

Prison Visitation After COVID-19: Policy Change, Permanence, and Justification

A Comparative Qualitative Policy Analysis of Six State Correctional Systems

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Abstract

In March of 2020, prisons all over the United States closed their doors to visitors. States referred to the closure as *temporary*; this study investigates what became of that assertion. Using publicly available records from state prisons across six states (California, New York, Texas, Minnesota, Florida, and Georgia), I analyze prison visitation policy before, during, and after COVID-19 along four dimensions: the frequency of visits allowed, who may visit, the conditions placed on visits, and whether there were in-person visitation substitutes. Two patterns surfaced that complicate the idea of a suspension followed by a restoration. First, neither shutdowns nor reopenings were single events; prisons closed and reopened in conditional waves. Second, and more important, not one of the states examined adhered to a consistent, publicly verifiable reason for its changes in visitation. Justifications regularly moved around or silently disappeared from public record. The unsteadiness of stated justifications is itself the main finding. It is, alone, the mechanism by which a *temporary* health measure hardens into permanence without a state needing to make a case for it. When a restriction of this magnitude is normalized without being named, the families affected are denied the acknowledgment that something was taken from them, intensifying the isolation that comes with incarceration.

Keywords: prison visitation, COVID-19, visitation policy, correctional policy, family contact, policy permanence, comparative policy analysis

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Introduction

During the latter half of March 2020, every state prison system in the United States prohibited visitors. The closures were simultaneous, and each was announced as a temporary response to a public health crisis (McNeeley, 2025). Six years later, the word “temporary” deserves a closer look. Because every state prison system shut down visitation at essentially the same moment and for the same reason, whatever each state did next reflects its own choices rather than differences in circumstance.

Among the factors studied in reentry research, visitation is among the most consistently linked to staying out of prison. A meta-analysis of 16 studies found that people who received visits had, on average, a 26% lower recidivism rate, meaning they had a lower chance of being convicted of a new crime after release (Mitchell et al., 2016). When a state narrows visitation and fails to restore it, the costs fall on the incarcerated individual, their families, and the communities to which many return. Yet how a narrowing becomes permanent has gained much less attention than whether narrowing happens at all.

Positionality

My interest in this subject is both academic and personal. I study how policy produces inequality for low-income populations, and I grew up with an incarcerated brother, for whom visitation was a fragile and unpredictable lifeline. That experience taught me to notice not only whether visitation exists on paper, but how quietly access can narrow and how heavily its loss falls on families with the fewest resources. This is my position, not evidence; the analysis rests on public records. But it is why I began researching.

Research Question & Scope

The guiding question has two parts. How have public state prison visitation policies changed since COVID-19 began, and what justifications do states offer for their practices? I limit the study to public state prison systems for two reasons. State systems hold the large majority of incarcerated people in the country, so their decisions weigh most heavily on all those affected (Sawyer et al., 2026). State prison systems are also subject to open-record laws and public accountability, which makes their policies easier to document and track than those of private operators.

Background: Why Visitation Matters

The claim that visitation supports desistance from crime was well established before the pandemic. Beyond the Mitchell et al. (2016) meta-analysis, a large body of work links visits to lower misconduct rates inside prisons, as well as lower reoffending after release (Duwe & McNeeley, 2021; Mears et al., 2012). These studies use matched-comparison and propensity-score designs, which compare visited and non-visited people who are otherwise similar. This approach strengthens the case for a causal relationship but cannot establish it with the certainty of a randomized experiment.

The benefit of visitation depends on the quality of a visit, not simply whether one occurs. Baker et al. (2022) found that difficult or negative visits can worsen an incarcerated individual's worries about reentry, while supportive visits reduce them. This is conceptually relevant because a policy can keep visitation on the books while stripping its quality through shorter visits, worse conditions, or a switch to non-contact formats behind glass.

Studies confirm that in-person visitation was suspended in all fifty states early in the pandemic. Many systems tried to soften the loss by expanding phone access and video visits

(McNeeley, 2025). Yet the evidence on video is sobering for anyone hoping it can simply replace in-person visits. Studying people released from Minnesota prisons, Duwe and McNeeley (2021) found video visits significantly reduced general and felony reconvictions, but showed no significant effect on the rarer categories of violent reconvictions and technical violations. A later Minnesota study of people released during the pandemic reached a similar conclusion: video visits are a useful supplement, but they should not be used to replace in-person visits (McNeeley, 2025). The direction of video visits is favorable, but the effect is not equivalent to in-person visits.

Methodology & The Problem of Which States Get Documented

This study is a comparative policy analysis. Rather than surveying all fifty states shallowly, I examine six in depth: California, New York, Texas, Minnesota, Florida, and Georgia. I selected them to maximize variation in the outcome, not to build a statistically representative sample. The goal was range: states that varied in restoration speed; states in different regions of the United States; and at least one state, Minnesota, with independent quantitative research. As a starting index for what each state did during the pandemic, I drew on a state-by-state tracker compiled by The Marshall Project (Park, 2021), then followed its links to each department of corrections' own records and built the analysis, starting from the primary source.

A weakness in this design is that I chose states partly because a great deal is documented about them, but how much a state documents is not random. States with active advocacy groups, aggressive local journalism, and transparent agencies are both better documented and likely to have had their restrictions challenged. My central claim is that permanence often arrives through failure to announce — through restrictions that simply don't become topics of conversation after a certain time. But my method selects against the quietest states, because a silent state offers little

to study. The implication is important, and I treat it more as a feature than a flaw. Silence found in a heavily surveilled state is more telling than silence in an unwatched one: if a restriction can quietly harden even where advocates and journalists are paying close attention, it can surely do so where no one is looking. I cannot conclude that quieter states have done the same, only that they face fewer checks against it.

For each state, I gathered sources in a rough order of credibility: peer-reviewed research first; then primary institutional records such as press releases, administrative codes, and legislation; then archived web pages; and finally news reporting for context and dates. I then coded each state across three periods (before, during, and after the pandemic), and along four dimensions (frequency of visits, who is eligible to visit, the conditions placed on visits, and the availability of video or other alternatives).

Three limits bind each of the claims that follow. The analysis rests on publicly available records, so it captures what states said publicly, not their private intentions. Archival coverage was unavailable for some states, so coverage is uneven and only used as support. The recidivism research serves as context here, not as the measured outcome; nothing in this design allows me to claim that any state’s policy caused a concrete change in its recidivism.

Table 1. Coding framework: four dimensions of visitation policy

Dimension	What it captures	Why it matters
Frequency	How often visits are allowed (days per week, per month, holidays)	The most visible measure of access; the target of most overt cuts
Eligibility	Who may visit (visitor caps, age limits, vaccination status, custody level)	Restrictions here narrow access without changing the headline schedule
Conditions on visits	Contact vs. non-contact; dividers; time limits; scheduling friction	Captures quality erosion: a visit can be “restored” yet hollowed out
Video/alternatives	Availability, cost, and rationing of video or tablet visits	Reveals whether a paid substitute displaced free in-person contact

Findings

I organize the findings by pattern rather than by state, because the argument lives in what the states share and where they diverge.

Table 2. Visitation policy across three periods, by state

State (system)	Before COVID	During COVID (2020–21)	After COVID (2022–present)
California (CDCR)	2 weekend days, contact visits; no video visitation	Suspended Mar 11, 2020; video launched Nov 2020; phased reopen Apr 2021; Omicron re-suspension Jan 2022	3-day in-person from Jul 2023; video decommissioned system-wide; brief security suspension Jun–Jul 2025
New York (DOCCS)	Daily at max-security; weekend at medium/min; 2017 proposal to cut 7 days to 3	Suspended Mar 2020; reopened Aug 2020; re-suspended Dec 2020; reopened Apr 2021	2025 wildcat guard strike; visitation canceled statewide; ~2,000 officers fired
Texas (TDCJ)	2-hour visits; contact for eligible; no video; no conjugal visits	Suspended Mar 13, 2020; paid video (\$10/mo) launched Aug 2020; non-contact reopened Mar 2021; contact Jul 2021	HB 2708 (2023) requires in-person regardless of video; paid video retained
Minnesota (MN DOC)	Video visitation existed since 2015 (paid supplement)	Suspended Mar–Jul 2020; then facility-by-facility on “two active cases in 14 days” rule; free weekly video added	Video retained, reverted to paid; video use rose from 4% to 28% of releasees
Florida (FDC)	Every weekend + holidays; “privilege, not a right”; 2018 cut attempt defeated	Suspended Mar 11, 2020; reopened Oct 2020 degraded (no contact, dividers, capped)	2022 every-other-weekend cut proposed (not made permanent); 2025 weekly advance online scheduling, no walk-ups; paid video
Georgia (GDC)	Weekend + holiday visits; “privilege, not a right”	Suspended Mar 12, 2020; extended repeatedly; reopened 2021 as “modified... by appointment only”	Appointment-based visiting presented as standard policy; “modified” COVID framing dropped from main page

1. A Misleading Timeline: Waves and Staged Reopenings

The uniform March 2020 shutdown is the baseline for everything that follows, but neither the closures nor the reopenings followed a single, tidy path. New York shows the pattern on the closing side: it suspended visits in March 2020, reopened at half capacity that August, closed again during the December winter surge (DOCCS, 2020), and reopened once more in spring 2021. California went through a comparable cycle, re-suspending statewide in January 2022 as

Omicron spread (CDCR, 2022). A before-and-after frame cannot capture a system that passed through restriction, restoration, and re-restriction inside two years.

The reopenings fractured the same way, into conditional stages rather than a single moment when the doors opened. In Texas, non-contact visits returned first in March 2021 under strict conditions: a rapid COVID test, a single visitor, a one-hour limit, while full contact visits waited until July 2021 (Texas Tribune, 2021; TDCJ, 2021). Florida reopened in October 2020 in sharply degraded form: no contact, plastic dividers, a two-visitor cap, closed vending machines (Orlando Sentinel, 2020). "Restored" is not yes-or-no; a state can reopen on paper while leaving out most of what makes a visit valuable. The practical lesson is that "during" and "after" COVID-19 are each better understood as a series of waves, and any account that cannot represent a second closure or a partial reopening will misdescribe these states.

2. The Limits of a Video Substitute

Across the country, video visitation moved from a marginal feature to a fixture, and the way it was deployed reveals a great deal. Texas offers the clearest case. It had no video visitation system before the pandemic; an archived version of its visitation page from March 2019 mentions none (TDCJ, 2019). When the state built one in August 2020, it was a paid, rationed service: sessions ran sixty minutes, cost ten dollars each, and were limited to one per incarcerated person per month, with the fee waived only for the first ninety days (TDCJ, 2020). The free in-person visit was replaced by a metered product families had to purchase, reinforcing the Minnesota evidence that video helps but does not equal in-person contact (Duwe & McNeeley, 2021; McNeeley, 2025). The defects of video as a replacement for in-person visits are two-fold: it works less well, and it costs money the original did not.

Minnesota is a useful contrast because there, unlike Texas, video visitation predated the pandemic; the state had offered it since late 2015 (McNeeley, 2025). This lets us separate the technology from the emergency. The problem is not video itself, which can help families separated by distance, but video deployed as a stand-in for suspended in-person contact. California makes the same point from the opposite direction. In 2023, funded by a legislative appropriation, California expanded in-person visiting to three days a week and decommissioned weekend video visiting entirely, describing it as a measure that had always been meant to be temporary (CDCR, 2023). The trade was deliberate: rather than let a paid video option quietly stand in for in-person contact, the state enlarged in-person access and retired the substitute. The choice was not costless: in a state as large as California, video was for some distant families the only feasible contact, and ending it likely worsened access for those least able to travel. Still, California is the exception that illuminates the rule: it treated video as genuinely temporary and chose to reinvest in in-person contact, where most states let the cheaper substitute harden into the norm simply because nothing intervened to stop it.

3. The Instability of Stated Reasons

The central finding of this study is not about any single policy, but about the justifications behind them, and specifically about how those justifications refuse to stay fixed. I anticipated finding at least one state that offered a stable, verifiable reason for its policy and held to it from restriction through restoration, but this was not the case. What I found instead was a rolling set of justifications that shift, move between categories, and in one important case, entirely disappear.

At one end sits Minnesota, which offered the most concrete and testable reason of any state in the sample. When it reopened after the initial shutdown, it tied in-person visiting to a specific numerical threshold: a facility would suspend visits whenever it had two or more active

COVID cases, counting staff and incarcerated people together, within a fourteen-day period (McNeeley, 2025). An archived copy of the department's visiting page from October 2020 shows this rule in operation, listing eight facilities closed and two open on a single day (Minnesota DOC, 2020). This is rare and analytically valuable: a stated reason that could actually be checked against the facts.

Most states offered far softer justifications. Georgia and Florida both leaned on staffing shortages to explain restrictions, a reason that is nearly impossible to confirm from the outside and that never forces a state to admit a restriction has become permanent. Florida is the most striking case: there the stated reason can be checked, and it fails. When the state moved in 2022 to cut visitation to every other weekend, it cited staffing and a flood of contraband entering its prisons (Florida Justice Institute, 2022). Yet according to news reporting on the department's own figures, contraband attributable to visitors held steady at around 2.5%, and a state legislator noted that most contraband was carried in by staff, not by weekend visitors (CBS Miami, 2022). Here the justification is not merely unfalsifiable; it is contradicted by the department's own data. Such a contradiction surfacing at all is a product of Florida's active advocacy and press environment. This is exactly the point made earlier about documentation: in a politically quieter state, the 2.5% figure might never have emerged.

New York shows the same instability across time. Its justification for lost visitation migrated from health, at the start of the pandemic, to pressure from the corrections officers' union, and finally, in 2025, to a labor collapse. That February, roughly 15000 officers walked off the job in a wildcat strike, and the department canceled visitation statewide; when the strike ended, roughly 2000 officers were fired, deepening a staffing shortage that the state itself traced to the pandemic (New York State Focus, 2025). The reason families could no longer visit had, by

then, nothing to do with the virus and everything to do with the staffing conditions the virus had helped create. Visitation does, of course, require staff to run. But there is a difference between depending on staffing and being the first thing cut whenever staffing tightens. Meals, medical care, and headcounts maintain a protected status during shortages. Visitation is treated as a revocable privilege, so it is sacrificed first, and families lose contact as collateral damage of a crisis they had no part in.

4. Silence as the Final Form of Permanence

Georgia shows what the result of an unstable justification looks like. The state documented its restrictions publicly and in real time. It announced the suspension in March 2020, extended it through the summer, and reopened in 2021 with in-person visitation explicitly labeled modified and by appointment only (GDC, 2020; GDC, 2021). The department's own COVID-response page still carries that modified language. But the current, main visitation page presents appointment-based weekend visiting as ordinary standing policy, with no reference to the pandemic and no acknowledgment that anything was ever modified (GDC, 2023). The same department tells two different stories on two of its own pages, and only the older one admits a restriction ever occurred. It arrived not through a decision but through the failure to announce one, as the language marking the restriction as temporary quietly disappeared.

Florida reveals a subtler version of the same tactic. Its dramatic 2022 proposal to cut visits by more than 90 percent drew public outcry and did not become permanent statewide policy. Yet the retrenchment did not vanish; it relocated. As of 2025, Florida requires visitors to submit a scheduling form during a narrow window each week, from Monday morning to Wednesday afternoon, and bars walk-up visits entirely (FDC, 2025). The headline frequency

looks restored, while real access quietly narrows for any family that cannot navigate an online form inside a 60-hour window.

Discussion

Across all six states, the instability of stated reasons is not noise obscuring a signal — it is the signal. A restriction justified one way, then another, then not at all, is a restriction shielded from accountability. Each shift is defensible on its own terms: staffing really was strained, surges really did return, a strike really did happen. But the cumulative effect is a policy environment in which no single justification ever has to survive over time, because none stays in force long enough to be tested. This is how a measure introduced as temporary becomes permanent without anyone ever making, or defending, a decision to keep it.

The two states that resist this drift prove that it is not an inevitability. California interrupted it with money, funding an expansion of in-person visits and ending video (CDCR, 2023). Texas interrupted it with law: in 2023, the legislature passed a statute requiring that in-person visitation be offered regardless of whether video is available, closing the loophole (Texas Legislature, 2023). Both required an outside force, a budget line or a bill, to break the pattern. Where no such force intervened, the pattern held. That contrast reframes the questions that first motivated this study. The decisive distinction is not really geographic or technological. It is about time and language: how long a justification must survive public view, and whether it must survive at all.

Future Research

No study links a state's post-pandemic visitation retrenchment to its later recidivism rate. Future research should examine recidivism rates during and after COVID-19, accounting for a changing political climate, law enforcement shifts, and disrupted reentry services. Future work

could also extend to other states, or beyond the states to the federal Bureau of Prisons, testing whether a single centralized system drifts toward the same quiet permanence found here.

Conclusion

The pandemic suspended prison visitation everywhere at once and then, unevenly and largely without announcement, gave some of it back. This study set out to learn what became of the suspensions and how the resulting policies are justified. On the first question, both the shutdown and the reopening behaved less like switches than like processes, full of second closures and staged, conditional reopenings that a simple before-and-after frame cannot capture. On the second question, the answer is harder to sit with. Across six states, no consistent, publicly checkable reason survived from restriction through restoration. Justifications changed, hid behind claims about staffing that no outsider can test, or lapsed into silence. That instability is the foundation that allows permanence. When a state never has to defend a restriction as permanent, when it can simply stop explaining it, the burden falls entirely on the families affected by incarceration. The emergency measure and the settled policy become one and the same, and the family contact that research proves links to better outcomes grows thinner with no one, anywhere, on record having chosen to thin it.

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