

# A New Role for Technology?

## Implementing Video Visitation in Prison

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## FROM THE DIRECTOR

Human beings need connection with one another. For people incarcerated in state prisons and other correctional facilities, sustaining contact with loved ones can be a lifeline. Regular interactions with family, friends, and supporters can help to alleviate the pain of imprisonment, sustain parent-child relationships, and aid effective planning for reentry into the community—all of which increase the chances of success. However, the structure of the criminal justice system creates many barriers to meaningful contact. Incarcerated people often serve their sentences far from home in places unreachable by public transport. In-person visits can place a substantial burden on the visitor, who may have to miss work, pay for childcare, and cover the costs of travel.

In response to these challenges, prison officials across the United States have sought new ways for those in their charge to connect with loved ones. Video visitation, like Skype, allows visitors to hold video calls with their incarcerated family members and friends from a personal computer. Video visits provide the opportunity to see loved ones, rather than just hear their voices—a small difference, but a potentially profound one nevertheless. The promise of these technological advances led the Washington State Department of Corrections to introduce video visitation in all state prison facilities in 2014. Other states have begun to use the technology, while some have decided against it.

There are reasons to be cautious about embracing this innovation in correctional settings. Other technologies have carried a steep cost: People incarcerated in state prisons and their families have long borne the burden of exorbitant, previously unregulated, telephone charges. And some jails have introduced video visitation as a replacement for in-person visits.

At present, little is known about how state prisons use video visits. How do incarcerated people and their loved ones experience the service? How much does it cost to implement and operate the systems? And what are the costs to taxpayers and customers? We know that relationships are critical to people's dignity, wellbeing, and success—but for those held in prison, can video visits effectively support meaningful and quality contact and interactions? This report examines the current landscape of video visitation in prisons nationwide and offers a detailed case study of an early adopter, Washington State. Upcoming research from the Vera Institute of Justice will study the impact of this technological innovation on people's behavior while they are in prison.



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# Introduction

For people in prison, maintaining contact with loved ones—through phone calls, letters, and in-person visits—is one of the most important ways of reducing their sense of isolation. Perhaps most important, nurturing personal relationships produces positive outcomes for incarcerated people, including reducing their behavioral infractions, decreasing the risk of reoffending after release, and, for incarcerated parents who keep in touch with their children, lowering rates of depression, anxiety, and stress.<sup>1</sup> With the advent of inexpensive and popular video technology, such as Skype and FaceTime, that allow people at a physical distance from one another to have face-to-face visits, corrections administrators around the country are exploring whether and how this technology can help incarcerated people under their jurisdiction sustain crucial supportive relationships.

People often serve their prison sentences in facilities far from their friends and family. The costs of in-person visiting can include lost wages, childcare, a place to stay, food, and gas and other travel-related expenses.<sup>2</sup> Video visitation, which has the potential to provide opportunities for incarcerated people to see their families and friends without the costs and time associated with travel to corrections facilities, has increased across the country. In several jurisdictions, incarcerated people can now hold video calls from a computer station—usu-

## METHODOLOGY

Vera’s researchers conducted a national survey of state departments of corrections to determine the scope of video visitation offered by the country’s 50 state prison systems. The survey, administered in November 2014, asked about departments’ intentions to implement the service or their experiences so far, including usage levels and cost, and about the perceived benefits and challenges of implementing video visitation in adult correctional facilities. All 50 state DOCs responded to the survey.<sup>a</sup>

The researchers used a second survey to collect information about the costs of video visiting in Washington State. It was completed by the director of the unit that oversees video visitation statewide and by administrators at each of Washington’s 12 prisons. The survey asked about all the potential expenses associated with video visitation, such as staff hiring and training, supplies, and equipment. To gain a deeper understanding of the costs associated with the implementation and operation of a system-wide video visitation service, the researchers also analyzed the costs incurred by WADOC during and after the service’s rollout. In addition, researchers interviewed a director and a manager at JPay, WADOC’s contracted vendor, to determine the vendor’s expenses for implementing and operating the service.

Finally, researchers surveyed 211 incarcerated people using a self-

ally for a fee—with visitors who connect from a personal computer or, in some states, public terminals in the community.

The response to jail video visitation in early-adopter counties has been mixed. Critics of jail video visitation have faulted high costs for families, the poor quality of audio and visual functions, and, in some jurisdictions, the elimination of in-person visitation (which at least one service vendor in 2015 required as a condition of the contract).<sup>3</sup> In contrast, policy analysts and the media have paid less attention to the availability, quality, and costs of video visitation in prisons.

To further knowledge of video visitation in prisons and its potential to connect incarcerated people with their families and communities, researchers at the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) began in Fall 2014 to examine the current use of, and future plans to implement, video visitation through a first-ever survey of all 50 state departments of corrections (DOCs). Through the survey, the researchers sought to document states' various approaches to implementing and delivering this service—including whether they contracted for the service or provided it themselves—and to understand the goals and concerns of states that have yet to do so.

After presenting the results from the national survey of existing prison video visitation programs, this report examines the experiences of one state—Washington—in implementing and operating video visitation services through the Department of Corrections (WADOC). As a recent adopter of this form of

administered pen-and-paper survey at three Washington State prisons to learn how they used and experienced video visitation. The sites included a women's facility in the western part of the state (Washington Corrections Center for Women) and two men's prisons in eastern Washington (Airway Heights and Washington State Penitentiary). To recruit participants, the researchers visited the facilities and sought volunteers on housing units and program areas, or asked staff to select a random group of incarcerated people when this was more practical.<sup>b</sup> The survey asked respondents about the reasons they did or did not use video visitation, other ways they stayed in touch with family and friends and, for those who had used video visits, their satisfaction with the service.<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Bureau chiefs, program coordinators, staff from DOC budget departments, and research and planning officers completed the survey.

<sup>b</sup> The survey tool for incarcerated people also collected contact information for respondents' loved ones in the community. Vera researchers will contact a sample of this group for phone interviews regarding their experiences of video visitation and report the results at a later date.

<sup>c</sup> At the time of survey, women accounted for 7.6 percent of the population in WADOC's custody. Sampling at this same rate would have included too few female participants for their experiences to be represented meaningfully. The researchers therefore intentionally oversampled incarcerated women, who comprised 26 percent of the sample. The survey sample slightly under-represents incarcerated Hispanic and Latino people at 9.8 percent, compared to the state DOC's reported figure of 12.7 percent. However, the sample was broadly representative of the WADOC incarcerated population for the same year in terms of race and age. All demographic information is taken from the Washington State Department of Corrections Fact Card, December 31, 2014.



visitation, Washington's experience provides a useful case study; the researchers were able to follow the implementation of the service (first introduced in a single facility in 2013) from the outset. The Washington example expands on the national survey, by providing specific details about how video visitation works in prisons when an outside vendor is brought in to install and operate the system. This model of service delivery appears to be growing in popularity and is therefore of particular interest.

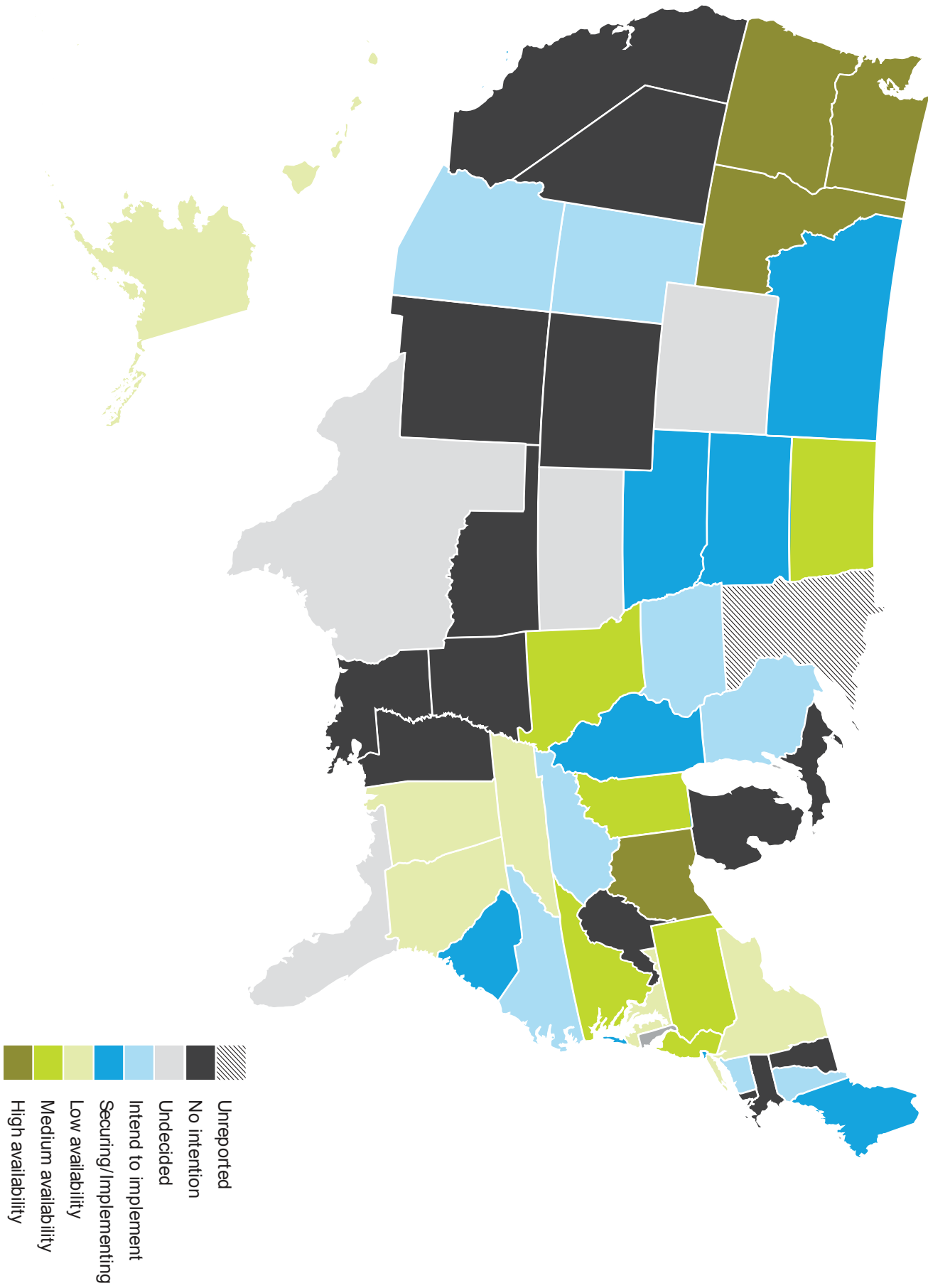
The WADOC study allowed the researchers to enumerate the costs associated with implementation, operation, and use of video visitation; chart the process of policy development; and describe the experiences and reactions of the system's users—people incarcerated in Washington State prisons. By gathering and comparing information on national and state levels, this report, funded by the National Institute of Justice, presents a snapshot of the use of video visitation in U.S. prisons in late 2014 and early 2015.

## The prevalence of video visitation in state prisons

The survey of state corrections departments sought to determine the current availability and accessibility of video visiting in state prison systems as of November 2014. The responses revealed that while both its availability and accessibility remain limited, video visitation is a service that is likely to expand. Figure 1 shows the availability of video visitation in prisons. Fifteen states (30 percent) are currently using video visitation. But these states use the technology in varying degrees: Video visitation is available in all, or nearly all, facilities in four states (Indiana, Ohio, Oregon, and Washington), but, in nearly half of all states with video visitation, it is available in fewer than 20 percent of facilities (Alabama, Alaska, Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, New York, and Tennessee). In the remaining four states (New Jersey, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, and Virginia) availability varies between 30 and 66 percent of state facilities.<sup>4</sup> An additional nine states report they are in the process of implementing video visitation, and seven more intend to offer it in the future. Fourteen states (28 percent) have no plans to provide it.

Even when a prison offers video visitation, it may be limited by rules that make the service accessible only to certain categories of incarcerated people. Vera's survey found that people held in segregated housing (commonly known as solitary confinement) were often unable to access video visits. Of the 14 state DOCs that provided information on accessibility, nine reported that prisoners held in disciplinary or punitive segregation (that is, segregated housing used to punish people who had violated prison rules) could not use the service, and six state DOCs deny access to those in administrative segregation (a form of housing used to hold people who are thought to pose a risk to the safety and security of the facility because of a history of assaultive behavior or gang involvement, for example). Prisoners held in protective custody (that is, they are removed from the general prison population for their own safety) and special

Figure 1: Prevalence of video visitation by state DOCs



**Figure 2: Video visitation accessibility for visitors as of November 2014**

	Personal computer	Community-based terminal	Prison-based terminal
Alabama	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Alaska*			<input type="checkbox"/>
Georgia	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Hawaii		<input type="checkbox"/>	
Indiana	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maryland		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
New Jersey		<input type="checkbox"/>	
New York		<input type="checkbox"/>	
North Dakota	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
Ohio	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Oregon	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Pennsylvania		<input type="checkbox"/>	
Tennessee*			<input type="checkbox"/>
Virginia		<input type="checkbox"/>	
Washington	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

\* Alaska uses video visitation only for state prisoners held by the Colorado Department of Corrections. Tennessee uses video visitation only for visits with people held in maximum security housing units.

behavioral or mental health units are ineligible for the service in four and five states' DOCs, respectively.<sup>5</sup>

Availability is also influenced by how visitors are able to access the service. In seven of the 15 states with video visitation, visitors can access it from any location via their personal computers, and two of those seven—Washington and Alabama—reported that they hope to expand access to visitors' smart phones and tablets in the near future. Meanwhile, in 11 of the 15 states, visitors can conduct video visits from sites in the community such as parole offices, libraries, or community-based organizations including reentry service providers. But in five of these 11 states, these options are the only ways for visitors to access the service. (See Figure 2 for accessibility options to video visitation.)

The most restrictive option for visitors to access video visitation is on-site—in the prison. While five state DOCs offer on-site video visitation, only two reported that it is the visitor's only option for holding a video visit. This is perhaps because both states use video visitation for a specific purpose: In Alaska, visitors use it to visit with Alaskan state prisoners held by the Colorado Department of Corrections. In Tennessee, visitors use it only with people held in maximum security housing units.

As the Tennessee and Alaska examples suggest, the differences in video visitation's accessibility and availability are often based on the needs of a given state. Maryland, for example, implemented video visitation only in facilities that are not accessible by public transportation. Other states target the service to specific incarcerated populations—for instance, parents whose children are unable to visit the facility (New York), or those who have not received in-person visits for more than a year (Pennsylvania).



## VIDEO VISITATION IN WASHINGTON STATE PRISONS: A SNAPSHOT

In Washington's prisons, a video visit takes place at a kiosk installed in a housing-unit day room. Depending on the prison's security level, the kiosks may look more or less similar to computer monitors, with a webcam and a headset for the person to speak into and listen to his or her visitor. The visit, which an approved visitor must schedule in advance, lasts 30 minutes at a cost to the visitor of \$12.95. For an additional \$12.95, visitors can extend their visit to an hour at the time of the call if no one else has reserved the kiosk for that time slot.

While the hours during which people can access kiosks vary by prison facility, some visits take place as late as 10 p.m., substantially expanding the time for families to connect beyond in-person visiting hours. The visitor participates in the visit using any computer with Internet access and a webcam. The vendor records all video visits, which the WADOC staff can review following completion of the visit. Corrections staff can also opt to monitor the visits in real time, and can end a call immediately if they witness prohibited behaviors or interactions, such as gang signs or nudity.

The first video visitation pilot began in February 2013 at the Washington Corrections Center for Women. By June 2014, all 12 of the state's adult prison facilities offered video visitation.

JPay, a private vendor that also provides prison services such as e-mail, music, and commissary accounts, operates the video visitation program. Securus Technologies, a large criminal-justice technology and prison telecommunications company, acquired JPay in July 2015.

Incarcerated people confirmed that distance was a substantial barrier to face-to-face contact.

## Why video visitation? Bridging the distance between communities and prisons in Washington State

Washington State offers video visitation in all its prisons. As a high-availability jurisdiction, Washington serves as a valuable case study to examine in detail, against which to contrast and compare the researchers' national DOC survey results.

The survey of DOC administrators found that, for many states that offer video visitation, the goal is to increase opportunities for incarcerated people to stay in contact with their loved ones and to reduce their isolation. The survey revealed that each of the 16 states in the process of securing video visitation services or planning to do so in the future believed that it would extend visiting access to people who cannot make in-person visits because of restricted mobility or distance.

Among the incarcerated people surveyed in Washington State, respondents confirmed that distance was a substantial barrier to face-to-face contact. Two-thirds of respondents reported that the distance that their loved ones would

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have to travel limited the number of in-person visits, and more than half of all respondents (58 percent) cited the costs of an in-person visit as another inhibiting factor. Vera’s researchers determined that 50 percent of the incarcerated people in the survey previously lived at least 129 miles from the prison where they were serving their sentence—a trip that averaged nearly three hours’ driving time in one direction.<sup>6</sup> And for those incarcerated at the two easternmost men’s facilities—the furthest from the state’s main population centers—opportunities for visitation were especially limited. Because median distances between home ZIP Codes and those facilities were 103 miles and 209 miles, the drive times were long—at two hours and 22 minutes, and four hours and 27 minutes, respectively. This means that, at one facility, 50 percent of respondents were located at least four-and-a-half hours’ drive from their homes, requiring their visitors to travel a minimum of nine hours round-trip. Unsurprisingly, 95 percent of survey respondents stated that they would like to receive more in-person visits (92 percent of women and 96 percent of men). Of the respondents who reported having children (109 men and 41 women), only 37 percent of men and 27 percent of women reported having had in-person visits with their children during the previous year.<sup>7</sup>

Distance, however, is not the only barrier to in-person visitation. A third of incarcerated people surveyed reported that their loved ones did not have access to the necessary transportation—public or private—to make the journey. Fourteen percent of respondents claimed that, while they would like more in-person visits, their friends and family did not want to come to the prison. And although the survey did not specifically ask, an additional 7 percent of respondents commented that, although they wished for in-person visits, age or poor health kept their loved ones from traveling to the facility.

Video visitation thus appears to be a potentially valuable tool for increasing contact for incarcerated people and their loved ones in Washington. Of the 211 incarcerated people surveyed, 78 (37 percent) reported some direct experience of video visitation; 58 percent of service users reported that they use video visitation to stay in contact with loved ones who live far away or out-of-state. Respondents expressed gratitude for the service: according to one person, “... it can really help keep families together.” Indeed, for some respondents, video visitation represented “the only way [they] can see [their] family right now.”

Whether video visitation is being used in Washington State in addition to, or instead of, in-person visitation is not yet clear and will be the subject of further research by Vera. WADOC reported that it intended the service as a complement to in-person visitation, not a replacement. In fact, the agency hopes that strengthening family bonds through video visits might lead to an increase in in-person visits.

# The costs of video visitation

While corrections departments nationwide are concerned about the cost of introducing video visitation, the experience in Washington State demonstrates that a DOC's implementation and operational costs can be minimal when it uses a contracted provider that bundles video visitation with other services (such as e-mail, money transfer, or music download, for example) and charges fees to the service users—incarcerated people and their visitors—to cover their costs.

## IMPLEMENTATION

Of the 18 states reporting they had no intention of providing video visitation in the future or had not yet reached a decision, eight stated concerns that the implementation process would be expensive. This is understandable; video visitation, like other new technologies, requires an investment in infrastructure—most notably, secure and high-speed Internet connections. Prisons are secure buildings with dense walls that render most wireless Internet connections unreliable. They therefore require wired Internet, which is expensive to install. Fourteen of the 15 states that currently provide video visitation answered the survey question regarding the implementation process—all 14 reported needing to bring additional hardware into at least one of their facilities to implement the service. Computer kiosks for prisoners, broadband routers, universal serial bus (USB) hubs, new wiring, computer screens for monitoring visits, and cameras were among the new hardware.

In Washington, the implementation of a video visitation system had virtually no impact on the state's budget because WADOC used a full-service provider. When investing in video visitation, DOCs generally have two options: a self-owned and operated system in which the state DOC purchases, installs, and operates all equipment, or a contracted full-service system in which a contracted vendor installs, maintains, and manages the video visitation system.<sup>8</sup> In five of the nine state DOCs that contract with an outside vendor the provider paid the costs of new hardware. In these cases, the DOC incurred minimal expense, including modest costs to escort technicians around the prisons during installation, and for new Internet access plans and furniture.

WADOC's vendor, JPay, paid for the system's infrastructure and maintains the computer kiosks that support video visitation and other services. Since 2010, JPay has installed full-service kiosks in all facilities, which were initially used for services such as e-mail and music download, but were then enhanced to provide video visitation services in 2013. WADOC administrators reported minimal costs for the upgrade that implemented video visitation, which totaled only \$25,249.<sup>9</sup>

One implementation of video visitation had virtually no impact on the state's budget because WADOC used a full-service provider.

## OPERATION

Washington's experience in providing video visitation demonstrates that a state's operational costs can be low when an outside vendor operates the service. Moreover, the national survey found that, of the nine states using an outside vendor, seven reported that video visitation was "a low-cost addition to [their] previous visitation provisions." None of the states operating their own system agreed with this statement.<sup>10</sup>

The ongoing video visitation cost to WADOC is \$67,793 and comprises central administration (\$21,691) for operational oversight, contract management, and corrections officers' time to monitor video visits (\$46,102). JPay is contractually required to cover nearly all the cost associated with operation of video visitation including the installation and maintenance of the kiosks, network fees, customer service, and monitoring visits for disallowed behavior or interactions.

It is important to note, however, that Washington State's video visitation services are bundled with other services, which is a common practice in the contractual model. Therefore the costs of operating the kiosks for video visitation also support other services that incarcerated people access there. The revenues from all the kiosks' services—not only video visitation—also defray their cost.

## DOC REVENUE

Even when a DOC contracts with an external vendor to bring communications systems including video visitation into a prison, the agency can charge a commission for these services. Using video visitation to raise revenue was not an explicitly stated motivation for the majority of respondents to the survey of department administrators. Of the 16 state DOCs that are currently planning to implement video visitation, or would like to do so in the future, only three cited their desire to "produce needed revenue" as a reason for doing so. Indeed, only five of the 15 states that currently operate the system reported that video visitation yields revenue for their agency, and four reported that all revenue from video visitation is used for programming and recreation needs of incarcerated people. (Reported annual revenue ranged from \$6,200 in Indiana to \$289,585 in Oregon.)

As part of its operating agreement with JPay, WADOC receives a \$3 commission per 30-minute video visit (23 percent of the \$12.95 fee for a video visit). The agency reported revenue of \$14,316 in commission on 4,772 video visits conducted during 2014.<sup>11</sup> Because the service was not implemented in all of the state's prisons until June 2014, this amount is likely to rise in subsequent years. All commission proceeds go to the Offender Betterment Fund, which is used for prison libraries, televisions, and family-centered programming.<sup>12</sup> JPay collected an estimated \$47,481 in revenue from video visits. Fees from other kiosk-based services provided to prisoners—such as the sale of MP3 players, music, e-mail, and commissary fund transfers—also support the operation of the kiosks.<sup>13</sup>

## NATIONAL USER COSTS OF VIDEO VISITATION

In seven of the 10 states that charge users a fee, the DOCs reported that they consider video visits to be “an affordable way for visitors to contact prisoners.” The average user fee for video visits was 41 cents per minute, with the highest fee reported by the Alabama DOC at 60 cents per minute. The DOCs in Georgia, Indiana, and Oregon reported the lowest user fees—33 cents per minute. Many jurisdictions require users to pay for a minimum number of minutes; in Pennsylvania, for example, visits last 55 minutes and cost \$20 (36 cents per minute).<sup>a</sup> It is not known whether families in jurisdictions that charge a usage fee find the rates to be affordable; however, the survey of incarcerated people in Washington State suggests that a substantial number of potential users are deterred by these costs.

In all but five states—Hawaii, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, and Tennessee—visitors pay to use video visitation. In the five states with no fees, the DOC alone or in partnership with a community-based organization pays for video visitation. For example, in New York, families in certain prisons can stay connected via video visits that are provided by the Osborne Association, a nonprofit organization that provides services to people during and after incarceration as well as to their families. In conjunction with the video visits, this local nonprofit provides supportive services to children of incarcerated parents and runs parenting programs in prisons.<sup>b</sup>

In states where visitors and/or incarcerated people pay for the service, there are some exceptions. For example, the Alabama DOC provides free minutes for prisoners participating in the Aid to Inmate Mothers group.<sup>c</sup> In Oregon and Washington, other state agencies—such as child protective services—subsidize the service for children of incarcerated parents on a case-by-case basis when in-person visitation is not feasible.

### User cost of video visitation

State	Contracted or self-owned	Cost per minute	Standard call duration (minutes)
Alabama	Contract	\$0.60	20
Alaska	Self-owned	Not reported	55
Georgia	Contract	\$0.33	30
Hawaii	Self-owned	Free to users	15
Indiana	Contract	\$0.33	30
Maryland	Self-owned	Free to users	Not reported
New Jersey	Operated by NJ State Parole Board	Free to users	30
New York	Contract	Free to users	45
North Dakota	Contract	\$0.42	30
Ohio	Contract	Not reported	Not reported
Oregon	Contract	\$0.33	30
Pennsylvania	Contract	\$0.36	50
Tennessee	Self-owned	Free to users	60
Virginia	Operated by local nonprofit organizations	\$0.50	30 or 60
Washington	Contract	\$0.43	30

Note: Alaska and Ohio did not provide information on the fees.

<sup>a</sup> Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, “Virtual Visitation Program,” <https://perma.cc/9KDQ-RZ59>

<sup>b</sup> Allison Hollihan and Michelle Portlock, *Video Visiting in Corrections: Benefits, Limitations, and Implementation Considerations* (New York, NY: Osborne Association, 2014) p. 37.

<sup>c</sup> Aid to Inmate Mothers is a nonprofit organization providing services to incarcerated mothers to support personal growth and the maintenance of the mother/child relationship.



## COSTS TO USERS

When a corrections agency does not cover the cost of implementation and operation, it passes them on to the users: incarcerated people and their visitors. WADOC visitors pay \$12.95 for a 30-minute video visit, which is consistent with the price in states that charge for the service (see “National User Cost of Video Visitation,” p. 13).<sup>14</sup> While this user fee is low compared to travel costs and other expenses associated with in-person visits, it was reportedly still prohibitively high for many of the incarcerated people surveyed in WADOC facilities—nearly half of all the incarcerated people surveyed (47 percent) said that the cost of video visitation prevented them from using the service or from using it more often.

## Managing rollout: The challenge of bringing new technology into a secure environment

Introducing a new technology in multiple prison facilities raises significant logistical and operational challenges. Of the 35 states that do not currently offer video visitation, many respondents expressed concern about impediments to its successful operation. The most commonly cited concerns were that “unapproved visitors may participate in visits” (19 of the 34 responding states) and that their “facilities do not have the technology” necessary for video visitation (18 states).<sup>15</sup> If states are to be successful in adopting video visitation, corrections departments must develop new policies and procedures and invest in the technological infrastructure needed to deal with these challenges.

In response to such concerns, WADOC decided to pilot the system in one facility before expanding it statewide. For the pilot, WADOC chose Mission Creek Corrections Center (MCCC), a minimum-security prison for women approximately 40 miles from Tacoma, where the first video visit was conducted in February 2013. A second prison’s video visiting system went live in August 2013 and, by January 2014 video visitation services were available at nine of the state’s 12 facilities. Rollout was completed system-wide in June 2014.

## DEVELOPING POLICIES

Corrections staff may worry about adopting new technology in prison settings. WADOC’s staggered adoption of video visitation allowed the project manager to meet with key staff in each prison to explain the system’s details ahead of implementation. These meetings were followed by in-person and live online training for prison staff provided by JPay. This process allowed staff to voice their concerns. Staff expressed reservations that video visits would give prison-

In its internal  
review, WADOC  
found inappropriate  
behavior in fewer  
than 1 percent of the  
video visits.



ers the opportunity to engage in prohibited behaviors such as interacting with people with whom they have no-contact orders.

Sensitive to this concern, the corrections department started from a relatively conservative position, modeling video visitation policy on existing in-person visitation policy.<sup>16</sup> It required prospective video visitors to appear at a WADOC facility, present identification, and be photographed. This process posed difficulties for people who lived too far from a facility to fulfill the requirement of the in-person application—potentially excluding the very people the service was designed to help. As agency and prison staff became more comfortable with the technology and recognized that video visits posed minimal safety concerns, WADOC gradually relaxed this approach, allowing prospective visitors to complete a visitor request form without having to verify their identity in person. In fact, the new policy gave WADOC an avenue to selectively approve people who would be denied an in-person visit—for example, someone with a recent felony conviction.

## MONITORING FOR MISUSE

The department's comfort with the system increased after a WADOC staff member reviewed all of the visits to date (500 as of February 2014, when the review took place) and completed a checklist for each one, documenting such factors as the number of people on the visit, the quality of the video and sound, any compromises to the privacy of other incarcerated people, gang signs or activity, and appropriate dress and behavior.<sup>17</sup> This review revealed inappropriate behavior, such as the appearance of a non-approved visitor or nudity, in fewer than 3 percent of the visits. It also revealed a need for WADOC to develop a graduated response plan for when video visitors violate the rules. The plan, which WADOC is currently finalizing, has a series of suspension periods ranging from 30 to 90 days for each repeat rule violation, ultimately resulting in termination of video visit privileges.

After the implementation phase, JPay began monitoring all video visits. JPay agents review the visits live or within 24 hours of their completion, documenting any security-related problems arising during the visits and notifying appropriate corrections staff if there were any major concerns. Corrections staff also can monitor any visit live (and terminate the visit if necessary) and review recorded video visits. Typically they will watch the recordings only if JPay has raised a concern, but they also conduct spot checks.

## TROUBLESHOOTING TECHNOLOGY

The introduction of video visitation in a prison system inevitably involves addressing technical glitches. In this regard, WADOC's decision to pilot the service in one facility was prudent. During the first two months of piloting (February and March 2013), only 10 out of 35 scheduled visits were completed successfully. Through careful monitoring of subsequent video visits, the monitors identified and corrected a number of technical challenges. For example, incoming and

outgoing audio-visual recordings were often out of sync, limiting staff's ability to monitor content. Visitors were having difficulty navigating the vendor's website to schedule visits and had technical problems using the service (for instance, JPay's system failed to recognize a visitor's webcam). JPay was able to talk visitors through these processes and sought to address these issues systemically.

## Usage rates and the user experience

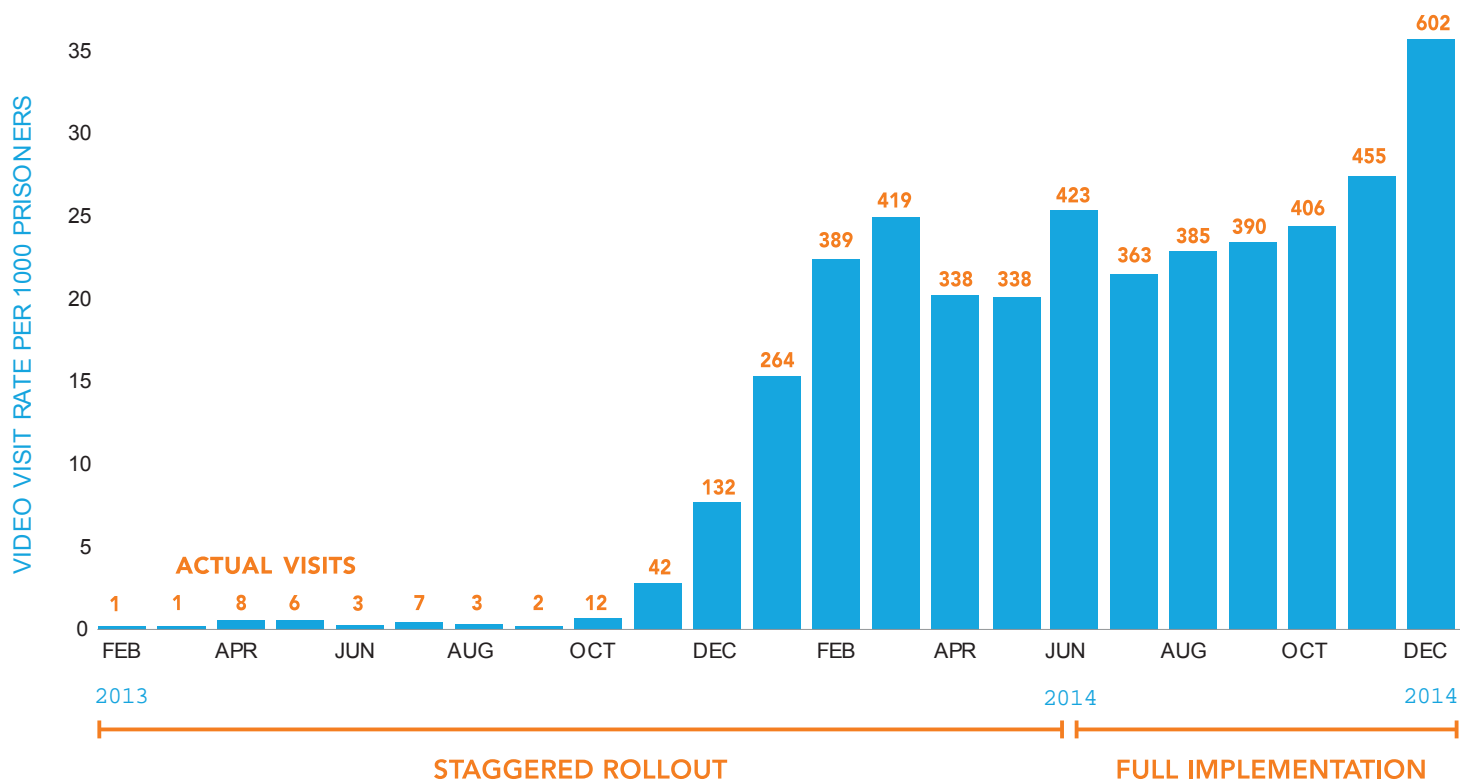
Despite incarcerated people's desire for new ways to connect, adoption of a new service may be slow. Five of the 15 states that provide video visits reported that those in prison were reluctant to use the service. For implementation of the system to be worthwhile, corrections department and prison personnel must actively track, analyze, and address barriers to use, whether they are motivational or practical.

Usage rates in Washington State have been relatively low when compared to other states, such as Oregon.<sup>18</sup> However, the service is in its relative infancy, and, if Washington follows the trajectory of other states that have implemented video visiting, adoption is likely to grow. WADOC and JPay both undertook a number of activities to engage incarcerated people and their loved ones in using the service. For example, WADOC staff spoke with and provided information to advisory groups of incarcerated people and family members; JPay sent video visitation information to incarcerated and non-incarcerated people who were already using their other services (such as money transfers).<sup>19</sup>

Figure 3 shows visit rates per 1,000 prisoners in WADOC custody for each month since piloting began in February 2013. Usage rates increased markedly with the addition of Airway Heights, a 2,200-bed men's facility near Spokane. However, even at the usage peak of December 2014 (most likely a holiday effect) there was considerable variation among facilities. The highest rates during this month occurred in the women's facility MCCC (64 visits per 1,000 prisoners), Clallam Bay Corrections Center (a remote men's prison on the Olympic Peninsula, 62 visits per 1,000 prisoners), and Stafford Creek Corrections Center (a large men's prison on the western coast, 54 visits per 1,000). Washington Corrections Center (a men's prison, 30 minutes' drive from Olympia) by contrast, saw only six visits per 1,000 prisoners during that same month.<sup>20</sup>

These usage rates do not necessarily reflect people's desire (or lack thereof) to use the service. Indeed, three-quarters of respondents to the survey of incarcerated people (85 percent of female respondents and 71 percent of male respondents) reported that they would like to have more video visits. Obstacles to usage and possible solutions are described below.

Figure 3: Usage rates in Washington State prisons



### INCREASING USAGE RATES

Respondents to Vera’s survey of incarcerated people in Washington State suggested that the convenience of the service could be improved by increasing access to the kiosks. Currently, kiosks are located in day rooms and are therefore only accessible at times when the day room is open, which varies by facility and custody level. Furthermore, visitors currently schedule the visits, and they do not necessarily know when their loved ones will be available (if, for example, they attend programs or work during the day). Fewer than half (46 percent) of the incarcerated people surveyed felt that the kiosks are easy to access, and only 40 percent believed that they had greater flexibility in scheduling video visits than in-person visits. Forty-one percent reported that there were enough available time-slots for them to use the service when they want to. In response to these concerns, JPay started to add more kiosks to the day rooms during the summer of 2015, increasing the opportunities for video visits. The company also plans to introduce a new feature that will allow a prisoner to initiate a video call.

For video visits to happen, however, visitors also must have access to the necessary technology. Half of the 35 states that do not provide video visitation expressed concern that this would prove to be a significant challenge to people using the service. The survey of incarcerated people in Washington State

reflected this problem. It found that, of the respondents who would like to make greater use of video visitation, one in five (21 percent) is prevented from doing so because a loved one lacks Internet access.<sup>21</sup> The Public Law Library of King County offers free video visits at two locations—the County Courthouse in downtown Seattle and the Maleng Regional Justice Center in Kent—but the usage rate is low there as well.

## USER SATISFACTION

Beyond issues of convenience, accessibility, and cost, users' experience with the service is likely to influence usage rates. Among the subsample of direct users of video visitation in the survey of incarcerated people in Washington State, satisfaction rates were relatively low; approximately one quarter (24 percent) agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement, "I am satisfied with my video visitation experience," and just over half (55 percent) disagreed or somewhat disagreed (the remaining 21 percent were neutral on this issue). Nearly two-thirds of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the visual quality of their visit, and 70 percent disagreed or somewhat disagreed with the statement, "I am satisfied with the sound quality of my video visits." In their comments, users of the service mentioned experiencing a time lag between picture and sound, with visitors' voices being heard at a delay. Respondents reported that the picture would sometimes freeze and, occasionally, the call would be dropped. Respondents were unsure whether this was a problem with the JPay system or the result of insufficient bandwidth on the visitor's computer. As mentioned above, the DOC and JPay noted these technical issues during the implementation phase and reported that they took steps to fix them. It is unclear from the survey whether negative experiences with the system were recent, or whether early frustration with technical glitches had discouraged users from making further visits that might have demonstrated that the service had improved. In either case, the perceived quality of the service continued to deter participation, with 28 percent of the full sample stating that poor audio and visual quality discouraged them from using the system more frequently.

Nuanced perceptions of the experience of making contact with loved ones via video visitation are difficult to capture through a survey. Through survey respondents' comments in the margin and their conversations with the researchers, many people expressed concern that WADOC might end video visitation. And the survey results show that while technical and cost issues frustrated users, they still valued the service. A minority of respondents reported that they "don't like visiting by video" (12 percent), but a similar number (14 percent) reported that they preferred video visitation to in-person visits. Nearly one-third (30 percent) believed that their family or friends preferred video visitation to in-person visits.

## EXPANDING VIDEO VISITATION IN WASHINGTON

Having seen the potential of video technology, WADOC has forged various partnerships to increase access to video visits for incarcerated people and to address specific needs. For example, the agency collaborated with child protective services to connect children in the child welfare system with their incarcerated parents using video visitation.<sup>a</sup> WADOC has also introduced video conferencing as a way for incarcerated people nearing release to meet with parole officers and other community-based supporters—peer mentors, family members, and sponsors—to help decrease anxiety and prepare for successful community reentry. Additional applications WADOC is considering include using video visits for seriously ill family members or incarcerated people and expanding video visiting access to people sentenced to death.

<sup>a</sup> Washington State law allows a court to delay beyond statutory limitations a decision on termination of parental rights when the parent is incarcerated, on the condition that the parent satisfies a host of other criteria, including the ability to maintain a relationship during incarceration. Video visits can be used to meet this condition of the court. See Washington State SHB1284.

## Conclusion

The prevalence of video visitation in adult prisons, currently available in just over 100 of the 1,190 prisons nationwide, is likely to grow in the near future.<sup>22</sup> Departments of corrections, once reluctant to introduce computer or web-based technologies into their facilities, are increasingly convinced that the security capabilities and functionality of new systems are sufficiently developed to meet their needs. With private companies willing to subsidize the implementation and operation of new systems—or even pay for them fully—state corrections departments may find little reason to resist adopting the technology.

The experience in Washington State demonstrates that, by partnering with a private vendor that is also contracted to provide other electronic services, the burden placed on a corrections department's budget can be negligible.

States in search of an affordable supplement to their current visitation provisions should not, however, disregard the work needed to introduce video visitation in a way that both engages staff and potential users, and conforms to a prison's security requirements. Corrections agencies must make numerous policy and operational decisions, collaborate with vendors to identify and resolve technical bugs, and educate staff and users on best practice in the use of this technology on an ongoing basis. Without proper training for incarcerated people and prison staff and consistent attention to the technical quality of the service, negative experiences with the service may inhibit participation and, as a result, obstruct the goal of supporting relationships between incarcerated people and their loved ones.

DOCs need to consider whether adding co-visitation onto the price of a video visit will reinforce or undermine their goal of keeping families connected.

States also cannot ignore the fact that some operational costs are passed on to video visitation's users. DOCs need to consider, for example, whether adding commissions onto the price of a video visit will reinforce or undermine their goal of keeping families in touch with incarcerated people. Although people in Washington State's prisons identified the cost of video calls as a barrier to greater use, technologies are likely to continue to improve and may become more affordable, and more systems may come online to create economies of scale. JPay reports that the cost of video kiosks has decreased since the technology first became available. However, the extent to which video visits can confer the benefits already demonstrated for in-person visits—such as improved well-being and behavior—is unknown. Later this year, Vera researchers will seek to answer this question through interviews in Washington State with incarcerated people and their loved ones and an analysis of the impact of participation on a person's in-prison conduct.

While factoring in users' concerns about the price and quality of the program, Vera's analysis also confirmed that video visitation addresses a very real need. Incarcerated people are routinely held at long distances—sometimes hundreds of miles and across state lines—from their loved ones and home communities. As long as this practice continues, video visits may be the only available means some people have to communicate with family members face-to-face.



## ENDNOTES

- 1 For more on the connection between family contact and reduced behavioral infractions, see John D. Wooldredge, "Inmate Experiences and Psychological Well-Being," *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 26, no. 2 (1999): 235-250, and Shanhe Jiang and L. Thomas Winfree, "Social Support, Gender, and Inmate Adjustment to Prison Life: Insights from a National Sample," *The Prison Journal* 86, no. 1 (2006): 34, 50-51. For more on the connection between family contact and recidivism, see Grant Duwe and Valerie Clark, "Blessed Be the Social Tie that Binds: The Effects of Prison Visitation on Offender Recidivism," *Criminal Justice Policy Review* 24, no. 3 (2013): 271-296, and William D. Bales and Daniel P. Mears, "Inmate Social Ties and the Transition to Society: Does Visitation Reduce Recidivism?" *The Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 45, no. 3 (2008): 287-321. For more on how visiting benefits children with incarcerated parents, see Julie Poehlmann et al, "Children's Contact With Their Incarcerated Parents: Research Findings and Recommendations," *The American Psychologist* 65.6 (2010): 575-598. PMC.
- 2 See for example, Johnna Christian, "Riding the Bus: Barriers to Prison Visitation and Family Management Strategies," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2005): 31-48.
- 3 Allison Hollihan and Michelle Portlock, *Video Visiting in Corrections: Benefits, Limitations, and Implementation Considerations*. (New York, NY: Osborne Association, 2014). See also Bernadette Rabuy and Peter Wagner, *Screening Out Family Time: The for-profit video visitation industry in prisons and jails*. (Northampton, MA: Prison Policy Initiative, 2015).
- 4 After the survey was conducted, Minnesota announced its DOC is providing video visiting in all its prisons. Reporting on the video visits suggests the DOC is taking a \$1 commission on the \$9.95 visit, which lasts 30 minutes. See Beatrice Dupuy, "Minnesota prisons add video visitation," *Star Tribune*, October 19, 2015. In Georgia, the DOC currently offers video visitation in five female facilities but is in the planning stages of expanding the service to more prisons.
- 5 New York and Indiana were the only two states to report that video visitation is accessible to all prisoners held in the relevant facilities.
- 6 To provide a greater understanding of the difficulty that incarcerated people face in receiving visits, survey participants were asked to provide the ZIP Code in which they were living immediately prior to their incarceration. Of those surveyed, 181 participants (86 percent) gave valid ZIP Codes. Researchers then estimated the direct distance and driving time between the incarcerated person's current prison facility and his or her home. The mean distance between facility and home ZIP Code was 167 miles. Eight respondents (4.4 percent of the subsample) reported ZIP Codes outside of Washington at considerable distances from the facility, slightly skewing the average. Researchers therefore considered the median, or mid-point, value for the sample. The median direct distance between previous ZIP Code and current facility was 129 miles.
- 7 Sixty-two percent of male and 54 percent of female respondents with children had at least one child aged 10 or younger.
- 8 Adapted from Hollihan and Portlock, p. 28.
- 9 Central WADOC administration reported a one-time salary cost of \$25,009 for procurement and contract negotiations with the vendor. Of its 12 prisons, only one reported a one-time cost of \$175 to install new stools.
- 10 Cost data were collected through a survey sent to each of the state's 12 facilities and WADOC headquarters, which is responsible for procurement and oversight of video visitation.
- 11 WADOC also earns a commission from other kiosk-based services the vendor provides: 5 percent of gross e-mail revenue and \$2 per MP3 player; \$0.04 per song/video; and \$0.20 per music album that JPay sells to incarcerated people.
- 12 Washington State Department of Corrections, "Policy 200.200 Offender Betterment Fund," <https://perma.cc/V2Q5-VRVG>.
- 13 JPay revenue is calculated by multiplying the number of video visits provided in 2014 (4,772) by \$9.95, which is JPay's revenue per visit net of the \$3 commission to WADOC.
- 14 Should the call end early, the visitor will still be charged the full amount. However, if the call fails because of a technical malfunction, the users receive credit toward future calls.
- 15 Perhaps a sign of the extent to which corrections departments have become comfortable with introducing Internet-based technologies to their facilities, 75 percent of the states surveyed believe that video visitation poses significantly fewer security threats than in-person visits.
- 16 Washington State Department of Corrections, "Policy 450.300 Visits for Prison Offenders, Video Visiting Attachment," Rev. February 2, 2015 <https://perma.cc/V2Q5-VRVG>.
- 17 The video visitation policy gives guidelines on visitor conduct including appropriate dress, things one cannot show (such as weapons and drug paraphernalia) and prohibits third-party recordings of the visit.
- 18 In October 2014, 24 video visits per 1,000 incarcerated people were conducted in Washington, compared with 160 video visits per 1,000 prisoners in Oregon.
- 19 JPay also posted a blog about a Valentine's Day video visit at MCCC to let people know that video visiting was available at that facility. See JPay Blog, "Meet Brandon and Erin," March 11, 2013. WADOC also made several attempts to attract news coverage once video visiting was available statewide to increase awareness of the opportunity among families. Staff wrote an article in January 2014 for its website and a local news outlet covered the story; see Washington State Department of Corrections, "Video Visitation Expands Statewide," January 13, 2014, <https://perma.cc/N7L3-7Z4J>; and KBKW News, "Washington Department of Corrections expands video visitations statewide," January 20, 2014. <https://perma.cc/QW97-WSSM>
- 20 Vera will conduct a more detailed analysis of usage rates as they relate to prisoner demographics and location, as part of its upcoming study on the impact of the video visitation program.

- 21 The U.S. Census Bureau reported that in 2013 in the lowest income category (\$25,000 or less), 37.6 percent of households did not have a computer as compared to only 1.9 percent of the highest income category (\$150,000 and more). Similarly, while 77.4 percent of white households and 86.6 percent of Asian households have a computer and broadband Internet access, only 61.3 percent of black households and 66.7 percent of Hispanic households have computers and broadband Internet access. See Thom File and Camille Ryan, "Computer and Internet Use in the United States: 2013," American Community Survey Reports, ACS-28, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2014. <https://perma.cc/JFR9-4FCP>. See also the National Telecommunication and Information Administration and the Economics and Statistics Administration in the U.S. Department of Commerce, "Exploring the Digital Nation: America's Emerging Online Experience." June 2013. <https://perma.cc/4JF3-JH4Y>. Although the role of smart phones as a way to conduct a video visit may grow, not all families have equal access to this technology. In 2014, of households with an annual income under \$30,000, only 47 percent had smart phones compared to 81 percent in households over \$75,000 and a national average of 58 percent. Pew Research Center, Mobile Technology Fact Sheet <https://perma.cc/VPR9-M5Z3>
- 22 In a 2005 census of correctional facilities, there were 1,190 state confinement facilities. James J. Stephan, Census of State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 2005. (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008, NCJ 222182).

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