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Mitigating Contraband via the Mail

An overview of approaches for managing the introduction of drug contraband through the digitization of inmate mail

This brief is part of a series of documents that focuses on contraband in correctional facilities and specifically focuses on the digitization of incoming inmate mail to counter the introduction of contraband drugs. The goal of this series is to offer foundational insights from use cases, highlight challenges of contraband detection, compare illustrative products, and discuss the future of contraband detection and management.

Key Takeaways

- Digitization of inmates' incoming personal mail may reduce the introduction of drugs into facilities by diverting items to an offsite mail-processing vendor, who converts it to a digital form and transmits the documents to correctional facilities for distribution to inmates via tablets or kiosks.
- Implementing a digitized mail solution may be most efficiently deployed as part of a bundled approach with other inmate services such as telephone, messaging, video-visitation, and electronic books, supported by kiosks or tablets. In most cases, the digitized mail services can be provided at no cost to the agency as part of a comprehensive inmate services platform.
- The shutdown of the mailroom pipeline will not reduce inmate demand for drugs; therefore, pressure on other common contraband pathways (e.g., smuggling by staff and visitors, "throw-overs," or drone drops) could increase.

Detecting drug contraband entering correctional facilities via the mail is challenging because drugs can be sprayed onto paper, incorporated into ink, hidden under stamps, and inconspicuously concealed within a piece of correspondence. The methods used to hide the drugs, coupled with the sheer volume of mail received daily, make it difficult to detect all drugs through physical screening. Undetected drugs that are delivered to inmates pose significant health and safety concerns, including overdose and death. To mitigate the flow of drugs through mail, some correctional facilities are employing solutions that replace physical mail with electronic communication or reproductions of originals. This approach appears to be part of a progression toward using technology to deliver services to incarcerated people and is in line with societal trends with respect to interpersonal communication.

Contraband Interdiction Solutions for Correctional Facilities

This document focuses on the digitization of inmate mail. Additional documents in this series address specific contraband topics.

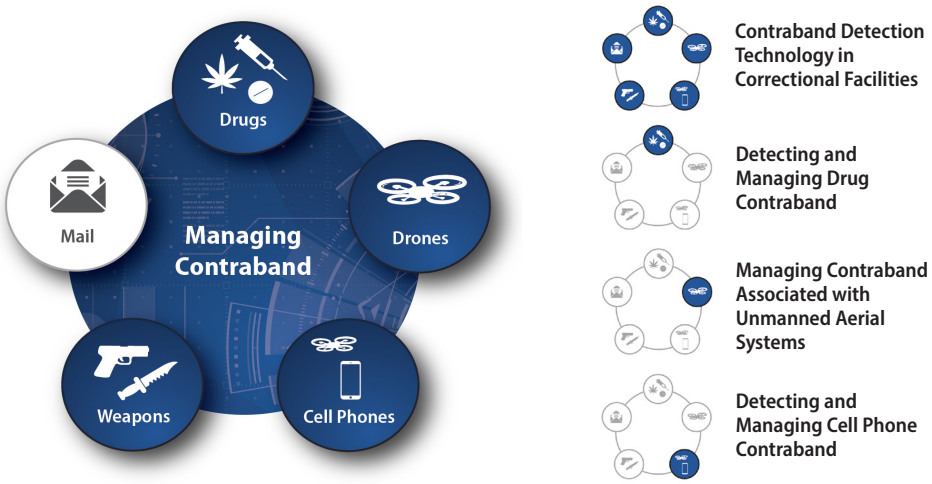

Figure 1: The digitization of inmate mail can be an effective strategy to stem the flow of drugs into correctional facilities.

Drugs entering correctional facilities compromise safety and well-being.

Contraband drugs can undermine the safety and security of a correctional facility in a variety of ways. For example, the drug trade is a lucrative criminal enterprise, and inmate gangs often use violence to protect their interests. Staff can be manipulated into bringing drugs into a facility and, once compromised, can be forced to participate in other nefarious activities on behalf of inmates. The availability of drugs undermines a facility's rehabilitative efforts in support of inmates who desire to overcome addiction. Inmates under the influence of drugs may become violent toward staff or other inmates. Further, evidence suggests that some newer forms of contraband drugs (e.g., synthetic cannabinoids, fentanyl, and fentanyl compounds) are becoming more prevalent and more dangerous; subsequently instances of inmate overdoses and deaths are on the rise.[1,2]

The health of correctional staff is also directly impacted by these dangerous drugs. Reports of staff falling ill following incidents in which they have accidentally inhaled second-hand smoke from inmate use of synthetic cannabinoids or encountered fentanyl while conducting a search have been noted in several U.S. correctional facilities.[3,4] Concerns regarding life-threatening risks associated with passive or incidental exposure have been documented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.[5] However, there are no known cases in which staff have experienced lasting effects after exposure, and there is some debate about whether some victims may suffer from psychosomatic symptoms related to fear and anxiety when they simply think they may have been exposed. Regardless of the likelihood of serious harm, staff are personally affected, and incidents can have critical consequences for the facility in the form of lockdowns, hazardous material cleanups, and reduced staff availability due to illness.

Inconspicuous drug contraband enters via the mailroom.

Although contraband drugs are introduced into an institution through several pathways, one primary entry point is the mailroom. Screening mail for drugs is challenging because of the high volume of mail, small quantities of drugs trafficked, and ease of concealment. The ability to embed or infuse chemical substances into mail items has resulted in the increased prevalence of drugs such as synthetic cannabinoids, fentanyl, and Suboxone in correctional facilities. As seen in **Figure 2** and **Figure 3**, synthetic drugs can be cleverly hidden or integrated into seemingly innocuous materials, such as handwritten letters and books. The growing threat of contraband drugs entering via the mailroom has prompted several correctional agencies in the United States to consider digitized inmate mail processing solutions, which have both benefits and potential negative implications.

1. Tennyson, K. M., Ray, C. S., & Maass, K. T. (2021, January). *Fentanyl and fentanyl analogues: Federal trends and trafficking patterns.* Retrieved from https://www.ussc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/research-and-publications/research-publications/2021/20210125_Fentanyl-Report.pdf
2. Carson, E. A. (2020) *Mortality in state and federal prisons, 2001-2016 – statistical tables*. Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved from https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/msfp0116st.pdf
3. Kalinowski, B. (2021, March). *Two SCI-Dallas officers sickened by drug-laced mail*. Retrieved from https://www.citizensvoice.com/news/doc-two-sci-dallas-officers-sickened-by-drug-laced-mail/article_4acf895a-81e5-52fb-b927-540fb12089eb.html
4. Esack, S. (2018, August). *Pennsylvania orders lockdown of all state prisons, cites sickness from smuggled chemical drugs*. Retrieved from https://www.mcall.com/news/breaking/mc-nws-pennsylvania-state-prisons-lockdown-20180829-story.html
5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). *Preventing emergency responders' exposures to illicit drugs*. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/fentanyl/risk.html

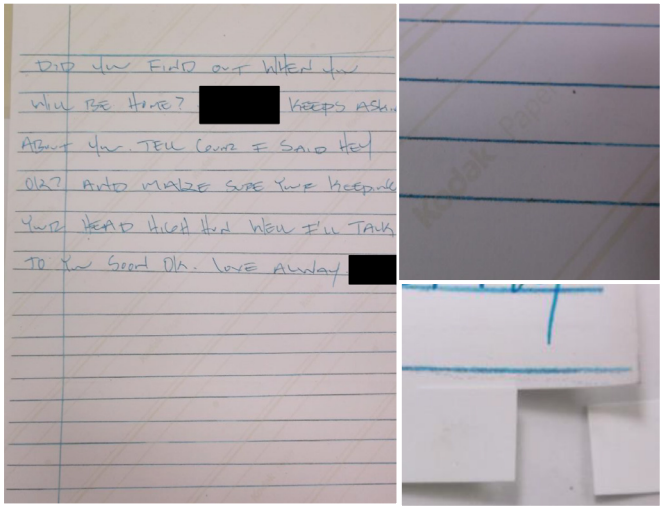

Figure 2: This letter, discovered by the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PA DOC), tested positive for synthetic cannabinoids. The photo paper was disguised as notebook paper with handwritten lines saturated with drug-laced ink.

Figure 3: A package containing books was mailed to an inmate; upon inspection, 57 strips of Suboxone were discovered hidden within a Bible.

Digitized mail can mitigate risk of drug introduction into a facility.

Digitization of incoming inmate personal mail (legal mail is discussed below) may serve as a tool in combating the contraband drug problem. Under the most current prevalent implementation model, inmates' friends and family are instructed to send personal mail not to a correctional facility, but to a contracted vendor at an outside location. The vendor receives the mail and screens items for compliance with facility regulations. Authorized items (i.e., letters, greeting cards, photos, envelopes) are then electronically scanned and uploaded to the vendor's information system platform. The original documents are typically stored for a period of time (dependent on the using agency's records retention/retrieval schedule) before they are destroyed.

Institution staff have access to the platform to download mail items. In specific scenarios, the platform may be programmed to automatically screen for keywords indicative of security or inmate mental health concerns. Items flagged as potential concerns can be reviewed by security staff or healthcare professionals to facilitate the appropriate response. Ultimately, mail is made accessible to the inmate via tablets or kiosks. The most efficient and effective implementation model uses a single vendor (or partners) to provide the offsite mail processing and digitization platform as well as the kiosk/tablet and e-messaging as a bundled end-to-end service under one contract. The process of digitizing mail can be viewed in **Figure 4**. Several correctional facilities have employed this model. For example, Shawnee County, Kansas, has implemented a digitized mail solution to combat the influx of drugs entering the jail system. Shawnee County established the process for the facility's 500+ inmate population, which provides offsite scanning of mail and subsequent access to the scanned images through tablets or designated kiosks.[6]

6. Hrenchir, T. (2020, February). To guard against drugs, county digitizes jail mail. *The Topeka Capital Journal*. Retrieved from https://www.govtech.com/public-safety/To-Guard-Against-Drugs-County-Digitizes-Jail-Mail.html

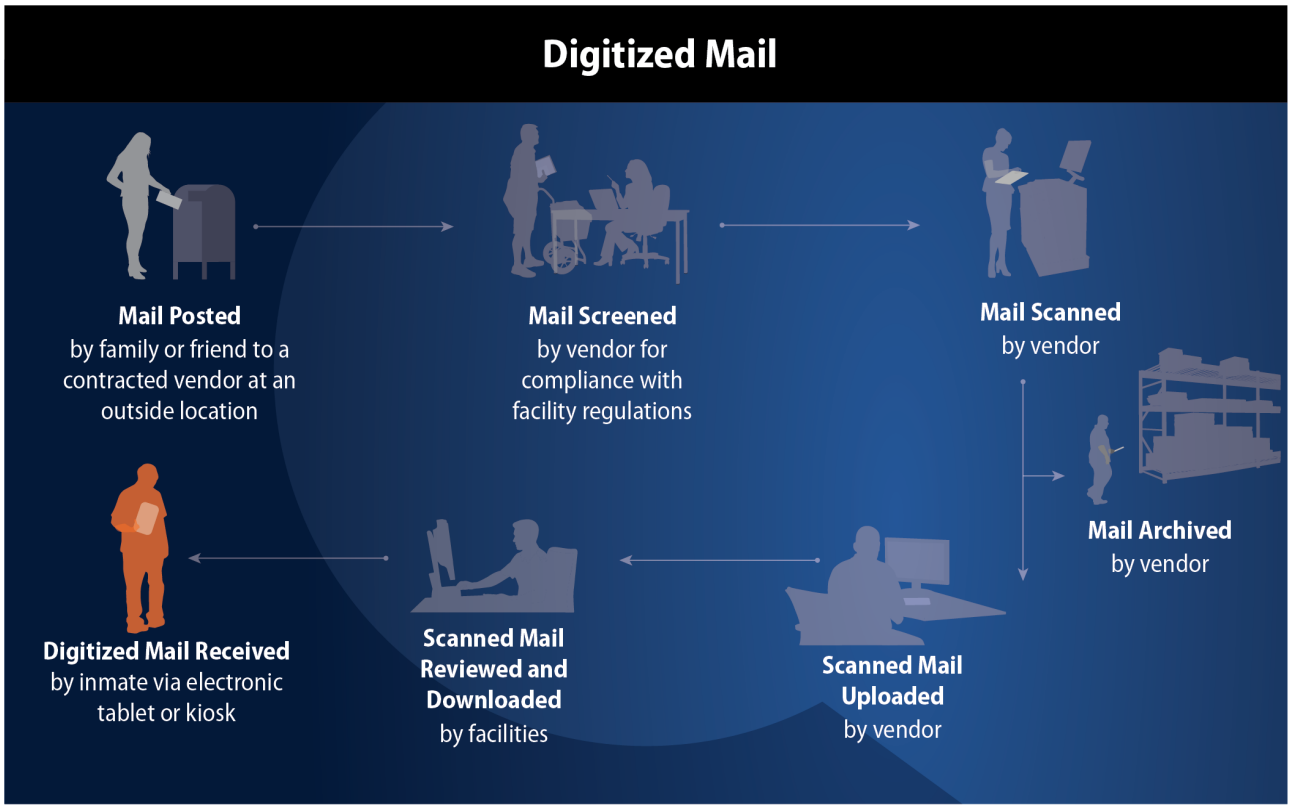

Figure 4: A digitized mail solution scans incoming mail, typically in an offsite facility, and uploads the image for inmate electronic viewing—effectively eliminating the introduction of drugs into a correctional facility via personal mail.

The implementation of a digitized mail system becomes cumbersome, if not impossible, in cases in which one vendor is contracted to handle the physical mail process but another controls the networks and devices necessary to electronically transmit the items to inmates. Therefore, agencies interested in this model must consider existing contracts that could introduce problems with procurement and logistics that may create inefficiencies if multiple systems are required that do not integrate seamlessly.

The positive impact of a digitized inmate mail system on the contraband drug problem may be evident through decreases in the number of drug finds, positive drug tests, and inmate overdoses. An effective digitized inmate mail system may reduce drug-related events, including a decrease in the incidence rate of inmate-on-inmate assaults, inmate-on-staff assaults, inmate and staff trips to an outside emergency room, and deaths.

The model described above provides an elegant way to eliminate the introduction of drugs via incoming inmate mail. This is not the only way to manage inmate personal mail; other variations include systems in which:

- Friends/families can send digital mail through the following methods:
  1. Electronic communication received by a vendor is printed and mailed to the facility for distribution.
  2. Electronic communication is delivered, through a vendor, to a kiosk in a facility mailroom where it is printed and distributed to the inmate.
  3. Electronic communication is sent directly to inmates and is viewed electronically on tablets/kiosks.
- Vendors receive and process inmate mail offsite; however, the items are downloaded by facility mailroom staff who then print copies of the items for distribution to the inmates.
- Facilities still receive incoming mail as normal but now photocopy the items and provide the copies to inmates.

Limitations of Digitized Mail Programs

For a correctional agency to adopt a digitized mail system and leverage the technology as a potentially efficient and effective solution, multiple limitations must be addressed before implementing such a system:

1. Review existing contracts with incumbent vendors, including clauses that may prohibit shared use of the incumbent's network infrastructure or the installation and operation of a separate, parallel network.
2. Consider local, state, and federal privacy regulations specific to third-party access and control over inmate personal mail, as well as potential issues regarding the digitization and destruction of original documents and personal property.
3. Recognize the potential negative impact that digitizing personal inmate letters and photos may have on maintaining inmate wellness and connectedness to family, friends, and outside parties. Because of this benefit, the restriction of physical mail has been challenged by the American Civil Liberties Union, which claims banning incoming mail violates inmates' First and Fourteenth Amendment rights.[7]

Future of Mail Contraband Prevention

Digitizing inmate mail appears to be part of a natural progression toward the greater use of technology to deliver a variety of services to those incarcerated and is in line with societal trends with respect to interpersonal communication. Further, a digitized inmate mail system appears to be a critical aspect of a modern, multilayered security approach to address the contraband drug problem in correctional institutions and contribute to the momentum of the correctional capability to combat synthetic drugs. When implemented as part of a bundled inmate communications platform and coordinated to take advantage of the need for fewer mailroom staff, digitized mail can be cost-efficient.

Contraband in Legal Correspondence

Although this brief focuses on incoming inmate personal mail, legal mail is also a pathway for contraband drugs, as seen in **Figure 5**. Unlike personal mail, legal mail is protected by attorney-client privilege. Staff may open privileged mail to check for contraband but only in the presence of the inmate; thus, some of the solutions discussed above may not be acceptable in all jurisdictions. That said, the technology exists to securely transmit legal documents between parties (i.e., attorney and inmate); therefore, digitizing this type of mail could be explored. Agencies should consider potential legal challenges and coordinate with stakeholders (e.g., advocacy groups, courts, district attorneys, public defenders) to identify and address concerns prior to implementation.

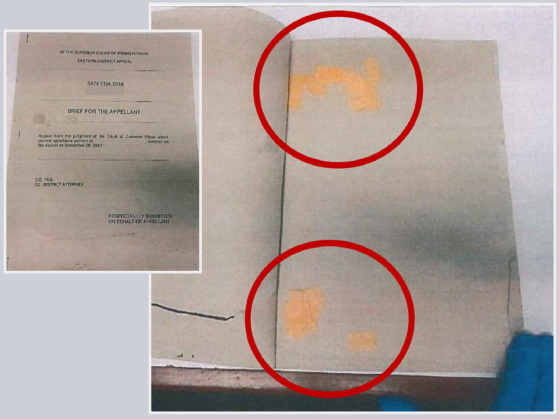

Figure 5: Legal documents discovered by the PA DOC containing liquified Suboxone.

7. ACLU. (2015, December). *ACLU of NH challenges state prison ban on mailed Christmas cards, prayer cards, and children's drawings*. Retrieved from https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/aclu-nh-challenges-state-prison-ban-mailed-christmas-cards-prayer-cards-and-childrens

Key Considerations for Leaders in the Corrections Community

1. While a digitized incoming inmate mail solution can eliminate vulnerabilities associated with traditional mail, it is not a panacea. The demand for drugs is not altered, and inmates and their conspirators will seek to exploit other contraband pathways (e.g., visitors, staff, drones, throw-overs). Agencies should focus resources on each pathway with equal rigor such that management of contraband is part of a holistic strategy.
2. A key benefit of a digitized mail solution is the potential cost savings associated with reductions in mailroom staffing. In agencies with mailroom employees who are represented by a union, it will be necessary to negotiate for downsizing or reallocation of staff in advance so that cost savings can be realized as soon as possible after deployment.
3. Agencies should coordinate with stakeholders (e.g., advocacy groups, courts, district attorneys, public defenders) to identify and address concerns prior to implementation, particularly for legal correspondence.
4. Agencies should consider the ancillary benefits of a fully digitized mail solution beyond stemming the flow of drugs via the mailroom. For example, written communications can be automatically scanned for keywords indicative of security issues or inmate mental health concerns. In addition, the elimination of physical mail items can reduce excessive clutter in cells, which can reduce the fire load and allow for officers to conduct more efficient cell searches.

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More Information

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