

COURT WATCH

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DISCONNECTED:

Mobile Phone Access in
Orleans Parish
Criminal District Court

2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Orleans Parish Criminal District Court's prohibition on public entry with mobile phones creates significant barriers for community access and engagement. This policy, which diverges from practices in comparable jurisdictions, impacts defendants, families, and court observers in ways that undermine efficiency, equity, and public safety. Court Watch NOLA's comprehensive report evaluates the issue from multiple perspectives and provides actionable recommendations.

Key Findings:

1. Outlier Status in Policy Comparisons:
 - New Orleans stands as one of only two cities out of the top 50 U.S. cities with similar crime rates to prohibit public entry into criminal courthouses with phones. This policy contrasts sharply with the majority of jurisdictions, which permit public access to electronic devices under regulated conditions.
 - Local examples, such as New Orleans Municipal Court and Baton Rouge's 19th Judicial District Court, demonstrate that allowing phones in courthouses can be managed effectively through clear guidelines and consistent enforcement, without compromising courtroom order.
 - Other states, including Michigan, Massachusetts, South Carolina, and Maryland, have enacted statewide policies allowing mobile devices in courthouses, further highlighting New Orleans' divergence from emerging norms.
2. Community Impact:
 - Survey data reveals that 68% of courthouse visitors found it more difficult to attend court without their phones, with those relying on public transportation experiencing the greatest challenges.
 - Additionally, 47% of visitors felt less safe without their phones, indicating that the policy undermines public confidence and comfort when engaging with the legal system.

3. Accessibility Concerns:
 - Mobile phones serve as critical tools for individuals managing medical conditions and disabilities, such as diabetes, hearing loss, and mobility impairments. The prohibition excludes or burdens many individuals, reducing their ability to participate fully in legal proceedings.
4. Financial and Safety Issues:
 - For-profit phone storage services operated by bail bond companies impose an unnecessary financial burden on courthouse visitors, especially those from low-income communities. This arrangement also raises ethical concerns about potential conflicts of interest.
 - Crime data highlights the risks of leaving phones in vehicles near the courthouse. In 2023, over 465 crimes, including 147 vehicle thefts and break-ins, were reported within a half-mile radius of the courthouse.
5. Impact on Court Watching:
 - The phone ban significantly hampers Court Watch NOLA's ability to recruit and retain volunteers, many of whom rely on phones for transportation coordination, safety, and data collection.
 - The policy diminishes transparency and community oversight by discouraging participation in court-watching programs, a vital mechanism for civic engagement and judicial accountability.

Recommendations:

1. Policy Revision:
 - Allow public entry with electronic devices under enforceable guidelines to ensure appropriate use in courtrooms.
2. Interim Measures:
 - Improve public awareness of the policy by including clear notifications on the court's website and communications with court visitors.

Conclusion:

The existing phone prohibition exacerbates inequities, restricts access, and creates avoidable logistical and safety challenges. It is both feasible and necessary to revise this policy to align with modern standards and best practices, fostering a more accessible and just court system.

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