

Closing the Distance: The Impact of Video Visits in Washington State Prisons

August 2017
Fact Sheet

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Separation from family and friends is a difficult fact of life for incarcerated people. Yet in-person visits to loved ones serving their sentences in remotely located prison facilities can often be financially and logistically daunting. Because research has shown that contact with loved ones is a critical factor in improving outcomes for incarcerated people returning home, prison systems are increasingly turning to video technology as another medium beyond in-person visits for face-to-face contact. One state, Washington, introduced the service in its prisons beginning in 2013.

Researchers from the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) analyzed administrative data from the Washington Department of Corrections (WADOC) and the private vendor that provides the video visit service, JPay. The researchers analyzed the data to understand the frequency of video visits and in-person visits in Washington State, and the demographics of the people who received them.

Research design

To understand the impact video visits had on incarcerated people, Vera researchers used a quasi-experimental design. The researchers measured changes in people's in-person visit rates and the number of prison rule violations they committed before and after video visits were first made available to them. They then compared users of the service with nonusers, to see if there were any differences. To

✂ One of the most significant barriers to prison visits may be the long distances visitors generally have to travel to the facilities where their loved ones are incarcerated. ✂

ensure an 'apples to apples' comparison, the researchers matched users with nonusers on factors such as age, race, length of time in prison, and how often they had received in-person visits in the past. The researchers used Bayesian Additive Regression Trees (BART) and inverse probability of treatment weightings with a difference-in-difference design (IPTW/DID).

To better understand the results of the data analyses, the researchers interviewed 20 incarcerated people (10 men and 10 women) who had recently used the video visit service. They asked participants to describe what they liked about the service, what challenges they faced in using it, and how they felt it had affected them and their loved ones.

For more information

The Vera Institute of Justice is a justice reform change agent. Vera produces ideas, analysis, and research that inspire change in the systems people rely upon for safety and justice, and works in close partnership with government and civic leaders to implement it. Vera is currently pursuing core priorities of ending the misuse of jails, transforming conditions of confinement, and ensuring that justice systems more effectively serve

America's increasingly diverse communities. For more information, visit www.vera.org. To learn more about video visitation, read the full report at www.vera.org/video-visitation-in-prison-Washington-State.

Contact Ram Subramanian, editorial director, at rubramanian@vera.org for more information.

This study was supported by Award Number 2012-IJ-CX-0035, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Findings

Service use: Use of the video visit service was limited to a small proportion of incarcerated people. In Vera's sample, 11.5 percent of incarcerated people (1,058) participated in at least one video visit. On average, people who used video visits had 3.6 video calls per year. Interview participants suggested that the low use rates may have been a result of the relatively high cost of the service (at \$12.95 for a 30-minute call) and dissatisfaction with the picture and sound quality.

The impact of video visits: People who regularly used the service experienced a 40 percent increase in their in-person visits, while those who had nine or more video visits per year ("high users") saw a 49 percent increase. Service users described video visits as an opportunity to strengthen their relationships with loved ones in the community. Reinforcing

those bonds increased the likelihood that visitors would incur the costs and hardships of traveling long distances to make in-person visits. Vera's analysis did not find any significant impact of video visit use on in-prison behavior.

In-person visit rates: Through the course of the study year (ending November 2015), a substantial proportion of incarcerated people—45 percent—did not receive any in-person visits. Women, younger people, and those who did not have identified mental health needs received, on average, more visits than other incarcerated people. However, the distance that people were held from their home communities appeared to be a significant barrier to in-person visitation. Vera's analysis found that the number of in-person visits people received decreased by about 1 percent for every additional mile from home they were incarcerated. The average distance from home for people in the sample was 130 miles.

Video visits created a **safe space**
for people to **strengthen their bonds.**



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