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Online First Posting

COVID-19 and Prison Policies Related to Communication With Family Members

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Abstract

To limit the spread of the highly contagious COVID-19 virus, departments of corrections (DOCs) in all 50 states suspended in-person visits to state prisons between March 7 and March 19, 2020.

This article describes changes to policies related to the contact incarcerated individuals could have with family members and others since the pandemic began. We also examine the clarity of the information presented to the public regarding COVID-19 testing and outbreaks in state prisons.

The results show that DOCs quickly made free phone calls available to incarcerated individuals, although for how long this policy remained in place is unclear.

The capacity for video visits during the pandemic was notably less; only 25 state DOCs had video visits in place before March 2020, and 16 of those reported adding free video visits with family members during the pandemic.

A smaller proportion of states reported offering free email access ($n = 15$) and free postage/stamps ($n = 10$). Analysis of state DOCs' webpages showed variability in the range of information available about testing and outbreaks.

The clarity of the information presented on DOCs' websites was associated with the total number of policy changes DOCs made related to other forms of contact with family members.

States that made more policy changes had more accessible and informative data related to COVID-19 testing and prevalence on their webpages.

These results have important implications for policy considerations related to incarcerated people's contact with their families as the pandemic continues and are discussed in light of pending legislation in the U.S. Senate.

KEYWORDS:

COVID-19, incarceration, correctional policy, visiting, communication