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# Incarcerated by Association

When parents go to jail, their kids go with them. Maybe not in the literal sense, but the kids do face many issues when having an incarcerated parent. It is a childhood in constant motion with very little stability. For me and my family, we were nomads traveling from town to town every time my father was moved from one prison to the next. Our hardships seemed to be of little concern to those who were making the decisions. How little the family unit matters becomes even more apparent when visiting the prisons. The visitation areas are unwelcoming, difficult, and provide no space for the intimate bonding a family needs. This puts unnecessary strain on a family that has already been through so much. Of all the prisons I have visited, there never seemed to be much thought into the design of the waiting and visitation areas for families. Just improving these spaces alone would provide a substantially better experience for families and inmates alike while avoiding any undue stress.

While it is critical that the design is focused on inmate and staff safety, all users need to be considered. Families are impacted by the design as well and this fact is too often forgotten. Prisons naturally create disadvantages for families; there is no need to add to the hardship. Families know their loved ones are incarcerated, they do not need to feel or experience the

incarceration themselves. Sadly, this is the visitation experience for most.

I feel as though my childhood was misplaced. I was continuously on the move. Between kindergarten and high school, I had lived in seven different towns following my father from prison to prison. The only thing that remained constant was, ironically, that every prison was different. The rules and regulations for visitation were never the same and we were continuously having to adapt to the changes. Visitation made us feel as though we were intruders or even inmates ourselves. We were processed, pushed through metal detectors, and our food and belongings were checked. As a kid, I did not really understand this process, nor did I care. I was just happy to see my father.

The experience of going through security was rough and the actual visitation was not much better. The visitation area was a large room filled with tables that families were meant to share. The room can be best described as a grade school cafeteria. It was loud and people made

a continuous effort to talk over one another. There were no quiet, intimate moments shared among families, which is something desperately needed to maintain a bond.

As I began to move into my teenage years, this lifestyle began to take a toll on me. I started to dislike visiting prisons. I began to see the process as intrusive and unwanted. The feelings of joy I once had when I went to see my father were replaced by fear and embarrassment. I began to see how some of the guards viewed us as an annoyance. The visiting areas did little to alleviate these fears. The visiting areas felt unsafe. I was in my teenage years when I made the decision to stop visiting my father. This continued until his passing.

It was not until I had a child of my own that I realized how terrible this must have been for my dad. I could not imagine a day where my daughter did not want anything to do with me. He must have had a feeling of complete abandonment and isolation. This is a fundamental reason why it is important to create a private, welcoming environment for families when they visit. Visitation can have a direct positive impact on the inmates, subsequently reducing their chances at recidivism.

The leading cause of prison deaths in 2016 was suicide, and according to the prison policy initiative, the cause of this is "certain features

of the jail environment enhance suicidal behavior: fear of the unknown, distrust of an authoritarian environment, perceived lack of control over the future, isolation from family and significant others, shame of incarceration, and perceived dehumanizing aspects of incarceration." Society will never be able to quantify the emotional toll suicide takes on the victims' loved ones. Something that could be quantifiable is the financial impact.

However, there has been no study done in the United States to show the monetary effect suicide has on the taxpayer. In the UK, a study was done that showed in a single year, suicide among inmates could cost the taxpayers upwards of 3 million pounds, which translates to about 4 million US dollars. This number would be significantly higher in the US though, because the UK only has about 61 suicides a year compared to roughly 4,000 in the U.S (League, Howard). Sadly, this is not the only impact family visitation has on the detainees.

From my own perspective and experience, I see a lot of similarities between prisoners' experiences and what soldiers experience while deployed. The difference, however, is that soldiers are briefed



**Visiting Center at Central Utah Correctional Facility.  
Image Courtesy of Utah Department of Corrections.**

at length about the effects the separation will have on the family unit prior to their deployment. Separation has a negative effect on the power structure in the family. When so much time is spent apart, the family will adapt and learn to live without the absent parent. The family will get used to doing things a certain way and this ends up making it harder for the parent to reintegrate into the family unit. I have experienced this myself

just in the short time my dad was released. I had stopped visiting for a while and no longer saw him as an authority figure. My attitude towards him, along with all the common struggles inmates face in society with integration caused him to reoffend, earning him his third strike.

Successful reintegration is a key component in a person's chances of not reoffending. There are many different studies that show the different levels in which family visitation helps reduce recidivism. A study done in 2012

showed that visits can reduce reoffending by 8% and this could increase by the frequency of the visits (Mears). Even with all this information, jails are doing nothing to improve the visitation experience.

The current visitation policy at Oklahoma County

Jail is very restrictive. It allows for a maximum of 25 adult members per floor for each visitation period. Who visits is also limited. Detainees are only allowed five people on their visitation list and three of those must be immediate family. When it comes to minors, each one must be accompanied by an adult and only allows for two children at a time. Time limit cannot exceed 15 minutes of non-contact visitation per week. There are no contact visits between family and detainees. Contact visits are only for attorneys and law enforcement. There is also a strict dress code and visits can be cancelled without notice, at the discretion of the staff (Inmate). Restrictive visitation policy, coupled with an unwelcoming environment, discourages visitation. Based on all the data showing that good visitation experiences can have such a positive impact, the obvious strategy would be to encourage and incentivize visitation.

Norway is often looked at as the example when it comes to incarceration, and rightfully so. Halden prison in Norway is a great example of how making visitation a priority can help create a more rehabilitative environment. Family visitation is seen as a resource. Halden prison allows private visitation for up to two hours twice a week, it has toys for the children, and even a changing table. Families



are not searched prior to entry; the inmates are searched afterwards (Trust). This proactive approach to reducing recidivism can be easily adapted into the future design of the Oklahoma County Jail.

Although safety is the main priority, the ultimate objective of jail is to rehabilitate the detainee, which justifies the idea that the family visitation experience should also be a priority in the design process. If we are ever going to lower incarceration rates, we must reduce the rate at which people reoffend. Therefore, the design of visitation should be a focal point so that families can be used as the valuable resource they are. We must get rid of restrictive policies that discourage visitation. The design itself must be both, welcoming and reassuring. Color, acoustical design, lighting, and a different approach to material selection can have a big impact on the mood and mental wellbeing of prisoners. This will have the same impact on families and friends during visitation.

I am not a designer. I am not going to leave you with an architectural masterpiece; I will leave that up to future architects. My hope, however, is that my own experience from spending my childhood visiting multiple prisons will inspire designers to focus on visitation as an integral function, rather than an afterthought.

### Citations

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