

Despite public outrage, web access for prisoners isn't a luxury item – here's why

December 14 2017, by Dr Victoria Knight



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The UK's prisons are slowly catching up with the digital age. But in an era of austerity and turmoil, introducing inmates to technologies that many of us take for granted is – for some – alarming.

My research shows that digital progress in prisons allows offenders to

order their own meals, book visits, contact home, undertake e-learning, manage their finances, improve their health and prepare for release.

Prisoners using web-based tools to manage their daily lives is good for society. It's also an opportunity for prison staff to work with inmates to help them rehabilitate.

However, [prisoners'](#) relationships with technology isn't neutral and there are challenges in this changing landscape. I have observed that, when granted access to TV in their cells, they withdraw from their surroundings and are less dependent on fellow inmates.

But it also resonates beyond prison walls. Gary, one of my respondents, explained how he feels cut off from the outside world now that digital communication dominates so many of our lives:

"Emails now rapidly replace letters and very few people even consider letter writing any more. I have been in the prison system for six years so far with another 16 to go ... I am in the position where I can watch as everything changes ... Some of us even find those people you grew up with or once were so close to, forget you're there because you're no longer around digitally."

Gary's "digital lag" experience could have adverse effects once he is released. But while the "digital prison" could potentially save taxpayers' money, it is still undecided if it will improve life behind bars.

Lockdown: the e-prison

There are small pockets of progress in countries experimenting with digital offerings for inmates. In Belgium, a "secure" digital service called [PrisonCloud](#) is used in prison cells. It looks and feels like a typical setup, with access to a range of software, television and film,

telecommunications, desktop programmes and e-learning gateways.

The service "offers web access through different categories like healthcare, job search, e-learning and others, where security is key", said Benny Goedbloed, chief developer of PrisonCloud.

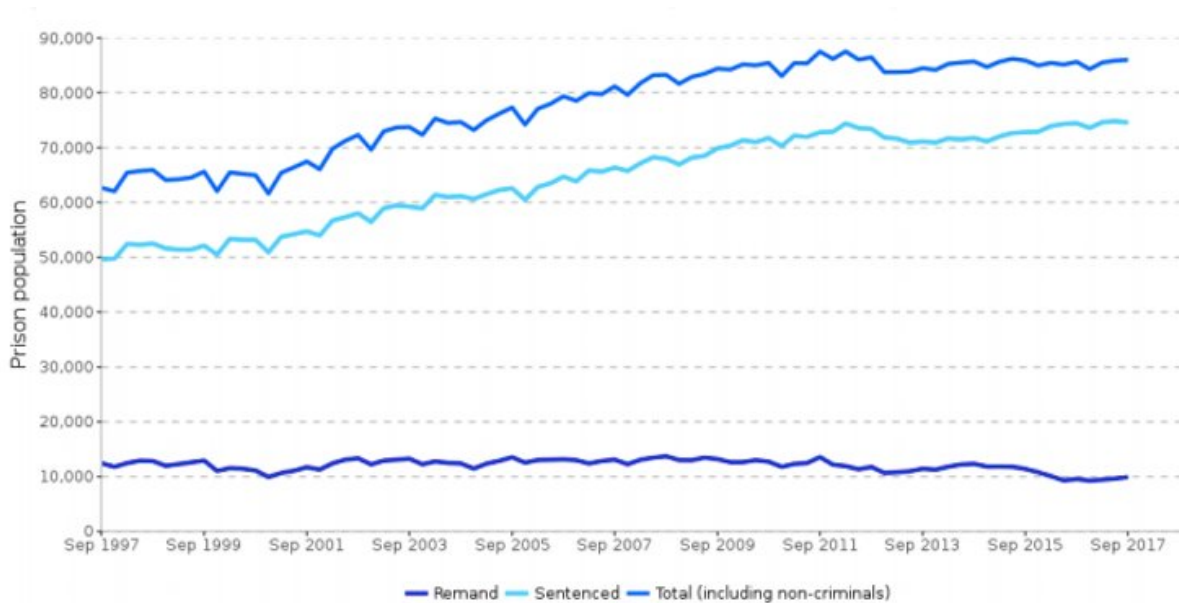
"The inmate has no url bar, the solution is able to block all buttons and form fields without denying the ability to read, listen or view videos on the selected web pages."

In Australia, e-learning opportunities are taken seriously and many jails provide tablet devices where inmates can access online courses and reading materials.

Like Belgium, these devices are locked down. While prisoners have digital access, freedom to surf the web is denied. Instead, [secure systems prevent them reaching the outside world](#) with access limited to a [walled garden](#).

Devices are linked to a prison server and guards are alerted if an offender – whose every finger stroke is recorded – attempts to hack the system or use a tablet or laptop for nefarious means.

Such security measures have led to some countries gaining confidence in moving towards digitisation behind bars.



The prison population for England and Wales stood at 85,997 on September 30, 2017, official figures show. Credit: Ministry of Justice and the Office for National Statistics

In England and Wales, a project is underway to implement and test a model similar to the one in Belgium. In-cell telephony and self-service kiosks where prisoners can manage their visits, order things from the prison shop and make requests have been established for some time now. However, there is a systematic plan to enable digital opportunities in all prisons.

[HMP Berwyn](#), which opened earlier this year, is giving prisoners basic and securely locked laptops allowing them to access [self-service](#) rehabilitative programmes and support in custody. But use of these devices isn't widespread: they appear in a very small number of UK prisons with few inmates gaining routine access.

It's worth noting, however, that the government – perhaps wary of a

potential public outcry – has declined to reveal how many digital devices are being used across prisons in England and Wales.

Eventually, one can expect that digital services in British prisons will become the norm – driven by priorities to keep the public safe and rehabilitate the prisoner. But nationally and internationally, the e-prison is yet to be adopted at scale.

Boredom is mental poison

Being online is, for most people, part of their everyday lives from watching TV to communicating with friends and family to applying for jobs and managing money. A prison sentence disrupts digital literacy, which can lead to increased isolation, loneliness, boredom, frustration and anger. My earlier [research on in-cell TV](#) found that prisons are poor on communication and this leads to boredom.

Leon, another research respondent, told me:

"Boredom is poisonous, it is mental poison. You can easily get distressed and suicidal in here. TV keeps you occupied. Even just changing the channels using the remote, it keeps you focused."

Such an emotive response can be detrimental to prisoners serving time productively and safely.

My research indicates that television, radio and digital services result in therapeutic outcomes for many [inmates](#). Coping and surviving prison is a key part of rehabilitation and [digital technology](#) can help them achieve this.

But it also helps prisons run more efficiently by making systems and processes easier, saving time and reducing incidents. Recent [findings](#) by

Professor McDougall and colleagues support my research.

Public opinion

A [perceived anxiety and fear](#) persists that prisoners will use laptops and tablets to commit criminal offences. While this is a valid concern, it has also been argued that they should be denied luxury, pleasure or even basic opportunities.

The idea, previously floated by then justice secretary Michael Gove, that [iPads should be dished out to prisoners](#) is distasteful to some. But such opinions hinder digital progress.

My [recent survey](#) on the acceptability of digital technology in prisons revealed that the British public was largely supportive of this progress. As long as security assurances are maintained, time in prison should help people return to society better prepared to live a life free of crime.

Notably, prisoners aren't getting unfettered digital access and the benefits extend beyond the walls of the prison and have the potential to help us all. But, for now, uptake of digital services in UK prisons is a postcode lottery.

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