

Inmates foil mobile phone blockers

By Cormac O'Keeffe

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GANG bosses in the country's only prison with a fully operational mobile phone blocking system are smuggling in Skype internet phones and satellite phones to bypass the technology. Official figures show that 15 satellite and Skype phones have been seized in the Midlands Prison in the first eight months of this year. The Prison Service figures also show that ordinary mobile phones continue to be seized in the jail – 62 phones up to August. This raises concerns that the system is not fully successful in blocking mobile calls. Prison officers claim that the system works in parts of the jail close to the blocking source, but does not work in areas farther away.

The blocking technology became operational in the Midlands towards the end of last year, following lengthy and extensive testing.

Sources in the prison said it appeared that the phone blocking technology appears to work in the centre of the jail. The Midlands facility comprises of four landings radiating out from a circle.

"It seems that the closer you are to the circle the greater the blockage, but, at the other end of the landings, it doesn't work. So, at the far end, ordinary mobile phones are being used," said one source. He said: "If the system is supposed to be working, why are ordinary mobiles being seized?"

He said the satellite and Skype phones were being seized at the parts of the landings close to the circle. "They are being found. The thing is there is no blocker out there for satellite phones or Skypes. Prisoners have time to think and are resourceful. If they know they can't be blocked, it's no wonder they're coming in. It's only a matter of time before more and more come in."

Skype phones work over the internet, not through the mobile phone networks. Their popularity has grown worldwide and the technology is typically used to allow voice and visual communication between computers.

However, the technology can also be installed on some mobile phones. Last March, Prison Service boss Brian Purcell told a Dáil committee that the piloting of the system had been completed and evaluation was over. He said: "We are satisfied it has achieved what we set out to achieve."

Prison Service figures show that two other satellite or Skype phones have been seized, one each in Castlereagh Prison and Portlaoise Prison, which is adjacent to the Midlands.

A statement from the Prison Service said that three different mobile inhibition systems were being tested in three locations: the Midlands/Portlaoise complex, Mountjoy and Limerick.

"The systems in Midlands, Mountjoy and Limerick Prisons are still live and working with varying degrees of success," said the statement. "The inhibition system at Portlaoise is still under installation and is currently inactive pending further refinement of software which is unique and site-specific."

It is understood that the system may have interfered with phones in Portlaoise Hospital, across the road from the prison. It underlines the difficulties in installing such systems. The thick walls in Mountjoy and Limerick also limit their effectiveness.

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