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Visiting time: A tale of two prisons

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Abstract

Prison visitation remains an under-researched and under-theorised aspect of prison life. Drawing on extensive fieldwork, this article takes an in-depth look at the lived experience of the prison visit from the perspectives of prisoners and their visitors. First, this paper describes the inherently problematic nature of current visits practice reflecting on the restrictions placed on prisoners and families and the longer term implications for their lives post-release. Whilst acknowledging these fundamental flaws, the paper then, describes what can make some visiting experiences more 'survivable' than others by comparing visiting experiences at two ostensibly similar prisons.

Introduction

Most studies treat the visits hall as peripheral to the 'main' prison or primarily speak to visits in relation to their capacity to influence re-offending rates (Duwe and Clark, 2013; Cochran, 2013; Mears et al., 2012). Aside from rare, but valuable, exceptions (Comfort, 2007; Christian, 2005; Kotarba, 1979; Sharratt, 2014) there is a dearth of research on the lived experience of the prison visit. In Prison Service Instruction 16-2011 (that details expected general standards around visits practice), the predominant focus from the perspective of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) is value of prison visits for their utility:

Regular and good quality contact time between an offending parent and their children/partner provides an incentive not to re-offend, and helps prisoners arrange accommodation and employment/training on release. . . . Visits also assist in maintaining good order. Good quality visits in a relaxed environment make a significant contribution to the well being and attitude of prisoners and generally help to build better relationships between families and staff to the point where families are encouraged to share sensitive information which may have an impact on the welfare of the prisoner. (Prison Service Instruction 16-2011, Providing Visits and Services to Visitors)

This recognition of the importance of family contact is to be welcomed and supported. However, that NOMS's focus is clearly on incentivising prisons to facilitate family contact on the basis of their utility and linking access to visits to prisoners' incentive and earned privilege status is problematic, as I have discussed elsewhere (Hutton, forthcoming). Such a prison and prisoner-centric approach arguably reduces prisoners' families to 'tools' for reducing re-offending or 'unpaid informal law enforcement personnel' (Scott and Codd, 2010: 152). Most problematically, this limited focus fails to fully take into account families' standalone rights under the European Convention on Human Rights 1950 (ECHR) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989. The study that informs this article aimed to fill the research lacuna. Adopting a less instrumental approach to the visiting endeavour than we see in policy, the study explored empirically how prisoners and their families understood the terms 'private and family life' under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights in the prison environment. In essence, then, the study was an examination of to what extent, the Article 8 ECHR right was respected at two local male prisons in England and Wales with reference to the 'lived experience' of the prison visit by asking those directly affected.

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Much of the (sparse) literature on prison visits describes them as a bitter-sweet experience (Codd, 2008; Comfort, 2007; Liebling, 2004). To a great extent this proved to be true, as will be discussed below. In the first instance, then, this article will discuss the inherently problematic nature of the current visiting system, focusing on 'restrictions on prisoners' movements', 'restrictions on physical contact' and 'security and surveillance' during visits. The paper will then reflect on the serious implications of these visiting conditions on prisoners' relationships with their families post-release. However, just as Liebling (2011: 550) found that 'some prisons are more survivable than others' because there are 'differences that matter', I found that, similarly, some visiting experiences are more survivable than others too. Despite both prisons having identical functions, similar operational capacities and inner-city locations, the difference between each prison's ethos around family contact was stark. This translated into significant differences in how family contact was experienced. The aim of this article is to explore the practical implications of these findings and look more closely at 'what matters' in the realm of prison visits for those who experience them.

Methodology

Over the space of 10 months in 2012–13, I conducted an ethnographic study of visiting practices in two male Category B/C prisons in England and Wales: HMP Doncaster and HMP Anon.¹ Both prisons in the study were busy local prisons chosen because they are the type of establishment where the majority of prisoners will serve at least part of their sentences. This ensured that I would encounter a wide range of experiences to draw my sample from. For visitors to the prison, the only criterion for participation was being connected to and visiting a prisoner who was a family member. With prisoners, I recruited those who received visits and a small number who did not. Initially, at both prisons, I employed convenience sampling. I then undertook theoretical or purposive sampling to ensure I captured specific types of visiting experiences, for example with those who participated in closed and family-orientated visits. I undertook 61 semi-structured interviews with prisoners and their adult visitors (both romantic partners and extended family members). Alongside extensive observations of every stage of the visits process, I also conducted informal and ad-hoc interviews with visits staff. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, analysed and coded thematically.

I deliberately chose HMP Doncaster as Her Majesty's Inspector of Prisons (2010) had described the provisions for family contact there as 'generous', 'innovative' and 'creative'. At HMP Doncaster, to promote family contact as a core part of the Senior Management Team's role, the prison had created a 'multi-disciplinary' department called 'Families First'. Families First run prison visits and other family initiatives working in partnership with security personnel to create a working environment that synthesises and respects what are often seen as competing aims: maintaining order and security in the prison and facilitating as high quality family contact as possible. In short, the two aims are not viewed as inherently oppositional and the prison continuously pushes the boundaries of how family contact can operate in the prison environment. Therefore, in addition to 'standard visits' the Families First department facilitates a plethora of extra visits including 'daddy newborn visits', 'toddler groups', 'family days', 'homework dads', a 'social kitchen' and foundation courses in parenting, family learning and early years.

My second prison was a more traditional prison that recognised their limitations around family contact but wanted to transform their visiting practices. HMP Anon had a much less progressive visiting ethos compared to HMP Doncaster; they had only recently started to hold family days. However, they informed me that they aspired to emulate the visiting system at HMP Doncaster,

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which they considered to be the 'gold standard'. Therefore, I thought it would be of value to study a prison at the beginning of this transition.

Common ground

The most common or 'standard' form of prison visits take place in a communal visits hall. Prisoners and their visitors sit opposite one another, surrounded by other prisoners and their visitors for anywhere from half an hour to three hours, depending on the rules of the prison. During 'standard visits' prisoners and their visitors are monitored by security cameras overhead, prison staff, who frequently weave in and out of the tables to observe, and, of course, other prisoners and their visitors. Despite distinct differences between prisons, areas of commonality emerged that reflected the inherently challenging nature of maintaining family contact by way of these 'standard' visits alone. What follows is a brief overview of the findings of the study focusing on three areas: restrictions on prisoners' movements', 'restrictions on physical contact' and 'security and surveillance' during visits.

Security and surveillance

From the prison's perspective the close scrutiny of interactions on visits is deemed necessary to prevent any transfer of illicit items such as drugs or mobile phones. However, the threat to security caused by the minority who had nefarious intentions was experienced by the majority, who did not, as pre-emptively and unnecessarily punitive. This was irrespective of how well prison staff treated them (although this did matter to some extent, as will be discussed below). Some visitors were especially indignant at being subjected to multiple modes of surveillance upon reaching the visits hall. They felt they had already been through the security 'mill', having been subjected to extensive searching procedures and stripped of all but a bare minimum of their personal possessions before entering the visits hall. That the prison believed they still had to be watched and monitored after these extensive security procedures spoke to a manifestation in policy of a system-wide general mistrust of prison visitors. Many visitors felt that all families were treated as potential drug smugglers, despite there being no evidence to suggest this might be the case. Indeed, only two of the members of prisoners' families I encountered had criminal records or any involvement in criminal activities; for most the prisoner they were visiting was the only member of their family involved in the criminal justice system. And yet, there was little doubt in many visitors' minds as to how they were perceived by the prison:

You feel a bit like a criminal yourself. Trust, there is no trust is there? They think because you are coming to see a criminal, that you are kind of in circles but I'm not.
(Garth, prisoner's father, HMP Doncaster)

Therefore they felt unfairly judged by 'the people who watch those cameras' who 'don't even know my family?' (Marcus, father, HMP Anon). Sadly, because of this, many participants were keen to emphasise to me that they were-law-abiding and deferent to authority (and therefore had no intention of attempting to smuggle in drugs). These stringent security measures in the visits hall also exacerbated visitors' very real sense of being subjected to 'secondary prisonisation' (Comfort, 2007) the notion that, upon entering the prison, they were as much subject to carceral norms as the prisoners despite their purportedly remaining 'free' citizens.

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Whilst many developed coping strategies to reduce the impact of this perpetual supervision, it was, for most, impossible to completely ignore or dismiss. The constant surveillance made many reluctant to discuss anything of significance due to the lack of privacy on visits. Even the most innocent of conversations could become risky in the prison visiting environment. Joshua explained that he had stopped his mother discussing with him a fight between his brothers for fear it might be overheard or recorded. His fear was that a relatively innocuous family dispute would be misinterpreted as indicative of a 'troubled' home environment and therefore negatively affect his application for home detention curfew. There was no evidence that his conversation would be recorded or overheard, but the possibility and the consequent perceived risks were too much to chance. This quasi-paranoiac state manifested itself in a number of prisoners and visitors and led to a self-consciousness that made them constantly aware of how even the most innocent of gestures could be interpreted by those monitoring their movements. For example, it was not uncommon for prisoners to state that they felt they could not hug their children too frequently on standard visits for fear the security department might infer that they were attempting to smuggle drugs into the prison. Physical touch then, for some, became akin to making themselves and their visitors a security risk.

Restrictions on movement

During standard visits, prisoners' movements are severely restricted; they are not allowed to move from their chairs for the duration of the visit. Contingent on the prison and the exercise of staff discretion, a breach of this rule could result in mild censure or the threat of or actual termination of the visit. How damaging this requirement was to the nature of prisoners' contact with their younger children was a recurring theme throughout the research. Whilst it is to be applauded that many prisons now provide play areas in visiting halls, the implications of doing so are not straightforward. Often, after an initial greeting, their children would get bored of sitting around the table and would want to go and play in the crèche area. As prisoners had to remain in their seats at all times they were not allowed to follow their children there, instead having to refuse their children's requests to come and play with them – a situation as upsetting as it was frustrating, as Calvin explained:

just being sat and getting annoyed with myself and him when he's asking me, 'Dad come over here' and I've told him, cos after a couple of times of telling 'em it starts playing in your head and you're thinking why the fuck can't I just get up and do it? We're in a big room, doors are shut, why can't we walk about with us kids? It's wrong. (Calvin, father, HMP Doncaster)

Participants affirmed Murray et al. (2012)'s assertion that 'normal visitation environments do not facilitate the close contact that could reassure children of parental availability', as children also found this enforced distance confusing and upsetting:

And I don't want her thinking that I don't want to, cos I want to play with her as much as she wants to play with me, she's my kid. (William, father, HMP Doncaster)

Many questioned why, if prisoners and their families had been searched before entering the visits space, they could not then join their children in the play area and play with them as any 'normal' father would. These restrictions on movement also impacted on romantic relationships. As many expressed to me, most couples do not spend their time sitting opposite each other for hours; to do so was abnormal and made interactions awkward and stilted, particularly in light of the restrictions on physical contact to be discussed below. Most families would be able to move around during their time together, not remain seated in one fixed spot the entire time. Most longed to be able to sit next

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to each other during a visit as they would at home and could not understand why this was not possible.

Restrictions on physical contact

The rules around permitted levels of physical contact in the visits hall also took their toll on prisoners' relationships with their significant others. The Prison Service Instruction governing visits (NOMS, 2011) sets out that, at a minimum, prisons should allow 'prisoners to embrace their visitor at least at the beginning and at the end' of a visit. What this frequently translated into was a general prohibition on contact during the main body of a visit beyond, at staff's discretion, the holding of hands. Whilst prisoners said that these prohibitions had little impact on their relationships with extended family members (as one prisoner pointed out, a hug and a kiss with his Mom is probably enough!), this enforced separation from their romantic partners led to a distancing in their relationships. Visitors felt similarly stymied too. They were not referring to a lack of sexual contact; most understood that in a shared space where children were present, heavy petting was not appropriate. It was the lack of intimacy this restricted contact led to – not being able to hold hands or kiss more than twice during a visit felt unnatural for those connected romantically to one and other. Spontaneous shows of affection, an integral part of a romantic relationship, were prohibited in the prison environment. This was especially problematic when one or the other was having a difficult time. This inability to touch meant they were unable to offer even the most basic physical comfort of a hug to one another.

The aftermath

The combination of constant surveillance and restrictions of movement and physical contact led many to question how their relationships could remain normal, when face-to-face contact took place in such abnormal conditions. The consequence of these visiting conditions was that most of the prisoners I interviewed felt that the nature and brevity of contact in prison had led to a lack of intimacy in their relationships with their families. They were no longer fully engaged with the minutiae of their families' lives. This was echoed by visitors who would, with reluctance, agree. The prisoners were especially frustrated as they were conscious that to a great extent it was their own fault; they were responsible for the actions that had led them to prison and the consequent impact on their families. But they felt powerless because the limited contact available to them in the prison environment had exacerbated the negative effects of imprisonment and impeded any efforts to remain fathers, brothers and sons.

They appreciated the importance of having contact with their families as a way of maintaining their relationships and saw this time as a welcome respite from the prison environment, thus lessening the negative effects of imprisonment. But they also found standard visiting conditions challenging in a way that often made contact with their loved ones as much a source of pain as of joy. It is for this reason that a member of staff at HMP Doncaster described standard visits as 'empty visits'. Visits were a mechanism for seeing their families, not for being or remaining a part of their family's life in any meaningful way.

This had implications for life post-release irrespective of sentence length. Many of my participants expressed real concerns for the sustainability of their relationships upon release, even where there was a dogged determination and will to stay together. Family breakdown during the prison sentence is common; nearly half of prisoners in England and Wales lose contact with their families, many separate from their partners (NACRO, 2000) and a significant number of prisoners' marriages end in

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divorce or separation (Dodd and Hunter, 1992). Relationships ambled along during imprisonment but the distance was keenly felt and, for many, the real test would be after the sentence was completed as they attempted to resume 'normal' relations after such a long period of abnormality.

Differences that matter

There were important differences between the two prisons that, while they could not solve all of the inherent problems in the current system of 'standard' visits, certainly ameliorated their negative effects. These were: the quality and frequency of visits offered, whether staff attitudes towards visitors were characterised by care or contempt, and the senior management's approach to the management of visits.

Quality and frequency of visits

Both prisons were committed to offering family days on a regular basis. Compared to standard visits, family days were coveted because of their more relaxed conditions. Prisoners and their families are able to move around freely for a few hours, engage in fun activities such as face-painting, and eat a meal together. Due to the less restrictive conditions, not only were family days perceived as an opportunity for the prisoners to 'momentarily restore their role as a parental figure' (Dixey and Woodall, 2012: 37), but they also provided them with a brief period of relative normality. This qualification is made here because family days should not be treated as a panacea, and it is important to recognise their limitations as a measure for improving family contact in prisons. Not least because, they still take place under constant surveillance similar to standard visits, albeit in less crowded conditions. Furthermore, a family day is a great day for all concerned but it is an 'event'; they usually only happen once a month. In this respect, they do not allow for the sustained high quality contact so many of these prisoners so desperately craved with their children. To be clear, I am not advocating the discontinuation of family days. Putting on a family day for 10 to 15 prisoners once a month is a good start but it does not make a family friendly prison. In order to better facilitate a higher quality and frequency of family contact, more needs to be done.

One important difference between the prisons was the range of visits available to prisoners and their families; in this respect HMP Doncaster excelled. The ethos was centred on offering high quality and frequent family contact for as many prisoners as operational costs would allow. Many of the men I interviewed were active in their children's lives prior to imprisonment. They had lived with their children, taken them to school every day and generally described themselves as having good and strong relationships with their children. They felt that they had been good fathers on the outside and wanted to continue being so, as far as the prison environment would allow. HMP Doncaster did not start from the assumption, as is so frequently the case, that prisoners are inherently deficient as fathers and need to be taught how to father their children. The visits ethos at HMP Doncaster acknowledged the diversity of prisoners' relationships with their children. Therefore in addition to offering fathering programmes for those who needed them, where men had been 'good' dads before imprisonment this was also recognised. Families First worked hard with those men to maintain their bonds with their children during imprisonment. The operation of the Families First initiative, by facilitating a higher quality and frequency of contact, allowed fathers the opportunity to stay 'in' their children's lives in a way impossible by way of 'standard' visits and infrequent access to family days alone. In addition to family days, the prison offered weekly 'daddy newborn visits', toddler days, homework clubs, play projects, treasure box and a social kitchen that enabled prisoners to prepare and eat a meal with their children. The importance to participants of

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these enhanced opportunities for more family focused visits lay in allowing them a sustained period of unprecedented 'fatherhood' in the prison environment that, dependent on their circumstances, re-established or maintained their role as central to their children's existence. Importantly, despite the more relaxed and intimate conditions on these visits, security infractions were incredibly rare.

Nigel's case is instructive here. Nigel had previously, by his own admission, been a heavy duty drug dealer before imprisonment but had ceased all illegal activity upon the birth of his son, Brandon, eight years before. Since Brandon's birth he had lived with his son and long-term partner, working and living – in his words – 'a normal life'. He had returned to prison for a relatively minor drug offence committed out of financial desperation due to losing his job. He was devastated and ashamed at finding himself behind bars again. Nigel, with the encouragement and support of the Families First team, threw himself into every family activity there was at HMP Doncaster in order to maintain the bond with his son; he attended family days, took part in play projects, and homework dads every Saturday. During our interview, Nigel described how during the time at 'homework dads' he could sit on a sofa with his arm around his son, which was how they would sit normally at home. This opportunity for a small period of normality with his son made him remember what he had lost and determined his resolve to never return to prison again.

These additional family visits gave him space to talk to his child in relative privacy in a way that was impossible in a crowded visiting hall or during the 'excitement' of a family day. Children of prisoners can experience trauma and anxiety due to the unexpected separation from their parents and experiences of stigma (Loesel et al., 2012). However, a visits system that allows for sustained, high quality contact undoubtedly lessens the potentially profound and wide-ranging harmful effects of parental imprisonment on children. During his regular 'homework dad' visits, Nigel could have the type of conversations he did not feel able to have with his son in a crowded visits hall. Being able to sit together quietly and intimately, he could remain better connected to his son because it allowed for more natural and relaxed interactions. Most importantly, this visits environment allowed Brandon to ask the questions he so desperately needed to ask of his father about why he was in prison and get answers that would re-assure him that his dad was still there for him.

The variety of visits at HMP Doncaster was also of huge importance for men on longer sentences as they could maintain high quality contact with their children all the way through their sentence. Clive's case illustrates this 'progression'. His son had been born while he was on remand at HMP Doncaster. Working with the Families First team, a few days after his son was born, Clive had been able to have a 'daddy newborn' visit. He was immensely grateful that his first-time meeting with his son would not be in a crowded visits hall surrounded by strangers but in a quiet, well equipped room with his partner. Although a member of Families First staff was present during the visit, their presence was unobtrusive and facilitating. During the next few months, Clive had a number of these visits and came to know his son; he could change his nappy, weigh him, bath him, feed him and carry out all the 'normal' duties of a new dad. When I asked him what this meant to him, he simply said, 'my son knows me, really knows me'. Once his son was too old for 'daddy newborn' visits, Clive progressed to toddler visits that again allowed him to maintain a higher quality of bond with his child than if he had just been able to interact with him on standard visits or family days. This consistent high quality contact meant that Clive felt connected to his child, giving him hope for maintaining that bond upon release, which was a strong impetus for him to stop offending upon his release.

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Visitor treatment: Care vs contempt

On my first day conducting fieldwork at HMP Anon, when I explained the aims of my research a visitor said, 'if I told you the truth about this place, they'd have to shut it down'. When I explained my presence as a researcher to a visits officer he told me that 'I need to make sure I keep an open mind because they lie . . . they will have an agenda' – they being the prisoners and their visitors. This set the scene for the nature of the interactions between visiting staff and visitors – for the most part oppositional and antagonistic on both sides of the fence. Positive and warm interactions were duly noted but unfortunately they were the exception, not the norm. The general perception amongst visitors was that visits staff, and by extension the prison, held visitors in contempt. Visitors generally expressed the sentiment that staff enjoyed exercising their power over them and had no empathy or understanding for how difficult many visitors found visiting a prison. I witnessed numerous examples of staff behaviour that explained (and supported) these sentiments. For example, it was not unusual for legal visitors to be ushered to the front of the queue for processing even when domestic visits were running late and a large number of domestic visitors had been waiting for a significant length of time. At other times staff would stand outside finishing their cigarettes in full view of domestic visitors waiting to be processed. Troublingly, as Maguire (2016) also witnessed, staff would frequently express inappropriate views about prisoners' families when they believed they were out of my earshot, as the following fieldnote describes:

I'm in the visits hall, an officer is next to me but I don't think she realises I can hear her as she calls a kid who looks about seven years old 'mini me C&R kid' and tells her colleagues to keep an eye on that one. She adds 'he's delights' in a sarcastic tone. (Fieldnote at HMP Anon, 9 January 2013)

It was very clear from her affect that this officer did not find this child delightful. Further, the use of the term C&R is a reference to the control and restraint procedures used to restrain unruly prisoners. The clear implication here is that this child's behaviour was not to be viewed as simply that of a bored, and therefore boisterous, child running around a visits hall; his having a prisoner for a father transformed him into something more sinister.

The frustration felt by visitors at these actions was palpable. It went beyond an indignation at the contempt staff displayed towards them. Not being able to get into the visits hall because a staff member thought it was more important to finish a cigarette or privilege a legal visitor's speedy entrance to the prison had real-world consequences. Visitors' time with their loved ones had already been greatly attenuated by the fact of imprisonment. Many had gone from living with their partners to now seeing them for only a few hours a month during visits. Therefore every second counted on the way into the prison because every second lost in processing meant less time with their loved one. Because there was a general sense that staff held them in contempt, even the most innocuous inquiries from staff were read as antagonistic, even if they were not intended as such. For example, despite the searching procedure at HMP Anon being less extensive than that at HMP Doncaster, it was perceived more negatively by visitors. The perception was that when staff searched them on their way into the prison, they were not just doing their job – it was personal and an exercise of power over them. However, it is important to note that not all visits staff at HMP Anon held these negative views of visitors; some acted in a consistently kind and professional manner, but their efforts were undermined by the attitudes of the majority. Similarly, the staff who behaved inappropriately were not especially vicious or nasty people

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away from the visits environment and would have struggled to see anything wrong with their behaviour. It was a consequence of an ingrained culture that permeated the entire visiting system and led to a perpetual cycle of general acrimony between staff and visitors.

The contrast between the two prisons in the way visitors were treated could not have been starker. Where HMP Anon was characterised by underlying institutional contempt, HMP Doncaster was perceived by visitors as a prison that cared about them and complaints about staff treatment of visitors were rare. The vast majority of visitors described having a good rapport with staff, and I observed many instances of warm and friendly interactions between visitors and staff during my observations. Because of this warmth and familiarity in their relations, it was not unusual for visitors to refer to staff by their first names and vice versa. This ethos of caring for visitors was driven by a deep empathy with visitors' predicaments; indeed visits staff at HMP Doncaster were very keen for me to understand just how difficult life was for many of the visitors.

In practical terms, this empathy manifested itself in efforts by visits staff to do all they could to make the visitors' progression into the prison as problem-free as possible. Staff would invariably take the time to explain to new visitors exactly what the process was or why staff had to take particular actions that could have been perceived as obstructive without an explanation. I saw many instances of staff going above and beyond the call of duty – lending visitors £1 for the locker, calling the prison housing department for a visitor who was worried that her son would have nowhere to live after release, and frantically trying to get late arrivals across to the visits hall so that they did not miss a visit. This facilitation of visitors' smooth transition into the prison was considered an integral part of the visiting staff's role. However, I am not presenting HMP Doncaster as a comparative utopia. Visitors could name the 'rotten apples' among staff, but the difference was that these staff were generally, and genuinely, considered to be the exception, not the rule. But where visits staff did not act according to the ethos of care, visitors expressed frustration and, similar to HMP Anon, experienced these behaviours as contempt. Often, if there was a long queue, staff at HMP Doncaster would open the centre to begin the processing of visitors a little earlier than the advertised opening times to prevent a backlog. However, on one occasion, despite long queues at the door (and it being within opening hours), visits centre staff instead sat at the desk drinking tea. Whilst this frustrated visitors, part of that frustration was that this (mis)treatment of visitors was such an unusual occurrence at HMP Doncaster.

Further, although interactions with staff during searching procedures were overwhelmingly perceived as friendly, courteous, and – perhaps most importantly for this stage of the visits process – respectful, there were problematic aspects. The searching procedure was considered particularly extensive for the category of the prison, reinforcing their perceptions of a procedural mistrust of visitors. However, it is important to note that this disgruntlement was rarely directed at individual staff who were, in contrast to those at HMP Anon, mostly perceived as just doing their job. Similarly, although, unlike HMP Anon, legal visitors and families went through the same process in the order at which they arrived, there was no requirement for legal visitors to remove their shoes; there was still some distinction made which was noted by several visitors.

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Despite these problematic aspects at HMP Doncaster, the ethos of care that permeated the visits process there made a significant difference to visitors' experiences; the whole process of entering a prison was perceived as much less intimidating. Consequently, even those visitors who hated the fact that they had to visit a prison at all did not hate coming to Doncaster, and it was held in high regard compared to other establishments they had visited.

Full body searching

This difference in attitudes to visitors between the two prisons most starkly manifested itself in decisions around the appropriateness of full searching visitors (previously known as strip searching). Prisons have the power to conduct 'full' searches of prison visitors, for example if a drug dog indicates the presence of an illegal substance (see Prison Service Instruction 2011-67 on 'Searching the Person'). A full body search of visitors mirrors exactly those carried out on prisoners: first the top half of their clothing is removed and that part of the visitor's body is examined, and then the same follows for the bottom half.

To this extent, it is perhaps the ultimate imposition of carceral norms on an allegedly free citizen – secondary prisonisation personified (Comfort, 2007). Recognising this, at HMP Doncaster the prospect of full searching a visitor was deemed unconscionable and contradictory to the general ethos of treating visitors with dignity and respect. In short, it was deemed inappropriate for the prison to carry out such an invasive procedure on a member of the public in spite of having the legal authority to do so. If there was strong enough evidence to suggest an illegal substance was present then the appropriate action was to call the police. At HMP Anon, it was a very different approach. Full body searching of visitors was, if not common, then certainly not unusual. The few participants I spoke to who had been full searched, perhaps unsurprisingly, felt demeaned and humiliated by the process, not least because prison officers who would then be monitoring their visits had seen them naked and at their most vulnerable. But they objected most of all at then being subjected to closed visiting measures. Despite their having been cleared of wrongdoing so viscerally, perplexingly, if a full search had been conducted and no evidence of illegal substances found, a closed visit was still imposed despite this finding of innocence. Visitors viewed this as unnecessarily punitive, speaking to an ongoing, deep rooted and fundamental mistrust of visitors irrespective of proven innocence or not.

Management style

The aim here is not to romanticise the staff at HMP Doncaster and vilify those at HMP Anon. Some staff at HMP Doncaster disagreed with the Families First endeavour vehemently, although they were few and far between. But even where staff did hold the Families First initiative at HMP Doncaster in contempt, because the cultural shift was so entrenched and so conspicuously supported by senior management, there was little disgruntled staff could do to disrupt it. It is perhaps an understatement to say that Families First was not universally accepted when it first came into existence. However, the then Director, in spite of strong opposition at times, consistently supported and encouraged the efforts of the Families First manager to establish it as a department that made family contact an operational priority for all. The importance of this consistent and entrenched approach cannot be understated as it

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has allowed the department to grow in ways that would be unimaginable without this top-down endorsement.

The dangers of not doing so are illustrated by HMP Anon. As stated, when I first conducted research there visits were universally condemned by prisoners and their visitors. However, when I returned two years later significant improvements had been made. A visits manager was in place who had recruited staff into visits who cared and wanted to be there. There were fewer complaints about staff attitudes and relationships were becoming respectful and cordial. In particular, staff had become fully immersed in improving family days, and they were a real source of joy for all involved. Unfortunately, a year later this progress had been undermined by the decision of senior management to rotate most of the experienced and committed visits staff back onto the wings. They had been replaced by staff who had little experience on visits and had yet to fully embrace the emergent Family Friendly visits ethos. In short, disappointingly, visits were once again returning back to being a hostile and oppositional environment.

Conclusion

This article aims to highlight the inherent problems with the conditions under which 'standard' visits take place. The lack of privacy due to the high levels of security and surveillance, restrictions on movement, and physical contact during standard visits undermined many of the perceived benefits of the visits experience with very real-world consequences. In short, the risk is that the current format of standard visits is contributing to relationship breakdown and not supporting relationships. To this end, it counteracts many of the stated aims of visits within NOMS policy. Current policy is to send prisoners to a resettlement prison six months before their release to assist them with re-establishing their family ties. This research suggests that, for many, this may be too late. Therefore, the ultimate clarion call of my research was to consider a system of private visits akin to those found in other European countries that contract to the European Convention on Human Rights, such as France and Belgium. However, as the Commissioner for Human Rights highlighted in 2005, doing so 'would require major cultural changes' in the UK (Gil-Robles, 2005), particularly in the current political climate. But it is possible, if not to extinguish, then to ameliorate the negative effects of the visiting process on a number of grounds as the comparison between these two ostensibly similar prisons has shown. Despite family contact being central to NOMS policies on reducing re-offending (and ignoring the negative implications of such an instrumental approach), the stark difference between the two institutions highlights that current policy does not go far enough to ensure consistency and fairness in the operation of prison visitation. One final point is that while there is a move to improve visiting conditions for those visits prisoners have with their children, improving conditions on visits with their romantic partners and extended family members should also be a priority – not least because these relationships will be crucial to many prisoners post-release and therefore need to be equally nurtured during imprisonment. So, whilst there appears to be a general will to move in the right direction, more needs to be done to ensure progress is ongoing and consistent across the prison estate and to ensure sustained and high quality visitation for all prisoners and their families.

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