

## Rehabilitation Potential of Prison Visits for Vulnerable Categories of Prisoners<sup>1,2</sup>

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Prison visits are crucial for the rehabilitation of prisoners, especially for vulnerable categories such as prisoners of a younger age and prisoners of an elderly age. Younger prisoners, as the dominant prison population, more frequently have addiction issues, while elderly prisoners face health problems and social isolation. Visits to these groups can significantly improve their mental health and provide the necessary social support. This paper seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the specific needs of the above groups of prisoners, but also to draw attention to the importance of adapting the visitation system to the specific needs of different categories of prisoners, in order to support their rehabilitation and preserve the family structure, which can have lasting positive effects on their behavior in prison and on the social reintegration process. The results presented in the paper were obtained as part of the project *Assessment and possibilities for improving the quality of prison life of prisoners in the*

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*Republic of Serbia: Criminological-penological, psychological, sociological, legal and security aspects* (PrisonLIFE). Some of the most significant results indicate that 87.2% of respondents receive visits, and that maintaining regular contacts with family and friends has a positive impact on the quality of prison life (Ilijić et al., 2025). Age as a predictor is negatively correlated with receiving visits, which means that as the age category of the respondent increases, the number of visits decreases. The travel distance between prison and home is a significant predictor of visits – the respondents whose home is less than an hour's drive away from prison receive visits more often. Also, respondents who have partners receive visits more frequently. The above results suggest that age plays a key role in social interactions and opportunities for social networking, where younger generations clearly have a better chance of achieving social connection and support. Elderly respondents, according to the analyses, receive fewer visits, which may indicate a decrease in social ties with the outside world as the age category changes. The distance between prison and home also plays a vital role, with a shorter travel distance correlating with a greater number of visits, which suggests that logistical barriers may significantly affect the frequency of visits. Analysis and monitoring of the experience of receiving or not receiving visits provide an opportunity to reflect on the existing visitation policies, but also to develop visitation strategies that would improve the prison treatment practice by introducing customized visitation support (therapeutic, psychological, social) based on the recognition of the specific needs of individual groups of prisoners.

**Keywords:** *Prisoners, at-risk categories of prisoners, Visits, Improving the practice of receiving visits*

### **Introductory considerations**

Visits to convicted persons in prison, among which the most common and significant ones are the visits from family and friends are, ostensibly, part of the prison routine that is regulated by law and the protocol of the correctional facility. However, we should keep in mind that visits are a complex event that can differ in terms of dynamics, quality, and importance for the convicted persons. Also, the research into receiving prison visits and their effects, as well as understanding the reasons and circumstances under which certain prisoners do not receive visits, provides valuable insight that is important for the development of prison policies, and creates room for improvement of prison practices.

Numerous studies confirm the importance of visits (DeClair & Dixon, 2017; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005; Vladu et al., 2021) and indicate that they accomplish several important functions. First, they contribute to the preservation of the family structure (Visser, 2013), positively affect the well-being, prosperity and development of prisoners and their family members, and facilitate the process of social reintegration after release (Burns et al., 2024; Duwe & Clark, 2013; Hairston, 1991; Wolff & Draine, 2004). Moreover, intensive and high-quality visits can reduce violence in prisons (Berghuis et al., 2023; Mitchell et al., 2016) and break the intergenerational cycle of incarceration, thereby facilitating the process of reintegration into community life (Duwe & Clark, 2013), and reduce recidivism rates. In other words, “effective visitation policies help prison staff and inmates feel safer, reduce crime, save money, and mitigate the harm that incarceration does to individuals, families, and communities” (Boudin, Stutz, & Littman, 2012, p. 152 cited by Ilijić et al., 2025, p. 28).

In professional literature, the prevailing conclusion is that visits have a positive effect, in terms of mitigating the harmful effects of imprisonment (Siennick et al., 2013), but their complexity implies a certain degree of ambivalence in which the negative effect of visits is recognized (Casey-Acevedo et al., 2004; Cochran et al., 2017). The absence of visits to prisoners can certainly deepen the feeling of isolation, due specifically to the interruption of the continuity of social and family relations with the outside world. However, the importance and benefits of visits depend on a number of internal and external factors, including the quality of the relationship, the dynamics of mutual interaction, as well as the conditions in which the visits take place.

The research on visits, as complex events, often includes a wide variety of predictors, such as individual, demographic and social characteristics of prisoners (Cochran et al., 2017; Young & Hay, 2020), the nature of the crime (Cochran et al., 2017), the length of the sentence (Wildeman et al., 2018), the travel distance between the prison and the place of residence (Andersen et al., 2022; Comfort, 2008; Cochran et al., 2020), the visitation experience and the quality of the relationship between the prisoner and the visitor before incarceration (Hickert et al., 2019), marital status, and the conditions in which the visits take place (Andersen et al., 2022).

Prison visits are an important aspect of the rehabilitation of convicted persons, especially when viewed in the context of vulnerable categories of prisoners. These categories include people who face specific challenges, such as addiction to psychoactive substances, mental disorders, old age and/or lack of social connections. For these categories of prisoners, visits can have multiple rehabilitation potential – they can provide the necessary

emotional support during incarceration and enable easier adaptation to society after release.

Having in mind the positive effects of visits on the behavior of convicted persons in prison and the preservation of family ties, in this paper we focused our attention on the study of variations in receiving visits depending on the prisoners' age. Prisoners of a younger age and prisoners of an elderly age are addressed as separate categories for several reasons. First, younger respondents are often placed in at-risk categories due to high rates of alcohol or drug addictions. On the other hand, elderly prisoners are faced with specific health problems and social isolation, which is why they are a separate group that requires additional attention. Visits to these categories of prisoners can play a key role in improving their mental health and providing social support.

This paper seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the specific needs of these groups of prisoners, but also to draw attention to the importance of adapting the visitation system to the specific needs of different categories of prisoners, in order to support their rehabilitation and preserve the family structure, which can have lasting positive effects on their behavior in prison and on the social reintegration process.

Analysis and monitoring of the experience of receiving or not receiving visits provide an opportunity to reflect on the existing visitation policies, but also to develop visitation strategies that would improve the prison treatment practice by introducing customized visitation support (therapeutic, psychological, social) based on the recognition of the specific needs of individual groups of prisoners.

In the research conducted as part of the PrisonLIFE project, valuable data was obtained on the social and family contacts of prisoners, and the effects that visits have on the quality of prison life of convicted persons in the Republic of Serbia, and some of the results will be presented in this paper.

### **Review of previous research**

Numerous studies emphasize the importance and positive impact of maintaining social and family ties on the behavior of convicted persons in prison and after release – in the social reintegration process (Cobbina, Huebner, & Berg, 2012; Cochran et al., 2017; Jiang & Winfree, 2006). Prisoners who maintain social ties with family members have a greater chance of preserving conventional social roles (primarily parental and partner) and cope better with stress and social isolation in prison, as well as during social reintegration (Cochran & Mears, 2013; Cochran et al., 2017; Duwe & Clark, 2013).

In addition to the empirical evidence that not only indicates the positive effects of maintaining family and social ties on the behavior of prisoners, but also suggests that visitation is a key strategy through which prison systems can improve maintaining order in prisons (Christian, Mellow, & Thomas, 2006), the research also points to the simultaneous existence of disproportionality in visits (Cochran et al., 2017). The nature of this disproportionality stems from the prison system itself, reflected in unequal visitation opportunities for all prisoners (type of prison, internal classification, prison policies, etc.), from the individual characteristics of the prisoners and the quality of their social and family ties before (and after) incarceration, as well as from objective difficulties (of a physical nature – the travel distance between prison and home, economic and financial difficulties of the family, high costs, etc.).

Some authors emphasize that the disproportionality in visits can also represent a potential form of unequal punishment, the consequences of which are more pronounced among certain at-risk or minority groups (Bales & Mears, 2008; Cochran et al., 2015; Pavićević & Ilijić, 2022) of prisoners. The existing literature on prison visitation offers mixed results. Previous research indicates that the rate of prisoners who do not receive visits varies from 39% (Duwe & Clark, 2013) to 74% (Cochran et al., 2015). Among the most common reasons for the relatively low visitation rates in U.S. prisons are restrictive visitation policies (Arditti, 2003; Farrell, 2004), inadequate conditions for prison visits, high travel and accommodation costs (Christian, 2005), as well as the large geographical distances between prison and home, or places where potential visitors live (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Cochran et al., 2015; McNeeley, & Duwe, 2019).

In the research carried out as part of the project *Assessment and possibilities for improving the quality of prison life of prisoners in the Republic of Serbia: Criminological-penological, psychological, sociological, legal and security aspects – PrisonLIFE*, the social and family contacts of prisoners and the quality of prison life were analyzed in relation to certain socio-demographic and criminological-penological characteristics of prisoners (gender, age, education, type of crime, distance between prison and place of residence, distribution, etc.).

The total sample consists of 634 respondents from five correctional facilities<sup>5,6</sup>. The average age of the respondents is 39.7 years (min. = 20 years; max. = 74 years). When considered by age category, 19.1% are respondents who are 20 to 30 years old, while 39.1% are respondents from 31 to 40 years of age. If these two age categories are viewed as one category – the younger population, we arrive at the data that the sample consists of 58.2% of respondents aged 20 to 40<sup>7</sup>.

In terms of maintaining social and family contacts, 96.2% of the respondents keep some form of contact with their family, through letters or phone calls, and 87.2% of the respondents receive visits. Maintaining regular contacts with family and friends has a positive effect on the quality of prison life (Ilijić et al., 2025). Correlation analyses showed that age as a predictor is negatively correlated with receiving visits ( $r = -0.99, p < .05$ ). This correlation coefficient indicates an extremely strong negative correlation between age and the frequency of receiving visits, which means that the number of visits decreases with the increasing age of the respondents. On the other hand, younger respondents, in accordance with this result, receive visits significantly more frequently. Also, the distance between prison and home statistically significantly correlates with the frequency of visits ( $r_{pb} = .177, p < .01$ ). Respondents in prisons that are less than an hour's drive away from their homes receive visits more often. Marital status also has a statistically significant correlation with visits ( $r_{pb} = .107, p < .01$ ), where respondents who have a partner (either married or cohabiting) receive visits more frequently (Ilijić et al., 2025).

This analysis clearly suggests that age plays a vital role in social interactions and opportunities for social networking, where younger generations evidently have a better chance of social connection and support. Elderly respondents, according to the analyses, receive fewer visits, which may indicate a decrease in social ties with the outside world as age changes. The travel distance between prison and home also plays a

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<sup>6</sup> The study utilized the Measuring the Quality of Prison Life Survey – MQPL (Liebling et al., 2012), specifically an adapted version of the questionnaire for measuring the quality of prison life in Serbian (Milićević, Ilijić & Vujičić, 2024; Međedović, Drndarević, & Milićević, 2024).

<sup>7</sup> For more detailed information on the criminological-penological characteristics of the sample of the examined population, see: Stevanović, I., Ilijić, Lj., & Vujičić, N. (2024). Previous prison experience and evaluation of the quality of prison life. *NBP Nauka, bezbednost, policija*, 29(1), pp. 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.5937/nabepo29-47558>

key role, where shorter distances are associated with a higher number of visits, suggesting that logistical barriers may significantly affect the frequency of visitation. In addition, marital status is shown to be a factor that contributes to a higher number of visits, where persons who have partners receive visits more often, which may indicate the importance of stable partner and interpersonal relationships in the context of social and family contacts of prisoners. Undoubtedly, these findings point to the need to consider social and logistical factors when creating policies that would support more frequent and better quality visits to prisoners.

Furthermore, the fact that the age structure of prison population in our research is dominated by younger prisoners is in accordance with statistical data on the age structure of prisoners in other countries. According to the available data, 18.8% of the total number of prisoners in the United States are 20 to 30 years old, and 31.5% are 31 to 40 years old (Statista Research Department, 2024). The average age of inmates in European prisons in 2022 was 38 years. In countries with more than a million inhabitants, the average age of the prison population ranges between 31 and 44 years. The lowest average age of prisoners is recorded in Bulgaria (31 years) and Denmark (34), while the highest average age of prisoners is in Georgia (44), Italy (42) and Portugal (41) (Aebi et al., 2023).

### **Younger prisoners as an at-risk category and visits from family and friends**

According to the previous research, younger prisoners showed a high prevalence of mental health issues, especially in the initial period of their incarceration (Monahan et al., 2011). Some researchers report that the prevalence of mental health disorders among younger prisoners reaches up to 70% (Collins et al., 2010; Teplin et al., 2002; Gonçalves et al., 2016).

The World Health Organization states that mental health problems are as much as seven times more common in the prison population than in the general population of Western societies (WHO, 2024). This increase in mental disorders coincides with the growth of the prison population, and an additional aggravating factor is substance abuse in prisons (Gómez-Figueroa, & Camino-Proañó, 2022). Research results indicate that approximately half (57%) of prisoners in Europe used drugs at least one year before going to prison (van de Baan et al., 2022), and upon their incarceration, 30% of men and 51% of women meet the diagnostic criteria for drug use disorders (Fazel, Yoon, & Hayes, 2017).

In the research conducted by Fovet et al. (2022) in prisons in France similar results are reported – that drug use and the frequency of drug use disorders

are significantly more common among prisoners than the general population. Half of the prison population uses drugs, compared to 14% of users in the general population, and 29% of the prison population have a diagnosed drug use disorder, compared to 5% in the general population (Fovet et al., 2022).

The use of psychoactive substances is often associated with reasons for punishment (Favril, 2023) and recidivism (Lokdam et al., 2022).

In the research within the PrisonLIFE project, we found that 48.6% of respondents used drugs before going to prison, while 10.5% of respondents stated that they had problems with both drugs and alcohol before incarceration. According to the results, 12.6% of respondents stated that they needed help with drug addiction recovery upon arrival in prison, 1.2% that they needed help with alcohol addiction recovery, while 1.3% of respondents stated that they needed help with both drug and alcohol addiction recovery upon arrival in prison. 3.5% of respondents were included in a specialized drug addiction recovery program in prison (Milićević et al., 2024).

The above findings, which show that younger respondents dominate in terms of age structure, as well as the data on the number of respondents who used drugs before incarceration, point to the justification for directing attention to the at-risk categories of prisoners, but also to the importance of institutional, social and family support during the execution of the prison sentence.

Despite the high prevalence of mental health issues among younger prisoners, little is known about the longitudinal course and factors impacting the symptoms of their mental health during incarceration, particularly the impact of the prison environment (Gonçalves et al., 2016).

The effects of incarceration and living in prison are a blow to the well-being of prisoners of all age categories, and can have a negative effect on their behavior in prison, especially in younger prisoners. The impact of visits from family and friends, which is assumed to help improve the mental health of the prison population, especially younger prisoners, as well as their adaptation to prison life, has not been the subject of much research interest so far, and the findings related to this matter are inconsistent (Gonçalves et al., 2020).

Young adult age carries specific characteristics associated with identity, social, educational and other determinants that are more or less successfully realized, while their need to be more socially connected, and the fact that they find social isolation more difficult to endure, is documented in research into prison life (Cochran et al., 2018; Lindsey et al., 2017; Kreager et al., 2016).



In view of these specific characteristics of young adulthood, it is possible that adjustment to prison life, receiving prison visits, and the connection between visits and mental health happen differently in young adults compared to adults (Gonçalves et al., 2020, p. 235).

For the purpose of bridging the research gap, given that visits to the younger inmate population are underrepresented in prison visitation research, a study was conducted in Portugal on the longitudinal course of visitations to young adults during their incarceration. The study focused on their individual characteristics associated with receiving prison visits, as well as the reciprocal relationship between visitation and mental health (Gonçalves et al., 2020). Some of the key findings of this research have been singled out for the purpose of further analysis. Namely, the results showed that visits from family and friends are more intensive for younger inmates with a lower level of education, compared to younger inmates with a higher educational level, and also, that the visits are more intensive if the prisoners are Portuguese citizens, if they have had a history of treatment for mental illnesses, and a less complex criminal history (Gonçalves et al., 2020, p. 245). In conclusion, the authors suggested that prisoners of a younger age receive more intensive support from their family members, friends and the community, so it is possible that families of people with mental issues visit their loved ones more often due to concerns about increased stress levels and difficulties in adapting to the prison environment.

The final results of this study indicate that a higher level of mental health symptoms upon incarceration resulted in a higher number of visits in the first three months of the prison sentence, while visits after the third month in prison had no effect on subsequent mental health symptoms, which is in contrast with earlier findings in the criminological literature (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Liebling, 1999; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018; Turanovic & Tasca, 2019 according to Gonçalves et al., 2020, p. 246).

Mental vulnerability of the younger prison population is often perceived as a motivation for more frequent visits, so the greater number of visits can be explained by the greater concern of family members and friends about the consequences of stress, separation, isolation and adaptation to prison life, especially in the initial phase of incarceration. The need of the relatives to provide social support is the key reason for the greater number of visits that younger prisoners receive.

The results of the research on prison visits from family and friends in relation to the quality of prison life in the Republic of Serbia, as previously stated, showed that younger prisoners receive more visits than elderly prisoners. No statistically significant correlations were found between the

variables age and maintaining regular contacts with family, the importance of getting support from family, and the importance of getting support from friends (Ilijić et al., 2025). The results of our research imply a similar conclusion that we came across in the Portuguese research, that the number of visits is related to the motivation of the visitors, primarily family members, who try to reduce the effects of prison strains by providing emotional and practical support through visits (Gonçalves et al., 2020; Hickert et al., 2019). Also, if prosocially oriented persons are willing to visit frequently, they are likely to be more willing (or able) to provide crucial emotional or instrumental support in overcoming dramatic changes in circumstances and uncertainty after release (Hickert et al., 2019).

By presenting the results of the Portuguese research documenting the visits from family and friends for members of the Portuguese nation, we sought to highlight the importance of the component of cultural specificity, which also manifests itself in our research on contact with family and friends as a very high number of visits, which is not the case in prison practices of developed Western countries.

While the results of research within the PrisonLIFE project indicate that, based on a sample from five correctional facilities in Serbia, the percentage of prisoners who receive visits is more than 85%, the research in Denmark showed that in the period of 12 months before release, almost 60% of prisoners in Denmark received at least one visit, while the data from Florida show that number to be 40%. Prisoners who receive visits in Denmark record a total of 25 visits per sentence, while in Florida, the number of visits is less than half that number, i.e. 10 (Andersen et al., 2022). A study of visitation patterns by type of visitor found that differences in visitation stem from “significant others”, relatives and friends, rather than the immediate family, although these patterns were not consistent across all parameters (Andersen et al., 2022).

When considering and researching prison practices (particularly visits to prisoners), it is essential to take into account the general cultural and social practices and specificities that shape the behavior, norms and values in the social as well as the prison system.

In this sense, the importance of family and the type of social capital that is generated and shared can be significant for understanding the behavior of families in more traditional societies where bonding social capital prevails, compared to North-Western European societies where cultural and family practices are characterized by greater autonomy, egalitarianism and more distant social ties (Ingelhart & Baker, 2000; Schwartz, 2006). In addition to being in line with the social support paradigm (Cullen, 1994), theories of attachment (Bowlby, 1988; Inagaki & Orehek, 2017) which Portuguese

researchers (Gonçalves et al., 2020, p. 246) suggest as an explanation for a greater number of visits from family members to the younger prison population, the research of visits should also take into account local cultural and social specificities.

### **Elderly prisoners as an at-risk category and visits from family and friends**

Elderly<sup>8</sup> prisoners are another specific and vulnerable group within the prison system. With the aging of prisoners, a number of physical, psychological and social changes occur which require adaptation of prison conditions and access to rehabilitation. Some authors state that elderly prisoners are the fastest growing part of the prison population (Williams et al., 2012), and their number has doubled over the last two decades (Turner et al., 2018). Complex health and social care-related needs that arise from aging, frailty and poor physical and mental health are significant characteristics of this population, which makes them different from younger prisoners (Hayes et al., 2012 as cited in Milićević & Ilijić, 2022). Also, factors from the prison environment accelerate the aging process. Mental health issues, social and emotional impacts, as well as the loss of contact with the outside world, are just some of the frequently cited factors of more intense aging in a prison environment. In other words, the physical and mental health of prisoners is comparable to the physical and mental health of a more advanced age group of people outside prison, i.e., prisoners are functionally older in relation to their chronological age, which can be attributed to their previous lifestyle, lack of medical care and prison experience in general (Trotter & Baidawi, 2015; Veković et al., 2021, as cited in Milićević & Ilijić, 2022, p. 505).

According to official data on the prison population in Europe, approximately 16.5% of prisoners are aged 50 or over, while 3% are aged 65 or over. In countries with more than one million inhabitants, the highest percentages of prisoners over the age of 50 are found in Italy (28%), Spain (25%), Portugal (24%), while on the other hand, the highest percentages of prisoners over the age of 65 are found in North Macedonia (8.3%), Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina) (6.6%), and Bulgaria (5.6%) (Aebi et al., 2023).

In our research, prisoners over the age of 50 are the least represented age category, and make up 14.8% of the sample of the observed population. Also,

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<sup>8</sup> In the literature, there is no single definition of elderly prisoners, but 50 and over 55 years of age are often mentioned as age thresholds. (Baidawi & Totter, 2016 as cited in Milićević & Ilijić, 2022; Williams et al., 2012).

elderly prisoners receive fewer visits than younger prisoners (Ilijić et al., 2025).

Visits play a key role in the lives of elderly prisoners, not only in the emotional, but also in the physical and psychological sense. The involvement of family, friends and other significant persons in the rehabilitation process of elderly prisoners can have a major impact on their well-being and prosperity, as well as physical and mental health.

Prisoners of an elderly age often suffer from loneliness, which may further worsen their existing physical, mental and emotional difficulties. Visits from family and friends play a key role in reducing the feelings of loneliness and social isolation. For elderly prisoners, who often struggle with physical limitations and may not have the same opportunities for social interactions as younger prisoners, regular visits from family members and significant others outside prison can provide vital emotional support.

The loss of family contacts and social ties is particularly challenging for elderly prisoners who have spent a long period of time in prison. Restrictive or limited contact with family or friends leads to reduced satisfaction with the quality of life and well-being of prisoners (De Motte, 2015; Ilijić et al., 2024). Findings from some research indicate that for elderly prisoners, apart from the fear of death in prison, one of the biggest worries is precisely the fear of losing contact with the closest family members and the feeling of loneliness (HMIPS, 2017). In other words, limited or severed social contacts are often cited as one of the key unmet needs of elderly prisoners (Hayes et al., 2013 as cited in Milićević & Ilijić, 2022, p. 507).

Maintaining contact with important persons outside the prison environment is one of the starting points in preserving the dignity of elderly prisoners. Therefore, it must be pointed out that contact with the family can restore their personal sense of dignity and have a positive impact on their rehabilitation and reintegration into society after leaving prison (Testoni et al., 2020; Tucker et al., 2021 as cited in Milićević & Ilijić, 2022, p. 513).

In the literature, we can find information that the most important factors that lead to not receiving visits are obstacles of a social, practical (economic) and material nature (Rubenstien et al., 2019). The probability of receiving visits varies depending on the quality and intensity of social and family relationships and the prisoner's experiences before incarceration. The prisoners are more likely to receive visits if they had harmonious family, marital, partner and friendship relationships and ties before going to prison, that is, it is less likely that the prisoners will receive visits if they had weak relationships with family members, if there was divorce or separation from their partner, or impaired relationships with their parents and children (Ilijić et al., 2025). Also, the greater the distance

between prison and home, the lower the frequency and prevalence of visits (Clark & Duwe, 2017; Hickert, et al., 2017). The type of crime is a factor that can lead to a lower number of visits to the prisoner by family members, especially if it is a crime of violence and/or a crime against a family member. Among other factors, the age of family members, socio-economic status and the availability of material and financial resources for travel from the place of residence are often cited (Ilijić et al., 2025; Milićević & Ilijić, 2022; Veković et al., 2021).

### **Visits and respect for order and discipline in prison**

A large number of researchers have focused on studying the effects of visitation on the prisoners' behavior in prison, and/or the effects of visitation on respect for order and discipline (Jiang et al., 2005; Jiang & Winfree, 2006; Cochran, 2012; Hensley et al., 2002), depending on the prisoners' gender (Jiang & Winfree, 2006) and relation with the visitors, where the effects of visits from spouses (Hensley et al., 2002) and children (Jiang et al., 2005; Rubenstein et al., 2021) were studied most frequently.

Research results are often inconsistent (Bales & Mears, 2008), which prevents the simple conclusion that contact with family necessarily promotes respect for order and discipline in prison.

In a study conducted by Hensley et al. (2002), it was concluded that conjugal visits do not have a significant effect on the violent or undisciplined behavior of inmates in prison.

On the other hand, the results of the research conducted by Cochran (2012) support the thesis that visitation reduces the probability of undisciplined behavior of prisoners. Namely, although the results suggest that the majority of prisoners did not violate the rules of order and discipline in prison, the research is important because it indicates that the effects of visits vary depending on the time and consistency with which they occur. This finding is significantly different from previous research because it suggests that prisoners who are visited more often are less prone to rule-breaking behaviors. In contrast, prisoners who did not receive visits at all, as well as those who received visits at the beginning, but not later during their incarceration, were more likely to engage in more regular patterns of undisciplined behavior in prison (Cochran, 2012).

The research conducted by Jiang, Fisher-Giorlando, and Mo (2005) provides quantitative data on the impact of social support on prison misconduct, with child visits as one indicator of social support. Three categories of disorderly conduct were considered on a monthly basis: the total number of disorderly conduct violations, prison violence violations,

and drug and property violations. The results of the research in terms of social support coming from outside the prison point to the fact that prisoners who were married were 14% less likely to violate the rules regarding order and discipline in the prison. On the other hand, prisoners who received visits from children were significantly more likely to violate rules related to drugs and property in prison (Jiang et al., 2005). This research provided evidence that prison visitation, particularly by children, can increase rule breaking in the prison environment. This “counterintuitive result may be linked to the fact that more intensive visits, especially from children, provide more opportunities for the introduction of contraband into prisons” (De Claire & Dixon, 2015, p. 13). Similar findings are reported by other researchers. Berghuis et al. (2023) state that inmates who received visits were 63% more likely to be reported for possession or use of prohibited items compared to inmates who did not receive visits. Siennick et al. (2013) also found that receiving visits significantly increased the likelihood of disciplinary infractions related to possession of prohibited items. These results are understandable, considering that the ways in which prohibited items can get into prison are limited (Berghuis et al., 2023), and are most often connected to visits from significant persons.

### **Potential for improving visits to at-risk categories of prisoners**

Researchers who have looked into the effects of visits on the behavior of prisoners suggest that prison systems should make additional efforts to increase the number of prisoners who receive visits, while ensuring that those efforts do not jeopardize the safety and security of prison staff, prisoners, and visitors. Bales and Mears (2008) gave specific guidelines for improving the intensity of visits, which state that prisons as institutions can increase the number of visits by: sending prisoners to serve their sentences in prisons that are close to the family's place of residence and near the prisoner's home; encouraging organizations from the community to visit prisoners (especially those who do not receive visits from family and friends), simplifying / reducing the bureaucratic procedures associated with visits, and ensuring adequate physical and spatial conditions in which the visits will take place.

Schuhmann et al. (2018) investigated how prisoners value “one-on-one” volunteer visits in prisons in the Netherlands. Based on the semi-structured interviews with prisoners in six prisons, the authors concluded that the prisoners perceive the visits from volunteers as very significant and useful. Prisoners point out that the visits from volunteers give them a rare

opportunity to talk to someone in confidence, and that the visits give them hope and encourage a more positive outlook on the future.

Also, the experiences of good organization and encouragement of regular family visits in the U.S. prison practice should be taken into account (Boudin et al., 2014). This refers to the programs of private family gatherings, with the aim to preserve, improve and strengthen the family ties that have been damaged due to incarceration of a family member, where visits within the framework of such programs are only available to prisoners who behave well and participate in prison programs focusing on reintegration into society, education and work. The programs are clearly explained, defined, and include penalties for rule violations, prevention of communicable diseases, and forms used in program administration (Boudin et al., 2014, p. 177). The authors point out that the relative rarity of such special support programs for family visits in the USA is a fact that speaks for itself. They imply larger financial and organizational investments, which, however, pay off, as can be seen from the experience of the federal states and institutions where these programs have been implemented.

Incentive programs in support of visits from family members aim to motivate prisoners to receive (more) visits, and one of the ways is to reward them with additional enhanced visits (special family visiting days) (Hutton, 2017). However, it should be noted that programs that include IEP (Incentives and Earned Privileges) or RSP (Regime Status Points) have been criticized for the negative impact on the behavior of prisoners, the perception of fairness and the quality of the relationship between staff and prisoners (Hutton, 2017; McCarthy & Adams, 2017). The need for prisoners to harmonize their behavior with the existing rules of reward and advancement within the system implies that prisoners who fail to impose themselves in this sense remain invisible to the administration despite following the rules. Entire groups of prisoners who are unable to self-regulate and align with performance management in accordance with reward requirements, primarily those with mental health issues, are denied support through the program (Hutton, 2017, p. 93). Additionally, promoted positions encourage the ability to better achieve expected behaviors and nurture artificial interpersonal relationships that represent a path to privilege (Hutton, 2017; Pavićević & Ilijić, 2020).

### **Instead of a conclusion**

The potential for a negative impact of reduced visitation on prison and reentry outcomes, as well as increasing social inequality, points to the need for policies that expand the prisoners' access to social networks during their

incarceration. Prison institutions should focus on identifying and removing the obstacles that reduce opportunities for visits, especially those that contribute to the creation of unequal visitation conditions. Such efforts have the potential to improve prison order and discipline, as well as security, and to reduce inequalities that may occur in prisons (Cochran et al., 2015).

Prisoners with mental health and addiction problems come to prison with a greater degree of vulnerability, and have increased needs for health services upon entering prison. As especially important visitation characteristics and patterns, when it comes to the young prison population, we point out vulnerability, increased stress level due to social isolation, and higher prevalence of mental disorders.

On the other hand, a higher number of visits from family and friends is noticeable, motivated by the tendency of the visitors to provide support and reduce the anxiety caused by incarceration. The results of the PrisonLIFE research showed that although younger prisoners receive visits more often than elderly prisoners, no statistically significant correlations were found between the variables age and maintaining regular contact with family, the importance of support from family, and the importance of support from friends.

The idea of encouraging the interest of young prisoners in visits from family and friends indicates the need for professional support in the revitalization of family relationships based on trust and mutual support. Through improving the conditions and content of visits, the aim is to harmonize the needs and expectations of both the person who receives the visit, and the visitors, which would contribute to the strengthening of interpersonal, family and social ties. Professional support would include psychological and psychiatric assistance (in case of mental health issues) as well as the intervention of social workers, who would take into account the visitation experience and the quality of the relationship between visitors and prisoners.

Improving visits for elderly prisoners is not only a matter of meeting their emotional and social needs, but also an important means of improving their physical health, mental state and chances of successful reentry into society. Visits can play a key role in reducing stress, increasing social ties and support, and providing practical assistance, all of which can contribute to a better quality of life for elderly prisoners and a reduction in recidivism. It is recommended that facilities and conditions related to prison visits reflect the specific needs and requirements of elderly prisoners and their visitors. It is also necessary for the prison administration and professional staff to recognize the at-risk categories of prisoners and direct additional attention to prisoners whose family relationship is damaged.



Taking into account the specific needs of at-risk categories of prisoners when designing visitation policies and programs can contribute to a more humane and efficient prison system.

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