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**Social Isolation and Inmate Behavior: A Conceptual Framework for  
Theorizing Prison Visitation and Guiding and Assessing Research**

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## Abstract

*Purpose:* Scholarship suggests that prison visitation is important because it allows inmates access to social ties that, in turn, can offset social isolation and help inmates cope with the transition back into society upon release. Only a small number of empirical assessments of visitation exist, however, and existing studies have typically overlooked how the heterogeneity inherent in visitation may influence whether visitation is beneficial, harmful, or has no effect. The goal of this paper is to develop a conceptual framework for theorizing this heterogeneity and its impacts, evaluating visitation research, and guiding future research aimed at estimating visitation effects. *Methods:* The paper reviews theory and research on inmate visitation. In so doing, it systematically examines heterogeneity in visitation and the implications of this heterogeneity. *Results:* The paper identifies five dimensions—visitation timing, longitudinal patterns in visitation, visitor type, visitation experiences, and inmate characteristics—that can be used to characterize visitation events or patterns that, themselves, may have varied effects on in-prison outcomes and reentry outcomes. *Conclusions:* More nuanced theories of, and empirical research on, inmate visitation are needed both to understand better the implications of visitation, and inmate social ties more broadly, and to advance theory, research, and policy.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Visitation may affect inmate behavior and influence prison order and prisoner reentry.
- Prior research has not systematically examined visitation heterogeneity or its effects.
- Visitation heterogeneity can be characterized along five dimensions.
- This heterogeneity may affect whether visitation is beneficial or detrimental.

Key words: visitation, prison experiences, social ties, social isolation, reentry, prison order

# **Social Isolation and Inmate Behavior: A Conceptual Framework for Theorizing Prison Visitation and Guiding and Assessing Research**

## **Introduction**

The United States has experienced dramatic growth in its prison population over the past three decades. As a result, policymakers, practitioners, and scholars have expressed a growing interest in understanding the social and fiscal consequences of incarceration and prisoner reentry (Gendreau, Goggin, Cullen, & Andrews 2000; Lynch and Sabol 2001; Clear 2007; Gottschalk 2011; Rosenfeld and Messner 2010; Weisberg and Petersilia 2010). Although a large body of scholarship has emerged that examines those consequences, little is known about individuals' experiences during incarceration and the implications of these experiences on in-prison behavior and post-prison outcomes (Maruna 2001; DeLisi 2003; Visher and Travis 2003; Nagin, Cullen, & Jonson 2009; DeLisi, Trulson, Marquart, Drury, & Kosloski 2011; Cobbina et al. 2012; Mears 2012; Duwe and Clark 2013; Siennick, Mears, & Bales 2013).

Scholarship suggests that visitation is an especially salient experience for prisoners and can have a beneficial impact on behavior during incarceration and over the life course (e.g., Ohlin 1951; Glaser 1964; Holt and Miller 1972; Hairston 1988; Bales and Mears 2008; Monahan, Goldweber, & Cauffman 2011). Drawing on theory and research that emphasizes the importance of social ties on offending and desistance, scholars have highlighted several theoretical pathways through which visitation can be beneficial for inmates, including reducing strain, maintaining social bonds, and providing access to social resources during and after incarceration (e.g., Fishman 1988; Hairston 1991; Wolff and Draine 2004; Jiang and Winfree 2006; Blevins, Listwan, Cullen, & Jonson 2010; Listwan, Sullivan, Agnew, Cullen, & Colvin 2013). Separately, qualitative studies involving interviews with inmates have highlighted the importance of social ties for helping individuals manage incarceration and the transition back

into society (e.g., Datesman and Cales 1983; Adams 1992; Maruna 2001; Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest 2003; Maruna and Immerigeon 2004; Christian, Mellow, & Thomas 2006).

Empirical research has tended to find that visitation improves individuals' adjustment and behavior in prison and after release (see, e.g., Bales and Mears 2008; Monahan et al. 2011; Cochran 2012; Duwe and Clark 2013). However, prior studies have largely overlooked the considerable heterogeneity of visitation experiences and how it may affect inmate behavior and reentry outcomes. The bulk of studies, for example, examine visitation as an event that occurs or not—that is, the inmate was visited or was not visited—rather than as one that may vary in quality and quantity and that may be patterned in different ways over the course of a prison term.

This situation is unfortunate for several reasons. Visitation provides many opportunities for developing and testing theories about inmate experiences and, in particular, for identifying how social ties may affect prisoner behavior. For example, visitation constitutes the sole conduit through which inmates can maintain ties to their previous social networks. This fact is of particular relevance given a large body of studies on inmate adjustment that show that separation from family and friends “is one of the most difficult features of prison life to endure” (Adams 1992:286; see also Hairston 1991; Bales and Mears 2008; Ross and Richards 2009; Mignon and Ransford 2012). There also are opportunities for understanding better what types of visitation experiences contribute to improved behavioral outcomes and when visitation may have little effect or may even adversely influence inmate behavior (see, e.g., Casey-Acevedo, Bakken, & Karle 2004; Siennick et al. 2013). For example, a recent study found that visitation that occurs early in a prison term but then does not continue is associated with a higher rate of misconduct than arises among inmates who are not visited at all (Cochran 2012). Not least, there are opportunities to inform policymaker and practitioner efforts aimed at identifying strategies for improving outcomes for inmates and ex-prisoners (e.g., Weintraub 1976; Schafer 1978; Hairston 1991; Sturges 2002; Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005; Cammett, Christian, Fisherman, & Scott-Pickens 2006).

Against this backdrop, the goal of this paper is to present a conceptual framework for theorizing inmate visitation, evaluating prior research on visitation, and guiding future work that seeks to understand how social ties to families, friends, and community may affect inmates. To this end, the paper first describes why visitation has garnered considerable attention from practitioners and researchers and the potential benefits that arise from a greater understanding of visitation. The paper then presents a conceptual framework, consisting of five dimensions, that provides a foundation for describing the heterogeneity of visitation and, in turn, the potential for it to exert a range of different effects. The paper then concludes with a discussion of the implications of this framework for theory, research, and policy.

### **Prison Visitation**

The historically unprecedented growth in prison populations in recent decades has led to considerable research aimed at identifying whether incarceration reduces recidivism. It also has led, as recent reviews have highlighted, to the observation that relatively little is known about the effects of prison experiences on inmate behavior and reentry outcomes (Petersilia 2003; Travis 2005; Nagin et al. 2009; Cullen, Jonson, & Nagin 2011). Accordingly, scholars increasingly have called for greater attention to identifying how the experiences individuals have while incarcerated may affect them (see, generally, Visher, Kachnowski, La Vigne, & Travis 2004; Windzio 2006; Cobbina, Huebner, & Berg 2012; Mears 2012; Morris, Carriaga, Diamond, Piquero, & Piquero 2012; Reidy, Sorensen, & Cunningham 2012; Wolff et al. 2012; Cochran, Mears, Bales, & Stewart 2013). Implicit in such calls is the recognition that these experiences may be heterogeneous; they may include, for example, variation in programming, services, inmate culture, officer and warden professionalism, and inmate ties to family, friends, and community.

Although all of these dimensions warrant investigation, inmate social ties arguably merit special attention. Incarceration, by definition, involves separation from family, friends, and the

broader network of social relationships that inmates had prior to imprisonment. The separation is a central part of what makes incarceration a punishment and it constitutes a central area of concern among inmates (Sykes 1958; Adams 1992:286; Liebling 1999; Windzio 2006). Even so, few studies have explored the effects of visitation on inmate behavior either during incarceration or after release from prison. And although existing studies typically have found that visitation has a beneficial effect on individuals' behavior (see, e.g., Monahan et al. 2011; Mears, Cochran, Siennick, & Bales 2012; Duwe and Clark 2013), this work has largely ignored the considerable heterogeneity in visitation experiences. As this paper argues, this limitation has important consequences for understanding visitation and its effects on inmates. Before developing this argument, however, the importance of visitation is discussed further. Five considerations, in particular, underscore the need for development of a more nuanced account of visitation and its effects.

### **1. Prisoners have a legal right to be visited**

One reason the study of visitation is of scholarly and policy relevance is because inmates have, with some exceptions, a legal right to be visited (*Overton v. Bazzetta* 2003; see also, Kent 1975; Hardwick 1985; Schafer 1991). A U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Overton v. Bazzetta*, decided in 2003, highlights the issue. In the case presented to the Court, prisoners challenged a set of restrictions enforced by the Michigan Department of Corrections on inmate visitation. The Court considered the constitutionality of regulations regarding the eligibility of potential visitors, restrictions of visitation access for inmates who have committed multiple substance-abuse violations, and noncontact visitation for inmates classified to be high security risks. It ultimately decided against the inmates' petition, thus preserving Michigan's right to restricting visitation in different capacities. However, although the Court did not explicitly declare that inmates have a right to visitation, its ruling implied that inmates' right to outside association is not forfeited as a result of incarceration. Viewed in this light, prison visitation is, to an extent, a right afforded to prisoners (Farrell 2004; Monahan et al. 2011; see also, Han 2012). Even so, at the same time,

the Court upheld the discretionary power of prisons to limit or suspend visitation as deemed necessary, such as when concerns for inmate and staff safety exist.

State-by-state reviews of visitation procedures largely highlight the same implication—that visitation is a right but one that prisons can restrict in various ways. In Florida, for example, administrators can suspend visitation up to 3, 6, or 12 months, dependent upon the seriousness of an inmate’s violation (more details about visitation suspension procedures in Florida can be found in the Florida Administrative Code, Chapter 33, section 601.731). The California Department of Corrections follows a similar set of guidelines—inmates can have visitation suspended from 30 to 180 days, and can be restricted to noncontact visitation only for even longer periods of time (see California Code of Regulations, Title 15, Division 3, Article 7, Section 3176.4). Indeed, a review of guidelines across other states highlights that most if not all states provide minimum visitation opportunities (see, e.g., Schafer 1991) but, consistent with the reasoning in the Court’s decision, administrators retain discretionary power to restrict visitation as needed for such institutional goals as maintaining order and safety.

Implicit in this legal right is the moral argument that deprivation of liberty, via incarceration, should not entail complete isolation from family, friends, and communities. As an empirical matter, however, a substantial proportion of inmates are never visited. Some inmates may never be visited because they have, for different reasons, severed ties with family and friends and thus have a limited pool of potential visitors. Family members may have been the victim of the offender’s crime, they may have restricted access to the individual because of a restraining order, or they may otherwise choose not to remain in contact with the prisoner. For example, research suggests that a proportion of inmates, about 5%, are pathologically violent (see, e.g., DeLisi 2005; Vaughn, DeLisi, Gunterbh, Fu, Beaver, Perron, & Howard 2011), and it is plausible that these offenders have no remaining ties on the outside with whom they could engage in visitation.

However, the percentage of inmates never visited greatly exceeds that figure. For example, recent statewide analyses in Florida (Mears et al. 2012) and Minnesota (Duwe and Clark 2013) found that only 24% and 39% of prisoners, respectively, received 1 or more visits. Another

recent study identified slightly higher visitation rates among Canadian inmates, with about 46% receiving 1 or more visits (Derkzen et al. 2009). Similarly, analyses of specific inmate subpopulations, such as females (see, e.g., Derkzen et al. 2009; Mignon and Ransford 2012), have identified higher, but still relatively low, rates of visitation compared to males and adults, respectively. Scholarship on youth incarcerated in juvenile justice system facilities is almost non-existent. However, a study by Monahan et al. (2011) examined under-18 youth in a high security California facility and found that only 12% of individuals were never visited by a parent over the course of their sentence. This percentage of non-visited is considerably lower than the percentage typically identified for adult populations, which suggests that visitation is more prevalent for incarcerated youth.

Research suggests that visitation occurs rarely because of a range of challenges that inmates' family and community members face when trying to visit a prison. As will be discussed below, these challenges can include paying fees, taking time off from work, finding childcare, travelling long distances, and navigating complex administrative procedures and regulations (see, e.g., Schafer 1978; 1991; Comfort 2003; Christian 2005; Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005; Mignon and Ransford 2012). Regardless, the fact that few inmates are visited raises the possibility that a fundamental legal right is impeded, perhaps for some groups more so than others. By extension, limitation of this right may be viewed not only as a harm itself but also as a condition that may result in other adverse outcomes, such as increased inmate misconduct and increased recidivism.

## **2. Visitation may reduce the adverse effects of social isolation**

Scholars have argued that visitation is salient because of the isolation inherent in a prison stay. Separation from social networks is a critical challenge for inmates. As emphasized by Adams (1992) and others, it contributes to prisoner maladjustment in the short and long term (see, generally, Bottoms 1999; Liebling 1999; Wooldredge 1999; Haney 2003; Tasca, Griffin, & Rodriguez 2010; Trulson, DeLisi, & Marquart 2011). Indeed, according to Adams' review of scholarship on inmate adjustment, social isolation during imprisonment is the most frequently

reported concern that inmates report. This finding is echoed by other reviews, including those by Sykes (1958), Clemmer (1940), and others (e.g., Holt and Miller 1972; LeClair 1978; Flanagan 1981; Hairston 1991; Liebling 1993, 1999). For example, Liebling's (1993) research on prisoner suicide identified social isolation as a key contributor to inmate self-harm. Specifically, interviews with inmates who had attempted suicide suggested that they had fewer friends among fellow prisoners and "received fewer visits, wrote fewer letters, and missed specific people (family members or mates) more" (p. 393).

Scholarship on inmate visitation consistently argues that the effects of isolation may carry over not only to life in prison but also to life after prison (Hairston 1988; Mears et al. 2012). This idea not only pervades the literature on inmate visitation but it also is reflected in prisoner accounts. For example, a recent study of soon-to-be-released inmates in Illinois, Ohio, and Texas found that inmates who reported less family support and who stayed in prison for longer periods of time had less optimism about their life following prison (Visher and O'Connell 2012; see also Flanagan 1981).

Both quantitative and qualitative accounts underscore the idea that visitation influences inmate and ex-prisoner behavior. Empirical tests of the key theoretical mechanisms are largely non-existent. Regardless, a central argument is that visitation reduces the strain of social isolation (e.g., Datesman and Cales 1983; Fishman 1990; Houck and Loper 2002; Arditti et al. 2003; Bernstein 2005; Comfort 2008; Ross and Richards 2009). Visits can, for example, serve to maintain or strengthen existing ties. This idea is aptly illustrated in an interview Datesman and Cales (1983:147) conducted with an inmate, who observed that "the main advantage of the visits are tightening up the relationships." The strains of social isolation are well documented by several studies. For example, a study of long-term inmates by Richards (1978) found that individuals who felt more isolation ("deprivation of relationships in and with the outside"—p. 168) were those who reported greater psychological stress. Prisoner interviews by Flanagan (1981) suggested that such stresses may stem, in part, from inmates' fear of having damaged outside relationships irreparably as a result of being incarcerated (see also Hairston 1991).

Visitors seem to perceive, too, the potential harm of isolation and benefits of visitation. For example, a visitor interviewed by Christian (2005:42) stated: “I mean these people put them through so much. And, if they don’t have nobody there, that’s the main reason they lose self-control, and they start to do things.” Another visitor, the brother of an inmate, identified a similar responsibility to help offset isolation: “I just felt the need to give him that companionship, you know? . . . I’ve never been incarcerated . . . but I can imagine how terrible it must be to be locked up in four walls and not have any companionship (p. 43).”

Recent scholarship has identified other ways through which visitation may affect social isolation and, in turn, behavior. For example, separation from potentially prosocial ties on the outside may lead inmates to adopt more deviant norms while incarcerated. From this perspective, maintaining contact with outside social ties may help to offset the internalization of criminal roles while in prison and help inmates to adopt more conventional, socially approved roles on the outside (Fishman 1988; Bayse, Allgood, & Van Wyk 1991; Uggen, Manza, & Behrens 2004; Wolff and Draine 2004; LeBel 2012). Visitation also may promote mental health by reducing social isolation. For example, a study of released prisoners in Texas and Georgia by Ekland-Olson and colleagues (1983) found that inmates with greater familial support exhibited lower levels of post-release depression (see also Wolff and Draine 2004). In addition, and as is discussed below, inmates who leave prison with fewer social connections may face greater difficulties managing the practical challenges of reentry that include finding housing, healthcare, employment, and also, avoiding further engagement in criminal activity (see, generally, Petersilia 2003; Visher and Travis 2003; Maruna and Immarigeon 2004; Berg and Huebner 2011).

### **3. Visitation can reduce or increase misconduct and recidivism**

Many theoretical accounts suggest that visitation can improve inmate behavior and reentry outcomes, not only by reducing social isolation but also through a range of other mechanisms. Visitation provides, by and large, the only opportunity for prisoners to access social ties to

conventional society. Accordingly, it implicates several mainstream criminological theories. For example, as noted above, scholars have argued that visitation may help individuals manage the strains related to incarceration (Sykes 1958; Holt and Miller 1972; Hairston 1991; see also, Agnew 2005; Blevins et al. 2010; DeLisi, Caudill, Trulson, Marquart, Vaughn, & Beaver 2010). It may help inmates to maintain or strengthen social bonds that in turn exert informal social control on behavior (e.g., Hirschi 1969; Sampson and Laub 1993; Solomon, Draine, & Marcus 2002; Drury and DeLisi 2010). Visitation, too, may contribute to inmates' views that prison authority is legitimate (see, generally, Bottoms 1999).

In addition, and as discussed above, access to social networks, via prison visits, can provide individuals access to social capital and resources that can increase their chances of successful reintegration (e.g., Ekland-Olson, Supancic, Campbell, & Lenihan 1983; Wolff and Draine 2004; Berg and Huebner 2011; Cobbina et al. 2012). For example, a recent study of male parolees by Berg and Huebner (2011) found that inmates who maintained family ties after incarceration were more likely to find employment and less likely to recidivate than parolees who had fewer quality ties. Similarly, Cobbina and colleagues, in a study of both male and female former inmates, found that individuals with stronger social relationships after prison were less likely to reoffend, and that such ties may be more salient for females than males. Other recent studies and reviews have identified similar benefits of social ties for reentry outcomes (see Sampson and Laub 1993; Bayse et al. 1991; Hairston 1991; Petersilia 2003; Visher and Travis 2003; La Vigne, Visher, & Castro 2004; Maruna and Immarigeon 2004; La Vigne, Naser, Brooks, & Castro 2005).

The negative relationship between visitation and misconduct, as well as recidivism, has been documented in a growing number of empirical studies. For example, prior research has found that visitation is associated with reductions in in-prison misconduct (Lembo 1969), aggressive behavior (Ellis, Grasmick, & Gilman 1974), and improved self-reported adjustment (Monahan et al. 2011). Scholars have also focused on specific sub-populations of visitors and prisoners. For example, Monahan et al. (2011) examined effects on incarcerated youth visited by their parents, and Jiang and Winfree (2006) examined effects on incarcerated parents visited by their children

(although the latter identified a null effect on misconduct). Recent studies on the effects of visitation on recidivism across inmate populations in Florida (Bales and Mears 2008; Mears et al. 2012), Minnesota (Duwe and Clark 2013), and Canada (Derkzen et al. 2009) all have also identified statistically significant reductions in reoffending among visited inmates.

Juxtaposed against the above arguments and findings is the possibility that visitation may have an adverse effect. Early penal theorists believed, for example, that social isolation was “central to penitentiary practices” and that contact with family and friends was disruptive to the prison experience because it decreased the potency of social isolation for imposing discipline (Rothman 1971:142). Contemporary scholarship in fact suggests that visitation may increase misconduct (e.g., Liebling 1999; Ross and Richards 2009; Siennick et al. 2013). The studies are few, but suggest warrant for the concern that visitation, perhaps by certain types of individuals (e.g., those with histories of offending), may be harmful. Corrections administrations typically restrict inmates from being visited by individuals with prior convictions or incarcerations. Even so, visits from individuals with histories of offending may slip through the visitation screening process and in turn result in exposure to criminogenic associates (see, e.g., Gordon and McConnell 1999; Simons, Stewart, Gordon, Conger, & Elder 2002; Mears and Bales 2008; Cobbina et al. 2012).

#### **4. The need for cost-effective prison interventions**

States increasingly have faced fiscal constraints that have led to reduced funding for prison programs (Jacobson 2005; Gottschalk 2006; Phelps 2011). Inmates also serve longer sentences (Pew Center on the States 2012) and experience more social isolation today than in previous decades. To the extent that social ties improve inmate behavior during and after release, the result of reduced programming, including efforts to promote visitation, can be expected to result in a more criminogenic prison environment. Indeed, over a decade ago, Riveland (1999), who interviewed prison administrators about past and future trends in corrections, found that a lack of sufficient funding for prison programs made it difficult for administrators to address social

isolation, prisoner adjustment, safety, and improving reentry outcomes. Visitation, as a programming option, constitutes one potentially cost-effective method for improving prison order and for increasing the likelihood that inmates are better prepared for reentry (Mears et al. 2012). Most prison facilities allow visitation and thus already have in place the necessary physical and administrative infrastructure to provide prisoners access to visitors.

There may also be straightforward, cost-effective methods to improve the likelihood and frequency of visitation. Administrators may, for example, be able to remove barriers to visitation that some visitors face. More studies are needed that can systematically identify the types of barriers that exist, but extant research provides some guidance. For example, inmates are typically housed far away from home. A Bureau of Justice Statistics report by Mumola (2000) found that inmates in state and federal prisons are on average housed in facilities more than 100 miles away from their previous residences. Similarly, Christian's (2005) interviews with visitors identified many personal and practical challenges the visitors faced in travelling long distances from New York City to prisons throughout the State to visit incarcerated family members and friends. The author concluded that long travel distances and the relatively impoverished social and economic status of visitors, among other factors, "may create barriers to prisoners' maintenance of family ties (32)." Thus, simply being housed in a facility closer to friends and family may be enough to increase the probability of visitation (see also Visser 2013).

Through interviews with visitors and inmates, and through observations of prison visitation rooms, scholars have identified other potential barriers and ways to address them. The barriers include limited or inconsistent visitation hours, inadequate parking facilities, costly fees, inability to find or afford childcare, complex administrative regulations (e.g., proper clothing attire during a visit), insufficient amenities for visitors at the prison, and the sometimes intimidating conditions of the prison environment (see Weintraub 1976; Schafer 1978, 1991; Mumola 2000; Casey-Acevedo and Bakken 2002; Comfort 2003; Christian 2005; Hoffman, Dickinson, & Dunn 2005; Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005; Naser and Visser 2006; Sturges and Al-Khattar 2009). In each instance, there may be, as these scholars have argued, simple remedies. These can

include expanding and posting visiting hours, providing easier access to parking and public transportation, reducing fees, improving amenities for visitors, and placing inmates in facilities closer to home. These and other such steps may increase visitation for relatively less expense than what is typically required for many other in-prison programs.

## **5. The limited state of research on visitation**

Despite the potentially central role that visitation may play in the lives of inmates, systematic empirical research on visitation is scant. Early work—including seminal work by Ohlin (1951), Glaser (1954), Holt and Miller (1972), and others (e.g., Wolfgang 1961; Hopper 1965; Ellis et al. 1974; Adams and Fischer 1976; LeClair 1978; Borgman 1985)—provided valuable insight about the potential effects of visitation. However, these studies employed statistical analyses that typically did not control for potential selection effects. In addition, many of them relied on indirect measures of visitation, such as letter writing or phone calls, rather than directly investigating visitation. Only a handful of studies exist that have examined directly, using multivariate analyses, the link between visitation and prisoner adjustment or misconduct (Wooldredge 1999; Jiang and Winfree 2006; Lahm 2008, 2009; Monahan et al. 2011; Siennick et al. 2013); and a smaller handful of studies exist that have examined visitation effects on recidivism (Bales and Mears 2008; Derkzen et al. 2009; Mears et al. 2012; Duwe and Clark 2013).

These studies tend to find that visitation is associated with modest improvements in inmate behavior and reduced recidivism. However, studies have not uniformly identified benefits. Indeed, several have identified null effects (e.g., Hensley, Koscheski, & Tewksbury 2002; Jiang and Winfree 2006; Lahm 2008, 2009) and a handful of studies have identified potential harmful effects. In the analysis by Siennick et al. (2013), for example, the authors examined inmate disciplinary reports in the days before and after a visitation event and found that inmates engaged in misconduct more frequently in the days immediately following a visit. A recent descriptive analysis by Cochran (2012) found that inmates who are visited consistently have lower rates of

misconduct than non-visited inmates but that inmates who experienced discontinued visitation had higher rates of misconduct. A study by Mears et al. (2012) identified reductions in recidivism resulting from visitation. However, the authors also found that visited inmates committed greater amounts of drug-based misconduct in prison and were reconvicted for more drug crimes after prison, when visited by friends, than were non-visited inmates. (However, these differences did not reach statistical significance.)

More relevant, in some ways, than the limited amount and rigor of prior empirical research is the limited measurement and conceptualization of visitation. Few extant studies go beyond measuring visitation as a binary event—that is, an event that happened or did not. Accordingly, they do not consider such possibilities as visitation events unfolding in patterned ways over the course of incarceration (e.g., Cochran 2012) or different types of visitors exerting different effects on inmate behavior (e.g., Mears et al. 2012; Duwe and Clark 2013). There are, to be sure, exceptions. For example, some studies have explored the effects of non-traditional types of visitation, such as conjugal visits, home visits, and furloughs (LeClair 1978; Hensley et al. 2002; Baumer, O’Donnell, & Hughes 2009), or have examined the effects of contact between specific groups, such as incarcerated mothers being visited by their children (see, e.g., Casey-Acevedo et al. 2004; Poehlmann 2005; Tuerk and Loper 2006; Loper, Carlson, Levitt, & Scheffel 2009). Such work has highlighted different dimensions that characterize “the” visitation experience and, in turn, that may influence how visitation affects inmate behavior during and after release from incarceration. At the same time, it has led to the insight that visitation is not a uniform event. Accordingly, research is needed that systematically takes account of this insight to inform theory and research on visitation and how visitation may influence misconduct, recidivism, and other outcomes.

## **A Conceptual Framework for Theorizing, Evaluating, and Guiding Research**

The discussion above highlights the potential salience of visitation for inmates and describes extant theory and research on visitation and its effects. It underscores the potential for research on visitation to advance theory and policy aimed at improving prison social order and reentry outcomes. And, not least, it identifies the limited empirical research on visitation and its effects. A central problem that remains is that research has not been guided by a coherent framework for describing and understanding either visitation or its effects. To address this gap, this paper presents a conceptual framework for theorizing visitation and evaluating and guiding research on it. The framework consists of five dimensions, described in table 1 and in detail below, including: (1) visitation timing, (2) visitation patterns, (3) visitor types, (4) the experience of visitation, and (5) characteristics of inmates that might condition the effects of visitation.

Insert table 1 about here

### **Dimension #1: Timing of visitation**

Few studies to date have investigated the potential effects of the timing of visitation (see, however, Bales and Mears 2008; Duwe and Clark 2013; Siennick et al. 2013). During the course of incarceration, there may be times when inmates are more at-risk for misbehavior or more vulnerable to strain; in such instances, visits may yield stronger effects on in-prison behavior. Similarly, there may be certain times when visits have stronger effects on reducing recidivism. For example, prior accounts and empirical analyses suggest that the early stage of a prison sentence constitutes an especially challenging adjustment period for offenders (e.g., Adams 1992; Monahan et al. 2011). Newly incarcerated individuals often experience an initial shock that includes feelings of loss, uncertainty, and isolation (e.g., Sykes 1958; Adams 1992; Liebling 1999). If individuals indeed are more vulnerable and under more strain in the initial period of incarceration, visitation in the first months may be more effective than in later months at helping

inmates cope with newly severed ties and the sudden pains of incarceration. For this reason, early visitation may have stronger effects than later visitation on individuals' in-prison adjustment, which in turn could affect in-prison and post-release behavior.

By contrast, late visitation—such as visitation in the final months of an incarceration period—may be more effective at improving individuals' behavior after release. They would, of course, be unlikely to affect inmate behavior while incarcerated. However, later visits might more effectively improve an offender's optimism about reentry, which in turn could increase the likelihood of a successful transition back into society (Visher and O'Connell 2012). Visitation prior to release also may be useful for helping soon-to-be-released inmates reconnect with family members and gain access to resources (Wolff and Draine 2004). For example, it may provide a time for inmates to plan reentry with family or community members by organizing transportation and providing access to housing, healthcare, and employment (Breese et al. 2000; Wolff and Schumann 2012). Not least, visits later in a prison term may help, more so than early visits, to offset negative social stigmas that released offenders experience by providing a more proximate reminder to the individual of their pro-social roles (e.g., Maruna 2001; Uggen et al. 2004), such as that of a “parent,” “spouse,” or “sibling.”

A third possibility is that visits that occur in the middle of an incarceration term hold the greatest potential for improving individuals' in-prison and post-release behavior. Early visits might do little to improve prisoners' conduct in the initial stage of incarceration; the transition may be so acutely traumatic as to render visitation effects inconsequential. At the same time, if an inmate is not visited until just before release, it could essentially constitute a situation of “too little too late” because, by that point, the prisoner's ties to family and friends may be severed by the lack of social contact. Thus, visitation during the middle of a term of incarceration may be the most effective time for visits to occur. Such visits may act to bolster an inmate's efforts to adjust to incarceration following the initial admission period and they may occur sufficiently early to help an inmate maintain social ties that endure through incarceration and after release.

Despite arguments such as these that timing may moderate visitation effects, it has not been systematically examined in the literature (see, however, Siennick et al. 2013). The typical approach adopted in research is to measure visitation as a dichotomous variable (e.g., visited vs. not visited). This approach groups together all inmates who were visited regardless of whether visitation occurred in the early, middle, or late period of an incarceration term. Accordingly, it makes only a single comparison—the effect of visitation versus non-visitation—and obscures the possibility that variation in the timing of visitation may affect inmates differently. Only two studies to date have assessed the possibility of timing effects, and both focused on a delimited aspect of such timing. Specifically, the studies investigated the possibility that visits that occur later in an incarceration period might have stronger recidivism-reducing effects than those that occur earlier in a term of incarceration (Bales and Mears; 2008; Duwe and Clark 2013). In both studies, weighting schemes were used to assess whether visits that were more proximate to release had stronger recidivism-reducing effects. They each found evidence to support this idea and thus underscored the need for future research that systematically explores timing effects.

Notably, the limitation in prior research does not stem from methodological constraints. For example, researchers can test timing effects by utilizing data sources that provide information about when during a term of imprisonment visitation events occurred (see, e.g., Cochran 2012; Siennick et al. 2013). Using such data, researchers can explore how early, middle, and late visitation affects both in-prison misconduct and post-release offending. Studies can assess a range of comparisons and counterfactual scenarios, including the relative effects of being visited late to being visited at other time periods and also to not being visited at all. Scholars also can explore whether the frequency of visitation during different time periods is important. For example, early visitation might only act as an effective coping mechanism if an individual is visited several times, whereas one or two “doses” of visitation (e.g., Mears et al. 2012) may be all that is needed near the end of a prison term to help an inmate strengthen social bonds or capital and improve the chances of desistance.

## **Dimension #2: Patterns of visitation**

Visitation may be patterned during the course of incarceration. Longitudinal patterning of visitation can be defined by reference to the timing, rate, and consistency of visits over the course of incarceration. Qualitative accounts highlight the possibility that prisoners can experience a range of visitation patterns over the life course of a prison term (e.g., Fishman 1990; Arditti 2003; Christian 2005; Comfort 2008; Ross and Richards 2009; Dixey and Woodall 2012). For example, visitation can occur regularly or consistently throughout incarceration, or it can occur sporadically and unpredictably. Visitation can be frequent during one time period and occur infrequently or not at all at other periods. Some prisoners may have a slowly escalating trajectory of visitation—they may be visited rarely early on but become more frequently visited over time. In contrast, other inmates can experience a de-escalating trajectory if they are visited frequently upon admission but then experience a slow decline or a sudden knifing off of visitation later on. Within these broad categories, more nuanced patterns can exist. There can be, as just one example, variation among those who are “regularly” visited. To illustrate, “regular” visitation might consist of weekly visitation, monthly visitation, or yearly visitation.

What effects can we expect from different visitation patterns? This question is complicated because visitation patterns are heterogeneous and because we know little about which patterns are most common. There are, however, grounds for anticipating different types of visitation and, in turn, differences in the effects of some types. For example, prisoner accounts suggest that some inmates have sustained visits over the course of incarceration (e.g., Christian 2005; Comfort 2008) and that the sustained nature of the visitation provides a greater effect, one that may be more pronounced than would be captured simply by focusing on the frequency of visitation, on inmate strain and behavior. A similar logic holds for social bonds. Sustained visits may provide a stronger foundation on which to maintain or strengthen social bonds between an inmate and a family or community member, which in turn might improve reentry outcomes. A distinct contrast to such possibilities is the situation in which visitation is suddenly stopped. For example, an inmate who is visited frequently but then experiences a sudden cessation of

visitation may experience a substantial increase in strain that in turn leads to misconduct or adverse effects on mental health (see, e.g., Liebling 1999; Ross and Richards 2009).

Prior studies of visitation have not explored these possibilities and, here, again, have been limited to dichotomous or, sometimes, count measures of visitation. Such measures aggregate visitation experiences and fail to account for longitudinal patterns of visitation. Consider an example involving two inmates who each receive ten visits while incarcerated. The first inmate receives all ten visits in the first three months and the second inmate receives one visit every month. It is possible that the pattern of early visitation with an abrupt cutoff has a harmful effect on an inmate and increases the chances of misconduct and recidivism; by contrast, the sustained, uninterrupted pattern may be beneficial and reduce misconduct and recidivism. A count measure, however, treats these two individuals as if they had the same experience.

Two studies to date have attempted to account for longitudinal patterns of visitation. Siennick et al. (2013) assessed the short-term effects of visitation on misconduct over the course of inmates' prison terms by examining misconduct in the days and weeks leading up to and directly following a visitation event. The researchers found that misconduct decreased prior to visits and increased immediately after. A second study, by Cochran (2012), took a different approach and explored the bivariate association between longitudinal patterns of visitation and misconduct for a group of inmates who served twelve months in prison. He found that visitation trajectories overlapped in different ways with each type of misconduct trajectory. Such research lends support to the idea that visitation indeed may be patterned in diverse ways and that the patterning of visitation may have consequences for inmate behavior.

Here, again, data and methodological constraints do not constitute a significant barrier to research. To the contrary, prison administrative records typically provide information about admission, release, misconduct, recidivism, and visitation dates. These kinds of data provide opportunities for different descriptive and predictive analyses. For example, scholars can employ event history modeling (e.g., Siennick et al. 2013), trajectory modeling (e.g., Nagin 2005; Cochran 2012), or latent class analyses to identify groups of inmates who experience

different types of visitation patterns, and in turn, to estimate the effects of them on different outcomes.

### **Dimension #3: Types of visitors**

Visitation effects can also vary by the type of person who makes the visit, which in turn may affect inmate behavior in different ways. A prisoner's ties to their spouse or child, for example, are likely to be stronger than his or her ties to a community volunteer. Visitation by volunteers or distant relatives may be less likely to be effective, especially if those visits hold little potential for fostering a long term bond or providing access to social resources. Even so, it may be that any visit, regardless of the intimacy of the connection, can plausibly provide relief from the day-to-day rigors of imprisonment and thus work to improve behavior (Mears and Bales 2008).

In a related vein, a distinction between family and non-family visitation is warranted, based on prior scholarship that has underscored the importance of family for offenders during imprisonment and afterwards (see, generally, Sampson and Laub 1993; Maruna 2001; Maruna and Toch 2005; Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, & Shear 2010; Mignon and Ransford 2012). To the extent that family ties provide greater support to prisoners in facing the practical challenges of reentry (e.g., finding housing, employment, healthcare, transportation), family visitation should be more beneficial (e.g., Wolff and Draine 2004; Bales and Mears 2008). Family members also can provide opportunities for ex-prisoners to reenter social and familial roles and to reduce the occurrence or effects of being stigmatized (Fishman 1988; Houck and Loper 2002; Uggen et al. 2004; Visher 2013). Not least, family members, perhaps more so than non-family members, may act as authority figures by providing guidance and exerting informal control (e.g., Hirschi 1969).

Another distinction of potential relevance is that between criminal and non-criminal visitors. Any visitation, regardless of the criminality of a visitor, may be an enjoyable, positive experience. Yet, there is the possibility that visitation by a criminal peer or family member can exert a criminogenic effect (Bales and Mears 2008). Visits by criminal associates may increase misconduct if the visitor smuggles contraband into the prison and passes it on to the inmate.

Criminal visitors can also affect inmate behavior indirectly if visitation contributes to the transmission or reinforcement of norms that support in-prison crime or deviance (Gordon and McConnell 1999). Similarly, maintaining connections to criminals during imprisonment can be harmful if it increases the likelihood that an offender reconnects with a deviant lifestyle or sub-culture upon release. Criminal visitation could also have both effects—it may help the inmate by reducing strain and misconduct in prison, but it also may harm the inmate if he or she is more likely to join back into a deviant network upon release.

All of these possibilities, and more, suggest that visitor characteristics may contribute to visitation effects. To date, however, research has focused primarily on the fact of visitation and not investigated the effects of who visits. Indeed, few exceptions exist (see, e.g., Casey-Acevedo et al. 2004; Mears et al. 2012; Duwe and Clark 2013; Siennick et al. 2013; Visher 2013). Findings from these studies suggest that visitor types that tend to be associated with stronger social bonds, such as spouses or children, are associated with greater reductions in recidivism. Even so, some research suggests that visits from them may increase misconduct (Casey-Acevedo et al. 2004; Siennick et al. 2013). These studies collectively underscore the potential for the type of visitor types to be consequential for understanding “the” effects of visitation.

#### **Dimension #4: Experience of visitation**

The effect of visits may depend upon the context under which they occur and the events that transpire during them. For example, visits can be positive because visitation provides an opportunity for family and community members to express support for inmates and to provide encouragement. Visitors can bring gifts, food, or other items from home. During visitation, inmates have opportunities to catch-up with recent events, to interact with their children, and to maintain a sense of connection to their roles as a family or community member and, more broadly, a connection to the free world. Under some circumstances, conjugal visitation can occur; in such cases, inmates and their spouses have opportunities for extended, overnight stays, an experience that might yield added benefits over traditional day visits (Hensley et al. 2002;

D'Alessio, Flexon, and Stolzenberg 2013). Alternatively, even if a visit is from a volunteer or a distant relative, the interaction during a visit may offset some of the day-to-day strains of prison life.

Other types of visitation experiences, however, may be more unpleasant. For example, relationships between inmates and their spouses or intimate partners may become strained during incarceration (Ross and Richards 2009; Massoglia, Remster, & King 2012). In some cases, visitors may travel to prison for the sole purpose of terminating a relationship with an inmate. In addition, visits can lead to arguments and fights, which may be more likely in settings, such as prison, where power differences exist. Inmates cannot, for example, control what happens outside of the prison, and may feel acutely the strain of not being able to influence what a visitor has done prior to, during, or after a visit. At the same time, visitors typically characterize prison visitation as challenging and intimidating, which can contribute to tension during visits (e.g., Fishman 1990; Arditti 2003; Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005; Comfort 2008; Sturges and Al-Khattar 2009; Dixey and Woodall 2012; see also Moran 2013).

Here, again, prior research provides little insight into which experiences are more common and which exert the greatest effect on whether visitation improves or worsens inmate and ex-prisoner behavior. Here, as compared with the three dimensions above, data limitations present a challenge. Information about how inmates and visitors interact is not readily collected or included in administrative datasets. Inmate surveys about visitation are, however, possible. Questionnaires can ask questions about a range of considerations, including the demeanor of the inmate before, during, and after a visit, the perceived demeanor of the visitor, whether the inmate received gifts from the visitor, whether there was fighting or arguing, and whether the inmate perceived visitation to be an overall beneficial or harmful experience. Measures along such lines can provide opportunities to test the effects of specific circumstances related to a visit, and to examine how positive or negative experiences are associated with misconduct and recidivism.

### **Dimension #5: Characteristics of inmates**

Finally, theoretical reasons exist to anticipate that inmate characteristics condition the effects of visitation. Adams (1992:285) implies, for example, that prisoners' race and ethnicity might moderate visitation effects because "the saliency of concern for being separated from family members varies across racial groups." He suggests, too, that Hispanics represent a unique group because of "the importance that Hispanic cultures place on family relationships." Similarly, visitation may hold more value for females than males if the diminished familial or parental roles that result from incarceration are more salient for females. Such possibilities appear, on the face of it, plausible, but whether empirical research would bear them out remains largely unknown.

In addition, scholarship suggests the possibility that age is an important conditioning factor, especially if young offenders have more to gain from maintained connections to social networks than older offenders, who perhaps are more entrenched in criminal careers (e.g., Monahan et al. 2011). The effect of visitation may also vary among inmates with differing levels of misconduct. Visitation might be most effective for inmates who have higher rates of prior misconduct than for relatively well-behaved inmates. Other factors, including sentence length, prior experiences with formal sanctions (including incarceration), and psychological characteristics (e.g., mental illness), also may condition the effect of visitation. In each instance, administrative records, along with inmate surveys, hold the potential for illuminating how visitation may affect individuals during and after incarceration.

## **CONCLUSION**

The potential implications of prison experiences, like visitation, to improve prison order and reentry outcomes has led scholars to call for investigation of them (Adams 1992; DeLisi 2003; Camp and Gaes 2005; Nagin et al. 2009; Trulson et al. 2011). With over 700,000 individuals released from prison annually in the United States, there is a considerable need to understand the prison experiences inmates have and what their effects may be on prison adjustment and

misconduct as well as recidivism and successful reentry. Inmate visitation merits special attention for several reasons. Inmates have legal rights to visitation; visitation may mitigate the potential harmful effects of social isolation and improve inmate behavior and reentry outcomes; and visitation might provide a way to cost-effectively achieve these benefits. Juxtaposed against such considerations is the paucity of research that systematically examines the heterogeneity of visitation experiences and how such heterogeneity may affect whether visitation improves or worsens the behavior of individuals during and after incarceration.

Accordingly, to advance scholarship on prison order and reentry, this paper presented a conceptual framework for theorizing, evaluating, and guiding research on prisoner visitation and its effects. Briefly, the framework consisted of five dimensions—visitation timing, visitation patterns, visitor type, visitation experiences, and individual characteristics that may moderate visitation effects—that individually and collectively characterize, or define, “the” visitation experience and how it may affect inmate adjustment and reentry outcomes. Several implications flow from the use of this framework to examine extant research on prisoner visitation and to guide theoretical and empirical research aimed at understanding the effects of social ties on inmate adjustment and reentry.

First, use of the framework helps to identify and describe the heterogeneity of visitation and, in turn, the possibility of different effects of different visitation patterns and experiences on behavior. Inmates can, for example, be visited at different times, such as the early, middle or late stages of incarceration. They can be visited only once or twice, or with varying levels of frequency and consistency (e.g., weekly, monthly, yearly). And for each visitation event, there are different types of visitors and different types of circumstances that can lead to varying benefits and detriments.

The heterogeneity in visitation experiences is paralleled by heterogeneity in theoretical expectations about visitation’s effects. One such expectation is that later visits will provide inmates contact with social ties prior to release that can exert informal control and provide access to social capital. These can, in turn, improve post-release behavior (e.g., Wolff and Draine 2004;

Bales and Mears 2008). Early visitation, on the other hand, can affect in-prison behavior, if by participating in visitation, prisoners are better able to adjust to incarceration and also, if their views of the legitimacy of the prison system are improved (e.g., Adams 1992; Bottoms 1999). Future research can and should investigate these and related possibilities.

Second, the conceptual framework outlined here provides a basis for evaluating prior scholarship. Extant research has provided valuable insight into the potential for visitation, and social ties more broadly, to improve inmate and ex-prisoner outcomes. However, studies have overlooked the considerable heterogeneity inherent in visitation experiences. In some instances, they have made strong claims about visitation effects in a context where only one delimited type or measurement of visitation—visited or not—has been employed. Indeed, a central conclusion flowing from the conceptual framework is that relatively little is known about the nature or effects of visitation for either inmate behavior or reentry outcomes.

Third, and finally, the framework provides guidance for future research that can systematically assess visitation and that advances theory and policy focused on understanding and improving prison outcomes. Future studies that are attentive to the heterogeneity in inmate visitation experiences will be able to provide more accurate estimates of visitation effects. Here, the need for and benefits of such work are parallel to each of the five dimensions articulated in the framework. For example, studies that account for and test the effects of visitation timing can help to answer critical theoretical and policy questions. If, for example, early visits are found to decrease misconduct, this would provide partial support for theoretical arguments that suggest it is the early period of incarceration that is more strainful and that visitation can help to ameliorate such strain (Hairston 1991; Adams 1992; Bales and Mears 2008; Blevins et al. 2010; Morris et al. 2012). Such a finding, in turn, might be useful to corrections officials. For example, it would suggest that efforts should be expended in attempting to increase visitation, especially during the transition period after inmates are admitted into prison.

Studies of visitation patterns can provide further insight into related possibilities. To the extent that sustained visitation more strongly reduces recidivism than other patterns, for example,

it would lend support to the idea that visitation can help maintain social connections and that the strength of these ties are important for coping with strain and improving reintegration (Wolff and Draine 2004; Naser and La Vigne 2006; Listwan et al. 2013). It is possible, at the same time, that other patterns increase strain or are criminogenic in some other way. One-time visits, for example, may contribute to marked elevations in stress and, in turn, to misconduct. Here, again, such possibilities would have the potential to provide useful guidance to prison officials. If sustained visitation provides the greatest effect on inmate behavior, then efforts to support such visitation would be indicated. However, if even one or two visits provide substantial improvements, then such efforts could be more circumscribed and yet potentially yield large increases in prison order and safety (see, however, Siennick et al. 2013).

Research on the effects of different visitor types can help shed light on theoretical questions about the effects on behavior of strong versus weak ties, of authority versus non-authority figures, and of criminal versus non-criminal associates (e.g., Granovetter 1983; Simons et al. 2002; Wolff and Draine 2004; Naser and La Vigne 2006; Cobbina et al. 2012). In addition, research can help to advance policies focused on promoting more effective visitation. Studies that differentiate between the effects of family visits versus visits from volunteers, for example, can help determine if motivating local community members to visit prisons is an effective method for improving behavioral outcomes, or if stronger efforts should be made to promote visits from family members. Similarly, if studies find that heightened criminality among visitors increases deviance and recidivism, it would suggest a need for enhanced policies that restrict visitation by individuals with criminal backgrounds.

A focus on visitation experiences will be important as well. For example, is visitation always beneficial or are certain types of visits, such as those that involve arguing and fighting, detrimental to inmate behavior? What is the effect of consistent visitation if the visitation experiences consistently involve arguments? Answering these and other questions holds the potential, again, for investigating and testing theory and for informing policy. Officials would be

able to better anticipate, for example, when visitation is helpful and when inmates, as a result of visitation, may be more at-risk to misbehave or be violent.

Finally, the potential conditioning effects of inmate characteristics should be better understood. Such studies can provide information for administrators who seek to better predict when visits calm or relieve strain and when visits have null or aggravating effects. If research determines, for example, that visitation is effective for prisoners who chronically engage in misconduct, it would suggest that restricting visitation—as a form of punishment—may be counterproductive. As Monahan et al. (2011:150) have suggested, it is those individuals “who are prohibited from visits who may benefit from visits the most.” Yet, prohibitions mark only the beginning of potential possibilities. Younger people, for example, may suffer more from becoming disconnected from family and friends. If so, imprisonment exacts a greater harm for them than older inmates, resulting in worse outcomes for the very group at greatest risk of misconduct and recidivism.

It is commonplace for researchers to call for more research. We are guilty of making such a call here. The reality, however, is that visitation—both its occurrence and its effects—remains poorly understood. Greater understanding of it holds considerable potential to inform theory and policy and, ultimately, to improve inmate and ex-prisoner outcomes. It, therefore, is none too soon to begin systematically and empirically examining visitation in all its heterogeneity.

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**Table 1. A Conceptual Framework for Theorizing, Evaluating, and Guiding Research on the Occurrence and Effects of Inmate Visitation**

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**1. Timing of visitation**

Early visitation  
Middle visitation  
Late visitation

**2. Patterns of visitation**

Weekly visitation  
Monthly visitation  
Early- or late-only visitation  
Escalating or de-escalating visitation  
Sporadic visitation

**3. Types of visitors**

Family  
*Spouse/significant other*  
*Parent*  
*Child*  
*Other family (e.g., sibling, grandparent)*  
Non-family  
*Friend*  
*Clergy/legal/community volunteer*  
Authority or non-authority figure  
Criminal or non-criminal

**4. Experience of visitation**

Positive event/experience  
Negative event/experience

**5. Characteristics of inmates**

Age  
Gender  
Race  
Ethnicity  
Prisoner demeanor  
Prior prison commitments  
Sentence length  
Prior in-prison misconduct  
Mental illness

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