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Caregiver views on father-child contact in prison during the COVID-19 pandemic: implications for the use of video visits

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ABSTRACT

It is generally understood that visits to see incarcerated family members are good for children, families and those in prison. Much research has focused on the impact of prison visits on children and incarcerated mothers, 'parents' as a generic group or barriers to contact, while less attention has been paid to the effect of prison visits on incarcerated fathers. When COVID-19 spread across the globe in early 2020, prisons restricted in-person visits. In Australia, alternative forms of communication between prisoners and their families were utilised, including phone calls and video visits. Drawing on data from an online survey of caregivers of children with a family member in prison ($n=84$), this paper specifically focuses on a sub-sample, reporting on imprisoned fathers ($n=70$), describing and evaluating experiences with video visits. Most respondents reported that the father was not coping well with the lack of face-to-face contact, and almost two-thirds of respondents reported problems with keeping in contact after in-person visits were suspended. However, a small cohort of fathers were found to be coping well. These findings are explored, highlighting barriers to technology-facilitated visits, and point to a range of issues that need to be addressed for such visits to be beneficial.

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Introduction

Men make up the vast majority of those in prison; in Australia, this is around 92% ($n=38,908$) (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2020). Though there are no national figures on the number of parents in prison in Australia, about 38% of people entering prison in Australia reported having children in the community who are dependent on them for their basic needs (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2019). Research from the United States finds nearly half of state prisoners (47%) and more

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than half of federal prisoners (58%) are parents (Maruschack, Bronson, & Alper, 2021). While there is scant research and no consistent record keeping on child contact with an imprisoned father, there is evidence that father-child contact is beneficial for both children and their incarcerated parent (eg, see Roettger & Swisher, 2013; Scharff-Smith & Jakobsen, 2014; Turney & Wildeman, 2013). Yet, when COVID-19 spread across the globe in early 2020, prisons enforced restrictions on in-person visits. In Australia, such visits were cancelled, and alternative forms of communication between prisoners and their families were utilised, including phone calls and video visits.

This paper draws on data from an online survey of caregivers of children with a family member in prison ($n = 84$), with a focus on a sub-sample of imprisoned fathers ($n = 70$). Caregivers described their experiences of video visits with fathers after COVID-19 restrictions were enforced and the perceived impact on fathers' coping and wellbeing. Evidence of the impact of COVID-19 on prisoners and their families and their coping during imprisonment remains in its early phases (see Charles, Kerr, Jensen, Kaitlyn, & Poehlmann, 2023; Hanley, Duursma, Conley-Wright, Simpson, & Wardle, 2023, in this special issue reporting on research; Zoellner (2023); and Faraguna (2023), reporting on practice developments, in this special issue). This article begins to fill this research gap by examining caregivers' perceptions of video visits in the context of paternal incarceration during COVID-related restrictions, and the implications of this for prisoner wellbeing and mental health.

Incarceration and family separation

By definition, incarceration involves physical separation from family, friends and broader social networks (Cochran & Mears, 2013). This separation has been consistently reported in research over recent decades to lead to feelings of social isolation and increased mental illness, such as anxiety, depression and self-harm (eg, Charles, Muentner, & Kjellstrand, 2019; De Claire & Dixon, 2015; Poehlmann, 2005). This is in addition to the already high rates of mental health disorders noted in prison populations worldwide, with one in seven suffering from major depression or psychosis (Fazel & Seewald, 2012). These concerns are reflected in the Australian prison population; the *Health of Australia's Prisoners 2018* (AIHW, 2019) reveals that of the 43,000 people then imprisoned in Australia, 40% of those entering prison had been told they had a mental health condition, 26% had high or very high levels of psychological distress, 23% were taking mental health medication and 21% reported a history of self-harm. When asked to rate their concerns about a range of issues, 52% of respondents ranked 'family or relationships in the community' as their biggest cause of distress, beyond their current imprisonment (43%), followed by their physical and mental health issues (28% and 27% respectively) and substance abuse (27%).¹

It has been suggested that imprisoned parents in particular suffer, as their ability to contribute to the lives of their children is dramatically diminished (Arditti, 2002). In addition, the prison environment generally does not lend itself to parenting (Bartlett & Eriksson, 2018; Scharff-Smith & Jakobsen, 2014). Prisons restrict visitation hours,

¹We use the results from the 2018 AIHW survey, rather than the more recent survey, as this was closer in time to the data collection for this survey.

while the cost of outgoing calls limits the frequency of interactions between incarcerated parents and their children; parents therefore have limited control over how, when, or how often they interact with their children (Burgess & Flynn, 2021). There are also practical barriers, such as the distance required to travel to the prison, as well as socio-economic factors, that may limit the frequency of child-parent contact (Rubenstein, Toman, & Cochran, 2021; Young, Nadel, Bales, Pesta, & Greenwald, 2019). Further, the consequences of that environment on parents are also influential; for example, prison overcrowding has been found to directly contribute to the incarcerated parent's distress, indirectly impacting parenting capacity (Arditti, 2002). Indeed, as Arditti (2002, p. 7) has noted, '[c]riminal justice policy is generally not formulated with family well-being as an explicit outcome'.

A greater understanding of the effects of separation from family on the parent in prison is needed. While the extant literature consistently reports on the negative effects of parental incarceration on children (see, for example, Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012), much of the evidence regarding the effect this separation has on the parent in prison focuses on mothers. Earlier research established these patterns. Houck and Loper (2002), for example, investigating the effects of separation for mothers in prison, found significant levels of psychological distress, well above those of non-incarcerated mothers. These findings were also supported by Poehlmann (2005) who, through interviews with 94 incarcerated mothers, found high rates of depressive symptoms, which were correlated with experiences of loss, trauma and relationship disconnection. More recently, Baldwin and Epstein (2017) interviewed 17 mothers serving short sentences. Almost all reported that their time in custody was 'traumatic', 'painful' or 'heartbreaking', largely due to being separated from their children. While an Australian study of 21 incarcerated mothers with a mental illness found that self-reported mental health significantly improved as they moved through the criminal justice system, it was suggested that this was affected by prison being a respite from chaotic lifestyles and providing improved access to relevant support services (Burgess & Flynn, 2021).

While some research over recent decades has examined imprisoned fathers' barriers to contact with their children, particularly in the United States (eg, Hairston, 1998; Nurse, 2002; Swanson, Lee, Sansone, & Tatum, 2013), less is known about the effect of separation on incarcerated fathers' mental wellbeing; that which exists similarly comes primarily from the United States (Charles et al., 2019; Dargis & Mitchell-Somoza, 2021; Turney, Wildeman, & Schnittker, 2012). In one of the few Australian studies of imprisoned fathers, Bartlett and Eriksson (2018) found that, once incarcerated, fathers were 'stripped of their fathering identity'. One father commented that, '[a]s soon as you pass that door man. ... [I]t doesn't exist. Forget your kids man ... they don't exist. ... [C]ouldn't even find out if my kids were alive let alone okay' (p. 8).

The role of prison visiting in family relationships

It is generally understood that visits are good for children, families, those in prison and the prison itself. For children, visiting allows them to see and communicate directly with their family member, reducing their fears in relation to their family member's safety and wellbeing (Flynn, 2014). Horgan and Poehlmann-Tynan (2020, p. 400) described contact visits as allowing the parent and child to 'see each other in person', where they can 'hug

and hold hands, [as] the most meaningful form of social interaction supporting family relationships'. Such contact also allows parents and children to either continue, or work on rebuilding, their relationships (Tasca, 2018); this may result in better adjustment for children (eg, see Trice & Brewster, 2004).

Recent research describes the opportunities for imprisoned parents that visiting presents: connecting with their parenting role, albeit for brief periods of time (Hutton, 2016) and providing opportunities for those who have been disconnected from children and families (Tasca, 2018). Findings from research with a small group of fathers in prison in Victoria concurs with and extends these patterns (Flynn, Trotter, Sheehan, & Bartlett, 2018). In that study, fathers described visiting as enabling them to build and sustain relationships with their children, as well as helping them to manage emotions, and the impact of separation, in a closed and stressful environment. Research with imprisoned fathers in the United States has indicated other opportunities. Tasca (2018) found that, even where men had limited contact pre-prison, they did receive visits, with caregivers describing this as giving the father-child relationship a 'second chance'. This builds on previous research, which indicates that visiting 'allows prisoners and caregivers a chance to work out the past, communicate about present circumstances, and plan for the future, especially with respect to parenthood' (Tasca, 2016, p. 741). Beckmeyer and Arditti (2014) highlighted the importance of the quality of in-person visits to reducing parental stress, as well as fostering the relationship between the imprisoned parent and their child/ren. Specific research with fathers found that those who received visits were more involved in their children's lives post-release (Charles et al., 2021; Roettger & Swisher, 2013; Turney & Wildeman, 2013) and demonstrated more positive parenting (Visher, 2013).

This is not to suggest that all visitation is positive. For example, the nuances of visits, from the prisoner perspective, have been described by Turanovic and Tasca (2019). They found that, while visiting can support social ties, foster coping and provide practical resources on release, visits can also be stressful, full of conflict and less helpful. This was partly dependent on who was visiting and how often. Beckmeyer and Arditti also described the potential for visitation to have multiple realities for participants; they referred to this as a paradox: while visiting may 'foster family relationships [it] can also remind family members of past traumatic events' (2014, p. 132). This trend has been reported in other United States research (Duwe & Clark, 2011, p. 271), which found that visits from 'siblings, in-laws, fathers, and clergy' were associated with better post-release functioning, while visits from ex-partners were not. Moreover, there is some research to suggest that imprisoned fathers prefer their children not to visit, for fear of the child becoming accustomed to the carceral environment. As one incarcerated father in a United States study stated, '[I d]on't want him to see me this way—I want him to be on a different path—I don't want him to become comfortable with seeing me in jail' (Thomas, Wirth, Poehlmann-Tynan, & Pate, 2022, p. 13). The type of visit may also have detrimental impacts. For example, from observations of children's visits in jails, Poehlmann-Tynan et al. (2015) found that Plexiglas barriers and closed-caption video-conferencing appeared to increase children's distress levels with signs of fatigue, confusion, sadness and anger visible by the end of visits. Similarly, in a survey of adult visitors to three jails in the United States, Tartaro and Levy (2017) found that Plexiglas was considered to be stressful, with respondents citing long wait times and crowded, dirty lobbies as adding to the stress.

Despite these nuances, overall, for imprisoned parents, maintaining supportive family ties during imprisonment has been associated with greater capacity for desistance and better post-release adjustment and community integration (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Farrall & Maruna, 2004; Panuccio, Christian, Martinez, & Sullivan, 2012). While it is not fully understood how these ties work, some (eg, Maruna, 2001; Ronel & Segev, 2013) have suggested that for many, families may aid the person in constructing and maintaining an alternative, non-criminal identity, namely, their outside self (Meek, 2011; Tripp, 2009). However, the implications for families and family connections, as a result of the restrictions on visiting due to COVID-19, are only beginning to be understood (see, for example, Cui, Doyle, & Carey, 2023; Flynn, Bartels, Dennison, Taylor, & Harrigan, 2022).

COVID-19 and prison

COVID-19 spread across the globe from early 2020 and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 11 March 2020. The WHO also provided guidance on preventing and responding to COVID-19 in prisons, noting the potential for 'huge mortality rates' (Summers, 2020, p. 1), a result of the intersection of overcrowded prisons (World Prison Brief, 2020) and the additional, heightened health risks of those in prison (Prison Reform International, 2020).

Although Australia saw a late, but significant, surge in cases in 2022 (Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, 2022), at the time of writing up our findings, there had been a relatively small number of COVID cases among both prisoners and prison staff (see, eg, Gibson & Hynninen, 2020; Raphael, 2021; for discussion of the impact of COVID on prison policy and practice in Australia generally, see Flynn et al., 2022).

In March 2020, across all Australian state and territory correctional centres, in-person visits were cancelled (for an overview of the restrictions imposed in each jurisdiction, see Australian Capital Territory Inspector of Correctional Services, 2020; Flynn et al., 2022). Alternative forms of communication between prisoners and their families had to be relied upon, including phone calls and video visits. In most correctional centres, this involved a rapid upgrade of facilities and changes to procedures, to enable video conferencing with family members for the first time (see Ellem, in this special issue), including a trial using computer tablets in Australia's largest state, New South Wales (NSW) (Fitzgerald, 2020).²

Video visits

The use of video visits or audio-video links (AVL) had already been flagged pre-COVID-19 as offering the opportunity to address key challenges with visiting, notably distance and cost (Cramer, Goff, Peterson, & Sandstrom, 2017). Turanovic and Tasca (2019) suggested that this type of visiting may also reduce the risk of secondary prisonisation (ie, the consequences of imprisonment, in terms of restrictions, surveillance, treatment

²Following the successful trial in 2020, 28 correctional centres across NSW will receive computer tablets to support offender rehabilitation (see Chirgwin, 2022).

by prison staff etc, experienced by those connected to the imprisoned person), by virtue of avoiding the physical prison environment.

However, relatively little is known about the use and impact of video visits in Australia. And, until COVID-19, they were relatively little used, with concern expressed that reliance on such technology would lead to a reduction in face-to-face visits (McKay, 2016). Evidence in the United States of such reductions had been reported, largely in the media (eg, Sims, 2017) and by advocacy organisations (Rabuy & Wagner, 2015). It is evident that, in the United States, video visits have been in place and growing over the past decade. In 2015, they were described as being trialled in more than 500 prisons/jails across 44 states/districts (Rabuy & Wagner, 2015). As noted above, such moves could be seen as positive, by reducing barriers of travel time/cost; yet, in some United States settings, visitors still have to travel to the prison setting to engage in a video visit (Rabuy & Wagner, 2015). Practical challenges with these visits are also emphasised, such as poor quality, cost and availability, as well as visits ending abruptly (Cramer et al., 2017). Rabuy and Wagner (2015) also described some jails using video visits, then banning face-to-face visits, as part of the contract with the company providing the video technology. Horgan and Poehlmann-Tynan (2020) reported considerable backlash against this, noting that some US states have now legislated to ensure that video contact cannot replace face-to-face visits, although this was before the pandemic made face-to-face contact a public health risk.

Horgan and Poehlmann-Tynan (2020) contend that video chat may be an effective and developmentally appropriate means of contact for children with imprisoned parents, where face-to-face visits are not possible. They suggested that the visual element of this medium creates more meaningful contact than the telephone for children under eight years, as they may not have the verbal and cognitive abilities required to engage on the telephone and often rely on visual cues and facial expressions to communicate. These authors also suggested that video chat can create a greater sense of physical closeness between the child/ren and parent at a distance. Kerr et al. (2022) have described the Enhanced Visits Model (EVM), which promotes in-home video visits between the incarcerated parent and their child and supports positive interactions, through attachment-based visits coaching. Importantly, the EVM acknowledges the economic and racial inequalities that may present barriers to accessing technology and attempts to address these, by providing no-cost in-home video chat technology, as well as free internet for those who need it. Findings from an early evaluation of the EVM support the use of remote video visits between children and their imprisoned parent/s to supplement in-person contact (see Charles et al., 2023).

As it stands, video visits present a range of possibilities, but also challenges with access, including the impact of digital poverty, referring to the inability of an individual to interact with the online world when, where and how they need to (Allman, 2022; Australian Council of Social Services, 2016; Vinson, Rawsthorne, Beavis, & Ericson, 2015) and the unknown impact of this mode of visiting, specifically, the effects on children of a sustained lack of physical contact with their parent (Narvaez et al., 2019). Moreover, people in prison, with limited (if any) exposure to digital technology, may find it challenging to easily adapt to the ever-changing technology used to maintain social engagement (see Hart, 2023). Digital inclusion may also be an issue for families of people in prison without reliable access to the Internet. In rural areas in particular, research shows that

residents have lagged in gaining both access and proficiency, leading to digital inequality (Salemiink, Strijker, & Bosworth, 2017).

Methodology

To understand how families with children experienced prison contact during the period of suspended visits, an online survey was developed in conjunction with SHINE for Kids. The survey was distributed to adults caring for children with a relative in prison via SHINE for Kids, other not-for-profit support organisations and social media platforms. It is likely that recruitment via these support services affected the study sample, with caregivers being more likely to be in contact with their imprisoned family member. The survey was available from 17 June to 17 August 2020 and included data from 70 respondents, in relation to 158 children whose father was in prison, with representation across all states and territories. This subset of caregivers of children with an imprisoned father is the focus of this paper. It is worth mentioning here that the proceeding analysis on father wellbeing relies on second-hand assessments from caregivers and is not necessarily the perception of the incarcerated father. Nevertheless, given the scant research that has considered the wellbeing of incarcerated fathers, especially in the Australian context, we consider this research to be an important addition to the knowledge base on how different forms of contact impact father wellbeing.

Caregivers were asked about their experiences of visiting before and during the COVID-19 restrictions; access to and the types of visits; the challenges in maintaining contact; factors affecting visiting; perceptions of the availability and quality of contact between the child/ren and their imprisoned father; self-reported coping, as well as observations on how both the child/ren and imprisoned father were coping; and suggestions for improvements to visiting. The project received ethics approval from Monash University.

Data were primarily analysed using univariate descriptive statistics, with occasional use of inferential statistics such as Fisher's Exact test, where appropriate. This test is used to assess the association between two nominal variables and is preferred to the Chi-square test when expected cell frequencies are very small, as they are in this study. A small number of questions sought open-ended, qualitative responses. Content analysis was used to analyse these responses, as this approach is the most suitable for mapping data, particularly where structured questions are used and where the aim is to systematically describe and quantify trends (Bryman, 2015). Given the focus on descriptive and manifest content, one coder completed this task. The second author then reviewed the themes the coder identified and refined these through discussion.

Survey respondent characteristics

Nearly all respondents were women ($n = 69$; 98.6%) and most were the mother of the child/ren they were caring for ($n = 61$; 87.1%). The next most common caring role was grandparent ($n = 6$; 8.6%). The most common respondent age group was 30–39 ($n = 27$; 38.6%), followed by 20–29 ($n = 24$; 34.3%). Most respondents ($n = 60$; 85.7%) identified as non-Indigenous. While few caregivers identified as having any type of disability or chronic illness ($n = 4$; 5.7%), more described their children ($n = 11$; 15.7%) as needing

Table 1. Prison location reported by respondents compared to the Australian prison population.

State or Territory	Percentage ^a of survey respondents	Percentage of the Australian prison population (ABS, 2020)
Australian Capital Territory	7.1	1.1
NSW	62.9	30.7
Northern Territory	1.4	4.0
Queensland	5.7	21.1
South Australia	4.3	7.0
Tasmania	1.4	1.6
Victoria	15.7	18.0
Western Australia	1.4	16.6

regular help with daily activities, due to disability or chronic illness. This is considerably higher than in the community population, where 7.4% of children aged 0–14 have some type of disability (AIHW, 2020).

Table 1 below shows that two-thirds ($n = 44$) of respondents related to an incarcerated father in prison in New South Wales (NSW). This is more than twice the overall representation of that state in the Australian prison population, but is a likely consequence of SHINE for Kids, the commissioning organisation, having its head office and the majority of programs in this state. The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) was also over-represented, accounting for 7.1% ($n = 5$) of respondents, compared with only 1.1% of the Australian prison population. Conversely, there were two states with noticeably low representation: Queensland ($n = 4$) and Western Australia ($n = 1$) (both jurisdictions with relatively higher Indigenous populations than other jurisdictions across Australia). This seems to have had some impact on capturing the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Table 2. Characteristics of imprisoned fathers.

Characteristics	N (%)
Age	
20–29	21 (30.4)
30–39	30 (43.5)
40–49	15 (21.7)
50–59	3 (4.3)
Indigenous status	
Indigenous	12 (17.6)
Non-Indigenous	55 (80.9)
Prefer not to answer	1 (1.5)
Prior imprisonment	
Yes	31 (44.9)
No	38 (55.1)
Legal status	
Sentenced	51 (72.9)
On remand	19 (27.1)
Assistance required due to disability/chronic illness	
Yes	4 (5.8)
No	65 (94.2)
Language other than English	
Yes	6 (8.8)
No	62 (91.2)

Some questions had missing respondents, as follows: Age ($n = 69$), Indigenous status ($n = 68$), Prior imprisonment ($n = 69$), Disability ($n = 69$), Language ($n = 68$). Percentages are based on these denominators.

Findings

Characteristics of imprisoned fathers

While there are no official data gathered about imprisoned fathers, national data are collected on prisoners; we utilise ABS (2020) data to make some comparisons and draw tentative conclusions in relation to a range of characteristics. Table 2 displays the characteristics of the imprisoned father for each respondent/family. As shown, 30 (43.5%) imprisoned fathers referred to in this survey were aged 30–39 years, compared with 34.3% of the total Australian prison population who were in this age group (as at 30 June 2020). The latter population shows a wider spread, with considerably younger and older people. That this study sample reported a smaller age range, mostly in their thirties, is not unexpected, given the survey was targeting caregivers of children. The same pattern with regard to age range has been observed in other Australian research with imprisoned parents. The majority (n = 55; 80.9%) of respondents identified the imprisoned father as non-Indigenous, with a minority (n = 12; 17.6%) as Indigenous (one respondent opted not to answer this question, with data missing for two respondents). This shows an under-representation in the sample of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, compared to 20.4% in the wider prison population. This discrepancy is likely due to the low representation of respondents from Queensland and Western Australia, which we address in more detail above.

Almost three-quarters of the fathers in prison (n = 51; 72.9%) were sentenced, while just under a third (n = 19; 27.1%) were remandees (ie, unsentenced). This compares to 67.8% and 31.9% respectively in the wider prison system. Again, this is perhaps unsurprising, given the survey was seeking the experiences of those who were or had been in contact and/or seeking contact with the imprisoned person, as early research shows that those on remand may be less likely to have told anyone about being in custody (eg, Caddle & Crisp, 1997). Just over half of survey respondents (n = 38; 55.1%) described the father as being in prison for the first time, while (n = 31) 44.9% described the father as having experienced prior imprisonment. A snapshot of the wider Australian prison population shows 40.5% being imprisoned for the first time, compared to 59.5% having prior imprisonment experience, so this would appear to be fairly representative.

Problems with keeping in contact

As set out in Figure 1, 42 (60.0%) caregivers stated that they experienced problems with children being able to keep in contact with their father, once COVID-19 restrictions were implemented. Multiple responses were possible, and the data are presented as the number of caregivers who reported this issue.

Of the 42 caregivers describing problems, most reported multiple problems. As is evident from the figure above, the majority of identified problems were related to prison facilities and prison functioning, including prison lockdowns (n = 27; 64.3%); shortened time for visits (n = 28; 66.7%); and poor or no access to video visits at the prison (n = 20; 47.6%). Almost half of respondents who indicated problems, however, described the children (rather than the imprisoned father) as not wanting to participate in video visits (n = 20; 47.6%).

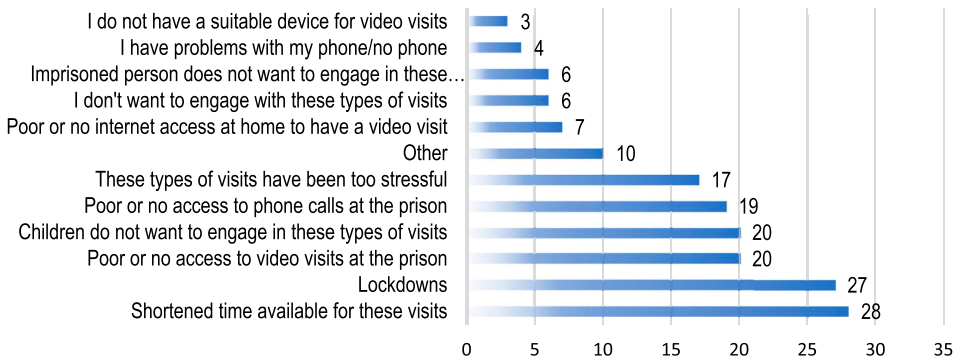


Figure 1. Caregiver views on the problems with maintaining contact after the introduction of prison visiting restrictions ($N = 42$).

The imprisoned father's mental health

Caregivers' views ($n = 66$; 4 were missing) on how imprisoned fathers were coping with the changed visiting conditions were overwhelmingly negative, with the majority ($n = 56$; 84.8%) disagreeing with the statement that the imprisoned person was coping well. The issues identified as affecting fathers' ability to cope are stark, with almost one-third ($n = 20$; 30.3%) indicating that the changed visiting arrangements were having a negative effect on the father's mental health. For example, not having a visit to look forward to was seen to have had a detrimental effect:

No face to face contact has made him depressed and feeling like the time he has left is dragging on and on. He has nothing to look forward to with no visits. ... Usually we spend every weekend with him, both Saturday and Sunday 9am until 2.30pm and have a bbq lunch. He finds he has nothing to look forward to and has been largely cut off from his family. (Caregiver 61)

Another factor seen to influence the mental health of fathers in prison was not being able to physically see their children. This was expressed by several caregivers:

He is more depressed and finding it harder and harder to not see his children physically as the time goes on. (Caregiver 54)

Prolonged period without physical interaction from family is quite anxiety inducing. (Caregiver 28)

Sometimes he doesn't want an AVL visit as he hates seeing the kids face when he says goodbye or when they ask to be able to come see him. (Caregiver 58)

Others reported that the imprisoned father would feel sad after video visits and highlighted the lack of physical contact as a reason for this:

He loves the video calls but it has made him even more homesick seeing the house and misses being able to cuddle his kids. (Caregiver 69)

[A]ll he wants is to see his kids and give them a hug. (Caregiver 57)

These comments suggest that visits serve the important function of connecting the father with the outside world, and with their identity outside of prison. This supports

other research (Meek, 2011; Tripp, 2009), discussed earlier in the paper, that suggests maintaining family connections while in prison can help the incarcerated person to maintain their outside self. What is evident is that removing face-to-face contact, which brings tangible, embodied interactions, has a negative effect on fathers. Video does provide some benefits, as we discuss later. However, it could be hypothesised that these men benefit most from grounded, physical interactions, to remain connected with themselves and their families, particularly given the hypermasculine environment of prisons.

Fathers coping well

While the majority of survey respondents described problems with maintaining contact and reported that the father was not coping well, in contrast, a small number of caregivers (n = 10; 15.2%) reported that the imprisoned father was coping well with the changed contact arrangements. Patton (2015) has pointed to the value of examining extreme or outlier cases. These can generate useful insights for the wider population, in this instance, about the circumstances in which imprisoned fathers can be supported to do well, despite highly challenging circumstances.

The association between caregivers' perceptions of the *imprisoned fathers* coping well and *children* coping well was tested using an exact test, which found a significant association between perceptions of both fathers and children coping well with the changed prison contact arrangements (exact $p = 0.004$). Most of the children of the 10 fathers seen to be coping well were also described as coping well (n = 7; 70.0%). In comparison, only 12 (21.4%) of the children of the 56 fathers described as not coping well were regarded as coping well. These differences are explored further below, by examining experiences of visitation, once the COVID-19 restrictions were introduced. The small sub-group of caregivers who perceived the father as coping well (n = 10; 15.2%), was therefore compared with the group of fathers considered to not be coping well (n = 56; 84.8%) on a range of characteristics. Statistical power to detect differences was very low, due to the small sample of fathers doing well, hence the majority of analyses were descriptive in nature, rather than inferential. Key points of difference are highlighted in Table 3 and discussed below, noting that we are not testing statistical significance of the key points, due to the small sample.

Table 3. Caregiver views on the problems with maintaining contact after the introduction of prison visiting restrictions by prisoner well-being status (N = 38).

	Father not doing well n = 33	Father doing well n = 5
Shortened time available for these visits	72.7% (24)	40.0% (2)
Lockdowns	66.7% (22)	60.0% (3)
Poor or no access to video visits at the prison	57.6% (19)	0.0% (0)
Children do not want to engage in these types of visits	48.5% (16)	20.0% (1)
Poor or no access to phone calls at the prison	42.4% (14)	80.0% (4)
These types of visits have been too stressful	45.5% (15)	0.0% (0)
Other	24.2% (8)	20.0% (1)
Poor or no internet access at home to have a video visit	21.2% (7)	0.0% (0)
I don't want to engage with these types of visits	9.1% (3)	20.0% (1)
Imprisoned person does not want to engage in these types of visits	15.2% (5)	0.0% (0)
I have problems with my phone/no phone	9.1% (3)	20.0% (1)
I do not have a suitable device for video visits	6.1% (2)	0.0% (0)

Problems with maintaining contact with the imprisoned father after visits were suspended

As described above, of the 66 caregivers who responded to the question about whether the imprisoned father was coping well, an overwhelming majority ($n = 56$; 84.8%) responded in the negative, with a minority ($n = 10$; 15.2%) in the affirmative. Of those who stated that the imprisoned father was not coping well, more than half ($n = 33$; 58.9%) identified problems with maintaining contact. Such problems were also reported by half ($n = 5$; 50.0%) of the caregivers who stated that the imprisoned father was coping well. Table 3 presents a detailed analysis of these 38 caregivers, who describe problems with contact and examines any differences between families where the fathers were seen to be doing well, versus those where fathers were not doing well. While this may suggest some connection between contact and coping, it should be noted that the magnitude of difference is small. When this was explored further, some differences in the types of problems identified by these two groups emerged. However, given the small sample size of fathers coping well, these percentages should be interpreted with caution.

The data in Table 3 suggest that, where respondents described problems, for fathers who were not doing well, there were more likely to be *multilayered problems* with the types of visits on offer, which distinguished them from those who were described as coping well. For those fathers found to be coping well, these problems either did not exist or were limited. These differences are most apparent in four areas, described below.

Systemic problems with video visits

No problems with access to video visits were reported by caregivers where the father was coping well. This is in contrast with over half of those where fathers were seen to be not doing well. Problems were experienced with access to video (as the main 'replacement' for face-to-face visits), as one caregiver reported:

No physical contact, took months to get an AVL, couldn't get through on visits line unless you sit pressing redial until you finally get it & 35mins AVL versus 1hr or more normal visits. (Caregiver 67)

Similarly, there were no issues with accessing video visits at the prison among the five fathers coping well, unlike those who were not ($n = 19$; 57.6% of whom experienced access issues).

Children's willingness to engage with video visits

Almost half of the caregivers who described fathers as not coping ($n = 16$; 48.5%) reported that children did not want to engage with these types of visits, compared to just one of the five fathers who were coping well. We do not make an assumption as to the direction of this relationship, and in fact it may be mutually interacting. In addition, the data indicate that any benefits derived from video visiting are also influenced by other factors, such as the age of the child. Babies and very small children were described by caregivers as being unable to communicate or have much meaningful interaction with their father via video; this is seen to have a negative impact on both the children and their fathers. As respondents explained:

[F]ace to face visits must be reinstated as soon as possible, small children are mentally struggling, they can not understand about COVID-19 yet. (Caregiver 53)

Not being able to hug her Dad. It's also hard for young children to maintain a conversation on an iPad especially when it freezes and her Dad can't hear her. (Caregiver 62)

My son is only 11 months old and bonding with his father is crucial for him to learn who he is. It affects my partners mental health when he doesn't have a bond with his son who is his only child and was born while he was imprisoned. (Caregiver 4)

Caregiver experience

Almost half of the caregivers (n = 15; 45.5%) where the imprisoned father was not coping found non-contact visits stressful, compared to none of those where the father was doing well. This is not surprising, given the problems with technology access, in addition to having children who are unwilling to participate.

We then examined whether caregivers noted any positive developments in relation to contact with the imprisoned person, after the suspension of in-person visits. Eight of the 10 (80.0%) caregivers in the 'coping well' sub-group noted some positives, compared with 9 of the 56 (16.1%) in the 'not coping well' sub-group. Positives included: no transport costs, less risk to themselves and/or children and that video visits were more private than in-person visits. Many of these caregivers also noted the specific benefits of video to the imprisoned father, in being able to engage with, and remember, their outside life:

He's just happy he gets to see our faces and our new home. (Caregiver 26)

Something to look forward to every week and feel like less of a burden and reminds them of home ... can show him things they've [the children] done and their bedrooms etc. (Caregiver 25)

Being able to see his two children has helped him mentally and he gets to be involved more with his kids, especially now the eldest has started school this year. (Caregiver 19)

These comments suggest that, while not a panacea for face-to-face contact, video visits, when running smoothly, may go some way to supporting both family relationships and the wellbeing of the person in prison, during periods when contact is not possible, and may in some circumstances even be preferable.

Discussion

Our study revealed that most caregivers noted concerns regarding the imprisoned father's overall coping and mental health subsequent to the cessation of contact visits with children as a result of COVID-19. However, while face-to-face contact is considered the most meaningful form of parent-child contact (Beckmeyer & Arditti, 2014), video visiting has potential to support relationships between prisoners and their families, when in-person contact is not possible. Our research finds some support for this, with a small cohort of caregivers commenting that the video visits had helped their family member in prison, as well as the caregiver themselves and the children. For example, some respondents mentioned that a positive outcome of the changed visiting

arrangement was no longer incurring costs associated with transport to travel to and from the prison. Other Australian studies have repeatedly found that distance, the need for accommodation and financial hardship, can impede prison visits (Dennison, Smallbone, Stewart, Freiberg, & Teague, 2014; Healy, Foley, & Walsh, 2000).

However, the findings also highlighted the barriers of technology for people in prison (eg, not being comfortable using certain technology, frustration using video etc). There are a range of obstacles that should be addressed for video visits to be beneficial, including dealing with unreliable technology, which may affect the quality of the video visit, as well as strained parent-caregiver relationships, which may act as a barrier to successful visits (Charles et al., 2021). Several caregivers also highlighted challenges associated with the unfamiliar nature of video interactions with children, and particularly small children and babies, as barriers to high-quality contact. Caregivers may benefit from additional support and/or a practical tip-sheet for how to help their child/ren participate in video visits and how to communicate with children via this medium, as well as what can be done ahead of time to prepare for these visits, such as having an activity to do. Brief workshops and tip-sheets could be provided to individuals in prison, to help build their skills in preparation for video visits with children. Visit coaching has also been suggested as a way to enhance the quality of video visits between a child and their incarcerated parent (Charles et al., 2021, 2023; Peterson et al., 2019). The range of emotions felt by fathers when seeing their home life via video also lends support to the potential benefits of coaching sessions to prepare them for the emotions they might experience, as well as to discuss the short- and long-term benefits (for example, a sense of closeness and maintaining relationships with family) of these types of visits.

It is important to keep in mind that each state and territory manages its own prison system and has been subject to very different consequences as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. Accordingly, the survey findings cannot be seen to accurately provide jurisdiction-based findings in light of the disparities between response rates and the relative size of the prison population. Similarly, the survey cannot be said to be representative of the overall Australian prison population or their families. However, as the vast majority of data were collected in the period before the resumption of visits, the survey provides an initial view of the experiences of a range of families across the country, during a period when face-to-face visiting was suspended.³

Although not an evident issue in this study, being mindful of the impact of poverty on access to technology must also be taken into consideration, given the often high levels of disadvantage experienced by families of prisoners (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Smith, Grimshaw, Romeo, & Knapp, 2007). Families may also need support to access videoconferencing facilities in their communities, if they are not readily available in their home. This could be achieved by prisons working together with community agencies, to support families on the outside. Access to video visits could also be enhanced by using platforms that are freely accessible on a tablet or smartphone.

³Since March 2020, all Australian states and territories had 'lockdowns' of varying lengths, during which face-to-face visits to people in prison were suspended.

⁴Percentages in table may not add up to 100%, due to rounding.

Conclusion

Overall, this study finds some support for the use of video visiting as a way of sustaining father-child contact while a father is in prison. However, it is important to stress that face-to-face visits should remain as the main form of contact noting the concerns raised by caregivers regarding the mental health of the incarcerated father once contact had been suspended. The study also highlighted that contact visits serve the important function of connecting the father with the outside world, and with their identity outside of prison. It is not clear that video visits can replace this, although further research should continue to explore the ways in which technology may be best utilised to connect incarcerated parents with their roles as parents on the outside. Consideration should also be given to the age of the child and whether video visits are appropriate. The data suggests that babies and very small children were unable to communicate or have much meaningful interaction with their father via video and that this was seen to have a negative impact on both the children and their fathers. Future research should consider how best to accommodate the needs of very young children and their incarcerated parent when interacting in a virtual space.

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