

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/video-visits-in-prisons-enhance-connections-but-at-a-cost>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

It's easy to take for granted the million ways in which technology makes our lives easier.

Many of us can access and share information at lightning speeds and talk with family and friends across the globe at a moment's notice, a fact that almost feels unremarkable.

However, prisons and jails have traditionally been behind the curve when it comes to keeping up with advances in technology. As a case in point, my colleagues and I at Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections found that only 15 state prison systems [in 2014](#) allowed incarcerated people to conduct video visits with loved ones in the community, despite the ubiquity and low cost of video-call services on the outside. Many departments of corrections were resistant to the idea because they were concerned about their ability to limit use of the service to approved visitors, and were uncertain of how to introduce the necessary technological infrastructure to their prisons.

Since that time, video visits in prisons and jails have proliferated, driven in part by private vendors who are willing to cover the costs of implementation while charging fees directly to users. Far from enjoying all the benefits that modern technology has to offer, however, many families have suffered from its arrival. In some local jails, video visits have been brought in [to replace in-person visits](#), which have been eliminated entirely. And, in some cases, users have been required [to travel to the jail](#) to conduct the video visit, thus negating one of the most positive aspects of video calls: the ability to conduct them from anywhere with an Internet connection. Many incarcerated people and their visitors have also been hit by high service costs; as with phone calls, a lack of [regulation](#) means that [private vendors are able to charge](#) amounts far exceeding those typically paid by non-incarcerated people for similar, or better, products.

Here at Vera, we decided to investigate [the impact of introducing video visits](#) in one state prison system, and found just how much potential is being missed. We partnered with Washington State Department of Corrections, where people who are incarcerated have been able to access video visits since 2013. The service, provided by JPay, allows users to receive video calls from approved visitors anywhere in the community, at a cost of \$12.95 for a 30 minute call. Our study found that video calls can make a powerful supplement to prison life when people used the service regularly, they saw an [increase](#) of between 40 and 50 percent in the number of in-person visits they received. The users of the service explained that video visits provided a safe space for them to maintain and strengthen their relationships with people in the community.

Even here, however, the service only benefited a small percentage of the incarcerated population. People who used the service suggested that poor picture and sound quality, combined with a high cost, deterred people from using the system more frequently. A high level of need certainly existed; Vera found that, during a one-year period, 45 percent of incarcerated people did not receive any in-person visits. Distance from home was a significant factor; for every additional mile from home that people were incarcerated, the number of visits they received decreased by about one percent. The average distance from home for people incarcerated in Washington State prisons was nearly 130 miles.

For incarcerated people, receiving visits is important. The opportunity to see loved ones in person [has been linked](#) to better outcomes for everyone: improving people's mental health and decreasing the likelihood that they commit new crimes, which is an important consideration for public safety. Vera's study shows that video visits could play an important role in promoting stronger relationships between incarcerated people and their families and friends. At present, this potential is only being realized marginally. And when in-person visits are scrapped in favor of video visits, agencies are likely doing more harm than good.

One thing that we know for certain, however, is that technology continues to evolve. Soon, the current models of video visitation where incarcerated people access the service through kiosks in their housing units may be [replaced](#) with Internet-connected [tablets](#). And after that? Perhaps something else. Through all of these changes, more needs to be done to ensure that technology is [democratized](#) in similar ways within custodial settings as it has been on the outside: available to everyone, unhampered by poor quality and high costs. At the same time, the right to in-person visits must not only be fiercely safeguarded, it should also be bolstered for the benefit of all people, both inside and outside of prison.

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