



Performance-based  
Standards



Research Brief: Increased Family Visitation  
Leads to Fewer Incidents and Less Staff Fear

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## Introduction

Performance-based Standards (PbS) has worked for more than 25 years improving conditions of confinement and the quality of life in our nation's juvenile justice facilities and programs. We've learned how to bring research into practice to increase the likelihood youths will not reoffend and will become productive, purposeful citizens.

In 2014, PbS collaborated with the Vera Institute of Justice, Family Justice Program, to launch the Family-Youth Initiative (FYI) to lead, promote and guide a new wave of facility-family partnership. PbS developed national standards and performance measures for facility-family partnerships and integrated them into the existing PbS continuous improvement model, recognizing the importance of family alongside safety, security, health, behavioral health, programming, fairness and reentry. FYI also developed the PbS Family Survey, the first national survey of families of youths in confinement.

In 2020, more than 200 correction, detention, assessment and community residential facilities and programs participated in PbS. More than 23,000 family surveys have been collected and agencies are listening to the feedback: Facilities that restricted visitation to weekends now open their doors for whenever is convenient for families and families join as valued partners in their child's treatment and reentry planning.

Georgetown researchers Alyssa Mikytuck, MPP, and Jennifer Woolard, PhD, analyzed PbS data to learn more about the impact of family visits and found two more reasons to ensure families stay connected to their children: it decreases the number of incidences of youths acting out or failing for follow the rules and as a result of fewer incidents, makes more staff feel safe. PbS greatly appreciates their work and is pleased to present their report.

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## About PbS

*PbS is a data-driven improvement model that challenges juvenile justice agencies to continually meet the highest standards for residential care of youths. Launched in 1995 by the US Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), PbS sets standards for safety, rehabilitation services, programming, reentry and family connection. PbS measures and monitors facility practices by collecting and reporting data from administrative records and survey responses from youths, staff and families to provide a holistic picture of the conditions and quality of life in residential facilities. PbS data highlights the practices that are effective in promoting youths' healthy maturation and identifies those that are not. PbS trains staff to use the information to change practices and support reforms implementing the adolescent development approach.*



## Project Description

We evaluated the relationships among family visitation, behavioral incidents, and staff safety concerns in juvenile correctional facilities using Performance-based Standards (PbS) data. PbS is a voluntary, data-driven juvenile corrections improvement model implemented in 36 states and over 100 juvenile confinement facilities. We used data from administrative reports, incident reports, and staff surveys at six time points: every April from 2011 to 2016. We found that greater family visitation was associated with fewer total incidents in facilities. Additionally, we found that the total number of incidents in a facility predicted staff reports of safety fears. We argue that increasing family visitation may be a useful tool to combat staff safety concerns in juvenile correctional institutions.

## Background

Evidence shows that family contact is important for the psychological and behavioral well being of incarcerated youth. For example, one study found that depressive symptoms declined over time for youth in a secure juvenile facility that received in-person visits from their parents, and the more parental visits youth received the larger the decline in depressive symptoms (Monahan, Goldweber & Cauffman, 2011). The quality of the parental relationship did not matter, meaning that youth with and without high quality parental relationships experienced decreased depressive symptoms following parental visits (Monahan et al., 2011). In another study, more parental visits were correlated with fewer disciplinary infractions for juveniles while in custody (Agudelo, 2013). However, these data come from a single year in a single jurisdiction.

Although many juvenile correctional facilities prioritize family engagement, implementing family focused reforms can conflict with policies intended to enhance safety and staff retention initiatives. Approximately 20% of juvenile correctional staff leave their job annually (Wright, 1993). Some of those who leave voluntarily cite safety concerns as a reason (Mikyuck & Cleary, 2016; Minor, Wells, Angel & Matz, 2011). Research has found these concerns are related to fear and risk of inmate-initiated victimization (Gordon, Proulx, & Grant, 2013). In the quest to promote staff safety and retention, facilities may implement policies (e.g., prohibit visitation by persons with criminal records, and restricting visitation opportunities) that undermine family engagement (OJJDP, 2018).

## Present Study

We investigated if facilities would be better served in their pursuit for facility safety and family engagement by amending their policies to promote family visitation. Specifically, we measured how



family visitation related to youth behavioral incidents, and how behavioral incidents related to staff perceptions of facility safety. We predicted that (1) as family visitation increased, there would be fewer behavioral incidents and (2) as behavioral incidents increased, perceptions of a safe environment would decrease, and staff reports of fearing for safety would increase. The present study was strengthened by the use of five years of data from facilities in multiple jurisdictions.

## Methods

### *Facilities*

The present study used administrative, incident, and staff survey data from 62 juvenile correctional facilities that submitted data every April from 2011 to 2016. The facilities contained male-only, female-only, or mixed (male and female) populations of youth in the facility.

### *Measures*

**Family Visitation.** Facilities reported the total number of visits to the facility from family and community members during the data collection period. We considered both family and community visits as “family visits” in line with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s (OJJDP) encouragement of a broad definition of family (OJJDP, 2018). Because larger facilities may receive more visits as a result of their size, we indexed the visitation total with the number of youth who were eligible to be visited. The indicator is visits per hundred-person days.<sup>1</sup>

**Incidents.** Facility reports contained incident-level data on the type of incidents, or behavioral infractions in the facility that occurred during the month of April. We focused on the total number of incidents collapsing across incident type (e.g., assault, property). The indicator is incidents per hundred-person days.

**Staff Safety.** Staff at each facility completed self-report surveys about perceptions of safety in each facility. Staff perceptions of safety were measured with two variables: (1) a dichotomous measure of whether staff reported feeling safe or not, and (2) a rating of the safety environment ranging from poor (1) to excellent (4).

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<sup>1</sup> We calculated the number of “person days” by summing the number of youth present on each day during the data collection period. Then, we calculated the rate of visits or incidents per hundred-person days in order to create standardized proportional variables.





### *Controls*

**Gender of the Population.** We controlled for the gender of the facility youth population with a categorical variable that measured: (1) exclusively male populations, (2) exclusively female populations, and (3) mixed populations.

### *Procedure*

The strengths of our sample – multiple facilities measured in multiple years – presents some analytic challenges to assumptions underlying standard multiple regression. We used multilevel modeling to account for the nesting of observations within facilities, and facilities across time. Specifically, we ran random effects<sup>2</sup> models using the Stata xtreg command<sup>3</sup> with the option for robust standard errors. We noted Facility ID as the clustering variable and year as the time variable. We classified and capped outliers as values over four standard deviations above the mean (New Amsterdam Consulting, Inc., 2011).

### *Results*

**Descriptive Statistics.** Most facilities (87%) held male and female youth with an average of 10 family visits per hundred-person-days. Family visits were fairly consistent over time ( $M = 10.44$ ,  $SD = 8.69$ , range: 0.69 - 53.14; see Figure 1). There were about two incidents per hundred-person-days, which was also consistent over time ( $M = 1.98$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ , range: 0.67 – 8.96; see Figure 2). The staff rating of the safety environment was fairly high ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = 0.41$ ), but 20% of staff reported fearing for their safety.

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<sup>2</sup> After failing to reject the null hypothesis of a Hausman test ( $p = 0.75$ ), we decided to use a random effects model, rather than a fixed effects model.

<sup>3</sup> We used the Stata xtlogit command for the dichotomous measure of staff reports of fearing for safety.



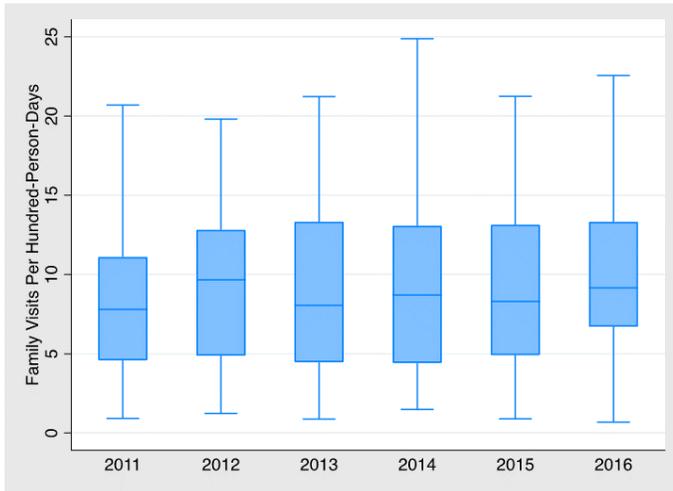


Figure 1: Family visits per hundred-person days over time

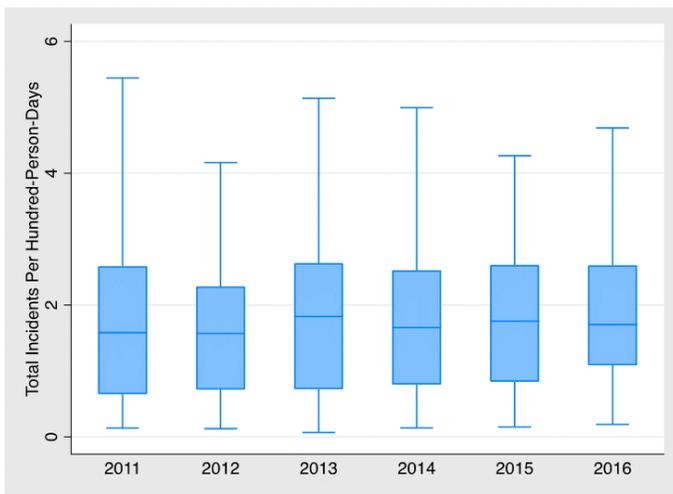


Figure 2: Total incidents per hundred-person days over time

**Family Visits and Behavioral Incidents.** The number of family visits was significantly associated with the total number of incidents in a facility. As family visits increased, total incidents decreased. Specifically, a one-unit increase in family visits was associated with a two percent decrease in total number of incidents ( $\beta = -0.02, p < 0.01$ ), holding gender of the facility constant. In other words, if there were 100 incidents in a facility, our results suggest that one additional family visit would be associated with two fewer behavioral incidents (*i.e.*, 98 incidents) holding gender of the population constant.



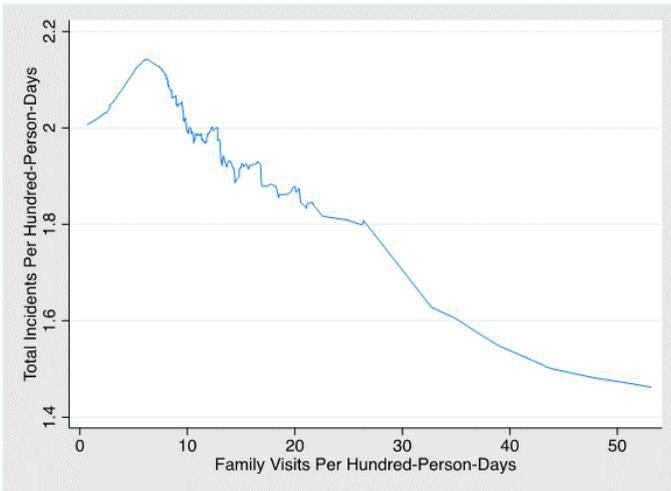


Figure 3: The relationship between family visits and total incidents

**Behavioral Incidents and Staff Perception of Safety.** The total number of incidents was significantly associated with the staff reports of feeling safe. As total incidents increased the odds that staff feared for their safety increased ( $\beta = 1.66, p = 0.01$ ).

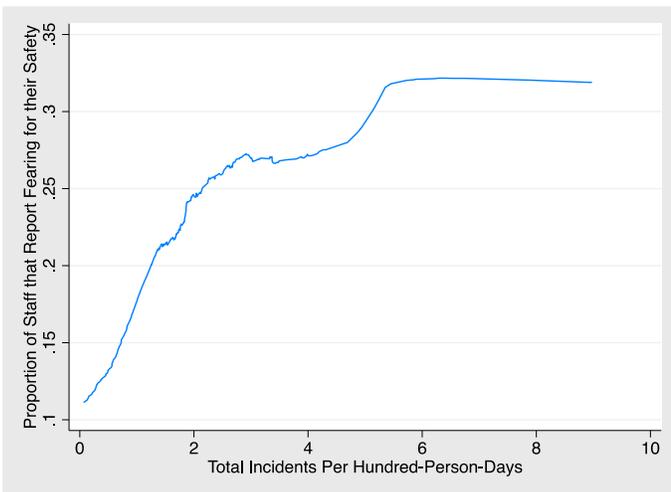


Figure 4: The relationship between total incidents and staff reports of fearing for safety

Relatedly, as the number of incidents increased, staff rating of the safety of the facility environment decreased ( $\beta = -0.04, p < 0.05$ ), holding the number of family visits and the gender of the facility constant.



## Conclusions and Implications

We found that family visitation and behavioral infractions were inversely related. The results supported our hypotheses on the relationship between family visitation and behavioral incidents as well as the relationship between behavioral incidents and staff perceptions of safety. We replicated the findings of Agudelo (2013) - that family visitation is associated with fewer behavioral incidents - in a larger sample of correctional facilities with multiple years of data. We also found that higher numbers of behavioral incidents were associated with lower ratings of safety and greater odds staff reported fearing for their safety.

Our evidence calls into question the utility of restricting family visitation in the name of safety. Higher rates of family visitation were associated with fewer incidents. This is important given that incidents can erode correctional officers' perceptions of safety and contribute to their decisions to voluntarily leave their positions. Additionally, policies that promote family visitation are important because they are in line with family-centered care, which is a growing advocacy movement to include the family as key stakeholders in the youths' treatment program. Although promising, our results did not test whether family visitation caused fewer behavioral incidents or if behavioral incidents caused staff safety perceptions. It may be that an explicit or implicit culture may drive each of these variables and their apparent relationship. It is also possible that the facilities choose to participate in PbS may differ in systematic ways from facilities that do not participate. Although correlation is not causation, the associations suggest there is limited utility in restricting family visitation to promote safety.

Future work with similar samples should test whether staff perceptions of safety concerns are related to voluntary turnover and assess other policies, in addition to family visitation, associated with fewer behavioral incidents. Combined with our results, such work could identify potential intervention targets to reduce staff safety concerns and increase retention. For example, staff training initiatives may be linked with fewer behavioral incidents and could be another tool for juvenile correctional facilities to utilize in combating the problems of staff safety concerns and voluntary turnover in correctional facilities. In the interim, we recommend facilities expand family engagement efforts to increase visits for incarcerated youth.



## About the Authors

**Alyssa Mikytuck, MPP**, is a doctoral candidate in the department of Psychology at Georgetown University. Her program of research focuses on promoting developmentally appropriate juvenile justice interventions, particularly for youth that are confined in secure institutions.

**Jennifer Woolard, PhD**, is an associate professor in the department of Psychology at Georgetown University. Her research examines how individuals and families interact with care and control systems, including the juvenile and criminal justice systems as well as child welfare system.



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