

EDITORIAL

Phone rates for prison inmates exploitative, counterproductive

By The Editorial Board , April 27, 2015, 6:47 p.m.



In 2013, almost half a billion dollars were paid in concession fees to prisons and state and local governments by companies offering inmate phone calls. ROBERT STOLARIK/THE NEW YORK TIMES

IT'S QUITE a business model: Charge predatory phone rates for a captive population that has no other communication options. In this case, the target population meets every definition of a captive audience: prison inmates, whose loved ones must pay 20 or 30 times normal rates for a phone call.

As The New York Times [reported last month](#), the companies offering inmate phone calls, including those in Massachusetts prisons, can pay concession fees to prison and correctional

facilities in exchange for getting exclusive contracts. These commission costs are then transferred to the customers in the form of phone charges that can run more than \$1 per minute. Almost half a billion dollars were paid in 2013 in such fees to prisons and state and local governments. Additionally, the phone companies impose high fees for opening, keeping, or closing a debit account. By any measure, this amounts to blatant exploitation of inmates' families.

In 2013, the Federal Communications Commission [issued a report on the industry along with some long-awaited reforms](#), including a cap on the rate for an interstate prison collect call at 25 cents a minute. But the industry responded by increasing fees on intrastate calls, which represent the vast majority of all prison calls. The FCC is currently considering more restrictions, such as limiting or banning the concession fees and capping the intrastate and local prison phone calls.

Alarming, the industry is only expanding — and the FCC should pay close attention. Securus, the company that controls between 20 and 30 percent of the prison market, [has been rolling out video visitation through a computer screen](#). The Prison Policy Initiative, an advocacy group based in Massachusetts, [found that the service](#), at a cost of \$1.50 per minute, is nothing like the high-quality and affordable video technology of Skype and FaceTime. Not surprisingly, the service [has drawn criticism and lawsuits](#), some of those criticisms based on Securus's requirement that prisons eliminate face-to-face visits completely if they want to offer their video service.

Companies contend that any rate below 20 cents a minute would dramatically reduce their operating margins and compromise their ability to adequately monitor the calls for security purposes. But prison advocates recommend a maximum rate of 7 cents a minute, which would still allow the companies to run a sustainable business.

By paying exorbitant phone fees, families and friends of inmates are effectively subsidizing operating costs of local and state prisons. It's a flawed, counterproductive policy, and the FCC agrees: "Studies make clear that inmates who maintain contact with family and community while in prison have reduced rate of recidivism and are more likely to become productive citizens upon their release," according to a commission document. The law should reflect that finding, and remove a needless financial burden on inmates' families.

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