The future of prison visits? An autoethnographic perspective on the developments of the digitisation of prison visits during COVID-19

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Abstract
This article explores the current status, evolution, and envisaged future of prison visits, analysing the shift in paradigm from traditional models to an increasingly digital format that demands specific policy amendments and fosters an empathetic approach towards incarceration. The discourse begins with an in-depth examination of the current prison visitation models, delving into the strengths, weaknesses, and potential of both in-person and video visitations. This exploration uncovers the critical shortcomings of in-person visits, such as limited accessibility due to geographical and logistical constraints, and the rising potential of video visits to bridge these gaps. Simultaneously, we highlight the challenges in implementing video visitation systems, focusing on issues such as equitable access to technology, appropriate surveillance, and privacy regulations. It underscores the need for considering both sides of the coin, i.e., the convenience and feasibility of video visits versus the potential risks to the privacy and dignity of incarcerated people and their families. The article then delves into the policy considerations necessary to ensure a smooth transition to video visitations, exploring regulatory and statutory amendments needed to safeguard incarcerated individuals' rights and ensure a more humane prison system. The analysis uncovers a pressing need for a robust framework that not only respects privacy rights and promotes familial ties but also supports

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an important goal of prisons – effective rehabilitation of incarcerated people. Proposing an idealised future model for prison visits, the discourse presents a hybrid approach that skilfully combines the strengths of both in-person and video connections. This innovative model reimagines the future of prison visits, suggesting a shift from punitive and impersonal methods to empathetic and relationship-focused practices that align with contemporary understandings of rehabilitation.

Introduction

The conception and application of incarceration have undergone dramatic changes throughout history. At its core, the prison system serves as society's response to crime, embodying the philosophies and policies that define societal attitudes towards crime and punishment at a given time. A critical, yet often overlooked facet of the incarceration experience is the provision of prison visits. The perception of these visits has transformed, evolving from a privilege or control mechanism to a potential instrument for rehabilitation. This shift parallels broader movements in criminological theory and penal policy. The history of prison visits mirrors the evolution of the prison system itself, deeply rooted in societal values and expectations of punishment and reform. Early European prisons in the eighteenth century, heavily influenced by punitive philosophies, generally denied incarcerated people contact with the outside world, including family visits (Foucault, 1977). This approach encapsulated the belief that isolating incarcerated people from society would serve as a deterrent and punishment for criminal behaviour.

Administrators in Australia have increasingly acknowledged the potential therapeutic and rehabilitative benefits of prison visits. However, the practical implementation of prison visitation policies in Australia continues to vary, often hindered by logistical challenges, security concerns, and shifting political climates (Carlton & Segrave, 2013). The emergence of the reformatory movement in the late nineteenth century had an indelible impact on the treatment of incarcerated individuals, including in Australia. Penal philosophies began to pivot from punishment to rehabilitation (Rothman, 2002). Consequently, the prison system in Australia underwent significant reforms to accommodate these new principles. Prison visits, formerly a privilege contingent upon good behaviour, became instrumental in rehabilitating incarcerated individuals by providing a link with the outside world and aiding their eventual societal reintegration.

In the early twentieth century, Australian prisons also saw a shift from punitive ideologies to rehabilitative philosophies, mirroring international trends. This led to a more inclusive approach towards prison visits, acknowledging their potential to help incarcerated individuals maintain connections with their families and communities, thereby assisting in rehabilitation. The formation of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 led to the standardisation of many public systems, including the prison system. During this period, visitation became an integral part of prison policy across various states and territories. This shift echoed the transformation

seen in the United States Federal Bureau of Prisons during the same period (Hirsch, 1992). The perception of prison visits in Australia underwent further evolution in the latter half of the twentieth century and continuing into the 21st century. Reflecting global trends, Australian researchers, policymakers, and prison administrators have increasingly recognised the therapeutic and rehabilitative benefits of prison visits (Baldry, 2018; Carlton & Segrave, 2013). However, the practical implementation of prison visitation policies in Australia has been fraught with challenges. Logistical issues, security concerns, and fluctuating political climates often impede the operationalisation of prison visits (Hanley et al., 2023). Despite these barriers, the potential of prison visits in rehabilitating incarcerated individuals and aiding their societal reintegration continues to be acknowledged (McNeeley & Duwe, 2020; Mears et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2016), necessitating ongoing research and policy reform. Additionally, receiving prison visits is a legal right of many incarcerated people both in Australia and globally (Monahan et al., 2011).

A variety of methods have been employed over the years to facilitate and maintain this critical contact between incarcerated individuals and their families. These include postal correspondence, telephone conversations, in-person visits, and more recently, digital communication. Each of these methods, while valuable, presents its unique set of challenges. Postal correspondence is a traditional form of communication that has been used since the inception of the prison system. This method allows for detailed communication and can hold sentimental value as it can carry tokens like photos or drawings (Pollock, 2018). However, it comes with a set of issues. Letters are subject to scrutiny for safety reasons, including searching for contraband or scanning for potentially harmful content. This can lead to delays in delivery, or even non-delivery of some letters, leading to frustration and a potential breach of privacy (Pollock, 2018). Furthermore, illiteracy or learning difficulties may pose a barrier to some incarcerated individuals when trying to communicate via written correspondence (Duguid et al., 1996), as many incarcerated people have poor literacy skills or are illiterate (Vacca, 2004).

Telephone communication provides a faster and more interactive mode of communication than letters. It enables real-time conversation and emotional exchanges, which can be beneficial for incarcerated individuals and their families (Booth, 2020). However, there are several limitations to this mode of communication. Firstly, calls are often priced exorbitantly, making regular communication unaffordable for many families (Booth, 2020). In addition, the time allocated for calls is typically short and is usually limited to specific hours of the day. As a result, families may find it challenging to schedule calls that are convenient for all parties involved, especially for those with school-aged children. Moreover, phone calls are often monitored, potentially infringing on the privacy of the conversation and inhibiting open and free communication (Booth, 2020). In-person visits, while the most emotionally fulfilling form of interaction, come with a unique set of complications. Travel to prisons, which are often geographically remote, can be time-consuming, expensive, and logistically challenging for families (Christian, 2005). In addition, visits are restricted to specific times, often subject to change at short notice, which can create additional difficulties for families trying to plan their visits. The environment of the visit can also be stressful, with families and incarcerated individuals subjected to security checks and surveillance during their time together (Comfort, 2007).

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a significant shift in the way prison visits are conducted, with digital communication or video visits becoming increasingly prevalent.

Technological advancements have allowed for video calls between incarcerated individuals and their families, thus circumventing geographical distance and rigid scheduling (Gill, 2020). This form of communication allows for more participants, potentially broadening the incarcerated individual's support network. Video visits have the added advantage of allowing family members who may find prison visits distressing – particularly children – to maintain contact in a more comfortable environment (Poehlmann et al., 2010). Drawing on an autoethnography of the first author, who experienced incarceration during the COVID-19 pandemic at Ravenhall Correctional Centre (Ravenhall), this analysis presents a unique perspective on the shift to video prison visits within the specific context of Victoria, Australia. Situated in Melbourne's western suburbs, Ravenhall played a pivotal role in the author's journey through the intersection of incarceration, pandemic, and digital communications. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic created a global need for physical distancing measures, disrupting traditional prison visitation methods (Kinner et al., 2020). As a consequence, prisons across Victoria, including Ravenhall, initiated a swift transition to video visits. This marked a significant shift in the dynamics of maintaining familial and social connections from within the prison environment (Gill, 2020). Several advantages accompanied the transition to video visits. A discussion of these is found below.

Methodology: Autoethnography

Autoethnography, a post-modern research approach, underscores the potential insights derived from the interplay between personal experiences and the broader social, cultural, and political context (Ellis et al., 2011). Widely acknowledged for its capacity to generate novel knowledge within the health and social sciences (Bath, 2017; Peterson, 2015), autoethnography involves the systematic analysis of personal experiences to comprehend cultural context (Karalis Noel et al., 2023). The autoethnographic material in this article revolves around an autobiographical narrative detailing the first author's experiences of prison visitation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Autoethnography provides a means to leverage personal experiences for a deeper understanding of a specific culture (Ellis et al., 2011), requiring the researcher to focus both inward on the vulnerable self and outward on the sociocultural setting. The resulting reflections aim to engage the reader in a dialogue and reflective exploration rather than offering straightforward explanations. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that autoethnographic research comes with its own set of challenges. There is a risk of inadvertently romanticising the video-visit experience, for example, which could lead to biased interpretations (Richardson, 2022). Despite these challenges, we argue that the unique perspectives offered by autoethnographic insights are largely absent from current literature. Consequently, we opine that the potential benefits of this research methodology outweigh the negatives.

In the realm of criminology, autoethnography serves as a valuable tool to shed light on subtleties that traditional qualitative methods of criminological enquiry may overlook. Convict Criminology, a subfield originating in the United States, places a special emphasis on utilising autoethnography to elevate the voices of formerly incarcerated individuals, thus creating novel epistemological frameworks (Newbold et al., 2014; Richards & Ross, 2001). In subsequent years, additional subfields, such as Lived Experience Criminology in Australia, have emerged to deliberately encompass, empower, and amplify the voices and perspectives of those with lived experience of the criminal justice system (Antojado, 2023). Autoethnographic data in this study was obtained through

introspective reflection of the first author's time in prison and written material drafted whilst he was imprisoned (including in personal diaries, and correspondence with family and friends).

The significance of autoethnography and the incorporation of lived experience perspectives is steadily gaining momentum and attention, particularly in Australia. An illustrative example can be found in the recent Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology Conference held in Melbourne, Australia, which included a lived experience panel titled "Nothing About Us Without Us", featuring lived experience experts like Dwayne Antojado and Koryom Gatluak. In alignment with these progressive developments, our approach integrates the lived experiences and autoethnography of the first author with innovations and insights from existing research and literature. This integrated approach enables us to engage in a comprehensive discussion and formulate recommendations that are pertinent to the field of prison visitation research and policy. Although this may be new in criminology, it is not novel in other fields of scholarship including education (hooks, 1994), healthcare (Mukherjee, 2011), and social sciences broadly (Pascoe, 2012).

Discussion

Benefits to prison visitation

A myriad of benefits are associated with prison visitation, as outlined extensively in scholarly literature. These advantages span various aspects, from fostering pro-social networks, preserving parent–child ties, enhancing the adaptation to prison environment, mitigating prison conflict, bolstering mental well-being, fostering post-release life optimism, to reducing the odds of reoffending. It is notably critical to the rehabilitation of incarcerated people to maintain positive relationships with their family and friends (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Maruna & Immarigeon, 2004; Petersilia, 2003; Visher & Travis, 2003). Upon release, formerly incarcerated individuals often rely substantially on family and friends for vital support, encompassing transportation, housing, food, financial assistance, informal guidance, and occasionally, introductions to employment opportunities. In the absence of these pivotal supports, their path to reintegration becomes markedly more arduous. Drawing from the autoethnographic account of the primary author, the pivotal role played by parental support was crucial in his endeavour to abstain from criminal activities and successfully re-enter society. For instance, the primary author's residence was located approximately two hours from the prison of his release, and he was discharged on the very day a release warrant was issued by the Court. Without his parents' assistance, he would have faced the challenge of arranging his own transportation home. The significance of the initial hours following release warrants no further emphasis (see Mears et al., 2016).

However, the prison environment is not always conducive to maintaining these pro-social relationships, which often diminish over time. This is where prison visitation serves as an optimal means of sustaining these relationships, enabling real-time verbal and non-verbal communication. This allows for mutual reassurances that each party is doing "okay", verified through visual cues rather than relying solely on verbal affirmations. The uncertainty surrounding a loved one's well-being in prison is a recurrent stressor for family and friends and often serves as a compelling reason for prison visits (Cochran & Mears, 2013). Similarly, incarcerated people find comfort in knowing their family and friends are managing well, potentially

reducing their levels of stress, anxiety, and feelings of guilt (Hanley et al., 2023). The first author's initial incarceration in South Australia from 2016 to 2018 coincided with his paternal grandmother's breast cancer diagnosis. She was residing in the Philippines at that time, and the option for video visits was not easily accessible. This lack of communication with his grandmother and the difficulty in receiving updates about her health added significant stress to an already challenging period, particularly as he was on remand. The provision of video visits in this instance would have been useful in the maintenance of his well-being.

Furthermore, maintaining connections with family and friends assists incarcerated people in upholding their pro-social roles, such as those of a parent. Retaining these important life roles is essential for the parent–child bond (Flynn et al., 2022), but also instrumental in resisting the enculturation of prison subculture norms, values, and ideologies (Cochran & Mears, 2013). Maintaining these pro-social roles through visitation aids in normalising life for incarcerated people, providing a sense of hope and optimism for life post-prison (Hochstetler et al., 2010; Maruna, 2001; Visher & O'Connell, 2012). The degree of optimism harboured by an incarcerated person significantly influences their re-entry process, with research showing a lower likelihood of reincarceration for those who maintain high optimism levels (Burnett & Maruna, 2004). Given that incarcerated people's perceived reactions from loved ones to their incarceration status critically shape their role identities, sustaining these social roles and familial connections are crucial as they help shield an incarcerated person's self-esteem while visualising a successful life post-prison (Peternoster & Bushway, 2009). This was notably observed in the experience of the first author. Numerous peers were afforded the opportunity to persist in their paternal roles during incarceration, engaging in activities such as reading stories to their children, viewing their artworks and academic achievements, and even addressing their children's behaviour remotely. Such interactions signify their active engagement in their families' daily lives from within the prison walls. Many incarcerated individuals expressed how these interactions enabled them to retain their sense of humanity; despite their incarceration, their paternal identity remained intact. This suggests that their role as incarcerated people is merely an additional aspect of their identity during imprisonment, rather than a replacement of their pre-existing identities as fathers. This capability to perform roles that were previously thought to be incompatible due to physical barriers then became possible as a result of the video visits, underscoring the profound impact of this technology on the preservation of personal identity and familial bonds. Prison visitation typically permits a one hour visit per week, leading to incarcerated people frequently reporting social isolation as a major concern (Liebling, 1999; Mears et al., 2012; Trulson et al., 2011).

Separation anxiety is a critical challenge for incarcerated people, which significantly contributes to their struggle to adjust to prison life (Bales & Mears, 2008; Liebling, 1999; Tasca, 2014; Tasca et al., 2010). This anxiety can further exacerbate mental health issues (Wolff & Draine, 2004) or even induce self-harm behaviour (Liebling, 1999). The experience of separation anxiety, as experienced and narrated by the first author, is a profound and tangible state of distress that is unavoidable. This encompasses a sensation of entrapment, characterised by the absence of the ability and opportunity to interact with friends and family or even to communicate with them. One finds oneself confined in an unfamiliar space, surrounded by strangers, a setting where the first author felt a lack of belonging from the outset. The moment that a prison officer announced his name, indicating that his family had attempted a visit within the initial days of his incarceration, significantly alleviated his anxiety. This act of communication served as a reassurance that despite his circumstances his family continued to offer their

support from afar. This experience transcended mere knowledge; for him it was as if he was receiving a symbolic yet profoundly felt embrace, encapsulating feelings of being loved and cared for. This autoethnographic insight supports research, which indicates that visitation can help mitigate the onset or severity of mental health problems while in prison (Wolff & Draine, 2004). Additionally, research has shown that incarcerated people who receive visits are more likely to adapt quicker to prison life and have fewer instances of misconduct (Bales & Mears, 2008; Mears et al., 2012). Incarcerated people receiving visits also tend to perceive their treatment in prison as procedurally legitimate (Carrabine, 2005; Reisig & Mesko, 2009), making institutional support for prison visitation paramount, as it contributes to a safer environment for both incarcerated people and prison staff.

Lastly, prior research consistently found that visitation can significantly reduce incarcerated people's likelihood of reoffending (Bales & Mears, 2008; Cochran & Mears, 2013; Derzken et al., 2009; Duwe & Clark, 2013; McNeeley & Duwe, 2020; Ryan et al., 2020). A meta-analysis of 16 studies found a 26% reduction in recidivism associated with visitation (Mitchell et al., 2016). Furthermore, incarcerated people who had frequent visits and visits closer to their release date had the largest reduction in reoffending risk, while any visit was shown to have a positive effect (Bales & Mears, 2008). These factors could primarily stem from the likelihood that incarcerated individuals who receive visits are also more apt to receive family and social support upon release and throughout the reintegration process. This was the experience of the first author, who had sustained familial and social support (from friends) throughout the entire time of his incarceration and into his reintegration. Visitation can also reduce the risk of parole violation, with a United States study showing a 10.8% reduction in recidivism and a 25% reduction in parole violation for incarcerated people who were visited at least once in the month preceding their release (Duwe & Clark, 2013). Notably, the only Australian study exploring the relationship between visitation and reincarceration found a positive effect for non-Indigenous individuals, with visitation reducing their reincarceration risk, but not for Indigenous people (Ryan et al., 2020). This disparity might be due to Indigenous people being 61% less likely to receive a visit compared to non-Indigenous individuals (Ryan et al., 2020). Not receiving visits during imprisonment is not uncommon, with visitation rates ranging from 39% (Duwe & Clark, 2013) to 74% (Cochran et al., 2016) of incarcerated people being visited at least once during their incarceration. The first author's experience in prison resonates with this statistic. In a diary entry, he remarks, "my peers at the visit centre remain a constant group of people that it feels like I have reached into their homes and have become well acquainted with their families". This observation suggests that the people he regularly encounters during video visits are a constant group, indicating that only a select few incarcerated individuals receive visits, while many others do not.

Barriers to visitation

In-depth studies on prison visitation highlight that the majority of individuals seldom experience an in-person visit during their incarceration (Bales & Mears, 2008; Derzken et al., 2009; Duwe & Clark, 2013; Ryan et al., 2020). This reality is largely a product of a plethora of structural barriers that either prevent or deter prison visits. Prisons are inherently designed to constrain people within their boundaries; they are not typically constructed with the intent of fostering a welcoming and easy-to-access environment for family and friends' visits (Austin

& Hardyman, 2004; Christian, 2005; Naser & Visher, 2006). As a consequence, the prison atmosphere tends to make visitation an intimidating endeavour. Potential visitors often confront facilities that are not designed with their needs in mind. For example, lacking convenient parking spaces, unaccommodating visiting hours and procedures, and inadequate amenities for families with young children (Christian, 2005; Duwe & Clark, 2013; Naser & Visher, 2006; Sturges, 2002; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005). Furthermore, the complicated administrative procedures required for a prison visit, such as completing an application for visitation approval and then submitting to a criminal history check, present another obstacle (Duwe & Clark, 2013; Mignon & Ransford, 2012). For individuals unfamiliar with the correctional system, navigating these administrative tasks can be an uphill struggle (Ryan & Ryan, 2024). Indeed, these are the stark realities faced by individuals seeking to visit their loved ones inside prison facilities. When the first author was initially incarcerated in South Australia, his parents encountered substantial delays before receiving assistance with the visitor application process. Furthermore, it is common for individuals to have been in custody for up to a week on remand without having been visited by their families, as was the situation for the first author on this occasion, who found himself unable to freely communicate with his parents during his time in police custody. It is also important to note that the conditions in many police cells are frequently more dire than those in prisons, which are already challenging environments. Consequently, by the time a visit was arranged, a significant amount of time had already passed. When assistance was finally provided to his parents, they learned that each prison unit offered only two visiting slots within standard business hours and days, accommodating visits for merely five incarcerated individuals per slot. This scheduling posed a significant challenge for the first author's parents, both of whom were professionals with work commitments during these hours, necessitating them to take days off work to visit their son.

Complications increase when considering that the visitation application process, rules, policies, and procedures can vary greatly based on the prison facility, jurisdiction, security level, and whether it is a private or public institution (Ryan & Ryan, 2024). Visitors must therefore familiarise themselves with the specific processes for the prison they intend to visit. This task becomes even more burdensome when this specific information is hard to locate, or in some instances, not available at all, leading to visits being postponed, delayed, or even cancelled. Evidently, upon the first author's admittance to a correctional facility in Victoria, Australia, he encountered different procedures for arranging parental visits compared to those in South Australia. In Victoria's public prisons, the incarcerated individual is responsible for scheduling visits and communicating the details regarding time and duration to their visitors. This task can be especially daunting, as access to efficient communication methods is limited, especially for those newly incarcerated and unfamiliar with the bureaucratic system. This additional responsibility compounds the stress and anxiety inherent in their circumstances.

For individuals with limited literacy or digital skills, those without access to a digital device, or those lacking personal identification documents, or who have restricted access to postal services, navigating these systems is even more challenging. Furthermore, despite managing to traverse these administrative hurdles, visitation approval may still be denied due to a person's criminal history (Queensland Corrective Services, 2022). The importance of maintaining connections with family and friends while in prison makes these barriers even more critical, especially considering Australia's Indigenous population, who are more likely than non-Indigenous people to have lower literacy skills (Cooke et al., 2007), and a criminal history (Ryan et al., 2018). These factors could potentially explain why Indigenous

incarcerated people are significantly less likely to receive visits than non-Indigenous people (Ryan et al., 2020). Furthermore, individuals face additional structural impediments to visitation. Given that many incarcerated people come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, it is reasonable to assume that their visitors are likely to reside in similar conditions, facing the same obstacles. Individuals from low socioeconomic areas often lack disposable income and access to resources (Bowman & Travis, 2012; Stahler et al., 2013; Weatherburn & Lind, 2001), thus, hindering their ability to afford the cost to take time off work, transportation, and/or childcare that visitation requires (Christian, 2005; Cochran & Mears, 2013).

Adding to these difficulties, incarcerated people are often housed far from their home communities, placing an additional burden on visitors (Christian, 2005; Mumola, 2000; Ryan et al., 2020; Schirmer et al., 2009), as was the case for the first author whose family lived some two hours away. Travel and its associated costs, such as overnight or weekend accommodation (Christian, 2005), can dramatically decrease the frequency and likelihood of visits (Clark & Duwe, 2017; Cochran et al., 2017; McNeeley & Duwe, 2020; Ryan et al., 2020). Moreover, the farther a visitor must travel, the less likely a visit will occur (Ryan et al., 2020). In Australia, it is not uncommon for visitors to require overnight accommodation to visit their loved ones in prison – an additional significant expense that must be deducted from their household budgets. Due to the high average costs of overnight accommodation in Australia, regular visitation becomes financially prohibitive for many individuals. This particularly affects those with family and friends living interstate or overseas, making it highly unlikely that these people will receive in-person visits while incarcerated.

Video visits: Benefits and concerns

The technology to conduct video visits is not new, although it has improved over time. Many correctional facilities were compelled to make significant technological investments during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was to implement digital capabilities for video visits as a risk-mitigation strategy, in response to cancelling all in-person visits and instituting rolling lockdowns where incarcerated individuals were confined to their cells 24/7. Additionally, advocates for incarcerated people and their families have been calling for access to video visits since as early as 1998 (Anthony et al., 2022). Prior to the pandemic, conversations regarding access to video visits were sidelined due to "security concerns" (Hanley et al., 2023; Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016). However, with the imminent threat of prison unrest, riots, prisoner-to-prisoner, and prisoner-to-officer violence, exacerbating mental health concerns of incarcerated people, and increased risk of self-harming behaviours (Hanley et al., 2023), security concerns associated with video visits were shelved whilst correctional institutions quickly adapted and experimented with developing video-visit architecture to allow in-person visits to be intermittently replaced with video visits. Now as we move into what many have dubbed as the "new normal" post the pandemic, many organisations are starting to review their COVID-19 decisions and policies in a bid to determine "what is the new normal?" As such, should incarcerated people and families have continued access to digital technology allowing video visits?

Considering the importance for incarcerated people to maintain familial relationships whilst in prison, access to video visits has the potential to remove many of the known barriers that prevent and/or delay in-person visitation. Video visits remove the financial burden that visits can place on families and friends of visitors as there is no need to travel, or pay for

accommodation costs (Flynn et al., 2022). This not only reduces the financial burden of visitation but removes the geographical barrier to prison visitation entirely. For the first time during the pandemic, many incarcerated people were able to "see" family and friends who reside too far away for in-person visits to logistically occur without significant financial outlay and time (i.e., interstate and/or overseas). Additionally, video visits remove the stress, anxiety, and feelings of humiliation and degradation that is associated with visiting the prison environment for visitors, especially for children (Arditti, 2003; Austin & Hardyman, 2004; Comfort, 2003; Farrell, 2004; Tasca, 2014). Often, even if incarcerated people do receive in-person visits they will refuse visits from their children as they do not want to expose them to the harsh intimidating prison environment (Hilliman, 2006). As such, video visits have been found to have significant positive effects on the ability for incarcerated people to maintain and/or restore their relationships with their children (Minson & Flynn, 2021; Skora Horgan & Poehlmann-Tynan, 2020).

With many communities being forced into varying degrees of "lockdowns" during the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals were forced to find alternative ways to connect with and create meaningful relationships with their loved ones. During this time, an ethnographic study that examined the use of digital technologies for communication found that these technologies have a "significant opportunity for digital media to be used for expressions of affection, friendship, familial ties, emotional connection and concern for others" (Watson et al., 2021, p. 3). Families, friends, and loved ones found new ways of connecting and creating meaning during video visits through performing tasks such as reading bedtime stories to children, supervising schoolwork, playing/listening to instrument recitals, and other mundane daily tasks such as eating meals together during the video call (Hart, 2023). With some prisons in Australia providing incarcerated people with access to technology that greatly expands visitation times (i.e., New South Wales Corrections provided incarcerated people with Android devices for their cells that have video call capabilities, thus allowing incarcerated people and their families flexibility to have "prison visits" right up to "lights out" (Lulham et al., 2016), many incarcerated people for the first time in correctional history in Australia are able to engage in dinner conversations with their family, hear stories about their children's day at school, and engage in their children's bedtime ritual. Additionally, incarcerated people are able to see and feel connected to the home environment and can see physical changes to the environment as they occur (i.e., renovations) which may help to improve the re-entry process when incarcerated people return home and their connection to "place" has been maintained. As such, having access to video visits is important to "normalising" the prison-life experience as much as possible and mitigating any feelings of alienation, thus protecting against the indoctrination of individuals into the prison subculture and prisonisation occurring (Hart, 2023; Johns, 2017).

In addition to the many benefits that video visits provide incarcerated people and their families, accessing the digital technology needed for video visits requires incarcerated people to develop their digital literacy skills. In today's technologically savvy society, digital literacy skills are critically important for incarcerated people to have a positive reintegration process, thus reducing the likelihood that they will be returned to prison. Many employment opportunities are closed to people without good digital literacy skills and technological experience (Hanley et al., 2023). Furthermore, when connecting to service providers, making medical appointments, restaurant bookings and even using public transport all require users to have a minimum level of digital literacy skills to navigate apps and online booking systems (Hanley et al., 2023). As such, providing video visits to incarcerated people provides them

the ability to upskill their digital literacy skills and experience with technology, thus decreasing the digital divide between society and incarcerated people, and potentially increasing their likelihood of a successful reintegration to society (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016; Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018; Van De Steene & Knight, 2017). All of these reasons may explain why video visits have been found to reduce reoffending in a matched comparison study that compared reoffending outcomes between incarcerated people who received at least one video visit whilst incarcerated compared to incarcerated people who did not (McNeeley & Duwe, 2020).

However, whilst there are many positives for the argument to continue providing access to video visits, there are some ongoing concerns that require consideration, possible investigation/ research, and addressing by correctional departments and/or prison visitation researchers. Correctional officers, policy and practice advisors, victim advocates, and politicians have longheld concerns about providing incarcerated people with technological capabilities for video visits (Champion & Edgar, 2013; Hanley et al., 2023). The concerns for correctional staff fall into one of two categories: (a) job-role requirements and (b) security concerns. For some correctional officers in Australia, the overnight rollout of video visits during COVID-19 may have felt sudden, causing many officers being caught unprepared and left to scramble learning new technology platforms they themselves often did not know (Hanley et al., 2023). Many people are now very familiar with Zoom, Teams, Skype, WhatsApp, Messenger, and Apple Facetime, all commonly used digital technology during the pandemic to help people stay connected. However, there are concerns that the rapid development of digital technology, the skill set required for the day-to-day role of a correctional officer is expanding at a faster rate than correctional institution can provide adequate professional development and training (Hanley et al., 2023).

Most security concerns relate to incarcerated people misusing the technology and security threats to individual prisons, and/or individual staff (Champion & Edgar, 2013; Hanley et al., 2023). Specifically, in relation to the misuse of the visitation technology concerns centre around the misuse of the device used to conduct video visits. These concerns include incarcerated people using USB ports to charge mobile phones they should not have, store hidden prohibited images in the device's folders, breach intervention orders, intimidate, taunt, and/or threaten victims and/or witnesses, operate criminal syndicates, and engage in other criminal activity (Champion & Edgar, 2013; Hanley et al., 2023; Harrison, 2014). Concerns relating to security involve incarcerated people using the device to plan prison escapes, create unrest in the prison resulting in prison riots, compromised safety for individual officers who are seen by "outsiders" during the video visit, and a reduction in safety within the prison environment due to incarcerated people using parts of the device to make makeshift bombs and/or weapons (Champion & Edgar, 2013; Hanley et al., 2023; Harrison, 2014). As such, it is important for systems administrators to "prove that the sky [will not] fall in" (Hanley et al., 2023, p. 10) when developing and implementing video visit architecture.

In most Australian prisons, video visits are still heavily monitored and controlled by the institution and correctional officers. Visitors must still apply for visitation approval and undergo all required criminal history checks to be placed on the incarcerated person's approved visitation list before they can organise a video visit (Hanley et al., 2023). In most jurisdictions, video visits must be booked in and conducted in the approved visitation space where they are actively monitored by correctional staff in-person (Hart, 2023). Screen sharing capabilities are disabled, and warning messages to visitors are displayed prior to the commencement of video

visits informing them that visits will be cancelled and/or banned for inappropriate behaviour, breaches of dress standards, sharing of images, etc. (Hart, 2023). Furthermore, correctional officers are usually responsible for commencing and ending the video visit to confirm the identity of the outside person and their approved visitor status (Hart, 2023). To date, as far as the authors are aware, only one prison in Australia (in the Australian Capital Territory) allows incarcerated people access to whitelisted websites (i.e., pre-approved websites on a closed link), emails and video call programmes (i.e., Zoom) via desktop computers in their cells (Hart, 2023; Kerr & Willis, 2018). All computer activity by incarcerated people in this prison are monitored from a central location. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Australian correctional departments have mainly operated reactively, facing staff shortages and financial constraints due to infections and isolation requirements. As a result, there have been limited assessments of the effectiveness, benefits, security risks, and safety of staff, visitors, and prisons.

From the limited research regarding video visits, correctional officers and visitors have reported concerns regarding access to video visits. Whilst video visits can remove the geographical barrier of needing to travel for an in-person visit, people who reside in rural and/ or remote areas have equal trouble accessing video visits due to having poor/no Internet service in their area (Hanley et al., 2023). More non-Indigenous people reside in city/urban areas than rural/remote areas, which may disadvantage Indigenous incarcerated people and their family and friends more than non-Indigenous incarcerated people and their family and friends because Indigenous people are more likely than non-Indigenous people to reside in rural/remote areas in Australia (Markham & Biddle, 2018). Likewise, there are also access concerns regarding video visits for families and friends who are considered to be of low socioeconomic status as they are less likely to possess the means to purchase the required technological devices and pay for Internet subscriptions than individuals considered to be of medium to high socioeconomic status (Anrijs et al., 2023). Finally, there are major privacy concerns for visitors participating in video visits in their own home as some jurisdictions automatically record all video visits (Hanley et al., 2023). As such, visitors are forced into a coercive relationship with the State to visit their loved one via video visits, for if they refuse to be recorded, the video visit is cancelled. Given the importance of visitation, the maintenance of pro-social relationships with family and friends, the rapid expansion of video visits during COVID-19, and the largely unknown/unevaluated benefits and concerns of video visits, there is a lot for prison visitation researchers to unpack and consider for future research, policy, and practice.

Policy considerations for video visits

Governmental actions in response to societal challenges are often perceived as sluggish and frequently inadequate (Austermann et al., 2020). This issue is particularly apparent in the prison system worldwide, which is typically mandated and largely run by public bodies. However, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically shifted this dynamic. The sweeping restrictions imposed during this period – including bans on in-person visits – necessitated rapid action by government bodies to ensure that individuals in custody could continue to communicate with their family and friends outside prison. This urgency was not only driven by the therapeutic benefits of maintaining familial ties, especially during prison lockdowns, but also due to the legal mandates requiring active prison visitation programmes.

The autoethnography of the first author reveals that Corrections Victoria, the agency overseeing custody operations in Victoria, Australia, remarkably organised and launched infrastructure within three to four weeks. Although the swift introduction of video visitation is commendable and necessary, it is important to critically analyse and resolve various challenges and implications to guarantee that this service effectively meets the ongoing needs of incarcerated individuals and their families.

Cultural diversity in prisons and language barriers. The culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) population in Australian prisons presents a significant challenge in the context of video visits, particularly with respect to ensuring equitable access to and understanding of this modality of communication. Australia is a multicultural nation, home to people from a variety of cultural backgrounds and languages (Lopez, 2013). This cultural diversity is mirrored within the Australian prison population (Awofeso, 2002). In many cases, CALD people in prisons may not possess a proficient level of English language skills, creating a potential barrier in communication during video visits. Language barriers can prevent individuals from fully comprehending the guidelines and instructions for video visits, potentially limiting their ability to effectively use the digital visitation system. Additionally, cultural differences can influence the way in which incarcerated people and their families perceive and engage with video visits. For instance, certain cultural norms might value in-person visits more than video visits, creating psychological barriers to embracing this form of communication.

A culturally sensitive approach to introducing and implementing video visits is therefore essential to address these challenges. Ensuring that instructions and guidelines are available in multiple languages and cultural contexts can help overcome the language barriers and improve understanding of the system. Moreover, providing adequate training and support for CALD people in prisons to navigate the digital visitation platform can further enhance their ability to utilise this service effectively. Cultural competence training for staff can also assist in addressing cultural nuances and misunderstandings, leading to a more inclusive environment for video visits. The provision of video visits facilitates geographical accessibility, allowing individuals from around the world to "zoom into" the prison space when visiting incarcerated people. Certain regions possess unique cultural norms that may appear novel and unfamiliar within the Australian context. These cultural nuances could induce stress for both incarcerated individuals and their visitors. Implementing cultural competence training could mitigate these issues, ensuring that incarcerated individuals are able to fully capitalise on the advantages offered by video visits, as discussed above. Furthermore, the use of translation services can enhance communication during video visits. Just as an interpreter may be present during in-person visits, the inclusion of real-time translation services in video visits can assist in breaking down language barriers. While this may present logistical challenges, it is an essential step in ensuring the equitable delivery of video visit services to all incarcerated people.

Finally, the challenges of cultural diversity and language barriers are magnified in the context of video visits, necessitating tailored solutions that go beyond those applicable to in-person interactions. The digital nature of video visits introduces specific considerations, such as the need for technological literacy alongside linguistic and cultural understanding. This section delineates the reasons why existing support systems for in-person visits are insufficient for video visits, advocating for the development of resources and training that are uniquely designed for the digital visitation environment. By addressing these issues, we can ensure equitable access to video visits, thus fostering a more inclusive correctional system.

Privacy of incarcerated individuals and microaggressions from prison officers. The privacy of incarcerated individuals and the issue of microaggressions from prison officers represent two significant challenges in the context of video visits in Australian prisons. These issues have serious implications for the ethical execution of video visits and require careful policy development and implementation. Privacy is a fundamental right, yet, within the prison context, it is often severely limited to maintain security and order (UNODC, 2009). The introduction of video visits exacerbates this tension, as these interactions are typically monitored and recorded, potentially infringing upon an incarcerated person's privacy (Fair, 2018). Conversations that might have previously been relatively private during in-person visits now become part of a recorded digital archive, raising substantial concerns about privacy and confidentiality. Drawing from the first author's experience, it appears that incarcerated individuals are not given information regarding the storage of data collected by prisons; they are merely informed that the data are used for security reasons. There is a clear necessity for incarcerated individuals to be informed about the methods prisons use to securely store and dispose of these data.

Microaggressions, which are subtle, often unconscious acts of discrimination, from prison officers towards incarcerated people can also be problematic in the video visitation context. These could manifest as unfair allocation of video visitation times, derogatory comments, or discriminatory practices that further marginalise certain groups of incarcerated people (Sue et al., 2007). In the transition to digital platforms, these behaviours could transition into the video space, affecting the quality of video interactions and further impacting the psychological well-being of incarcerated people. Policy implications in these areas are significant and should seek to balance the need for security with the rights of those incarcerated. Policies regarding the monitoring and recording of video visits should be transparent, with clear guidelines about data retention, access, and use. Additionally, incarcerated people should be informed of their rights to privacy and how these rights may be limited during video visits.

To address microaggressions, anti-discrimination policies should be enforced and include specific sections addressing video visits. Training programmes aimed at promoting cultural sensitivity and reducing bias among prison officers should be a mandatory part of the officer training curriculum. There should also be clear policies and protocols for reporting and addressing instances of microaggressions during video visits (Sue et al., 2007). Lastly, in creating these policies, the voices of incarcerated people should be included (and empowered) in the conversation to ensure that their experiences, perspectives, and rights are considered. This could be best achieved through co-production practice charted and discussed by the likes of Johns et al. (2022).

Regulatory and statutory amendments. While it is acknowledged that the use of video visitation technologies has greatly enhanced the ability of incarcerated people to maintain connections with their families, it is equally crucial to consider the legal implications and the need for regulatory and statutory amendments in this regard. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the capability of correctional systems to adapt rapidly, but policy changes should ensure that these technological advancements align with the principles of justice, fairness, and human rights. As such, the Australian Law Reform Commission and equivalent legal institutions globally should consider statutory amendments that adequately cater for the digital transformation in correctional settings. Primarily, the law must address privacy and data protection concerns, the rights of incarcerated people and their families, as well as the duties of correctional institutions

regarding the use and management of these technologies (Crawford & Schultz, 2014). There is a need for explicit laws that clarify the expectations around the use of video visitation technologies, monitoring protocols, data storage and sharing, as well as the possible repercussions for misuse. For instance, regulations should stipulate whether video visits should be recorded, who should have access to these recordings, and for how long they should be kept (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016). Additionally, legislative amendments should provide clear guidelines on the conditions under which video visits can be withdrawn, bearing in mind that these visits should not be used as a punitive measure but as a means of enhancing incarcerated people's well-being (Fazel & Baillargeon, 2011). Hence, correctional policies and statutory provisions should acknowledge video visits as a right rather than a privilege for incarcerated individuals (Gavrielides, 2007). Moreover, statutes should also consider potential digital inequality and stipulate provisions that promote equitable access to video visits. This includes incarcerated people from marginalised communities and those in remote or under-resourced facilities, thus ensuring that the benefits of digital visitation technologies are not limited to a certain group.

Time limitation, frequency, and capacity of video visits. The establishment of guidelines regarding the time limitation, frequency, and capacity of video visits is vital for their effective implementation and administration. These rules should take into consideration the institutional capacity, incarcerated people's rights, and the needs of their families (Wilper et al., 2009). Regarding the time limitation, prisons should consider the potential benefits of allowing longer video calls compared to traditional in-person visits. Lengthy visits can provide an opportunity for meaningful interactions and for incarcerated people to participate in family activities, such as assisting children with homework or joining in household events, which could potentially improve the quality of their relationships. However, longer call durations could also strain the capacity of the prison's infrastructure and staff, so there needs to be a balance (Duwe & McNeeley, 2021). In terms of frequency, research indicates that increased family contact correlates with reduced recidivism rates (Mears & Siennick, 2016). Therefore, policies should be supportive of regular video visitations, with some provisions for increased frequency during significant family events or crises. However, this also needs to be balanced against the capacity of the prison system and staff workloads (Hanley et al., 2023), but it should be noted that the incarcerated person's needs, especially those that are related to their rehabilitation, should be at the forefront of correctional objectives. Prison systems and staff workloads can be managed through various mechanisms, including increasing staffing capacity of prisons.

Moreover, capacity is a crucial aspect to consider. While video visitation allows for more visitors, as it eliminates the physical constraints of visitation rooms, it is important to manage this to prevent system overloads (Freudenberg et al., 2008). Policies should outline how many individuals can participate in a single video visit, which can enhance familial connections but may present a challenge in terms of moderating the visits. As there are varying levels of institutional capacity (within prisons) it would be difficult to articulate this figure, it may be more practical to set out minimum standards that prisons must adhere to. This may manifest by way of statutory framework that covers these recommendations, helping to provide a fair and consistent application of video visits across all correctional facilities. For example, Victoria's Corrections Act 1986 could be amended to include guidelines for video visitations, similar to how it currently regulates in-person visits. A well-considered policy

framework can ensure that the benefits of video visits are maximised while mitigating potential challenges.

The future of prison visits

The realm of prison visits has seen significant evolution over the years, and as we project into the future, the integration of technology, policy changes, and a humanistic approach towards incarceration provides an exciting vista. Drawing from the wealth of discussions offered in this article, a clear vision emerges of an idealised model for the future of prison visitation. The cornerstone of the future prison visit system is the harmonious combination of in-person and video visitations, providing a balance between intimacy and accessibility. Indeed, in-person visits offer an emotional richness that cannot be entirely replicated in a video setting (Hanley et al., 2023). However, technological advances have allowed us to facilitate connections that transcend the barriers of geography and time (Folk et al., 2019). The digitisation of visitation should not translate into an exacerbation of existing inequalities. Instead, the future of prison visits should provide equitable access to everyone, with cost considerations made secondary to the fundamental right of familial connection (Duwe & McNeeley, 2021). This would involve substantial changes to the current system, including a shift from current cost-prohibitive models to an empathetic, and humanistic approach to visitation. Emphasising a hybrid approach to prison visits requires a comprehensive regulatory and policy framework. In the future, we would expect time, frequency, and capacity regulations to be rooted in the principles of rehabilitation and the maintenance of family ties (Hanley et al., 2023). Rules should reflect the research indicating the significance of regular and extended interaction times in promoting reformation and reducing recidivism (Duwe & McNeeley, 2021).

An idealised model for prison visits would inherently respect the right to privacy. As we navigate the dichotomy between security and privacy in video visits, the future needs transparent and ethical surveillance practices, coupled with clear data protection rules (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016). Indeed, to ensure the trust and continued engagement of users, the assurance of privacy and confidentiality is paramount. As noted earlier, achieving a seamless transition to this idealised future calls for significant investment in infrastructure, capacity building, and a redefinition of visitation rules (Hanley et al., 2023). High-quality technological setups, intuitive and secure digital platforms, and readily available technical assistance should be the standard. Moreover, training prison staff in digital literacy, conflict management, and empathetic communication are essential steps towards ensuring the successful implementation and management of this hybrid visitation model (Freudenberg et al., 2008). All these changes and adaptations align with the growing perception of prisons as institutions focused on rehabilitation and reintegration, rather than merely punishment (Duwe & McNeeley, 2021). Thus, the idealised future of prison visits will have far-reaching implications for the entire prison system and its goals. The future of prison visits represents an opportunity to revolutionise an aspect of the prison system that significantly impacts incarcerated people's lives. This future vision of an idealised system seeks to strike a balance between the human need for intimacy and connection, the opportunities afforded by technology, and the necessity for security and safety for those within prison walls. This future, while ambitious, is entirely achievable with the commitment and collaboration of key stakeholders.

Conclusion

As we look towards the future of prison visits, this article concludes with the assertion that our understanding and approach towards incarceration must evolve to be more rehabilitation and reintegration-focused. The proposed future of prison visits is a revolutionary and transformative aspect of the prison system, with the potential to drastically improve the lives of incarcerated people, their families, and, in turn, society at large. This article presents a vision of an idealised visitation system, a hybrid model that harmoniously blends the intimacy of in-person visits with the convenience, accessibility, and extended reach of video ones. To realise this vision, substantial policy and regulatory changes are vital, along with significant investment in technological infrastructure and capacity building.

The proposed model requires transparent and ethical surveillance practices that respect the dignity and rights of incarcerated people, clear data protection rules to prevent misuse, and an assurance of privacy, providing a safe and secure platform for incarcerated people to connect with their loved ones. Furthermore, it stresses the necessity for a transition from cost-prohibitive models to ones that prioritise the fundamental right to familial connection, eliminating financial barriers to communication. While the presented vision is ambitious, it is entirely achievable with sustained commitment and collaboration from all stakeholders – policymakers, prison administration, technological solution providers, and the wider community. By embracing this progressive model, we can move towards a more humane, rehabilitative, and socially beneficial prison system, promoting overall societal well-being. This vision for the future of prison visits sets the stage for broader discussions on the reformation of correctional systems worldwide, shifting the focus towards rehabilitation and successful reintegration into society.

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