

Highlights of GAO-11-893, a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The rates Bureau of Prisons (BOP) inmates pay to make phone calls generate revenue that funds inmate wages and other amenities; however, inmates' contraband cell phone use is growing. The Cell Phone Contraband Act of 2010 criminalized cell phone possession in federal prisons and mandated that GAO study related issues. In response to the mandate, this report addresses (1) how telephone rates for BOP inmates compare with other correctional systems and the implications of lowering rates; (2) the number of cell phones confiscated in BOP and selected states, and any reported impact; and (3) the extent to which BOP and selected states have taken actions to minimize cell phone smuggling, these actions' effectiveness, and how BOP has coordinated internal and state information sharing. GAO reviewed BOP's policies, procedures, and cell phone confiscation data (2008–2010). GAO also interviewed BOP officials within BOP's 6 regions and 4 of its 116 institutions—as well as officials from 8 state correctional departments—selected for their cell phone detection efforts or challenges faced. The results are not generalizable, but provide insights.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that BOP's Director formulate evaluation plans for cell phone detection technology to aid decision making, require use of these plans, and enhance regional collaboration with states. The Department of Justice concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View GAO-11-893. For more information, contact David Maurer at (202) 512-8777 or maurerd@gao.gov or Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

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BUREAU OF PRISONS

Improved Evaluations and Increased Coordination Could Improve Cell Phone Detection

What GAO Found

BOP's rates for inmate telephone calls typically are lower than selected state and military branch systems that also use telephone revenues to support inmate activities; lowering rates would have several implications. Inmates would benefit from the ability to make cheaper phone calls, but lower rates could result in less revenue and lower profits, and therefore fewer funds available for inmate wages and recreational activities. According to BOP officials, when inmates have fewer opportunities for physical activity, idleness increases, and the risk of violence, escapes, and other disruptions also rises.

BOP and selected states confiscated thousands of cell phones in 2010, and these entities believe that rising inmate cell phone use threatens institutional safety and expands criminal activity. All of the BOP officials, as well as officials from all eight of the state departments of correction with whom GAO spoke, cited cell phones as a major security concern, given the potential the phones provide for inmates to have unmonitored conversations that could further criminal activity, such as selling drugs or harassing other individuals.

BOP and selected states have taken actions to address contraband cell phone use in their correctional institutions, but BOP could better evaluate existing technologies to maximize its investment decisions. BOP screens visitors and staff to detect contraband and has also tested multiple cell-phone detection technologies. However, BOP has not developed evaluation plans for institutional use to measure the effectiveness of these tests, which could help ensure that such tests generate information needed to make effective policy decisions. Moreover, while BOP has shared detection strategies with state agencies to some extent, BOP's regional offices have only had limited interaction with states, and could increase coordination and knowledge sharing to better identify and benefit from other strategies being used.

This is a public version of a sensitive but unclassified – law enforcement sensitive report that GAO issued in July 2011. Information that the Department of Justice deemed sensitive has been omitted.

Cell Phones That BOP Has Confiscated at a Federal Prison and Adjacent Camp



Source: GAO.