

Sexual offenses between inmates occur less often in states that allow conjugal visitation

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Could widespread conjugal visitation reduce sexual offending in prisons? It's a possibility, according to Stewart D'Alessio and his team from Florida International University in the US. Their work shows that in states where conjugal visits are permitted, there are significantly fewer instances of reported rape and other sexual offenses in their prisons. The study is published online in Springer's *American Journal of Criminal Justice*.

At present, there are two opposing theories of the causes of sexual violence. The feminist perspective asserts that sexual violence is motivated primarily by an offender's desire to exert power and control over another individual. Therefore, according to this theory, conjugal visitation should have little or no effect on sexual offending in prison. In contrast, sexual gratification theory argues that the ultimate motivation for rape and sexual violence is to achieve sexual gratification. Therefore, based on this view, conjugal visitation should reduce sexual offending in prison.

D'Alessio and colleagues put the two theories to the test, and analyzed data for the 50 US states from 2004-2006 from a combination of sources - the Directory of Adult and Juvenile Correctional Departments; Sexual Violence Reported by Correctional Authorities; and an article published in Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law - to elucidate the relationship between conjugal visitation and the amount of sexual violence behind prison walls. They compared the number of yearly inmate-on-inmate sexual offenses reported to prison officials, (including

non-consensual sexual acts and abusive sexual contacts) between states where inmates are allowed conjugal visits and those where the practice is not permitted.

After taking into account the size of the [prison population](#)*, the researchers found that the rate of sexual violence was significantly lower in states that allowed conjugal visitation: 57 incidents per 100,000 inmates compared with 226 incidents per 100,000 [inmates](#) in states that do not allow the practice. This finding casts doubt on the feminist perspective and supports sexual gratification theory.

The authors comment: "The observed negative effect of conjugal visitation on sexual offending suggests that more states should consider allowing conjugal visitation as a means to attenuate [sexual violence](#) in prison. Conjugal visitation has also been reported to promote family bonding, better inmate discipline and post release adjustment and socialization."

According to the authors, treatment programs in prisons should be geared to view sexual offending as a sex crime instead of solely as a crime of power, and the use of controversial chemical castration may be an effective strategy to reduce rape and other types of sexual offending.

More information: D'Alessio SJ et al (2012). The effect of conjugal visitation on sexual violence in prison. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*; [DOI:10.1007/s12103-012-9155-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-012-9155-5)

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