



Ministry
of Justice

Social Contact in Prison

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Ministry of Justice

Ministry of Justice Analytical Series

2025



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First published 2025



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ISBN 978-1-911763-00-0

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Tim Lloyd, Head of Family Services at HMPPS, for his commitment to driving this research. We are grateful to BT, Purple Visits, and Phone Hub for providing prisoner phone and video call data. Thanks also to policy colleagues across the Ministry of Justice for their input and support throughout this work. Special thanks to Zayn Bakth, Molly-Rose Murray, Wendy Smith-Yau, Kitty Yates, and Anna Blaylock for their contributions to earlier drafts. We also thank Katherine Bruce, Elise Kenning, and Kieren Roberts for quality assurance of data and models. Finally, we appreciate the valuable feedback from two external academic peer reviewers.

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1. Executive summary

This study is the first to quantify in-person, video, and phone contact across public prisons in England and Wales. It shows how social contact changed between 2019 and 2024, including before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. All types of contact were positively correlated, meaning prisoners with more of one type often had more of another. The analysis establishes a basis for further research and policy development in this area.

1.1 Face-to-face visits

In June 2024, 33% of prisoners² used a face-to-face visit; 19% used two or more visits that month. This compares with 41% using visits and 26% using at least two visits per month in 2019 (pre COVID-19).³ This means fewer prisoners used face-to-face visits after COVID-19. However, those who did receive visits in June 2024 had the same average number as before: 2.3 visits per person. This shows that prisoners who still received visits got about the same number as before the pandemic.

1.2 Video calls

Secure video calls were introduced in May 2020, around the same time when face-to-face visits fell to effectively zero. Video calls increased after launch, peaked in March 2021, and declined after the COVID-19 period. Since April 2023, about 6,800 prisoners (9% of the population) used video calls monthly. Prisoners who used video calls made about two calls per month, and this rate stayed steady.

1.3 Phone calls

Phone calls stayed high during COVID-19 and rose as face-to-face contact fell. They peaked in March 2022 and stayed higher than pre-pandemic levels by June 2024. Phone calls were the most used method of contact throughout the study period. In June 2024,

² In 103 prisons included in the analysis.

³ The statutory minimum entitlement to face-to-face visits is two visits every 28 days for sentenced prisoners. This was calculated as prisoners using 2 visits per month.

64,000 prisoners (84%) made 5.9 million calls. That's about 92 calls per month for each prisoner who made calls.

1.4 Variation by sentence type, prison region, sex, prison status, and prisoner age

In the year to June 2024, 63% of prisoners had at least one face-to-face visit. 31% had only remote contact, and 5% had no recorded contact at all. Social contact varied by sentence type, prison region, sex, status, and age:

- All youth prisoners had some contact, compared to 97% of women and 95% of men.
- High Security prisons had the lowest contact levels, with 90% of prisoners having any contact.
- Older prisoners were more likely to have no contact, especially men.
- Prisoners on remand or unsentenced had the most face-to-face contact (73%).
- 8% of prisoners on indefinite sentences had no contact, the second highest group.
- Immigration detainees had the lowest face-to-face contact (58%) and highest remote-only contact (39%).
- 80% of prisoners for drug offences had face-to-face contact, the highest among offence types.
- Prisoners for criminal damage, arson, and sexual offences had the lowest face-to-face contact.

2. Background and context

Positive family⁴ contact during a prison sentence has been linked to good outcomes for prisoners and their families. During COVID-19, in-person prison visits from family and friends were either fully suspended or severely limited (HMIP, 2021). In response, the rollout of secure video calls⁵ and in cell-technology was significantly expanded to help maintain family contact.

The HMPPS Family Services Team commissioned this study to understand whether types of social contact in prison have changed over time. It explores whether any identified changes may be associated with shifts in preferences in how contact is made between prisoners and their families since COVID-19 (e.g., introduction of video calls), or whether other factors may be influencing these changes.

2.1 Why family contact is important

In 2017, the Secretary of State commissioned the Farmer Review, which concluded “good family relationships are indispensable to a prisoner’s ability to get through their sentence well and achieve rehabilitation” (Farmer, 2017. p7). Two years later, a further review was published, focusing on the needs of women in prison (Farmer, 2019). As other research has noted, many women in custody are primary carers, and concern for their children will be a significant source of stress (Rees et al., 2017; Prison Reform Trust, 2022; HMIP, 2016).

Research shows meaningful contact with family and friends can effectively support prisoners in maintaining their overall wellbeing and mental health (Berghuis et al., 2024; Prison Reform Trust, 2024). Parents in prison report feeling less depressed, anxious, and

⁴ For the purpose of this paper, the definition of ‘family’ is taken from the Wales HMPPS 2019 Family and Significant Other Standards. Family includes the significant and supportive relationships for prisoners who are important in their life. This might include relationships with a blood or legal relative, or a significant person they identify as their next of kin. It may be a friend, partner, or even someone that provides a statutory service. A 2024 Prison Reform report highlighted the importance of recognising personal relationships were not only the family unit, but ex-partners, friends, former work colleagues, or volunteers from the charitable sector.

⁵ [Secure video calls help all prisoners maintain essential family ties during pandemic - GOV.UK](#)

stressed when they have contact with their children (Sobol, 2018). For children in custody, visits from their family have been found to reduce depressive symptoms (De Claire and Dixon, 2017). Feeling isolated from loved ones is a consistent risk factor for suicidal thoughts and self-harm in prisoners (Favril, 2020).

Research shows prison sentences impact both prisoners and families, especially where support is limited or complex (McCarty & Brunton-Smith, 2017). The distress of being apart, life continuing without them, being seen in prison, or fearing they are a burden have been highlighted as experiences effecting prisoners and their families (McKay et al., 2018; De Motte & Thurston, 2021; Pratt & Foster, 2020).

Positive family support has been linked to reduced substance misuse in custody (Caravaca-Sánchez, 2020). Research also suggests that practices aiming to improve the frequency and quality of positive social support for prisoners can influence prison violence levels (Day et al., 2017; Duwe, 2017).

There are some complexities to the research on contact. There is good evidence that maintaining family contact in prison reduces reoffending and aids reintegration after release (Ministry of Justice, 2025; Brown, 2009; Shrinkfield & Graffam, 2009; Mowen, 2019). However, there is also some debate on the causality of visits and improved resettlement outcomes. Only a small number of studies have been able to control for prior family circumstances. When this is factored in, the link between visitation and reduced recidivism is generally been found to be weaker (Cochran et al., 2020; Brunton-Smith and McCarthy, 2017).

Family support is usually seen as helpful for prisoners, improving outcomes like reoffending and reintegration. However, research shows that contact marked by conflict may not always help (Mowen & Boman, 2018; 2019). Family relationships are complex and vary widely, so more research is needed to understand why some help reduce reoffending while others do not. Furthermore, prisoner contact with their children, if relevant, should only occur when it is safe, desirable, and appropriate. Nonetheless, frequent contact with family during a prison sentence is linked to family connectedness, which can help support adjustment during the stressful process of returning to society (Folk et al., 2019).

2.2 Benefits and barriers to face-to-face social contact visits

Research shows prisoners and families benefit most from visits that feel like normal family life (Dixey & Woodall, 2012). Visiting areas that feel less like prison can ease intimidation, boost visit rates, and support relationship rebuilding (Children's Commissioner, 2023; Woodall & Kinsella, 2018; COPE, 2024).

Prison staff are vital to visits, balancing security with supporting prisoners and families in maintaining or rebuilding relationships (Dixey & Woodall, 2012; COPE, 2024). Staff from independent third sector organisations have also been shown to improve the visiting experience by promoting a positive atmosphere (Woodall & Kinsella, 2018; Woodall et al., 2009; Long et al., 2022).

Regarding barriers to face-to-face social contact visits, two of the most common issues identified are cost and distance. Many families have limited social networks to draw on for help with the financial and practical challenges of visits (Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018). Long travel distances for prison visits can heighten stress and strain, potentially reducing the quality of the visit (Young & Turanovic, 2022).

Another barrier identified in the research is what has been described as 'secondary prisonisation' (Comfort, 2003). This term is used to describe how visitors can feel treated as 'quasi-prisoners' during the visiting process. Families can experience the rules, security procedures, and restrictions on their freedom in ways similar to those they are visiting. Some have spoken about not feeling trusted, being judged, and being perceived as a criminal themselves (Comfort, 2003).

Although face-to-face visits can help maintain social bonds among families, for some, the associated processes and procedures can overshadow the visit itself (Boppre, et al., 2022; Children of Prisoners Europe, 2024).

2.3 Benefits and barriers to telephone contact

Face-to-face visits can be difficult, so the positive impact of family phone contact is encouraging (Barrick et al., 2014; Celinska & Fanarraga, 2022). In-cell phones help prisoners stay in touch with family by offering more flexibility and making it easier to feel

involved (Palmer et al., 2020). Flexible phone access helps families fit calls around daily routines like school and work, rather than being limited to prison schedules (Booth, 2020). Regular, meaningful contact can ease the emotional strain of separation, especially for children (Children of Prisoners Europe, 2024).

Research shows barriers to phone contact include cost and limited access, especially for those without in-cell phones (Barrick et al., 2014). A 2016 inspection found that short call times, poor privacy, and rigid schedules made phone calls challenging (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2016). Some prisoners find call monitoring intrusive and feel unable to speak freely (Ellison et al., 2018). Even with in-cell phones, shared rooms can limit privacy and make emotional conversations harder (Sobol, 2018). Phone calls may not work well for very young children or those who don't speak yet. Older children may struggle with phone contact, and many became disconnected during COVID-19 when phones were the only way to stay in touch (Minson, 2021).

2.4 Benefits and barriers to video contact

Video calls offer flexible, travel-free contact for families, especially helpful for those with health issues or who find prison visits stressful (Tartaro & Levy, 2017).

Video calls don't fully replace in-person visits, especially when technology issues affect the experience (Boppre et al., 2022; Minson, 2021; User Voice, 2022). Problems like poor connection, lack of privacy, and limited access can make video calls less effective. An Australian study found that while video calls saved time and money, over a third didn't meet children's needs (Flynn et al., 2022). Young children struggled to sit still and communicate, and technical issues made calls awkward or confusing. Video calls only help families with access to technology and the skills to use it. The 'digital divide' impacts those excluded from technology, often due to poverty, disability, or other barriers (Sanders, 2020).

2.5 Preferences and patterns between different types of contact

The evidence suggests different forms of contact appear to be beneficial for different individuals at different points of time, with no one type of contact found to be universally

helpful for all families (Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018). More research is needed to establish what type of contact benefits whom, when, and under what circumstances.

Concerns have been raised that video calling could reduce the frequency (and potential benefits) of in-person visits. However, one U.S. study found video calls actually increased face-to-face visits before COVID-19 (Fulcher, 2014). There isn't enough strong evidence yet to say how video calls affect in-person visits. More research is needed to explore this further. No social contact

For some, the emotional strain of prison leads to broken family relationships and no visits (Burns et al., 2024). Seeing loved ones can remind prisoners of their separation from society, making visits emotionally painful (Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018). Some avoid visits to reduce stress or because they don't want to be seen as prisoners. Other reasons include distance, loss of trust, and growing apart—especially during long sentences (Comfort et al., 2018; La Vigne et al., 2005; Brunton-Smith & McCarthy, 2017; Turney, 2015).

A Scottish study found that prisoners serving long sentences often limited visits to special occasions to spare loved ones the financial burden (Jardine, 2018). A Prison Reform Trust report (2024) found long sentences can make it painful to see life continue outside while prisoners remain behind. Some prisoners described relationships breaking down as visits stopped, families changed, loved ones died, and children grew up. Many expected to leave prison with no one to return to. Others feared dying in prison without any family contact. Many long-term prisoners interviewed had no outside support and received no visits.

3. Methodology

This research counted face-to-face visits, video calls, and phone calls across prisons in England and Wales. It tracked how contact types changed from 2019 to 2024, including before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study used cleaned and structured administrative datasets to ensure consistency and comparability. It focused only on social contact data.

3.1 Rationale for the research

The aim of this research is to understand how much social contact prisoners have and how it has changed between 2019 and 2024. It looks at the types of contact used and how patterns shifted before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Family contact is protected under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which covers private and family life. This research helps show how many prisoners use their minimum visit entitlement and whether this has changed over time. The findings can support future policy decisions about prison visits across England and Wales.

3.2 Research questions

The following research questions have guided the analysis:

1. How has the number of prisoners using face-to-face, video, and phone contact changed between 2019 and 2024?
2. For prisoners who use each contact type, what is the average rate of contact, and how has this changed over time?
3. How do contact levels in late 2019 (pre-COVID) compare with late 2023 (post-COVID)?
4. Is there a link between the different types of contact used by prisoners?
5. Does the use of face-to-face, video, and phone contact vary by prison type (e.g. high security, female prisons, youth prisons)?

6. Does the use of contact vary by individual factors like legal status, offence type, or age?

3.3 Data overview

Population and Characteristics Data

Prisoner details and sentence information came from NOMIS, a database used to manage offenders in prison. The dataset includes age, offence type, and sentence details. Despite cleaning NOMIS data, some errors may remain due to its size. NOMIS was used to estimate monthly prison populations from April 2019 to June 2024.

Contact Data Overview

This section explains how face-to-face, video call, and phone call data were accessed and cleaned. Face-to-face and phone data were only available for public prisons. After cleaning, 103 prisons were included in face-to-face data and 106 in phone data. Video call data included both public and private prisons, covering 122 prisons.

Face-to-Face Visit Data

Visit data came from NOMIS, covering April 2019 to June 2024. Only scheduled and completed social visits were included; cancelled and legal visits were excluded. After cleaning, 2.4 million visits for 162,000 prisoners in 103 public prisons were analysed.

- **Limitations and Caveats:**

- Some prison codes were unrecognisable or linked to closed sites and were removed.
- Missing data during COVID-19 was assumed to reflect paused visits, not recording errors.
- 60% of visits were marked “scheduled” but not updated post-visit, possibly overestimating actual visits.
- Scheduled visits were kept as indicators of planned contact.
- Legal visits were excluded, but social contact couldn’t be split by relationship type.

- Data excludes private prisons and may not represent the full estate.

Video Call Data

Video call data came from Purple Visits (May 2020–May 2021) and Phone Hub (May 2021–June 2024). Data from both providers was cleaned and merged. Final dataset included 107 public prisons, 777,000 video calls, and 64,000 prisoners.

- **Limitations and Caveats:**

- Reporting varied over time due to rollout, provider switch, and technical issues.
- Data excludes private prisons and may not represent the full estate.

Phone Call Data

Phone call data was provided by BT, covering July 2019 to June 2024. It included 335 million calls from 260,000 prisoners in 106 public prisons.

- **Limitations and Caveats:**

- All calls were included, even unanswered ones, possibly overestimating actual contact.
- Changes in call patterns may reflect other initiatives, not just COVID-19.
- Data excludes illicit phone use.
- Data excludes private prisons and may not represent the full estate.

3.4 Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted in R Studio 4.4.1.

Individual Dataset Analysis

Each dataset - face-to-face, phone, and video - was analysed for monthly totals (2019–2024), with two key statistics calculated per contact type.

- **Monthly rate of contact:** total contacts divided by number of prisoners using that contact.

- **Monthly prisoner ratio:** number of prisoners using contact divided by total prison population that month.

To estimate use of the statutory minimum, a dataset was created assuming two visits per prisoner per month. This helped calculate the percentage of prisoners meeting their minimum entitlement, averaged over 12 months.

Combined dataset analysis

Datasets were merged using prisoner ID and prison name to explore contact patterns over time. Matching with NOMIS data was strong, over 99%. Final dataset included 298 million phone calls, 2.2 million face-to-face visits, and 720,000 video calls. It covered 102 public prisons and 274,000 prisoners from July 2019 to June 2024. Contact types were compared between late 2019 (pre-COVID) and late 2023 (post-COVID), accounting for seasonal effects. Spearman correlation analysis (December 2023) was used to explore relationships between contact types.

- **Combined analysis caveats:**
 - Sample excludes some prisons, so results may not reflect the full prison population.
 - Some prisoners used more than one contact type, creating overlap.
 - Correlations do not imply causation; other factors may influence results.

Establishment, sentence, and individual-level analysis

Analysis covered the 12 months to June 2024. Prisoners were grouped into five categories:

1. Had at least one face-to-face visit in 12 months to June 2024.
2. Had only remote contact (phone or video) in that period.
3. Had no recorded contact in that period.
4. Met the statutory minimum number of face-to-face visits.

5. Used all three contact types.

Data was shown in tables. Subtotals may not match totals due to suppression of small groups (fewer than five prisoners). Only prisoners present in the same prison each month were included, giving a sample of over 33,000. This mostly included prisoners serving longer sentences. Some short-sentence or remand prisoners were included if they re-entered prison during the period.

- **Additional Caveats:**

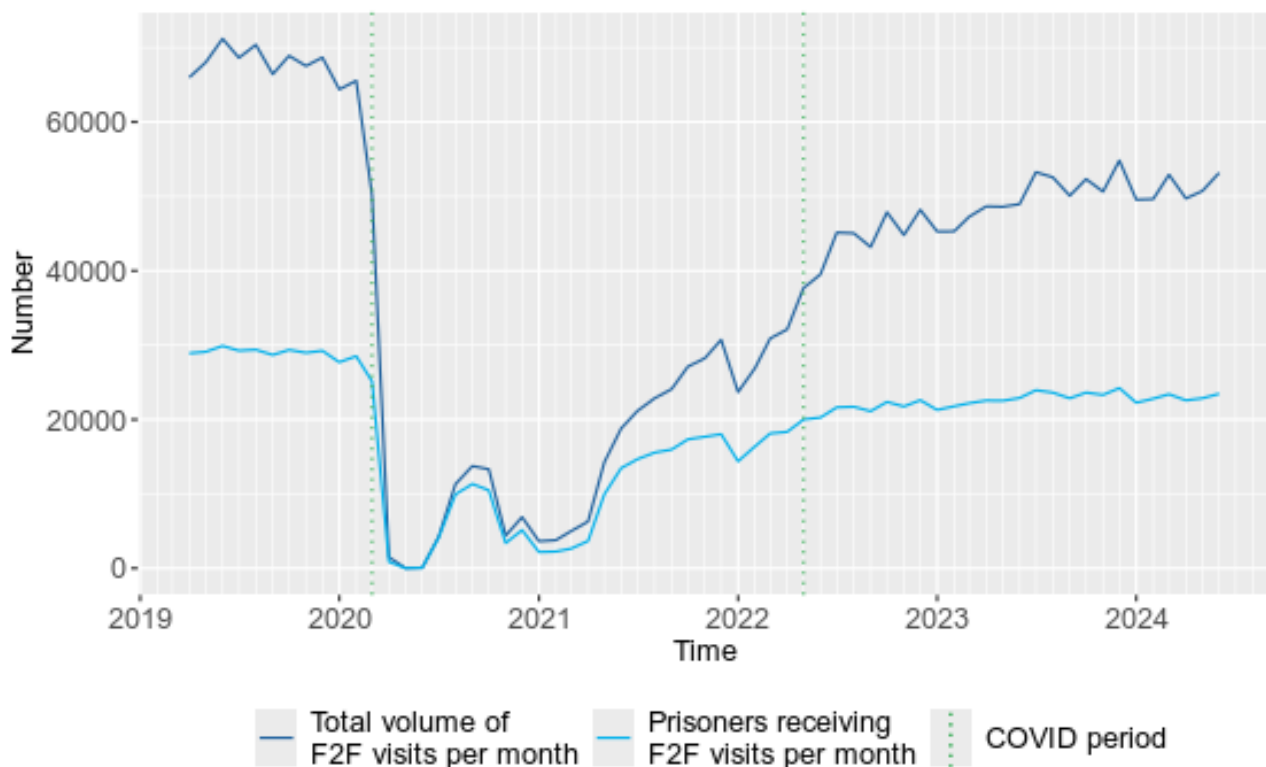
- Filtering excluded most prisoners serving less than 24 months.
- Data only includes public prisons.
- Prison functions may have changed, affecting contact access.
- Transfers between included and excluded prisons affected data completeness.
- Prisoners transferred in or out during the first or last month were included but may lack full data.

4. Social contact over time: individual contact methods

4.1 Face-to-face visits over time

Figure 1⁶ gives a visual comparison of face-to-face visits between April 2019 and June 2024 across 103 public prisons. This chart shows the 15% decrease in total face-to-face visits over the study period. This chart highlights the drop in the proportion of prisoners using face-to-face visits, from 41% in April 2019 to 33% in June 2024.

Figure 1: Monthly number of face-to-face visits and prisoners using them across 103 public prisons, from April 2019 to June 2024.



Between March and May 2020, face-to-face social visits stopped almost completely due to COVID-19 restrictions. After May 2020, there was a fluctuation in the number of face-to-face visits, possibly reflecting changes to lockdowns. The visit rate changed during this time, peaking at 2.1 visits per prisoner in May 2020, and dropping to 1.1 in July 2020. However, the low number of people having visits may have made the rate more volatile. It

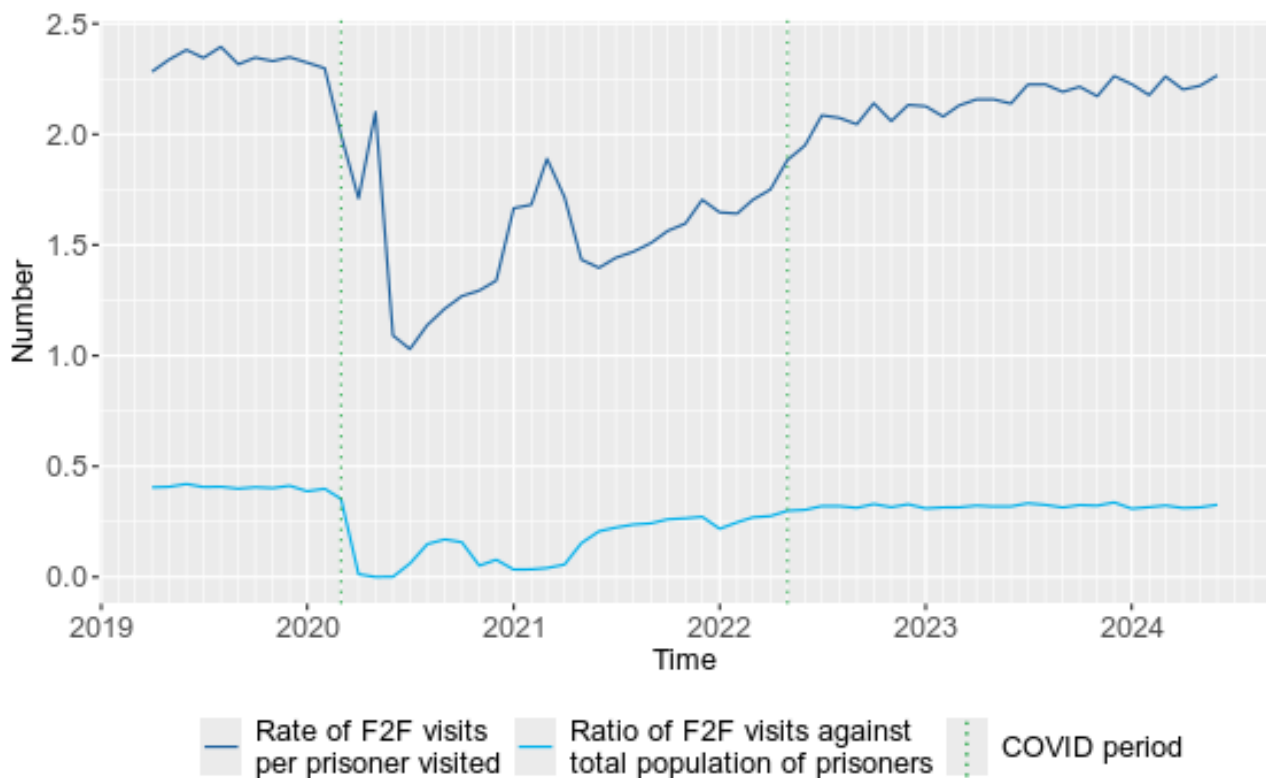
⁶ The red vertical lines indicate the start (March 2020) and end (May 2022) of COVID-19 restrictions.

is important to note that during the COVID-19 period, prisoners were only allowed one visit per month due to social distancing. This rule was relaxed over time to help more prisoners get face-to-face visits, despite limited space in visit halls.

Visits slowly increased during the rest of the COVID-19 period. They more than doubled from 14,000 visits with 10,000 prisoners (15% of the population) in May 2021 to 32,000 visits with 18,000 prisoners (28%) in April 2022. This contrasted with the proportion of the prison population in April 2019 (41%) who received visits. The visit rate rose from 1.4 visits per prisoner in May 2021 to 1.8 visits per prisoner by April 2022.

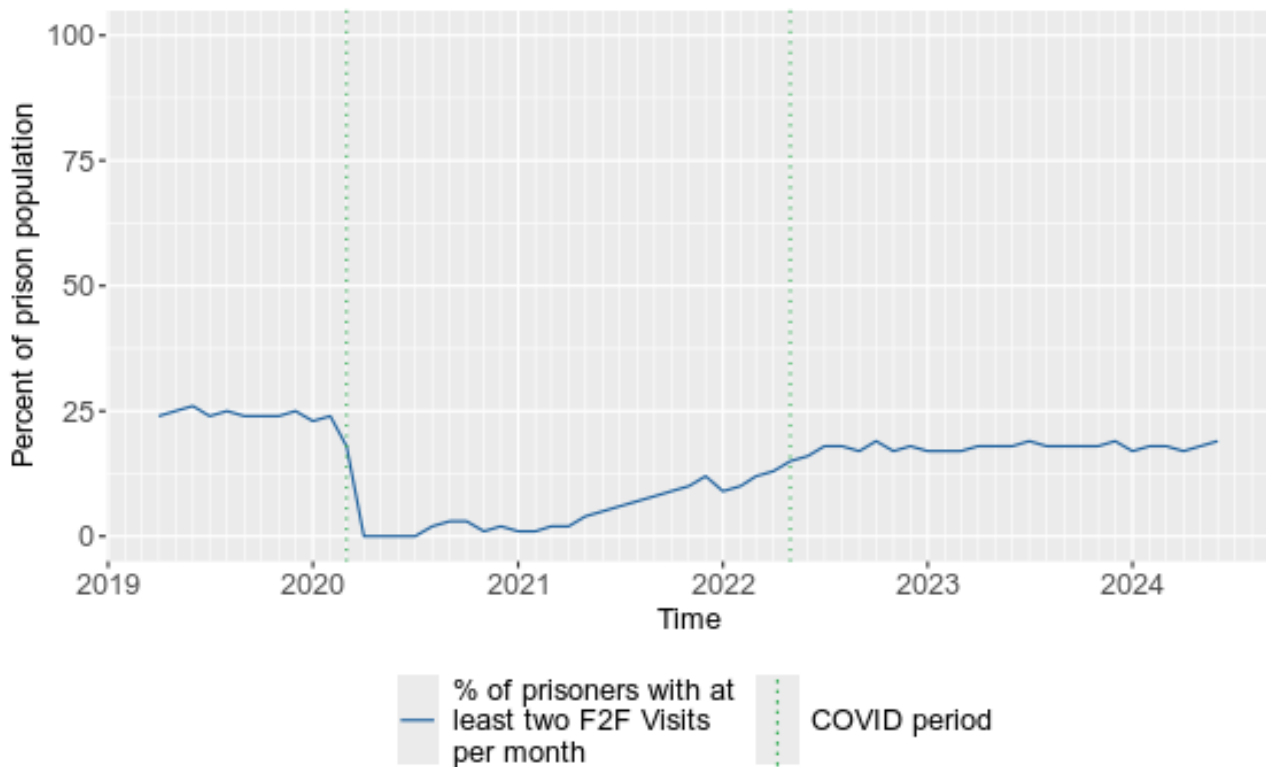
Between May 2022 and June 2024, the number of visits rose by 41%. Visits increased from 38,000 to 53,000. The percentage of prisoners receiving visits also went up, from 25% to 33%. Even though fewer prisoners were visited overall, the average number of visits per prisoner stayed the same. It was 2.3 visits per prisoner in both April 2019 and June 2024 - see Figure 2.

Figure 2: Monthly average of in-person visits per prisoner and total visit rate across 103 public prisons from April 2019 to June 2024.



Further analysis shows that in June 2019, at the start of the study period, 26% of prisoners were using least two face-to-face visits a month. This fell to 0% at the start of the COVID-19 period (March 2020) but steadily increased throughout the COVID-19 period. Following COVID-19, the proportion has remained around 19% of prisoners, not returning to the level found before COVID-19 - see Figure 3.

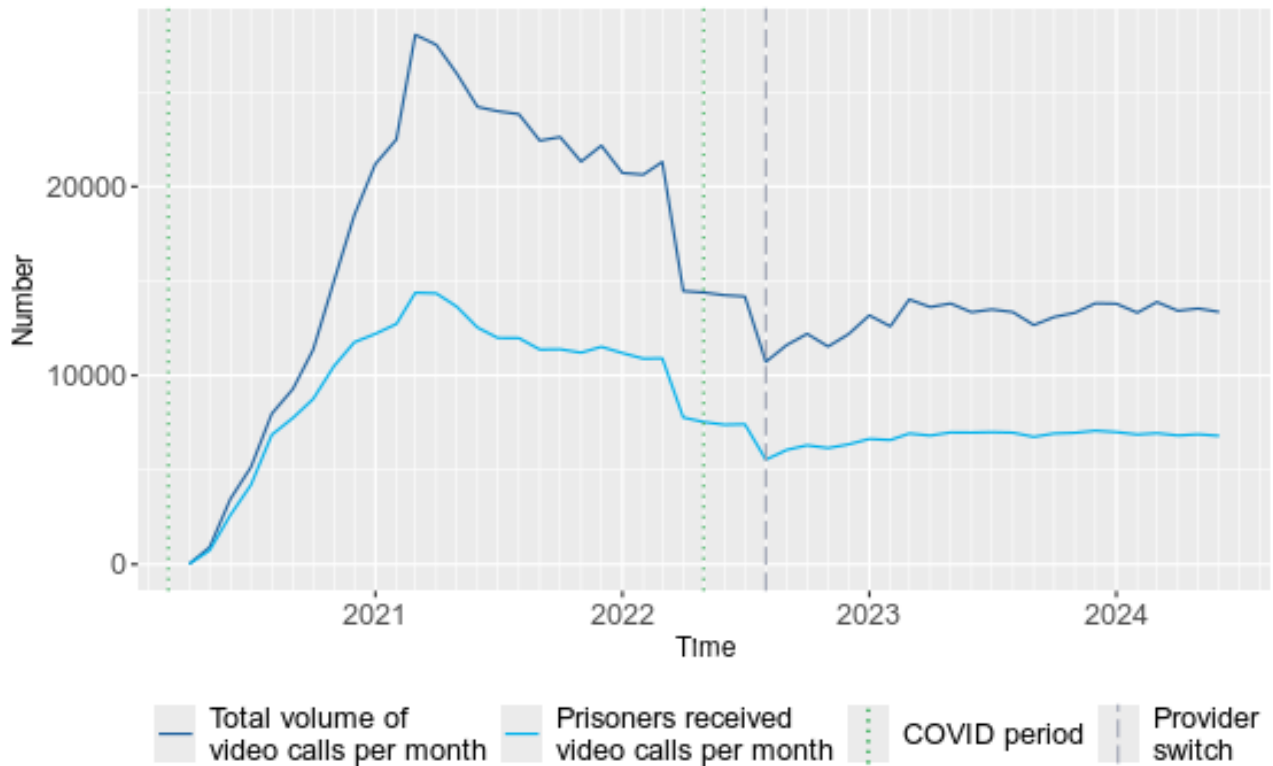
Figure 3: Prisoners using two or more face-to-face visits monthly, April 2019–June 2024 (103 Public Prisons)



4.2 Video calls over time

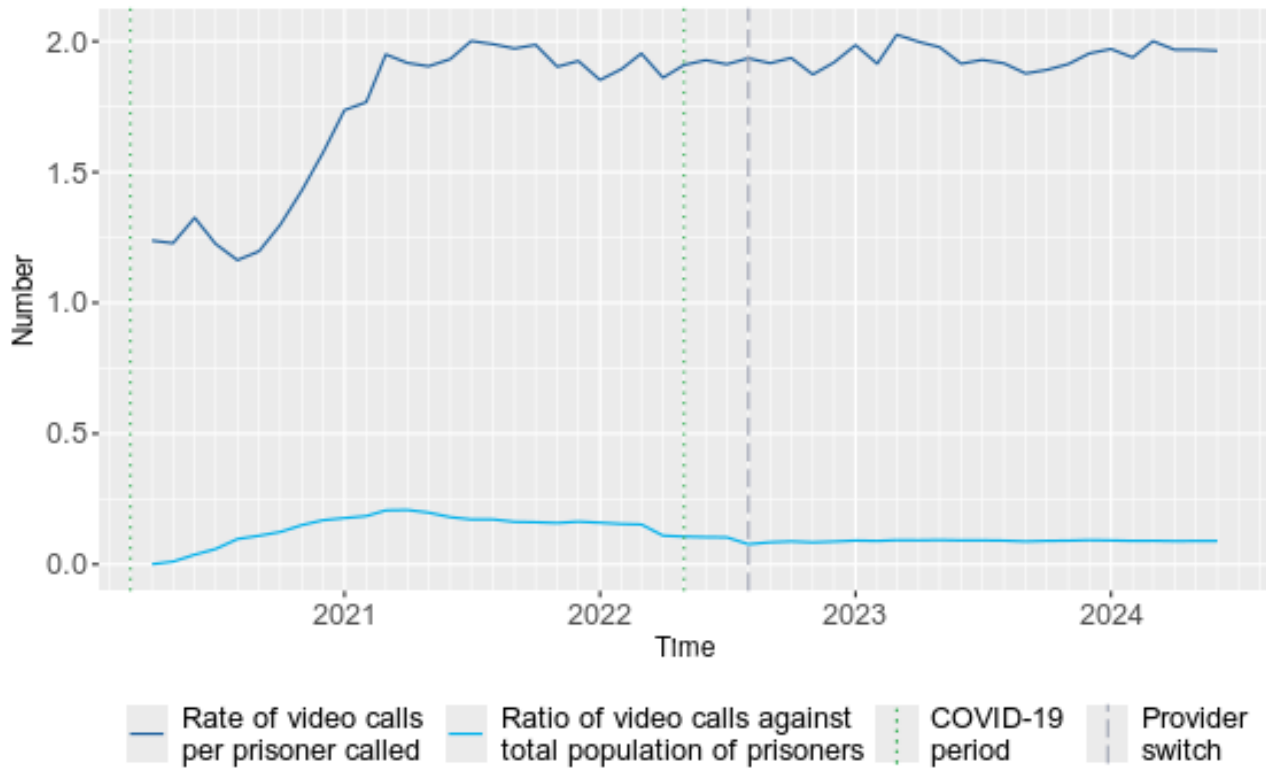
Video calls were introduced during COVID-19 and peaked in March 2021 at 28,000 calls by 14,000 prisoners across 107 public prisons. Usage declined steadily, with a sharp 24% drop in July 2022 after switching to a new secure video call provider. From April 2023, usage plateaued at around 13,000 calls monthly, made by roughly 6,800 prisoners (about 9% of the public prison population).

Figure 3: Monthly number of video calls and prisoners using them across 107 public prisons, from April 2019 to June 2024



Between March 2021 and June 2024, video calls and users dropped by 52% from the March 2021 peak. Despite this, the average remained around two video calls per prisoner each month. This suggests consistent usage among those who continued using the service. Figure 5 shows only a small decrease in the calls-per-prisoner ratio over time.

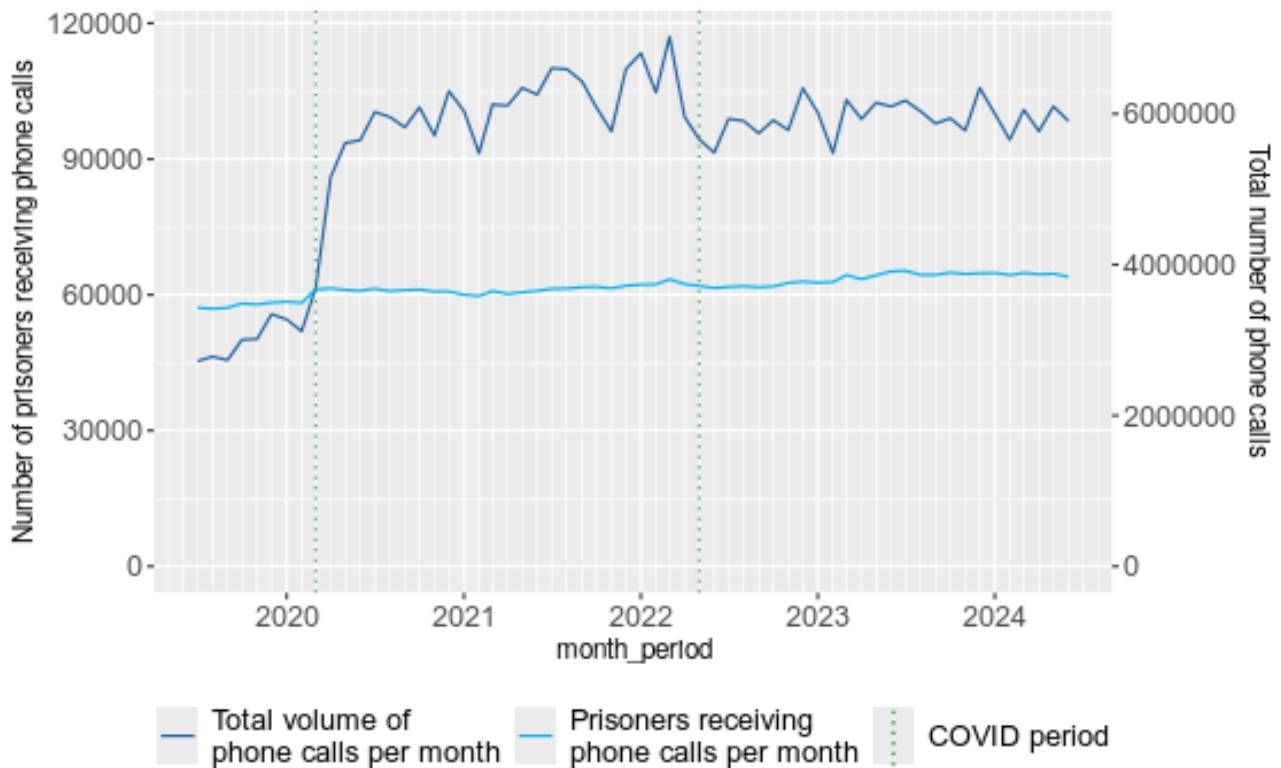
Figure 4: Monthly average video calls per prisoner and total video call rate across 107 public prisons from April 2019 to June 2024



4.3 Phone calls over time

Phone calls had the highest usage volume across 106 prisons throughout the time series. Usage increased further after COVID-19, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Monthly number of phone calls and prisoners using them across 106 public prisons, from April 2019 to June 2024



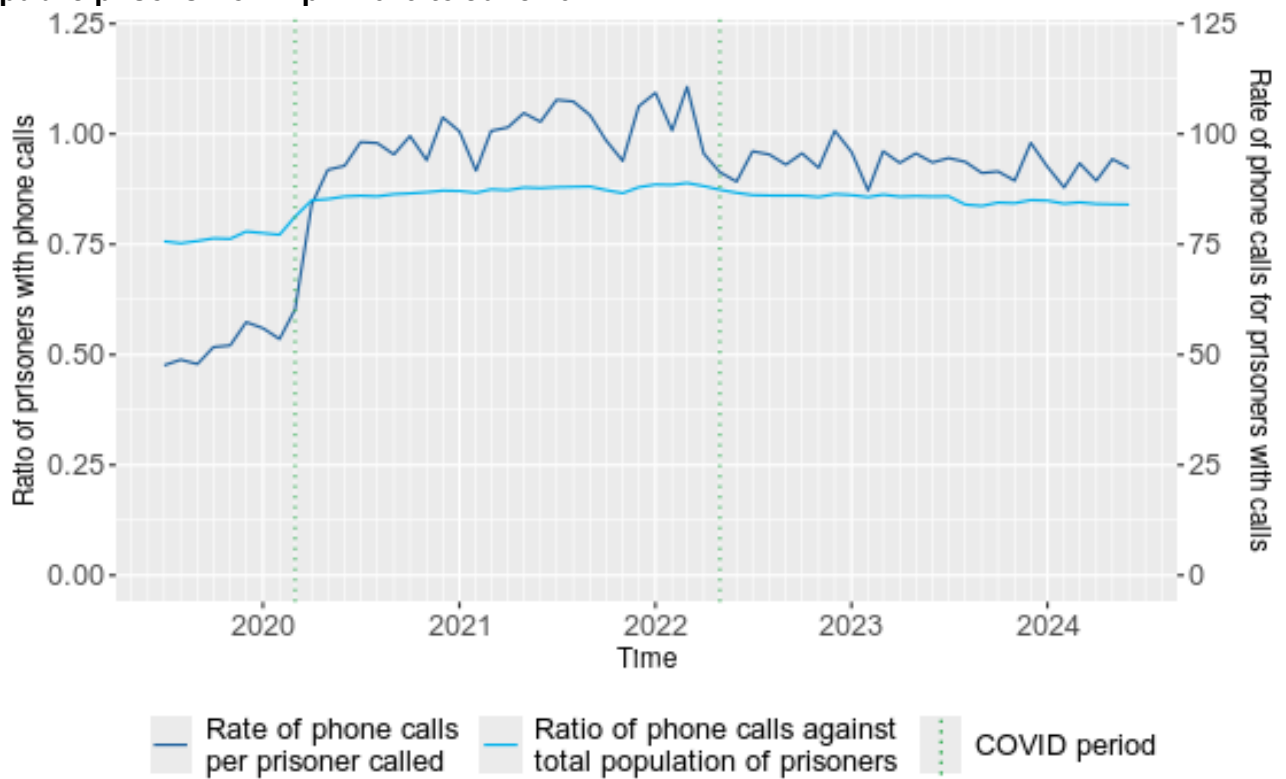
In July 2019, 2.7 million calls were made by 57,000 prisoners, representing 76% of the prison population. By February 2020, this rose by 15% to 3.1 million calls made by 58,000 prisoners (77% of the population). The call rate increased from 48 to 54 calls per phone-calling prisoner between July 2019 and February 2020.

At the start of COVID-19 in March 2020, 61,000 prisoners (81%) made 3.7 million calls, averaging 60 calls per prisoner. Call volumes stayed high during COVID-19, peaking in March 2022 at 7.0 million calls by 63,000 prisoners (89%), averaging 111 calls per prisoner.

After COVID-19, call volumes dropped but stayed above pre-pandemic levels. In June 2024, 5.9 million calls were made by nearly 64,000 prisoners (84%), down from 89% in March 2022. The call rate in June 2024 was 92 calls per prisoner, lower than the peak but higher than pre-pandemic levels.

External factors may have influenced these trends. For example, from March 2020 to May 2022, prisoners received weekly free credit: up to £5 for men and £10 for women.

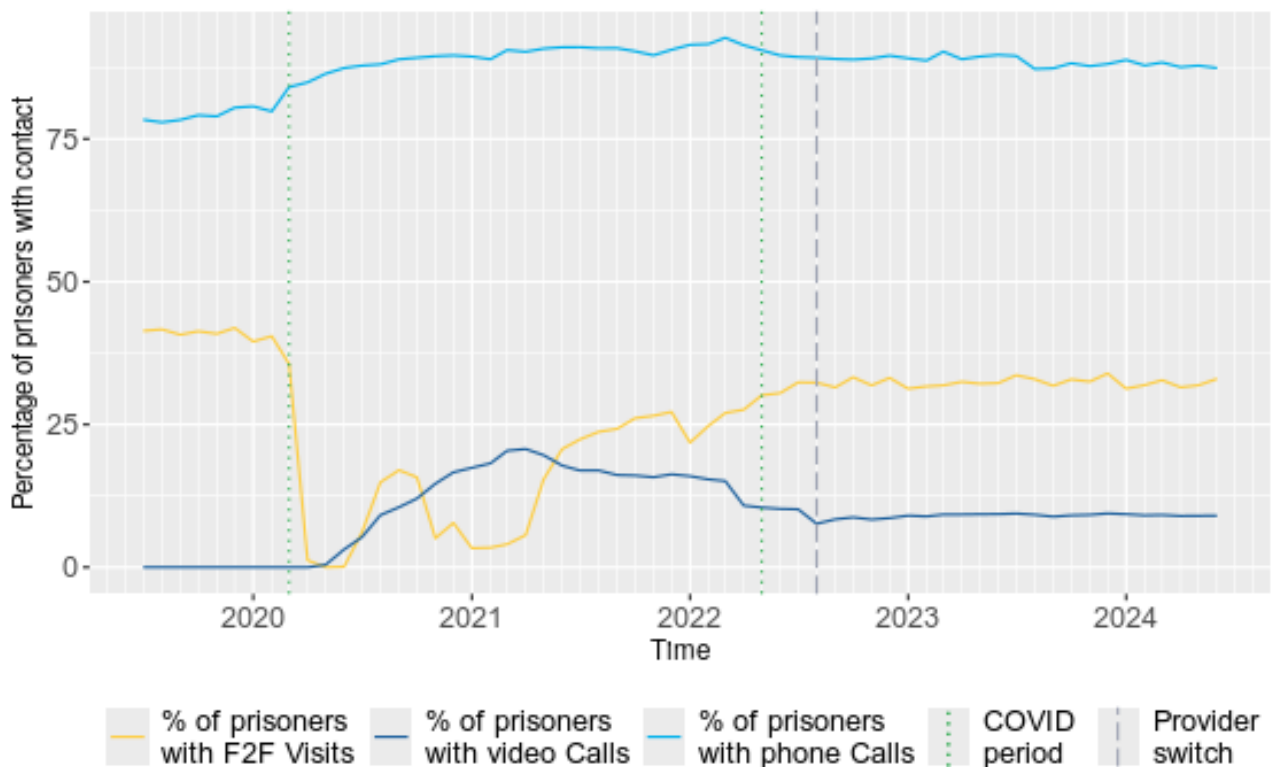
Figure 6: Monthly average phone calls per prisoner and total phone call rate across 106 public prisons from April 2019 to June 2024



5. Combined social contact methods over time

5.1 Differences in proportion across the three measured contact methods

Figure 7: Social Contact by Type: 102 Public Prisons in England and Wales, July 2019–June 2024



Phone calls consistently had the highest uptake across the observation period. This aligns with previous research highlighting their flexibility for maintaining family contact (Palmer et al., 2020). Phone call usage rose at the start of COVID-19 and peaked in March 2022, when 90% of prisoners used phone calls.

Face-to-face visits had the second highest uptake across 102 observed prisons, though not throughout the full time series. Before COVID-19, around 40% of prisoners received face-to-face visits. These dropped to nearly zero immediately after the outbreak.

Video calls peaked at 21% usage in March 2021, surpassing face-to-face visits during that period. Post-COVID-19, face-to-face visits recovered but remained steady, with about one-third of prisoners using them by June 2024.

Fluctuations in contact types were likely influenced by COVID-19 and availability of services. Other factors may have contributed, including the introduction of in-cell telephones and laptops, which remained in use throughout the period.

5.2 Correlations between methods of contact

All three observed forms of contact were significantly positively correlated with each other. This meant that using more of one form of contact was correlated with using more of another form of contact. This partly reflects US research showing video calls increased face-to-face visits (Fulcher, 2014). However, in this study, face-to-face visits, and phone calls had a stronger correlation than between face-to-face visits and video calls.⁷

⁷ There was a relatively strong sized correlation (0.5, $p < .01$.) between face-to-face and phone calls, but a small (but positive and significant) correlation between video calls and face-to-face (0.2, $p < .01$.) or phone (0.2, $p < .01$.).

6. Establishment level analysis

The following chapter outlines analysis at the establishment level for the 12 months ending June 2024, rather than the whole study period.

6.1 Overall contact

Table 1 outlines national contact levels across 102 public prisons, based on a combined sample of approximately 33,300 prisoners.

Nearly two-thirds (63%) received at least one face-to-face visit in the 12 months before June 2024. Only 13% received the statutory minimum of two visits per month, though this may be overestimated for prisoners entitled to more, such as those on remand. In the same period, 31% of prisoners received only remote contact. Around 5% had no observed contact of any kind.

Female establishments showed higher face-to-face visit rates (66%) and more contact across all three types (29%) than male establishments (63% and 20%). Approximately 5% of prisoners in male establishments and 3% in female establishments had no recorded contact during the 12-month period.

Table 1: Social contact by establishment type at 102 observed public prisons, 12 months to June 2024

	Prisoners who had F2F contact (%)	Prisoners who only had remote contact (%)	Prisoners who had no contact (%)	Prisoners who had statutory minimum entitlement to F2F visits (%)	Prisoners who had all three forms of contact (%)
National	63%	31%	5%	13%	20%
Male	63%	32%	5%	13%	20%
Female	66%	31%	3%	11%	29%
Youth	90%	10%	0%	22%	40%

6.2 Prison type and function

Table 2 outlines contact methods by prison function. Almost all prisoners in YOIs, Female, and Open establishments had contact through at least one method (100%, 97%, and 96% respectively).

In youth establishments, 90% of children and young adults received in-person contact. A higher proportion (40%) used all three contact methods compared to adults. Those without face-to-face contact all received remote contact. None of the children or young adults had no form of contact.

Reception prisons had the highest proportion of prisoners receiving two or more in-person visits monthly, averaging 23% over 12 months. Possible reasons include proximity to home, transport links, sentence length, and offence type.

High security prisons had the highest proportion of prisoners with no observed contact (10%) in the 12 months to June 2024. This study could not confirm why, but previous research highlights barriers like distance and cost (Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018). Longer sentences may lead to transfers further from home, reducing contact opportunities. Some prisoners may avoid burdening loved ones with travel costs (Jardine, 2018).

Others may experience relationship breakdowns over time (Prison Reform, 2024).

Further research is needed to understand differences in contact across prison types.

In open prisons, 55% of prisoners used only remote contact—the highest across prison functions. Only 2% received the statutory minimum number of face-to-face visits.

This may reflect access to in-person contact during day release.

Table 2: Social contact methods by prison function at 102 observed public prisons, 12 months to June 2024

	Number of people	Number of prisons	Prisoners who had F2F contact (%)	Prisoners who only had remote contact (%)	Prisoners who had no contact (%)	Prisoners who had statutory minimum entitlement to F2F visits (%)	Prisoners who had all three forms of contact (%)
High Security	2,820	6	57%	34%	10%	9%	22%
Cat B	2,840	6	49%	42%	9%	5%	15%
Reception	1,987	23	67%	28%	6%	23%	19%
Cat C	12,183	41	63%	32%	6%	11%	19%
Open	1,776	13	42%	55%	4%	2%	5%
Youth	58	3	90%	10%	0%	22%	40%
Female	1,165	10	66%	31%	3%	11%	29%
Total	22,829	102	59%	34%	6%	11%	18%

6.3 Prison region

Table 3 shows contact methods by prison region. Between 91% and 97% of prisoners received some form of contact in all regions in the year ending June 2024.

Prisoners in London had the highest level of face-to-face contact (74%). London and Wales had the highest proportion (20%) receiving at least two face-to-face visits monthly. South Central had the lowest face-to-face contact (47%) and the highest proportion using only remote contact (44%).

Further research is recommended to explore regional differences in face-to-face visits. Known barriers such as cost and distance (see Chapter 2) may have influenced these patterns. Transport links and individual prison approaches to visitation may also affect contact levels.

Table 3: Social contact methods by region at 102 observed public prisons, 12 months to June 2024

Region	Number of people	Number of prisons	Prisoners who had F2F contact (%)	Prisoners who only had remote contact (%)	Prisoners who had no contact (%)	Prisoners who had statutory minimum entitlement to F2F visits (%)	Prisoners who had all three forms of contact (%)
East Midlands	2,864	11	58%	35%	6%	11%	19%
Eastern	3,866	11	60%	33%	6%	9%	18%
Kent and Sussex	1,632	9	60%	36%	4%	11%	16%
London	2,069	9	74%	23%	3%	20%	22%
North East	1,708	6	60%	33%	7%	15%	26%
North West	3,443	12	65%	31%	5%	15%	13%
South Central	1,893	9	47%	44%	9%	7%	18%
South West	2,147	10	59%	34%	7%	10%	19%
Wales	352	4	64%	28%	9%	20%	21%
West Midlands	1,993	9	64%	30%	5%	11%	25%
Yorkshire & Humberside	3,555	12	62%	31%	7%	13%	17%
Total	25,522	102	61%	33%	6%	12%	19%

7. Sentence and offence level analysis

The following chapter outlines analysis at the sentence and offence level within 12 months to June 2024 rather than the whole study period.

7.1 Imprisonment status

Immigration detainees (58%) and prisoners with indefinite sentences (55%) had the lowest levels of face-to-face contact. Immigration detainees had the highest proportion using only remote contact (39%).

Prisoners with indefinite sentences had the highest proportion with no contact (8%) during the 12 months to June 2024. Remanded and convicted unsentenced prisoners received the most face-to-face visits (73%), reflecting policy allowing more visits for those on remand. They also had the highest proportion receiving the statutory minimum, though this was only 29%.

Among females on remand or convicted/unsentenced, 64% received face-to-face visits, and 17% received the statutory minimum.

Prison status in the female estate

In the female estate,⁸ the opposite pattern was observed: convicted/unsentenced prisoners had the lowest levels of face-to-face contact. Females on remand had the highest levels of face-to-face contact, consistent with the male estate, and also the highest levels of no contact. Females had a lower level of statutory minimum face-to-face contact than males (11% compared to 13%). However, the sample size for females who were on remand or convicted/unsentenced was small.

Prison status in the youth estate

In the youth estate, 0% had no contact. Sentenced youth prisoners tended to have less face-to-face and more remote only contact.

⁸ Sample size for female immigration detainees below five so results not displayed.

Table 4: Social contact methods by imprisonment status and establishment type at 102 observed public prisons, 12 months to June 2024

Status, by establishment type	Number of people	Number of prisons	Prisoners who had F2F contact (%)	Prisoners who only had remote contact (%)	Prisoners who had no contact (%)	Prisoners who had statutory minimum entitlement to F2F visits (%)	Prisoners who had all three forms of contact (%)
Remand and convicted unsentenced	1,112	46	73%	22%	4%	29%	24%
Female	36	5	64%	28%	8%	17%	25%
Male	1,074	44	74%	22%	4%	29%	24%
Sentenced	24,176	100	66%	30%	4%	13%	21%
Female	829	10	66%	32%	3%	11%	29%
Male	23,286	89	66%	30%	5%	13%	19%
Youth	38	2	84%	16%	0%	13%	37%
Indefinite Sentence	7,742	98	55%	37%	8%	8%	16%
Female	298	10	69%	28%	3%	8%	30%
Male	7,414	88	54%	38%	8%	8%	14%
Youth	19	2	100%	0%	0%	42%	47%
Immigration Detainee	179	23	58%	39%	3%	15%	23%
Male	178	22	58%	39%	3%	15%	23%

7.2 Offence group

Table 7 shows social contact by offence group, broken down by male and female establishments.

Prisoners with fraud offences had the highest overall contact rate (100%) and the highest proportion receiving the statutory minimum (29%). Fraud offences also had high face-to-face contact, especially in adult male prisons (80%).

Drug offences had the highest face-to-face contact for both male (80%) and female (77%) prisoners. Around 24% of prisoners with drug offences used all three contact methods. This was driven by females, with 37% using all contact types.

Females imprisoned for robbery had the lowest face-to-face contact (46%), compared to 60% of males. Male prisoners with criminal damage and arson had the lowest face-to-face contact (50%), compared to 53% of females. Prisoners with criminal damage, sexual offences, and arson had the highest levels of no contact.

Summary non-motoring offences had the highest remote-only contact (43%) and the second-lowest face-to-face contact (51%). This may reflect short sentences or remand spell.

Table 5: Social contact methods by offence groups and establishment type at 102 observed public prisons, 12 months to June 2024

	Number of people	Number of prisons	Prisoners who had F2F contact (%)	Prisoners who only had remote contact (%)	Prisoners who had no contact (%)	Prisoners who had statutory minimum entitlement to F2F visits (%)	Prisoners who had all three forms of contact (%)
Violence against the person	12,061	100	66%	30%	5%	12%	20%
Female	593	10	71%	26%	3%	12%	32%
Male	11,398	89	65%	30%	5%	12%	19%
Sexual offences	7,993	71	52%	39%	9%	9%	19%
Female	87	10	69%	28%	3%	14%	36%
Male	7,901	61	52%	39%	9%	9%	19%
Robbery	2,700	96	59%	38%	3%	8%	18%
Female	123	10	46%	50%	5%	2%	13%
Male	2,570	85	60%	37%	3%	8%	18%
Theft offences	1,806	95	60%	35%	4%	10%	17%
Female	66	10	53%	45%	2%	5%	15%
Male	1,737	85	61%	35%	4%	10%	17%

	Number of people	Number of prisons	Prisoners who had F2F contact (%)	Prisoners who only had remote contact (%)	Prisoners who had no contact (%)	Prisoners who had statutory minimum entitlement to F2F visits (%)	Prisoners who had all three forms of contact (%)
Criminal damage and arson	486	93	50%	38%	12%	5%	14%
Female	36	9	53%	36%	11%	3%	19%
Male	450	83	50%	38%	12%	6%	14%
Drug offences	5,034	94	80%	19%	1%	23%	26%
Female	158	10	77%	23%	0%	13%	37%
Male	4,875	84	80%	19%	1%	23%	26%
Possession of weapons	832	92	75%	23%	2%	15%	17%
Female	12	6	58%	42%	0%	17%	8%
Male	817	86	75%	23%	2%	15%	17%
Public order offences	460	82	56%	37%	8%	9%	17%
Female	11	6	55%	36%	9%	0%	9%
Male	447	76	55%	37%	8%	9%	17%
Miscellaneous crimes against society	693	92	68%	28%	5%	19%	26%
Female	30	8	70%	30%	0%	17%	33%
Male	661	84	68%	28%	5%	19%	26%
Fraud offences	228	58	79%	21%	0%	29%	33%
Female	22	7	68%	32%	0%	23%	41%
Male	206	51	80%	20%	0%	30%	32%
Summary non-motoring	107	58	51%	43%	6%	10%	27%
Male	104	56	52%	42%	6%	11%	28%
Summary motoring	26	22	73%	27%	0%	4%	12%
Male	26	22	73%	27%	0%	4%	12%

8. Age group level analysis

This short chapter focuses on age-level analysis within the 12 months to June 2024.

Findings show that social contact generally decreased as age increased. Remote-only contact increased with age.

The trend of reduced contact with age was less pronounced among female prisoners. Male prisoners primarily drove these results, though similar patterns were seen among females for face-to-face and remote-only contact.

Table 6: Social contact methods by age group and establishment type at 102 observed public prisons, 12 months to June 2024

	Number of people	Number of prisons	Prisoners who had F2F contact (%)	Prisoners who only had remote contact (%)	Prisoners who had no contact (%)	Prisoners who had statutory minimum entitlement to F2F visits (%)	Prisoners who had all three forms of contact (%)
Youth Estate							
15 - 17	33	2	94%	6%	0%	27%	36%
18 - 20	25	2	84%	16%	0%	16%	44%
Adult Estate							
18 – 20	629	44	89%	10%	1%	22%	33%
Male	526	36	89%	11%	1%	23%	33%
Female	10	6	60%	40%	0%	10%	20%
21 - 24	2,447	97	83%	16%	1%	18%	27%
Female	65	9	78%	22%	0%	17%	46%
Male	2,382	88	84%	15%	1%	18%	27%
25 - 29	4,389	99	78%	21%	1%	17%	26%
Female	135	10	82%	17%	1%	19%	39%
Male	4,254	89	78%	21%	2%	17%	26%
30 - 39	10,467	96	69%	28%	2%	15%	24%
Female	383	10	64%	34%	1%	8%	32%
Male	10,084	86	69%	28%	2%	15%	23%

	Number of people	Number of prisons	Prisoners who had F2F contact (%)	Prisoners who only had remote contact (%)	Prisoners who had no contact (%)	Prisoners who had statutory minimum entitlement to F2F visits (%)	Prisoners who had all three forms of contact (%)
40 - 49	7,154	96	58%	37%	5%	10%	19%
Female	321	10	62%	34%	4%	11%	24%
Male	6,833	86	57%	37%	5%	10%	19%
50 - 59	4,469	95	46%	44%	10%	7%	13%
Female	166	10	66%	28%	5%	6%	24%
Male	4,303	85	46%	45%	10%	7%	12%
60 and over	3,665	94	44%	40%	16%	6%	9%
Female	85	10	61%	33%	6%	11%	15%
Male	3,580	84	43%	40%	17%	6%	9%

9. Conclusion

This report presents the first analysis of social contact patterns in public prisons in England and Wales from April 2019 to June 2024. It focuses on contact types—face-to-face visits, phone calls, and video calls—across approximately 162,000 prisoners and 2.4 million visits. The analysis explores variation in contact during the 12 months to June 2024 by sentence type, region, sex, prison status, and age.

9.1 Types of contact and region

During the observation period, face-to-face visits dropped sharply after COVID-19 began and did not return to pre-pandemic levels. Meanwhile, alternative contact methods increased. Video calls peaked in March 2021, and phone call usage reached 90% in March 2023. London had the highest percentage of face-to-face contact among prisoners.

9.2 Sentence and offence level and individual differences

Older prisoners generally received fewer visits than younger prisoners. Only 44% of prisoners aged 60+ received face-to-face contact, compared to 89% of those aged 18–20. Immigration detainees and prisoners with indefinite sentences had the lowest face-to-face contact (58% and 55%). Immigration detainees had the highest remote-only contact (39%). Prisoners with indefinite sentences had the highest rate of no contact (8%).

In the female estate, convicted/unsentenced prisoners had the lowest face-to-face contact. Females on remand had the highest face-to-face contact and the highest levels of no contact.

9.3 Research and policy implications

This report strengthens the evidence base on prison contact, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings support further research and policy development, with two interrelated policy implications emerging:

1. Strengthening social contact - enhancing access and inclusion:

While changes in the levels and types of social contact have been observed, their underlying causes remain unclear. Notably, the number of prisoners engaging in face-to-face prison visits remains below pre-pandemic levels, with many still receiving none. Policymakers should consider expanding access to visits and video calls where appropriate and safe to do so. This should be informed by further research into:

- The varying impacts of different modes of contact, (e.g., face-to-face, video, phone, family days).
- Barriers to social contact, such as distance, cost, visit quality, and how these differ across prison types, demographic groups and personal characteristics.
- How the use of different modes of contact relate to changing preferences to encourage uptake and use where it is appropriate and feasible.
- Understanding the experiences of non-visited prisoners, and ways to increase contact.

2. Strengthening social contact - improve the quality of interactions, environments, and culture to support rehabilitation:

Beyond access, the quality of social interactions is crucial. Policymakers should explore ways to enhance visit experiences to foster more positive interactions among prisoners, visitors, and staff. Consistent support across the prison estate should be available for those affected by negative visits. This should be informed by further research into:

- Dynamics of prison visits, and insights into the lived experience of those involved.
- The emotional impact of visits, and what effective support looks like for those who experience distressing or harmful interactions.
- The nature of relationships between prisoners and their visitors (e.g., child, partner, friend) and how these influence outcomes.
- The role of prison regimes, staff training, organisational culture, and leadership in prioritising family ties.

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