

How to Work with Incarcerated Sources as a Journalist

By [Katie Way](#)

Firsthand accounts from incarcerated people in the U.S. are urgent and often revelatory. They expose the ugly flipside of the American Dream: what it's like to be a person who the government has written off as disposable. But the people who live in the U.S. prison system are so unused to being listened to that I have rarely—maybe never!—worked with sources who are more eager to talk to a journalist.

Actually getting in touch with someone “on the inside” can be daunting. There are well-documented, systemic barriers that make it difficult for incarcerated people to talk to *anyone*, let alone a reporter. Working with incarcerated sources means you might have to deal with temperamental communication software; mail restrictions; the monetary cost of sending and receiving phone calls, emails, and texts; regular breaches of privacy and confidentiality; or, most likely, some combination of the above.

Think you don't have any reason to talk to incarcerated people because you're not on the criminal justice beat? Think again: If you cover labor, race, drugs, tech, health (especially public health), politics, finance, or culture, you're not hitting all the angles until you talk to people living in the thousands of jails, prisons, immigration detention facilities, and youth correctional facilities across the U.S.

Are the obstacles that stand in the way annoying? Definitely. Bad for a deadline? Sure thing. Insurmountable? Hell no. Here's how.

How to get in touch

Before reaching out, it's important to think about what you're asking for and why. You wouldn't reach out to a non-incarcerated source with no pitch in sight, and (especially because most other sources don't have to pay to talk to you) that also applies here.

In terms of story ideas, the bad news of the day is a good place to start. Not only do issues that affect people on the outside, like wage stagnation, climate disasters, or public health crises, affect people inside detention facilities, their impact is often magnified by baseline shitty conditions. See: all of the great reporting on how COVID has devastated prison populations. Personally, I've found it helpful to look for a news report about something happening in a detention facility that doesn't include comment from actual incarcerated people—but you could also turn tips from a prisoner's friends or family members; ask for

comment on on-screen depictions of incarceration; dig deeper into the costs of being incarcerated for workers who make pennies per hour; or pursue stories about how and why people in detention facilities use social media. Reading that list of ideas probably gave you a *better* idea. Sky's the limit!

After you land on a story idea, there are a few routes for cold outreach. If your reporting isn't time-sensitive, you could go through a prisoner advocacy group, like the [Prison Journalism Project](#), which connects incarcerated reporters with outside journalists. Research localized and specialized prisoner advocacy orgs too—like [Black and Pink](#), an organization with twelve local chapters made up of current and formerly incarcerated LGBTQ+ people and people living with HIV/AIDS, which runs its own [pen pal program](#). You could also try reaching out to someone whose information is listed on a prison pen pal website, or—if you're really in a time crunch to contact someone at a specific facility—reach out to people on social media who've “checked in” to that facility and see if they can put you in touch with the person they were visiting.

Once you have a pitch and potential source(s), you get to enter the realm of [notoriously exploitative](#) prison communication systems, like JPay, Global Tel Link, Zenitel, ICSolutions, or Securus—services run by corporations that make their money charging incarcerated people and anyone who wants to talk to them for every text, video call, email, or minute of conversation.

Information about which (and how many) systems you'll need to pay into should be available on the detention facility's website, along with visitation guidelines and rules for sending paper mail. You'll need to make an account for every system you want to communicate through and input information like your name, your address, and your contact information. Be aware that you'll probably need to give potential sources your “real” phone number, not one from Google Voice. Many jails and prisons forbid their incarcerated population from calling anyone using a call-forwarding service, for what they'd call security (and I'd call surveillance) reasons.

These systems tend to be buggy and ugly, with the absolute bare minimum customer service assistance, so expect communication interruptions while you use them. In that vein, I highly recommend loading money onto a prepaid card—the kind you can buy at a grocery store, a drug store, or a big box retailer—to use specifically for contact-related expenses instead of forking over your credit card number or bank account information. That way, you set a hard cap on how much of your money these systems can access and avoid any worst-case-scenario ripple effect on your credit score.

Once you have contact information and all the right accounts, reach out—and identify yourself as a journalist as soon as you do so, especially if you're reaching out cold. Do the normal intro stuff: Let potential sources know who you're working for, what you're working on, and ask if they'd be interested in speaking to you. But bear in mind that whatever you

send in writing, or even say on the phone, won't necessarily stay between you and your source, because correctional facilities have the power to monitor prisoner communications—or, at least, the ones that happen through official channels.

Staying in contact

Ideally, once a source and a journalist connect, it doesn't take long to jump from intro to scheduling to interview. Unfortunately, working with incarcerated people takes time and patience, not just because of the shitty software everyone involved has to navigate, but because they are uniquely out of control of their own schedules.

Many people in detention facilities have jobs with predictable hours and relatively static access to the phones, but regular features of incarceration — facility-wide lockdowns, disease outbreaks, staffing shortages, write-ups, medical emergencies, or stints in solitary confinement — all impact someone's ability to communicate with the outside world or keep specific commitments. Propose some dates that would work for you, ask your source for their schedule, but be patient and willing to roll with the punches and don't give up just because you haven't heard from a previously communicative source in a while.

Be transparent about your timeline. Are you working on a story about TikTok trends that you plan to turn around in the space of a week, or are you digging in for a months-long investigative feature? Let your sources know in advance how much you might need from them and how long they may have to wait until publication so they don't feel left hanging if you have to focus on other projects while working with them.

Set boundaries about who you're willing to communicate with, how, and when. You might need to answer a phone call during your "off hours," but again, given the chaotic nature of incarceration, that may be unavoidable. But doing the work of a prison advocate, i.e. reaching out to someone's family members or partner on their behalf, or reviewing case files that aren't related to the story you're working on are not part of the gig. Without the right training, you're not even the best person your source could be asking. If you do have an advocacy or legal background, or if you're involved in movement work outside of your role as a journalist, things get a little trickier. Establish the confines of your reporting process—what you can and can't offer in terms of support—with your editor and think about colleagues, comrades, or organizations you could point sources towards to provide help that you can't.

These requests, or an ask to be paid for talking to you, should be met with a respectful, firm, "No." In my experience, none of them are deal breakers for working with a source on their own (a *lot* of people ask to get paid for talking to journalists), but if someone isn't able to understand your role as a reporter, or refuses to talk to you unless you comply, wish them luck and cut your losses.

Questions to ask during the reporting process are obviously going to vary on a case-by-case basis, and this is probably common sense, but two questions I've never asked and never plan to ask are: "What did you do?" and "Did you do it?" It's never been relevant to anything I've written after speaking to incarcerated sources, and it's also none of my business. Any concerns about what sources say can be solved with the power of diligent reporting—reject the idea that just because someone is incarcerated, they're less likely to be honest with you than any other source.

After you're done with reporting and your work is published, there's no obligation to field updates or concerns from your sources ad infinitum—again, you don't want to unintentionally cross the line from journalism into advocacy. If you decide to keep your comms system accounts active, let them know that in case they ever want to reach out with future tips or pass along contact information for potential sources.

Since you can't just send incarcerated people the link to a story over email, tell them to turn on the TV, or guarantee they'll catch the article in a print edition, take the time to mail them your finished product. Remember that you can't necessarily print out a web page or cut out a newspaper article, slap it into an envelope, and expect it to get to your sources—check their facility's mail rules online or by calling the facility and asking. Some don't allow color photos; others don't permit any photos. Some don't care at all! Send accordingly.

Finally, I've also found that it's helpful to keep a few extra copies of these articles on hand. If you reach out to more incarcerated people in the future, they might want to see examples of your past work to confirm it's worth spending the time and the money to share their stories with you.