**Headline:** Prison Calls Are Increasingly Free, but Prisoners Still Aren’t

**Teaser:** New reforms have made it easier and cheaper to make calls to and from incarcerated people. But corporate profiteering will continue until we abolish the system.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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**Source:** Independent Media Institute

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by* [*Economy for All*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/economy-for-all/)*, a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

**Tags:** Prison Reform, Human Rights, Economy, Media, Politics, North America/United States of America, Opinion, News, Time-Sensitive

**[Article Body:]**

I recently saw the face of a friend whom I had never met before. In a video call to a California state prison facility, I was finally face-to-face—albeit via video chat—with [Dominic Williams](https://www.laprogressive.com/law-and-justice/death-by-incarceration), who is serving a sentence of life in prison without the possibility of parole and who has spent the majority of his life behind bars. Until recently, Williams and I had been corresponding the old-fashioned way, writing letters to one another for about 20 years. Although we spoke on the phone many years ago, I hadn’t ever seen his face aside from photos sent by mail. Now, thanks to new regulations of the prison communication industry, we were able to schedule a video conversation with one another.

Prison communication has been a booming business and is part of a web of industries that depends on society’s propensity to lock people up. As the advocacy group [Worth Rises](https://worthrises.org/theprisonindustry2020) has documented, “private corporations have fully monetized crime and punishment with the help of their government partners.” More than 4,100 corporations extract money from imprisoned people and their loved ones, exploiting a community held hostage by the prison industrial complex.

For decades, profit-based companies leeched off of incarcerated people by charging [outrageous per-minute rates](https://www.aclu.org/news/smart-justice/price-gouging-prison) for phone calls, simply because they could. Communication with family members—a critical aspect of [maintaining mental health](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6625803/) in the most inhumane of circumstances—can [bankrupt](https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/22/opinion/the-bankruptyourfamily-calling-plan.html) families. Given that mass incarceration in the United States [disproportionately targets](https://www.vera.org/ending-mass-incarceration/criminalization-racial-disparities) low-income communities of color, this is the same demographic that the prison communications industry routinely fleeces.

In June 2021, [Connecticut](https://eji.org/news/connecticut-becomes-first-state-to-provide-free-calls-from-prison/), whose incarcerated people were among the most exploited by the prison communication industry, became the first state in the nation to make prison calls free. Just over a year later, [California](https://worthrises.org/pressreleases/2022/9/30/california-becomes-the-second-state-to-make-prison-calls-free-after-governor-newsom-signs-sb-1008) followed suit, although advocates pointed out that the state’s county jail system was left out (county jail phone calls were separately capped at 7 cents per minute). Several cities have moved to ensure that the state is on the hook for phone calls to and from prisons, and [pressure is growing](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/10/17/free-prison-phone-calls-california/) to adopt such standards nationwide.

What’s ironic, but unsurprising, is that such regulations are coming too late. Traditional phone calls are already becoming obsolete in the world outside prison walls, and corporations have rapidly moved to control and monetize digital communications that are not as well regulated.

Such corporate monopolies are exceedingly lucrative. Katya Schwenk explained in [Jacobin](https://jacobin.com/2024/02/prison-phone-calls-telecom-revenue) that one major corporate player, ViaPath Technologies, “has been tossed between major private equity firms, bouncing from Goldman Sachs and Veritas Capital to, most recently, American Securities, which says its portfolio of companies brings in $46 billion in annual revenue.” Further, companies like ViaPath are finding creative new ways to exploit the imprisoned population for services such as “music streaming, e-messaging, video calling, and movies, all hosted on tablets, and all monetized.”

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) [gave out 90,000 free tablet devices](https://www.capradio.org/articles/2023/07/19/almost-all-people-incarcerated-in-california-now-have-free-tablets/) to imprisoned people throughout the state to use ViaPath’s services. As a result, communication can be tantalizingly instant—however, as I found out in the course of arranging my video chat interview with Williams, it will cost you. People behind bars and their contacts are charged 5 cents for each email, and 20 cents per minute for video calls.

Further, I discovered the hard way that even when charging a premium for its services, [ViaPath Technologies](https://www.viapath.com/), previously called [Global Tel Link](https://www.gtl.net/) (GTL), seems to feel little incentive to provide efficient services. After spending several days installing the GTL app on various platforms and devices, depositing money into an account, being caught in endless loops within its buggy and poorly designed systems, and being dropped by customer service calls that went nowhere, I finally got a response from the company via email that was filled with unhelpful suggestions merely copied and pasted from its website.

Take the irritation we have all felt while trying to navigate corporate customer service lines and multiply that by 10 or even 100 to get an inkling of the frustration felt for a system that slowly chokes users who have no other options. My experience is [not out of the ordinary](https://slate.com/technology/2023/05/prison-messaging-apps-gettingout-viapath.html). Olivia Heffernan and Steve Brooks (who is an incarcerated journalist) pointed out in [the Appeal](https://theappeal.org/viapath-california-prison-phones-tablets-messaging/), “CDCR and ViaPath have failed to deliver on their promises.”

They quote Jesse Vasquez, executive director of [Friends of San Quentin News](https://www.friendsofsanquentinnews.org/), who said, “Nothing is free in prison. We all know that. So as soon as one good thing is announced, we pretty much know a bad thing is going to follow.” And there is the crux of the problem.

We cannot reform our way out of the prison system. Incarceration is inhumane by design, and tweaking the edges of a system designed to dehumanize can end up legitimizing it. Reforming the prison communications industry as a way to make prison more humane is like putting lipstick on a pig. It looks pretty for a time and may have some short-term benefits, but the underlying porcine nature of the system remains intact.

While I was thrilled at the ability to finally communicate in real time with my friend, to actually see his face and have him see mine, a video chat session is a poor substitute for Williams’s actual freedom. A brilliant, highly educated thinker, academic, and author, his continued incarceration benefits no one, other than companies like ViaPath. There are millions of people like him in prisons, jails, and detention centers across the U.S. Williams apologized for the technical problems we encountered while trying to arrange our video chat. I responded, “Don’t apologize. It’s not your fault; it’s the system.”

Abolishing the prison system, and its adjunct systems of policing and criminal justice, needs to remain an overarching goal for anyone appalled by the inhumanity of incarceration. It was nearly four years ago that the racial justice uprising of 2020 centered calls to [divest](https://calmatters.org/justice/2020/06/divest-from-police-and-invest-in-policies-that-take-a-different-approach-to-public-safety/) from policing and prisons and invest in things that actually keep us safe. Just as police reforms like body cameras and chokehold trainings [did nothing to reduce police killings](https://portside.org/2023-12-20/surprise-police-reforms-didnt-work), regulating prison communications will do little to change the fact that we continue to keep millions of people physically trapped in conditions that defy imagination.