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More Money, Less Love

Video-Only Visitation Polices in Jails – The Bottom Line

THE MOVE TOWARD VIDEO-ONLY VISITATION POLICIES IN JAILS AND ITS EFFECTS ON FAMILIES

Jails and prisons dehumanize. They destroy and diminish. Ever since jails and prisons have existed, visits from friends and family have provided relief and hope to incarcerated individuals that there is life outside the cage.

The introduction of visits via video has been seized upon by private corporations as a way to increase profits, and by county jail officials as a way to decrease costs, by charging fees to those who wish to visit their incarcerated friends and relatives. Corporations that offer video visitation services have adopted a tactic popular with private prison corporations that requires jails and prisons to institute social policies that guarantee profits, ignoring the fact that these policies contribute to the destruction of communities. In the case of video visitation, corporations insist that jails and prisons using their services deny face-to-face communication between incarcerated individuals and those who love them.

This requirement counters studies that have been done on prison visitation, which maintain that in-person visitation is vital for maintaining child/parent bonds^{1,2} while decreasing the chances that people leaving incarceration will return³. In addition, the most-often provided rationale for video-visitation only policies – that institutions will become safer – has not been borne out in Travis County. In fact, disciplinary incidents and infractions; assaults on staff; and possession of contraband cases have all gone up dramatically since eliminating in-person visitation in the Texas county that, up to now, has been the most populous Texas county to adopt video-only visitation.

KEY FINDINGS - SHOW THEM THE MONEY

- The corrections community has begun pushing video-only visitation policies as a revenue stream, as evidenced by an article in *“Corrections Today,”* in March of 2014, which stated that, “Video visitation may save facilities money by reducing the number of staff needed to supervise visitation areas, and may actually produce revenue if visitors or inmates are charged a fee – a common practice among facilities using this technology.”⁴
- County jails are guaranteed a certain amount of money for the first year of operations – ranging from the \$15 million Global Tel-Link guaranteed Los Angeles County, to the \$3 million Securus would have guaranteed Dallas County had they signed a contract with Securus – to have access to those jails’ captive populations. The guarantee is in addition to the approximately 23 percent of gross revenues counties receive from all calls and video visits made by individuals incarcerated in their jails.
- In exchange for that money, companies like Securus – which has contracts in 90 jurisdictions nationwide – basically dictate jail visitation policy to assure their profits. In Dallas, the proposed contract would have **required** the Dallas County Jail to:
 - Eliminate all in-person visitation by friends and family;
 - Place onerous requirements on those wishing to use the free, on-site videos;
 - Reduce availability of free, on-site video visits to 20 hours per week.

KEY FINDINGS - VIOLENCE AND CONTRABAND CLIMB

The mantra by officials, in jurisdictions from Orange County⁵ to Memphis⁶ to Minneapolis⁷ is all the same – video-only visitation policies will make for safer institutions and reduce contraband. However, a review of data received through Open Records Requests from Travis County, which has the 5th largest day-to-day jail population in Texas, refutes those assumptions. Travis County eliminated all in-person visits in May of 2013, and its phone and video services are provided by Securus.

- Disciplinary infractions in the Travis County Correctional Complex have climbed from approximately 820 in May of 2012, to 1,160 in April of 2014. The facility **averaged** 940 disciplinary infractions per month for the year *before* the May 2013 elimination of in-person visitation and 1,087 disciplinary infractions per month *after* the elimination of in-person visitation.
- Disciplinary cases for possession of contraband in the facility showed an overall 54 percent **increase** from May 2013 through May 2014.
- Inmate on inmate assaults saw a 20 percent **increase** between May 2012 and May 2014.
- And most troubling, inmate on staff assaults immediately **doubled** after elimination of in-person visits, going from three in April to six in May, climbing to seven in July, and topping out at eight in April of 2014 with drops in between.
- Another rationale for the introduction of video visits is the claim that it frees up staff to perform other duties. This ignores the fact that, as the numbers of video visits dramatically increases, the number of staff needed to monitor conversations also increases, unless the jail sees no need to monitor conversations that may include threats, escape plans, or other criminal activities.

CONCLUSION

A recent study made this interesting observation about video visits and the reactions of incarcerated individuals to the loss of visits that were not contact. “The loss of non-contact visits may not provide as strong a disincentive to disciplinary infractions in the prison, thereby decreasing rather than increasing security in correctional facilities.”⁸ Prisons and jails have long emphasized that visits were a privilege, and that allowing incarcerated individuals to receive visits from friends and family were powerful management tools.

That tool has been discarded, its utility lost in the cascade of dollars offered by the companies raking in profits by demanding that the **ONLY** permissible visits be provided by them. As a result, the incarcerated are left to blink at grainy images bracketed by the image area of an impersonal camera; their families are forced to pay exorbitant fees to have any type of interaction with their incarcerated loved ones; and the security promised by jail officials has yet be proven.

Citations

¹“Connecting children with incarcerated parents”. *Child Protection Best Practices Bulletin*, 2011. Available at <http://childlaw.unm.edu/docs/BEST-PRACTICES/Connecting%20Children%20with%20Incarcerated%20Parents%20%282011%29.pdf>

² Ciccone, A., Dallaire, D.H., & Wilson, L. (2010). “Teachers’ experiences with and expectations of children with incarcerated parents.” *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 31.

³ *The effects of prison visitation on offender visitation*. Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2011. Available at <http://www.doc.state.mn.us/PAGES/files/large-files/Publications/11-11MNPrisonVisitationStudy.pdf>

⁴ Loper, A., Coleman, E. (2014). “Video visitation for inmates: Thinking outside of the tiny box”. *Corrections Today*. American Correctional Association. <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-368381214.html>

⁵“Orange County, Calif., jail to debut visitation by video despite ACLU worries.” By Doris Bloodsworth, *The Orlando Sentinel*. (Jan. 6, 2003). Available at <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-96115214.html>

⁶ “Video visitation – New system at jail eliminates seeing inmate face to face.” Chris Conley, *The Commercial Appeal*. (Sept. 27, 2007.) Available at <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-21800012.html>

⁷ “Video visits: a new trend in jails.” Pam Louwagie, *The Minneapolis Star Tribune*. (Oct. 17, 2001.) Available at <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-79208681.html>

⁸ Boudin, C., Littman, A., & Stutz, T. (2014). "Prison visitation policies: A fifty-state survey." Social Science Research Network. Available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2171412