

# **SHSU professor investigates parent-child visitation in prison**

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Melinda Tasca, Ph.D., work at Sam Houston State University's College of Criminal Justice. Credit: Courtesy of Melinda Tasca

It's not "cupcakes and lollipops" for most children who visit a parent in prison, with two-thirds reported to have negative experiences including fear, anger, anxiety, and related reactions, according to a study funded by the National Institute of Justice by Melinda Tasca, Ph.D., of Sam Houston State University.

The study, "It's Not All Cupcakes and Lollipops: An Investigation of the Predictors and Effects of Prison Visitation for Children during Maternal and Paternal Incarceration," found that 65 percent of children reacted negatively to prison visitation, resulting in crying, [emotional outbursts](#), [depressive symptoms](#), poor attitudes, acting out, and developmental regression, according to interviews with caregivers of 40 children who have a parent incarcerated in the Arizona Department of Corrections.

One-third of children were reported to have had a positive experience, which included excitement, improved attitudes and behaviors.

Two primary factors shaped how children responded to visits with an incarcerated mother or father: the institutional environment and the parent-child relationship.

In addition to examining the impact of prison visitation on children, the study also examined factors associated with the likelihood of parent-child prison visitation. For incarcerated mothers, children were accompanied most frequently by a grandmother; for incarcerated fathers, it was the child's mother who often escorted the child to [prison](#).

Most families of prisoners are fiscally and emotionally overburdened, the study found. More than half of the caretakers of the children of imprisoned parents were on public assistance and lived more than 100 miles from the facility where prisoners were housed. Many of the inmates suffered from mental health or substance abuse problems, and many families faced economic hardships or family instability.

This study can help the criminal justice system identify family members most embedded in prisoners' lives to better inform reentry processes. This study also underscores the need for family-centric interventions. In addition, this author calls for more child-friendly visitation areas, where inmates and their [children](#) can better interact.

**More information:** This study was Tasca's dissertation which was funded under the National Institute of Justice Graduate Research Fellowship Program. It is available through NIJ at:  
[www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/248650.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/248650.pdf)

Provided by Sam Houston State University

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