



The Experiences of Unvisited Men in Prison In NI

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Introduction

Prison visits are widely recognised as important for maintaining family ties, supporting wellbeing, and helping people prepare for release (Cooper and Berwick, 2001; Bales and Mears, 2008; Mears et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2016). However, not all prisoners can or do receive visits from family or friends. A recent qualitative systematic review found that men without visits often experience a range of practical, relational and emotional barriers, with loneliness and depression commonly described as effects of going without visits (Burns et al., 2024).

This policy brief addresses this neglected issue in the Northern Ireland prison context. Drawing on new empirical research with men in Maghaberry and Magilligan prisons, alongside staff interviews and observation of prison visiting processes, it sets out why the absence of visits matters, what barriers contribute to it, and what practical policy and practice changes could help reduce uncertainty, reduce friction, and preserve dignity for prisoners and families.

What is the problem?

Not all prisoners can or do receive visits from family or friends, yet this group is often overlooked in policy and practice. Alternative forms of contact can help prisoners stay connected, but they do not always replace the emotional, practical, and relational value of face-to-face visits (La Vigne et al., 2005). When visits are absent the effects can extend beyond social contact; prison can become harder to manage emotionally and materially, support can weaken, and the risk of isolation can increase both during custody and on release.

The absence of visits is shaped by a wider set of factors than individual choice or family breakdown alone. Prisoners may lose, avoid, or be unable to sustain visits because of distance, cost, uncertainty around the visiting process, strained relationships, shame, homelessness, foreign national status, or limited support outside prison. For some, this becomes part of a wider pattern of disadvantage, affecting wellbeing, family contact, access to practical support, and preparation for release.

What the research examined

This policy brief draws on qualitative data collected in 2025 through interviews with 28 prisoners and 14 staff in Maghaberry and Magilligan prisons, plus 50 hours of observation in domestic visiting rooms in Maghaberry prison.

The prisoners who took part in the research had not received a face-to-face visit for at least three months. The research sought to understand the following:

- What life is like for men in prison who do not receive visits;
- Why some prisoners do not receive visits, or choose not to receive them;
- How the absence of visits affects daily prison life, wellbeing, and relationships with family and friends;
- What support currently exists for prisoners who do not receive visits, and how well this support works;
- How going without visits may affect prisoners' plans and support needs when preparing for release.

What the research found

Prison without visits was harder emotionally and materially

Visits were not only a means of maintaining relationships but the route through which prisoners received material support, as family members routinely deposited money into prisoners' Inmate Private Cash (IPC) accounts and left clothing packages when attending. The absence of visits therefore often meant that prisoners received little or no money or clothing from outside, leaving them reliant on prison wages and their weekly PREPS allowance. Basic

items such as phone credit, tobacco, clothing, and toiletries became recurring pressures, with some prisoners describing having to choose between tobacco and staying in contact with family. Clothing was not just a practical issue, but was also linked to dignity, self-confidence, and feeling looked after. For many, phone contact was the main remaining link to family and friends, but maintaining that contact could itself create additional financial strain. Although an online service allowing nominated friends and family to deposit money into prisoners' IPC accounts was introduced in January 2026, this was after the research had concluded.

The absence of visits reflected overlapping practical, relational, and emotional barriers

Uncertainty around the visiting process, especially for first-time visitors, could discourage contact. Failed visits, no-shows, distressing interactions, unanswered calls, and broken promises could also make prisoners reluctant to keep reaching out. Other barriers included homelessness, unstable accommodation, addiction, fractured family relationships, distance and travel costs for foreign national prisoners, and, in some cases, prisoners withdrawing from contact because they felt like a burden or feared further disappointment.

Routine and purposeful activity became key coping strategies

Prisoners described relying on routine, distraction, and self-discipline to get through the week, but complained about limited availability of jobs, courses, programmes, and other forms of purposeful activity. Sentenced prisoners with a known release date showed more signs of adaptation to life without visits than remanded prisoners.

Isolation was frequently accompanied by hidden emotional strain

Men described loneliness, sadness, disappointment, overthinking, and wider emotional pressure linked to going without visits. Remote contact was not always felt to be an adequate substitute, with phone and video contact sometimes experienced as awkward, emotionally unsatisfying, or difficult to sustain. Cancelled visits, no-shows, and fading family ties could be especially destabilising, while lack of money also increased worry, rumination, and stress.

Support for prisoners without visits was often uneven, poorly signposted, and too reactive

Awareness of available support was often low among prisoners and, in some cases, staff. Many prisoners relied on peer support on the wings, with AskHIM (Health Information Mentor) mentors, prisoners who helped others navigate prison life and connect with healthcare and wider support, proving important in helping to fill the gaps. Staff relationships could also matter where officers showed care and interest beyond basic custodial duties, while volunteer visiting and befriending schemes were sometimes misunderstood as being solely or primarily religious, which often discouraged prisoners from taking them up. Support was often only provided after the effects of isolation had settled in, rather than identifying and responding to risk earlier.

Release could feel more uncertain and exposed without established support

Men described approaching release with weaker relational support, less confidence, and fewer practical resources, with some feeling as though they were starting again from scratch. Housing insecurity emerged as a major reintegration issue, with hostels, homelessness, lack of an address, and difficulty accessing rented accommodation

described as serious barriers to stability. Without established supports from regular visits, release could feel overwhelming and demoralising, increasing the risk of relapse or further instability.

Why do these findings matter?

The findings show that the absence of visits has implications beyond family contact. For some prisoners, it can create or deepen practical disadvantage, emotional strain, isolation, and uncertainty about release. This matters for prison policy as family contact, wellbeing, access to support, purposeful activity, and resettlement are closely connected. Responding earlier and more consistently to prisoners who are not receiving visits may help reduce isolation, improve support, and strengthen preparation for release.

What could be done?

The findings point to a range of policy and practical changes that could improve support for prisoners who are not receiving visits, while also making the visiting process easier for families. The revised Northern Ireland Prison Service Strengthening Family Relations Strategy and its 2026/27 Action Plan are still at an early stage of development, with ongoing work including consideration of how ‘family’ should be defined. These recommendations are therefore especially timely, build on the previous *Strengthening Family Relations Strategy 2019-2024* (Northern Ireland Prison Service, 2019) and would inform a new strategy.

Some actions could be taken relatively quickly through clearer information, better signposting, and improved follow-up. Others require longer-term policy development, particularly around digital contact, foreign national prisoners, payment systems, and reintegration planning. Recommendations are outlined below.

- **Improve access to visits**

- Make first-time visit booking easier for families.
- Provide clearer pre-visit information for families, including a visual walk-through of the process.
- Introduce a dedicated first-visit support officer or named point of contact for families.
- Reduce travel strain and improve the physical accessibility of the visiting journey.
- Review visit timing and regime arrangements around the practical demands on families.

These are largely practical changes aimed at reducing uncertainty and friction for families, particularly those visiting for the first time or travelling long distances.

- **Improving communication and follow-up**

- Where possible, notify prisoners only once their visitors have physically arrived.
- Improve communication and follow-up when visits are missed, cancelled, or cut short.
- Provide more information to families about how contact can affect prisoners after the interaction ends.

These recommendations focus on reducing avoidable distress. Missed, cancelled, or difficult visits can have a significant emotional impact, so clearer communication and follow-up would help both prisoners and families manage expectations.

- **Strengthening alternative forms of contact**

- Develop secure two-way video messaging as a supplement to live visits and Zoom calls.
- Explore a targeted pilot of immersive virtual family contact for cases where in-person visits are especially difficult.
- Develop tailored contact policies for foreign national prisoners.

Digital contact should not replace face-to-face visits, but it could provide an important supplement where distance, cost, health, family circumstances, or immigration status make in-person contact difficult to sustain.

- **Support for prisoners not receiving visits**

- Create a targeted support pathway for prisoners who go prolonged periods without visits.
- Re-launch and clearly signpost volunteer visiting in a more open and approachable way.
- Use peer mentors and support groups as bridges into contact and support.
- Strengthen staff training on visits, family contact, and the role of NIACRO.
- Review access to prison jobs, courses, and programmes for prisoners without visits.

These actions would help move support from being reactive to more proactive. Prisoners who go prolonged periods without visits should be identified earlier, offered clear information about available support, and helped to access meaningful activity, peer support, and volunteer visiting where appropriate.

- **Reducing material disadvantage**

- Ensure that new payment reforms do not reproduce inequality for prisoners without visits.
- Review money-drop and clothing procedures to reduce the disadvantage faced by prisoners without visits.

For some prisoners, the absence of visits also means fewer practical resources. Policy changes around money, payments, clothing, and property should therefore consider how prisoners without family contact may be affected.

- **Connecting family contact to reintegration**

- Recognise remand and sentenced prisoners as distinct groups in family-contact policy.
- Recognise homelessness and social dislocation as risk factors for not getting visits.
- Treat not getting visits as a reintegration issue as well as a custody issue.

The absence of visits can shape how prisoners experience custody, but it can also affect release planning. Where prisoners are approaching release with weak family contact, housing insecurity, or limited practical support, this should be recognised as part of resettlement planning rather than treated only as a visits issue.

Conclusion

The findings show how a range of barriers can make family contact harder to maintain. These include; unclear information, awkward first visits, long waits, difficult journeys, missed visits, strained calls, poor follow-up, and weak signposting of support. These issues often overlapped, making it harder for prisoners and families to stay connected and access support. Looked at holistically the findings suggest that a helpful guiding question for future policy and practice is whether it *reduces uncertainty, reduces friction, and preserves dignity* - for both prisoners and families.

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