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## Please Deposit All Your Money

Faced with high prison costs, the states have been desperately seeking ways to make sure that people who are released from prison will forge viable lives outside - and not end up right back behind bars. Part of the solution is to help former inmates find training, jobs and places to live. In this context, the increasingly common practice of jacking up the costs of inmates' telephone calls to bankrupting levels, and then using the profits to pay for some prison activities, is self-defeating and inhumane. It also amounts to a hidden tax on prisoners' families, who tend to be among the poorest in American society.

A vast majority of the state prison systems have telephone setups that allow only collect calls. The person who accepts the call pays a premium that is sometimes as much as six times the going rate. Part of the money goes to the state itself in the form of a "commission" - or, more simply put, a legal kickback.

While such commissions are common throughout the country, the one in New York is particularly high: the state takes a commission of nearly 60 percent. Faced with telephone bills of \$400 or more a month, the inmates' families must often choose between paying phone bills or paying the rent. This billing strategy erodes fragile family ties by discouraging prisoners from keeping in touch with loved ones - especially small children - who often have difficulty visiting because they live hundreds of miles away. Inmates who lack family ties are less likely to make a successful transition once released, and more likely to end up back inside.

While most states use collect-calls-only phone systems for prisons, federal prisons use a less expensive and less onerous debit-calling system. Federal inmates are allowed to use money that is accumulated in computer-controlled accounts to call a limited number of phone numbers. Prison rights groups have long urged the states to adopt the debit-calling system. Lawsuits pending in several states, including in New York, could eventually force prison authorities to abandon their policies of allowing only collect calls. And the New York State Assembly has passed a bill that, if it becomes law, will put an end to this system.

New York state corrections officials argue that the current system is good thing because the money goes to pay for AIDS treatments, cable television for inmates and other prison programs that benefit the inmates. But the inmates' families already support the prison system through their taxes. Dunning the poor to run the prisons where so many of the poor wind up may have been acceptable in Dickens's time, but no longer.