

Fighting for families: How advocates are resisting attacks on visitation and physical mail

Speakers and Panelists:

Sarah Staudt, Policy and Advocacy Director, Prison Policy Initiative

Emmett Sanders, Policy and Advocacy Analyst, Prison Policy Initiative

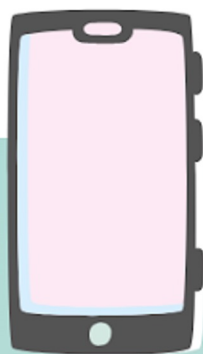
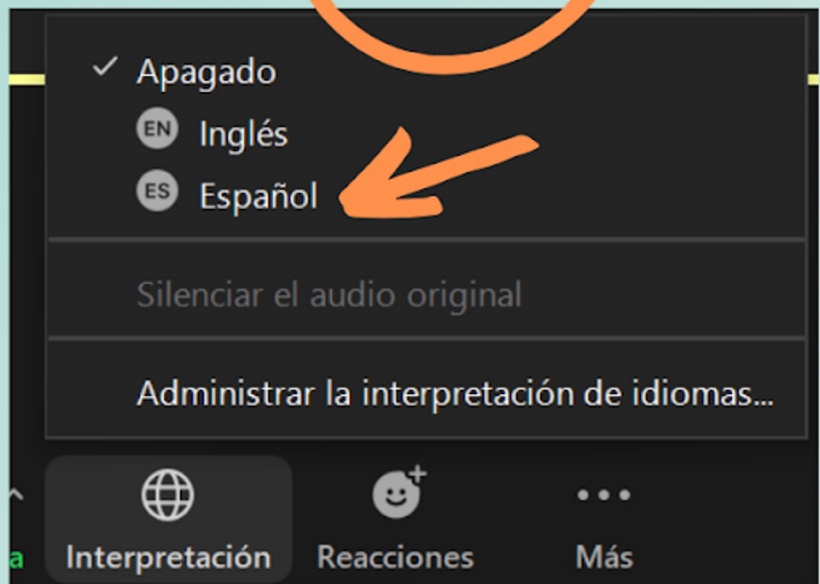
Jodi Hocking, Founder and Executive Director, Return Strong

Taj Mahon-Haft PhD., Executive Director, The Humanization Project

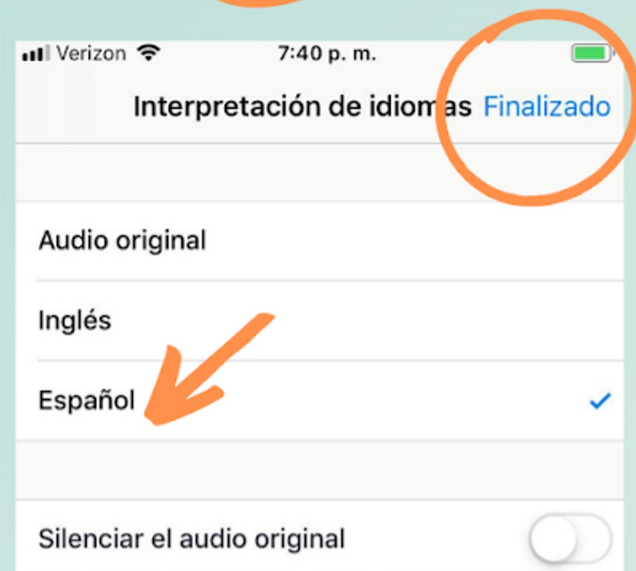
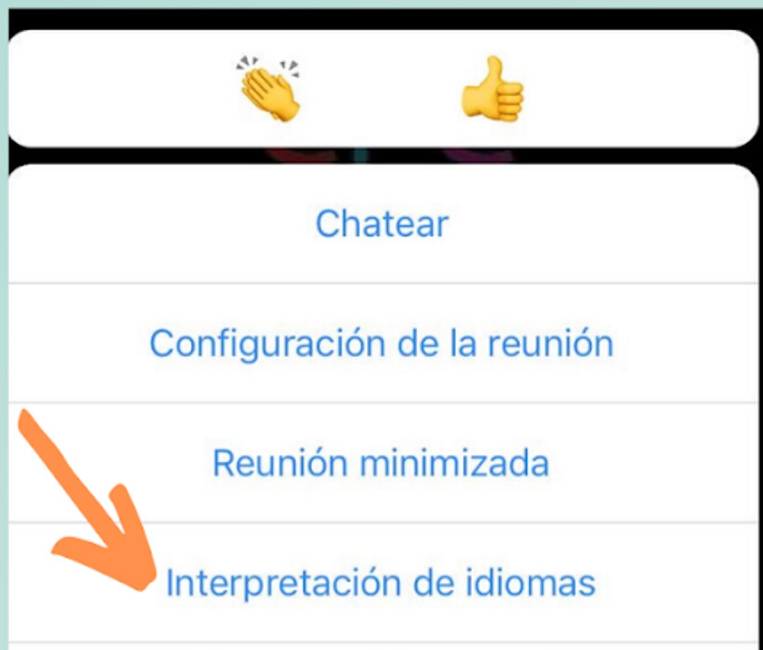
PARA ACCEDER A LA INTERPRETACIÓN



Por computador



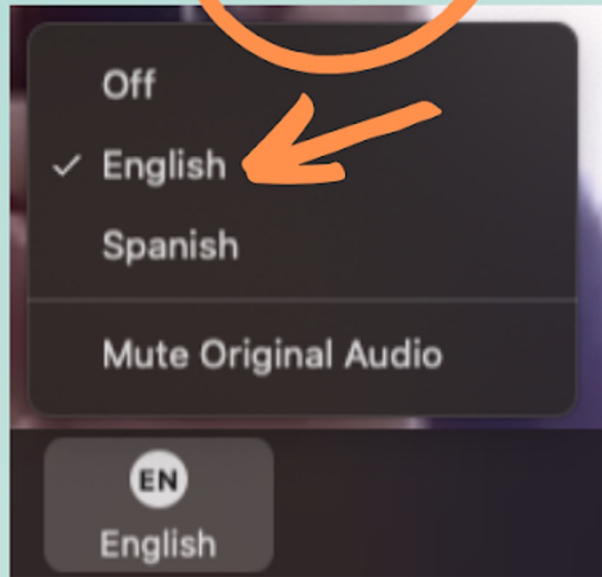
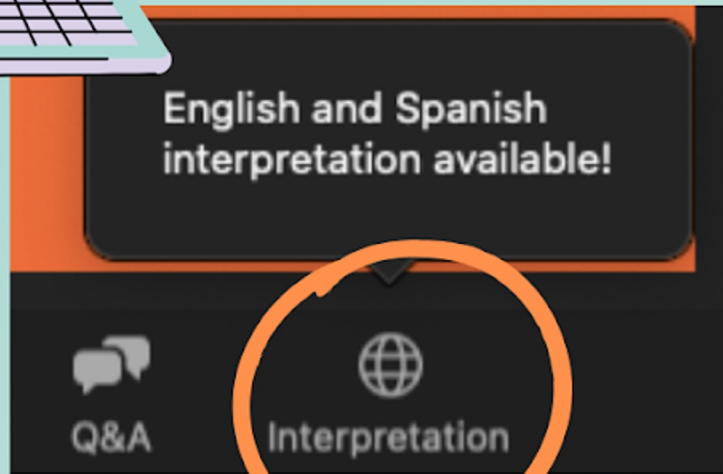
Por teléfono inteligente



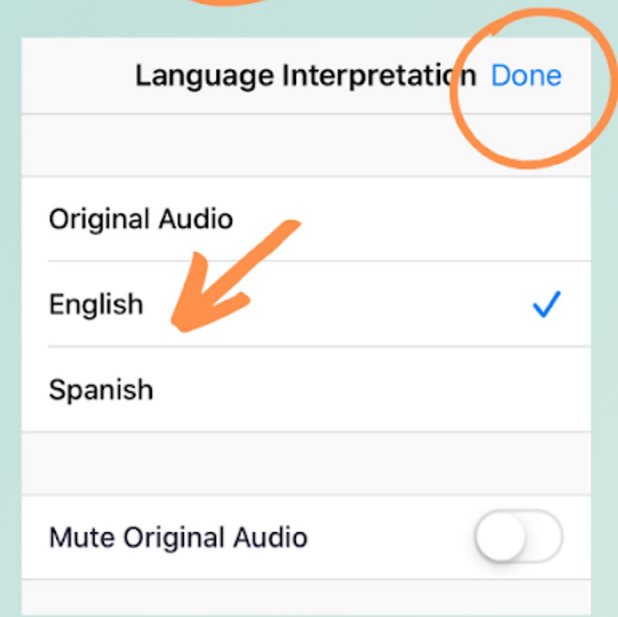
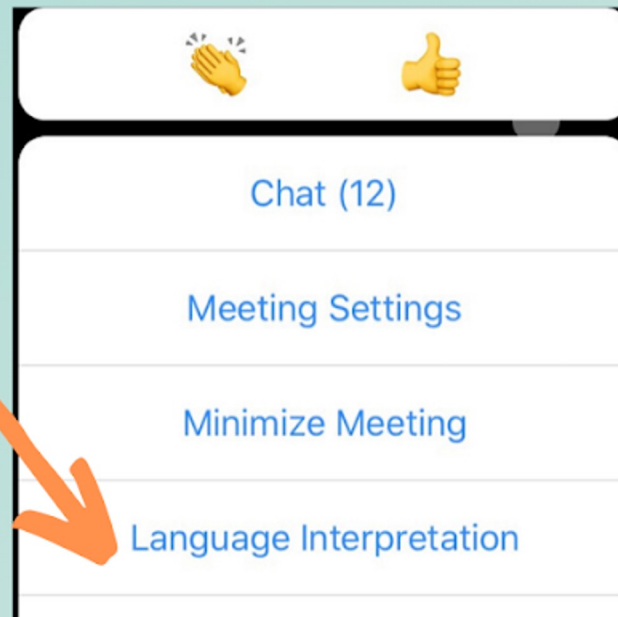
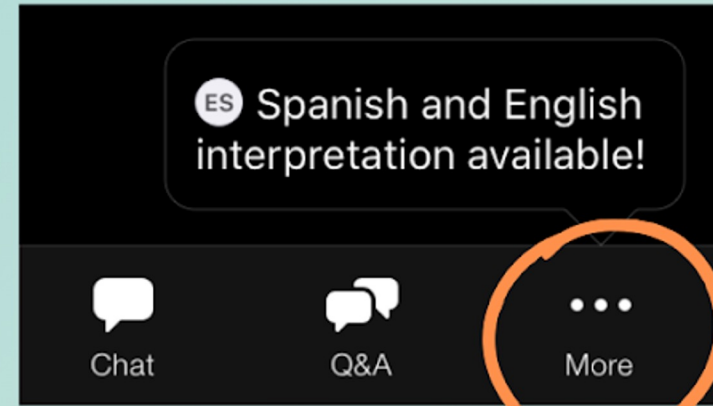
TO ACCESS INTERPRETATION



Via computer



Via smartphone



ASL Interpretation

- Press the Interpretation button at the bottom of your zoom screen to select ASL

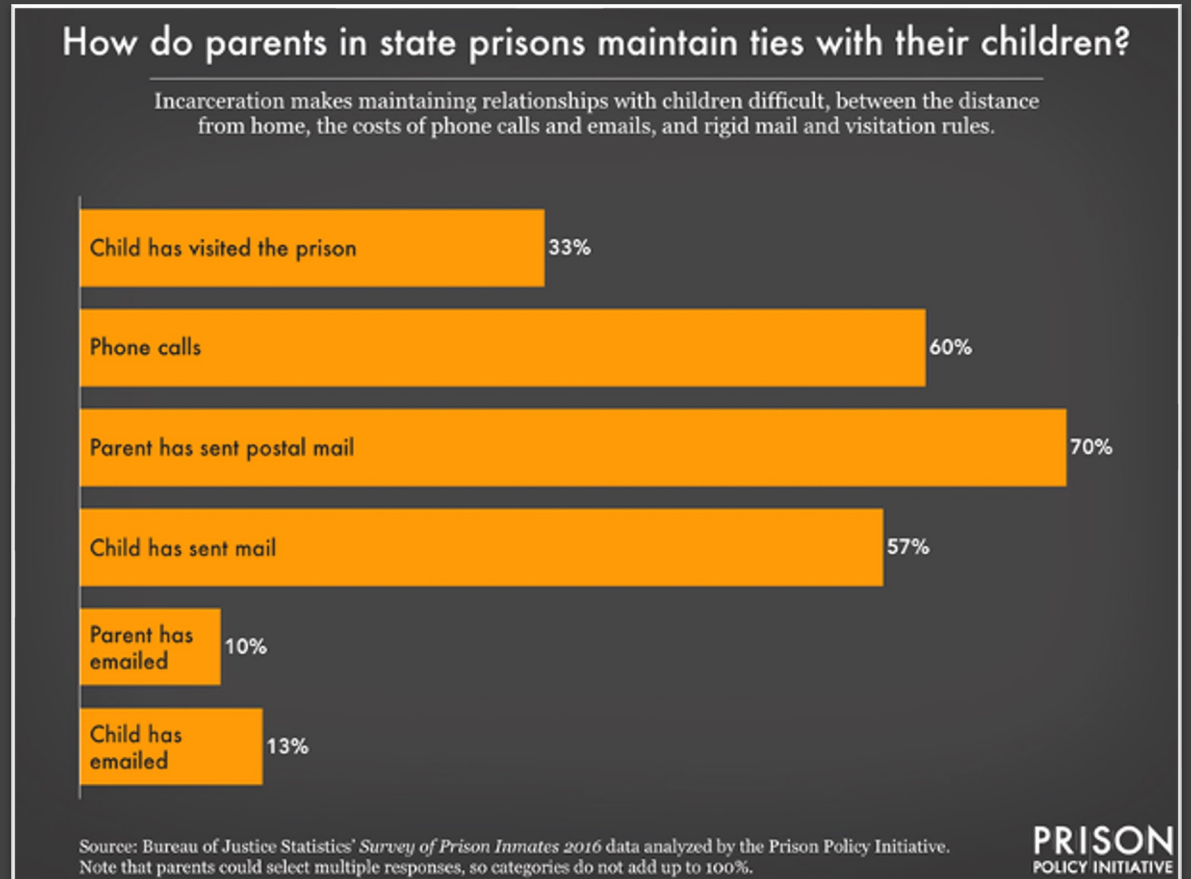
Welcome and Introductions

Overview

- Discuss some of the ways families maintain connection during incarceration and why these bonds are so important
- Talk about where and how these connections are under attack
- Panelist discussion with Jodi Hocking (Return Strong Nevada) and Taj Mahon-Haft (The Humanization Project in Virginia)
- Q & A.

How do people maintain family and community connections?

- In-person visits
- Physical mail
- Phone calls
- New technologies
 - E-messaging
 - Video calls



The cost of keeping connected

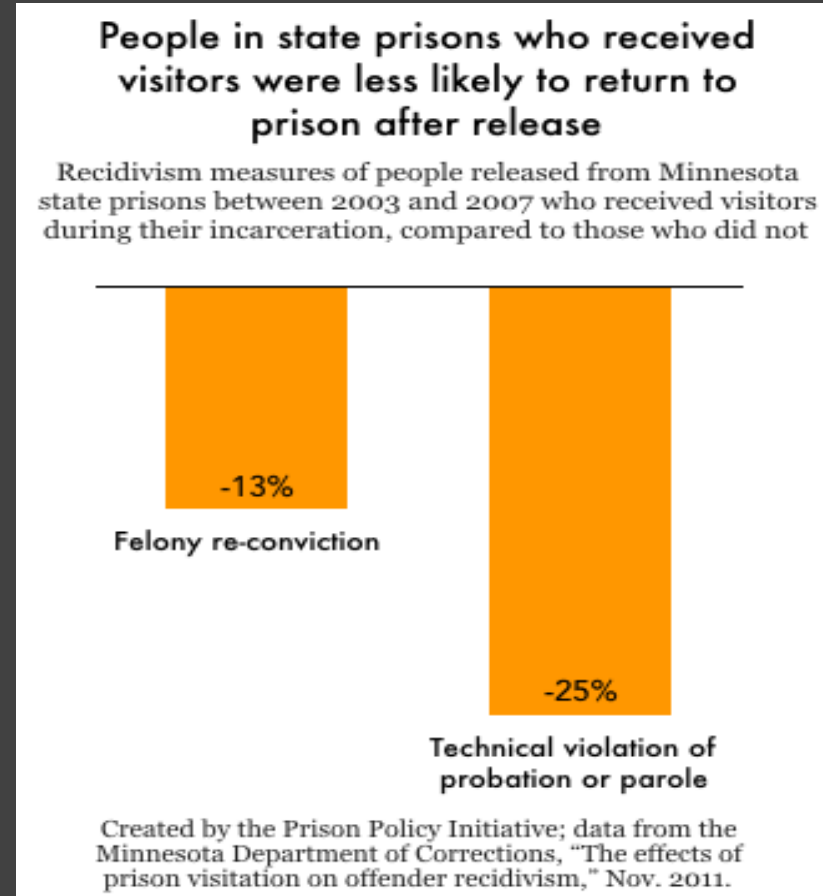
- Families spend an estimated \$4,195 per incarcerated family member per year to take care of them and to stay in touch. (NORC Survey, 2025)
 - Total of \$1.8 billion spent annually on travel to state and federal prisons to visit immediate family members.
 - Costs fall disproportionately on Black Americans.



Visitation

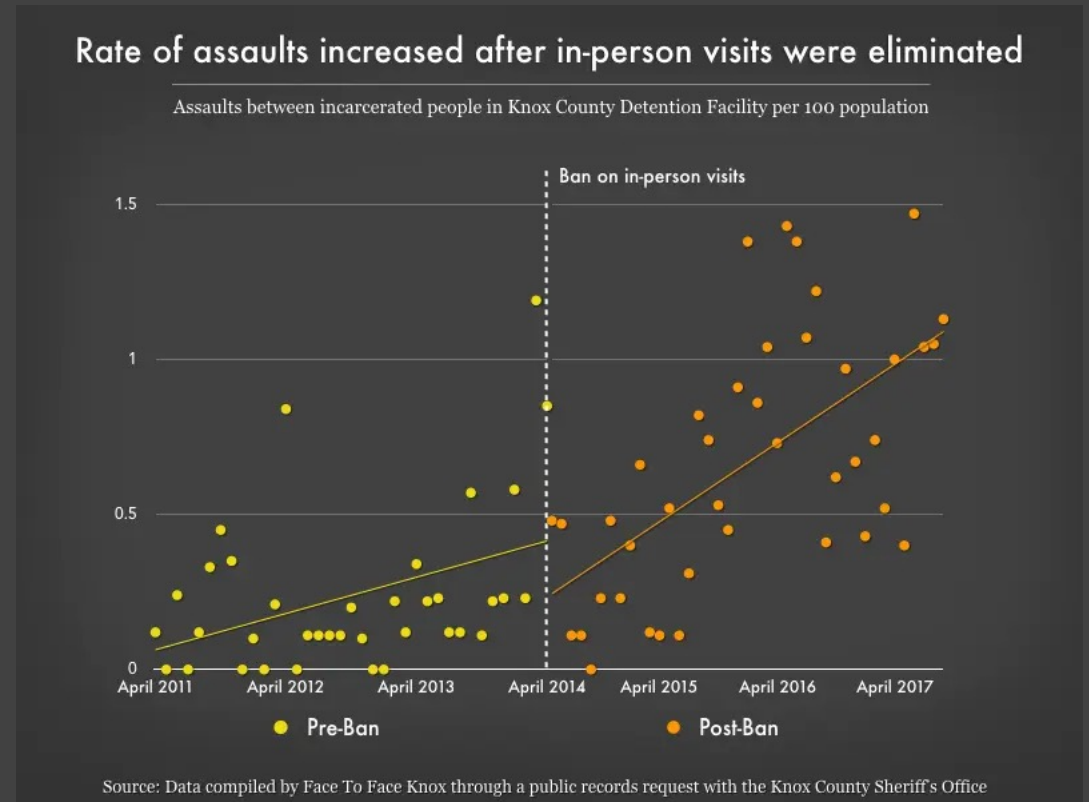
Visitation and Phone Calls reduce recidivism

- Recidivism
 - Receiving visitation leads to a 13% reduction in new felony arrests and a 25% reduction in technical violations
 - In multiple studies, each individual visit had an effect decreasing recidivism.
 - These results hold even when controlling for whether people overall have family support – the visits themselves matter.



Visitation creates safer conditions inside

- **Misconduct**
 - One additional visit per month was found to reduce misconduct by 14% - and reduce time served by 11%.
 - Replacing in-person visits with video visits was associated with higher rates of assaults.
- **Mental Health**
 - Visitation is linked to reduced depressive symptoms in incarcerated people.



Threats to Visitation

- Punitive restrictions or loss of family visitation.
 - Can be taken away for disciplinary reasons
 - Particularly concerning in the case of revocation for drug use.
- Arduous, humiliating, and faulty screening processes and dress codes, arbitrary enforcement, discriminatory rules.
- Complete elimination of contact visitation and replacement with video calls.

Protecting Visitation

- Legislation establishing visitation is a right; not a privilege
 - Together Colorado and [HB 25-1013](#)
- Screening processes should be minimally traumatic, particularly for children.
- Dress codes should be clear, publicly posted, and non-discriminatory.
- Video Calls should not be a source of revenue, nor should they replace in-person visitation.

Phone Calls

Phone calls are a vital lifeline

- Phone calls are among the most accessible forms of communication for all incarcerated people, since they don't require travel.
- Some studies show that regular (weekly) phone contact can be even more beneficial than visitation in maintaining family connections

Stronger families mean safer communities

- Parent-child relationships improve with weekly phone calls.
- People with regular mail contact with their children reported stronger parent-child relationships.
- Children of incarcerated parents who have stronger relationships
 - Do better in school
 - Are less likely to be arrested themselves



Progress – and backtracking – on phone rates at the federal level

- After decades of advocacy, the bipartisan Martha Wright-Reed Act Fair and Just Communications Act clarified that the FCC could regulate in-state calls placed from corrections facilities. The FCC set rate caps for both phone and video calling in 2024.
- Bowing to pressure from sheriffs and telecom companies, these rates have been hiked 83% between 2024 and 2025.

Free phone calls

- Even though the federal government is being held captive by big business and local sheriffs, states and localities can still make phone calls free.
- **Worth Rises** has advocated for and tracked the progress of free phone call measures across the country (see their *May 2026* impact report)
 - Over 330,000 people currently have access to free phone calls
 - Free phone calls increase both the frequency and length of calls and save hundreds of millions of dollars for incarcerated people and their families.

Postal Mail

The importance of postal mail

- Mail is the most common way children stay in touch with incarcerated parents.
- It has numerous intangible benefits to incarcerated people and their families like:
 - Being able to share childrens' drawings and see loved ones' handwriting
 - Being able to keep physical mail in housing units, even when tablets are taken away
 - Having physical keepsakes after loved ones die during incarceration

"Prisoners know their partners' handwriting and special language, they've seen their children's pictures evolve over time. For a large portion of inmates, their loved ones are the main reason they try to succeed upon reentry." —incarcerated person, Hawaii

Mail Scanning

- Mail scanning is the practice of digitizing mail and either providing photocopies or only electronic versions to incarcerated people.
- 31 states and the federal prison system now scan mail.

Mail Scanning makes the communication process worse

- Scanned mail is often low quality, and is frequently misdirected or misplaced.
- Mail scanning allows more ways for private companies to profit, for example by charging for photocopies or promoting e-messaging instead of onerous mail scanning processes.
- Although legal mail is generally subject to different rules than personal mail, educational mail and other correspondence with official outside organizations is affected as well.

Mail scanning does not address substance use behind bars

- Evidence is clear: mail scanning has not reduced overdoses or decreased contraband in states that have implemented it
 - Pennsylvania implemented mail scanning in September 2018, yet saw positive drug tests nearly triple in the five years that followed.
 - Illinois, one of the most recent states to implement mail scanning, was required to produce data on its effectiveness – it had no substantial impact on contraband.

Mail scanning does not address major sources of contraband

- Mail scanning ignores staff as a major source of contraband – low pay, poor oversight, and lax employment standards make drug smuggling a lucrative and attractive business for some guards.
- Hundreds of corrections officers around the country have been prosecuted for drug smuggling.

“Scanning mail doesn’t stop the drug flow, but it does make the prices go up. The people who sell contraband in prison love it!” — incarcerated person, Illinois

Opposing Mail Scanning

- Insist on data collection
 - How many pieces of mail test positive for drugs and for what substances?
 - How many incarcerated people/staff have experienced suspected overdose?
 - How many staff have been suspected of or investigated for drug related contraband?
 - What were the outcomes of these investigations?
- Address the cause, not just the effect
- Mitigating harm caused by scanning

“Physical mail is so important because it carries a certain tangibility that is stripped away when scanned and turned digital. The feelings and the essence of physical mail one can touch fades when digital, it’s like you can’t see and feel the love and contents anymore when it’s scanned.”
—Alabama

Discussion

Q&A

Connect with us

- **Sign up for Prison Policy Initiative's Newsletter:**
<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/subscribe/>
- **Follow us on Social Media:**
 - Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/prisonpolicy/>
 - LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/prison-policy-initiative/>
 - Twitter: <https://twitter.com/PrisonPolicy>
 - Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/PrisonPolicyInitiative>

Want to work with Prison Policy Initiative?

- Our advocacy department works with grassroots groups, legislators, and other advocates working on criminal legal system reform. We provide:
 - Legislative testimony and public comment
 - Research support
- Email us at advocacy@prisonpolicy.org to get started!