

INSTITUTIONAL CORRECTIONS AND TECHNOLOGY

Technology is a large part of society, from smartphones, smartwatches, hand-held computers, and fitness bands. Technology keeps us in touch with friends, relatives, and even businesses. It is constantly changing and upgrading in any number of settings, including institutional correctional facilities. Two types of technology that are becoming more prevalent in correctional facilities are body and handheld scanners and video conferencing and visitation.

Full-body scanners used by the Transportation Security Administration to screen passengers entering the departure gates at airports are being used by correctional facilities to detect contraband, such as cellphones and weapons, and confiscate these items from visitors or inmates before they enter the general prison population. These scanners were banned from the airport for the flying public because their real-life nude images displayed on the screen violated privacy rights. In correctional facilities, however, inmates' constitutional rights and privacy protections are much more limited. Since the primary responsibility of a correctional facility is to maintain safety and security, inmates are often subjected to screening and scanning like the body scanners. Body scanners are effective at detecting objects individuals have hidden under their clothing, but they are expensive and typically do not detect objects that are not made of metal, like credit cards or handmade knives or other blunt objects made of wood or plastic. Handheld scanners, similar to the metal detector wands used at airports, are less costly and can detect both metal and nonmetallic objects (Bulman 2009).

Video conferencing and video visitations is another type of technology that is becoming increasingly common in correctional facilities, especially jails, because it has the potential to increase security, save money, and decrease recidivism. During the past decade, video technology has become popular in prisons and jails. Inmates can use video technology to talk to

family members, friends, lawyers, probation officers, and the court. Courtroom appearances for many persons held in jail during pretrial proceedings such as the initial appearance are often done by videoconferencing over the Internet, which is similar to communicating via FaceTime or Skype between the defendant and the judge. Video technologies such as videoconferencing can save money because jail staff are not needed to transport inmates between the jail and court, and related physical transportation costs are avoided.

Videoconferencing, especially between the court and inmates, has been around for about a decade. A more recent application of video technology is video visitation where, again, like FaceTime or Skype, inmates can communicate with family and friends via the Internet. Another model of video visitation is an onsite, no-contact visitation, where visitors speak with the inmate via video systems at the jail. This is commonly called a “central video visitation.” A fee is charged for a 20- to 30-minute visit, ranging from \$20 to \$30, and the jail receives a certain percentage of the revenue from the company installing the system (“Video Visitation” 2014).

Web Activity

See an example of video visitation from Palm Beach County, Florida, at
<http://www.pbso.org/index.cfm?fa=jailexpansion&id=74>.

The benefits of video visitation are numerous. First, allowing inmates to have more contact with visitors can reduce prison infractions and facilitate pro-social ties with outside family and friends who can help them upon release as social supports, employment prospects, housing, and finances (Berg & Huebner 2011; Duwe & Clark 2011). Second, if done from a remote location such as the visitor’s home, it reduces the travel time and costs for family members and friends, thereby allowing for more frequent visits. Prior to Internet video visitation, family and friends had to commute to a correctional facility, and depending on where the

institution was located, this could range from a tank of gas to multiple tanks of gas, an overnight stay at a hotel, and/or bus or train tickets. Third, once arriving to the facility, visitors avoid the logistical issues of finding parking, passing through screening and metal detectors, standing in line to check in, and standing/sitting in crowded waiting rooms for a visit.

For jail and prison administration and staff, video visitation is also advantageous, especially in regards to monetary and time expenditures. One, fewer staff are needed and less staff time is devoted to scanning and searching inmates and visitors entering and exiting visitation areas. Two, video visitation reduces the opportunity for drugs, weapons, and other contraband from entering the facility and reaching the inmate population. Third, fewer staff are needed to monitor and provide security for inmates and visitors while in the visitation room.

Web Activity

Another example of video visitation can be found at <http://www.homewav.com/natchez-installs-inmate-video-visitation/>

There are also disadvantages to video visitation. First, there are still costs associated with the remote visit that the visitor is required to pay. Depending on the fee, which varies by facility, some inmates' friends and family members might not be able to afford to have many more visits than they would have had in person. Second, some facilities restrict video visitation sessions for shorter time periods than is common with in-person visits. Third, personal visits are preferred by inmates and visitors alike, and there is growing concern that video visits will replace in-person visits in some facilities ("Video Visitation" 2014). Finally, there are some ethical concerns surrounding the profit motive of the facilities that receive a percentage of the fees accrued from the video visitation company.

Web Activity

To explore video visitation further, go to

http://blogs.westword.com/latestword/2015/01/prison_video_visitation_report.php and view the report. Should the county jail profit from video visitations? Why or why not?