



Conjugal Visitation Programs in Correctional Settings: Perspectives of Criminal Justice Students at an American University

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To Cite this Article

Mensah Adinkrah, Johnita Cody & Carley Engstrom (2025). Conjugal Visitation Programs in Correctional Settings: Perspectives of Criminal Justice Students at an American University. *Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice Studies*, 3: 1, pp. 39-55. <https://doi.org/10.47509/JCCJS.2025.v03i01.02>

Abstract: Public attitudes towards conjugal visitation programs remain an understudied topic in the literature on corrections. The current exploratory study was undertaken to investigate college student' attitudes toward conjugal visitation programs in American correctional settings. A survey was conducted of 147 students enrolled in a criminology course in an American public university. The data show that 85.7% of respondents agreed with the statement that conjugal visitation was good for the inmate; 91.2% agreed with the statement that conjugal visitation was good for the spouses of incarcerated inmates; 81% said their home state which did not have conjugal visitation, should adopt conjugal visitation programs for incarcerated inmates.

Keywords: conjugal visitation, correctional inmates, correctional institutions, inmate rights, prisons, attitudes of college students.

Introduction

Conjugal visitation programs in correctional settings refer to policies, practices, and programs that afford inmates and their visiting spouses the opportunity to spend time together in a separate facility, away from the regular visiting room, where they are often granted additional privacy to be intimate with their visitors (Castle, 2014; Cripe, Pearlman & Kosiak, 2013; Goetting, 1982; Hensley, Rutland & Gray-Ray, 2002; Katz, 2017; Wyatt, 2006). Conjugal visitation programs are known by a variety of names,

including “Extended Family Visitation Program,” “Family Visiting Program,” “Family Visits,” “Family Reunion Program,” “Family Reunion Visits,” “Private Family Visits,” and “Sunday Visits.” (Castle, 2014; Correctional Service Canada, 2020; Hensley, Rutland & Gray-Ray, 2002; Katz, 2017).

A survey of the professional literature reveals that conjugal visitation programs have been the focus of only a limited number of academic studies (Carlson & Cervera, 1991; D’Alessio, Flexon, & Stolzenberg, 2012; Einat & Rabinovitz, 2012; Hensley, Rutland & Gray-Ray, 2002; Hensley, Tewksbury, & Chiang, 2002; McElreath *et al.*, 2016; Wyatt, 2006). Indeed, most of the research focusing on public attitudes towards conjugal visitation programs in correctional settings is dated (Hensley, Rutland & Gray-Ray, 2002). The dearth of scholarship on the topic stands in stark contrast with the massive number of studies that have accumulated on such topics as attitudinal surveys towards the death penalty (e.g., Adinkrah & Clemens, 2016; Lambert *et al.*, 2008). Regrettably, the scant number of scholarly studies on conjugal visitation programs implies that there is very limited information on the scope of public support for or against the program. To help address the minimal scholarship on the issue and provide additional information on the topic, the current authors conducted a survey of attitudes depicted by a sample of American criminal justice students towards conjugal visitation programs. The present article presents a description of the results of the survey.

Research on public attitudes towards conjugal visitation programs has several important uses. First, it fills a gap in knowledge about the issue. At present, it is unknown the extent or scope of public support that exists for such programs in the United States. Second, it adds to the scant extant research on the issue. As stated previously, currently most of the existing studies on the subject are dated. Indeed, writing in 2002, Hensley *et al.*, (2002) noted that: “Future research is desperately needed in the area of conjugal visits [because] most studies of conjugal visitation programs are outdated” (pp.154-155). The situation has not changed much since those comments were made. The current shortage of research on this topic, 19 years after this commentary was made, further elucidates the desperate need for updated scholarship. Determining the contemporary extent of public support for conjugal visitation programs is vital. In the United States, correctional institutions and programs are financed through taxpayer dollars. Whether a program will be implemented or discontinued is dependent, largely, upon whether or not public support exists for the program. In sum, this article presents the perspectives of a sample of criminal justice students on conjugal visitation programs. The criminal justice students of today will become future practitioners in the criminal justice system. Some will proceed to hold expert positions and manage justice programs in the years

to come; therefore, their perspectives on major programs matter. In addition, all the respondents will become taxpayers in future and their tax dollars will be earmarked to finance correctional programs. Therefore, the views of current criminal justice students on the subject matter.

The article begins with a brief review of conjugal visitation programs in correctional settings. This is followed by a history of the origins of conjugal visitation programs in the United States. For further contextualization, we then discuss briefly conjugal visitation programs in some parts of the world.

Arguments Supporting Conjugal Visitation Programs

A major argument for the development, implementation, and administration of conjugal visitation programs is preservation of the marital bond between the incarcerated person and his or her spouse. Research suggests that the loss of a partner to long-term incarceration is one key reason for dissolution of the marital bond (Massoglia *et al.*, 2011; Siennick *et al.*, 2014). In some situations, the incarceration of a spouse and the loss of physical relationship causes immense suffering. In some instances, the ensuing loneliness can lead to stress and self-harm (Carlson & Cervera, 1991). For some incarcerated men and women, loss of contact with their spouse can reinforce this hopelessness. This can lead to a depressed, demotivated state. Conjugal visitation is thus, one avenue for maintaining marital relationships (Goetting, 1982; Hensley, Rutland & Gray-Ray, 2002; Katz, 2017; McElreath *et al.*, 2016).

Besides strengthening marital bonds, advocates of conjugal visitation contend that the program can assist in the preservation, maintenance, or restoration of existing, weak, or severed bonds between the incarcerated person and their offspring on the outside (Goetting, 1982; Land, 2013; McElreath *et al.*, 2016). Many inmates had children prior to being convicted. According to one estimate, over 60 percent of women inmates in state prisons, and nearly 80 percent of those in jail in the United States, have minor children, and most are their primary caretaker (“Incarcerated Women and Girls,” 2020). As such, it is important to preserve the existing familial bond by allowing these children to visit their incarcerated parents on a sustained level. Lack of opportunities for parents and children to spend adequate time with each other, including developing or strengthening emotional attachments with the incarcerated parent might lead to delinquency on the part of the child. The emphasis of conjugal visitation programs on family preservation is seen in the fact that in many jurisdictions, conjugal visits frequently include the incarcerated person’s children, siblings, and parents (Goetting, 1982; Hensley, Rutland & Gray-Ray, 2002; Katz, 2017). Due to their reparative potential,

conjugal visitation programs are also known as “family restoration programs,” “family reunion programs,” or “extended family visits” (Carlson & Cervera, 1991; Department of Corrections Washington State, 2021).

Although preservation of family bonds rather than sexual release is touted as the main objective of granting inmates conjugal visitation, there is a presumption that sexual intercourse between the correctional inmate and the visiting spouse would occur during such visits. For example, proponents of conjugal visitation programs laud the program as one way of reducing situational homosexuality among incarcerated inmates (Castle, 2014; D’Alessio, Flexon & Stolzenberg, 2013; Goetting, 1982; Hensley, Rutland, & Gray-Ray, 2002; Katz, 2017; Land, 2013; McElreath, 2016). More importantly, advocates of conjugal visitations programs argue that sexual intimacy between couples during conjugal visits have the potential to curtail or eliminate the incidence of inmate-on-inmate sexual assaults, or prison rape. Believing that sexual aggression in prison settings is attributable to lack of legitimate sexual outlet for releasing pent-up sexual energies, it is offered that providing the inmate sexual outlet with his or her legitimate sexual partner would reduce the incidence of sexual assault (or rape) among inmates (Castle, 2014; D’Alessio, Flexon, & Stolzenberg, 2013).

Advocates of conjugal visitation programs contend that the provision of conjugal visitation opportunities to correctional incarcerated people contributes to rehabilitation by providing an incentive for good behavior (Castle, 2014; Goetting, 1982; Land, 2013). This link in conjugal visitation and behavior is emphasized in the eligibility requirements for conjugal visitation. To be eligible for conjugal visits, the incarcerated person must abide by prison rules for a stipulated period of time, as chronic violators of prison rules are typically ineligible for conjugal visits. For this reason, eligible inmates often strive to exhibit impeccable adherence to prison rules (Castle, 2014; Goetting, 1982; Hensley, Rutland & Gray-Ray, 2002; Land, 2013; McElreath *et al.*, 2016).

In sum, conjugal visitation programs are extolled for the numerous potential benefits they bring to correctional administrators, the prison inmate, as well as the nonincarcerated family members of the correctional inmate. Washington State, one of the only three remaining states in the United States providing extended family visits, touts the program’s prospective benefits at the website of its Department of Corrections:

The Extended Family Visit (EFV) Program is for visits in prison facilities between eligible inmates and his/her immediate family member(s) in a private housing unit. EFVs are intended to support building sustainable relationships important to inmate reentry, as well as provide incentive for those serving long-term sentences to engage in positive behavioral choices, therefore reducing violent infractions (Department of Corrections Washington State, 2021).

Arguments Opposing Conjugal Visitation Programs

Conjugal visitation programs have never been a popular correctional program for many jurisdictions around the world. In the United States, this is evidenced by the small number of states that have embraced it. Even at the height of its popularity, only 17 (34%) of the states adopted the program. At the time of this writing in March 2021, only 3 states had conjugal visitation programs for its correctional inmates. What accounts for the lack of support for and the precipitous decline in the number of states that practice conjugal visitation? The lack of support for conjugal visitation may be related to the get-tough attitudes and sentiments towards incarcerated inmates prevalent in the country. Many citizens believe that deprivation of sexual relations is one of the expected “pains of imprisonment” that goes with retributive punishment. Correctional inmates, it is contended, are already receiving “3 hots and a cot” (a reference to 3 hot meals and a sleeping facility) at taxpayer expense. To many, the addition of sexual “privileges” will make incarceration neither a deterrent nor retributive punishment (Castle, 2014; Hensley, Rutman & Gray-Ray, 2002).

Another criticism of conjugal visitation programs, particularly in the United States relates to the issue of equality. Critics often argue that restriction of participation to married partners is unfair to other inmates. It is argued that unmarried inmates who are ineligible will be angry, even hostile, towards correctional authorities over this lack of fairness. This has the potential to spark disruptive behavior in the correctional setting (Castle, 2014). Some correctional administrators say that conjugal visitation tends to generate negative attitudes and bad behavior among inmates who for various reasons do not participate in the program (Hensley, Rutland, and Gray-Ray, 2002).

One reason for the opposition to conjugal visitation programs is that it is costly to implement and maintain (Land, 2013). For opponents, the provision of additional space and structures as well as the need for the services of additional staff to implement the program would be financially prohibitive. It is important to emphasize that in 2014, the Mississippi Department of Corrections abrogated its century-old program, ascribing the rescission partly to the cost of administering the program (Land, 2013; McElreath *et al.*, 2016). Expenses associated with operating conjugal visitation in Mississippi prisons included “compensation for correctional officers to escort inmates, costs associated with the ‘personal hygiene’ of inmates, and costs associated with maintaining the facilities for conjugal visits” (McElreath *et al.*, 2016, p.759).

Another criticism of conjugal visitation programs is that it leads to the births of children to be raised by a single parent (Land, 2013; McElreath *et al.*, 2016). Concern over the increasing numbers of children born to participating couples stemming from

these visits who would then have to be raised by single parents was another reason for the Mississippi Department of Corrections' decision to abrogate the program. In an announcement that marked the termination of the program, the state's Commissioner of prisons noted:

There are costs associated with the staff's time, having to escort inmates to and from the visitation facility, supervising personal hygiene and keeping up the infrastructure of the facility. *Then, even though we provide contraception, we have no idea how many women are getting pregnant only for the child to be raised by one parent* (Land, 2013, emphasis ours).

In 2014, New Mexico also ended its conjugal visitation program, stating that the annual \$120,000 of taxpayer dollars spent operating the program was unjustified. A spokesperson for the New Mexico Department of Corrections stated: "After two years of research we found the overnight stays had no impact on decreasing the rate of inmates returning to jail" (Kolb, 2014). It is notable that New Mexico's decision to abrogate the program was hastened by a high-profile news report concerning a convicted killer who managed to father four children with multiple women while incarcerated. New Mexico approved conjugal visits after a 1980 riot at the Penitentiary of New Mexico, during which 33 inmates perished at the hands of fellow inmates. In the aftermath of the mayhem, legislators created a system of conjugal visits in hopes of averting another eruption of violence (Caldwell, 2016).

Challengers of conjugal visitation resist the program on the grounds that conjugal visitation will serve as a conduit for the introduction of contraband items into the institution. At present a major problem confronting correctional administrators and prison management is the introduction of prohibited material or contraband. It is contended that conjugal visits may provide one more avenue for drugs and other contraband items to be introduced into the prisons (Castle, 2014).

Opponents of conjugal visitation programs also argue that conjugal visitation has negligible rehabilitation potential since only a minority of inmates actually participate in the program (Hensley, Tewksbury & Chiang, 2002). In addition, as previously noted, the mass of ineligible offenders would be angry for nonparticipation for their ineligibility. This would create tension between participants and non-participants as well as non-participants and correctional administrators and staff.

Another source of opposition to conjugal visits is that such visits tend to facilitate the spread of sexually transmitted infections such as HIV-AIDS (Castle, 2014; Hensley, Rutland, & Gray-Ray, 2002). In the United States, correctional inmates reportedly have higher incidence of HIV infection than the nonincarcerated population, probably due

to drug use and unprotected sex. Conjugal visitation, it is argued, may facilitate the transmission of STI's from the infected inmate to his or her spouse.

Some opponents of conjugal visitation programs express concerns that conjugal visitation may create a space that allows for the fostering or exacerbation of domestic violence amongst incarcerated people and their partners. German authorities faced a barrage of criticisms when an inmate lethally assaulted his visiting spouse. Though an isolated incident, this case is used by opponents of conjugal visitation as one reason for not granting inmates unsupervised visits with their spouses ("Prisoner Murders Girlfriend During Conjugal Visit," 2010).

Conjugal Visitation Programs in the United States

According to several accounts, conjugal visitation programs in the United States emerged in the early 1900s in the southern state of Mississippi out of an anti-Black ideology centering around Black males' sexuality and propensity for violence (McElreath *et al.*, 2016). There was widespread belief in the society that Black men had anomalous sexual capacities that necessitated immediate control. Black people were believed to have voracious sexual appetites which, if unrestrained, could lead to explosive violence, particularly during confinement in correctional settings. For this reason, Black inmates in Mississippi prisons were afforded the opportunity to obtain sexual services from their marital spouses and non-marital consorts. For unmarried inmates, sex workers were sometimes transported to the prison to satisfy the sexual appetites of the incarcerated men for a fee (Castle, 2014). Moreover, it was presumed that Black male inmates, who were believed to have superhuman strength and inordinate capacity for menial work, could be induced to perform even greater amounts of work, achieve greater productivity, and still become behaviorally compliant in the prison's cotton fields through the offering of sexual intimacy with spouses and/or prostitutes as a reward (Hensley, Rutland & Gray-Ray, 2002; Katz, 2017; "Dark Origins," 2016).

In subsequent years, Mississippi's conjugal visitation program evolved to provide conjugal visitation privileges for all incarcerated people, regardless of racial background. Over time, the conjugal visitation programs expanded to include female inmates and same-sex couples (Land, 2013). As these programs became available for a wider array of inmates, the purpose was no longer to release sexual tension for the safety of the facility. Children were able to visit with spouses and spending quality time became the priority. A number of American states embraced the idea, introducing conjugal visitation programs for their married inmates and children. In June 2007, correctional authorities in California announced plans to permit same-sex conjugal visits for inmates and their

spouses. About four years later in April 2011, the state of New York passed legislation to allow conjugal visits for currently married or civil-union same-sex partners (Blain, 2011).

At present, various American courts have ruled that incarcerated inmates do not have a constitutional entitlement to receive conjugal visits from their spouses (Cripe, Pearlman & Kosiak, 2013). The courts have also ruled that non-incarcerated spouses do not have a constitutional right to have physical access to their incarcerated spouses for purposes of conjugal visitation (Cripe, Pearlman & Kosiak, 2013). It must be added, however, that conjugal visitation as a constitutional right has never appeared before the United States Supreme Court (Cripe, Pearlman & Kosiak, 2013). Today, the United States Bureau of Federal Prisons does not grant conjugal visitation to inmates convicted in federal courts and housed in federal prisons (Federal Bureau of Prisons, n.d.).

Despite the rejection of conjugal visitation as a legal entitlement, some American states currently, or previously granted conjugal visitation privileges to eligible inmates and their spouses (Cripe, Pearlman & Kosiak, 2013). Eligibility requirements for participation in these programs are strict and have been based on criteria introduced by the states' Department of Corrections. A common eligibility criterion was that only legally married inmates whose marriage preceded the inmate's incarceration were allowed. Second, both the inmate and his or her visiting spouse must be free from sexually transmitted disease (Hensley, Rutman & Gray-Ray, 2002). Inmates excluded from conjugal visitation programs include maximum-security inmates, death row inmates, those serving time for heinous crimes (e.g., child abuse, domestic violence, rape, murder), sex-offenders, mentally disordered offenders, inmates with chronic institutional disciplinary problems, and those with infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS (Hensley, Rutman, & Gray-Ray, 2002). In some facilities, inmates participating in conjugal visitation programs are required to undergo urinalysis examination; failure of the test means exclusion from future visits (Hensley, Rutman & Gray-Ray, 2002).

At its peak of popularity in the early 1990s, 17 states in the United States offered some form of conjugal visitation for its incarcerated inmates. These included Mississippi, Minnesota, California, Connecticut, New Mexico, New York, and Washington (Hensley, Rutland & Gray-Ray, 2002). At the time of this writing, (March 2021), 14 states have discontinued their conjugal visitation programs, with only three states currently providing such benefits for incarcerated inmates and their spouses. These are California, New York, and Washington. Some analysts attribute the retrenchment of conjugal visitation programs in the country to the retributive and deterrent sentiments that currently dominate discourse on the treatment of offenders (Hensley, Rutland &

Gray-Ray, 2002). Consistent with this perspective, many state prisons have curtailed or eliminated many supposedly comfortable, pleasant, entertaining, enjoyable, or relaxing inmate programs and privileges (Hensley *et al.*, 2003). At the U.S. federal level, a “No Frills Prison Act” was enacted in 1996. The objective of the law was to curtail or eliminate amenities and conditions perceived to be luxurious, plush, comfortable, or sumptuous for correctional populations in federal correctional facilities. The legislation “ordered facilities to provide the least amount of amenities consistent with constitutional requirements, good order, and prison discipline” (Hensley, Miller, Tewksbury & Koscheski, 2003, p.251). Following the passage of the act, several states enacted legislation mandating the reduction of amenities for prison inmates. In some states, the amenities that were eliminated included the state’s conjugal visitation program for inmates. For instance, Hensley *et al.*, (2003) reported that following the passage of the ‘No Frills Prison Act’, “over one third of the wardens [surveyed] had eliminated or restricted tobacco use, conjugal visitation programs, boxing, and marital arts instruction” (p.251).

Conjugal Visitation Programs Around the World

International data show that conjugal visitation programs exist in a small but significant number of countries around the world. These include Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Kenya, Russia, Spain, (Correctional Service Canada, 2020), Israel (Einat & Rabinovitz, 2012), Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Costa Rica, and Mexico (“Conjugal Visits,” 2013). Some of these countries grant conjugal visitation for same-sex couples as well as common law partners (“Brazil Approves Conjugal Visits for Gay Inmates,” 2018). The programs differ greatly by country, but they all encompass the basic premise of extended visits with spouses and family on prison grounds. Some governments (e.g., Israel) maintain that it is a married couple’s fundamental right to reproduce, regardless of their incarceration status. The focus of conjugal visitation or extended family programs in most international settings is similar to what pertains in the United States. It is designed to promote family stability and preserving the structure of the family. In Mexico, families are such an important institution in the society, that conjugal visitation is enshrined in national policies to ensure the welfare of the family unit (Hensley, 2002). The literature reveals that most international family reunion programs are centered around the family and children, rather than the married couple itself. As in the United States, another major purpose of extended family visits is to reduce violence in prisons and to achieve lower recidivism rates upon release from prison.

Existing Research on Conjugal Visitation Programs

As noted in the introductory section of this article, there is currently a paucity of scholarship on conjugal visitation programs. This section of the article presents brief summaries of some of the extant research that has been conducted on conjugal visitation. One of the arguments proffered by conjugal visitation advocates is that these visits help curtail prison rape or sexual offending in prison. In a 2012 publication, D'Alessio, Flexon and Stolzenberg (2013) investigated this claim by studying the impact of conjugal visitation on sexual violence in United States prisons. They concluded that inmate-on-inmate sexual offending was much less noticeable in states that allowed conjugal visitation than states that did not permit conjugal visitation. Based on this finding, the authors recommended that "more states should consider allowing conjugal visitation as a means to attenuate sexual violence in prison" (D'Alessio *et al.*, 2013, p.22).

Some studies have examined the attitudes of prison wardens towards conjugal visitation programs (e.g., Bennett, 1989; Hensley, Tewksbury & Chiang, 2002). For example, Hensley *et al.*, 2002 conducted an attitudinal survey of 226 female and male wardens in the United States towards conjugal visitation. They reported that the vast majority of the wardens of state-operated prisons did not think that conjugal visitation programs had positive effects on inmates' family stability or institutional behavior. They also reported that nonwhite wardens in their sample were more likely to say that conjugal visits reduced homosexual behavior in prison. They wrote:

More than three fourths of all wardens reported that they did not believe conjugal visits significantly contribute to the maintenance of inmates' family stability (75.7%), nor do they believe that conjugal visits reduce institutional violence (84.4%) or the incidence of homosexual behavior among inmates (87.3%) (p.312).

In Bennett's (1989) survey of the attitudes of correctional administrators towards conjugal visitation programs, it was reported that the respondents only demonstrated only lukewarm of support for conjugal visitation program. As Bennett (1989) reported,

The group tended to feel that Private Family Visiting would be of value in reducing disciplinary problems (49.3 percent endorsed) but did not accept the idea that it would reduce sexual assaults (56.9 percent rejected the statement). Similarly, most felt it would not reduce homosexuality in the prison (56.3 percent rejected) and that it would not reduce violence in prison (51.9 percent responded negatively to this position) (p.111)

Studies of the perspectives of correctional inmates towards conjugal visitation programs also exist in the scholarly literature (e.g., Einat & Rabinovitz, 2012). In a rare study of female inmates' attitudes towards conjugal visitation programs, Einat and Rabinovitz (2012) utilized in-depth interviews to explore the views and experiences

of female inmates participating in a conjugal visitation program in an Israeli prison regarding conjugal visitation programs. Findings from the study revealed that all 8 inmates endorsed conjugal visits and were highly satisfied with the opportunity afforded them through conjugal visits to communicate face-to-face with partners and to renew family intimacy. They also expressed satisfaction over opportunities afforded by the program to experience romantic feelings with their partners, enjoy sexual gratification and privacy, as well as experience temporary feeling of freedom. For those who wished to get pregnant, conjugal visitation afforded a welcoming opportunity. Alternatively, the inmates in the study expressed considerable displeasure and unease over the lack of privacy and the unnatural or artificial conditions under which the visits occurred and were managed. Respondents also expressed a wish to have the frequency and length of conjugal visits extended and the criteria for inclusion in conjugal visitations broadened to include non-married couples (Einat & Rabinovitz, 2012).

In a previous research conducted on inmate attitudes toward conjugal visitation programs, Carlson and Cervera (1991) studied the impact of incarceration on 63 U.S. correctional inmates and 39 inmate wives, half of whom received conjugal visits through a Family Reunion Program. Inmates participating in the Family Reunion Program reported that they felt closer to their families than inmates who did not participate in the Family Reunion Program.

Until recently, studies of criminal justice students' perspectives towards criminal justice issues were predominantly focused on support versus opposition towards the death penalty and other criminal sanctions (see Hensley *et al.*, 2003). Studies of college students' attitudes towards conjugal visitation programs and other inmate privileges were limited. In 2001, Hensley, Miller, Tewksbury and Koscheski (2003) examined the attitudes of criminal justice students and non-criminal justice students in the United States toward conjugal visitation and other inmate privileges. Respondents in that study expressed greater support for "functional privileges" such as psychological counseling and college education programs than they did for the so-called "prison luxuries" such as conjugal visitation, weightlifting and cigarette smoking within prison. Female respondents in that study were also more likely than male respondents to favor psychological counseling; male respondents on the other hand, favored granting inmates conjugal visits and opportunities to lift weights than did female respondents (Hensley, Miller, Tewksbury & Koscheski, 2003).

Some research has shown that conjugal visitation reduces prison rapes. D'Alessio *et al.* (2013) studied the impact of conjugal visitation on sexual violence in American prisons by comparing states with and without conjugal visitation programs. They

concluded that states allowing conjugal visitation had significantly smaller numbers of reported rape and other sexual offenses in their prison.

In sum, a number of studies have focused on perceptions towards conjugal visitation programs. Though the efforts are laudable, most of these studies have focused on the attitudes of inmates and correctional administrators. Lamentably, very few have focused on public attitudes towards the program. This is regrettable given that public funding supports correctional institutions and correctional programs. Public disaffection towards the programs will lead to the elimination of the program. Public support will lead to the restoration or implementation of the programs. The current study with its focus on criminal justice students, a section of the public, towards conjugal visitation programs, is one step in the direction of gauging public support for or opposition towards the program.

Research Methods and Data Sources

Given the dearth of research examining public attitudes towards conjugal visitation programs, formal hypotheses were not constructed or tested. Rather, a series of research questions were investigated: (1) Do you think conjugal visitation programs are a good for prison inmates? (2) Do you think conjugal visitation programs are good for spouses of prison inmates? (3) Do you think conjugal visitation programs are good for correctional authorities? (4) Do you think your home state should adopt conjugal visitation programs?

An attitudinal survey was conducted of all students enrolled in a 300-level undergraduate criminology course during the spring 2011 academic semester. Participants comprised of students attending a public university in a midwestern state in the United States. The authors were affiliated with the university and the research site was selected because of convenience. At the time of the research, the U.S. state which was the site of this research did not have conjugal visitation programs for correctional inmates and there were no impending plans to implement such. As part of the criminology class, a lecture on conjugal visitation lasting 35-40 minutes was given to students enrolled in the class by the first author. The lecture covered (1) the features of conjugal visitation programs; (2) the history of conjugal visitation programs; (3) the objectives of conjugal visitation programs; (4) the modalities of conjugal visitation administration; (5) a survey of conjugal visitation programs around the world. The objective of the lecture was to ensure that all students were familiar with conjugal visitation programs.

In all, a total of 147 respondents participated in the survey. These comprised 83 (56.5%) females and 64 (43.5%) males. Five (3.4%) of the respondents self-reported as freshmen, 37 (25.2%) as sophomores, 71 (48.3%) as juniors and 34 (23.1%) as seniors.

The overrepresentation of juniors' stem from the fact that the course was 300-Level and was open to students who had completed basic requirements for the degree. Seventy-seven out of the 147 (52.4%) of the participating students were pursuing a Criminal Justice Concentration, 22 were pursuing general Sociology without the Criminal Justice Concentration; 19 were psychology majors and 9 were Youth Studies majors; 2 were Anthropology majors; 20 were from other disciplines. Students averaged 19-21 years old. The survey was anonymous and took an average of 15 minutes to complete. The research protocols employed in this research were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the authors' university.

Results

In this study, we probed respondents' awareness of the existence of conjugal visitation programs in the United States. According to the results, ninety-eight (98 or 66.7%) said they were aware of the existence of conjugal visitation programs in some states in the United States; forty-nine (49) (33.3%) said they were not aware of the existence of such programs. The study also enquired about respondents' knowledge of the existence of conjugal visitation program in other parts of the world. The results showed that 117 (or 72.8%) of the respondents were not aware of the existence of conjugal visitation programs in prisons in other parts of the world.

Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement: "Conjugal Visitation Programs are good for inmates. The data showed that 126 (85.7%) out of 147 respondents agreed with the statement that conjugal visitation was good for inmates. Twenty (13.6%) disagreed with the statement. 1 (0.07%) respondent declined a response.

Respondents were further asked to demonstrate agreement or disagreement with the statement: "Conjugal visitation programs are good for spouses of inmates." 134 (91.2%) of respondents agreed with the statement that conjugal visitation programs are good for spouses of prison inmates. 13 (8.8%) disagreed.

Another question on the survey asked respondents to indicate agreement or disagreement with the statement: "Conjugal visitation programs are good for prison authorities." 112 (76.2%) agreed with the statement that conjugal visitation programs are good for prison authorities. Thirty-four (34) (23.1%) respondents disagreed that conjugal visitation programs are good for prison authorities.

In another question, respondents were asked whether all U.S. states should be required to have conjugal visitation as part of their correctional programs. The data show that 72 respondents (49.0%) responded affirmatively, 74 (50.3%) responded negatively. There was 1 (0.7%) missing data.

Finally, respondents were asked to indicate whether or not their home state in the United States should or should not adopt conjugal visitation programs. The data show that 119 (81%) of respondents agreed with the statement that their home state which at the time of the research did not have conjugal visitation programs, should adopt conjugal visitation programs. 27 (18.4%) said it should not adopt conjugal visitation programs.

Discussion and Conclusion

In their quest to find programs that will aid in the rehabilitation of offenders under their care and custody, correctional administrators continually search for programs that are feasible and effective. Given that corrections are publicly funded, such programs, when identified, must not only meet the rehabilitation potential, but have sufficient support from the paying public. The conjugal visitation program was identified as one program which would not only aid in the rehabilitation of the incarcerated but help preserve their bonds with family and society. Unfortunately, whether or not the program has public support or not has not been adequately investigated. The current preliminary study was designed to gauge public support for the program in a sample of the American public. The findings demonstrate strong support for the program and its potential benefits for the incarcerated inmate and spouse, as well as for corrections officials. Future research on public attitudes towards conjugal visitation that replicates the current study will be valuable.

The current study shows that only a small number of respondents were aware of the existence of conjugal visitation programs in other parts of the world. While 67% of respondents were aware of the existence of conjugal visitation programs in the United States, only 27% expressed knowledge about the existence of similar programs in other parts of the world. The implication of this finding is that comparative criminal justice courses should be introduced into criminal justice programs to help broaden awareness of criminal justice programs and policies in other parts of the world.

The current research has some limitations which must be acknowledged. First, the study explored the attitudes of respondents at one university in the United States. The focus on one university limits the generalizability of the findings. The findings should therefore be considered preliminary while awaiting the results of replication studies in other institutions in the United States and beyond.

Despite these limitations, the strong support exemplified in the present findings imply that public support for conjugal visitation programming may be higher than previously believed. Since the notion that the public is largely unfavorable toward such programming has been used to justify the curtailing of conjugal visitation programs

in several states, providing expanded research that contradicts these claims would be highly beneficial to prisoners' rights advocacy efforts. Likewise, increasing research efforts that capture the benefits of conjugal visitation programming as well as increasing public knowledge about these benefits could be particularly fruitful in ensuring the preservation of such programs in existing states, and potentially in restoring or expanding support for their employment nationwide.

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