

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/jails-and-prisons-ending-in-person-visits/>

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Photograph: Ben Depp

Hundreds of correctional facilities across the country have replaced in-person visits with video calls that are expensive and glitchy.

The Guardian [reports](#) that researchers estimate at least 600 jails and prisons in America have instituted video visitation programs. While a handful of states including California and Texas have passed laws ensuring that in-person visitation be maintained in jails where video visitation is offered, data shows that 74 percent of correctional facilities that implement video calling either reduce or eliminate in-person visits.

The video technology is offered by prison telephone companies like Securus, which charges \$12.99 per 20-minute video call at the Jefferson Parish correctional center in Louisiana.

The prison phone system is a \$1.2 billion per year industry. For years, private companies like Securus, which says it serves over 1.2 million incarcerated people across North America, have charged exorbitant rates to families of incarcerated people for talking to their loved ones in prison. Earlier this year, they [succeeded](#) in forcing the FCC to withdraw support for regulations that cap the cost of phone calls from people in jails and prisons.

Prison phone companies are pitching video calls as a potential new source of revenue for counties, with facilities typically receiving 10 to 20 percent commissions on each call.

Despite the hefty price tag for video calls, the technology often does not work. Callers cannot see the image or hear any sound, or the calls are cut off midway through.

In addition to the per-call price, video calls require an updated tablet, computer, or smartphone. For those without access to compatible devices, facilities like the Jefferson Parish jail have set up video visitation centers, to which family members have to travel just to place a video call.

In-person visits, which used to be free, have been shown to decrease recidivism.

International human rights instruments indicate that in-person visits are a basic human right. [UN rules](#) call for the allowance of visitors, and the [European Prison Rules](#) emphasize that incarcerated people shall be allowed to receive visits from their families, friends, and representatives of outside organizations.

The American Bar Association and the American Correctional Association have published guidelines providing that video visitation should be a supplement and not a substitute for in-person visits, but the Supreme Court has not yet recognized a right to in-person visits in the United States.

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