

*Testimony re: H 326*

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I am testifying today as a subject matter expert in the field of criminology, especially in the study of Corrections and reentry upon release. I am a Professor of Sociology at the University of Vermont. Today I am speaking about the impact of visitation on incarcerated individuals. This is of particular relevance to the correctional population that the State of Vermont sends out of state to serve their sentences.

The empirical evidence is clear that *maintaining family relationships* while an individual is incarcerated contributes to positive outcomes:

- It lessens the strain for the incarcerated individual and family members, and increases family function after release (Mowen & Visser, 2016)
- It reduces infractions and misconduct in facilities (Siennick, Mears & Bales, 2013)
- It is associated with reduced recidivism upon release (Mowen, Standfield & Boman, 2019)

### **Reentry Process**

Since 2000, the evidence base on what works in reentry after a prison term has proliferated. There are numerous findings related to effective reentry, among them access to housing and employment. But *social support* is chief among those resources that contribute to the success of those released.

There is no longer any debate about the importance of family connection in the reentry process. Prisons and jails often make the process of maintaining contact difficult (Dholakia, 2022); extreme distance between family and those incarcerated exacerbates the difficulty.

- Prison policies that contribute to the creation and maintenance of social support networks improve after-release outcomes (Lee, 2019)
- Distance between family and prisons corresponds to less frequent visitation (Clark & Duwe, 2017)
  - Video calls and visits can be problematic as the technology can be unreliable, expensive, and the visits are not as satisfying (Tasca, 2014)

- Each unique visitor (family member, or community mentor) **reduced recidivism by 3%** (Duwe & Clark, 2011)
  - Community mentors or volunteers had great impact on recidivism, especially for high-risk incarcerated individuals who lack social support (Duwe & Johnson, 2016)
  - The more distinct visitors, the greater impact on recidivism (Lee, 2021)

## **Family Impacts**

In addition to the clear and compelling evidence about reduced recidivism, research also shows that maintaining family contact has positive effects on the facility's operations, the incarcerated individual's mental health, and the children and families on the outside both during and after the incarceration period.

- Family contact during incarceration improves family relationships upon release (Mowen & Visser, 2016)
- Prison visitation is demonstrated to assist in reentry, as people leaving prison can turn to family and friend networks for help with housing and employment (Duwe & Clark, 2013)
- Visitation's impact on children and families of incarcerated individuals is positive (Peterson, Cramer, Goff & Sandstrom, 2017)
  - Having a parent incarcerated is considered an "adverse childhood experience" that contributes to a range of future problems as children mature; maintaining family contact with the incarcerated parent can mitigate some of the damage
- Family contact improves the mental health of those incarcerated (Hairston, 1991)

In conclusion, family visitation is important for those incarcerated, as well as their family members, who are the "hidden victims" of incarceration. The societal benefit of visitation in general is great in reducing re-offense rates. The vast majority of those incarcerated will be released eventually. Even for those with very long (or life) sentences, family connection and community volunteer engagement are important for their wellbeing and future success.

Visitation improves outcomes for children and family functioning post-release. Making access to visitation difficult puts some individuals and families at a distinct disadvantage.

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