
**JHA COVID-19 Prison
Survey Comment
Report**



Perceptions and Experiences from People inside Prison during the Pandemic

Section: Ability of Prisoners to be Heard

Overview

JHA's COVID-19 Prison Survey Comment Report presents information from comments shared in response to [JHA's COVID-19 survey](#), contextualized with survey data and other information. This survey was responded to by 16,351 people incarcerated in IDOC in late April and early May 2020.

Many prisoners commented that they had difficulty getting concerns heard and addressed within facilities. This section of the report summarizes people's comments regarding law library, grievances, the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), and staff conduct. Although JHA's survey did not contain questions related to these topics, there were comments regarding issues with these areas. This is one of 12 sections reflecting the comments JHA received from people in prisons; the report's Executive Summary and all other sections can be found on our website www.thejha.org.



Ability of Prisoners to be Heard: Law Library, Grievance System, PREA Concerns, and Staff Conduct

LAW LIBRARY

We have no access to the law library. Even though the courts have given extensions, we can't do any meaningful research in the preparation of our cases for when the courts do open up. – Menard

There are certain jobs that go out to work and in my opinion greenhouse worker is not essential but law library clerks are. – Logan

Zero law library access to review legal texts in person even if with a deadline. Only mail correspondence to law library for copies. Very hard to do legal research. – Dixon

No law library clerks, staff working according to COs. Calls do not answer Period 1.5 months. No copies or assistance. – Stateville

In a memorandum released at the start of this 'administrative quarantine,' we were told law library would be provided. I have submitted five request slips, asking to go and listed the upcoming legal deadlines I had. I was never allowed to go nor did I ever receive a reply. – Robinson

I was not allowed access to any of my legal papers for over a month ... To receive legal copies of anything including legal papers, medical documents, or grievances, they want us to attach it to a money voucher and stick through the hole into the officers' bubble

... some papers are irreplaceable. Also anyone along the way looking at and reading these privileged papers. – Graham

While there was no survey question related to access to law library, several people commented reporting issues with lack of law library access. Many courts were closed during the early months of the pandemic; however, people still needed access. Lack of access to adequate legal assistance and resources has been an ongoing reported issue as discussed in JHA's 2019 [Law Library Special Report](#). Of the 12,780 people who responded to [prior JHA surveys](#) at 21 facilities between April 2018 and May 2019, 41% of people disagreed that they had adequate access to law library.

Some administrators reported their lockdown or quarantine level affected people's law library and personal legal material access. Some prisoners reported they particularly did not understand this restriction when other movement was allowed. Some administrators reported that law library staff were expected to make rounds, although the frequency of rounds was not specified, and said prisoners were allowed to submit written requests to the law library, with documented court deadlines prioritized, and for access to legal boxes, prisoners needed to submit written requests to Personal Property indicating which legal box to be accessed and the reason for access.

Some prisoners in survey comments reported law library workers were not making rounds and they did not have access to copies, notaries, filing, legal research or legal boxes. At some facilities multiple people commented about it taking weeks to get requested library materials, being limited in the number of things they could request or having to pay for these services. People who had no funds but who had been able to research and read things in law libraries wrote at some facilities they were now expected to pay for copies up front and they could not afford this. JHA recommended to all facilities where we heard this concern that people be provided with some sort of free remote access. Western administrators have responded that they did allow free copies and people had access to two excess legal boxes per request, as well as notary service.

Some people also reported lack of legal visits and calls, or these being canceled or denied.

Several people also commented about their inability to get information about rules and laws that affect them as prisoners, including IDOC policy.

Why can't new laws be posted on our units? Not everyone goes to the library. – Decatur

No law library access to get necessary legal work done and can't access Administrative Rules or Codes to read about disciplinary procedures. – Graham

People wanted legal research apps on tablets or access through kiosks on housing units.

*We here at Lawrence have no access to the law library ... GTL said they can put the GTL law library on the tablets, so why are we not allowed the app to be downloaded?
– Lawrence*

There were also some comments regarding lack of access to general library materials.

We have no librarian, so no books, magazines, papers, etc. are available to Lawrence's population, unless you can purchase items. There is no literature available to the average inmate. – Lawrence

At Logan, women housed in the X-house reported not having access to a book cart; Logan administrators reported this had been corrected in response to JHA's survey feedback. At several facilities people commented on being locked down without TVs with nothing to do or look at.

A few people also commented that their lack of commissary access meant they could not buy paper, pens or write-outs needed for their legal work.



GRIEVANCES

Us inmates are scared at all times we can't speak without getting threatened ... Every time I try to write a grievance, they throw it away so it never gets addressed.

– Vandalia

We can't write grievances because they read them too. – Shawnee

The grievance process, as far as sending grievances, have improved some. But, the return of grievances is the problem. How and when the paperwork is delivered to the cell houses. It comes up missing. The only person(s) responsible for passing out the mail are the staff. – Menard

Many inmates here won't write grievances because they are either given jobs (favoritism by race) or discouraged from writing one. – Big Muddy

I have filed four grievances for denials of serious medical needs which put my life at risk. I am now having to grieve the fact that they are not answering the grievances.

– Jacksonville

Grievances, you can never win them, because you are an inmate and you can never be right. Even if they are dead to the wrong, you will still lose. The grievance has changed, now you have to put what race you are. What does race have to do with your grievance? – Illinois River

I have written 2 emergency grievances and two regular ones about this, yet, no response. The counselor refuses to answer my grievances. The Warden won't either.

– Graham

There were many comments expressing concerns regarding the integrity of the grievance system. Again, this is not a new issue; of the 12,780 people who responded to [prior JHA surveys](#) at 21 facilities between April 2018 and May 2019, 75% of people disagreed that IDOC's grievance process is effective and only 13% reported they would feel comfortable filing a grievance.

Some people wrote that general lack of responsiveness in IDOC led to the need to file grievances or even litigate.

Only 5% of the request slips I send out get a reply. – Vandalia

Many things within IDOC that we should be able to access by writing a request slip, such as records office or trust fund often go unanswered for months. This leads to people having to write several requests for the same thing and then eventually a grievance just to get simple things like healthcare, medical records, or trust fund balances. Then the counselors complain about the volume of grievances that they receive when they should have just responded to our request slips. This is a waste of everybody's time, energy, resources, and manpower and easily fixed. – Lawrence

Some people felt that grievances are a "waste of ink" or that staff were dismissive of their concerns, for example as related to physical plant issues, which have increased relevance during COVID-19 due to people's need for functional plumbing and clean areas.

Many people commented that they felt that there was no genuine accountability through the grievance process.

The grievance proceeding is a joke, because if you write a grievance on someone the person that hears the grievance is a friend of theirs and will not go against their coworker. Just like the Internal Affairs. They don't care. They will lie for the officer, overlook things and never investigate if an offender has a complaint. Internal Affairs is supposed to be here to make sure that the officers are not messing over the inmates. They don't. They are the ones who mess over the inmates. – Kewanee

Some people wrote that due to COVID-19 lockdowns they did not even have access to grievance boxes to securely turn in their grievance forms. There were reports that staff read and interfered with grievances. People reported not getting responses to multiple grievances filed months prior, and not getting responses to emergency grievances.

At Southwestern people reported that grievances were only being picked up once a week, which would mean that emergency grievances would not be seen in a timely manner. At Lawrence someone sent JHA an emergency grievance that was marked denied by the counselor for being written on the pre-2020 grievance form, while several other people at Lawrence reported the new forms were not available. At some facilities multiple people reported that they were told that grievance forms were unavailable. Additionally, multiple people at different facilities reported lack of other necessary forms, such as money vouchers, which may prevent them from sending legal mail.

When we ask for the grievance, we are either being told, "there are none" or we are asked, "Why? What do you need a grievance about?" Etc. Basically it's an obstacle, in which no grievance is given so no grievance can be written. – Lawrence

My grievances are returned telling me inappropriate forms however the ones that were accepted were on the same forms they sent back. I was threatened by staff telling me that if I filed a grievance I was 'digging my own grave' I was apprised that also the porter was told to give me a hard time. This has been horrific. – Graham R&C

We have not been allowed to possess grievances for over a month, I've personally wrote letters to the counselor, concerning the grievances, he promised to send some, twice, but he never did so, the first excuse was that no grievances had been printed, then all of the staff say that the documents are locked-up, but there's no excuse why we should not be permitted to have grievances to contest or complain about the many

issues around the prison, also the countless wrongdoing by the staff, which are many, that's why we're not being allowed the grievances. – Western

Several people wrote about retaliation from staff for filing grievances.

Putting us all on commissary restriction in retaliation for using a system we are allowed to use is cruel. It also makes me afraid to file a grievance, as this is just one example of staff here retaliating for grievances filed against them. Why even have the grievance process in place if we, as inmates, are just going to be punished for using it. – Taylorville

COs threatened to take our rec, tv, phone, privileges if we write them up or write Springfield. – Vandalia

If you write a grievance about anything, and I mean anything, there will be a retaliation coming behind it. – Western

Grievances being turned in right in front of officers who will retaliate. No privacy.
– Graham

People that write grievances about situations concerning COVID-19 and staff conduct have been getting told not to pursue them and to stop telling the local news.
– Illinois River

I was put in segregation for writing a grievance about not having proper cleaning supplies nor anything to clean our cells with and not having any face masks.
– Big Muddy

Here, we don't get to properly grieve any issues due to staff retaliation. – Robinson

Threatened to take what little patio time away if we write grievances or have our people call about the mismanagement of the situation. – Jacksonville

Several people reported also that various things have gone missing through institutional mail or stated that they are in the position of only having one copy of some things that they don't want to lose through the mail.

Other people commented that they felt the grievance process is too slow. Some commented that when and if they did eventually get grievance responses they were unsatisfying or nonresponsive. For example, a response just stating the issues they attempted to grieve were “outside the scope of [DR 504](#)” without further explanation or statement of what IDOC might be doing to address such problems. IDOC has posted a [position](#) that would be charged in part with improving the integrity of the grievance system. This is an overdue measure and JHA will continue to advocate for improvements and accountability. Prisoners often send JHA their grievances because they are too afraid to turn them in at their facilities and while JHA does track people's issues and use them in our system advocacy people must file their grievances in order to comply with procedure and properly document their efforts to obtain relief.

People are scared and need someone to tell their stories to. They need to know that if they come forward, they will not be beaten to death because some of them have been threatened with that. – Western

I am attaching a handwritten grievance with the survey that I have had under my bed and didn't turn in out of fear I would be treated a certain way, and/or be prevented from being transferred or put in population because of my complaint. Only because I am confident that someone who can have a voice besides myself, is the reason why I am sending this because I really felt as if my voice did not matter. – Graham R&C



PRISON RAPE ELIMINATION ACT (PREA)

A few COs have verbally stated sexual things to other inmates with playful language behind it. ... You can't talk to PREA about it because officers always seem to know who called, so PREA is becoming problematic with keeping you confidential, so why contact them? – Danville

With COVID-19 lockdowns there was a need for increased vigilance around issues of custodial sexual abuse and harassment and concern about possible increases in incidence with people being further isolated. JHA's method of surveying for COVID-19 allowed people to send free confidential and anonymous reports to an outside entity and promoted PREA reporting. Typically, people can make anonymous reports via privileged mail to JHA; however, for the COVID-19 surveying people were provided with a prepaid return envelope and did not have to put their return information on the envelope. Additionally, people had the cover of many other surveys being returned at the same time, so it would not in any way be discernable that they were making a PREA report. This exercise has made it clear that people do need a continually available free and anonymous way to report concerns about sexual abuse and harassment outside of IDOC. As noted in the communications section, some people reported that they did not have access to the IDOC PREA hotline or have funds or commissary access or had other issues that prevented them from contacting others on the outside or sending mail.

While there were a wide variety of reports, with only some being specific enough to be followed up on, there were some themes.

Several transgender people reported having issues including with their housing, lack of approval for protective custody, lack of availability of equivalent privileges (e.g. phones, out-of-cell time, video visitation, etc.) due to concerns about safety and security, not having appropriate clothing or hygiene including access to razors, harassment by other prisoners and lack of assistance with harassment from staff.

There were also some reports of inappropriate sexual comments and threats from staff at some facilities. Multiple people reported homophobic comments, slurs or actions were tolerated or even condoned by some staff.

I feel like I'm treated differently by some staff due to me being gay. I was called a faggot by another inmate in front of staff and IA told me to just get over it when I told them I was worried for my safety. I was given the choice to get over it or go to seg. – Taylorville

There were also several reports of issues with showers including that staff "forced" multiple people to shower together, allegations of staff voyeurism and cross-gender viewing, or just general concerns regarding shower visibility and lack of privacy.

JHA again recommends that IDOC be transparent regarding accountability for PREA issues. Currently it is unclear what response people can expect to concerns about harassment. Prisoners are not informed if staff are reprimanded. It seemed in general many people still lacked confidence that IDOC would be responsive to their concerns about escalating situations regarding sexual safety or that they could report safely and anonymously while locked down.



ISSUES WITH STAFF

No one comes to our cells to ask, or see if we are ok, or nothing ... Inmates are coughing all the time and nobody checks to see why. – Pontiac

We don't tell staff anything because they will give us disciplinary report for bothering them or we get cursed out. – Centralia

The people [staff] that are here are here just to get a paycheck ... They say little guy things to the offender. They belittle the offender, and they make sure the offender knows that even if they are right, they will always be wrong in the eyes of the ones in charge. The staff will lie for each other and the Warden goes right along with it. As for me, [this prison] has shown me that I can't trust people in authority and that these people in authority still feed off this Black and White thing. – Kewanee

The only comment I have is that the officers in this institution are not properly trained to deal with this situation. I've had officers tell us that 'we're all going to get the virus because it's airborne.' It would be helpful if the officers would be educated properly and trained to deal with us in a more sensitive manner. This is stressful enough and having officers yelling at us, not answering some of our questions, doesn't help. – Decatur

It's a staff full of contradictions. We have counselors that do the bare minimum even when our families call with concerns they are disrespected and turned away with contradictory information. The staff here especially the newcomers feel it's okay to talk to us in a condescending manner. I've been incarcerated for [many] years and I've never felt so disrespected and the sad part is that when we try to voice our concerns some staff members threaten us with a disciplinary action which is known for retaliation. Please something has to be done. When I took my time disrespect wasn't a part of the deal. – Decatur

I have heard several COs state that it would be best if all inmates could contract COVID-19 and die. – Taylorville

Here at Western, most of us are afraid to say anything to staff as we then get singled out and treated unfair. – Western

Some of the communication between staff and inmates is very concerning. I mean honestly, I am concerned for my safety and theirs as well from what I might do if staff approach me wrong, bullying. – Western

The officer basically said, out of his own mouth, that they do what they want down here because Springfield is too far away. And, they are not coming down here, and it's true.
– Vienna

Said if our people keep calling Springfield, then he was going to punish us for that. My family is concerned about me, and that I'm not safe here. – Jacksonville

Whenever we bring up any health issues, cleaning surfaces, or social distancing, staff tell us it's our problem, they just work here. – Southwestern

There was a particular need for staff to show kindness and compassion and practice de-escalation during the pandemic when people's anxieties about their incarceration and isolation were heightened.

Many people had concerns about staff in relation to use of PPE, cleaning, social distancing, lack of response to medical issues, and other issues directly related to COVID-19 concerns as discussed in other sections of this report. For example, there were several comments regarding staff not following and modeling good hygiene practices by not covering coughs, sometimes as a "joke" or even a "threat." People believed that staff were coming to work while sick.

Certain officers have admitted that their coworkers have tested positive for COVID-19 and they are refusing to stay home and quarantine and they are refusing to wear face masks. – Stateville

I think that some of the COs are not taking this COVID-19 virus serious, because they continue to walk up and down the gallery with their mask down, putting me and other high-risk inmates at risk. – Pontiac

JHA did note some exceptional comments regarding positive experiences with staff.

We had one CO that was taking action before anyone. CO [X] started wearing a mask way before they ordered them to wear one, and she gave us cleaning supplies to clean all surface areas when it was her shift. She was tough and mean, goes by the book, but she also cared about our safety and hers. – Robinson

Nonetheless, many people at different facilities chose to comment about staff unprofessionalism including making inappropriate, insensitive, uncaring, and even cruel statements making light of the pandemic or even about hoping prisoners did get COVID-19. For example, at Menard JHA saw in paperwork submitted with survey comments that a counselor at Menard wrote in a response to concerns and questions that was perceived as flippant and dismissive "be thankful you have toilet paper," and prisoners at Menard also reported staff said things including, "if I catch COVID-19, I am going to make sure I come in and give it to all of the inmates," "A nurse told me if I get sick, the only thing she can do for me is toe tag me," and one person commented that staff told him they "don't care if we die. There will be less black people in the world." Even if these comments represent exceptional "bad apples" or "gallows humor" they taint the overall impression of IDOC's good faith and professionalism in COVID-19 response and cause needless anxiety, suffering and anger within a closed system that does not need more of those sentiments.

I also overheard staff – COs talking maybe if all the inmates get covid-19 and die it would do society a favor and started laughing. – Graham

I have heard some staff joke about digging holes for the bodies out back. – Taylorville

We were around staff who openly said they wanted to catch the virus so they could get hazard pay. As well as, COs who before the pandemic were always understaffed now are around us more than ever, which puts us at greater risk. – Kewanee

Dixon staff have become very cruel and are treating inmates in a punishment manner. Officers constantly curse at inmates and talk down to them. Saying things like 'I hope Covid-19 kills all of you,' 'I'm glad we can keep you guys in the cages now.' Calling us bitches for complaining. – Dixon

JHA has reported many such issues regarding staff conduct raised in COVID-19 surveys to individual facility leadership. While some administrators reported all allegations of staff misconduct are taken seriously and investigated, few took JHA's offer to share additional details about concerns from our surveys or bothered to respond. Such concerns about need for more professionalism in IDOC are not new; of the 12,780 people who responded to [prior JHA surveys](#) at 21 facilities between April 2018 and May 2019, 60% of people disagreed that most staff treat prisoners with respect.

As noted in other sections of this report there were many issues about lack of staff and supervisor responsiveness to reported issues. People wanted increased supervisor presence and use of cameras and review of footage to help with accountability, although some pointed out camera coverage was not comprehensive. Several issues commented upon in survey responses suggested need for better supervision including use of PPE, cleaning concerns, bullying, ensuring privilege provision such as phone usage, issues of staff accessibility, etc. In addition, people felt there was a lack of incarcerated worker supervision. While some people reported supervisors were not helpful, other people reported not even getting access. JHA continues to recommend supervisor and Warden rounds be regularly conducted as well as camera use and review. Some administrators responded to concerns by saying they are conducted and logged. A few people reported that staff were falsely logging contacts with prisoners or rounds that did not occur. Many people reported not having access to counselors. Someone asked who he could tell if there was an issue with staff performing their duties due to the perception of lack of appropriate accountability.

There were safety concerns including that people reported cellmate issues including threats of physical harm were not being responded to by staff. People had concerns about lack of staff attentiveness and emergency buttons. Several people wrote about staff inattention to duties including reports of staff playing cards, sleeping, and not supervising units appropriately resulting in things such as people hogging phones or bullying others. Some people commented on staff "lounging," or coming and going on units where they were not assigned to work, possibly causing cross contamination. Some people also felt that staff response to medical concerns was not swift.

For four winged buildings, I am surprised there are no cameras in any of the wings. There are so many fights in the dayroom and all of them happen with no CO in sight. They see this from the bubble, and no one does anything. – Menard MSU

On multiple occasions, I have found officers (mostly on 3rd shift) sleeping, clearly hungover (maybe sleep deprived) or even clearly under the influence. I always felt I could take no action since there are no cameras in the 'bubble.' – Robinson

The officers are lazy. Play cards in the foyer. Never responds back to you when you call them. They only do things on their time. – Graham

They say they have trained officers that's on duty 24/7, but they hang out off the wing away from the inmates all sitting or hanging out behind another locked door enjoying the AC that's for officers only, and if you need an officer you would have to be able to make it out to the room they call a foyer, also you would have to bang on the foyer locked door. – Western

Some people shared concerns about serious incidents involving excessive use of force, or staff use of made-up sanctions or humiliation tactics. Some people reported that hunger strikes were not being reported.

Some people continued to feel that discipline was not evenly applied by staff and that some other prisoners got away with things they should not because of lack of appropriate supervision or response. Many people feel that some staff write “bogus” tickets. Some felt that staff practiced mass punishment rather than writing individual tickets.

At some facilities people reported that shakedowns were conducted or property was broken, confiscated, or staff allowed prisoners to steal others’ personal belongings as a retaliatory tactic. As noted above, many people expressed concerns about retaliation for filing grievances or even raising issues to staff. Some people commented that staff will provoke prisoners in order to produce a confrontation.

Some people commented that during COVID-19 that they felt that security staff was particularly resentful or unpleasant, perhaps due to having to pass trays or take on new COVID-19 duties or issues. At Decatur there were several reports of staff “screaming” or “yelling” at women and that women reported being told to “shut up” by staff when they tried to ask questions, and there were several concerns about retaliatory actions in relation to commissary, as was the case during JHA’s February 2020 visit to the facility. Such responses are not trauma-informed.

Officers' frustration with the current situation shows in their attitudes daily. – Danville

People felt that staff took their “privileges” such as out-of-cell time, recreation time, dayroom, yard, or time to use phones and showers arbitrarily and punitively. It was reported that staff would deny people cleaning supplies if they were irritated with the individual.

Any time we try to go to yard, something always comes up, and the staff will tell us that yard was cancelled. – Robinson

Officers often try to hurry up and finish all the dayroom time and then they sit back in the bubble for the last 3 hours of their shift. – Dixon

According to the memo Springfield sent us we are entitled to one 20-minute phone call and showers. A lot of the staff have been extremely disrespectful screaming and yelling at us to get off the phone when we haven't had our full 20 minutes. Sometimes the person would be on the phone 10 minutes and the COs are threatening us to give us tickets. – Decatur

Others commented on lack of consistency from staff. Some asked that staff be retrained or reminded of procedures; expectations for what is allowed or not needs to be made clear and staff needs to consistently enforce it, or else people see it as arbitrary and retaliatory.

As discussed in the PPE section of this report, there continued to be concerns about staff not properly displaying their identification and people's inability to know who staff was particularly where masks were worn. Some people commented that some staff refused to give their names when asked. JHA again notes that IDOC must be able to identify staff by post and that people should still be able to grieve issues without staff names.

IDOC officers no longer wear ID tags, so I can't identify. I can't hear names said either.
– Menard (hard-of-hearing individual)

Some people wrote about their perceptions of staff inappropriate favoritism or racism, e.g. discrimination in job assignments or grants of early release or sentencing credits. IDOC is now supposed to be tracking and looking into such issues under an August 2019 Administrative Directive, [Addressing and Reducing Disparate Treatment and Impact](#). At Vandalia, people reported staff called prisoners "boy," which is completely inappropriate.

They just do more for the whites even with tickets, they try to say all blacks are in gangs but these white guys blatantly show they got swastikas all on them they let them pick who they want to cell with but make us deal with whoever. – Graham

There were several reports that staff inappropriately told prisoners about other's offenses or used inappropriate slurs in referring to people and their offenses.

They [staff] also give sensitive private info. about prisoners with sex cases to inmate office workers to share with other inmates in the cell houses to harass and intimidate them. – Taylorville

At a few facilities people reported staff breaking rules by smoking and chewing tobacco in the facility.

Some people felt their mail or calls expressing concerns to people outside were improperly censored. There were also a few comments about perceptions that staff retaliated for people communicating their concerns to people on the outside. For example, at Logan people believed that a woman was punished for contacting a news station in April. Logan administrators responded that this person received a ticket for participating in a three-way call, which is prohibited. At a few facilities people wrote to JHA that staff referred to them filling out our COVID-19 surveys as "snitching." People have a right to share their opinions.



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This survey project was generously supported by the
John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation