

The Impact of Family Visitation on Incarcerated Youth's Behavior and School Performance

Findings from the Families as Partners Project

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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

As described in this brief, families and other sources of social support are critical to the success of youth in juvenile justice facilities. Many juvenile justice agencies do not have consistent ways to track youth visitation rates—important information when trying to understand how much contact youth have with their families.

Vera, along with the Performance-based Standards Learning Institute, developed a set of family engagement standards for use by juvenile correctional facilities and state agency leaders nationwide to help address that gap. These family engagement standards bring family and social support awareness and engagement into daily facility operations including in discharge planning. As agencies start reporting on these standards they will be able to draw connections, as we have in this brief, on the relationship between family contact and youth outcomes.

We hope this brief is helpful to facility administrators and decision makers as they consider the role of increased family involvement on the youth in their care.



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Introduction

Research shows that incarcerated adults who have strong relationships with loved ones fare better in prison and pose less of a risk to public safety when they return to the community.¹ Phone calls, letter writing, and visitation with family members, and other so-called “pro-social supports,” help sustain these relationships. They also help adults adjust to imprisonment and limit what has been called the “pains of incarceration”—all of which has been associated with reduced behavioral infractions.² It seems likely that such findings also hold true for incarcerated youth. However, there is very limited research on whether family visitation affects incarcerated juveniles’ behavior.³

To examine the effects on juveniles, the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) and the Ohio Department of Youth Services (DYS), with support from the Public Welfare Foundation, collaborated on Families as Partners: Supporting Youth Reentry in Ohio, a research and technical assistance project. Vera researchers found that family visitation of incarcerated youth was associated with improved behavior and school performance. These findings highlight the importance of visitation and suggest that juvenile correctional facilities should try to change their visitation policies and related practices to promote more frequent visitation with families.

BACKGROUND

In February 2010, Vera began Families as Partners with DYS. The project, which concluded in March 2013, sought to promote better outcomes for incarcerated youth by helping staff draw on their families as a source of material and emotional support. Specifically, the project aimed to encourage visits and correspondence between youth and their families and increase family involvement in youth’s treatment and reentry plans. DYS is the first agency to implement Vera’s Juvenile Relational Inquiry Tool, which helps staff identify youth’s family and social support.⁴ Vera also helped DYS incorporate improved staff practices into the agency’s policy. The research component of the project looked at whether there were any associations between family support and outcomes for youth during their incarceration. As of this writing, DYS continues to focus on family engagement for youth during and after incarceration.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Associations between family visitation and the behavior and school performance of incarcerated youth were examined by matching self-reported survey

data collected by Vera with DYS administrative data. In June 2012, Vera research staff visited each of DYS’s four juvenile correctional facilities and asked youth to complete a survey. Approximately half (290 of 581) of youth incarcerated in the four DYS juvenile correctional facilities consented to participate in the survey and have their responses linked to DYS administrative data. The survey asked participants about family contacts by phone, letters, and visitation and about perceptions of family support.⁵

DYS provided Vera with administrative data on each youth including age, race, length of time in the facility, school attendance, grades, and number of behavioral incidents. Vera analyzed the DYS administrative data for a one-year period between June 2011 and June 2012 for all youth who were incarcerated at the time of the study and consented to have their data reviewed.

The analysis explored the relationship between family visitation and two juvenile correctional outcomes: (1) behavioral incident rates and (2) grade-point average (GPA). To account for the different lengths of stay among youth, an incident rate per month was calculated using the number of behavioral incidents and time in the facility (in months). Researchers analyzed differences in behavioral incident rates among youth who were never visited, visited infrequently (on average less than one visit a week), or visited regularly (on average at least a weekly visit). They also examined the association between visits and youth GPA, controlling for other factors.

Findings: Visitation Affects Behavior and School Performance

YOUTH CHARACTERISTICS

Figure 1 provides demographic data on the 290 incarcerated youth who participated in the study. The sample was representative of the DYS population. The majority of the sample were male (98 percent), black (58 percent), and the average age was 16.9 years. For these youth, the average time spent at a DYS juvenile correctional facility was 10 months.⁶

Figure 1: Demographic Information of Study Participants

CHARACTERISTIC	VERA SAMPLE (N=290)	DYS POPULATION ⁷
Gender		
Male	98% (n=283)	94%
Female	2% (n=7)	6%
Race		
Black	58% (n=167)	56%
White	33% (n=95)	35%
Other	9% (n=28)	9%
Average age	16.9	17.6

FAMILY CONTACT

All but 12 (about 4 percent) of the surveyed youth had some form of contact with their families during their incarceration. Phone calls and letters were the most commonly reported ways youth stayed in contact with their families: 90 percent of youth received at least one phone call, and 93 percent received at least one letter. Almost 70 percent reported having at least one in-person visit. Over a quarter of the youth (26 percent) had visits at least weekly. Conversely, 30 percent of youth never had a visit from a family member.⁸

Visitation frequency varied by race (see Figure 2). White youth were visited more frequently than non-white youth. Almost 36 percent of black youth were never visited, compared to 21 percent of white youth and 26 percent of other racially identified youth. These differences, however, were not statistically significant.

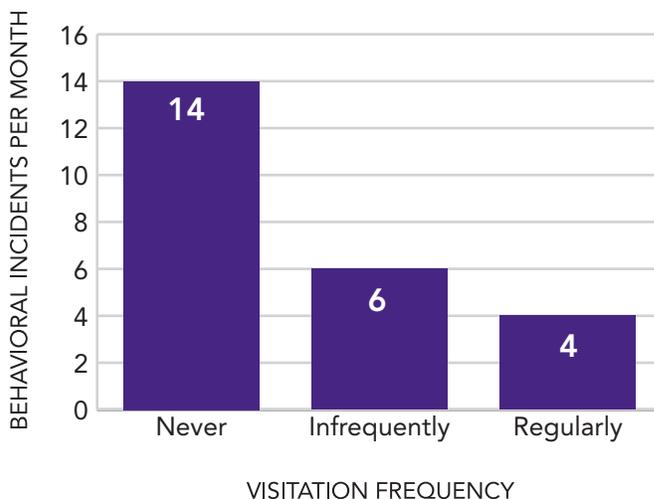
Figure 2: Visitation Frequency by Race

	NEVER	LESS THAN ONCE A WEEK	WEEKLY
Black	36%	42%	22%
White	21%	46%	33%
Other	26%	52%	22%

BEHAVIOR

The average number of behavioral incidents per month was eight (range 0–168 behavioral incidents per month). Youth who were never visited had statistically significant higher behavioral incident rates compared to youth who were visited infrequently or youth who received regular visits (See Figure 3).⁹ Youth who were visited regularly committed an average of four behavioral incidents per month, compared to six among those visited infrequently and 14 among those who were never visited. Results suggest that visitation is associated with better youth behavior. Youth who had never received a visit exhibited the highest rates of behavioral incidents; as visitation frequency increased, the number of behavioral incidents decreased.

Figure 3. Behavior Incidents per Month and Visitation Frequency



SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

While the average grade point average (GPA) for the study sample was 82.1, an analysis showed an association between GPA and frequency of visitation. The average GPAs for youth who never had a visitor was 80.4, compared to 82 for those who had visits infrequently and 85 for youth who had frequent visits. These differences were statistically significant.

Further analysis tested whether the association between GPA and frequency of visitation persisted after controlling for other factors that might be associated with GPA, such as age, race, school attendance, number of schools attended while under DYS custody, and being placed in special education. (See endnote 10 for statistical details.)

More frequent visitation continued to be associated with improved or higher GPA, even after controlling for these variables. Youth who were visited regularly (weekly) had a GPA that was 2.1 points higher than those who were visited infrequently or never visited. In addition, incarcerated youth who attended school regularly while in the facility had higher GPAs. As students increased their attendance rates by 1 percent, their GPA increased 0.3 points. White youth also had higher GPAs than non-white youth. White youth's GPAs were 3.5 points higher than non-white youth. There is abundant research highlighting the differences in grade-point average for racial and ethnic groups.¹¹ Because race could also be associated with other individual, family, and school characteristics—including family income, parents' educational attainment, English as a second language, and access to quality schools—the effects of race on GPA should be explored further. Being placed in special education, attending different schools, and age had no significant effect on youth's GPA.

Conclusion

Consistent with research highlighting the importance of visitation in reentry outcomes for adults, the findings from the Families as Partners Project suggests a relationship between weekly visitation by family members and maintaining good behavior and improved school performance for incarcerated youth. Future studies need to explore the relationship between behavior and school outcomes and the quality of visits, the relationship between the youth and the visitor, as well as the timing of the visits. Although frequent visitation suggests improved behavior, it is likely that incarcerated youth exhibit problematic behavior as a result of externalizing feelings of anger, sadness, and separation anxiety following a visit, as has been seen in studies of incarcerated adults.¹² Similarly, although frequent visitation was associated with a higher GPA, it is unclear if school performance changed (improved or decreased) after the incarceration.

Despite the benefits of family contact for youth, families often face significant barriers when visiting incarcerated loved ones. Preliminary findings from this project revealed that distance was a significant barrier to visitation; youth who were placed far from home were less likely to receive an in-person visit while incarcerated.¹³ Because there are many factors involved when making placement decisions, facilities can benefit immensely by changing their visitation policies to encourage frequent contact between family and incarcerated youth.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Shanhe Jiang and L. Thomas Winfree, "Social Support, Gender, and Inmate Adjustment to Prison Life: Insights from a National Sample," *The Prison Journal* 86, no. 1 (2006): 34, 50-51.
- 2 John Wooldgredge, "Inmate Experiences and Psychological Well-Being," *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 26, no. 2 (1999): 235-250.
- 3 Robert Borgman, "The influence of family visiting upon boys' behavior in a juvenile correctional institution," *Child Welfare* 65, no. 6 (1985): 629-638.
- 4 Vera's Juvenile Relational Inquiry Tool helps juvenile justice staff build on incarcerated youth's strengths and social connections and build rapport between staff and youth while collecting information that can enhance reentry planning. For more information, see Ryan Shanahan, "Integrating Family-Focused Approaches In Juvenile Justice Reform," *The Link: Connecting Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare* (Child Welfare League of America) 8, no. 1 (2010): 1-6.
- 5 The survey also included questions about perceptions of family support, and about perceptions of safety while incarcerated but are beyond the scope of this publication.
- 6 Youth committed at DYS facilities have undetermined lengths of stays. The Release Authority is in charge of conducting reviews and making decisions regarding the continued confinement, release, or discharge of a youth.
- 7 Ohio Department of Youth Services. Monthly Fact Sheet, June 2012 <http://www.dys.ohio.gov/DNN/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=jfcoh0%2fGtMo%3d&tabid=117&mid=885>
- 8 In previous research in Ohio, Vera found a relationship between visitation rates and distance of the family from the facility. For more information, see Ryan Shanahan and Sandra Villalobos Agudelo, *Families as Partners: Supporting Incarcerated Youth in Ohio* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2012). <http://www.vera.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/families-as-partners.pdf>.
- 9 Since behavioral incident rates were not normally distributed a Kruskal-Wallis Test was performed to address if there were any significant differences in behavioral incident rates among the different visitation groups. Kruskal Wallis $H(2)=22.95$, $p < 0.001$.
- 10 The figure below shows linear regression results for factors related to GPA. For this model, attendance rate $t(254) = 7.269$, $p < 0.001$, race (white youth) $t(254) = 3.760$, $p < 0.001$, and weekly visitation $t(254) = 2.079$, $p < 0.05$ are all significant predictors of incarcerated youth's GPA.

	B	β
Age	.247	.042
Attendance	.297***	.439
Special Education	-1.068	-.067
Number of schools attended	1.439	.087
Race (white v. non-white)	3.519***	.206
Weekly visitation (yes/no)	2.111*	.113
F Value	17.184***	
R-Squared/Adjusted R squared	.29/.27	

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

- 11 U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, High School Transcript Study (HSTS), various years, 1990-2009.
- 12 A study at a prison in Florida revealed that the probability of an in-prison infraction declines in anticipation of visits, increases immediately following visits, and then gradually declines to average levels. For more information, see Sonja Siennick, Daniel Mears, and Williams Bales, "Here and Gone: Anticipation and Separation Effects of Family Visits on Inmate Infractions," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* (2012) 1-28.
- 13 Shanahan and Villalobos Agudelo, 2012.

ABOUT VERA'S FAMILY JUSTICE PROGRAM

The Family Justice Program provides training, tools, and consultation to help government and community-based organizations implement family-focused policies and practices. The program's primary goal is to leverage the assets of families to end cycles of crime and victimization. The program's work includes:

- > **Conducting research on how to help families stay connected.** Vera's Family Justice Program, Center on Sentencing and Corrections, and Cost-Benefit Analysis Unit are working in partnership with the Washington State Department of Corrections (DOC) to conduct a study about video visitation. This study, funded by the National Institute of Justice, explores whether providing incarcerated people with access to video visitation improves the nature and frequency of their contact with their families and other people who support them. It also explores if these contacts improve their compliance with custodial rules and outcomes after their release from prison.
- > **Developing national standards for family engagement by juvenile justice agencies.** Vera's Family Justice Program partnered with the Performance-based Standards Learning Institute (PbS Li) to develop national standards for juvenile correctional facilities to engage incarcerated youth's family members in all aspects of the youth's incarceration. PbS Li has developed a system of performance-based standards that allows agencies and facilities to identify, monitor, and improve conditions and treatment services for incarcerated youth using national standards and outcome measures.
- > **Helping prisons, jails, and community corrections involve families in reentry planning.** Vera's Family Justice Program provides training to staff at prisons, jails, and probation/parole offices, as well as technical assistance and evaluation to help sustain changes in practices and institutional policies that reinforce a family-focused approach. Vera recently concluded projects in Maryland, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin.

WHY WE NEED THIS PROGRAM Juvenile and adult justice agencies are increasingly aware of the role that families and social networks play in the lives of incarcerated people or those under justice supervision. Yet these agencies often do not know how to tap families as a resource. The Family Justice Program provides tools, training, and technical assistance, and conducts research to help governments and agencies overcome obstacles to implementing family-focused, strength-based policies and planning. All Family Justice Program initiatives are designed with input from people involved with the justice system and their families, as well as agency staff.

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> For More Information

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This report can be accessed online at www.vera.org/pubs/impact-of-family-visitation-incarcerated-youth

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