

Telehealth services may help smokers in rural prisons quit tobacco smoking

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Telehealth smoking cessation treatment programs can reduce tobacco-related disparities among incarcerated smokers, according to a Rutgers study.

The study, published in the *Journal of Telemedicine and Telecare*, found that [video conferencing](#) with tobacco treatment specialists may help smokers incarcerated in rural prisons quit tobacco smoking.

"Tobacco use is an important public health issue, especially among people who are incarcerated, in the US," says Pamela Valera, assistant professor in the Department of Urban-Global Public Health. "Currently, tobacco [cessation](#) programs are not offered consistently in US prisons due to a lack of resources and limited certified tobacco treatment specialists. This is especially true for prisons in rural parts of the country."

Inmates are three to four times more likely to smoke than the [general population](#), contributing to high levels of chronic health conditions, like cancer, heart disease, and stroke. Smoking is also more common in rural prisons, which often lack cessation resources and have few medical professionals to care for a population with more health needs.

To address the lack of resources, the researchers were the first to use video conferencing to deliver group-based smoking cessation counseling to inmates in rural prisons. They also provided inmates with [nicotine replacement therapy](#) patches to aid in the cessation process.

"Our experience with the implementation and production of remote group-based smoking cessation treatment allows us to suggest that virtual platforms may be one solution to addressing inequities in access to tobacco cessation among people who are incarcerated," adds Valera.

Telehealth, which includes the use of apps, [social media](#), and text messaging, has become more popular in healthcare settings due to the removal of physical barriers like distance and time. Providers can also ensure adequate services are extended to those who lack access to [healthcare settings](#) and treatment with the recent coverage of telehealth

services to Medicare and Medicaid recipients.

"Improving inmate access to telehealth is vital to reduce barriers to care, treatment, and existing tobacco-related health disparities," says study-coauthor Sara Malarkey, a student at the Rutgers School of Public Health.

"In a time of uncertain budget constraints due to the COVID-19 pandemic, using novel approaches like telehealth or virtual tobacco cessation treatment programs can be an inexpensive and effective approach to address smoking in rural populations," concludes study co-author Nadia Smith, who is also a student at the Rutgers School of Public Health.

More information: Pamela Valera et al, Exploring the role of telehealth: A novel approach to group-based smoking cessation treatment for men incarcerated in a rural state prison, *Journal of Telemedicine and Telecare* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/1357633X211034734](https://doi.org/10.1177/1357633X211034734)

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