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Maintaining father–child relationships using video visitation in Australian prisons

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Celebrating
50 years

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The insights provided by all participants will, we hope, positively shape the future of video visits.

Disclaimer

This report cannot be considered as either endorsed by state or territory government departments or corrections agencies or an expression of their policies and views. Any errors of omission or commission are the responsibility of the researchers.

Glossary

Name	Description
Australian Capital Territory Corrective Services (ACTCS)	Government area responsible for correctional centres in the Australian Capital Territory
AVL (audiovisual link) suite	Area equipped with audiovisual teleconferencing facilities originally used for professional visits and/or justice matters. In some correctional centres, since the COVID-19 pandemic, AVL suites have been used for family or social visits.
Correctional centre	A custodial environment operated by corrective services, or a private provider on behalf of corrective services. Referred to as 'prison' or 'jail' by some participants.
Corrections Victoria (CV)	Government area responsible for correctional centres in Victoria
Corrective services	The collective term used in this report for government areas responsible for corrections environments and supervision. In some jurisdictions this language is used directly (eg Corrective Services New South Wales) while in others it is not (eg Tasmania Prison Service). To avoid confusion, correctional services are denoted by state or territory in the findings presented in this report.
Corrective Services New South Wales (CSNSW)	Government area responsible for correctional centres in New South Wales
Corrective Services, Government of Western Australia (CSWA)	Government area responsible for correctional centres in Western Australia
In-person visit	A person in the community attends a correctional centre to visit a person in prison. While visits classified as Professional/Official can be conducted in-person (eg health/justice appointments), in this report 'in-person visit' is used to denote social contact with family and friends.
Queensland Corrective Services (QCS)	Government area responsible for corrections environments and supervision in Queensland
South Australia Department for Correctional Services (SADCS)	Government area responsible for correctional centres in South Australia
Video visit	Contact between a person in prison and person in the community via audiovisual teleconferencing. While visits classified as Professional/Official can be conducted by videoconference (eg health/justice appointments), in this report 'video visit' is used to denote social contact with family and friends via videoconference.



Abstract

Video visitation developed rapidly in Australian correctional centres when in-person visits stopped to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. Using mixed methods, this report presents findings from the first multi-jurisdictional study exploring the experiences and impact of video visits between fathers in prison and their children. Findings show that there are significant benefits to video visitation for fathers, children and children’s carers, and corrective services. Benefits include visual access to the child’s world, more child-friendly visit experiences, improved convenience and reduced cost, and a reduction in contraband entering correctional centres. However, video visits are most beneficial as a complement, not alternative, to contact visits. There is now an opportunity to maintain positive momentum by supporting enhanced relationship quality via video visits between fathers, children and carers.



Executive summary

Temporary cessation of in-person visitation between people in prison and their loved ones was among the transformations of daily life resulting from governmental responses to the COVID-19 pandemic across 2020 to 2022. Video visitation was quickly implemented by corrective services in all Australian states and territories, except the Northern Territory, to enable ongoing contact. This major change provided an opportunity to explore potential benefits because, prior to COVID-19, video visitation had not been used on a wide scale in Australia or internationally.

Focusing on contact between fathers in prison and their children, this study reports on the experiences and perspectives of fathers at two publicly operated prisons in regional and urban New South Wales ($n=27$) and the carers of children with incarcerated fathers in these two facilities ($n=17$). One of the prisons has a mixed security classification, while the other is minimum security. Of these participants, 11 fathers identified as Aboriginal and four identified as culturally and linguistically diverse, while three carers identified as Aboriginal and none identified as culturally and linguistically diverse. Professionals in corrective services ($n=19$) in five states and territories (ACT, NSW, Qld, SA and WA) and two community organisations ($n=6$) were also interviewed and a written response to the interview questions was provided by Corrections Victoria. These data were thematically analysed and reported together with the father and carer data. Analyses of quantitative data about the uptake of video visits are reported from two jurisdictions (WA and NSW). The primary data are presented following a systematic evidence scan of the current literature on video visitation that situates the findings of this study within the Australian and international literature. While few studies have yet been conducted on video visitation between children and their incarcerated fathers, the overall body of literature on visitation strongly supports its value for maintaining parent–child relationships during incarceration.

Mirroring the literature on visitation more broadly, there was significant agreement across the participant groups in this study about the major benefits of video visits. Moreover, there was broad consensus about the desire to continue video visitation as a complement to in-person visits, which were acknowledged as essential. Video visits were beneficial for reducing the child's exposure to the prison environment and enabling the father to enter the child and family's social worlds, bringing the father into the home and social events. Video visits enabled fathers to be child-focused, though some fathers would benefit from support to enhance the quality of the interactions. Video visitation has practical benefits: it removes travel time and costs and can be inclusive for overseas or interstate visitors and those with low mobility or disability. Corrective services staff appreciated the reduction in contraband resulting from video visits (compared with in-person visits) and the positive effect on behaviour and atmosphere in correctional centres. However, some issues were noted with booking visits due to the 'first come, first served' policy, which could cause problems, particularly in family networks with complex dynamics. There were access issues for family members with limited or poor internet connection as well as connectivity issues for fathers in some correctional centres. Balancing safety and privacy to reduce the potential for coercive control or other unsafe interactions is a vital next step.

Recommendations based on the research findings include:

- Increase opportunities for video visits in ways that provide flexibility to families.
- Prepare fathers to engage in sensitive, child-focused ways during video visits.
- Support fathers to respectfully communicate with children's carers, including ex-partners.
- Use visual guides to explain connectivity instructions to non-English-speaking or low-literacy visitors.
- Provide guidance for carers to support their children before, during and after visits, including carers of children with disabilities.
- Avoid last-minute cancellations of video visits, recognising that this is upsetting to children.



Introduction

In March 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic was declared (World Health Organization 2023), the immediate need to limit the risk of COVID-19 outbreaks in correctional centres resulted in emergency responses taking effect across Australia. There were several reasons for this preventative response. People in correctional centres typically have poorer health than the public on a range of measures that may correlate with the severity of COVID-19 outcomes, and large numbers of people living closely together, as in corrections environments, presents a higher risk of infectious disease transmission (Payne & Hanley 2020). The public health imperative to reduce the risk of an outbreak was a catalyst for measures including correctional centre closures to visitors, cessation of some programs, COVID-19 symptom checks for staff and new intakes, quarantine arrangements, introduction of personal protective equipment and physical distancing (Payne & Hanley 2020).

Globally, these unprecedented public health changes created the potential for conflict among the overarching objectives of corrective services to create a 'safe, secure and humane custodial environment' (Productivity Commission 2023). Visitation is a core strategy for achieving both safe and humane custodial settings (McCarthy & Adams 2017). Facilitating the connection between people in prison and their families and friends in the community has positive effects for people in prison (Folk et al. 2019) and contributes to safety within correctional centres. The public health provisions enacted during the pandemic in many countries, including Australia, restricted or prevented visitation from occurring; therefore, keeping staff and people in prison safe from infection increased the risk of disruption and violence in the custodial setting as tensions escalated. The risk presented by the lack of contact with family and friends was exacerbated by the general uncertainty and anxiety associated with the global public health crisis (Heard 2020) and specific fears about the wellbeing of loved ones. International literature demonstrates that, for people with restricted opportunities to contact loved ones due to their imprisonment, these anxieties were heightened (Johnson et al. 2021).

The number of adult prisoners in Australia is currently approaching 42,000, with males (93%) making up the large majority of the Australian prison population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023). Around half of the men in prison are estimated to be parents (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare 2015). Separation from family, and in particular children, is a major concern for most people in prison. Family visitation can help prisoners to cope with separation (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken 2002), may improve family relationships and prisoner mental health, and appears to result in less disruptive behaviour in prison (De Claire & Dixon 2017; Harris & Landreth 1997; McLeod & Bonsu 2018; Shlafer & Poehlmann 2010). The positive effects linked to visitation last over time: family visits are associated with reduced recidivism, higher rates of reunification of family household post-release (Wilson & Koons-Witt 2021), and better social adjustment during imprisonment and after release (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken 2002). Moreover, visitation may somewhat buffer negative impacts of parental incarceration for children (Hayes, Butler, Devaney, & Percy 2018; Schubert et al. 2016). However, fathers in prison and their children require significant support to maintain a positive relationship (Bartlett & Trotter 2019).

Broadly, there is limited research on video visitation in practice, and very little of the available work originates from Australia or reflects the experiences or perspectives of a range of groups affected by video visitation with people in prison. That is, there is limited evidence about the effectiveness, experience and impact of video visitation for people in prison, their family members, corrective services and other stakeholders such as children's support and advocacy groups. Most of the research focuses on mothers in prison, does not consider all relevant stakeholders, and is from the United States. The implications for stakeholders differ in the American context due to the comparatively different administration of corrective services. Moreover, the existing literature typically identifies potential rather than realised benefits because video visitation has not previously been used on a wide scale. Now that the infrastructure supporting video visitation has been developed and piloted in different forms across Australian jurisdictions, it is timely for this study to offer robust, systematic, mixed methods research on the experience and impact of video visitation.

The next section of this report presents a rigorous evidence scan of the available international literature on video visitation, summarising key knowledge and highlighting gaps. Next, the research design underpinning this project is described. Findings from the qualitative and quantitative data are then presented thematically. Finally, comprehensive recommendations arising from this study are offered.

Evidence scan

This evidence scan synthesises current evidence on the benefits and challenges of in-person and video prison visits between incarcerated parents and their children. The body of literature is organised in categories that capture the perspectives and experiences of children, prisoners, family members or caregivers, and staff. Division of the literature into these categories facilitates exploration of the voices and perceptions of everyone involved in in-person and video visitation, and a holistic understanding of the nature, impacts and perceptions of these modes of contact.

Electronic database search strategy and results

A search strategy was developed identifying a variety of search terms that address visitation between incarcerated parents and their children (eg prison visit* OR video visit* AND prison based parenting OR parental incarceration). Search strategies identified keywords in titles and abstracts, and in subject headings, where permitted by the database.

The search strategy was adapted for each database used. See *Appendix A* for a detailed description of searches conducted. Searches were conducted from 20 to 28 April 2022. Electronic databases searched included: PsycInfo, Social Services Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, CINCH, Criminal Justice Abstracts, Google Scholar, FAMILY, JSTOR, ERIC and the University of Sydney library database. A total of 1,091 results were retrieved from searches across these databases. Following removal of all duplicates, 384 results remained. Abstract screening of all 384 results reduced relevant references to 81 results. All 81 references were retrieved for full-text screening.

Grey literature database search results

A grey literature search was conducted across 12 databases between 20 and 28 April 2022. These databases included: the National Institute of Justice, Child Welfare Information Gateway, Urban Institute, SHINE for Kids, ARACY, Children's Social Care (What Works Network), Youth Endowment Fund (What Works Network), the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (CEBC), Analysis and Policy Observatory (APO), Child Family Community Australia (CFCA), Australian Institute of Criminology, Campbell Collaboration and Cochrane Library.

Search terms such as ‘prison visit’, ‘visitation’ and ‘video visit’ were used and results screened by topic categories relating to parental incarceration and parent–child contact in prison contexts. In addition to these search terms, a member of the research team searched through ‘Topic’ pages identified as relevant to visitation in each database. These searches yielded a total of 18 results. See *Appendix B* for a detailed description of grey literature searches. After abstract screening, relevant results were reduced to six references for full-text reading.

Evidence scan results

All 87 results yielded from electronic and grey literature database searches were read in full. This full-text screen reduced the overall number of references to 75. Data were then extracted for the remaining 75 references. Where applicable, data were extracted for the country in which the study was conducted, the method used, the relevant visitation practice, the sample, and key findings or other points of relevance. The majority of studies included in this evidence scan were conducted in the United States ($n=54$), followed by Australia ($n=10$), and the United Kingdom ($n=7$). One study each was conducted in Canada, the Netherlands and Ireland, and one study was conducted across both Australia and the United Kingdom. The bulk of the literature focuses on in-person visitation ($n=65$) with 10 results specifically examining video visitation.

Evidence scan discussion

In-person visitation

Child perspective

Evidence of the impacts of prison visits on children’s wellbeing is limited and equivocal. Some studies suggest that visits have an overall detrimental effect on children’s emotional wellbeing. For example, Martin and Wells (2015) surveyed 600 incarcerated parents in the United States and interviewed 100 caregivers facilitating visits for 218 children to examine the impacts of parent–child visits. The authors found that most children had an emotionally difficult time visiting their parent, with responses ranging from fear to anger, anxiety, depression, crying and outbursts. However, other studies have highlighted the deleterious effects of limited or no parental contact on children’s emotional wellbeing. Shlafer and Poehlmann (2010) undertook a longitudinal mixed method study involving interviews and questionnaires with children and caregivers ($n=57$) to assess associations between incarcerated parent–child and caregiver–child relationships and contact with incarcerated parents, as well as children’s behaviour problems. The authors found that children who had no contact with their incarcerated parent felt alienated by that parent compared with children who had contact (Shlafer & Poehlmann 2010). Moreover, several studies have highlighted the importance of relatively constant or frequent contact between an incarcerated parent and their child. For example, Kremer et al. (2022) explored the effects of visits and visit frequency on a range of psychological outcomes among children of incarcerated parents ($n=228$) in the United States. The authors found that children who more frequently visited their incarcerated parents maintained a greater parent–child bond.

In most cases, the detrimental impacts of prison visits are attributable to poor visiting environments (see Siegel & Napolitano 2021). Arditti and Savla (2015) explored the impact of parental incarceration on child trauma symptomology and the extent to which this association is mediated by visitation and children’s caregiving arrangements via a comparative analysis of 45 single caregiver and child dyads and similarly disadvantaged single caregiver families. The authors found, firstly, that parental incarceration was associated with higher levels of child trauma symptomology and, secondly, that this was fully mediated by the quality of visitation. Consequently, Arditti and Savla (2015) advocate for family-friendly visitation programs that consider the needs and welfare of visiting children.

This recommendation recurs throughout the bulk of literature exploring in-person visitation for children with incarcerated parents. For example, in a study exploring the extent and nature of parent–child visiting in Victoria, Australia, Flynn (2014) found that the quality of visits was poor because of structural factors such as surveillance strategies and staff attitudes within the prison visiting environment. Similarly, interviews with caregivers visiting an incarcerated family member during children’s visiting hours ($n=56$) in the US state of Virginia revealed that ‘harsh, disrespectful treatment by jail staff’ and a lack of physical contact with the incarcerated parent negatively impacted visiting children (Arditti 2003). In an article investigating the needs and issues facing children experiencing parental incarceration in the Australian Capital Territory, Saunders (2017) found the prison visiting environment is not responsive to, or supportive of, children visiting their incarcerated parents. Through interviews with 16 children, Saunders (2017) found that the visiting environment directly impacts the quality of contact and highlighted an urgent need for ‘innovative and child-focused’ (p. 70) responses to visitation in the Australian Capital Territory. The inadequacy of visiting environments was further highlighted in a later study exploring visiting spaces in maximum, medium and minimum security prisons in Victoria (Bartlett & Eriksson 2019): via interviews with 39 incarcerated fathers, Bartlett and Eriksson found that prison visiting spaces are ‘not conducive to fathering’ (p. 289).

Prisoner perspective

While the impacts of visitation on children are less clear, the importance of visits for parents in prison is well-established in the literature. The literature has a mixed focus, with some research focusing on mothers in prison, some on fathers, and some on parents in general. Studies that have explored the impacts of visits for incarcerated parents have shown an association between visits and a reduction in parenting stress as well as in-prison misconduct (Loper et al. 2009). A systematic review of research exploring the impacts of prison visits with family members on prisoner outcomes found that studies ($n=10$) reported consistently positive effects of visits (De Claire & Dixon 2017). Specifically, prison visits were found to reduce depressive symptoms among female prisoners. This review also found mixed evidence pointing to a reduction in rule-breaking behaviour and recidivism (De Claire & Dixon 2017).

Similarly mixed findings were reported in a study exploring the effects of visitation on inmate misconduct within a jail population ($n=349$) in the United States (Pierce et al. 2018). In this study, visitation was found not to influence minor infractions but had a significantly positive impact on incidents of serious misconduct (Pierce et al. 2018). Interestingly, one study found that visits contribute to parole decision outcomes, with prisoners receiving any visit three times more likely to be released compared with their non-visited counterparts (Vilcica 2015). Finally, there is some evidence that the positive effects linked to visitation endure: family visits are associated with reduced recidivism, increased likelihood of reunification of family households after release (Hairston 1991), and better social adjustment both during the period of imprisonment and following release (Charles et al. 2019; Casey-Acevedo & Bakken 2002; Turanovic & Tasca 2022).

Given the benefits of visits for prisoners, research demonstrating the disproportionately low likelihood of visits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people compared with non-Indigenous people in Australia is concerning (Ryan et al. 2020). In their study of survey and linked administrative data for 1,238 Australian prisoners, Ryan et al. (2020) found that Indigenous people were less likely to be visited than non-Indigenous people and that travel distance further decreased the likelihood of visitation.

Moreover, the limitations of the prison visiting environment have flow-on effects not just for children and families visiting their incarcerated loved one, but also for the incarcerated parent seeking to sustain a relationship with their child (Charles et al. 2019). Arditti, Smock and Parkman (2005) conducted interviews with 51 incarcerated fathers in the United States to explore their perceptions of fatherhood and the quality of their relationship with their children. The authors found that the fathers felt 'helpless' and unable to be a 'good father' (p. 275) while incarcerated. This was attributed to constraints around their capacity to be involved in their children's lives and the reliance on caregivers for contact with their children. This feeling of helplessness was echoed in a more recent study by Pierce (2015) involving surveys and interviews with 32 incarcerated men in a US correctional facility. Pierce (2015) explored the perceptions of the prisoners on their contact with their children and families and found that most anguished over the cost of phone calls and visits and the resulting financial burden and stress on their family members and children. Consequently, many of the respondents expressed a desire to be housed in a facility closer to their families. Moreover, the majority described visiting environments as non-conducive to family interaction and bonding.

Caregiver/family perspective

In a literature review of 36 publications exploring supports for incarcerated fathers and their children, Bartlett (2019) found several recurring barriers to in-person visits that marred the effectiveness and frequency of parent–child visitation. These included: high cost of travel and accommodation options, distance and prison accessibility, and financial hardship. For example, Clark and Duwe (2017) examined the effects of distance on the number of times prisoners in Minnesota ($n=2,817$) were visited and found that distance decreased the frequency of prison visitation. Similarly, Dixey and Woodall (2012) explored the perceptions of families ($n=30$), prisoners ($n=16$) and staff ($n=14$) relating to prison visitation in a local prison in England via semi-structured interviews and focus groups. They found, first, that families consider in-person visits to be logistically and emotionally difficult; second, that prisoners are often disappointed with how visits are handled; and third, that staff view visits as threats to security and an organisational burden. More recently, Boppre, Dehart and Shapiro (2022) examined the experiences of family members ($n=21$) visiting incarcerated loved ones in a south-eastern US state and found that financial and time-related burdens, stress from rules and regulations and strained familial interactions overwhelmingly characterised their visit experience. Given these findings, researchers have advocated for programs that assist families with the cost and logistics of travel for prison visits (see Haverkate & Wright 2020).

The financial burden for families visiting incarcerated loved ones is particularly pertinent in light of research that demonstrates the magnitude of financial strain among caregivers visiting incarcerated family members (Arditti, Lambert-Shute & Joest 2003; Families Outside 2023). Financial hardship has increased with the substantial rise in the cost of living, exacerbating the existing pressure on families when a parent is imprisoned (Families Outside 2023). Arditti, Lambert-Shute and Joest (2003) interviewed 56 caregivers visiting an incarcerated loved one at a local jail in the United States and found that pre-existing financial strain became more pronounced following the incarceration of their family member and this tended to coincide with parenting and emotional strain as well as concern for children’s disengagement from their incarcerated parent. Similarly, Rubenstein, Toman and Cochran (2021) analysed survey data from a nationally representative sample of 4,627 parents in prison in the United States and found that economic disadvantage is a barrier to families staying in contact during periods of incarceration.

Staff guidance

Considering the challenges faced by families and children seeking to visit their incarcerated loved one, Peterson et al. (2019) developed a set of model practices to be administered by US correctional staff that address the barriers for children visiting their incarcerated parent. From interviews with subject-matter experts and literature reviews, the authors distilled three key elements in a practice model for cultivating and maintaining parent–child relationships during incarceration. These include the following actions by correctional administrators:

- acknowledgement that children want a relationship with their incarcerated parent and vice versa;
- allowance for incarcerated parents to take responsibility for their children; and
- provision of opportunities for families to communicate and bond.

In a similar vein, Cramer et al. (2017) explored how visits could be better administered and implemented. They conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on visiting practices as well as semi-structured interviews with expert stakeholders. The authors made a series of recommendations to correctional facility staff including: enabling more opportunities for visits, especially contact visits; offering more support to children and caregivers; listening to incarcerated parents and their families about their needs and desired services; providing staff training; understanding how families function and how to apply trauma-informed approaches; and engaging with research and evidence to continually improve parent–child visiting practices. While these practices and recommendations can be broadly applied to correctional settings outside of the United States, it is important to acknowledge that there are significant differences in the use of imprisonment in the United States compared with Australia; therefore it is crucial to closely consider how to best guide staff working in the Australian correctional landscape.

Summary: Importance of supports and child-friendly visiting environments

Overall, research suggests that child-friendly visiting practices (including opportunities for play) are beneficial for maintaining parent–child relationships during periods of incarceration. An evaluation of a play visit service in the United Kingdom found that play promotes positive outcomes for children (Woodall, Kinsella & Stephenson 2014). Similarly, a mixed method study exploring the use of a ‘Visiting Garden’ in a prison-visiting environment in Iowa found that the garden environment fostered play and nature engagement and ultimately improved visits for 90 percent of the visitors (Toews et al. 2020). The benefits of the Visiting Garden were attributed to its more child-friendly and home-like visiting environment.

The importance of supports is reiterated in literature exploring the effectiveness of parenting programs in prison environments. Hoffmann, Byrd and Kightlinger (2010) surveyed 387 wardens across correctional facilities in the United States to measure the prevalence and impact of programs and services for incarcerated parents and their children. They found that both parents and children benefited from parenting programs. Parents advanced their knowledge of child development, developing behaviour management strategies and improved bonding with and empathy towards their child. Children demonstrate improved emotional wellbeing and better relationships and communication with their incarcerated parent. While parenting programs have been shown to assist with parenting skills and parent–child relationships, research has also shown that these effects can be undermined by structural factors such as prison policies, procedures and practices surrounding visitation, and access to visit modalities (Hayes et al. 2018).

In addition to supports for incarcerated parents and their families, visiting programs that allow for extended visits have been heralded as fostering positive parent–child relationships during incarceration. For example, Snyder, Carlo and Mullins (2001) explored the effectiveness of the Mother–Child Visitation Program (MCVP) for incarcerated mothers and their children via interviews with female participants in the program. MCVP provides monthly contact visits outside of the visiting room in a child-friendly former classroom. These visits combine organised activities with quiet time and the program includes transport and organisational supports for children and their caregivers travelling to and from the prison. The authors found from interviews with 58 mothers that mothers in the MCVP were able to maintain more frequent contact with their children and were more likely to report their children coping with the separation compared with their non-MCVP counterparts (Snyder, Carlo & Mullins 2001).

A more recent evaluation of an extended visiting program (EV) was conducted by Schubert, Duininck and Shlafer (2016). This EV serves incarcerated mothers in the United States and involves structured, four-hour long child-centred visits at a prison. The authors interviewed participant mothers ($n=24$) and caregivers ($n=19$) and found that, overall, participants preferred EV to typical visitation. The benefits included more natural physical contact, activities and movement, private time with the children, and extended visiting time.

Video visitation

While video visitation has been available to correctional services for many years, its use has dramatically increased since the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions and suspension of in-person visits worldwide. In Australia, research by Flynn et al. (2020), reported across several publications, suggests that most families with an incarcerated parent had some form of contact, primarily via phone or videoconferencing, during lockdown restrictions (see also Minson & Flynn 2021). A survey of 84 caregivers of children with an incarcerated parent in Australia found that 60 percent reported problems maintaining contact during lockdown restrictions (Minson & Flynn 2021). This finding has been replicated in studies investigating video visitation across the world. This may be partially attributable to the advent of video visitation largely occurring in tandem with visiting restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has led, in some jurisdictions, to the haphazard adoption of video visitation practices.

Accessibility issues have arisen in contexts where facilities implement ad-hoc lockdowns where all visitations are suspended. The complexity of this situation was demonstrated by Flynn et al. (2020) when 84 carers of children with an imprisoned family member were surveyed about the type, frequency and quality of contact before and during COVID-19 restrictions in Australia. The authors found that the majority of their sample considered the quality and accessibility of visits pre-COVID-19 restrictions to be good despite frequent reports of long distances between homes and prison facilities. During COVID-19 restrictions, however, caregivers reported that children had less contact with their parent, which had detrimental impacts on their wellbeing and the wellbeing of their incarcerated parent. Specifically, while video visits were described positively as a communication mode allowing for parents to read a story to their child or participate in a bedtime routine, the overall consistency and availability of contact was less frequent and secure. Consequently, while reports of the benefits of video visits are documented, they are often dampened by the overriding circumstances in which qualitative investigations into their efficacy are taking place—that is, during or immediately after COVID-19 restrictions.

Problems with video visits are often attributed to lack of access to video visits at prison facilities, lack of support at home (with technology and education or training on how to use), prison policies and implementation that restrict visiting times or initiate unexpected lockdowns, and poor quality control of video visit or conferencing applications. The challenges faced by families engaging in video visitation have led some researchers to condemn transition to video visitation as detracting from the benefits (psychological wellbeing, facility security and reduced recidivism) derived from in-person visitation (see Bou-Rhodes 2019; Fulcher 2014; Murdoch & King 2020). However, many studies investigating the impacts of video visitation point to benefits for children and families, highlighted below (see Minson & Flynn 2021; Horgan & Poehlmann-Tynan 2020).

Suitability of video visits for children

A central concern with video visitation is its appropriateness for children, especially young children. Research has shown that young children under three have a ‘video deficit’ that precludes them from learning from a screen (National Council on Crime and Delinquency 2020). A number of strategies can be used to mitigate the barriers for young children engaging with adults via video. For example, games and play can assist with sustained interactions, and caregiver support is helpful for emotional regulation before, during and after the visit (National Council on Crime and Delinquency 2020).

Research underscores that parents and carers share these concerns. Flynn et al. (2021) explored children’s experiences of contact with their incarcerated parent in Australia before and during COVID-19 restrictions via surveys with carers of 184 children. While carers reported maintaining contact during the restrictions, a number of challenges impeded their own capacity and that of their children to sustain quality visitation. For example, prison-based restrictions including lockdowns and the lack of physical contact had an overall negative impact on children’s emotional wellbeing throughout this period. This led most carers to question the suitability of video and phone visits for young children. However, some benefits of video visits were also noted including reduced travel time and cost, and safeguarding children from the prison environment.

Similarly, Minson and Flynn (2021) explored the implications of COVID-19-related impacts on children with an incarcerated parent in Australia and the United Kingdom via surveys and interviews with families. The authors reported analogous benefits and challenges to video visitation as documented by Flynn et al. (2021). For example, lack of face-to-face contact was found to be particularly difficult for pre-verbal and non-verbal children and removal of physical contact was detrimental for young children and children with disabilities. However, the reduced time and cost involved in video visits, the privacy afforded by video visits, and the capacity for incarcerated parents to engage with children in their everyday routines, including bedtime, were reported by families and caregivers as positive aspects of video visitation.

Need for supports and services to facilitate video visits

The importance of supports in the form of visit coaching or parental education for incarcerated parents was emphasised in a study conducted by Folk et al. (2012). The authors examined children’s reactions to video messages from their incarcerated parents ($n=186$) in the state of Virginia. These video messages comprised 15-minute recorded messages from incarcerated parents to their children as part of the Messages Project program. Parents were provided with colourful backgrounds, books to read and props to make their message more child-friendly. Folk et al. (2012) assessed children’s moods after viewing the message, as well as parental moods prior to filming the message, using the Positive and Negative Affect Scale. They found that when parents were in a negative mood prior to filming the message, this transferred across to the children via the video message such that children were in more negative moods after viewing. Consequently, the authors highlighted the importance of parents learning to regulate their emotions prior to visitation contact with their children.

These findings were supported in a later review conducted by Horgan and Poehlmann-Tynan (2020). The authors explored the usefulness and accessibility of in-home video chats for children and their incarcerated parents in the United States and found that, while video visits are beneficial (especially when opportunities for in-person visits are suspended or limited), a number of important supports can benefit children and families engaging in video visits. For example, parenting education classes, visit coaching and support groups for at-home caregivers can facilitate more positive visit experiences for both incarcerated parents and their children.

Other studies also support the importance of combining video visitation programs with technological support strategies for families and ensuring flexibility in delivery. Charles et al. (2021) conducted an evaluation of an Enhanced Visits Model (EVM) program, which sought to connect children with their incarcerated parents via in-home video chats and visit coaching. EVM provides tablets set up with an in-home video chat application, free internet access and technology support including one-on-one in-home coaching to children and caregivers. Incarcerated parents were also offered in-jail coaching to facilitate positive video visit experiences. Charles et al. (2021) conducted interviews with 33 families who participated in the program including 33 jailed parents, 33 caregivers and 42 children at baseline, post-visit and three-month follow-up. The participants generally reported feeling positive about the video chat as a means of communication that allowed for regular parent–child ‘chats’ and visits from home. The authors noted benefits for caregivers and parents that received visit coaching support in terms of their capacity to reflect on the child’s perspective and their role in supporting children during visits. Similarly, technological support and tangible assistance were beneficial for families navigating the virtual visits.

Benefits and challenges of video visits for incarcerated parents

For incarcerated parents, video visits have been shown to have some impact on recidivism outcomes. For example, Duwe and McNeeley (2021) examined recidivism outcomes for 885 inmates released from Minnesota (US) prisons between 2016 and 2018 who received at least one video visit (not defined) while incarcerated, and may also have received other forms of visits such as in-person visits. This cohort was compared with a matched group of 885 inmates who did not receive video visits. Their analysis found an association between video visits and reduced general and felony reconviction rates but no significant association with violent and technical violation reconvictions. The positive effect of video visits on general and felony reoffending increased with the rate of video visits experienced by the inmates. These findings mirror research exploring the effects of in-person visitation on recidivism outcomes (outlined above). Generally, both in-person and video visits are associated with less recidivism and, consequently, agencies focused on reducing recidivism should consider maximising opportunities for both types of visitation.

More generally, research points to mixed feelings among incarcerated parents about video visitation. Murdoch and King (2020) sought to understand the benefits and challenges of video visitation from the perspective of prisoners incarcerated in a jail in north-western United States. From analysis of interview and survey data, the authors reported mixed feelings among the sample of prisoners. Reported benefits of video visitation included the capacity to visit with loved ones who lived far away and were otherwise unable to visit. However, prisoners also reported technological and access issues that impacted their experience of video visitation.

A recurring video visit modality: Reading a book via video recording

A mode of video visitation frequently evaluated in the literature, mostly in the United States, is an incarcerated parent reading a book to their child via video recording. This type of video visitation or program has several incarnations. For example, Blumberg and Griffin (2013) discussed the Family Connections program in which incarcerated parents read a book for their child while being recorded on DVD. The book and DVD are then mailed to the child's home. The authors highlighted the numerous benefits of the program including the need for virtually no resource expenditure on the part of correctional facility staff.

Stickel, Prins and Kaiper-Marquez (2021) undertook an evaluation of a similar program, Read to Your Child/Grandchild (RYCG), which involves incarcerated parents or grandparents making video recordings of themselves reading a book to their child or grandchild and that video being mailed to the child. Eleven incarcerated fathers in a rural Pennsylvania prison participated in RYCG and reported that the video recordings enabled their children to retain a 'lifelike' portrait of their parents which consequently was an 'upgraded' way to sustain their parent–child bond (p. 182).

Cumulatively, research on video visitation for children and their incarcerated parents demonstrates that in-person and physical contact remains critical for maintaining a parent–child relationship during incarceration. Additionally, technological and access issues mar the beneficial impacts of video visits (Murdoch & King 2020; Prison Reform Trust 2020). However, there are clear benefits associated with video visits.

Evidence scan limitations

It should be noted that any synthesis of evidence pertaining to prison visits, in-person or otherwise, is limited by the diversity of visitation policy and practice within and among jurisdictions. Some policies and practices are much more restrictive than others, and variations can often be identified from one facility to another, even within the same jurisdiction. This was illustrated in a report from the Task Force on Children of Incarcerated Parents (2020), which developed a series of recommendations to address issues for families with an incarcerated loved one in Illinois, United States. A key finding of the task force was that visitation practices vary widely across the state, with 40 of 92 jails only offering video visitation and 41 offering no visitation at all. This variation across facilities and among states and territories is also the case in Australia. Furthermore, there is a time lag between developments such as the rapid expansion and increased use of video visits in correctional centres and publication of data about experiences of video visits. Therefore, much of the available evidence is pre-pandemic, or early-stage pandemic, when visitation was either underdeveloped in most countries or was undergoing substantial change.

Evidence scan summary

This evidence scan has explored current literature pertaining to the benefits and challenges that characterise in-person and video visits between incarcerated parents and their children. Findings from this scan support previous research highlighting the limited scholarship on video visitation in general, and the particularly sparse consideration of fathers' experiences. This is of critical importance given that men are imprisoned at a much greater rate than women, and a substantial proportion of men in prison are parents. Of 75 studies identified in the scan, 10 specifically examined video visitation. The bulk of these studies were conducted in the United States. However, Australia differs from the American context due to the different administration of corrective services. Broadly, there is limited research on video visitation in practice, and very little of the available work is located in the Australian context or reflects the experiences or perspectives of the range of groups affected by video visitation with people in prison. Moreover, the existing literature typically identifies potential rather than realised benefits because, prior to COVID-19, video visitation had not been used on a wide scale. The emerging evidence base on video visitation for incarcerated parents and their children demonstrates that video visits can be a helpful addition to the visit modalities available to families and incarcerated parents. Given evidence pointing to the importance of physical contact and extended visits for children and their incarcerated parents, it is clear that video visitation should not supplant face-to-face and in-person visits. Instead, corrective services should consider implementation of child-friendly, extended in-person visiting options in addition to video visitation with provision for programming and technological supports for caregivers and incarcerated parents.

Methodology

The aim of this study is to understand the perceptions, experiences, and ongoing feasibility of video visitation between fathers in prison and their children. This is important because video visitation emerged as a key mechanism for people in prison and their families to stay in touch during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is timely to assess the future of video visits now that the immediate crisis has passed. Conducted in two stages, fathers in prison, caregivers of their children, corrective services and community organisations supporting families were interviewed about their perceptions of benefits, challenges and limitations of video visitations as well as how they compared with other modes of contact. Where provided, these qualitative data were supplemented by quantitative data analysis on the uptake of video visits. This section details the overarching study design and underpinning research questions, the participant groups, sampling and recruitment approach, and data collection and analysis techniques.

Study design

This study uses a mixed methods design that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to respond to a series of research questions:

- What is the scale and nature of video visitation in Australian prisons?
- What is the uptake of video visitation?
- What factors make a significant difference to the video visitation experience for fathers, children and carers?
- How does video visitation compare to in-person visitation?
- What are the implications of video visitation on fathers' and families' preparedness for release from prison?
- How can corrective services and relevant stakeholder groups facilitate positive video visitation experiences?
- What are the resourcing and sustainability implications of video visitation?

Stage 1 of this study reports on data from:

- 19 video or telephone interviews with corrective services staff from five Australian jurisdictions (ACT, NSW, Qld, SA, WA), and a written response to the interview questions from one jurisdiction (Vic); and
- corrective services data records about the uptake of video visitation (NSW and WA).

At the time of approach, the Northern Territory did not use video visitation in correctional centres and was therefore ineligible to participate in this study. Tasmania Prison Service approved the project, but no responses to data or interview requests were received.

Stage 2 of this study reports on data from:

- 27 interviews with fathers in prison from two correctional centres in New South Wales;
- 17 interviews with caregivers of children with fathers in these two correctional centre sites;
- six interviews with support workers from two NSW community organisations that support children and families who have a family member in prison.

Ethical approval was provided by the Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council (AH&MRC) and Corrective Services NSW (CSNSW). Either ethical approval, or approval to conduct the research on the basis of approval from another Human Research Ethics Committee, was additionally provided by ACT Corrective Services (ACTCS), Queensland Corrective Services (QCS), South Australia Department for Correctional Services (SADCS), Corrections Victoria (CV) and Corrective Services, Government of Western Australia (CSWA). The Tasmania Prison Service also approved the project but data were not provided from that jurisdiction.

Aboriginal Reference Group

The research was supported by an Aboriginal Reference Group comprising Aboriginal cultural advisers with expertise and/or experience of culturally safe research, and/or working with Aboriginal people in prison. Two of the advisers were involved in the project from the beginning and a further three advisers (also corrective services staff) became involved during recruitment planning. Advisers provided feedback on different elements of the project, reflecting the time of their involvement and their preferences. Overall, advice was received on the research design, recruitment approach, appropriate support for Aboriginal participants and the draft report.

Participants

In stage 1, all corrective services in Australia were invited to participate in the research to garner a national picture of the development and impacts of video visitation across the country and to enable information sharing. All of the eligible jurisdictions agreed to participate in the project: Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia.

There were two ways each of the jurisdictions were able to participate: via interviews with staff and officers, and through the provision of documents such as policy papers, statistical data and information publications. Data were collected from six jurisdictions. The data provided by each jurisdiction varied based on access and availability of the requested information.

Corrective services interviews

Following a criterion sampling approach (Palinkas et al. 2015), five of the six participating corrective services provided access to interview staff in a range of roles related to video visitation (ACT, NSW, Qld, SA, WA). Staff who met the inclusion criteria of involvement in the development, dissemination or monitoring of video visitation policy and practice received an email invitation to participate from the research team (the invitation was circulated by corrective services).

Interviews took place over telephone or videoconferencing, reflecting the participants' preference. With permission, interviews were recorded and typically lasted for one hour. Across five of the six participating services, 19 corrective services staff members participated in a semi-structured interview about the design, implementation, policy, and practice of family video visitation. The sixth service (Corrections Victoria) provided a written response to the interview questions. Interview questions included:

- How long has this service been using video visitation for any purpose?
- What has worked best so far in terms of video visitation facilities?
- How do you think the video visits could be improved?

Corrective services data, policy and research records

A data request was submitted to every participating jurisdiction with the aim of capturing de-identified information about the number and nature of video visits over time, as well as demographic data about visit participants. There was significant variation in the data collected by the jurisdictions and not all of the jurisdictions provided data records before the data collection period concluded. Data records were received from Western Australia, New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland. However, only two jurisdictions provided a reportable level of detail about the uptake of video visits (WA and NSW). The data from Western Australia and New South Wales were provided at different levels of aggregation and were therefore not comparable. Separate descriptive analyses of each dataset were completed. Two jurisdictions, the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales, had completed internal research on video visits among visitors (ACT and NSW) and staff (NSW).

To provide context to the interview and record data, policy documents about video visits were either provided directly by participating corrective services or were publicly available and sourced via the relevant service website. In most cases, these documents described the process, requirements and restrictions on video visits in correctional centres. These included video visitation policies, internal research into video visitation, organisational demographic information, user guides or manuals, and reports that included information about video visitation. The policy documents reiterated findings from the qualitative data and are therefore not reported separately.

Stage 2 of this research used a case study design focused on New South Wales. In addition to the corrective services staff interviews which took place in multiple jurisdictions in stage 1, semi-structured interviews to understand the experiences, challenges and benefits of video visitation from the perspective of fathers in prison in New South Wales, carers of the children of fathers in prison, and support organisations in New South Wales were also completed. The next sections describe the interview methodology.

Fathers in prison interviews

In stage 2, fathers in two public prisons (1 metropolitan and 1 regional) self-selected for semi-structured interviews. People in custody are most affected within correctional centres by methods of visitation. We attempted to encourage participation by fathers in diverse groups by displaying research posters in English and other dominant languages in the prison in participating sectors of the correctional centre (chosen by each prison's governor). Advertising the project via posters may have reduced the potential for fathers in prison to feel pressured to participate. The research team further managed the potential for coercion in the pre-interview briefing with participants who had expressed interest in the research. At this point, prospective participants were reminded that participation was voluntary, questions could be skipped and the interview could end at any time without a specified reason. Specific sectors were selected for recruitment purposes to manage the participation numbers and simplify access arrangements. Interested fathers in prison were asked to contact one or two staff members at each site who compiled a list of those prisoners. The staff members at each prison included at least one Aboriginal staff member. Once 10 prisoners in each facility expressed interest in participating, those staff members contacted the researchers. Twenty-five percent Aboriginal participation was sought to reflect the over-incarceration of this group in correctional centres in New South Wales.

A total of 27 interviews with fathers were conducted at two prison sites, with interview durations between 23 and 50 minutes. One of the sites was in regional New South Wales and the other metropolitan New South Wales. Both facilities were publicly operated, and all participants were in minimum-security sections, although one of the sites was classified as mixed-security levels. As shown in Table 1, 11 participants identified as Aboriginal and four identified as culturally and linguistically diverse. Researchers provided and explained participant information sheets prior to each interview and \$40 payments were made into participants' prison accounts following their interviews.

Fathers were asked questions that included:

- Can you tell me about a typical video chat? What kinds of things do you talk about during video chats?
- (Where relevant) Is the experience of video chatting different with different children?
- How you think video chats with your children helps you get ready for when you leave prison?

Interviews with fathers in prison were conducted face-to-face, while all other interviews occurred on Zoom, Microsoft Teams or by telephone. Before each interview commenced, participants were offered a support person to sit with them during the interview. Two support people were available in each site including an Aboriginal support person. The support people were not custodial officers but were people who had welfare or support roles in the prison site.

Carer interviews

Carers were invited to participate as they are either involved in, facilitate or are affected by video visits between children and fathers in prison. Carers were recruited via Corrective Services NSW. A list of all registered social or family visitors at the two research sites was compiled and an email advertisement prepared by the research team was sent to this visitor list by CSNSW. To express interest in participating, visitors were asked to complete a contact and screening questionnaire only accessible by the research team. Overall, there were 86 screening questionnaire responses, including incomplete responses. A small number of responses came in after the data collection period and these people were not contacted. A total of 54 potential participants were contacted by email. Following contact by researchers, two respondents did not agree to participate and one was under 18 and therefore ineligible. Additionally, five did not disclose whether they were under 18, 24 did not leave contact details, three were not eligible as they were not the carer of a child, four did not attend their scheduled interviews and a number did not respond to attempts by researchers to contact them. In total, 17 interviews with carers were completed.

Carers were asked questions that included:

- What is a typical video visit involving the children and their father like?
- What do you notice about your child’s mood before, during and after video visits?
- How do you think video chat has made a difference to communication between [father] and child?

Interviews with carers varied from seven minutes to an hour in length. As a token of appreciation, carers received \$40 gift cards following interviews. The research instruments included a safety protocol in the event that carers or fathers in prison became distressed during the interview.

Table 1: Sample carer characteristics

Child’s age	<i>n</i>
Infants under 2	3
Preschool age (2–5)	8
Primary school age (6–11)	7
Secondary school age (12–18)	11
Relationship to child	
Mother	12
Grandparent	3
Other relative (eg aunt)	1
Out-of-home care provider	1

Support worker interviews

Finally, staff from two support organisations, the Community Restorative Centre (CRC) and SHINE for Kids, were sought because they provide a service perspective on video visitation for family members and are in the best position to speak about changes in the provision of video visitation that occurred due to COVID-19. Service providers have contact with many families and can also reflect on the challenges and benefits they have observed across this large group.

The CRC provides a range of services to people involved in the criminal justice system in New South Wales and their families. This includes throughcare, post-release, and reintegration programs for people transitioning from prison into the community, court support, and counselling, service referrals and financial assistance (regarding travel and accommodation for prison visits) for their families. In 2013, the CRC began to offer video visits to the families of people in custody on their premises or from seven courthouses around New South Wales. These visits were initiated by people in prison, who would apply at their correctional centre. There were instances of video visitation with people in prison in Tasmania and requests from other jurisdictions.

All bookings for these video visits were completed by CRC staff and visits were monitored to ensure that the family who attended their offices or court were those for whom the booking had been made. These bookings faded out during COVID-19 when the system changed, and families began to make their own bookings through corrective services and better understand the technology.

SHINE for Kids provides support to children and young people who have a family member in prison. This is done through advocacy and referral services, casework, mentoring, provision of information, and financial and in-person support for visiting and contacting family members in custody. The organisation also runs program training for other services, such as teachers, on how to best support children and young people with someone in custody.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, SHINE for Kids supported video visits between children and family members in custody including video visits between children or young people who have a family member who is incarcerated. As was the case for CRC, this video visit support has faded since the implementation of home-based video visits for families of prisoners.

Following organisational approval, the research team sent a project advertisement via email to a key organisation contact, with a request for internal distribution. This strategy meant that the research team was not provided contact information for people who did not want to participate. Interested staff members contacted the research team directly to arrange an interview time at their convenience. In the pre-interview briefing, prospective participants were reminded that participation was voluntary, questions could be skipped and the interview could stop at any time. Seven support-service workers agreed to participate; however, one later declined due to a change of role. Two support staff were interviewed from CRC and four from SHINE for Kids. Interviews with support service workers ranged from 39 to 74 minutes. Interview questions included:

- What are the benefits of video visits in general?
- What are the drawbacks of video visits in general?
- Are there any messages you feel are important to share with corrective services across Australia about video visits?

Interview data analysis

Interview transcripts were thematically analysed to identify codes which were synthesised into common themes. Codes were identified in two ways. First, the literature scan provided the basis for a series of deductive codes. Transcripts were checked for accuracy and then reviewed against the deductive codes. Next, data related to the research questions that were not captured by the deductive codes were identified via multiple line-by-line readings of the interview transcripts. In this way patterns, relationships and associations within the data deductively and inductively emerged (Maxfield & Babbie 2011). Dedoose, a qualitative data management software, was used to categorise and code data into descriptive codes. Codes were then organised into interconnected and overlapping themes on the benefits and drawbacks of video visitation as a mode of access for fathers in prison and their families. Data inter-coder reliability was established through the review and refinement of deductive codes prior to coding and then the double coding of data by several researchers (Castleberry & Nolen 2018).



Results

There was significant agreement across the participant groups about the major benefits of video visits. Moreover, there was broad consensus about the desire to continue video visitation. There was a strong and consistent preference for video visits to be offered alongside in-person visits. While participants acknowledged that in-person visits were preferable overall, for a wide range of reasons, video visits were considered an excellent complement to other visitation modalities. The reasons for this position were myriad, including consideration of the child and carers' wellbeing, pragmatic considerations such as travel time and cost, fathers' access to the child and family's social worlds, and equitable access for visitors overseas or interstate and those with low mobility or disability.

This section begins with an overview of how video visitation developed across participating jurisdictions, with key decisions and considerations highlighted. Next, quantitative data about the uptake and nature of video visits in two jurisdictions are described. Then, qualitative data findings on the impact of video visits are reported across four domains: relationship quality, wellbeing, practical arrangements, and the prison environment. In the final part of this section, the barriers and challenges to accessing video visits are presented. These include technical barriers, security and compliance, resources and gatekeepers. Where perspectives were particular to a participant group or jurisdiction, this is noted. Data are presented by participant group and/or jurisdiction but participant names and job roles are not included to maintain confidentiality. In some cases, quotations have been lightly edited for clarity—for example, by removal of repeated words.

Development of video visits

In this section, the account of the development of video visitation is presented in aggregate, reflecting strong convergence in the corrective services narratives across the six jurisdictions (ACT, NSW, Qld, SA, WA and Vic). Notable points of distinction and examples are highlighted.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was limited access to visits using audiovisual link (AVL) technology in Australian correctional centres. The availability of AVL visits was mostly confined to professional visits, such as legal aid meetings, and some court appearances. In some jurisdictions, small-scale, ad hoc pilot programs used AVL technology. Some examples of these programs were a mother–child video visit program (Vic), a mother–child joint homework club (NSW), virtual attendance at family funerals on compassionate grounds (NSW and SA), and video visits for family members in different custodial environments (WA).

It's fairly new technology but it had already been used: into-prison visits were already being done by video link; a lot of things were starting to go via video link, anyway, because we didn't have to actually move the prisoner out of the prison to do it. (WA staff 1)

While a small number of AVL programs existed, the corrective services participants reported that, prior to the pandemic, there was broad concern about the security implications of developing or expanding AVL communication for people in correctional centres. At the organisational level, this hindered significant progress in most jurisdictions and AVL contacts were the exception rather than the norm. New South Wales had already commenced a pilot program providing in-cell tablets to people in some prisons for limited purposes, such as telephone calls and games, indicating that there may have been a more established base from which to grow the use of technology in that jurisdiction.

When the emerging public health crisis began to impact on Australia, an urgent need to find alternative modes of contact for people in prison and their families catalysed corrective services across the country to look for solutions.

They were very, very concerned about staff and also inmates' safety ... it was all about unrest in the centres, and the safety of the inmates, and the safety of staff. (NSW staff 3)

Using videoconferencing programs was quickly identified as a potential approach to maintain contact between people in prison and the outside world, not limited to friends and family but also including professional and justice services. This approach was being widely adopted or expanded to facilitate work-from-home arrangements, health and other essential services and social contacts across Australia and internationally.

Despite the negativity of COVID-19, the pandemic forced the prison system to move with the times and introduce technology to ensure that the connections between prisoners and their family/friends remained in place, whilst also putting in measures to remotely deliver programs and other services. (Vic, written response)

However, there were a number of specific challenges, identified in all six participating jurisdictions, associated with custodial environments that complicated the development or expansion of video visits. The challenges coalesced around security concerns. As one staff member highlighted: 'The key thing is security, security; what are the security concerns?' (Qld staff 3).

Security

A portion of staff in each jurisdiction expressed reservations about moving to video visits on two main grounds. First, there was concern about extension to their job role, including developing a new skill set; second, there was concern that video visits could compromise the safety of individual staff members who could be seen on video in the custodial centre as video visits monitoring processes had not been established.

I think the staff are always sceptical of new things. I think that's human nature. I think human nature is always like, 'Oh, something new. How is this gonna work?', especially with technology. People are like, 'Oh, I don't know how to use it.' If there's gonna be loopholes, particularly in prison, if there's gonna be loopholes for detainees to be able to access internet or do something with it other than what's intended, I think there was that side of it but there's been no hiccups with it. It's been absolutely brilliant. (ACT staff 2)

... first challenge was the officers themselves ... when you try to get people who are not computer savvy to try to do this ... this is a big, big thing. (Qld staff 1)

Corrective services staff involved in developing the video visit architecture had to navigate a series of fundamental security questions. As one participant stated, 'We had to prove that the sky was not going to fall in' (NSW staff 2). These questions included:

- How could access to only approved social visitors and AVL applications be ensured in the online environment?
- How could online communication between social visitors and people in prison be appropriately monitored?
- How could internet access be sufficiently contained to ensure it was not accessible via other devices (eg telephones)?
- How could secure corrective services IT systems be protected?
- How could staff concerns about safety and the expansion of their job role be addressed?

In the first weeks of the pandemic, corrective services pulled together relevant departments to brainstorm solutions. Informal cross-jurisdictional scanning and consultation occurred between some services, facilitated by existing cross-jurisdictional relationships.

Devices and infrastructure

Solutions were shaped by existing and available resources in all jurisdictions. For example, New South Wales had approximately 550 tablets that had been purchased for a different program but were not in use and could be repurposed. Beyond New South Wales, the other jurisdictions had to quickly source devices suitable for video visits. Participants reported the challenges associated with procuring technology. Due to the global nature of the pandemic, devices were not being imported at the same rate as usual and there was an increased demand for devices.

Procuring and setting up devices was an extremely frantic process due to the extremely short time frames given the rapid response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Tablets were in high demand and it was extremely difficult to procure the desired amount needed by the prison locations. (Vic, written response)

Ultimately, jurisdictions were able to purchase tablets and/or repurpose AVL suites to respond to the video visit need. Queensland also considered the sustainability of different device types, anticipating that some could be damaged accidentally or intentionally by people in prison. The availability of devices shaped the volume of visits available. Once devices had been identified or procured, the next questions focused on functionality:

- Which platform could best host secure video visits?
- What type of device could best host secure video visits?
- How could connectivity be securely enabled in correctional centres?
- How should video visits be booked?

Most jurisdictions selected Zoom as their preferred platform because it was free to access and comparatively simple for community members to navigate. The enterprise version of Zoom contained additional security features, which was particularly important as general news stories started to emerge about ‘Zoom bombing’ (uninvited guests accessing Zoom video meetings). The ease of use for community members was a major consideration. Security was also crucial because any system had to accept incoming video calls only. Early in the response, New South Wales deployed CISCO Jabber because it was already in place for professional visits. However, it quickly emerged that family visitors were experiencing difficulties understanding how to successfully connect via this platform, so Zoom was deployed as an alternative. Similarly, Western Australia initially used Skype but moved away from that platform. Clear communication around the process for accessing visits was identified as a key challenge, yet vitally important, early in the video visitation implementation process in Victoria.

The second challenge was getting information out to prisoners and visitors of the new processes. There was some resistance from people as Zoom was being scrutinised in the media about their lack of security settings. (Vic, written response)

To make sure that everybody understands the expectations in regards to a video visit, I think that that’s really important when it comes to visitors. (NSW staff 1)

While most jurisdictions across Australia have continued to use Zoom, there is some intra-jurisdictional variation. For example, Junee Correctional Centre in New South Wales, which is privately operated, selected the BlueJeans videoconferencing system. In Western Australia, both Microsoft Teams and Zoom are now in use, depending on the centre, with Microsoft Teams being more common. The preferred solution in Queensland is Webex. Across jurisdictions, connectivity was established using the 4G network to manage security concerns; however, in Victoria, poor 4G signal necessitated boosters or installation of local wi-fi networks to some areas of the correctional centre.

There is variation across the jurisdictions in the booking system used and the responsibility for troubleshooting and maintaining systems and devices. Some jurisdictions have a centralised telephone booking process (ACT and Qld), while in Victoria and Western Australia bookings are taken via correctional centres directly. New South Wales and South Australia have an online booking process for all centres in the jurisdictions. The information technology architecture was already in development for booking in-person visits online to standardise and improve visitors' customer service experience in New South Wales and this enabled CSNSW to draw upon and quickly extend the existing network for video visits. In most jurisdictions, the booking process is managed internally by corrective services while the videoconferencing program and, in some cases, device management and troubleshooting, were outsourced to a private provider. This is an efficient solution, but can carry considerable cost.

The responsible party for initiating bookings also varies. Bookings are made by the visitor in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales and Victoria; either by the person in prison or the visitor in Queensland; and the person in prison requests the visit in South Australia and Western Australia. This has been a recent shift in South Australia that was not supported by all participants because it was considered overly complicated compared with the previous system. In New South Wales, one of the reported challenges was getting different internal systems to work effectively together, particularly because in New South Wales the booking process is automated and therefore must gather data about restrictions from the Offender Integrated Management System. Similarly, complexity arising from multiple systems and devices was reported in Western Australia.

The only little bit of a downside of it is the Zoom, because we've got Zoom, so basically we're using our normal DOJ [Department of Justice] computer to do the booking on ... our prisoner offender system. So we've got to do it on that first and then we're gonna go and jump onto another computer, to then do a booking on that, email the meeting out to them, and then basically we try and include ourselves in that email as well so then we do know that the email does send to the person, because we have had a couple of problems with the email as well. (WA staff 2)

Testing and support

Video visits were initially trialled on a small scale in some areas. For example, South Australia tested the devices to ensure they were sufficiently secure; New South Wales piloted a small number ($n=30$) of visits in week one of the development of video visits; and Queensland piloted video visits in one centre. The trials were an effective method of identifying problems and solutions prior to rollout. A further benefit of piloting in Queensland was that it enabled the development of video visit policy via observation of the pilot testing process. During the rollout period, there were various approaches to providing support and staff training. In some jurisdictions, staff could access ongoing IT support from a third-party provider (NSW and WA), and initial then refresher training was provided to staff virtually (NSW). Others prepared instruction guides for visitors (NSW, SA and Vic from 2021) and staff guides or knowledge base and troubleshooting guides (ACT, NSW and Qld). A comprehensive training guide, which included a process map, instructions on key functions in different systems and troubleshooting, was produced in New South Wales. In most of the jurisdictions, at least one participant reported learning informally from briefings or other participants (ACT, Qld, SA and WA), indicating piecemeal practices around training, which meant that training was not offered to every staff member working in the visits area, or was not offered at the optimal time. Several areas noted that support was only available during standard business hours and this did not reflect video visit hours, which were more commonly offered on weekends, so it was not always possible to obtain assistance when needed.

Admin usually take care of that but they're only here eight till four, Monday to Friday.

The visits don't start till four o'clock in the afternoon. That's where we have difficulties.

(WA staff 1)

All jurisdictions except Victoria offered direct support to visitors either from correctional centres or a central helpdesk. In Victoria, Vacro were contracted to provide visitor support for the first 12 months.

The gap between in-person visits stopping and video visits commencing was remarkably short in some jurisdictions (generally 2–3 weeks) given the tasks required to make this switch. Staff commented that, while this period was stressful for people in prison and families, there was usually patience and generosity from visitors and people in prison. Jurisdictions like Queensland that had slower community transmission of COVID-19 were under less time pressure because video visits could be developed alongside in-person visits in the first instance.

Restrictions and monitoring

Security was managed similarly across jurisdictions. Visitation devices were generally used exclusively by people in prison for visitation so they could be set up to function in very limited, approved ways. For example, the devices did not have any applications other than the chosen videoconferencing platform and features like screen share were disabled. Corrective services staff in the visit areas would typically start and end video calls to verify the identity of the visitor, and to ensure compliance with rules and regulations such as dress code. Visitors were provided with a statement about the visit rules and consequences for breaching them.

We created a warning screen on all the visits, that the visitor has to acknowledge prior to the commencement of their visit, and that's acknowledging the fact that if they do share images or take screenshots, they would be banned or considered to be banned. Any inappropriate behaviour, that would be considered banned as well. So that's just a mandatory warning screen that comes up prior to the session and they have to acknowledge [it]. And also, around the staff and the visit session as well, [staff] would get a visual of the visit before it commences just to ensure the right people are there ... (SA staff 1)

Monitoring practices varied between and within jurisdictions. In one jurisdiction, all video visits were automatically recorded. In others, there was a capacity to record but this was not automatic. Staff also use a variety of monitoring strategies, such as walking around the visit area during video visits to conduct visual monitoring, or watching a bank of screens containing multiple video visits. In most places, people in prison used headphones to minimise the noise disruption from surrounding visits, with the effect that monitoring is visual and layered with CCTV in the visit areas.

From a policy perspective, many of the existing rules governing visitation were fit for purpose. For example, regulations such as dress code requirements and approved visitors only were upheld. However, there were some key changes that had to be made. For example, it was necessary in New South Wales to change legislation to allow mobile devices into custodial settings. In Queensland, there were significant changes to visitation forms and the booking process. For all jurisdictions, new rules had to be added because of the affordances of the technology and the video visit context where the visitor is in the community in an uncontrolled environment. For example, visitors were not allowed to take photos of the person in prison or to show the person in prison content on another device by, for example, holding up a mobile telephone to the camera. This also protected corrective services staff.

So, it was all about who's at the other end, what's at the other end, how many people are at the other end, and, to a certain extent, what are they talking about? But admittedly, that was not a major issue, because they could still have their own telephone, but it was very much about ... that person agreeing to no mobile phones being in the same area; they weren't going to ... take a video of the videoconference, of the officer setting up the videoconference, so their safety was paramount. (NSW staff 3)

These restrictions did not need to be in place for in-person visits as visitors were not allowed to bring devices into the correctional centre at all. Policy development also had to balance common process yet provide appropriate flexibility. As one participant said, ‘You have to take the processes but make sure it can be developed with the nuances of different centres’ (Qld staff 3). Implementing video visit policy highlighted an occasional need to assist with interpretation.

... we put something along the lines of ‘same conditions as applies to a personal visit’, thinking that would give the officer some guidance ... a particularly diligent officer managed to close a call ... because the other person was smoking, which of course isn’t illegal in your own home ... and that’s an example of the detail ... where do you draw that line of what’s a given? (Qld staff 3)

The future of video visitation

Across all jurisdictions, only one staff member thought that video visits should be phased out and the rationale for this position was that in-person visits had resumed and therefore there could be a return to business-as-usual and in-person visits are generally preferred. This position contrasts with data from the other participants. While many other participants preferred in-person visits overall, for a wide range of reasons, a large majority of all participants wanted continued access to both in-person and video visits.

As in-person visits resumed, all jurisdictions have continued to offer both visit modalities. There is considerable variation at the correctional centre level about the split of in-person and video visits, reflecting differences in centre population, visitation area space, number of devices, location of the centre and demand. In South Australia, guidelines were initially developed centrally to ensure a consistent ratio of in-person to video visits. It became apparent that standardisation was hampered by the size of visit areas in different centres. It was not always possible to comply with corrective services guidelines and public health requirements about physical distancing. As a result, the guidelines were changed to enable centres to make choices at the local level.

Participants were asked to reflect on the achievement of which they were most proud. Two key achievements, both related to feeling unified as a staff team, were nominated consistently across the jurisdictions: first, that a variety of groups pulled together quickly and effectively, in difficult circumstances, to come up with a speedy solution. This was particularly notable because custodial environments are typically considered slow to change.

Everyone just came together, got it done, we just had workmen come in and just things up and going. We had iPads set up, and everyone just pulled together and just had a go and, before you knew it, detainees are up having visits. It was just wonderful. (ACT staff 1)

My team were absolutely amazing, saying, 'Everybody in the correctional centres, everybody came together,' which I think was the biggest thing and the most powerful thing, that people actually came together knowing this had to happen. It wasn't about want, it was about they just knew, they needed it, so everybody came together, and that's huge. (NSW staff 2)

Second, staff took satisfaction from being able to connect people in prison with their families during a time of shared hardship.

I've got a prisoner here, so an Aboriginal prisoner ... where he's reconnected with his family, his kids, and he's got his new partner with babies now that's growing up. He's building that rapport with the family. (SA staff 5)

To enable these people to have this contact ... I see enormous benefit there and that made me very happy. (Qld staff 1)

One participant mentioned that video visits had a positive impact on interactions between people in prison and staff, though this contrasts with findings presented later that indicate poor staff attitudes remain in some sites and hamper the visit experience.

For me, it is the attitude towards the prisoners. We created an environment straightaway that was no longer military style ... with the virtuals, we had to soften it right down ... you could offend someone very quickly over the technology. Whereas, when you're in the presence of someone, you have time to turn it around. So, we had to soften things. We had to show the prisoners that we're not there to victimise them or anything like that, that we value their visit time. (Qld staff 4)

The team in the Australian Capital Territory won an innovation award and, while most teams did not receive similar formal recognition, the introduction of video visits offers a unique opportunity to celebrate the work of staff members who often remain hidden. Overall, staff were incredibly positive about the introduction of video visits and supported their continuation.

They are the best thing we've done in any jail environment. (ACT staff 3)

Resourcing

The impact of video visits on corrective services resources was highlighted by some of the corrective services participants. While the immediate outlay for devices and infrastructure, technical support, and data was significant, some participants noted that there was a potential for savings to be realised.

The infrastructure that had to be put in place, and the changes that had to happen. Now, while it is a benefit in the long run, there's a huge cost to that. And when there's no money, you put together what you can where you can. And I think, like I said, COVID allowed us to ask for forgiveness sometimes rather than ask for permission, so I think we've used all that up, and now we have to professionalise some of this, but with professionalising some of this, it costs money. (NSW staff 2)

One example provided by staff in Queensland was the potential to implement video-visit monitoring banks containing multiple screens which would reduce the number of staff required in the visit area and assist with rostering. Conversely, the cost of technological services into the future, as new applications and uses are deployed and support is needed, may potentially mean that some costs are passed on to people in prison and/or visitors, like telephone calls. It should be noted that no participating service reported in interviews that costs would be transferred.

The reliability and the cost of the support is what we really notice we have to reel in. (NSW staff 2)

Successfully navigating the concerns about expanding online activities in correctional centres has opened up possibilities for the future both in relation to, and beyond, video visits. Video visitation has paved the way for new developments.

COVID really was positive for the organisation in this sort of way. A number of initiatives that had been perhaps waiting in the wings, waiting for the right time, waiting for the right funding, all the planets to align, COVID did give the opportunity for some of those to come to the fore quite quickly. (Qld staff 3)

Participants in all six jurisdictions anticipated that video visits would continue and be refined and expanded over time. For example, in Queensland, visits may move from tablets to all-in-one installed devices and may be extended to people located in work farms. Several jurisdictions were working through the possibilities of in-cell technology. While no jurisdictions had yet determined that video visits would be offered on in-cell devices, that may form part of the considerations into the future.

Lessons learned

Participants were asked to reflect on the key lessons learned from the development and implementation of video visits in their jurisdiction and to consider what advice other areas might usefully draw upon. Key points included:

- Work from a central command centre to facilitate cross-unit work and improve the quality and efficiency of decision-making.
- Identify the purpose and parameters of the system at the outset, then pilot and evaluate.
- Undertake a market scan and service tender to understand the best choices available.
- Test a range of potential solutions.
- Promote efficiency through online, centralised, visitor-led booking systems.
- Allow international identity documents for visitors outside of Australia.
- Develop training, instruction and troubleshooting guides to support staff.
- Include remote troubleshooting capacity on devices.
- Provide access to technical support during video visitation times.
- Collect data on video visit uptake.
- Use data to direct resources and balance in-person and video visits across the custodial system.
- Understand which components of the video visit process and system require a standardised response (eg bookings) and which components ought to reflect local need and facilities (eg ratio of in-person to video visits).
- Use zoning, recognising that visit areas can be noisy, particularly when in-person and video visits are co-located. Zoning video visits and using separate spaces or dividers would improve the experience.

A snapshot of video visitation in two jurisdictions

Quantitative data about the volume of video visits over time were provided by two jurisdictions (WA and NSW). The demographic profile of people in prison was provided by Queensland, while Victoria offered information that largely focused on the requirements and restrictions associated with video visits. Data about video visits were not collected by the Australian Capital Territory in a reportable format, and research data management policies of the South Australian Government prevented access to data during the data collection period. Consequently, this section focuses on video visit uptake in Western Australia and New South Wales, with greater detail provided by the Western Australia dataset.

Western Australia

The quantitative data about the large-scale rollout of video visitation due to the COVID-19 pandemic mirrors the qualitative interview data collected from Western Australia and is tabulated in *Appendix C*. In 2017, only 116 visits were classified as ‘video visits’ across the state compared with more than 35,000 visits classified as ‘video visits’ in 2021. The largest annual increase occurred between 2019 and 2020, as the global pandemic was declared. Proportionally, of all visit types in custodial settings in Western Australia, visits classified as ‘video visits’ increased from 0.05 percent in 2017 to almost 23 percent of all visits in the first quarter of 2022.

At the same time, the mean number of visitors (per visit) increased each year from 2017 to 2022. In 2017, the mean number of visitors per visit was 1.008 and by the end of the first quarter of 2022 the mean had increased to 1.82 visitors per visit. These data echo the qualitative data from corrective services participants that video visits were predominantly used for ad hoc or special circumstances prior to the pandemic, and increased access to video visits has resulted in greater uptake by visitor groups.

There was some variation in the average (mean) age of people in prison who received video visits over the data period. In 2017, the mean age of people in prison receiving a video visit was 38 but dropped as video visits became more widespread, with the mean age recorded at 36 in 2020 and 2021, and 37 in 2022. These data suggest a slightly greater uptake among younger people in prison once video visit availability increased due to COVID-19.

The data on people in Western Australia with a disability indicated whether the person in prison was also a Disability Services client or, from 2021 onwards, had a primary disability recorded. From January 2017 to March 2022, more than 28,000 visits of any type ($n=28,189$) took place where the person being visited had a disability alert. In the same period, 1,416 video visits (5% of all visits) took place that involved a person in prison with a disability alert. However, these data should be interpreted with caution because the number of unique people in prison was not disaggregated and records about people with disability before 2021 are limited. While the data provided in this study cannot show whether people in prison with disability are experiencing equitable access to family visits in general, and video visits in particular, these findings offer a starting point for assessing that.

When reporting by cultural background, the largest total number of video visits involved a non-Aboriginal Australian person in prison ($n=36,246$), followed by Aboriginal Australian people in prison ($n=13,356$). The uptake of video visits involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in prison in Western Australia changed over time. In 2017, 20.69 percent of all video visits involved an Aboriginal person in prison, but video visits were used irregularly at this time with a total of 116 video visits in that year. This decreased to only 3.83 percent in 2018, by 2021 it had increased again to 20.11 percent but this time out of a total of over 35,000 video visits. The next largest number of video visits involved Vietnamese people in prison ($n=3,279$) followed by Maori people in prison ($n=1,934$) and people in prison classified as ‘New Zealand European’ background ($n=1,666$). The data about the uptake of video visits by people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds suggest that visual guides to accessing and engaging in video visits may be helpful.

The data were filtered by sex to identify the number of visitors of different relationship types who visit male prisoners in Western Australia. The relationship-type categories with the largest number of visitors were partners (aggregated from de facto spouse, partner, girlfriend, spouse, fiancée; $n=25,863$) and friends ($n=14,520$), followed by daughters ($n=12,689$), mothers ($n=12,539$) and sons ($n=11,335$). These data suggest the need for research attention on the connection between people in prison and their friends as this was the second largest group of visitors by relationship type and is under-researched. As the above data show, sons and daughters made up two of the top four categories of visitor type for males in prison who participated in video visits. Next, the number of visitors who were children (as opposed to adult sons or daughters of men in prison) was explored from 2017 to March 2022. Of 31,744 child video visitors to males in prison, 23,250 (73%) were daughters, stepdaughters, sons or stepsons of the person in prison. Within each of the relationship categories of son, daughter, stepson and stepdaughter, the majority of video visitors were children under 18 rather than adult children of the person in prison. Specifically, 83 percent of daughter, 85 percent of son, 93 percent of stepdaughter and 96 percent of stepson video visitors were children under 18. These data indicate that, of the video visitors in a parent–child relationship with a male prisoner in Western Australia, the large majority (85%) were under 18 years at the time of the visit.

The data were disaggregated at the visitor level, which precluded analyses of the proportion of people in prison belonging to different demographic groups who received different types of visits. Consequently, without data about the number of unique people in correctional centres, it was not possible to discern, for example, whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (or people from any other demographic group) in prison were more likely to receive an in-person compared with video visit. Equitable uptake of video visits across the correctional services population is a fruitful consideration for future research.

New South Wales

In New South Wales, quantitative video visit data were provided in an aggregated format rather than unique visit records, and therefore the same level of detail is not available. It should be noted that the record period differs from that of Western Australia, with a reporting period of 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2022. There are important features in these data that shed much-needed light on the uptake and nature of video visits in this state.

Over the four-year period, a total of 413,422 confirmed video visits took place across all correctional centres in New South Wales, with an average duration of 38.6 minutes. Over 20,000 unique people in prison received a video visit during this time period ($n=20,522$). The average number of visitors on each video visit was 2.2 people, which is higher than in Western Australia. Most of the video visitors in NSW correctional centres were adults (74%), with just over one-quarter (26%) children. Reflecting the qualitative data, video visits were available in some circumstances but were uncommon prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, there is a significant jump in the video visit weekly average numbers across New South Wales at the start of April 2020 and most of the data described above reflect the period April 2020 to end June 2022.

Satisfaction with video visits

Australian Capital Territory

In July 2020, ACTCS distributed an online survey to 300 visitors who had used Zoom for video visits with a person in the Alexander Maconochie Correctional Centre, and 115 responses were received. The large majority (82%) of respondents reported being ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with the video visit. While video visits had been available for just over three months at the time the survey was distributed, the large majority had participated in more than one visit. Self-reported confidence levels in using the technology varied but, notably, only eight percent of respondents reported that they were ‘not so confident’ or ‘not at all confident’. Satisfaction rates were high with the booking process (86%).

The majority of video visitors who had not been visiting the centre in-person previously were from interstate (56%), while 29 percent had not previously visited in-person because the person they had contacted was newly incarcerated. A minority (15%) reported that they had not visited in-person to avoid exposure to the correctional centre environment or did not want to bring a child.

Respondents were asked to identify what they enjoyed about video visits and what could be changed or improved. Enjoyment was derived from the visual aspect of the visit (49%), convenience (22%), and limiting travel time (12%). The remainder selected ‘other’ but the reasons were not specified. Improvements and changes suggested by respondents included improving the background noise (44%) and increasing the number of visits (15%). Almost one-third of participants (31%) did not suggest any improvements. An unspecified ‘other’ group accounted for the remaining responses. Most respondents (93%) wanted video visits to continue after in-person visits resumed, with the majority reporting a preference for weekly visits (87%). Finally, respondents were asked if they had a preference for face-to-face or video visits, or no preference. The large minority (45%) indicated that they did not have a preference or liked both visit types, 36 percent preferred face-to-face visits and 19 percent selected video visits.

These data indicate strong support for video visits as an additional option that is convenient for the visitor. Overall, respondents were very satisfied with the video visit option, and wanted the option to continue to be regularly available.

New South Wales

In New South Wales, three surveys have been conducted to garner feedback on video visits from visitors and staff. The first survey was distributed in May 2020 as a pilot with 200 participants. A longer version of the survey was distributed in July 2020, with 2,153 family and friend participants who were mostly female (82%). The results from both surveys were provided in one report dated July 2020 (Ellem 2020a). That month, 493 staff from publicly and privately operated correctional centres completed a survey on their perceptions of video visits, reported in a separate document (Ellem 2020b). The overarching findings from the two survey data reports produced by CSNSW are provided below.

Prior to the introduction of video visits, most family or friend survey participants had visited a correctional centre, though a significant minority (38%) had not. Of those, most had not visited because they lived too far away, including interstate (56%). At the time of the survey, when video visits had been available for around three months, the large majority of respondents said that they had previously used videoconferencing software (84%), and most booked video visits by calling the correctional centre directly (84%). More than three-quarters (76%) of visitors were able to choose their preferred visit time, which was most commonly during the day (61%) rather than evening or any other time. The large majority (88%) reported that they would use video visits more often if they were retained.

Most visits occurred as planned (92%). For the minority who reported experiencing difficulties, the reasons included: lack of visit confirmation (7%), a problem with the meeting link (10%), poor or no signal (20%), and problems downloading the software (2%). The 'other' category made up the remaining responses.

Like the results from the ACT visitors, respondents appreciated the visual, connection and convenience dimensions of video visits. More than one-third (36%) of visitors said that the best thing about video visits was being able to see the person in prison, almost one-fifth (19%) nominated showing the person in prison a familiar environment, and 16 percent reported that not having to travel to the correctional centre was the best thing. Ease of visit and less time or stress were additional benefits, suggesting that, in aggregate, convenience was one of the most appreciated elements of the video visit. Overall, 20 percent of the respondents were located overseas or interstate, with a further 34 percent residing in regional New South Wales. The benefits were borne out in the qualitative survey responses, where visit access for people overseas or with mobility issues or other health concerns were reported as the best parts of the video visit. Overall, 90 percent of respondents were satisfied with video visits. Only two percent reported that they did not like video visits. In the qualitative comments, the short visit time, poor audio quality, and not being able to have physical contact with the person in prison, especially for children, were highlighted as key areas of dissatisfaction.

Noting that the survey was completed in July 2020, when video visits were a relatively new option, visitors were asked if they wanted the option to continue and the large majority said yes (85%). Almost three-quarters (74%) indicated that they would use video visits for all or half of their visits in the future if the option was available.

Staff agreed that video visits were a positive development, with almost all respondents noting improved security (98%), less contraband (98%) and that the people in prison enjoyed the visits (95%), particularly families and people who lived further away. Contraband reduction and increased security were regarded as the biggest impacts on staff.

Regarding training, 82 percent of staff felt that they had enough training to do the work, though just over one-quarter (26%) had not received training about video visits, and this was an area identified for further support in the qualitative data. Refresher training was later offered in this jurisdiction. Staff supported the continued use of video visits, particularly to maintain gains in the reduction of drugs in centres.

The next section of the results reports on the qualitative interview data from carers of children, fathers in prison, and community organisation and corrective services staff. The themes focus on the main reported strengths, barriers and challenges associated with video visits by the participants.

Relationship quality

Participants from every group discussed the way in which video visits had helped to establish, maintain or reconnect the father–child relationship, and this was a very strong theme across the data. Several participants' children were born following their imprisonment and this meant that some participants may have only had an opportunity to see their child on video.

Without the video visit, I don't know, I don't think I'd have the same relationship.

(Father 11)

Video visits are so essential for these families to stay connected and to see [their] loved one, even though it's not in person, but to see them and talk to them and have that extended period of time, like an extended visit, I think it is so important for families to stay connected and reconnected. (Service provider 4)

'Cause my kids have never seen me bad. They've never seen me raise my voice. I've never raised my hands to my kids. I've never ever smacked my kids. So, it's pretty hard when my kids are standoffish. But with video visits, now I can engage with them. I can show them I'm that person that they hear about. So, my daughter, she's starting to come around.

(Father 23)

I don't think the bond with his son would be as strong as it is today [without video visits].

(Carer 1)

Beyond having a relationship, relationship quality was of critical importance. Quality was derived from deepening the relationship between the father and child or, less commonly, the father and the child's carer in the community. There was a broad consensus among participants that video visits had a positive impact on the quality of relationships with fathers in prison. Relationship quality was closely connected to fathers' access to the social world of the child via the audiovisual medium. Unlike in-person visits, during a video visit the child could show, and in turn the father was able to see, the spaces the child inhabits, their toys, pets, awards and other meaningful items. In this way video visits can be child-led in ways that are difficult to achieve with an in-person visit.

He does better on video than he does in person. On video, you know, he's in his home. He's in his comfort. He can do whatever he likes. He can show [the father] his room. He can get new toys ... his options are a lot more there. (Carer 3)

It's better because they're in their own environment, they don't close off, and shut down or whatever. They're all happy; they don't have to go nowhere. I've had visits where they're in the pool. That's good. (Father 1)

In the AVL they can show that person their ... 'look at my wall, look at my award', you know, they can help that person see the work they've been doing, or they can see the room or ... they can show them they have painted the house. So, I think it has a connection to the home, which ... is a bonus, because that person inside hasn't seen maybe that home or whatever they're showing them in a long time, so I suppose it brings that connection to them to the home. (Service provider 3)

Visual access was impactful for fathers; it allowed them to feel part of the child's life by being up to date and familiar with the things that are important in the child's world (such as toys, hobbies and pets) and to celebrate important events and milestones. These include birthdays and developmental changes. Seeing into the life of the child and wider family provided things to do and talk about during visits. One carer mentioned that they organised events like blowing out candles on a birthday cake around the times that video visits were scheduled. Another carer described how video visits enabled the child's father to observe some of his 'firsts' but it also provided useful conversation topics to build or deepen the connection.

When it comes to birthdays and stuff ... I feel like he's also not missing out on the special moments, we just worked them around the video times. (Carer 11)

Because it was Father's Day not long ago, we talked about Father's Day and they proudly showed me all the things they got me for Father's Day. They got me a mug saying 'World's greatest dad' and that makes you happy. (Father 18)

When [the child] first learned to crawl, I put the phone up against the lounge and I moved [the child] maybe about half a metre away from the phone and I said to [the child], 'Go on, crawl to Daddy', and [the child] crawled straight up to the phone and gave the phone a kiss. [Father] got to watch his first steps ... video visits help with things like that, that they don't get to see in person when it's those first things. (Carer 3)

Fathers mentioned that children could be more themselves on the video visits compared with in-person visits as the in-person visits come with more restrictions.

They're happy, they're comfortable, they're not shy, they actually want to talk to you. It's not like they have to stay there and talk to you. They can run off and come back. (Father 4)

Video visits were valued by the fathers who said they did not like their children coming into the correctional centre. This was particularly relevant for fathers with young children who worried about their children running off or getting upset, which in turn made the visit stressful. Fathers were also not keen on showing children their life in prison and sometimes children did not know their father was in prison.

I can't deal with him. I don't wanna put him in that situation. (Father 26)

I don't wanna show them this life. (Father 18)

I didn't really like them coming in, because jail, there's a lot of bad people in here. And if something happens on a visit, where it has in the past, I don't want the kids to see that ... (Father 23)

There were also practical considerations regarding young children visiting in prison that could be circumvented through video visits.

If a child needed to use the toilet, as they often do, again that would cut the visit off early because, if you had to go out of the visits area, they weren't going to process you back. (Service provider 1)

Correctional centres are located, they are so far away, and it means for the parent who is caring for children, especially young children or children with special needs, they just cannot travel. It's just not a possibility in [financial terms]. (Service provider 4)

For children with a disability, visits to the prison may be particularly challenging. Fathers and carers who had children with autism indicated that in-person visits were challenging for their children and sometimes the father was unsure how to best interact with the child. For these participants video visits were more suitable for their children.

Over the phone, I can't really engage with my son 'cause he has autism, my youngest one. But face-to-face [on a video visit], he sees my face. He's happy and he's excited, and he'd show me everything, so it seems better. (Father 23)

Participants observed that for older children, video visits enabled them to share their interests. One carer described that the father and child played games online together.

The older ones discovered horse racing and so they talk about, you know, what horses are running, what they like, the statistics. Yeah, yeah, all the normal things. (Carer 14)

At the moment, I'm talking to him about getting a truck licence and that, because he's driving his boss' truck. He got his car licence but we're talking about him taking the next step. (Father 6)

Carers and fathers stressed how important it was for children to actually see their father. Particularly for young children, video visits enabled some engagement with their father, including pre-verbal infants who could recognise their father.

We at least get to see his face ... it makes it a bit more real, and his son actually gets to see his face, which is good because he has changed a lot. (Carer 9)

It keeps the communication with the kids ... especially for people that live in a different state and can't actually see their dad to keep that relationship going. I guess the video helps massively, that they can see their daddy, it's not just a quick one-minute phone call, you know. (Carer 17)

Just seeing my kids, and just seeing their smiles. They get to see me and I get to see them. I can tell them to their face I love them and I miss them and I do. (Father 23)

Father and carers acknowledged that children do not necessarily know what to do on video calls and lose interest quickly. Particularly for young children with limited attention spans, they have the ability to leave and return to the video visit, without having to stay in one spot. Carers shared the ways that children took charge of the interactions and integrated the father into their play.

Because I guess the good thing about doing them on the video is that she just takes him wherever she goes. If she's finished playing with her activities, she's like, okay, we're done now, and she goes on. They go on to the next thing, you know, and it's like he'll be on the trampoline with her. (Carer 11)

All of them actually come up [to the camera] and say hello and tell me what they did that week or did at school, and after that they can go and play, get back on the game or draw. (Father 18)

By integrating fathers into play and activities, video visits could offer access to routines that cannot be shared in person, but that are very meaningful for a parent in prison. Carers used a range of strategies to facilitate a positive video visit. Some caregivers planned ahead to organise activities that would maximise interactions. One caregiver said that the father and child both enjoy a particular kind of lolly, and she always has a packet ready so that they can eat the same snack together.

[The father] really loves those snake lollies, yeah, so every visit that we've done via video I always have a packet here. That way [the child is] eating them with [the father]. (Carer 3)

The same carer used activities included 'chasing', where the caregiver put the phone in their hand and held up the phone so that the father could 'chase' the child around.

A few times I've had the phone in my hand, and I've held the phone in front of [the child] ... and [the father] chased [the child] around the house, you know. Yeah, obviously, it's me running with the phone. But like, they get to do so much more. (Carer 3)

In most cases, carers reported that their child transitioned easily from the video visit back to what they had been previously doing. However, some children experienced distress after visits.

But having to end the video visit, I would say 80 percent of the time ends in tears, and they're definitely not my own; I kind of keep that inside for when the kids are in bed.
(Carer 7)

Comparatively, a number of participants reported that the child was less distressed at the conclusion of a telephone contact or video visit compared with an in-person visit.

It's just hard to leave and all, and she just wouldn't let go of me. But the only hard thing is, I think—I did realise that actually it's the leaving part. The end of a phone call is—my daughter on the phone is like, 'Bye! Bye! Bye!' She loves saying goodbye. She's excited about saying goodbye and being able to communicate. Whereas, at the visit, in face-to-face contact visit, she's struggled. She's bawling her eyes out. She struggled a great deal.
(Father 27)

[For video] it's a bit easier to say goodbye than it is in-person. (Carer 3)

Beyond fathers and their children, the benefits extended to maintaining a relationship with the wider familial and social network. While there are restrictions about who can be on a video visit, several staff participants indicated that there was some flexibility, as this staff participant from South Australia commented: 'They can see a wider range of people ... they can have their whole family around' (SA staff 2). Carers also reported that the video visits were important for them. This was equally the case for those who had difficult relationships with the father.

I notice in my own mood. If I don't have that video call once a week, I can become really very short. (Carer 14)

Yeah, I mean, I suffer very bad depression after what he did, and anxiety, and I guess if I didn't see him, and then going from just phone calls to actually seeing him [in person], it might be overwhelming, or I don't know, but it definitely helped that I could visually see him. (Carer 17)

Like in-person visits, video visits were not always positive experiences and there were times when difficult issues could not be resolved in the time allowed, which is typically shorter than in-person visits.

Video visits don't go well, as in there's an argument, you know, between the prisoner and a family member and the length of time of the visit isn't enough to resolve that argument and so people get to the end of their 20 minutes and they're upset. You know, someone might be crying and there's no time ... it just ends because video visits just end ... (Service provider 2)

Behavioural and mood impacts

Retaining the connection between fathers and children and caregivers not only maintained or improved the quality of those relationships but was also perceived to provide the father in prison with motivation to self-manage behaviour. In this regard, both video and in-person visits were highlighted.

Humans crave human touch. Humans like to smell, especially if you associate your wife with the smell of perfume. You smell that perfume once again on your wife, and automatically you're back there again thinking, 'Hey, I can do this. There's a reason for me to keep going every day. There's room for me to progress and keep my head down and not get caught up in some of the shenanigans that may happen in jail.' (Qld staff 4)

It makes me feel like I'm not so much in jail, not as taken away from the world, like throw away the key, locked in a dungeon feeling ... There is hope. I'm gonna be home soon ... Makes me happier to be in prison. (Father 21)

You're opening their eyes to a life they once had ... they now have a realisation that 'I fucked up and I'm in here, and I can't do it, and maybe I need to start reinventing myself so I can get back to it'. (SA staff 2)

Self-management by people in prison to retain privileges, including visitation, was also mentioned by a number of staff participants.

... they know if they screw around too much they could lose that privilege ... it's called self-management, they know if there's a prisoner gonna go and screw up then they're gonna lose one of their privileges. They'll self-manage themselves and there's nothing wrong with that. (SA staff 2)

Overall, fathers reported a range of emotions before and after visits. Several fathers described feelings of anxiety and nervousness before a video visit about the anticipation of seeing loved ones, the importance ascribed to that contact, and the concern that something could go wrong and prevent the visit. It is not possible to determine the extent to which these feelings are common across visit types.

I'm always getting nervous and get butterflies on a visit ... But in then saying that, I'm getting nervous about something going wrong. Like the other day, I couldn't get through. (Father 18)

Many of the fathers noted that while it was always difficult to say goodbye to loved ones, it could be harder in person.

They literally say, 'That's it and you've got to go.' And that's a very short goodbye, isn't it? And that short goodbye is like literally you have your children torn off you. You know what I mean? And it's so traumatic. (Father 27)

Yeah, it always lasts. It makes you feel good. And then if you know you got a visit coming next week, you're excited, you feel good. Nothing is gonna bring you down. It's awesome. (Father 23)

Some of the guys, when they're seeing the kids on the screen, their whole mannerism changes. And same after they come out of an e-visit: they're all happy, they're all upbeat, and all that sort of stuff. It is good for them to have those visits. (WA staff 2)

For a minority of fathers, any contact was difficult because it highlighted what they were missing.

Sometimes, it's a bit hard. That's why another reason I'm not worried about the video visits is time out too. It can make you realise you're missing out on a lot. Sometimes it's a bit hard. Sometimes it takes you a little while to get back into routine in jail. (Father 20)

While the research design underpinning these data did not include measures of release impacts, participants were asked to reflect on whether video visits might have a post-release impact on the father, child and family. Participants unanimously recognised the positive potential of video visitation, and this is supported by the existing literature on in-person visitation benefits presented in the evidence scan. Participants particularly highlighted the importance of an existing father–child or carer connection to support successful family reintegration.

[If not for video visits] I would be nervous of the relationship that [the child] and [father] have because they are just not getting the time to build it before release. (Carer 3)

They can still, you know, build that bond and build that connection that they need, so when the parent does happen to come out of custody, they will know who that person is so it's not like a culture shock when they're out, like 'Who is this stranger?' ... regardless if they're older or younger, they're still getting to build that connection and keep that connection with them. (Service provider 4)

We talk about recidivism and people being able to reintegrate back into society; they have a better chance of success when they maintain those community connections, so if a person is completely cut off it's obviously much more difficult. (NSW staff 1)

One participant noted that this might be particularly beneficial for people serving a life sentence who may be more disconnected from their family's life.

And it's just great for those lifers and people who wanna reconnect with their families. So when they're on release ... it just builds that relationship back up, which is great. (SA staff 5)

Practical arrangements

All participants reported that video visits were often preferable to in-person visits because video visits eased practical concerns such as travel distance, travel costs and the challenges with the prison environment. For people in prison from countries other than Australia, or who had family members overseas, this contact was the only way the distance could be bridged.

They were able to talk to their families in South America, you know, who they hadn't spoken to in so long and they were so appreciative of this and they thought, 'wow this is so great' and that's all they do now. (Qld staff 2)

Overseas or interstate, you know, if we talk about the pandemic where we weren't allowed to travel, interstate families were able to still connect and have that virtual [visit], which we've never had before. (SA staff 4)

Before video visits, people overseas would never have had the chance to have contact with the person in custody. (Service provider 1)

Some carers did not have a drivers licence so driving to the prison was not an option and video visits filled this gap. Other families would have to travel long distances for a brief visit. Some participants indicated that there would be no contact between the child and father if it were not for the video visits because the father lives too far away for in-person visits.

It would have been a six-hour drive each way for a 30-minute visit ... I couldn't do that to three kids. (Carer 14)

There's an old couple that used to come and see their son religiously every week. They live five hours away ... they stopped doing that because they had a car accident coming to see their son. And now, because of virtual visits, they don't have to leave home ... they thought it was wonderful. When they drive five hours, they didn't stay here, they drove five hours' home, so that's a 10-hour round trip and, I mean, after sitting in the car for five hours, you don't get the quality. So, the benefit there is the quality of sitting down in your own environment and being yourself. I noticed that people on the video linkups are themselves. They're not portraying, they do not try to be good for the officers that are looking at them. (Qld staff 4)

Contact with distant family not only impacted on relationship quality but also gave the person in prison motivation to get through their sentence.

We get families and the one that's quite beautiful, actually, is we get a young man that hasn't spoken to his mum in 15 years. Now, on the video chat [they are] able to see each other and talk to each other clearly. So that there changes people's lives. It gives a person a reason to keep going. Jail can be quite daunting at times, and it can be quite lonely, it can quite be monotonous, but just that interaction over the internet can make somebody go and say, 'It is all worth it in the end and I'm gonna keep going' ... Yeah, that was huge; there was not a dry eye in the house. (Qld 4)

The comparative value of video visits compared with face-to-face visits may be related to the length of visits. In South Australia, in-person visits were 30 minutes while video visits were 20 minutes. This modest increase in time must be balanced against practical considerations and the benefits of visiting in-person.

The cost associated with visiting for some families meant that the caregiver was faced with difficult choices about how to best use limited family resources. In turn, this had an emotional impact on the father in prison.

I love seeing them and they love seeing me, but I felt guilty. Like I said, they'd go without fun stuff all week to come visit me. (Father 25)

In the case of larger families, restrictions on the number of face-to-face visitors (especially since COVID-19) could also be circumvented through video visits. Service provider 2 cited a mother who had to make two visits to a facility in order to take all her children to see their father, as opposed to the following example:

I have a family who, you know, the entire extended family gets together ... for the video visit. Well, you know, this is cousins and brothers. (Service provider 2)

For families who were able to visit in person some of the time, video visits provided flexibility to fit visitation within their busy lives, and to ensure that children were not missing out on alternative opportunities and activities.

Children are penalised sometimes when children play sport; you know, if they're in something on a Saturday ... well then, they can't come ... So, then, they don't get to see their parents. (Service provider 3)

Carers are also able to have conversations and involve fathers in parenting decisions.

Just because you are incarcerated, right? It does not mean that you are not still a parent, and that you are not still valued in that child's life. You can still parent from behind bars. (Carer 14).

Prison environment

The results presented reflect remarkable convergence in perceptions of video visits across all of the participant groups. There was a broad agreement that video visits strengthened relationships and alleviated a range of practical barriers to in-person visitation. In relation to the prison environment, however, there were unique perspectives that divided the findings from the participant groups. Importantly, this division does not indicate disagreement between the groups, but rather showcases the different problems and priorities facing the participant groups. For carers, fathers and service providers, the most notable aspect of the prison environment was its effect on the wellbeing of the child. For corrective services staff, the most salient issues relating to the prison environment were the reduction in contraband and the positive effect on behaviour and atmosphere. The wellbeing concerns are canvassed first.

Participants referred to wellbeing in a range of ways and highlighted both the child's and father's wellbeing. Interestingly, the wellbeing of the caregiver was much less commonly discussed. In the context of video visitation, child wellbeing considerations took several forms. First, it prevented the harms to children associated with in-person visits via screening and security procedures. The security process of prisons was described as being onerous and challenging for many children. This process involved lining up and waiting, with children often becoming bored and restless. Particularly during the era of COVID-19 restrictions, carers and children often had to test prior to entering the correctional centre.

The screening process that happens for in-person visits could be quite daunting for children. On the other hand, video visits might be easier on some children than having to go through the screening process at prison. You know, it's ... a frightening, frightening experience ... sniffer dogs ... pat-down searches, so that can be quite devastating for some children. (Service provider 2)

It's just not a place to be, especially when they first come in. Last weekend, the boys were saying that the young kids, five- and six-year-old kids, were getting scanned in a big machine out the front. That scares them. (Father 14)

[Families] have to go and queue up outside the entrance to the prison at a certain time and there has been no sort of cover. If it was pouring with rain, or if it was a 35-degree, baking-hot day, they would be out in the elements. (Service provider 1)

Several carers pointed out that the prison environment could be distressing for children. Reasons included the institutional setting and the presence of other people.

He was actually being taken to the jail for the visits. He prefers the video calls because [of] being in that environment in the jail. So he was really quite scared at the other inmates around. And yeah, so he actually prefers the video calls. (Carer 14)

While acknowledging that nothing replaced the opportunity for a hug in a face-to-face visit, all carers emphasised that video visits contributed to the wellbeing of their child.

I think that people don't understand how not seeing that person impacts the child, and that if you don't want to take your child into a prison this is a great opportunity. (Carer 11)

I've dealt with the trauma that comes from kids visiting their fathers in jail. It's not the best place for a child to see its father. They come home with sometimes chips on their shoulders. They come home sometimes devastated that dad can't leave that area, so they come home sometimes crying and stuff like that. So trauma comes in many different styles, and visiting personally can bring out those traumas or make those traumas happen. So there's another [way that video visitation] is good. (Qld staff 4)

The reduction in contraband was one of the most commonly cited benefits of video visits by corrective services staff across all jurisdictions, including the reduction in standover tactics to coerce visitors to bring in contraband. In turn, reduced access to contraband, and particularly illicit substances, meant a safer correctional centre for both staff and prisoners.

If you talked to staff now, 100 percent [say] stay with Zoom, stay with iPad visits, get rid of face-to-face ... first weekend back of the face-to-face visits ... [someone] got eyeballed ... he'd swallowed something. (SA staff 2)

Other good benefits that we found, while they stopped physical visits and went to e-visits, was drugs and contraband coming in. It essentially stopped. That's where we get a lot of stuff coming in and that, essentially, went to zero during that time. So it made a huge difference there for the security of the prison, definitely a big benefit. (WA staff 1)

There's been a massive reduction in the introduction of contraband. That's one of the key [areas] that's been really good. People haven't been pressured and assaulted and threatened to bring stuff in with a family member ... there's none of that peer pressure no more. It's a lot easier—there's no member of the public contact ... and I suppose that's really the main impact ... we have had domestic violence and—well, not domestic violence, but domestics—here in the visit centre between husband and wife or stuff like that. So that tension is all gone now ... and the female or the male and the community feels just a bit more safer, I reckon, because it's not face-to-face live sort of thing. That's one—a massive thing that we've seen. (SA staff 5)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a major concern that precipitated the development of video visits was the risk of disease transmission through custodial environments. Reducing the risk of disease exposure was, accordingly, identified as one benefit of video visits.

The iPad visit restricts that [transmission] and eliminates any of those incidents of having, of COVID being brought in. (SA staff 5)

Barriers and challenges to video visits

Physical contact

One of the clear highlights of in-person visits repeatedly identified across participant groups was non-verbal communication, particularly physical affection including the opportunity to hug and hold children and loved ones. In this regard, video visits were lacking, and were considered a ‘next best thing’ when in-person visits were not an option, or to relieve some of the pressure of only attending visits in-person.

I’m very thankful these video things come about, but nothing is like in-person ... hugs and getting to see him grow—you can’t see how tall he gets, or the difference or energy when you can hug him and hold him is different to the video ... So it makes a difference, but contact visits will always be the best visits, I believe, for family in general. (Father 24)

However, there were some contingencies during physical distancing where contact was significantly reduced or disallowed and this disadvantage of video visits was moderated. Similarly, people in prison required to have non-contact visits only were not able to share affection with their family members, reducing the gap between in-person and video visits.

We have to differentiate what we’re talking about, contact visits or non-contact visits. Virtual visits replace both ... in non-contact visits we do not allow prisoners to hug and cuddle ... so in that sense it’s the same thing, there is no physical contact as such. (Qld staff 1)

Technical barriers

For the majority of participants, technical barriers related to the video dropping out due to reception problems. In many cases, the reception issues were considered to have largely improved since video visitation was established and therefore were considered a mild inconvenience rather than a major technical issue. However, one of the two prison sites in New South Wales and some of the rural and remote regions in the other jurisdictions were identified as having ongoing reception problems.

It just freezes heaps; like I will be frozen or they will be frozen, and most of the time it happens but it depends where you are in the room, I guess, ‘cause it mustn’t pick up. (Father 1)

Major drawbacks relate to poor internet connectivity. Connectivity and application outages have resulted in a lag to video calls, which causes frustration to the visitor cohort and family/friends, and calls being cancelled. (Vic, written response)

Less commonly, corrective services participants reported that the technical challenges were occurring on the visitors' side of the contact due to problems accessing suitable devices or connecting to the internet.

That was a bit of a negative, actually ... for families that didn't have internet reception or mobile phone or an iPad or whatever it was. And again, we're talking probably a very small [group], but it would have affected our Aboriginal cohort and population a lot more than anyone else. (SA staff 4)

The big thing is they've actually got to have data on their phone. A lot of them choose to use mobile devices. So you've got to have data enabled and you've got to have credit there to use your data. It's not so much like between two Apple phones where you can just make a FaceTime call and it's easy. Because it's actually done over a web browser, there's got to be data there. So if they don't have any credit, they're not gonna be able to dial in. The other thing is, remoter areas have limited 3G and 4G capability. A lot of the remote areas, including here, they're still on 3G. A lot of them will be out of range and not able to do it. (WA staff 1)

While the large majority of NSW correctional centres use the same video visit system, there are some exceptions (private prisons) as well as variation in the number and length of video visits across individual correctional centres. This lack of consistency was identified as a potential source of frustration for some visitors.

It would be really nice if there was consistency across the system as well. And not having different systems in different prisons, because people do get moved around a lot. And so then every time that most in custody get moved to a new centre, the family has to familiarise themselves with how it all works at the new centre and get used to the technology and work out how it all works and that's really stress-inducing for some people. (Service provider 1)

Overall, carers were satisfied with the booking system and the ease of organising visits. While the platform was identified as easy to use, there were issues with accessing visits. Several carers noted that the video visits were released in the early hours of the morning, which was difficult (Carer 14). Limitations on available times were also a concern.

Maybe six different spots of times. This one only had like two choices, and ... for me living in Perth it was either I get the girls up at like 5 o'clock, or something stupid like that. (Carer 17)

Where there is family conflict or poor communication, booking visits can present additional challenges around competition for limited visits. With only one visit available per week, some carers noted that the father's other family members 'book from underneath me' (Carer 3) and that they do not know if the visit is already booked until they log in.

There's no communication in between us. So, we don't know, you know, either he books this week and whether you book next week. (Carer 4)

Carers also noted that the father will not know who has booked the visit until they log on. A few carers identified that the father was not consistently notified about scheduled visits, which therefore might start late or be missed. It should be noted that these challenges are specific to jurisdictions where visitors make bookings as opposed to jurisdictions where people in prison request the visit.

Sometimes he'd come down and be like, 'Oh, they told me there was no video', that you didn't book a video, and I would have booked a video. (Carer 17)

This was difficult for children who were expecting a visit.

I think it would be better if they sent out an email and say, 'Look we're not gonna have this video' ... Yeah, I guess the communication on that end was, it was frustrating for me to see my child waiting on the iPad, waiting for a video and [it] not coming up. Yeah. And then having no answers, you know. (Carer 17)

Some participants expressed concerns about the privacy of video visits, as they could hear other calls in progress and vice versa. For this reason, many preferred having video visits in AVL suites where possible.

Everyone has a booth; I was in a cell, in a small room, whatever ... More privacy. We see each other, we see the front, we see each other, but you can't talk loud here. You need to be quiet 'cause if there's four of us talk, we can't hear, no one can hear the other ... most of the time, I need to grab my ears, listen, repeat myself a couple of times. That's the only thing here: just more privacy, so we can be more loud. (Father 26)

But it should be noted that the lack of privacy generally in video visits mirrored face-to-face experiences.

There's no privacy. Whether it's an in-person visit or a video visit there's no privacy. (Service provider 2)

The noise level due to video visits taking place in a single area in the prison was difficult for some participants. This was particularly an issue for a father with a hearing impairment, for whom the noise from other calls made video visits more difficult (Carer 14). Several fathers described tension between freely interacting with their children and being mindful about disrupting other people's visits by making noise.

You've gotta watch how loud you're talking. They talk too loud and you can't hear. There's been a few arguments, like the boys come back arguing, fighting over people being loud in their visits, or this and that. I've been told I was too loud before and I didn't even mean to be. Like I said, I was just talking to my kids and it's loud in the background so you talk loud. (Father 25)

Security and compliance

The security concerns that presented barriers to the introduction of video visits in many jurisdictions pre-COVID-19 were not realised in the data. Incidents of rule-breaking were reported but they were largely characterised as minor infractions as opposed to security risks and were not commonly detected. There was a general view among corrective services participants that access to any visit modality was important and this acted as a disincentive to rule breaking. Despite the reportedly low rate of rule breaking, safety, security and rule compliance remained concerns.

So, our phones are monitored, our non-contacts are monitored. We walk around our contact visits and so normally, if there's something going down, somebody had an opportunity to hear it. On this screen, without being there, you can't hear it. It's done using a headset and mic, so you can't hear what they're talking about, so that's the challenge in the service. Well, they could set up the biggest drug deal over there and you wouldn't even know. And I've brought that up before because of the DV [domestic violence] part, not so much the drug dealer part, because I don't want the people to have continued abuse even though they're now in jail and they're safe from that person. (Qld staff 4)

When I look at all the other security that we go through in the Department, you know, you can't bring a mobile phone in, you can't bring a bloody USB in, yet we can do an iPad visit and on the other side I can screen-record that. (SA staff 2)

I mentioned [earlier] people flaunting different parts of their body; when people got used to it [video visits], it didn't happen. So, I was surprised how people responded to it, very quickly coming into line with how the government wanted it to operate ... Everybody decided they will follow the rules and they wanted that visit regardless. (Qld staff 4)

One of the ways in which this was managed was via the careful monitoring of visitors, particularly in regard to existing orders that prevented contact with particular people including family members, current or former partners and/or children. In this way, video visits mirrored in-person visits.

I've supervised video visits but they've always been sex offenders ... we get referrals and [are] asked to supervise parents with visits. There was a visit that I supervised at our centre on an AVL visit ... It was a mother [in prison], and the father was at the [support] centre with the two children. The visit went really well. The victim was never the children in this situation, but, yeah, you know, they updated her on school. Talking about things going on at school, things coming up, talking about cooking. They weren't able to do it at home because it had to be supervised, but at the centre they could talk freely, updating them on their lives. (Service provider 3)

The other consideration was things like domestic and family violence contact and so we're very careful to make sure we check in our records. (Qld staff 3)

However, one carer noted that she was verbally abused during a video visit in front of her children, and expressed concerns about whether the visits were adequately monitored (Carer 17). Like all contacts, video visits have the potential to be used as a coercive tool and this important issue warrants further research.

Some jurisdictions recognised that there were opportunities to enhance security processes.

Security improvements to allow staff the ability to remotely monitor video calls and ensure no inappropriate or misconduct behaviour is occurring. Having the ability to remotely monitor calls, much like the telephone system, will alleviate a lot of the security concerns. (Vic, written response).

Gatekeepers

Different types of ‘gatekeepers’ were identified by participants, particularly, though not exclusively, by fathers in prison and carers. For some participants, the breakdown of a relationship with the child’s carer made it difficult or impossible to see the child. In New South Wales, where the interviews with carers and fathers in prison took place, visitors need to make the booking, so an unwilling former partner presented a significant barrier to visits.

Because I broke up with my ex-partner, she’s not interested in bringing the kids.
(Father 25)

Sometimes families would be kind of not that keen on doing it. It might be that they felt that they were obliged to go visit the person, even if they didn’t really want to because of the relationship. I mean very often families have gone through a lot of really bad times with that person before they even went into custody ... We’ve had a fair number of ex-partners who have only taken part in video visits for the benefit of the children. Not because they want to at all for themselves, but they’ve done it because they know that it’s important for the kids. Yeah, so there is that pressure on families to have ongoing contact if they don’t want it. (Service provider 1)

For people with more than one child, an additional gatekeeping challenge was derived from the child residing in different locations, either because of different mothers, placement with various family members, or because the children were in separate out-of-home care arrangements. While this did not always prevent visits from occurring, it did make them more complicated and less frequent as children cared for separately could not have a video visit at the same time.

My mum and my partner will bring two of my kids anyway. They’ll bring my eldest, which is my daughter, and then my youngest, which is my son. The other son’s with his mum and she’s—I don’t know—going through some troubles and that, so, yeah, it’s hard to see him ... at this point in time. (Father 23)

A minority of participants commented that the visit booking system could result in competition for access between visitors. While visitors with strong relationships could negotiate access via strategies like turn-taking, visitors with acrimonious or no relationships could use the visit process to block each other.

I don't really get along with [the father's] mother and their family. They don't like me, they never have, so it's hard ... I've been trying to book a visit for the last month and a half, and ... they just take the visits out from underneath me. (Carer 3)

Several participants noted that, like contact visits, video visits were restricted due to court orders such as apprehended violence orders (AVOs) or access restrictions or rules to ensure child protection.

I can't talk to my son and my ex at the moment because it's a touchy situation. The last time I came to jail, there's an AVO in place that was put on by the police. (Father 21)

The attitude of custodial staff was nominated as a barrier by some fathers in prison. This manifested in shorter visits than anticipated and in visitors being abruptly cut off. These issues were reported much more commonly in one site.

This is our only time that we get. We're not asking much of them. It's just, 'Get us on the screen, don't keep your families waiting', if they're just sitting around me. But if they've been sitting there 15 minutes, that's 15 minutes we lose out on, just because they're lazy to get on the PA and call us to come. (Father 8)

Usually they give a five-minute warning or something. They never gave us a five-minute warning and she just come up and stood next to me, and she's just trying to press the button. I'm like, 'What are you doing?' She's like—wouldn't even let me say goodbye to my family. She's like, 'You gotta go.' And she started to press that button to hang up ... She could have at least just been nicer and said ... 'Look, you need to say goodbye.' (Father 6)

Unsurprisingly in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, public health related restrictions on visits acted as a gatekeeper to visitation contact. Data collection spanned the period of varying public health order restrictions and ended soon after all restrictions were removed in NSW correctional centres. Consequently, some of the data reflect conditions which are no longer active (eg social distancing and mandatory vaccination) but which had significant consequences for the experience and perception of in-person and video visitation. Responses to contain the spread of COVID-19 led the prisons to cease most or all in-person visitations. For some families, this meant no contact at all for long periods of time and no in-person visits at all. The video visit sessions provided a source of contact for families when in-person contact was not possible. When in-person visits were allowed again, some carers mentioned that going through the COVID-19 screening was challenging as it meant they had to take more time to get there.

When I went to go visit him, having COVID tests [meant being] there half an hour earlier than the visit, sometimes even earlier than that. (Carer 12)

Some carers were not able to commence the in-person visits as they, the child or the father did not have the required vaccinations and therefore continued with the video visits.

Video calls were great, even after the pandemic when visits were allowed back in ... they wouldn't let you touch ... on those visits anymore. So yeah, the video calls were more personal. (Carer 5)

They are vaccinated, but my partner [is] one of those anti-vaxxers, so there's not much I can do about that from in here. (Father 19)

The good aspects of it are I don't think I could've been able to do this sentence without having them, without getting a visit. I would've gone and got the injections. And I religiously do not believe in the COVID injection. (Father 21)

Other COVID-19 disruptions included video calls being cancelled due to lack of staff related to COVID-19 medical leave.

It was really destructive because of the lockdowns, and it was really disruptive, because sometimes you would book the video calls and they would get to a point where they'd be, like, 'Oh, we've got too many people off with COVID or too many people in the jail have COVID [so we're] not doing videos this week.' (Carer 11)

Sometimes fathers were put in isolation as they had contracted COVID-19 and the family did not know where he was or what was happening.

They've had to isolate for two weeks because of COVID. So that was very stressful, not knowing how he was. (Carer 7)

COVID also impacted in-person visits as more restrictions were introduced such as the wearing of face masks but also not having activities for children available due to the COVID restrictions or fathers not being allowed to move around and play with the child. This was boring for the child and they would get restless during the process. (Carer 3)

Some fathers were incarcerated after the pandemic when video visits were already implemented, so there were no direct disruptions in terms of going from in-person to video visits. For others, the absence of in-person visits was keenly felt, but video visits were a useful stopgap.

Being able to see him in person and give him a hug and a kiss and that kind of thing. I do hate video, because in that sense, because you don't get that. But, as I said at the start of the interview, I'll take what I can. I mean, contact is contact and I'm very grateful that we are still allowed. (Carer 7)



Conclusion and recommendations

There was a rapid change from in-person visits to video visitation in the crisis context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research was conducted during 2021 to 2022, capturing a multi-jurisdictional, historical record of how these changes unfolded. In addition to understanding the impacts of policies and procedures in correctional centres, this research highlights the flow-on effects of public health measures on other services domains—in this instance, the justice system and children and families impacted by the incarceration of fathers.

On the whole, widespread uptake of video visitation in prisons is a positive outcome emerging from the challenging experience of the pandemic. The use of video visitation technology has been met by corrective services with enthusiasm and goodwill, largely viewed as an opportunity for innovation in a setting that has historically been slow to introduce change. To date, the focus of corrective services has been on what we term ‘Video visitation 1.0’—ensuring that incarcerated people can see and communicate with their loved ones. Now that the pandemic is subsiding, and it is clear that video visitation will continue going forward, corrective services are turning to the question of how else video visitation can be used, especially around procedures for in-cell technology usage. We suggest that this evolution to ‘Video visitation 2.0’ should centre on how video visitation can be more effectively used to support quality contact that can strengthen and enhance positive relationships between people in prison and their families, especially children. With that goal in mind, we highlight key messages that emerge from the research and recommendations based on this evidence, alongside acknowledging limitations of the research.

Key messages from the research

A window into the child's world

Video visitation enables incarcerated fathers to enter into the social worlds of their child in ways never before possible. Through video chats, fathers can be 'present' virtually for milestones and special events. They can share interactions with their child while the child remains in the comfort of their own home, supporting the child's emotional regulation as compared with the potentially stressful prison setting. Fathers can see things within the child's environment. This new level of access into their children's lives can enable fathers to be more attuned to what is happening, strengthening their capacity to parent their children and maintain their emotional relationship. However, it is important to stress that video visits are a complement and enhancement rather than a replacement for in-person visits, which enable essential physical touch and interaction.

Father engagement in video visitation

Some fathers are able to engage in child-focused ways during video visits and take on their child's perspective. However, others found interactions more challenging. Fathers could be supported to prepare for visits to enable meaningful interactions—for example, by thinking through beforehand what they would like to talk about with their children. As video visits develop in the future, opportunities to connect visits with other parenting-focused initiatives, such as creative story writing and reading, should be explored to achieve compound benefits.

Balancing safety and privacy

Given the newness of video visitation, there are issues arising that require policy and operational attention. One significant concern that emerged from the research is the potential for coercive control. Corrective services will need to balance the desire for privacy with the need to prevent and monitor the potential for abusive or otherwise unsafe interactions.

Providing equitable access

The research uncovered some issues around equitable access to video visitation, related to booking policies as well as availability of technology. A 'first come, first served' policy to booking video visitations meant that, in large extended family networks with complex dynamics, slots for video visits could be dominated by one person, while another was unable to book a visit. In situations where there are different carers of a father's children (who may not communicate with each other), a quota system could allow each child a minimum number of monthly visits with their father. There are also issues with access to video visitation technology, which relies upon internet connection and may not be available to families in remote geographic areas, and which may impact on the quality of video visits in some correctional centres.

Limitations

This research is subject to limitations which should be kept in mind when considering its findings and their implications. The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when public health orders and rates of community and institutional disease transmission were changing, sometimes rapidly. The data reflect policies and measures in place at the time of collection, which varied within and between jurisdictions. Some of the restrictions no longer exist; these include the requirements for in-person visitors to wear masks, practise social distancing and comply with vaccination requirements. While the study has captured perspectives of incarcerated fathers, children's carers, corrective services staff and community-based service providers, children were not part of data collection, so their perspectives are missed. Moreover, fathers and carers were limited to two prisons in New South Wales, neither of which was a private prison nor in a remote area, missing those perspectives. (Two jurisdictions initially agreed to provide data from one privately operated prison each, but these data were not shared.) In terms of the information provided by states and territories, not all jurisdictions were able to provide the data requested, resulting in gaps.

Recommendations

The recommendations below are not limited to fathers in prison. All parents in prison are likely to benefit from greater access to and support for quality video visit interactions with their children. Implementing these recommendations has the potential to generate wide benefits.

- Increase opportunities for video visitation by offering longer and more frequent visits, and varied timeslots (eg one weekday evening and one weekend).
- Enable registration for group video visitation calls for people who are approved for visits and have different residences, including those based overseas.
- Change the booking time opening to daytime (eg 8 am) rather than midnight or early morning.
- Review feasibility of allowing video visitation on in-cell technology, including considering how to maintain safety given the potential for coercive control.
- Promote consistency within states in the systems and processes used, to reduce confusion for visitors using these booking systems.
- Increase availability of audiovisual link suites, which are best suited for video visits, though given resource constraints this must be balanced with increasing the numbers of video visits that can be offered.
- Embed discussion of respectful communication in existing programs (eg men's behaviour change, parenting programs), including consideration of respectful communication with former partners and how to use contact to build quality relationships.

- Identify additional opportunities to support respectful and quality contact (eg in men’s groups and other settings).
- Review opportunities to provide equitable access in areas with known reception and technology inequalities.
- Address support needs for visitors whose first language is not English, or who have low literacy, by introducing visual communications into booking and connection instructions and protocols for staff to effectively respond to enquiries from these visitors.
- Recognise staff success and show appreciation for those staff who have facilitated ongoing family connections for fathers and their children.
- Support carers of children with disability to engage effectively in quality video visits, and support all carers to help children with their intense emotions at the end of a visit.
- Take care when communicating changes to visits at short notice, recognising the potential to upset children who are expecting a video visit with their father.

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URLs correct as at November 2023

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Appendix A: Electronic searches and results

PsycInfo

1	Exp institution visitation/
2	("prison based parenting" or "prison visit*" or "parental incarceration" or "video visit*").mp
3	1 and 2
4	3 limited to peer reviewed, English language and 2000–Current
5	23 results (exported)

Social Services Abstracts

1	noft("Prison based parenting" OR "parental incarceration" OR "prison visit*" OR "video visit*" OR "institution visitation")
2	limited to peer reviewed, English language and 2000–Current
3	133 results (exported)

1	noft("Prison based parenting" OR "parental incarceration")
2	noft("prison visit*" OR "video visit*" OR "institution visitation")
3	1 and 2
4	3 limited to peer reviewed, English language and 2000–Current
5	5 results (exported)

Sociological Abstracts

1	noft("Prison based parenting" OR "parental incarceration" OR "prison visit*" OR "video visit*" OR "institution visitation")
2	limited to peer reviewed, English language and 2000–Current
3	167 results (exported)

1	noft("Prison based parenting" OR "parental incarceration")
2	noft("prison visit*" OR "video visit*" OR "institution visitation")
3	1 and 2

CINCH

1	All fields (“Prison based parenting” OR “parental incarceration” OR “prison visit*” OR “video visit*” OR “institution visitation”)
2	limited to peer reviewed, English language and 2000–Current
3	9 results (2 duplicates); 7 results (exported)

Criminal Justice Abstracts

1	AB (“Prison based parenting” OR “parental incarceration” OR “prison visit*” OR “video visit*” OR “institution visitation”)
2	limited to peer reviewed, English language and 2000–Current
3	150 results

1	(“Prison based parenting” OR “parental incarceration”)
2	(“prison visit*” OR “video visit*” OR “institution visitation”)
3	1 and 2
4	3 limited to peer reviewed, English language and 2000–Current
5	11 results (exported)

Google Scholar

1	(“Prison based parenting” OR “parental incarceration”)
2	(“prison visit*” OR “video visit*” OR “institution visitation”)
3	1 and 2
4	3 limited to 2000–Current and ‘review articles’
5	6 results (exported)

University of Sydney library database

1	(“Prison based parenting” OR “parental incarceration”)
2	(“prison visit*” OR “video visit*” OR “institution visitation”)
3	1 and 2
4	3 limited to peer reviewed, English language and 2000–Current
5	115 results (exported)

FAMILY

1	All fields (“Prison based parenting” OR “parental incarceration” OR “prison visit*” OR “video visit*” OR “institution visitation”)
2	limited to peer reviewed, English language and 2000–Current
3	11 results (3 duplicates) 8 results (exported)

JSTOR

1	Abstract (“Prison based parenting” OR “parental incarceration” OR “prison visit*” OR “video visit*” OR “institution visitation”)
2	limited to English language and 2000–Current
3	27 results

1	(“Prison based parenting” OR “parental incarceration”)
2	(“prison visit*” OR “video visit*” OR “institution visitation”)
3	1 and 2
4	3 limited to English language and 2000–Current
5	7 results (exported)

ERIC

1	(“Prison based parenting” OR “parental incarceration” OR “prison visit*” OR “video visit*” OR “institution visitation”).mp
2	limited to English language, peer-reviewed and 2000–Current
3	35 results (exported)

1	(“Prison based parenting” OR “parental incarceration”)
2	(“prison visit*” OR “video visit*” OR “institution visitation”)
3	1 and 2
4	3 limited to English language and 2000–Current
5	3 results (exported)

Appendix B: Grey literature searches and results

Database	Search terms	Exported results
National Institute of Justice (NIJ)	"prison visit"	3
Child Welfare Information Gateway	Topic search: children of incarcerated parents; "prison visit"; "video visit"	8
Urban Institute	"prison visit"; "video visit"	1
SHINE for Kids	Research papers page	3
ARACY	"visitation"; "prison visit"; "video visit"	0
Children's Social Care (What Works Network)	"visitation"; "prison visit"; "video visit"	0
Youth Endowment Fund (What Works Network)	"visitation"; "prison visit"; "video visit"	0
CEBC	"visitation"; "prison visit"; "video visit"; "prison"	3
APO	"visitation"; "prison visit"; "video visit"; "prison"	0
CFCA	"visitation"; "prison visit"; "video visit"; "prison"	0
Campbell Collab	"visitation"; "prison visit"; "video visit"; "prison"	0
Cochrane Library	"visitation"; "prison visit"; "video visit"; "prison"	0
AIC	"visitation"; "prison visit"; "visit"	0

Appendix C: WA visit data

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022 (Jan– Mar)	2017– 2022 Total
Total number of visits categorised as 'video'	116	2771	4741	24,480	35,233	8,678	76,019
As % all visits	0.05	1.24	2.12	13.45	18.15	22.83	6.95
% video visits with an Aboriginal person in prison	20.69	3.83	6.56	17.95	20.11	18.63	17.8
Number son, daughter, stepson, stepdaughter who attended a video visit with a male prisoner	3	342	689	9,062	13,449	3,749	27,294
Number son, daughter, stepson, stepdaughter under 18 who attended a video visit with a male prisoner	3	177	429	7,824	11,666	3,161	23,260

CRG reports
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