

Taking the Lede:

How advocates can shape news coverage
of the criminal legal system



Some quick table-setting:

- Introductions
- This webinar will go until 1-1:30pm PST/4-4:30pm EST
- This session is being recorded and will be posted in the Prison Policy Initiative's [Advocacy Toolkit](#).
- We'll include some time for Q&A, but feel free to drop your questions in the Q&A box now and we'll get to them at the end.

So: Why are we here?

The media doesn't usually represent incarcerated people, their loved ones, or their advocates

- Instead, the media represents the system.
- Politicians and government agencies are regularly, and proactively, in touch with the media.
- That can influence news about:
 - Conditions in prisons and jails
 - Crime and community safety
 - How “the system” works
- When it comes to changing policy or preventing regressive laws from being passed, this can tip the odds against advocates.

How system actors can influence news coverage: IDOC paper mail bans

WGLT

Here's why some lawmakers want to ban paper mail going into Illinois prisons.

A bill that would ban all incoming physical mail, and would instead require Illinois Department of Corrections facilities to have the mail electronically...

Nov 20, 2024



WGEM

WICC employees call for mail scanning as prison safety in Illinois declines

The report stated that Ernst will make her plans official next Thursday. U.S. Sen. Joni Ernst will not run for re-election, per report. Updated:...

Oct 17, 2024



WTTW News

Amid Concerns Over Paper, Illinois Prisons Would Be Able to Electronically Scan Mail Under New Contract

IDOC signed a contract in October that will give the department the ability to scan physical mail and deliver digital copies.

Dec 10, 2024



WGN-TV

Corrections officers exposed to narcotics at Illinois prison

At least 15 corrections officers went to the hospital on Wednesday after being exposed to narcotics at FCI Thomson. Three have been released.

Apr 17, 2025



WSIL-TV

Local lawmakers urge state to stop mail at prisons to help end drug exposures

CARTERVILLE, Ill. (WSIL)— We continue to follow health incidents at Illinois correctional facilities, including many in our area.

Sep 25, 2024



KFVS12

Southern Illinois lawmakers call for change at prisons after exposure incidents

The lawmakers sent IDOC a joint letter on Monday, September 23, stating the suspension of mail services should remain in effect until "proper protocols and...

Sep 24, 2024



WCIA.com

IDOC planning mail changes following drug exposure increase in prisons

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (NEXSTAR)— Going back years, prison guards across Illinois have reported an uptick in drugs making it to inmates.

Nov 22, 2024



More: An attack on elder parole in California reframed as “closing a loophole”

7 SAN DIEGO LOCAL WEATHER TRAFFIC POLITICALLY SPEAKING SPORTS IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD SUBMIT PHOTOS ENTER... 78°

CALIFORNIA

Senate committee passes 'Mary-Bella's Law' to end elderly parole for violent sex offenders

Proponents say Senate Bill 286 would close a loophole that allowed for early releases of violent sex offenders through the state's elderly parole program.

By City News Service • Published April 9, 2025 • Updated on April

SIERRADAILYNEWS.COM
NORTHEAST CALIFORNIA'S FIRST SOURCE

HOME NEWS NATIONAL OBITUARIES WEATHER 93 JDX 1240 KSUE EVENTS CONTACT DAILY NEWSLET

Home » State » Senate Democrats Block Mary Bella's Law to Address Elderly Parole Loophole

Senate Democrats Block Mary Bella's Law to Address Elderly Parole Loophole

Wed, May 28, 2025

TIMES of SAN DIEGO

All topics ▾ Home Beach & Bay Downtown News La Jolla La Mesa Courier Mission Ti

People rallied on the steps of the state Capitol Tuesday in support of Senate Bill 286. (Screenshot courtesy of @ZavalaA X video)

A bill co-authored by state Sen. Brian Jones, R-Santee, and sponsored by the [San Diego County District Attorney's Office](#), which aims to prevent people convicted of violent sex offenses from receiving elderly parole, was unanimously passed by the state Senate Public Safety Committee Tuesday.

Proponents say Senate Bill 286 would close a loophole that allowed for early releases of violent sex offenders through the state's elderly parole program. Its authors have dubbed the bill as “Mary-Bella's Law” after two of the victims.

The program makes parole hearings available for inmates over 50 years of age if they have served at least 20 years of their prison sentence.

A prior law change lowered the program's age threshold from 60 to 50. Jones' office said the law change also created the loophole offering parole after 20 years no matter the length of the person's sentence or the violence involved in the crimes.

Media-created moral panics/crime waves



POLITICS

California voters pass initiative to make some shoplifting and drug offenses felonies

What we'll do in this webinar

- By building relationships and sending smart pitches to reporters, advocates can shift the balance of news coverage.
- We'll go over:
 - Who we're talking about when we talk about the media
 - Some basic media terminology
 - Different goals to keep in mind with media outreach
 - Two methods of influencing the news
 - Keeping system-impacted sources protected

Who do we mean when we say “the media”?

Montgomery Advertiser

THE ORANGE COUNTY
REGISTER

WHIO
DAYTON'S NEWS & TALK
1290AM • 95.7FM

AP ASSOCIATED PRESS

ST TODAY ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

FOX
11
LOS ANGELES

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Amsterdam News

KOH AM 780
NEWS TALK

OPB
Oregon Public
Broadcasting

KOMO
NEWS
abc **4**

AL **COM**

wttw

KUT
NEWS 90.5

The
Observer

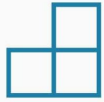
PINE CITY
PIONEER

Cincinnati.com

THE KANSAS CITY STAR.

The Enquirer

Who (else) do we mean when we say “the media”?



Institute for
Nonprofit News

States Newsroom



AXIOS



The Center Square

 **substack**



Common reporter jargon, part 1

“Talking on the record”	A reporter talking to a source with permission to quote anything the source says in their reporting. If a journalist says they are looking for “comment,” this is what they want.
“Talking on background” or	A reporter talking to a source with permission to <i>paraphrase</i> what the source says, but not to quote them.
“Not for attribution”	You can be quoted directly, but without your name attached.
“Talking off the record”	A reporter talking to a source with the understanding that nothing the source says will be attributed to the source, either quoted or paraphrased.

Common reporter jargon, part 2

“On deadline”	A journalist must get a story ready to publish or air by a certain time, usually before close of the business day.
“Turning in this story/filing this story on [day/time]”	A journalist must send a draft of the story to their editor by the specified day/time.

Why the difference matters:

- Reporters can often add stuff to a story after they turn in a draft.
- After a deadline, though, they aren't usually able to make additions or changes.

Common reporter jargon, part 3

“Embargoed/under embargo”	You are sharing a report or statement with a journalist in advance of when you will publish it. The reporter is expected not to share or publish anything about it until the embargo is lifted.
“Offering an exclusive”	You are offering a report or statement to a journalist in advance of when you publish it, with the understanding that if the journalist accepts, you will not make the same offer to anyone else.

What's your objective?

Four ways that connecting with a reporter can be fruitful:

- Shaping news coverage
- Getting “clippings”
- Investigating the system
- Putting direct pressure on system actors

Shaping news coverage

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

With Little Notice, Oklahoma Prison Phone Call Rates More Than Double

When the FCC announced in June that it would postpone its 2024 regulations of prison phone calls, we pushed out a blog post and sent it to a bunch of reporters. This helped influence coverage of the FCC's decision, including this article in Oklahoma Watch.

Susan Ingram was confused when an automated prompt told her she had just 20 seconds to talk with her fiancé, John, a prisoner at the Joseph Harp Correctional Center in Lexington.

She had recently loaded \$10 onto her Securus account, enough to pay for at least seven 20-minute calls at the six-cent per minute rate the Oklahoma Department of Corrections [agreed to in February](#). This was just her fourth call of the Labor Day weekend, made on the evening of Sept. 1.



Susan Ingram poses for a photo with her fiancé, John, at the Joseph Harp Correctional Center in Lexington. (Provided)

“Sure enough, I looked at the account, and the previous call we had done cost more than double,” she said. “I was like, what the heck.”



A couple years ago, the Nevada legislature decriminalized several traffic offenses. The Fines and Fees Justice Center, which pushed for the change, also helped shape how that change was covered in the media.

Minor traffic offenses downgraded under the new law include, but are not limited to: driving in a carpool lane with too few passengers, driving slowly and then failing to allow other cars to pass, talking on a cellphone while driving and lower-level speeding.

Leisa Moseley — who serves as the Nevada state director at the Fines and Fees Justice Center, an organization that works to eliminate fees in the justice system and ensure that fines are equitably imposed and enforced — said in an interview that the change will bring relief to thousands of people.

“Anyone who has a ticket for a violation that as of Jan. 1 will become civil, if they have a ticket for that now, it's no longer going to be a criminal offense,” Moseley said. “It is going to be a civil offense, and they will not have the fear of having a warrant issued and being arrested for having an outstanding warrant.”

At the start of the pandemic, there were [about 270,000 traffic warrants](#) pending in the Las Vegas Justice Court alone, though the court suspended enforcement of those warrants at the time because of the public health crisis.

For those unable to pay for a ticket, additional fees can accrue quickly, Moseley explained. She pointed to additional fees associated with opting for community service or establishing a payment plan to pay off the fine.

“It's a harmful system simply because you're not able to pay that initial citation in full,” Moseley said. “Nevada does not have a grace period. If by 12 o'clock midnight, you have not paid that payment, you're automatically back in warrant status.”

Getting “clippings”


A clipping is a news story you can share around to influence how people view certain issues in the system, or get them to pay attention.

Daily Memphian

PREMIUM SHELBY COUNTY

Memphis doesn't need a new jail, new study says. At least, not right now.

By Aaron Fleming, Daily Memphian
Published: September 02, 2025 4:00 AM CT



Issues with processing at staffing are at the heart of the problems inside Shelby County Jail, also known as 201 Poplar, the Prison Policy Initiative report says. (The Daily Memphian file)

Before Shelby County spends more than \$1 billion building a new jail, management of the current facility needs to be addressed, according to a new report.

Issues with processing at staffing are at the heart of the problems inside Shelby County Jail, also known as 201 Poplar, the report says. And at least one person who studied

Clippings: some examples

The Guardian

US

News

Opinion

Sport

Culture

Lifestyle

US news

US politics

World

Climate crisis

Middle East

Ukraine

US immigration

Soccer

Business

Environment

Roe v Wade

This article is more than 1 year old

Over half of US women on probation or parole need permission to travel for abortion - study

Policies are 'one-two punch' for women caught in criminal justice system, report's author says



Abortion rights demonstrators hold signs outside the supreme court in Washington DC on 24 June 2023. Photograph: Stephanie Scarbrough/AP

Jessica GlENZA

Mon 24 Jun 2024 07:50 EDT

Share

The number of women on probation or parole who must seek permission to travel for an abortion more than doubled to 635,000 in two years since the supreme court overturned the federal right to abortion, a new report finds.

Fourteen states have near-total abortion bans and 21 restrict the procedure. Together with near ubiquitous travel restrictions imposed by probation and parole, more than half of women on probation or parole in the US must seek permission to travel before obtaining an abortion.

The Philadelphia Inquirer

SIGN IN / SIGN UP

OPINION

Pennsylvania should stop suspending driver's licenses for non-driving offenses | Editorial

Pennsylvania's added punishment for a non-driving related offense is senseless overkill.



Pennsylvania suspends driver's licenses of 19,000 ex-offenders a year locking them in a "geographic prison." Without a license, they can't get jobs and move on with their lives. Handout

by The Editorial Board

Published Aug. 1, 2018, 5:00 a.m. ET

After Pennsylvania is finished punishing people for offenses ranging from underage drinking to drug crimes, it piles on by suspending their driver's licenses, robbing ex-offenders — including

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CRIMINAL JUSTICE
VOTING RIGHTS
WHAT'S ON THE BALLOT

MENU

Minnesota Just Became The Latest State to Eliminate Prison Gerrymandering

A new law will end the practice of counting incarcerated people where prisons are located, which skews political power within the state.

Alex Burness | May 22, 2024



Minnesota State Capitol Building (iStock/ReDunnLev)

Share

In 2010, ahead of the decennial redistricting process, Minnesota's legislature considered adopting a bold reform: It would stop counting state prisoners as residents of the districts where they were incarcerated, and instead count them as

Clippings, continued

Questions to consider:

- Whose opinion do we want to influence about this issue?
- Where are they most likely to get their news?
- How is this story going to be distributed?



Investigating the system

Sometimes, journalists can augment research that you have already done about an aspect of the criminal legal system.

For instance, investigations of local prison and jail tablet contracts have helped us get a better understanding of the industry.



The Tribune obtained contracts between Securus and Dallas County, Harris County and Fort Bend County. Both Harris County and Fort Bend County receive commission from Securus. Dallas did away with the payments in 2020.

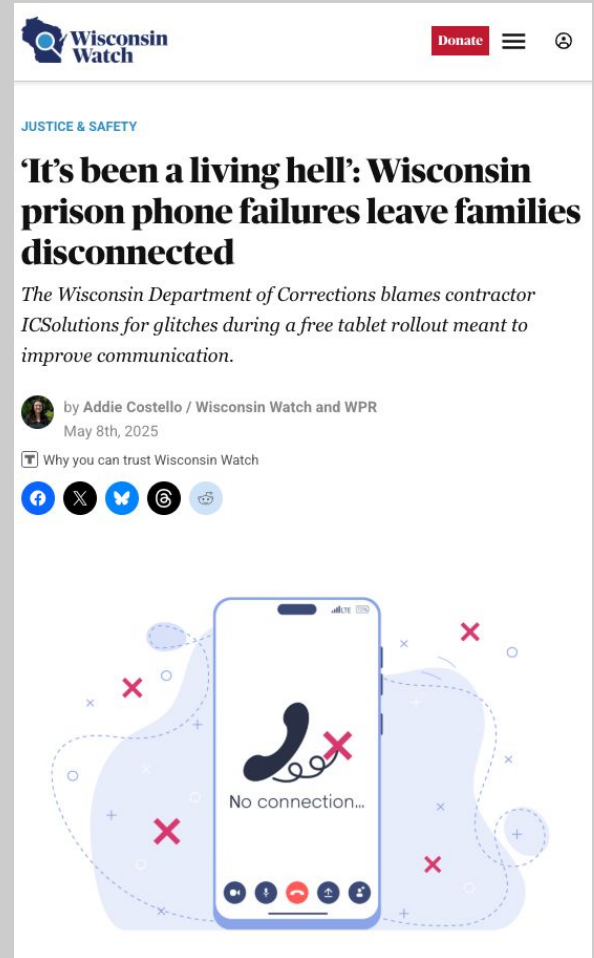
Fort Bend County has received \$6.7 million from Securus since it began contracting with the company in 2016, said Melissa Elster, Fort Bend County's auditor. The majority of that money — \$4.4 million — went to the Jail's Commissary Fund, which, per state law, must be used for the benefit of the people in jail, Elster said. She said the funds have been used to pay for cable television, supplies for vocational programs and hygiene kits. The rest — \$2.3 million — was sent to the county's general fund and used for the sheriff department's detention budget.

Harris County's 2023 contract with Securus was hailed a win among jail advocates. On the heels of a national movement to eliminate the cost of phone calls from jail, the county agreed to a contract that gives those detained up to four free calls per week and that lowered the per-minute costs of phone calls made beyond that allotment to 2 cents per minute.

But the county still receives payments made on those phone calls from Securus — a minimum of \$500,000 per year — and phone calls are not free.

Putting pressure on the system

- Going through the media can be a way to get prisons, jails, and other agencies to pay attention to problems
- Reporters asking questions can get agencies to shed light on a problem and, sometimes, to commit to solve it



Neither ICSolutions nor its parent company responded to requests for comment. But in [an undated statement on its website](#), the company promised improvements in the “coming weeks,” with “significant optimization coming this summer.” The statement recommended shifting calls to “off-peak hours” — before 5 p.m. or after 9 p.m. But family members say they are not always available at such hours.

Corrections spokesperson Beth Hardtke squarely blamed ICSolutions, saying state-run infrastructure and Wi-Fi access played no role in the issue.

“To be very clear, the quality of service that ICSolutions is providing is not acceptable to the department. If reliability and customer service do not improve, the department will be forced to reevaluate our contract,” Hardtke wrote in an email.

The statement from ICSolutions blamed “unexpected challenges” from increased demand for calls. But Hardtke said the company previously assured the department it could handle higher call volume during the rollout.

Prisoners in nine of Wisconsin’s 36 adult institutions — including all three women’s facilities — still lack tablets. The glitches affect them, too, because ICSolutions services the entire phone system, not just tablets.

The corrections department is pausing tablet distribution while trying to fix the reliability problems, Hardtke said.

Influencing journalists, formally and informally

Two ways, broadly speaking, of influencing the press:

- Informally, by forging friendly and trusting relationships.
- Formally, by sending pitches.

Forging relationships with “media people”

- Step 1: Say hi!
 - Most reporters have their emails posted publicly.
- You don’t need to have a reason to reach out
- *But*, if you’re reaching out with some form of correction or feedback, come prepared with different sources/more information

Hi Rob,

I hope you're doing well. My name is Hannah Riley and I work at a small journalist support nonprofit called The Center for Just Journalism. I'm reaching out because someone from the federal defender's office flagged your story on APD and ATF working together on a "mobile ballistics lab", and we're hoping that y'all can maybe add a bit more important context to this story (the one I'm referencing is [here](#).) I worked at the Innocence Project for a number of years, and this kind of ballistics evidence is seen as pretty unreliable when it comes to obtaining convictions. People have been exonerated because of its misuse, and, for example, various state Supreme Courts have limited its admissibility in court. Here's what [Maryland did last year](#). Here's a [well-known report from 2016](#) about unreliable forensics, including ballistics. My former colleague at the Southern Center for Human Rights, Mark Loudon-Brown, is an expert in unreliable forensics (I am not!) and would be happy to speak with someone in your newsroom to explain more about this, if interested. I think it's a good opportunity to tell a slightly more nuanced story about this kind of evidence. I'd love to chat more about this if you've got some time for coffee or lunch this week.

Informal Relationship Building

The biggest shifts in coverage come from relationships, not one-off pitches. Treat media work like organizing: build shared analysis over time and move reporters along a spectrum. This work can help beats evolve.

Trust invites earlier calls that shape coverage beyond a perfunctory quote at the end of a story. When reporters really get to know you, they ask for reality checks before headlines are set, which makes space for nuance that challenges official narratives.

Your expertise is indispensable! You understand so much about this complex, opaque system. You know things they don't know. Offer that knowledge proactively.

THE WATCHDOGS CHICAGO GANGS CRIME

Chicago's kid carjackers: Inside the SRT Boys' yearslong crime spree

During the COVID-19 lockdown, a band of masked robbers terrorized the city. It turned out they were just kids. Now, cops say they've graduated to smash-and-grab burglaries of stores. Here's how that's happened.

By Frank Main and Tom Schuba | Jun 6, 2025, 6:30am EDT



Chicago: Does your water service line contain lead?

Enter your address to find out whether any part of your water service line needs replacing and how your neighborhood compares to others.

Important Information Data is current as of the city's 2025 water service line inventory. The city's data is incomplete and might contain inaccuracies and duplicates. Multiple addresses might be served by the same service line. Some addresses will appear as ranges. We encourage users to independently verify any information before acting on it.

Sources City of Chicago / Census Bureau

Analysis Peter Aldhous / Inside Climate News; Amy Qin / WBEZ

Development Clayton Aldern / Parker Ziegler / Grist. See our [methods](#).

Downers Grove

Woodridge

Darien

Burbank

Berwyn

Cicero

Oak Park

Wood Park

Skokie

Select a data layer to visualize

AGGREGATION LEVEL

Community areas

Census tracts

DATA VISUALIZATION

Lead

Poverty

Race

PERCENTAGE OF SERVICE LINES REQUIRING REPLACEMENT



Color boxes are sized proportionally to the number of community areas they contain, with finer detail offered for the top and bottom of the range.

The formal way: pitching journalists

- A pitch is a proposal that a reporter write about a specific topic.
- It's normal and acceptable to send pitches to reporters you've never talked to before.
- A great pitch:
 - Gives the reporter a story that is newsworthy
 - Offers resources to help them write it

New Prison Policy Initiative briefing finds that two years post-Dobbs, most women on probation or parole have to ask permission to travel for abortion care

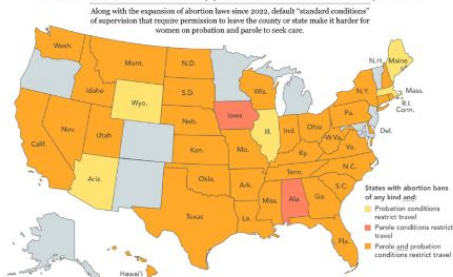
Hey Jessica,

The one-two punch of laws restricting abortions and "standard conditions" of probation and parole restricting travel mean that hundreds of thousands of women may be trapped in states where they cannot receive abortion care, a [new briefing by the Prison Policy Initiative](#) finds. Today, the vast majority of the 800,000 women on probation or parole must seek their supervising officer's permission to travel for an abortion.

Two years ago, we [sounded the alarm](#) about how the fall of *Roe v. Wade* would put abortion care virtually out of reach for women under community supervision. Our new analysis puts numbers to this problem, finding that two years post-*Dobbs*:

- **82% of women on probation and 85% of women on parole** live in states that both (1) completely ban abortion or restrict it based on gestational age and (2) list travel restrictions as a standard condition of their supervision.
- **53% of women under supervision** live in states with bans stricter than those that were allowed under *Roe v. Wade*, meaning they are far more often forced to travel out of state.
- The much tighter restrictions imposed by 21 states since the *Dobbs* decision have put **over 400,000 more women** in the position of having to seek permission to travel for abortion care, compared to under *Roe v. Wade*.

Policy map: Where parole and probation travel restrictions make abortion bans even more oppressive for women on supervision



Compiled by the Prison Policy Initiative from state and county probation documents, Parole Rules in the United States: Conditions of Parole in Historical Perspective, 1980-2000 by Wiggins, et al. (2002), and the Guttmacher Institute's State Bans on Abortion Throughout Pregnancy (as of May 1, 2024). See the full methodology for details about data categorization.

PRISON
POLICY • 2024.06.18

Travel restrictions are not the only conditions putting abortion care out of reach for many on probation and parole. Most people under supervision are low-income, and [a quarter have no health insurance](#). And the rapidly-growing population on electronic monitors face an even more daunting process for seeking healthcare, in-state or out.

You can read the full briefing here: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2024/06/18/dobbs/>

I hope this is useful in your work.

Adams County Jail starts charging more for phone calls to get kickbacks, families devastated

Hi News9 Investigates team,

I'm with the Prison Policy Initiative, an organization investigating issues around mass incarceration. I wanted to drop you a line about an issue impacting loved ones of people at the Adams County Jail.

You may know that last year, the Federal Communications Commission [passed regulations](#) to protect people in jail/prison and their loved ones from high phone rates. Last week, the FCC decided to pause these regulations for two years. As our organization explained in a [blog post](#), this decision was driven by the FCC's new Trump-appointed Chairman Brendan Carr.

This morning, we heard from two people with loved ones in the Adams County Jail that the jail, having *already implemented* the new rules and lowered their phone rates earlier this year, abruptly went back to the old rates. In the words of one of them, "What cost me \$2.50 for 30 minutes yesterday cost me almost \$5 today with absolutely no warning."

Not all jails are doing this: For example, I checked and it appears the Denver County Jail lowered their rates to comply with the rules and have not reversed course.

It's very likely that Adams County is doing this in order to regain kickbacks it was earning from its provider, HomeWAV, before the rules went into effect. These kickbacks are basically a gift to the facility paid for by the families.

If you want to be connected to one of the people who reached out to us this morning, she says she would be happy to talk.

Let me know if this is of interest.

Pitching is about convincing reporters that a topic you care about is *newsworthy*. But what does that mean?

As the Purdue Writing Lab explains, it is largely about **relevance, timeliness, and simplification.**

The Components of "Newsworthiness"

Why is it that mass media outlets feature particular news stories prominently while others receive little, if any, coverage? Just as individual audience members have access to so much news that they need to decide what kind of information they want to consume (and how they access it), news outlets must decide which events are worth covering and which events are not.

Although every outlet is different, mass media gatekeepers have traditionally relied on some predictable values to evaluate the newsworthiness of a story. Their decisions impact if and how any given story is covered, including how many resources are spent following the story, and how prominently the story is featured. The following is a brief overview of two conceptual news values models that journalists continue to use today to evaluate the newsworthiness of potential stories. Gatlung and Ruge developed the first model in 1973 and Shoemaker et al. followed up with a similar model in 1987.

GATLUNG AND RUGE, 1973

- **Relevance** - How relevant is a news story to the audience in question? For example, a California earthquake is almost always more relevant to a West Coast audience than to an audience in Calcutta.
- **Timeliness** - How recently did the event unfold? Timing is of the utmost importance in today's 24-hour news cycle. Recent events, or events in the making, are most likely to lead the news.
- **Simplification** - Stories that can be easily simplified or summarized are likely to be featured more prominently than stories that are convoluted or difficult to understand.

A highly **relevant** issue might be one that clearly impacts a lot of the reporter's readers or viewers.

COLORADO NEWS

Some Colorado families may face skyrocketing costs for jail and prison phone calls

One family with a loved one in the Adams County Detention Center saw call costs double overnight.



Author: Jeremy Jojola
Published: 5:30 PM MDT August 11, 2025
Updated: 5:30 PM MDT August 11, 2025



ADAMS COUNTY, Colo. — A recent suspension of federal rules that govern the cost of jail and prison phone calls could mean surprise bills for some families of people who are incarcerated.

"I was just really upset, trying to figure out how we would pay twice as much to talk on the phone," said Autumn Ray, whose husband is incarcerated in the Adams County Detention Center.

A highly **timely** issue might relate closely to another topic already in the news.

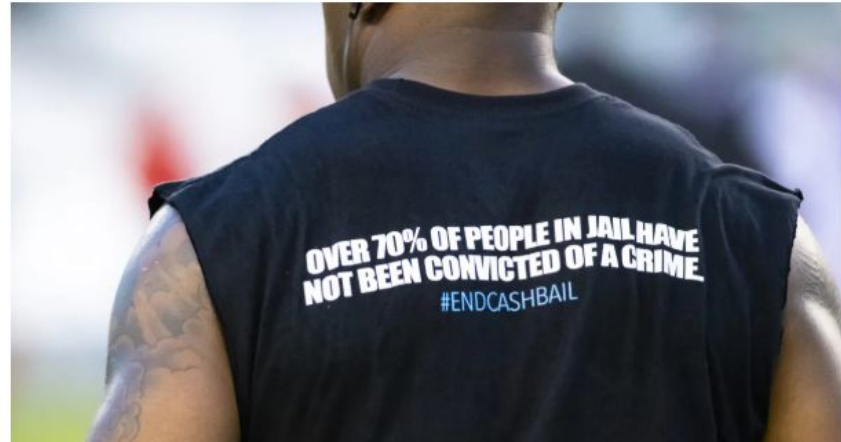
Cashless Bail Helps Keep Families Together. Trump Wants to Shut It Down.

As the president escalates his federal takeover of D.C., his latest efforts target a system held up as a model since 1992.



By [Christina Carrega](#)

August 26, 2025

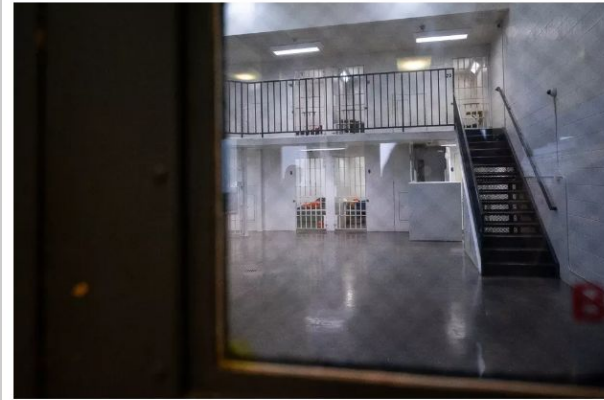


A **simple** issue is one that can boil down into a skimmable, accessible headline.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Fueled by harsh drug sentences, Idaho leads nation in women's incarceration, report finds

Idaho Justice Project calls for drug policy reforms, but lawmakers say public safety is at stake



Overcrowding led Canyon County jail to move all of its women detainees out of the main detention facility, pictured above, in 2020 and into a temporary structure that was erected in the parking lot where they're still held today. (Whitney Bryen/InvestigateWest)

JANUARY 13, 2025

Republish Share

By **Whitney Bryen**

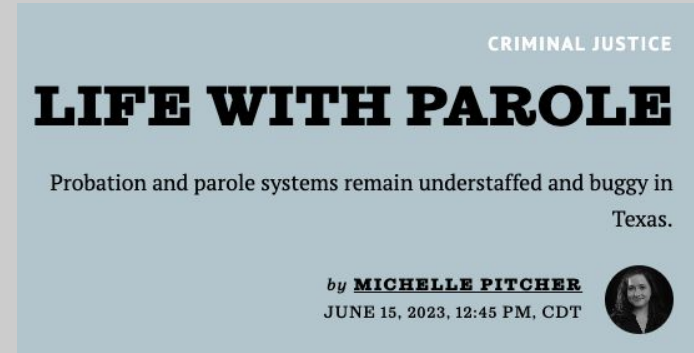
Despite having some of the nation's lowest crime rates, Idaho incarcerates more women per capita than any other state.

Two final tips

1. If you can find a reporter who has written about the issue you're concerned about before, even if it was years ago and you have no prior contact with that reporter, reach out and make a connection.
2. Pitches that go out early in the day and on Mondays are more successful!

“Is there someone directly impacted I can talk to?”

- Almost every news story is about people. That means journalists are often looking for an individual to interview about their experience with the system.
- Making these connections for reporters will help you get pitches accepted, but it comes with risks for the source, especially if they are under state supervision.



Jasmine Torres tried to answer the phone call, but cell service was poor at her factory job. Torres has been on a GPS ankle monitor since December 2021 as a condition of her parole, and the command center was calling to check in. She paid for the missed call with a month in jail.

Torres is one of the 437,000 people on parole or probation in Texas, a number that accounts for more than half of all the people affected by the criminal justice system as a whole, according to [a recent report by the Prison Policy Initiative \(PPI\)](#). Almost twice as many people are under community supervision—an umbrella term that includes probation and parole—as are incarcerated in prisons or jails nationwide.

You control the conversation!

- Get clear on what kind of attention this will bring you. Is your interview a big part of the story?
- You can ask for questions in advance. “This is a big topic and I’d like to know what to prepare for.”
- Prepare the journalist for what *you* (or whoever is doing the interview) can and can’t talk about.
- Practice talking points to avoid leading questions.

message-body: I’m a reporter at The Marshall Project working on a story about what happens after someone dies in custody -- specifically what families go through when trying to retrieve their loved one’s body and belongings. I’m looking at policies across the federal and state systems and trying to understand how delays, unclear rules and poor communication compound people’s grief.

I’ve found some great policy language, but I’m hoping to talk with someone who can speak more broadly about systemic issues and reforms, especially when it comes to families being left in the dark or having no recourse when something goes wrong.

Would someone at PPI be available for a brief interview? I’d love to hear how you all are thinking about this issue and whether you’ve tracked examples or data related to post-death procedures, personal property or family inclusion.

I’m with the Prison Policy Initiative, following up on your message to us.

Would it be possible to give a little more detail on what you’re hoping to learn from us? I’m happy to give you my personal impressions of how prisons interact with families following someone’s death (and what I have heard anecdotally has been awful!), but I can’t speak from a research standpoint since this is not something we have studied.

You control the conversation, part 2:

Sources who are incarcerated or on supervision face unique risks. Some tips:

- Ask the reporter what they need for their story and why. A background chat might be enough.
- You can offer to talk off the record, with an option for the reporter to ask for an on-record interview on specific questions later.
- If you don't already have a trusting relationship with the reporter, do a little background research.
- Ask if they will commit to not writing about personal details you don't want mentioned, and to not using dehumanizing language, before the interview.
- And/or, ask the reporter to use a pseudonym for you to protect your safety.
- Make sure the reporter knows how to minimize your risk. This Freedom of the Press Foundation guide for interviewing incarcerated people is handy.

Q&A

If you have more questions for Wanda and Hannah, don't hesitate to reach out:

- Wanda: wbertram@prisonpolicy.org
- Hannah: hannah@justjournalism.org

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