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Inmate Video Visitation Grows, So Do Concerns

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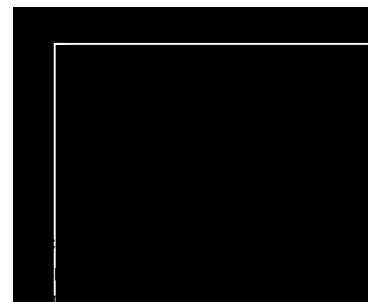
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Use of video visits for inmates grows, along with concerns

By Juan A. Lozano Associated Press

POSTED: 05/20/2015 12:07:27 AM MDT

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RICHMOND, Texas (AP) — Four-year-old William Cole saw his father's face and reached out to touch it during a jail visit. But he could only feel a video screen.

The facility in Fort Bend County, southwest of Houston, is among a growing number of jails and prison systems across the U.S. in which video visitation has replaced the more familiar in-person visits, where people are in the same room but separated by thick glass.

William's mother found it jarring to have to communicate with her husband through pixels rather than face to face. In video visitation, inmates and their visitors are not in the same room but see each other on computer or television screens.

"This was a very big shock for me," said Edna Cole, 24, as her son talked with his dad from one of 34 screens in the jail's visitation area. "I'm used to actually being able to see them in person, and here I can't do that."

Officials who run the facilities say video visits have improved security and increased visitation hours. However, prisoners' rights advocates worry the trend is to eliminate free in-person visits for a system they say is full of technical glitches and could eventually require families to pay a fee.

Because of the backlash, the Texas House recently approved a bill guaranteeing a minimum of two in-person visits per week at county jails, but it's unclear if the measure will pass the Senate.



According to the Prison Policy Initiative, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit group, about 545 correctional facilities (mostly county jails) in 43 states and the District of Columbia use video visitation. While video visitation was first used in the 1990s, much of its growth has taken place the last two to three years.

A report in January by the nonprofit found that 74 percent of county jails banned in-person visits when they started using video visitation. In Texas, of the 23 counties using video visitation, 13 have eliminated in-person visits.

The group also found that at least one of the major companies in video visitation, Dallas-based Securix Technologies, has included language in its contracts requiring the elimination of in-person visits.

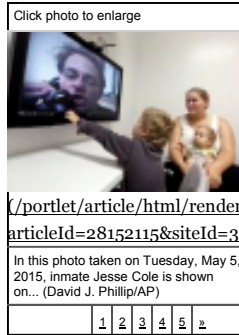
Bernadette Rabuy, with Prison Policy Initiative, said video visitation can be beneficial as it allows inmates in facilities far from loved ones to have contact. While it is currently not a big money maker for companies, Rabuy is concerned video visitation will become a large revenue source as people are pushed to use it from home. While video visitation is usually free at a jail, fees to use it from home can be up to \$1.50 per minute.

In Fort Bend County, video visitation — in use since 2009— improved efficiency and security as inmates no longer had to be moved to visiting areas and it ended the passing of contraband between visitors and inmates, said Sheriff's Office Lt. Daniel Quam. The change also freed up personnel and extended visitation hours, he said.

Quam said his agency has focused on providing the best service possible, including building a room for use by families and offering 30 minute visits when state law only requires 20 minutes.

The Arkansas Department of Correction, which in April approved a video visitation contract, will not eliminate in-person visits, said spokeswoman Cathy Frye. In the U.S., nearly 30 state prison systems use video visitation.

A December report by the National Institute of Corrections recommended using both in-person and video visitation.



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Sue Gregory, 50, who used video visitation last year when her husband was held at a detention center in Camp Verde, Arizona, said video visits eliminate human interaction that's beneficial for inmates.

"If the only way you have to visit is through a TV monitor, that is not a real visit," she said.

Travis County, which includes the state capital of Austin, eliminated in-person visits in 2013 but is discussing whether to bring them back. Two lawsuits were filed this year in Denton County, Texas, after in-person visits were eliminated.

Sheriff Dan Staton considered ending in-person visits in the Oregon county that includes Portland after signing a contract with Securus Technologies that called for doing so. But after listening to community feedback, Staton decided to have both video visitation and in-person visits in Multnomah County.

In Arkansas, Securus didn't push for the elimination of in-person visits in its contract with the state but offered a higher commission from revenue if the state urged inmates to use the service, Frye said.

Josh Gravens, with Texas CURE (Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants), a prisoners' rights group, said a large group mobilized last year in Dallas County after officials considered approving a video visitation contract with Securus that would have eliminated in-person visits. That contract was rejected, and another that included both forms of visitation was later approved.

Earlier this month, Securus announced it would no longer include in its contracts restrictions related to in-person visits. A spokesman for Securus did not respond to numerous phone calls and emails seeking comment.

Philip Hilder, a Houston criminal defense attorney and former federal prosecutor, said while the Supreme Court has found that jail and prison visits can be restricted, the rise of video visitation could mean it's time to revisit the issue.

"There is room for technology to play a role here," Hilder said. "But to say that technology should supplant personal visitation would be a grave error. I think it would create a lot more problems because people will feel much more disconnected by not having that human element."

Follow Juan A. Lozano on Twitter at www.twitter.com/juanlozano70

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