

January 9, 2023

To the New York City Board of Correction:

In terms of mail on Rikers, I was lucky. I got a lot of volume and a lot of variety. Graph paper, notebook paper, and fingerpaintings from my friends' toddler. Tiny, delicate pages from a Muji notebook, studded with a grid of little gray dots. Sky-blue stationery embossed with an ornate, shiny floral motif around its borders. Cream-colored sheets almost as thick as cardstock, so rough to the touch they felt like wicker beneath my fingers. One friend sent me vintage Halloween postcards almost every week with exquisite holographic Halloween stamps to match. Another sent me a campy promotional scratch-and-sniff card designed to accompany the 1981 John Waters film *Polyester*. I once got a piece of what would, in the outside world, be called "junk mail" from the Arbor Day Foundation and kept it just because I found the full-color high-definition photos of trees and woodlands on it so beautiful.

I kept my favorite pictures and postcards pasted to my walls with toothpaste or propped up on my windowsill, if I was lucky enough to have one. I kept every letter I received, and took them home with me when I left. Because that is what paper mail means to a prisoner. Its value is second only to a hug on a visit. If you can imagine a policy requiring that a CO physically stand between a prisoner and their visitor on the visiting floor and mimic their words and gestures for them, you can begin to understand just how cruel and absurd a policy of digitizing all inmate mail would be.

Numerous studies of paper versus digital texts have found that participants report paper copies to be more "familiar and comforting," that there is something about the physical sensation that draws them in.<sup>1</sup> A 2012 study by the University of Stavanger found that "participants that read an upsetting story on paper reported higher levels of 'empathy, transportation, immersion, and narrative coherence' than those who read the same story on an iPad."<sup>2</sup> A 2017 study by American University showed that 92% of those surveyed found that they concentrated better when reading print materials versus a digital version.<sup>3</sup> A 2015 study by the University of Virginia showed that e-signatures of all different types, across participants, "evoked a weaker sense of the signer's presence and involvement. This weaker sense of social presence, in turn, induced negativity."<sup>4</sup> Time and time again, those studied have reported the sensory aspects of books—touch, feel, smell—as being key to their preference for books over ebooks.<sup>5</sup> It only stands to reason that the same holds true for letters. There is something about their physicality that matters.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/42639695\\_Persistent\\_Paper\\_The\\_Myth\\_of\\_Going\\_Paperless](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/42639695_Persistent_Paper_The_Myth_of_Going_Paperless)

<sup>2</sup><https://www.learning-mind.com/ebooks-vs-printed-books-brain/#:~:text=A%20study%20conducted%20at%20American.on%20the%20task%20in%20hand>

<sup>3</sup><https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1016/j.tele.2016.11.008>

<sup>4</sup><https://batten.virginia.edu/paperless-and-soulless-e-signatures-diminish-signers-presence-and-decrease-acceptance>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/04/printed-books-vs-e-books-which-is-the-most-popular>

Prisoners who keep strong ties with the outside world are, of course, much more likely to recover better from incarceration, and are less likely to recidivate.<sup>6</sup> Paper mail is one of the most fundamental ways of keeping those strong ties, and may even be “the most common form of family contact,” according to a December 2021 report by the Prison Policy Institute.<sup>7</sup> A letter’s physicality is essential to its role as a link with the outside world, rather than a reinforcement of a person’s institutional identity.

That institutional identity is hard to shake. Everything in jail just screams at you—the walls, the food, the sounds—that you have no agency, that you have no future. That you’re not deserving of dignity. That the institution is all-encompassing. A physical letter in that world is a small marvel, a message in a bottle, a reminder of who you are, not in jail, but in the world outside. Of where you came from, of who still cares about you, of why you should stay out of trouble and come home soon. It is not only desirable for incarcerated people’s well-being, but essential. To that effect, a number of those I was incarcerated with even asked me to set them up with pen pals, because they just needed somebody to talk to.

In addition, it is a simple fact that in facilities that have implemented mail-scan policies, digitized inmate mail often comes out blurry, poorly scanned, and barely legible, impeding prisoners’ communication with their loved ones.<sup>8</sup> Then there are the serious privacy issues raised by the prospect of scanning copies of every letter to every incarcerated person. And while the efficacy of paper mail bans is questionable at best, it is well documented that the conversion of paper mail to digital leaves prisoners angry, upset, and distressed.<sup>9 10</sup>

If you allow the DOC to pull this critical psychological buttress out from under those lucky enough to have it, they will begin cracking under the stress. Assault rates are documented to rise when in-person visits are banned in jails and prisons, and I can confirm firsthand that when programming is cut, when recreation is cut, when visits are cut, inmates get angry and tempers flare.<sup>11</sup> If real mail is replaced with a pale copy of itself, as the DOC is proposing, you’ll likely see more violence as prisoners take it out on each other and maybe on the guards as well.

Digitizing mail is currently a hot commodity in the world of mass incarceration, and the DOC wants the same shiny new toy it sees other jurisdictions playing with. This issue is also a particularly charged one

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<sup>6</sup><https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/prison-jail-mail-bans-harm-incarcerated-people-1234636421/>

<sup>7</sup>[https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family\\_contact/](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family_contact/)

<sup>8</sup><https://www.vera.org/news/more-and-more-prisons-are-banning-mail>

<sup>9</sup><https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/new-prison-mail-policies-reduce-already-limited-connections-incarcerated-people>

<sup>10</sup><https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/prison-jail-mail-bans-harm-incarcerated-people-1234636421/>

<sup>11</sup>[https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family\\_contact/](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family_contact/)

for the DOC in the face of the recent spate of fentanyl overdoses on Rikers, because if drugs aren't coming through the mail or visitors, they must be coming through other vectors—namely, DOC staff. And in fact, the available research indicates that this is indeed the case.<sup>12 13</sup> Bans on visits at Rikers during the first wave of the pandemic gave rise to nearly twice the amount of drugs found on the island, far more than can be accounted for by mail alone.<sup>14</sup> Further proof is the fact that dozens of DOC staffers have been arrested and charged with smuggling contraband in recent years.<sup>15 16 17</sup> While the number of fentanyl-related overdoses on Rikers is certainly cause for concern, the DOC is deflecting blame here, sending you a red herring with prepaid postage. Send it back.

Instead of digitizing inmate mail, invest in better mail services, better medical services, and better addiction treatment services. Invest in more programming, recreation, education—I know from experience that most of any Rikers prisoner's day is spent doing absolutely nothing, simply because there is nothing to do. Make it so that fewer people feel driven to escape the crushing boredom and acute cabin fever by getting high. But you can't allow the elimination of paper mail and claim to be making the New York City jail system more humane. Because paper mail is one of the few things that keeps prisoners feeling that they have something to return to. Indeed, it is one of the few things that keeps them feeling human.

David Campbell

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<sup>12</sup><https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/new-prison-mail-policies-reduce-already-limited-connections-incarcerated-pe>

<sup>13</sup><https://wires.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/wfs2.1473#:~:text=The%20main%20smuggling%20routes%20for.and%20security%20measures%20in%20place.>

<sup>14</sup><https://www.thecity.nyc/2022/2/9/22926241/when-visitors-were-banned-from-rikers-island-even-more-drugs-showed-up>

<sup>15</sup><https://www.cbsnews.com/news/officers-charged-with-smuggling-contraband-for-inmates-new-york-city-rikers-island/>

<sup>16</sup><https://gothamist.com/news/seventh-rikers-officer-charged-with-smuggling-drugs-into-jails>

<sup>17</sup><https://www.reuters.com/article/us-new-york-crime-rikers-idUSKCN0VD2TJ>