



RESEARCH REPORT

# Nontechnological Challenges in Managing Contraband Cell Phones

**A Look at Organizational Culture and Staffing in Correctional Facilities**

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# Nontechnological Challenges in Managing Contraband Cell Phones

Contraband cell phones in prisons and jails pose a serious threat to the security of those institutions and the safety of incarcerated people, corrections staff, and members of the public. Although cell phones enable people incarcerated in prisons and jails to stay connected with family members, friends, and others on the outside, they may also be used in criminal activity. For example, cell phones have been used to plan the murders of witnesses outside of correctional facilities, facilitate escapes, arrange attacks on corrections staff, coordinate disturbances in and across facilities, facilitate drug smuggling, and engage in wire fraud and money-laundering schemes (Russo et al. 2019). In addition, many corrections officials and policymakers believe cell phones can pose dangers to incarcerated people, corrections staff, and members of the public. For example, a former head of the Federal Communications Commission said, “In the hands of an [incarcerated person], a cell phone is a weapon.”<sup>1</sup>

In response to these issues, much of the conversation about how to remove contraband cell phones from or prevent them from entering correctional facilities has focused on technology-based solutions including signal jamming, managed access systems, full body scanners, and radio frequency detection and location systems (Peterson et al. 2022). Though these technologies may help correctional administrators manage contraband cell phones, contraband interdiction involves many nontechnological factors that agencies must consider. These include organizational culture and staffing, which are key to a well-run institution and can be critical for controlling contraband threats of any nature. In this report, we expand on these concepts and describe solutions agencies can employ.

## The Importance of People and Processes

Staff are the backbone of a correctional agency. Though various technologies can provide important tools, administrators and personnel across the correctional system agree that quality, well-trained staff applying effective security practices remain the key to running a safe and secure institution (Shukla, Peterson, and Kim 2021). This is related to challenges posed by contraband cell phones in at least two ways. First, though the majority of correctional staff work diligently to uphold agency policies and exercise professionalism in their day-to-day work, some are responsible for the introduction and use of these devices in their facilities. For instance, correctional staff have sold and transported contraband cell phones and knowingly allowed incarcerated people to use them. Correctional administrators report

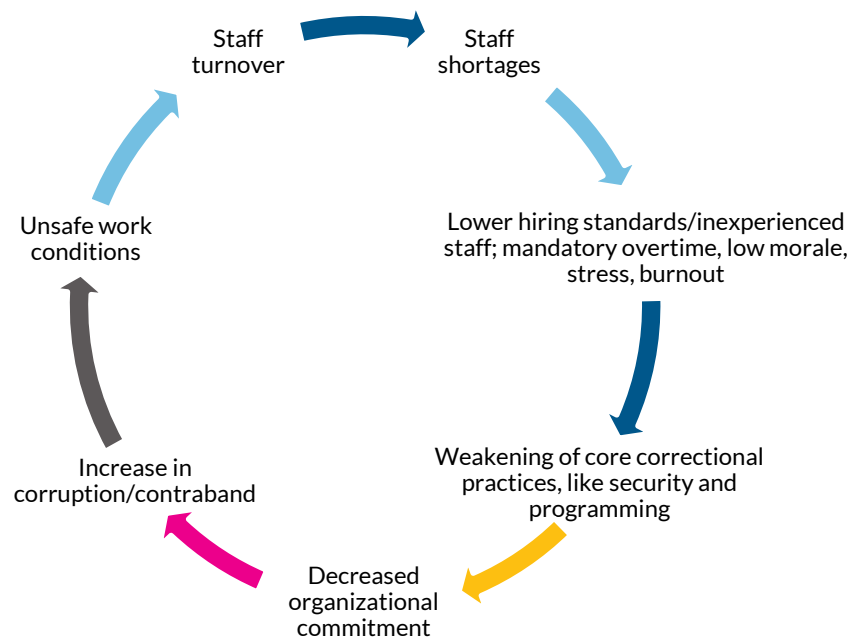
anecdotally that a significant percentage of contraband cell phones enter institutions via staff assistance (Peterson et al. 2021; Shukla, Peterson, and Kim 2021).

Second, many correctional systems have long experienced significant challenges in recruiting and retaining quality staff who are well trained and have enough experience on the job to avoid introducing contraband into facilities (MacDonald 2018), challenges that have been greatly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup> As a result, these systems struggle with high vacancy and turnover rates, which lead to inadequate staffing levels, fewer experienced staff, and challenges in maintaining institutional security and detecting and combating contraband cell phones.

These two factors are related, and many systems are seemingly locked in a continuous cycle of staffing concerns (figure 1). The cycle begins as agencies struggle to attract quality staff. Common explanations for this include inadequate pay relative to responsibilities, harsh work conditions, exposure to violence and trauma, and the job's poor public image (Griffin et al. 2010; Potter 2021; Ricciardelli, Power, and Medeiros 2018; Trautman 2022), all of which can often be attributed to the scale of incarceration and prison crowding (Martin et al. 2012; Ricciardelli, Power, and Medeiros 2018). High vacancy rates create significant downstream pressures. In some cases, agencies have had to lower hiring standards to attract more candidates. For example, the Mississippi Department of Corrections lowered the minimum age for officers from 21 to 19 and the Florida Department of Corrections will now hire officers as young as 18.<sup>3</sup> The minimum education requirements have also decreased. In decades past, many agencies sought officer candidates with at least some college credit; today, those with a high-school diploma or GED are eligible in most states.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the field has relatively younger, more inexperienced, and less educated staff, which can be detrimental to safety and security (Crewe, Liebling, and Hulley 2015), including by resulting in contraband-related incidents.

FIGURE 1

The Continuous Cycle of Staff Shortages in Correctional Systems



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**Source:** The authors, with information from Griffin and coauthors (2010), Lambert (2001), Leip and Stinchcomb (2013), Stohr, Self, and Lovrich (1992), and Worley and Worley (2013).

Furthermore, there is pressure on agencies to fill vacancies in correctional facilities as soon as possible so their operations are not disrupted. For example, the South Carolina Department of Corrections shortened its initial training academy from 6 weeks to 4.<sup>5</sup> The Alabama Department of Corrections created a new classification called basic correctional officer, which has lower minimum qualifications and requires candidates to complete a 6-week academy rather than the 12-week academy for full-fledged correctional officers (Brown 2019).<sup>6</sup> Recently, in Louisville, Kentucky, the jail had to pull eight officers from its training academy before they completed it to fill posts.<sup>7</sup> These types of measures are deemed necessary for maintaining staffing, but concerns have been raised about whether staff are being adequately prepared for their demanding roles.

Moreover, high vacancy rates put inordinate demands on existing staff, who often work mandatory overtime and double shifts. This leads not only to fatigue, which undermines security, but also to low morale, stress, and burnout, which can result in high turnover, further exacerbating staffing shortages (Lambert 2001; Leip and Stinchcomb 2013; Trautman 2022).<sup>8</sup> In extreme situations, agencies have pressed noncustodial staff such as teachers and medical personnel to work as correctional officers.<sup>9</sup> Decreased commitment to one's organization can be a byproduct of intense stress and burnout. At

minimum this can result in decreased vigilance in one's security duties, and it may also make staff more vulnerable to compromise and corruption. In either case, the institution is made less secure, making the jobs of correctional officers less safe. An unsafe work environment leads to further recruitment and retention challenges, and the cycle repeats.

This cycle, which has broad implications for the safety, security, and overall operations of prisons and jails, directly exacerbates the contraband cell phone problem in several ways. For example, staff who believe they are underpaid and are experiencing high job-related stress may be more willing to risk their jobs by bringing contraband into their facilities (Shukla, Peterson, and Kim 2021).<sup>10</sup> Inadequate staffing levels may result in compromised security practices such as less frequent or rigorous searches that inadvertently allow contraband to enter and remain in facilities. Lastly, these staffing issues may impact the efficacy of other interventions aimed at combating the use of contraband cell phones. For example, technological solutions such as managed access systems, radio frequency signal detection/location systems, and body scanners are only effective when agencies have enough staff who are trained to employ them and follow up with appropriate interdiction measures (e.g., staff who can search for and recover cell phones once a radio frequency has been detected in a particular area in a facility).

## What Can Agencies Do?

There are various strategies agencies can consider implementing to address personnel challenges associated with cell phone contraband interdiction. This section elaborates upon nine such strategies that contribute to an organizational environment that can make interdiction easier.

### Organizational Culture and Climate

Organizational culture (i.e., correctional staff's shared beliefs and values) and climate (i.e., an agency's attributes, like leadership, management, and resources) are critical for maintaining order in correctional facilities (Lugo 2016). This extends to preventing the use of contraband cell phones. The tone from the top should be consistent and clear, emphasizing the values of integrity and consistent adherence to rules. Prison and jail administrators should emphasize that corruption will be detected and addressed, and staff should be able to report misconduct without the pressure of a “code of silence” and fear of retaliation. Furthermore, a culture of peer accountability and workplace ethics should prevail. This can include positive reinforcement in the form of incentives (e.g., a rating increase in performance review, a



step increase in salary, earned vacation time) to facilitate a positive work climate and can lead to organizational commitment and lowered stress among staff (Lugo 2016; Taxman et al. 2007).

These concepts can be summarized under the umbrella of “organizational justice.” Research suggests that organizational justice, or the extent to which members perceive their organizations to be fair, is pertinent to the mitigation of stressors in the workplace, and its absence can exacerbate employee dissatisfaction (Lambert, Hogan, and Griffin 2007; Reginal and Jannetta 2021; Taxman and Gordon 2009). The organizational justice framework consists of three components: procedural justice, or fairness in processes and decisionmaking by leadership and management; distributive justice, or fairness in outcomes for staff (e.g., workplace promotion or discipline); and interactional justice, or fairness in treatment of staff by management, leadership, and peers (i.e., treating staff with respect and dignity) (Boateng and Hsieh 2019). Correctional officers’ perceptions of organizational justice can significantly impact their commitment to their agencies and the extent to which they agree with their agencies’ goals (Reginal and Jannetta 2021), making them important for correctional leadership to consider when trying to improve staff recruitment and retention.

## Compensation

Though better pay may not solve all challenges, fair and competitive compensation can help address staffing shortages. Many agencies struggle in this regard. For example, some correctional administrators reported they had been in competition with retailers like Walmart for staff,<sup>11</sup> and agencies have reported that it is common for staff to work second jobs to make ends meet.<sup>12</sup> To address this, agencies have been working with state legislatures to increase correctional officers’ starting salaries. In some cases, new hires can earn yearly retention bonuses. Salary increases and retention bonuses are also being offered to existing staff in recognition of their service. If these measures improve vacancy rates and turnover, agencies might be able to be more selective in their hiring decisions while alleviating the stress of mandatory overtime on staff. Relatedly, increasing staff pay and retention can reduce the need for overtime or secondary employment, which could mitigate staff burnout and improve vigilance on the job.

Furthermore, better compensation and job satisfaction could reduce the temptation for corruption. Though researchers have not rigorously or systematically studied this hypothesis, low wages for correctional officers are correlated with the number of cell phones confiscated in state prisons systems, as has been depicted in news coverage.<sup>13</sup>

## Screening of New Hires

Staffing shortages have compelled some agencies to lower their selection standards. Though understandable, this practice may be contributing to the contraband cell phone problem. For instance, reports have indicated that criminal gangs are positioning members or affiliates with clean records to apply for jobs in prisons and jails (FBI 2011) to gain access to and funnel contraband into institutions, which can be a highly lucrative enterprise.<sup>14</sup>

To the extent possible, agencies should not take shortcuts in their hiring processes. For example, psychometric or other psychological tests used to make hiring decisions should include questions related to integrity and accountability. The answers could help determine whether candidates are suited to be correctional officers and indicate their susceptibility to corrupt practices. Thorough background checks should also be completed before new staff are assigned to institutions.

## Dedication to the Wellness of Staff and Correctional Populations

A correctional institution is a demanding work environment. Successful correctional systems are increasingly investing in employee assistance programs to provide counseling and mental health resources to staff, and these systems are prioritizing stress-reduction training. Demonstrating care for and supporting staff can go a long way toward reducing stress and nurturing organizational commitment, which can reduce the possibility of corruption. Investing in incarcerated people can also yield benefits. Providing productive programming opportunities and behavioral health services, for instance, can reduce idle time and violence and directly improve staff morale, as many staff draw satisfaction from engaging in activities that help incarcerated people make positive change (Reginal and Jannetta 2021). A safer environment for incarcerated people and correctional staff can also help recruitment and staff retention. Higher staffing levels can in turn help maintain a safe environment while reducing the risk of corruption.

## Supervisor Support

Relationship dynamics between staff and their immediate supervisors are key in staff wellness, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, which are further related to staff's performance on the job and their ability to effectively interdict contraband. Research indicates that supervisors play an important role in job satisfaction and, therefore, retention. For example, studies have linked inadequate supervisory support (Maahs and Pratt 2001), dissatisfaction with supervisors (Stohr, Self, and Lovrich 1992), and a perceived lack of respect from management (Boateng and Hsieh 2019; Lambert et al.

2019; Reginal and Jannetta 2021) with negative attitudes and turnover intention. Furthermore, corrections officers who do not feel supported by their supervisors might be more likely to have attitudes that are conducive to institutional deviance (Worley and Worley 2013).

Providing supervisors managerial trainings to adequately inform them about departmental policies, managing correctional staff, efficient communication strategies, and working with teams can benefit intradepartmental relationships. Similarly, mentorship programs can help supervisors and line staff build positive relationships. In addition, agencies can create positive work cultures and increase employees' perceptions that they are valued by increasing transparency and regularly providing staff necessary information and explanations for organizational decisions and actions.

## **Training**

Staff need adequate preservice and in-service training emphasizing professionalism and security basics. Staff must understand that a cell phone is not always innocuous contraband. The presence of cell phones in a facility puts staff and those who are incarcerated at risk and compromises public safety. Staff also need to be trained on consistently enforcing rules to establish legitimacy in the eyes of incarcerated people (Bottoms 1999) and avoid any manipulation that might occur. Again, some systems are curtailing their preservice training, which can hinder efforts to make staff practices consistent and develop a more professional staff.

Furthermore, as more and more agencies adopt novel technologies to detect and disable contraband cell phones, it is important to adequately train staff to effectively use those technologies and to complement them with nontechnological strategies. For example, when using a managed access system as an interdiction solution, security staff need to be properly trained by the vendor or field experts on how the system can be used and the specifics of its functionality. Because managed access systems can only be used to disable unauthorized calls and have little to no impact on other cell phone functions, staff need to be trained on how best to use other solutions like pat searches and cell shakedowns and other technologies like handheld detectors and body scanners to effectively detect and confiscate cell phones.

## **Policies and Procedures**

Correctional systems are increasingly adopting policies, procedures, and technology to detect contraband cell phones and deter staff from bringing them into institutions. For a variety of reasons,

some agencies have been reluctant to search staff as they enter facilities' secure perimeters, one of which is that proper screening takes time and adequate staffing. Some believe the practice demoralizes the noncorrupt staff who make up most of the workforce. Furthermore, collective bargaining agreements may limit facilities' ability to search staff.

The increase in contraband, including cell phones, has forced agencies to reexamine their operations. Agencies must develop strong staff search policies and develop processes to ensure the policies are adhered to. Among other things, policy should specify the frequency of searches (e.g., all staff, random) and approved search methods (e.g., body scanners, metal detectors, pat-downs). It should be noted that in some states, such as New Jersey, New York, and Ohio, public health laws prohibit the use of ionizing radiation for nonmedical purposes. Though this technology may be permissible on incarcerated people, staff are not usually exempt. Lastly, agencies must ensure they have adequate staffing to conduct staff screening.

Furthermore, other policies can influence how easily staff can introduce contraband in facilities. For instance, staff may be required to use clear plastic bags (which make it more difficult to hide contraband) for any food and personal items they bring in (Shukla, Peterson, and Kim 2021). Post assignment can also be used to reduce contraband cell phones; though regular posts to a housing unit have benefits (e.g., continuity, knowledge of the population), they also raise potential risks. For example, performing the same routine and (often tedious) tasks every shift can lead to boredom and complacency. Rotating staff can address this issue and improve overall security. Moreover, as officers and people who are incarcerated spend more time with each other, officers can become less vigilant. For instance, they may be manipulated into sharing personal information with people who are incarcerated, and they may engage in inappropriate activities that open them up to further compromise and corruption. Regularly rotating high-risk post assignments can mitigate these risks. As allowable (e.g., in collective bargaining agreements), rotation could mean rotating assignments inside an institution or periodically rotating staff out of it.

Lastly, to mitigate against corrupt or complacent staff, agencies can employ dedicated search teams. For example, an agency can rotate one highly trained team of officers from facility to facility to conduct contraband searches. One benefit of this approach is that such teams have a singular purpose and are somewhat independent in that they have not established relationships with facility staff or those incarcerated. Having a team dedicated to searching and processing staff as they enter a facility may also be advantageous for similar reasons. Vetted members of such teams may be more likely to hold fellow staff accountable.

## Investigating Suspected Misconduct

Instances of suspected misconduct, both by staff and incarcerated people, are pertinent to identify and investigate. Agencies have used several investigative techniques, such as polygraph testing and other deception detection tools, to weed out bad actors among staff,<sup>15</sup> although these techniques should be used with caution and by highly trained personnel given the risks they entail (e.g., false positives on polygraph tests). In addition, a great deal of intelligence is collected as part of routine surveillance in correctional facilities that can be used to identify and keep a closer eye on staff and incarcerated people suspected of smuggling or using contraband cell phones.

## Responding to Staff Misconduct

How agencies respond to incidents in which a staff member brings a phone into a facility varies. Agency policies and legal sanctions vary considerably between states. Most agencies maintain zero-tolerance policies for corrupt staff members, and responses can range from warnings and disciplinary actions (e.g., suspension) to prosecution. Moreover, certain criminal acts involving contraband can be federally prosecuted when they involve smuggling and trafficking. For instance, a former correctional officer in Georgia was sentenced to 46 months in prison for smuggling contraband cell phones and methamphetamine into a prison.<sup>16</sup>

Having clearly outlined policies and guidelines around staff corruption, with clauses about contraband-related misconduct and related sanctions, can be important for agencies to draft and maintain to inform key players (i.e., leadership, administrators, supervisors, and line staff) on how best to respond. It may also be helpful to routinely inform staff of and train them on these policies to ensure they understand how contraband is defined and what is considered contraband in their facility, what they are permitted to bring in (e.g., whether cell phone access and use is permissible in certain areas and not in others), and the risks (including departmental and legal sanctions) that accidentally or deliberately bringing contraband in involves. It is also important to have good accountability mechanisms for all kinds of professional conduct, including staff corruption, to ensure rules are adhered to and reduce staff misconduct.

## Conclusion

Staff are among the most essential components of a correctional institution. The secure and orderly operation of a facility depends on staff being qualified, well trained, dedicated, and professional. Though

technological solutions are important in combating contraband cell phones, it is important to recognize they are just tools. Without staff who can properly use these tools and follow effective correctional practices, investing in them will not yield the expected benefits.

Moreover, staff are the foundation of the layered security approach most agencies use. Therefore, to combat contraband cell phones effectively, stakeholders should invest the resources required to build a high-quality workforce. This means professionalizing the correctional officer position and paying a wage commensurate with the position's duties, providing adequate training at academies and continuous in-service training, and valuing staff and providing them the support they need to perform an extremely difficult job.

# Notes

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