



Improving Latino Offenders' Access to Visitation

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Executive Summary

The Department of Corrections commissioned a six-month project to evaluate how it can improve the legitimacy of its practices that attempt to maintain connections between Latino offenders and their families, specifically visitation. Despite available visiting opportunities, Latinos may face unique circumstances relative to other ethnic or racial groups that can impact their ability to maintain close ties or fully participate in the available programming.

This project focused on in-person visitation, Extended Family Visits (EFVs), and video visitation. It examined DOC's visitation policies and practices that seek to foster connections between offenders and their families, identified barriers that may exist in strengthening the relationship between Latino offenders and their families, and examined opportunities that might help DOC improve its efforts in supporting family connections among Latino offenders and their families.

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods to examine Latino offender visitation. Administrative data was analyzed to determine utilization patterns for various visitation programs among Latino offenders. Qualitative data on the experiences of Latino offenders, Latino offender family members, and DOC visitation staff was generated through focus groups, interviews, and site visits to Coyote Ridge Corrections Center and the Monroe Correctional Complex Twin Rivers Unit.

Visitation data shows that Latino's overall visit utilization for in-person, EFV, and video visits is comparable to their 13% share of the prison population. Despite no indication of disparities at the aggregate level, when utilization rates are broken down by the different types of visitation programs there is evidence that issues may exist with EFV and video visit participation that merit further examination. A presentation of findings and recommendations follows.

Findings

- Visit staff do not see any barriers to Latinos visiting but offenders and offender family members report that Spanish-speaking visit applicants often have difficulties with the application process and don't know where to turn when they encounter problems.
- Unlike the English version of DOC's website, the Spanish site does not provide links to the required visitor application forms and features outdated information that may discourage visitation.
- Between different facilities, there is a large difference in the time spent processing applications as well as differences in how they are processed. The differences in how they are processed, particularly in regards to Social Security Numbers, may impact Latino visit applicants.
- Offenders and their families are content with their in-person visitation experiences but less so with video visits. All offenders that have used Jpay's service complained of frequent problems with the video and audio quality and said that the sessions were expensive. The interviewed offender family members also opined that the service was expensive though they have not used it.
- Prison staff reported that the majority of visit staff are courteous and professional in their dealings with the public but most also mentioned that they had witnessed "jaded" employees treating visitors poorly. A minority of offenders echoed this sentiment.

Recommendations

- Centralize the application process within one unit and have one or more of those positions designated as dual-language.
- Update the Spanish section of DOC's website to include current visitation policies and practices. It should also provide prospective visitors with easy access to the different visit application forms.
- Clarify background check process for visitor applicants without an SSN. If DOC's practice is to not require them on online applications, staff must understand the process for running NCIC checks based on other identifying information. DOC can also examine the feasibility of removing SSN requirement from the hard copy of the visitor application.
- For video visits, DOC should continue to work with Jpay to improve the bandwidth in the facilities. It should also explore opportunities to better market video visits for families with offenders in remote locations.
- Have customer service evaluations available in both languages for visitors in the waiting area as well as on the DOC website.

Acknowledgement

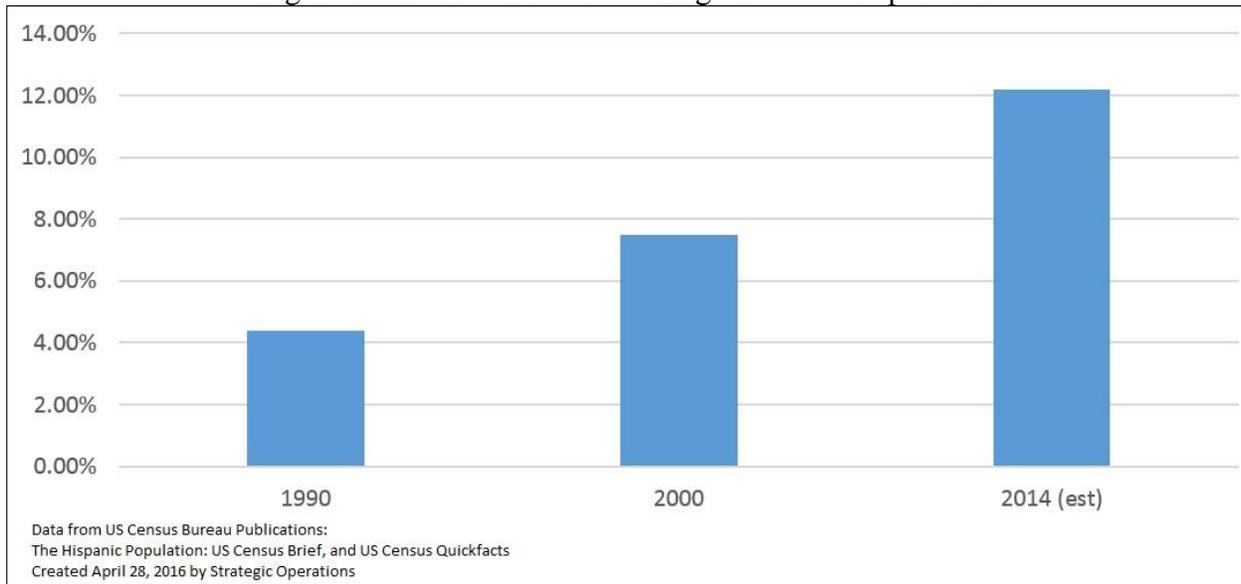
This work would not exist without the generous help of my colleagues at the Department of Corrections. I am grateful for their support and willingness to share their knowledge and advice. I also extend my sincerest appreciation to Jeff Uttecht and Eric Jackson as well as the staff at Coyote Ridge Corrections Center and Monroe Correctional Complex-Twin Rivers Unit for their hospitality and assistance.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Mexican Consulate and the Washington State Commission on Hispanic Affairs for their collaboration and I also thank the staff, offenders and family members who participated in the focus groups and interviews. Their candor in sharing their visitation experiences was invaluable in informing this work.

Introduction

During the past two decades, the Latino community in Washington has increased by 177% and changed demographics across the state, as shown in Figure 1 below. A high immigration rate, particularly during the 1990s, combined with a high fertility rate has made Latinos not only the largest-growing minority group in Washington but also one of the youngest with a median age of 23 (Pew, 2011). Primarily of Mexican origin, Latinos now account for 12% of the state population overall but maintain much higher densities in Central Washington. For example, about half of the population in counties such as Yakima and Franklin is Latino (Census, 2011).

Figure 1 – Latino share of Washington State’s Population



The Washington State Department of Corrections (DOC) Latino offender prison population has also increased over past years from 10% in 2005 to around 13% in 2015. Further, 2013 DOC statistics show that Latino offenders are responsible for 21% of all violent infractions, a number that is disproportionate relative to their numbers in the prison population. This is influenced by a subset of Latino offenders who are gang-involved as some of DOC’s most challenging prison gangs are primarily comprised of Latinos. The violent infractions combined with prison gang affiliation may contribute to a notable portion of Latino offenders being held at higher custody levels as Latinos comprise 24% of maximum custody offenders. The high level of violent infractions may also be related the relative youth of the Latino offender population which on average is close to five years younger than the rest of the offender population. Young offenders have been characterized by older offenders as wanting to emulate the pop culture idea that a gangster should strive to be bad and not follow established norms (Martinez, 2010). Similarly, an influx of young rebellious offenders with a disregard for existing norms have been blamed in the past for breakdowns of the social order in the California prison system (Skarbek, 2015).

A possible way to reduce offender violence in correctional facilities is by facilitating relationships between offenders and their families. Visitation is one way that relationships between offenders and their families are maintained during incarceration. Studies have found that visits by family and friends can reduce offender infractions and violent behavior as offenders are aware that visitation is a privilege that may be lost should they commit anti-social behavior. In one survey, offenders reported that they were appreciative of visitation privileges and were careful to not do anything that would jeopardize their participation (Derkzen, Gobeil, & Gileno, 2009). Unsurprisingly, DOC prison staff have categorized the program as a “violence prevention tool.”

The DOC has several visitation opportunities including traditional in-person visits, extended family visits, and video visits. During traditional in-person visits, visitors sit across from offenders in large communal visiting rooms, while extended family visits permit qualified offenders to spend up to 48 hours with immediate family members in private buildings on prison grounds. Video visitation allows families to have face-to-face interaction with offenders through their computer without having to leave home.

Despite available visiting opportunities, Latino offenders and their families may face unique circumstances relative to other ethnic or racial groups that can impact their ability to maintain close ties or fully participate in the available programming. A large contributing factor to this is the sizeable number of undocumented immigrants who have either overstayed their visas or entered the United States without authorization. As a result of their immigration status, those that are undocumented may often fear engaging government organizations, including representatives of their own government, lest they draw the attention of immigration authorities responsible for deportations such as the Department of Homeland Security and its Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE). This fear is so pronounced that the staff from the Mexican Consulate in Seattle have mentioned this as a problem they’ve had to overcome when performing outreach to their own citizens. If this is the case with the consulate, it is likely an even greater problem with DOC’s status as a law enforcement agency. Though the state-administered DOC is a completely different entity with a different mission from the federal ICE, many Latino immigrant families may fear that submitting a visitor application could lead to deportations.

English language proficiency may also present a problem for Latino families visiting offenders. Though DOC publishes its visitation application and visitor guidelines in Spanish, mono-lingual Spanish speakers may nonetheless feel intimidated if they have difficulties navigating an English-speaking visit room. Surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center show that 77% of first-generation Latinos lack fluency in English and while this may not pose a serious issue in areas with a more established Latino community, nearly 40% of Washington State’s Latino population is foreign-born (Pew, 2011). Due to these type of circumstances, it may be that Latinos receive fewer visits, visitors, or have different levels of participation in some visitation programs over others. Indeed, though visitation policies and practices vary between states, a study of the Florida DOC visitation program shows that the potential for differences exists as Florida’s Latino offenders received fewer visits than its Caucasian offenders (Cochran, Mears, & Bales, 2014).

As established, visits can be used as a violence prevention tool since they're a privilege that can be taken away in cases of offender misbehavior. This may account for discrepancies in visitation rates between individual offenders. For example, an offender compliant with prison rules may receive more visit opportunities than his misbehaving cellmate. If however, there are systemic issues that result in unequal access to visitation for a particular group, there would be important implications for DOC's legitimacy.

Researchers studying why people follow the law have written that individuals comply not so much because they fear the consequences of their non-compliance, but rather because they feel that the body with authority over them is legitimate and that its decisions and rules are usually fair (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012). Similarly, studies on offender behavior show that when an offender population perceives a prison authority as legitimate, they will as a whole, agree that there should be rules and that they should be followed (Jackson, Tyler, Bradford, Taylor & Shiner, 2010). Thus, prison administrators should strive to maintain their legitimacy if they are to run a well-functioning facility. Legitimacy can be eroded, however, if offenders perceive there to be a lack of fairness, even if unintended, in the application of the rules. In this light, equality in the opportunity for visitation may be particularly salient. Offenders who receive visits are more apt to view prison authorities as legitimate (Cochran et al., 2014), and it is likely that the inverse is also true.

The DOC commissioned a six-month project to evaluate how it can improve its legitimacy among the Latino offender population in terms of its visitation policies and practices that intend to foster connections between offenders and their families. This project aims to identify any barriers that may exist as well as examine any opportunities that might help DOC improve its efforts in supporting family connections among Latino offenders and their families.

Methods

This study gathered relevant information on DOC's visitation practices by conducting a thorough reading of policy as well as utilizing a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Policies reviewed included 450.300 – Visits for Prison Offenders, 530.150 – Family Centered Services, and 590.100 – Extended Family Visiting. Further information on policies and practices were provided by DOC's visitation subject matter experts and policy authors.

Administrative data was analyzed to determine utilization patterns for various visitation programs among Latino offenders. The driving questions that guided this portion of the project were: (1) to what degree are Latino offenders and their families currently participating in the various visitation opportunities and have there been any changes in their level of participation and (2) are there particular kinds of visitation opportunities that Latino offenders and their families tend to utilize more than or less than others?

DOC's data for EFVs and in-person visits measured the number of visitors that Latino and non-Latino offenders received and spanned from 01/01/2013 through 11/30/2015. Video visitation data was sourced from Jpay, the outside vendor that administers the video visitation program and measured the number of visits that offenders engaged in. In contrast to DOC's in-house visitation data, Jpay's available data spans a shorter range of 7/19/2015 through 11/30/2015 and included individual entries for each video visit with the names of the participating offenders. These names were checked against ethnicity tags in OMNI to create Latino and Non-Latino categories.

Qualitative data on the experiences of Latino offenders, Latino offender families, and visitation staff with DOC's visitation programs was generated through focus groups, interviews, and site visits to Coyote Ridge Corrections Center (CRCC) and the Monroe Correctional Complex Twin Rivers Unit (MCC-TRU). Focus groups were the primary format used to collect qualitative data and provided the benefit of discussion of experiences between participants. All offenders participated in a focus group format. Focus groups were also conducted with offender family members and staff participants when at least three participants could be gathered in the same location. Individual interviews were utilized when it was not possible to bring participants together. Site visits enabled the observation of offender-visitor interactions, visit staff-visitor interactions, the visiting room environment, and the security procedures during check-in.

Participants

Offenders

Offenders at both facilities were recruited with the help and coordination of superintendents and staff at both prison facilities. The CRCC focus group was held with seven medium custody offenders while the MCC-TRU group consisted of four minimum custody offenders. While the number of offender participants is small relative to the number of Latino offenders at both prisons, the commonality of their responses suggest that their experiences are not unique to individual offenders but representative of a more general Latino offender experience.

Offender Families

Two offender family members participated in interviews and were the relatives of offenders held at CRCC. Both women were recruited with the help of DOC's Family Services Unit, which had had previous contact with them. After introductory phone calls explaining the research project, individual interviews were later scheduled as one-on-one meetings at the Kennewick and Grandview public libraries. Both interviews were conducted in Spanish.

Staff

Interviews with visit sergeants and other visit staff took place at the facilities where they worked. As with the offender focus groups, these interviews were scheduled with the assistance of the facility superintendents.

Description of Visit Application Process and Visitation Opportunities

Visitor Approval Process

The first step for a friend or family member who wants to visit an offender in prison is to be added to the offender's list of approved visitors. Potential visitors must fill out a DOC visitor's application form, which may be completed electronically or through hard copy. The form asks applicants to list their names, contact information, and identifying characteristics such as race and hair color. It also asks that visitors provide the number of their government, school, or tribe-issued identification card. The hard copy additionally requires that visitors submit their social security numbers while the online application does not. Lastly, visitors are asked about their relationship with the offender and if they have a criminal history. For visit applicants under the age of 18, further steps are required. Notarized, written permission must be granted by a non-incarcerated parent or guardian and filed along with a copy of the minor's birth certificate. Also, if the minor plans to visit without their non-incarcerated parent, the parent must designate an escort for the prison visit by completing and notarizing an additional consent form.

Completed forms along with the required documentation are turned into the facility where the offender is housed and are processed by the visit staff within a 21 day window. Staff will then check the applicant's name in local, state, and federal databases to verify identity and criminal history. If the application is missing information, visit staff may either reject the application or notify the applicant by mail or email so it can be corrected. The facility's visit sergeant will then review the completed application and makes a decision on its approval.

Once a decision is made, the offender will be informed of the outcome. Applicants can be denied if they are the offender's victim or if they participated in the commission of the crime for which the offender is incarcerated. For example, an accomplice to a robbery would be prohibited from visiting the offender with whom he committed the crime. Applicants that are denied can appeal the decision to the facility's superintendent and if denied again, to the Assistant Secretary for Prisons. If the application is approved, the visitor will be placed on the offender's approved list and can participate in in-person and video visits.

In-Person Visits

In-person visits can be either contact or no-contact depending on the offender's classification. With contact visits, visitors meet with offenders in the prison's visit room. The room's layout varies by facility but they generally can accommodate up to 300 people. Visitors sit across the table from offenders and must keep hands visible above the table top although child visitors under eight years of age are allowed to sit on offenders' laps.

During no-contact visits, visitors are separated from offenders by a plexiglass barrier and speak through a handset. No-contact visits are primarily utilized for offenders held in maximum custody, in administrative segregation, or during the intake process before classification at the Washington Corrections Center. This type of visit may also be used if facility staff has reason to suspect that a visitor may try to introduce contraband to the offender or if the offender has a communicable disease.

Both contact and no-contact visit privileges may be suspended if the offender commits serious infractions during the period of their incarceration such as assault, or is found in possession of dangerous contraband.

Video Visitation

Working through Jpay, an outside vendor, DOC has video visitation, which allows offenders and their families to communicate through video chat. Video visitors must have access to a webcam-enabled computer as well as a stable internet connection while offenders use Jpay video kiosks located in facility day rooms. Visits can be purchased and scheduled on the Jpay website. Sessions can last up to an hour and are booked in 30-minute blocks which cost \$12.95 each.

Though visitors participate remotely, they are still required to abide by the prison's Visitor Guidelines for clothing and conduct. Jpay records each session and if requested makes the recording available to DOC staff for additional review. Staff can also view the live feed at any time and terminate the visit if visitors or offenders violate the guidelines.

Extended Family Visitation

During EFVs, offenders and their family members can spend up to 48 hours together in mobile homes or trailers within prisons' secured perimeters. EFV mobile homes are equipped with bedrooms, kitchens and living rooms. They also have a television, family-friendly movies, and board games for the family to use. Unlike with in-person visits where visitation staff continually monitor the visitation room, EFVs allow for a greater degree of privacy as facility staff usually perform checks on participants to once every eight hours.

EVFs are a special program with more stringent qualification requirements than in-person or video visits. In order to be considered, offenders cannot be classified at a higher level than medium custody and cannot be on death row. Additionally, if they are sentenced to more than five years, they must serve 12 consecutive months before they are eligible. Those serving less than five years must serve six months. Offenders must also have a clean infraction history. They cannot have been found guilty of committing a major infraction such as aggravated assault within the preceding five years, a less serious infraction such as refusing to submit to a urinalysis within the past three years, or been infractioned for possessing contraband such as tobacco within the last year. They also cannot have any outstanding felony warrants in other jurisdictions or Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detainees.

Past histories of domestic violence are also scrutinized at higher levels and abuse toward visitors in similar-types of relationships are also a disqualifying factor. For example, an offender convicted of abusing his ex-wife would be allowed to receive in-person visits with his current wife but not EFVs because he has a documented history of abusing intimate partners.

On the visitor side, EFVs are limited to immediate family. DOC defines this as an offender's spouse or state-registered domestic partner, parent, grandparent, sibling, birth child, stepchild, grandchild, great grandchild, and adoptive versions of these. Policy does not dictate a time frame for length of the approval process but it generally takes three to six months.

Findings

As previously mentioned, Latinos comprise around 13% of Washington DOC's offender population and while there are many similarities between Latino and non-Latino offenders, there are important differences. A demographic comparison of the two populations is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1 – Latino & Non-Latino Offender Demographics

Category	Detail	LATINO		NON-LATINO	
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent
GENDER	MALE	2065	92.5%	13824	92.4%
	FEMALE	167	7.5%	1142	7.6%
AGE	AVERAGE	34.3	NA	39.1	NA
	MEDIAN	33.0	NA	37.0	NA
CITIZENSHIP	U.S.	1440	64.3%	12883	85.9%
	MEXICO	398	17.8%	17	0.1%
	LATIN AMERICA	55	2.5%	8	0.1%
	OTHER/UNKNOWN	346	15.5%	2085	13.9%
LENGTH OF SENTENCE	LESS THAN TWO YEARS	286	13.1%	2114	14.4%
	TWO TO FIVE YEARS	569	26.1%	4090	27.8%
	FIVE TO TEN YEARS	374	17.2%	2539	17.3%
	OVER TEN YEARS	618	28.3%	3597	24.5%
	LIFE WITH THE POSSIBILITY OF RELEASE	289	13.3%	1771	12.1%
	LIFE WITHOUT RELEASE	44	2.0%	583	4.0%
CRIME ROLLUP	MURDER 1 AND 2	340	15.2%	2013	13.5%
	MANSLAUGHTER	48	2.2%	289	1.9%
	SEX CRIMES	427	19.1%	3089	20.6%
	ROBBERY	203	9.1%	1471	9.8%
	ASSAULT	672	30.1%	3539	23.6%
	PROPERTY CRIMES	228	10.2%	2827	18.9%
	DRUG CRIMES	215	9.6%	1087	7.3%
	OTHER/UNKNOWN	53	2.4%	323	2.2%
	MISSING	46	2.1%	327	2.2%
NUMBER OF MINOR CHILDREN	NONE	975	44.0%	8148	54.7%
	ONE	470	21.2%	3060	20.5%
	TWO OR MORE	771	34.8%	3689	24.8%

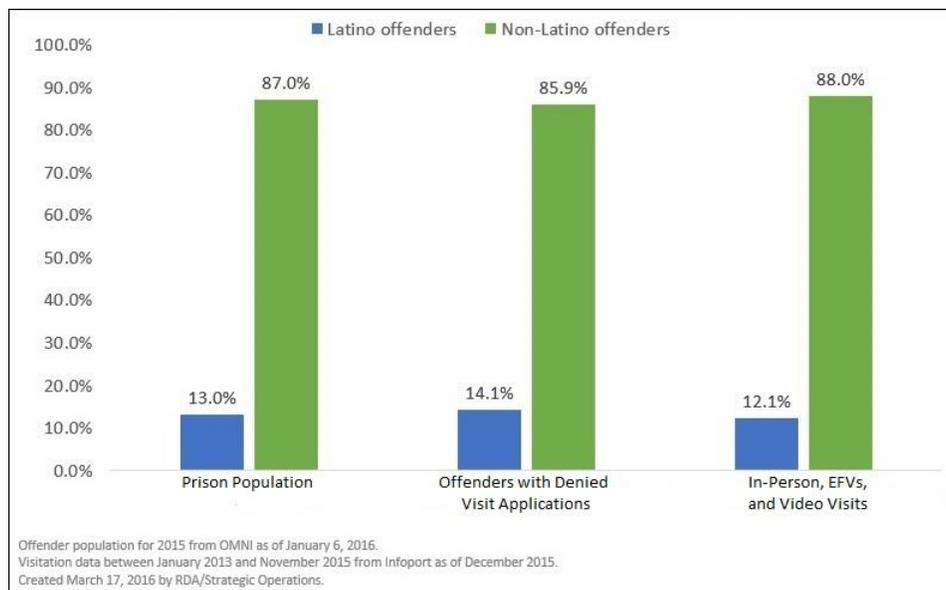
Latino offenders are younger than non-Latinos with an average age of 34.3 compared to 39.1. They are also more likely to be parents with 56% of Latino offenders having at least one child under the age of 18 compared to 45.3% of the non-Latino population. However, offenders self-report on their parental status and number of children during intake, there is some evidence that underreporting may be an issue because some offenders may think that not reporting on having children will exempt them from having to pay child support. As with non-Latinos, the majority of Latino offenders are United States citizens though a substantial minority of 36% are not. Of those, Mexicans make up the largest share and represent 50% of the non-citizens. The implications of the high number of foreigners will be discussed at greater length below.

Latino offenders are less likely than non-Latinos to be serving prison sentences for property crimes (10.2% vs 18.9%) but more likely to serve sentences for violent crimes such as assault (30.1% vs 23.6%). Differences in the seriousness between property crimes and violent crimes in turn likely fuels differences in lengths of sentences for Latinos compared to non-Latinos. For example, a higher percentage of Latinos than non-Latinos have sentence lengths of over 10 years (28.3% vs 24.5%) as well as life sentences (13.3% vs 12.1%).

Latino overall visit utilization is comparable to their share of the offender population

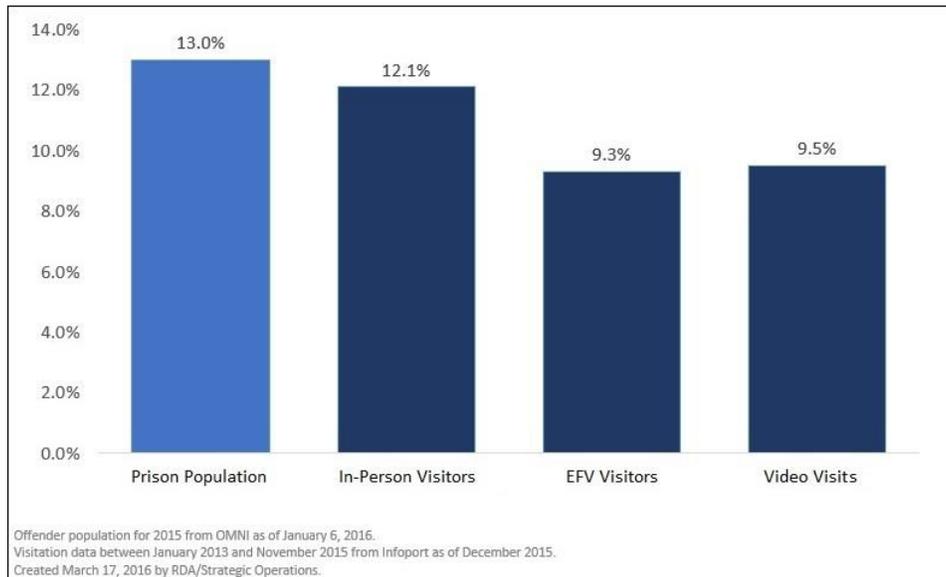
Figure 2 below shows participation in visitation as well as visit application denial rates for Latino and Non-Latino offenders compared to their percentage of the prison population. For in-person, EFVs and video visits, Latino offenders receive 12.1% of all visitors. Further, data on the denial rate for visit applications show that Latinos make up 14.1% of offenders with denied visit applications. Compared to their 13% of the offender population, this suggests that overall visit utilization for in-person, EFV, and video visits is comparable to their share of the prison population.

Figure 2 – Comparison of Prison Population, Denied Visit Applications, and Aggregate Visitation for Latino and Non-Latino Offenders



Despite no indication of disparities at the aggregate level, Figure 3 which shows utilization rates broken down by type of visit program, suggests that EFV and video visit participation may merit further examination.

Figure 3 – Latino Offenders: Population and visit utilization comparison



As mentioned earlier, Latino offenders and their families may face unique circumstances relative to other ethnic or racial groups that can impact their ability to fully participate in the available visitation programming. An analysis of qualitative data from the focus groups and interviews revealed how these circumstances impact Latino visitation and are discussed below.

Spanish-Speaking families may have challenges with the application process

One of the first resources that offender family members may consult when searching for information on visiting may be DOC’s website which includes the English site as well as a section for Spanish speakers. Both version of the site feature a section with information geared toward family and friends but the Spanish version is outdated, contains information that is no longer accurate, and is missing links to all of the documents that prospective visitors would need. In contrast, the English site provides a detailed frequently asked questions (FAQ) section on the application process with links to the online and hard copy versions of the visitor application form as well as links to information on the different types of visits.

The differences between the two versions of the website is important for several reasons as the information, particularly with EFVs, is inaccurate on the qualification criteria and may discourage undocumented visitors from wanting to participate. Current policy dictates that a person who marries or enters into a domestic partnership with an offender during their incarceration may participate in EFVs within a year of the union if they are birth or adoptive parents of a child who is also participating. Otherwise, the couple must wait three years. The Spanish website, however, references past policy and says that marriages entered into after an

offender's incarceration do not qualify. Further, the Spanish site also states that EFV visitors who are not United States citizens must prove legal entry into country in order to be able to participate. DOC used to have this requirement for all types of visits but changed the policy in 2013 in order to promote greater access to visitation.

The Spanish site also makes no mention of video visits as a possible visitation opportunity. In contrast, the English version devotes a section to video visits and includes information on the cost as well as a link to Jpay's website where visitors can schedule a session. Though there are several factors that may explain Latino's lower usage rates for video visitation, not having equal access to information about the program likely contributes.

Perhaps the most important difference between the English and Spanish sites is the Spanish version's lack of access to the required application forms or as the English site terms it, a "One-Stop-Shop for visiting forms." In addition to the aforementioned hard copy and online versions of the visit application, the Spanish site lacks access to the "Parent/Guardian Approval for visiting" forms required for child visitors. Aside from making it more difficult for Spanish speakers to access the applications, the omission of the online form is especially problematic. As previously mentioned, the online version does not require applicants to disclose a social security number (SSN) while the hard copy does. Undocumented immigrants do not have valid SSNs, so providing an easily accessible online form is likely the only way that they can apply without falsifying information.

While using the online application form allows the undocumented to apply, differences in the ways facilities process those applications may nonetheless impact that subsection of Latinos. For example, when visit staff search the applicant's name as part of the background check associated with the visitation approval process, the databases can produce many hits depending on how common the name is. In these cases, visit policy staff have directed prison visit staff to follow up by phone or email to request additional identifying information that is not an SSN. Some facilities will nonetheless send back the application and ask for an SSN. The de facto requirement at these facilities to provide an SSN when it's not part of policy may then create unintended problems irrespective of what form undocumented immigrants use to apply. A possible reason for the differences between directives and practice may be that some facilities do not have the needed staff resources to contact applicants due to a substantial application workload. Conversations with visit staff revealed large differences in the number of applications that they were responsible for processing with one facility reporting up to 250 applications per week which required 20 hours of staff time compared to between five to 10 applications received by the other facility. The lack of available staff may also result in some facilities' application processing times exceeding the 21-day window proscribed by DOC's visitation policy. This was mentioned by visit policy staff as an occasional but persistent problem.

When applications are sent back or denied for a lack of an SSN or other reasons, Latinos with limited English proficiency may face additional barriers in navigating the process. In such cases, Spanish speakers may not have an identifiable recourse for finding out what went wrong since the majority of prison visit staff do not speak Spanish. Compounding this, some prisons reject applications without giving applicants an explanation for the decision. The impact of this barrier was illustrated by one of the offender family members who recounted her ongoing experience with getting her children approved as visitors:

“I’ve had applications for them rejected twice and I just sent in the third. It’s been three months of trying for them and they want to see their father. Maybe this time it will be different. I don’t know what else they want, I’ve sent them everything that they’ve asked for. I keep calling the prison to get more information but since I don’t speak English, I ask if they speak Spanish and they hang up on me.”

That Latinos often have problems navigating the application process was confirmed by offender focus group participants with many recounting that their family members had denied or rejected applications, did not understand why, and could not talk with anyone at DOC for help in resolving the problem.

Several issues limit Latino video visiting

Quantitative data on video visits demonstrate lower utilization rates for Latino offenders compared to the other visitation options. Unlike the problems identified with the Spanish website and the potential communication difficulties with the application process, the issues that limit video visit participation may affect Latinos at a higher rate but likely apply to the offender population as a whole. Indeed, a recent case study by the Vera Institute of Justice on DOC’s video visitation program identified the same factors that were recounted by Latino focus group participants as contributing to relatively low usage of the program in Washington as compared to other states (Digard, diZerega, Yaroni & Rinaldi, 2015).

The Vera Institute’s report notes that, “For video visits to happen... visitors also must have access to the necessary technology (Digard et al., 2015). Census Bureau figures show that 83.3% of the nation’s households have a computer and 74.4% have home internet access suggesting that for most people, this may not be a problem. However, the Census data also found a strong correlation between computer ownership and high income and education levels (Census, 2013). On this point, Washington State Latinos, may be disproportionately affected as the Latino poverty rate is the second highest in the state and the Latino high school graduation rate is the second lowest (Talk Poverty, 2014). Indeed, both of the offender family members admitted that they did not have home access to the necessary equipment.

The cost of video visits is another area where the Latino poverty rate may disproportionately affect usage. Both offender family members as well as the majority of offenders mentioned the \$12.99 price of a half-hour session as barrier to participation. It should be noted, however, that the offender family members lived within an hour’s drive of the prison so the cost of a video visit was weighed against the relatively minor cost of driving to the facility as well as the different experiences between video and in-person visitation. Given that, it is possible that the perceived value of video visits may be higher for family members with offenders in more remote locations. Nonetheless, the Vera Institute also revealed this as a problem that they identified throughout the state prison system, writing that “a substantial number of potential users are deterred by these costs.” (Digard et al., 2015)

As none of the family members had participated in video visits, information on user experiences came solely from offenders and revealed another reason for lower usage rates. In addition to their complaints over cost, every offender who had used video visits reported dissatisfaction with the service’s audio and video quality. As a result of both, they did not

perceive this visit opportunity as being worthwhile for them or their families. As one offender said, “It’s not worth it. [It’s] too expensive for bad quality. If my family pays the \$13 and we can’t even have a conversation, they just wasted money.” As with the other factors that may limit Latinos’ video visitation use, this mirrors the Vera Institute’s findings which showed that only 24% of offender users reported being satisfied with their video visitation experience.

Negative experiences with visit staff may impact in-person visitation

Though the visitation data does not indicate low usage of in-person visits, negative experiences with visit staff may nonetheless have a detrimental effect on Latino participation. While having negative experiences with visit staff is not an issue that exclusively affects Latinos, it may have a greater effect on a population that already has a fear of the system, a distrust of government, and language difficulties. Some of the offenders interviewed reported either personally experiencing or witnessing staff acting rudely to visitors and other offenders. However, observations on negative experiences with visitation were more commonly reported by visit staff. Staff reported that the overwhelming majority of their colleagues are courteous and professional in their dealings with the public but most also mentioned that they had witnessed “jaded” employees treating visitors poorly. One prison staff member remarked that, “Visit staff need to think about the fact that they are the public face of the agency for every visitor that comes in and be conscious that customer service is paramount.” Similarly, other DOC staff mentioned that when talking about the importance of providing good customer service, some visit staff responded that, “If you want customer service, go to Walmart.”

Recommendations

The following recommendations are in response to the findings detailed above though there is acknowledgement that some of these recommendations will have a budgetary impact and the feasibility of their implementation will depend on the availability of needed funds. Further, it is important to note that DOC is already moving ahead on some of these recommendations as a result of this project.

For the application process

The Department should rebuild the Spanish version of its website to mirror the information and layout of the English one. The updated site should also provide links to Spanish translations of the various application forms, especially the online visitor application. This will not only ensure that potential visitors can find accurate information but will also make it easier for the undocumented subset of Latinos to apply through the online form which does not require a Social Security Number. DOC could also explore the feasibility of removing the SSN requirement from the hard copy of the visitor application form given that there is other identifying information that could be used in its place. There is a precedent for not requiring an SSN as neither the California nor Oregon DOCs ask for it on their respective application forms.

In order to address the problems that Latinos face when there are problems with the application process, DOC should explore centralizing the application process within one visiting unit and have one or more of those positions designated as dual-language. This recommendation represents a considerable change from current practices but it would standardize the application process and provide a central point of contact for applicants who encounter difficulties. Though DOC's visit policies dictate a uniform procedure for handling applications, having staff at 12 different facilities processing applications may create the unintended effect of having 12 different application processes. The agency should also clarify and retrain visit staff on the background check process for applicants without an SSN. As DOC's practice is to not require them on online applications, staff must understand the process for running NCIC checks based on other identifying information.

For Video Visits

Working with Jpay, DOC has determined that bandwidth problems within prisons are responsible for video visit connectivity problems. It is already working with the vendor to determine how these problems could be fixed and improvements have already been made at a few facilities. As connectivity improves, DOC should also work to better market video visits as a convenient and less expensive way to maintain ties with offenders in remote prison locations. Part of this effort may include partnering with local public libraries to increase family members' access to the necessary equipment. The costs of administering video visits as well as the infrastructure investments in wiring facilities means that the price of the service will remain expensive for some Latino family members. However, for those that live a substantial distance away from the facility where their relative is held, video visits may be a more affordable option when considering the transportation and lodging costs associated with long distance travel.

For Customer Service

The DOC currently solicits visitor input on their experiences through the English part of the website as well as through comment cards in English in facility waiting rooms. As Spanish-speaking visitors may have different experiences given their language limitations, DOC should make customer service evaluations easily accessible in both languages on the website and in the facilities. Further, in order to address complaints or recognize visit staff's good work, these evaluations should be regularly reviewed by visit sergeants with quarterly reports to the shift lieutenant.

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