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# **Playwork in prison as a mechanism to support family health and well-being**

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## **Abstract**

**Objective:** The health of the prison population has become an increasing concern, given the disproportionate rates of ill health in this population. Moreover, the challenges faced by prisoners' families and their children are also becoming more apparent, with prisoners' children being more likely than other children to experience mental and emotional health problems and more likely to go to prison themselves. Prison visits are an integral part of institutional structures and are a key way by which families stay in contact and mitigate against the negative effects of family separation. This paper focuses particularly on the impact of prison play visits as an alternative to 'standard' visiting procedures.

**Design:** Cross-sectional qualitative study.

**Setting:** A male prison in Northern England.

**Method:** Telephone interviews with six prison visitors who had regularly participated in a play visit, plus a focus group with five prisoners.

**Results:** The paper identifies play visits as a useful way to maintain family well-being as they 'mimic', albeit temporarily, domestic life. This is reported to be beneficial for future family outcomes and in enabling children to adjust to parental incarceration. Play visits improve levels of intimacy, which is beneficial for the mental and emotional health both of prisoners and their children.

**Conclusion:** The paper argues for a more holistic notion of prisoner health that sees family connections as a key part of supporting health and well-being.

## **Keywords**

Prison, prison visiting, health setting, family bonds, play work

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## Context

Reductionist approaches to prison health have prevailed strongly over the past century, resulting in models and approaches that have privileged disease prevention at the expense of more holistic conceptualisations of health (de Viggiani, 2006). There are many reasons for this, including the disproportionate rates of ill-health experienced by members of this population (Woodall, 2016). Much of this is 'imported' into the prison setting as result of prison populations being drawn from communities where poverty, deprivation and inequality exist but other aspects of health may be compromised as a result of the socio-environmental conditions within the prison (Irwin and Cressey, 1962). Prisoners' families also face distinct challenges, although their needs are often overlooked (Schekter et al., 2017). Social, psychological and economic losses are often reported by families of prisoners (Schekter et al., 2017; Murray, 2005) and moreover, prisoners' children are twice as likely as other children to experience mental health problems, are more likely to have higher emotional health needs and more likely to go to prison themselves (Henshaw, 2014; Murray, 2005; Seymour, 1998). Exact figures on the number of children with a parent in prison are unknown, although it is somewhere in the region of 200,000 in England and Wales (Waldegrave and Woodall, 2016).

Given the health and social profile of people in prison and their families, many interventions to address this inequality have focussed on 'treatment' and reacting to issues as they arise – this has meant an explicit focus on salutogenesis in prison populations has been lacking (Woodall et al., 2014a). Nevertheless, evidence has shown that prisoners often require time outside of their cell and 'fresh air' in order to remain a 'healthy' inside (Woodall, 2010). Family contact in prison is also an important aspect of prisoners' and their families health (Woodall, 2010; Dixey and Woodall, 2012) and forms the main focus of this paper. Family contact can happen in several ways, but predominantly through letter writing, telephone conversations and through face-to-face contact through prison visitation processes (Mignon and Ransford, 2012). The latter is considered the 'lynchpin' that keeps the majority of family connections together (Codd, 2008) and evidence shows how visiting can promote prisoners' mental health by reducing social isolation (Cochran and Mears, 2013). Prisoners who have regular visits from family have a reduced likelihood of post-release depression (Wolff and Draine, 2004) and are also more likely to have better post-release outcomes in relation to finding employment (Niven and Stewart, 2005). Maruna (2001) has also demonstrated that those who desist from criminal activities, rather than persist, after a prison sentence have good family connections and express strong generative themes in their narratives (i.e. a commitment to their children). It is, of course, recognised that in some instances maintaining family contact is not appropriate especially if the prisoner's offence relates to domestic violence (Mignon and Ransford, 2012).

The most common form of prison visit takes place in communal prison halls and during these visits prisoners and their families are able to spend anywhere between thirty minutes to three hours together (Hutton, 2016). Standard visits are monitored closely by prison staff and generally physical contact is restricted (prisoners can embrace their visitors at the beginning and end of the visit session (NOMS, 2011)) because of security concerns in relation to the exchange of contraband (Woodall, 2012b). While prisoners generally look forward to visits, they have also identified the stress of family visits, or their infrequency, as a major impact on their well-being (Department of Health, 2002). Emotional and physical distress is more likely to be found by mothers in prison who have limited or no contact with

their children (Mignon and Ransford, 2012). Yet, the barriers surrounding visits for families – the financial costs and emotional challenges coupled with the way in which prison can make visitors feel unwelcome – make visiting difficult (Dixey and Woodall, 2012). Light and Campbell (2006: p.300) noted the challenges of prison visits and the difficulty for families connecting in a natural way:

“Then there is the nature of the visit itself. This is usually conducted in less than relaxed circumstances. Restricted time, and the starkly contrasting circumstances of the inmate and the family, can result in conversations being artificial and stilted, with everyone keen to make the most of the visit and not to upset the other person. Consequently, issues and problems may go unresolved and even unmentioned.”

In England, the provision of visits and the ways in which they operate vary considerably between prisons with specific institutions having idiosyncratic features and approaches (e.g. whether visits provision is organised by prison staff, or voluntary and community sector providers) (Browne, 2005; Light and Campbell, 2006). There has however, been a greater focus on the ways in which prison visits and family contact, especially with children, is maintained and offered. Regular family days, toddler days, drama activities and homework clubs are examples of this expansion in provision (Hutton, 2016; Kinsella and Woodall, 2016). These sessions often provide a more intimate space where the ‘quality’ of family interaction and well-being is often greater (Hutton, 2016).

Prison play visits are an example where prisoners, their partner and their children can interact. These types of visit use trained playworkers to facilitate interaction and to encourage family bonding through exploratory child-led play. Playwork uses the medium of play as a mechanism to address various physical, mental and emotional needs of children and allows children a sense of agency in a prison environment where structure and procedure is usually enforced upon them (Wragg, 2016). Allowing agency in a structured prison environment where security must be of the highest concern is rare (Woodall et al., 2013a), but research suggests that allowing prisoners’ families to make agentic decisions where power is limited is important (Foster, 2016). While play visits are a relatively new addition to the suite of prison visit options (Wragg, 2016), there is a growing evidence base which reports their success in achieving several health and social outcomes for both prisoners and their children (Hart and Clutterbrook, 2008; Tamminen, 1999; Woodall et al., 2014b).

There is a growing amount of research which has focussed on prison visiting and the role of prisoners’ families in supporting rehabilitation (Foster, 2016), but there is little doubt that this has been overshadowed by a greater focus on other parts of the prison experience. Despite their prominence in prison life and their potential to support family health and well-being, the spaces in which visits take place is one of the most “underresearched carceral spaces” and one, which is argued, merits further investigation (Moran, 2013: p.174). Much of the research undertaken in the field of prisoners’ families and prison visiting is relatively small-scale, usually because of ethical and practical barriers preventing access to this group (Codd, 2008). This has led several commentators to assert that the voices of prisoners’ families has been unheard resulting in families being regarded as the ‘forgotten victims’ (Light and Campbell, 2006).

This paper reports findings from research undertaken in one prison where play visits have been operationalised for several years. The play visits can be tailored for children of

various ages, but in this case are particularly used for children aged between 2-12 years of age. Drawing on a social model on health and on the wider determinants of prisoner health, the paper demonstrates the impact of play visits on the constituents of the play session. The paper focuses mostly on the impact of play visits for the prisoners themselves and the family's perception of the impact on children. The paper argues that a broader view of health, which encompasses issues such as how family ties are maintained and enhanced, is important for those working toward reducing health and social inequalities both for prisoners and their families.

## **Methodology**

The focus of this study is on prisoners and prisoners' families involved in a prison play visit scheme in one men's prison in Northern England. The prison is a category-B institution<sup>1</sup> and holds approximately 1100 men. All aspects of the research followed the Social Research Association's ethical guidelines and received University ethical approval. The governor of the prison granted permission for the research to be undertaken on receipt of the ethical approval from Leeds Beckett University. Given that only one family at a time can access the play visit at any one time, the numbers of families currently engaging regularly with the scheme is relatively small.

The value of qualitative research approaches when exploring facets of prison experiences cannot be understated. Codd (2008: p.19), for instance, discusses the 'vivid and detailed information' that can be ascertained through such approaches with prisoners' families. In this study, qualitative approaches were used to elicit the 'lived experience' of prison visiting. In relation to ascertaining the views of prisoners' families, it is often the case that prison visitors' centres are used as a prime location to recruit and sample (Foster, 2016). However previous studies have noted the difficulties that this poses, particularly that prison visitors often do not have the time or inclination to participate prior to or after the visit (Dixey and Woodall, 2012). To counter this, telephone interviews were undertaken with six female prison visitors who had been involved regularly in play visits in the prison over the past three months or more – these interviews were usually conducted in the evenings at the request of participants and lasted between 20-60 minutes. There are pragmatic advantages to telephone interviewing, but there is also evidence which shows that individuals feel that the anonymity afforded by telephone interviews allows them to disclose more detailed information and not feel 'judged' by what they discuss (Ward et al., 2015). One concern was ensuring that potential participants were able to give informed consent. Prior to the interview, it was explained that the researchers were independent of the prison and that refusing to participate would hold no disadvantage to them or their partner in prison. Issues of confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw from the interview at any point were explained along with the aims of the research. Participants gave verbal permission for the interviews to be audio recorded (the process of providing consent was also audio recorded and stored securely as a record).

To explore the views of prisoners involved in the play visit scheme, five prisoners who had regularly participated in play visits over the past three-months or more voluntarily participated in a focus group after information had been distributed to eligible prisoners within the institution. The focus group took place in a private room within the prison and,

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<sup>1</sup> Category B prisoners are not held in the highest security conditions but their potential for escape should be made very difficult.

due to security issues, a member of prison staff was present but did not contribute to discussions. Prisoners participating in the discussions had no connection to the visitors interviewed. Researchers have to critically examine whether participants in a focus group actually share their true thoughts, feelings and beliefs in the discussion. Hollander (2004) describes the concepts of 'problematic silences' and 'problematic speech' during focus group discussions. She suggests that problematic silences occur when participants do not share their experiences or viewpoints within the group and instead withhold their own point of view and perspective. Carey (1995), for instance, claims that participants may be reticent to share personal information especially when the levels of trust are low in the group. This may be particularly pertinent in prison environments, where prisoners can be wary and concerned with the presentation they give of themselves. In contrast, problematic speech occurs when participants offer opinions that do not represent their true beliefs. Problematic speech often arises when there are pressures to conform, thereby leading participants to adjust their contributions to match others or when participants feel an expectation to offer information that they think the researcher wants to hear (Hollander, 2004). Given these distinct challenges, focus group discussions have proved a useful method when discussing vitiation processes with prisoners (Dixey and Woodall, 2012).

Data were analysed thematically with an emphasis on identifying inductive themes and patterns. Time was allocated prior to the development of thematic categories to become fully immersed in the raw data. Data familiarisation is perhaps an obvious step in the analysis of qualitative data; yet, this process was a critical for forming a firm intellectual understanding of the overall data set. After a process of immersion, codes were applied to the transcripts. The process of coding manually involved writing notes on the text, highlighting and using post-it notes to identify salient data segments (Ritchie et al., 2003). From the list of tentative codes, initial themes were abstracted and categorised; this required a great deal of interpretative work, but eventually reduced the data into a more manageable set of discrete extracts. The researchers were mindful of generating themes relating to both the prisoner perspective and visitor perspective and also in developing cross-cutting thematic areas where commonality of issues arose in discussion (for example, cross-cutting themes on the benefits of play for the child). Essentially this was a process of re-focussing the analysis, considering how the codes may be combined and amalgamated to form overarching themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

## **Findings**

This section presents the findings from the research. Where appropriate, direct anonymised quotations have been used to illustrate key themes or issues.

### ***Play enhancing the quality of visiting time and family well-being***

The play visit allowed prisoners and their families to reconnect through spending 'quality time' together. This had little to do with the length of time – as play visits and standard visits were the same length of time – but through closer engagement and interaction. Both prisoners and visitors commented that the atmosphere and relaxed nature of the visit itself meant that prisoners were able to recreate a home environment with their children:

“So we might all sit at the table together or do a picture or build bricks, just we are all together and we’re not sat at a table and talking, we’re just interacting and playing. We’re interacting like we would at home.” (Telephone interview, prison visitor 3)

The relaxed environment in which the play visits were delivered allowed prisoners and their families’ freedom to move and have greater physical contact. Physical contact and connection between the prisoner and his child was seemingly an important ingredient allowing a sense that bonding between the father and his child was being maintained:

“Yes he really enjoys it because like I say he feels like he’s missing out on this time at home where he would be playing on the floor at home with him and playing with his toys. He still gets to roll around and mess about with him on the floor there. So it’s helpful, it’s good for him.” (Telephone interview, prison visitor3)

Prisoners were able to learn more about their children through the facilitated play visits this included being able to see more closely the child’s physical and cognitive development:

“My partner sees how my little boy is growing and developing and learning and it’s good for my boy to bond with his dad and have a play time with his dad really because any other way he wouldn’t get that.” (Telephone interview, prison visitor3)

“You see how they progress with school as well. It’s like when I came in here, my daughter, she could write her name, and that was it. But then now it’s like, ‘to daddy, I love you.’ She’s putting sentences together and stuff like that.” (Prisoner focus group)

Several prisoners spoke about feeling as though they were not in prison during the visits which provided respite and helped them to focus more on the time they were spending with their children. Such contact gave prisoners reassurance that on leaving prison they would transition back into family life:

“It’s like for that half an hour you’re living in – not a dream because it’s reality – but it’s like a little dream. You go back to your cell and you’re thinking, ‘oh well, it will be all right when I go home to my family. I’ve just been with my family.’” (Focus group, prisoner)

Linked to the quality of prison visits was the perception that the play visits service maintained, and sometimes strengthened, family ties between the prisoner and his family. This was a very important part of prisoners maintaining a positive outlook while in prison. The consequence of feeling relaxed enabled a better quality of visit and prisoners described how this provided them with an opportunity to re-establish their role as a father:

“So it’s like holding us together. Even though you might only think, oh it’s only half an hour or whatever, but it’s holding us together, so you’re doing something as a family. So it’s great.” (Focus group, prisoner)

Moreover, prisoners explained that the play visits helped to also keep their relationship together with their partner. While play was used as a mechanism to stimulate the parent-child bond, secondary effects in relation to wider family relationships were noted:

“The relationship gets stronger as well between your partner, you know, your missus and yourself. I feel like it’s got stronger with them visits because then we are acting as a unit.” (Focus group, prisoner)

The collective experience of better engagement with both the prisoners’ children and partner meant that for some individuals this was a ‘turning-point’ to cease re-offending in the future:

“I think from my point of view, I was so far committed to my offending before my daughter was born... So I couldn’t get out of the situation that I was in at the time. But now, I wouldn’t go back offending because of what I’ve done to her. And I’ll spend the rest of the days making it up to her. Because from two until ten she’s got no dad – she has because but she’s only got me for a couple of hours a week. So at the end of this process that’s what will stop me from coming back to jail so to speak.” (Prisoner focus group)

### ***Benefits for children***

It was noted that standard visits could often lead to children becoming bored and restless. Both prisoners and prison visitors felt that children had more freedom to move around during a play visit and therefore they feel more relaxed and interested in the visit:

“I think all I’d say is that it provides a natural relationship with my daughter that we wouldn’t both have otherwise. That’s it. Just a natural environment to play, and that makes it easier for us to bond through the naturalness of the environment as opposed to over a table.” (Prisoner focus group)

Co-ordinated play activities helped children to engage and interact with their fathers which contributed to creating a fun experience that children looked forward to. The extract below demonstrates how easily children can resist seeing their father in prison and for family contact to potentially breakdown. This example shows how crucial the play visits had been for this particular family:

“She’s started going through a phase where she didn’t want to come and see me no more. She just said, ‘mum, I don’t want to go.’ She’s only five, but she didn’t want to come to see me. But when the play visits and everything started kicking in for me, and she had the first one, and then after that, she’s wanting to come more and more.” (Prisoner focus group)

Reaffirming this position, one mother suggested that the prison environment was daunting for children, but that the play visit provided a different experience, or a more

'normal' environment, which fostered sustained visitation between children and their father in prison:

"It just keeps things as normal as possible and makes it a fun experience where the children want to go and it's not daunting because you can imagine it might be quite daunting for them going in the first couple of times and having to go through the procedure of a little search and having to see all these locked doors behind them- it's nothing they've ever experienced. It makes it a good positive fun way and they actually look forward to going." (Telephone interview, prison visitor\_2)

The play visits were reported to build the confidence of children and prisoners suggesting that play visits had helped their children to be more engaged with them as fathers. Perhaps because play visits recreated normal family life, visits allowed children to express how they were feeling not only during the visit itself but afterward through letters and telephone communication:

"One of my daughters wrote to me the other day. But she said, 'dad, why did you leave me, mum, and then put all her sisters' names, in this situation?' So when she's come up and we've been on a play visit, we've managed to have a conversation. Our conversation has been very open. She's only five. Oh yes, she can see what's going on. And ever since then, our connection has been stronger, because we've managed to speak, because of them visits. That's what she's got out of them. She's got to sit down, find some space to sit and enjoy me as a person." (Prisoner focus group)

More broadly, prisoners argued that prison visits had enabled their children to adapt and transition more easily to a new family dynamic whereby the father would not be at home. One prisoner suggested how the play visit had been a component in supporting this process:

It definitely helps the separation from when you initially come into custody, and your child's world's changed. My child wouldn't go to nursery because she didn't want to leave her mum because I'd left, and then she thought her mum's going to leave her and what's she going to be left with? Because she didn't understand what was going on. But once we'd had a few of these visits, she knows that she can still see her daddy. Daddy isn't gone forever. So it's from the initial point of coming into custody as well as building the routine up afterwards. It helps the whole process, I think." (Prisoner focus group)

## **Discussion**

There are some promising shifts in the way that public health advocates and health promoters are considering the health of people in prison. While prison health management has traditionally been typified by reactionary physical care underpinned by a biomedical philosophy, a more holistic recognition is emerging in relation to the wider determinants of prisoners' health (Ramaswamy and Freudenberg, 2007). This includes a greater focus on the principles enshrined in the Ottawa Charter (WHO, 1986) with emphasis given to the role of

families in developing healthy prison policy and in creating supportive environments for health (Woodall et al., 2014a).

The role that prison visits play in addressing prisoners' mental health is increasingly recognised (de Motte et al., 2012) – especially in providing a 'buffer' from the realities of contemporary prison life, such as overcrowding and violence. Other literature shows how maintaining contact through prison visits is beneficial for improved social connectedness on release and a greater likelihood of reduced re-offending (Bales and Mears, 2008). This research has shown the benefits of enhancing the standard prison visits experience through using play as a medium to foster greater bonding between prisoners and their children. One of the key effects of prison play visits was the sustained contact that prisoners had with their children; with the more relaxed and informal conditions being crucial to fostering parental bonds. Others have argued how visits, temporarily at least, re-create domestic family life (Holligan, 2016). The enhanced 'quality' of the visit and the closer interaction seemed critical and indeed other interventions that move away from standard visiting processes report similar findings (Hutton, 2016). Family breakdowns during periods of imprisonment are common and ensuring that this does not happen is beneficial for individuals, communities and wider society. Much research has shown how prison policies and procedures detract from families wishing to stay in contact. Brooks-Gordon and Bainham (2004: p.12), as an example, argue that security and invasive search procedures "weaken the receptiveness of prisons to visitors".

It would be naïve, however, to homogenise prisoners and their families and suggest that visits, or indeed play visits, were a 'silver bullet' to reducing health and social inequalities faced by this group. Instead, play visits should form part of a menu of options that prisons could offer to support prisoner and family well-being during a period of incarceration. Children who have a parent in prison face distinct challenges, particularly in terms of their emotional health and wellbeing' (Seymour, 1998: , p.472), this study does show that some of this can be countered by policies and practices that allow children to have more meaningful time with their father in prison.

The notion of a health-promoting prison has been discussed for over twenty years now (Woodall, 2016) and yet the import role that family connections play in both supporting prisoners' health and overall family well-being has been significantly overlooked. Applied to prison contexts, the settings-approach recognises wider determinants of health and moreover privileges a holistic view of health. The role that regular prison visits has on prisoners' health and their families health is not fully understood, although this study does show that prisoners feel able to have more meaningful interaction and better able to reconnect as a father – this is an important aspect of prisoners feeling 'healthy' inside prison (Woodall, 2010). There are, however, wider implications of more positive and 'family-friendly' prison visits experiences. Research has shown that positive prison visits can create a calmer atmosphere that can reduce demands on prison staff workload – poor visit interactions, on the other hand, can create more volatile situations that staff must manage after the visit has ended (Dixey and Woodall, 2012). This would require further investigation, but the potential to minimise staff workload and reduce stressors on prison staff would be welcomed given the high-levels of sickness and ill-health in this group (The Howard League for Penal Reform, 2014).

There are also alternative arguments to providing prison play visits that cannot be ignored. Although there is no data to suggest that prison play visits causes increased security threats, prison visits *per se* can be seen to be a threat to prison staff as they open

up the possibility of contraband being exchanged (Dixey and Woodall, 2012). Further exploration of this may be needed.

Clearly, the study's cross-sectional design throws up several limitations. Most notably, longitudinal tracking of the impact of the play visits is unknown and moreover whether family bonds are maintained and enhanced post-release from prison is an area where further exploration would be recommended. One of the major criticism of adopting the settings approach is that it fosters insularity and fragmentation (Dooris, 2006). This criticism is particularly appropriate in the criminal justice context, where prisoners often feel that progress achieved in the prison in relation to health, confidence and self-esteem is often 'lost' when returning back to the community setting (Woodall et al., 2013b). In relation to this, using play as a medium to foster interaction should ideally continue after release and, where necessary, supported by trained professionals. That said, the likelihood of this, given the apparent lack of political will for play *per se*, it seems inconceivable that specialist playworkers working with prisoners will become more prevalent or expand into ex-prisoners in the community (Wragg, 2016).

## Conclusions

This research, albeit modest in nature, contributes to gaining a greater understanding of an underexplored facet of prison life. It identifies the critical role of prison play visits and demonstrates the positive implications of these for health and well-being. Visiting can cause emotional strain for all members of the family and moreover there is pressure, because of the limited number of visits that prisoners can receive, to make these experiences as positive as possible. The literature shows that attributes of a 'bad' visit include discussions about financial difficulties or other domestic information and where strict time constraints within the visit do not allow resolutions to be achieved (de Motte et al., 2012; Holligan, 2016). In contrast, the factors that create a 'good' visit experience is poorly reported in the literature (Moran, 2013), although indication from this study suggests that prison play visits can increase intimacy and increase perceived levels of family bonding.

Individuals and organisations working to support and improve the health of the prison population have often neglected the critical role that families can play in this process. While a more holistic view of the prison setting, acknowledging the structural and environmental impact that the environment has on health, has emerged in recent times, the role of the prison visit is frequently neglected (Woodall, 2012a). Considerably more needs to be done to equip, support and empower families to play their role in the rehabilitation of prisoners – a sentiment echoed by Maruna et al. (2004) and by The Centre for Social Justice (2009). Play visits offer the opportunity for families to play an active role in shaping a positive future for those serving prison sentences. That said, the danger of homogenising prisoners' families must be avoided and this paper does not advocate play visits for all families and children. Such an approach would be oversimplifying the complex dynamic that prisoners and their families face. What this research, and other research focusing on the play visit, has revealed is that for some families and children play visits are an important part of sustaining health and well-being outcomes. To this extent, play visits should form part of a suite or menu of options for families to stay connected.

A greater understanding of the mechanisms underpinning the play visit in prison is needed through further research investigation. For example, how frequent and how often should play visits occur in order to maximise positive effects? Which families benefit the

most from play experiences in prison? The majority of research in this area (Tamminen, 1999; Woodall et al., 2014b), including this study, has focussed on men in prison but further work is required to see how and if hegemonic masculinities enable or constrain play visits being successfully implemented. Finally, the transferability of playwork interventions to mothers in prison or young offenders is relatively unknown.

Play tends typically to be misunderstood or trivialised by the adult population (Wragg, 2016) and its role in supporting prisoner and family health and well-being requires further evaluation and examination if it is to be feasibly part of mainstream service provision in prison settings. Nonetheless, this study has shown the potential value in play visits in prison to support the wider determinants of prisoners and their family's health.

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