

MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS



Distance Matters: Examining the Factors that Impact Prisoner Visitation in Minnesota

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One of the untested assumptions within the prison visitation literature is that inmates receive fewer visits when visitors must travel long distances to prisons. Measuring distance by comparing the addresses of the prisons where offenders were confined to the residential addresses of those who visited them, this study tested this hypothesis by estimating the effects of distance on the number of times Minnesota prisoners were visited. The effects of distance were estimated by performing multilevel repeated measure analyses, measuring the frequency of visitation across the different facilities at which inmates were housed, the different neighborhoods from which they received visits, and between-inmate differences in visitation frequency. In addition, the study estimated the effects of social disorganization on the frequency of visitation.

KEY FINDINGS

- The average distance between visitor neighborhoods and prison facilities was approximately 129 miles.
 - The median distance was 60 miles.
 - 95 percent of visitors traveled to facilities within 400 miles of where they were living at the time.
- The distance between visitors' residences and the facilities of the prisoners they visited decreased the frequency of prison visitation.
 - For every 100 miles between visitor neighborhoods and the prison facilities they visited, visitation decreased by 20 percent.
- The effects of distance were more severe for visitors living in disadvantaged communities.
 - An increase in concentrated disadvantage was associated with a 4 percent decrease in visitation.

A growing number of recent studies have demonstrated the beneficial effects of prison visitation. Research has shown, for example, that visitation can reduce prison misconduct and recidivism. Despite the generally positive outcomes associated with

prison visitation, research indicates many offenders are not visited at all in prison. Reasons for the relatively large number of unvisited inmates include cumbersome visitation policies and procedures, strained relationships between prisoners and potential visitors, and the distances visitors must travel to correctional facilities.

This study examined the effects of distance on visitation by comparing the addresses of the correctional facilities where offenders were incarcerated to the residential addresses of those who visited them. The sample for this study consisted of 2,817 inmates and 7,154 visitors. The offenders in this sample were released from prison in 2013, and visitation was measured over the entire length of their stays in prison.

Given that prisoners do not necessarily come from the same locations as their visitors, using visitor address data is a more accurate approach for analyzing the impact of distance on visitation. The use of visitor address information also enabled an examination of the neighborhood characteristics where visitors live. In particular, this study connected the residential address information for visitors with census tract-level data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Communities Survey (ACS). The study used multilevel repeated measure analyses to analyze the effects of distance and community-level characteristics on the frequency of visitation.

The Effects of Distance and Community on Visitation

There was an average of nearly 7 visits between each neighborhood and facility; however, relative to the amount of time inmates spent at each facility, the average number of visits was less than one per month (0.84 visits). The inmates spent an average of nearly 14 months at each of the facilities where they were housed. The visitor(s)'s neighborhoods were located an average of nearly 129 miles from each facility that individuals visited, or could have visited.

The results showed that distance significantly reduced the frequency of visitation. For every 100 miles that separated the neighborhoods visitors came from and the prison facilities they visited, visitation decreased by almost 20 percent. In addition, an increase in concentrated disadvantage was associated with a roughly 4 percent decrease in the frequency of visitation.

Summary

In line with the hypothesized relationship between distance and visitation, the results showed the frequency of visitation decreases as the distance between visitors and prisons increases. Moreover, given that concentrated disadvantage decreased the frequency of visitation, the distance effects were more pronounced for visitors living in disadvantaged communities. While prisoners are more likely to come from, and return to, disadvantaged neighborhoods, these findings are consistent with research that has found that concentrated disadvantage makes desistance more difficult.

Due to the effects that distance and disadvantage have on visitation, video visitation is a potentially promising strategy to increase prison visitation opportunities. For offenders confined at facilities that are geographically distant from where their potential visitors reside, video visits may represent the best, and perhaps only, means of staying connected with pro-social sources of support. Moreover, if the fees for virtual visits are affordable for lower-income families, then video visitation may also be effective at lessening the impact of concentrated disadvantage.