

Cell phone smuggling to inmates still on rise

More contraband being seized year after crackdown, reports show.

By Mike Ward
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A year after a Texas death row killer's cell phone threat to a powerful state senator embarrassed prison officials and triggered the largest shakedown of prisoners in state history, more cell phones are getting into prisons than ever.

Prison reports show that prison authorities confiscated 995 cell phones between January and August, a rate that will top last year's 1,226 seizures if it continues.

Prison officials have stepped up random cell searches and random searches of staff members and visitors. They also have installed video surveillance cameras at the entry points of nine prisons where contraband traffic has been high.

But as the first of \$10 million in security upgrades is being spent to block and detect the flow of contraband, officials say that stopping the problem will take more time and equipment.

"The demand for cell phones remains significant enough for people to try and beat the system," said Brad Livingston, the executive director of the prison system. "We think that when we implement the new security devices, we may see a spike in the numbers as we detect more. But we think that the efforts we have taken and will continue will make a difference in the long term to address this problem."

New security tools on order include \$480,000 worth of electronic devices that can detect and locate cell phone signals. They are expected to be delivered by February.

One potential solution, prison officials say, lies in pending federal legislation that would allow them to jam cell phone calls inside prisons. That would render the devices useless and remove the market for smuggling. The bill passed the U.S. Senate last week and is headed to the House, where cell phone interests have pledged to oppose it.

Thirty states, including Texas, have endorsed the jamming.

Though the number of reported cell phone seizures has increased overall, there is wide variation among Texas' 112 state prison units.

The Stiles Unit in Beaumont continues to rank first — with 207 cell phones confiscated from convicts in eight months. Privately, prison officials concede that the Stiles Unit has long had a history of problems with contraband, including drugs, weapons and tobacco.

At the other end of the spectrum, cell phone seizures have plummeted at East Texas' Polunsky Unit near Livingston, which houses death row. Twenty-three phones have been confiscated at Polunsky this year, reports show, compared with 193 last year. Prison officials attribute that drop to their stepped-up enforcement.

During the statewide lockdown a year ago, 22 cell phones were found on death row. During the latest search, none turned up, officials said.

"I'm glad they're continuing to find these cell phones, but the fact that the numbers are so high indicates we still have a big problem," said state Sen. John Whitmire, D-Houston, the lawmaker who received the threatening phone calls a year ago from condemned double-killer Richard Lee Tabler, who pleaded guilty last month to felony contraband and retribution charges. "If they're getting cell phones inside prisons in increasing numbers, what other contraband are they getting in there?"

Prison system spokeswoman Michelle Lyons said confiscations of other contraband are also on the rise.

"Because of our concentrated and continuing efforts, yes, we're finding more contraband," Lyons said.

Two weeks ago, reacting to the continued flood of smuggled cell phones, prison officials ordered 14 of Texas' toughest state prisons locked down and 35,000 convicts searched.

Lyons said 63 cell phones were found in initial searches, most hidden in cell door crevices and inside cell walls.

Prison officials said the security upgrades now on order — additional surveillance cameras, X-ray machines to inspect packages and purses like those at airports and a chairlike device called a Body Orifice Security Scanner that allows guards to check inmates for well-hidden contraband — are to be installed in coming months at the prisons where the most contraband is being found.

Other states are also grappling with an increase in cell phone confiscations.

California prison officials have confiscated more than 4,100 contraband cell phones this year, more than all those seized in the three previous years combined, a recent report disclosed.

In South Carolina, where more than 2,000 cell phones were confiscated last year, officials expect more this year.

"There's no sign (that) it's going down. It's a steady flow," said Josh Gelinis, communications director for the South Carolina Department of Corrections.

For his part, Whitmire said he thinks that jamming would solve the problem once and for all. But because its passage into law remains uncertain, he intends to continue pressing for security measures in the meantime.

"I'm not going to rest until we get the number (of confiscations) down," he said. "When is someone going to get hurt or killed because of it?"

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Cell phones in Texas prisons

Confiscations of smuggled cell phones:

2009*995

20081,226

2007 561

2006262

* Through August

Source: Texas Department of Criminal Justice