

Colinas Women's Detention Facility in
Santee, California, on April 22, 2020.

SANDY HUFFAKER / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

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The sun is shining bright as it sits high in the clear blue sky. Its warmth comforts the skin as a light breeze blows. The view of the beach is breathtaking. Everyone there has a bright smile, and at first glance, one would think this was a snapshot of the perfect moment in time.

These are the types of photographs you'll find on the website linked to one of the largest communications providers for prisons and jails in the United States, Securus. Prison communications companies like Securus and Global Tel*Link (GTL) rake in over **\$1.75 billion annually**

(<https://www.prisonphonejustice.org/news/2020/apr/1/ongoing-push-end-outrageous-prison-phone-charges/>) and hold close to 6,000 contracts with prisons and jails across the U.S (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/many-families-struggle-pay-phone-calls-loved-ones-u-s-n1107531>). However, these picturesque photos are nowhere close to the grim realities prisoners and their loved ones experience while at the mercy of these companies.

Here's a more accurate picture: I stand in line, shoulder to shoulder with other men during a global pandemic where we're supposed to be "social distancing," waiting to use the phone. Tired, I shift my weight from foot to foot, trying to find some comfort as I continue to wait. I have been in this line for almost an hour, and I am still three people back from receiving a chance at using a phone. This does not feel like a nice beach. There is no light breeze kissing my skin. We are on our second round of a two-week lockdown "quarantine" after another guard tested positive for COVID-19. Time out of our cells to use the phone is rare, but for many of us, it's the only way we can contact our loved ones during these uncertain times.

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That being said, accessing phones wasn't a walk on the beach even before the virus. The prison in which I reside holds around 800 prisoners, with each of the four living units housing around 200. There are 10 phones in each living unit, but it's rare to see them all fully functional. In my unit, one of the 10 phones has completely quit working, and three of the remaining nine only work if you hold the cord just right — move the cord slightly and conversation becomes impossible. The phone cords are short and hardly make it all the way down to the tiny stools we're supposed to sit on. This leaves us to stretch cords beyond their max capacity and inadvertently damage the wires that connect receivers to phone boxes.

Phones frequently become choppy or sound as if you're underwater. This results in mounting frustration between prisoners and their loved ones. It's annoying and exhausting to pay by the minute to say "What? Can you

hear me?” over and over, until tensions are so high you suddenly find yourself in an argument. I’ve witnessed breakups over these literal communications breakdowns.

“Man, I really hope I get one of the good phones,” is all I can think. Struggling to have a conversation on a phone with a poor connection can sometimes be worse than not talking at all — adding pressure to an already frustrating situation is never beneficial. Nevertheless, I know I’ll take whatever phone I can get. I miss my loved ones and want to make sure they are okay, especially during these times of vast uncertainty.

As I continue to shift my body weight, I look at the prisoner behind me and say, “I am so tired of all this bullshit; hard to believe we pay for this, right?” Sometimes it feels like you just have to know you are not in this alone. The guy behind me agrees, and goes on to say, “What choice do we have if we want to call home?” I shake my head, but must admit I feel some type of way about it. The fact we have all just come to accept this as okay and normal — well, that is a hard pill to swallow.

We pay exceptionally high prices for these terrible services just to stay in contact with our loved ones. In my state, most prisoners make 43 cents an hour. In order to make a 20-minute local phone call to your family — which costs

\$2.20 not including fees — you have to work over 5 hours. This largely leaves the burden on our families to pay for communication. Prison telecommunication companies know that families are desperate to stay in contact with their incarcerated loved ones and take advantage, charging high rates for services that are cheap or even free in the outside world.

The charges don't just stop at the phone calls. It costs anywhere from \$3 to \$9.95 to be able to add money to your phone account to make the calls in the first place. Say that your loved one wanted to put \$200 on your account so that you can call their number. GTL charges them upwards of \$9.95 on top of everything just to do that. While technically the company is supposed to have their max allowance at \$200, my loved ones have experienced months on end where the website caps it at \$50, giving the corporation opportunities to collect more and more fees knowing families will continue to put more and more money in our accounts to stay in contact with us. We spend thousands every year just to stay in communication; the least they can do is ensure our phones work.

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Since the cancellation of in-person visitation due to the virus, video visits have become hugely important. Video visits can be painfully excruciating to sit through. They cost \$7.95 for 30 minutes and rarely, if ever, function properly. Connections are so disruptive that conversation becomes completely impossible. In my own experience, around 90 percent of the visit is spent repeating things over and over, gazing upon a blank or frozen screen, or talking over each other because delays can last up to 30 seconds after speaking.

When our loved ones file complaints, they often are ignored or met with boilerplate responses that blame our loved one's bandwidth at home and not the prison's services. Because of this, many forgo complaining and have come to expect poor services as a fact of life. I often hear prisoners and their loved ones repeat the same old saying, "It is what it is."

When prisoners file complaints, it quickly becomes an uphill battle. Many of them are disregarded and thrown out through procedural roadblocks involving the

complicated rules of the prisoner grievance process, put in place by the Prison Litigation Reform Act to try and discourage us from complaining. Last year, I filed a complaint with the prison's grievance coordinator about our poor phone service that everyone was experiencing. I was chasing my tail for months. Although everyone was collectively experiencing the same issue, the grievance office blamed my loved one's cell services and said, "Many times, issues with static and poor call quality are due to the recipients using a cell phone in a location with poor reception, while driving, and things that are out of GTL's control." Prisoners had been complaining for months about the phones, yet the grievance office thought it was more logical to assume everyone in the free world's cell phone service failed simultaneously rather than there was something afoot with the prison's aging phones.

Regardless of how unrealistic their claim was, that was the end of my ability to move forward with the complaint.

They ended their message with: "The complaint was resolved informally," and absolved themselves.

These experiences teach us not to waste our time filing grievances. As if struggling to pay the rates wasn't enough, we are left to take whatever services are offered. There is little to no oversight, maintenance or repairs. When there are repairs, they can take months. These companies know

they essentially have a monopoly and that the Department of Corrections (DOC) will renew their contracts regardless of the quality of services. They also know our families are desperate and will pay. They've learned the way to extract as much money as possible, with as little oversight as possible.

However, simply putting the blame on the communication industry would be all too easy; their hands are not the only ones in the cookie jar. The DOC is equally at fault for the astronomical rates and poor services. The DOC continues to sign exploitative contracts with the companies and refuses to hold the companies accountable when problems arise.

This is because the DOC receives a percentage of the revenue generated from prisoners and their families. The DOC's involvement with these companies and between prisoners and our loved ones seems to end once they receive their check.

Given that the DOC remains one of the sole benefactors of the river of cash that flows through these pipelines, there is little motivation for them to hold these companies accountable. What's in the best interest of the DOC is to accumulate as much revenue as possible, not to ensure we are receiving good services at low prices. Like the

telecommunication companies, the DOC knows we will desperately continue to use broken and dismal services to stay in connection with the outside world.

Of course, when asked about the kickbacks, the DOC will spin some feeble tale that this money is used for rehabilitation programs through something called the “Offender Betterment Fund.” Yet the majority of the Offender Betterment Fund is used for things like paying staff salaries, funding law libraries (our access to law libraries is not just for betterment, it’s a constitutional right), for general maintenance within the prisons, and pretty much any cost that does not fit neatly into any other appropriations budget category. The DOC’s budget is now reliant on the commission generated from telecommunication companies extorting prisoners and their loved ones, leaving it highly unlikely they will stand up for us.

With the current COVID-19 crisis, phones and other communication systems have never been in more demand than they are now. As movement within our prison becomes more restrictive, phones and **JPay tablets** (<https://www.wired.com/story/jpay-securus-prison-email-charging-millions/>) have become our only source of communication with those we most love. Many prisoners and their loved ones have started to heavily rely

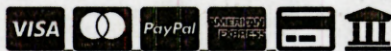
on these lines of communication as a sense of security that all are safe and healthy in a world that seems to be changing direction by the hour, making these services essential. However, these services are so expensive, for many, it simply isn't possible to budget them in. Even though these companies have offered minor handouts over the last month, like two free five-minute calls a week, they are nothing compared to the billions of dollars they have raked in year after year.

As everyone in society struggles to pay bills, feed themselves, and maintain their basic needs, these companies should not be able to profit off the backs of prisoners and their loved ones, while providing us with dysfunctional services. Amid the virus, we must meaningfully examine these companies and their oppressive practices, along with the DOC's reliance on their revenue and lack of motivation to hold them accountable and to negotiate contracts that are beneficial to prisoners and their loved ones. Just because we are incarcerated shouldn't mean that we and our families should be subject to extortion.

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Christopher Blackwell, 39, is incarcerated at the Washington State Reformatory in Monroe, Washington, and is working toward publishing a book on solitary confinement.

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