Locked In and Locked Out: How COVID-19 Is Making the Case for Digital Inclusion of Incarcerated Populations

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Abstract

Digital inequalities have been exacerbated for many marginalized populations during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is no different for one of the most marginalized populations in the United States, incarcerated people. Due to the pandemic, in-person visitations as well as educational and vocational programming were, and in many cases remain, suspended across numerous correctional facilities, leaving incarcerated people even more socially isolated than before the pandemic. Although an increasing number of facilities provide prison tablets for entertainment and communication purposes, high prices for electronic messages, video visitations, books, and entertainment content leave incarcerated people and their families unable to pay for these services. As best practice examples from California, Maine, New York City, and Pennsylvania demonstrate, connecting prisons to the internet and allowing incarcerated people secure access to the internet is possible, and long overdue. The pandemic has highlighted these issues and provides an opportunity to overhaul outdated ideas about prison communication.

Keywords

digital exclusion, incarceration, COVID-19, supercharged digital inequality

Introduction

When country after country shut down schools, businesses, and thereby public life due to COVID-19, any aspect of life that could be moved online, was moved online. This

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change has amplified and exacerbated the so-called digital divide between those who have internet access and those who do not have internet access (Patrick, 2020). Various newspaper articles have highlighted issues such as the "homework gap," which disproportionately affects students from minority backgrounds (Kreighbaum, 2020) and has been touted as one of the most pressing issues to solve during this pandemic and beyond (Gilliland, 2020).

However, while there is a newly invigorated debate about digital inequalities, certain populations continue to be excluded from debates around solving the digital divide. While correctional facilities across the United States shut down their facilities to outside visitors as well as reentry and rehabilitation programming from non-profits and other providers (e.g., Smith, 2021), most incarcerated populations are not able to participate in the online shift, as accessing the internet is by and large prohibited across U.S. jails and prisons, regardless of state or type of correctional facility (e.g., state prison, federal prison, county jail, or privately run prison facilities). As McClain argues in Robinson et al. (2020), those who are experiencing incarceration are both locked in and locked out, meaning that they are on lockdown within the correctional facility to prevent the further spread of COVID-19 inside the facilities, and they are also locked out from using the internet to participate in education programs, to find information on the pandemic, and to communicate with loved ones during a pandemic that is disproportionately affecting Black, Hispanic, low-income communities (Oppel et al., 2020), and correctional facilities alike (Watts & Erdman, 2020).

The case for (limited and secure) internet access in correctional facilities has been made before, largely in the context of providing incarcerated people with the tools and skills to participate in a highly technology-dependent society upon release (Bagaric et al., 2017; Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016; Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018). In addition, internet access allowing incarcerated people to connect with their loved ones, for example, via free-of-charge video calls, could serve as a tool to maintain social connections that are important for succeeding after release (Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016). While limited internet access is, for instance, available in Belgian (Gilna, 2017) and Finnish prisons (Yle, n.d.), no institutions in the United States offer internet access to incarcerated people. Although a growing number of facilities across the United States offer video visitations through JPay tablets—one of the main providers of this service in the United States—those tablets often have to be purchased by the incarcerated person or their family, and visitations and entertainment content need to be paid for as well (JPay Inc., n.d.). In his examination of digital exclusion in prisons during the first wave of COVID-19 in the United States, McClain (in Robinson et al., 2020) emphasizes the predatory nature of many of the video visitation programs through for-profit prison tablets and the problems with the technologies themselves, which are prone to errors, such as freezing, disconnecting, or failing entirely. Institutions that offer free video visitations via kiosks often limit visitations to 15 min and they are not always accessible during the pandemic due to continuing social distancing measures within the facilities (Smith, 2021). In addition, many prisons have historically used the availability of expensive video visitations offered by for-profit companies to eliminate in-person visitations, even prior to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (Prison Policy

Initiative, n.d.). Lack of access to the internet has existed in carceral institutions in the United States prior to the pandemic. However, as with other digital inequalities, COVID-19 has highlighted and, in many cases, exacerbated the severity of the problem for incarcerated populations.

In this paper, I argue that the coronavirus pandemic highlights and exacerbates digital inequalities disproportionately for one of the most marginalized populations in the United States: those who are incarcerated in jails, prisons, and detention facilities. This exacerbation of social isolation and (digital) inequity, paired with increasing numbers of COVID-19 infections and deaths across detention centers (Watts & Erdman, 2020), renews the call for free or at least not-for-profit internet access and video visitations for those who are currently incarcerated to be able to communicate with their loved ones, to find educational content, news, and information, and to use entertainment content during this time of crisis and beyond. Building on McClain's (in Robinson et al., 2020) discussion of these issues early on in the pandemic, this paper uses evidence from newspaper and magazine articles, websites of correctional facilities, non-profits, and academic articles to examine how digital inequalities for incarcerated people have evolved from before the pandemic until spring 2021. In the following sections, I will first discuss how digital inequalities in general have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by a discussion of how digital inequality intersects with incarceration and reentry. I will then examine how COVID-19 has affected correctional facilities and their staff and residents in the United States, before discussing internet connectivity in the carceral system. I will structure this discussion along different types of digital services, such as communication (e.g., email and video visitations) and education (e.g., pre-loaded tablet content and college classes) and entertainment. In addition, I will conduct a pre- and post-COVID-19 comparison in each section. I will conclude this paper with a critical discussion of the moral imperative of providing incarcerated people with the tools to navigate a digital society during and after incarceration.

Digital Inequalities and COVID-19

Digital inequalities have long been a subject of academic investigation and policy efforts alike. Whereas early work on digital inequalities focused mainly on access to computers and the internet, the so-called *first-level* digital divide (Norris, 2001), research soon shifted to investigating different levels of engagement with the internet (DiMaggio et al., 2004), as well as different levels of skills, the *second-level* digital divide (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2011), and outcomes of internet uses, the *third-level* digital divide (Van Deursen & Helsper, 2018). In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in examining the nuances in access to the internet and digital devices. A number of studies have demonstrated that lack of adequate access to the internet, such as only being able to go online through mobile phones and data plans, or lack of broadband access and computers or laptops, affects people in how broadly and how well they can make use of and benefit from the internet (Gonzales, 2016; Reisdorf et al., 2020). Reisdorf et al. (2020) demonstrated that it is not socio-demographic factors

themselves that affect how much people engage with the internet, but it is the breadth and variety of different access points that allow broad engagement with the internet and all it has to offer. The more types of internet access someone has available, the more types of activities they can engage in (Reisdorf et al., 2020).

With the quick spread of COVID-19, these basic levels of digital inequalities have been pushed to the forefront of digital inequality research, policy, and advocacy. As soon as schools, universities, and businesses moved learning and work online, it became apparent that wide swaths of the population had inadequate internet speeds and were lacking the devices to partake in online learning and being able to work from home (Patrick, 2020). When lawmakers realized how essential the internet is to keep the country going during the pandemic, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) created the Keep Americans Connected Pledge, which asked telecommunications companies to pledge that they will not shut off internet and phone services, even if customers are unable to pay (FCC, 2020). To rectify some ongoing issues, the FCC announced the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program in February 2021 (FCC, 2021). This program allows a large share of the population to apply for monthly subsidies for broadband access and a one-time payment to "purchase a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet from participating providers if they contribute $10-$50 toward the purchase price" (FCC, 2021, p. n.p.).

At the same time, academic research homed in on digital inequities and what the new way of living large parts of our everyday lives online means for those who are struggling to gain or maintain adequate access to the internet. Notably, Van Deursen (2020) found that those who are better off, that is, those who are younger, have higher educational qualifications and higher internet skills, as well as broader access to the internet and digital devices, are more likely to use the internet's information and communication opportunities to their benefit during this pandemic, leading to an exacerbation of digital and social inequities of those who are already worse off. Similarly, Robinson et al. (2020) examine how being at a higher COVID-19 exposure risk is related to socio-demographic factors, such as race and ethnicity, education, income, occupation, and age. These factors are directly related to how much and how well someone is able to digitize their life and thereby affects their exposure risk. Taken together, the taxonomy of exposure risk demonstrates that those who are digitally unconnected and exposed due to the nature of their work or living situation experience the highest risk of contracting the virus (Robinson et al., 2020).

Digital Inequalities, Incarceration, and Reentry

Although literature on digital inequalities and incarceration is only beginning to emerge, there has been an increased interest in the intersection of digital inequalities and incarceration in recent years. Over the past 5 years, several studies have looked at the types of internet access that might be available to people who are currently incarcerated across different countries (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2020; Kerr & Willis, 2018; Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016). In their scoping study of prisons in the United Kingdom, Reisdorf and Jewkes (2016) found that only a few facilities offered very limited access

to internet and computers. Most uses were limited to video visitations with family who lived far away, and any available computer classes were limited to offline computers and the Microsoft Office suite. Despite the move of distance learning from paper-based systems to online learning, computer or internet uses for distance learning and degrees were unavailable to incarcerated people in these facilities, so that they experienced what Reisdorf and Jewkes (2016) describe as "supercharged digital exclusion" upon release from jail or prison. In addition to having served a prison sentence, which comes with stigma and a criminal record that affects the ability to secure housing and employment, among other things, returning citizens find themselves in a society that is heavily dependent on digital technologies and the internet. Depending on the age of the returning citizen, their length of sentence, and if and how much they were able to engage with the internet before beginning their sentence, many lack the digital skills necessary to navigate devices and the internet (Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016). In addition, returning citizens require at least a basic understanding of computers and the internet to be able to access important reentry services and apply for jobs (Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019).

Several recent studies have shown that, due to their time offline during incarceration, returning citizens struggle with both access to digital technologies as well as basic and advanced digital skills that are needed to navigate the digital society (Gurusami, 2019; Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019; Seo et al., 2020). Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al. (2019) showed that male returning citizens were lacking skills related to job applications and employment, whereas Seo et al. (2020) and Gurusami (2019) both focused on female returning citizens. In their qualitative study with 75 formerly incarcerated women, Seo et al. (2020) found that difficult housing and financial situations, concerns about ex-partners, mental health issues, and lack of self-efficacy were challenges for access, and the women they interviewed relied heavily on cellphones. Tying into this theme, Gurusami (2019) argues that formerly incarcerated women have no choice but to engage with the digital society. However, given their lack of access and (advanced) digital skills, they struggle to free themselves from the digitized criminal record, which makes them susceptible to exploitation and reincarceration (Gurusami, 2019). Examining the use of information and communication technologies for educational purpsose in Australian prisons, Farley and Hopkins (2017) argue that incarcerated people need training beyond basic digital skills and to include advanced skills in order to succeed in technologically dependent societies.

There is an additional layer of inequalities that must be considered when discussing incarcerated populations in the United States. Poverty and race play a distinct role in the likelihood of serving a jail or prison sentence, with Black and Hispanic people being disproportionately represented among incarcerated people (Lyons & Pettit, 2011; Mauer & King, 2007). These are the same factors that are also associated with being less likely to have broadband internet access in the home or having several digital devices available (Pew Research Center, 2019a; Turner, 2016). In fact, many people with lower incomes and an ethnic minority background depend on their cellphone as the only means to get online (Pew Research Center, 2019b), which leads to less diverse use of the internet and the services it has to offer (Reisdorf et al., 2020; Tsetsi

& Rains, 2017) and is, in turn, associated with lower social support and local social capital (Rains & Tsetsi, 2017; Reisdorf et al., 2020). This compound disadvantage means that many of those who are incarcerated or have been incarcerated have been socially and digitally excluded, even prior to serving time and being forced offline altogether during incarceration.

As digital devices and the internet play an increasingly important role in society—especially during the COVID-19 pandemic—activists and scholars have called for the availability of limited internet access and more digital services during incarceration (Bagaric et al., 2017) and the inclusion of digital realms in rehabilitation and reentry practices (Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018). As will become evident over the next two sections, the importance of digital connectivity during incarceration has become especially pronounced during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Incarceration and COVID-19

Mass incarceration has been a problem in the United States for several decades. Since the 1970s, the number of people incarcerated in federal and state prisons increased from below 250,000 to over 1.5 million at its peak in 2009 (Ghandnoosh, 2019). Although the numbers have been slowly declining by about 1% per year over the past 10 years (Carson, 2020), in 2020, more than 2.3 million people were incarcerated in jails, prisons, and other detention facilities in the United States (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). And although imprisonment rates fell considerably for Black and Hispanic Americans since 2008, they are still disproportionately represented in the prison population with an imprisonment rate of more than 1,100 per 100,000 U.S. residents for Black Americans and more than 500 per 100,000 residents for Hispanic Americans, in contrast to less than 250 per 100,000 residents for White residents (Carson, 2020).

In addition to high numbers of incarcerated people in general, many correctional facilities were overcrowded and understaffed (Vansickle, 2020), even before the pandemic began spreading in the United States. In such circumstances, it does not take much imagination to envision potentially catastrophic outcomes of a highly contagious virus like COVID-19 spreading quickly in correctional facilities, which led to early warning calls over the threats of this pandemic to correctional staff, incarcerated people, and the communities surrounding them (Grey Ellis, 2020; Montgomery, 2020). In addition to less-than-ideal conditions within the correctional facilities, many departments of correction (DOC) across the country continued to send incarcerated people to high-risk work release jobs, such as chicken processing plants (Neff, 2020), which increased the risk of bringing the virus into the facilities themselves.

In light of these circumstances, it did not take long for COVID-19 to spread quickly across jails, prisons, and immigration detention centers all over the country. As of March 25, 2021, more than 390,896 incarcerated people had tested positive for the virus, and at least 2,502 had died (The Marshall Project, 2021a). This represents an infection rate of 17% of the U.S. prison population in comparison to an infection rate of 9% among the general population as of March 22, 2021 (29,652,483 million confirmed cases and 539,517 deaths [CDC, 2021]). In some prisons, positive tests among

incarcerated people were as high as 89% in April 2020 (Perkins, 2020), demonstrating that correctional populations are at much higher risk of contracting the virus than those who are not detained. Despite a number of releases of non-violent incarcerated people and commutations across several states over the summer of 2020 (e.g., Becker, 2020; Hirschkorn, 2020; KCCI, 2020; Myers & Willon, 2020), numbers continued to rise, leading lawmakers to demand more transparency about the toll of the virus in correctional facilities across the country (Simpson & Barr, 2020).

To slow the spread of the virus, correctional facilities implemented different types of policies aimed at increasing social distancing and preventing overcrowding of certain areas within the prison. One such change is that most correctional facilities across the United States discontinued in-person visitations and large parts of rehabilitative programs run by community organizations and non-profits once the pandemic hit the United States (e.g., Smith, 2021). As of March 19, 2021, only 13 states' corrections systems had resumed in-person visitations for families with additional precautions and limits, 28 had suspended normal visitation but allowed legal visits, and 10 states continued to suspend all visitations, including legal ones, although the reopening plans can vary greatly even between districts in the same state (The Marshall Project, 2021b). Although federal prisons appear to have resumed some in-person visitations, these vary from facility to facility and are highly restricted in time and number of allowed visitors (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2020). In addition, county jails and private prisons can implement their own rules for in-person visitations, leading to a patchwork of rules across the various facilities across the country.

Visitations from family and friends during incarceration have been positively associated with in-prison behavior as well as positive reentry outcomes (Cochran & Mears, 2013; De Claire & Dixon, 2017; Sugie & Augustine, 2020). With the option of in-person visitations being eliminated or at least heavily restricted during the COVID-19 pandemic, residents of correctional facilities rely on other means for social and family interactions. However, many facilities have put their populations on so-called "lockdowns," meaning that residents of these facilities cannot congregate in dining halls or communal spaces and spend the majority of their time (in many cases upwards of 23 hr per day) inside their cells or dormitories (Blakinger, 2020; Lennon, 2021). According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons (2020, p. n.p.), people currently incarcerated in federal prisons "are limited in their movements to prevent congregate gathering and maximize social distancing" but "[i]nmate movement in small numbers is authorized" for commissary, laundry, showers (three times/week), and telephone access, as well as access to Trust Fund Limited Inmate Communication Systems (TRULINCs; Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2020, p. n.p.), the secure email system implemented by all federal prisons in the United States (Zoukis Consulting Group, n.d.). However, it is unclear what "movement in small numbers" means and how often incarcerated people can access either phones or TRULINCs, for how long, and how this may differ between different facilities.

Taken together, COVID-19 has made living conditions for incarcerated people across the world and in the United States worse. In addition to high numbers of infections, large numbers of residents of correctional facilities have lost various types of

access to communication with their families due to discontinuation of in-person visits and the often expensive, precarious, and reduced nature of phone calls due to lockdowns within the facilities (Robinson et al., 2020).

Digital Devices in Correctional Facilities Prior to and During COVID-19

In the following sections, I build on evidence from newspaper and magazine articles, prior literature, and reports from prisoner advocacy groups to demonstrate that the pandemic is exacerbating (digital) inequities for incarcerated people and their communities. To illustrate these points, I will provide problem cases of two stylized and hypothetical (formerly) incarcerated people, Thomas and Tyrone,[1] who are facing challenges during and post-incarceration due to a lack of internet access and digital devices during their time in prison and the added layer of issues due to COVID-19.

Communication Before and During COVID-19

Phone Systems

The U.S. prison system has a history of privatizing—and thereby monetizing—communications that are not in-person. Before the internet became widely available, the only two options to communicate outside of the prison walls were letters and phone calls. These phone calls, however, are facilitated through private companies who can charge as much as $1 per minute, much in contrast to phone calls outside of prisons, which have been capped at $0.21 per minute by the FCC (Wagner & Jones, 2019). Given that most incarcerated people come from already impoverished backgrounds and prison earnings average between $0.89 and $3.45 per day (Sawyer, 2017), they have to save up considerable amounts of money to connect via phone call through these predatory systems (Robinson et al., 2020).

In addition to high costs, when the COVID-19 lockdown began inside correctional facilities, access to phone facilities was initially eliminated altogether (Hymes, 2020) or limited in order to avoid congregations of many incarcerated people in the same areas (e.g., Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2020). This means an ongoing reduction in opportunities to call family members and loved ones in comparison to pre-COVID-19 times, meaning that communication became even less frequent than it already was during incarceration to begin with (e.g., Lennon, 2021). In March 2021, the California Department of Corrections announced in a news release that their new contract with Global Tel*Link Corporation (GTL), one of the two main players in the area of prison communication besides JPay, includes a significant reduction in costs for phone calls, both nationally and internationally, the elimination of the US$3 fee to establish a GTL account, and one free 15-minute call every 2 weeks (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2021). While this is a step in the right direction, such developments are currently far from the norm across U.S. correctional facilities, despite the pandemic.

Tablets and Video Visitations

Since the increasing proliferation of the internet, similar kinds of predatory systems as overly expensive phone class have been set up through video visitations through prison tablets, such as JPay or GTL. According to GTL's website, the largest provider of prison communications provides service to 1,900 correctional facility customers with locations in all 50 states as well as Washington, D.C. and Puerto Rico (GTL, 2021). The other main player in this area, JPay, is available across 1,200 correctional facilities in 40 states (JPay Inc., n.d.). However, it is unclear what kinds of services either provider offers at each facility, as GTL, for example, also offers telephony services. In addition, there are 1,833 state prisons, 110 federal prisons, 1,772 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,134 local jails (overall, 6,849 facilities, not including immigration detention centers and Indian Country jails) in the United States (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). As there are additional, smaller companies offering communications solutions to correctional facilities, it is not fully clear how many facilities in the United States offer video visitations to their residents overall.

In most cases, incarcerated people (or their families) have to purchase the tablet although there are exceptions in some states and some facilities where the tablet itself is provided for free (Finkel & Bertram, 2019; Lennon, 2021; Ross, 2021). In addition to potential initial purchasing costs, they also have to pay for electronic messages, video visitations, and any entertainment content (Law, 2018; Lennon, 2021; Leskin, 2020; Ross, 2021). In Oklahoma, where JPay tablets will be implemented in spring 2021, incarcerated people will pay US$5.95 for a 20-minute video call (Ross, 2021); in other states, the cost for a 15-minute video call could even exceed US$20 (Leskin, 2020). Many, although not all, prisons are earning commission per sent email or accessed entertainment content (Finkel & Bertram, 2019). Such payments, for example, translated into $40,000 of monthly earnings for the Department of Corrections in Michigan, where incarcerated people send between 800,000 and 1 million messages per month (Law, 2018).

When COVID-19 began to spread rapidly in the United States and particularly inside prisons, most facilities locked down their facilities (Blakinger, 2020), meaning that already existing, potentially cheaper or *free* video visitation systems, such as the ones offered by the NYC Department of Correction (City of New York, n.d.), were unavailable to incarcerated people and their families on the outside for several weeks and sometimes months. However, in more recent months of the ongoing pandemic, an increasing number of DOCs and facilities have begun to offer free—although limited—video visitations to many of their residents (Leskin, 2020). For example, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (n.d.-a) announced in December 2020 that residents at all 35 state prisons would receive one free 30-minute video visitation through WebEx every 30 days, and in Pennsylvania, the DOC initially arranged free 45-minute Zoom visitations between March and August 2020 (Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, n.d.-a) and has now moved to another permanent, and free, video visitation system (Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, n.d.-b). However, all calls with non-attorneys are recorded and subject to review by

the DOC. Although the majority of correctional facilities still seem to use predatory for-profit communications companies, these developments are important moves in the right direction and give weight to advocacy organizations like Color of Change and Worth Rises, who are advocating for free communication for incarcerated people now and beyond the pandemic (Leskin, 2020). These cases also highlight that Skype, WebEx, or Zoom visitations that are free of charge to both the incarcerated person and their family are a feasible option that could replace predatory video visitation systems.

Education and Entertainment Content Before and During COVID-19

A second area heavily affected by the pandemic is education and programming inside correctional facilities. By law, U.S. federal prisons are required to offer certain approved types of classes believed to help reduce recidivism (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2020, p. n.p.), such as education to earn a General Education Degree (GED), but also college degrees, vocational training, and other classes such as yoga or computer classes (e.g., Powell, 2019). Prior to the pandemic, these classes would be taught in face-to-face group settings within the correctional facilities. Unless a facility went on lockdown (usually for security reasons), residents would be able to congregate in communal spaces to work out, play card games, watch television, or visit prison libraries. In addition, an increasing number of incarcerated people have educational materials available through prison tablet programs, such as the ones offered by JPay and GTL. However, in most cases—including in the acquisition of digitized books—incarcerated people must pay for the content (Finkel & Bertram, 2019; Law, 2018; Riley, 2018).

When correctional facilities went on lockdown, all in-person programming was suspended to protect staff and incarcerated people from the fast spread of COVID-19. Some educational programming immediately shifted back to the prior correspondence models, where students would receive paper copies of materials and had to send assignments back by mail, leading to a sense of isolation and uncertainty for incarcerated students (Burke, 2020; Ositelu, 2020). Although the Federal Bureau of Prisons, for example, emphasizes in their COVID-19 operations document that Evidence-Based Recidivism Reduction (EBRR) programs are required by law, it is up to each of the 110 individual facilities how much programming they will provide and institutions with active COVID-19 cases "may make exceptions to these programming requirements for the safety of inmates and staff" (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2020, p. n.p.). Even though some very few in the United States were able to shift to classes via Zoom or email (Lewis, 2020), the general lack of educational technologies across correctional facilities makes it difficult to move education online for incarcerated students.

This lack of educational technologies has become an issue for Thomas, 28, who is currently serving a 12-year sentence at San Quentin State Prison in California with a prospect of being released in late 2022. Although San Quentin has one of the

best-known educational programs in the country and continues to allow residents to use phone facilities, educational in-person programming has been suspended since March 2020 to keep residents and staff as safe as possible (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, n.d.-b; CBS SF BayArea, 2021). Thomas completed his GED earlier during his time at San Quentin and he is enrolled in the Associate of Arts degree in General Studies program offered by Mount Tamalpais College (n.d.) that he hoped would help him find work or qualify him for a graduate-level college experience post-release. However, since the pandemic, he has been unable to continue with his classes. As all other programming has also been shut down and he spends the majority of his time in his cell, Thomas feels disconnected from his studies and unsure about the future, as he does not know whether he will be able to finish his degree before his prospective release date in late 2022. Although more than half of San Quentin's prison population had been vaccinated against COVID-19 by March 2021 (CBS SF BayArea, 2021), it remains unclear when in-person programming, including his degree program, will be able to resume.

Even though an ever-increasing number of correctional facilities use prison tablets to allow incarcerated people to read or play games, these devices are set up mainly for communication and entertainment purposes, rather than completing classwork (Burke, 2020). In addition, educational or informational content available through such tablets is often expensive for incarcerated people to access with some state prisons charging per minute or read pages, which can add up quickly—especially for slower readers or those struggling with literacy. For example, people incarcerated in facilities in Delaware and West Virginia who contracted with GTL have to pay US$0.05 per minute of reading e-books, sending messages, watching videos or movies, or listening to music (Finkel & Bertram, 2019). This means that if someone wants to read for an hour, they have to spend US$3.00 to do so. Given that most prisons are on 23-hour lockdowns and very few other distractions, these kinds of offerings are a lifeline for incarcerated people, but they are also an extreme financial burden for them and their loved ones.

Digital Connectivity in Correctional Facilities Beyond COVID-19

The increasing importance of digital devices and internet in our lives due to COVID-19 has laid bare the digital inequities that we are experiencing in society, and especially the effects of digital exclusion on marginalized populations—this is particularly palpable for those who are currently incarcerated and their families. Arguing from a strictly humanitarian perspective, access to the internet was declared a human right by the United Nations in 2016 (Howell & West, 2016). Although incarcerated people lose their right to privacy upon entering a correctional facility, they do have a right to send and receive mail (ACLU, n.d.). This right could be extended to email communication, which is faster and cheaper, and can be monitored just as easily as traditional mail, making security concerns as a reason for preventing this service in correctional

settings largely irrelevant. The ability to communicate with loved ones in person or by phone has been extremely limited since the restrictions were set in place due to COVID-19 in spring 2020 (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2020; Lennon, 2021). Correctional systems in other countries, such as Belgium and Finland, have demonstrated that secure and limited access to the internet is not just possible, but it also helps incarcerated people maintain a sense of normalcy and integration that can be beneficial for a successful reentry back into society (Gilna, 2017; Yle, n.d.). The current pandemic is making this case even more urgent, as other types of communication with the outside world have been removed due to social distancing, quarantines, and lockdowns.

Another important reason for allowing free access to the internet is the positive effect that social support has on rehabilitation and recidivism. Although there are heterogeneous types of social support and visitations, research has largely shown that social support during incarceration and post-release are beneficial for reentry success (Cochran & Mears, 2013; De Claire & Dixon, 2017; Sugie & Augustine, 2020). As in-person social support is currently unavailable in 37 out of 50 states due to social distancing measures and lockdowns in correctional facilities, incarcerated people depend on mediated communication for social support. Telephone calls are limited, highly sought after, and often expensive, and can cost up to US$1 minute (Wagner & Jones, 2019). The alternative of pay for tablets from companies such as GTL or JPay, as described above, are not available at all correctional facilities and are often cost-prohibitive for incarcerated people and their families. Although free kiosks to connect with incarcerated people exist in some locations, for example at three New York public library locations or through the California DOC's monthly, free video calls (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, n.d.-a; City of New York, n.d.), these free options are not available to most incarcerated people in the United States, as each type of prison and each state decides how to handle communications to and from their correctional facility. Given the importance of continued social support and close social ties during and after incarceration (Cochran & Mears, 2013; Robinson et al., 2020), providing incarcerated people with a steady and free means of communication opportunities with their loved ones during the pandemic and beyond is not only a moral imperative, but also a potential aide in reducing recidivism.

Finally, providing residents of correctional facilities with (limited and secure) ways to access the internet may have a considerable effect on whether returning citizens can find educational content and employment in a highly technology-dependent world, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which has moved even more parts of our everyday lives online. As most job opportunities are advertised online and a large number of jobs require at least some basic digital skills, depriving incarcerated people of the opportunity to develop such skills is setting them up for failure upon release (Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019). Depending on the length of sentence, age of the returning citizen, and how familiar and comfortable they were with digital devices and the internet prior to incarceration (if applicable), those returning home from serving a sentence experience so-called "supercharged digital inclusion" (Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016).

Tyrone, who is 45 years old and was recently released after serving a 5-year sentence in a medium-security prison in the State of Michigan, has experienced many issues similar to the ones mentioned above. Although he only served a comparatively short sentence, he was unable to use computers or smartphones during his time in prison. Aside from a smartphone, Tryone did not really engage much with digital technologies and computers before serving his sentence, and he feels out-of-his-depth with using computers and the internet. Tyrone was given a used smartphone by his brother when he was released, but due to a difficult family situation, Tyrone is currently residing in temporary housing in Detroit. Due to the pandemic, he has to use his smartphone or the computers provided by the shelter to look for more permanent housing and to look for jobs, as the Detroit Employment Solutions Corporation (DESC, n.d.) had to move most services online, including job fairs and other services that would have been in person prior to the pandemic. Due to low levels of digital literacy, Tyrone is struggling to use the computers provided and to navigate the homepages of job listing sites, such as "Detroit at Work." Despite having taken a job readiness class during his time in prison, which taught him to create a basic resumé in Microsoft Word, he is not sure how to upload it to the job site or how to attach it to an email. He describes himself as "old-school" and would much prefer to bring his printed out resumés directly to potential employers. Tyrone is also worried that his lack of knowledge about digital technologies might be a giveaway of his time in prison, given that he is technically part of Gen X, who are generally expected to be able to handle technologies and the internet well.

Prior work has shown that even short periods of disconnection can have serious impacts on employment, health, and other realms of everyday life (Gonzales, 2016). Therefore, even a comparatively short time of incarceration can have a negative effect on a person's digital skills as evidenced by Tyrone's example and academic literature (Gurusami, 2019; Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019; Seo et al., 2020). Given the importance of digital skills for the 21st century job market, even in low-level or mid-level jobs, allowing incarcerated people to develop these skills can boost their confidence and their ability to find work post-incarceration (Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019). Providing limited and secure access to the internet and computers, as is done, for example, in Finland (Yle, n.d.), as well as providing digital skills and literacy classes that cover more than just the basics of how to use a computer, would increase returning citizens' ability to navigate the digital world successfully upon release. Instead of struggling to figure out how to find housing or work online or how to even use a computer and the internet in the first place, returning citizens could spend their time and energy on rebuilding their lives and reconnecting with loved ones. Not providing this minimum of digital inclusion will lead to avoidable problems post-release (see also Gurusami, 2019; Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019; Seo et al., 2020).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that free, safe, and secure internet access in correctional facilities is possible and desirable for a number of reasons, including moral reasons—incarcerated people are *people*—and the potential for improved reentry outcomes via

social support, access to educational content, and digital skills. These points have been made even more palpable during the COVID-19 crisis that is sweeping the world and the nation. During a time where in-person visitations have been impossible in 37 U.S. states since March 2020, in-person educational programming has been largely halted, and phone calls or emails are restricted and/or unaffordable due to predatory phone and tablet schemes, incarcerated people are—in many instances—even more cut off from the world than they have been before. Given that the majority of incarcerated people come from already disadvantaged backgrounds who suffer disproportionately from the economic and health-related consequences of this pandemic, asking them or their families to pay for communication as well as educational and entertainment content is immoral in general, but especially so during a pandemic. However, there are important and notable exceptions, such as the free video visitations provided in Pennsylvania, New York City, and California (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, n.d.-a; City of New York, n.d.; Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, n.d.-b) and the Zoom classes provided in Maine (Lewis, 2020). In addition, many correctional facilities have put their residents on a lockdown, meaning that they cannot socialize with others, unless they have cellmates or reside in dormitories. This cutoff from the outside world and the social isolation that comes with it is not only detrimental to incarcerated peoples' mental and physical health during incarceration, but also potentially likely to cause harm post-incarceration (Cochran & Mears, 2013).

The pandemic has highlighted and, in many cases, exacerbated the social and digital inequities the United States is facing. This is especially true for incarcerated people and their families trying to navigate how to maintain their social relationships during quarantines and lockdowns. If we do not accept being cut off from digital means of communication for the general public, why would we accept this scenario for incarcerated people who are even more dependent on such means of communication? The COVID-19 pandemic has made us reconsider the impact of digital inequalities and inequities at large, with advocates and lawmakers calling for better and free or heavily subsidized access to the internet for low-income communities across the world (e.g., United Nations, 2020). Digital connectivity has the same importance for incarcerated people, who depend on such access to communicate with their families during this crisis. Although a number of scholars and advocates have argued for this shift for the past several years (Bagaric et al., 2017; Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016), the current crisis has given this plea and argument additional weight. Connecting prisons to the internet and allowing incarcerated people secure access to the internet is possible, as the positive examples from California, Maine, New York City, and Pennsylvania demonstrate, and long overdue—and COVID-19 has made this abundantly clear.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Note

1. Both Thomas's and Tyrone's cases are hypothetical problem cases intended to illustrate the issues at hand and do not reflect real persons. These cases are based on interviews and focus groups with over 100 currently and formerly incarcerated men and women in the United States and the United Kingdom that I conducted between 2015 and 2020 as well as media accounts from incarcerated people, such as Lennon (2021).

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