

BUSTER!

A Product of the Federal Interagency Reentry Council

MYTH: Incarcerated persons should never be allowed Internet access because it creates an unreasonable risk to the public and to institutional security.

FACT: Internet access can be limited rather than prohibited. Incarcerated persons may be able to use Web-enabled resources to assist them in preparing for post-release success.

- Correctional institutions have a dual mandate: to protect public safety by running safe and secure prisons and to provide incarcerated individuals with treatment and training necessary to be productive and law-abiding citizens upon release. To address both mandates, a nuanced approach to Internet access can be used for many incarcerated populations—somewhere between “no access” and “unfettered access.” Lack of access can be an impediment to release preparation. Unfettered access can result in significant risks to public safety.
- Education and education-related activities—including computer-assisted instruction, online learning, digital literacy development, assessment, certification, and academic research—are key reasons to examine safe and effective ways to expand access in correctional settings. However, numerous other reentry-related functions are also greatly enhanced by access to the Internet. These include activities such as seeking employment; accessing benefits important to sustaining a crime-free post-release life; and, addressing issues such as child support payments and student loans, and obtaining a driver’s license and health insurance.
- While access to online resources is appropriate for some segments of correctional populations, it may not be for others. Incarcerated individuals nearing release, especially those who have progressed to lower security status, may appropriately be afforded greater levels of access to electronic information resources. Correctional professionals classify members of the prison population to security levels and these security classifications will be a key determiner of appropriate levels of access to information technology. No access or extremely limited access may be necessary in the case of individuals in higher security risk classifications.
- Technologies to permit controlled or limited access to the Internet have advanced and are increasingly being applied in correctional settings. One prominent example is the now routine use of limited, electronic messaging for personal correspondence in the Federal Bureau of Prisons. This secure filtered access provides inmates with an additional method of communication with friends and family beyond visiting, telephone calls, and letters. At the same time, electronic messaging allows for security oversight through greater ease of monitoring and review. It also decreases physical mail, thereby allowing correctional staff to spend time on security and inmate programming rather than processing and inspecting in and outgoing mail. Other correctional systems also apply information technology security solutions to expand cost-effective reentry programming while maintaining high standards of institutional security.
- While expanding information technology access within correctional settings is not without challenges - particularly challenges relating to costs and security concerns - as the technology matures there should be increasing opportunities to use these tools in a safe and cost-effective manner to assist inmates in education, programming, visitation, and reentry transition to help them return to their communities as law-abiding citizens.

For More Information:

To learn more about technology solutions in correctional education, refer to the forthcoming publication [Information Technology and the Internet](#) (Fall 2014).

For further information on how technology is transforming education, refer to the [National Education Technology Plan](#).

What is a REENTRY MYTH BUSTER?

This Myth Buster is one in a series of fact sheets intended to clarify existing federal policies that affect formerly incarcerated individuals and their families. Each year, about 640,000 individuals are released from state and federal prisons. Another 9 million cycle through local jails. When reentry fails, the social and economic costs are high -- more crime, more victims, more family distress, and more pressure on already-strained state and municipal budgets.

Because reentry intersects with health and housing, education and employment, family, faith, and community well-being, many federal agencies are focusing on initiatives for the reentry population. Under the auspices of the Cabinet-level interagency Reentry Council, federal agencies are working together to enhance community safety and well-being, assist those returning from prison and jail in becoming productive citizens, and save taxpayer dollars by lowering the direct and collateral costs of incarceration.

For more information about the Reentry Council, go to: <http://csgjusticecenter.org/nrrc/projects/firc/>