

“THE PRISON SYSTEM DOESN’T MAKE IT COMFORTABLE TO VISIT”

Prison Visitation From the Perspectives of People Incarcerated and Family Members

BREANNA BOPPRE 

Sam Houston State University

DANA DEHART 

CHERI J. SHAPIRO

University of South Carolina

While extensive research documents the causes and impacts of incarceration, the effects on families are under discussion. Prison visitation is one mechanism to help families communicate and bond, yet the institutions and restrictive policies often create distinct barriers and stressors. This qualitative descriptive study examines experiences and perceptions of visitation through focus groups with 77 people incarcerated and interviews with 21 family members in one southeastern U.S. state. Using thematic analysis, three major themes were developed through qualitative coding of participants’ responses: financial and time-related burdens, stress from rules and regulations, and familial interactions. Our findings highlight that although visitation can help maintain social bonds among families, the barriers, processes, and procedures overshadow the visit itself. The weight of such stressors is especially felt by immediate family members and women who visit. The findings are discussed in light of implications for correctional policy and future visitation research.

Keywords: prison visitation; families; incarceration; qualitative; impacts of incarceration

The United States is currently the world leader in incarceration with a rate higher than any other nation in the world (Walmsley, 2014). The incarceration rate in the U.S. has increased sevenfold from 1970 to 2010 and is largely attributed to punitive policy shifts

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during the “Get Tough on Crime” era in the 1970s to the early 2000s (Clear & Frost, 2013). Strict sentencing laws widened the threshold for prison admissions and sentence lengths for nonviolent and violent offenses (Pfaff, 2017; Tonry, 2016). The social costs of mass incarceration are widely documented and extend to communities and families (see Kirk & Wakefield, 2018 for a review). Each of the 1.4 million people incarcerated in the United States (Carson, 2020) leaves behind a family system. A recent nationally representative study found that an estimated 45% of the U.S. population (113 million adults) has had a family member incarcerated (Elderbroom et al., 2018).

A growing body of literature has documented the adverse effects of incarceration on families, including increased financial burdens (DeHart et al., 2018; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018; Tasca et al., 2011), mental and physical health deficits (DeHart et al., 2018; Elderbroom et al., 2018), negative social and behavioral outcomes (Foster & Hagan, 2009; Tasca et al., 2011), and disruption of family bonds (Beckmeyer & Arditti, 2014; Elderbroom et al., 2018). There are specific implications for relationships between incarcerated parents and their children. Recent reports indicate that nearly half of state prisoners (47%) and more than half of federal prisoners (58%) are parents to an estimated 1.5 million children (Maruschak et al., 2021). Parental incarceration, especially maternal incarceration, has adverse impacts on children, including mental health issues, lower educational performance, and increased likelihood for system involvement (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2016; Tasca et al., 2011).

One hidden process underlying families’ experiences with incarceration is visitation. Details of what occurs in individual facilities, including processes and interactions during visitation, are “out of sight, out of mind” due to the physical distance of facilities, lack of transparency, and limited ability to document due to strict rules and regulations (Armstrong, 2014; M. L. Comfort, 2003). Given the importance of visitation, its effects have been studied extensively using quantitative methods since the 1990s, revealing distinct impacts on people incarcerated, in particular. More detailed research into visitation processes has been examined through a range of methodologies, including reviews of codified policies (Boudin et al., 2013) as well as ethnographies (i.e., Aiello & McCorkel, 2018; M. L. Comfort, 2003; Hutton, 2016). Yet, few studies examined the direct experiences and perceptions of those who visit in prison across various relationships beyond immediate families (Christian & Kennedy, 2011).

While prison visitation helps families maintain social bonds, the experience of visitation is prefaced by distinct stressors, such as location of facilities and restrictions on clothing and physical touch (M. Comfort, 2008; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018). This qualitative study examines the visitation process from the perspectives of people incarcerated and family members with incarcerated loved ones in a southeastern state. This study contributes to the literature on prison visitation through in-depth narratives on visitation processes across familial relationships.

BACKGROUND

Given the overwhelming size of the prison population in the U.S., it is important to understand processes that affect those individuals who are incarcerated. Prisonization (Clemmer, 1958; Haney, 2012) occurs as those who are incarcerated adjust to the “pains of imprisonment” or deprivation of their autonomy, security, access to goods, and relationships (Sykes, 1958). Incarcerated people may feel powerless under the myriad of rules and

regulations combined with social isolation (Clemmer, 1958). The process of adaptation to incarceration and survival largely depends on how well an individual adapts to the prison environment and is indicative of their postincarceration outcomes (Haney, 2012; Souza & Dhimi, 2010). Incarcerated people may engage in mature coping (Johnson, 2002), or conversely, “act out” physically or emotionally, which can result in disciplinary infractions or misconducts (Rocheleau, 2013). Not being able to adequately parent while incarcerated can be stressful and can lead to increased aggression and violence, and/or depression among incarcerated mothers in particular (Loper et al., 2009).

As incarceration physically removes a person from the community, families are simultaneously cut off from their incarcerated loved one. M. L. Comfort’s (2003) ethnographic research with women who visited their partners in a California state men’s prison led to the development of the concept called “secondary prisonization.” Secondary prisonization is defined as the process through which the prison alters the routines, relationships, emotions, appearance, and worldview of those who visit (M. L. Comfort, 2003). M. L. Comfort (2003) argues that, similar to incarcerated people, loved ones on the outside experience “restricted rights, diminished resources, social marginalization, and other consequences of penal confinement” (M. L. Comfort 2003, p. 73). Although families are legally innocent and live beyond prison boundaries, the rules and regulations extend to them as “quasi-inmates” (M. L. Comfort, 2003, pp. 79, 103). Thus, families undergo a similar transformation process as incarcerated persons as they are exposed to the norms and subculture of the prison environment (M. L. Comfort, 2003; M. Comfort, 2008, 2019).

Secondary prisonization also encompasses the living adjustments families make to adapt to incarceration. Family dynamics shift in the absence of their loved one, including financial responsibilities and caretaking roles (Christian et al., 2015). The relationship and communication also must change due to the restrictions on contact with those incarcerated (Christian & Kennedy, 2011). Families bear the financial costs associated with incarceration, including phone calls, commissary, fees associated with their offense, and programming (Christian et al., 2015, 2006). One major familial adjustment and component of secondary prisonization is visitation.

Visitation refers to physical visits between an incarcerated person and approved visitor(s). Given technological advancements, video visitation is now available in over 30% of U.S. facilities (Digard et al., 2016). There are significant restrictions on visitation that vary across institutions, and further restrictions may be enacted if rules are violated (Farrell, 2004). Each facility enacts individual policies, including who can visit, how often, how long, and in what capacity (Boudin et al., 2013). Contact visitation allows for sitting at a table together, whereas noncontact visitation occurs behind plexiglass (Cramer et al., 2017). Typically during contact visits, visitors must sit on the opposite side of the table and physical touch is limited to an embrace at the beginning and end of the visit (Boudin et al., 2013). Prisons across the U.S. have specific and varying dress code rules for visitors and most prohibit “tight” or “revealing” clothing (Lazareck, 2015). The experience of visitation in one facility may vary greatly from another, even within the same state, and there can be variation between codified rules and what families actually experience during visitation (M. L. Comfort, 2003).

Communicating verbally and nonverbally during visitation allows for family time through food, play, physical connection, parenting, and discussion of family roles (Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018; Poehlmann et al., 2010; Tasca et al., 2016). Visitation is particularly important for building parent–child relationships (Arditti, 2002, 2012; Poehlmann

et al., 2010; Tasca et al., 2016), especially among incarcerated mothers as they are typically the primary caregivers to their children (Aiello & McCorkel, 2018). However, interactions during visitation can also be conflictual and emotional, bringing up prior conflict and reliving separation (Arditti, 2012; Tasca et al., 2016; Trahan & Evans, 2020). Visitors may express frustration with the stressors of having a loved one incarcerated and their absence from the family system (Tasca et al., 2016). As some family members bear more immediate burdens, such as taking on financial and caretaking roles, their visits may be particularly conflictual (Turanovic & Tasca, 2019).

The process of visitation itself further embeds families into the prison subculture, through secondary prisonization (M. L. Comfort, 2003; M. Comfort, 2008). As a result of secondary prisonization, visitation and other prison-related processes (e.g., phone calls monitored, sending funds) become normalized. Consequently, incarcerated persons and their families may feel helpless under the power and control of state authority, through increased surveillance, degradation from staff, lack of privacy, restrictions on physical contact, long waits, and noisy crowded conditions (Arditti, 2012; M. Comfort, 2008; Fasah, 2018; Hutton, 2016). Such stressors can lead to negative views of visitation, placing a strain on interactions during the actual visit (Christian & Kennedy, 2011).

Families with young children face additional stressors (Arditti, 2012; Beckmeyer & Arditti, 2014). The visitation process itself is not child-friendly as children are expected to participate in metal detection, pat-downs, clothing checks, and are usually required to sit quietly throughout the entire visit (Fasah, 2018; Johnston, 1995). Such conditions may cause children to be distressed and anxious during the visits (Arditti, 2002, 2012).

Visitation has distinct implications for prisonization among incarcerated people and secondarily among their loved ones on the outside. Family members are typically incarcerated persons' main connection to life outside of prison and they provide emotional and financial support (DeHart et al., 2018). Communicating and visiting loved ones may reduce incarcerated persons' feelings of loss and frustration associated with imprisonment (Cochran, 2012; Mears et al., 2012; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018). Visitation helps support social bonds among incarcerated people, thereby increasing informal social control and capital (Cochran, 2012; Cochran & Mears, 2013; Cochran et al., 2017; Hirschi, 1969; Maruna & Toch, 2005; Sampson & Laub, 2003).

Prior research reveals that visitation leads to a variety of positive behavioral outcomes for people incarcerated (Cochran, 2012; Meyers et al., 2017). Such outcomes include increased mental and physical well-being (e.g., Monahan et al., 2011), decreased misconducts (e.g., Cihan et al., 2020; Cochran, 2012; Cochran & Mears, 2013; Siennick et al., 2013), as well as reduced recidivism and increased social support postrelease (e.g., La Vigne et al., 2005; Liu et al., 2016; McKay et al., 2016; Mears et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2016; Mowen et al., 2019). Prior research indicates reductions in misconducts (particularly major, violent, and injurious) by 25% (see Reidy & Sorenson, 2020) and recidivism by 26% (Mitchell et al., 2016). However, such effects are conditioned by demographic factors, who visits and how consistently, the quality of relationships, and whether the visitor is supportive (Atkin-Plunk & Armstrong, 2018; Cochran, 2012; Cochran & Mears, 2013; Meyers et al., 2017; Turanovic & Tasca, 2019).

Despite the benefits, access to visitation varies. The number of incarcerated people who receive visits varies from approximately 40% to 75% (Cochran et al., 2017; Duwe &

Clark, 2013). Incarcerated people who are older, Black, who have been incarcerated more frequently, for longer sentences and more severe offenses, and come from communities with lower incarceration and social altruism have less visitation (Cochran et al., 2014, 2017; Tasca, 2016). Given the stressors of incarceration, or due to existing familial conflict, some family members completely sever contact with incarcerated people (Christian, 2005; Christian et al., 2015; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018). Incarcerated people may also discourage visitors due to the pain involved with their crime or incarceration (Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018).

Yet, families who visit face significant financial, structural, and emotional difficulties throughout the process (Christian, 2005; Christian et al., 2006; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018; Trahan & Evans, 2020). The biggest structural barrier to visitation for families is related to the physical location of prisons. As many prisons are in rural areas, families must travel long distances to visit their loved ones, resulting in increased transportation costs (Arditti, 2002; Christian, 2005; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018; Young & Turanovic, 2020). Family members may also have other caretaking roles and responsibilities that prevent visitation (Christian & Kennedy, 2011). While these burdens directly impact those on the outside, incarcerated loved ones are cognizant of the stress caused to families and may dissuade visitors due to the structural burdens (Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018).

THE CURRENT STUDY

While prior research has documented families' experiences related to incarceration (e.g., Christian & Kennedy, 2011; DeHart et al., 2018), few studies have focused specifically on prison visitation (for exceptions, see Aiello & McCorkel, 2018; Arditti, 2002; Christian, 2005; M. L. Comfort, 2003; M. Comfort, 2008; Tasca et al., 2016). As prison visitation is an elusive phenomenon due to decreased transparency and accessibility, qualitative methods can demystify such experiences, including informal or noncodified processes. Direct interviewing provides an understanding of families' experiences and perceptions related to visitation (Genty, 2013; Tasca et al., 2016). While some studies on visitation used interviews, the data were transformed for quantitative analyses (Meyers et al., 2017; Turanovic & Tasca, 2019), compressing the thick descriptions and narratives of those directly impacted (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Much of the prior literature on prison visitation focused on parents, caregivers, and children or spouses/partners (e.g., Aiello & McCorkel, 2018; Arditti, 2002; M. L. Comfort, 2003; M. Comfort, 2008; Tasca et al., 2016), solely visitors' experiences (for exceptions, see Pierce, 2015; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018), and men's institutions/experiences (e.g., Christian, 2005; Christian & Kennedy, 2011; M. L. Comfort, 2003; M. Comfort, 2008; Pierce, 2015; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018), and few examined incarcerated women's experiences (Aiello & McCorkel, 2018; Casey-Acevedo, & Bakken, 2002). Our study extends the literature by using direct interview methods with incarcerated men and women, as well as with a range of family members of incarcerated people. Scholars have specifically called for this type of research to build a more comprehensive understanding of how visitation impacts families (see Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018). Using thematic analysis, we expand upon M. L. Comfort's (2003) framework and the work of others (i.e., Arditti, 2002; Christian, 2005; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018; Tasca et al., 2016) to examine experiences during visitation and how secondary prisonization impacts broader relationships.

METHOD

This study provides a thematic analysis of participants' experiences and perceptions related to prison visitation (see Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). This study utilized focus groups with incarcerated people as well as with individual and small group interviews with family members of incarcerated people using convenience sampling. While the data were collected contemporaneously, recruiting through the same facilities, family members were not necessarily related to incarcerated people who participated in focus groups. The data collected were part of a larger project examining the impacts of incarceration on families (DeHart et al., 2017).¹

PROCEDURES

This study was conducted in a southeastern state with an incarceration rate higher than the national average, characterized by racial and ethnic disparities (Prison Policy Initiative, 2021). The sampling sites included three state correctional institutions. Men's Institution 1 included those sentenced under the Youthful Offenders Act² as well as men serving typical sentences. Men's Institution 2 was a maximum security prison for general population, special-needs men, and men in treatment for sexual offenses. The Women's Institution was a maximum security prison for general population and special-needs women. Two of the facilities were located in metropolitan areas, and one of the men's facilities was located in a rural area.

Incarcerated people and family members were recruited through flyers posted at each correctional facility. Incarcerated participants could also inform family members of the study. Visitation experiences (or lack thereof) did not restrict eligibility for participation. The sampling frame was representative of incarcerated people in the state; however, incarcerated women were overrepresented and family members who did not visit were likely underrepresented. This convenience sampling reflects the challenges of research in carceral settings and is similar to prior methods (e.g., Christian & Kennedy, 2011; M. Comfort, 2008). A sample of about 100 was the goal for "strategic coverage" (Werner & Bernard, 1994).

Incarcerated people participated in eight focus groups on-site in a private large room in the prisons. Family members could choose to participate in an individual or group interview, either in person at a location of their choosing or via phone. Small group interviews (2–3 people) were held off-site (e.g., at a nearby restaurant), and individual interviews were mostly by phone. Family interviewees were provided US\$20 to compensate for their time in participating.

The semi-structured prompts were adapted from the Family Interview Questionnaire developed by Ramirez-Barrett et al. (2006). Beyond broad questions related to the impacts of incarceration, relationships, and communication, researchers used probing questions when relevant such as "What's the process like for a typical visitation day?" and "What were the impacts of costs associated with incarceration (including travel/visitation)?" Visitation organically emerged at other points during the interviews and focus groups.

SAMPLE

A total of 77 incarcerated persons participated in eight focus groups conducted at the institutions: three groups from Men's Institution 1 ($ns = 9, 10, 12$), one group from Men's Institution 2 ($n = 7$), and four groups from the Women's Institution ($ns = 12, 11, 12, 4$).

Incarcerated participants ranged in age from 17 to 66 years, with the mean age being 34. Most identified as African American (47%) or White (44%). Nearly, half (47%) completed high school or a General Equivalency Diploma. Prior to incarceration, most incarcerated participants (44%) were employed full-time, with most others being unemployed (38%). Most were single (46%) or partnered (unmarried; 21%). Prior to incarceration, many participants' household income was less than US\$10,000 (26%) and most lived in households with three or more adults (49%) and lived in households with one or more minor children (69%).

Twenty-one family members were interviewed, mostly individually and via telephone. Most heard about the study via flyers or word of mouth. The family member interviewees were comprised of five mothers, one father, two wives, one husband, five sisters, six daughters, and one son, and were predominantly women who visited incarcerated men. Family members ranged in age from 21 to 78 years, with a mean age of 54. Most identified as White (62%) followed by African American (38%). Most (71%) had some college education. Most family participants were married (67%). Nearly, half (48%) were employed full-time, with most others unemployed (43%). Household income nearly splits evenly among those who made between US\$10,000 and US\$25,000 (29%), US\$25,001 to US\$35,000 (29%), and over US\$50,000 (29%). Most (48%) lived with one other adult and the majority (81%) had no minor children in the household.

Information related to offense type and sentence length was also collected. Most (55%) were incarcerated for violent crimes (e.g., assault, strong-arm robbery, murder) and their sentences ranged from 6 months to life. Most (67%) family members were related to a person incarcerated for a violent crime whose sentences ranged from 10 years to life.

Each prison offered in-person visitation, but had specific rules on who can visit with increased restrictions on children who are extended family members. Video visitation was pilot tested for selected persons who were geographically distant from their families. Most family interviewees visited once a month, yet the frequency ranged from once a year to 2 times per week.³ Siblings tended to visit less often. Only three interviewees indicated they did not visit or were unable to visit at all. Most stated that they did not visit at all due to the punitive environment or that their loved one did not want them to visit. Others stated they could not visit frequently due to lack of transportation or distance from home. Public transportation was available on a main road located several miles from each of the metropolitan facilities, but was not available for the rural facility.

TRANSCRIPTION

As audiotaping was prohibited in facilities, one team member facilitated each focus group while two members took notes by hand, assuring accuracy through note comparisons. The procedure was identical for in-person family interviews. The remainder (i.e., family phone interviews) was audiotaped and transcribed. The researchers had previously conducted interviews in correctional settings and trained through practice sessions to achieve a benchmark of quality in note-taking and transcription of field notes (i.e., limited errors and omissions).

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Analyses were facilitated by MAXQDA software. We used thematic analysis to develop summative themes from the focus group and interview responses jointly using Braun and

Clarke's (2006) six steps. First, the transcripts were read through for familiarization with the data. Second, the data were coded openly (i.e., line-by-line, represented by a word or phrase), resulting in a large range of provisional and emergent codes (Saldana, 2009). Initial coding was then reviewed a few months later with time for engagement, reflection, and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Third, the initial codes were refined and grouped together by commonality, frequency, and representation from participants to form three themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed to ensure clear distinctions. Fifth, the themes were then defined and named as conceptualized and situated by the researchers' theoretical assumptions based on prior research on prison visitation and prisonization (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Finally, the findings were written up by theme and subthemes and reflected by one or two representative quotes from participants.

POSITIONALITY OF THE RESEARCHERS

The data were collected by a team of faculty and graduate students, with the group including representation of White and non-White women as well as some LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans) representation. All researchers are highly educated with at least a master's degree or Ph.D. These demographics contrast with the characteristics of participants, particularly related to race, gender, and level of education. Two members of the research team had some direct or indirect experience related to the project. A graduate student was formerly incarcerated and her prior experience likely helped build rapport with participants. Also, one faculty member had experience with parental incarceration and visitation, which likely shaped interpretation of findings.

RESULTS

All focus groups with incarcerated people and the majority (16; 94%) of interviews with family members discussed visitation. Visitation, unless otherwise noted, refers to in-person visitation. We developed three themes (see Table 1). Each theme is discussed and illustrated with representative quotes below (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

“MY HUSBAND HAD TO DROP EVERYTHING”: FINANCIAL AND TIME-RELATED BURDENS

The burdens, or strains and sacrifices, associated with visitation were the most prominent theme. This theme was discussed during the majority of family interviews (13; 76%) and in the majority of focus groups with incarcerated people (7; 88%). Participants discussed the financial costs associated with visitation largely stemming from transportation costs (i.e., gas, lodging), food during visitation, and clothes specifically for visitation. Parents, in particular, described such financial burdens. A mother (No. 7) discussed the costs of visitation with her son, “You have to buy gas and food [during visitation]. It's about \$10 each visit and I go eight times per month, so that makes it about \$80 a month [for food]. And, I live on a low income.”

Incarcerated people also discussed the financial costs associated with visitation placed on their loved ones. For example, an incarcerated man (Focus Group 4) stated, “Sandwiches are \$4 each plus drinks, [equates to] \$25 per visit. Plus gas. I told her no more [buying food during visits], because it's too expensive and [the food] is not nutritious.” Thus, families face the financial burdens of visitation, especially straining those with low income (Christian, 2005).

TABLE 1: Results of Thematic Analysis

Participants	Discussed visitation	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3
Family interviews				
No. 1: Sister and wife of an incarcerated man	✓	✓	✓	✓
No. 2: Mother, father, and wife of an incarcerated man	✓	✓	✓	✓
No. 3: Mother and father of an incarcerated daughter	✓	✓	✓	—
No. 4: Husband of an incarcerated wife	✓	✓	—	—
No. 5: Mother of an incarcerated son	✓	—	✓	—
No. 6: Mother of an incarcerated daughter	✓	✓	✓	✓
No. 7: Mother of an incarcerated son	✓	✓	✓	—
No. 8: Mother of an incarcerated son	✓	✓	✓	✓
No. 9: Sister of an incarcerated brother	✓	✓	—	—
No. 10: Sister of an incarcerated brother	✓	—	—	—
No. 11: Daughter of an incarcerated mother	✓	✓	✓	—
No. 12: Mother of an incarcerated daughter	✓	✓	✓	✓
No. 13: Sister of an incarcerated woman	—	—	—	—
No. 14: Mother of an incarcerated son	✓	✓	✓	—
No. 15: Sister of an incarcerated brother	✓	✓	✓	✓
No. 16: Mother/grandmother of an incarcerated son/grandson	✓	—	—	✓
No. 17: Son of an incarcerated father	✓	✓	—	—
Total	16 (94%)	13 (76%)	11 (65%)	7 (41%)
Focus groups with incarcerated people				
Focus Group 1: Men's Institution 1	✓	✓	✓	—
Focus Group 2: Men's Institution 1	✓	✓	✓	✓
Focus Group 3: Men's Institution 1	✓	—	✓	—
Focus Group 4: Men's Institution 2	✓	✓	✓	✓
Focus Group 5: Women's Institution	✓	✓	✓	✓
Focus Group 6: Women's Institution	✓	✓	—	✓
Focus Group 7: Women's Institution	✓	✓	—	✓
Focus Group 8: Women's Institution	✓	✓	✓	—
Total	8 (100%)	7 (88%)	6 (75%)	5 (63%)

Beyond the financial costs associated with traveling, burdens related to the time it takes to visit with travel time and waiting in line to get into visitation were discussed among parents, siblings, spouses, and adult children. Some family members indicated they drove up to 16 hours to visit. A mother (No. 14) described the time it usually takes to visit her incarcerated son:

I drive 45 miles and I'd be there [4 hours]: 8am-12pm or 1-5pm. You can go Saturday or Sunday. There's a line. Sometimes you have to stand there in the cold a long time to get in. You put on the right amount of clothes; put a scarf on your head and then you stand there. [Sometimes] he'll tell me, "Okay, go home if you're tired, you look tired."

Incarcerated people also reflected on the sacrifices made by their loved ones to visit, including the amount of time spent traveling. Participants during two focus groups even noted that their loved ones moved closer to the facility. An incarcerated woman (Focus Group 5) stated,

I'm from out of state. My husband had to drop everything, leave his job in [other state], and move here. He had to sell the house. We left our adult kids in [other state]. My husband tried to stay there, but the 10-hour drive for visitation was just too much.

Similar to Christian's (2005) work, families faced challenges in getting to visitation. Notably, a few family members discussed the inconvenience of visitation scheduled on weekends, which compound the barriers and time needed to travel to the prisons. One family member mentioned taking paid time off just to visit. A mother (No. 6) who visited her daughter stated,

The visitation times were a real problem in the beginning because I worked in retail, so I worked Saturdays, Sundays, and Friday nights. I would have to be on the road at 6:00 am for years on Sunday mornings and then I worked from 11:00 am-5:00 pm on Sundays [after visitation].

Overall, participants discussed significant financial and time-related expenses that preface visitation, especially for those who lived far from the prisons. Family members across relational types reported challenges related to transportation and visitation hours. Mothers in particular planned around their work schedules or took time off. The burdens relate to M. L. Comfort's (2003) concept of secondary prisonization as families adapt and normalize the costs and intrusions associated with visitation with little agency or control.

“WHEN [THEY] GET HERE, IT’S LIKE JUDGMENT DAY”: STRESS FROM RULES AND REGULATIONS

The second most prominent theme was the environmental stressors related to the rules and regulations of visitation, which were distinct from the financial burdens associated with visitation. This theme was discussed during 11 (65%) of family interviews by wives, mothers, and a daughter and during six (75%) of the focus groups with incarcerated people. Multiple family interviewees noted the application process for approval to visit. A mother (No. 2) who visited her son stated, “Just getting on the list is horrible. One of my son’s friends has filled out the form to be added 3 times. We never hear anything. Just figuring out the website and form to fill out is frustrating.”

Both family members and incarcerated people noted that the procedures had a negative impact on their visits. Parents, wives, and adult children discussed significant anxiety around rules and regulations, in particular. A mother (No. 8) described visitation with her incarcerated son:

The prison system doesn't make it comfortable to go visit. You stand in line with people visiting their loved ones, it's like a circus. Sometimes the line is long, sometimes it's short. You always have to go on a specific day, specific time, specific alphabetical order. The dog sniffs your car now, but before the dog would sniff all over you. I've been in line with children and the kid would be screaming because they were frightened of the animal. It's a terrible situation. You have to take off everything, put it in a box, go through one of those [a scanner], just like at the airport. God forbid you leave a barrette in your hair because it has metal on it. You have to go back through it, take your barrette out. You can't wear earrings, you can't wear jewelry, you can't wear anything.

Her response highlights the search processes and rules regarding what visitors are allowed to wear. Such processes exemplify secondary prisonization (M. L. Comfort, 2003)

through which families must adhere to rules that strip away pieces of their humanity and autonomy, similar to incarcerated people. Clothing restrictions were discussed as a stressor by mothers, wives, and sisters. Some reported being turned away for an outfit they had worn successfully to visitation previously. A wife (No. 2) who visited her husband discussed a specific instance:

A lot of it depends on who is working. I made it all the way to visitation, and then they tried to humiliate me and send me back based on what I was wearing. I've worn long dresses with pants underneath and they are like, "You have too much going on." I wear the same black jacket every time. I wear two dresses and leggings so they can't say they can see through it.

Further, a sister (No. 1) who visited her brother noted if the visitor is an "attractive woman," the "guards target her." She elaborated and explained her own experiences:

We've seen some women come for one visit and never come back, because of everything you have to go through. I had to get a whole new wardrobe to visit. I keep an extra sweater in the car for ladies, because I know if I see a lady in a cap sleeve, she will get turned away. I tell her to wear my sweater, so she can get in. They turned me away for my dress once and oh, I was furious. I have been visiting for years and never wore a revealing dress. I called the duty warden and asked if I could come back after buying a new dress. I lost an hour of my visit.

These findings are important as very few prior studies have noted the distinct gendered contexts of visitation in which women are subjected to increased scrutiny and control over their appearance (M. Comfort, 2008). These realities are important to consider as women often represent the majority of those who visited in the current study and broadly (Duwe & Clark, 2013).

Incarcerated participants were also well aware of the stress associated with the dress code on families. An incarcerated man (Focus Group 4) described the stress of the clothing restrictions:

The rules are dumb. It brings more stress on us and the people who enforce them. They check our family with searches, but if you buck back you can't [visit], so you are forced to comply. [Visitors] have to buy baggy clothes or their body build is just naturally difficult to disguise. When [they] get here, it's like judgement day. That's a stress: "Am I going to make it in?"

These experiences highlight the differential discretion of correctional officers who oversee visitation. A mother (No. 2) who visited her son remarked, "You're at their mercy. The rules are subject to change. They treat the inmates like they're nobody, and when you come in, you're treated the same way. It's degrading. The staff have no empathy. It's like they are desensitized." Her quote reflects M. L. Comfort's (2003) concept that families are treated as "quasi-inmates." Family members are subjected to similar rules and treatment as incarcerated people. Yet, her quote also demonstrates that family members must be prepared for potential variation in correctional officers' discretion, adding an additional layer of uncertainty and loss of autonomy.

A couple of family members and incarcerated women mentioned additional challenges related to the rules and regulations for those with health conditions, including pregnancy. A mother (No. 7) who visited her incarcerated son discussed her experience:

I have a doctor's note and blue card like for the airport that says I'm not supposed to be scanned or wanded. It will affect my defibrillator. And [the officer] would make me walk through the scanner! He ignored [the note and card].

Another major stressor mentioned by parents, wives, and a daughter, as well as incarcerated men, was the uncertainty of whether visitation would be canceled. A daughter (No. 11) described her experience when visiting her mother:

Be prepared at any moment for any sort of chaos. You never know when they're going to be on lockdown. You'd show up for a visit one day, then you're not allowed to go in for some crazy reason. There's just so much stress.

A few family members reported a lack of communication regarding cancelation of visitation. A sister (No. 1) who visited her brother discussed the stresses of uncertainty:

You can drive so many miles and then the visitation room could be full, and there is no way of knowing. The website is terrible. They don't tell you if it's a lockdown. They have been locked down for four weeks before, and that means no visits, no phone calls. [Staff] will never tell you why or when it will end.

Hence, the lack of certainty and communication adds to the stressors related to incarceration and the process of secondary prisonization (M. Comfort, 2008; Trahan & Evans, 2020). These uncertainties also cause frustration among incarcerated people, particularly as cancelations are outside their control. As expressed by an incarcerated man (Focus Group 4): "We are on lockdown now; we might not get visitation tomorrow for stuff someone else did." Similarly, a wife (No. 1) who visited her husband stated, "There's a lot of people that don't do anything wrong, but if one person does something wrong, all inmates are punished. It punishes me too because I don't get to see him." Thus, some viewed lockdowns as an unfair punishment to those beyond the individuals involved.

Related to the uncertainty of visitation, a mother and incarcerated women noted the need for increased information and support. A mother (No. 2) who visited her son stated, "The first time I came to visit, I had no idea what was going on. There's nothing that they give you that prepares you. It's trial and error. I don't think there is a support group for families."

In summary, incarcerated people and family members discussed stress surrounding the rules and regulations regarding visitation, particularly clothing restrictions, applying to visit, and searches. The stress around the dress code was particularly felt among women visitors. Participants also noted frustration with the arbitrary causes of lockdowns and subsequent cancelation of visits that felt like punishment. Similar to incarcerated people, family members lose their autonomy while visiting and are subjected to the intrusive punitive authority that emerge them into the prison subculture (M. Comfort, 2008).

"THEY'RE ABLE TO LEARN ABOUT THEIR FATHER THEMSELVES": FAMILIAL INTERACTIONS

Finally, participants discussed interactions during visitation, once reunited with their loved ones. This theme was discussed during seven (41%) of family interviews, including mothers, wives, and a sister, and during five (63%) of the focus groups with incarcerated people. Family interviewees discussed interactions during visitation to build familial bonds.

A mother (No. 2) who visited her son noted a hint of normalcy as a family through visitation: “When we do come to visit, the only way we can resemble a family is buying food from the vending machines and sitting down to eat together.” A few family members discussed playing games or talking during visitation as well. Similarly, a mother (No. 12) who visited her daughter stated,

We sit down and talk for a while. And when we get through the talking, we play cards or Scrabble or something like that until time to leave. And she wants to know what’s happening in our lives and stuff like that. She has a son [out of state] we talk about, too.

Family members, particularly mothers and wives, described incarcerated parents’ ability to build bonds with their young children. A wife (No. 1) who visited her husband said,

[During visitation], they’re able to learn about their father themselves. He’s showing them how to love and embrace. They don’t even complain [about visiting]. I’ve seen changes in them. The cutest thing is them whispering in his ear. He sits there and smiles a big smile.

These findings demonstrate family time as described in prior research (Arditti, 2002, 2012; Tasca et al., 2016) in which families socialize and build relationships during visitation.

While incarcerated people described benefits to build relationships, many also noted that visitation was an emotional experience, particularly for children. An incarcerated man (Focus Group 4) noted the stress upon leaving:

Children have anxiety. [They] want to stay [at visitation] or to know when you are coming home. They are crying. That’s a storm brewing within them that could turn to hate or resentment. They want to be with daddy. They want him around.

Similarly, an incarcerated mother (Focus Group 6) discussed her reaction: “The things that bring us the most happiness bring the most pain. Seeing [my daughter] go back through that gate was traumatic.” These findings highlight the emotional nature of visitation for families. Arditti (2012) discusses this as the paradox of prison visitation: visitation may build familial bonds, but can also be an emotional experience, reliving the separation between children and parents.

Notably, several family members and incarcerated men disliked the restrictions against physical contact during visitation. A mother (No. 6) who visited her incarcerated son stated,

The first time I [visited, we] had to sit on opposite sides of the table, and I couldn’t hold my [son’s] hands. You’re allowed to give an initial hug when you get there and when you leave. But you’re not allowed to touch them in between. That’s just awful to me. I mean how can you expect somebody to be in prison for 20 years with absolutely no human contact?

A wife (No. 2) who visited her husband noted other restrictions, including lack of privacy:

I hugged [my husband] tight and [the officers] rushed us. If we laugh or talk too much, they would post up and listen. I will tell them, ‘I know you’re listening.’ I was writing a budget to move here, and they took the paper. They wanted to harass me, but I pushed back. I cannot love on my husband the way I want.

These findings demonstrate the intrusions associated with incarceration that extend to family members. Just as incarcerated people lose their right to privacy, so do those who visit, further illustrating the process of secondary prisonization (M. Comfort, 2008).

Despite the restrictions on physical touch during visitation, a few family members and incarcerated people expressed their preference for in-person visitation over video visits. An incarcerated man (Focus Group 2) stated, "I prefer face-to-face contact. You want to hold people. You want to hug them [especially] if you have kids. Video is like talking on the phone. It might be good for people who have family that's out of state."

To summarize, incarcerated people and family members, particularly mothers, wives, and a daughter, discussed the positive impact of visitation on their families. The face-to-face interaction helps families engage in behaviors and communication (i.e., family time, Tasca et al., 2016) that simulate dynamics on the outside. Yet, these interactions are overshadowed by the prison environment, including restrictions on physical contact. Hence, family time is encased in the experience of secondary prisonization, bound by the norms and rules of the prison.

DISCUSSION

The impacts of mass incarceration are vast, extending to the entire family system through adverse physical, social, and emotional consequences (DeHart et al., 2018). Visitation provides opportunities to build and maintain social bonds among families, which helps reduce misconducts and recidivism, yet the experience of visitation is prefaced by distinct stressors. Beyond incarcerated people themselves who adapt to the norms and subculture of prison and face the pains of imprisonment (Haney, 2012; Sykes, 1958), so do their loved ones through a process called secondary prisonization (M. L. Comfort, 2003). Our findings demonstrate the complex processes of secondary prisonization as families become immersed in the punitive norms of the carceral system through visitation. They are forced to adhere to the intrusions (i.e., searches, lack of privacy) and dehumanizing control (i.e., regulation of appearance and behavior) associated with incarceration. Families also face significant burdens that become normalized, such as increased costs for food, traveling long distances, or waiting in line for long periods of time. Such conditions are already stressful, yet families also face uncertainty and inconsistency in rules, which further heighten frustration and anxiety. The findings echo M. Comfort's (2008) statement that visitation "reinforce[s] the curious position that visitors occupy in their relationships with the prisons: never fully captive nor fully free" (p. 64).

While prior research uncovered the impacts of visitation on outcomes among incarcerated people, few documented the lived experiences and perceptions of those directly impacted. This study adds to the literature by examining the perspectives of incarcerated men and women and loved ones on the outside from three facilities in a southeastern state. The combination of interviews and focus groups allowed for rich qualitative narratives through personal accounts and shared experiences. Sampling incarcerated women and family members who visit them is important as women's incarceration experiences are distinct from men, particularly around parenting stress and mental health (Aiello & McCorkel, 2018; Loper et al., 2009).

As qualitative findings are not intended to be generalized and each facility has distinct policies and norms that change over time, it is vital to build a collective understanding of

prison visitation processes across the U.S. Prior studies have examined experiences of prison visitation among institutions across various states, including the northeast, west, southwest, and Midwest; however, this study provides context from a jurisdiction that has not been thoroughly studied: the southeast. The southeast is characterized by high incarceration rates, racial disparities in incarceration, scattered population densities, and lack of public transportation to rural areas where prisons are often located (Prison Policy Initiative, 2021). These circumstances increase the likelihood for families to be impacted by incarceration, but also create challenges in accessing visitation. The southeast also tends to be relatively punitive (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2016) and lacking or modest in their adoption of rehabilitative evidence-based policies (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2017), which can create a harsh environment within the prisons and among family members who visit. While much of the prior research, including this study, focused on one state or one facility, a multistate or nationwide comparison of visitation would provide further understanding of the variation in policies, barriers, and the subsequent impacts.

This study explored responses from a range of familial relationships (e.g., parents, spouses, adult children, and siblings), which has not been examined previously. Although the purpose of thematic analysis is not to quantify or compare across groups (Braun & Clarke, 2021), we identified some patterns in which immediate family members and women experienced distinct stressors related to visitation. Future research should further examine visitation with extended family and friends. Interviewing those in the same familial system would also provide comparative insight on differential experiences across relational types. Further, future research must continue to examine potential gendered experiences with visitation with larger more diverse samples, oversampling for men who visit for comparison.

As reported by both family members and incarcerated people, the process of visitation is prefaced by distinct financial and time-related burdens. These repercussive effects of incarceration (M. Comfort, 2007) were felt especially by immediate family members (i.e., parents and spouses) who commonly take on additional financial burdens (Christian & Kennedy, 2011; Tasca, 2016). This study indicates potential regional differences in costs associated with visitation, as the reported daily costs were significantly lower than what participants reported in Christian's (2005; US\$25 vs. US\$80) work, which took place in the northeast. As the majority of incarcerated people enter prison from impoverished backgrounds (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015), financial assistance toward transportation and other costs could improve the ability to visit more often. Further, increased and varied hours for visitation could also increase visitation, allowing for enhanced flexibility to accommodate visitor needs and work schedules.

Similar to prior research, participants described intrusive and inconsistently enforced rules (Arditti, 2012; M. Comfort, 2008; Hutton, 2016; Trahan & Evans, 2020). Frustration was heightened due to inconsistencies in officer discretion, low empathy from staff, and lack of communication about potential changes. The restrictions related to dress code were especially felt among women who visit. These findings have implications for visitation processes. Staff must be mindful that visitors are community members and should be treated with dignity and respect. The rules and regulations are intended to maintain the safety and security of the institutions (i.e., prevent contraband from entering), yet some research indicates that visitation is not a main source for contraband (McCullough, 2021; Renaud, 2018). Agencies should work collaboratively to ensure fair and consistent rules with accountability, for example, through shared advisory boards with families (Cox, 2019). Participatory

action research could also be utilized to engage with families to develop specific policy recommendations (McIntyre, 2007).

In addition, family members noted a lack of clarity in procedures and availability of visitation (i.e., notification of cancellation). Anxiety and frustration surrounding visitation can be reduced through increased transparency and communication to families. Facilities could provide a clear webpage or social media with updates on visitation status (i.e., open or canceled) as well as guides on rules and regulations particularly for those visiting for the first time. For example, families outside based in the U.K. provide a video walk through of the visitation process.⁴

Support groups could also benefit family members through peer-to-peer guidance (Cox, 2019). Support groups exist throughout the U.S. in individual states and cities, but are not consistently available in every jurisdiction. Typically, support groups are initiated by family members or nonprofit agencies and are largely utilized through Facebook. Examples of formal support groups include Friends and Families of Incarcerated Persons (based in Las Vegas, NV) and Texas Inmate Families Association (TIFA, based in Texas with local chapters). Other national organizations exist, such as the International Prisoner's Family Conference and Strong Prison Wives and Families. Given the gendered experiences of visitation and need for support, such efforts may be particularly important to provide for women.

Consistent with prior research, participants discussed how visitation helped with communication and the acts of playing board games or eating together helped resemble familial behaviors on the outside (Christian, 2005; M. L. Comfort, 2003; Tasca et al., 2016). Both incarcerated individuals and family members noted the importance of visitation to build bonds with children (Arditti, 2012). However, participants, especially incarcerated mothers, also discussed the trauma and sadness caused by the end of the visit, for both children and parents. Such effects are of particular concern among mothers who are primary caregivers and may be more susceptible to symptoms of depression (Aiello & McCorkel, 2018; Loper et al., 2009). Institutions could enact more humane and child-friendly visitation (see Cramer et al., 2017; Fasah, 2018), similar to nations outside the U.S. that created family centers: welcoming and positive environments to visit incarcerated loved ones (Woodall et al., 2009). Also, visitation infused with parenting courses and debriefing can reduce negative emotions upon the visit's end (Cramer et al., 2017).

The findings also have implications in video visitation. Video visitation is increasing across the U.S. and can provide opportunities for communication for families who live far away or during lockdowns amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Boppre & Novisky, 2020). Yet, correctional facilities, especially jails, have been removing the option for in-person visits in lieu of video visitation (Sims, 2017). While initial research indicates positive impacts on recidivism (Duwe & McNeeley, 2021), removing in-person visitation entirely is not advised given concerns expressed by participants, particularly around the need for in-person contact, including touch (Maruna & Toch, 2005). Family time described by participants is not easily replicated over video, especially given current limitations in the technology (i.e., stationary booths, lack of privacy, connection issues; Lewis & Lockwood, 2019). Further, video visits can be costly to families depending on the provider (Sims, 2017), adding to the financial burdens placed on families. Future research and policy should engage with families regarding visitation modes.

This study is not without limitations. This article represents findings from a larger study on the impacts of incarceration on families broadly. As the focus was not specifically on

visitation, additional probes and questions could have revealed additional findings. Future research should gather more information from participants about visitation (i.e., timing, patterns, relationship type, experiences, facility characteristics, and individual characteristics; Cochran & Mears, 2013) as well as the quality of relationships across family members (Atkin-Plunk & Armstrong, 2018; La Vigne et al., 2005). This convenience sample reflects voluntary incarcerated people and family members who were willing and able to participate in this study. Their views and experiences are not representative of all families impacted by incarceration.

CONCLUSION

The carceral state's dehumanizing and punitive nature (Binnall, 2008; Ortiz & Jackey, 2019) is a source of systemic trauma (Goldsmith et al., 2014) that extends onto families (Condry & Smith, 2018). This study provided insight into experiences with prison visitation among incarcerated people and family members who visit. The findings further confirm the process of secondary prisonization among families and the stressors that overshadow family time during visitation (M. L. Comfort, 2003; Tasca et al., 2016). As existing research has well established the importance of maintaining social bonds among families, through decreased misconducts, recidivism, and family conflict, it is imperative for the U.S. carceral system to reduce barriers to communication among families. Ultimately, addressing the nation's overreliance on punishment and incarceration is key to reducing systemic trauma associated with incarceration.

ORCID IDS

Breanna Boppre  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3864-4552>

Dana DeHart  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6437-7531>

NOTES

1. The research is protected by a federal privacy certificate and was reviewed and approved by human participants' review boards at both the university and the State Department of Corrections.
2. The Youthful Offender Act was designed to provide more intensive rehabilitative treatment to those incarcerated under age 25.
3. Information about visitation (i.e., frequency, who visited) was not collected from incarcerated participants. More detailed information about visitation frequency or which facilities were visited was not collected from family members.
4. See <https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/families/visiting-prison/>.

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Breanna Boppre is a tenure-track assistant professor in the Department of Victim Studies at Sam Houston State University. Her research examines system involvement through gendered and intersectional lenses, the carceral system, and the impacts of incarceration on families. Her work appears in various peer-reviewed outlets including *Justice Quarterly*, *Feminist Criminology*, and *Victims & Offenders*.

Dana DeHart is a research professor at the University of South Carolina's College of Social Work. Her research focuses on victimization, incarceration, and gendered pathways to crime. She has served as principal investigator or coinvestigator on a multitude of funded projects involving research, evaluation, and training.

Cheri J. Shapiro is a research associate professor and director of the Institute for Families in Society, College of Social Work, at the University of South Carolina. Dr. Shapiro has served as editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Child and Family Studies* since January 2020. Research interests include translational and applied research supporting the well-being of children, youth, and families.