



Searching for the unexpected – understanding information-seeking behaviours of people new to prison visits

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Often, when an offender is sentenced their family and friends find themselves in a state of uncertainty. At this point, family and friends of prisoners need support and often find themselves alone to navigate and learn the correctional system to gain visitation approval. It is unknown how people new to visitation learns the rules and processes of prison visits to gain visitation access. This study explores 21 prison visitors' information-seeking behaviour to understanding how people new to prison visitation learns to navigate the system to obtain visitation approval and identify any factors that might impeded their ability to information-seek, thus delaying or preventing visitation. Using Flexible Pattern Matching Analysis we identified five factors that can occur prior to individual's need to information-seek, and one key factor that was common during the visit experience that can impact peoples 'ability to information seek'. Implications for prison visitation policy and practice are discussed.

Key words: flexible pattern matching analysis; information seeking; prison visitation; prison visitors; uncertainty management theory.

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Introduction

Despite the successful reintegration of prisoners back into the community being a common goal of many correctional departments worldwide, most prisoners will be reincarcerated within two to five years of their release (Ryan et al., 2019; Langan & Levin, 2002). Prisoners being released into the community with limited or no social support is a well-known risk factor for reincarceration (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Hirschi, 1969; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Most prisoners when released heavily rely on family and/or friends for housing, food and transport (Maruna et al., 2004; Petersilia,

2003; Visher & Travis, 2003). Unfortunately, prison is not conducive for prisoners to maintain pro-social networks with family and friends on the outside. While in prison there are three ways a prisoner can try to maintain their social support networks with family and friends. These are: (a) by written correspondence (i.e. letters or emails); (b) via telephone calls; and/or (c) by visits (in-person and/or via video conferencing; Ryan et al., 2020).

Considering a large proportion of prisoners have poor literacy skills or are illiterate (Greenberg et al., 2007; Wundersitz, 2010), receiving and sending written correspondence is not an option for maintaining social support

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networks whilst in prison (Ryan et al., 2020). Additionally, most prisons limit the length of outbound phone calls prisoners can make,¹ and the cost of making phone calls is expensive, making regular communication via phone unaffordable for most prisoners. Further, family and friends cannot simply call a prisoner for a chat; instead they must wait to receive a call from the prisoner, thus maintaining social support networks via phone calls is not an ideal option. Additionally, prisoners may also be deterred from communicating with their family and friends via written communication and/or the telephone as all communication through these means are heavily monitored and regulated by prison staff (Queensland Corrective Services, QCS, 2022a). As such, the preferred and primary way that prisoners can maintain their social support networks is through visitations.

Whilst visitation is widely recognised as a potential protective factor against reincarceration post-release and is promoted by policy makers and researchers as a cost-effective programming tool that is relatively easy to implement in prisons (Bales & Mears, 2008; Derkzen et al., 2009; Duwe & Clark, 2013), not all prisoners are visited. Prior research that has examined why prisoners might not be visited has focused on barriers that might prevent visitation from occurring (i.e. travel, cost, work, childcare etc.) once the visitor has approval to visit (see Christian, 2005; Naser & Visher, 2006; Sturges & Al-Khattar, 2009; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005). However, no prior research has investigated how people new to prison visitation find information that explains where or how to apply for visitation approval, what the visitation rules and requirements are and/or what a visitor could expect to experience during the visitation process (i.e. security check procedures, drug screening, exposure to sniffer

dogs etc). Considering prisoners have the legal right to be visited whilst incarcerated in most countries (Han, 2012; Monahan et al., 2011; Queensland Corrective Services, QCS, 2022a), and that visitation is a protective factor against reincarceration, it is critical to understand the information-finding process of people new to prison visitation to ensure visits are not being prevented and/or delayed by unfriendly cumbersome visitation systems and processes.

Prison visitation benefits

Prisoner visitation is one of the main sources of social capital, emotional support and informal social control mechanisms that can assist prisoners in maintaining their connection with family and friends (Anderson et al., 2022; Hickert et al., 2019; Turanovic & Tasca, 2019), thus providing a protective factor against the feelings of strain associated with incarceration and prisoner reintegration (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Hirschi, 1969; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Solomon et al., 2002). Additionally, maintaining connections with family and friends is important in helping prisoners to maintain pro-social roles, such as the role of a father or mother, as this helps prevent the adoption and internalisation of prison subcultural norms, values and ideologies (Cochran, 2019; Cochran & Mears, 2013). Furthermore, visitation may also increase a prisoner's optimism about life after prison (Hochstetler et al., 2010; Maruna, 2001; Visher & O'Connell, 2012). Research examining the quality and frequency of visits received found that prisoners who had positive experiences had fewer post-release concerns about employment, housing, debt and recidivism than those who had negative visitation experiences (Baker et al., 2022). A prisoner's level of positivity is important for the re-entry process, as longitudinal research shows that prisoners who have high levels of optimism about life after prison are significantly less likely to be reincarcerated post-

¹Maximum length of an outbound phone call made by a prisoner in a prison in Australia is approximately 12 min (Corrections Victoria, 2023).

release (Burnett & Maruna, 2004). With reflected appraisals and perceived reactions from loved ones about their prisoner status being critical for the adoption and maintenance of role identities while in prison, the maintenance of social roles and familial bonds for prisoners are paramount as it helps protect a prisoner's self-worth in imagining a well-adjusted life after prison (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). However, it is not uncommon for prisoners to never be visited (Derkzen et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 2020).

Previous research has shown that at most 46% of prisoners received at least one visit whilst incarcerated (Derkzen et al., 2009) with other studies finding as little as 39% (Duwe & Clark, 2013) and 24% (Mears et al., 2012). The social isolation experienced in prison is one of the most reported concerns by prisoners (Liebling, 1999; Mears et al., 2012; Trulson et al., 2011). The separation from one's family and friends whilst in prison is a critical challenge for prisoners and is a key contributory factor in prisoners' maladjustment to prison life (Bales & Mears, 2008; Liebling, 1999; Tasca et al., 2010; Trulson et al., 2011), poor mental health that can lead to depression (Wolff & Draine, 2004) and self-harming behaviour (Liebling, 1993). Prisoners who are visited in prison have been found to experience fewer mental health problems whilst in prison than prisoners who are not visited (Wallace et al., 2016; Wolff & Draine, 2004), are less likely to have instances of misconduct (i.e. general misbehaviour, prisoner-to-prisoner violence, prisoner-to-officer violence etc.; Bales & Mears, 2008; Cochran et al., 2020; Mears et al., 2012) and are more likely to have a favourable perception of procedural legitimacy (Carrabine, 2005; Reisig & Mesko, 2009), all of which results in a safer living environment for prisoners and working environment for correctional staff.

It is also suggested that the more a prisoner is visited the more likely they are to possess a strong social support network that is critical for their successful reintegration to community

post-release (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Hirschi, 1969; Meyers et al., 2017; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Solomon et al., 2002). Likewise, it could be assumed that prisoners who are not visited or visited very little whilst in prison may have little to no social support network and, thus, have a significantly greater risk of reincarceration post-release (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Solomon et al., 2002). Furthermore, it is possible for prisoners who are visited to have better re-entry plans in place prior to leaving prison than prisoners who are not visited, or visited less frequently, as they have potentially had more opportunity to discuss their plans and needs with the people who will most likely be their support on the outside (i.e. their family and friends; Baker et al., 2022). As such, it would be possible for correctional and reintegration support staff to identify prisoners who may benefit from greater reintegration support services upon release based on visitation data.

Finally, many researchers argue that by increasing the number of people being visited and the frequency in which people are visited, we could promote a decrease in reoffending post-release (Baker et al., 2019; Mears & Cochran, 2015; Meyers et al., 2017; Tasca et al., 2016; Turanovic & Tasca, 2022). Research using conventional regression analyses has consistently shown visitation to have a modest effect in lowering people's risk of reoffending/reincarceration post-release (Cochran et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2020; Turanovic & Tasca, 2022). A meta-analysis of 16 visitation studies concluded that being visited in prison resulted in a decrease of prisoners' recidivism risk by an average of 26% (Mitchell et al., 2016). Furthermore, recent research that controlled for the security level of prisons that visits were being received in found a similar effect on recidivism, with visitation lowering the likelihood of reoffending for prisoners in this study by 24.6% (Turanovic & Tasca, 2022). As such, it is clear from the research that visitation has many benefits and that we should want family and friends to visit people in prison.

Visitation rules and processes

To visit a family member or friend in prison an individual must first be approved to visit, and once approved must abide by all visitation rules, regulations and processes. However, there is no uniform application process for visitation approval, or rules and regulations across Australia or individual states within Australia. Each correctional facility can have their own visitor application process, specific rules, regulations and visitation processes (i.e. security checks, finger printing, sniffer dogs etc, at the prison when visiting). For example, in Queensland, Australia, all people who wish to visit someone in prison are required to apply for visitation approval by submitting a form through a centralised application process, and once approved the approval follows the visitor to each correctional facility they need to visit (i.e. there is no need to reapply if the prisoner is transferred to another facility) for the duration of the sentence of the prisoner that they are visiting (Queensland Corrective Services, QCS, 2022a). However, in other Australian state jurisdictions such as New South Wales and Victoria anyone wishing to apply for visitation access must apply to the specific prison the individual they are wanting to visit is being housed in (Corrections Victoria, 2023a; Corrective Services New South Wales, CSNSW, 2023). To complicate matters more, some prisons require the prisoner to first list the name of any people they want to visit them, and only once a person's name has been placed on the visitor list by the prisoner will the prison accept and process a visitation request from the person wanting to visit (Corrections Victoria, 2023a; Department for Correctional Services South Australia, 2023). These differences between jurisdictions and between same jurisdiction prisons also persist when comparing how an individual books a visit.

The most common process to book a prison visit in Australia is by phone. However, even when prisons use a visitation booking line there are significant differences

in how these are used between prisons. Some prisons will have their visitation booking line manned by an administrative officer who will process the visitation booking at the time of the phone call (Corrections Victoria, 2023a; Corrective Services NSW, 2020; QCS, 2023). Other prisons will use a phone messaging system where visitors leave a detailed message that includes their name, email, phone number, visitor identification number, the prisoner's name they want to visit, their prisoner identification number and the date they wish to visit (ACT Corrective Services, 2023). Staff process the messages from the booking line and send visitors an SMS approving or denying the requested visit (ACT Corrective Services, 2023). A key difference between a manned booking line and a messaging booking line is the operational hours of the booking line. The operational hours of the manned booking lines are mostly restricted to 1–4 days per week, for 2–6 hours during standard business hours (i.e. 8am–4pm) depending on the prison (Corrections Victoria, 2023a; Corrective Services NSW, 2020; QCS, 2023). Having restricted operational hours on the manned booking lines is problematic for people wanting to visit who work during business hours as they would find it difficult to find time to make these calls, whereas the message booking line is accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, thus providing visitors with convenience when booking visits. Other processes to book a visit that some prisons utilise are an online booking system accessible by the visitor, an email booking system and the requirement by one prison for the visitor to write the prisoner a letter informing them they want to visit and the date they want to visit, and the prisoner then uses the letter to book a visit (Department for Correctional Services South Australia, 2023).

Differences in visitation rules and processes also exist. Whilst all prisons require visitors to present personal identification when visiting, Western Australian prisons do not

require registered visitors to present their ID each visit, but visitors should be able to present their ID if asked (Department of Justice, Corrective Services WA, 2023). However, visitors in the Australian Capital Territory only need to present their ID for their first visit (ACT Corrective Services, 2023), and in South Australia visitors must present more than one form of personal identification to pass the identification test (i.e. 100 points of ID – a photograph ID such as a driver's licence and a bank card; Department for Correctional Services South Australia, 2023). Other differences in visitation rules and processes include the number of visits a prisoner can receive,² the number of people who can attend a visit together³ and reasons for terminating visits.⁴ With so many different visitation rules and processes existing between prisons and jurisdictions, it is understandable how a visitor can become overwhelmed, confused and even misinformed about the visit process and what to expect when visiting. Often, information explaining how to apply

²Most Australian prisons allow prisoners one visit per week. Certain Queensland, Northern Territory and Victoria prisons allow prisoners two visits per week. The most restrictive prison for visitation is located in Melbourne Victoria, and this prison only allows one in-person visit a month (Corrections Victoria, 2023b).

³Typically, most prisons in Australia allow between two and three adult visitors to visit a prisoner together. However, this visitation rule is one that does vary more than other visitation rules dependent on the prison the visitor is visiting. For example, one prison in South Australia will allow a maximum of five people to visit at once (Department for Correctional Services South Australia, 2023), whereas a Queensland prison will allow a maximum of three adults and four children (seven people in total) to visit at the same time (QCS, 2022b).

⁴In Tasmania and Queensland, a visit will be automatically terminated if the visitor needs to go to the toilet during the visit (Department of Justice TAS, 2021; QCS, 2022b). If a visitor brings in tobacco-related products in Queensland the visit will be automatically terminated, and the visitor may be given a visitation ban (QCS, 2022b). In Western Australia, any visitor not considered to be acting 'appropriate' during their visit can have their visit terminated immediately and potentially receive a visit ban (Department of Justice, Corrective Services WA, 2023).

for visitation approval and the rules and processes of visitation that visitors should be aware of are not readily available for consumption by individuals. Instead, this information must be pieced together by the visitor from various sources such as information phone lines, the websites of specific prisons, centralised government departments that have basic common operating information, lawyers, support groups and/or family and friends who have first-hand experience of visiting someone in prison. It is possible that the process of finding out this information, learning the rules and processes of visitation, and the differences between prisons could delay and/or prevent visitation from occurring.

Uncertainty management theory

Having a friend or family member sentenced to prison for the first time arguably places an individual in an immediate state of uncertainty. Brashers (2001, p. 478) states that uncertainty is '*when details of situations are ambiguous, complex, unpredictable or probabilistic; when information is unavailable or inconsistent, and when people feel insecure in their own state of knowledge or the state of knowledge in general*'. Having a loved one sentenced to prison is a situation that immediately places an individual in an ambiguous (i.e. not knowing which prison the person is going to be housed in, and/or when and if they will be able to visit), complex (i.e. the prison system in each state can be complex and difficult to navigate for someone new to the visitation process), unpredictable (i.e. no universal prison visitation rules exist, and this often leads to inconsistent and unfair enforcement of the rules between officers and between prisons) and probabilistic situation. Uncertainty management theory looks to understand how individuals judge and manage their level of uncertainty when experiencing ambiguous or unpredictable events (Brashers, 2001, 2007; Brashers & Hoggan, 2013). When found in uncertain situations individuals appraise uncertainty for potential harm and/or benefits (Brashers,

2007; DeLorme & Huh, 2009). Individuals who perceive that the uncertainty could have a positive outcome are more likely to be optimistic and hold a higher level of hope for the future (Brashers, 2001; Myrick, 2017), whereas individuals who assess the uncertainty as danger and having negative outcomes often report higher levels of fear, stress and anxiety (Brashers, 2001). Information seeking is a mechanism commonly used by people to decrease their level of uncertainty and alleviate feelings of fear, stress and anxiety as information can help an individual make sense of the event/problem (Brashers 2007; Brashers et al., 2000; DeLorme & Huh, 2009). However, uncertainty can also occur when a person has too much information (i.e. information overload) or receives inconsistent information and/or incorrect information (Brashers, 2001). It may be possible that visitors experience uncertainty due to a lack of clear and/or consistent information pertaining to visitation policies, procedures and rules being easily accessible and available. As such, visitors may feel they are not getting the information they need to visit their loved one in prison, and this can lead to feelings of frustration, injustice and resentment towards the criminal justice system.

Information-seeking behaviour and information sources

In most cases, individuals who engage in information-seeking behaviour have an identified problem that they need addressed (Belkin, 2000; Case, 2002). Depending on the context of this problem, the individual's knowledge level (i.e. topic knowledge and/or educational level), their searching skills, their social network and their available resources will influence how and when an information source is accessed, and what an information seeker does with the knowledge acquired from the information source (Ikoja-Odongo & Mostert, 2013; Muse et al., 2012). Information sources that an information seeker might access are

considered to be either *formal* or *informal*. Formal information sources are those that are organised and have some form of regulatory oversight. These might include but are not limited to information sources like government/organisational websites, 'closed' search engines (i.e. search engines that are found on government/organisation websites) official reports (i.e. annual reports), topic experts/professionals, support services, helplines and topic advocates (McKenzie, 2003; Wilson, 1999). Informal information sources are those that have no regulatory oversight, and, as such, there are no controls or protective measures in place to ensure that the information being provided via these information sources is true and correct (McKenzie, 2003; Wilson, 1999). Informal information sources might include, but are not limited to, Google searches, Q and A forums, social network sites/apps (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat etc), blogs, podcasts, family, friends and even the visitor waiting area of a prison.

Information seeking is not straightforward and consists of multiple stages that a person might cycle between as they progress through the information-seeking process. Information-seeking behaviour consists of seven stages. These stages are: (a) the problem recognition stage – this is where an individual becomes aware they have a problem (i.e. a knowledge gap); (b) the problem articulation stage – in this stage the individual understands their problem and can articulate this to other people/information sources; (c) source selection – this stage is where individuals identify appropriate information sources to access; (d) query formulation – in this stage individuals identify whether they need general information (i.e. current information on the topic) or specific information (i.e. information that provides solutions or helps problem solve) and formulates targeted questions to obtain the desired information; (e) search execution stage – the individual performs the information-seeking behaviour; (f) extraction and examination of results – this is the stage where the individual

collects and collates all information found and examines the information and the information sources; and (g) reflection – in the final stage the individual reflects on what information has been found and the reliability and validity of the information source to determine its trustworthiness and how to use the information (Marchionini, 1995).

At any point from (c) the 'source stage' to (g) the 'reflection stage' an individual might need to repeat a stage depending on what is found. For example, an individual might engage in (e) the 'search execution stage' and realise that the information source(s) they have chosen are not reliable, valid or trustworthy and, thus, they need to return to (c) the 'source selection stage'. This example also demonstrates how an individual might simultaneously be in multiple stages of the information-seeking process at once, thus clearly demonstrating that information-seeking behaviour is not a linear process, but one that is complex and needs to be understood for prison visitors if better access and provision of information is to be provided.

This study

It is important to understand not only what information sources visitors are accessing during their information-seeking process, but also what visitors do with this information, and whether they consider the information source, and thus the information received, reliable, valid and trustworthy. This is vital to know, for if people are receiving information that is not reliable, valid and/or trustworthy it could result in: (a) people not knowing how to apply for visitation approval and therefore not applying, and not visiting; (b) people's visitation approval being delayed due to misinformation and/or not enough information; and (c) people's initial visitation experience being negative and/or traumatic due to misinformation or not enough information.

Considering the many benefits of prison visitation, we want people to visit their loved

ones in prison. As such, it is vital that we ensure that the probability of prisoners being visited is not being jeopardised by how visiting information is being provided to potential visitors. To address this important gap in the prison visitation literature, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do people new to prison visitation learn how to apply for visitation approval and the rules and policies relating to prison visitation?
2. Did visitors feel that they were adequately informed about what to expect when visiting someone in prison?
3. How did visitors feel during the visitation application stage and prior to visiting the prisoner for the first time?

Method

Recruitment process

Participants included in this study were drawn from a larger project 'The Visitation Project'.⁵ Considering the difficulty in identifying members of the targeted population (i.e. prison visitors) we decided to recruit using a social media campaign. Participants were recruited using: (a) a paid Facebook ad; and (b) an unpaid Facebook ad distributed within a closed Facebook group. The same recruitment material (i.e. an ad with a direct link to the online survey) was used for both. Facebook advertising to recruit hard-to-identify populations has consistently been found to be a more effective and efficient recruitment strategy than traditional recruitment methods, with cost and recruitment time being significantly less (Frandsen et al., 2016; Kayrouz et al., 2016; Lohse, 2013; Whitaker, Stevelink, & Fear, 2017).

⁵'The Visitation Project' is a larger project that consists of a two-staged study that aims to explore what factors prevent, delay or increase the likelihood of prison visitation, and how the visitation experience impacts the visitor. The two stages of the study consist of an online survey and in-depth interviews.

In ‘*The Visitation Project*’ participants were first recruited to complete an online survey via a paid Facebook ad. The targeted audience for the Facebook ad was any Australian Facebook account with an account holder 18 years or older. In addition to the paid Facebook ad, a link to the online survey was advertised twice per week, on varying days and times, for three months in a closed Facebook group called *Prison Support Australia*.

The *Prison Support Australia* Facebook page was started by two women who had experienced prison visitation themselves when their loved ones were sentenced to prison. After trying to find support and advice when they were navigating the correctional system as visitors, to only be ridiculed, stigmatised and given incorrect information, they decided to start *Prison Support Australia*. The aim of the Facebook group is to provide other family members and friends of prisoners a safe space to get support or ask for advice, or for them to just share their stories and experiences with a community who understands and does not judge. *Prison Support Australia* has approximately 2300 members.

Individuals must apply and be approved by the group’s administrators to become members of the *Prison Support Australia* Facebook group. Two research project members on application to join *Prison Support Australia* disclosed to the Facebook group’s administrators that they were university researchers undertaking research on prison visitation and what the research involved, and asked for permission to advertise the project in the group’s page. For the purpose of transparency and to build trust with the group’s administrators, the two research members first applied to the group using their own Facebook profiles. Once contact was made with the administrators and agreement was obtained to advertise on the group’s page a new Facebook profile was created specific for the project that was used by the researchers to recruit. This Facebook page was called *The Visitation Project*.

In total, 248 participants were recruited and completed the online survey. At the end of the online survey participants could self-select to participate in an in-depth interview. To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants’ survey responses, those who self-nominated to participate in an in-depth interview had their name, contact number and email automatically recorded into a separate dataset from their survey responses so it was not possible to link interview participants with their survey responses. A total of 34 participants self-nominated for an interview, and of these 21 completed an in-depth interview. A \$20.00 gift card was offered to participants who completed an interview in appreciation for their time. However, of the 21 participants only two (9.50%) accepted the gift card. The common sentiment among the participants who refused the gift cards was that they were happy to participate if it might help to change visitation and how the system currently works.

Participants

This study analyses information collected from the 21 participants interviewed in ‘*The Visitation Project*’. To be included in the study, not only did participants have to complete the online survey and then self-nominate for an interview, they also had to reside in Australia, be 18 years or older and meet one of the following inclusion criteria: (a) at the time of the survey be currently visiting someone who is in an Australian correctional centre; (b) has previously visited someone who is currently in an Australian correctional centre; (c) knows someone who is in an Australian correctional centre and would like to visit but cannot for whatever reason; and (d) has visited a person in the past 5 years in an Australian correctional centre who is no longer in prison. Anyone visiting prisoners in a professional context (i.e. a lawyer, doctor, prison chaplain, therapist etc.) were excluded from the study. Of the 21 participants, two (9.50%) were male, and 19 (90.50%) were female. Two participants (9.50%) identified as Indigenous, and

19 (90.50%) identified as non-Indigenous. A total of 14 (66.66%) participants were visiting their partner, six (28.57%) visited their son, and one (0.04%) visited a friend. All people who were visited were males. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 78 years, with the mean age of participants being 42.04 years.

Procedure

Ethical approval for *'The Visitation Project'* was obtained (HEC20411). Participants were provided with a choice to complete the interview in-person, on the phone or via a Zoom link. Only one participant chose to complete the interview via a Zoom link, with the other 20 participants opting to complete the interview by phone. On average the interviews took approximately 60 min to complete, with the shortest interview taking 42 min and the longest taking 135 min. A semi-structured interview design was used, which consisted of a series of closed and open-ended questions on prison visitation and participants' visitation experience. To protect participants' confidentiality all interviews were transcribed immediately, and all identifying information was deidentified. During the deidentification process participants' names were removed from the transcripts and the acronyms 'VA', 'VB', 'VC' (i.e. Visitor A, Visitor B, Visitor C etc) were provided to distinguish between the different visitors who participated in an interview. Following this, all the recorded interviews were destroyed.

Analysis

A qualitative flexible pattern matching (FPM) analysis was conducted to identify inductive themes in the interview data and to match and adapt the analysis with existing theoretical models (Bouncken et al., 2021, p. 257). The benefits of this iterative approach, relative to this study, are to strengthen the internal validity of the small sample qualitative data by matching the existing theoretical patterns with the observed patterns in the collected data and

providing a 'structure for theorising about the findings' (Bouncken et al., 2021, p. 257). FPM is grounded in the epistemological assumption that our understanding of reality is constructed through iterations between prior theories and empirical observations, and that knowledge creation progressed through comparing previous knowledge with new empirical observations (Burchell & Kolb, 2003; Reay & Jones, 2016; Sinkovics, 2018). When there is 'no clean theoretical slate' and the participants, site selection, data collection and analysis have been guided by specific research questions informed by previous literature, FPM analysis is considered to be the most appropriate analysis when analysing qualitative data such as interview transcripts (Bouncken et al., 2021; Eisenhardt, 1989; McCutcheon & Meredith, 1993).

Results and discussion

The aim of our research was to explore prison visitors' information-seeking behaviour to identify how a person new to prison visitation seeks information, what factors might impact a person's ability to information-seek and whether visitors felt adequately informed about the visitation process prior to their first prison visit, and to identify any improvement or supports that could be implemented to help facilitate quicker access to visitation for visitors and prisoners. Our findings, policy and practice recommendations and future research needs are discussed below.

Difficulties preceding the search

When an individual is at the point of needing to find out how to apply to visit a loved one in prison, they have probably already experienced several highly emotional, stressful and/or traumatic events. The stress from these events can add to the level of uncertainty felt by people new to prison visitation. Considering the higher the level of uncertainty a person feels can impact their ability to information-seek, analyse and process new

information, it is vital to identify what stressors people experience leading up to the need to search for prison visitation information and how these might impact a person's ability to information-seek. We coded the interview transcripts for factors that might impact a person's ability to information-seek that occurred prior to the need for information (i.e. prior to needing to know about prison visitation) and identified five themes. These five themes were: (a) *the court system*, (b) *loss of a family member*, (c) *the media*, (d) *financial stressors and* (e) *mental health impact*.

The court system

As would be expected, the process for family members going through the legal system can be emotionally challenging. Participants commonly identified feeling a sense of unfairness regarding how they and their family members were treated through the court process. While playing the role of the support person in court, many participants described feeling overwhelmed, uninformed and 'shut-out' by the process as all formal support and court processes focused on either the accused or the victim, and, as such, most had little understanding of what was happening during the court proceeding or how serious the matter was. This was particularly evident with participants commenting on how '*blown away*' they were when their loved one was found guilty and sentenced to prison, as one participant explains:

I guess because of the nature of the trial I wasn't allowed into the courtroom. I had to give a testimony myself. So, I guess – the case went for a number of days. And I was blown away with the outcome. That he actually got jail time. (VD)

With little time to say goodbye before their loved one was removed from court and remanded in custody, participants had no time to overcome the shock of the sentence before feelings of helplessness, anger and resentment

towards the system set in, as explained by participant VC:

It was a smack in the face. I was not expecting it at all. The lawyer told us he would not get jail time. I felt a bit annoyed. I guess I was pretty devastated of what had just transpired, and I felt pretty alone and vulnerable. I had no idea of what went wrong. (VC)

This feeling of loss, devastation and anger was often the point that participants' information-gathering journey would start, and it is a fair assumption that the court experience and the resulting high levels of emotions would greatly impact a person's sense of unfairness about how the court system treated them and their loved one. Starting the information-seeking process from a position of unfairness, coupled with higher levels of uncertainty due to the court experience, could create barriers to the information-seeking process as the information-seeker might not trust the information source and judge it to be unreliable when it could be factually accurate.

Loss of a family member

One of the more difficult factors participants had to come to terms with was the sudden and unexpected loss of a family member, and in most cases a prominent member of the family. This loss was likened to the pain a person would feel if a family member unexpectedly died, but worse, as explained by one participant:

The pain and the deep sense of loss when he was sentenced was um . . . was like . . . like someone close to you had just died unexpectedly . . . yeah . . . that's what's it like, except . . . except worse. You go home expecting them to be there, wanting to talk to them, and . . . [starts to cry] . . . and they're not there . . . and they're umm . . . they're not going to be there for however many years because . . . umm . . . well you know. But it's worse than a death because you know they umm they want to be there, and ahh, you want them there, but yeah . . . but they're not and that's just the way it is. (VI)

The grief of losing someone unexpectedly can have a devastating effect on an individual. Besides the emotional impact that can trigger feelings of shock, disbelief, anger, guilt, sadness, depression and loneliness, which can all increase the feelings of uncertainty, grief can also impact a person's cognitive capabilities (Hall et al., 2014). It is not uncommon for people who are experiencing high levels of grief to experience short- and/or long-term difficulty with being able to concentrate, learn new things, remember information and make decisions (O'Connor, 2019). Considering the impact grief can have, we can begin to understand why many participants reported feeling overwhelmed and inadequately prepared to visit their loved one in prison, with some participants reporting:

Nothing was clear. I had no idea of anything. (VB)

I was scared stiff [laughs]. Absolutely scared stiff. Yeh, had no idea what I was in for, what I was walking into. (VD)

Being able to navigate and learn a new system and the system's associated rules can be a daunting task for any person, which may result in a person experiencing an increased level of uncertainty. Information-seeking behaviour is commonly performed by people in a heightened sense of uncertainty to acquire new knowledge in a bid to ease the feelings of uncertainty being experienced. However, this is difficult to do if experiencing grief, or any other emotional stressor that might be impacting their cognitive capabilities to learn, retain information and make decisions. All of this is potentially problematic for facilitating fast and efficient access to prison visitation for those wanting to visit loved ones in prison.

The media

In addition to the emotional stress caused by the court proceedings and/or the loved one being sentenced to prison, participants reported that the media's portrayal of the case

in the local news, and in a couple of cases the state/national news, added an extra level of stress and complications that participants struggled to cope with, with some having dire consequences for the participants themselves, or their immediate family. Many were personally persecuted by community members because of the media coverage and the crime the person was accused of committing.

The things people would say to my son were . . . they would call him a . . . umm . . . a 'kiddy fiddler' and those derogatory names . . . some people even go to the stage of um, of asking him how he felt about [paedophilia], or umm, if he was that way inclined. It was horrific and my son did not cope well at all. (VD)

I was extremely sociable in the community, would like always go out and such. I even had my own business. Not no more though, that all changed. We were shunned. It was horrible. I essentially just had to close my doors and walk away from everything. (VE)

Participants also reported that the media exposure resulted in the stigmatisation and humiliation of themselves by everyday strangers:

I think it was two days later that I was [pause] umm, in Coles. And it was like everyone recognised me from the newspaper article and it was like I was standing still but the shock – the world was spinning a million miles around me. (VB)

Feelings of stigmatisation and humiliation can lead to feelings of shame, embarrassment, isolation and even depression (Dinos et al., 2004; Subu et al., 2021; Velotti et al., 2017) all of which are not conducive to lowering a person's feelings of uncertainty and increasing their ability to information-seek. Instead, these feelings may lead to people internalising the feelings of shame and embarrassment to the point that it prevents them from performing information-seeking behaviours so they can

avoid having to talk to/see people, as many participants expressed that people perceive them negatively. If people are actively avoiding the information-seeking process due to feelings of shame and embarrassment this will have a negative impact on the amount of people visiting prisoners, and on the length of time it takes for people to secure visitation approval.

Financial stressors

While it is common for people to experience financial stress in everyday life, most participants reported that these were exacerbated by the legal process and the fallout from the media coverage on their loved one's case. Aside from the direct loss of income because of the person being incarcerated, many participants reported going into debt to cover legal fees and having lost employment/long-term businesses because of the fallout, as explained by these participants:

We'd borrowed money from my parents for the trial. We'd refinanced the house. It was kind of – it was tough. I felt a lot of pressure to pay them back quickly. (VD)

My son lost his livelihood as we had to let the family business go. Once it got out in the media no one renewed their contracts with us and my son could not get any new ones so yeah, he had to let it go which was hard as not only did I lose money, but he could not support his family anymore. (VL)

Severe financial stress can negatively impact a person's well-being and ability to function effectively in day-to-day tasks. People who experience prolonged severe financial stress may begin to experience mental health problems such as anxiety and/or depression, have problems concentrating and learning new tasks, or have increased feelings of helplessness and/or hopelessness (Guan et al., 2022; Richardson et al., 2017), all of which can increase people's feelings of uncertainty when faced with a new unknown.

Mental health

As can be expected with people who experience highly stressful events, especially long-term or on-going events, most participants reported struggling with their mental health and feelings of complete hopelessness. In extreme cases, a few participants disclosed having suicidal tendencies, and even attempting suicide (themselves or an immediate family member) as explained by these two participants:

. . . we were sitting in the emergency department. My son had just tried hanging himself. We were quiet, there were no words. (VA)

He [participant's son] tried committing suicide twice at home. My daughter tried once. I got stopped once, but no one really knew how close I was. And, I probably thought about it, [paused] honestly in reality about putting things in place about 100 times. (VH)

Chronic stress can lead to structural changes in the part of the brain that is responsible for memory and decision making (Lupien et al., 2018; Lupien et al., 2007). Moreover, prolonged chronic stress can impair a person's cognitive flexibility, thus hindering their ability to adapt to change and information-seek to manage their level of uncertainty (Lupien et al., 2018; Lupien et al., 2007). Furthermore, dealing with long-term chronic stress and suicidal tendencies can leave a person feeling drained and unmotivated and lacking the ability to seek information to resolve the problem that created the feelings of uncertainty (Koutsimani et al., 2019).

How does a person new to prison visitation seek information about prison visitation?

Considering the multitude of differences regarding prisoner visitation (approval process and visitation access) between and within jurisdictions, it is important to examine how people new to prison visitation acquire

visitation information so: (a) visitors are provided with correct and adequate information; (b) the information is provided through modes commonly used by people new to prison visitation; and (c) any potential barriers to information seeking are identified that can be overcome by changes in policy and/or the way information is provided. With most prisoners not being visited whilst incarcerated, it is important to avoid willing visitors feeling demoralised and losing interest in visiting out of frustration with not being able to easily find information that is both adequate and reliable. As such, we coded the transcripts for information-seeking behaviours and factors preventing information seeking and identified the following three themes: (a) *active searching*; (b) *non-directed monitoring*; and (c) *barriers preventing information seeking/gathering*.

Active searching

All the participants engaged in active information-seeking behaviour to locate where their loved one was being held in custody post sentence. To our surprise, participants were not provided with this information by the criminal justice system at the time of sentencing, shortly after sentencing, or at all. In fact, all participants had to actively seek this information, with many being in 'limbo' not knowing where their loved one was for a few days, and often up to a week. In a few cases, the participant was unable to find any information regarding where their loved one was being housed, and only found out once they received a phone call from the person several weeks later after their intake screening and risk assessment had been completed, and they had been transported and settled into the prison in which they were serving their sentence. For participants, armed with only the information they had learned from television shows and movies about prison-life, not knowing where their loved one was, or whether they were dead or alive, hurt or injured, or even if they were just okay, was almost debilitating, as explained by one participant:

I've never had anything to do with any of this before [he] went to prison. I knew nothing about police, courts, prison or anything. When [he] went in I was a mess because no one told me anything and I could not get anything out of anyone [long pause]. I think it was maybe day 3 or 4 of him being in there and I had the worst nightmare I've ever had about stuff, you know, happening to him in there and him being killed. Yeah, after that it was a downward spiral for me pretty fast until I heard his voice on the phone. Cause I didn't know anything I could not sleep, I was not eating . . . I just stopped functioning. (VS)

When information seeking almost all participants accessed formal sources of information through searches of information online via the state-based corrections websites and/or specific prison websites for information pertaining to prison visits. However, many participants explained that even with finding what they thought was reliable and accurate information from 'official' websites (i.e. formal sources), the information provided: (a) was outdated; (b) was inaccurate; and/or (c) omitted important information, which often resulted in participants having their visit cancelled and/or feeling demoralised about the whole visitation process.

I looked online, but I still got in trouble for dress code once. Lace. Lace on the back of my shirt. Not cleavage, or it being skintight . . . lace. You're not allowed to wear any lace, not in max, but there was no information about that, for I wouldn't have worn it if I knew. I had to change into this old smelly shirt to go in or my visit was to be cancelled [getting emotional] . . . this was my first visit and I had driven over four hours to get there. (VL)

There was one participant though who had worked in government for over 20 years and was very familiar with government information systems and experienced no problems with being able to locate reliable information online via formal sources that translated into

incident-free visitation experiences. The participant suggested that her employment experience probably assisted her with her information-gathering.

The systems were pretty easy to navigate to find the information I wanted, but then again, I am used to how government provides information with having worked across multiple departments . . . you learn the tricks of how to find information quickly, which if you're not using those systems all the time it might not be so easy. A few times I would hear one of the other visitors complaining about not being able to find something that I knew was there because I found it, but I found it using search techniques they probably don't know. (VK)

Many participants also accessed multiple sources from which information could be gathered. While all participants made initial enquiries online via formal sources of information (i.e. corrections department websites), this often led to phone enquiries to prison information lines, another formal source of information. However, participants commonly reported that these sources of information often led to confusion and to participants looking elsewhere for what they considered 'reliable' information.

When [he] first went to prison I was trying to find out what I needed to do to visit him. The department's website was not very clear. There was no information about him needing to put me on the approved visitor list and that I would not be approved until he did this. I did not find this out until I think the third person I spoke to on the phone at the prison and I was only told that after specifically asking if he need to do that because I was told that information by a person on a Facebook group for prisoners' family that I found. I was getting very frustrated with what was taking so long for my approval to come through and no one was giving me the information I needed. Each time I spoke to someone I was getting different information, and different information from the website. You would think that

they would have a checklist or something that they could just run through with all the information you need to know when first applying to visit, but no. (VF)

Most participants reported making some type of information query through connections made on social media (e.g. community-created Facebook groups dedicated to supporting family members of incarcerated people), with many reporting this informal information source to be more reliable and accessible than the information provided by the prisons (i.e. formal sources).

I quickly learned not to bother with the phone line to the prison to get information. I mean, you could be trying for hours to get through on the phone, and then when you do finally get through the person on the end gives you the wrong information and you get in trouble when you go visit because you don't have something you need, or you have brought something you shouldn't have, or worn inappropriate clothing, all because you got the wrong information from them, and you try to tell the officer this when visiting but they don't care, they just cancel your visit. So yeah, why would you trust them? Now if I need to know anything I just ask online in the Facebook group and there is generally someone that has the information because you know, they have been through it, they know, and they know how important it is for us to do the right thing so we get our visit, so they don't tell you crap that's not true. (VL)

A few participants also noted accessing non-profit organisations for information such as the Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO), as well as other formal sources via approved print material located in information pamphlets in the visitor centres of the prison. While the effectiveness of these sources of information was mixed with some finding this information valuable, most participants found the information provided largely inadequate and unreliable.

Non-directed monitoring

The main form of non-directed information gathering came through the form of existing relationships with people who had some prior knowledge of the corrections system. As a point of contact that is present in every case, it was surprising how little the family member's lawyer was mentioned in providing visitation information, with only one participant acknowledging receiving visitation information from the lawyer.

Oh, the lawyer was the only one that said, 'you have to do paperwork to go and visit' and things like that. They were the ones who, I guess because she knew that had to happen. They – the lawyer I think got our paperwork and scanned that up to the prison for us. So that happened straight away. So [visits] could happen as soon as possible. (VG)

While it was the participant's first-time visiting prison, it was often not the first time the person they were visiting had been in prison. This allowed visitation information to be passed from a trusted informal source such as the family members who had previously experienced the person going to prison to the new partner as explained by one participant:

I was kind of lucky that he had been in prison before. And his mum and I and we were all pretty close. I was actually living with them at the time, so it was easier for me to just speak to them. His mum just helped out a lot. She knew what to do. What to do to visit straight away and who to contact and that sort of thing. (VG)

It must also be acknowledged that the information-gathering process does not end after the first visit, although the use of online resources such as government websites was primarily a first search option. Other informal information sources such as other visitors sharing information at the prison or in circumstances around the visit (i.e. on the journey) were not uncommon, as explained by one participant:

Another visitor helped me. Just told me what I had to do. Umm [pauses and coughs] they explained things I needed to know – things I didn't know. They told me that I wasn't allowed to wear like jewellery and stuff, and my necklace. So, putting them in the locker rather than when we're in line up. So, to put them in the locker now, not being told to do it. (VB)

The final way of finding information about the prison visitation process was through direct experience. Participants who had navigated the process of booking a visit and making it to the prison were then able to access information through direct or vicarious learning experiences.

I remember my first time going I had no idea what to expect really, or what to do. I just sat there [in the prison visitors area] and watched everybody else. [pauses] They kind of seemed to have the gist of what was happening. So, I learnt from everybody else. [pauses] Just watching what they do. Was not the best as I remember watching one lady being hauled off and having her visit cancelled and I was trying to work out what she did wrong so I did not do it. I was so nervous going through security that the officer gave me a hard time because he thought I was hiding something, but it was just my nerves because I didn't know what I was doing. (VB).

This was one of the more disheartening ways to access information as it usually resulted in a stressful visitation experience and/or the visit being denied. It was common that a participant had searched for information in multiple ways accessing informal and formal sources, and then attended the prison only to be turned away for a minor breach of protocol such as wearing clothing deemed to be inappropriate or having the wrong identification, both of which could be avoided by access to a simple visitors' checklist.

Barriers to information seeking

One common barrier to participants' information seeking was the enforcement of strict

prison rules. Most participants either directly experienced or witnessed someone being chastised for communicating with another visitor while lining up to enter the prison. *'So you're not allowed to talk. You're told very quickly to shut the fuck up. Like, [shakes her head] you're not allowed to make any noise'* (VA). While we cannot comment on why visitors were not allowed to talk to one another, this communication restriction denies visitors an opportunity to help one another through the transfer of knowledge and serves to reinforce the common assumption that visitors are not trustworthy people as they are visiting convicted criminals.

Surprisingly, this assumption about other visitors not being *'good people'* was reinforced by prisoners to visitors. Many visitors were warned by the person they were visiting not to talk to or have anything to do with other visitors because *'they might get taken advantage of'*, *'be harmed in some way'*, or at the worst *'have their visits cancelled or even banned'*.

There was a woman in her 50s and it was her first visit visiting her partner and she was nervous and crying. Back then I would talk to anybody, pretty dumb. So, I said, 'it's all right you just do this'. I was just reassuring her and telling her everything is fine. You know 'like leave your bag in the car. These guys are nice. Just put your arms out' and blah, blah, blah. She ended up talking me into giving her a lift and she got banned from visiting for taking contraband, and because the guard knew she came with me I was then under suspicion and nearly had my visits banned. There are people who will take advantage. So, now I don't speak to anybody. [name of person] says, 'don't talk to anyone babe'. 'You're visiting criminals'. 'I don't want anybody linking back to you'. (VK)

What is needed?

One of the main difficulties visitors experienced when first learning to navigate the

correctional system is the procedural and practice differences between prisons. This was a source of frustration for visitors as prisoners were often transferred to multiple prisons while serving their sentence. This meant visitors had to engage in another information-seeking process to check whether the same rules and processes apply at the new prison or risk their first visit being cancelled. Fundamental to this problem is that visitors need to first know that there are differences in procedures and practices between prisons as it is not possible to actively search for information that you are not aware is needed. This leaves a visitor in the position of needing information to be found through non-directed monitoring or serendipitous connections, which, as identified above, are often restricted for various reasons. Individuals who are new to visitation are not aware that there are differences between prisons and assume procedures and practices are standardised across what they believe to be state-operated facilities, as explained by one participant:

Information given out upfront about what to expect when you arrive and the process you would actually go through when you do arrive. Because it was – the visit was booked through the Department of Corrections, the State Government department but the prison itself was run by a contractor. They don't communicate very well. They don't share information very well. A lot more information would have been better. (VI)

To help people new to visitation and address the clear lack of information and support at or shortly after sentencing, several participants suggested that there should be a visitation liaison person whose role it is to actively contact family members of sentenced individuals to: (a) ask them if they want to visit the person in prison; (b) provide information to them about the immediate process for the sentenced person (i.e. explain the in-take and risk assessment process, where the person is being housed and what happens next) and

how long this usually takes; and (c) provide visitation information regarding the application process and the requirements for approval to visit. Considering most of our participants expressed being in shock at the time of sentencing, having contact with a visitation liaison person at this point might not assist the family member as they may not be able to process any information provided. To counter the shock effect, some participants suggested that, in addition to the visitation liaison officer, an information support pack that can be provided to friends and family either immediately or shortly after sentencing, which they can read in their own time at their own pace when ready, and which also includes support numbers of people they can contact for further information, would be beneficial in providing an initial starting point for people at the beginning of the information-seeking process.

To address the uncertainty in the visitation process for first-time visitors, one participant suggested that a short demonstration video of how the visitation process works should be made available online. This is a good suggestion. By seeing the inside of the prison and being 'walked through' the security process may reduce much of the uncertainty that is experienced by first-time visitors, as they can listen to, and see, what will be expected when visiting. Providing an avenue for individuals to develop a 'sense' of what is expected in stressful situations helps to build individual resilience, which in turn helps to protect individuals against emotional trauma (Frey, 2023; Stanley & Jha, 2009). Without the ability to prepare before entering a stressful situation, the individual experiences the full weight of the shock related to being exposed to the stressful situation, which can then increase the likelihood of them experiencing a traumatic response. By familiarising visitors in an already heightened state or arousal with the visitation process, some of this potential shock could be mitigated, thus allowing them to have a more positive visitation experience, and therefore may increase the likelihood

that they will become a repeat and frequent visitor.

Finally, it was recommended for correctional departments and prisons to take advantage of already well-established online support groups operated by former and/or current prison visitors as another resource/information source to help improve the availability and access to visitation information for visitors who find the need to information-seek (i.e. when new and learning the system, or when a prison transfer has occurred). This could simply be achieved by providing links to the online support groups on government/prison websites and establishing an open line of communication with these groups in which information updates regarding policy and procedural changes could be provided and general announcements regarding visits could be made by correctional staff with access to post on these platforms (e.g. if a prison was in lockdown, and visits were cancelled for the day, a correctional officer could communicate this via a post they make to these online groups, thus providing the group members with timely updated information). Participants viewed online support groups to be effective at providing helpful advice for several reasons. First, it was a common perception among participants that people who have direct visitation experience (i.e. they have or are a visitor) are best placed to identify issues with the visitation process and flag potential problems with 'work-around' solutions for others. Second, if visitors feel they have been unfairly treated by correctional officers during the visit process, or have had a negative experience whilst visiting, they are unlikely to report this to official channels due to their anxiety and perceived non-receptiveness of the department to criticism, coupled with a strong belief that raising these issues would result in negative consequences for their loved one in prison. As such, visitors found the online support groups helpful to vent frustrations and feel a sense of camaraderie with the knowledge that they were not on their own and could receive

empathy, support through discussion and assistance with how to deal with/prevent situations occurring. Establishing a formal relationship with these online support groups, which online traffic could be directed to via shared links on government/prisons websites, and updated information could be shared, has the potential for being a low-resource, low-cost assistive measure that could improve people's access to correct and timely visitor information, thus reducing visitors' levels of uncertainty and potentially improving the overall visitation experience.

Conclusion

From what we have learned from our participants, it is important to understand what a new person to prison visitation experiences leading up to their need to information-seek regarding prison visits, for most are beginning their information-gathering journey from a place of distrust, hurt and isolation, coupled with the effects of being subjected to prolonged chronic levels of stress, which we know serve to increase uncertainty and decrease one's ability to information-seek. While we must be careful not to generalise our findings to all people new to prison visitation, what we have found highlights the need for: (a) better supports to be implemented that provide assistance in navigating the prison visitation system and learning the rules to facilitate ease of access to prison visitations; (b) future research to further examine and determine the common stressors experienced by people new to the prison visitation system, the trends and patterns in these experiences and whether they differ for different groups of visitors, and how these experiences might impact a person's information-seeking ability so different supports can be identified that would improve the outcomes from an individual's information-seeking process to facilitate faster and more frequent access to prison visitation for visitors and prisoners.

Ethical standards

Declaration of conflicts of interest

Nicole Ryan has declared no conflicts of interest.

Nathan Ryan has declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee (ethics approval number HEC20411) and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants in the study.

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