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Uncovering reasons for no visitation among families experiencing parental incarceration

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ABSTRACT

Relying upon narrative accounts from a highly diverse sample of caregivers (N=62), this study used open and axial coding techniques to shed light on the complex choices and circumstances that led families to never visit, or stop visiting, an incarcerated parent. Findings revealed a complicated mix of interpersonal and structural reasons to explain the lack of visitation. Structural themes included financial/logistical and approval process barriers. Interpersonal themes encompassed consequences of carceral exposure, limited parental involvement, histories of violence, and retributive attitudes. This study highlights the need for family-centric approaches that address the unique challenges of families not engaged in visitation.

KEYWORDS

visitation; prison contact;
parental incarceration

Introduction

Parental incarceration has become a common life event for millions of children and families in the United States (National Research Council, 2014; Shlafer et al., 2019). Prison visitation offers a meaningful opportunity to preserve or repair relationships and mitigate against the harms of incarceration and preexisting stressors (Arditti, 2012; Christian & Kennedy, 2011). Visitation can serve as a “reset” for incarcerated parents, their children, and loved ones as they attempt to resolve past issues, navigate present circumstances, and prepare for the future (Tasca et al., 2016). While most studies emphasize the benefits of prison visitation for both incarcerated persons and their children, research also reveals that visits can be particularly stressful experiences given daunting prison environments and strained relationships (Christian, 2005; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018; Turanovic & Tasca, 2019).

Approximately half of the incarcerated population—the majority of whom are parents—do not receive visits (Roxburgh & Fitch, 2014; Rubenstein et al., 2019). The reasons why, however, are not fully

understood. While research shows that logistical and financial challenges are major impediments to visitation, most studies have relied on administrative records or interviews with incarcerated persons or visitors (Clark & Duwe, 2017; Cochran et al., 2017; Comfort, 2008; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018;). As such, the perspectives of those who have never visited, or stopped visiting entirely, are limited in the literature.

Less is known about structural barriers beyond logistical and financial challenges as well. Families experiencing parental incarceration are often embedded in multiple legal and public systems of control that can impede access to prison contact (Arditti, 2012; Fong, 2020; Giordano & Copp, 2015; Gurusami, 2019; Hughes, 2019; Katzenstein & Waller, 2015; Roberts, 2014; Sugie, 2012). Formal approval processes also hinder contact and interact with multi-system involvement in myriad ways that have yet to be fully explored (Boudin et al., 2013; Clark & Duwe, 2017; Cochran et al., 2017; Gurusami, 2019; Rubenstein et al., 2019).

Interpersonal dynamics can also play a significant role in whether visitation occurs. Visitation decisions may be fluid considering shifting familial relationships over time (Cochran et al., 2017; Mowen & Visher, 2016; Turney, 2015). The complexity of this decision is compounded during parental incarceration given the role of caregivers as “gatekeepers” (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2011; Roy & Dyson, 2005; Tasca, 2016). Consequently, family dynamics may lead some families to never visit and others to stop contact entirely (Christian & Kennedy, 2011; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018). Given the array of challenges routinely faced by incarcerated parents and their families, a lack of visitation may be a result of both structural and interpersonal barriers.

To fill gaps in knowledge, the overarching aim of this work is to shed light on families who do not visit during parental incarceration to understand the reasons why. To do so, this study draws upon deep narrative accounts from a diverse sample of caregivers to explore the complex choices and circumstances that led these families to never visit, or to stop visiting, an incarcerated parent. By moving beyond a traditional focus on logistical and financial barriers, this study can inform comprehensive, family-centric approaches to better support families who are not visiting for interpersonal and/or structural reasons to tailor interventions to their needs.

Structural barriers to parental prison visitation

Families of the incarcerated face a multitude of structural barriers to prison visitation (Poehlmann-Tynan & Arditti, 2018; Rubenstein et al., 2019). In-person visitation is often considered the most meaningful as these visits generally allow for some physical touch, sharing of food, and tend to be longer in duration, as well as offer a greater degree of privacy

than other forms of contact, such as virtual visitation, which are heavily monitored and recorded (Muñiz et al., 2024; Tartaro & Levy, 2017). However, the process to facilitate in-person visits is inherently difficult given restricted visiting days and hours, strict dress codes, invasive search procedures, limited activities for children, and constraints on physical contact (Arditti, 2012; Flynn, 2014; Lockwood et al., 2022; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2011). Comfort (2008) has characterized this experience as “secondary prisonization,” where visitors are subjected to similar scrutiny and control mechanisms as incarcerated individuals themselves. The financial burden is also substantial, with costs associated with traveling long distances, lodging, and taking time off work, making regular visits prohibitive for many families (Clark & Duwe, 2017; Cochran et al., 2017; Young & Turanovic, 2022). Given these challenges, some families may choose not to navigate the visitation process at all or decide not to return (Christian & Kennedy, 2011; Mowen & Visser, 2016; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018).

While logistical and financial barriers are well-recognized, less attention has been paid to other structural impediments. The prison system regulates who is approved for contact through strict policies that commonly exclude individuals with criminal records, victims of crimes, and those without particular forms of identification (Boudin et al., 2013; Clark & Duwe, 2017). Moreover, in many jurisdictions, individuals can only be on one incarcerated person’s approved contact list forcing difficult choices for families experiencing the incarceration of multiple loved ones (Boudin et al., 2013; Tasca et al., 2016). These restrictions disproportionately affect poor, racial/ethnic minority and immigrant communities, where involvement in multiple systems, prior records, lack of government-issued forms of identification, and the incarceration of multiple family members are more common (Christian et al., 2015; Cochran et al., 2017; Fong, 2020; Gurusami, 2019; Hughes, 2019; Rubenstein et al., 2019). Even as carceral systems expand visitation options to include virtual visits, it is important to note that approval and financial barriers remain.

Families’ entanglement in multiple systems of state control further compounds the challenges in maintaining contact with incarcerated parents. Families experiencing parental incarceration are often embedded in various legal and public systems including child welfare, family/dependency court, and the criminal justice system, which can create additional obstacles to prison visitation (Arditti, 2012; Fong, 2020; Roberts, 2014). For instance, if a caregiver is identified as a victim in a case involving the incarcerated parent, visitation may not be approved (Boudin et al., 2013; Edleson & Nissley, 2006). If a child is under the care and custody of child welfare services, decisions about whether the child may have contact with their incarcerated parent are made by the state, not the caregiver or parent (Brown & Bloom, 2009). The complex interplay of these systems often

results in decisions about what is “good” for families being made without the families’ input, effectively removing their agency and potentially disrupting familial relationships (Arditti, 2012; Brown & Bloom, 2009; Roberts, 2014). Fong (2020) describes the expansive surveillance of family life through multi-system connections as a “surveillant assemblage” that can introduce harm and exacerbate inequality.

The cumulative effect of structural barriers extends beyond the immediate challenge of visitation as well. Negative experiences with “the system” can worsen feelings of fatalism among affected families, potentially increasing disadvantage and cultivating feelings of hopelessness, cynicism, and powerlessness (Foster & Hagan, 2007; Lee et al., 2014). This psychological impact can further discourage families from attempting to navigate the visitation process, even when they might otherwise desire contact with their incarcerated loved one. Taken together, it is critical to illuminate the ways in which the complex web of systemic obstacles impede visitation as prolonged separation can undermine family functioning, well-being, and future reentry (Griffin et al., 2020; Mowen & Visser, 2016).

Interpersonal barriers to parental prison visitation

For some families, a lack of visitation is an active choice rooted in interpersonal dynamics (Beckmeyer & Arditti, 2014; Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). Periods of confinement and other longstanding stressors weigh heavily on familial relationships (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Mowen & Visser, 2016; Poehlmann-Tynan & Arditti, 2018). Family members who have had conflicts with incarcerated parents over histories of substance abuse, violence, mental health issues, and prior system involvement may be less inclined to maintain contact during incarceration (Christian et al., 2015; Tasca, 2016; Turanovic et al., 2012). Extended absences, before and during incarceration, create a state of “liminality” in which parents are “neither here nor there” (Roy & Dyson, 2005). This state of limbo makes it difficult to maintain strong and healthy connections which can lead to family disengagement. Giordano et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of capturing the broader family climate before and after incarceration, noting that ongoing conditions of family life—including parents’ adverse behaviors and unmet needs—are critically important in shaping family dynamics. In some cases, incarceration may be viewed as a respite from challenging family situations, including violence (Comfort, 2008; DeHart & Altshuler, 2009; Turanovic et al., 2012; Wakefield, 2016).

Caregivers of children experiencing parental incarceration must navigate complex parent-child histories and dynamics as well as their own relationship with the imprisoned parent (Flynn, 2014; Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2017). In this role, caregivers become the “gatekeepers” of contact for the

family unit as they typically control whether, and under what circumstances, contact occurs (Miller et al., 2013; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2011; Roy & Dyson, 2005; Tasca, 2016). Many caregivers harbor conflicted feelings in the process. As one caregiver in Shlafer and Poehlmann's (2010) study noted, "it's a tough situation. I don't want to take them away from their dad, but sometimes dads aren't good dads. I'm worried if I let them see him, what kinds of people they will grow up to be" (p. 406).

Resentment can also affect visitation decisions. Caregivers and children may be angry with the incarcerated parent and wish to pull back from contact (Beckmeyer & Arditti, 2014; Lockwood et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2013; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2011). Shlafer and Poehlmann (2010) found that nearly one-third of children in their study reported negative feelings about their imprisoned parent, with some expressing a preference for no contact. The potential trauma of prison visits, especially for young children, is another significant interpersonal barrier as caregivers and incarcerated parents alike may believe that visits do more harm than good (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2017; Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). For example, some families hold the view that visitation serves to "normalize" incarceration (Moran et al., 2017). These concerns highlight the complicated decisions families experiencing parental incarceration must make as they weigh potential benefits against perceived risks in deciding whether to visit.

There may be a desire for the parent to be held accountable and punished for their actions as well—especially if he or she has been incarcerated multiple times (Christian & Kennedy, 2011; Cochran et al., 2017; Flynn, 2014). As one youth whose mother was incarcerated explained, "I was very angry 'cos she kept making promises that she wouldn't go back [to jail], and she did. I was just fed up" (Flynn, 2014, p. 185). On the other side of the equation, incarcerated parents may withdraw into "hard timing" and "opt out" of visits themselves (Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018); Roy & Dyson, 2005. This withdrawal could be a coping mechanism for dealing with the pain of separation, damaged relationships, or a response to feelings of shame and inadequacy (Moran et al., 2017). Understanding the ways in which interpersonal barriers can lead to no visitation is essential for advancing research and developing more effective interventions and policies that address the multifaceted needs of incarcerated individuals, their children, and loved ones.

Current study

The broad aim of this work is to fill gaps in knowledge about families who do not visit during parental incarceration. Drawing from in-depth interviews with 62 caregivers, this study focuses on families who have never visited, or stopped visiting, an incarcerated parent to understand

the reasons why. Strengths of this work are grounded in the comprehensive focus on structural *and* interpersonal barriers to parental prison visitation, reliance on the perspectives of non-visitors, and use of a highly diverse sample of White, Black, Latino/a and Native American caregivers. Insights from this study can inform future research, policy reforms, and enhance practitioner approaches to better support those families who are not visiting by choice, circumstance, or both.

Data and method

This study utilized data from a larger project examining the effects of incarceration on children and families in Arizona, which included in-depth interviews with 100 caregivers.¹ The caregivers comprised a diverse group of women and men living in Maricopa County, Arizona, who were providing care for children whose parents were in prison. Participation was voluntary, and caregivers received 50 dollars for participating in a 60-to-90-minute interview. Recruitment was carried out through telephone calls and letters mailed to home addresses.² Interviews took place in private university offices and conference rooms in late 2010 and early 2011. Importantly, the same visitation approval processes and restrictions remain in effect today as when these data were originally collected.³ All interviews were audio recorded and later professionally transcribed.

Interviews were semi-structured using open and closed questions to capture parental engagement and prison contact histories, family relationships, living situations, caregiving experiences, service needs, and background demographics. Caregivers were probed in-depth about prison visitation experiences among the family unit. Those who reported children never visited, or stopped visiting entirely, were probed about reasons why. The open-ended nature of the questions enabled back-and-forth dialogue to develop a deep understanding as to why incarcerated parents were not visited. Overall, these narratives offered important context—particularly with respect to familial circumstances before and during incarceration—necessary to gain a more complete understanding of the reasons behind no visitation.

The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, each interview transcript was read and coded to identify cases where visitation never occurred or had stopped altogether. Nearly two-thirds of caregivers reported no parental prison visitation at the time of interviews, producing a sample of 62 cases for analysis.⁴ Next, an open coding strategy was employed to draw out dominant categories reflected in caregiver accounts to explain the lack of parental prison visitation (Charmaz, 2014). Structural and interpersonal barriers emerged as the overarching codes through this process. Lastly, using axial coding techniques, the

transcripts were reviewed again to identify and capture specific reasons why visitation was not taking place within the open codes. Multiple iterations of this process were carried out to cross-check and validate themes.

Nearly two-thirds of the current sample ($N=62$) were experiencing paternal incarceration (65%). Most caregivers were either other parents (58%) or grandparents (29%). Caregivers were racially and ethnically diverse as 42% were Black, 27% were Latino/a, 18% were White, and 13% were Native American. Incarcerated parents were similarly racially and ethnically diverse—consistent with broader patterns of disproportionate minority contact in the criminal justice system. Over one-quarter of incarcerated parents were in prison for a violent offense (29%), over half had been in prison previously (52%), nearly three-quarters had a history of substance abuse, and roughly one-quarter had mental health problems. Approximately 19% of parents had a history of involvement with child protective services.⁵ [Appendix A](#) presents full sample characteristics.

As the sole author of this work, it is important to reflect upon my positionality. My research approach is defined by over fifteen years of field research in carceral environments and direct engagement with system-impacted individuals and families. My roots in the state extend beyond academia, further enriching my contextual understanding of the complexities of incarceration in diverse local communities. Consistently cognizant of the potential for researcher bias, my approach is both reflexive and objective, prioritizing authentic participant perspectives. My experiential depth and intentional centering of participants' voices enables a methodologically rigorous depiction of families' visitation decisions in the context of parental imprisonment.

Findings

Themes are couched under structural and interpersonal barriers. Two themes were identified for structural barriers which included: (1) financial and logistical concerns and (2) contact approval processes. Four themes represented interpersonal barriers which involved: (1) perceived consequences of carceral exposure, (2) limited pre-incarceration parental involvement, (3) histories of family violence, and (4) a desire for retribution.⁶ Many cases exhibited multiple barriers, often spanning both structural and interpersonal categories. Importantly, both structural *and* interpersonal reasons were offered by nearly half of caregivers to explain why incarcerated parents were not visited. Only 21% of caregivers reported that structural barriers alone accounted for no visitation, while 31% referenced strictly interpersonal barriers.

Structural barriers

Nearly half of caregivers (47%) cited financial or logistical concerns as reasons incarcerated parents were not visited. Caregivers commonly cited car problems, work conflicts, and expenses for gas, lodging, and food as major impediments to visitation. Discomfort with security protocols were also noted. Danica, a Black mother, explained, “going through the process feeling like I’m the person who did something wrong, having my child searched, you know, it’s bad.”⁷ Black families were overrepresented in cases citing financial or logistical concerns, with over half of caregivers and incarcerated parents within this theme identifying as Black compared to 42% of caregivers and 39% of parents in the full sample (see appendices for sample characteristics).

Nearly one-third of interviewees (32%) cited approval processes as a structural barrier to parental prison visitation. Caregivers described how processes established by the Department and other state systems (e.g., child welfare, family/dependency courts) hindered contact. In some cases, family members were ineligible from visiting because they were the victim in the parent’s incarcerating offense. Marcus, a Black father, was unable to facilitate visitation between his children and their incarcerated mother given a history of intimate partner violence. He explained, “I’m not allowed to visit cause I’m the victim. The system could care less about the kids. Because I’m the father, I still think that I should be able to bring my kids to see their mother.” In other instances, parents had been involved in child welfare cases where contact with their children was restricted. Olivia, a Latina grandmother, shared how her grandson was placed in her care by Child Protective Services (CPS) following longstanding physical and sexual abuse by his mother’s boyfriend. She recounted the painful aftermath following her grandson’s victimization: “He can’t see her. He had been abused to the point where he started acting out. The state severed her rights.” Strikingly, 35% of cases citing approval process barriers involved incarcerated parents who had histories of CPS involvement compared to 19% in the full sample.

Other issues that arose in the approval process included family members having criminal records, lacking required identification (e.g., valid state ID or birth certificate for children), and rules against being on the contact list of more than one incarcerated person. Latino/a caregivers, who comprised roughly one-quarter of the full sample, accounted for half of all cases where approval processes were reported as a reason for the lack of parental prison visitation. Sandra, a Latina caregiver, described the dilemma she faced between visiting her own husband and being able to take her nieces to see their mother: “I got taken off her visiting list cause I was going on my husband’s. I can only be on one list, so I wanted to start

seeing him.” Yvette, a Native American foster parent to her niece, faced multiple hurdles in the approval process, including navigating child welfare services. She explained, “We can’t visit because the father is not listed on [his daughter’s] birth certificate and then we have to go through CPS.” Nia, a Black mother, struggled to get approved for contact so she and her children could see their father. Nia pointed out, “When you’re trying to go visit, they do a full background check. I mean, you could never get in trouble in your life. I tried to write letters to the warden for me to go down there. It didn’t go through. You paid your debt to society, and they still won’t let you visit.”

Interpersonal barriers

Approximately 42% of caregivers expressed beliefs that exposing children to carceral settings was inappropriate and offered this rationale for why visitation did not occur. Caregivers were concerned that visits could lead children to believe that “prison is ok.” Others talked about how children would not cope well with their parent not “coming home.” Candice, a Black mother, stated, “I’m not going to visit. I don’t want her growing up and be like, ‘It’s okay to be in jail.’ So, I will not let her visit her father.” For some families, the incarcerated parent shared these same concerns. John, a White grandfather, explained that his daughter did not want her children to visit: “She doesn’t want me to take the kids out there. It’s going to be too hard on them to see their mother and then we have to leave, and I have to deal with that.”

Thirty-one percent of caregivers explained that the lack of visitation was due to the limited involvement of parents in the lives of their children before incarceration. These relationships were deeply strained by cyclical imprisonment that interfered with parenthood. Among the cases citing limited parental involvement, nearly 80% of parents had been in prison before compared to 52% of parents in the full sample. These patterns fueled feelings of resentment and anger by both caregivers and children alike. One Latina grandmother articulated how her grandson’s fractured relationship with his mother led him to decide not to visit her in prison: “Only twice he went with me to visit her. You know, the mother closeness was never there. He’s angry and says, ‘I’ve never had a mother.’ So, I’ve given up. I can’t fight it. At this point, it’s his choice. I cannot force him to visit.” Maggie, a White grandmother, similarly struggled with her grandson not wanting to visit his mother in prison. She explained, “There has been so little contact since the age of two or three. I would love for my daughter to have a relationship with her children, but it has been damaged by the choices she has made. I told my grandson, ‘I would really like you to go and see your mom.’ And he said, ‘Nana, you told me that if I didn’t

want to go, I didn't have to.' And I said, 'You are absolutely right, and I will honor that.'"

Other caregivers expressed that they and the children had been let down by parents who would promise "to change their ways" but then fall back into old patterns. Simone, a Black mother, discussed how she decided to cease contact with her children's father during his latest imprisonment: "We used to go all the way wherever he was to visit, but this time, I washed my hands. It's a pattern. He gets out, does right, then he wanna sell drugs, hustle, and he keeps going back. I'm not gonna keep letting you drag me and these kids through that. I'm through." Kendra, a White mother, expressed similar feelings about her children's father who struggled with sobriety for most of his adult life: "All the empty promises. [The kids] are tired of hearing it. I didn't feel like my kids needed to go to the prison to visit him before, but I always made the excuse, 'Well, he's, their dad'. I should have got fed up a long time ago."

Family violence was mentioned by caregivers as a reason for no visitation in nearly one-quarter of cases (23%). These caregivers largely described the decision to not visit as a personal choice, although some caregivers noted system-imposed restrictions as well. Notably, in cases citing family violence, 43% of incarcerated parents were reported to have had prior involvement with Child Protective Services (CPS) compared to 19% of all incarcerated parents. White families, incarcerated parents with histories of substance abuse, and incarcerated parents with mental health problems were also overrepresented in cases citing family violence. Half of parents and 36% of caregivers among family violence cases were White versus 26% of parents and 18% of caregivers in the full sample. Over 85% of incarcerated parents had a history of substance abuse among cases citing family violence compared to 71% of all incarcerated parents. Additionally, over one-third of cases citing family violence involved an incarcerated parent with documented mental health problems compared to only one-quarter of the full sample.

Briana, a White mother, explained that she and her children cut ties with their father upon his incarceration following extensive histories of intimate partner violence: "I don't think my kids have to suffer and go sit there and go visit him. My oldest child says, 'I remember when he was choking you and I couldn't get him away from you.' That's just one of the memories that sticks in his head." For others, visits happened in the past, but the caregiver later decided to stop contact in light of repeated victimization. Isabel, a Latina mother, recounted, "When he would go to jail, we would visit him and be there when he would get out. We had domestic violence, but I didn't call the police on him. I truly believed I had to stick by my husband's side, and I did until that last time. He attacked me with a bat. We didn't go back to see him anymore. I grew

tired and I had it hard enough. It had to be about me living out here with the kids.” Other caregivers described children expressing not wanting to visit given their own experiences with family violence. Rosa, a Latina grandmother, shared that her granddaughter experienced sexual violence by her mother’s boyfriend while they were living together on the streets before her mother went to prison: “My daughter didn’t believe my oldest granddaughter who was getting molested. Now my granddaughters resent her. They get this hatred and say, ‘I don’t wanna see her. What for?’”

The final interpersonal barrier that accounted for no visitation involved retributive attitudes held by caregivers. Eighteen percent of all caregivers expressed the belief that withholding parental prison visitation was an appropriate consequence for going to prison. Caregivers commonly cited no visitation as a “price to pay” for the parent’s “choices.” Nearly half of the parents within the retributive attitudes theme were in prison for a violent offense compared to 29% of all parents. These parents, where retributive attitudes were cited, were also serving particularly long sentences (80 months on average versus 53 months among all parents). Additionally, most parents among retributive attitudes’ cases were incarcerated for the first time, with only roughly a quarter having served a prior term compared to 52% of the full sample.

Valerie, a Native American grandmother who was taking care of her grandchildren during their father’s incarceration put it this way: “If you hadn’t committed the crime, you would have never left. I didn’t commit a crime, so I don’t need no time to go there.” James, a Black father recounted a heated exchange with his children’s mother: “She told me, ‘Oh, you won’t come bring my son to see me?’ I said, ‘Look, the times I went to jail nobody came to visit me. I didn’t cry and complain and bitch about it. I put myself here. Nobody else should be forced to see me. You knew what you were doing.’” Emilia, a Latina grandmother, felt as though withholding visitation would teach her incarcerated daughter a lesson for getting involved in drugs and landing in prison. “I think what I wanted to do was get into [my daughter’s] head that, hey, you need to clean up your act. If it means that I have to take [your daughter] away from you, then that’s what I’m going to do. I told her, ‘I’ll be damned if I take her to see you, you know?’” Considered altogether, both structural and interpersonal barriers hinder visitation for families in complex, interwoven ways.

Discussion

This study addressed a significant gap in the knowledge base by shedding light on families who do not visit during parental incarceration. By analyzing in-depth caregiver accounts, this research provided insight into the reasons why some families never visit or discontinue visitation with an

incarcerated parent. The study's strengths lie in its comprehensive examination of both structural and interpersonal barriers, its focus on the perspectives of non-visitors, and the inclusion of a diverse sample. Findings have important implications for future research, policy reforms, and the development of family support strategies.

An interplay of structural and interpersonal factors accounted for why incarcerated parents were not visited. Structural barriers included financial and logistical challenges (47%) and contact approval processes (32%). Interpersonal barriers encompassed concerns about carceral exposure (42%), limited parental involvement (31%), histories of violence (23%), and retributive attitudes (18%). Notably, both structural and interpersonal reasons were cited as reasons why visits were not occurring in approximately half of the cases, 31% referenced interpersonal barriers alone, and 21% cited strictly structural barriers.

Multi-system involvement emerged as a significant factor in families' never visiting or ceasing visitation, as entanglement with child welfare, family/dependency courts, and the criminal justice system frequently intersected with prison contact approval processes to create substantial obstacles for families. Findings are in line with prior work on multi-system surveillance of marginalized families in which "the system" decides what is in the best interests of families (Arditti, 2012; Brown & Bloom, 2009; Fong, 2020). In some cases, such as those involving child abuse, it may be appropriate to restrict parental contact. In other cases, contact restrictions may be an overreach that can exacerbate family harm.

There is a critical need to create coordinated protocols between criminal justice, child welfare, and family court systems to better facilitate appropriate family contact. This includes establishing stronger communication channels between systems and developing specific guidelines for when exceptions to contact restrictions may be appropriate. Prison systems should consider revising blanket contact bans among adult victims or those with criminal histories to allow case-by-case reviews. Additional policy reforms to minimize logistical and financial challenges should include expanding visiting days and hours, housing individuals closer to their families when feasible, reducing the costs of food and beverages available for purchase, and lowering fees associated with recently established virtual visitation options for those unable to travel.

Preexisting stressors and strained relationships also played crucial roles in families' decisions to avoid or discontinue visitation which is consistent with prior work (Beckmeyer & Arditti, 2014; Flynn, 2014; Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). Substance abuse, cyclical imprisonment, and histories of violence were major contributing factors. Findings further revealed that these decisions were not solely made by caregivers acting as

gatekeepers; in many instances, children themselves expressed a desire for no contact. Caregivers and incarcerated parents alike also expressed concerns about visitation normalizing incarceration for children. Some caregivers withheld visits to punish incarcerated parents for landing in prison. These attitudes reflect the complex emotional landscape surrounding parental incarceration.

High-quality, intensive, therapeutic support must be prioritized for families, with particular emphasis on those not visiting (Miller et al., 2013; Poehlmann-Tynan & Arditti, 2018). Simultaneously addressing parents' underlying issues of substance abuse, mental health, and violence is also essential (Mowen & Visser, 2016). Doing so meaningfully, however, is challenging and requires significant investment and partnerships between community providers and the criminal justice system (Hairston, 2002). Some families became “fed up” and ultimately stopped visiting incarcerated parents who continued to cycle through the system. Family-centric interventions implemented early on, especially upon parents' initial entry into the criminal justice system, may hold greater promise for family wellbeing, contact, and future reunification. Importantly, resources should be available to incarcerated parents and families both jointly and separately to not exclude loved ones who choose no contact from access to support to address their own traumas and hardships (Wakefield, 2016).

Findings further illuminated the racialized nature of structural and interpersonal barriers to visitation. For instance, Black families were over-represented in facing financial and logistical barriers, reflective of long-standing structural inequality. Latino/a caregivers were more likely to encounter approval process obstacles, which may relate to Latinos' over-criminalization in the Southwest and immigration status barriers. White families more often reported family violence as a reason for non-visitiation. These patterns highlight the need for culturally tailored interventions and further research across diverse groups, particularly among understudied populations like Native Americans (Fox et al., 2023).

Despite the study's strengths, several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, these data were collected in 2010–2011. While the policies that led to structural barriers identified in this study remain in place, virtual visitation has recently become an available option (subject to the same approval processes). Studies should explore whether the availability of virtual visitation changes families' contact decisions as well as the extent to which families are connected through other means not explored in this study (e.g., written communication and phone calls, which are also subject to approval processes). Second, this study was conducted in a single state with strict contact policies, which may limit generalizability. This research should be replicated with families experiencing incarceration in other

systems. Third, the current study relied solely upon caregivers' perspectives. Although their take is critical, future work should incorporate child and parent perspectives as well. Longitudinal research designs are also needed to examine family engagement alongside shifts in relationships and circumstances over time.

Recent nationwide expansions in visitation opportunities, including virtual options, mark progress but do not fully address the complex barriers to family visitation. Current efforts predominantly support families already maintaining or seeking contact, while neglecting those not visiting over interpersonal challenges. Effective future strategies must adopt comprehensive, culturally sensitive approaches that provide early intervention and holistic support for all families impacted by incarceration, especially those not visiting by choice, circumstance, or both. Subsequent research should explore how policy changes and other contact modalities impact family contact decisions across diverse populations and correctional contexts.

Notes

1. In 2010, structured interviews were conducted with 600 incarcerated persons (300 men; 300 women) in the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reentry (ADCRR) who self-reported being parents of minor children. Participants were randomly selected from daily count sheets, with no staff involvement in screening or recruitment. Participation was voluntary, with a 93% participation rate for men and 96% for women, despite no incentives. Interviewees provided contact information for their children's caregivers, from which 100 were subsequently interviewed.
2. To achieve 100 caregiver interviews, 75 paternal and 75 maternal cases were randomly selected from the incarcerated parent interviews. Among paternal imprisonment cases, 16 had invalid contact information, 2 didn't respond, and 2 declined participation. Among maternal imprisonment cases, 7 had invalid contact information, 8 didn't respond, and 2 declined. Thirteen additional caregivers agreed to participate but were not interviewed as the target of 100 completed interviews had been reached.
3. While virtual visitation has been added as an option following data collection, the structural barriers to visitation identified in this study still apply today for every form of available contact (e.g., background checks, visitor eligibility, crime victim restrictions, etc.). See the ADCRR policy: <https://corrections.az.gov/visitation>.
4. Half of the cases ($n=31$) involved parents who were never visited. The other half of caregivers ($n=31$) reported that parental prison visitation took place in the past and later stopped entirely. Importantly, the same dominant themes accounted for no visitation of both groups.
5. Few differences emerged between the current sample of those who do not visit ($N=62$) and the total caregiver sample ($N=100$). Grandparent caregivers were slightly underrepresented in the current sample (29% vs 39%). Other groups were slightly overrepresented in the current sample: Black caregivers (42% vs 32%), paternal incarceration cases (65% vs 55%), and cases where the incarcerated parents had been in prison previously (52% vs 43%).
6. While the same themes accounted for no visitation among the never visited and stopped visiting groups, there were some differences in prevalence. The financial/logistical

concerns theme was more common among the stopped visiting group (67% vs 26%), while the consequences of carceral exposure was more common among the never visited group (61% vs. 23%). There were minimal differences between the never visited and stopped visiting groups among all other themes and all themes represent the dominant reasons for no visitation among both groups. As such, findings are reported for both groups combined.

7. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of interview participants.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix A. Sample characteristics

	%; Mean (SD)
Maternal incarceration	35.5%
Paternal incarceration	64.5%
Caregivers	
<i>Relationship to child</i>	
Grandparent	29.0%
Other parent	58.1%
Other relative	11.3%
Non-relative	1.6%
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>	
White	17.7%
Black	41.9%
Latino/a	27.4%
Native American	12.9%
<i>Gender</i>	
Female	83.9%
Male	16.1%
Incarcerated parents	
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>	
White	25.8%
Black	38.7%
Latino/a	25.8%
Native American	9.7%
<i>Incarcerating offense</i>	
Violent offense	29.0%
Property offense	32.3%
Drug offense	30.6%
Public order offense	1.6%
Other offense	4.8%
<i>Histories and needs</i>	
Sentence length (months)	53.3 (65.5)
Prior incarceration	51.6%
History of substance abuse	71.0%
History of mental illness	24.2%
CPS involvement ¹	19.4%
N =	62

¹CPS refers to Child Protective Services.

Appendix B. Sample characteristics by theme (N=62)

	Structural barriers %; Mean (SD)		Interpersonal barriers %; Mean (SD)			
	Financial/ logistical	Approval processes	Carceral exposure	Limited involvement	History of violence	Desire for retribution
Maternal incarceration	27.6%	35.0%	26.9%	36.8%	42.9%	36.4%
Paternal incarceration	72.4%	65.0%	73.1%	63.2%	57.1%	63.6%
Caregivers						
<i>Relationship to child</i>						
Grandparent	17.2%	25.0%	34.6%	42.1%	35.7%	36.4%
Other parent	65.5%	65.0%	57.7%	47.4%	57.1%	54.4%
Other relative	17.2%	10.0%	7.7%	10.5%	0.0%	9.1%
Non-relative	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	7.1%	0.0%
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>						
White	6.9%	5.0%	19.2%	31.6%	35.7%	18.2%
Black	51.7%	30.0%	46.2%	26.3%	28.6%	45.5%
Latino/a	24.1%	50.0%	19.2%	31.6%	28.6%	18.2%
Native American	17.2%	15.0%	15.4%	10.5%	7.1%	18.2%
<i>Gender</i>						
Female	82.8%	75.0%	84.6%	94.7%	92.9%	90.9%
Male	17.2%	25.0%	15.4%	5.3%	7.1%	9.1%
Incarcerated parents						
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>						
White	13.8%	25.0%	26.9%	31.6%	50.0%	27.3%
Black	51.7%	20.0%	42.3%	15.8%	21.4%	36.4%
Latino/a	20.7%	40.0%	15.4%	47.4%	28.6%	18.2%
Native American	13.8%	15.0%	15.4%	5.3%	0.0%	18.2%
<i>Incarcerating offense</i>						
Violent offense	34.5%	30.0%	26.9%	31.6%	28.6%	45.5%
Property offense	24.1%	35.0%	23.1%	36.8%	28.6%	18.2%
Drug offense	31.0%	20.0%	42.3%	26.3%	21.4%	27.3%
Public order offense	3.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Other offense	3.4%	10.0%	3.8%	5.3%	14.3%	9.1%
<i>Histories and needs</i>						
Sentence length (months)	64.6 (77.7)	51.4 (90.3)	56.9 (60.7)	48.9 (53.1)	41.4 (56.5)	79.5 (72.3)
Prior incarceration	44.8%	45.0%	42.3%	78.9%	64.3%	27.3%
History of substance abuse	58.6%	85.0%	69.3%	73.7%	85.7%	63.6%
History of mental illness	17.2%	35.0%	15.4%	10.5%	35.7%	9.1%
CPS involvement ¹	17.2%	35.0%	15.4%	26.3%	42.9%	9.1%
n =	29	20	26	19	14	11

¹CPS refers to Child Protective Services.