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



Perceptions and Experiences from People inside Prison during the Pandemic

Section: Programming & Early Release

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 programming and early release, for although JHA surveys did not have any questions specific to these areas, many people chose to comment about these issues. 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.



Programming & Early Release

PROGRAMMING

Why can't all of us stuck in our rooms sign these contracts and start getting days, maybe help keep our minds occupied and expand our knowledge. – Decatur

I have been down here 2 years now, haven't been in one program, no school and I'm supposed to be mandatory ABE. – Jacksonville

What is being done to force IDOC to comply with the legislative intent to provide cognitive behavioral therapy or behavioral change classes to all offenders who wish to participate. As it stands right now [from administrators] you have to be at least 1 year short to qualify for classes. ... Also it has been verbally stated that murders and sex offenders do not deserve treatment. – Graham

School programs should be open to all people who want to educate themselves not according to your out date. What if the person has a long out date so he or she has to wait till they a year short, and all the people who a year short can go to school before them and not even have enough time to finish the class. – Graham

As always, people in IDOC wanted more access to programming. People in COVID-19 survey responses commented on their desire for programming including education and substance use disorder treatment. [IDOC quarterly reports](#) contain some programming data and report the number of enrollments in educational and vocational programming at facilities; as of May there were about 3,600 enrollments, at best representing about one for every 10 people in the population. Without programming people felt "warehoused." People again expressed concerns that IDOC prioritizes waitlists by outdates. Of the 12,780 people who responded to [prior JHA surveys](#) at 21 facilities between April 2018 and May 2019, only 13% of people reported that educational programming is adequate and 10% of people reported rehabilitative programming is adequate.

During COVID-19 IDOC represented that people could continue classes for programming credit through packet work in-cell if needed. Based on information JHA received in the form of comments with survey responses, letters, emails and phone calls from people who are incarcerated as well as their loved ones, it appears this did not universally occur. For example, at Pontiac MSU someone wrote that his teacher “*said she will continue the class when lockdown is over.*” Others reported other classes were not available or expressed anxiety that they could not continue their program contracts.

I was enrolled in Lakeland College (academics). When we went on quarantine 3-20-20, Lakeland told all academics students that our ‘earned sentence credits’ were cancelled. But if you were a Lakeland ‘vocational’ student you are allowed to still receive ‘earned sentence credit.’ – East Moline

I would like to get help in finding out or you all looking into Lakeland College and them stopping programs. How can we get our good time for programming if we can’t program? Its making inmates restless and irritable about possibly not getting our good time we have been working for. – Taylorville

For the first 4 weeks, we were given “homework” assignments for our “good time contracts.” This is the 5th week of quarantine, and we have not been given any “assignment.” We are all concerned and wondering if we will receive any of the contract good time for this past week and the future of this pandemic. – Sheridan

I had 10 school days of DACC construction left before I completed the class when COVID-19 hit. The staff here told us we would not be able to receive the good time we earned already because of COVID-19. – Danville

Some people also commented that TABE testing was not occurring or that people could not continue their work assignments as tutors or teachers’ aides. Some also commented that IDOC was not offering proctors for correspondence course exams, and someone wrote that up until 2016 this occurred and exams could be proctored by staff doing other testing without use of additional staff. JHA recommends IDOC clarify policy.

Even at facilities with more programming than other prisons, such as the Life Skills Re-entry Centers, people wrote about lack of opportunity.

We are still running some classes, albeit in a limited capacity in our Building Block program on the wing. The oversight of the program has been messy because of the changes coming down from administration often. This has created some tension on the wing, unfortunately. – Danville

We feel that they went over precaution on the level one lockdown and yes we come out for four hours a day and can shower and do laundry now but no others have become ill and we feel that the prison should be put to light that this is no longer a reentry program but now feels even more like a prison...– Kewanee

Some people commented on their inability to get into treatment programming. Some wrote about there being limited numbers of spaces for people to earn credits in substance use disorder treatment classes and despite them being housed in the treatment housing areas and participating in programming that they were unable to earn credits while waiting to be officially admitted.

I been in this Drug Program since the beginning of January waiting for my file to get open, but due to the COVID 19. This program has been shut down, but everyone who file has been open still get packages to complete to continue good time. Is there anything you can do to get the same privilege done for us guys who been sitting around waiting, basically doing the same thing these guys been doing and we are not getting anything out of this program due to COVID 19? – Graham

Several people wrote that were not able to get program sentence credit because they had not completed sex offender treatment programming, but this was unavailable to them as there is extremely limited availability within IDOC. Someone at Centralia reported he had not been ordered to complete sex offender treatment and was currently incarcerated for a failure to register; nonetheless, he tried for treatment and was screened and denied for the one available program at Big Muddy. JHA again strongly recommend IDOC waive this requirement, as is within their discretion under the law which states “prisoners who are waiting to receive treatment, but who are unable to do so due solely to the lack of resources on the part of the Department, may, at the Director’s sole discretion, be awarded sentence credit at a rate as the Director shall determine.” The current practice of denying people earned programming good time because they have not completed virtually non-existent programming is patently unfair and likely costly in number of extra days people remain incarcerated. This is a particularly good time to reconsider this and to begin using the authority that exists, given efforts to decrease population to aid in pandemic containment.

I have to register as a sex offender. So since they don’t have a sex offender program here that I can be enrolled in they won’t allow me to earn the good time. And the law does allow for me to earn it as long as it is not my fault, I’m not in it and it’s because they don’t offer it. – Graham

Some people also wrote about the lack of religious services. In response to concerns regarding lack of religious services at Logan, administrators responded that at that time religious services were being offered on an altered schedule with the Chaplain going house to house to hold Christian services each Sunday and touring housing units weekly, and the Rabbi coming once a month. They were working with a Catholic priest and an Imam to develop a schedule to visit at Logan as these services had not been offered during the COVID crisis.

Some administrators responded to concerns that they too look forward to resuming programming as soon as it was deemed safe to move to the next phase.



EARLY RELEASE

Why Can't I earn my Way Home?

How is it that guys like myself, 3 months or less to serve, are still incarcerated?
– Kewanee

Releases should be based on health risk, time, and rehabilitation. We've done all the work necessary to rehabilitate ourselves, so we deserve to go home to our families as well. – Decatur

Inmates that fit criteria for early release through EDSC [Earned Discretionary Sentencing Credit] are being denied. None of this makes sense! – Murphysboro

It seems like they're waiting for the outbreak to happen in here first before kicking eligible inmates to leave earlier than their MSR date. – Taylorville

I'm stressed out and family is too, something needs to be done ASAP. At least let the people that are under a year be released like they say they're doing. There's people with 2 weeks left still being held. – Danville

People that is eligible for the 6 months goodtime should receive that immediately instead of having to wait until your 1 month or 2 months short to get and some not even getting it at all. – Graham

I'm not even considered to be released early. Never been in trouble for 6+ years of my incarceration. Have done classes to show my correction and growth, but yet not considered for anything. No good time, no schooling as of yet. – Vienna

On April 6, the Governor issued an executive order expanding IDOC's ability to place people on medical furloughs for the duration of the disaster proclamation. Previously, on March 23 and March 26, the Governor by executive order allowed for awards of sentencing credits without 14-day notifications to State's Attorneys, allowing people to be immediately be released as awards were applied. In [JHA's April 8 recommendations](#) we reiterated that IDOC should devote every available resource to placing people who can go home. Effectively reducing population, increasing physical distancing and reducing demand on limited resources is needed to address the risk of the pandemic.

It would be nice to know what the governor is doing about releasing inmates with less time and medical conditions. So that we can let our family members know who to possibly contact to implement starting the procedure to be released. – Graham

In addition to compassionate or medical releases, IDOC should have implemented grants of programming and discretionary credits to the greatest extent possible. Many people commented on their medical vulnerability or that they have non-violent offenses or were within six months of parole. Several people wrote that they were within weeks of parole. People wanted to be considered for house arrest.

Sentencing credits should be used effectively and efficiently for population management, ideally all the time, but with particular urgency in a time of pandemic, when this tool is also highlighted as critical to public health.

Many reported that the choice of individuals who are released early seems arbitrary to them. At minimum-security prison Decatur, JHA heard comments from many mothers after women in the [Moms & Babies program](#) were able to leave.

Why did the inmates with babies get to leave when they could send their babies to live elsewhere and continue to serve their sentence under previous circumstances clearly

that has changed so when they left so should have we. Most of us are mothers, grandmothers, daughters, aunts etc. We need our family at this time too!
– Decatur

I have small children too, let me go. – Decatur

Please help me. My child needs me. If my mom gets sick, my [child] has nobody... It was a slap in the face watching the moms and babies go home, some with more time than me... Don't my children matter too? – Decatur

I would give up anything to be with my other kids. They keep telling me my ticket is stopping me but somebody went home before me that have multiple tickets, I'm just saying, they also went to seg with me... – Decatur

Other people wrote of their need to be caretakers for other family members.

A large group of offenders were given paperwork stating that if they supplied a host site, upon its approval, they would be allowed to finish their sentence on electronic monitoring. To date, I've only had a handful of fellow inmates tell me their potential site had been contacted, let alone approved. – Robinson

Although not technically “early” release, some people commented regarding not being released as expediently as might have been possible. For example, some people wrote of delays on reviews of restoration of sentencing credit, application of programming credits or approvals of host sites. Several people wrote about being unable to be resumed on parole or being door violated because of lack of approval for parole host sites. Someone who was housed in Pontiac mental health and door violated commented, “*they keep me locked up because the COVID -19 field services ... will not parole me out when IDOC pay for the first 3 month for me to go somewhere to a halfway house or a shelter for me to go to, ... ask them why I was not paroled out, they said because the COVID-19 but by the COVID-19 being in the IDOC they should parole me out.*” While many stakeholders have been working to address this problem, lack of placements in the community has kept people incarcerated during the pandemic.

We continue to strongly encourage the Department to provide more opportunities for positive behavioral motivation and action for the population and to grant credits as liberally as possible. This is critical for several reasons, not least among them to ease pandemic crowding conditions and free up more resources.

I've noticed some people got 6 months good time. This is my first time in prison, it's non-violent, and I'm at 50%. I have less than 8 months left and have not received any kind of good time. They told me I was supposed to start school last year, but it didn't happen. It's like I got skipped or something? – Vienna

Some people commented that people who are working or waitlisted for programming should be given special consideration for EDSC because they could not earn program time. Clearly if people are not doing the right thing, they will be deemed ineligible for EDSC; we hope positive actions would equally be acknowledged.

Many people wrote from minimum-security facilities that most people could just be released, particularly those with under six months left to serve.

No one is a danger to the community in here more than the next guy. – Vandalia

I am eligible for good time and home detention and do not want to risk dying in this dorm setting of 100 men elbow to elbow 24 hours a day, because of a few remaining months for my marijuana offense of 1 pound. – Jacksonville

Several people wrote about their perception that counselors would only help certain people or that good time was being implemented unfairly based on race.

They've given a few people six months. They were all white and had been in jail a couple times. I have never seen one black man get it. – Southwestern

IDOC in August 2019 implemented an [Administrative Directive](#) to identify and address issues of disparity. JHA will continue to monitor implementation of this policy and encourages the Department to be transparent and accountable with their findings as such impressions of disparate treatment are common and need to be addressed.



This report was written by JHA staff.
Media inquiries should be directed to JHA's Executive Director Jennifer Vollen-Katz
at (312) 291-9555 x205 or jvollen@thejha.org.
Learn more about JHA at our website www.thejha.org.

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