



# Contraband and Interdiction Strategies in Correctional Facilities

*Rochisha Shukla, Bryce E. Peterson, and KiDeuk Kim*

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**The Urban Institute received funding from the National Institute of Justice to develop an understanding of the challenges and practices involved in managing correctional contraband. Urban researchers visited 11 correctional facilities managed by the Florida Department of Corrections (FDOC), the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD), and the Montgomery County Department of Correction and Rehabilitation (DOCR). This brief summarizes lessons learned from the site visits and discusses the scope and breadth of contraband issues and contraband interdiction strategies employed by the correctional agencies.**

Contraband in prisons and jails is a major security concern for correctional agencies. For example, contraband weapons can be used to inflict serious injury to incarcerated people and correctional staff (Biermann 2007; Wolff et al. 2007) and to facilitate escapes from custody (Peterson 2015; US Sentencing Commission 2008). Moreover, contraband drugs and alcohol can create and exacerbate substance use problems for people in prison and jail (Centre for Social Justice 2015; Dillon 2001; Gore, Bird, and Ross 1995; Swann and James 1998), and drug use can lead to HIV transmission (Calzavara et al. 2003; Jürgens, Ball, and Verster 2009).

In response to these risks, facilities across the country have adopted various interdiction strategies to combat the contraband problem. Agencies work to prevent contraband from entering facilities by searching visitors, staff, and incarcerated people for unauthorized items during visits, upon entry, and before and after being transported (ACA 2008). Staff also aim to prevent contraband from being thrown over walls or flown in via drones by patrolling the perimeter, monitoring cameras, and outfitting exterior fences with special netting.<sup>1</sup> To locate and confiscate illicit items already in a facility, staff may

employ metal detectors, body scanners, and other technologies or strategies. Agencies may also use their own specialized officers or teams to gather intelligence on contraband issues.

This brief elaborates on the contraband-related challenges and strategies correctional administrators have employed to prevent, detect, and remove contraband from their facilities. We draw on case studies of the interdiction solutions implemented in one prison system—the Florida Department of Corrections—and two jail systems—the Montgomery County Department of Correction and Rehabilitation and the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department.

## Case Study Sites

The **Florida Department of Corrections** oversees 50 state and 7 private prisons, processing approximately 96,000 people through its system in 2018 (Vera Institute of Justice 2019). We visited three of these prisons: the Taylor Correctional Institution, the Hamilton Correctional Institution, and the Kissimmee Community Release Center. Taylor and Hamilton house male adults with different security levels, ranging from minimum custody to close custody.<sup>2</sup> Kissimmee is a minimum-security work-release center designed to prepare people for reentry by focusing heavily on vocational programming, mental health support, substance use treatment, educational programming, and employment preparedness.

The **Montgomery County Department of Correction and Rehabilitation** oversees two county jails in Montgomery County, Maryland: the Montgomery County Detention Center and the Montgomery County Correctional Facility. The former is a pretrial booking unit responsible for the intake and processing of people charged with criminal offenses. The facility operates as an intermediary between screening and transfer. The Montgomery County Correctional Facility is responsible for the custody and care of people serving sentences of up to 18 months. It houses males and females, juveniles and adults, and includes a medical wing. Approximately 13,000 people are processed through the Montgomery County Detention Center annually. As of December 2019, the average daily population in the Montgomery County Detention Center and the Montgomery County Correctional Facility were 60 and 557, respectively.<sup>3</sup>

The **Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department** oversees seven jail facilities in Los Angeles County, California: Twin Towers Correctional Facility, Men’s Central Jail, Century Regional Detention Facility, North County Correctional Facility, North Correctional Facility, South Correctional Facility, and East Correctional Facility. It also oversees the Inmate Reception Center, the primary unit for processing people into and out of the LASD system. For our case study of LASD, we visited every facility except the North Correctional Facility. The Century Regional Detention Facility houses female adults, whereas the Men’s Central Jail, the North County Correctional Facility, and the South Correctional Facility house male adults. Twin Towers is a special medical unit for people with acute physical and psychological health needs. As of year-end 2019, 103,839 people were booked into the county jail system, and its average daily population was 17,070 (LASD 2019).

## Methods

To learn about the contraband challenges facing correctional facilities, we conducted site visits to observe facility operations with respect to contraband detection and control and interviewed correctional staff and leadership. We visited two DOCR jails in January 2018, six LASD jails in September 2018, and three FDOC prisons in December 2019. Our goal was to collect information on issues related to contraband in each of the jail/prison systems and the interdiction methods used to address them.

We conducted in-depth facility observations, which included walk-throughs of the facilities where we observed cells and dorms, yards and recreational areas, visitation rooms, mail rooms, work areas (e.g., carpentry shops), classrooms, and common areas like laundry units, chapels, dining areas, and day rooms. We also collected information on the facilities' architectural layouts, common contraband entry points, and interdiction technologies in use. Wherever possible, we observed demonstrations of interdiction technologies to better understand how and when staff use them to detect contraband. We took pictures of these technologies and relevant areas throughout each facility.

To supplement these observations, we met with and interviewed leadership and staff in each facility, including line officers and investigators responsible for detecting and recovering contraband on a daily basis, supervisors, and administrators involved in staff training and decisionmaking around the selection and purchase of interdiction technologies and contraband-related policymaking. The interviews focused on how each facility or system defines contraband, common types of contraband, how contraband enters facilities, the strategies and technologies used to detect contraband, policies around contraband recovery and related sanctions, and recommendations for improving interdiction (e.g., newer technologies, staff trainings). The research team hand-coded observation and interview notes to identify high-level themes, which we summarize in the sections that follow.

## Contraband

Although contraband is commonly thought to refer to illicit weapons and drugs brought into correctional facilities, it also includes permissible items for incarcerated people that are manipulated to be used in a way other than intended (figure 1). For example, a person could sharpen a toothbrush and use it as a weapon, or make homemade alcohol using fruits, vegetables, and other available ingredients. In addition, excessive accumulation of otherwise permissible items, such as items from the commissary, newspapers, toiletries, or food, is considered contraband. Though the agencies that participated in this study deal with these types of contraband, staff at all the facilities we visited indicated that narcotics are among the most critical contraband items and pose a serious threat to safety and security. Moreover, DOCR and FDOC noted significant issues with contraband cell phones at the time of our visits.

FIGURE 1

**Contraband Recovered by the Montgomery County  
Department of Correction and Rehabilitation**



**Source:** Photo taken by the Urban research team with permission from the Montgomery County Department of Correction and Rehabilitation.

When contraband is recovered, there are a variety of actions staff may take in response. Interviewees noted that, in general, contraband recovered from an incarcerated person results in an officer submitting a disciplinary report on that person. A disciplinary committee then decides on an appropriate penalty. Depending on the type and dangerousness of the contraband recovered, sanctions may include administrative segregation, loss of privileges (e.g., visitation, canteen, telephone), or the filing of new criminal charges. We found that DOCR had created a “punishment matrix” that outlined sanctions based on previous and current infractions. In the case of minor violations, such as the possession of nondangerous contraband like excessive food items, officers had discretion over whether to file a disciplinary report. Therefore, not all instances of contraband recovery were documented.

Staff are usually not allowed to carry items like cell phones, cigarettes, and other items considered contraband inside their facilities. When they violate these policies, they may face disciplinary actions, termination of employment, and even criminal charges, depending on the seriousness of the violation and their culpability. Similarly, visitors caught with contraband items usually lose visiting privileges and may be subject to criminal legal action.

# Interdiction

To combat and control contraband, correctional administrators and officers rely on various interdiction strategies. These strategies focus on preventing contraband from entering facilities or detecting and removing items once they are inside. Interdiction strategies are formally integrated into officer trainings, and staff also gain a substantial amount of working knowledge on contraband interdiction from colleagues.

Correctional agencies depend on several technologies designed to assist with contraband interdiction. In the three jurisdictions we visited, for example, the facilities were using a variety of metal detectors (including walk-through devices, handheld wands, and other portable units) and surveillance cameras. In addition, LASD and FDOC made use of full-body scanners—similar to the machines used for airport security screenings—at the time of our study.

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## BOX 1

### Acquisition of Interdiction Technologies

Correctional administrators usually learn about possible interdiction technologies through one of two ways:

- through **vendors** who may approach administrators directly or make presentations about their technologies at trade shows or corrections conferences
- through **word of mouth** when administrators speak to colleagues and other professional contacts about the technologies they have tested and used in their own facilities

Upon learning of possible technological interdiction solutions, administrators select and purchase equipment based on the unique needs of their agency and facility, such as the agency's budget, the specific types of contraband being recovered by staff, and the location of the facility. For example, full-body scanners cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to purchase and install, but two of the agencies we visited (the LASD intake and release center and an FDOC prison with a work crew) installed these machines in facilities that needed to quickly process a lot of people in and out each day.

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Overall, correctional administrators and officers from all three agencies noted that the interdiction technologies they employ are effective for detecting and controlling contraband. However, they noted some specific issues. For example, most technologies rely on the detection of metal found in many contraband items (e.g., most weapons and cell phones), but these are ill-suited for finding other types of contraband items, such as narcotics, cigarettes, and nonmetallic weapons. Furthermore, interviewees noted challenges in finding technologies that can keep up with the new and innovative ways that contraband is being brought into their facilities. For example, at the time of our visit, FDOC had been dealing with people depositing contraband into its prison via drones. Lastly, although technologies are crucial for contraband detection and institutional safety, staff across all three sites contended that technology alone was not sufficient. The agencies still rely heavily on traditional prison operations and

strategies to combat contraband, including pat searches, cell shakedowns, K9 searches, and intelligence gathering.

In the next sections, we describe the interdiction technologies and strategies that FDOC, LASD, and DOCR were using and the contraband issues they were facing at the time of our site visits. We frame this discussion around seven critical processes and areas in correctional facilities: (1) entry, (2) cells and dormitories, (3) common areas, (4) mail rooms, (5) throwovers and drones, (6) visits, and (7) staff.

## Entry

This section describes our observations and lessons learned around contraband and interdiction strategies at the point of entry for incarcerated people. Staff and leadership from DOCR indicate that the most common method by which contraband is introduced to their system involves people entering a facility to await trial or serve a short sentence. People often hide contraband inside layers of clothing and body cavities. Common contraband items recovered at this stage include cigarettes and marijuana, although officers occasionally find weapons and other drugs.

There are several interdiction strategies that FDOC, LASD, and DOCR employ to detect and prevent incarcerated people from bringing contraband into their facilities. For example, people who are newly admitted to a facility or are transferred from another facility go through multiple steps of security screening. They are usually held together in a large room—commonly referred to as a reception area, booking area, or central processing unit—and asked to complete paperwork and security requirements. These people are then searched, including through physical pat searches and modified strip searches (that is, searches where people are made to take off their shoes, socks, and every layer of clothing except the last layer). Staff also use various technologies to ensure these people are not concealing contraband on or in their bodies, including walk-through and handheld metal detectors, Cellsense towers, Body Orifice Security Scanner chairs, and full-body scanners (figure 2).

Both LASD and FDOC were using body scanners at the time of our visits. These devices are efficient because they allow officers to detect contraband without making physical contact or asking people to remove all their clothing. The effectiveness of these devices, however, is highly dependent on their radiation settings. In the two jurisdictions we visited with operational body scanners, the machines' radiation settings were minimal (roughly 1/200th of a standard X-ray machine) out of an abundance of caution for the health and safety of the incarcerated people who were being processed through them. According to staff, these low settings allow the machines to detect metal but make it difficult to detect drugs and other nonmetallic items. Thus, staff frequently need to rely on other strategies to supplement body scanners, such as pat or strip searches.

FIGURE 2

## Interdiction Technologies at Facility Entry Points



### Walk-Through and Handheld Metal Detectors

Walk-through detectors are stationary and can find metallic contraband items on a person's entire body at one time. Conversely, handheld wands are portable and allow for quick and efficient scanning. Wands can also help locate contraband detected in a walk-through machine.



### Cellsense Towers

These are powerful metal detectors designed specifically for detecting cell phones and other objects with small amounts of metal. People walk past the tower, which alerts if they have one of these items in or on their person. The towers can be moved around facilities.



### Body Orifice Security Scanner Chair

Devices that detect small weapons, cell phones, and other metallic objects when people sit on them. These chairs are specifically designed to detect items concealed within abdominal cavities and the shin area and are typically installed near facility entry points.



### Full-Body Scanner

A device used to detect objects concealed on or inside a person's body using X-ray technology. Body scanners are similar to the machines used during airport security screenings and enable the detection of metallic and nonmetallic objects.

**Source:** Photos taken by Urban research team with permission from the Montgomery County Department of Correction and Rehabilitation and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

If correctional officers have reason to believe a person still has contraband on their person after they have been processed through a body scanner, metal detector, or other standard interdiction procedure, they may conduct a strip search. Facilities may also require additional security procedures for people based on their offense history. For example, at the time of our visit, LASD was conducting enhanced searches for everyone arrested on felony charges, drug- and/or weapon-related charges, and probation or parole violations.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in Florida prisons, people identified as having prior gang affiliation (marked as Security Threat Groups, or STGs) go through more stringent checks at entry. Once correctional agencies complete these inspections, people are booked into the facility and are typically held in holding cells until they are processed into the facility. Similar search strategies and technologies are used to check for contraband when incarcerated people return from court visits and work assignments to reenter facilities.

Another policy in some of the facilities we visited requires everyone to shower upon entry and change into uniforms before being escorted to holding cells. According to staff in Los Angeles County, if people possess contraband that has gone undetected during initial screenings, they usually transfer it to uniform pockets, or leave it behind in the shower areas to be recovered later by other incarcerated people (as part of a preplanned arrangement). As an additional check, therefore, showers are inspected before and after use, and people are pat searched after they change into their uniforms.

Moreover, some facilities we visited have a “contraband watch” area. If officers have reason to believe someone is in possession of contraband (e.g., undetected contraband in a body cavity) or if someone refuses to walk through a body scanner or metal detector, they are held in these areas before being assigned a cell. These people are strip searched and observed for a period by officers, usually until they “purge” the contraband item. If someone is found in possession of contraband, they could be charged with an additional crime or face internal discipline in the facility.

## Cells and Dormitories

Although agencies aim to prevent illicit items from ever entering their facilities, some contraband is successfully smuggled or created inside the facility. Thus, interdiction strategies also focus on finding and recovering contraband inside facilities. Our case studies found that contraband interdiction in cells and dorms usually consists of shakedowns, which can be prescheduled, conducted randomly, or initiated in response to a critical event or intelligence gathered by correctional investigators. In DOCR jails, correctional officers reported randomly selecting three cells per shift for shakedowns, in addition to scheduled shakedowns of the entire facility conducted four times a year by the county’s emergency response team. They also reported making two or three rounds a day where they “window search” each cell by looking into cells from the outside to ensure everything is in place.

Facilities in some jurisdictions also use K9 units to conduct checks on a monthly basis or upon request if staff suspect the presence of drugs or cell phones inside a housing unit. In addition, all the agencies participating in this study use portable Cellsense towers in housing units to assist with shakedowns and check for cell phones and other contraband items. According to correctional officers, the most common types of contraband recovered from cells are cell phones, medication, razor blades, and hoarded food, especially fruits that can be fermented to make alcohol. Staff also regularly find weapons and drugs during these shakedowns.

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*I schedule one of my routine window searches around the time when most inmates are asleep. Around the time inmates are sleeping, they are usually not careful and leave things (including contraband) in plain sight. If I spot nondangerous contraband like hoarded food or towels, I make an announcement once people are awake about how the facility defines contraband and asks them to turn in any item that fits the definition. Most inmates, who were genuinely unaware of which items are considered contraband or who want to avoid getting into trouble later, surrender. If there are people who I suspect of possessing contraband, but who don't surrender, I conduct a thorough shakedown at a random time.*

*—DOCR corrections employee*

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Officers noted during interviews that during shakedowns they focus on areas commonly used to hide contraband, such as in, under, and behind beds, tables, light fixtures, doors, bags, and other personal property. Officers also noted that incarcerated people sometimes use magnets from radios or tape to stick things on the underside of beds and tables. Similarly, items can be hidden under and inside blankets, pillows, and mattresses, which can be ruffled and turned inside-out to check for contraband (figure 3). Lastly, shoes are commonly used to hide small items, making it important for staff to periodically check inside shoes or under the soles.

FIGURE 3

**Mattress Searched by Staff for Contraband**



Source: Photo taken by Urban research team with permission from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

During shakedowns and cell searches, officers look for certain items. For example, a DOCR officer we interviewed described how they usually started each cell search by looking for toilet paper, which is a commonly hoarded item and frequently a sign that someone is hoarding other items. They then search for radios and headphones. Because people are typically assigned one of each, extras are considered contraband. The officer also noted that any damaged item should be thoroughly examined. For instance, if staff found a torn blanket with a piece missing, it would be important to account for the missing piece to ensure it had not been used to make a weapon. Similarly, broken toothbrushes, combs, trash cans and toilet brushes are inspected carefully during searches.

Staff members at the agencies we visited also indicated that razors are commonly hoarded. Although incarcerated people are given razors to shave with, they are supposed to discard them immediately after use. As such, missing blades on discarded razors could be a warning sign that someone possesses

dangerous contraband. Moreover, officers reported looking out for plastic bags and cups, neither of which are allowed inside cells because they can be used to make and store alcohol and other contraband items. In LASD jails, plastic bags (e.g., those used to package food items) are perforated to ensure incarcerated people cannot use them to store liquids (like alcohol) or to harm themselves or others.

## Common Areas

Correctional facilities have many common areas, such as kitchens, dining areas, bathrooms, laundry rooms, medical wings (often equipped with examination rooms, waiting rooms, physical therapy rooms, and dental and mental health service offices), libraries, chapels, classrooms, work areas, and reentry centers. Furthermore, most facilities have yards and recreation areas where incarcerated people can get exercise and fresh air. Outdoor exercise yards are surrounded by tall fences or terraces covered in mesh, whereas indoor recreation areas resemble gymnasiums with large, secured windows for ventilation.

Because common areas grant easy access to other incarcerated people, staff, and volunteers, they offer opportunities for people to pass along or stash contraband. To combat this, the facilities we visited have staff routinely patrolling all common areas. Moreover, staff employ interdiction devices and strategies at points of ingress and egress throughout the facilities to limit the spread and exchange of contraband. For example, staff from FDOC, DOCR, and LASD use standing and handheld metal detectors, Cellsense towers, and/or pat searches on people returning from recreation yards or moving from one part of the facility to another. The agencies have also placed surveillance cameras throughout the facilities to watch for transactions and incidents (e.g., gambling, assaults, fights, and escape attempts) that may involve contraband.

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*Having a search routine and being attentive are necessary measures to detect contraband. Following the same checks every day makes it easier to catch irregularities. Similarly, making it evident to inmates that they are being watched reduces chances of inmates acquiring and exchanging contraband. I regularly ask inmates about their day-to-day activities to subtly indicate that I have my eye on everything.*

*—DOCR corrections employee*

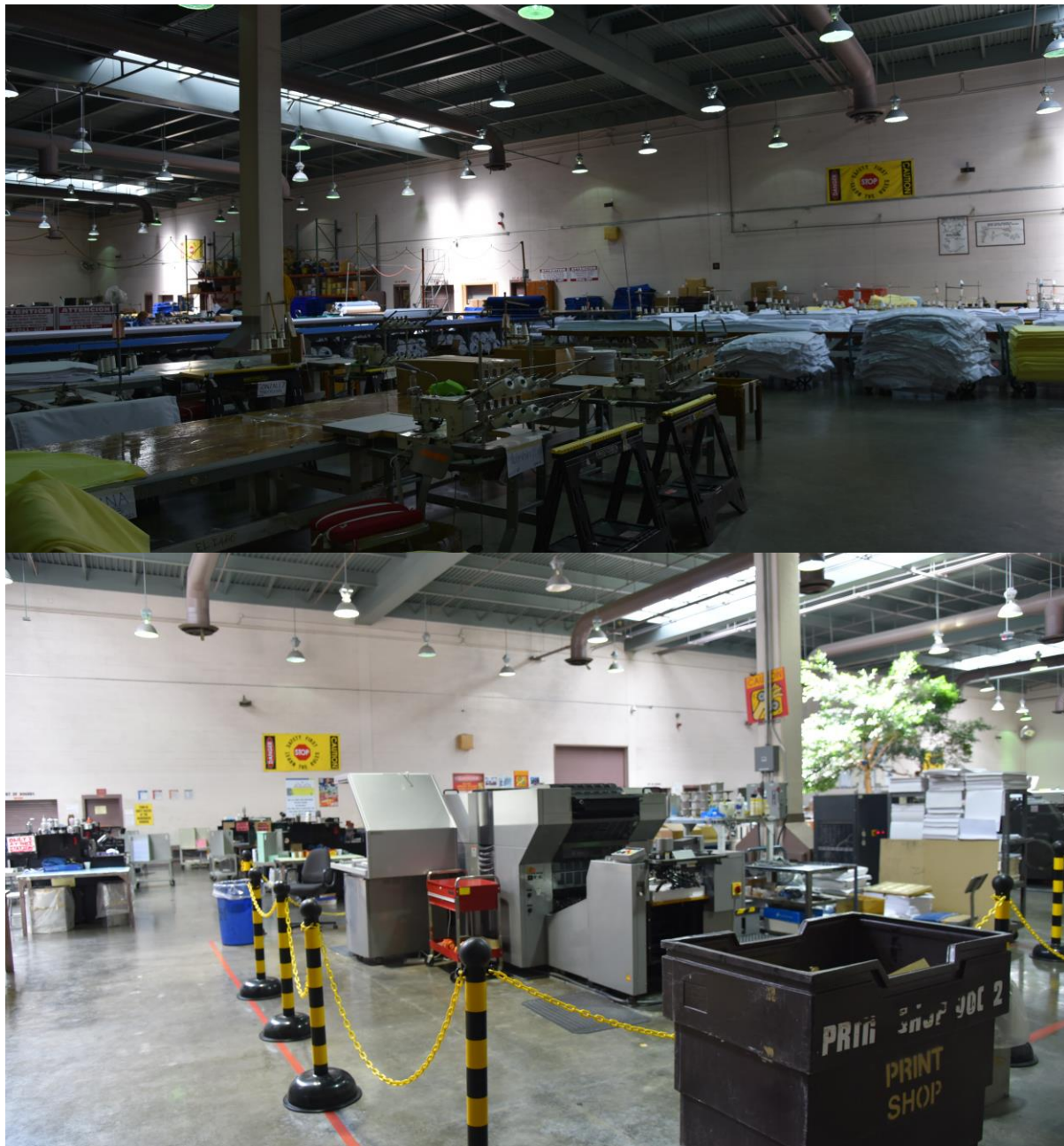
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The agencies had implemented similar interdiction strategies in facility work sites. Most of the facilities we visited provide incarcerated people employment opportunities, including apprenticeship programs and vocational training and certification. For example, LASD jails have sewing factories and print shops, among other vocational programs (figure 4). Because these areas offer incarcerated people access to items that can be turned into contraband (e.g., tools, needles, chemicals), the facilities take extra precautions to ensure such items are not removed from work sites. For example, incarcerated

people have to check out tools from locked storage areas, and staff use metal detectors, Cellsense towers, and pat searches to ensure people do not leave work sites with potentially dangerous items.

FIGURE 4

Los Angeles Sheriff's Department Sewing Factory (Top) and Print Shop (Bottom)



Source: Photos taken by Urban research team with permission from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

Agencies also used these interdiction strategies in areas in the facilities where people on work crews or work release programs exit. In Montgomery County, people leaving a facility are pat searched and made

to walk past or through metal detectors to ensure they do not exit the facility with contraband. Similarly, people leaving LASD jails and FDOC prisons are pat searched at exit and scanned using a body scanner at entry. At the FDOC Kissimmee facility, where people leave the facility for work each day, staff explained that people returning from work have to pass through a metal detector and submit to a pat search to ensure they are not bringing back contraband from their job sites. In addition, FDOC officers have the permission of outside employers to search the incarcerated people's on-site work areas (e.g., lockers) for contraband and illicit items such as drugs and weapons.

## Mail Rooms

In addition to common areas, most correctional facilities have mail rooms where letters and packages are sent to incarcerated people. In the facilities we visited, staff stationed in these rooms are responsible for ensuring that contraband does not get into the facility via mail. Moreover, most of the facilities follow strict protocols. For example, they require family members and friends to send mail on basic postcards or letters in plain white envelopes. Furthermore, many facilities only allow letters written in blue or black ink pens, and any letter or card containing messages in crayons, paints, or markers is discarded. This is because some contraband (e.g., Suboxone and other narcotic substances) can be mixed into paint and crayons. Some facilities also provide some people colored photocopies of their mail rather than the originals. Moreover, some facilities do not allow packages larger than a certain size, and if such packages addressed to incarcerated people reach those facilities, they are discarded or returned to the senders.

In all the facilities we visited, all pieces of mail are opened and individually checked by mail room staff and may also be rechecked by deputies in the housing units before distribution. Other than physically checking each item sent to the facility, many staff also use detection devices to confirm they do not miss any contraband. For example, DOCR scans mail on top of a 1,000-watt bulb table to ensure contents in envelopes are safe to pass on to recipients. Similarly, LASD staff use a mobile trace detection device (figure 5) to detect envelopes, business cards, and postage stamps that may be laced with drugs. Contraband smuggled into facilities this way is difficult to catch without such detection devices.

Furthermore, staff manually inspect magazines, books, and pop-up cards to ensure paraphernalia and other contraband are not hidden between pages or in hollowed-out compartments. They also run packages through X-ray machines to look for concealed contraband. Per the law, staff wait to open and inspect legal mail (i.e., mail from people's attorneys about their cases or other legal matters) in the presence of the incarcerated recipient upon delivery. Because of these constraints, some of the staff we interviewed reported that people outside prison had tried sending cigarettes, drugs, and other contraband items in letters disguised as legal mail to make it more difficult for staff to find.

FIGURE 5

Los Angeles Sheriff's Department's Mobile Trace Device Used to Check for Narcotics in Mail



Source: Photo taken by Urban research team with permission from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

## Throwovers and Drones

In facilities where incarcerated people have access to outdoor areas (e.g., recreation yards), there is the potential for contraband to be thrown into the premises from the outside or dropped in using drones. To address this, such outdoor areas are surrounded by tall fences (and in some cases, a second line of fences) to prevent people from coming too close to the facility. Staff also conduct regular patrols around facilities' perimeters to deter escape attempts and stop people outside from walking up to the fences and throwing or flying contraband into the facilities. Surveillance cameras had also been installed along exterior fences as a form of contraband interdiction.

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*We recently intercepted a drone carrying close to 30 cell phones using our covert cameras. The cameras caught movement around the facility fence. It was the man controlling the drone. Drones are becoming a big problem in Florida prisons. We would like to invest in drone detection technologies to better deal with this problem.*

*—FDOC corrections employee*

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Some of the FDOC prisons are particularly susceptible to contraband being delivered via throwovers and drones because of their large open outdoor areas (which are relatively easy to access from public roads) and trees that provide cover close to facilities' exterior fencing. Shortly before we visited FDOC, staff at one of its facilities recovered a package on facility grounds that had been wrapped in brown tape to blend in with the winter grass and contained 10 cell phones (figure 6). In response, FDOC purchased special outdoor "covert cameras" with motion detection sensors and hid them in trees around the facility. The cameras would alert staff when someone came too close to the fence. This interdiction strategy proved effective: the cameras later alerted staff of someone operating a drone carrying more than two dozen cell phones (figure 6).

**FIGURE 6**  
**Throwover Camouflaged for Winter Grass (1), Cell Phones Inside Throwover (2), Recovered Drone with Contraband Cell Phones (3), and a Drone Operator Captured on Covert Camera (4)**



Source: Photos taken by the Florida Department of Corrections and shared with Urban.

## Visits

Visitors can also bring contraband into facilities, and staff at the facilities we visited conduct thorough checks of visitors and of visitation areas. Visitors at these facilities are not permitted to carry personal items inside, except for attorneys, who can bring case paperwork. Visitors also undergo some of the security processes that incarcerated people and staff undergo when entering the facilities, including

walk-through metal detectors, pat searches, and X-ray machines to scan personal belongings. In FDOC facilities, visitors are also subjected to searches by K9 teams that FDOC randomly deploys.

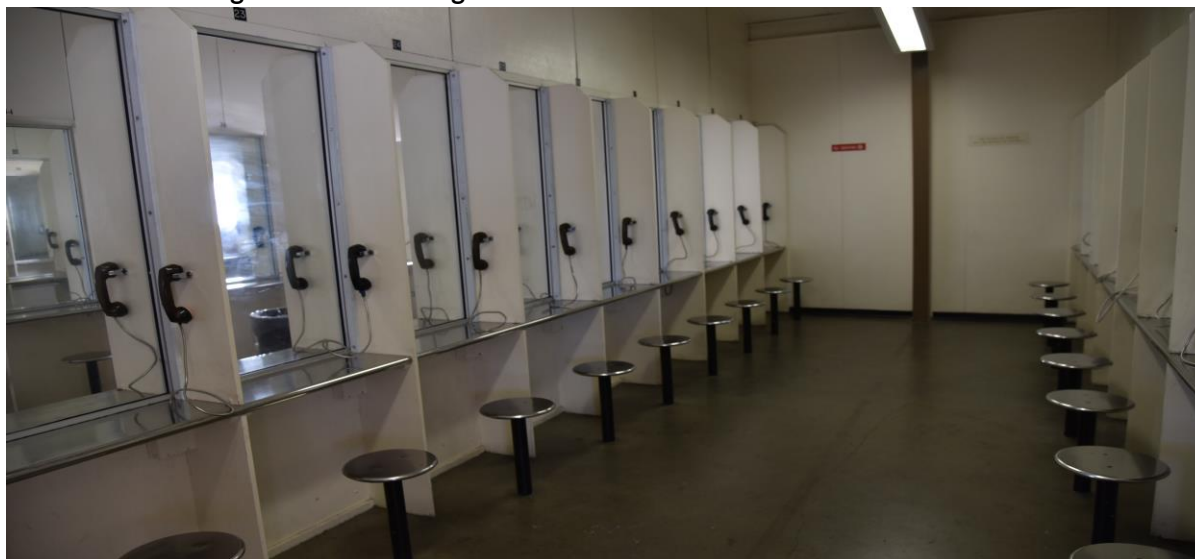
Visiting rooms inside the facilities have separate areas and processes for family and attorney visits, with attorney visits generally occurring in more private areas to ensure confidentiality. The types of visits the facilities allow vary widely. For example, FDOC prisons (like most US prisons) offer contact visits where incarcerated people and their loved ones can meet in person and exchange brief hugs or kisses. Conversely, LASD and DOCR jails primarily allow incarcerated people to visit with their loved ones at booths separated by glass or plexiglass partitions, using phone receivers on either side to communicate (figure 7).

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*The bottom part of visiting booths is made of wood. We recently caught a visitor with 20 grams of meth that he was planning to pass through the gaps in the wood using a pixie straw. These small items can go undetected when relying on metal detectors and simple pat searches. We need to be very observant and look for suspicious behavior to catch these, in addition to relying on insider intel. –LASD corrections employee*

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**FIGURE 7**  
**Noncontact Visiting Room in a Los Angeles Jail**



Source: Photo taken by Urban research team with permission from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

The agencies that participated in our study noted that these procedures are designed to minimize the amount of contraband entering their facilities during visits. For instance, LASD staff noted that their jails' common areas are usually serviced, cleaned, and maintained by "inmate workers," people who hold maintenance and janitorial jobs that provide access to visitation areas and visitor restrooms. According to staff, visitors have brought in drugs and other small contraband items undetected by routine pat searches and hidden them in the restrooms, where the workers retrieved them and brought them into the facilities. To prevent this, staff have to thoroughly check all visiting areas before and after visits, and the workers can enter these areas only after the checks are completed. A new policy also dictates that staff must keep a record of every visitor who uses a visitor restroom by checking their IDs so that investigations are more efficient if contraband is found there. In addition, LASD staff reported that visitors had attempted to pass laminated papers (e.g., papers laced with methamphetamine) through gaps in windows or cracks in the wood of visiting booths.

In FDOC prisons, where contact visits are allowed, staff are more stringent with checks on visitors. Visitor belongings are run through X-ray machines and physically searched. All visits are closely supervised using surveillance cameras and by officers stationed in visiting areas. Although visitors may occasionally try to smuggle contraband into prisons and jails, it is important to note that research finds that visitation does not lead to a significant increase in a facility's overall contraband levels (Peterson et al. 2019; Siennick, Mears, and Bales 2013); in fact, visiting can improve safety and security by lowering rates of institutional misconduct and recidivism (Cochran 2012; De Claire and Dixon 2015; Duwe and Clark 2013; Mitchell et al. 2016).

## Staff

In addition to incarcerated people and people outside of facilities, contraband can enter facilities through correctional staff. For example, we found through interviews with FDOC leadership that a significant amount of contraband enters FDOC facilities through staff, especially illicit cell phones and cigarettes. Such staff may be driven by moneymaking opportunities, and the fact that cigarettes are allowed on prison premises for staff but not for incarcerated people makes this problem more difficult to monitor and control. Conversely, DOCR administrators noted that they rarely find staff smuggling contraband items into their jail system. According to one interviewee, this is because compared with other jails in the US, DOCR staff receive relatively high salaries and good benefits. Therefore, officers do not want to lose stable employment with competitively high salaries for a little money on the side.

Each of the agencies we visited had its own security protocols for preventing staff and volunteers from introducing contraband into facilities. They typically have to walk through metal detectors and undergo pat searches, and they are also required to leave their cell phones in lockers before entering facilities. In some facilities, they are required to use transparent bags to carry their personal belongings, so everything is clearly visible to the other staff conducting security screenings.

In Florida, staff sometimes undergo additional checks before entering prison premises, including accounting for the brand and number of cigarettes they have on their person. Across all three agencies, several facilities have airport-style X-ray machines (figure 8) to scan jackets, lunch boxes, purses, and



other personal belongings. Although FDOC and LASD have body scanners in some facilities, they do not require staff to go through the machines. In Florida, this owes to state regulations preventing staff and visitors from being scanned. Some of the leadership we interviewed indicated that these regulations are challenging because the strategies and technologies used on staff (e.g., metal detectors and pat searches) are not as effective as body scanners at detecting contraband.

FIGURE 8

### X-Ray Scanning Device Used for Personal Belongings



Source: Image taken by Urban research team with permission from the Montgomery County Department of Correction and Rehabilitation.

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*We cannot use body scanners on visitors and staff. This is a big problem for us. Metal detectors and hand wands often miss contraband hidden in body cavities. In the past few months, we have recovered 13 cell phones being smuggled into the facility by visitors through additional physical searches. It would be much easier to catch these if we could make use of body scanners.*

*—FDOC corrections employee*

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## Takeaways and Conclusions

Through these deep-dive case studies, we aimed to formulate an understanding of the scope of contraband-related challenges in a range of facilities across three correctional agencies and the interdiction strategies they use to address them. This section summarizes the four main takeaways from our study.

**First, contraband is a universal critical issue for correctional agencies, but some facilities face unique challenges.** Various factors, like facility type (i.e., prison versus jail), architecture, security levels, facility capacity, location in an urban environment, jurisdiction, ratio of staff to incarcerated people, staff compensation, and facility policies and procedures determine what contraband enters facilities and how. For example, some of the facilities we visited are particularly susceptible to contraband being thrown or flown over perimeter fences via drones. In some facilities, staff members are a key source of contraband.

**Second, because challenges with contraband are facility specific, interdiction strategies need to be tailored to each agency and facility.** What works for one jurisdiction may not be best for another. It is crucial that facilities develop an in-depth understanding of the unique contraband issues they face and design interdiction strategies that address them. For instance, if a facility identifies staff as a major source of contraband entry, implementing policies and technologies to address that particular problem may be more beneficial than applying a generic approach to interdiction.

**Third, agencies should take a robust approach to combating contraband.** No single technology or strategy will solve the contraband problem. In fact, although interdiction technologies are helpful in intercepting and recovering contraband, some of the most effective strategies are still “boots-on-the-ground” investigations. In this study, most of the staff who participated emphasized the importance of using physical or manual checks (and using technology as a supplement) to fully intercept and detect contraband, particularly given the technical and implementation-related limitations of most interdiction technologies (e.g., the legal limits on body-scanner radiation settings that make it difficult to detect smaller, nonmetallic objects).

**Fourth, prison and jail administrators should collect timely and reliable data to inform their approaches to contraband interdiction.** In many cases, the adoption of interdiction policies and technologies is driven by political concerns, funding availability, or personal connections with vendors rather than best practices and data. Prison and jail administrators should strive to collect reliable data on recovered contraband items and contraband-related incidents to systematically inform current practices and policies. Moreover, the scientific community should strive to advance the understanding of the efficacy of contraband-interdiction technologies through rigorous testing and evaluation and translate that knowledge into actionable lessons for practitioners.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Mississippi Department of Corrections, “MDOC Intensifies Efforts to Keep Out Cell Phones, Other Contraband,” press release, 2014, not available online.
- <sup>2</sup> In close custody, people must be maintained within an armed perimeter or under direct, armed supervision, whereas in maximum custody, people are under a sentence of death.
- <sup>3</sup> “Correctional Facility Average Daily Population,” Montgomery County Government, accessed December 28, 2020, <https://data.montgomerycountymd.gov/Public-Safety/Correctional-Facility-Average-Daily-Population/gknn-vrfa/data>.

- <sup>4</sup> This policy was a direct response to the rapidly increasing problem of narcotics affecting Los Angeles jails. According to staff, these groups were identified as posing the highest risk to bringing in drugs, based on prior interceptions.

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## About the Authors

**Rochisha Shukla** is a research associate in the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute, where her research portfolio centers around institutional safety, correctional technology, prison reforms, and reentry. She presently manages various projects focusing on contraband interdiction and the use of video analytics in correctional settings, in addition to serving as a data analyst on several others. Before joining Urban, Shukla completed her master's degree in criminology and criminal justice from the University of Maryland, College Park.

**Bryce E. Peterson** is a principal research associate in the Justice Policy Center. His research focuses on correctional policy, children of justice-involved parents, and technological interventions in criminal justice settings. He received his PhD in criminal justice from the John Jay College/The Graduate Center, City University of New York.

**KiDeuk Kim** is a senior fellow in the Justice Policy Center, where he leads multidisciplinary research teams to examine issues related to criminal justice interventions and policies. He has extensive research experience and national expertise in data-driven decisionmaking in criminal justice.

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500 L'Enfant Plaza SW  
Washington, DC 20024

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