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



Perceptions and Experiences from People inside Prison during the Pandemic

Section: Use of Personal Protective Equipment

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.

This section of the report summarizes people's comments regarding the use of personal protective equipment. 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.



Use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

There were no JHA COVID-19 survey questions about personal protective equipment (PPE), because at the time the survey was finalized in April it was still unclear which staff had been directed to use PPE, or what sort of PPE was being used in IDOC amid the worldwide shortage. Further, prisoners were only being supplied PPE in limited cases, such as if they were suspected to have the virus. As of September, IDOC's guidance for whom should be provided with what particular PPE and at what frequency is still unclear, although staff and prisoners have been issued some PPE.

Wearing masks is not enforced! Staff or inmates. – Big Muddy

Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) guidance recommended universal masking in congregate facilities, including corrections, on [March 31](#). IDOC later represented that they had provided all staff at Stateville with masks on March 31, and on April 2 all staff agencywide were directed to wear masks. JHA received reports that staff were not wearing masks much later than these dates and continues to get reports of improper PPE usage. According to public information, universal provision of masks for prisoners did not occur until May.

In [JHA's April 8 recommendations](#) we reiterated that IDOC should explain, in detail, expectations for who should be taking various PPE measures without exception, and where exceptions or modifications to PPE protocols may be necessary, to staff, to people who are incarcerated and to their outside supports. Additionally, we recommended that IDOC educate people on proper use of PPE, monitor use, and reinforce training, and reeducate people who use it improperly. Despite the lack of survey questions relating to use of PPE, it was a subject frequently commented upon. This section discusses comments regarding Staff and Prisoner use of PPE.



Staff Use of PPE

I do appreciate how hard they are working. I know it's a hard time for everyone and that the staff is learning how to handle it just like we are. I just feel like some try really hard, and others just walk around with no mask, no gloves, and it is a little scary.

– Logan

IDOC has represented that all staff are screened and have temperatures taken upon arriving at facilities for shifts. However, as it becomes clear that many people are contagious prior to being symptomatic, such measures are not likely to adequately protect prisoners and staff. There is a need for both increased testing and enforcement of available prevention measures, including minimizing unnecessary contacts with others, practicing social distancing and good hygiene, and properly using PPE.

There were many reports in survey comments about staff not using PPE or using it improperly. It was commonly reported that staff did not wear masks covering their noses and mouths as required. Some of JHA's [staff survey](#) respondents and some administrators also acknowledged that other staff members' PPE usage was problematic, and some staff in surveys expressed desire for increased or more protective forms of PPE.

the staff hap hazardly wears masks

They pass out food, soap, mail and cleaning supplies, potentially infecting inmates who are basically trapped in a cage with no way to distance or prevent transmission of the disease. – Pontiac

Some of the COs have not been wearing their mask throughout the whole day like they are supposed to. Some other staff have not been wearing them either. – Murphysboro

The staff as a whole have not been taking this virus seriously. They're always taking off their mask, and they don't wear gloves, period. – Robinson

Also the staff were still not wearing gloves or masks until a week later [after staff moved prisoners off a unit after another prisoner reportedly tested positive]. Some are still not wearing them properly. Two staff members that have tested positive were 2 of the ones I've seen wear a mask, but it was only half on and not covering their mouth. – Pontiac MSU

Not all staff members are using masks and/or gloves, even though there are bulletins posted everywhere saying staff are wearing them for our protection and theirs. Was told by staff members that it's not mandatory. – Shawnee

Many people believed staff should have been wearing masks and gloves throughout the pandemic response. People also specifically commented regarding some healthcare staff's lack of use or misuse of PPE, such as not wearing gloves during medication passes. Where gloves were used, some people commented on lack of adequate changes of gloves or cross contamination issues. Some staff shared in [survey responses](#) that venter healthcare provider Wexford was not providing appropriate PPE and that they were buying their own PPE and hygiene

materials because of concern about the inadequacy of the PPE that was supplied. Some expressed that they felt that PPE protections came too late.

They came around and took everyone's temp, didn't change gloves, but were touching doorknobs in gloves. – Decatur

I went to healthcare to see the nurse practitioner, and the officer that handcuffed me in healthcare was not wearing a face mask or gloves, and the nurse was sitting 2ft away talking to me and had her mask on her neck instead of her mouth. – Menard

The nurses sometimes don't have masks on when they come by us. The nurse is the person trained to care for the sick. But they are not helping us by not putting on their masks. – Big Muddy

Nurses are passing out medication with no gloves on and placing their hands on and in the rim of the cups they pass medication out in. – Lawrence

While drawing blood ... nurses did not wear gloves or masks. When I asked about gloves, I was told that protocol is for them to put gloves on after they find a vein. There were 3 inmates and 3 nurses drawing blood, none had gloves on, even while changing vials! My male nurse put on gloves only after I questioned him. – Shawnee

The officers congregate in the dialysis room for no reason. They often don't wear masks. While talking about how they have been around sick family members, who have COVID-19. This is very scary for all of us on dialysis. The nurses do not wear their masks properly. Staff in general only put masks on when inmates approach them. – Graham

Additionally, dietary was an area where there were a lot of concerns about PPE practices and the delays in providing PPE, e.g. some people reported that PPE was not worn while food was prepared, only while serving. Unsurprisingly, [as JHA forewarned](#), a lot of cases appear to be traceable to dietary. IDOC must ensure that they can safely provide food to their population. Other issues with dietary in relation to cleaning, treatment of incarcerated workers, social distancing, cohorting, and food quality are discussed in other parts of this report.

Some staff refuse to wear masks. Sometimes 4-5 staff members congregate in close proximity to each other with no mask on. The staff acts as though they're not the most likely source of Covid-19. – Dixon

Security staff are not following appropriate procedures for wearing protective masks on a consistent basis, i.e. they'll have them on but pulled down off their face. When confronted about these health hazards, they tell us "don't worry about it" or "they don't care." – Vienna

People's concerns were heightened when it was known that there were staff with the virus at the facility. Staff – often out of necessity – touch prisoners' bodies, living environments, property, ID cards, mail, food trays, medications, etc. Prisoners reported that they continued to have more of such contacts than was necessary and with more than the number of staff necessary. This raises heightened concerns given that staff are the most likely vectors of the virus within prisons, given that prisoner transfers have halted, and outside visitors are excluded.

Many people commented about tensions and confrontations with staff about improper PPE usage. People felt that improper PPE usage evidenced that staff was uncaring about their well-being. Several people stated that staff responded poorly and with hostility when asked why they were not properly wearing PPE or not wearing their PPE at all, e.g. threatening retaliation, or retaliating. For instance, someone at Vandalia reported losing his job because of asking staff to wear their masks, and people at Pontiac MSU likewise reported not being let out of cells after filing PPE-related staff grievances.

The staff are not wearing masks when they were told to do so and when we write a grievance on anything to do with COVID-19 we get backlash from it, so there are a lot of inmates who are scared to say anything. – Jacksonville

What is disconcerting is staff that do not take into account the serious nature of this pandemic. If you ask a staff member why he/she isn't wearing a mask, you're more apt to get cussed or threatened. – Pontiac

My biggest concern has been staff members' improper use of PPE. I see the same pair of nitrile gloves being worn for hours, and I see masks worn improperly (e.g. untied at the bottom so the mask flaps in the breeze, worn over the mouth but not the nose, worn over those stylishly thick, bushy beards, or slid up to their foreheads so they can talk more clearly.) It's as if there is no knowledgeable oversight. We are often treated like 'dirty inmates' who have the plague... yet COVID, when it finally hits here, will come in on a staff member, who starts an epidemic through sloppy use of PPE, mark my words. – East Moline

Not all officers wore protective masks at all time, some had them around their necks even when talking to inmates. Then when sergeants, higher ranked or health care workers would come in they would put them on. Other officers would call them ahead a time and they would have them on. – Taylorville

Several people wrote about filing grievances regarding staff improper PPE usage; however, no one reported this was effective. Many survey respondents provided specific names of staff who were particularly lax in their PPE use, which JHA offered to pass on to administrators, but our offer was not accepted.

If they pass it on to us, what will a grievance do to help us live and get over the coronavirus? – Pontiac

Some staff verbally say they hope they get sick, so they wouldn't have to come to work, which puts us at even more risk because they take their masks off. - Sheridan

People felt that the ongoing misuse of PPE by staff stemmed from lack of accountability, noting that cameras could easily be used to review staff PPE usage. JHA agrees, although we also believe that the range of camera coverage within IDOC should be improved. Currently, it is unclear how staff would be reprimanded for not complying with proper use of PPE, how often reprimands occur or if at all, or whether they are effective. JHA has only been told that for progressive discipline is used to address improper staff PPE usage. Some staff reported higher compliance over time and with use of surgical masks instead of the heavier-duty KN95s.

They constantly pull them down around their neck until they see supervisors coming, then they put them on proper and take them right back off as soon as the supervisor leaves the housing unit. – Southwestern

Many people commented that, at the time the surveys were completed, some staff would wear masks only in the presence of supervisors. Others also commented on some supervisors not correcting staff for improper PPE usage, and also that some supervisors or administrators were not modeling good PPE practice and were not wearing masks when in prisoner living areas. At some facilities people said that staff on later shifts were less likely to comply with PPE rules when wardens were not on grounds. Staff also were commonly reported to not be wearing masks, or socially distancing, in control or “bubble” security areas.

People also expressed increased fears that some staff were coming to work sick, and some wrote about watching people touch things such as doors, handles, railings, or their property after coughing or sneezing on their hands. At one facility, a staff member reportedly coughed without a mask saying, “seasonal allergies.” At other facilities, people reported that staff would “joke” or “threaten” by coughing around prisoners.

Then you got some staff that don’t care and don’t take the guidelines seriously at all. They walk around, no mask, no gloves, and when you ask them why you don’t have PPE on, they say everyone is overreacting and taking this COVID-19 too far.
– Sheridan

Several people wrote that staff were outwardly skeptical or hostile about COVID-19 precautions and use of PPE, e.g. at Pinckneyville, some staff reportedly said things regarding masks such as, “it’s not going to do anything,” and at Menard, that COVID-19 is a “political scam.” Regardless of a person’s individual opinions or beliefs, they must be professionals at work and adhere to IDOC rules and public health directives. Given the information provided by disease experts and the public health guidance that has been issued on COVID-19 transmission, IDOC employees also should adhere to recommended public health guidelines outside of work in order to protect their workplace. JHA continues to hear rumors about staff acting irresponsibly and dismissively toward COVID-19 precautions outside of work hours, likely endangering their colleagues and charges.

These police are not following the same instruction they’re asking us to follow... Most just say “President Trump don’t wear one [a mask].” – Lincoln

Protective masks worn by staff aren’t being used as much, claiming that they are unrealistic and annoying. – Western

People commented on other inappropriate staff actions and comments, e.g. at Menard someone wrote some staff “even take their masks off and joke about it saying COVID-19 kills mostly black men, so they’re fine.” At Pinckneyville, someone wrote that a particular staff member, who was named, reportedly responded to concern regarding not wearing a mask as follows, “he told me to mind my f*ing business. Then I said ‘it is my business,’ to which he replied he hopes myself and my whole family get COVID and die.”

At various facilities people had concerns about staff searching them or shaking down cells and touching their things without PPE. Several people wrote about their concerns about staff touching them and their things and their inability to sanitize after these contacts.

The proper safety precautions have not been taken while interacting with security. They will go into multiple cells at a time shaking down and never change gloves! This has happened many times despite our bringing it to their attention. – Illinois River

Additionally, both staff and prisoners expressed concern when they knew staff from their facility had been in other facilities, e.g. as occurred as part of the [Stateville response](#) to COVID-19, when tactical teams were sent in from across IDOC to assist with the early outbreak at that facility. People at Stateville also expressed concern about staff from other facilities coming into Stateville and not complying with PPE usage.

Staff have been leaving Robinson CC and going to Stateville CC to help, and instead of a mandatory 2-week quarantine, they are returning the next day or same day. – Robinson

Why did IDOC have officers from here go work at Stateville where there is a known outbreak that is rampant. The officers worked 2-week 12 hour shifts then 3 days off and back to work at Graham. I thought as per the CDC they should have had to quarantine 14 days after exposure. – Graham

There are several staff who do not wear masks once they're in the industries complex. This includes drivers, who've gone to highly problematic and contagious facilities such as Stateville. – Hill

People also expressed concerns regarding the adequacy of PPE provided. In addition to lack of glove changes, someone noted, “Some COs are made to reuse face masks even though they’ve basically sweated clean through them.” Others commented that staff said they were not using masks because they were too hot and uncomfortable, particularly in un-airconditioned prison environments.

There were a few comments regarding staff at one point wearing homemade masks that had unspecified “offensive” slogans on them.

People reported that it is even more difficult to be able to identify staff wearing masks. As JHA [previously reported](#), predating the pandemic, there has been an ongoing issue throughout the Department with prisoners’ being unable to readily identify staff members by their ID badges. Since IDOC changed uniforms, staff do not always have identification badges visible, as required.

All staff members of IDOC should be forced to wear big bold nametags on their shirts and outside garments at all times because due to everybody being forced to wear facemask the mask makes it extremely hard to properly identify the staff members especially when staff misconduct occurs. – Pontiac

Some administrators responded to JHA’s concerns about staff PPE use by stating that staff PPE was restocked daily and replenished on request, and that designated safety officers tour the facility along with administrative and supervisory staff to ensure that people are appropriately donning PPE. Yet concerns persist.

Staff and workers did not wear masks to cover their mouths and nose. I had to put in a grievance in order to make them comply with the warden. Even when I did grieve it to the warden, they did for a day, then stopped. – Menard

We continue to recommend making PPE usage expectations clear and public. Now it seems all staff are required to wear masks, but it is unclear if they can take them off in certain areas, e.g. to eat and drink, and how that can be done safely. It remains unclear whether PPE changes are adequate, although IDOC reports supplies are available. There is need for greater information about when staff are expected to wear and change gloves, clean or sanitize their hands, and how IDOC is spot-checking and enforcing PPE use. Does IDOC also have expectations for staff complying with COVID-19 best practices outside of the workplace so that they are less likely to introduce the virus to their coworkers and prisoners? Updated guidance makes clear that masks and proper PPE usage are some of the best tools to keep the virus from spreading, and conversely, lack of such use is a danger.



Prisoner Use of PPE

In [JHA's April 8 recommendations](#) we reiterated that IDOC should permit incarcerated people to wear masks as they feel is warranted, and not just in situations where it is absolutely required. IDOC should also consider making other PPE more broadly available as best practices evolve and supplies permit.

We are not provided with PPE supplies, only a Next of Kin information sheet.

We are not getting masks or gloves they have an industry for embroidery that can make masks for the inmates here and other facilities. – Danville

We continue hearing rumors that all offenders will be issued two (2) washable masks that are being made at Centralia Corr. Ctr. At this time it is speculation and conjecture until they actually arrive and/or are handed out. – Graham

IDOC represented that on April 4, every prisoner at Stateville was issued a surgical mask. On April 25, every prisoner at Logan, Fox Valley ATC, Hill, and Sheridan (all facilities with diagnosed positive cases at the time) received masks. On May 2, all IDOC prisoners were issued KN95 masks that were to be used for a week at a time.

On May 2nd inmates received KN95 masks and are required to wear them whenever outside of our cells. However, several staff members continue to remove their masks while on the deck. – Big Muddy

Masks were provided on May 2, but many do not wear them properly. - Western

Some people commented that issuance of PPE improved the climate.

I really must say that in my [decades] of this incarceration (brutally honestly speaking), I have NEVER seen this level of "human" cooperation between inmates and STAFF. [...] Overall, this facility is doing ALL they possibly can to get through this pandemic safely for staff - and inmates alike. PPEs (masks and gloves) are in use frequently and overall mood from staff to inmate has changed dramatically. – Centralia

People believed high-risk individuals should have been provided with PPE earlier.

Initially JHA fielded many complaints regarding lack of PPE for incarcerated workers. Some people expressed that they felt that people cleaning and passing trays should wear masks and gloves. As noted in the Staff PPE section above, gloves are not always indicated as they may actually contribute to cross contamination in some circumstances. In some situations, use of handwashing or hand or surface sanitizer may be preferred. Again, we recommend making it clear to staff and people who are incarcerated what the expectations are for PPE use based on consultation with health experts.

The gallery workers touch everything brooms, garbage, mops, trash, food trays, milk and more with no gloves. – Stateville

Dietary workers are not provided with masks when taking trays to the quarantine housing units. – Western

At some facilities incarcerated workers received PPE earlier than the general population. However, as with staff, JHA received some reports that incarcerated workers also were not using PPE properly.

Menard CC does not permit inmates to wear cloth masks or any type of substitute for a mask... Menard will not allow inmates (not including workers) to wear masks (professional or makeshift) to protect fellow inmates and themselves from exposure to COVID-19. – Menard

The inmates in the kitchen just started wearing masks on the 11 to 6 shift. First time ever 4-28-20. – Danville

Prisoner workers were eventually given latex gloves, but it became a false sense of security because they did everything with the same pair of gloves: clean toilets then pass out our food. – Stateville

Also, the early masks in use were not N95 equivalents. Someone at Stateville mailed JHA a mask used in the early part of the pandemic that was flimsy and see-through.



They do not provide us with masks that are helpful in any way. They are white, see through, and very thin. – Lincoln

We need face masks and gloves ... I believe I could get several guys here with me to donate money for masks and gloves for incarcerated. – Pontiac

Since they began providing us with masks, many inmates' masks have broken (ear loops) so they are walking around without them. – Dixon

Some people commented that staff were writing tickets for broken masks. Administrators have stated that they will replace masks as needed.

When masks were eventually issued, some people expressed concerns that prisoners wearing them might be in conflict with rules, e.g. someone wrote, "We was not given any type of memo stating that all offenders must now wear a face mask when leaving our cells and according to the ILCS covering our face is against the rules under [DR 201](#) which is "concealment of identity" that carries 6 months across the board! Therefore a memo needs to be signed and issued to all offenders." A Pontiac staff member also commented in their survey, "I heard a Lt. tell a worker (offender) that they were not to wear the mask because it would be considered concealing his identity and then he laughed." There were reported to be some inappropriate responses from staff to prisoners' desire for protection, e.g. at Taylorville, some people reported that staff told people they could use a garbage bag as a mask, conveying the message that they should suffocate themselves. Some people described having handmade masks confiscated.

I've made my own mask and was told to take it off. I felt that was not fair because that's one of the things to do to stop the spread. – Danville

I was covering my mouth and nose with a mask I made out of a T. shirt the officer took it from me and stated to me that he would write me up if I cover my face again. – Graham

There were a few comments that some prisoners defaced their own or others' masks.

Many people, and JHA, expressed concerns regarding people being required to use the same KN95 mask for a week when this is not recommended. It is recommended by health authorities to rotate mask usage daily if they are being reused and cannot be properly cleaned. Some staff reported that prisoners, as of September, were being issued more than one mask at a time; however, policy is not public or clear about Departmental expectations.

They've just now provided us with a face mask to wear when in dayroom. 1 only. 3-4 weeks after COVID case was determined on my wing. – Hill

Other people were confused by expected usage of PPE. For example, in large dorm settings people said they were only required to wear masks outside, where they were less likely to infect others, but may nevertheless potentially encounter people not in their cohort. It is not clear for people in dorm settings when mask usage is mandatory. Again, IDOC should provide, continually repeat, and make public clear guidelines and explanations of when PPE is to be used.

All of the sudden, starting in May, they want us to wear masks, but only outside. – Robinson

Some people wrote that they appreciated receiving PPE. However, others still experienced this protective practice as inadequate and punitive, or noted inconsistent enforcement.

They just gave us KN95 masks and said anytime we come out of our cells it's mandatory to wear or you don't come out. They say they will replace them weekly and if they get quote "smelly" just wash them in your sink. – Kewanee

Here in North 2 cellhouse, on the 1st shift, half the workers do not properly wear the N95 face masks that were handed out on 5-2-2020. 1st shift officer said inmates

cannot leave their cell without wearing a mask. 2nd and 3rd shift do not even wear a mask to pass out food trays or perform gallery work. – Menard

Why are inmates allowed out their cell without a face mask? It is posted on the institutional channel but the staff does not enforce this said rule! – Stateville

Staff and other prisoners also commented that some prisoners did not properly wear PPE or were not wearing their PPE at all.

Very hard to breath in the N95 face masks they passed out. Will only get worse as it gets hotter outside! No air or AC in these buildings! – Graham

At Pinckneyville, it was reported that there were postings saying that if people did not wear their masks, they would receive disciplinary segregation. We understand from IDOC administrators that this is not appropriate and the sanction for someone not wearing a mask would be to not permit the person to participate in the out-of-cell activity unless wearing a mask. This was raised in facility follow up.

Someone requested that IDOC also consider PPE for release.

I feel it should be mandatory that all people/inmates leaving IDOC on MSR or otherwise, on release from IDOC should be supplied a face mask and gloves. A lot of inmates take public transportation home. I want to be safe going home. – Lawrence

As someone at Decatur wrote, "I'm terrified I'm going to bring it [COVID-19] home to my family and child." JHA requested information about what was being issued to people on release in Warden Questionnaires and received few responses. While we believe PPE is being issued, IDOC should again make this information public to relieve anxieties.

Although these comments and the survey data JHA collected on PPE usage are from April and May of 2020, we continue to receive letters, phone calls and emails providing us with information on many of the same issues related to COVID-19, including lack of proper PPE usage.



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