



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on March 26, 2020

Federal Prisons Do Poor Job of Monitoring Terrorist Inmates' Communications, Audit Finds

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Federal prisons have “significant deficiencies” when it comes to identifying terrorist inmates and monitoring their communications with each other and the outside world, a recent audit reveals.



According to the [audit](#) conducted by the Department of Justice’s Office of the Inspector General (OIG), as of 2018, there were “approximately 512” inmates in federal prisons “with a known nexus to international or domestic terrorism.” The Bureau of Prisons (BOP), however, had failed to identify 28 of those inmates as terrorists, mostly because of poor communication between government agencies. BOP officials told OIG “they have often had to rely on media coverage or an internet search in an attempt to identify the individual’s ties to terrorism.”

The BOP is supposed to monitor all social communications of high-risk inmates, but it often fails to do so. This has been a problem for years. In 2006, OIG found that “the BOP had not effectively monitored the postage mail or verbal communications ... of terrorists,” and though the BOP promised to improve, it clearly didn’t. If anything, by expanding inmates’ communications options to include e-mail and video calls, it made matters worse.

“Based on the sheer volume of emails and BOP staffing levels, several BOP staff members told us that meeting both requirements of mandatory monitoring of high-risk inmates and random monitoring of general population inmates is just not possible,” wrote OIG.

As a result, BOP employees often multitask in an effort to meet their monitoring targets. At one facility, auditors “observed a staff member listening to inmates’ phone calls while a television was loudly playing the news and they were processing BOP staff through a security checkpoint.” It wouldn’t be difficult for inmates to slip something past these distracted employees. Indeed, OIG notes that inmates have discovered many ways to circumvent the BOP’s communications controls.

The prison system’s e-mail system is, in theory, supposed to enable BOP employees to monitor all e-mail communications in which inmates engage, yet OIG found over 7,000 e-mails to or from high-risk inmates that had not been monitored, some of which contained content that should have caused them to be flagged for review. The problem is partially caused by the e-mail system, which automatically forwards e-mails that aren’t manually flagged, and by cost controls that prevent foreign-language e-mails from being translated so they can be reviewed.

The situation is just as bad when it comes to telephone calls. Every call to which a high-risk inmate is a party is supposed to be monitored by listening to either the live call or a recording of it, but at the seven



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facilities auditors visited, they found the BOP had not listened to 44 calls made by such inmates, three of which were made by terrorist inmates. Since the phone system considers a call to have been monitored if staff have listened to just a portion of it, that is what BOP employees frequently do. They also listen to a large number of short calls to increase their monitoring percentages.

The highest-risk inmates are often placed under a measure requiring all their calls to be monitored live by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). While that may happen, the technology in place at prisons often makes it difficult for FBI agents and translators listening remotely to understand what is being said. At more than one facility, conversations are transmitted to the FBI either by placing a speaker phone next to a computer speaker or by taping two handsets together, OIG learned.

The BOP is no better at monitoring inmates' conversations with visitors or with each other, and it does a subpar job of monitoring postal mail and inmates' reading material, reported OIG.

"Overall," OIG wrote, "we found the BOP was: (1) not monitoring all terrorist inmate and high-risk non-terrorist inmate communications as required, (2) not adequately preventing inmates from circumventing communication controls, (3) not listening to communications between most terrorist inmates and visitors, and (4) in certain circumstances using very limited and inadequate equipment to monitor cellblock conversations of terrorists."

OIG gave the BOP a list of recommendations to improve its monitoring of terrorist inmates, and the agency pledged to implement them. But given the BOP's track record, don't hold your breath.

Michael Tennant is a freelance writer and regular contributor to The New American.



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