

The Financial Cost of Maintaining Relationships with Incarcerated African American Men: A Survey of Women Prison Visitors

Olga Grinstead, Bonnie Faigeles, Carrie Bancroft, and Barry Zack

INTRODUCTION

There is an incarceration epidemic in the United States. There are currently 1.8 million people in custody in the United States and about half of these inmates are African American (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999). African American men, in particular, have been disproportionately impacted by incarceration. One in every 14 African American men in the United States is now incarcerated, and one in four will be incarcerated at some point in his life (Schlosser, 1998).

For every man who is incarcerated, there are women and children who suffer social, psychological and financial consequences. In addition to the loss of income that can result when a family member is incarcerated, families face the additional financial burden of prison visiting, telephone calls and other contacts with the incarcerated (Girshick, 1996).

One of the most consistent findings in criminal justice is that visiting during incarceration promotes family reunification

Women maintaining contact with incarcerated men face emotional, social and financial challenges. In addition to loss of support and income, there are significant financial costs of prison visits, telephone calls and sending packages. We interviewed women leaving a large state prison after visiting. These women reported spending an average of \$292/month maintaining contact; women in the lowest income category spent 26% of their income on contacts and women in the highest income category spent 9%.

OLGA GRINSTEAD is an associate professor in the Department of Medicine, Center for AIDS Prevention Studies, University of California San Francisco. Address for correspondence: Olga Grinstead, Center for AIDS Prevention Studies (CAPS), 74 New Montgomery Street, Suite 600, San Francisco, California 94702.

BONNIE FAIGELES is a statistician in the Department of Medicine, Center for AIDS Prevention Studies at the University of California San Francisco.

CARRIE BANCROFT worked at Centerforce Health Programs Division directing the Love Your Man, Love Yourself project, a peer-led HIV prevention intervention for women with incarcerated partners.

BARRY ZACK is the director of the Health Programs Division at Centerforce in San Quentin, California.

and reduces recidivism (Schafer, 1994; Hairston, 1991), and programs have been developed to encourage family support and reunification (e.g. Jorgensen, Hernandez and Warren, 1986). Maintaining contact with an inmate, however, is also stressful, costly and potentially stigmatizing for the family and other visitors (Hairston, 1991). While the psychological costs and stigma of imprisonment of a family member and of prison visiting has been well-documented (Girshick, 1996; Daniel and Barrett, 1981; Moerings, 1992; Fishman, 1988a), and the financial burdens of visiting and maintaining contact with an incarcerated person have been described qualitatively (Girshick, 1996), the actual financial costs have not been assessed quantitatively.

Here we report on the demographics, income, relationship to the person being visited, patterns of contact and the costs of visits, telephone calls and packages sent to the inmate among a group of women visiting male inmates at a large state prison. We also discuss implications for the health of African American families and offer policy recommendations.

METHODS

Data Collection Site

Data were collected in August of 1998 at a large state prison in California. Approximately 6,000 inmates are currently housed at this prison. Inmates are 40 percent African American, 25 percent Latino, 30 percent European American and 5 percent other ethnicities. Visiting is permitted for several hours in the visiting room on four days of the week, Thursday through Sunday. Inmates in certain programs are also allowed "ranch" or "picnic" visits in which family members share a meal in a more relaxed setting. Some inmates who are legally married are also allowed family visits in which family members visit for three days and two nights in a family housing unit on the prison grounds. All visitors enter and leave the prison through a hallway known as "the tube." A house across the street from the main prison entrance serves as the visiting center and provides childcare as well as a place for visitors to rest, have a snack and, if necessary to meet prison rules, to change their clothes before visiting. The visiting center also has a peer health education program, assists with transportation for visiting, and offers referrals for other services.

Survey Methods

Data were collected during five days in August, 1998. Interviewers stood at either end of "the tube" at tables display-

ing snacks and gifts. Each woman leaving from the visiting area when an interviewer was free was approached and asked if she would like to participate in a survey. Interviewers were available to offer the interview in English and Spanish, although no interviews were conducted in Spanish. Women were told that the survey would take about 10 minutes and that after the survey they could choose a gift to thank them for their time. Gifts included video games, costume jewelry, computer games, watches and other items that had been donated to the visiting center. The survey was anonymous. Women who agreed to answer the survey were read a summary of information for research participants and given a copy of this information to keep. In addition to the individual surveys, we also counted all of the women who left the prison and categorized them by ethnicity based on our observation. This count allowed us to estimate what percentage of the entire population of women leaving the prison that day were surveyed and if we were able to recruit a representative sample. This project was approved by the Committee on Human Subjects at the University of California, San Francisco.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was designed to be administered verbally in approximately 10 minutes and included the following topics: demographics (age, income, education, ethnicity, ethnicity of person she was visiting, whether she was raising children), frequency and patterns of visiting, relationship to the person being visited, use of visiting services and the amount of money spent on visiting, telephone calls and packages sent to the inmate. To protect privacy, each woman was asked to point to the income category that most closely matched her income in the previous year. Costs of contact with the inmate were assessed by asking how much each woman spent on an average visiting day, the frequency of visiting and her monthly costs for telephone calls to the prison. Participants were asked if they had ever sent a quarterly package, and if so the cost of that package. They were also asked if they had any other types of visits (such as overnight family visits), and if so the frequency and cost of these visits. Monthly costs of maintaining contact with the inmate were calculated by summing the following: amount spent per visit multiplied by the frequency of visits per month; amount spent monthly on other visits; amount spent monthly on phone calls; and amount spent on quarterly packages divided by three. This sum was then multiplied by 12 to create the annual cost of visiting. Descriptive statistics presented include means for continuous variables and frequencies for categorical variables. For

TABLE 1
Demographic Characteristics

	N = 75
Age	
17–25	24%
26–35	27%
46–45	32%
>45	16%
Ethnicity	
African-American	76%
European-American	17%
Latino	4%
Asian	1%
Have children	91%
Education	
<High school	12%
Completed high school	20%
Some college or vocational school	35%
Completed college	24%
Any graduate school	8%
Household income	
<\$10,000	17%
\$10,000-\$19,999	23%
\$20,000-\$29,999	23%
\$30,000-\$40,000	11%
>\$40,000	19%
Don't know or refused	1%

^aCategories are not mutually exclusive.

this report on the impact of incarceration on the African American family we describe a sub-sample of respondents who were either themselves African American, who were visiting an African American man, or who were both African American themselves and visiting an African American man (African American sub-sample).

RESULTS

During data collection periods on the five days of data collection, 981 women were counted leaving the prison visiting area. Based on appearance, the observers estimated that 34 percent of these women were African American, 20 percent Latina, 39 percent European-American and 4 percent Asian. Of the 981

TABLE 2
Relationship to Man Visiting and Visiting Patterns

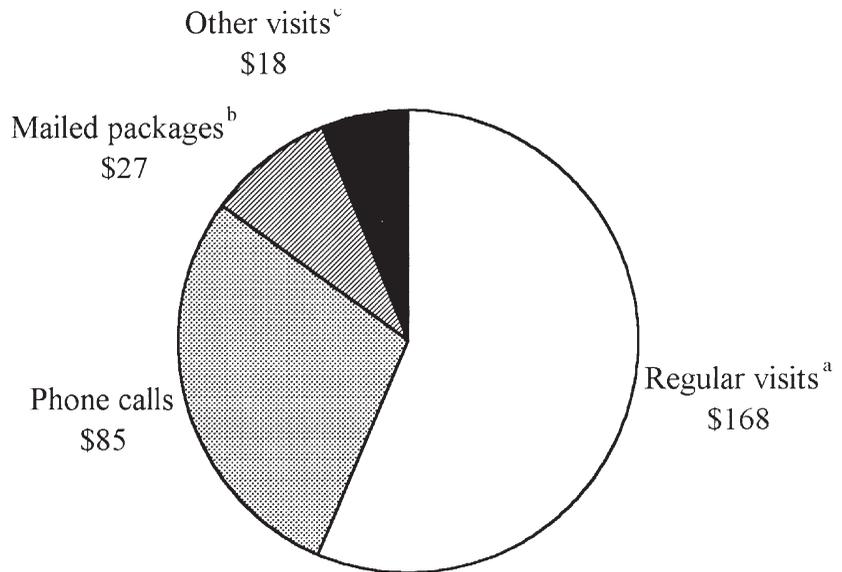
Relationship to man visiting	
Husband	39%
Fiancée	19%
Boyfriend	12%
Friend	14%
Relative (not husband)	16%
Frequency of visits/frequency planning to visit (if first visit)	
4 times per week	4%
2-3 times per week	36%
1 time per week	25%
2-3 times per month	18%
1 time per month	13%
Has he been incarcerated before this time?	
Yes	76%
Did you visit him during a previous incarceration?	
Yes	41%
How long have you been visiting him in prison?	
>1 year	56%
1-3 years	23%
4-6 years	4%
7-9 years	3%
>10 years	9%

women who were counted, 153 (16%) completed a survey. Those who completed a survey had the same ethnic representation as the overall population of women leaving the prison (37% African American, 16% as Latina, 38% as European-American, 1% as Asian and the remainder of mixed ethnicity) suggesting that a representative sample was achieved.

Women who were African American, visiting African American men, or both, included 75 of the 153 women who were surveyed. Demographic characteristics of this sub-sample are shown in Table 1. Most women in the sub-sample were African American (76%) and the remaining European-American (17%), Latina (4%) and Asian (1%) women who were visiting African American men. The most common educational level was having completed high school as well as some college or vocational school. Nearly a quarter of the women had completed college. Overall, this was a relatively low-income sample. Only one in five women earned more than \$40,000 per year. Ninety-one percent reported that they had children, and 75 percent reported living with their children.

Characteristics of the women’s relationships and visiting patterns are shown in Table 2. Most of the women reported that they were visiting their husbands (39%) followed by their fiancée (19%), boyfriend (12%), friend (14%) or other relative (16%). A

TABLE 3
Average Monthly Cost of Contact with Inmate



Note: N = 75. Mean total cost of monthly visit = \$292, rounded.

^a Regular visits occurred in the visiting room.

^b Cost of a quarterly package/3 = monthly cost.

^c Examples include picnics and overnight visits with family.

majority of women, then, were visiting their intimate partners. The most common visiting frequency reported was two to three times per week (36%) followed by once a week (25%). Most women had been visiting for less than one year (56%), although there were a number of women who had been visiting for 10 years or more (9%). Over three-quarters of the women surveyed reported that the men they were visiting had been incarcerated previously, and 41 percent had visited them during a previous incarceration.

All but one of the women surveyed had been to the visiting center at the prison. The most frequently mentioned reason for going to the visiting center was for childcare. Other services that were mentioned (in order of frequency) were to attend a health education program, to use the bathroom, to get food, to wait or "hang out," to change clothes or to remove the underwires from her bra (to pass through the metal detector). Only one or two women mentioned using the telephone, arranging transportation, or for a place to leave her belongings.

The overall average monthly cost of visiting, calling and sending packages was \$292. Table 3 shows the relative amount

TABLE 4

Annual Income and Annual Amount Spent on Inmate

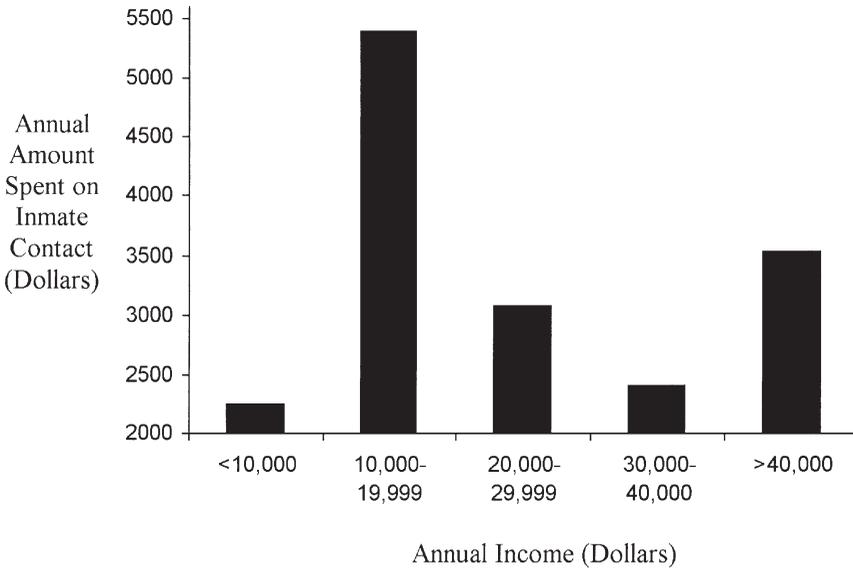
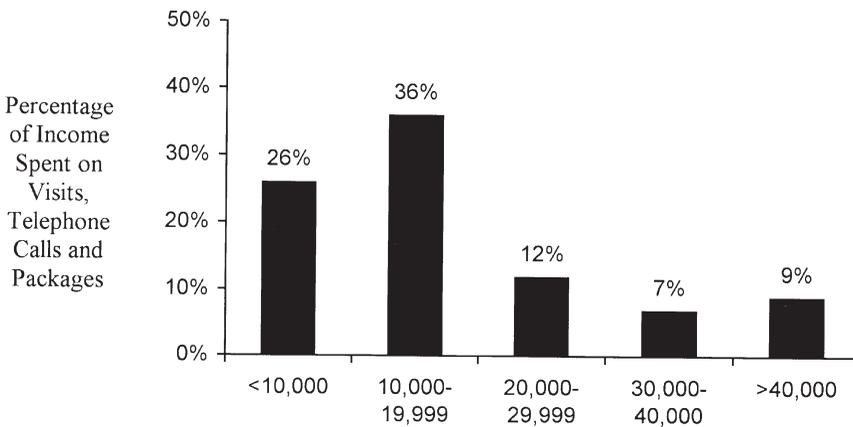


TABLE 5

Percentage of Annual Income Spent on Inmate Contact



spent on various types of contact per month. The most expensive type of contact was regular visiting (visits in the prison visiting room). Visits cost an average of \$43 each, but because many women visited frequently, the overall average monthly cost of visiting was \$168. Telephone calls were the next most expensive contact at an average of \$85 per month. Most women (64%) had sent a quarterly package; quarterly packages cost an average of \$82 which equals a monthly cost of just over \$27. Twelve women reported having had other types of visits such as "ranch" or family visits. Because these types of visits were infrequent, the overall average monthly cost was low (\$18). However, these types of visits could be expensive; women reported spending up to \$200 on one family visit. These cost estimates did not include the cost of time off from work when needed.

The overall annual costs of maintaining contact with an inmate relative to annual income is shown in Table 4. The amount spent on contact was not proportional to income; women in the second lowest income group spent, on average, the largest amount of money on visits, phone calls and packages combined. When we consider the proportion of income spent on contact with the inmate, women in the lower income groups spent a larger proportion of their entire income than did women with higher incomes (shown in Table 5). While women in the lowest income category spent 26 percent of their income on visits, telephone calls and packages, women in the highest income group spent only 9 percent of their income on these activities.

The remainder of the original sample included 78 women who were not themselves African American and who were not visiting African-American men. This sub-sample included European American (58%), Latino (27%), Native American (8%) and Asian (1%) women. They reported a similar distribution of household income, educational level, age and relationship to the inmate being visited and nearly identical average spending (\$289/month and \$3,464/year) as the African American sub-sample. Women in the highest income category spent the smallest amount. Although the overall amount was the same, women in this sub-sample spent more per visit (\$63 versus \$43), less on telephone calls (\$63 versus \$85/month), less on other visits (\$4 versus \$17/month) and more on packages (\$103 versus \$81) than women in the African American sub-sample.

DISCUSSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Women visitors in our sample, particularly low-income women, reported spending a large proportion of their income on prison visiting and other costs of maintaining contact with

incarcerated men. While the specific impacts of this financial burden were not explored qualitatively in this study, others have described in detail the severe budgeting, self-denial and financial constraints imposed by the cost of prison visiting, telephone calls and sending money to an incarcerated man (Fishman, 1988b; Girshick, 1996). Most of the women in this study were also raising children; the impact of this financial burden on the welfare of children deserves further research and intervention. Women in African American families and women not in African American families reported the same amount of spending.

Visiting centers can provide social and other services to families attempting to maintain contact with incarcerated men such as support groups, referral and case management. In addition to efforts to provide individual support and services for visiting families through visiting centers and family reunification programs, however, structural interventions should also be initiated to reduce the high cost of visiting (Fishman, 1988b; Hinds, 1981; Light, 1993). Prisons are often placed far away from urban centers and there is also a growing trend to move inmates from crowded states to "rental cells" in other states. These practices make prison visiting logistically and financially prohibitive for most visitors and increase the cost of telephone calls. Housing inmates close to family members would be useful in reducing the cost of visiting.

Phone calls are another source of expense that could be addressed via structural intervention. Inmates are allowed only collect calls, which are already expensive, to which surcharges are added by the state, making collect telephone calls from prison one of the most expensive types of calls in the nation (Soloman, 1999; Schlosser, 1998). This should and is being addressed legislatively; in the meantime, visitors need to be fully informed of the costs of telephone calls and letter writing assistance should be provided to visitors with limited literacy.

Another major cost of visiting is food. No food may be taken into the visiting room, thus obligating purchases from the vending machines, and new, unopened food packages must be brought for family visits. This problem could be addressed by providing low-cost, nutritious food for visitors or by allowing packaged foods to be brought into the visiting room, particularly for children. While packages of goods may still be sent to inmates on a quarterly basis, the content of packages has been restricted. In some cases, all goods sent to inmates must be purchased through mail order houses specializing in sending approved items to inmates. In addition to the impersonal nature of this exchange, families are no longer allowed the option of

economizing by comparing prices.

Finally, legislators and the public should be made aware of how these regulations increase the financial burden of maintaining contact with the incarcerated, and be informed that visiting during incarceration promotes family reunification and reduces recidivism (Schafer, 1994; Hairston, 1991). Visiting centers may also present opportunities to develop and support advocacy and empowerment of women visitors to challenge the structural barriers that support and maintain the high cost of

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