stay for only two or three hours. Visit length is six hours or more at 58.9 per cent of the responding institutions. This represents a considerable increase since the 1976 survey which found 37.2% of respondent institutions with visit lengths of six or more hours.

We asked also how many visits were permitted each resident in a month. Since 20 per cent (N=43) of the institutions place limits on the visitor rather than the prisoner, responses to this item tended to be confused. Sixty-nine institutions reported that there was no limit, but 19 of these indicated that the number of times a visitor could visit per month was limited. Six institutions gave the number 30 or 31, indicating virtually no limit. Thus, 35 per cent of the responding institutions permit the prisoner to have daily visits (though the number who actually receive visits this often is probably very small). Twenty percent indicated that prisoners were permitted four or five visits per month (approximately once a week), 12.7 per cent permitted 8 or 10 visits per prisoner per month (approximately twice a week). Only 4.3 per cent of the sample permit less than four visits per month (N=9).

One item on the survey asked if most visits were contact visits, and 95 per cent of the respondents answered in the affirmative. The ten institutions which answered no to this question were in four states: Hawaii, New Mexico, North Carolina and Texas. The prison in Hawaii is a small (population 150) high security institution and reported no contact visits. Central Prison in North Carolina holds several custody levels, has a population of 956, and also reported no contact visits. The six institutions in Texas are fairly large units (population 656 to 3402) in which both contact and closed visits are available. In all but one the closed visiting area was reported to have a larger capacity than the contact visiting area. The New Mexico institution is the women's prison and offers both closed and limited contact visits.

There were 24 women's prisons in the sample as well as a small number of coeducational facilities, though these last were not always accurately coded. A smaller proportion of women's prisons had seven-day schedules (37.5%) than did men's prisons (60.0%). Most states have more than one institution for men but only

one prison for women. The women's facility is, therefore, less accessible to all parts of the state, and weekday or evening visiting hours might not be cost effective. Many men's prisons serve a specific geographic location. Forty-five percent of the survey respondents indicated that location was one factor considered in assigning an inmate to that prison.

In 1976 only two states made provisions for extended family visits (conjugal visits) and only one of these responded to the survey (California). The 1987 survey asked about these visits and had affirmative responses from 23 institutions in eight states. Seven of these responses were from California and six from New York. Of the remainder three were from South Carolina and three from Washington and one each from Connecticut, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Georgia. Because the Georgia institution did not supply information on additional items related to conjugal visiting (visiting room capacity and length of conjugal visit) the affirmative answer may have been an error. At the Connecticut facility these items were also omitted but the respondent noted that such visits were arranged at another facility.

While the extended family visit is usually represented as an overnight visit, five responding prisons reported what might be called private family visits with visits of ten or fewer hours in length. Overall conjugal visits ranged in length from 2 to 72 hours. Three facilities had overnight visits (21-22 hours), nine had two-day visits (42-48 hours) and three (all in California) permitted visits of up to three days (72 hours). Three did not respond to the question regarding length.

The decade since the last survey has seen a major increase in the opportunities for extended private family visiting. Seven states out of forty-five do not, however,

constitute a rapid move toward meeting the accreditation standard which deems such visits essential wherever state statutes permit them.

Because the standards cited above suggest assisting visitors through subsidization, a question on subsidization was included in the survey. Subsidized visits were available to nearly half of the responding institutions (N = 97). In most cases (68) private agencies sponsored transportation to the facility from high "catchment" areas. Departments of Correction provided subsidized visits to 27 facilities. This is a major move toward the National Advisory Commission's recommendation to encourage visitors rather than to merely tolerate them.

Subsidization is not the only way to encourage visitors. Pleasant surroundings, rapid processing and cooperative staff encourage visitors to return, but the initial visit is the important one. Many institutions ensure that potential visitors are aware of rules regarding acceptable identification, permitted gifts, etc., by mailing information to the persons identified by the resident as prospective visitors. Twenty percent of respondents mailed rules to visitors, and fifty percent indicated that this was the prisoner's responsibility. More than 82 per cent (N = 174) required visitors to be on an approved list submitted by the inmate and 55 per cent (N = 116) conducted background checks of visitors on the list. Since such checks are often begun with questionnaires mailed to the visitor, letters encouraging visits and giving basic visit information could easily accompany the questionnaires.

Since "loners" do not seem to be as successful upon release as prisoners with some active family interest (Holt and Miller, 1972), many prisons cooperate with volunteer agencies to match volunteers with prisoners who have no family or friends available for visiting. The survey assumed that institutions which work with such volunteer

groups would maintain records on the number of prisoners with no visits. While 96 of the responding institutions do work with such groups, less than half of these (N = 43) were able to provide a count of the number of prisoners without visits. Ten respondents ignored this item, 133 indicated that the information was not available, and the remainder estimated percentages or numbers. While computerization has helped prisons keep track of a great deal of information for annual reports, data on visiting is not often part of the information collected.

One survey item requested the number of visitors processed in the week, month, and year preceding survey completion, as well as an indication of whether the number was an estimate or a count. Though this information is probably not computer retrievable, many respondents (N = 102) did a count for the previous week; fewer counted the month's numbers, and most of the annual figures provided were estimates. Fifty percent of those who counted the visitors had processed fewer than 260 visitors in seven days. Twenty-five percent had processed fewer than 160 visitors. Seven responses appeared to be estimates rather than counts; numbers for these seven ranged from 908 to 1313. Since only 38 of the prisons had prisoner populations of more than 1313 it seems highly unlikely that that many visitors would be processed in a week at any prison. There were three prisons with populations of more than 3000. Perhaps a prison of this size would process 1/3 of its population in visitors each week.

It does appear to be true that summer produces an especially large volume of visitors. One-third of the respondents indicated that summer weekends were the busiest visiting days, 48.6 per cent mentioned holiday weekends, 9 per cent mentioned summer and holiday weekends, and 7.1 per cent said other periods or all weekends. Respondent institutions which mentioned summer weekends tended to be



located in northern states. Since the survey was conducted during the summer perhaps this accounts for the high visitor volume noted by seven of the respondents.

## **Conclusion**

The 1987 survey was undertaken to determine if changes in visiting policies had occurred in the past decade. The results suggest that there is a trend toward maximization of opportunities for prisoners to maintain family relationships. Comparisons cannot be precisely made with the 1976 survey because different institutions responded, but gross measures document this trend. There are proportionally more facilities with forty or more visiting hours per week and proportionally more with seven-day visiting schedules.

The survey data show a definite increase in the kind and number of opportunities available for the maintenance of prisoner-family relationships. Contact visits are the norm among 95 per cent of the responding institutions. Only two out of the 213 facilities did not offer any contact visits, exceptions so rare as to require remark. Opportunities for private/extended family visits are more widely available today than they were a decade ago, and both the permitted length of visit and the number of visits permitted per resident per month have increased since 1976.

The new survey reflects increased interest in visiting as well as a movement toward increased visiting opportunities. The response rate to the survey was high and a substantial number of respondents requested information on survey results. This reflects an interest in comparing policies elsewhere with policies at one's own institution and curiosity about what other prisons are doing to encourage visits.

One way to encourage visitors and to assure their best possible treatment is to designate a specific staff member to be in charge of visiting at the institution. A substantial portion of respondents (72.6%) reported that there is at their institutions a single staff member in charge of visiting. No information was requested about the duties and responsibilities of the visiting "director." In the best of all possible worlds this person would review rules and procedures, initiate suggestions for change, monitor visitor volume, and collect suggestions from staff, visitors and inmates on ways to improve visits. While he or she need not monitor the visiting room during all visiting hours, he should be there frequently to assist visiting room staff and might have input into the selection of personnel for visit room duty and/or for visitor processing. The "director" should be in charge of visitor lists and background checks of visitors and be responsible for maintaining visit records. He or she would arrange special visits and work with volunteer groups interested in visiting prisoners.

While visiting policies and practices are always bound by schedule, state statute, centralized policies, personnel considerations, geography and space, there should be room for change in nearly all of these limiting factors. Facilities should be encouraged to experiment with expanded schedules where location and visitor volume appear to warrant it. In states where hours are set for all institutions, authorities might consider making these minimum schedules and encouraging prisons to find ways to go beyond the minimum. Evening hours, for example, would require minimal changes in personnel assignments which need not be costly. Evening visiting hours would not, however, be practical at geographically isolated facilities. At the same time, isolated institutions should be able to offer longer visits to make up for what is lost in frequency.

By and large, state prisons in this country have acted to take advantage of the relationship between visits and post-release success and have implemented policies which encourage visits. Although the new survey reflects a substantial increase in the number and kinds of visiting opportunities available to prisoners and their families nationally, there is room for improvement. Visiting should be considered a priority and policies and practices should be continuously reviewed in order to maximize the maintenance of prisoner-family relationships.

## NOTES

1. The New Jersey State Prison in Trenton, for example, was built on the outskirts of the city in the 1820s. One hundred years later the city had surrounded it.

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