How to find someone who is incarcerated

When someone is arrested, families are often left with no information at all — no phone call, no facility name, no case number. Finding them is usually possible within a day if you search in the right order. This guide walks through that order.

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IMPORTANT NOTE

Search systems are run separately by federal, state, and county agencies, and records can lag by hours or days after an arrest or transfer. Never pay a site that charges to 'find an inmate' — every official search is free.

WHO THIS GUIDE CAN HELP

- **For youth**
  If you are under 18, ask a trusted adult to search with you. You can still write down what you know — full name, birthday, the city where it happened — and that is the hardest part.
- **For professionals**
  The 'why a search returns nothing' section resolves most family calls: wrong custody level, name spelling, in-transit status, or a hold in another county.

GATHER THIS BEFORE YOU SEARCH

The more of these you have, the faster the search resolves. Two or three is usually enough.

- Full legal name, including middle name and any name spelling variations
- Date of birth, or an approximate age
- The city and county where the arrest happened
- The date of the arrest, even approximate
- Any booking, case, or inmate ID number the family already has

SEARCH IN THIS ORDER

Custody level determines which system holds the record. Work from local outward, unless you already know it is a federal case.

- **1. County jail, if the arrest was recent**
  Search "[county name] county sheriff inmate search" or "[county] jail roster." People arrested in the last days or weeks are almost always here, not in a state prison.
- **2. State department of corrections**
  Search "[state] department of corrections inmate search" or "[state] DOC offender locator." This is where someone goes after sentencing on a state charge.
- **3. Federal Bureau of Prisons**
  The BOP runs a free national inmate locator at bop.gov for federal cases, and it also includes people released since 1982. Use it if the charge was federal or if state and county searches come up empty.
- **4. ICE detainee locator**
  If immigration detention is possible, ICE operates a separate online detainee locator that searches by A-number or by name plus country of birth and date of birth.
- **5. Call the facility directly**
  If an online search fails, call the county jail's booking line and ask if the person is in custody. Have the name and date of birth ready. Staff will typically confirm custody status even when the website has not updated.

WHY A SEARCH COMES BACK EMPTY

- **The record has not posted yet**
  Booking can take many hours. Rosters often update once or twice a day. Search again the next morning before assuming anything.
- **The name is spelled differently**
  Try the legal name, nicknames, hyphenated and unhyphenated surnames, and a partial last name if the system allows it.
- **They are in transit**
  People being moved between facilities can disappear from both rosters for days. This is common and does not mean anything is wrong.
- **Wrong system entirely**
  A federal charge will not appear on a county roster, and a hold for another county may mean they are physically in one place and listed in another.

ONCE YOU FIND THEM

- **1. Write down the ID number**
  Every later step — mail, phone accounts, money, visits — requires the inmate ID or booking number and

the exact facility address. Keep it in one place.

- **2. Read the facility's family page**
  Mail rules, phone providers, deposit options, and visiting hours are all facility-specific and change often.
- **3. Send mail first**
  Mail is the cheapest and most reliable contact, and it usually reaches someone before phone or visit access is set up.
- **4. Decide what and how to tell the children**
  Children usually already sense something. Age-appropriate honesty protects them better than silence — our guide on telling a child their parent is in jail walks through what to say.

+ QUESTIONS FAMILIES ASK

- **How do I find out where someone is being held?**
  Start with the county sheriff's inmate search for the county where the arrest happened, then the state department of corrections locator, then the federal Bureau of Prisons locator at bop.gov. If online searches fail, call the county jail's booking line with the person's full name and date of birth.
- **Is there a free national inmate search?**
  The federal Bureau of Prisons operates a free national locator for federal cases at bop.gov. There is no single free national system covering every county jail and state prison — those are searched agency by agency. Avoid sites that charge a fee; the official searches are always free.
- **Why can't I find them in the inmate search?**
  The most common reasons are that booking has not posted yet, the name is spelled differently in the system, the person is in transit between facilities, or you are searching the wrong custody level. Try name variations, wait a day, and call the facility directly.
- **Can I find someone with only their name?**
  Often yes, though a common name will return many results. Adding a date of birth or the county of arrest narrows it quickly. If you only have a name, call the county jail booking line — staff can usually check custody status by name.

+ KEEP GOING

- **Family Guide: Navigating Incarceration**
  https://www.myfairygodparents.org/resources/navigating-incarceration
- **Sending money and staying in touch**
  https://www.myfairygodparents.org/resources/guides/staying-in-touch-with-an-incarcerated-parent
- **Prison visit dress code and what to bring**
  https://www.myfairygodparents.org/resources/guides/prison-visit-dress-code-and-what-to-bring

More guides and family resources: myfairygodparents.org/resources

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