



Justice Insights Series: Research Briefs for Policy and Practice

When Staff Bring Contraband In: Which Prison Conditions Are Linked to More Drugs and Cellphones?

Key Takeaways

- Prisons that were more short-staffed tended to have more contraband drugs and cellphones, although the amount of contraband decreased when staffing levels became extremely low.
- Prisons with a higher share of female staff generally had less contraband overall, contrary to the common assumption that female staff pose a greater smuggling risk.
- Higher staff pay was linked to less contraband, but it would take raises of tens of thousands of dollars to significantly reduce the number of drugs and cellphones in prison.

Why This Matters

Drugs and cellphones are among the most dangerous items smuggled into prisons. Drugs fuel unregulated prison economies, debts, and violence and carry health risks such as overdoses and the spread of disease. Cellphones can be used by incarcerated people to organize criminal activity both inside and outside prison walls. Unlike weapons or alcohol, which are usually made from materials already inside a facility, drugs and cellphones must be smuggled in from the outside - and staff are a major source of that contraband.

Earlier research found that staff were responsible for more of these smuggling incidents than visitors. Across 150 prisons, staff averaged more contraband violations per year (about 2.6) than visitors (about 1.7). Other studies suggested three common reasons staff bring contraband in: improper relationships with incarcerated people, low pay, and weak oversight in short-staffed facilities. But that research mostly relied on surveys and interviews from single prison systems and focused on individual behavior.

No study had tested whether these three assumed causes actually line up with the amount of contraband reported by prisons. This study fills that gap by analyzing data from 301 prisons across six states to identify which facility conditions are tied to higher levels of contraband drugs and cellphones.

How the Study Worked

The researchers used the National Survey of Correctional Contraband, which asked prison administrators to report contraband found in their facilities during 2018. The final sample covered 301 adult prisons in Arkansas, Florida, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, and Wyoming. The two outcomes were the number of drug recoveries and the number of cellphone recoveries at each prison over the year. On average, prisons reported about 28 drug recoveries and 31 cellphone recoveries.

The study used facility-level measures to stand in for the three suspected causes: the share of staff who were female (for improper relationships), average staff salary and how it compared with local pay (for low pay), and the number of residents per officer and the number of contraband-screening steps the prison used on staff (for staffing and oversight). The analysis

compared prisons to see which of these conditions were tied to more contraband while accounting for other facility traits such as security level, building size, location, and the size of the prison population. Because contraband counts are uneven, the study used a method suited to this kind of count data rather than a simple average.

What Was Learned

- **Thin staffing was linked to more contraband, up to a point.** As the number of residents per officer increased, drug and cellphone recoveries generally increased as well. But after reaching a certain level, the relationship reversed, possibly because there were too few officers left to find and seize contraband.
- **More female staff were associated with less contraband overall.** Prisons with a higher share of female staff had fewer drug and cellphone recoveries. One exception surfaced: in male-only prisons, a larger female workforce was tied to more cellphone recoveries but not more drug recoveries.
- **Higher pay helped only modestly.** Prisons with higher paid staff had somewhat less contraband, but the effect was small. The authors estimate that a \$10,000 raise would result in only about one fewer drug recovery and two to three fewer cellphone recoveries per year, and how pay compared with local incomes made little consistent difference.
- **More staff screening came with more finds, not fewer.** Prisons that used more contraband-screening steps on staff recovered more drugs and cellphones. This finding may be because facilities that looked harder for contraband simply found more of it.

What This Means in Practice

Adequate staffing may be one of the most practical levers for reducing contraband in prisons. The clearest pattern was that short-staffed prisons tended to have more drugs and cellphones, so the authors point to stronger recruitment and retention - especially in response to pandemic-era staffing shortages - as a potential way to reduce contraband and improve safety for staff and residents alike.

The researchers frame the study as exploratory: their measures stand in for staff motivations rather than directly capturing them, and reported contraband reflects both smuggling and how thoroughly a facility looks for smuggling. They suggest that hiring more women may help overall and recommend pairing that approach with training that helps all staff recognize and resist manipulation attempts by incarcerated people. They add that large pay raises may be out of reach for many agencies, so modest raises combined with training and better staffing may work better than pay alone. The researchers also caution that these results come from 301 prisons in 6 states and should not be read as applying to every facility or to local jails. Official records may also miss undetected contraband, so reported amounts may be lower than the true amounts.

Source article

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