

Things You Learn Listening in on Every Prison Phone Call

Prison systems actually have intricate rules about who you're allowed to call, how you call them, and what you talk about. We sat down with a woman who monitors those calls. In the grand tradition of oversimplifying, we'll call her a phone warden. Here's what we learned:

Phone Calls Are a For-Profit Business

The gist of my job involved setting prisoners up to make their phone calls with the outside world and then listening in on all the catty prison gossip. The company I worked for changed hands to Verizon Business for about a month during my tenure, then it wound up owned by Global Tel Link, but when I started it was with MCI. The only reason I bring that up is to point out that services like mine aren't run by the government or through the prison system. Big ol' corporations handle the work, and their primary concern is making a profit. Hence, one of my main jobs was making sure nobody dared to try a three-way call. Not because phone shenanigans, including three-way calls, can and have led to actual prison escapes -- but just because it cheated my employers out of like, 20 cents.

Here are the basic rules for prison calls: When I started in 2006, one of the phones had to be a landline. Each prisoner was allowed 10 people on his call list. And if you wanted to be added to a list, you had to mail the prisoner directly and wait for her to approve you. Also, they pay for the privilege of calling out of prison -- hence why I worked for Verizon.

The job was sold to me as a cushy gig. I was told I wouldn't even go behind the gate or see prisoners. When I toured the facility, it looked sweet: I'd make more money than I'd ever made and I'd even have my own office -- all for eavesdropping with occasional light data entry. Unfortunately, it turned out that everything I'd been told was a class Rumsfeld lie.

You Have to Meet the Prisoners You Spy On Face to Face

Only a few days passed before they asked me, "Would you mind going out to inmate dorms to answer questions about the phone system?" Now I had to go meet dangerous criminals face to face, sometimes after shooting down their requested phone contacts.

"Oh hey, convicted criminal, I listen to everything you say -- some of it possibly meant to be secret. Here's my face, my name, and my place of employment. Oh, and here's my card, too. I've included a list of my deepest fears and allergies on the back, just for funsies."

I had one chick send me eight different numbers (in eight different states) for her husband. I had to deny her because none were a landline. Later that day, I was listening to calls and heard her going on and on about the "phone bitch" -- she kept saying she was going to find me at the prison and *make me* add the numbers.

Luckily the prison system doesn't take math-based threats lightly: They gave me a Personal Body Alarm, or PBA, to carry with me. It was a black, rectangular box with a belt clip and a single white button. Should anything happen, I'd just press the button and hopefully guards would come to my aid before I

caught a sharpened tooth brush to the gall bladder. Thankfully, I never had to use it. To this day, the only person to force me to add anything was Count von Count from *Sesame Street*.

Your Job Is Snitching

My job wasn't exclusively monitoring for illicit use of call waiting and whatnot. I did have to listen for possible criminal scheming, mostly about drugs. Drugs are a fact of life in every single prison on Earth. Prison guards seized nearly 3,000 grams of weed and 92 grams of cocaine alone between 2008 and 2009 -- and that's just the stuff they caught.

There are a few ways to pick out a drug call. Mostly it's just in the flow of conversation. Drug calls don't use normal sentences, and the participants talk in really short spurts. I mean, they're not Navajo code talkers or anything. They'll substitute some random word for whatever drug they're talking about. "Cookies" for "weed" was pretty common: "Did you get those cookies I sent in?" or "that last batch of cookies was really dry, and I think it was laced with something" or "if you don't find that missing batch of cookies, *your whole family is dead.*"

Once you walk the halls and realize your prison doesn't smell like the Famous Amos bakery, it's pretty obvious what's really going on: The prisoners have somehow found a way to bake cookies without the smell.

This must be stopped

Sometimes It's Unexpectedly Heartwarming

This job wasn't all math threats and remedial class-caliber criminal intrigue. I got a call from a mother once, right after her daughter was put into the county jail. She hadn't spoken to her daughter in years and needed to know how to get in touch with her, so I walked her through the process. She was a bit technologically clueless. It was like an extremely high-stakes version of helping your parents fix their computer over Thanksgiving.

I helped the mother set up a landline, got the request letter to the daughter, approved the contact, and after a week, finally saw on the log that her daughter had called. A few weeks later, I saw the daughter on one of my trips to the jail. She thanked me effusively for helping, and that Christmas her mom sent me a thank-you card. Apparently they just spent that whole first call sobbing to each other -- it was the first time they'd talked in years.

Aww, isn't that a Hallmark moment? Like, it's kind of messed up -- one of those cards you find in the clearance rack, for sure -- but still sweet, in its own way. You've got to hold on to the good stuff, because ...

It Can Be Deeply Sad and/or Creepy

Once this guy called up about contacting his convict girlfriend. He very quickly connected the dots and figured that if his girlfriend was in prison, she couldn't catch him cheating. He then abandoned that and

all other forms of logic, and proceeded to hit on the one girl who can actually contact his girlfriend: me. I tried everything to deter him -- I declined, I changed the subject, I told him I was married (even though I wasn't), but he wouldn't let up. He kept calling and calling. I eventually wound up having to get an escort from the prison.

Seriously, dude: You want one girlfriend in prison and another working at the prison? What kind of bizarre fetish is having you try to hook up that unlikely three-way?

Then there were the more pedestrian tragedies: People clearly cheating on their imprisoned spouses. Relationships falling apart. I wound up listening to a lot of women string sugar daddies along, getting them to send over money so they could buy things at the prison commissary. The thing that got me the most was the young, imprisoned girls calling their moms around Christmas -- reminiscing about holidays past and knowing they wouldn't spend another one together for a long time. It was awful. They're in on a stupid drug charge surrounded by all these hardened criminals, away from their family.

there's a symphony of tiny violins playing. Let's change the subject to the elephant in the room...

You Listen In on a Lot of Bizarre Phone Sex

Obviously, phone sex was extremely common. I'd say 40 percent of the calls had a sexual element to them. The phone sex in this case was especially strange, because our prisoners weren't allowed to have any kind of sexual contact. But if their significant other wanted to do *their* half of the phone sex, well, that's not against the rules. That led to bizarre calls where one party was very intentionally not saying anything sexual while the other blatantly said horrible and icky things into the receiver. It's like dirty talking to your accountant while she patiently does your taxes.

Also, you only get 15 minutes, so if you spend too much time on the one-sided foreplay, your call would cut off right in the middle of the "act."

Every once in a while, an inmate would tell the guy more explicit stuff, regardless of the consequences: Lots of talk about sexual encounters with other inmates in the shower and other such *Caged Heat* stereotypes. I suspected most of it was made up, but it seemed to do the trick.

If you picked up the next call, you'd usually hear that the guy had deposited money into her commissary account, so she could buy Twinkies and what have you. You ever talked a dude off for a Hostess snack cake?

That's the real prison, son.