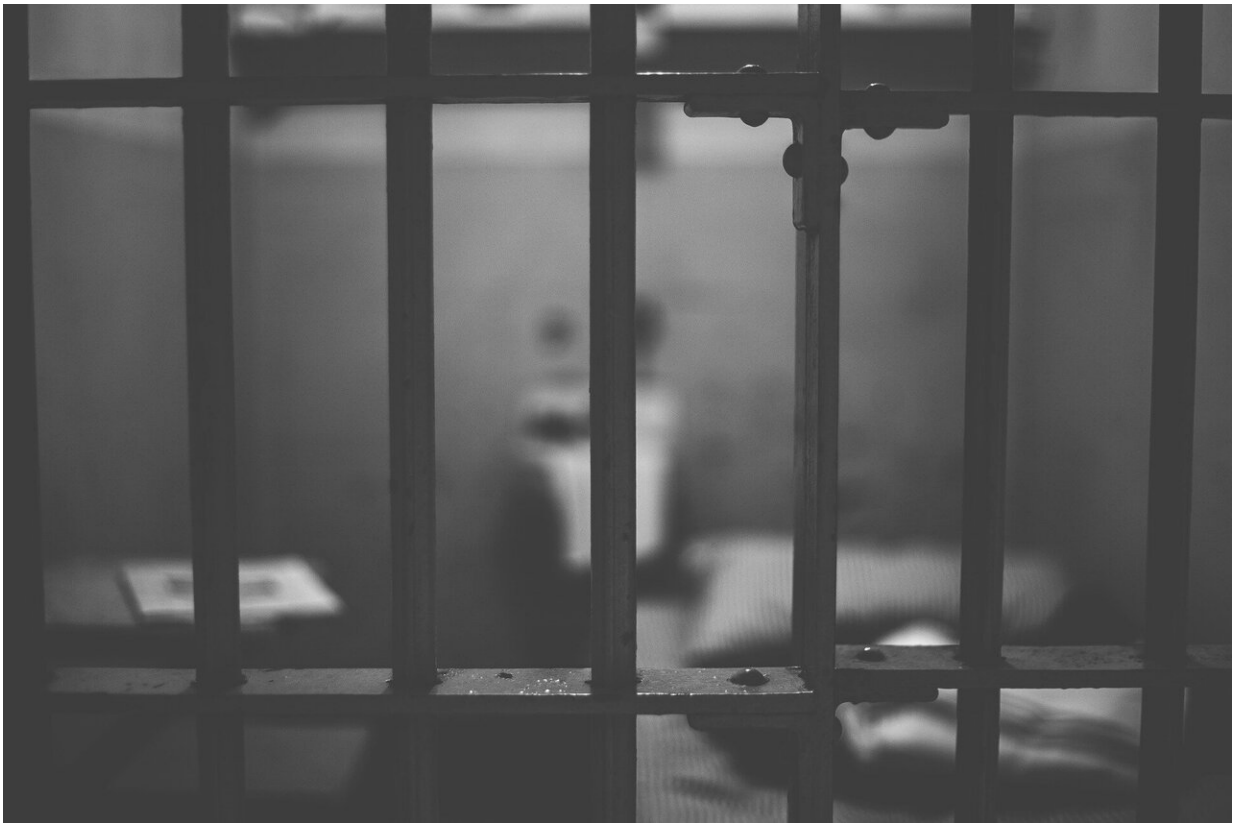


# Better use of tech in prisons would help with transition back into society, says researcher

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Better use of technology in prisons would improve family relationships, and ultimately, a detainee's prospects of transitioning successfully back into society.

University of New England (UNE) researcher Dr. Lukas Carey should know. He was incarcerated for a year himself and now manages the reintegration of former prisoners in Western Australia.

In a study just released, Lukas and colleagues Dr. Caroline Doyle from UNSW and ANU Law graduate Joanna Cui concluded that much more could be done to support the invisible victims of the criminal justice system—the children of incarcerated parents. They are at greater risk of experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and can suffer poor mental and [physical health](#), especially the children of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who are more likely to be jailed.

The researchers believe there is one cheap and easy measure that could help. They want to see in-cell communication devices, like digital tablets, introduced throughout Australian corrective services to keep parents remain connected with their children. It would make permanent the "video visits" introduced during the height of the COVID pandemic.

## **Limits of time and distance**

"During my [prison term](#) in Victoria, six years ago, two of my three children were in Perth and visited just twice," Lukas said. "There is the cost and time limits of phone calls (capped at 12 minutes per person per day), the incompatibility of face-to-face visiting hours, the mental and physical anguish of not being able to see your children, and them not being able to see that you are safe. You are still their parent and the current system does little to bring families together.

"My youngest child experienced significant separation anxiety when I returned home. It's as though the system does not consider [family relationships](#) or the well-being of families important until the assessment for parole."

Since his release, Lukas has completed a Master of Criminology and now lectures within UNE's Centre for Rural Criminology. His lived and living experience provides a valuable contribution to research and future policy development.

"I worked three jobs in prison simply to afford to speak to my kids often," Lukas said. "Guys would get off a [phone call](#) to their family and break down, and it's dangerous to show that vulnerability.

"They need a safe, private place to show emotion, not lining up with dozens of others to have public conversations with their families. The technology—like Facetime or video calls—already exists; it's the mindset that needs to change."

It could save money and heartache in the longer term.

"The children of incarcerated people have a higher likelihood of going to prison themselves," Lukas said. "This technology could help to alleviate the [adverse childhood experiences](#) that we know are linked to a higher incidence of criminal activity later in life.

"I am not suggesting we go soft on crime, but we have seen tablets successfully trialed in NSW and it is a really simple change that supports reintegration and rehabilitation. Maintaining [family](#) relationships while you are in jail can make life on the outside a little easier, and reduce [recidivism](#)."

## Starting again

Of the returning parents that Lukas works with at Outcare, he estimates that three-quarters have difficulty restoring relationships with their children.

"This is a real challenge, especially among Indigenous people," he said. "You come back into your kids' lives and essentially have to start again. It's not only men either. Women have described the trauma of separation, and the significance of children in shaping their rehabilitation and post-release plans."

The researchers found that audio-visual link visits can reduce the time, stress, inconvenience and financial cost of families traveling to prisons; support prisoners outside of standard visiting periods; and may even help to build parenting skills.

"The number of people being incarcerated in Australia continues to rise," said Lukas, who was charged with receiving secret commissions while working in local government and served one year in [jail](#) and two years' parole. "We need to consider what helps to heal families, and [children](#) particularly, rather than continue to traumatize them.

"A person's mistakes and actions do not necessarily represent them. I want to use my lived experiences to provide a voice for others who are not as lucky as I am."

Provided by University of New England

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