

**Report to
The Vermont Legislature**

**Correctional Facility Family Friendly Visitation Study Committee
Report**

In accordance with Act 159 of 2024

Submitted to: House Committee on Corrections and Institutions and Senate Committee on Judiciary

Submitted by: Nicholas J. Deml, Commissioner, Department of Corrections

Prepared by: Haley Sommer, Director of Communications and Legislative Affairs, Department of Corrections; Isaac Dayno, Executive Director of Policy & Strategic Initiatives, Department of Corrections

Report Date: January 15, 2025

Executive Summary

Act 159 of 2024 established a Family Friendly Visitation Study Committee to examine family visitation in Vermont's six correctional facilities and identify methods to expand visitation. The study committee included representatives from the Vermont Department of Corrections ("DOC" or "the Department"), the Vermont Office of the Child, Family, and Youth Advocate, Lund, Department of Children and Families (DCF), the Network Against Sexual and Domestic Violence, and other stakeholders.

In accordance with Act 159, this report compiled by the study committee examines the current Kids-A-Part Parenting Program; assesses correctional facility capacity and resources needed to facilitate greater family friendly visitation; evaluates the feasibility of locating incarcerated individuals at correctional facilities closer to family; assesses how discipline affects family visitation; furthers the creation of a family friendly visitation policy; explores more family friendly visiting days and hours; recommends methods to increase family friendly visitation for incarcerated individuals who identify as parents, guardians, and parents with visitation rights.

Current Family Friendly Visitation Programs

The State of Vermont has five male correctional facilities and one female correctional facility. Currently, comprehensive family friendly visitation programming is only facilitated at

Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility (CRCF), Vermont's sole women's correctional facility. CRCF's population typically hovers between 110 and 130 detained and sentenced women.

The Kids-A-Part Parenting Program (KAPPP) at CRCF, run by the Lund Center, provides enhanced case management services, visitation assistance, and parent-child contact, including mail, phone calls, video or in person visits in the child-friendly visiting space inside the correctional facility, along with training and consultation to systems of care.

The last reporting period, from June 1, 2024-November 30, 2024, reported 83 women utilizing KAPPP services.

Services provided in this reporting period included:

- Parenting groups focused on communication and co-parenting, resiliency and parenting, and behavior and communication
- 11 group mother-child in-person visits (including 4 enhanced visits where visits often coincide with holidays and include decoration, special foods and themes and activities)
- 21 one-on-one mother-child in-person visits
- 304 video visits
- Community trainings and presentations
 - Provided trainings throughout the state regarding the impact of parental incarceration on children
 - KAPPP provided training to all DCF field offices and all DOC Probation & Parole offices during this reporting period.

The study committee agreed future programming in male facilities should emulate certain aspects of KAPPP, while also acknowledging male parents may have different needs or be seeking different resources than female parents. To further assess what services and programming male parents may be interested in, DOC conducted a survey at Northern State Correctional Facility (NSCF) in Newport, VT for residents identifying as parents or guardians. The survey results are included below.

Factors Under Consideration for Expansion of Services

Over the course of the study committee meetings, DOC brought in various facility operations managers and facility superintendents to provide context on space constraints of correctional facilities, facility transfers, facility discipline and family visitation, and visitation days and hours:

Correctional Facility Physical Constraints

Four of Vermont's six correctional facilities have different physical layouts, sizes, and programming spaces. Any future parental programming must adapt to the physical infrastructure of its respective building. Infrastructural factors to consider include:

- Size of the visiting room

- Ability to keep children separate from secure portions of the facility to normalize the visitation experience
- Available space for parenting programs

Staffing is another important consideration. In December 2024, Vermont's correctional facility vacancy rate sat just above 17%. Staffing shortages pose barriers to running volunteer and facility programming as staff who are able to facilitate programming may be pulled to oversee security operations.

Locating Incarcerated Individuals Closer to Family

Because Vermont only has one female facility, facility transfers are not a factor of the current KAPPP program at CRCF. Facility transfers are routine in Vermont's five male correctional facilities. Transfers can be for a variety of reasons, including required programming, court dates, medical and mental health needs, and security concerns. Locating incarcerated individuals closer to family can be a consideration of facility placements but cannot not supersede the above factors.

The study committee discussed how this reality can be incorporated in future potential programming. The committee agreed that future programming should also coach parents at male facilities how to communicate to their children if they will be transferred.

Discipline and Family Visitation

DOC does not use revocation of family visitation as any direct consequence of disciplinary action for the sake of removing family visitation. To the contrary, family visitation often reduces behavioral incidents as individuals do not want visitation to be revoked.

In certain instances, contraband has been smuggled in through family members of all ages. In these circumstances, visitation may be revoked to ensure the safety of the other incarcerated individuals, staff, and visitors at the facility.

Visitation Days and Hours

Each facility has different visiting days and hours based on local procedures, staffing, and visiting room capacities. Currently, CRCF is the only facility that facilitates separate visitation days and hours for family visitation.

Some facilities group visiting by unit, whereas others conduct visiting by name. At times, visiting by unit can cause frustration with families if an individual transfers units and the family is unaware of the change in visitation days. Additionally, not all facilities have weekend visiting hours.

The study committee identified this as an area for further DOC exploration, specifically to assess:

- Feasibility of conducting visiting by name at all facilities
- Establishing and expanding weekend visitation at all facilities
- Identifying separate visiting days and hours for children

- Expanding alternate visiting hours for families traveling from farther distances, particularly if an individual transfers facilities.

Family Friendly Visitation Policy

The Department's Policy Development Unit (PDU) creates all internal department policies. PDU is currently engaged in a project to update all department policies over ten years old. PDU also continues to develop new policies based on correctional best practices, department initiatives, and legislative changes.

Prior to Act 159's passage, PDU had begun revising and updating the Department's [visitation directive](#), which is over ten years old. Upon Act 159's passage and the establishment of the Family Friendly Visitation Study Committee, the unit put this work on pause to include any outcomes from the study committee in the new policy.

PDU has been an active member of the study committee and has now resumed their policy development. The policy will allow for sites to create local procedures based on the programming at each site as any new programming will be localized to account for differing needs of male and female populations and physical space.

All policies, with the exception of security-sensitive policies, are published on the [DOC website](#). PDU has a rigorous policy development process that includes consultation with subject matter experts, engaging in an all-staff comment period and legal review. Once these steps have been completed, the family friendly visitation policy can be accessed on DOC's website.

Northern State Correctional Facility (NSCF) Visitation Survey

As noted above, the study committee created a survey for male parents and guardians at NSCF to identify what parental programming resources they may be seeking. Of the 414 residents at NSCF on the date of the survey, 115 individuals responded. Notably:

- 43% of respondents said their child was not on their approved visiting list
 - 20% of respondents said their child visits weekly
- 49% of respondents never do video visits with their child
 - 68% of respondents write to their child
- The greatest challenge to in-person visitations is distance
- The parenting support interest with the greatest response was weekly video calls in a quiet, family friendly space

The full results are included in the appendix below.

Recommendations

The family friendly visitation study committee recommends the following:

1. Expanding family friendly visitation days and times:
 - a. Creating separate visitation days and hours for children
 - b. Accommodating different visitation times for families traveling from further distances
2. Exploring parental programming at male facilities:

The committee recommends DOC expand family friendly visitation in all facilities, beginning with a pilot program at NSCF. NSCF is the most feasible facility to pilot expanding programming in because it is largest in size and population, and it primarily holds sentenced men. Committee members discussed current cost constraints and advocated for exploring funding options, including a potential Congressionally Directed Spending (CDS) package.

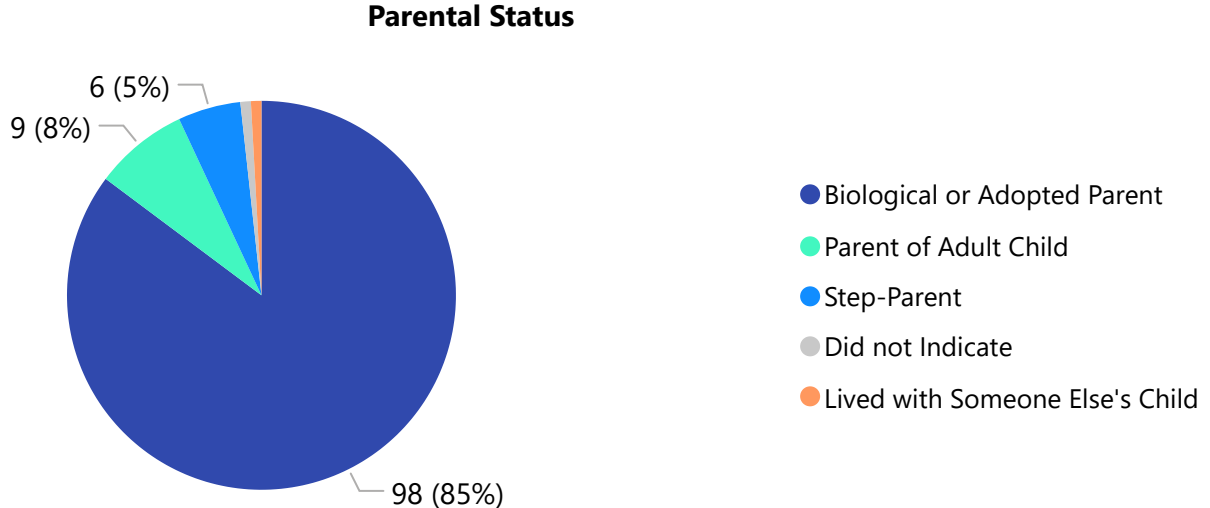
3. The committee recommends the legislature explore assessing, standardizing, and extending existing and new parental programming and continuity of visitation in the community following re-entry:

The committee does not recommend this be facilitated by DOC to minimize the carceral footprint following an individual's release, though does suggest this be incorporated into re-entry planning.

Incarcerated Fathers Survey

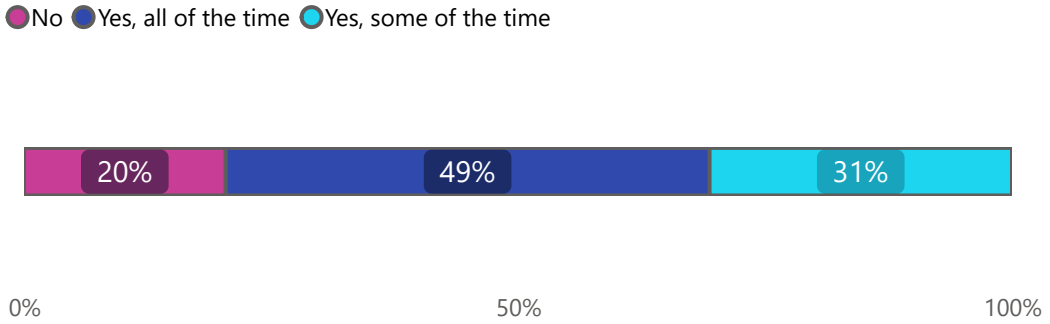
Conducted at Northern State 12/10/2024

414 12/10 NSCF Population Count
115 Respondents
98 Biological or Adopted Parents of Minor Children

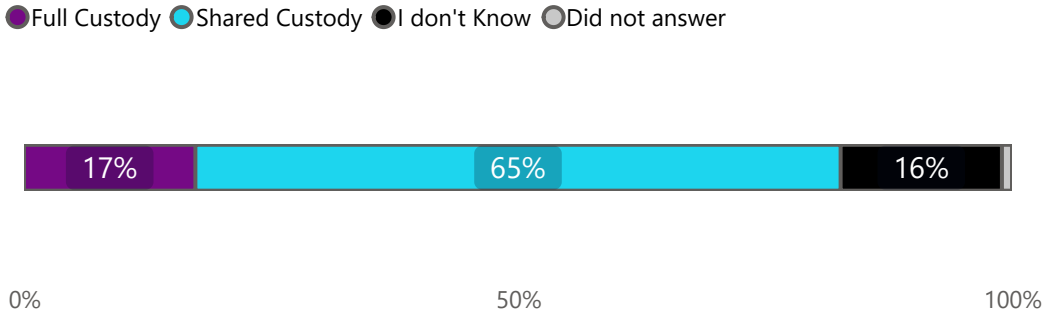


For the 98 Biological or Adopted Parents of Minor Children:

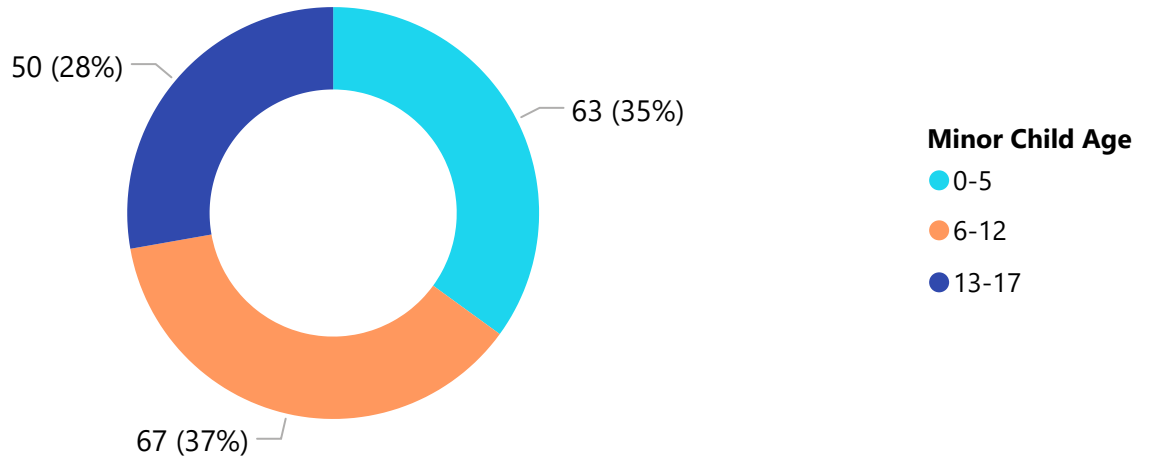
Before going to jail, were you living with your child?



Do you have full custody or shared custody?



Parents with Minor Children by Age



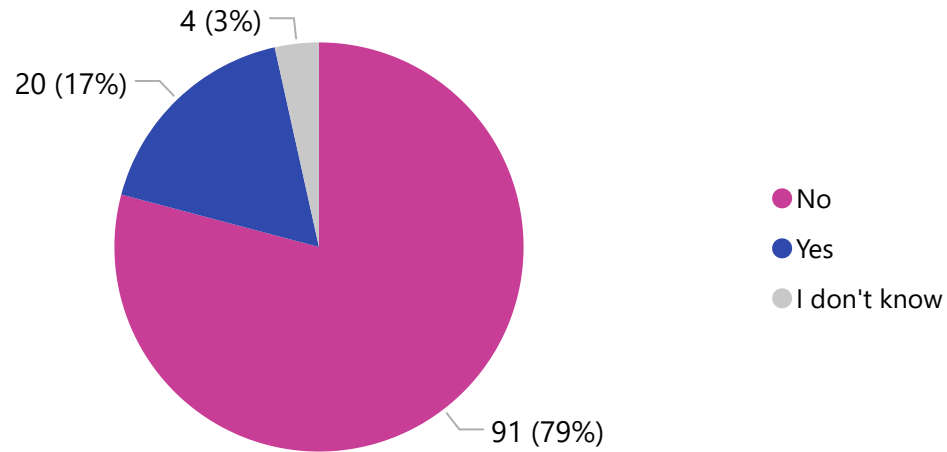
Note: Due to errors in how the question was answered by respondents, this visual only shows the number of incarcerated parents who have children within each age range and not how many children then have within each age range. Participants could select all that apply.

Incarcerated Fathers Survey

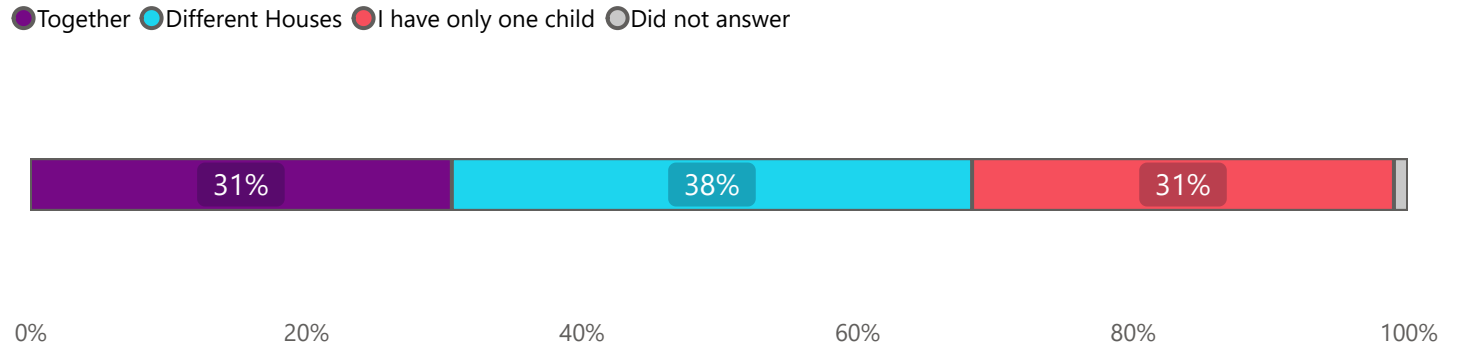
Conducted at Northern State 12/10/2024

For the 98 Biological or Adopted Parents of Minor Children:

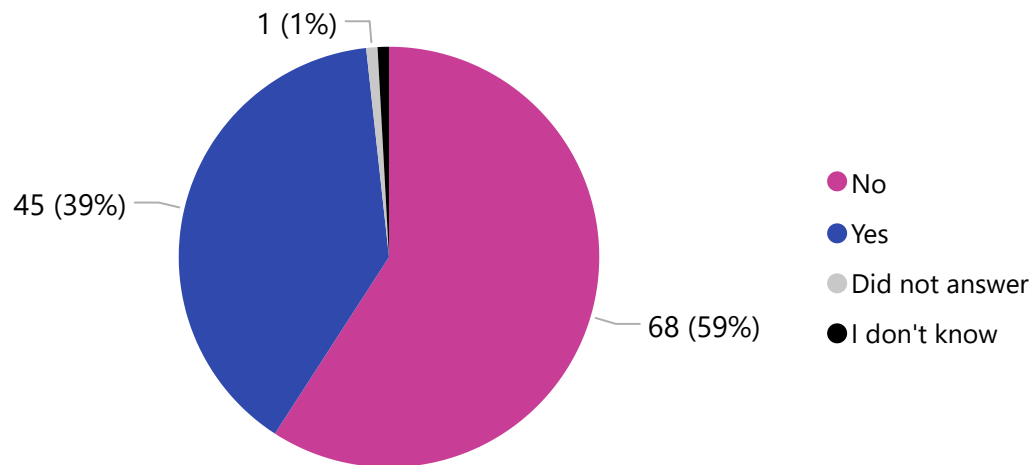
Is there a court order that limits contact with your child?



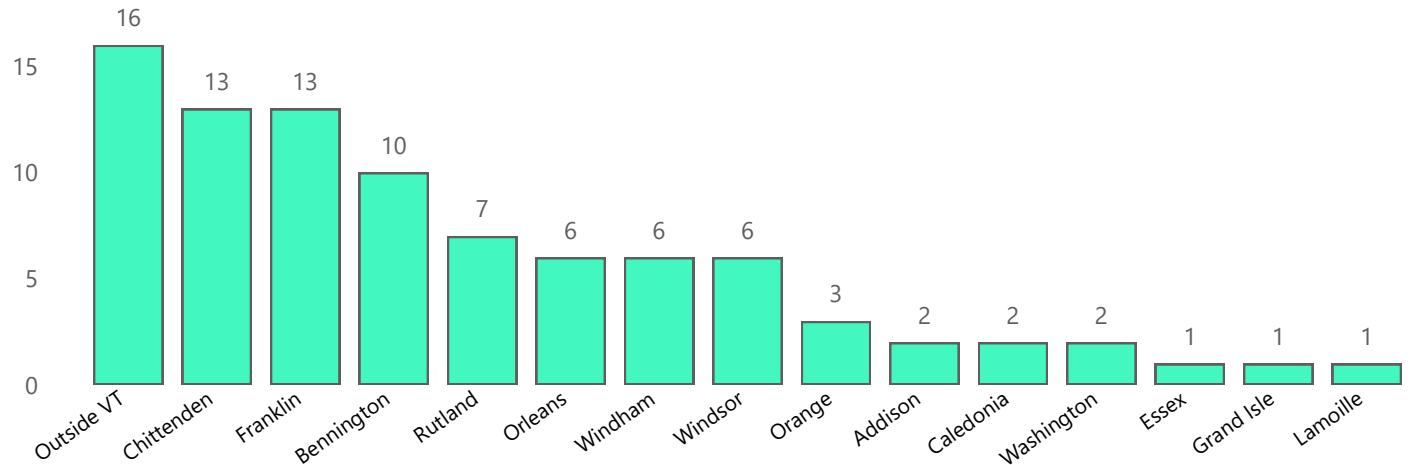
If you have multiple children, do they live together or in different houses?



Does a friend or family member have guardianship of your child?



Minor Child County of Residence



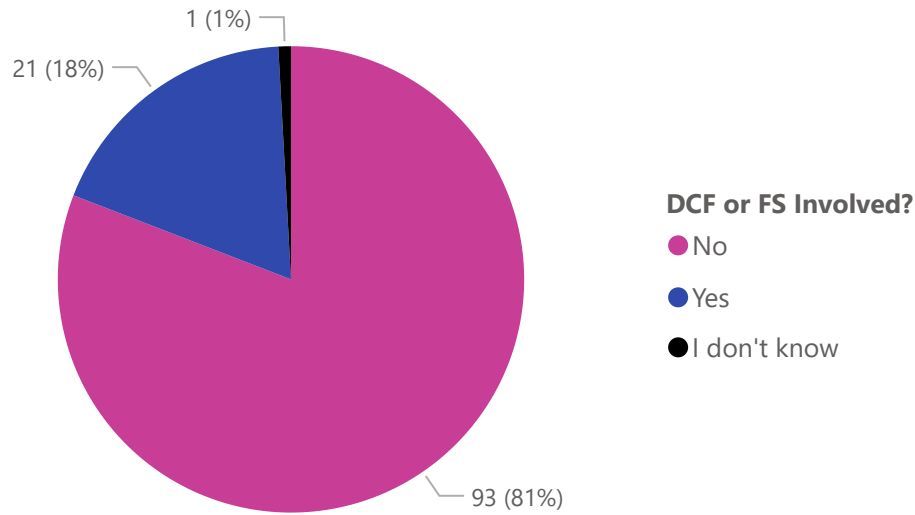
Note: Due to errors in how the question was answered by respondents, this visual only shows the number of incarcerated parents who have children within each age range and not how many children then have within each age range. This number does not equal the number of respondents, as a parent may have multiple children in multiple age ranges.

Incarcerated Fathers Survey

Conducted at Northern State 12/10/2024

For the 98 Biological or Adopted Parents of Minor Children:

Is the Department of Children and Families (DCF) or Family Services (FS) involved?



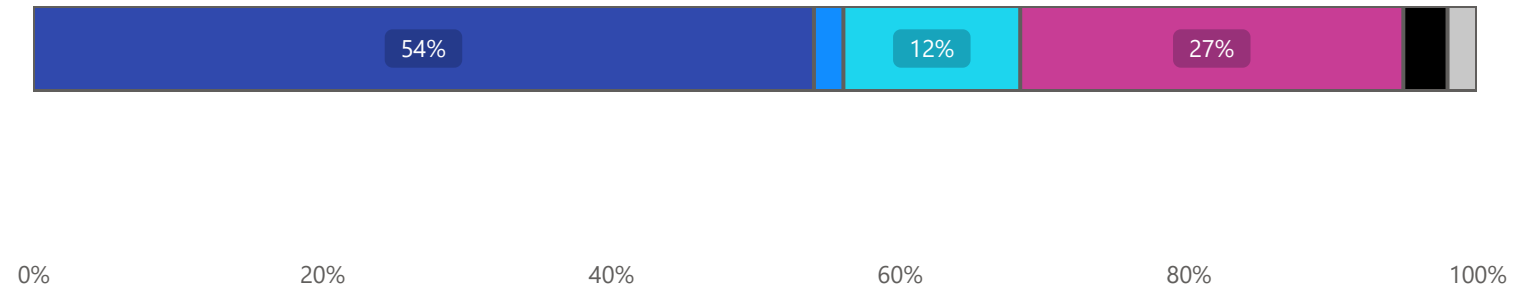
For the 16 who said yes to the above question and did not indicate they do not have a DCF caseworker:

- 50% said they have been in contact with their caseworker while in jail
- 25% have a copy of their DCF case plan

Is your child on your Approved Calling List?

● Yes, weekly calls ● Yes, monthly calls ● Yes, occasional calls ● No ● I don't know ● Did not answer

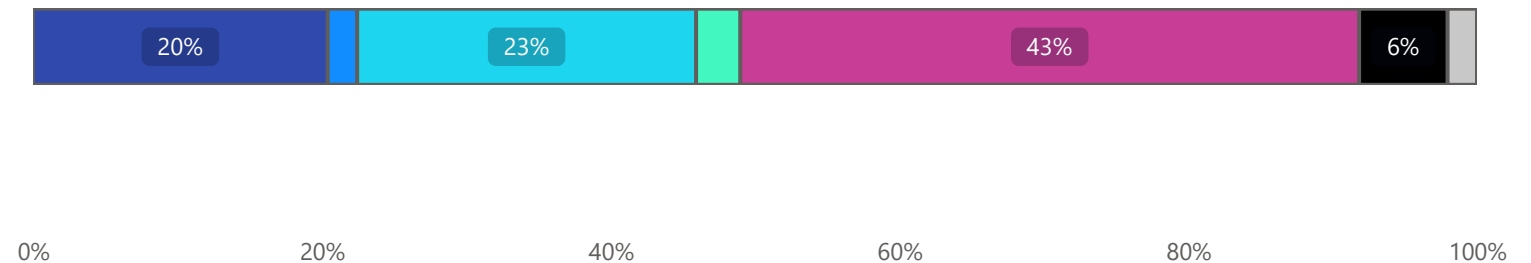
68% said Yes



Is your child on your Approved Visiting List?

● Yes, weekly visits ● Yes, monthly visits ● Yes, occasional visits ● Yes, never visits ● No ● I don't know ● Did not answer

48% said Yes



Incarcerated Fathers Survey

Conducted at Northern State 12/10/2024

For the 98 Biological or Adopted Parents of Minor Children:

Prior to Incarceration:

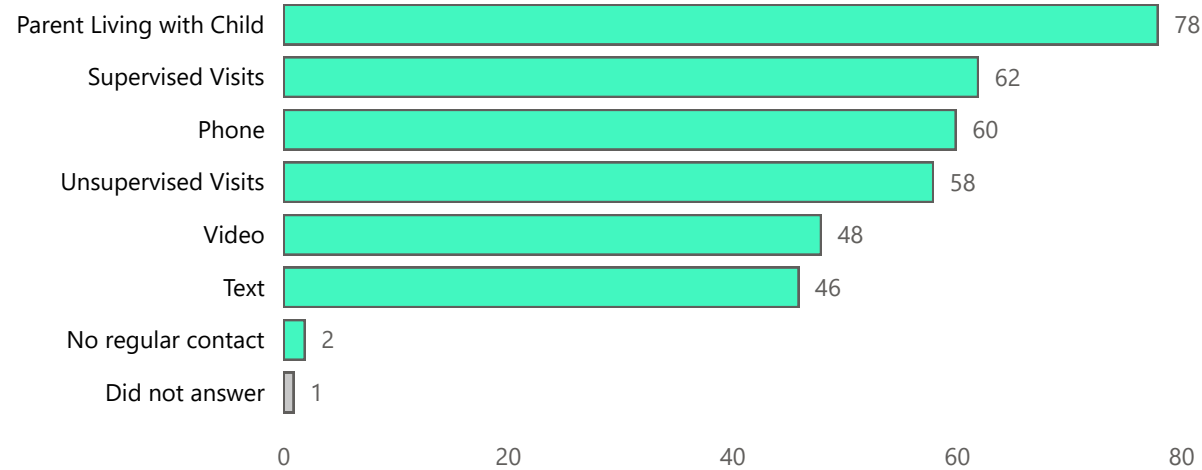
How often did you contact your child before going to jail?

● Daily ● Weekly ● Monthly ● No Regular Contact ● Did not answer

88% had some contact



Type of Pre-Incarceration Visits



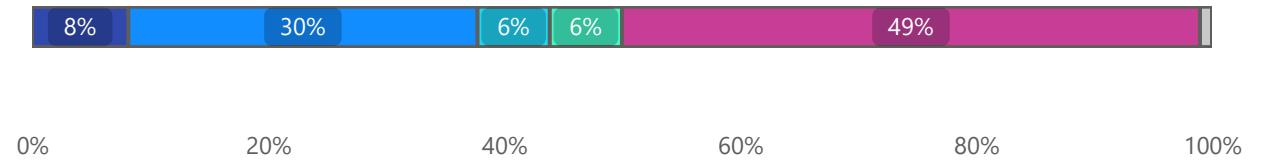
Note: Parent living with child was filled in by DOC based on prior response to *Before going to jail, were you living with your child?* and write-in responses by participants. Participants could select all that apply.

Post Incarceration:

How often do you have VIDEO visits with your child?

● Daily ● Sometimes ● Monthly ● Less than Monthly ● Never ● Did not answer

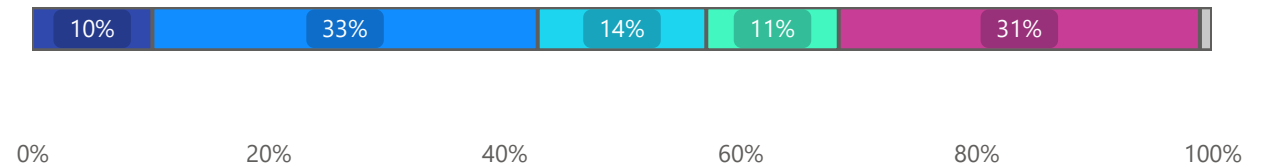
50% have VIDEO visits



How often do you WRITE to your child?

● Daily ● Sometimes ● Monthly ● Less than Monthly ● Never ● Did not answer

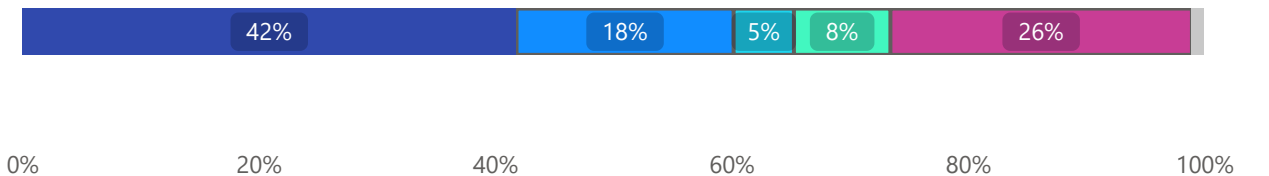
68% WRITE to their child



How often do you check in with your child's CAREGIVER?

● Daily ● Sometimes ● Monthly ● Less than Monthly ● Never ● Did not answer

73% check-in with their child's CAREGIVER

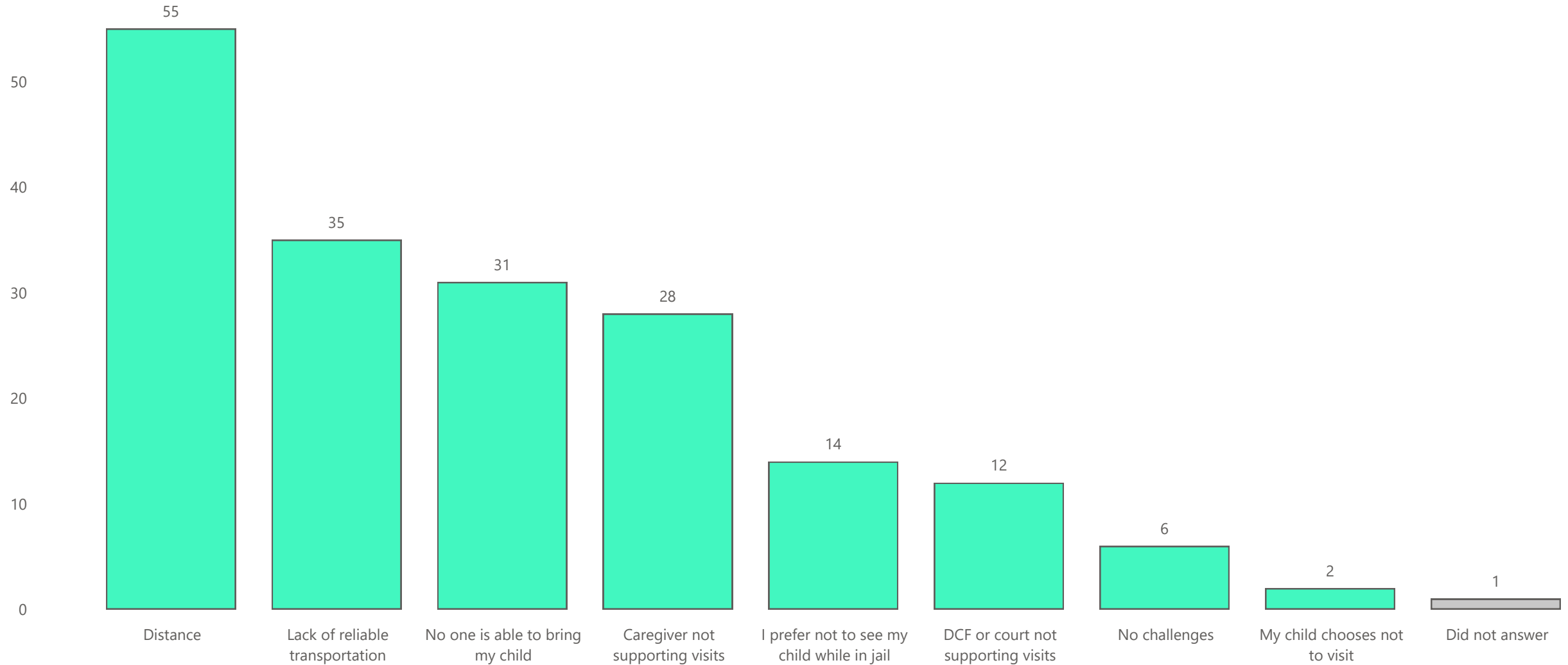


Incarcerated Fathers Survey

Conducted at Northern State 12/10/2024

For the 98 Biological or Adopted Parents of Minor Children:

Challenges to Child Visiting



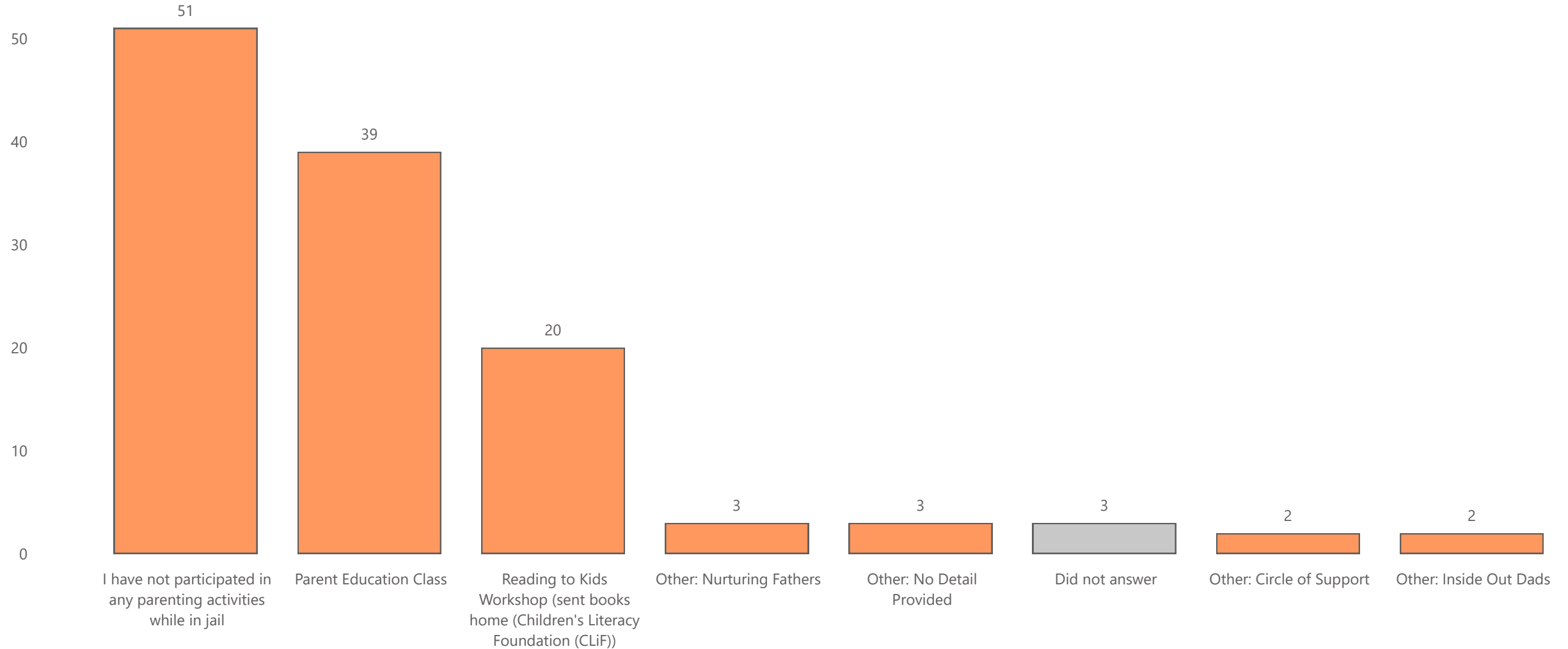
Note: Participants could select all that apply.

Incarcerated Fathers Survey

Conducted at Northern State 12/10/2024

For the 98 Biological or Adopted Parents of Minor Children:

Parenting Activities Participated In



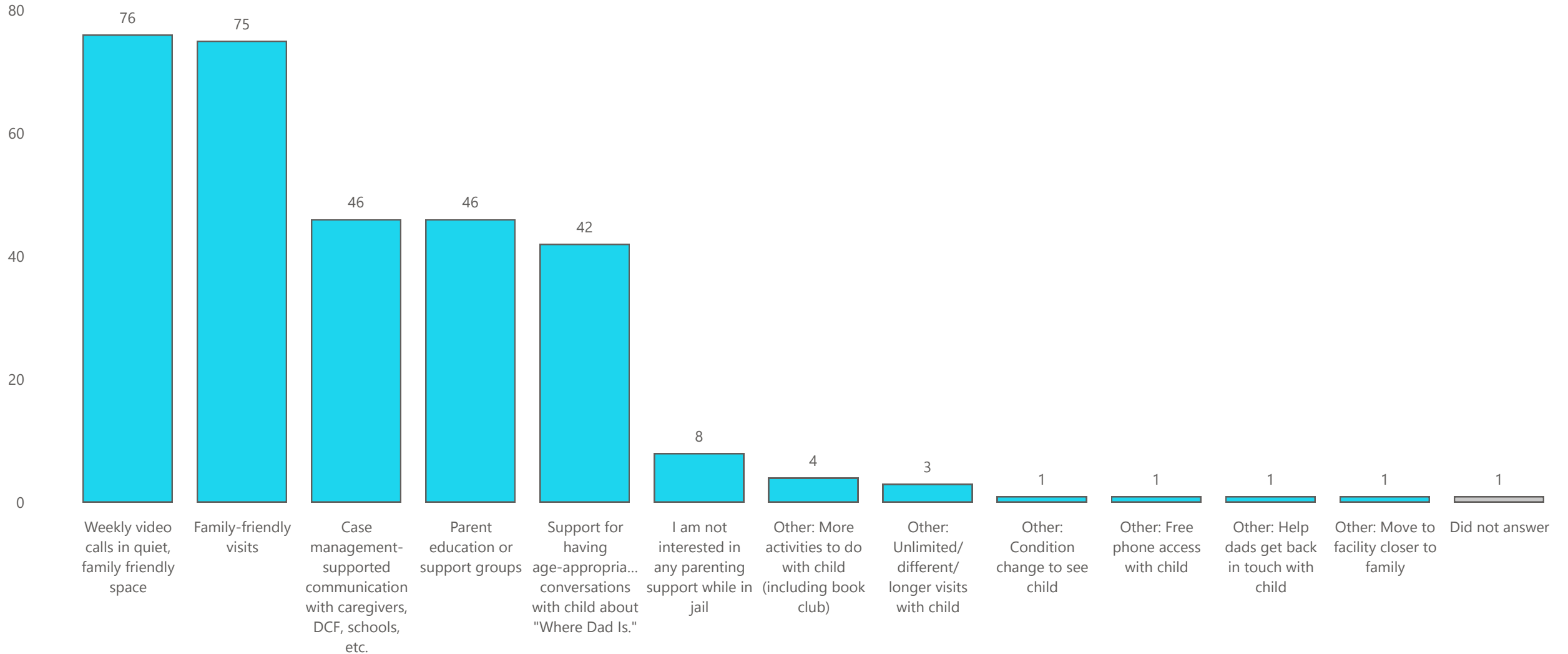
Note: Many who selected *I have not participated* indicated interest, but no activities have been offered. *Other:* indicates a write-in field. Participants could select all that apply.

Incarcerated Fathers Survey

Conducted at Northern State 12/10/2024

For the 98 Biological or Adopted Parents of Minor Children:

Parenting Support Interests



Note: Many selected everything indicating high interest in any activity offered. *Other*: indicates a write-in field. Participants could select all that apply.