

To What End?: Assessing the Impact of the Knox County Jail's Ban on In-Person Visits

Face To Face Knox
Knoxville, TN
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Introduction

Since April 2014, the Knox County Sheriff's Office has banned in-person visits at all county jail facilities. In the place of in-person visits, the Sheriff promoted a new "video visitation" system, requiring jail visitors to interact with residents through a video kiosk located inside the facility. Friends and family could also contact residents through a remote video call, but they could do so at the cost of \$5.95 [now \$5.99] per visit, assuming they had the necessary technology. When the ban was initiated, the Sheriff's Office gave the following reasons for eliminating in-person visits:

- Decreased visitation traffic—requires less staff
- No contraband entering jail
- Easier on visitors (dress codes, searches, etc.)
- No travel to visits (for remote video calls)
- Lessens impact on children
- Benefits to disabled persons and elderly who cannot visit in person
- Lessens chances for violence
- The cost is \$5.95 [in 2014], "less than two gallons of gasoline"

The Sheriff did not present evidence at the time to explain the sudden shift in policy. Even three years later, when Face To Face Knox asked for empirical evidence to support these claims, the Sheriff's Office simply claimed that its policy was "innovative," suggesting no further evaluation was necessary.

Because the Sheriff's Office refused to provide data, Face To Face Knox conducted an open records request, seeking answers to the following questions:

- How many inmate-on-inmate assaults were recorded at the Knox County Detention Facility in the three years prior to the ban, and how many have were recorded in the time since the ban?
- How many inmate-on-staff assaults were recorded at the Knox County Detention Facility in the three years prior to the ban, and how many have were recorded in the time since the ban?
- How many possession of contraband cases were assessed at the Knox County Detention Facility in the three years prior to the ban, and how many were assessed in the time since the ban?
- How many disciplinary infractions were assessed at the Knox County Detention Facility in the three years prior to the ban, and how many were assessed in the time since the ban?

One explanation--both then and now--was conspicuously absent: the video call system makes money for the County, while in-person visits do not. Under the County's current contract with Securus Technologies, the County takes a 50% "commission" on every remote video call, which goes into the County's general revenue fund. Because Securus pays the full cost of installing and operating the system, there is no need for the county to charge an extra fee. Face To Face Knox requested invoices to determine exactly how much revenue the county generated from commissions on the video calls. Over more than three years, Knox County has taken nearly \$70,000 from individuals trying to stay in touch with their friends and loved ones.

The results are clear: The ban on in-person visits makes the jail more dangerous, does nothing to stop the flow of contraband, and strips money from the pockets of families. It's time to end the ban and give visitors the option to see their friends and loved ones *face to face*.

Findings

Knox County Takes Money From Families

50 cents of every dollar paid by a friend or family member on a video call goes directly into the County's general revenue fund. From March 2014 (when the video call system was installed), to November 2017 (the most recent month where data is available), the County collected \$68,777 from commissions--an average of \$1,528 a month. Under its contract with Securus, the County pays nothing to install or operate the system, so the fees are superfluous. Every dollar made by the county is one taken from friends and family who are simply trying to stay in touch with their loved ones at a difficult time.

PROFIT

CONTRA-BAND

Banning In-Person Visits Does Not Stop Contraband

The data collected shows no drop in reported cases of contraband. Prior to the ban, visitors could not have physical contact with inmates; they could only speak through a plexiglass screen. It is unclear how contraband is entering the jail, but the sheriff's office cannot use visitors as scapegoats. An influx of contraband is not an excuse to enact punitive, anti-family policies that do nothing to solve the underlying problem.

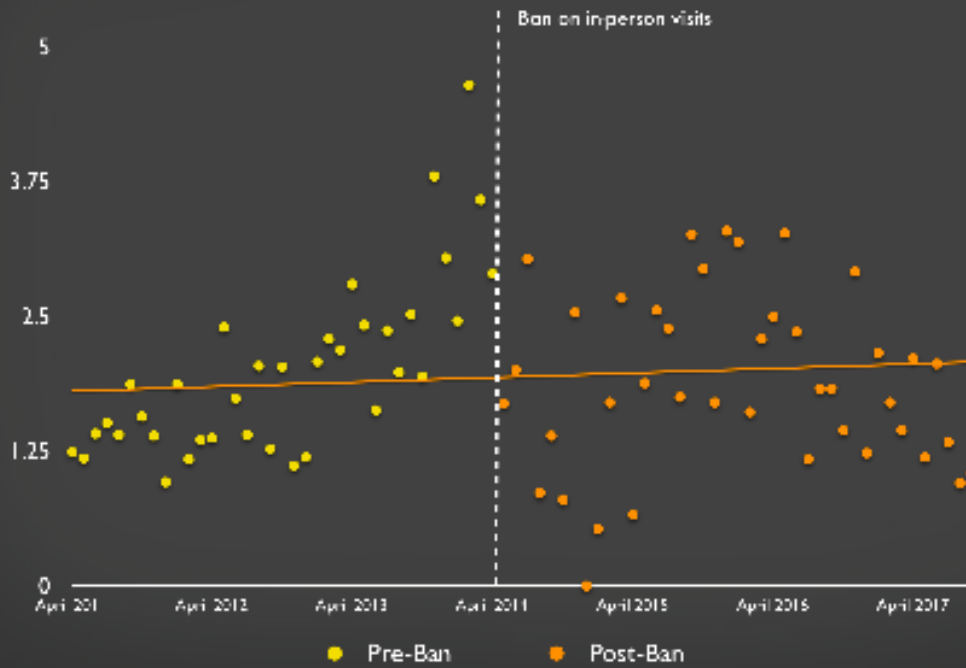
Banning In-Person Visits Makes the Jail More Dangerous

The ban has made the jail less safe for both inmates and staff. The total rate of assaults increased by an average of one assault per 100 inmates after the ban was enacted in April 2014. With a population of about 1,000 inmates at the Detention Facility, this means there are, on average, ten more assaults every month. Disciplinary infractions have also increased slightly since the ban went into place. The ban on in-person visits does not fully explain this increase, but studies have shown that it is harder to build trust and intimacy through video communications than through a personal conversation. In addition, inmates at the Detention Facility must speak to their "visitors" at pods with other inmates nearby who can eavesdrop. It should not be surprising that violence in the jail increases when inmates are deprived of any meaningful, private communications with their friends and family.

SAFETY

Eliminating in-person visits did not result in a substantial drop in contraband.

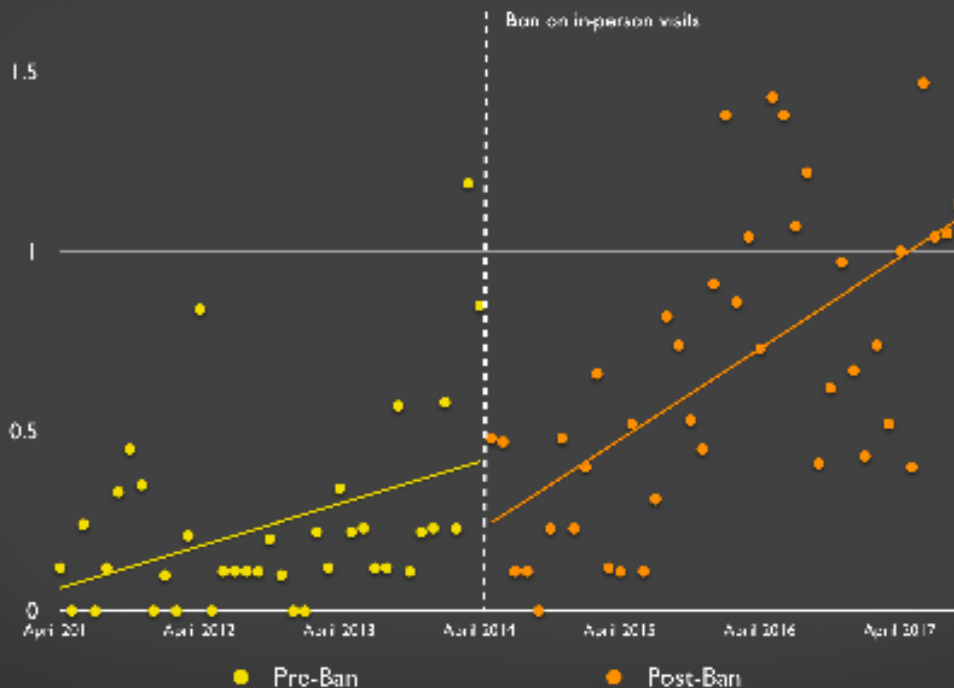
Contraband rate in Knox County Detention Facility per 100 population



Source: Data compiled by Face To Face Knox through a public records request with the Knox County Sheriff's Office.

Rate of assaults increased after in-person visits were eliminated

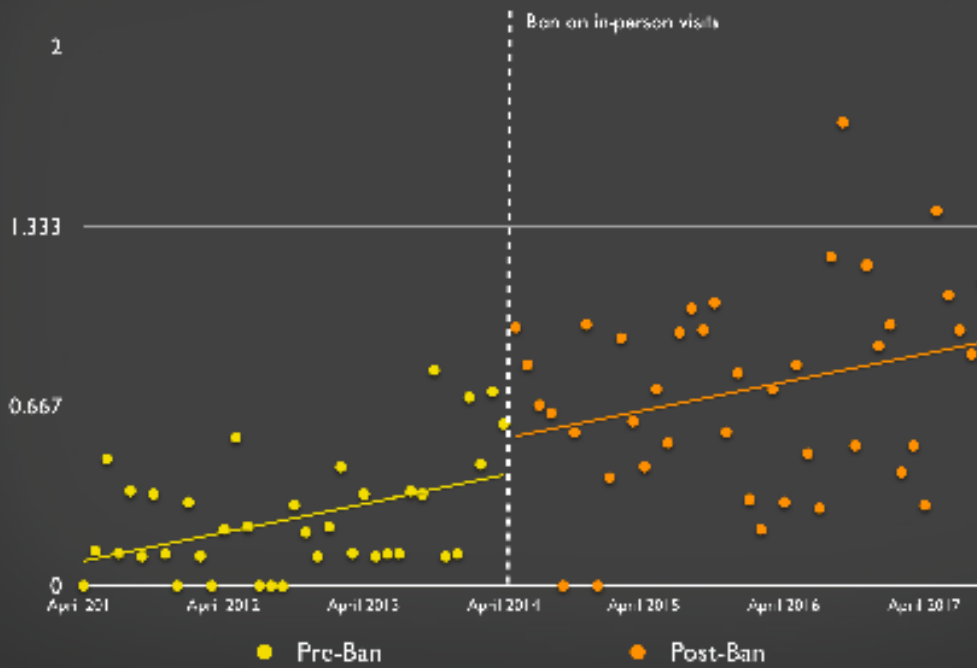
Assaults between incarcerated people in Knox County Detention Facility per 100 population



Source: Data compiled by Face To Face Knox through a public records request with the Knox County Sheriff's Office.

Rate of assaults on staff increased after in-person visits were eliminated

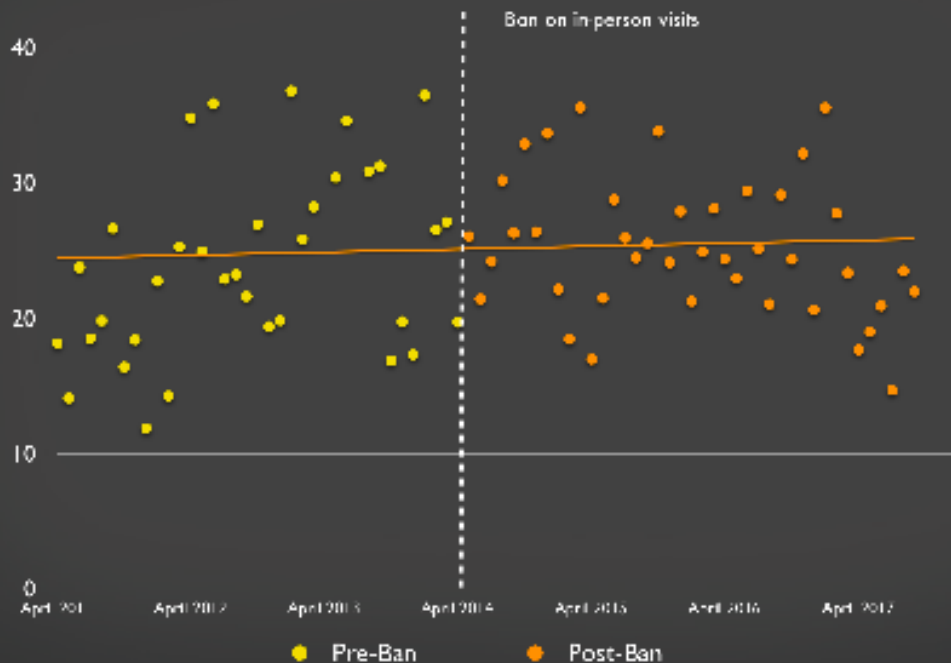
Assaults on staff in Knox County Detention Facility per 100 population



Source: Data compiled by Face To Face Knox through a public records request with the Knox County Sheriff's Office.

Average rate of disciplinary infractions increased after in-person visits were eliminated

Disciplinary infraction rate in Knox County Detention Facility per 100 population



Source: Data compiled by Face To Face Knox through a public records request with the Knox County Sheriff's Office.

The Need For Visits

Not only is the ban ineffective, but the benefits of in-person visits are clear. A comprehensive study of state prisons in Minnesota showed that more frequent and recent visits were associated with a decreased risk of recidivism (meaning that the more visits someone received in prison, the less likely they were to commit another crime upon release). Psychologists have found that in-person visits and video calls do not provide the same quality of interaction. Even assuming the technology works perfectly, the conversation during a video call is less fluid, making it more difficult to engage in complex conversation, establish trust, develop intimacy, and create a social connection. (See Appendix for sources.)

The public understands this. In December 2014, 13 people, including the president of the Knoxville chapter of the NAACP, spoke before the Knox County Commission to in favor of restoring in-person visits. No one spoke in favor of eliminating in-person visits. In Texas, the Travis County sheriff's office surveyed jail visitors, asking whether they prefer to visit in-person or through a video screen, 91 percent of respondents said they

prefer in-person visits. This evidence in part convinced local leaders to reinstate in-person visits. A survey of visitors in Knox County would likely produce similar results.

To be clear, Face To Face Knox is not asking for video calls to be eliminated at the Knox County jail. Video calls serve as a useful alternative to in-person visits in some instances, such as when friends and families live outside of Knox County, or do not have access to transportation. If the calls are free, or priced only to recover the costs of operation, then there is no reason not to give that option to inmates and visitors.

Nationally, the American Correctional Association, the American Bar Association, and the National Institute of Corrections all support making in-person visits available in jails. On the other hand, no report conducted has found that banning in-person visits is sound correctional policy. With our findings here in Knox County, Face To Face Knox adds one more piece of evidence indicating that bans on in-person visits are counterproductive, ineffective, and inhumane.

Recommendations

1 *Immediately restore in-person visits* at the Knox County jail, and work with advocates and affected individuals to craft a visitation policy that maximizes opportunities for in-person visits, and makes the jail facilities accessible and welcoming to visiting friends and family.

2 *Stop accepting commissions on video calls.* Because the county did not pay to install or operate the video call system, it should take a cut that needlessly increase the costs for families. Further, the County should offer free remote video calls to individuals who cannot afford them.

Support

The following local, state, and national organizations endorse the findings and recommendations in this report:

- Knox County Public Defender's Community Law Office | Knoxville, TN
- Tennessee Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, Knoxville Chapter | Knoxville, TN
- Knoxville Community Step Up | Knoxville, TN
- East Tennessee Community Defense | Knoxville, TN
- University of Tennessee Student Peace Alliance | Knoxville, TN
- Church of the Good Sheperd | Knoxville, TN
- Allies of Knoxville Immigrant Neighbors (AKIN) | Knoxville, TN
- Statewide Organizing for Community Empowerment (SOCM), Knoxville Chapter | Knoxville, TN
- Justice Knox | Knoxville, TN
- No Exceptions Prison Collective | Nashville, TN
- Free Hearts | Nashville, TN
- Prison Policy Initiative | Northampton, MA
- Southern Center for Human Rights | Atlanta, GA
- Human Rights Defense Center | Lake Worth, FL
- National Council for Incarcerated & Formerly Incarcerated Women & Girls | Boston, MA
- National Participatory Defense Network/Albert Cobarrubias Justice Project | San Jose, CA
- Young Women's Freedom Center | San Francisco, CA
- Silicon Valley De-Bug | San Jose, CA
- A.L. Costa Community Development Center | Union City, CA
- New Beginnings Re-Entry Services | Mattapan, MA
- Montgomery County Community Action Development Commission | Montgomery Co., PA
- Juan Schwanker Fathers & Families of San Joaquin | San Joaquin, CA

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Face To Face Knox is a grassroots coalition of citizens in Knox County who seek just and humane treatment for incarcerated individuals at the Knox County jail, and advocate for policies that improve the well-being of the incarcerated and their families.

More information at face2faceknox.org
Facebook/Twitter/Instagram: @F2FKnox

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