

# Inmates Who Receive Visits in Prison: Exploring Factors that Predict

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**HISTORICALLY, PRISON VISITATION** has been regarded as important by correctional practitioners and scholars (Schafer, 1994). For inmates, social support and connections to the outside world established and maintained through prison visitation are critical. Visitation programs help inmates maintain communication with family and friends throughout their incarceration (Lochhead, 1992; Martin, 1997). Visitation may conceivably reduce stressors inherent in the prison environment, thereby enhancing institutional adjustment among inmates. Inmates who are better adjusted to the prison environment and connected to the outside world may also be expected to maintain a stronger connection to the outside world, including free-world norms, behaviors, and expectations, meaning they may be more likely to refrain from conduct that would cause them to receive disciplinary infractions or jeopardize early release. Such a view is supported by studies suggesting that inmates who receive visits are more likely to be successful in reentering society (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2001, 2002; Schafer, 1991, 1994).

Much of the literature on prison visitation focuses on its effects on inmate mental health and post-release behavior. Common among existing literature are findings suggesting that visits improve mental health and decrease recidivism among inmates (Bales & Mears, 2008; Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2001; Duwe & Clark, 2011; Monahan, Goldweber, & Cauffman, 2011; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005). For instance, Monahan, Goldweber, and Cauffman (2011) explored the relationship between parental visitation and inmate

mental health. From the visitation records of 276 male juveniles over the course of the first two months of their incarceration, the researchers found that juveniles who received visits from parents reported more rapid declines in depressive symptoms over time compared to youth who did not receive such visits. In Florida, Bales and Mears (2008) examined the effects of prison visitation on recidivism among 7,000 inmates, and their results revealed that any number of visits and more frequent visits during the final year of incarceration decreased recidivism risk. Similarly, after studying the effects of prison visitation on recidivism among 16,420 inmates released from Minnesota prisons between 2003 and 2007, Duwe and Clark (2011) also found that visitation significantly decreased recidivism risk.

Beyond looking at the impact on inmate mental health and recidivism, prison visitation studies also center on visitors. Casey-Acevedo and Bakken (2001) reported that more than 60 percent of women did not receive any visits from their minor children during their incarceration. In terms of children who do visit incarcerated parents, research suggests that children who lived with the parent before incarceration were most likely to visit (Martin, 1997; Prison Visitation Project, 1994; Tennessee Department of Corrections, 1995). Besides children, individuals most likely to visit inmates were other family members (Grinstead, Faigeles, Bancroft, & Zack, 2001). As Tewksbury and DeMichele (2005) revealed with visitors of male inmates, "most visitors are family members, many of whom plan to

live with the inmate following incarceration" (p. 308).

Although the research on prison visitation thus far primarily emphasizes effects on inmate recidivism and identifying common classes of visitors, it is similarly important to understand identifiable factors associated with inmates that are related to whether or not they receive visitors while incarcerated. Among female inmates, Casey-Acevedo and Bakken (2001) found no significant differences between individuals who received visits and those who did not, with the exception of the county of commitment. However, no previously identified study has examined characteristics of male inmates that may be associated with the likelihood of receiving visits. The present study will address this gap by considering whether or not there are specific characteristics of male inmates that are related to the likelihood and frequency of receiving visits.

## **The Present Study**

The present study seeks to identify factors associated with inmates that may influence the frequency of their receipt of visits inside prison. Analysis centers on how both demographic and prison experience characteristics influence an inmate's number of visits.

## **Methodology**

The target population for this study included all adult inmates incarcerated in state-operated correctional facilities between January 1, 2011, and December 31, 2011, from one Midwestern state. Included in the data are inmate demographics, criminal/incarceration

history, and visitation records. Before receiving data, all procedures were reviewed by both the Department of Corrections and the authors' institutional review board to ensure that ethical standards were met.

### Sample and Sampling Procedure

The sample initially consisted of 620 adult inmates, all of whom were both (1) admitted to prison during the 2009 calendar year and (2) incarcerated for all 365 continuous days in the 2011 calendar year. Because the sample included only a small number of female inmates ( $n = 35$ ), and the literature suggests that female inmates' visitation experiences may be significantly different from those of men (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2001; Stanton, 1980), they were excluded from the present study. As a result, we analyze demographics, criminal/incarceration history, and 2011 visitation information for a total of 585 male inmates.

The authors recognized that these inmates constituted a biased (i.e., admitted to prison during the 2009 calendar year) sample of individuals serving time throughout the entire 2011 calendar year. The sample is appropriate, however, for the current investigation, as all inmates had been incarcerated for between one and two years before the study period of interest. This ensured that all inmates were acclimated to living in prison. As evidenced by Jones and Schmid (2000), within six months the vast majority of inmates are acclimated to institutional living and "adjusted" to the environment as fully as will occur.

### Measures

#### Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this analysis is the total number of visits received by an inmate during the 2011 calendar year. It is drawn from inmate visitation records maintained by the Department of Corrections. This measure was summed as a count and coded as a ratio-level variable.

#### Independent Variables

Nine predictor measures were used, including both demographic and prison experience variables. Demographics included race, age, education level, and marital status. *Inmate race* was coded as a dichotomous variable (Nonwhite = 0, White = 1), as the prison system in question comprises approximately 75 percent White inmates, 18 percent African-American inmates, and 7 percent Other inmates. The sample is 69.5 percent White

and 30.5 percent Nonwhite. *Inmate age* at admission to prison was based on date of birth and coded as a ratio-level variable; inmates in the sample have a mean age at admission of 32.5 years. *Inmate education level* was coded as an ordinal-level variable (Less than High School = 0, High School = 1, More than High School = 2). In the sample, 15.2 percent of inmates have less than a high school education, 77.2 percent have high school as their highest educational achievement, and 7.6 percent have more than a high school education. Finally, *inmate marital status* was coded as a dichotomous variable (Single/Never Married = 0, Married/Partnered/Divorced/Separated/Widowed = 1). Fully 62.6 percent of the sample is single/never married, and 37.4 percent are or have been married/partnered.

Prison experience variables included prison admission type, number of prior incarcerations, sentence duration, gang membership, and number of disciplinary infractions. *Prison admission* type was coded as a dichotomous variable (New Prison Commitment = 0, Parole/Probation/Special Sentence/Work Release Revocation = 1). In the sample, 71.3 percent of inmates are incarcerated on a new commitment, and 28.7 percent are incarcerated on some form of a revocation. *Number of prior incarcerations* was summed as a count, and it was coded at the ratio level, with the sample having a mean of .66 prior incarcerations (63.9 percent are serving their first incarceration). *Sentence duration* in years was also summed as a count, and it was coded as a ratio-level variable. The mean sentence for the inmates in the sample is 20.3 years. *Gang membership* was also coded as a dichotomous variable (Non-gang Member = 0, Gang Member = 1). In the sample, 21.9 percent of inmates are known or believed to be affiliated with a gang. Finally, *number of disciplinary infractions* for the 2011 calendar year was summed as a count, and it was coded as a ratio-level variable. Here, the sample has a mean of 3.34 disciplinary infractions for the 2011 calendar year.

### Findings

We employed both bivariate and multivariate analyses to identify predictors of the number of prison visits that inmates received. Table 1 presents the results of the bivariate analysis (i.e., correlations). As shown, total visits are significantly correlated with race, education level, prison admission type, number of prior incarcerations, sentence duration, gang membership, and number of disciplinary

infractions ( $p \leq .05$ ). Significant relationships are also shown for demographics, with race significantly correlated with age at admission, marital status, gang membership, and number of disciplinary infractions ( $p \leq .05$ ). Education level is significantly correlated with prison admission type, sentence duration, gang membership, and number of disciplinary infractions ( $p \leq .05$ ). Age at admission is significantly correlated with marital status, number of prior incarcerations, sentence duration, gang membership, and number of disciplinary infractions ( $p \leq .05$ ). Marital status is significantly correlated with number of prior incarcerations, sentence duration, gang membership, and number of disciplinary infractions ( $p \leq .05$ ). In addition, prison experience variables show statistically significant correlations. Admission type is significantly correlated with sentence duration, and number of prior incarcerations, sentence duration, and gang membership are all significantly correlated with number of disciplinary infractions ( $p \leq .05$ ). From these results, it appears that receipt of visits is related to two of the four demographic factors and all five prison experience measures.

Following evidence of strong correlations, all independent variables from the theoretical grouping of demographics (i.e., race, age, education level, and marital status) were regressed against the dependent variable.<sup>1</sup> Second, all five prison experience variables (i.e., prison admission type, number of prior incarcerations, sentence duration, gang membership, and number of disciplinary infractions) were added to the demographic variables and regressed against the dependent variable of total visits received, yielding the final model (see Table 2).

Results showed that measures from both theoretical groupings significantly influenced the number of prison visits that inmates received. The model, which includes both demographics and prison experience measures, accounts for 10.3 percent of the overall variation in the number of visits an inmate receives. Seven of the nine independent variables are statistically significant ( $p \leq .05$ ) predictors of total number of visits received. Only the demographic variable of inmate marital status and the prison experience measure of sentence duration were not statistically significant predictors.

<sup>1</sup> The use of multiple regression is appropriate because the dependent variable was measured at the ratio-level.

**TABLE 1.**  
Correlations between Study Variables for Inmates ( $n = 585$ )

	Total Visits	Race	Highest Education Level	Age at Admission	Marital Status	Prison Admission Type	Prior Incarcerations	Sentence Duration	Gang Membership
Total Visits	—								
Race	.178*	—							
Highest Education Level	.178*	.076	—						
Age at Admission	-.037	.135*	-.012	—					
Marital Status	.057	.175*	-.019	.524*	—				
Prison Admission Type	-.100*	.011	.086*	-.037	-.042	—			
Prior Incarcerations	-.114*	-.023	.009	.322*	.122*	-.031	—		
Sentence Duration	.087*	.015	.084*	.142*	.147*	.114*	.014	—	
Gang Membership	-.138*	-.242*	-.095*	-.241*	-.140*	.028	.067	-.051	—
Total Disciplinary Infractions	-.112*	-.091*	-.083*	-.220*	-.126*	-.038	-.099*	-.142*	.096*

\* $p < .05$

**TABLE 2.**  
Variables Identified by Multiple Regression Analysis as Predicting Number of Visits ( $n = 585$ )

	B	SE	Beta	Significance
Race	6.039	1.909	.129	.01*
Highest Education Level	7.556	1.803	.167	.00*
Age at Admission	-.212	.099	-.108	.03*
Marital Status	3.340	2.057	.075	.10
Prison Admission Type	-6.281	1.886	-.132	.01*
Prior Incarcerations	-2.043	.818	-.105	.01*
Sentence Duration	.096	.060	.064	.11
Gang Membership	-4.182	2.212	-.079	.05*
Total Disciplinary Infractions	-.348	.141	-.101	.01*
Constant	8.774	3.963		.02

\* $p < .05$

$F = 8.438; \alpha = .000$

$R^2 = .103$

$df = 9$

In terms of demographics, an inmate's race, education level, and age significantly predicted his number of visits. Being White was positively related to the number of visits received. White inmates received 6.0 more visits than non-White inmates. Regarding education, for each increase in the inmate's level of education, there was an average of 7.5 more visits received. Younger inmates are likely to receive more visits; for every one-year increase in an inmate's age, his visits decreased by 0.2.

In terms of prison experience, an inmate's prison admission type, number of prior incarcerations, gang membership, and number of disciplinary infractions all significantly predicted his number of visits. Inmates admitted on a probation/parole/other revocation had 6.2 fewer visits during the year, as compared

to those inmates admitted on new prison sentences. Inmates with more prior incarcerations also received fewer visits than those with fewer prior incarcerations. For every additional previous incarceration served, an inmate's number of received visits decreased by 2.0. Inmates identified as gang members received 4.1 fewer visits than inmates not identified as gang members. Finally, inmates with more disciplinary infractions received fewer visits. For every one disciplinary infraction increase, an inmate's visits decreased by 0.3.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify factors predictive of the number of visits that inmates received. By means of both bivariate and multivariate analyses, this investigation

highlights how both demographic and prison experience factors among inmates impact the frequency of receiving visits while incarcerated. The results of this study provide insights into alternative visitation strategies for specific types of inmates lacking visits and suggest directions for future research.

This research focuses on what types of inmates are more likely to receive visits during their incarceration. Findings reveal that an inmate's demographic information influences how frequently he is visited inside prison. Younger, white, and more highly educated inmates are more likely to receive visits, and to receive more visits, than their inmate peers. Thus, correctional systems and institutions that wish to pursue the advantages that accrue from inmates receiving visits should pursue alternative strategies for encouraging and facilitating prison visitation among inmates who are non-white (or, in the racial minority for a specific jurisdiction), have lower levels of education and are older.

This study shows that several aspects of an inmate's prison experience also impact the number of visits that he receives on the inside. Inmates who are admitted to prison on a new sentence are more likely to receive visits than inmates admitted to prison on a parole, probation, special sentence, or work release revocation. Inmates with fewer prior incarcerations are also more likely to receive visits than inmates with more prior incarcerations. Inmates without gang affiliations are also more likely to receive visits than inmates with gang affiliations. Further, inmates with fewer disciplinary infractions are more likely to receive visits than inmates with more disciplinary

infractions. Thus, alternative strategies for prison visitation among inmates who violate terms of their community supervision, have prior incarcerations, are affiliated with a gang, and have more disciplinary infractions should be considered.

In sum, these findings suggest that inmates most likely to receive visits, and to receive more visits, are those who are the least deeply ingrained in a criminogenic lifestyle and who have a history of less criminal and more pro-social involvement. Stated differently, it may be those inmates who are less stereotypical of "prison inmates," as well as more reflective of mainstream cultural values and lifestyles, who are more likely to receive visits from family, friends, and loved ones. As such, for these inmates, visits may help maintain a pre-prison lifestyle and offer greater opportunities of visits, resulting in desired outcomes of lower recidivism, increased mental health, and better overall social functioning.

These findings, however, do not mean that correctional leaders should focus only on facilitating visitation for inmates with less criminal lifestyles. Rather, it may be important for correctional officials to adopt programs that reach out to minority communities, as well as to the families and friends of older and less educated inmates, in order to facilitate increased visitation. Community supervision violators, individuals with numerous prior incarcerations, gang members, and individuals with numerous disciplinary infractions should also become the focus of increasing visitation efforts in prison. Programs aimed at these often recalcitrant inmates that attempt to increase positive social interactions may assist in facilitating more efficient management and operation of correctional facilities. At the same time, correctional management that features positive social interaction, such as a direct supervision approach, should be implemented in housing units where such inmates reside. Other correctional resources, like prison chaplains and religious volunteers, may also prove useful in affording social support and connections to the outside world. It may be important, as well, to incorporate visitation procedures that facilitate opportunities for visitation for those with physical, financial, or other limitations on their abilities to travel to (often remote) prison locations to visit their incarcerated loved ones. Using programs such as video visitation and organizations that provide transportation to prison may be especially valuable to the loved ones of inmates

who are more ingrained in a criminal (and poverty-stricken) culture and lifestyle.

This research is not without limitations. First, the sample is drawn from only male inmates in one Midwestern prison system. We acknowledge that these findings may not apply to inmates in other jurisdictions. Therefore, readers should generalize from this sample with caution. Second, because this study relies on official data from a correctional agency, the accuracy of some information cannot be verified.

It is clear that there is a need for more research regarding the characteristics of inmates who receive few or no visits. It may also be necessary to examine the visitation experiences of female inmates and inmates in other jurisdictions. From a policy and practice perspective, alternative strategies for promoting and facilitating prison visitation and positive social interaction focused on all inmates, especially those from communities and backgrounds where loved ones may face significant obstacles to visiting inmates, may allow more inmates to increase and maintain positive social relationships with the outside. Ultimately, ensuring that more individuals in prison receive more visits and positive social interactions may result in more inmates returning to the community without returning to crime.

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