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# Striving for a “good” family visit: the facilitative role of a prison visitors’ centre

James Woodall and Karina Kinsella

## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to explore the conditions that create a “good” prison visit, focussing on the role that a dedicated third sector-run prison visitors’ centre plays in creating a supportive environment.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *This paper draws on a synthesis of empirical data gathering conducted over a decade at a voluntary sector-managed prison visitors’ centre based at a male prison in Northern England. The paper draws specifically on qualitative data gathered through four independent evaluations of the centre over a ten-year period.*

**Findings** – *An important point to emerge from the research is the unwavering importance of the prison visit in the life, well-being and regime of a prisoner. Prison visitors’ centres are shown to be an important part of creating positive visits experiences offering a space for composure and for support for families.*

**Originality/value** – *Many voluntary sector organisations are unable to commission large research and evaluation studies, but are often able to fund smaller pieces of work. Pooling qualitative evidence from smaller studies is a viable way to potentially strengthen commissioning decisions in this sector.*

**Keywords** *Qualitative, Prison, Family ties, Prison visiting, Prison visitors’ centre, Visitation*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

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## Background

Prisoners consistently emphasise the importance of family connections in order to remain healthy “inside” (Woodall, 2010b). Family connections can be fostered in a myriad of ways, such as letters and phone calls, but more intimately through regular face-to-face prison visitation. Indeed, prison visits, where dedicated time between the prisoner and his or her family is authorised, have been described as the “lynchpin” which keeps families together (Codd, 2008, p. 152). The factors that create a “good” visit experience for prisoners and their families is poorly reported in the literature (Moran, 2013b), but evidence shows that positive interactions during visits do offer a series of benefits in terms of improved family well-being, re-establishing family roles (i.e. father, husband) and reduced re-offending (Bales and Mears, 2008; Woodall *et al.*, 2014). The causal pathway between visits and these positive effects is not understood fully, although evidence does suggest a link which may be influenced through re-connecting as a family member and through increased social capital (de Motte *et al.*, 2012; Woodall, 2010a). The prison visit is seen not only as an important component in prisoners’ rehabilitation and family well-being, but empirical evidence has shown a number of wider effects including an improved prison environment with less violence (De Claire and Dixon, 2017).

The National Offender Management Service (2014) in England and Wales concedes that anything that prisons can do to make environmental conditions easier for visitors will result in a more positive visit. A recent inspection at HMP Grendon, for example, clearly emphasised the need for the prison to provide a properly resourced facility to support family connections (HM Chief Inspectorate of Prisons, 2011). However, despite their prominence in prison life and their potential to support family health and well-being, the spaces in which visits take place is one of the most “underresearched carceral spaces” and one, which is argued, merits further investigation (Moran, 2013b, p. 174). Not only is the prison visiting hall – where conversations

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between prisoners and their families occur – underexplored, but prison visitors’ facilities – the “liminal” space between the prison and the wider society (Moran, 2013a) where families wait prior to going for their visit in the visit room of the prison – is a site where scholarship has been particularly lacking. This is arguably because prison visitors’ centres are not compulsory for prisons to have, although there is a stronger political mandate to see all prisons with these facilities in the future. Some prisons have outstanding prison visitors’ centres, but many have none at all or sub-standard provision as noted by Alston-Smith (2017, p. 58):

It is derisory that there are still visitors’ centres that are unfit for purpose, such as the converted containers that serve as the only waiting areas at some sites.

Support services for prisoners’ families and their children, particularly the running and management of prison visitors’ centres, have been one area that the community and voluntary sector has made significant contribution to the criminal justice system (Light, 1993; Codd, 2008; Woodall *et al.*, 2009). These facilities frequently offer financial and emotional support to prisoners’ families where they are available (Christian, 2005). More commonly, however, visitors’ centres are often cited as providing much needed functional facilities – hot drinks, food, toilets and play areas for children (Foster, 2016; Christian, 2005). Figures suggest that over 50 per cent of prison visitors’ centres in the UK are managed by third-sector providers (Loucks, 2002), but this is likely to have increased given that the role of the third sector within the criminal justice system has grown considerably in recent times (Abrams *et al.*, 2016). A shifting discourse, driven by increased political momentum for a more mixed economy of criminal justice, has seen third-sector providers being integral partners to statutory and private providers in offender management and the maintenance of family connections while an individual is in prison (Mills *et al.*, 2012).

This paper explores the conditions that create a “good” prison visit experience for prisoners and their families. It focusses particularly on the role that a dedicated prison visitors’ centre plays in creating a supportive environment for families. The paper draws on data gathered over a ten-year period, focussing on the impact of visits on prisoners and their families in one prison. While these groups are not the only constituent of the visits experience (see e.g. Dixey and Woodall’s (2012) work on the impact of prison visiting on staff), they form the focus in this particular paper.

## Method

This paper draws on a synthesis of empirical data gathering conducted over a decade at a voluntary sector-managed prison visitors’ centre based at a male prison in Northern England. The visitors’ centre is a separate building from the prison itself and, as well as providing support for visitors, offers refreshments and toilet facilities.

The paper draws specifically on qualitative data gathered through four independent evaluations of the centre over a ten-year period. There are well-rehearsed protocols and approaches to synthesising quantitative data (Britten *et al.*, 2002), but there have been a number of arguments against the synthesis of qualitative data with discussions centring on whether such an approach is acceptable (Dixon-Woods *et al.*, 2005). Decision-makers often face challenges in commissioning when the existing evidence is not based on neatly defined measurable outcomes or where rigorously designed trials have not been undertaken due to practical, ethical or philosophical reasons (Green *et al.*, 2015). Many voluntary sector organisations are unable to commission large research and evaluation studies, but are often able to fund smaller pieces of work. Indeed, pooling qualitative evidence from smaller studies is a viable way to potentially strengthen commissioning decisions in this sector (Newman *et al.*, 2006).

In this paper, qualitative evidence was synthesised from four independent evaluations of a third sector-provided prison visitors’ centre. The same methodological approach was replicated in each of the original evaluations. This included a primary focus on triangulation to enhance validity and rigour – premised on the notion that exploring the policies and practices of the visitors’ centre from differing perspectives improves overall accuracy (Neuman, 2014). The evaluations were based on methodological and data triangulation and throughout all of the evaluation activity, the perspectives of prison visitors (including prisoners’ families and children) and prisoners were

voluntarily sought qualitatively using focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Our experience suggests that triangulating data from the main constituents of the prison visit “experience” has not led to “a true version”, but rather to widely diverging and contested perspectives on the same event, with the players constructing their own versions of “reality” (Dixey and Woodall, 2012). This, in many ways, has added to the richness of the evaluation activity.

Table I provides an overview of the sample. The majority of those visiting the prison and participating in the evaluation were female. While we did not routinely ask the relationship status of the visitor to the prisoner, in conversation it was clear that wives and girlfriends made up the majority. On this point, we are conscious that we have not addressed the critique that research on prisoners’ family relations and prison visits works predominantly on a heterosexual model and that this is not representative of the plurality and diversity of family configurations (Granja, 2016).

While individual analysis of all data was conducted as part of each individual evaluation, a thematic synthesis of the entirety of the data was considered useful to monitor change and progress over time. The methodological approach underpinning this synthesis was guided by Thomas and Harden’s (2008) methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research. Data were extracted from each of the evaluation reports to provide an overall meta-synthesis. Data were predominantly located in the “findings” section of the evaluation reports. In line with Thomas and Harden’s (2008) approach, the findings were coded paying particular attention to outcomes and processes associated with prison visiting. Initial codes from this process were derived and grouped into broader thematic categories.

## Results

This section presents the main thematic areas derived from data analysis. Where suitable, anonymised direct quotations have been used to illustrate key points.

### *The salience of the visit for prisoners*

For the majority of prisoners, visiting time and re-connecting with family, children and friends was the most important aspect of prison life. Several men described this as their “lifeline” with the outside world which provided the impetus to endure imprisonment:

It’s the only thing that keeps us going, looking forward to the visit (Prisoner, focus group: 2012).

Visits functioned as important markers within the prisoners’ sentence which allowed time to pass more quickly:

[...] it makes my week go quicker, because I usually have a visit every Wednesday. So once I’ve got my visit done then I’ve got gym on a Thursday, I’ve got gym on a Saturday [...] then by the time you know it, Wednesday’s here again (Prisoner, 2009).

Visits also enabled prisoners to remain in “good spirits” and helped mental well-being:

They keep your focus and your head straight; do you know what I mean? (Prisoner, 2009).

Contact with family and friends were therefore commonly viewed as the focal point of a prisoner’s routine. Visits provided an important opportunity to remain in contact with the outside world or, as one prisoner suggested, “a chance to keep check of reality”.

**Table I** An overview of data gathered between 2006 and 2015

<i>Group</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Number of participants</i>
Prisoners’ families	Semi-structured interviews conducted in the prison visitors’ centre either before or after their scheduled visit	98 ( <i>n</i> = 90 females)
Male prisoners	Focus group discussions conducted on various prison wings	60 (9 groups)

Prisoners clearly conceptualised visits and time with their family as a privilege. This was reinforced by the prison system through the Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme (IEPS) which rewarded compliant and “good” prisoners with extra entitlements including visits with family members. The number of visits permitted to prisoners varied depending on their IEPS status as an enhanced or standard prisoner. For example, some men were entitled to five visits (these individuals were known as “enhanced” prisoners) and others to three (“standard” prisoners). Regardless of this, most prisoners ensured that they used all of their authorised allocation:

I’m an enhanced prisoner so I get five visits, same as every enhanced prisoner, and I use them all. I get family visits five times a month (Prisoner, 2012).

The threat (perceived or actual) that visits could be taken away from prisoners, or curtailed for poor behaviour meant that individuals were determined to comply with establishment rules and not forgo any of their visits entitlement. The removal of visitation rights was seen as the ultimate sanction against prisoners and a key strategy used by the prison service to ensure good order and discipline:

It’s the biggest item that they can remove from you, isn’t it, that’s the one that you dread. How do I tell my wife on the phone “look some fellow had a go at me yesterday and I couldn’t keep my hands in my pocket so I punched him on the nose, oh and by the way love you can’t come and visit me five or six times this month, it’s only two” (Prisoner, 2015).

### *The challenge of the visit for prisoners’ families*

For prison visitors, the emotional and logistical challenges of visiting could be overwhelming. Prison visiting was conceptualised as traumatic and anxiety-provoking with the emotional burden of seeing a son, father, husband or partner within an unfamiliar and daunting environment causing stress and worry for many:

[It’s] traumatising, the whole aspect of it, everything about it. It’s degrading in a way ain’t it, all the searching but they have to do it, I understand that. It’s also very frightening, not a nice experience (Prison visitor, 2012).

I mean for the first time going over there it’s a daunting experience. With the searches and everything it’s frightening, even now it still is a bit (Prison visitor, 2015).

Some visitors became acclimatised to prison procedure and process over time, but many still found travelling to and entering the prison difficult and daunting. Families visiting for the first time were particularly uneasy and apprehensive and many described feelings of uncertainty, insecurity and generally not knowing what to expect from the experience:

We’ve never been to one [a prison] before; we were totally lost and bewildered last week. It’s very hard (Prison visitor, 2012).

Prison visiting could be an extremely painful event. Many visitors described how they had been upset at the thought of a visit, frequently crying days prior to and after contact with their close relative. One mother discussed the contrast between her husband’s and her own coping response:

He balls and shouts and I just go home quietly and have a good cry, it is very stressful (Prison visitor, 2009).

Although uncommon, there was evidence that families find visiting so emotionally challenging that they stopped coming to the prison entirely. Several prisoners discussed being “ghosted” whereby they had arranged a visit with their family and they had not arrived. For one man this experience, which had happened on several occasions, had been upsetting and as a result he had chosen to temporarily stop visits with his family and friends:

I’ve been ghosted quite a bit and I just decided not to have visits and I’ve had a period of like seven weeks with no visits [...] you end up getting really angry (Prisoner, 2012).

### *Striving for a “good” prison visit*

Given the infrequency of the prison visit, the importance placed on ensuring that the visit was successful and an enjoyable experience for the constituents was critical. Prisoners greatly anticipated visiting time and frequently placed a great deal of importance on the occasion.

In some cases, a prison visit acted to temporarily elevate a prisoner's well-being and acted as a buffer against the sometimes stressful and oppressive prison environment. One prisoner commented that after a visit:

You feel refreshed and it just lifts your mood up [...] just the contact, a cuddle and a kiss and whatever (Prisoner, 2012).

Visits which allowed the prisoner and his family maximum time together (i.e. an hour) and those family interactions where the conversation was relaxed and stress-free were generally perceived as being the key ingredients of a "good" prison visit. The implications of these positive visits were profound and prisoners suggested that they impacted favourably on their future interactions on the wings with other prisoners and staff:

If you do have a good visit, even if it's an hour, say you see your kids or your family and you do have a good time your day will go a lot quicker, even the next day because you might still have those same good thoughts in your head (Prisoner, 2009).

However, prisoners suggested that less positive visits would increase stress levels and could spill-over into interactions on the wings. Discussions relating to domestic matters, financial insecurity or where relationships were on the brink of collapse were frequent conversation topics which characterised a poor visit. In these cases, discussions would often require more time than the allocated visit period and the prisoner would often have to resolve issues with family members over the telephone which could be expensive and cause additional frustrations if the line was engaged. One prisoner reflected on how a poor visit with his partner had severely affected him:

I had a bad visit once and I took an overdose [...] I spent five-weeks in intensive care because of it (Prisoner, 2009).

For some prisoners, it was important that to achieve a "good" prison visit it was necessary for their children not to be present. The decision not to allow children to come into the prison had often been a strategic choice made by families in order to protect the feelings and welfare of the child and to prevent intrusive procedures being subjected on their children, like searching:

I have got a four year old son, but I don't want him coming into the prison to see me. That's my choice. He thinks I am away working (Prisoner, 2012).

Many men felt uncomfortable at the prospect of their children seeing them in a daunting and unfamiliar environment and some suggested that seeing their child for only a brief period of time could be psychologically damaging. Two prisoners suggested:

I don't like visits. It's a bit hard and I don't like my son coming up [...] now and again I may ask for a visit but it's too much shit in my head when he has to go like [...] it makes my jail a bit easier (Prisoner, 2012).

Getting him taken away from me, being sat on the other side of the table from him, only having an hour with him, it would kill me, it really would kill me (Prisoner, 2012).

## The importance of a prison visitors' centre as an intermediary to the prison

For prisoners' families, the importance of a "good" prison visit for the prisoner was clearly understood and indeed they often felt pressure to ensure this happened. There was a general consensus from prisoners' families and some prisoners about the importance of dedicated prison visitors' facilities for enabling this to happen. In effect, the visitors' centre acted as a buffer and created an environment whereby children and partners were more likely to want to come and visit. Many prisoners suggested that the visitors' centre made the prison a friendlier environment which encouraged their families to visit them:

Prison's harsh, prison is you know what you see there, it's all bars, it's all doors, it's all you know [...] and barbed wire and it's kind of [...] I think the [visitors'] centre kind of like softens it off and it kind of makes it not necessarily a fun place to come to but there is that [...] like play area and the family type stuff. It's all like kid orientated and it makes it easier, a lot easier (Prisoner, 2012).

The value of such a space varied for individuals, but the benefits reported by visitors could be categorised under the following key areas.

### *A place for composure*

Some prison visitors viewed the centre as a place to compose themselves before going into the visiting room. Many valued the opportunity to have a “safe” area, free from the scrutiny of prison officers, to be able to relax in and prepare for their visit. Some visitors who had travelled a long distance to attend a visit also explained that the centre was an ideal place for them to relax after a long drive:

I'm not wound up and pent up. Whereas if I was getting straight out of the car from travelling and going straight in, I would be wound up (Prison visitor, 2006).

Some visitors thought that being able to use the centre had an indirect impact on the well-being of their relative in prison. They explained that by relaxing before the visit it meant that they could focus on their relative and their issues:

I think it's having that ten, fifteen minutes to sit in here and organise yourself. Calm yourself down, so by the time I'm over there I don't have to think about anything other than sitting and visiting him (Prison visitor, 2012).

One visitor was conscious about “looking stressed” in front of her partner, as such manifestations of the visiting process could be detrimental to sustaining long-term connections with her husband within the prison:

If I'm stressed, it stresses him out, then he's worrying why am I stressed [...] he might think don't bother visiting (Prison visitor, 2012).

### *A place for formalised and informalised emotional support*

The support offered by dedicated voluntary sector staff in the visitors' centre was recognised, with staff credited for their empathy, professionalism, communication skills and their ability to reduce the stressful and emotional nature of prison visiting. It was suggested that staff made the visiting process considerably easier, often taking the time to explain things, listen to family's concerns or simply be on hand to answer questions or enquiries:

When I came in here I was in tears and totally out of orbit and the ladies over there sat us down and told us to go over last to make it easier for us. They were absolutely brilliant, they made it a lot easier (Prison visitor, 2009).

If you're down and you have a chat to someone about it here, then it's not in your system and you're not going home brooding on it. Just get it out of your head (Prison Visitor, 2006).

Many suggested that as the visitors' centres were independent of the prison there was a different approach to dealing with visitors. There was a perception that staff within the voluntary sector visitors' centre offered greater amounts of empathy and support:

I think that's what my wife was saying you can tell when you go to the gate they're officers. Some of them are quite rude [...] then you go to like to the visitors' centre and it's completely different [...] they're just at ease with you (Prisoner, 2012).

The facilities at the prison visitors' centre made it an ideal space for visitors to foster relationships with others facing similar circumstances. Some visitors stated that they spoke to other visitors and some offered help and advice to people who were visiting for their first time:

Me and my daughter come here and we can spot the first timers and they are a bit nervous. We ask if we can give them a bit of advice and support as well (Prison visitor, 2015).

The value of having positive relationships with other visitors was a powerful support mechanism for families. Talking to others in similar situations helped families to feel that they were not alone in a sometimes daunting and isolating environment:

When you're sat here on your own, you wonder what you're going to do, but people will just come up and chat. Then you start seeing them every visit (Prison visitor, 2006).

It's somewhere to come, where you see that other people are in the same position as you [...] you don't feel as alone as you would say just going straight to the prison without dropping in here (Prison visitor, 2009).

You get talking to people and you tell each other stuff, it's nice (Prison visitor, 2012).

## Discussion

The aim of this paper was to present a synthesis of the data gathered over a decade of research and evaluation activity by the authors. This paper contributes to a small, but growing, research agenda that seeks to explore the prison visit and its contribution to prison life and family well-being. The paper's focus was on gaining a fuller understanding of the conditions necessary to create a positive visits' experience and moreover to explore the role that dedicated prison visitors' centres contribute to this process for families. Understanding the elements that make-up a positive visit interaction has importance not only for family dynamics, but also for communities as evidence shows a link between strong family connections and reductions in re-offending (Bales and Mears, 2008). Pooling qualitative data, while debated and contested (Dixon-Woods *et al.*, 2005), potentially allows more robust commissioning decisions to be made where ascertaining objective measures or quantifiable outcomes may be problematic. There has been a recognition that research and evaluation in prison visitors' centres is challenging and that attributing their activities with reductions in re-offending rates is methodologically complex (de Las Casas *et al.*, 2011; Mears *et al.*, 2012). This is because it is difficult to disentangle the impact that specific services have towards re-offending. The "added value" that a prison visitors' centre offers to improve or maintain family ties is one example where qualitative research provides greater insight.

An important point to emerge from the research is the unwavering importance of the prison visit in the life, well-being and regime of a prisoner. The saliency of visits is recognised by the prison service and has been argued is used as a lever to encourage good order and compliance through the IEPS scheme (Moran *et al.*, 2016). In short, poor prison behaviour results in individuals receiving fewer visits than counterparts who conform and are complicit. It is argued that such a strategy to withhold visits is counterproductive, especially for prisoners' families and children where such an approach is incompatible with meeting the best interests of the family and children (Sharratt and Cheung, 2014).

The view that prison visits are an "exclusively positive phenomenon" for prisoners is widely held (Moran, 2013a, p. 346), but not fully supported by this research. Some prisoners actively chose to disengage with visits as a consequence of the "come-down" after the intense and pleasurable experience of spending time with families, especially children. The transition between the visit and life back on the prison wing was often too difficult for individuals to cope with. Academics have described the mixed emotions that prisoners face during visits with this process described as "bittersweet" (de Motte *et al.*, 2012). This may be more pronounced in certain prisoner sub-groups, such as young prisoners who may lack appropriate coping strategies (Woodall, 2007). For the vast majority of prisoners though, the visit remains the highlight of the prison regime albeit with some prisoners experiencing "ghosting" which causes immense anxiety and frustration. Indeed, de Motte *et al.* (2012) shows how, for female prisoners, "ghosting" can lead to extreme distress and decline in well-being.

The data suggest that a "good visit" was important for prisoners and visitors did what they could to enable this to happen. The literature shows that attributes of a "bad" visit include discussions about financial difficulties or other domestic information and where strict time constraints within the visit do not allow resolutions to be achieved (de Motte *et al.*, 2012; Holligan, 2016). In contrast, the factors that create a "good" visit experience is poorly reported in the literature (Moran, 2013b), although indication from this study suggests that the sufficient duration of the visit is the key; opportunity for relaxed conversation; and opportunity for physical contact. The implications of the latter "ingredient" for the Prison Service and managing security on visits is clear and does mean, in many prisons, that physical contact is restricted (Dixey and Woodall, 2012). The decision to restrict or prohibit children's access to visits was a finding that may have wider implications for family health and well-being, but current evidence does suggest that children can find the process of visiting a prison to see their parent traumatic and daunting (Dixey and Woodall, 2012) and children often experience a range of emotions, including anger, shame, guilt and fear (Hart and Clutterbrook, 2008). By creating prison visiting spaces that are "less intimidating" or "less boring" (Sutton-Smith, 1999), there is a possibility that prisoners may be more likely to encourage visitation and re-establish contact with their children (Woodall *et al.*, 2014).



Our data have shown the importance of a prison visitors' centre dedicated to supporting the needs of prisoners' families. Academic analysis into the prison visitors' centre, however, is somewhat scant with relatively few scholars focussing their attention on the liminal space between the prison and wider society (Moran, 2013a). Moran (2013a) has discussed pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal stages of prison visiting and this analysis provides useful insight for this study. The pre-liminal aspect of visiting remains problematic for families, with logistical issues and overwhelming emotions prior to visiting the prisoner, such as fear and anxiety, often inhibiting regular visitation. Transitioning into liminal spaces, like well-run and empathetic prison visitors' centres, however serve a crucial support role for prisoners' families as demonstrated in this research. Nonetheless, prison visitors' centres do retain a "border region" status (Comfort, 2003) where visitors come under "the gaze" of the prison and its rules and regimes – visitors are not prisoners, but within this context they are not free either. As an example, processing procedures associated with prison visiting are necessary but seen as intrusive for families and was cited as a reason why children were excluded from participating in the visit itself. This, in some ways, is understandable and a choice of the family but is also counterproductive both for maintaining contact between prisoners and their children.

There was, implicitly at least, pressure on prison visitors to contribute to a good prison visit and they often did this through gaining composure and seeking support within the prison visitors' centre to enable a smooth dialogue and interaction during the visit itself. Previous studies have shown, for example, how families often withhold information about domestic problems or difficulties in relation to their children in order "not to spoil the visit" (McEvoy *et al.*, 1999, p. 183). While our research did not uncover such examples, prisoners did disclose the detrimental impact that such conversations can have on their own well-being and it is therefore understandable to see how such scenarios can arise.

Data gathered here show how important visitors' centres are for prisoners' families, offering a myriad of formal and informal support mechanisms. This study suggests visitors' centres offer functional and emotional support to visitors. Some of this is professionally driven, but other support occurs surreptitiously with others experiencing prison visiting at the same time. Ethnographic works by Foster (2016) and Christian (2005) have shown how prison visitors' centres can create informal peer support and indeed our study broadly supports this. Their research, for example, showed how support networks between families had formed unexpectedly, but offered a legitimate and credible quasi-support service. A great deal of focus has been placed on the role that prisoners' families and visitors play in enhancing prisoners' levels of social capital (Mills and Codd, 2008) and yet relatively little attention has been placed on how families extend or preserve their repertoire of support. Further investigation into whether prison visitors' centres and peer interaction can increase social capital for visitors would be worthwhile, given that the visitors' centre is a unique space where all individuals share a common denominator – visiting someone close to them who is incarcerated (Foster, 2016). That said, the findings here showed that some families actively disengaged from informal conversations and peer networks, preferring instead to "keep themselves to themselves". These choices that families make are important to consider and to maintain as it provides families with agentic capacity in an environment where they often feel disempowered (Foster, 2016).

Of particular note in this research was the management and governance of the visitor centre space which was controlled by non-state providers. The "gaze" of prison personnel was not present as fully in the centre and being situated "outside of the prison" both geographically and managerially seemed crucial to visitors feeling safe. Commentators have critiqued whether the different underpinning principles, values, expectations, intentions and imperatives of the public, private and voluntary sector can combine effectively to address the myriad of issues relating to prison life. Indeed, some have suggested that such arrangements are "intellectually and practically flawed" (Benson and Hedge, 2009, p. 35). Broader academic analysis into the role of the voluntary sector in criminal justice settings is lacking (Tomczak, 2017), but findings from this study suggest that they play a critical role in facilitating and supporting prison visits.

The role of the prison visitors' centre has changed from their original aims as "charitable" services for the "forgotten victims" of crime (Light and Campbell, 2006; Hartworth *et al.*, 2016), to organisations that are now part of wider political plans for reduced re-offending and maintaining

prisoners' positive mental health and well-being. Whilst these developments have been largely beneficial for prisoners' families, through better services, for example, voluntary and community organisations managing such services need to be cautious in moving forward in ensuring that their independence and distance from the prison is maintained. In England and Wales, third-sector providers managing visitors' centres have not been exempt from wider "efficiency and effectiveness" examinations in the criminal justice system (NOMS, 2014). Through delivering family services on behalf of statutory organisations, third-sector organisations could potentially be in jeopardy of distorting their primary goals and remit (Tomczak, 2014).

## Conclusions

There are worrying trends in the area of prison visits. A significant proportion of prisoners still do not receive visits despite strong evidence that shows in many cases visits provide several positive effects for prisoners and their families (Bales and Mears, 2008) and there has been a general decline in the number of families visiting prisons to see family members (Broadhead, 2002; Salmon, 2005). There remain research gaps in relation to fully understanding the role of families in the criminal justice system and the importance of family visitation. This study adds insight into the ingredients that constitute a "good" visits experience and moreover indicates how important dedicated visitors' centres are in supporting families in contact with the prison service.

To date, the prison visitors' centre as a liminal space between prison and the "outside world" has been overlooked as a site for research and scholarship, although there are some exceptions (Foster, 2016). The research shows the value that prison visitors' centres have in alleviating the stress of prison visiting for families and this is achieved through several means, including the physical space acting as a place for composure and relaxation and moreover the opportunity for support processes. The value of the centre being situated away from prison authorities and in the management and control of the voluntary and community sector was a particularly important finding.

Although this paper is based on the data gathered from one prison setting, there is potential for wider application. The future role of prison visitors' centres is relatively unclear, particularly given the wider changes happening in the UK in relation to prison systems and policies to promote rehabilitation. That said, the role of visitors' centres cannot be underplayed with this research demonstrating the particular "added value" of voluntary and community sector providers.

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