

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/womens-voices/being-together-alone>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Sometimes I wondered how I could be so lonely surrounded by so many people. The other people in prison may have seen me, but they didn't know me.

For many people who are incarcerated, it's hard to hold on to the labels we cherished before incarceration: mother, daughter, aunt, educator, scientist, driver, homeowner. Contact with the outside world helped me stay connected with those parts of me while I was incarcerated. But keeping in touch is hard from prison.

My incarceration began in 1995, when snail mail was the primary way to communicate with people on the outside. I was blessed with a big family, but they all lived six to eight hours away, which did not allow me to have frequent visits. Of course, I really wanted them to come see me, but I didn't want to put pressure on them because I knew it was expensive, time consuming, and emotionally hard to make all the sacrifices it took for a trip to the prison. I knew they would do whatever it took to get there, so I sometimes hid the harsh reality of what day-to-day life in prison was like to protect my loved ones from stress and worry. But I still craved that connection to them, that little piece of home, the normalcy.

So I wrote them. When I'd get passed up at mail call, it left me wondering if my family was okay. Did they not know that I wrote them? Was a letter on the way? Were they not getting my mail? It could take days or weeks to have a single conversation, and sometimes the response to a previous letter would reawaken old, painful feelings that had passed during the wait.

Then, in July 2017, a pilot program started at the prison in California where I was, allowing us to send e-mails for a small fee. I no longer had to worry that my family would start a card and forget to put it in the mail like they sometimes did. They could contact me right from home and attach pictures or videograms. I got photos of my nieces and nephews and family events in real time, not just at birthdays or holidays when my loved ones would remember to get prints developed and send them to me. We could respond to one another right away. This new form of connection allowed me to feel like I was a part of their experiences. Incarcerated people want to be involved in the momentous occasions in our loved ones' lives. We are aware of the exact moment someone is getting married or when a precious baby is being born, even inside those dark stone walls.

I was released on parole in 2018 before the COVID-19 pandemic began, but thanks to the e-mail system, I'm still in touch with people on the inside who are struggling to stay connected now more than ever with restrictions on in-person visits. I work with people to prepare for parole hearings and commutation applications and help them get support with medical needs and family contact. Real-time communication makes it easier to talk about things and deal with emotions when they occur, instead of waiting days or weeks for letters to be exchanged. Through e-mail, some incarcerated people I know have been able to make amends with people they've harmed, and it's been very healing. Others are getting to communicate with their kids or grandkids for the first time.

Ultimately, connection is important no matter how you do it: snail mail, visits, or e-mail. I had a huge support network that communicated with me through all of these methods, and I truly believe that's how I survived my 23 years of incarceration.

On May 15, 2021, the e-mail system was expanded to all prisons in California. I'm so excited for the people I know who are still inside, missing that connection to their loved ones. Hopefully, facilities will stop charging people to communicate electronically, so everyone can have access to this lifeline. E-mail makes it so much easier to keep hope between visits, to know you can survive another day. When the door closes, we can hold on to a visit in our minds, but it's easier to hold on to a photo.

[Read more from our Womens Voices series.](#)

Kelly Savage-Rodriguez is the Drop LWOP coordinator at the California Coalition for Women Prisoners, fighting to support people seeking release.

Vera believes in using our platforms to elevate diverse voices and opinions, including those of people currently and formerly incarcerated. Other than Vera employees, contributors speak for themselves. Vera has not independently verified the statements made in this post.

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