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# Jail Tech: Phones, Tablets, and So

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*The prison system has been notoriously slow to adopt new technology. That needs to change.*

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You've just been arrested for the first time. You're sent to a holding facility where you'll be detained until it's your turn to stand before a judge. As you enter the facility, your iris is scanned and stored in the facility's database.

This is how you'll gain access to every room for the duration of your detainment; it's also how guards will make sure you are who you say you are as you're moved from facility to facility. A bracelet is strapped to your wrist in order to continuously monitor your biometrics—have you been fed, have you taken your medication, is your heart rate accelerating, are you breathing? You're strapped into boots with magnetic strips that can be remotely latched to the floor by a corrections officer who is charged with monitoring your comings and goings. A metal collar is wrapped around your neck. This collar has only one job: If you leave the facility without permission, the collar explodes.

Like much of the rhetoric surrounding incarceration, the scenario I just described is a combination of hyperbole and fiction. Thanks to Hollywood and



prisons are run on a simple combination of software, hardware, paper, and pen, nearly all of which require manual data entry.

"There's a lot of hesitancy to provide technology to people in prisons," said Christopher Grewe, CEO and Founder of **American Prison Data Systems**, a company that provides tablets to inmates. "You don't become the leader of a correctional system by being great at technology. There aren't a lot of people who understand technology very well. They're a lot more comfortable buying pepper spray than they are in investing in technology."

The problem with technological hesitancy as it pertains to detention is that the prison population in the United States has exploded in recent decades. The US currently incarcerates 707 people per 100,000 residents, or 2.4 million people, which is the highest rate in the world, according to the **Center for Economic and Policy Research**. More than 7.5 million Americans—or 1 out of every 31 adults—is either incarcerated, on parole, or on probation. Prison hasn't helped to rehabilitate the imprisoned. Of the 700,000 prisoners who will be released within the next year, around 40 percent will reoffend and be sent back to prison within three years, according to the **PEW Center**. Life inside prison is hell for most: In 2012, 1.2 million violent crimes committed outside of prisons were reported to the FBI by police, while **5.8 million violent crimes** were reported by prison inmates.

Technology has solved a number of important social issues that affect humanity. Education has become democratized and health information can be distributed to doctors around the world via the internet. Vaccines are delivered via **drones**. Apps **predict earthquakes**. The world is changing because of technology.

Unfortunately, United States prisons rely on mostly outdated solutions. Many of these are unregulated and operated by engineers who haven't been scrutinized, and some technologies are designed to take advantage of

maintain prison technology. Much of the technology is understandably focused on real-time inmate tracking and management, but some companies are also creating solutions designed to educate, enrich the lives of, and hopefully rehabilitate prisoners.

A consistent effort must be made by local, state, and federal government to update old technologies, introduce new and innovative technologies, and use these tools to improve the lives of prisoners. This urgency is not just about safety and security, it's also about enriching prisoners' lives inside facilities in order to reduce violence, and to hopefully provide the foundation necessary to ultimately reintroduce ex-convicts to society. As Mike Cornstubble, VP of Technology at Edovo, puts it: "Technology should not be considered contraband."

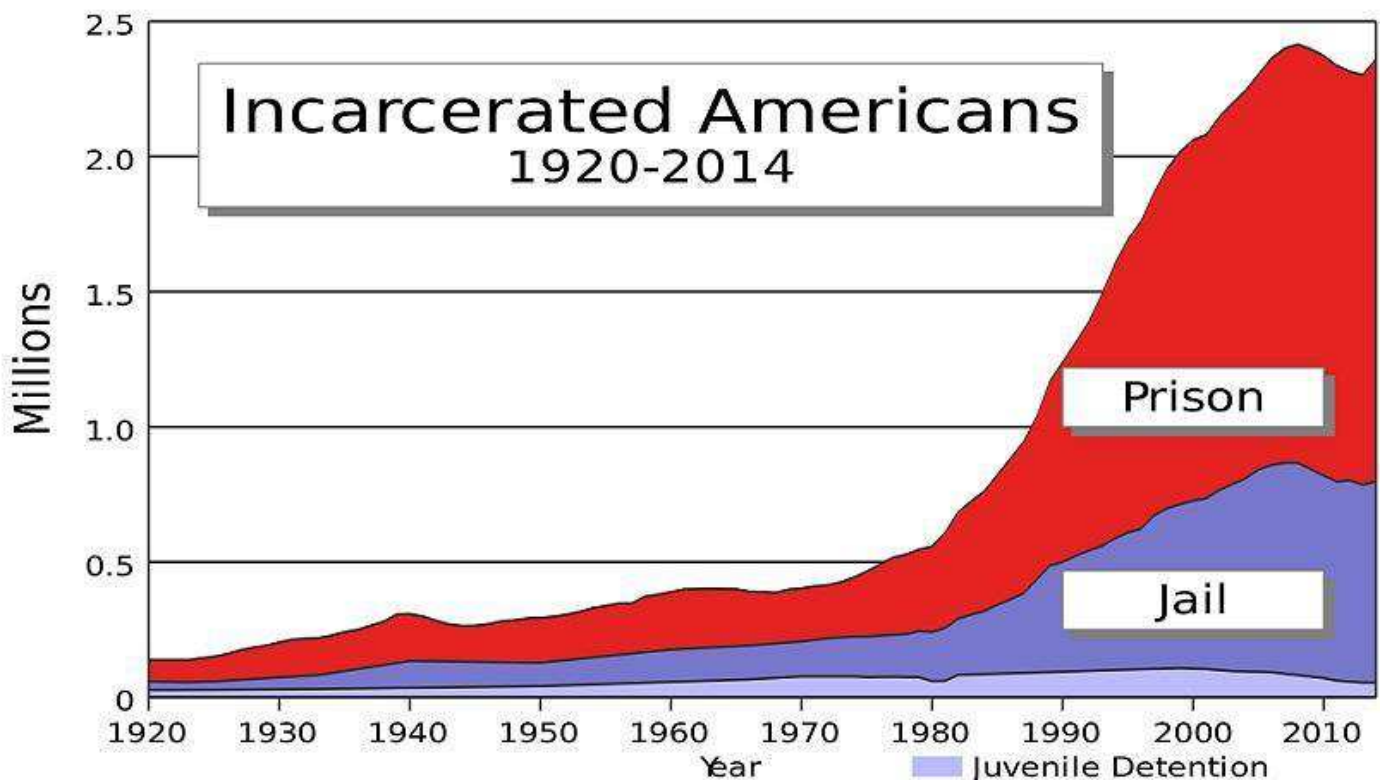


Image via Wikipedia Commons. Data via BJS

## On The Inside

Behind every institution is what's called a Jail Management System (JMS). A JMS is essentially the data repository for prisoners who enter the facility. Think of it like a **customer relationship management** (CRM) tool, but for



Standard fields like Name, Crime, Past Crimes, Outstanding Warrants, Gang Affiliations, and Release Date are entered into the system as prisoners arrive. Additional fields like Medications, Allergies, Dietary Restrictions, and Medical Conditions are logged to maintain the prisoners' health.

In order to track the information entered into the JMS, and to make sure protocol is followed by guards, the JMS can interface with tablets and an **RFID** tag housed on a prisoner's bracelet or uniform. These digital interactions are designed to track prisoner movement in order to maintain safety, but they're also built to account for prisoner health. If a guard scans a tag and sees that a prisoner is in a restricted area, the guard can remove the prisoner from the location. Alternatively, when a prisoner goes for his or her medication, the doctor can scan the tag to make sure the prisoner is actually due for a new round.

Ken Dalley Jr., President of **Guardian RFID**, an inmate management solution, said his company helps protect inmates and detention centers both physically and from litigation during disputes. "We automate the processes corrections officers perform multiple times an hour," he said. "Paper and pencil is still the most used tool in jails, prisons, and correctional facilities. But if there isn't a good area of documentation it's legal exposure to the facility."

Guardian RFID can track the standard items I previously mentioned, but it also gives prison managers the ability to log if and when inmates have been given access to the law library, if they've gotten the proper amount of exercise, and if they've been given access to indoor recreational activities. As inmates are led into and out of each area of the facility, their tags are scanned and a record is logged. "If [a corrections facility is] legally in trouble," said Dalley Jr., "paper-based platforms don't help you mitigate risk. Staff can falsify records. Records can get lost."

The tags, in combination with tablets and the back-end JMS, also provide guards with real-time notifications. Are all inmates accounted for? Are



movements being conducted properly? Has an inmate received a medication for which he or she is scheduled? If these actions aren't logged at the proper time, a real-time notification will be sent to the appropriate staffers.

JMSes are particularly important for monitoring and tracking recidivists. When someone is arrested, the offender's entire institutional history can be delivered via the JMS, especially if the jail is tied to the same JMS that is being used by additional facilities. Does the prisoner have an issue with any other prisoners in the facility? Has he been targeted by a gang that has a presence in the facility? This kind of information can help to properly and safely place new inmates within the facility.

"One of the things you have to realize about a jail is that the business is restricted by the wall of the jails," said Bob Kolysher, Product Manager for Tyler Technologies **Jail Manager**. "Paper can't flow freely from one location to another. If an inmate files a grievance and files a manual document, how do you move it from the cell to the administrator? In an electronic format, it's moved freely. If a single piece of documentation is available to only the person who is looking at it, you can't send it to multiple people [or locations] at the same time."



facility. Records are typically shared only by facilities using the same JMS, or because local regulation requires record sharing between institutions.

"The biggest reason [you don't see this kind of national network of data] is that there is not a single decision-maker," Kolysheer explained. "The sheriff is an elected official in many jurisdictions. He's got the budget and the authority to determine what [system is] good for him. The police commissioner may be doing something else. Building one giant system that meets everyone's needs is tough to do. It's much more likely to be successful to build small systems that connect to one another, to customize each piece to the needs of its constituents."



### Security Protocols (and Lack Thereof)

The same inability to connect local, regional, and state-wide systems prevents the kind of national scrutiny required to oversee who manages the technology and the sensitive data it's storing. Most corrections officers and police officials are given thorough background checks and mental health screenings prior to working in a facility. The original technologists who install JMSes and other forms of prison-specific technologies within an institution are also given



create.

Miro Macho, President of **BIS Computer Solutions**, said his company and its employees are run through the National Crime Information Center database when they're in the running for a government contract. But there isn't much more to the screening process. "If I don't tell [the institution that] this guy [in my company] is working on the system, and he gets access to the system because I needed him to fix a problem, that kind of thing could turn into a big problem. We do our best trying to figure out who our people should be. But any company or government agency doesn't know who is who. A lot of people could play nice for years and they're waiting to blow up something. In the future somebody could slip through and [use the information in our systems for nefarious purposes]."

Dalley Jr. said his company is required to be **Criminal Justice Information Systems Certified** (CJISC) in order to compete for government contracts. This standard was developed in 2011 by the FBI in order to protect the data delivered to federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. But here's the problem with CJISC: The FBI's CJIS Division doesn't evaluate products or services, and it doesn't assert certification. Instead, the vendor submits documentation of how it follows CJISC procedure and the FBI scrutinizes the self-audit and awards certification.

Even if we are to believe the self-audits are 100 percent truthful, there's still the possibility of a Trojan Horse. Somewhere within the vendor company, someone who has passed a background check and has all of the appropriate IT certifications may aim to do harm with the data he or she can access.

"We do our own screening and background checks as well," said Dalley Jr. "But there's no regulatory requirement and it's based on internal oversight within my company. Homeland Security and the government do not audit employees of public safety software."



**Correction** were each contacted for this story. We did not receive a reply from the organizations.

## Help from The Outside

Companies like APDS and **Edovo** work with correctional facilities to literally put technology into the hands of prisoners. APDS packages and delivers secure tablets loaded with educational and entertainment-based content designed to give inmates positive technological interactions. The tablets are secured via **United States Military Standard** cases and operated under closed, isolated networks, and secured with back-end **mobile device management** (MDM) software.

In order to deliver on safety, the tablets can't be physically damaged. If they're disabled or shocked via physical drop, an alert is sent to prison staff. The devices never connect to public Wi-Fi, and all of the content on the devices has been pre-approved by prison staff. Edovo offers a tablet-based education and entertainment package via tablet.





perspective and a reduction in violence because a population is working toward something and not just wasting time."

Grewe, of APDS, said he believes the tablets his company provides to institutions are not only decreasing violence, but they're also changing lives. APDS tablets are in all kinds of correctional facilities, from juvenile detention centers for young girls to Riker's Island in New York City.

"Violence in jails is caused by idleness and hopelessness," he said. "But [the argument has always been] why give a tablet to an incarcerated person when kids in school don't have technology? Now, it's not a luxury, it's a necessity. We've seen a very significant decrease in acts of violence in all of the institutions where we've been."

## **A Rock and a Hard Place**

Unfortunately, even the systems in place to give inmates access to tablets can be exploited. Unlike APDS and Edovo, which earn their money only from institutional payments, companies like **GTL** (which provides phones, tablets, and video kiosks to inmates) are funded by direct inmate payments. This is similar to how inmates pay a fee to use landline phones to call home. In Edovo's case, the inmates pay to rent a tablet, and in GTL's case payment is made for purchased services on the phones, tablets, and kiosks. For example: GTL offers inmates a library of music that can be downloaded onto the application.

"GTL has little to nothing to do with education, and life improvement," said Grewe. "They want to be iTunes for inmates, but instead of 99 cents a song it will be something like \$1.99." GTL disagrees, pointing to courseware it announced in July of this year intended to enrich learning opportunities for inmates.

Brian Peters, Executive Director for Enhanced Services at GTL, refused to disclose how much a typical song on a GTL tablet would cost an inmate.



prison phone system, which was, until recently, brutally exploitive of inmates and their families in terms of calling costs.

New **FCC regulation** recently capped the cost of a phone call from 11 cents a minute for debit or prepaid calls in state and federal prisons. For a both a 15-minute in-state call and a 15-minute long distance call, the cost is now capped at \$1.65. This regulation was deemed necessary because some prison phone companies were taking advantage of this unregulated market, and captive clientele, to charge up to **\$14 a minute or \$500 a month** for prisoners to call lawyers and family members. Sadly, even this small measure didn't last long as the **regulation was stayed** while this article was being written. That means it's effectively overturned, with the alleged reason being that a calling provider complained it would be "harmed" by the price cap.

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Worse, regulation of this nature doesn't exist at all for inmate tablets and apps. Combined with the lack of oversight into who can access prisoner data from the back-end of a JMS, the lack of regulation over funding prisoner-held devices is disconcerting. However, if the United States prison system is ever going to move from pen, paper, and database to biometrics, education-based digital hardware, and a national ecosystem of data, government agencies will have to continue to warm up to new technologies.

"Technology has not been adopted in the space because the first adopters were exploitive," said Grewe. "And technology has never been a core competency for government and the correctional space. That's changing a bit now."

It's imperative that correctional facilities, government agencies, and technology manufacturers unite in adopting and improving these new solutions in order to better the lives of guards, prisoners, and society alike. Equally importantly, these institutions must all work together to ensure that neither the technology nor the prisoners are exploited in the process.



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### **About the Author**

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