RESEARCH REPORT

The Scope, Severity, and Interdiction of Contraband Cell Phones in Correctional Facilities

Findings from the Contraband Cell Phones Needs Assessment

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The Scope, Severity, and Interdiction of Contraband Cell Phones in Correctional Facilities

Contraband cell phones have become a significant concern among correctional administrators and policymakers in recent decades due to concerns about the safety of incarcerated people, staff, and the public. There have been alarming reports of contraband cell phones being used to coordinate criminal activities, intimidate witnesses, and plan escapes.[1] Despite the consequences for the safety and security of correctional institutions, research on the scope and prevalence of contraband cell phones, and on the use of technologies and strategies to combat the problem, is limited (Peterson et al. 2023).

To this end, the Urban Institute and our partners—CNA Corporation, Correctional Leaders Association, the American Correctional Association, and criminal justice consultants John Shaffer and Joe Russo—conducted a needs assessment to (1) understand the scope and severity of contraband cell phones in prisons across the country, (2) identify which interdiction technologies and strategies agencies are using, and (3) assess the knowledge gaps related to correctional practice and contraband interdiction. Our team created a brief survey with those three focus areas and administered it to all 50 departments of corrections (DOCs) in the United States in March 2021. A total of 31 DOCs participated in this effort, 20 of which contributed to comprehensive statistical data for analysis.[*] This report presents our key findings from the data from those 20 DOCs' survey responses and discusses implications for policy and research.

Background

Despite the dangers associated with contraband cell phones, there has been very little systematic data collection on the scope of the problem. Most information is provided on an irregular or ad hoc basis by individual state correctional agencies. For example, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation reportedly recovered 6,776 cell phones in 2022.[2] A more recent study collected data on

[*] Our analyses exclude agencies that (1) did not respond to the survey, or (2) provided incomplete or otherwise unreliable information that could significantly distort the overall statistical findings.

the prevalence of contraband, including cell phones, through the National Survey of Correctional Contraband, which was completed by 301 prisons across six state DOCs (Peterson et al. 2023). Respondents identified cell phones as one of the most common contraband items recovered in prisons (second only to weapons), with a reported average of 31 cell phones per 1,000 incarcerated people, and a reported maximum of 366 cell phones recovered by a single prison in calendar year 2018 alone. While informative, these data-collection efforts have been limited to single or few correctional agencies, leaving a critical gap in our understanding of the full scope and severity of the contraband cell phone problem nationwide.

Information on what agencies are doing to combat the contraband cell phone problem is also limited. Administrators may employ a range of technologies to detect contraband cell phones (e.g., body scanners, metal detectors, and radio frequency detectors) or disable them (e.g., managed access systems and microjamming) (Peterson et al. 2022; Shaffer et al. 2023). These technologies are often supported by nontechnological solutions, such as pat searches, K9 units, interdiction teams, or netting around a facility's perimeter intended to prevent contraband from being thrown in (Russo et al. 2022; Shukla, Peterson, and Kim 2021). While it is clear agencies rely on a host of interdiction strategies to remove cell phones from, and prevent their use in, prisons, there are again no nationally representative data on the use of these strategies. This report provides data from our contraband cell phones needs assessment survey, which was intended to address this important knowledge gap.

Survey Overview

The cell phone contraband needs assessment survey had three goals:

1. Understand the scope and severity of contraband cell phones in prisons across the country.
2. Develop an understanding of the interdiction technologies and strategies currently used by correctional agencies.
3. Assess the gaps in knowledge about contraband cell phones in the correctional field.

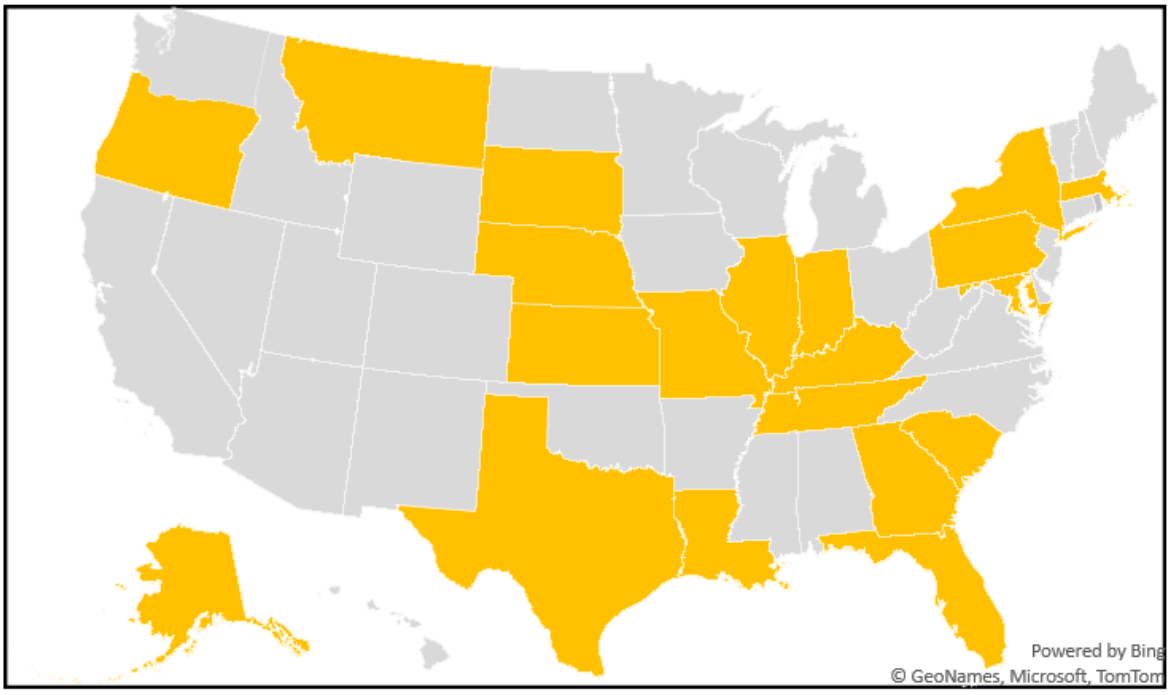
To address goal 1, the survey asked about the DOCs' management of contraband cell phones during calendar year 2020. It included questions on the number of cell phones they recovered; the number of punitive actions they took in response to the smuggling or possession of contraband cell phones; common points through which contraband cell phones enter their facilities; their assessment of the safety and security threat posed by cell phones; and the overall importance of cell phone contraband interdiction to them relative to other pressing issues like prison gangs, solitary confinement, caring for

people with mental health needs, staff recruitment and retention, and other contraband items. To address goal 2, the survey asked respondents to indicate which strategies and procedures they used to detect, confiscate, or remove contraband cell phones from facilities. To address goal 3, the survey asked about areas in which participating agencies would benefit from receiving additional support or information about contraband cell phones and interdiction strategies.

The survey was distributed in March 2021 to the 50 state DOCs, which were given two months to complete it. The research team received responses from 31 states (or 62 percent of DOCs). After processing incomplete and otherwise unusable data, we analyzed survey responses from 20 states (figure 1). This subset (hereafter the "study sample") of state DOCs represents 40 percent of all state DOCs.

FIGURE 1

State Departments of Corrections Included in This Assessment's Sample



Source: Urban Institute.

Figure 1 shows the geographic distribution of the states in the study sample. Approximately, three in five midwestern states (58 percent) and one in two southern states (47 percent) were included in our analysis, indicating more representation compared with the northeastern (33 percent) and western (15 percent) states. In addition, while our study sample consists of 40 percent of all state DOCs, it

encompasses over 55 percent of the total prison population on account of several larger DOCs participating in this effort.

Findings

This section outlines key findings from the needs assessment, organized by the scope and severity of the contraband cell phone problem, interdiction technologies and strategies, and knowledge gaps in the field.

The Scope and Severity of the Problem

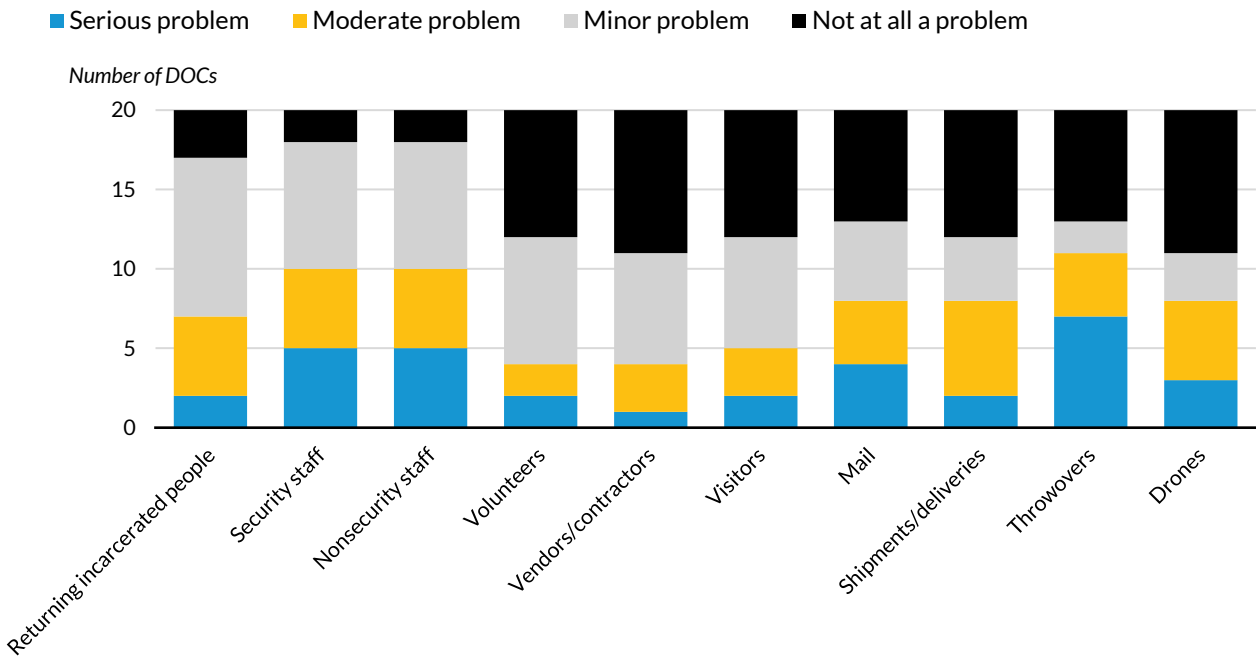
In 2020, the 20 DOCs in the study sample reported a total of 25,840 contraband cell phone recoveries. This resulted in an average of 1,292 cell phone recoveries per state. There was sizeable variation across states, however, with DOCs recovering between 14 and 7,971 cell phones over this period. Fifty percent of DOCs reported recovering 180 cell phones or fewer, and roughly 75 percent reported recovering fewer than 1,500 cell phones in the year. Notably, two of the participating DOCs reported recovering more than 6,000 cell phones.

The 20 state departments of corrections in our data analysis reported recovering 25,840 cell phones in 2020.

To further contextualize cell phone recoveries, the survey included questions about how cell phones enter prisons. We asked respondents to assess the extent to which common entry points for contraband cell phones posed a problem (figure 2).

FIGURE 2

The Extent to Which Common Entry Points for Contraband Cell Phones Were a Problem in US Prisons in 2020



Source: Urban Institute survey of state departments of corrections administered in March 2021.
Notes: DOCs = departments of corrections. *n*=20.

As shown in figure 2, 25 percent of participating agencies indicated that both security and nonsecurity staff were a serious problem, and close to 35 percent reported that throwovers (i.e., cell phones being thrown into prison premises from peripheries) posed a serious threat. Incarcerated people returning to facilities from court or work assignments were considered a minor problem or not a problem at all by more than half the respondents. Similarly, most respondents reported that visitors, vendors/contractors, and volunteers in prisons posed the least severe threat as cell phone contraband entry points.

The survey also included questions about the number of punitive actions related to contraband cell phones that DOCs took in 2020 (table 1). On average, 721 incarcerated people per agency received disciplinary reports for owning or using a cell phone while incarcerated, 36 were prosecuted, and 12 were convicted. The numbers differ substantially by agency, with one agency reporting issuing more than 4,000 disciplinary reports for cell phone–related infractions in 2020 alone. In addition, on average, 140 security staff members per agency received administrative sanctions, 30 were terminated, and 14 were charged or arrested for smuggling contraband cell phones into prisons. The extent of nonsecurity

staff involvement looks much smaller in scope, with 18 staff members on average receiving administrative sanctions, 2 being terminated, and 1 being charged or arrested.

TABLE 1

Punitive Actions Related to Contraband Cell Phones in US Prisons Taken by State Departments of Corrections in 2020

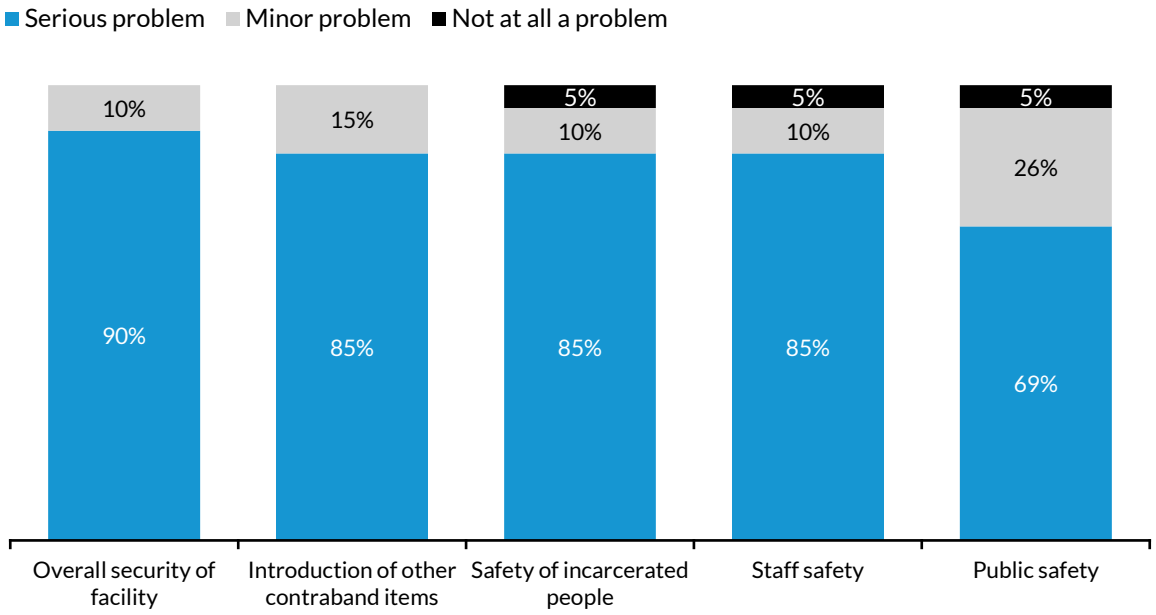
	Number of responses	Mean	Median	Minimum	Maximum
Punitive action, by group					
Incarcerated people					
Disciplinary reports	19	721	123	8	4,263
Prosecutions	15	36	1	0	402
Convictions	12	12	0	0	137
Security staff					
Administrative sanctions	15	140	3	0	1,407
Terminations	15	30	1	0	403
Charges or arrests	14	14	1	0	65
Nonsecurity staff					
Administrative sanctions	14	18	1	0	238
Terminations	14	2	1	0	19
Charges or arrests	11	1	0	0	6
Vendors/volunteers/contractors					
Terminations	14	1	0	0	4
Charges or arrests	12	1	0	0	10
Visitors					
Charges or arrests	14	1	0	0	5
Citizens in the community					
Charges or arrests	13	22	0	0	270

Source: Urban Institute survey of state departments of corrections administered in March 2021.
Notes: Not all departments of corrections in our study sample provided nonmissing responses to these questions. *n*=20.

To assess how cell phone contraband impacts safety and security, we asked DOCs to assess how much of a problem cell phones pose with respect to facilities' overall security, the introduction of other contraband items into facilities (e.g., incarcerated individuals may use cell phones to coordinate the smuggling of drugs or other types of contraband), the safety of incarcerated people, the safety of staff, and public safety. Eighty-five percent or more of respondents indicated that cell phones pose a serious problem for the security of facilities, the introduction of other contraband, and the safety of incarcerated people and staff, and close to 70 percent indicated that they pose a serious problem to public safety (figure 3).

FIGURE 3

The Extent to Which Contraband Cell Phones Pose Problems around Security, the Introduction of Other Contraband, and People's Safety



Source: Urban Institute survey of state departments of corrections administered in March 2021.
Note: *n*=20.

We also sought to understand the importance of contraband cell phones relative to other critical correctional issues. Sixty-five percent of DOCs in our sample ranked contraband cell phones among the three most important issues to their agencies.

It is also worth noting that 60 percent of DOCs reported that staff recruitment and retention was the most important issue they were facing.[†] While it is informative to see how concerning these issues are for these 20 states, it is essential to recognize that these issues are also inherently intertwined. Research indicates that while many correctional agencies are investing resources in acquiring complex interdiction technologies to detect and recover cell phones in facilities, these technologies alone are not enough to address this problem. Staff are a crucial element in identifying and seizing cell phones as they conduct manual searches, develop intel through networks, and manage technologies (Russo et al. 2022; Shukla, Peterson, and Kim 2021). Recruiting and retaining well-trained and quality staff is therefore key

[†] Response options included contraband cell phones, other contraband items, prison gangs/Security Threat Groups, solitary confinement, caring for incarcerated people with mental health needs, and staff recruitment and retention.

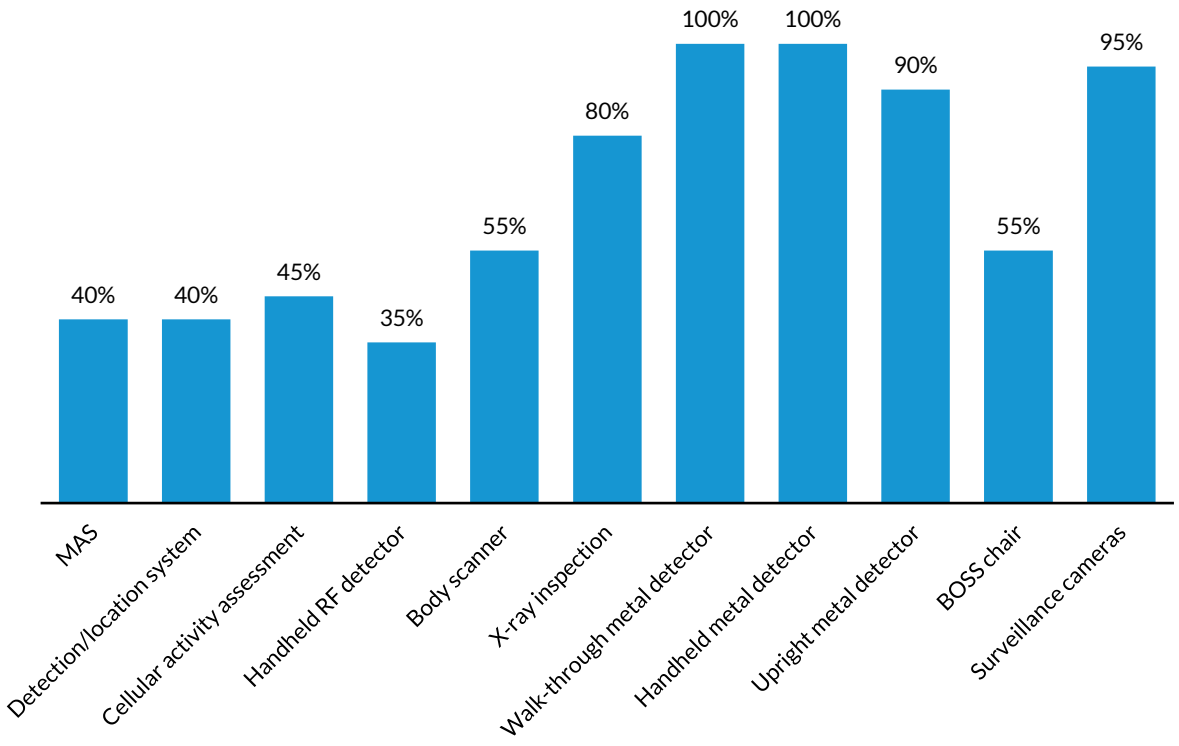
to contraband interdiction inside facilities. The next section delves deeper into the interdiction strategies employed by DOCs in the US.

Current Interdiction Strategies

To combat contraband cell phones, agencies implement various technological and nontechnological interdiction strategies. We asked respondents which of these strategies they employed in their facilities in 2020 (figure 4).

FIGURE 4

Cell Phone Contraband Interdiction Technologies Used in US Prisons in 2020, by Share of State Departments of Corrections



Source: Urban Institute survey of state departments of corrections administered in March 2021.
Notes: BOSS chair = Body Orifice Security Scanner chair. MAS = managed access system. RF detector = radio frequency detector. *n*=20.

Almost all DOCs reported using surveillance cameras (95 percent), walk-through metal detectors (100 percent), handheld metal detectors (100 percent), and upright metal detectors (90 percent), and more than half reported using body scanners and Body Orifice Security Scanner (BOSS) chairs (55

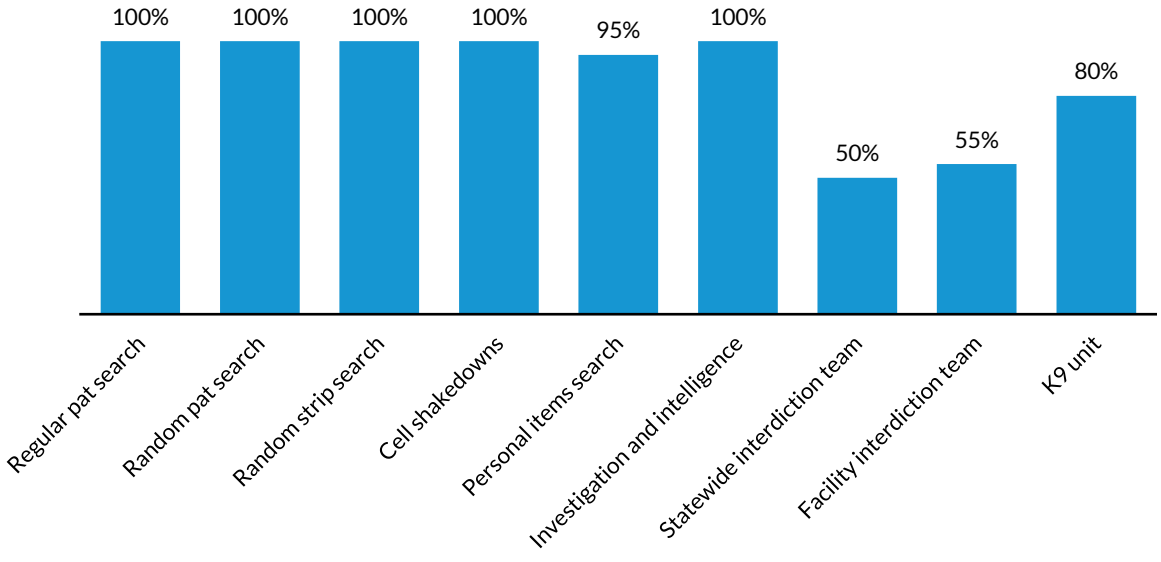
percent each). Several agencies also reported that they use more complex interdiction technologies for cell phone detection, like detection/location systems (40 percent) and cellular activity assessments (45 percent). Forty percent of respondents indicated using MAS to disable phones from being used in facilities by blocking non-approved phone numbers. Additional analysis showed that southern states reported having more interdiction technologies installed than states in other regions.

As discussed, interdiction technologies alone may not be sufficient for contraband interdiction. These technologies can be expensive to purchase, implement, and maintain (Peterson et al. 2022), and staff often need to be trained to use them. Some technologies also pose risks to certain groups. For example, metal detectors can interfere with pacemakers,[3] while the radiation from body scanners may be harmful to pregnant women.[4] Agencies therefore often combine these technologies with nontechnological strategies for a more holistic approach to contraband interdiction (Russo et al. 2022; Shukla, Peterson, and Kim 2021).

As shown in figure 5, all DOCs reported using pat searches, strip searches, cell shakedowns, and investigation and intelligence. Moreover, 95 percent reported regularly searching personal items of staff, visitors, vendors, and volunteers (e.g., bags, lunch boxes). Eighty percent of respondents indicated that they have K9 units specifically for cell phone detection. Around half of the agencies reported having statewide and facility-level teams focused specifically on finding and recovering contraband items.

FIGURE 5

Cell Phone Contraband Interdiction Strategies Used in US Prisons in 2020, by Share of State Departments of Corrections



Source: Urban Institute survey of state departments of corrections administered in March 2021.
Note: *n*=20.

This assessment also focused on identifying which of these technologies and strategies are used on different groups of people in prisons (i.e., incarcerated people, staff, vendors/contractors, volunteers, and visitors). Our findings, presented in table 2, show that with few exceptions, interdiction technologies and strategies are used most often on incarcerated people, followed by staff and visitors. It is also worth noting that, because of the nature of the interdiction strategies, certain strategies (e.g., MAS, walk-through metal detectors, surveillance cameras) are used on all individuals, whereas others (e.g., random strip searches, handheld RF detectors, BOSS chairs) are more restricted to incarcerated individuals.

TABLE 2

Percentage of State Departments of Corrections Using Interdiction Strategies on Different Groups of People in Prisons

	Overall	Incarcerated People	Security Staff	Nonsecurity Staff	Vendor/ contractor	Volunteers	Visitors
Strategy							
Managed access system	40%	40%	30%	30%	30%	30%	25%
Detection-location system	40%	35%	25%	25%	25%	23%	30%
Cellular activity assessments	45%	45%	20%	20%	20%	20%	20%
Handheld RF detector	35%	35%	10%	10%	5%	5%	5%
Whole-body scanner	55%	45%	35%	35%	30%	30%	30%
X-ray inspection/fluoroscope	80%	55%	75%	75%	75%	75%	80%
Walk-through metal detector	100%	90%	90%	85%	95%	95%	100%
Handheld metal detector/wand	100%	95%	75%	75%	75%	80%	90%
Upright metal detector/tower	90%	85%	75%	75%	70%	70%	75%
BOSS chair	55%	55%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%
Surveillance cameras	95%	95%	95%	90%	90%	90%	90%
Regular pat search	100%	100%	65%	65%	65%	65%	70%
Random pat search	100%	95%	65%	65%	55%	60%	55%
Random body cavity search	100%	100%	10%	10%	5%	5%	5%
Cell shakedowns/searches	100%	100%	--	--	--	--	--
Search of personal items	95%	--	95%	95%	95%	95%	95%
Investigation and intelligence	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Statewide interdiction team	50%	50%	45%	45%	45%	45%	45%
Facility interdiction team	55%	50%	40%	35%	35%	35%	30%
K9 unit	80%	75%	60%	60%	55%	65%	65%

Source: Urban Institute survey of state departments of corrections administered in March 2021.
Notes: BOSS chair = Body Orifice Security Scanner chair. Dashes indicate "not applicable" to those groups. *n*=20.

It is also worth mentioning that X-ray inspections are less commonly used on incarcerated people than on other groups. Correctional administrators may not repeatedly use certain methods (e.g., X-ray,

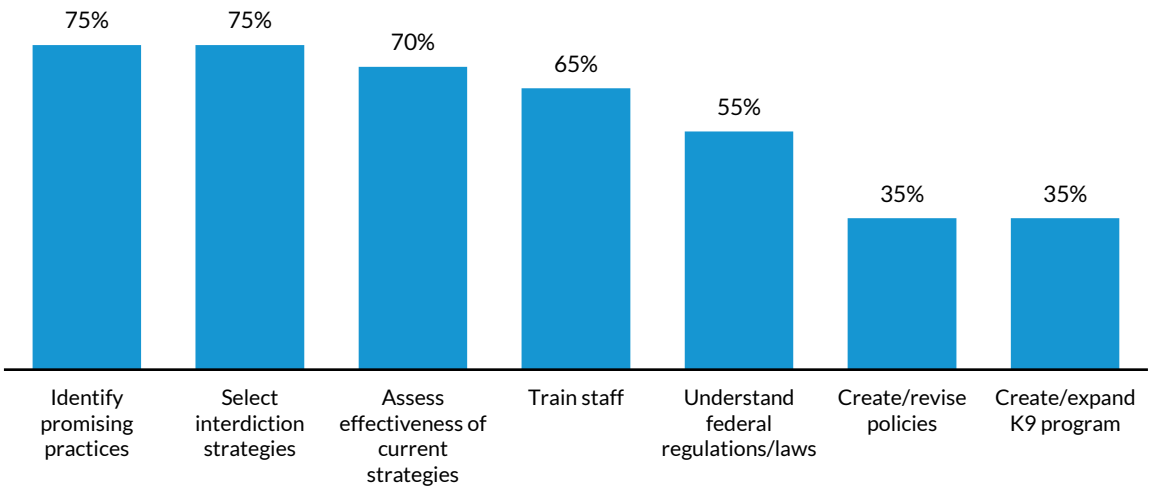
whole body scanners) to inspect incarcerated people, especially those who frequently exit and reenter facilities for their work assignments, because of radiation exposure concerns.[5]

Knowledge Gaps

The final part of our national assessment focused on knowledge gaps pertaining to contraband cell phones and interdiction strategies. As shown in figure 6, most agencies expressed interest in receiving support around identifying promising practices and selecting interdiction strategies for their facilities (75 percent each), followed by assessing the effectiveness of current strategies (70 percent), training staff in cell phone interdiction (65 percent), understanding federal regulations and laws related to cell phone contraband (55 percent), creating and revising contraband interdiction–related policies (35 percent), and creating or expanding a K9 contraband detection program (35 percent).

FIGURE 6

Areas in Which State Departments of Corrections Want Additional Support Related to Cell Phone Contraband Interdiction



Source: Urban Institute survey of state departments of corrections administered in March 2021.
Note: *n*=20.

Conclusion

Contraband cell phones can negatively affect institutional security and the safety of incarcerated people and prison staff. The knowledge base on contraband cell phones, however, is lacking in many

areas of inquiry and relies primarily on anecdotal evidence that pertains to specific jurisdictions. This shortfall contributes to an insufficient depth of understanding regarding contraband cell phones and their interdiction. It is therefore important to highlight that findings discussed in this report are representative of prisons that collectively hold 55 percent of the state prison population in the US. This report offers a first-of-its-kind, comprehensive assessment of the number and impacts of contraband cell phones recovered in 20 state prison systems, and of the interdiction strategies deployed to combat the issue.

Our survey of state correctional administrators revealed that, across 20 states, prison authorities recovered more than 25,000 cell phones in their facilities. Respondents also noted that these devices enter prisons through a variety of sources, including staff, incarcerated individuals returning from activities outside prisons, visitors, and other external sources (mail, throwovers, and drones). This has resulted in hundreds of punitive actions taken against these groups, including disciplinary reports, terminations, and arrests and convictions. Moreover, most correctional authorities believe that, once cell phones are inside a facility, they pose serious problems for the overall security of the institution, the introduction of other contraband items, and the safety of staff, incarcerated individuals, and members of the public. Authorities therefore employ a range of technological and nontechnological strategies to detect, disable, and remove cell phones from their prisons.

These findings offer a unique snapshot of the impacts of cell phones in prisons. It is important to note, however, that these data were collected for calendar year 2020, which coincided with the global COVID-19 pandemic. During that year, prison administrators enacted several policies to limit the spread of the virus. These included pausing in-person visitation, limiting movement outside prisons (such as to off-site court appointments), and offering free or discounted phone calls through prison telephone systems. These policies likely affected how many cell phones were smuggled into the prisons and recovered by staff during our study period. It is also conceivable that the demand for contraband cell phones increased during this period because of the limited access to family and other external contacts. We therefore believe it would be valuable to replicate our study to determine how the scope of the problem has changed.

Moreover, we believe it is important for policymakers, funders, and researchers to address the knowledge gaps identified by the corrections officials who participated in this data-collection effort. For example, even though corrections agencies have already deployed a range of interdiction strategies in their facilities, roughly three-quarters of respondents expressed interest in more information about promising practices, selecting strategies, and assessing the effectiveness of these strategies. Prison authorities and researchers should embrace more strategic collaborative approaches in evaluating

technologies and other methods for interdicting contraband cell phones. This collaboration should also aim to advance our understanding of the challenges faced by corrections professionals striving to ensure prison safety, as well as those faced by incarcerated people seeking to stay connected with the outside world. Philanthropic organizations and government agencies, alongside legislators and policymakers, should engage in more strategic planning to provide funding for such initiatives. These efforts will enhance correctional policy and practices and will ultimately benefit both corrections professionals and incarcerated people, and their families and communities.

Notes

[1] "Twenty one defendants convicted during three year investigation into drug trafficking and criminal activities led by inmates inside state prison walls using contraband cell phones," Internal Revenue Service, July 15, 2022, https://www.irs.gov/compliance/criminal-investigation/twenty-one-defendants-convicted-during-three-year-investigation-into-drug-trafficking-and-criminal-activities-led-by-inmates-inside-state-prison-walls-using-contraband-cell-phones; Joseph Darius Jaafari, "How Did They Run an Elaborate 'Sextortion' Scam from Prison? Cellphones.," The Marshall Project, November 11, 2019, https://www.themarshallproject.org/2019/11/11/how-did-they-run-an-elaborate-sextortion-scam-from-prison-cellphones.

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[3] "Devices that May Interfere with ICDs and Pacemakers," American Heart Association, November 28, 2022, https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/arrhythmia/prevention--treatment-of-arrhythmia/devices-that-may-interfere-with-icds-and-pacemakers.

[4] Reuven Blau and Savannah Jacobson, "Pregnant Pause: Jail Officials Seek Safe Path for Body Scanners," The City, June 12, 2019, https://www.thecity.nyc/justice/2019/6/12/21211013/pregnant-pause-jail-officials-seek-safe-path-for-body-scanners.

[5] Blau and Jacobson, "Pregnant Pause: Jail Officials Seek Safe Path for Body Scanners."

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