

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

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## Introduction

In March 2020, every US state prison *temporarily* closed their doors to visitors. This study asks what became of that promise. A meta-analysis of 16 studies tied visits to a 26% lower rate of recidivism (Mitchell et al., 2016). When a state narrows visitation and never restores it, the cost falls on incarcerated people and their families.

## Research Questions

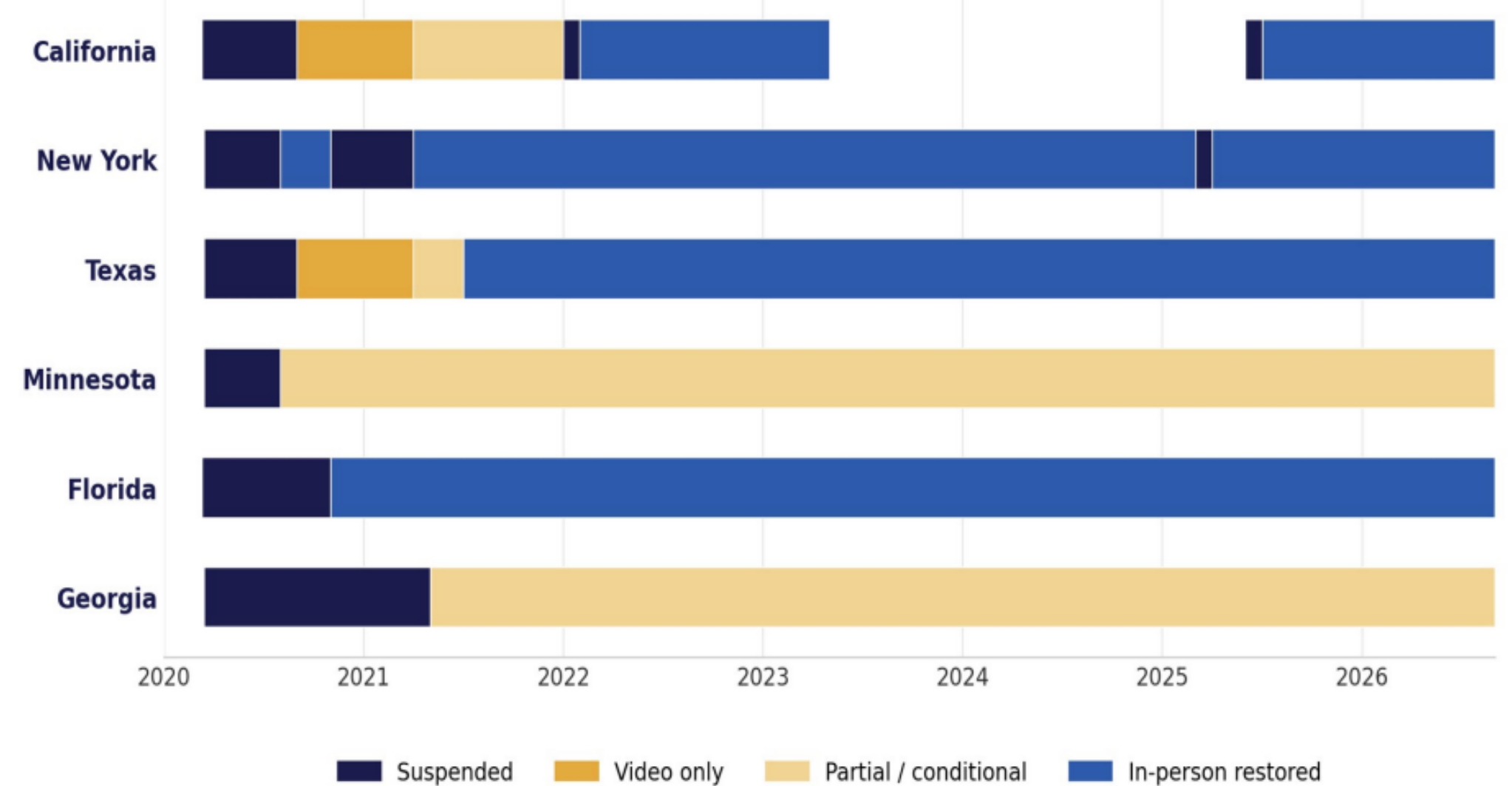
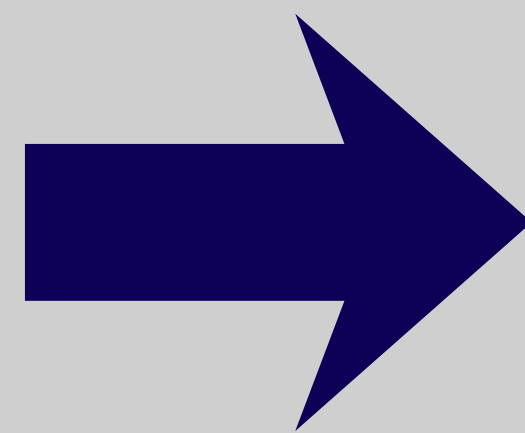
1. How have public state prison visitation policies changed since COVID-19 began?
2. What justifications do states give for the policies now in place?

## Methods & Selection

A comparative policy analysis of six state systems, chosen for variation, not representativeness. Using The Marshall Project's tracker as an index, each case was built from primary sources: press releases, administrative codes, legislation, and archived web pages. Selection bias was made a strength: well-documented states are the most scrutinized, so quiet permanence is hardest to spot there. Finding it anyway makes the pattern a floor, not a ceiling.

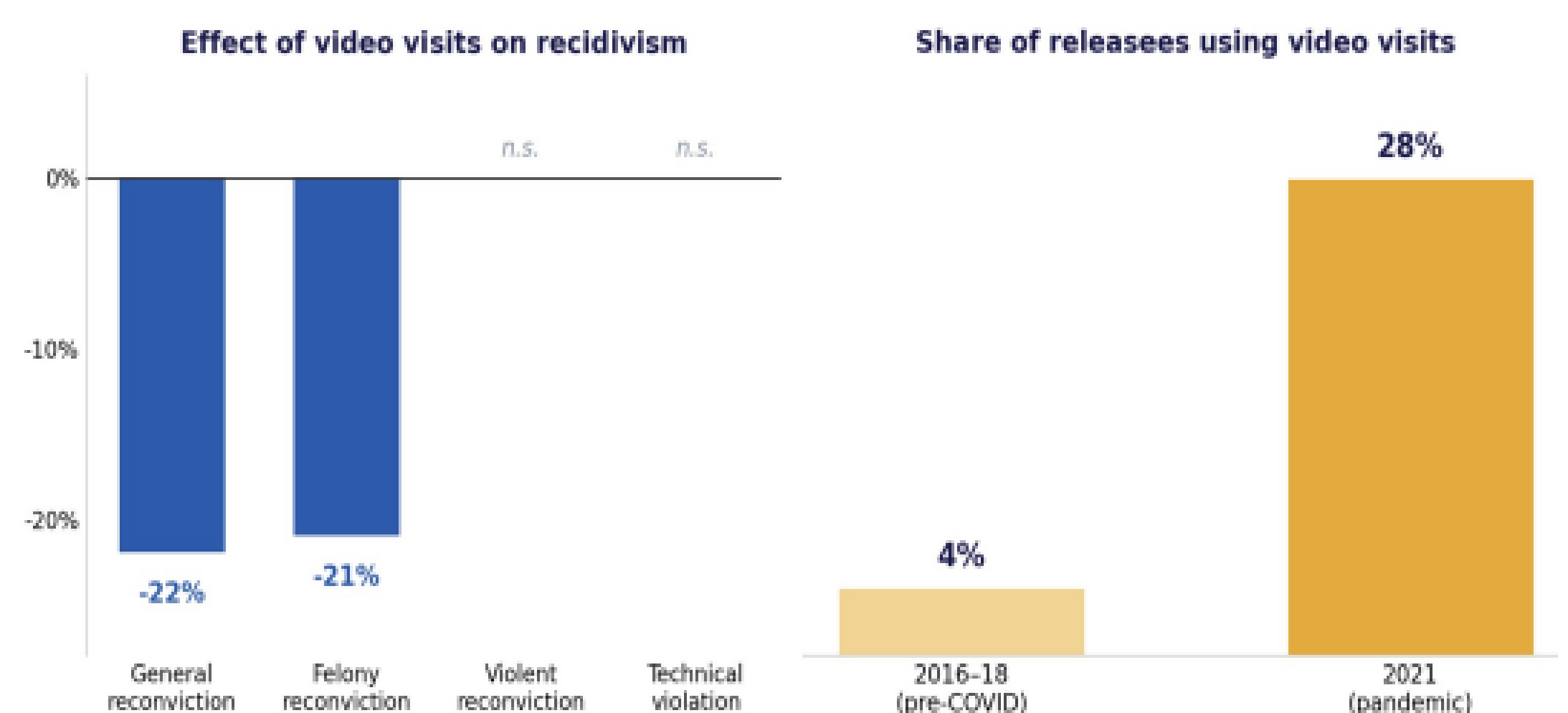
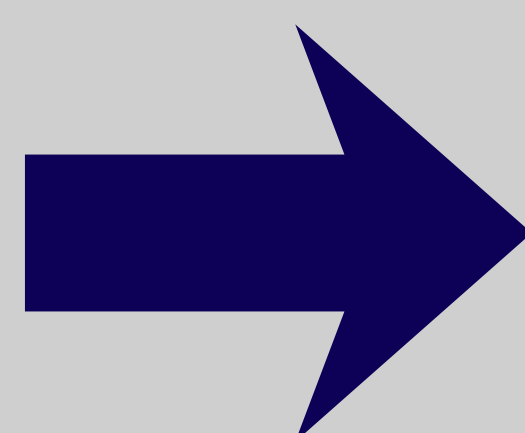
## Finding: A Misleading Timeline

Neither shutdown nor reopening was a single event. States closed in waves and reopened in conditional stages (non-contact first, vaccinated-only, capped). A before-and-after frame cannot capture it.



## Finding: The Video Substitute

Video went from marginal to fixed. In Texas it was a paid, rationed stand-in (\$10, one hour, once a month). The evidence says video supplements but does not replace in-person contact.



## The Central Finding

No state held a single, stable, publicly verifiable reason for its policy from restriction through restoration. Justifications shifted, migrated between categories, or quietly vanished. That instability is the mechanism of permanence.

## Discussion/Conclusion

Each shift is defensible alone, but cumulatively no reason ever has to survive scrutiny. California interrupted the drift with a budget, Texas with a statute; where no force intervened, temporary and permanent became indistinguishable. The burden falls entirely on families, and protective contact thins with no one, anywhere, on record having chosen to thin it.