

Prison Camera Reform Act of 2021

(Senators Ossoff, Durbin, and Grassley)

Background:

Security camera systems within prisons are critical for protecting the safety, wellbeing and civil rights of both incarcerated people and prison employees, including correctional officers, medical personnel and other staff. Documented deficiencies in the federal Bureau of Prisons' (BOP) security camera systems, however, limit the effectiveness of that protection. In 2016, the Office of Inspector General at the Department of Justice (DOJ) published a report identifying major deficiencies and needed upgrades within the BOP's security camera system, including blind spots, inoperable cameras and limited functionality.¹ Although BOP has begun upgrading these systems at some institutions, serious shortcomings remain.

As a direct result of these deficiencies, investigators have been unable to pursue allegations of serious misconduct within prisons, including assaults and medical neglect. In numerous investigations, the DOJ OIG was unable to substantiate allegations of BOP staff engaging in illegal physical relationships with inmates, sexually or physically assaulting inmates, or introducing contraband because there were no cameras to capture the activity. Smuggled contraband is a persistent problem in BOP institutions, as it hinders the agency's ability to provide a safe environment and poses a threat to incarcerated people, staff, visitors, and the public.

Furthermore, BOP's radio systems, which are often outdated or unreliable, impede communication between staff and further jeopardize the safety of everyone within the facilities.

Prison Camera Reform Act of 2021:

- The bill requires the BOP to evaluate the security camera, land-mobile radio, and public address systems in use at BOP institutions and submit to Congress within 90 days a plan for addressing deficiencies and implementing necessary system upgrades.
- BOP must implement the reforms within three years and submit annual progress reports.
- The plan for upgrading the security camera systems must address deficiencies including: an insufficient number of cameras, inoperable or malfunctioning cameras, blind spots, poor quality video, and other deficits in the systems. It must also include plans for converting analog cameras to digital surveillance systems with corresponding infrastructure and equipment upgrade requirements.
- The plan for upgrading the radio systems must address deficiencies including: an inadequate number of radios, inoperable or outdated radios, and radio dead zones. It must also include plans for ensuring that all radio systems include an emergency notification feature, also known as a "man down" function, which automatically sends an alert and transmits the location of that radio in the event the wearer is in a prone position.

¹ *Review of the Federal Bureau of Prisons' Contraband Interdiction Efforts*, Office of the Inspector General, U.S. Department of Justice, (June 2016), <https://oig.justice.gov/reports/2016/e1605.pdf>.