



Prison Commissaries and Services

Executive Summary

State prison commissaries sell items such as food, beverages, hygiene products, stationery, and clothes, and access to communication services such as postal mail and telephones to prisoners. Incarcerated individuals earn low wages while in prison, which may make purchasing items from the commissary or using communication services difficult. In recent years, some states have passed or proposed legislation eliminating or capping the costs of phone calls and increasing minimum wage for incarcerated individuals.

Highlights

- In Missouri, an incarcerated individual has a base-pay earning of \$7.50 per month (\$8.50 if they have a high school diploma).
- Product prices in commissaries are relatively similar to prices in most retail stores. However, most inmates rely on familial financial support to afford commissary items.
- Research has shown that communication (written, verbal, and in-person) while incarcerated reduces recidivism and improves familial relationships.

Limitations

- Commissary and service costs vary between states and within states. Therefore, best practices for commissary and service costs remain undetermined.
- There is limited evidence that increased minimum wage while incarcerated may reduce recidivism and other recidivism factors including homelessness and substance abuse.

Research Background

Missouri Offender Profile

In 2021, the Missouri Department of Corrections (DOC) institutional (incarcerated) population consisted of 23,137 individuals.¹ Approximately 80% of the incarcerated population is between the ages of 18–49 years old.¹ Males make up the majority of the incarcerated populations compared to females (91% vs 9%).¹ Racial disparities are evident amongst the incarcerated and supervised populations for both men (61.5% White vs. 35.7% Black) and women (80.2% White vs. 15.1% Black).¹

Commissary and Service Costs

The same wage and working-condition protections (e.g., the [Thirteenth Amendment](#), [Fair Labor Standards Act](#)) provided to those outside the correctional systems do not extend to incarcerated individuals. Incarcerated individuals may be employed for work within the facility (e.g., food

service, maintenance, or custodial services) or for those nearing release, may work off-site with a contracted government agency (Missouri Department of Transportation) or community organization. For more information about corrections employment and reentry, please see our published Science Note: [Reentry Programs and Services](#).

In Missouri, an incarcerated individual has a base-pay earning of \$7.50 per month (\$8.50 if they have a high school diploma).^{2,3} Those in work-release programs are paid 30–71 cents per hour or an equivalent \$7.50 per day by communities or agencies that hire incarcerated people through a work agreement.² These wages are used to pay for services such as phone access, food and beverages, hygiene products, health items, and communication services.

Additionally, families of inmates deposit money into their accounts to supplement their pay to help afford items from prison commissaries and to use communication services. Often, there are fees associated with depositing money into an inmate's financial accounts and utilizing communication services; this may increase the financial burden on incarcerated individuals' families.⁴

Commissaries

State prison commissaries sell items such as food, beverages, hygiene products, stationery, and clothes, and access to communication services such as postal mail and telephones to prisoners. Missouri inmates have spending limits which vary across the state. For example, at the Boonville Correctional Center, inmates are permitted to spend \$75 per week and no more than \$300 in a month.³ According to the Missouri DOC, profits from the commissaries are used to support education, recreation, and religious programming for the offender population.⁵

Depending upon the items, the prices for products in prison commissaries are relatively similar to prices found in most retail stores. The pricing for items has a flat 40% markup on items costing less than 99 cents and a flat 20% markup on items costing more than \$1.⁶ An item such as a toothbrush (priced at \$2.59) can be approximately 30-35% of an incarcerated person's monthly pay. Similarly, brand name [feminine hygiene products](#), on average, used to cost approximately \$6.00 in Missouri commissaries, which meant 70-80% of a monthly wage was used to afford adequate feminine hygiene products. Due to lack of accessibility to adequate products, 80.3% of 90 respondents created homemade tampons; this led to increased incidence of infections (1 in 4 women), but respondents continued to knowingly use homemade products due to inadequate alternatives.⁷ However, effective July 2021, menstrual hygiene products are available at no cost to menstruating people in custody ([RSMo 221.065](#)).

Communication Services

In general, state prisons provide the ability for inmates to receive written mail and phone calls. However, these generally come with a cost for the purchase of stationary, stamps, or fees per minute for telephone use. Video calls, emailing, and text messaging in some prisons are offered.

The cost for digital stamps (25 cents) and other virtual telecommunications are more than for using the telephone.⁶

Currently, the Missouri DOC contracts with the telecommunications company Securus, which provides phone services for many states' correctional centers.⁸ In Missouri, the Securus contract charges 5 cents per minute or 75 cents per 15-minute phone call. However, the cost is much different in local jails, which are contracted by the municipality, which can be closer to \$7 for a 15-minute phone call. Some prisons and local jails within Missouri permit video calls at their own discretion.

Due to logistical barriers (e.g., long commutes) to visit a family member in prison, most families utilize written communication and phone calls to keep in touch with inmates. Research investigating communication styles during incarceration has found a reduction in recidivism and improved familial relationships with written and verbal communication.^{9,10} A study of incarcerated women indicated that those who had received mail and phone communication from family members were less likely to return to prison within five years from their release.⁹ Additionally, a study investigating parent-child relationship during incarceration found that mail and frequent phone contact were as important for familial relationship quality as in-person visitation.¹⁰

Contracts for Commissaries and Services

Through the Statewide eProcurement System (MissouriBUYS), vendors can bid to sell products and services to the State of Missouri. Preference is given to commodities and tangible property produced in Missouri unless it is a better-quality product or delivered at a lower price. In other words, contract awards are made to the lowest and best bidder. The Division of Purchasing and Material Management (DPMM) is responsible for: 1) the selection of evaluators; 2) the evaluation of bids; 3) the selection of the successful bidder; and 4) the award of contract.¹¹ Currently, the Missouri DOC has 143 governmental agency contracts.¹²

State Legislation

States have proposed and passed legislation in two categories: 1) reduction in or eliminating the cost of phone calls and 2) increasing the minimum wage in prisons.

A few states (CT, IA, IL, MA, MO & OK) and municipalities (e.g., San Francisco, CA & Louisville, KY) have enacted or proposed legislation to reduce or eliminate the costs of phone calls. Filed in the 2022 Missouri Legislative session, [HB 2299](#) imposes a maximum amount that can be charged for a phone call at 12 cents including any fees and any per-minute rate. Effective starting July 2022, Connecticut enacted a [law](#) that provides cost-free telecommunications for all incarcerated persons. This is the first state in the United States to eliminate the cost for phone calls and is projected to save Connecticut families of incarcerated individuals more than 12 million dollars annually.

In recent years, New York, Maine, Kansas, Nevada, and Arizona have enacted or proposed legislation to increase inmate minimum wage to \$3 per hour. Filed in 2022, New York seeks to enact the [Prison Minimum Wage Act](#) which increases prison wage from 62 cents to \$3 per hour. It is unsure how much increasing minimum wage for inmates in Missouri would cost the state, but it could potentially reduce the costs associated with recidivism. Research suggests that higher minimum wages after incarceration can reduce recidivism, and other associated risks for recidivism such as homelessness and substance abuse.¹³ However, it is unknown if higher minimum wages while incarcerated may have the same effect.

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