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2017-05

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The publisher's version of record is available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128714542503>



PRINT VERSION CITATION: Cochran, Joshua C., Daniel P. Mears, and William D. Bales. 2017. "Who Gets Visited in Prison? Individual- and Community-Level Disparities in Inmate Visitation Experiences." *Crime and Delinquency* 63(5):545-568.

PRE-PRINT VERSION

**Who Gets Visited in Prison?\***

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## **Who Gets Visited in Prison?**

### **ABSTRACT**

Scholarship has shown that visitation helps individuals to maintain social ties during imprisonment, which, in turn, can improve inmate behavior and reduce recidivism. Not being visited can result in collateral consequences and inequality in punishment. Few studies, however, have explored the factors associated with visitation. This study uses data on Florida inmates to identify individual- and community-level factors that may affect visitation. Consistent with expectations derived from prior theory and research, the study finds that inmates who are older, Black, and who have been incarcerated more frequently, experience less visitation. In addition, inmates who come from areas with higher incarceration rates and higher levels of social altruism experience more visits. Unexpectedly, however, sentence length and economic disadvantage are not associated with visitation. Implications of these findings are discussed.

Key words: visitation, prison experiences, social ties, social isolation, inequality

## INTRODUCTION

A growing body of scholarship underscores the importance of social ties for improving in-prison and reentry outcomes (La Vigne et al. 2004; Maruna and Immarigeon 2004; Jiang and Winfree 2006; Cobbina et al. 2012; Listwan et al. 2013). One avenue of research that has garnered particular attention is inmate visitation (see, e.g., Hairston 1991; Bales and Mears 2008; Monahan et al. 2011; Duwe and Clark 2013; Siennick et al. 2013). Research has found that inmates with social ties to family more likely maintain conventional social roles and cope better with strain and social isolation and reentry back into society (Lembo 1969; Ellis et al. 1974; Adams 1992; Gordon and McConnell 1999; Wolff and Draine 2004; Christian 2005; Jiang and Winfree 2006; Lahm 2008; Blevins et al. 2010; Cochran and Mears 2013; Duwe and Clark 2013).

Despite scholarly attention to visitation and the potential benefits to correctional systems of social support for inmates and ex-prisoners, little is known about the factors that contribute to visitation. This research gap is surprising for several reasons. Visitation could be used to improve prediction of which inmates most likely will engage in misconduct or recidivate (Bushway and Apel 2012; Cochran and Mears 2013). Just as importantly, increased visitation constitutes a central strategy through which corrections systems might improve social order in prisons and post-release outcomes (Jackson et al. 1997; Christian et al. 2006; see also Schafer 1978). At the same time, disparities in visitation constitute a form of potentially unequal punishment, a collateral consequence (Travis 2005), concentrated more among some groups, such as minorities, than others (Western 2006; Bales and Mears 2008).

The goal of this paper, then, is to examine individual- and community-level factors that may be associated with prison visitation. In so doing, the paper responds to calls from scholars (e.g., Nagin et al. 2009; Mears 2012; Visher and O'Connell 2012; Duwe and Clark 2013) to describe and understand better the nature of in-prison experiences and their salience for prison order and reentry. The paper begins by describing prior research on prison visitation and the implications

of visitation for inmate and ex-prisoner behavior. We then discuss characteristics of inmates, and of the community contexts from which they come, that may influence visitation. Using data from a population cohort of all inmates admitted to and released from Florida prisons between November 2000 and April 2002, we presents multi-level negative binomial analyses that estimate the effects of individual- and community-level factors on visitation. We conclude by discussing research and policy implications of the study.

## **THE THEORY AND EFFECTS OF INMATE VISITATION**

The expansion of the correctional system in recent decades has led to growing concerns about the effects of incarceration and the implications of prison experiences for affecting in-prison and reentry outcomes (Adams 1992; Bottoms 1999; Liebling 1999; Nagin et al. 2009; Cullen et al. 2011). Prison experiences are heterogeneous. The dimensions along which they can vary include educational and vocational programming and drug and mental health treatment, victimization or gang activities, exposure to different inmate cultures or administrative approaches, and more (see, generally, Sykes 1958; Bonta and Gendreau 1990; Gendreau and Keyes 2001; Blevins et al. 2010; Tasca et al. 2010; Mears 2012; Listwan et al. 2013). Recent reviews suggest that little is known about how such experiences affect inmate behavior and post-release outcomes, such as recidivism (Nagin et al. 2009; Jonson 2011; Mears 2012). They suggest, too, that little is known about the experiences themselves. During an era in which mass incarceration has led to increased attention to recidivism and efforts to reduce it, this research gap stands out, given the potential for variation in inmate experiences to affect misconduct and recidivism.

Prior scholarship suggests that a critical experience for inmates involves access to social ties during incarceration (e.g., Adams and Fischer 1976; Hairston 1991; Liebling 1999). Prison visitation represents, by and large, the only opportunity inmates have for direct contact with outside social networks, and has led scholars to emphasize its benefits for improving behavior

(Ohlin 1951; Glaser 1954; Holt and Miller 1972; Hairston 1988). Questions remain about the effects of visitation and how the effects arise. In general, however, extant research has consistently found that visitation is associated with improved prison behavior (see, e.g., Goetting and Howsen 1986; Clark 2001; Hensley et al. 2002; Lahm 2008; Cochran 2012; see, however, Jiang and Winfree 2006; Siennick et al. 2013) and reduced recidivism (e.g., Bales and Mears 2008; Monahan et al. 2011; Mears et al. 2012; Duwe and Clark 2013).

Scholars have identified a diverse array of avenues, or theoretical pathways, through which visitation may achieve various outcomes. Research highlights that inmates themselves view maintenance of social ties as especially important (Fishman 1990; Adams 1992; Comfort 2003, 2008; Ross and Richards 2009; George 2010). Visitation can help reduce strain and help inmates cope with social isolation in prosocial ways, thereby reducing prison disorder (e.g., Adams 1992; Bottoms 1999; Blevins et al. 2010; Morris et al. 2012). Visitation also can help inmates maintain social bonds, which in turn can result in informal controls that reduce the likelihood of prison misconduct and recidivism (e.g., Hirschi 1969; Holt and Miller 1972; Hairston 1991; Gordon and McConnell 1999; Trulson et al. 2011; Cochran et al. 2013). Inmates who are visited, and who take part in other types of in-prison programs and privileges, may be more likely to view prison authority as legitimate (see, e.g., Bottoms 1999; Reisig and Mesko 2009). Not least, visited prisoners are better able to access social resources and capital, which can provide practical benefits upon release (e.g., Ekland-Olson et al. 1983; Petersilia 2003; La Vigne et al. 2005; Makarios et al. 2010; Berg and Huebner 2011; Cobbina et al. 2012).

### **THE SALIENCE OF IDENTIFYING WHO GETS VISITED**

In short, theory and empirical research suggest that visitation, and social ties more broadly, can improve inmate behavior and reentry outcomes. This body of work underscores the need to investigate a more fundamental question: Who gets visited in prison? Surprisingly, extant research provides few answers to this question (Jackson et al. 1997; Cochran and Mears 2013).

It thus remains unclear, for example, how age, gender, race, ethnicity, the characteristics of the areas from which inmates come, and other such factors influence visitation.

Greater attention to understanding who gets visited is warranted for several reasons. First, to the extent different types of inmates are less likely to be visited, questions of fairness and equity emerge. Visitation may have benefits and it is, with some exception, a right granted to offenders (*Overton v. Bazzetta* 2003; see Kent 1975; Hardwick 1985; Schafer 1978). Conversely, limited visitation can constitute a form of punishment, a collateral consequence (Travis 2005). Evidence of differential visitation may indicate structural inequalities or practical constraints that, however justified, may disproportionately favor or burden some inmates. Although correctional systems cannot control inmate social networks outside the prison walls, they can adopt policies that promote or inhibit visitation and social contact more broadly (Bales and Mears 2008).

Second, as emphasized above, a lack of visitation constitutes an additional punishment on some inmates that may constitute a form of unequal treatment and that may perpetuate social disadvantage (e.g., Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999; Mauer and Chesney-Lind 2002; Travis 2005; Beckett and Murakawa 2012; Cochran and Mears 2013). Collateral consequences constitute adverse events or experiences that stem from a sanction. Inmates report that the severing of ties to family and friends constitutes one of the most important fears that they have about incarceration (Adams 1992). Viewed in this light, impediments to visitation, especially if more pronounced for some groups, create greater punishment for them. For example, to the extent that such punishment is patterned along social and demographic lines, it raises questions about the social inequality in punishment in America (Western 2006).

Third, examining the factors associated with visitation can inform studies aimed at understanding how and why visitation effects occur. For example, if racial or ethnic differences in visitation effects exist, these differences may result not from a causal effect of race or ethnicity, or from any attribute of the system itself, but rather from differences in social capital and resources associated with race, ethnicity, or both (Mears et al. 2012). Identifying dimensions along which visitation varies thus provides a foundation both for assessing the effects of



visitation and for examining how such effect arise.

Fourth, and not least, understanding the factors that influence visitation may enable prison administrators to take policy steps to increase visitation and to reduce disparities in visitation. Such a possibility carries with it the attendant risk of worsening outcomes if, in fact, visitation produces harmful effects (e.g., Siennick et al. 2013). Visitation from criminal associates, for example, is not on the face of it likely to improve outcomes and may worsen them (Bales and Mears 2008). Even so, the bulk of research and theory to date indicates that visitation can have beneficial effects (Monahan et al. 2011; Mears et al. 2012; Cochran 2014; Duwe and Clark 2013; Visher 2013). Accordingly, information about who gets visited provides a first step in highlighting factors related to reduced visitation. These factors in turn constitute starting points for identifying methods for corrections systems to increase visitation to improve in-prison and post-release outcomes and reduce disparities in the collateral consequences of incarceration.

### **WHO GETS VISITED IN PRISON?**

What factors then are associated with visitation? Drawing on prior theory and research, we examine characteristics of inmates and their communities that research implicates as potential determinants of visitation. We begin by examining individual characteristics, including inmate demographics, prior record, and conviction offense. Then, building on a growing body of literature that highlights the importance of contextual factors on offender experiences and behavior (e.g., Travis and Visher 2003; Kubrin and Stewart 2006; Mears et al. 2008; Hipp et al. 2010; Wang et al. 2010), we investigate the possibility that characteristics of the counties inmates come from, such as economic disadvantage, community members' contact with the prison system, and social altruism, may be associated with prison visitation.

#### **Individual Factors**

*Gender.* Female inmates are likely to have stronger, more stable social networks (Moore

1990; Cobbina et al. 2012). Females are also more likely to take a more substantial role in the care taking of children than are males and to put more effort into maintaining ties with family and friends (Uggen and Kruttschnitt 1998). Research suggests that familial ties exert stronger effects on behavior than do friends or peers and that females have stronger attachments to the former than to the latter, when compared to males (Cobbina et al. 2012). Also, the friendships that females do develop typically are more intimate and affectionate (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Pugh 1986; Steffensmeier and Allan 1996). This work suggests that females will experience more contact and be visited more often than males during incarceration (see also Datesman and Cales 1983; Visher and Courtney 2006).

*Age.* Prior research suggests that younger inmates may experience more visitation than older inmates. Although young adulthood is the period during which offending peaks and social bonds may begin to weaken (see, generally Gibson and Krohn 2013), younger offenders are more likely than older offenders to still be involved with their family, including parents, guardians, and siblings. Over time, older inmates are more likely to have drifted away from tight-knit family and peer groups (Rose and Clear 2003; Uggen and Wakefield 2005). Furthermore, younger inmates, because of their age, may be perceived by family and friends as less culpable than their older counterparts (Massoglia and Uggen 2010). Thus, incarceration itself may sever social ties for older inmates more so than younger inmates, leading to decreased visitation for older groups. Not least, younger inmates may be perceived as more vulnerable to the harshness of prison life and so create a greater urgency among family and friends to visit.

*Race and ethnicity.* Minority inmates typically have fewer years of formal education, experience greater socioeconomic disadvantage, and have had more frequent contact with the criminal justice system (Wacquant 2001; Western 2006; Wakefield and Uggen 2010; Pettit 2012). Their potential visitors—their family and community members—are likely to share many of these characteristics. Thus, minority groups may experience less visitation because their outside social ties have fewer social and economic resources, experience greater difficulty in obtaining transportation to prisons, have difficulty paying fees associated with visitation, and,

more generally, may face more challenges in overcoming the many barriers to visitation identified in prior research (see, e.g., Hardwick 1985; Casey-Acevedo and Bakken 2002; Comfort 2003; Christian 2005; Hoffman et al. 2005; Christian et al. 2006).

Prior scholarship implicates race and ethnicity in other ways. Adams (1992) argues, for instance, that Latino inmates have greater levels of social support because of the tight-knit family structures inherent in Latino communities; this difference, in turn, might result in more visitation among Latinos. Also, minority inmates typically will be more likely than Whites to come from community contexts where incarceration is a more familiar phenomenon, and thus where a greater understanding exists about how to negotiate the prison experience (e.g., Wacquant 2001).

*Prior record and offense seriousness.* Scholarship indicates that prior record and offense seriousness are associated with less visitation. Inmates who have been convicted and imprisoned more frequently, and who have committed more serious offenses, may be less likely to experience visitation. Research suggests that serious or chronic offenders have lower levels of social support and fewer social resources than first-time and less serious offenders (Rose and Clear 2003; Gibson and Krohn 2013). As individuals engage in more offending, their social relationships may become strained (Rose and Clear 2003; Roberts 2004). Visitors who previously were willing to visit may grow weary of investing the effort to visit as individuals accumulate more convictions and experience multiple stints of incarceration (e.g., Christian 2005; Christian et al. 2006). The type of offense, too, can be consequential. For example, violent and sex offenders may experience less visitation than inmates who commit property or drug offenses or who are incarcerated for violations of probation and parole. Family or friends may view such crimes as more egregious or as greater violations and thus be less forgiving and less willing to continue to invest time, money, and resources on individuals who commit them.

### **Community Factors**

*Economic disadvantage.* As discussed above, inmates who come from areas with heightened

levels of economic disadvantage may experience less visitation. Family, friends, and community members from these areas—an inmate's pool of potential visitors—are more likely to be unemployed or to have low-paying jobs, and, because of a range of practical constraints, will have diminished abilities to overcome challenges related to visitation. Although potential visitors from such areas might be similarly, if not more, willing to visit incarcerated offenders, individuals from them typically will have fewer resources to allow them to take time off from work, to travel or pay for transportation to a prison, to find childcare, and to pay fees (e.g., background check, parking) related to visitation (e.g., Christian 2005; Tewksbury and DeMichelle 2005).

*Prison admission rates.* Two theoretical arguments suggest that areas with higher rates of incarceration would give rise to more visitation. Similar to arguments about the potential effects of race, citizens in these areas might be more familiar with incarceration and have more experience with the complexities involved with managing imprisonment and navigating the administrative systems surrounding inmate visitation. The end result would be more visits. It is possible, for example, that in these areas informal infrastructures exist that make it easier to visit; residents may be more likely to carpool together or provide childcare to assist other community members in visiting family in prison (see, generally, Rose and Clear 2003; Cammett et al. 2006).

A different line of reasoning leads to a similar prediction about the effects of aggregate incarceration rates on visitation. Studies suggest that groups that perceive that they are unfairly targeted by the criminal justice system, such as when citizens live in areas where incarceration occurs frequently, exhibit greater skepticism about the behavior and legitimacy of criminal justice actors (Tyler 1990; Weitzer and Tuch 2006). Similarly, qualitative accounts suggest that, under some circumstances, visitors are skeptical of the treatment friends and loved ones receive while incarcerated (Christian 2005). Thus, family and community members who come from areas where criminal justice contact is more frequent may have a greater willingness to visit inmates from those areas if they feel that it helps to increase prison accountability.

*Social altruism.* Not least, inmates who come from areas where levels of social cohesion or

social altruism are higher may also experience more visitation (see, generally, Chamlin and Cochran 1997; Putnam 2000; Rosenfeld et al. 2001). Recent scholarship has highlighted significant effects of group-level social capital, social welfare, and social support on released prisoners' ability to reintegrate into society upon release (Rose and Clear 2003; Holtfreter et al. 2004; Hipp et al. 2010; Orrick et al 2011). The bulk of these studies suggest that inmates who return to areas with higher levels of social capital are better off during prisoner reentry. What about during incarceration? It seems reasonable to expect that, drawing on this body of work, community social support or social cohesion can impact offenders, perhaps via visitation, prior to release (e.g., Wolff and Draine 2004). Communities with more social capital have increased social integration and larger amounts of collective outreach (e.g., Coleman 1990; Putnam 2000; Rosenfeld et al. 2001). Visiting offenders in prison requires a substantial amount of effort, but communities with heightened levels of social altruism may contain larger pools of family and community members motivated to help offenders in prison and to overcome these obstacles.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

This paper uses data from an admissions cohort of all felony inmates admitted into and released from Florida prisons between November 2000 and April 2002 ( $n = 17,921$ ). The data are provided by the Florida Department of Corrections (FLDOC) and contain detailed measures including demographic, offense, prior record, sentence length, and time served measures. Only inmates who served at least 2 months in prison are included to ensure that visitation was possible and to address the fact that initial screening facilities are not where inmates spend the duration of their term of incarceration. Ancillary analyses that included all inmates, regardless of time served, revealed substantively similar findings and are available upon request. To test the extent to which county-context measures predict visitation, individual-level data were linked to county-level information based on the county in which individuals committed their offense. The specific measures included in the analyses are described in more detail below (see table 1).

Insert table 1 about here

The dependent variable used here is a count measure of inmate visitation. Visitation records for inmates are electronically recorded by prison officers into the FLDOC Offender Based Information System (OBIS). For the analyses, visitation counts were truncated at 35 to reduce skew in the measure (99 percent of the sample had 35 or fewer visits).

Demographic factors in the OBIS system include inmates' age (continuous), race and ethnicity (Black non- Latino, White non- Latino, or Latino), and sex (male = 1, female = 0). Each of these is included in the analyses as independent variables. The analyses also include two measures of prior criminal history: the prior number of felony convictions (count) and the prior number of prison commitments (count). Inmates are designated as having committed one of five different primary offense types. These are included as dichotomous measures and can be drug, violent, sex, property, or other. Continuous measures of inmates' sentence length (in months) and time served (in months) are also included as independent variables. Time served is included here to control for differential opportunities to be visited over time.

The analyses also include three county-level independent variables. First, the analyses include a measure of county-level economic disadvantage. This measure is consistent with disadvantage and deprivation indices used previously by researchers (e.g., Land et al. 1990) and in prior studies that have analyzed Florida county data specifically (e.g., Wang et al. 2010). The index includes four measures based on 2000 U.S. Census data: percent female-headed households, percent under the poverty line, unemployment rate, and percent households on public assistance. Second, to test the effects of county-level contact with the prison system on visitation, the analyses include the rate of prison admissions per 1,000 for each county for the year 2000. This measure is based on data provided by the FLDOC that provides counts of all new admissions to prison from each county. These counts were then divided by the population for each county based on the 2000 U.S. Census. Third, to test the effects of social outreach or

social altruism on visitation, the analyses include a measure of county-level charitable revenue, measured in units of \$10,000 per household. This measure was obtained from the Urban Institute's National Center for Charitable Statistics ([nccsdataweb.urban.org](http://nccsdataweb.urban.org)) and is for the year 2000. Scholars have identified charities and charitable donations as measures of altruism, social capital, and social support (Chamlin and Cochran 1997; Orrick et al. 2011; Sampson 2013).

The dependent variable in the analyses is a count measure of visitation, and thus linear models are not appropriate. In addition, a modeling strategy is required that can account for nesting of cases within counties. To account for the count-based nature of the outcome and the hierarchical structure of the data, multilevel Poisson models were analyzed using Stata's `xtmepoisson` procedure (see Rabe-Hesketh and Skondral 2008).

Similar to previous studies employing multilevel regression, the analyses followed a two-step process. Step one involved assessing the extent to which inmate visitation varied at the county level. If there is significant variation across level 2 units, this variation may be attributed to two factors: compositional characteristics of the inmates within those counties and county-level attributes. To assess variability at the county level in prison visitation, a fully unconditional multilevel Poisson model was analyzed. The county-level random effects variance component (0.147) in this model was statistically significant at the  $p=.001$  level, suggesting significant variance in counts of inmate visitation across counties. Counties with fewer than 15 inmates were excluded from the analyses, which removed 104 inmates. (Ancillary analyses with the full sample revealed similar results to those shown in the tables and are available upon request.)

One problem with using the Poisson distribution for these analyses is that the number of zero counts in the dependent variable leads to overdispersion. For example, the variance in the outcome (33.53) is more than 10 times greater than the mean (2.13). This overdispersion was confirmed further by two goodness-of-fit tests: a deviance test and a Pearson test. In both instances, the tests were statistically significant and suggested that the Poisson model was inappropriate. Therefore, the multivariate models described below are based on multilevel random effects negative binomial regression models, using Stata's `xtnbreg` command, which can

account both for overdispersion in the count outcome and for the clustering of inmates within level 2 units (see, e.g., Osgood 2000; Parker 2004; Stucky et al. 2012). Ancillary analyses showed that the results for the negative binomial and Poisson models were substantively similar.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Descriptive Statistics**

Table 1 provides descriptive information about the inmate cohort and covariate measures. Inspection of table 1 highlights that, on average, inmates received 2.13 visits over the course of their incarceration period. Inmates typically were male (90%) and had an average age of 32. Forty-two percent were White, 50% were Black, and 8% were Latino. A significant strength of the analyses is that, in contrast to prior work, a sufficiently large number of females and Latinos can be included to examine gender and racial/ethnic variation in visitation.

The analyses also consider the effects of prior record, sentencing, and offense information. On average, inmates in the cohort served about 1 prior prison commitment (0.87), averaged 6 prior convictions (5.90), and were sentenced to 23 months of incarceration (22.81). The most common offense type was a drug crime (34%), followed by property (32%), violent (19%), other (13%), and sex (3%) crimes. Inmates, on average, served 12 months in prison (12.27).

An additional strength of the study is the inclusion of information about the characteristics of the counties from which inmates come. The first county-level variable is a standardized index of economic disadvantage. The second county measure is the prison admissions rate per 1,000 citizens in a county; the average prison admission rate is approximately 2 per 1,000 citizens (1.98), with a range of 0.48 to 4.30. Last, county-level charitable revenue averages about \$5,000 per household in charitable giving and values range from \$100 to \$27,000 per household.

### **Multivariate Analyses**

Turning to the multivariate results in table 2, we investigate the effects of the independent



variables on the likelihood of visitation. Table 2 presents the results of random effects, multilevel negative binomial regression models. Model 1 includes the individual-level variables only; model 2 then includes the county-level attributes.

Insert table 2 about here

Inspection of model 1 shows that several factors are statistically significant and related to visitation. Beginning first with the demographic measures, we can see that males experience fewer visits than females ( $b = -.125$ ) and that older offenders experience fewer visits than younger offenders ( $b = -0.037$ ). In addition, Blacks receive fewer visits ( $b = -.712$ ) and Latinos receive fewer visits ( $b = -.120$ ), respectively, as compared to Whites.

Inmates with more prison commitments also experience significantly less visitation ( $b = -.183$ ). Somewhat surprisingly, there is a positive and statistically significant effect of prior convictions on visitation. Although this effect is small ( $b = .014$ ), it runs counter to arguments that would suggest that chronic offenders would receive fewer visits. However, as expected, inmates who committed more serious offenses (e.g., violent and sex offenses) experienced significantly less visitation. Compared to drug offenders, violent ( $b = -.209$ ), sex ( $b = -.323$ ), and property ( $b = -.322$ ) offenders each experienced significantly fewer visits. “Other” offenders ( $b = .086$ ) experienced more visitation, but this effect did not reach statistical significance. Finally, sentence length had no statistically significant effect on visitation, but time served did; each additional month of time served was associated with a .077 increase in the log count of visits.

Model 2 includes the same individual-level variables as model 1, but incorporates county-level measures as well and serves to investigate whether conditions in the areas from which inmates come may influence visitation. Notably, the individual-level effects are nearly identical between model 1 and 2, even after the addition of county-characteristics, indicating that area-level effects operate largely independently of individual-level effects. Two characteristics exert statistically significant effects on county-level variation in visitation. Inmates from counties with

higher rates of prison admissions or with higher levels of charitable giving were visited more frequently ( $b = .049$  and  $b = .143$ , respectively).

Insert figure 1 about here

To present the effects identified in table 2 in a more intuitive manner, figure 1 provides predicted visitation counts for individuals with different characteristics. The predicted counts were generated using model 2 coefficients, holding all other covariates at their means.

Inspection of figure 1 highlights that age and race and ethnicity have substantial effects on visitation. In this study, a 20-year old inmate on average received approximately 2.6 visits; by contrast, the typical 50-year old inmate experienced less than one visit. White inmates were estimated to receive approximately .25 visits more than Latino inmates, and approximately 1.25 more visits than Black inmates. We can see also that substantively large differences exist across prior commitments and offense type. Specifically, an inmate incarcerated for the first time is estimated to receive nearly 2 visits compared to a little over 1 visit for someone who is incarcerated a third time. Drug and other offenders are estimated to receive about .5 more visits as compared to violent, sex, and property offenders.

Similar to prior studies, the gender differences appear to be small (see, e.g., Mumola 2000). There are non-trivial differences, however, with respect to county-level prison admission rates and county-level charitable giving. The high and low values for prison admission rates and charitable revenue are based on the predicted counts of visitation for inmates from counties in the top and bottom deciles for those two measures, respectively. Inmates from counties in the top decile of these two variables receive about .20 to .25 more visits than inmates from the low decile of these two variables. The magnitude of this effect appears small. However, the effect applies to all inmates who come from the top decile and bottom decile counties, respectively.

These analyses underscore the notion that males, older inmates, and more experienced offenders have fewer social ties, or less access to social ties, while incarcerated (Uggen and

Kruttschnitt 1998; Massoglia and Uggen 2010; Cobbina et al. 2012). They also lend support to the idea that more serious offenders are likely to have weaker social networks, but also, that imprisonment is likely detrimental to social ties (Sampson and Laub 1993; Rose and Clear 2003; Roberts 2004; Gibson and Krohn 2013). Not least, the findings highlight the possibility that inmates' former social contexts may exert significant influences on their in-prison experiences.

The findings above were robust across a range of alternate specifications. For example, the multivariate analyses shown here used grand-mean centered level 1 variables. This approach allows for more accurate effect estimates for the effects of level 2 (county) characteristics. The alternative is within-group centering, which provides more accurate estimation of coefficients at level 1 (see Enders and Tofighi 2007). Analyses using within-group centering revealed substantively identical findings for level 1 estimates, suggesting that the estimated effects of the covariates on visitation are robust across modeling approaches.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The expansion of the correctional system over the past three decades has led to scholarship aimed at understanding the effects of incarceration. It also has led to the creation of a body of work aimed at understanding the implications of social support for offenders (e.g., Berg and Huebner 2011; Cobbina et al. 2012; Orrick et al. 2012; Steiner et al. 2013). This work has identified visitation as an experience that can improve inmate behavior, reduce recidivism, and contribute to successful reentry (e.g., Monahan et al. 2011; Duwe and Clark 2013). At the same time, there remains almost no research that identifies who gets visited (Jackson et al. 1997). This gap is problematic because a lack of visitation can be viewed as a collateral consequence—a form of additional punishment—that is experienced more acutely by some groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, than others. It is problematic, too, because efforts to improve risk prediction, inmate behavior, and reentry success may be improved by efforts to increase visitation and, more broadly, to create stronger social networks for inmates and ex-prisoners

(Petersilia 2003; Travis 2005). Any such improvements, however, depend heavily on an ability to understand better the factors associated with inmate visitation.

The goal of this study was to address this research gap—and in turn inform scholarship and policy efforts aimed at understanding and improving inmate behavior and public safety—by identifying whether specific social and demographic groups, as well as inmates from different social contexts, are more likely or less likely to be visited. Three sets of findings emerged from the study. First, the analyses show that some groups in fact receive more visits and so have greater access to outside social ties during incarceration. Specifically, inmates who are young, female, White, or Latino experience the greatest amounts of visitation. Second, individuals with more extensive prior records, including those convicted of more serious crimes or incarcerated previously, experience less visitation. Third, social context affects visitation. Specifically, we identified a positive association between county-level prison admission rates and charitable giving, on the one hand, and visitation, on the other hand.

These findings provide important insights into the prison experience. We begin first with the observation that inmate groups vary in their likelihood of visitation. In turn, that means that they vary in the collateral consequences of incarceration. They will be more likely to fare poorly during and after incarceration. Many studies already have documented that a lack of visitation, and, more generally, limited social support and resources, contributes to inmate maladjustment, misconduct, and poor reentry outcomes, including increased recidivism (Hairston 1991; Adams 1992; Wolff and Draine 2004; Bales and Mears 2008; Blevins et al. 2010; Berg and Huebner 2011; Cochran 2012; Visher and O’Connell 2012; Cochran et al. 2013). If punishment policies are to effectively enhance public safety, addressing such variation constitutes an important issue to address. Failure to improve inmate visitation and social support amounts to a “get tough” punishment approach that may increase rather than decrease recidivism (Nagin et al. 2009).

Second, the patterns identified in this study accord with prior work that has identified disparities associated with mass incarceration and the “punitive turn” to be more concentrated among minorities (Wacquant 2001; Western 2006; Wakefield and Uggen 2010). Disparities in

visitation, as with access to public housing and with the right to vote, raise concerns about equity in American justice. In addition, they point to the potential for “invisible punishments” associated with mass incarceration to arise that can amplify existing inequalities. Minority inmates, for example, typically come from socially disadvantaged areas and may experience less visitation, with potential adverse effects for the inmates’ families and children. The adverse effects may continue upon release through an increase in recidivism and a failure to obtain housing, employment, or mental health services. In short, the disproportionate impact of mass incarceration policies can be seen not only in the large numbers of minorities sent to prison and in such collateral consequences as impeded access to housing and the right to vote, it also can be seen in a much more basic way—the ability of inmates to maintain social ties to their families and communities, and, at the same time, the ability of these families and communities to minimize harms associated with mass incarceration.

The potential for impeded visitation to adversely affect prison and reentry outcomes and to amplify social inequality underscores the need for policies that expand inmate access to social networks during incarceration. What can be done? Corrections systems should focus on identifying and removing existing barriers that reduce visitation opportunities, especially those that are responsible for creating unequal visitation. Such efforts hold the potential for improving prison order and public safety and for reducing inequalities that can emerge during or as a result of the prison experience—two critical goals for any prison system.

Steps for removing these barriers or for reducing their influence begin with the process of identifying them. Distance alone constitutes one of the more likely barriers. On average, inmates are housed more than 100 miles away from home (Mumola 2000). Many potential visitors must rely on public transportation for travel (Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005). This constraint, coupled with limited finances, reduces the likelihood of visitation. In addition, potential visitors, especially those who work low-wage jobs and have children, frequently cannot afford to take time off from work or will not be permitted to do so or cannot afford childcare that would enable visits (Christian 2005; Christian et al. 2006).

What can be done? Corrections systems undertake can seek to house inmates closer to their home communities. Administrators can also consider efforts to improve public transportation to and from facilities. These strategies may be especially effective in larger states where prisons are scattered across rural regions, far away from the metropolitan areas where most inmates originate and where their pools of potential visitors likely reside. An additional strategy for improving visitation is to make facilities more child-friendly through more flexible visitation hours, provision of childcare, and creation of settings that include games and books. Not least, correctional systems should consider outreach and educational efforts for inmates' families before and during a term of incarceration. These efforts should focus on explaining to the families and other potential visitors about the importance of social support for inmates and how to negotiate rules for and logistical challenges associated with visitation.

Alongside of such efforts is the need for substantially more empirical research on the factors associated with inmate visitation and, more broadly, social support during and after incarceration (Cochran and Mears 2013; Listwan et al. 2013). This study has identified the particular importance of focusing not only on individual-level characteristics but also on characteristics of the communities from which inmates come. Scholarship has identified many barriers to visitation and social support (e.g., Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005; Bales and Mears 2008). States should seek to document empirically facility rates of visitation and the barriers specific to each prison. Such information in turn can be used to determine what steps should be taken to increase visitation and social supports for inmates. Not least, it can be used to assess over time equity in the prison experiences of different inmate populations and the extent to which visitation and social support improve inmate behavior and reentry success.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Min	Max
<i>Outcome</i>				
Visitation (count)	2.13	5.79	0	35
<i>Demographics</i>				
Male (1/0)	0.90	0.31	0	1
Age (1/0)	32.14	9.90	15	77
White (1/0)	0.42	0.49	0	1
Black (1/0)	0.50	0.50	0	1
Latino (1/0)	0.08	0.27	0	1
<i>Sentence length and prior record</i>				
Sentence length (months)	22.81	22.34	12	600
Prior prison commitments (count)	0.87	1.43	0	12
Prior convictions (count)	5.90	6.50	0	94
<i>Offense information and time served</i>				
Primary offense - drug (1/0)	0.34	0.47	0	1
Primary offense - violent (1/0)	0.19	0.39	0	1
Primary offense - sex (1/0)	0.03	0.16	0	1
Primary offense - property (1/0)	0.32	0.47	0	1
Primary offense - other (1/0)	0.13	0.33	0	1
Time served (months)	12.27	5.50	2	31
<i>County-level</i>				
Economic disadvantage (z)	0.00	1.00	-1.66	3.53
Prison admissions (per 1,000)	1.98	0.84	0.48	4.30
Charitable revenue (\$10k per household)	0.50	0.36	0.01	2.70



Table 2. Multilevel negative binomial regression of prison visitation count on individual- and county-level characteristics (n = 17,921, 56 counties)

Independent variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
<i>Demographics</i>				
Male (1/0)	-0.125**	0.047	-0.120**	0.047
Age (1/0)	-0.037***	0.002	-0.037***	0.002
Black (1/0)	-0.712***	0.033	-0.721***	0.034
Latino (1/0)	-0.120*	0.051	-0.118*	0.052
<i>Prior record</i>				
Prior prison commitments (count)	-0.183***	0.016	-0.184***	0.016
Prior convictions (count)	0.014***	0.002	0.014***	0.002
<i>Offense, sentence length, and time served</i>				
Primary offense - violent (1/0)	-0.209***	0.043	-0.208***	0.043
Primary offense - sex (1/0)	-0.323***	0.088	-0.321***	0.088
Primary offense - property (1/0)	-0.322***	0.038	-0.320***	0.038
Primary offense - other (1/0)	0.086	0.047	0.082	0.047
Sentence length (months)	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001
Time served (months)	0.077***	0.002	0.077***	0.002
<i>County-level</i>				
Economic disadvantage (z)	-	-	0.002	0.019
Prison admissions (per 1,000)	-	-	0.049**	0.018
Charitable revenue (\$10k per household)	-	-	0.143***	0.040
Intercept	-2.133***	0.029	-2.301***	0.053
Wald $\chi^2$	2200***		2233***	

Note: “White” and “primary offense - drug” are reference variables.

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

Figure 1. Predicted counts of visitation by individual- and county-level factors

