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Between Walls and Screens: Fatherhood, Family Bonds, and Digital Inclusion in Prison

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Abstract

Digital inclusion in prison remains a contested terrain, where access to technologies is tightly regulated and unevenly distributed. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Italian prisons introduced video calls to compensate for restrictions on in-person visits. Initially conceived as an emergency measure, this practice has now become a permanent option in many institutions. Drawing on qualitative research conducted in a high-security prison in Tuscany between 2023 and 2024, this article examines how video calls reshape family relationships and everyday carceral life. The study is based on ten in-depth interviews with incarcerated fathers who highlighted the significance of video calls in maintaining family bonds. Participants described how digital contact partially mitigates the physical and social distance of imprisonment by allowing them to share domestic spaces, witness daily routines, and sustain a sense of presence in their children's lives. At the same time, they pointed to persistent barriers to digital inclusion, such as institutional constraints, limited resources, lack of privacy, and difficulties in coordinating schedules with relatives. These findings suggest that video calls contribute to making the prison a more "porous institution" by creating a fragile bridge between the inside and outside. The article situates these experiences within broader debates on digital inequalities, equity, and human rights, showing how access to digital communication can simultaneously alleviate and reproduce forms of exclusion.

Keywords

digital inclusion; digital inequalities; family relationships; incarcerated fatherhood; video calls

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1. Introduction

In a digitalised and interconnected world, prisons remain closed institutions shaped by security concerns and resistant to outside influences. Access to communication technologies is limited and tightly regulated. In this context, the relationship between incarceration and family life becomes especially significant.

The number of people in Italian prisons has grown steadily since the start of the century, with a growing number of children and families affected. In 2025, the penitentiary system held around 63,800 people, 95% of whom were male (Antigone, 2025). While the exact number of incarcerated fathers and their children in Italy remains unclear, available European estimates suggest that around 75,429 children in Italy are separated from an imprisoned father, based on a rate of 1.3 children per male incarcerated person (Children of Prisoners Europe, 2026).

Research has shown that incarceration has negative effects on family relationships and on children's well-being, particularly in terms of parent–child dynamics (Arditti, 2016; Dennison et al., 2017). However, existing studies have paid more attention to mothers (Booth, 2020), while fathers remain less explored in both their experiences of incarceration and their ability to enact their parental role. More specifically, research on fathers' experiences of video visitation is still limited and mostly focused on the US and Australia (Flynn et al., 2021; Hanley et al., 2024; Taylor et al., 2023), whereas the European context, and especially Italy, remains largely underexplored.

Drawing on interviews with incarcerated fathers conducted in a high-security prison in Tuscany between 2023 and 2024, this article explores how video calls have contributed to redefining relationships between fathers and their loved ones, particularly their children. By analysing their narratives on the introduction of video visitation, as well as its benefits and limitations, the article highlights the ambivalent role of digital technologies in processes of rehabilitation and social inclusion during incarceration.

2. Theoretical Framework: Incarcerated Fatherhood, Family Relationships, and Digital Inclusion

2.1. Incarceration, Family Relationships, and Children

Incarceration is known to have disruptive consequences for both the affected individual and their loved ones (Arditti, 2016; Dennison et al., 2017). The displacement of the incarcerated individual from their habitual environments can interrupt the ties with family and friends, leading to social isolation and difficulties in maintaining fulfilling relationships (Hanley & Flynn, 2023).

Families where one of the members is incarcerated can experience adverse outcomes as well; children of incarcerated parents are particularly affected by the absence of such an important figure, such as their mother or their father (Comfort, 2008; Day et al., 2005; Dennison & Besemer, 2018). Studies have shown that the incarceration of a parent can predict negative outcomes for children both in the short term and in the long term: struggles with physical and mental health problems, below-average school achievements, behavioural difficulties (Day et al., 2005; Murray et al., 2012), and a higher possibility of being exposed to adverse situations such as poverty or substance abuse. Early exposure to the carceral environment can

create secondary prisonization in children, who are believed to be particularly negatively affected by the interaction with correctional settings (Comfort, 2008).

Research has also focused on the relationships between children and their incarcerated parents. Although maintaining a relationship with a parent in jail has not always been considered beneficial for children, most research suggests that it is fundamental for both children and parents to cultivate their bond during incarceration. Most attention has been given to mother-child relationships, while incarcerated fathers have received far less consideration. However, studies have pointed out the importance for fathers to maintain relationships with their children during incarceration, highlighting how beneficial family relationships are in reducing the risk of reoffending and contributing to positive re-entry outcomes (Dennison et al., 2017; Kjellstrand et al., 2022; Visher, 2013).

2.2. Incarcerated Fatherhood and the Challenges of Parenting

Maintaining a relationship with their children is particularly challenging for incarcerated fathers (Clarke et al., 2005; Dennison et al., 2017; Fowler et al., 2017). The typical ways incarcerated people can communicate with family members are in-person visits, phone calls, letters, and, in some cases, emails. In-person visits have been shown to be particularly beneficial for both fathers and children, as they offer the highest form of intimacy possible in a carceral context (e.g., children can hug and touch their father; Flynn et al., 2026; Hutton, 2016; Oldrup, 2019).

However, visits pose several challenges, related primarily to the inadequacy of prison visitation areas themselves, lack of privacy, and excessively harsh behaviours from prison staff (Arditti, 2003; Flynn et al., 2026; Moran et al., 2017). A substantial number of studies have found that in-person visits can result in mixed experiences for children and cause distress and negative feelings (Arditti, 2003, 2012; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018). Visitation rooms are, in many cases, an unsuitable environment for children, because of the presence of other incarcerated people and prison staff, the absence of a child-friendly setting, and a mixture of other unsettling elements such as noise, dirt, and crowds. This is particularly true for young children, who can experience acute distress when forced to sit quietly in very crowded, noisy environments (Arditti, 2003; Hutton, 2016; Moran et al., 2017). Children's caretakers can, in some cases, consider it better for the child not to interact with the prison environment, due to inappropriate behaviours of other incarcerated people during in-person visits, mistreatment by prison staff, or excessively strict controls, such as body searches (Christian, 2005; Hutton, 2016; Tasca, 2016).

In addition, visitation can be costly and time-consuming (Arditti, 2003; Christian, 2005), especially when the incarcerated person is located far away from the family. This can constitute a serious obstacle, resulting in the limitation of the number of in-person visits.

Phone calls can avoid the traumatic experience of confronting the carceral setting for children, but it can be difficult, especially for young children still developing language skills, to remain engaged for long periods via phone (Singer & Brodzinsky, 2020; Skora Horgan & Poehlmann-Tynan, 2020). Letters and emails pose similar challenges because they require writing and reading skills that can be challenging for adults, let alone children. Mediated forms of contact that rely less on visual and interactional cues may be less accessible for younger children and often require adult mediation (Singer & Brodzinsky, 2020).

2.3. Digital Communication, Video Visitations, and Inequality

The introduction of video visitations in carceral settings expanded globally during the Covid-19 pandemic, due to the sanitary restrictions that suspended in-person visits in most prisons and jails (Antojado & Ryan, 2024; Flynn et al., 2021; Hanley & Flynn, 2023; Skora Horgan & Poehlmann-Tynan, 2020); however, they are not an absolute novelty, especially for the US, where they had already been implemented in many jurisdictions (Murdoch & King, 2019), although their employment was not without criticism (Hanley & Flynn, 2023). Similarly, video visitations were also employed in Australia before the pandemic (Hanley & Flynn, 2023), but their large-scale expansion is clearly linked to the pandemic emergency (Fulcher, 2014; Hanley et al., 2024; Murdoch & King, 2019). Research on its implementation and its perceived utility from the perspectives of both incarcerated individuals and their families shows mixed results, highlighting both advantages and limitations (Duursma et al., 2024; Hanley et al., 2024; Hanley & Flynn, 2023; Taylor et al., 2023).

Video visitation appears to be a flexible tool for maintaining relationships with individuals outside the prison: It allows incarcerated people to virtually connect with family and friends without requiring them to travel to the facility, which may be located far away (Flynn et al., 2021; Murdoch & King, 2019); it also enables interaction with individuals who would otherwise be unable to visit due to health conditions, disabilities, or limited financial resources.

Video visitations have also been perceived as safer for children because they guarantee contact with the incarcerated parent without exposing the child to the prison environment, which can be a stressful and unpleasant experience (Flynn et al., 2021; Hanley & Flynn, 2023). Video visitations allow children to interact with the incarcerated parent from the comfort of their homes, and they enable forms of non-verbal communication: Children, especially young ones, who are not proficient speakers, can communicate through pointing, eye contact, and body language (Singer & Brodzinsky, 2020; Skora Horgan & Poehlmann-Tynan, 2020), and better engage with their parent on screen.

However, video visitations are not without limits, which need to be considered. Studies have shown that, especially in the US, video visitation is increasingly used as a complete replacement for in-person visits (Murdoch & King, 2019). Although video calls are useful for connecting with family and friends and are a convenient solution, replacing in-person visits entirely seems problematic for several reasons. Firstly, video visitations are a relatively new tool and pose limitations to users who are not familiar with them or do not have the necessary technology to use them (Skora Horgan & Poehlmann-Tynan, 2020). Not having the needed devices or access to a stable internet connection can create an additional barrier to maintaining a connection with the incarcerated person (Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016). Even if it is true that, after the global pandemic, there has been an increase in the use of information and communication technology (Hanley & Flynn, 2023), it is important to consider how the implementation of digital tools can still become a potential barrier to communicating with the incarcerated family member.

Moreover, in many contexts, video visits are not free because they are provided by for-profit companies (Murdoch & King, 2019; Skora Horgan & Poehlmann-Tynan, 2020). This can clearly create a disparity between those who can afford to use the service and those who cannot and can generate isolation and exclusion from family contacts.

Privacy is also not guaranteed: Video visitations can take place in a communal area where other incarcerated people and prison staff are present, and conversations can be overheard (Murdoch & King, 2019; Wells, 2019). Additionally, in many US contexts, video visits are recorded and can be used against the incarcerated individual in civil or criminal proceedings (Wells, 2019), leading to self-censorship.

This ambivalence provides the conceptual framework through which this article examines the role of video visitation in reshaping father–child relationships during incarceration.

3. Research Context: Italian Prison System During and After the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Italian prison system holds people serving a definitive sentence or awaiting trial. In 2025, the prison population reached more than 62,400 people, despite a maximum regulatory capacity of 51,280 places, resulting in a high rate of overcrowding, estimated at around 121.8% (Antigone, 2025). The vast majority are men. Only about 2,700, representing around 4.3% of the overall population, are women.

Incarcerated individuals are held in different facilities based on their age and assigned security level. Minors and young adults are incarcerated in juvenile penal institutions, regardless of the length of their sentences. Adults are assigned to different security regimes: A high-security regime is applied to incarcerated individuals with particular security needs, typically reserved for those serving sentences for organised crime, terrorism, and international drug dealing; medium security applies to the general prison population. Lower-intensity forms of custody may operate within specific units, often through open-custody arrangements, but they do not constitute a uniform nationwide minimum-security regime comparable to those in some other jurisdictions. Additionally, a special maximum-security regime (41-bis) applies to individuals considered particularly dangerous, imposing supplementary restrictions.

Based on different security regimes, incarcerated individuals have different possibilities of interacting with family and friends. As stated in Law No. 354 of 26 July 1975 on the Prison System and subsequently in Presidential Decree No. 230/2000, prisons allow contact through in-person visitation, phone calls, and letters. The medium-security regime allows six in-person visits per month, while the high-security regime is limited to four, which can be increased for parents with children under 12 years old. Normally, all incarcerated people are allowed one phone call per week, with a maximum duration of 10 minutes; additional calls may be granted for special circumstances, such as returning from leave, urgent or relevant family reasons, or transfer (Italian Ministry of Justice, 2018).

Due to the health crisis generated by the Covid-19 virus, the Italian penitentiary system was forced to adapt to protect the health of incarcerated people and prison staff. With the introduction of Law-Decree 11/2020, facilities were closed to external contact to reduce the risk of infection (Ravagnani et al., 2020). In-person visits gradually resumed from mid-May 2020, subject to strict health precautions, including partition screens and limits on the number of visitors (Antigone, 2021). Video visits and phone calls were intended as replacements for in-person visits, but their implementation nationwide was uneven due to a lack of appropriate spaces and adequate technology. Once these limitations were overcome, most facilities allowed video visits as a replacement for in-person visits, and services like Skype and WhatsApp were implemented to provide them. In contrast to phone calls, which are charged, video visits are provided for free. This innovation was initially believed to be temporary, linked to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. However,

Circular No. 3696/6146, issued in 2022 by the Department of Penitentiary Administration, established video visitation as a permanent tool to guarantee incarcerated people's constitutional right to maintain contact with loved ones (Antigone, 2025).

Within this context, video visitations emerge as an innovative tool for maintaining relationships with the outside world. Overcoming the restrictions dictated by the pandemic, video visitations open a new horizon for communication within the prison system. The latter demonstrates "an uncharacteristic organisational agility" (Hanley & Flynn, 2023, p. 417), proving its capacity to adapt in critical situations and integrate new tools into its mechanisms. Against this background, it became important to see how video visitations have been used beyond the pandemic and how they have shaped the experiences of those directly involved. For this reason, the study explores the narratives of incarcerated fathers to better understand how video visitations impacted their ability to maintain meaningful relationships with their loved ones.

4. Methodology and Methods

This article draws on data collected during field research conducted in a high-security prison in Tuscany between October 2023 and March 2024. An ethnographic design was adopted, aiming to understand not only participants' accounts of video visitation but also how digital contact was embedded in everyday prison routines, spatial arrangements, and institutional constraints. Data were collected through close field observation, informal conversations with prison staff, and in-depth interviews with incarcerated individuals.

4.1. Research Setting

Research was conducted in a high-security prison in Tuscany. The facility was situated in an isolated area, around 10 kilometres from the nearest town. The prison operates under a closed custody regime, where incarcerated people are confined to their cells for most of the day; however, a dedicated unit operates in an open custody regime and accommodates 50 incarcerated people, all of whom must be enrolled in a university program. All but one of the interviewees were assigned to this unit, where single cells are provided and the overall perceived environment is more positive.

4.2. Participants, Recruitment, and Ethics

A total of 10 incarcerated fathers participated in the research. Participation was voluntary, and information about the study was circulated informally by the researcher with logistical support from prison staff. Each participant completed three audio-recorded, hour-long, in-depth interviews.

Given the structural power imbalance inherent in custodial settings, recruitment and consent procedures were designed to minimise any perceived pressure to participate. Prison staff were involved only in circulating general information and facilitating interview logistics. The researcher provided prospective participants with information about the study and obtained their informed consent directly. Staff were not present during interviews and had no access to recordings, transcripts, or individual accounts. No financial or in-kind compensation, penitentiary benefit, or institutional advantage was offered. This was communicated to participants before consent was obtained.

The prison administration reviewed the research protocol, issued a favourable opinion, and obtained the required authorisation from the competent authority. Under the applicable Italian institutional framework, separate ethics approval from a higher education institution was not required for this type of research. The research followed the principles of the CNR Charter of Principles for Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, 2017). Personal data and research materials were processed in accordance with Regulation (EU) 2016/679, the Italian Data Protection Code, and the applicable deontological rules for scientific research.

All participants were Italian and aged between 30 and 55 years, with a mean age of 44.3 years. All were originally from Southern Italy: five from Campania, three from Sicily, and two from Calabria. They were serving sentences ranging from 11 to 30 years, with a mean length of 18 years. Four were incarcerated for the first time, while six had previous prison experience.

Seven participants were married, two were in a committed relationship, and one was divorced. All had between one and three children, for a total of 20: One was under eight, seven were aged between eight and 15, eight between 16 and 24, and four were aged 25 or older. Before incarceration, nine participants had lived with the mother of their children and seven with their children.

4.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through a combination of close field observation, informal conversations with prison staff, and in-depth interviews. Fieldwork involved regular access to the prison environment, allowing observation of interactions among incarcerated people and between incarcerated people and prison staff, as well as exploration of key spaces such as visitation rooms and video visitation areas. Observation provided context for interviews by highlighting the material and institutional conditions of family contact. Informal staff conversations, though not recorded, clarified the rules and constraints of in-person and video visits.

Interviews were conducted in a private setting, without the presence of prison staff, to ensure confidentiality. The themes explored during interviews included previous detention experiences, current experiences of incarceration, aspects of everyday prison life, relationships with children prior to incarceration, current relationships with them, relationships with children's caregivers, and difficulties in maintaining the relationship due to institutional constraints. Additional topics included the adequacy of spaces and opportunities for interactions, the use of in-person visitations, video visits and other forms of communication, as well as expectations for re-entry into the family context.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Male pseudonyms were assigned to protect participants' identities, and sensitive information was omitted. Interview transcripts were thematically analysed through repeated readings, initial coding, and comparison across participants' accounts. Codes were then progressively grouped into broader themes, focusing on recurring patterns and differences. Results were grouped into four areas: access and affordability; mediated presence; embodiment and physical presence; ambivalence and inequality.

5. Findings: Reconfiguring Fatherhood Through Digital Contact

Findings suggest that video visitations were perceived positively by participants overall. Video visitations were introduced in their penitentiary institution during Covid-19 and have been used ever since. This tool was utilised not only for family contacts but also to interact with various other figures, such as attorneys and legal consultants, but participants recognised that being able to keep in touch with family members was the main advantage. However, not everyone was enthusiastic about video visitations, and some concerns emerged. Drawing on data collected through interviews, the following main areas emerged: two related to the positive innovations brought about by video visitation, and two to the main areas of concern.

5.1. Overcoming Distance: Access and Affordability

One of the main themes linked to the advantages of integrating video visitations was their capability to overcome a variety of issues that affect in-person visits. Especially for incarcerated people whose family members reside far from the prison, the possibility of substituting, partially or completely, in-person visits with video visits has had numerous advantages. Particularly relevant for fathers was the possibility of sparing families unnecessary travel, which is expensive in terms of both money and time. For many family members, attending in-person visits required taking time off work, booking a train or a plane, or driving for many hours. In most cases, staying overnight was also necessary, resulting in additional costs. One father highlighted the cumulative nature of these expenses:

> Having the opportunity to do the video call, rather than making her [my wife] spend…because it's not so much the trip itself, she still has to leave work for two/three days, at least, then she has to…the return ticket doesn't cost little, then when she comes, what does she do, doesn't she bring you the package? It's a series of things…then she has to sleep two nights here, but even one, she has to leave with at least 600–700 euros. (Fabio, November 2023)

Having to face expensive travel to see an incarcerated family member is not an unusual experience (Arditti, 2003; Comfort, 2008). This can result in difficulties in finding the necessary financial resources to do so, not to mention time and energy. For many incarcerated fathers, knowing that their partners and their children must make such efforts to see them is particularly frustrating. Not being able to help financially has emerged as one of the major issues for incarcerated fathers, who are deprived of the traditional male role of breadwinner (Bartlett & Eriksson, 2019; Ugelvik, 2014) and are forced to rely on their partner or other family members to provide for their children. Being unable to perform traditional traits of masculinity makes some feel useless and a burden to their loved ones, as emerges from the following extract:

> Just the other day I was talking with my wife on a video call and I said these exact words: "Look, I feel so bad knowing that in my day the most demanding thing I have to do is go paint, or go play football, while you instead have to get up in the morning and see what you have to do," because she has to send money to the boy who is studying….On top of that, she works at a school and, in the evening, at the bar….She does two jobs to make up for the economic situation, right? (Fabio, November 2023)

Knowing that your partner is struggling economically and needs to keep up with many responsibilities leads incarcerated fathers to reduce or give up in-person visitations, in order to help reduce the economic pressure

on their families. The introduction of video visitation has allowed many incarcerated individuals to maintain contact with their families on a weekly basis without spending any money, since the service is provided for free by the prison. However, the economic and logistical advantages are not the only benefits that emerge from the fathers' perspectives.

5.2. Mediated Presence and Everyday Family Life

Video visitations also enable a form of "mediated presence" in everyday family life. Incarcerated fathers can virtually enter the domestic sphere and interact with family, especially children, in a more intimate way. If in-person visitations are usually held in a specific location in the facility, where other incarcerated people are present, together with the prison staff, and privacy is not guaranteed, video visitations take place in the same location but in private rooms, with only visual surveillance. Additionally, only a limited number of people per incarcerated person are allowed during in-person visits due to security concerns and limited space. This limit is overcome by video visits, where there is no such limit, even though the participants need to be identified. As stated by one of the fathers, video visitations allow the whole family to be together, maintaining a stronger tie with loved ones:

> The activation of video calls was like a gift from the Lord…it may seem like nothing maybe for those who are outside, but for us it was a big thing, because I can have the [in-person] visits, and additionally I can only hear my wife on the phone, once a week, for 10 minutes…in 10 minutes I greet my wife, my son, the other son, I couldn't manage to complete the round…instead with the video call they are all there, present at home…and I talk with everyone, for three quarters of an hour, for 50 minutes….It was good, both for me who does not have visits but also for everyone else….I am watching my grandchildren grow up on the video call. (Diego, December 2023)

As Diego stated, video visitations also enable one to watch children (and grandchildren) grow up. Being able to see their children at least weekly has been identified as one of the most significant advantages, because it allows fathers to be present, even virtually, in their children's lives. In high-security prisons, incarcerated people are guaranteed four in-person visitations per month, which can be increased up to six or more if children under 12 are involved (Antigone, 2025). However, as noted before, travelling to the facilities can be unsustainable in the long run, and many participants stated they received only one in-person visit per month, but some received none at all. Replacing in-person visits with video calls permits the reduction of the gap between incarcerated fathers and their families and allows them to be present at special occasions and important life events. For example, Enrico talks about how he witnessed many significant moments in his daughter's growth. Since she was born after he was arrested, every moment with her was mediated by the prison environment, but without video visitations, he would have probably missed many milestones and would have had a much weaker bond with her:

> Her first steps, her first little tooth, I saw everything…fortunately, in the misfortune of Covid, there were video calls, and they were a very effective tool, especially for those who cannot have visits frequently, because they are far from home. And the video call helped me a lot to see my daughter grow; otherwise I would not have been able to see how she walked for the first time, her first little word, her first letter, her first writing, I would not have been able to see it. (Enrico, November 2023)

Watching their children grow and being involved in their lives was reported to be a great advantage for both fathers and their children. Fathers feel more connected with their children and think they could have a more active role in their education. Children interact more freely and tend to focus more on their everyday lives, which they share with their fathers. As stated by Enrico, interacting frequently means being able to return to the same topic more often and monitor the achievement of results, as in the case of school results:

> With my children….I always insist on this…also because [my oldest son] has started middle school, and I told him that, as time goes by…it won't be like in primary school….And he has realised it, because he is telling me: "Dad, I have to do my homework." And I tell him: "You have to do your homework for two hours a day." (Enrico, November 2023)

Active participation in children's lives is therefore perceived as possible through video visits. Involvement in everyday issues, such as school performance, can give incarcerated fathers a renewed sense of self, as it allows them to reinforce their identity as caring and present fathers and to put aside, at least temporarily, the absent one produced by their detention status.

Video visitations allow fathers not only to set aside their incarcerated identity temporarily but also to transcend the prison environment itself; participants underlined how beneficial it has been to see their homes again, to recognise familiar spaces once shared with their children. Being virtually present in their own home allows for the restoration of a sense of intimacy and proximity that is not achievable during in-person visitation (Singer & Brodzinsky, 2020). Additionally, being in their own familiar environment can encourage children to express themselves more freely and share through the camera objects in their own room; they can also express themselves physically in a non-restricted way and take breaks from the conversation when needed (Singer & Brodzinsky, 2020). Video visitations, therefore, seem to create a form of mediated presence in which fathers not only keep in touch with their children but also serve as a stable figure for them. Fathers are thus able to fulfil their parental role, even if in a mediated way. Although every participant stressed the centrality of video visitation for maintaining meaningful relationships with their loved ones, several limitations emerged.

5.3. The Limits of Digital Interactions: Embodiment and Physical Presence

Even with the numerous advantages of video visits, participants agree that in-person visits cannot be replaced by online interaction. It has been pointed out that visits have a positive impact on both incarcerated fathers and children because they allow a type of connection that is not easily achievable through mediated contacts. As stated by Taylor et al. (2023, p. 430), "visits serve the important function of connecting the father with the outside world, and with their identity outside of prison," allowing a deeper connection to their pre-prison sense of self and a better understanding of their role as fathers. Participants seem to confirm that visits make them feel more present for their children and allow more direct interactions. For instance, Lorenzo discusses the importance of spending time with his daughter, who was born after he was incarcerated. He specifically refers to a designated area outside the facility but within the prison's perimeter, where visits can be conducted during spring and summer. This zone, called "the green area," differs greatly from the indoor visiting room and allows for a more relaxed, natural interaction with children, who can run and play without many restrictions. In this regard, Lorenzo says:

> And seven months before I was arrested, the last one was born….I did not have the time to raise her, to…and this thing at the beginning destabilised me a bit….Here I saw her walk, because I had more space, because being in prison, coming to the visits, I had never seen my daughter walk, I do not know how she runs, if she knows how to run….Here I had the possibility, with the green area, they give you the possibility. (Lorenzo, December 2023)

Being able to see his daughter and interact physically with her is considered particularly relevant by this participant. Physical presence, especially if experienced outside the traditional prison environment, is considered fundamental to creating a bond with children. Children themselves were reported to be happier and more willing to visit their fathers when they knew the visit would take place in the green area.

At the facility under consideration, special events are also usually organised for families, where they can spend a significant part of the day together and share lunch. If the weather permits, these events are held outside. All participants stressed how beneficial it is to spend time with family in this context, where time and space are not limited, and family members can enjoy each other's company. As one father explained, his regret at not knowing basic information about his children, because he had not had the opportunity to get to know them before his arrest, was partially offset by the experience of sharing lunch with them during one of the events organised by the prison:

> I do not know what my children like; I do not know the colours they prefer; I do not know, in terms of food, what they eat…the everyday life. As I repeat to you, when I did the "event," when I ate at the table with my children…that is, a thing, a trivial thing…but that thing that you are at the table, with a plate, that thing gave me….I felt satisfied. (Lorenzo, January 2024)

Sharing experiences in person is, therefore, a valuable element for incarcerated fathers. Even trivial experiences, such as playing outside or sharing a meal, can acquire a special meaning in the context of incarceration, because they allow fathers to regain a sense of self as parents that is inevitably missing in everyday prison life. Although video visits help maintain relationships between fathers and children, in-person visits, especially when conducted in appropriate settings and with adequate time, allow the creation of core shared memories that strengthen the father-child bond. Mediated presence cannot substitute for physical presence because it lacks key elements that contribute to the richness of in-person meetings, such as the possibility of physical contact. Thus, video calls should be understood as a supplement to, not a replacement for, in-person visits: They sustain continuity but cannot reproduce embodied intimacy.

5.4. Ambivalence and Inequality in Digital Inclusion

Another key issue concerns the inherently ambivalent nature of digital technologies in correctional settings. While the benefits of maintaining remote contact with family members have already been highlighted, the mediation of interactions through technological tools also raises important questions regarding privacy and confidentiality. Surveillance and control are key elements of prison environments, where security concerns justify the panoptic gaze of the institutions into every element of incarcerated people's lives. As pointed out by Wells (2019), "video visitation…enables correctional facilities to extend the role of 'watcher' and expand the panoptic gaze" (p. 77), extending the control behind its usual perimeter and allowing its entrance into external spaces, such as incarcerated people's homes.

It is important to note that mediated contact with family can amplify incarcerated people's already clear perceptions of being constantly controlled, thereby reducing their appreciation for video visitations. In some cases, as Wells (2019) notes with reference to US prison contexts, video visits can be recorded. This is clearly an invasion of people's privacy, which can be extremely detrimental to the quality of interactions, especially when sensitive issues are involved. This is not the case in Italy, where video visitations are not recorded, and only visual supervision is allowed; conversations cannot (or at least should not) be heard by prison staff. However, participants noted mistrust and doubts about the confidentiality of conversations. For example, Claudio explained the usual interaction with his wife, which was clearly limited by the possibility of being overheard by prison staff:

> My wife has a character that…even if things are not going well, we talk on the phone or do a video call, and she always tells me that everything is fine…"no, don't worry, everything is fine, everything is okay," so….I understand her because I met her when she was 16, now she is 47, so I understand her. But on the phone, on video call, we never manage to talk, because possibly there is someone who listens to us…and I honestly cannot let the guards know my things. (Claudio, December 2023)

As the participant explained, when they suspect that others are listening, the content and manner of conversations change. Incarcerated people expressed their anxiety about the possibility of being listened to when talking to their loved ones, especially on family matters. Sensitive topics are avoided, and the conversation tends to be more superficial, less personal, so that even if someone else is listening, nothing sensitive can be overheard. However, self-censorship can undermine the potential benefits of video visitations, weakening their ability to create and maintain connections. From this perspective, video visitations can quickly lose their value and become an empty tool that gives the illusion of connecting family members when they are just a façade hiding another mechanism of surveillance that involves not only the incarcerated individual but also their loved ones. Although video visits are not recorded in Italy, suspecting that they are being overheard can create the same effect as certainty, and generate the same results: empty conversations, self-censorship, feelings of discomfort and anxiety.

This element, together with the many limitations related to implementing new technology in an environment that is normally resistant to change (e.g., inadequate spaces, insufficient or untrained staff, weak Wi-Fi connections, obsolete tools, etc.), can lead to adverse outcomes. New tools such as video visitation can be easily described as an entirely positive solution to overcome isolation and sustain relationships between incarcerated people and their loved ones, but they can just as easily become another barrier that divides incarcerated people from the outside.

6. Discussion

The integration of video visits in the Italian penitentiary system offers a valuable opportunity for both incarcerated fathers and their children to maintain and strengthen their relationships. As noted by Duursma et al. (2024), the Covid-19 pandemic has forced the prison system to rethink its practices, leading to a significant redefinition of prison visitation policies. Findings suggest that, consistent with other studies (Duursma et al., 2024; Hanley et al., 2024; Taylor et al., 2023), video visitations have affected how relationships are constructed and maintained in carceral spaces, especially for incarcerated fathers and their children. Video visits appear to be a fundamental tool for overcoming practical obstacles, such as distance

and economic costs, that can actively prevent family members from meeting in person. Children can experience their father's presence from the comfort of their home, avoiding adverse experiences related to the prison environment, which is usually not child-friendly (Hanley et al., 2024). Additionally, they can share domestic spaces and personal objects with their fathers through video, which would be impossible during in-person visits. Being part of their children's everyday lives proved relevant for fathers, who can be more responsive to their children's needs and offer support when needed. Fathers reported being more involved in their children's lives and family dynamics, contributing to strengthening their parental role and reinforcing their identity as fathers, simultaneously weakening the degrading identity imposed by incarceration. These findings also challenge gendered assumptions that position fathers as secondary caregivers, especially in male and high-security prisons where family-oriented practices may remain marginal (Bartlett & Eriksson, 2019; Ugelvik, 2014).

Video visitations create a third, new space (Duursma et al., 2024, p. 3424) where fathers and children can meet, neither completely inside prison nor completely outside. It is a virtual space that allows incarcerated individuals to connect with external spaces and interact with family outside prison, while at the same time allowing family members to enter the prison environment without being physically exposed to it. Implementing technological tools in prison spaces, enabling more flexible, immediate communication with the outside, contributes to opening carceral spaces to the external world and cracking the walls that separate those inside from those outside (McKay et al., 2019). Technology can thus help make prison less of a total institution (Goffman, 1961) and more of a porous institution (Ellis, 2021), where being deprived of personal freedom does not mean being isolated from the world.

Despite the relevance of implementing video visitations in carceral spaces, caution is needed. As noted by Wells (2019), technology can be introduced with the explicit intent of helping reduce barriers to communicating with the outside world but can also hide the intent of implementing surveillance and extending control not only to the incarcerated individuals but to their families too. Digital advancement can be beneficial for the penitentiary system when its purpose is to reduce inequalities and ensure more equal treatment while incarcerated. In this sense, digital tools may support rehabilitation and family and community connections only when implemented through ethical, inclusive, and human rights-compliant strategies (Knight & Ross, 2024). However, when the "rhetoric of technology" (Wells, 2019, p. 77) is used to endorse surveillance and control, the potential benefits of tools such as video visits are undermined.

Moreover, the advantages are significantly reduced when the implementation of technology fails to account for additional barriers that may be created, such as unequal access to knowledge or tools necessary for its effective use. This is why digital inclusion should mean more than formal access to devices and the internet. In the case of video visitation, it also requires digital literacy among incarcerated people and relatives. When family members lack confidence in using smartphones, managing internet connections, or navigating scheduling procedures, video calls can reproduce exclusion rather than reduce it. Staff support and reliable infrastructure are thus part of effective digital inclusion.

While these findings highlight the ambivalent nature of video visitation in carceral settings, the present study also has limitations. The research was conducted at a single high-security prison, and 10 fathers were interviewed. Long sentences, the high-security setting, and the relatively privileged open-custody university unit in which nine participants lived may have shaped participants' positive perceptions of video visitation, as prolonged separation can make digital contact especially meaningful.

The perspectives of children's caretakers and the voices of children themselves were not included due to limitations in prison policy. Although many aspects of the father-child relationship emerge through the narratives of the fathers themselves, future research should consider the experiences of children and their caretakers, along with the opinions of prison staff. Given the specificity of each prison, future work should also include a larger number of penitentiaries, including high-, medium-, and minimum-security prisons. Different security regimes imply different types of interactions between fathers and children, both in terms of quantity and quality. Although the study was conducted on a small sample, results suggest that the overall perception of video visitation as a complementary tool to maintain and strengthen the relationship between father and child during incarceration is positive and encouraging. However, more research is needed, especially in the Italian prison context, to understand how this new tool can be used more effectively to sustain the personal relationships of incarcerated fathers, and to protect the right of both fathers and children to cultivate their bonds, despite incarceration.

7. Conclusion

This study contributes to existing literature on how incarceration impacts family bonds, focusing on incarcerated fathers and their children. Drawing from the perspective of incarcerated fathers, it argues that the introduction and implementation of video visitations in carceral settings have proved to be beneficial for several reasons. Video visitation allows fathers to maintain and strengthen relationships with their children through a more flexible communication tool. This flexibility helps address the diverse needs of families. Additionally, video visitation provides a "third location" (Duursma et al., 2024, p. 3424) where fathers and children can meet. This space distances their relationship from the carceral setting and lets children share a domestic environment with their fathers, creating a stronger feeling of proximity. Video visitation also enables fathers to participate in meaningful moments and milestones with their children. This can help children feel seen, reduce the distance imposed by detention, and sustain fathers' well-being, helping them feel included in family life.

However, video visitations cannot replace in-person visits, which remain essential, as also suggested by various studies (Digard, 2018; Duursma et al., 2024; Hanley et al., 2024; Murdoch & King, 2019; Skora Horgan & Poehlmann-Tynan, 2020). Instead, video visits should be an accessible way for incarcerated fathers and their families to strengthen bonds and overcome the distance imposed by incarceration. Video visitations should be free and flexible, and carceral facilities should prioritise providing a good-quality service through private, well-equipped rooms, reliable connections, clear scheduling, and staff support for family relationships and children's needs; otherwise, these tools may become another barrier that incarcerated individuals and their families must face. Ensuring equal access to video visitation is necessary to protect the rights of incarcerated people and their families, especially children, to maintain adequate contact during incarceration. From a rights-based perspective, video visitation can support children's right to maintain meaningful contact with an imprisoned parent, but only if it expands available forms of contact without replacing embodied, face-to-face encounters. This article, therefore, contributes to ongoing debates on digital inclusion in prisons by showing that video visitation, while expanding opportunities for connection, must be carefully implemented to avoid reproducing existing forms of exclusion and control.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available owing to their sensitive and confidential nature.

LLMs Disclosure

Generative AI tools made available by the University of Pisa were used solely to assist with language editing and translation, as the author is a non-native English speaker.

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