



# improving communication access for children with incarcerated parents

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Mass incarceration is a crisis in the United States, with one in two adults experiencing the loss of a loved one to jail or prison. The Bureau of Justice Statistics found that most incarcerated people are parents, and child wellbeing researchers David Murphey and Mae Cooper's analysis of nationally representative survey data found *five million children* in the U.S. have experienced separation from a resident parent due to incarceration. This disproportionately affects children of color living in poverty: Black children are six times more likely to experience parental incarceration than white children and poor children are three times more likely than their wealthier peers to have an incarcerated parent.

Research shows that, compared to their peers, children with incarcerated parents experience greater risk of low academic achievement, behavior problems, homelessness, mental and physical health conditions, and criminal legal system involvement as they grow older. These negative effects can, however, be mitigated by strong parent-child relationships with the incarcerated parent, as a growing body of work has evidenced. For the incarcerated parent, maintaining the parent-child relationship and a connection to their parental identity is also associated with lower levels of recidivism (as criminal justice and health scholar Christy Visher and colleagues' research shows), and close family ties are associated with increased adjustment during reentry (as sociologist Bruce Western's research on prison re-entry shows).

However, families face many barriers

and challenges to maintaining parent-child relationships during parental incarceration. In this policy brief, we present three evidence-based policy recommendations that address key barriers to parent-child contact during parental incarceration: cost of visits and phone calls; corrections' visiting spaces and practices; and limited options for children to remain in contact with their parents.

## cost of visits and calls

Visits and phone calls in corrections settings are crucial for enabling families to connect while a parent is incarcerated, but the cost of both is prohibitive for many people. Despite the negligible cost of phone calls between non-incarcerated people, as of late 2021 jails charged an average of approximately \$3 per 15-minute phone call, according to the Prison Policy Initiative. One hour of phone calls is more than 1.5 times higher than the federal minimum wage of \$7.25. In-person visiting, while desirable, is also expensive and time-consuming. Remote video visiting from a family's home or other comfortable location offers children an opportunity to connect with their parents without going to the jail or prison, which can be better for the family. As our research shows, incorporating incarcerated parents into important family moments—from graduation and birthday parties to tee-ball games and everyday homework sessions—in this way may make a parent's physical absence easier for the child. However, like in-person visits and phone calls, video visits are often prohibitively expensive.

The cost of connecting is an issue in both jails and prisons, though jails (which retain people before trial and for shorter stays) have fewer federal regulations on the cost of phone calls and video visits than prisons (which retain people for longer periods of time after sentencing), allowing jails to charge even more. As of late 2021, twelve states had one or more jails that charged at least \$7.50 per 15-minute call—meaning that the cost of one 15-minute call is higher than an hour of work at the federal minimum wage.

Reformers have sought solutions at the city, county, and state levels, and many are proving that change is both feasible and within reach. San Francisco County, according to the "Justice Is Calling" report, offers an example of reforming video call fees. Beginning in 2018, the San Francisco Mayor's office, Sheriff's Office, and community-based Financial Justice Project collaborated to identify the needs of incarcerated people and their families. In this partnership, they simultaneously featured the voices of people with lived experience and assessed the fiscal impact of policy changes so the County could plan accordingly. A two-step approach was phased in across two years: (1) in 2019, the Sheriff's Office reduced fees by 50% and committed to eliminating them entirely the following year, and (2) in July 2020, the City and County of San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed an administrative code to eliminate the cost for jail phone calls entirely. The program is successful despite concerns that private telecommunications providers would no longer

want to contract with the jail; this proved untrue, and San Francisco worked with the same provider to provide free calls.

Connecticut offers a state-level example. There, all jails, prisons, and juvenile detention facilities fall under one collective Department of Correction, making it possible for the state legislature to eliminate all carceral communication fees by passing one bill, 2021's SB 972. At the federal level, the government could greatly reduce costs by imposing a lower cap on private companies' ability to charge for jail phone calls and video visits; even just matching jail restrictions to prison restrictions would make staying in touch more accessible for families.

Jurisdictions across the nation are passing legislation to decrease these costs, providing interested communities with several different models. These examples provide a road map that communities and corrections—especially county jails—can use to create positive change through what the Prison Policy Initiative considers “winnable” reforms.

### corrections' visiting environments

Visiting environments are a second barrier to maintaining quality parent-child relationships. When in-person visits are allowed at all, the facilities are difficult for families to navigate. When families visit an incarcerated parent in-person, they must often undergo security screenings, strict dress codes, long wait times, and restrictions on what families can bring. Toys and other comfort items are often considered contraband and cannot be brought into the visiting area. In addition, typical in-person prison visits limit physical affection to a brief hug at the beginning and end of the visit. It is worse in jails, where any physical contact is frequently curtailed, with families separated by plexiglass (which can be stressful for children) or limited to video visits only.

When possible, jails and prisons should offer child-friendly contact visits for incarcerated parents and their children, as described in our previous work.

During these visits, children can sit on their parent's lap, hold hands, and hug without the typical limits imposed by the jail or prison. Child-friendly activities and games can also be incorporated into visits, such as arts and crafts or simple board games. Child-friendly visiting spaces are also important, which can include toys for children, colorful murals, or free books that they can read with their parents and keep at the end of visits. Corrections should also rethink restrictions on what items children can bring into the visiting area to enable children access to comforting objects, like a favorite blanket or stuffed animal. Community organizations and corrections can collaborate to make this into a sustainable program and larger community initiative.

### family choice in visiting options

The third issue at hand is the limited options for families to keep in contact throughout incarceration. Our previous research has found that children are better behaved after seeing their incarcerated parents when their family has a choice regarding how they connect. As noted above, however, jails are increasingly moving exclusively to video visits, a move exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite many jails and prisons offering a limited number of free video visits, phone calls, and envelopes during pandemic lockdowns, these opportunities were still insufficient for many families. Even when in-person visiting is an option, it may not be accessible to families without adequate access to transportation or time, as well as for those with jobs or childcare responsibilities that conflict with the visiting schedule.

Families should be allowed to choose what type of visiting is best for them. Even when jails or prisons have the technology and capacity for on-site or remote video visiting, facilities should continue to have in-person visiting options. When possible, corrections should also try to offer some in-person visiting times outside of normal business

hours or on weekends to accommodate visitors' varying schedules.

Community organizations and state and local governments can help give families options by making visiting more accessible through programs that provide transportation to in-person visits or create child-friendly spaces for video visits. Recently proposed legislation (S4956 and A4881) before the New York State Legislature would, for instance, restore a free bus program for family members to visit people in prisons, while Massachusetts' S2371 requires people in jails to have a minimum of two available in-person visits each week and restricts jails from using video visits as substitutes for in-person visits. These policy prescriptions illustrate the types of measures that states are considering (and implementing) to protect family choice in visiting loved ones behind bars, which may support children during the stress of parental incarceration.

*This brief was written before the Martha Wright-Reed Just and Reasonable Communications Act of 2022 was passed in Congress. The Act gives the FCC more authority to regulate the cost of calls in correctional facilities.*

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