Visiting Days

Joel Medina and Beth Caldwell

Visiting days are the most important days in a prisoner's life. The authors of this article know this from personal experience. One of the authors spent twelve years of his life in prison. The other is his wife, who visited him for twelve years. This article explores the emotional aspects of prison visitation and the central importance of visiting days in people's lives. It also links the authors' personal experiences to research in order to critique policies that impact visiting. The United States incarcerates over two million people each year. More than two million people visit prisons each year given that many prisoners have multiple visitors. The impacts of prison visitation are far-reaching (see Beck *et al.*, 2008), impacting not only prisoners but also their loved ones and communities.

Part one is a detailed narrative that describes the visiting experience from the perspectives of a prisoner and a visitor, highlighting the importance of visitation, as well as the challenges facing visitors that are created by institutional policies and actors. Despite evidence that visitation programs increase safety and reduce recidivism, prison policies do not support visitation. Rather, as the narrative portion of this article explores, visitors must travel long distances, wait for long periods of time, and experience various rituals of degradation in order to spend time with their incarcerated loved ones.

Part two integrates our ethnographic accounts with academic studies to critique specific policies that impede visiting, including transferring prisoners to be housed in out-of-state facilities and locating prisons far away from where the family members of prisoners reside. This section explores how visitation helps prisoners to stay positively focused in the midst of difficult circumstances, thus promoting institutional safety, and questions policies that interfere with visiting. The link between prison visitation and successful re-entry is also discussed in order to emphasize the importance of visitation for people's successful integration into their families and communities when they are released.

Given the importance of visiting on people's lives and the associated positive impacts of visiting on safety and recidivism rates, prison policies should support, rather than discourage, visiting. However, the cumulative effect of prison policies and interactions between prison officials and visitors creates a climate that is hostile to visitors. The article concludes by recommending that prison policies support visitation, and

that incarceration be replaced by more community-based responses to crime so that people who are criminalized can maintain closer ties to their families and communities.

PART I:
NARRATIVE ACCOUNT OF A PRISON VISIT

Alternating between the perspective of a prisoner and a visitor, this section explores the emotional aspects of visiting and the central importance of visiting for maintaining relationships. By focusing on the details of the visiting experience, subtle and often-overlooked obstacles for visitors are highlighted. This ethnographic portion provides the context for the critique of prison policies that interfere with visiting that is presented in the second part of the article. Further, the experiences discussed point to the need for the institutional culture of prisons to shift such that people are treated with dignity regardless of whether they are prisoners, visitors or anyone else.

Visitation (Joel)

I had butterflies in my stomach as I entered the visiting room. My heart was pounding, my palms were sweating. At first glance, I did not see her. Then I spotted her on the far side of the room, sitting alone at a table surrounded by four plastic chairs. As I crossed the room, she looked up, saw me, and flashed a smile. I knew she was happy to see me, but I could also see that she was tired. She stood up as I took her into my arms and gently squeezed her. She melted into my body. Her arms wrapped around me, clinging tightly. I could feel her warm breath on my neck. I kissed her. Feelings of life surged through my veins. I did not want to let go of her, but knew that I had to. I did not want to risk having my visit terminated for holding her longer than the 30 seconds allowed. We sat down, gazing quietly at each other. I got lost in the moment and forgot about my surroundings, enjoying her presence as she once more awoke me to myself.

This is the moment that I used to dream about in between visits – a time that I got to be myself, laugh, and talk to her about my fears, and my dreams. I glanced up at the clock and noticed the hands were moving too fast – time flies when every second is so precious. Just sitting there with her felt good. Listening to her talk about what was happening in her life out in the world

made me feel like I was a part of it, even though it sounded so foreign to me. Sometimes she would cry. I wanted to make it all better, but all I could do was listen. Sometimes it was enough to let us forget, smile and laugh.

It was a relief to be able to talk to her about whatever I was going through without the threat of being recorded, as we were during every phone conversation. At times, I would vent about racial tension on the yard, which usually meant a riot waiting to happen. I would share how upset it made me to see people ready to kill each other over the most trivial things, like somebody accidentally bumping into another person. Other times, it would be that a CO [Correctional Officer] had it out for me and kept trying to provoke me to go off on him. Some would go as far as shoving me or poking my chest. I knew that any reaction would lead to serious consequences, but it was a challenge not to respond to such taunting. She would tell me, "It's okay baby. Those guys are just pathetic – don't let them get to you". Just hearing those words would change everything for me. With her, my life had meaning, even enough promise to ignore the world in which I lived.

Our Time Together (Beth)

I sat in a hot, plastic chair with my eyes fixed on the ground. It does not take much to start problems between prisoners, and I did not want anyone to misconstrue my gaze. Every second or two, I glanced up at the door that prisoners walk through to enter the visiting room. I usually waited for him for 20 to 30 minutes after getting into the visiting area. It had been close to an hour and I was getting anxious. If he did not come out in the next 15 minutes, it would be count time. That meant that the prison would stop allowing prisoners to come to visiting for the next two hours. I did not want to think about missing out on two hours of time that I could be spending with him.

I glanced up again. This time I thought I saw him through a small glass window. The door opened and I saw his smile. My heart started racing with relief and excitement. He had made it before count, so we would get to spend four precious hours together that day. He moved towards me as if there were no one else in the crowded room. He was finally here. I closed my eyes and cherished the feeling of being held.

Sometimes, on visiting days, we got to forget about the prison walls that normally divided us – just for a minute or two at a time. Like when I got there early enough for us to find a picnic table outside on the patio. We sat outside, enjoying the sunshine and the sounds of kids playing little league

in the park across the street from the prison. We would daydream about being able to sit in a park together sharing a picnic someday. Or when we sat outside on the concrete patio at Ironwood Prison, shaded by a tarp that hung over the tall barbed wire fences surrounding us. One time, as he sat with his arm draped around me, a butterfly landed on his hand right next to my face. It sat there for a minute as we stared at this beautiful creature.

Our relationship was sustained by visiting days. Visits are when we laughed and cried together. It was the time when we could talk openly about whatever was on our minds. I complained about issues at work or about problems with my car. He told me about his day-to-day struggles in there. We argued and made up. We smiled, held hands, and sometimes just stared into each other's eyes, appreciating each moment that we got to spend together. I do not know if I would have made it without visiting days.

Expecting a Visit (Joel)

It was 10:30am – past the time I usually got called for my visit. I was pacing the dorm aisle impatiently. Institutional head count would begin in 20 minutes. If I was not called out by then, I would have had to wait until count cleared; that could take up to two hours. My neighbors were telling me, "Relax she'll be here". Without looking up from his magazine, the CO told me jokingly, "Leave me alone Medina". He knew that I was once again coming to ask if Visiting had called for me yet.

This anxiety was nothing new – I had the same emotions every time I expected a visit. I would get up early to shower and get ready. Having ironed my visiting clothes the night before, it did not take long. Once dressed, the waiting would begin as the nagging fear that visiting would be cancelled hovered over me. A fight on the yard, a riot at another facility, fog outside or too many staff calling in sick – there were plenty of 'reasons' why visiting could be cancelled. I would worry that my wife would hit traffic and miss the cut-off time. Waiting for a visit was stressful. It was the best thing that could happen to me, so I had a lot to lose.

Waiting (Beth)

The process of getting to see him was emotionally charged, time consuming and physically draining. The alarm clock would start beeping at 4am. I am not a morning person, but I had to get up early in order to have enough visiting time. Otherwise, we might only get to spend an hour or two together.

It was a 3 ½ to 4-hour drive and if I did not get there around 8:15am, the wait to enter the institution would be even longer. I groggily got out of bed, made some coffee for the road and got ready. I had already selected the clothes I was going to wear and I had another bag packed with extra clothes in case the guards told me I had to change. I grabbed the zip lock bag filled with quarters, made sure I had my ID and I headed to the car.

The solitary drive is something I both loved and hated about visiting. Some mornings, like this one, I enjoyed driving down the 10 freeway while everyone else was sleeping. I watched the sunrise as I drove through the desert. Other mornings, I hated the drive – like the day when the freeway was closed for two hours in a lonely, solitary stretch of desert. Cars lined the freeway, stopped in a long row. Tears filled my eyes as I watched the clock, all to aware of the time I was losing with my love. But this morning, the roads were clear and the drive went well.

I exited the freeway and decided not to stop at the rest stop adjacent to the exit. I gambled I could make it another hour for the restroom at the prison. If I stopped, I might miss the moment when they pass out the numbers to the cars waiting in line. As I drove down the long, desolate road that leads to the prison, I could glimpse the row of cars already lined up on the side of the road. I parked in behind the other cars, beginning the process of waiting for the next four hours or so. After a while, one by one, people started their ignitions and a slow parade of cars drove towards the gate marking the entrance to the prison grounds.

By the entrance, each car was stopped by a pair of guards who looked for contraband. “Good morning”, I said politely to the guard as I handed him my driver’s license through the window. “Morning”, he said. “Do you have any drugs, alcohol, or weapons in the vehicle?” “No”, I said quietly. “Pop the trunk”, he instructed me, handing back my license. I reached down and pulled the lever to open the trunk. He looked through my things. “Go ahead”, he said, handing me a pass with a number on it. I peeked at my number and saw that I was number 104. I would probably get to see him by 11:30am – that would give us a 4-hour visit.

I had experimented with arriving at different times and had found that although I much preferred to have a lower number, it was too difficult to get there that early. One time, I wanted to get in early to spend as much time with Joel as possible. I left home around midnight and parked in the line of cars outside the prison at about 3:45am. It was cold out in the desert, and I

had not thought to bring a blanket. I remember huddling on the floorboard of my car trying to stay warm in the dark, staring at the barbed wire and humming lights of the prison to my right. That was a long night. By the time I got inside, I was so exhausted that it was hard to sustain a conversation.

Another time, I got there early again because I wanted to try to circumvent the long waiting process. Arriving half an hour later could mean waiting for an additional two hours. I arrived to the line of cars while it was still dark outside. Two hours passed before the cars started moving. I turned the keys in the ignition to start the car, but there was no response. I had forgotten to turn my lights off. The battery had died while I was waiting. Tears burned in my eyes as the cars behind me drove past, taking my place in line. I called a tow truck and eventually made it inside, but I lost hours of visiting that day.

After the guard waved me through, I drove down the road until I entered a large parking lot, surrounded by desert on one side and the prison on the other. Once in the parking lot, visitors began to freshen up, apply make-up, and change their clothes. Many had left home in the middle of the night. I walked into the Visitor Processing Center with a crowd of other people. Eventually, the COs began to call out people's numbers, beginning with one. There were upwards of 300 numbers that would be called out throughout the day. It was a slow, painful waiting process.

I found an empty plastic chair and sat down, hoping that by some miracle the process would move quickly. I scanned the room and recognized many of the faces of the COs. This reassured me. Last time I was there, they were training new visiting staff. It took five hours for me to be admitted, and we only got to spend an hour and a half together. The waiting room was filled with women and children. A young girl wearing a pink, flowered dress kept asking her mother when she would get to see her daddy. "Why does it take so long mommy?", she asked. I glanced up at the clock as I heard a CO call out the next number. It was 10:00am and they were only on number 48. The waiting felt unbearable sometimes.

Academic research identifies prolonged waiting as a common experience for prison visitors (Comfort, 2003; Christian, 2005). Johnna Christian's (2005, p. 38) study regarding prison visitation in New York revealed that some visitors spent 24 hours travelling to the visit, waiting, visiting for a few hours and then travelling home. Megan Comfort's (2003) ethnographic research on visiting at a California prison reflects on the emotions I experienced while visiting processing seemed to proceed at a snail's pace.

According to Comfort (2003, p. 92), "The lengthy and inefficient queues required for visiting a prisoner do not just belittle the worth of his family's and friends' time—they also deprecate the importance of the visit itself, the preciousness of moments spent with those who are otherwise physically barred from one's presence". Comfort's study includes an interview with Lynn, a prison visitor, whose sentiments echo those of visitors I overheard and spoke to for years:

> For instance, visiting hours are 7:30 to 2:30. But they don't start processing you until 7:30. And that's a frustration to me in that, "No, I would like to be face-to-face by 7:30, *why can't you start processing* at 7:15? *What is the problem* with the mentality behind starting processing fifteen minutes prior to visiting time?" […] [Once processing begins] they take their time, and they have to know that every minute – or maybe they don't. Maybe it's just a matter of not really comprehending, *every minute* is so valuable, you know? (ibid, original emphasis).

Over the years, as I waited in a various parking lots and visiting rooms in order to spend a few hours with my husband, I would return to these frustrations, feeling as if with some slight adjustments the process could be so much more efficient and more humane.

Secondary Prisonization – The Emotional Toll (Beth)

Most official prison policies claim to prioritize helping prisoners to maintain ties with their family members through visiting. However, this does not seem to be reflected in the actions of prison staff. The arbitrary enforcement of regulations and the derogatory treatment by correctional officers wears heavily on the spirits of those who fill visiting waiting rooms. Comfort (2003, p. 79) has termed the dehumanizing process that visitors go through "secondary prisonization". She explains that female visitors "experience restricted rights, diminished resources, social marginalization, and other consequences of penal confinement, even though they are legally innocent and reside outside the prison's boundaries" (see also Hannem, 2011).

As I was standing in line for visiting one time, a CO stepped out in front of the visitors and announced, "Listen up. I'm going to go over the dress code with you because some of you want to come up here looking like you work on the corner of Hollywood and Vine", making a reference

to a corner known for prostitution. According to California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation regulations, visiting "must be conducted in as accommodating a manner as possible in keeping with the need to maintain order". Being compared to prostitutes did not feel "accommodating", nor did it seem to promote the institution's need to maintain order. The CO proceeded to read some highlights from the list of rules and regulations regarding the visitor's dress code. He included some basic information, such as the fact that blue jeans were not allowed because the prisoners wear them. He also chose to read off some of the more offensive guidelines, such as the rule that visitors cannot wear any clothing that exposes their genitalia.

I heard a guard yell, "100". Knowing that my number would be called soon, I stood up and walked towards the counter so as not to waste any time. When I heard "104", I handed the CO my pass and my ID. She ran my name through the computer system, looked me up and down to see if I was dressed according to her satisfaction, and stamped my paperwork. I was relieved; the stamp meant that she approved me to advance to the next stage of the process.

Problems with a visitor's attire or with one's belongings often result in visitors being sent back at this point. First-time visitors who are unfamiliar with the dress code guidelines are almost always ordered to change their clothes. Many come in jeans, tank tops, or t-shirts in one of the many prohibited colors. One of the most unsettling parts of this process is the unpredictable and changing nature of the dress code regulations.

"I wear this outfit every time I come here to try to avoid problems, but today they decided I have to change", I heard the woman next to me say to another visitor. This is a common problem. There is a sense that the enforcement of the dress code is arbitrary in nature. One week, sandals are allowed. Another week, they must have a strap on the back of the shoe. Yet on another day, no open-toed shoes are allowed. One year, on Valentine's Day, the COs did not allow anyone wearing red to enter. Because it was Valentine's Day, over half of the visitors were wearing red for the occasion. As far as I saw, that rule was never enforced before or after that day. I got to be an experienced visitor and would generally bring three different changes of clothes and two extra pairs of shoes with me in the car. That way, no matter what the rule was that day, I would have something to wear.

A visitor's fear of being ordered to change clothes is that, even if it is as simple as walking back to one's car to put on something different, it means

less time with your loved one. Everyone is counting the minutes and these delays matter – a lot. One time when the CO asked me to empty my pockets, I pulled out a twenty-dollar bill that I had forgotten about. Rather than waste the time it would take to go back to my car, I gave it to another visitor who was being sent back to change.

Because I had been there so many times before, I knew to walk directly over to the line of COs near the metal detector after my paperwork was stamped. I presented my paperwork and ID to the CO and put my shoes, belt, and earrings into the plastic bin that sat on the counter. The CO instructed me to bend down so that he could inspect whether any cleavage was visible from his vantage point. They did not all do this – only those who seemed to want to add to the demeaning nature of this screening process. "Now turn around", he said, as he inspected my clothing, and body, from behind. "Those pants are a little tight, but I'll let you slide", he said with a wink. I cringed inside, but I heard the words "thank you", come out of my mouth. He had the authority to delay or refuse my entrance, and I felt powerless.

This was an unsettling feeling for me. I was not used to feeling so powerless. But over the years, I learned that as a prison visitor my freedom, power and humanity were limited. By virtue of loving someone in prison, the rules of his incarceration extended to me. It gave me a limited glimpse into what it must have been like for my husband all the time. Writing this article, I re-experienced the degradation that I used to feel during the visiting process. I was reading some other women's accounts of their experiences with visiting when my body began to tremble and I began to sob. The experience has had long-term effects on me.

I advanced to the next stage, walking barefoot through a metal detector. I made it through, but the woman behind me set it off. It was the underwire in her bra. The CO handed her a large, rusty pair of scissors and instructed her to go to the restroom to cut the wire out of the bra. "I just bought this bra though", she protested, "and it cost $40". "No bra, no entry", replied the CO, "and I can't let you in with a wire in the bra". She sighed and walked back to the restroom in the waiting area, scissors in hand. This is a familiar scene that plays itself out with most first-time female visitors. I had to do it my first time too.

My heart beat faster – I had made it through the most difficult parts of the admission process. I walked down the road to the visiting area. The cool air-conditioning hit my face and I smiled as the sweat that had accumulated on

my forehead began to dry. I handed my paperwork and ID to the CO seated outside the visiting area. He picked up the phone and called for Medina #K96616 to be sent out to the visiting room. I picked a table and bought some frozen burritos, chips and soda from the vending machines before they ran out. I returned to the table and sat with this pile of food in front of me, glancing up at the clock and at the door.

He walked into the room, and the fatigue, frustration and dehumanization I had felt over the past few hours melted away. We would get to spend three-and-a-half hours together, lost in the comfort of one another's presence.

PART II: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VISITING AND PRISON POLICIES

In addition to providing a necessary time for emotional support for prisoners and their loved ones, visiting supports the institutional goals of prisons, such as maintaining order and promoting rehabilitation. In this section, Joel's personal experiences highlight the influence of visitation on prisoner's emotions and behaviours. Academic research is discussed in order to link these experiences and research on the positive effects of visiting. Prison policies that interfere with visiting are critiqued on the basis that prisons should support visiting because it promotes positive social outcomes.

A Visit is a Lifeline: Institutional Safety and Security (Joel)

Academic research regarding prison visitation programs cites a range of positive effects of visiting. According to Bales and Mears (2008, p. 293), "a sizable literature examines factors that influence visitation and the hypothesis, largely supported, that prison visits can improve inmates' behavior while incarcerated". Another literature review regarding prison visitation reveals, "an inmate's connection with the outside, through visitation programs, could greatly reduce inmate tensions and in turn reduce the likelihood of riots, disturbances, and deviant behavior" (Tewksbury and DeMichele, 2005, p. 295).

My personal experiences, as well as my observations of the experiences of other prisoners are consistent with this research. There are many reasons why visiting promotes safety and positive behaviour among prisoners. Visits connect you to the outside world and help you to get a broader perspective.

They remind you of what you have to lose if you get into trouble. A good visit replenishes your emaciated spirit with love and encouragement that is otherwise virtually absent within the confines of prison. I can recall many times when a visit helped me to stay on track, and to stay out of trouble.

One instance, in particicular, stands out in my mind. As I sat up quickly to the sound of footsteps approaching, I was relieved to see it was an elderly man walking to the restroom. I had spent the last four days in a state of paranoia, waiting for the worst to happen. A prisoner had attacked me four days ago as I got ready to shower. As I placed my towel on the towel rack, I suddenly felt a strong punch on the side of my face. Half dazed, I looked back and, moving quickly, I managed to dodge the prisoner's fist. Having seen a shiny metallic glimmer coming from his hand, I focused on his hands to see what he was holding. I was relieved to see that his hands were both balled up without a shank; it must have been the reflection of his watch or something. Feeling more confident having realized that he did not have a knife, I responded the only way I knew how. I charged him and unloaded a series of punches. I was trying to drop this guy, but he was not going down. I kept looking towards the door, expecting more people to come towards me to jump me when a prisoner ran into the showers to tell me that the cops were coming. As I ran towards my bunk, I heard the incident alarm start to blare. I reached my bunk, put on my workout gloves, and started to do push-ups so that the COs would believe that I was agitated from my workout and not from fighting in the bathroom. They took him to the infirmary and ordered everyone to go to their bunks and to strip down to their boxers. They were coming around to do a body inspection to see who had marks or bruises. I took off my gloves and noticed that I was bleeding from a couple of my knuckles. "I'm caught", I thought to myself.

Even though I was defending myself and I was the one who was attacked, I knew no one would care about that. They were coming around in order by bunks. As a CO approached my bunk, my neighbor told me that my nose was bloody. I grabbed a t-shirt and wiped my face. The CO looked at me, told me to turn around, and inspected my body. He looked me in the eyes, nodded his head as if disappointed and walked over to the next bed. I would call this CO my friend, but in my environment, friendship with a CO was completely forbidden. I had talked with him in the past about my desire to change and about how the person I was forced to be in prison was not really me. He gave me a pass.

Two days prior to this attack, the guy who punched me had exchanged strong words with a prisoner of another race. Since I was a few bunks away and had not run over to him during this argument, he felt that I had failed to back him up. A rule among Hispanic prisoners mandates that we must back each other up in a physical confrontation with a person of another race. Although this rule does not extend to verbal disagreements, I had become more and more distant from the crowd, and someone must have been looking for an excuse to reel me back in. I was fed up of hanging out on the yard, hearing war stories and listening to gossip. I was immersed in the correspondence college courses I had enrolled in, and that upset people. Maybe they were jealous, or they thought I was stuck up. They would have preferred that I hung around doing nothing, waiting for something to happen, rather than spend time in the library.

Now, four days after the incident, I found myself full of stress and anxiety. I was hyper vigilant, constantly watching my back. I was so paranoid that I felt like everyone was against me. I could not sleep because I would have been vulnerable. I was tired, and part of me wished that I had gotten caught. They would have taken me to a cell where I would be locked inside 23 hours a day, but at least I would feel safe while I was in there. Normally, for a prisoner to attack another prisoner of his same race, he must have approval. By virtue of an attack against me being authorized, I knew that the people calling the shots on the yard had it in for me. That is why I felt so vulnerable. I did not share my worries or fears with anybody; I lived in an environment where it was dangerous to trust people. I walked around with my chest out high. The only solution I could envision to my problem was to get them before they got me. My survival instinct had kicked in and I decided that I would rather be a survivor than a victim, although I did not want to get in trouble or to hurt anyone.

By this point, I had narrowed my potential attackers down to just a couple of people – friends of the guy who punched me in the showers four days ago. I kept seeing these two guys watching me as if they were hunters and I was their prey. I had decided that I would make my move the next morning. I was sitting on my bed when suddenly I heard the CO call my name out. I stepped out into the aisle to see what he wanted. “VISIT” he shouted out. I got dressed as fast as I could, wondering who had come to see me. I stepped into the visiting room and right away spotted her by the vending machine. It was my girl. Suddenly, with a deep exhale, I let go of

all my worries. A sense of relief washed over me at the sight of her. I did not tell her about my situation because I knew it would worry her – I did not want to add more stress to her life. She worried about my safety all the time. I knew that telling her my problems in that moment would overwhelm her.

Even though I did not confide in her that day, being in her presence helped me to put things back into perspective. I did not want to disappoint her by jeopardizing my release date. We had so many plans – that was what I was living for. All of my stress suddenly felt bearable. During that visit, I decided that I would not initiate any confrontation but would instead continue to wait, ready to defend myself if ambushed again. She allowed me to think clearly and to gather my shattered mind. Everything seemed so much clearer now. I realized that I had to be strong – I knew that I had to control my thoughts so that I would not allow myself to be controlled by my circumstances. Once again, a visit was my lifeline.

There were many times when I was on the brink of breaking and a visit from a loved one gave me strength to hold on – to keep treading water. Holding my infant nephew and breathing in that distinct smell of a newborn, talking to my younger brothers about the importance of doing well in school, laughing with my sisters, or exchanging hopes and dreams with my girl. These were the small things that mattered and that kept me sane.

Looking around visiting rooms, I would see the softer, more humane side of the prisoners that I lived with. I remember seeing Sniper, his face covered in tattoos and quick to fight on the yard, holding his baby daughter lovingly with a soft smile on his face. Or Youngster, who generally walked around with a "fuck the world" attitude, crying while talking to his elderly mother. Visiting reminds us of our humanity, a perspective that is sometimes lost when living in an environment that seems designed to make us forget. Seeing this side of each other promotes compassion and, in turn, makes violence between people less likely. Visiting also promotes safety within prisons both because it provides prisoners with an opportunity to reconnect with the people who give our lives meaning.

Prison Geography: Distance as an Obstacle to Visiting (Beth)

Although the positive benefits of visiting are widely accepted, the locations of prisons in relation to urban centres where most prisoners' families reside pose a major obstacle to family members making regular visits. Increasingly, new prisons are built in rural areas far away from the urban areas where

most prisoners' families live (Huling, 2002). The decisions regarding where to build new prisons are influenced by economic interests of rural communities hoping to attract more jobs for local residents (Huling, 2002; Gilmore, 2007). The implications of the location of prisons on visitation seem to be ignored in the decision-making process.

Christian (2005) describes the distances of New York prisons from the city center. She notes that the closer facilities range from a 2 hour drive to a 6 1/2 hour drive, while other prisons are up to 11 hours away. Her study details some of the obstacles that this distance poses to the visitors of New York prisoners, concluding that "staying connected to a prisoner is a time, resource, and labor intensive process, which may create barriers to prisoners' maintenance of family ties" (Christian, 2005, p. 32; see also Bales and Mears, 2008).

Locating prisons far away from the homes of prisoners' families also places visiting family members in dangerous situations as they drive for many hours to reach prison facilities, often fatigued. I remember hearing about Guero's family. His parents got into an accident on the freeway while they were coming to visit him and they were both hospitalized as a result of the injuries they sustained. I also remember talking to Arturo after he got the phone call that his wife and son had died in a traffic accident while driving home from visiting him. He committed suicide not long after getting the news. These are some of the invisible costs of building prisons in remote locations.

Prison geography has significant political and economic impacts as well. Prisoners are counted as residents where they are imprisoned. This transfers both federal funds tied to U.S. Census, as well as political representation from poor minority urban areas to white rural areas where most prisons are located (Hunter and Wagner, 2009).

Cutting Family Ties through Out of State Transfers (Joel)

A growing number of states within the US transfer prisoners to serve their prison sentences in privately operated out-of-state prisons. This makes receiving visits impossible for many. In California, for example, the Governor declared state of emergency due to the extreme overcrowding of the state's prisons. This allowed the state to begin the transfer of thousands of California prisoners to private prisons in other states against their will, despite the fact that the State of California's constitution mandates that prisoners be housed within the state unless they volunteer to be transferred. I was one of the prisoners involuntarily transferred out of state.

Despite the rotten food, the poor quality of medical care, and the constant threat of danger in California prisons, none of us wanted to be transferred as it meant we would lose our contact and visits with our loved ones. I remember standing in a long line of prisoners who were scheduled to be transferred waiting to ask the authorities to allow us to stay in California. I was standing next to Jose, who told me, "Damn dog, this is some fucked up shit. I just started having contact with my kids after eight years of trying to get my ex-wife to bring them to visit me. I barely started to establish some type of relationship with them; I don't know what's going to happen now. She wouldn't bring them to see me when I was only five hours away, so I know damn well she's definitely not going to bring them to see me all the way across state borders". Juan Carlos was one of the most devastated because his family members, including his wife, were undocumented immigrants. To risk coming to see him in either Arizona or Mississippi would be out of the question due to immigration checkpoints along the way. He still had eight years to serve.

These patterns are replicated in other states as well. In an article about the implications of mass incarceration on families, Donald Braman (2002) presents the case of Lilly, whose son Anthony was transferred out-of-state from Washington D.C. to Ohio. Since his transfer, Lilly has spent 20 percent of her total income on prison phone calls. She has also had to invest a substantial amount of their family income to travel halfway across the nation money to visit Anthony in Ohio (Braman, 2002).

Visiting's Positive Effect on Recidivism and Re-entry (Beth)

In addition to improving the behaviour of prisoners while incarcerated, visits also reduce recidivism. Bales and Mears' (2008, pp. 304-305) analysis of Florida data found that for prisoners who received visits, "the odds of recidivism were 30.7% lower than the odds for those who were not visited". Their research also indicates that visits over a longer time period contribute to even greater reductions in recidivism. They found that "for each additional 3-month quarter in which visitation occurred, there was an 11.6 percent reduction in the odds of recidivating compared with the odds of not recidivating" (ibid, p. 306).

A growing recognition of the need for effective re-entry programs in the U.S. has been driven by an interest in reducing recidivism rates. The importance of visitation in reducing recidivism has been ignored despite clear evidence of the importance of developing the support of family and

friends to assist prisoners upon their release. It is during visiting times that relationships can be built or rebuilt in preparation for life outside. This is a critical bridge to reintegrating into one's family and community after spending years in prison.

CONCLUSION

Our personal experiences, in conjunction with the academic research discussed in this article, have important policy implications with regards to visitation policies and the geographic locations of prisons. Prisons should be located closer to the communities where most prisoners' families reside. Visitors should be treated with humanity and respect. The visiting entry process should be conducted in such a way that it does not contribute to the physical and emotional obstacles to visiting. Given that visits improve the behaviour of prisoners while they are incarcerated and reduce their recidivism rates once they are released, programs assisting and supportive of family visitation should be given high priority in correctional budgets and operations.

Furthermore, recognizing the profound importance of family in the rehabilitation of prisoners begs the question of whether relying upon incarceration as a primary response to crime, particularly given its negligible impact on crime, is good public policy. Furthermore, current evidence indicates that policies of mass incarceration are doing great harm to low-income communities of colour (Clear, 2007). Prisons isolate those they incarcerate from their families and communities, thereby making reintegration into these entities quite challenging after one has been incarcerated for a substantial period. Given the value of relationships on rehabilitation, as reflected by these ethnographic accounts on the effects of visitation, community-based alternatives that prioritize relationships represent a promising alternative to incarceration as a social response to crime.

REFERENCES

Bales, William D. and Daniel P. Mears (2008) "Inmate Social Ties and the Transition to Society: Does Visitation Decrease Recidivism?", *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 43(3): 287-321.

Beck, Victoria S., Stephen C. Richards and Preston Elrod (2008) "Prison Visits: On the Outside Looking In", *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, 17(1): 91-105.

Braman, Donald (2002) "Families and Incarceration in Invisible Punishment in The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment", in Marc Mauer and Meda Chesney-Lind (eds.), *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment*, New York: The New Press, pp. 117-135.

Christian, Johnna (2005) "Riding the Bus: Barriers to Prison Visitation and Family Management Strategies", *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 21(1): 31-48.

Clear, Todd R. (2007) *Imprisoning Communities: How Mass Incarceration Makes Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Worse*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Comfort, Megan L. (2003) "In the Tube at San Quentin: The "Secondary Prisonization" of Women Visiting Inmates", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 32(1): 77-107.

Gilmore, Ruth W. (2007) *The Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hannem, Stacey (2011) "Stigma and Marginality: Gendered Experiences of Families of Male Prisoners in Canada", in A. Doyle and D. Moore (eds.), *Critical Criminology in Canada: New Voices, New Directions*, pp. 183-217.

Huling, Tracy (2002) "Building a Prison Economy in Rural America", in Marc Mauer and Meda Chesney-Lind (eds.), *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment*, New York: The New Press, pp. 197-213.

Hunter, Gary and Peter Wagner (2007) "Prisons, Politics, and the Census", in Tara Herivel and Paul Wright (eds.), *Prison Profiteers: Who Makes Money from Mass Incarceration*, New York: The New Press, pp. 80-89.

Tewksbury, Richard and Matthew DeMichele (2005) "Going to Prison: A Prison Visitation Program", *The Prison Journal*, (85)3: 292-310.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Joel Medina spent 12 years in California prisons and is grateful to have the opportunity to reflect upon his experiences. He earned his AA degree while in prison from Palo Verde College and is currently working towards completing a BA degree.

Beth Caldwell is an attorney and a social worker with a passion for social justice. She earned a JD and MSW from UCLA and currently works as a law professor.