

What are the Financial Costs of Prison for the Family?

The taxpayer pays the majority of the costs of prisons. While the exact legislation may vary by state, I will be using the data from the State of Florida Department of Corrections for this topic.

The operating budget for the Florida Department of Corrections was \$3.8 billion in the latest fiscal year. The average cost to incarcerate one person is \$31,000. The State of Florida provides prisoners with necessities, including food, clothing, hygiene items, bedding, laundry services, access to medical, mental health, and dental care, along with programs for education, vocational training, and re-entry into the community.

While the state incurs these costs, there are significant costs for the families of an incarcerated person. A recent study conducted by fwd.us concluded a family will spend an additional \$4,200 per year to stay in touch and support their loved one who is incarcerated. To illustrate, I have described the most common family costs

Communications

- **Phone calls** – Inmates are not allowed to receive phone calls. Each inmate is allowed to make one five-minute phone call per month at no cost. Inmates can also make collect calls, which are paid by the person being called. Prepaid plans are also commonly established. The price to the inmate (family) is \$0.135 per minute. A 15-minute phone call costs \$2.03 plus taxes and fees. The provider charges an additional \$0.99 for each “deposit” on the prepaid plan. Connect Network/GTL provides all phone services for the State of Florida. Phone calls are limited to 30 minutes. All phone calls are monitored and recorded by the Department of Corrections, and may be disconnected at any time.
- **Emails** – Inmates are allowed to email through the Securus Technologies system. They are only able to email people outside prison who have been established as authorized users of Securus. “Stamps” must be purchased and placed on the inmate’s account. Stamps range from \$ 0.35 to \$ 0.44 each, depending on the quantity purchased. Each email requires one stamp. Up to 5 photos can be attached, and each photo requires two stamps. Responding to an email requires one stamp.
- **Video Calls** – A 15-minute video call can be scheduled. These calls are made through JPay. Jpay and Securus Technologies are both subsidiaries of the same corporation. A 15-minute video call is \$2.95. The person who schedules a video call must be on the Approved Visitor list of the prison.

In 2024, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) enacted a policy that limits the rate that can be charged for the above services. In all cases, the maximum amount was less than the current rates charged. To battle the policy, Securus immediately halted the video calls. During the Thanksgiving holiday and a portion of December 2024, no video calls were available. As a settlement, the FCC gave all companies until mid-2026 to enact the reductions.

Visitation

- **Travel** – A significant cost to visit a loved one is travel costs. Personally, I drive 75 miles each way. While you can use several methods to estimate this cost, I have used the IRS allowed rate of \$.70 per mile. This calculates to \$105 per trip. Obviously, this number can vary. I have met several people who live further away, including out of state. In this case, they are forced to stay overnight, which adds the cost of a hotel and food. Obviously, the greater the distance and cost, the fewer times they can visit.
- **Food** – During visitation, the only food and drink available must be purchased in the Visitation Center. These products are purchased from vending machines. Even cafeteria food from the prison is not allowed in the Visitation Center. On average, I spend approximately \$30 per visit on food and drink for Amanda and me.

During one visit, none of the vending machines were working. Because the visitation was a lunch, the guards brought cafeteria meals to each of the inmates. The meal consisted of a “taco-like” meat service, rice, roll, butter, and a dessert. I tasted each of them. While you can indeed exist on these meals, and they likely meet some nutritional standards, they fall far short of the quality of food we eat regularly.

ACCESS

- Once per quarter, incarcerated individuals can receive an Access Securpak package. This package (the inmate can choose items) includes snacks and food items such as coffee packages, candy, chips, crackers, breakfast items, noodles, etc. Each person can receive up to \$125 in items per quarter.

CANTEEN (NOTE – The inmate must purchase all items discussed below from their canteen fund. Each inmate is allowed to spend a maximum of \$150 per week. Funds for the canteen must be obtained from family or loved ones who place money on their account. Only Authorized Visitors are allowed to put money on the inmate’s account.

- **Catalog** - Three times per year, incarcerated individuals can purchase a variety of items, including personal care items, clothing, and hygiene products, from the inmate canteen using funds from their inmate accounts.
- **Canteen** – In theory, each inmate may shop at the canteen daily. In reality, because of the number of people, going to the canteen once a week is most common. The canteen contains snacks and food items. While the prison provides three meals per day, the quality and quantity of these meals are poor. In addition, cafeteria hours are limited and not convenient for many.
- **Entertainment** – Each inmate has a “tablet” assigned to them. While there is some free content (primarily faith-oriented), most of the content must be purchased. This includes music, movies, TV shows, documentaries, etc.

There is no access to the internet, social media, email (other than through Secururus), or other items that we utilize daily.

MEDICAL

- Even though the State of Florida proclaims they are responsible for inmate healthcare, there is a \$5 co-pay to the inmate for each visit to medical.

SUMMARY

Given the above information, you can see a significant cost to families. Obviously, these numbers can vary widely based on financial situation and relationship with family. In addition, lower-income families are disproportionately affected due to factors such as limited funds, inadequate transportation, insufficient time off from work for visits, and unfavorable location. In these cases, the family must decide how to prioritize funds to incur additional costs.

Shown below is an estimate of our family's additional expenses based on Amanda's incarceration of 31 months to date. For your information, she has an additional 38 months remaining.

TRAVEL –

150 miles roundtrip * 50 visits per year * \$.70 per mile \$ 5,250

FOOD DURING VISITATION

\$30 * 50 visits per year \$ 1,500

PHONE CALLS

3 15- minute phone calls per week * 52 weeks * \$.135 /minute \$ 315

EMAIL

2 emails per day *365 days * \$.44/stamp \$ 320

VIDEO CALLS

2 per week * 52 weeks * \$2.95/call \$ 306

ACCESS PACKAGE

4 per year @ \$125 \$ 500

CANTEEN (INCLUDES ALL SUB-SECTIONS)

\$100 per week @ 52 weeks \$ 5,200

MEDICAL

\$5 per visit @ 6 visits per year \$ 30

TOTAL YEARLY EXPENSE

\$13,421