

STATE GRAND JURY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Report of the Thirty-Fifth State Grand Jury on Organized Crime and the Use of Cell Phones Within the South Carolina Department of Corrections

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MARGARET J. SELF
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In its year of service, the 35th South Carolina State Grand Jury has investigated numerous matters in which sophisticated criminal enterprises operate within the prison system of the South Carolina Department of Corrections ("SCDC"). Gang leaders continue to run their criminal organizations once sentenced to prison, and inmate leaders develop new ways to commit crime with organizations they run within the prison walls. These inmate organizations extend their reach into the community, committing complex crime throughout South Carolina, the United States, and the world. The main weapon they use to do all of this? Contraband cell phones illegally smuggled inside the prisons. One solution? **The FCC allowing State prisons to jam contraband cell phones just like Federal facilities could do** – which could be immediately done with just a simple change of interpretation of Federal law. Or, if necessary, a new law by Congress.

We wish to begin by applauding the efforts, but also appreciating the frustration, of officials facing this issue. The South Carolina Attorney General, the SCDC Director and his Office of Inspector General, the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division, SCDC officers and staff, attorneys and staff of the State Grand Jury Section of the South Carolina Attorney General's Office, and other state, local, and federal prosecutors and law enforcement -- all have been committed to fighting this problem using every tool at their disposal. Law enforcement, correctional officers, and SCDC staff literally place their lives on the line. We commend the continued efforts of these public servants, as they tirelessly work to detect methods subject only to the ingenuity of the inmates and the willingness of corrupt employees and people on the outside to assist.

These criminal enterprises largely are funded by the purchase and distribution of drugs organized by inmates dealing with international cartels and criminal gangs both within this State and throughout the nation. Inside the prisons, these inmates remain in command and control of their criminal enterprises on the outside, sometimes even making more money inside than they ever did before they went to prison. They continue to run as much fentanyl and methamphetamine and cocaine as they ever did. They engage in fraud on government benefits, receiving money meant to help law-abiding citizens through tough times. They engage in extortion of people on the outside. They engage in all sorts of scams using cell phones and the internet to prey upon unsuspecting law-

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abiding citizens, often elderly. Contraband cell phones were even allegedly used to direct the sexual abuse of a child.

Within the walls, the inmates traffic in all sorts of contraband, despite the best efforts of dedicated SCDC staff to stem the tide. An extensive, sophisticated, and very lucrative black market exists within the prison system for the sale and delivery of contraband. This has led to violence among prison gangs and even death – such as the Lee Correctional riot, in which violence started over contraband and was perpetuated through contraband cell phones. Millions of dollars are being made both inside and outside the wire – by the inmates and their associates on the outside. Unfortunately, corrupt correctional officers and staff are sometimes those associates. Co-conspirators on the outside assist in these criminal activities, and can include fellow gang members, friends, wives, girlfriends, and even people groomed by inmates to believe there is an intimate relationship. Whether officer, staff, or just someone on the outside, they all work for the inmates, not the other way around.

The profits accrued from these gang related criminal enterprises are substantial. Inmates use those profits to corrupt, intimidate, and extort otherwise lawful employees of the South Carolina prison system who become involved in the introduction of contraband into the prison system. Their criminal enterprises endanger the lives of all South Carolinians in and out of prison.

Illegal cell phones are the principal tool inmates use to manage all phases of their operations. Some might ask – why not just do a better job at keeping the cell phones out? This Grand Jury has explored that issue. It is not that simple. SCDC and its Director have done a great job with the resources that they have. They have brought in some of the best technology there is to screen entry. This Grand Jury will not detail the methods that have been used to try to bypass those efforts for obvious reasons. It only needs be said that SCDC is fighting the good fight, but it is not that simple to defeat the criminal mind when that criminal mind can make millions of dollars.

The FCC will not allow States such as South Carolina to jam cell phones over their prisons. They only permit that capability for federal facilities. The worry is restricting the free airwaves we all use. We as citizens support those freedoms. But in a limited context, regulated by both the local State corrections agency certifying to the FCC the pinpointed

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need over specific facilities, and the FCC approving those, we as citizens would support immediately shutting down organized criminal activity.

In response to the outcry about this issue from prison systems across the country, in 2021 the FCC did approve a plan for “managed access” -- instead of allowing the States to simply jam cell phones in its prisons. Managed access allows a facility to hire certified vendors who can identify unauthorized cell phones within the facility and request that they be “bricked” by providers within two days. SCDC was on the forefront of implementation of managed access in 2023. This program has been successful in reducing inmate communications with the outside through contraband phones. While successful, and worthy of continued effort, managed access is not immediate. It is complicated and requires new capabilities that would be more easily and effectively solved by targeted jamming. The former Director of SCDC conducted a test and could easily walk from a jammed room to one that was not – clearly proving the very specific accuracy of jamming technology. If the worry with jamming is interference with legitimate communication, that is actually a bigger risk with managed access than it is with the accuracy of well managed jamming. While an appreciated solution, managed access is not the most effective solution to this problem that the States really need.

The solution? – **Allow South Carolina to jam cell phones in State prisons.** Jamming the cell phone communication of State inmates would **immediately** eliminate so much of the criminal activities within our State prisons. Each day that goes by without change results in the lost and ruined lives caused by the criminal enterprises. Our Federal Legislators and Agencies should act.

As the 35th South Carolina State Grand Jury, we recommend changes to regulations necessary to allow state prisons the same rights allowed federal facilities. At a minimum, allowing effective jamming technology to be used at State maximum security prisons would immediately disable a lot of the organized crime run by inmates. It would make our prisons -- and our communities throughout this great State and the Nation -- safer. And it would ensure that a prison sentence for a gang leader is accountability and not yet another opportunity.

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Cell Phones Within the South Carolina Department of Corrections**

We, the members of the Thirty-Fifth South Carolina State Grand Jury, do issue this
Report this 5th day of June, 2025.



FOREPERSON
35th SOUTH CAROLINA STATE GRAND JURY