A Child’s Right
Insights from a Multiple Case Study in the United Kingdom: Children’s Visitation With an Incarcerated Parent © 2018

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We embarked upon this research with a goal of informing United States policy makers on prison visitation practices that minimize children's exposure to adverse carceral environments. Thus, we explored prison visitation settings and models managed by prison staff in the United Kingdom.

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*October 2016, United Kingdom*
Prison staff can be instrumental in shaping the prison visitation experience for families and children (Hart-Johnson, Benoliel, Jonson, 2017-2018, in press).

Young children who visit prisons often are dependent upon several gatekeepers to remain connected to a parent: Caregivers; Prison Administrators, Corrections Officers, and even the individual who is incarcerated can decline visitation.

Decisions to visit may be largely based upon the caregiver’s and child’s experience during the prison visit (Myers, Smarsh, Amlud-Hagan, and Kennon, 1999). Yet every child has a right to be parented, according to the World Conference on Human Rights in a Convention on the Rights of the Child held in 1989.

Carceral environments in the United States can be intimidating, traumatizing, and sterile. These facilities are generally not designed with children in mind, but rather focused on maintaining safety & security of the facility, while mitigating the risk of contraband. They are generally noisy, lack privacy, crowded, and not conducive for familial bonding (Beckmeyer & Arditti, 2014).
Prison Visitation: United Kingdom

**WHAT WE BELIEVED INFLUENCED PRISON VISITATION PARADIGM SHIFT**


**Child focused.** World Conference on Human Rights in a Convention on the Rights of the Child held in 1989. [handout]

**Healthcare focused.** “The Department of Health assumed responsibility from Her Majesty's Prison Service for health policymaking in 2000, and full budgetary and health care administration control were transferred by April 2006” (Hayton & Boyington, 2006).

**Ethos focused.** Prison visitation is founded upon respect of families and preserving the wellbeing as a high priority. Social policy proceeded fiscal and justice policy.
Method

Source: AMH, Word Cloud
Unit of Analysis

England (Liverpool, Manchester, York), Wales, & Scotland

With the expansion of prison visitor centers in the United Kingdom (Dixey & Woodall, 2012), we used this qualitative multiple case study to understand how prison staff working in public and private prisons in the UK perceived their role in shaping the family experience during prison visits.

Ethics Approval & Informed Consent:

Her Majesty’s Prison Service
Scottish Prison Service
Third-Sector Organizations (Charities)
Walden University Institution Review Board
Data Use Agreements/Photos
Data Collection Agreements
Sample (N = 13)

**Private Prison Staff**

HMP Prisons in England, Wales, Scotland
- Corrections officers
- Family Contact Officers
- Advocates/Third Sector

**Public Prison Staff**

HMP Prisons in England, Wales, Scotland
- Corrections Officers
- Senior Staff/Administrators
- Family Contact Officers
- Advocates/Third Sector

**Advocates/Researchers**

- Social Workers
- Volunteers
- Advocacy Staff
- Trainers
- Researchers

**Research Questions:** How, if at all do prison staff interpret their roles, philosophies, and practices to shape the families visiting experience? Further, how, if at all, do the physical conditions of the facility’s environment contribute to the family experience?
Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological systems theory is instrumental in detangling the complexities of this research. In this study, we endeavor to explore how something as seemingly unrelated as a prison waiting room or visiting space can combine human experiences and the philosophies of prison corrections to produce a less traumatizing experience for a child and his or her family in a prison environment (Hart-Johnson, Benoliel, Johnson, 2018 [in press]).

Bowen’s (1978) Family systems theory illuminates how families who face crisis, can be subjected to patterns of disorganization and emotional stress; this leads to their need to find ways to remain congruency as an intact unit.
We asked: When did you see a shift in social conditions that may have generated a need for new policy, procedures, and process change to support family-centric prison visiting environments?

“10 years ago, there was so much evidence about the importance of engaging family and maintaining family ties... we started to package all of that [evidence] together and make a case.”

-Private Prison Staff

Source: (Hart-Johnson, Benoliel, & Johnson, 2017)
Prison Visitation Halls and Centers
Example of a Visiting Center [HMP Manchester]

- Information Center operated by Third-Sector
- Corrections staff
- Spacious in configuration
- Reading material
- Open and conducive for discussions
- Kiosk of information
- Restrooms/lockers
- Information cards that depict dress code
- Café Corner
Observations: Visitor Center

How if at all, do visitation area spatial configuration (height, form, size, scale, and color) furnishing and layout allow family members’ interactions, specifically children?

Source: DCPC photos. Prison Visitor Center, play room, meeting space, and general area for visitors. Reception staffed with family Contact officers and volunteers and paid nonprofit staff.
Themes and Subthemes

Prison Visits

Physical Space Equates to Human Value Judgment

Prison Visits Become a Family Intervention & Alternative Community

Bifurcated Social Worlds: ‘This is a Prison’ and ‘This is Not a Prison’
Design of Physical Space Equates to Human Value Judgement

BEFORE:
“So, the whole visiting experience had to be rebooted because it was rubbish. Well, it was worse than rubbish...It was oppressive. It was dirty. It had the wrong staff, disinterested staff, and an aggressive staff. It wasn’t even effective in terms of security. We had high levels of physical violence in the visitors’ hall and high levels of contraband. It wasn’t even working properly... the whole experience was miserable, depressive, bland, clinical, & austere.” –Private Prison Staff

AFTER:
“There's also like a little shop as well as a place where you get refreshments... it doesn't look as clinical like some [prisons] look like where it's white walls and tables. All the walls are covered in paintings and characters and [murals]“
–Third Sector Staff
Design of Physical Space Equates to Human Value Judgement

After: Clothing Swap Corner serves multiple purposes. 1. Children who are not properly dressed can change clothing. 2. Families in need of clothing can receive assistance. 3. Humanizes the space, integrates community stakeholders, and invites corrections or prison staff to contribute as well. 4. Draws upon the human experience of empathy.

Source: (Hart-Johnson, Benoliel, Johnson, 2017)
Subtheme: Prison Visits Become a Family Intervention & Alternative Community

“I have seen on many occasions children coming in, crying cause they got to leave their dad. One family always come to mind who's got five children and they have done lots of different interventions with us…the eldest daughter was old enough to understand [about prison], I would say more than the others. That she was feeling it [sadness/emotions] the most, so every time she came in, she was crying and upset. And I thought straight away we need to get them on the program [intervention], and that family needs to come over to the family unit and do the programs that we deliver—For lots of reasons, because they [also] get more time with their family as a unit. “ – Family Contact Officer

Note: Interventions offered prior to, during, and after the prison visit.
Spaces for intervention
Subtheme: Prison Visits Become an Alternative Community

“[W]hen mum's down at the lounge, she's getting to speak to the other mums. And they -- really got a click. They are mums; they enjoy coming in and they know they come in once a month on the first Monday of the month."

--Third Sector

“They look forward to coming in and having a chat --because they are all in the same boat. The children are all in the same boat. They are not being judged by others like they [experience] in school-- which does happen and we know that and it will happen in the [United] States as well."

--Family Contact Officer
“Some little children don't know that dad is in the prison because they choose not to tell them for whatever reason. Then they could have been visiting dad for months and months and they still don't realize that he's in a prison. So that tells you that it can look that sort of strange to them that they still don't know that he's in a prison.”

–Public Prison Staff
Wrap Around Services: “I've worked with a complex family, shall we say. Mother is a drug and alcohol abuser and domestic violence relationship is a massive concern in her life. The baby's dad was in prison. He's recently got out and tagged. So he was in prison for about seven years. The grandparents have had this child put into their care temporarily since she was five. She's been in and out of her mother's care over to the grandparents three times now. She's now eight. So she's living temporarily with granddad. Mom's got all these issues that she's having to deal with. Domestic violence is a massive one for her. Dad's come out and tagged. He's recently cut his tag off.” –Third Sector Staff (Public Prison)
This is a prison. This is not a prison.
This is a prison. This is not a prison
Play Spaces Across Domains: “In the visit hall, there is a play area that is staffed by the [Third-Sector/Charity]. So I spend some of my time actually working in that play area doing things like meaningful play and stuff. At the same time, we do try and encourage [the children to] spend time with the parent that they are there to see. Because often kids who have been here before and know the play areas there, they come in and run straight to the play area. One would spend an hour in the play area and not end up seeing the parent.”—Family contact Officer

Intervention: “I have been around children who've not had this type of support... This place is for everyone... You come here and you want some help then you get help. Otherwise, you'll see them in Ireland joining gangs as a way to fit in. Becoming a collective here, and knowing that everyone [here] has got a parent in prison.” –Third Sector

Creating Bonds: “Also we have -- we got them in scouts. We try to get them on as many interventions as we can. So they -- the children can make friends with the other children just like the mums makes friends. Just like the dads make friends. So they are creating these bonds, so they actually looked forward to coming in. They run in, they run through these doors. They can't wait.” --Private Prison Staff
"So after you're processed, you'd end up an hours wait for the actual visit which is quite difficult for children. Often, they've had really, really long journeys to actually get to the prison."

"... Before they enter the visitor's hall, that's where they are searched. Sometimes there's dogs on. So they'll be sniffed by the drugs dogs. Even children as well. Then, they scan you using the finger again to…"

"Yeah. From where your searched, you then walk into the visit hall. It's like a little sort of reception area in there where they are given what table to sit on and then they sit down in the table and await the prisoner."
Physical space conveys institutional reminders: This is a Prison

“Prisoners on a normal visit, wear an ID vest. [It is a bright colored [vest] over their clothes... so that they are easily identified in the visit hall...But then on family day, thy don't wear the vest.” – Public Prison Staff
Take-Aways

✓ Ecology of Prison Visitation includes all stakeholders engaging in the child’s experience; surrogate parenting (macro to micro)

✓ Treating inmates, families, and each other with dignity and respect; an ethos of human decency

✓ Cost reduction when the system works

✓ There is a potential consequence to not telling children the truth about “Daddy’s Work”

✓ Decided not to punish 95% of the visitors for 5% of contraband violations
Discussion

**Criminal Justice Policy.** United States prison visitation policy continues to be shaped without specific focus on long term implications on children (Bokneck, Sanderson, & Britner, 2009). Currently child welfare initiatives and justice related issues are considered different focuses; yet they can be tied to children’s futures and wellbeing.

**Child Well-being.** A child’s trauma [and underlying fear] can be a major impediment to healthy development, bonding, and attachment. If the child experiences crisis, social disorganization, in adverse environments [such as prison settings] these conditions can generate intimidation and fear, leaving (Perry, 2013) children at a higher risk of developing attachment problems.

**Child Emotional Development.** Children who are between 0 (infancy) and 3 years old are in the most crucial years of their attachment bonding (Perry, 2013). By age 3, 90% of a child’s brain responsible for establishing the emotional baseline for adulthood has been formed (Perry, 2013, p.3).
References


