

ADDING CAPABILITY TO PRISON SECURITY

Disruptive Contraband Screening in Prisons
and Custody Facilities



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Drugs undermined the safety of too many men’s prisons, driving violence, bullying, debt and self-harm.”

HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, Annual Report 2025-26

“One out of three prisoners has used an illicit substance at some time while incarcerated, with 16 per cent reporting current (past-month) use..”

UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC),
World Drug Report 2017



Contraband remains a major challenge for prisons, with organised criminals continually adapting methods to introduce drugs, phones and weapons. Effective mitigation requires a layered security approach that combines intelligence, staff expertise and complementary screening technologies.

41%

41% of prisoners surveyed said it was ‘easy’ to get drugs in jail.

13,284

Highest ever number of weapons finds recorded in a 12-month period

11,916

Mobile phone finds

39,900

Over 39,900 drugs & weapons finds

Mobile passive terahertz people screening enhances existing security measures by detecting anomalies concealed beneath clothing without emitting radiation or requiring fixed infrastructure. Safe for routine use across staff, prisoners and visitors, it complements rather than replaces X-ray body scanners, which remain essential for identifying internally concealed items.

Its primary advantage is mobility. Systems can be rapidly deployed to different locations, creating unpredictability that makes it harder to exploit security routines. This flexibility supports intelligence-led operations while increasing screening coverage and throughput.

Beyond detection, mobile screening acts as a powerful deterrent and disruption tool, encouraging individuals to abandon contraband before reaching screening points. By strengthening detection, deterrence and operational flexibility, it helps prisons reduce contraband, improve safety and maintain secure, well-managed establishments.

SOURCE: HMPPS Digest
2025 to 2026

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How Mobile Passive Screening Can Strengthen Existing Security Measures

Preventing the introduction and movement of contraband remains one of the most persistent challenges facing prisons today. Whether the threat comes from drugs, mobile phones, weapons or other prohibited items, those attempting to undermine prison security continue to adapt their methods. As a result, security teams must continually evolve their own approaches, combining intelligence, experienced staff and complementary technologies to reduce risk.

There is no single solution to the problem of contraband. **Effective prison security relies on a layered approach, bringing together searching, intelligence gathering, CCTV, detector dogs, metal detection, X-ray body scanners and experienced operational staff.** Each capability has an important role to play, and each brings different strengths depending on the operational scenario.

An effective and increasingly important addition to that layered approach is mobile passive terahertz people screening technology. Rather than replacing existing security measures, it provides prisons with an additional capability that can be deployed wherever and whenever operational need demands.

A DIFFERENT TYPE OF SCREENING CAPABILITY

Unlike technologies that emit radiation or require dedicated screening infrastructure, passive terahertz screening technology simply detects anomalies concealed beneath clothing using naturally occurring energy. It emits nothing itself, making it safe for routine use on everyone entering or moving around a prison.

This includes staff, prisoners, visitors, contractors, children, pregnant females and individuals with implanted medical devices such as pacemakers.

The result is a flexible screening capability that can be introduced without many of the operational restrictions associated with other technologies.



MOBILITY CHANGES THE SECURITY DYNAMIC

Perhaps the greatest strength of mobile passive screening is exactly that – mobility.

Many traditional security technologies are fixed installations positioned at key entry points. While highly effective, their location, routine and capabilities inevitably become known.

Mobile screening changes that dynamic completely.

A system can be deployed at staff entrances first thing in the morning, relocated to visitor reception later in the day, moved to residential units, positioned outside workshops or education facilities, or used to support intelligence-led searches anywhere within the establishment.

Because the technology requires no permanent infrastructure and can be deployed quickly, security managers gain the flexibility to respond to changing operational priorities as they arise.

This ability to screen almost anywhere introduces an important element of unpredictability.

DISRUPTING THE MOVEMENT OF CONTRABAND

Those involved in introducing or moving contraband quickly become aware that screening is no longer limited to fixed locations. Instead, it can take place at almost any point during the day and in almost any part of the prison.

That uncertainty changes behaviour.

Rather than simply focusing on detecting prohibited items, mobile screening creates an environment where moving contraband becomes significantly more difficult and considerably higher risk.

Several prisons, which have already deployed mobile terahertz solutions, have reported that screening operations often result in prohibited items being discarded before individuals reach the screening point. Rather than risk detection, people choose to abandon items instead.

In operational terms, this can be just as valuable as making a detection.

The objective is not simply to find contraband; it is to prevent it entering the establishment, disrupt its movement once inside, and reduce confidence among those attempting to traffic prohibited items around the prison.

The unpredictability created by mobile screening makes it a highly effective disruption and deterrence capability.

SCREENING MORE PEOPLE MORE OFTEN

Throughput remains a significant operational consideration within prisons.

Busy staff entry periods, visitor processing and prisoner movement all place pressure on security resources. Technologies that slow movement or require significant staffing can become difficult to use routinely.

Passive screening, due to its real-time video nature, enables people to be screened quickly without requiring them to stop, empty their pockets or undergo an immediate physical search.

Instead, security staff can focus their attention only where additional enquiries are justified.

This targeted approach allows existing resources to be used more efficiently while maintaining the smooth movement of legitimate staff, visitors and prisoners throughout the establishment.

SUPPORTING STAFF INTEGRITY AND CONFIDENCE

Staff remain one of the prison service's greatest assets, and maintaining confidence in security procedures is essential.

Because mobile screening can be deployed quickly and safely at staff entrances, prisons can increase the frequency of staff screening without introducing significant operational disruption.



Several establishments have reported that the increased visibility of staff screening has had wider operational benefits. Regular, unpredictable screening reinforces professional standards, reduces opportunities for corrupt behaviour and acts as a deterrent against attempts to introduce prohibited items into the prison.

Equally important is the reassurance it provides to frontline staff. Knowing that enhanced screening capability can be deployed whenever intelligence or operational circumstances require, without the need for prior consultation and authorisation, helps strengthen confidence in existing security arrangements.



SUPPORTING SAFER VISITS

Visits remain one of the most important aspects of rehabilitation, helping prisoners maintain family relationships and prepare for successful reintegration into society.

Security measures must therefore strike an appropriate balance between protecting the establishment and maintaining a respectful experience for legitimate visitors.

Because passive screening emits nothing, it can be used safely on adults, children and pregnant females alike. This provides establishments with additional flexibility when managing visitor centres and responding to intelligence, without creating many of the restrictions associated with other screening technologies.

Rather than replacing existing visitor security arrangements, mobile screening provides an additional layer of protection that can be introduced wherever operationally appropriate.

WORKING ALONGSIDE EXISTING TECHNOLOGIES

It is important to view passive screening within the wider context of prison security.

No single technology solves every challenge.

Metal detectors continue to play an important role. Intelligence gathering, searching, detector dogs and experienced officers remain fundamental components of effective prison security.



Importantly, passive screening is not intended to replace X-ray body scanners. X-ray scanners remain an important capability where high-resolution imaging is required, or where it is necessary to screen inside the body. And whereas X-ray full body scanners are typically large and require fixed installation, passive terahertz screening systems are, by comparison, compact, lightweight and mobile.

Passive people screening complements these existing measures by providing a capability that is rapid to deploy, highly mobile and suitable for routine use across virtually every category of person entering or moving within a prison.

Rather than asking which technology is best, many establishments are now considering how different technologies can work together to create multiple opportunities to detect, deter and disrupt the movement of contraband.

Layered security is almost always stronger than reliance on any single solution.

RESPONDING TO INTELLIGENCE

Operational priorities within prisons change quickly.

New intelligence, incidents or emerging risks often require an immediate response.

Because mobile passive screening requires no permanent infrastructure, it can be repositioned rapidly to support targeted operations. Whether responding to intelligence on a residential unit, increasing screening

around workshops, supporting searches following visits or providing reassurance after a security incident, the technology allows security managers to react quickly without waiting for specialist installation or engineering works.

This flexibility supports a more intelligence-led approach to prison security.

LOOKING AHEAD

As those involved in organised crime continue to adapt their methods, prison security must continue to evolve.

The most successful establishments will increasingly combine experienced staff, robust intelligence and complementary technologies to create multiple layers of defence.

Mobile passive screening represents one of those additional layers.

Its value extends beyond simply detecting concealed items. By enabling prisons to screen staff, prisoners and visitors almost anywhere, introducing unpredictability into daily operations and disrupting the movement of contraband once inside the establishment, it provides security teams with greater flexibility and another powerful operational tool.

Ultimately, the objective is shared across the prison estate: reducing the availability of contraband, protecting staff, visitors and inmates, supporting rehabilitation and maintaining safe, secure and well-managed establishments.

Technologies that strengthen existing security arrangements, increase operational flexibility and make it harder for contraband to enter or move around prisons have an increasingly important role to play in achieving those aims.



ABOUT THRUVISION

Thruvision people security screening systems are used daily to security screen tens-of-thousands of people in over 30 countries around the world in prisons, airports, entrances, retail distribution centres and border checkpoints.