



ILLINOIS CAMPAIGN FOR PRISON PHONE JUSTICE

www.phonejustice.org

"There's Something About the Voice"

Telecommunications companies earn an estimated \$1.3 billion every year by overcharging families of the incarcerated for phone calls. While you and I may make limitless calls from our cellphones, a totally different system operates inside prisons and jails. Profiteering corporations like GTL and Securus Technologies lure state departments of corrections and local sheriffs into contracts by offering them what amounts to legalized bribes, called site commissions or kickbacks.

The state of Illinois is a classic example. According to the contract between Securus and the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), a loved one must pay about \$4 for a phone call from a person inside a state prison, no matter how long they talk. Three quarters of that money goes back to the Department of Corrections as a kickback. In 2012 these kickbacks amounted to roughly \$12 million dollars. Securus replicates this process across Illinois. The company holds the phone contracts in 76 of Illinois's 102 counties. In every county except Champaign, where a campaign by Champaign-Urbana Citizens for Peace and Justice eliminated kickbacks in 2005, the practice of site commissions continues.

We of the Illinois Campaign for Prison Phone Justice believe that companies like Securus and corrections officials must stop draining scarce money from the loved ones of the incarcerated. Phone calls should be affordable. They are essential for keeping families together and reducing recidivism.



The Illinois Campaign for Prison Phone Justice is a project of the Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center, and part of the national campaign on this issue. In January 2015, the Illinois Campaign submitted a 15-page report to the FCC urging the need for lowering costs. We examined data from phone contracts for **23** counties across Illinois, including Cook County, site of a jail holds some **10,000** people, plus the IDOC contract. Additionally, we talked to dozens of people who have experience of paying for exorbitant phone calls from jails and prisons. Our findings:

- 1) The IDOC's **kickback** of **76%** on all phone charges, ranks among the highest percentage in the nation.
- 2) The IDOC provides **no accounting** for the millions they have earned in kickbacks.
- 3) **Securus Technologies**, a major prison profiteer, has a virtual monopoly in Illinois. They admit to having paid out **\$1.3 billion in kickbacks** nationally in the last decade.
- 4) Phone call charges vary greatly. In Sangamon County, provider PayTel charges **\$17.34 for a 15-minute** collect phone call. By contrast, Champaign County charges only **\$2.55** for a call.
- 5) Customers are subject to a range of **hidden fees**. Connection fees can range from **\$2.71 to \$3.99** for each call. Companies can charge as much as **\$9.95** to add money to an account.
- 6) **Services for the deaf** are either non-existent or inadequate.

We have three major recommendations for the FCC: **1)** set the maximum charge for all in-state calls at 5 cents per minute, **2)** end kickbacks, **3)** eliminate all extra fees.

The National Campaign for Prison Phone Justice

After nearly two decades of work by social justice activists who formed the National Campaign for Prison Phone Justice, the Federal Communications Commission has begun to regulate prison and jail phone calls. In 2013, the Federal Communications Commission put a cap on the per minute charges for interstate phone calls from prisons.

Currently, the FCC is considering regulating in-state prison calls in every state. Such a decision could put millions of dollars back in the pocket of those who communicate with the nearly **50,000** people incarcerated in the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) and with the thousands of others in county jails across the state.

Site Commissions: Where Do the Kickbacks Go?

The Illinois Department of Corrections simply deposits the millions it earns in site commissions into the General Assembly's 523 Fund, about which there is no public information. County jails have other explanations for where the commissions go. St. Clair County says it deposits the revenue into a general fund for jail maintenance. The Winnebago County Sheriff's Department hands the commissions over to the county's general fund. In Sangamon County, funds supposedly go into an Inmate Trust account that pays for, "items such as books for the inmate library, cable television, internet access for them to research an online law library." However, no county we contacted could provide a detailed accounting of where this money went.

The Geography of Phone Justice

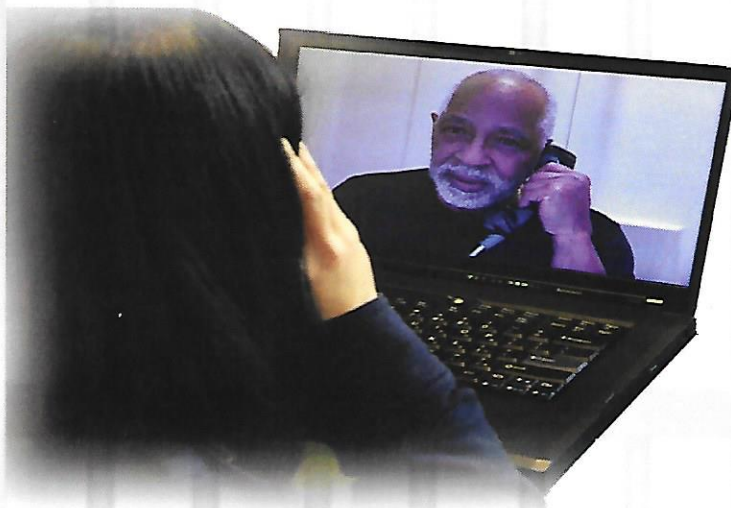
Many Illinois prisons are located far downstate, while large numbers of those incarcerated come from Chicago. Such distances make visits difficult. Therefore, regular phone contact is especially important.

Miguel Saucedo, who grew up in Little Village, Chicago, has a brother locked up with a long-term sentence. He recalled vividly the long trips to see his brother, "It's really hard for us to go visit our family members who are locked up downstate. So the only other means of communication is to receive phone calls." Miguel said his family spends about **\$100** a month talking to his brother. He estimated that over the 20 years his brother has been incarcerated his family has spent at least **\$20,000**.

Video Visits: A Disturbing Trend

Many jails are now installing video visit technology. These can have major benefits for families who live hundreds of miles from their loved ones who are incarcerated. We found at least **13** counties that have video visits. As with the phones, Securus is the major provider. However, we have several concerns about video visiting:

- 1) Making a video visit requires a computer, high-speed internet, and a web cam, a luxury that many working class families cannot afford.
- 2) Securus and other companies are overcharging. In most cases fees are a dollar a minute.
- 3) Securus is adding troubling conditions to contracts. In at least **6** counties, video visit contracts require the jail to eliminate in person visits.



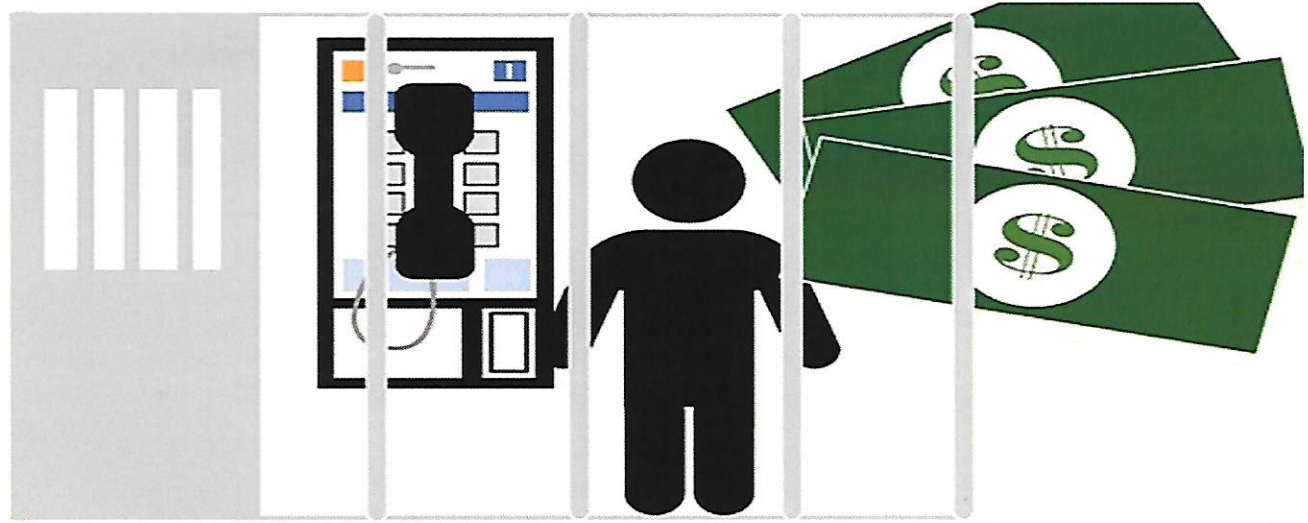
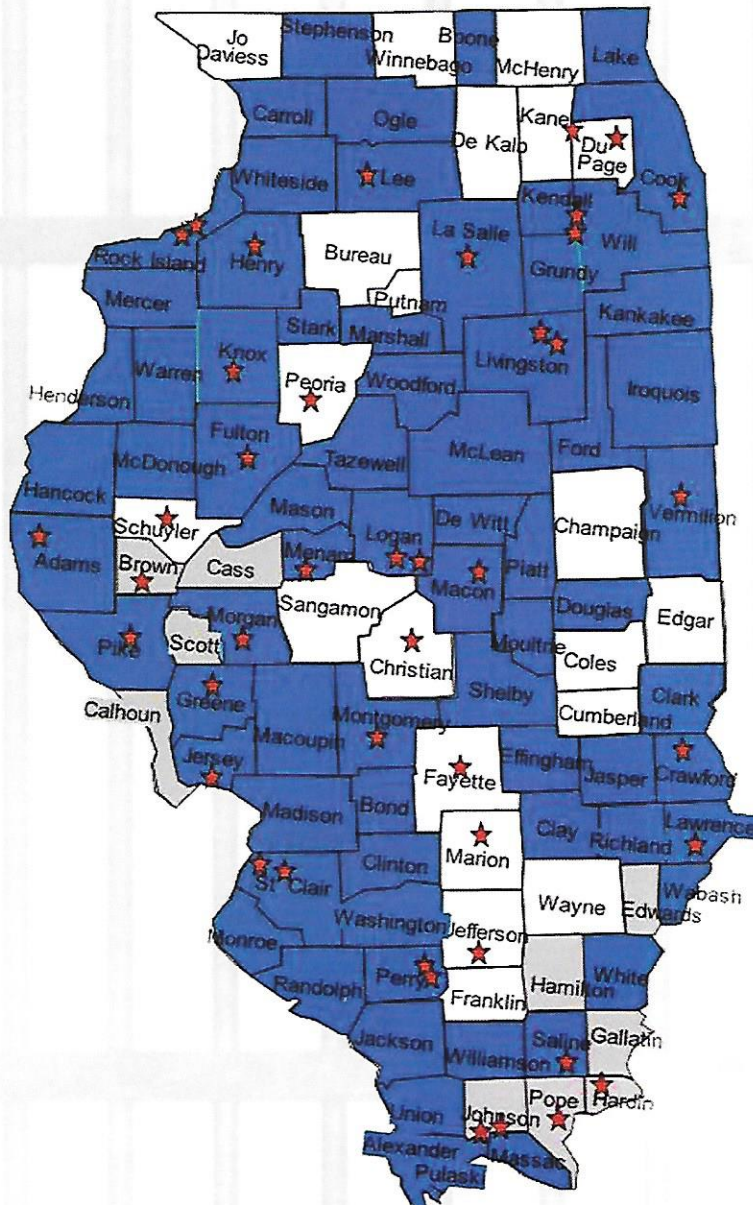


Table of Highest and Lowest Phone Call Charges In Illinois County Jails

	Highest	Lowest
Standard 15 min collect call	Kankakee (Securus) \$17.34	Champaign (ICS) \$2.55
15 minute pre-paid call	McLean (Securus) \$10.85	Peoria (GTL) \$2.25
15 minute debit call with Securus	Kendall \$8.60	Lake \$2.50



SECURUS (BLUE ON MAP)
HOLDS CONTRACTS IN
76 OF 102 COUNTIES

Change is possible

Phone companies can survive even without kickbacks and other extra fees. In Champaign County, phone services have been maintained despite the elimination of kickbacks. Moreover, states like New York and New Mexico have eliminated all commissions and fees. In those states, phone calls from state prisons cost only **five** cents per minute! Why can't this happen in Illinois?

Nationally, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) estimates that kickbacks to state corrections departments and county sheriffs amount to **\$460** million annually. That amounts to **\$460** million extracted from the pockets of some of the poorest people in the nation—family members of people in prisons and jails. It is time to act, to stop such profiteering, to build a movement for Prison Phone Justice.

Prison Phone Users Speak

Cheap and accessible communications between those incarcerated and their loved ones is an essential right and critical for a person's rehabilitation. Our interviews with users of prison phone services support this:

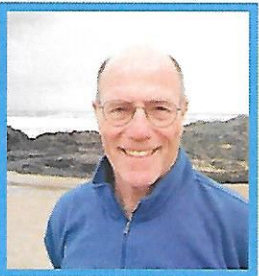


"I don't care what that person is or who they are, they're still family and as a mother that's still my child."

-Mary Haywood Benson, Champaign, mother of an incarcerated son

"We're supposed to be trying to rehabilitate the people who are locked up, not trying to profit from them."

-Miguel Saucedo, Chicago, brother incarcerated for 20 years



"During my years of incarceration, Sundays were kind of a special day, because that was phone call day. That was the day when I got to talk to my mother, my wife, my kids, to hear how they were doing. That was really something to look forward to. It was very important. You know, there's something about the voice."

-James Kilgore, Urbana, formerly incarcerated

"If someone is dealing with being incarcerated, if they can't talk to people they get more frustrated. The people on the outside get frustrated too because you don't know what's happening to your loved ones."

-Terri White, Urbana, mother of a formerly incarcerated son

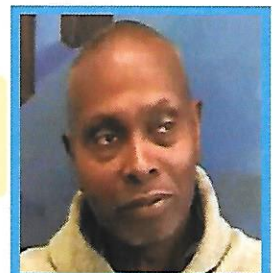


"The only thing the kids have in prison is their loved ones. It's so important to have that contact."

-Nancy Willamon, Champaign, mother of a formerly incarcerated son

"The phone call is the most important piece of communication going on in the system."

-Greg Gaither, Chicago, former corrections counselor



The Illinois Campaign for Prison Phone Justice is a project of the Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center, 202 N. Broadway, Urbana IL 61801.

Visit us on our website at: <http://nationinside.org/campaign/illinois-for-prison-phone-justice>

or on our Illinois Campaign for Prison Phone Justice Facebook page.

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