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Connecting Imprisoned Fathers and Their Children: The Role of Visiting and Child-Focused Visiting

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Abstract

The negative implications of paternal incarceration have been well described in the research. Visiting has been shown to not only ameliorate some of these effects, but to have a range of positive impacts on both the imprisoned parent and their children. What is less understood is how fathers experience visiting and what may facilitate positive experiences. This article presents an initial, in-depth investigation of nine imprisoned fathers' experiences of visiting and a child-focused visiting program provided by SHINE for Kids (SHINE) in Victoria, Australia. The role and emotional significance of visiting to these men is evident. Drawing from Goffman's ideas, we explore how this visiting program provided opportunities for men to engage in their fathering role and identity in the context of a total institution. While modest in scale, these findings add to limited existing research and scholarship. Recommendations are also made for further research with imprisoned fathers and for child- and family-focused practice.

Keywords: Prison; imprisoned fathers; fathering in prison; prison visiting; children of prisoners.

Introduction

Prison populations have continued to increase over recent decades, despite a brief decline during the COVID-19 pandemic (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024). The growth is reflected in data across Australian jurisdictions and globally, despite regional variations (Fair & Walmsley, 2024). As prison populations change, so too do the number of children affected, with current estimates that approximately 40 per cent of adults in Australian prisons have dependent children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023b). Most recent – although outdated – estimates propose that approximately 7000 Victorian children have an incarcerated parent at any given time (Parliament of Victoria, 2022). This suggests that there are thousands of fathers and children in Australia, and millions worldwide, who are separated by imprisonment, and who need to navigate the criminal legal and prison systems if they are to maintain contact and some relationship, given that most plan to reunite with their families (Fowler et al., 2017).

Research indicates that paternal absence due to incarceration creates significant and multifaceted strain in families (e.g., see Venema et al., 2022), and family connectedness is shown to be core to the well-being of children and families, including the incarcerated parent. Yet, despite the importance of father–child relationships, there is a general lack of research with this focus in the context of paternal imprisonment (Venema et al., 2022). Maintaining connections is achieved in a range of ways, including the more recent widespread use of video visitation, which has been found to offer benefits to both parents and children

when provided as a supplement to in-person visitation (Charles et al., 2023). However, it is generally agreed that alternative forms of contact should not replace in-person visitation. The importance of face-to-face contact is evident throughout the literature (Tasca et al., 2016), and learning from the restrictions placed on in-person visitation during the COVID-19 pandemic[1] further demonstrated both the benefits and challenges associated with video visits (Duursma et al., 2024), as well as the importance of access to face-to-face visitation for the wellbeing of most incarcerated fathers and their children (Taylor et al., 2023; Flynn et al., 2022).

Visiting has been shown to have a range of positive impacts on the imprisoned parent (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Visher, 2013), as well as for children (Hairston, 2007; Tasca et al., 2016). Much less attention has been paid, however, to the *experience* of the visit, particularly from the perspective of imprisoned fathers (Hutton, 2016; Moran et al., 2017; Pierce, 2015), including what can make it beneficial.

This article presents an initial investigation of imprisoned fathers' experiences and perceptions of visiting and a child-focused visiting program: the Prison Invisits Program (PIP), provided at that time by SHINE for Kids (SHINE) in Victoria, Australia.[2] This was part of a larger study evaluating a range of children's visiting programs. SHINE is a national children's charity that seeks to support children, young people and families with relatives in the criminal legal system. It provides a range of programs, including education support, supported transport to prisons and prison-based visiting programs. The PIP offered child-focused activities in prison visits centres, as well as indirect respite for carers (SHINE for Kids, 2017). The program was provided weekly on weekends for approximately four to five hours, during the usual visiting time.

To draw attention to this overlooked, but growing, group – particularly in Australia, where knowledge is noticeably absent – this article presents the findings from a small exploratory study. Focusing on the in-depth views of nine fathers imprisoned long term in Victoria, Australia, the role and significance of visiting to these men is evident.

The child-focused visiting program, specifically, is described as having a positive impact on children, families and the overall visiting experience. While modest in scale, these findings add to previous research and scholarship about the role of visiting, and how this can support a fathering identity in a total institution (e.g., see Bartlett & Eriksson, 2018). Recommendations for further research with imprisoned fathers and for child-family focused visiting practice are made.

Prison Visiting: Reviewing the Evidence

Visiting by children has been regularly investigated in research about parental incarceration, with it commonly estimated in several jurisdictions (such as Australia and the United States) that around one-half of imprisoned parents receive no visits from their children, and that when visiting occurs, it can be difficult for both parties (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Flynn, 2014; Rubenstein et al., 2019). Access to visitation is generally considered to be in the best interest of the child; however, there are individual circumstances in which visitation may not be appropriate, such as in cases of family violence (Smith & Jakobsen, 2014). Additionally, barriers to visiting are often present and have been described reliably in the literature, across a range of jurisdictions with varied policies and facilities. Several key elements have been identified: the prison itself, including its geographic location, visitation policies and its internal environment; and the presence and quality of relationships. Many studies describe prisoners being held a long way from their homes, creating additional stress for families when visiting, in terms of both time and financial costs (Ashraf & Farhad, 2023; Berghius et al., 2022; Dennison et al., 2014; Pierce, 2015; Smith & Jakobsen, 2014). The prison environment itself has consistently been described in research as hostile and intimidating (e.g., see Fischer-Hoffman, 2022; Lockwood et al., 2022), lacking appropriate child-friendly facilities and activities (Venema et al., 2022) and privacy (Fang et al., 2021; Pierce, 2015). As a result, for many children visiting can be frightening to navigate (Bartlett, 2019). The absence of strong social networks prior to incarceration can also impact the likelihood of visitation, and multiple incarcerations may compound these impacts (Berghius et al., 2022). Strained family relationships, including estrangement, hostility or family violence, may result in either carers not being willing to bring children to visit (Moran et al., 2017; Tasca, 2016), or parents not wanting visits.

Prison Visiting for Fathers and Their Children

Research on prison visiting for fathers specifically has similarly shown it to be problematic across a range of security settings, jurisdictions and regimes. Early, large scale US research indicates that 57 per cent of fathers reported never receiving a visit from their children (e.g., see Mumola, 2000). This general trend is replicated in qualitative research, with Pierce (2015, p. 376) reporting that even in a minimum-security facility offering prison family programming through a "within-the-walls" visiting centre, over one-third stated that they had never received visits from their children and in some cases, children were not told of their father's imprisonment. These trends are similar to those reported in the United Kingdom (Clarke et al., 2005; Murray,

2007). Reduced visiting may be a choice made by the incarcerated parent – perhaps to avoid or minimise the child's distress (Arditti et al., 2005; Bartlett & Eriksson, 2018) – or due to the types of obstacles noted above. Whatever the impetus, research has shown that visiting can offer fathers a "second chance" at the father–child relationship (Tasca, 2018), while minimal parent–child contact has an impact on a father's ability to parent, or remain involved with their child, while in prison (Arditti et al., 2005).

Previous research points to the importance of a child and family focus in visiting. A previous small, exploratory study into carer and child views of PIP in Victoria reported that its focus on activities (including art and craft, card and board games, etc.) helped to create a child-friendly environment in the prison. The art activities were specifically described as offering a distraction for children, facilitating communication and bonding, and providing a memento of the visit for the imprisoned family member (Devadason, 2013). Larger-scale research points to the significance of family visits, events or days for fathers and children (Hansen, 2017; Pierce, 2015; Smith & Jakobsen, 2014).

Fostering an Outside Identity: The Role of Family Ties

There is a perspective that institutions in the criminal legal system can reinforce a criminal identity. While everyone has many identities, the prison environment permits a restricted range of roles to be performed, with associated 'scripts' (Goffman, 1963). This control of available social roles leaves little room for alternatives. Fathers separated from family and familiar environments, prevented from expression of other legitimate roles, can experience conflicting inside and outside identities (Tripp, 2009), or what Bartlett and Eriksson (2018, p. 278) term "front-stage" and "backstage" selves. Berg and Huebner (2011) argue that familial and social bonds are incompatible with a criminal identity, with recent research on the topic going further to suggest that parenthood can offer an alternative to stigmatised identities associated with offending (McKay et al., 2019).

However, specific challenges exist, including the prison space itself, described in early scholarship as hyper-masculine (Mosher, 1998), with prison part of a cyclical and reinforcing process of masculinities development and the resulting inside identity that men take on as prisoners (Goffman, 1963; Mitchell, 2022; Morse & Wright, 2019). Nevertheless, this understanding of the complexity of identity can be used to argue for ongoing family contact and support during imprisonment, as it can interrupt the inside identity by engaging people, even for a short time in one element of their outside selves, through contact with family members. Some programs offered in prisons can be seen to directly foster men's engagement with their outside or backstage selves. Hutton (2016) argues that visits with a family focus, in a less restrictive environment, can allow for a period of normality and for men to temporarily access and enact their identity as parent/father. In research at HMP Doncaster in England, Hutton (2016) described the setting as providing good opportunities for family-centred visiting. Her conclusion was that this gives fathers "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" (Hutton, 2016, p. 354).

Specific programs exist in some jurisdictions to house men with other fathers, in separate residential units within prisons, such as the Fathers' Wing in the Netherlands (Hanze, 2022). In research examining such programs, findings commonly indicate the value of a less macho, more parenting-oriented environment, which allows men to focus on families and peer support (Butler et al., 2015; Clancy & Maguire, 2017; Nurse, 2002). Overall, the research on extended/family style contact draws attention to the potential of such approaches in maintaining father–child connections, as fathers are able to engage with their children and nurture their fathering identity (Bartlett & Eriksson, 2018; Pierce, 2015).

Empirical research shows that maintaining family ties has ongoing positive effects for both fathers and their children (Roettger & Swisher, 2013; Smith & Jakobsen, 2014; Turney & Wildeman, 2013). Sustaining family ties during imprisonment has been noted by some (Hanley et al., 2024; Roettger & Swisher, 2013; Turney & Wildeman, 2013) to be connected to ongoing involvement in a child's life on release, as well more positive parenting (Venema et al., 2022; Visher, 2013). Desisting from further crime has also been found to be a potential result of regular supportive family contact and visits (Cochran et al., 2020; Duwe & Clark, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2016; Panuccio et al., 2012). While understanding of any mechanism between family contact and desistance is not yet well established, as noted above, it has been argued that strong familial/social bonds are less compatible with a criminal identity (Berg & Huebner, 2011), with families anchoring the construction of this alternative, non-criminal identity (Maruna, 2001; Ronel & Segev, 2013). Fostering familial ties and an ongoing connection to children during imprisonment allow for the development or nurturing of a self that is related to fathering, and resists inside identities reinforced by the institution (Goffman, 1963). In this way, fathers can resist the simplistic and one-dimensional identity of "criminal" that is reinforced in the prison system (Johns et al., 2022). Arguably, then, visiting that allows men to engage with fathering, enact this role – even in small ways – and develop confidence in their parenting role may bolster an outside identity.

As is evident in this discussion, while the impact of "visiting" has been investigated and shown to have a range of positive impacts, with specific benefits indicated for visiting with a child and family focus, much less attention has been paid to the *experience* of the visit, particularly from the perspective of imprisoned fathers; this is what has been examined in this study.

Methodology

This study examined the views and experiences of a small group of imprisoned fathers in Victoria, Australia, who had some involvement with a child-focused visiting program. Data were gathered via structured interviews, developed by Corrections Victoria (CV).[3] All participants received a participant information sheet prepared by CV. Informed consent was obtained from all participants – in writing for interviews conducted face to face (n = 5) or verbally where interviews were conducted via telephone (n = 4).

Audio recording was not permitted in the prison setting. The sole interviewer (Catherine) took comprehensive notes, checking understanding on words and meaning with participants throughout.

As this study sought to describe participants' views on programs with which they had experienced contact, content analysis was the chosen method of analysis for qualitative responses. This as a suitable tool for mapping trends and patterns in sets of data, particularly where structured questions are used (Bryman, 2012). Given the limited knowledge on this topic area, a flexible – inductive – approach (Grbich, 2007) was taken to coding and categorising the data. All data analysis was conducted by Catherine. Given the pragmatic nature of the study, the interviews focused on exploring two core areas: the impact of imprisonment for fathers; and the impact of the PIP as a child-centred program.

Identifying Participants

This study took place in Victoria, Australia in 2017, at a public maximum-security facility that held around 500 men (Corrections Victoria, 2018). This site was chosen specifically, as it offered a supported children's visiting program provided by SHINE for Kids – the Prison Invisits Program (PIP). Across the state at that time, there were 12 men's prisons: nine were publicly operated, with the remaining three operated privately. The site where this study was conducted was located within 60 kilometres of Victoria's capital city, Melbourne. Recruitment was also attempted at a remand facility, with nine men initially expressing interest in participating; however, no interviews eventuated.

A convenience sampling strategy was used (Flynn & McDermott, 2025), where the research team took the participants who presented. While this is a less-rigorous strategy, with the resultant sample having an unknown relationship to the broader study population, it is appropriate for the current study, given the limited timeframe and aim: to establish the grounding for future research. Researchers followed the processes for ethical recruitment, as approved by the Justice Human Research Ethics Committee (JHREC), whereby flyers advertising the study were displayed in the visits centre and researchers attended one PIP session in December 2017 to share information about the study with potential participants. Given the restricted time and known stresses of visiting, researchers sought to discuss participation in the study with eligible fathers at the conclusion of their visit, with interviews then scheduled for a later date. The initial recruitment process involved visit centre staff attaching a university sticker to the inmate card of each person visiting with children. Staff then asked men at the end of their visit if they wished to hear about the study from researchers who were present. Three fathers expressed interest, of whom two were subsequently interviewed. Further recruitment was facilitated by a prison programs support officer, who approached fathers who used the PIP, provided them with initial information and asked whether they wished to participate in an interview. The researchers had no observation or control over this process. A further eight fathers expressed interest, with seven ultimately interviewed. Given the coercive nature of prison environments, the researchers were mindful of the need to pay close attention to ethical matters – particularly informed consent. To ensure that men were able to consent or dissent in an informed way, with all men who presented for interview, the interviewer verbally discussed the participant information sheet and what the study was seeking, and reiterated the voluntary nature of participation. The fact that two men declined at this stage is evidence that sufficient choice was created.

Site Description and Sample

Incarcerated people in Victoria have the right to receive at least one visit each week in accordance with the *Corrections Act 1986* (Vic). In this maximum-security setting, prisoners were eligible for one two-hour contact visit per week, on the weekend; PIP was offered during usual visit sessions. The type of visit permitted is dependent on both the prisoner's and the visitor's status. The visits centre is an open hall, with a door into an enclosed yard; this contains a basketball hoop and children's play/climbing equipment, as well as some seating and a walking path around the area. The visit hall contains approximately 20 tables, each with four chairs, two placed on either side of each table. These chairs and tables are not fixed to the floor. Prisoners

and visitors are free to move from this area to outside. Prison staff observe from a raised station located near the entrance, and walk about the room/outside area during visits. A small number of vending machines are available for the purchase of snack food, with free fruit provided for "children" and "diabetics". About one-quarter of the room is covered in linoleum; in this area, there is a sign on the wall that designates this as an "Activities" area (for children). This area contains a range of children's toys, balls and other objects. PIP was provided in this area, set up on small, child-size tables in this space. Fathers and carers can access this area freely with children.

Nine imprisoned fathers, with a median age of 35 years, participated in this study (Direct quotes from participants are labelled P1–P9). Table 1 provides an overview of relevant participant demographics.

Table 1

Participant Demographics (n = 9)

Variable	n
Country of birth	
Australia	8
Other	1
Previous incarceration	
Previously incarcerated	7
No previous incarceration	2
Current incarceration status	
Sentenced	7
Awaiting parole	1
Appealing sentence	1
Living arrangement prior to incarceration	
Lived with partner and children	6
Other	3

Almost all participants (n =7) had been imprisoned previously. All but one was born in Australia, with a range of cultural backgrounds identified; none identified as Indigenous. All sentenced participants (n = 7) were imprisoned for serious matters, ranging from assault to murder. Two participants did not indicate a release date: one was awaiting parole and the other was appealing his sentence. However, for the remaining seven participants, time left to serve ranged from three years to 25 years. The participant group shares some similarities with the general prison population. An estimated 83 per cent of people incarcerated in Australian prisons are born in Australia compared with 88 per cent in the study sample, and are mostly held on sentence (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2024). However, they are also different in that they are more likely to have experienced prior incarceration (78%) compared to the current adult prison population (60%) (ABS, 2024), and at the time of the study were serving sentences considerably longer than the then average sentence of just under one year (Sentencing Advisory Council, 2016). These participants therefore cannot be considered typical compared with the wider prison population. They do, however, provide a unique perspective on visiting and maintaining contact with family over a sustained period. This draws attention to the "highs and lows" of this experience, as it is known that as sentences increase, it becomes more difficult for relationships to be sustained (Duwe & Clark, 2011). Although it was not the intention of this study to obtain an extreme case sample (Patton, 2015), such a cohort serendipitously allows us to describe the experiences of visiting for fathers for whom an inside identity may be more entrenched.

Participants had a total of 17 children between them (11 male and 6 female), of whom 14 were biological and three were step-children, with an average age of just under seven years. The majority of fathers (n = 6) lived with their partner and children prior to imprisonment; most of these men (n = 4) planned to reunify with their family after release. It should be noted, however, that for four men serving long sentences, their children would be adults by their time they were released. Given that all participants were drawn from one prison site, and that the final sample is small, further demographic details are not provided to protect participant privacy.

Findings

Within the two focus areas of the study, a number of themes were identified:

(1) The impact of imprisonment on fathers:
- Family commitment to contact
- Overcoming barriers to contact (This theme is not reported on here, as this was a serendipitous finding, and not core to the study's aim)
- Separation from children and their role as father
- Visiting as a way for fathers to manage the impact of separation

(2) The impact of the PIP as a child-centred program
- Enacting their identity as fathers, through normalised interactions with children

Additionally, a tentative theme was noted that identified children's creation of artefacts as a reminder of fatherhood.

Experiencing Imprisonment as a Father

As part of the interview, participants were asked some general questions about their perceptions of child and family contact and the impact of imprisonment on parents. In addition to receiving face-to-face visits, all participants reported maintaining telephone contact with their children; most (n = 7) also wrote letters. Two participants described preparing other written materials for their children as a way of maintaining contact; for one, this was a book, while for the other it was a memoir. A number of challenges – practical and emotional – to maintaining contact with families were identified by participants: cost; distance; having no one to bring the child; being "locked down" from 4.00 p.m., when children may not finish school until 3.30 p.m.; and staff attitudes towards imprisoned parents. One participant noted his own attitude to having children in the prison environment. For the two men who reported other issues, for one this was the limited visiting times (one two-hour visit per week), while the other described initial advice from a child psychiatrist that the children would cope better if they did not visit. While participants acknowledged a range of barriers, they reiterated that families still visited; these were simply seen as issues to be managed.

Separation from Children and the Fathering Role

All participants described "separation [from kids]" (P1) and in turn their identity as a parent as a key negative impact of imprisonment. P4 explained how he perceived this affecting imprisoned parents and the ability to enact the roles associate with fatherhood: "Every day it kills you. How can you bring up kids from prison?" Others illustrated the impact they saw this absence having on their identity as a father as a result of restricted opportunities to perform this role by providing support to their children:

> Not there to be able to talk to them. Not able to be there to support them and be their father. (P5)

> Trying to still have an impact on their lives and to still be a positive influence. I know the way this has affected the boys – it's unfair on them. (P8)

Visiting as a Way for Fathers to Manage the Impact of Separation

Participants clearly portrayed the restrictions of prison life with regard to the hypermasculine and limited 'scripts' they needed to follow, advising that "You gotta act tough. It all happens behind closed doors" (P4), and being clear that "[Prison's] not the sort of place where emotions can get mixed up. You have to put on your [mask]" (P6).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, they described family visiting as addressing the negative impacts of parental incarceration. Visiting was seen by these fathers as addressing separation, by allowing for normal parental involvement with children, and by them enacting and practising their fathering role, both in practical and emotional ways:

> Yes, you can still be involved with your children's lives. You can have a relationship. Without visits, you're as good as dead … It also prepares you for home, and stuff I will do with my daughter. I think 'What would it be like at home?' (P1)

> It is helpful. It is important for prisoners and kids. It gives a stronger connection. The kids are more comfortable. I was very young when I had my daughter. I loved her, but it took time for unconditional love … I realised as I matured [that] I'm the one who's supposed to be there. It breaks my heart. (P5)

> It's critical. I strongly believe that if kids can't see their dad, or step-dad, they feel abandoned, and that leads to lots of different issues. (P8)

> It is very beneficial – to keep the bond. (P9)

An additional, indirect benefit of visiting described by men is that it assists them to manage a range of challenging emotions in the closed and stressful environment of prison. P2 explained that: "Visits get [men] to calm down"; P3 agreed and further expressed that it "makes time easier. Calmer … You just feel better. This is an angry place. For that hour or two you just don't feel angry." Men are able to enact less hypermasculine, softer aspects of their identity. For others, the anticipation of visiting was clear: P5 stated that:

> [The visit] gives me something to look forward to.

While P4, who had less contact with family because of distance, noted that:

> It's all I've got. I think it's great. It's a big thing. I get 'butterflies' three or four days before. I can't stop talking about it. I get really nervous.

For some men, visiting/family contact also helps them to manage the emotional challenges of day-to-day prison life by providing a behavioural incentive. P1 was very clear: "If you get into trouble, the first thing they take away is visits." Others described the incentive in a less-direct way: P5 said simply that it "makes me want to be better". Similarly, for P6, visiting helps him to stay focused on his role as a father – his outside self:

> It keeps me on the straight and narrow. You can easily get caught up in gaol politics – in a closed place full of testosterone. When you have privileges [visits], it gives you something to strive for. It comes back to the kids.

Similarly, P7 said:

> It helps me to think about changing; about being good; not using drugs in here; not getting into fights or being put in the slot. It keeps me in line. Because I want to see my son more than anything.

Prison Invisits Program: Supporting Father–Child Connectedness

Fathers were asked to reflect on their observations of differences in visiting when PIP was provided versus when it was not. Four were able to comment – all noting a negative impact when PIP was not offered. All four described the impact on their children's behaviour – and therefore the quality of the overall visit. P1 described the impact on what happened between imprisoned parents and children: "There's not as much variety of things to do – less options [for the kids] – no specific activity you can do together." Others reflected on the effect on children and their behaviour. P4 noted that the children got "bored and fidgety", while P5 added to this by saying that when bored, the children could get "a bit naughty." P6 described the relief felt by all involved in the visit when the program was available:

> A big difference. The kids get bored and have nothing to do. Like at the [assessment prison], after about 15 minutes they get bored and fidgety. It is hard for them to keep still. Having this program is a big relief.

One participant (P1) also described a wider impact: "Yes, it's like a section of the visits centre is missing."

Participants described their interaction with PIP in complementary ways: as an opportunity for normalised interactions with their children – enacting their identity as a father; and the activities allowing children to create a tangible product/art for their father. The program was also seen to indirectly provide respite for the carer. All were reported to aid a sense of family connectedness.

Enacting Their Identity as Fathers Through Normalised Interactions with Children

PIP provided typical children's activities in which fathers and children could engage and connect because of the *shared* nature of the activities:

> By the time I get there she will already be painting. I go and interrupt her. We talk about her painting. I teach her about colours. I talk to my missus. It is free here. You can go in and out and pull up a chair and do painting [with my daughter]. (P1)

> I go over and do stuff with her – like a painting or something. So, I can do stuff with her. I used to do so much with the kids. (P2)

> It is backwards and forwards. We go outside for a bit and then sit at tables – me and the kids, then go to activity tables – make cards and pictures. (P5).

All participants explained how what the program offered them – engaging in *normal activities*, enacting their parenting role and playing or just talking about everyday events – provided an opportunity for them to feel close to their children:

> It has helped me to have a closer relationship with my daughter. It is the only opportunity for me to be involved in my daughter's life. I can do stuff with her here. She wants to show me things she does and things she has learned during the week [on the playground]. (P1)

> I won't do anything but talk while they are doing [activities] and encourage them – see what they are doing. (P4)

> It gives the parents a bit more of a connection – a different perspective. [I tend to stand near her] when she is doing painting. [She loves to do] a painting for her old man. It's just like, I am used to doing this at kinder … It's a good program for those who want to improve being a father figure out there. (P6)

Serendipitously, fathers spoke about the artwork made by their children during these activities, which was either taken home with the children or, importantly, left for their fathers. These "artefacts" were commented on by most participants: "They go make stuff for dad" (P4); "She leaves paintings for me" (P6). However, P9 also noted the limitations: "Some they take away – things with glitter, which are you not allowed to have, and some they leave for me" (P9). While this was not a key focus of the overall study from which these data were drawn, and was not followed up in interviews, in reviewing the data it was clear that these artefacts were a reminder to participants of being a father.

Discussion

Nine fathers serving extended sentences at a maximum-security prison in Victoria, Australia provided data on their experiences of visiting and of a specific child-focused visiting program (PIP). The lack of this voice has been noted by a range of researchers (Hutton, 2016; Moran et al., 2017; Pierce, 2015). The outlined findings lead to two core conclusions: that separation from children, their fathering role and their identity were managed by men through both contemplating and "doing" visits; and that child-focused visits specifically were an opportunity to support and bolster men's identity as fathers. These findings are discussed below.

Visits: Contemplating and Doing

The imprisoned fathers who participated in this study all had regular visits with family and children; they described visiting as an important strategy that helped to mediate the negative effects of imprisonment, notably the emotional impact of separation from their children. They also articulated their opinions on the importance for children of maintaining contact. These findings reinforce previous research, which consistently supports visiting as being beneficial (Flynn, 2014). Although others may see these parenting spaces as "highly unusual" (Moran et al., 2017, p. 108), participants in this study, similar to Hutton (2016), focused on the normality that visiting presents – the opportunities to enact their fathering role through everyday conversation and play. The visiting space explored as part of this study could be described as sufficient to "give fathers a space to openly engage with their children" (Bartlett & Eriksson, 2018, p. 287). This is very different from visits to centres described in other studies, where tables/chairs are bolted to the floor and the entire visit must be conducted at the table.

The visiting experience was also seen as providing an emotional outlet for fathers, a place to express aspects of their identity and feelings that were less accessible and acceptable in the wider prison environment, and it supported resistance against inside identities normally reinforced by the institution (Goffman, 1963). Some specifically described the need to keep these emotions – and, by extension, their prison/father roles – separate, and the need to present a "tough mask" when interacting with the broader prison population. Given the original focus of this research, this issue was not explored further with men. Such incongruence should, however, encourage us to consider the range of ways that this can be reduced, so fathers can maintain a stronger sense of their outside-father role. The evidence on housing fathers with other fathers in residential units within prisons, as discussed by Butler et al. (2015) and Clancy and Maguire (2017), is promising. It addresses role conflict and allows men to connect and support each other as fathers in an environment that allows masculinity to be performed through fatherhood, and focus on their families (Reef & Doekhie, 2022). There are also more general principles, which could enable men to engage with and nurture their fathering identity. These could include immersive principles, such as family days or extended visits, some of which are evident in lower security setting prisons in Victoria (Corrections Victoria, 2018).

Participant accounts of visits with their children pointed to the role going beyond a time-limited physical event, extending to their day-to-day lives in prison due to their contemplation of visits. Responses indicated that the idea of the visit helped them to connect to their outside identity (Tripp, 2009), where the father role is foregrounded, even outside the actual visit. How this was interpreted and actioned varied among participants. For some, the visit was conceptualised as a behavioural incentive, a reminder to not fully immerse themselves in their inside identity, which may lead to problems with other inmates, violence and potentially a loss of privileges such as visiting. Others' accounts were more about using the idea of visits to retain a connection with their children and a positive father identity; to focus on change and being a better father, similar to findings from Fowler et al. (2017). Some also saw visiting as enabling fathers to engage with a calmer, softer aspect of their identity, which could act as something of a buffer against the wider prison environment. This seems to fit with Ricciardelli et al.'s (2015, cited in Bartlett & Eriksson, 2018) contention that men in prison *can* create a masculine identity positioned between an overt, stereotypical exterior and a more personal self.

Facilitating a Fathering Identity Through Child-Focused Visiting

Study findings highlight fathers' views on the value of a child oriented visiting program. This provides a clear child-focus through the activities provided, while the artwork made by children in the program for fathers can be kept in their cells, and remains as a reminder of the visit.

Providing a child-focused, child-friendly environment with non-prison staff, engaging activities and child-sized furniture, addresses some of the known environmental challenges identified consistently in research. In the short term, children are engaged in activities designed for them, where they can be more relaxed and engaged; this allows the visit to go well. In the longer term, fathers' descriptions of PIP indicate that it enhances the visiting experience and their connection with children. By actively foregrounding men's role as fathers, men have "permission" to play, to participate in children's activities and to engage with the softer – "backstage" – aspects of their identity (Bartlett & Eriksson, 2018, p. 278; Tripp, 2009).

One aspect of PIP on which men commented, but that has received little scholarly attention, is the role of artwork completed by children for their fathers. Although not specifically examined in this study, findings suggest that these artefacts, when displayed in their father's cells, can create this as a parenting space (Moran et al., 2017), acting as a tangible reminder for men of their outside fathering identify (Tripp, 2009). This is certainly an area worthy of further exploration.

The use of a small convenience sample, drawn from a maximum-security prison setting, presents a limitation to the study. The sample consisted of self-selected participants serving extended sentences, who may have different levels of investment in visitation than people serving shorter sentences or in different settings. However, the aim of this exploratory study was to investigate in depth the experiences of visitation between incarcerated fathers and their children from the perspective of fathers, so it is not intended to provide generalisable findings. Future research would benefit from a larger sample size to allow a greater breadth of data.

Despite the study's limitations, it provides initial data about the importance of visiting for imprisoned fathers, in line with the literature. Additionally, it contributes new knowledge by highlighting the positive impact of visiting extending beyond the physical time and space of the visit, how child-focused visiting responds to the known environmental barriers to visiting and supporting men to connect with themselves and their identity as fathers, and thereby with their children. However, it is a small part of the overall service delivery and on its own cannot address all barriers to visitation. Drawing on Goffman's (1963) theories of identity, additional programs are important to provide opportunities for incarcerated fathers to resist inside identities through the enactment of the fathering identity beyond visitation. Programs and policies encouraging active fatherhood and providing resources to maintain family connections, such as housing men with other fathers in separate residential units within prisons (Butler et al., 2015; Clancy & Maguire, 2017; Hanze, 2022; Nurse, 2002), should be explored further. The findings should encourage prisons to consider activities and approaches that support men to engage in a sustained way with their role as fathers. Two key areas that would benefit from further investigation include the specific role of art in facilitating and supporting father–child relationships and the longer-term impact of supporting imprisoned fathers in sustaining their parenting role.

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[1] The current study was completed prior to COVID-19, when video visiting was less prevalent.
[2] SHINE for Kids (https://shineforkids.org.au) ran the Prison Invisits Program for a number of years, in a range of Victorian prisons, until 30 June 2023.
[3] These data were originally collected for an evaluation of the children's visiting program. Subsequent Human Research Ethics Committee approval was sought and granted to draw from these data to publish material on fathers and visiting.

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