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



# **Perceptions and Experiences from People inside Prison during the Pandemic**

**Section: Yard & Out-of-Cell Time**

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# 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 yard and out-of-cell time. 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](http://www.thejha.org).



## Yard & Out-of-Cell Time

We haven't been outside in a month,  
Nobody comes to check on us.

*Being in the cell 22 hours out the day is starting to do something to me. – Centralia*

*I've been caged like a monkey 24 hours a day for almost 60 days straight, only coming out for shower 3 times a week. – Menard*

*We only get 30 minutes of yard a week and our time starts when they start getting the first guy out of his cell, so we actually only get about maybe 20 minutes at the most on the yard. – Big Muddy*

*As inmates, we should have more time out of the cell. We showed that we are taking this serious and staying safe, but still we're locked up for long periods of time. It's very stressful. – Western*

*Have been given one yard time this last month which is driving me crazy. Spend a lot of time staring out of cell window trying to get fresh air. ... Put in sick call slip just so I can walk outside to the vocation school where the doctor takes sick calls. – Pontiac MSU*

*If I have to serve the [few remaining] days why can't I have time to exercise? This is a very stressful time, being allowed to release mental, emotional, and physical pressures is essential to healthy living. – Kewanee*

*About 65% of inmates aren't dealing with this very well. There's much more fights between cellies since we are constantly stuck together. Everybody hopes there will be some way to restore dayroom privileges even if we are still considered locked down. – Illinois River*

*We need more yards per week we have been locked down for over 1 ½ month at 22 hours a day in our cells. It's really starting to get to some people we should be able to come out more.* – Graham

*This institution has allowed yard once every 2 to 3 weeks for 30 minutes.* – Shawnee

*We haven't been outside since 3/20, everybody's going crazy, fighting and more.*  
– Logan

*Update [4/30]- Have finally been "let out in the sunshine" today. It was almost too much to bear, it's been so long.* – Sheridan

In [JHA's April 8th recommendations](#) we reiterated that IDOC should allow everyone access to out-of-cell time to address quality of life issues while conforming with official COVID-19 prevention guidelines and that IDOC should make a concerted effort to allow people outside in small groups for fresh air and sunlight. We continue to stress the need for increased out-of-cell time and for permitting more small group or cohort activities while maintaining social distancing with use of PPE and heightened hand hygiene and cleaning practices in place.

Various IDOC facilities were on different levels of restrictions over the time period of the survey. Level 1 lockdowns for medical quarantine were in place at some facilities with confirmed COVID-19 (staff or prisoner) cases, and when this occurred yard was not run; [43.8% of respondents \(6,903 people\) reported they had not been allowed to go to yard in the prior week](#). Only 36.7% reported they had been to yard at least once in the week prior. Many people commented not only had they not been to yard in the prior week, they had not been in many weeks or more than a month. At some facilities, restrictions eased shortly after JHA's survey was distributed.

*We are no longer allowed outside at all. We are locked in our rooms 24 hours.*  
– Decatur

*It's a full lockdown no yard no gym no nothing just a cell for 24 hours. ... We will be coming out for under 2 hours twice a day to use the phone, shower, dayroom but only six cells at a time.* – Kewanee

*We used to get 3 hours 45 min yard time per week, and an extra hour in the summer. Now, we get 1 hour per week with a limit of 12 inmates at a time.* – Lawrence

The southern small reentry-focused facility Murphysboro had the highest positive response rate for people having yard, with 97.6% (40) reporting they went to yard in the prior week. Danville had the next most positive response with 77.6% (646) reporting they had been to yard in the prior week at the time of the surveys. Southern male maximum and medium-security facility Menard had the third highest positive percentage, 67.7% (672), reporting they had been to yard in the week prior to survey completion. At Menard, however, some people reported that yard time was offered only in one longer period instead of having shorter, more frequent yard opportunities, which seems in line with the stated need to reduce movement to limit/avoid exposure and contagion of the virus. Some commented that yard had been restricted previously or that they had to choose between yard and showers. Someone at Menard wrote, "*Beside the 4 hours of yard for that one day and the 10-minute shower 3x a week, we are literally in our cell the rest of the time. So, out of 7 days in a week, we leave the cell for 4 hours and 30 minutes.*"

A significant number of people, **19.5% reported they did not go to yard because they did not want to**. In comments, some people expressed fear of movement and possible exposure to the virus. At Menard, an elderly individual commented he does not attend yard because there is nowhere to sit down except the ground.

*Won't go to yard because they give us a direct order to congregate at the front of the wing where we are shoulder to shoulder with 70 people in a 50 sq. ft. area. – Western*

*If you go to yard you can't shower, so I stay in my cell. They have only had yard twice since the COVID-19 lockdown started. – Shawnee*

*New unsafe practices recently implemented that perpetuate COVID-19 transmissions or create a second wave of cases stronger than the first, by opening up the recreation yards for 60 inmates per gallery 200+ per unit, who are imprisoned based on disobeying rules. ... Yes there's rules [for recreation resuming], but there's no repercussions to violated rules, which are common practices. – Stateville*

**There were five prisons with more than 90% of survey respondents reporting they were not allowed to go to yard in the prior week:** Male medium-security substance use disorder treatment prison Sheridan (99.1%, 965), female mixed-security prison Logan (98.9%, 975), male medium-security prison Hill (97.5%, 596), male maximum-security prison Stateville (97%, 526), and female minimum-security prison Decatur (90.4%, 197). At Stateville, only eight respondents reported going to yard in the prior week, and many people reported that they had not been out in about a month and a half.

At Decatur, some women reported they had access to the small patio or “fresh air pit” area off their units; however, some reported they did not. At facilities with patio areas available, people seemed to appreciate having some outdoor access and fresh air. At Jacksonville some people noted that, at the time they completed the survey, they had not received any yard or gym time for two to three months. However, some commented that they were able to walk around the patio, but it was reported the schedule is not regulated and the amount of time was limited to 20 to 30 minutes. At Vandalia most people reported they had not had any yard, e.g. in at least 2 months; however, several people reported that at some point they were allowed fresh air on the patio in groups of 10 for 30 minutes.

*We were allowed one 30-minute session on the yard in April. During the month of May, we will be allowed to go to the patio areas outside the cellhouse for 30 minutes once a week. – Illinois River*

At Hill at the time surveys were completed, only three respondents reported going to yard in the prior week, as JHA's survey was distributed during a level 1 lockdown. Someone at Hill reported he had not been allowed to go to yard for almost six weeks at the time of his response. He believed that for three of those weeks the facility was not running yard because there was not a plan for how to do it in small groups so that people could be cohorted and socially distanced. Some people at Hill, as at other facilities, reported only being allowed out of cells to dayroom or showers for 30 minutes a day or only being allowed out at all every two to four days. Hill administrators responded that the facility was on Level 1 lockdown more than a month, from April 9 through May 13, medical quarantine from May 13 through May 26, and returned to administrative quarantine thereafter. They reported a new dayroom schedule was implemented June 3 to provide phone access on a daily basis at varying times a day on both first and second shift, and that yard time was offered to everyone at least once a week.

*We are told they are “short staffed”, so they don’t run yard.* – Sheridan

At Sheridan, only two respondents reported going to yard in the prior week and some reported they had not been to yard in more than 45 days. Some people at Sheridan, as at other facilities, reported being out of their cell only 20-30 minutes at a time, three times a week, for a 20-minute phone call and 10-minute shower; someone wrote, *“If you not quick you’re gonna get shorted on your time for one or the other.”*

*30 minutes is how much time we get to shower, clean our cells, and make a phone call. That’s not nearly enough, especially if you have to wait on any of these things.*

– Big Muddy

Some people reported that there was unpredictability regarding dayroom times, which made it harder to connect with family. Many people reported only 30 minutes outside of their cells for dayroom, in which they had to decide whether they wanted to use their limited time to shower, clean their cells, or contact their loved ones. Some people reported being let out of their cells late, which cut their allotted 30 minutes of out-of-cell-time short. People also reported missing out on yard opportunities because no yard schedule was posted; no warning was given beforehand; staff did not loudly enough announce yard opportunities; and staff ran yard lines out of the units very quickly. As a result, people often missed yard because they didn’t know it was going to be offered. Many commenters reported that yard time is often cancelled or cut short, and that people must use that same hour to decide if they want to try to use the dayroom (phone/shower/kiosks, etc.). At Big Muddy, people commented that they are only allowed to go to yard about once every two to three weeks for only 20-30 minutes.

At some facilities there were reports of issues with staff in various locations or on various shifts not allowing out-of-cell time. Hill administrators clarified that during lockdown, all privileges (showers, phone access, video visits, etc.) were only conducted on first shift, but because prisoners did not necessarily know this, some felt that second shift staff were not performing duties.

People who reported having yard access often also commented that it was less frequent and shorter than typical, which makes sense if a facility is trying to offer opportunities to smaller groups. Some people in dorms did not understand why they could share inside space with their whole cohort but not have the same larger group on yard. Many people commented on the restrictions of activities on yards, particularly weights, and questioned the necessity.

*The only people who are on the yard are the same people we share dayroom, phones, showers, etc. So why can’t we share weights and clean them between sets, as we do with the phones?* – Centralia

*Why can’t we be on a big yard together when we are packed in here like sardines?*

– Jacksonville

*We’re still allowed to exercise using the pull up bar and dip bar in groups, and this virus can live on those surfaces.* – Danville

As noted above, nearly 20% of respondents reported they did not go to yard because they did not want to. Several people expressed reluctance to go to yard because of lack of physical distancing. Often people would have to group up at some point in the movement process and at the time

most surveys were completed most prisoners did not have PPE. Other concerns about going to yard involved fears relating to others' actions or hygiene, or there being fewer activities, or lack of cleaning. At Lawrence, people commented on the pull up bars that remained when weights had been removed and wondered if they were cleaned. We recommend as the pandemic stretches on that IDOC reconsider how exercise equipment and other recreational activities could be provided safely, i.e. with use of PPE, appropriate ventilation and distancing, and regular sanitation.

*If they run yard, how will we sanitize the phones and work out equipment out there? How would we wash our hands after using the bathroom, etc.? – Stateville*

Some people commented there was nowhere to wash hands when going to yard. Again, this is an area where access to hand sanitizer would be helpful.

At some facilities certain people reported not getting yard access, e.g. at Lawrence, some workers reported they were not given yard and were told to quit their jobs if they didn't like it. Some people housed in the infirmary also reported not getting yard, stating "*we are being treated as if we don't exist.*" People in reception and classifications centers, segregation, or other special populations may have had even less out-of-cell time. At Pinckneyville, people reported being denied access to yard because of their "Red ID," which designates a person as a high escape risk. However, yard restrictions can only be given for conduct relating to misuse of yard.

*They run yard everyday [for 30 minutes], but because I work in the kitchen 7 days a week and the time that my house goes I'm at work, I am unable to go to the yard. I would like to go to the yard to exercise. – Danville*

At several facilities dayroom expectations were unclear, and lack of access or perceived unevenness of access reportedly was causing tensions. Some people who had access to dayrooms often reported they only had 30 minutes to use the shower and phone. With infrequent yard or other out-of-cell opportunity, this essentially amounts to a 23.5-hour per day lockdown, which in some places lasted for more than a month. Other people reported getting an hour of dayroom on first and second shift, which would still be 22-hour lockdown absent other movement. Some people commented on limited out-of-cell opportunities also being cut short due to food or medication distribution. Several people commented that dayroom time was inconsistent in both frequency and duration, with some receiving more or less time out-of-cell. People reported the lack of dayroom time adversely affected their communications access. Some people blamed staff for not allowing dayroom.

People reported there were more fights in rooms due to lockdown and lack of consequences for fighting because they were already locked down.

*We were limited to 10 people in dayroom at a time, with no time limits, for at least a month. Meaning only 10 inmates out of 100 per wing had that privilege. This did not seem very fair, much favoritism during this period by COs. – Lincoln*

*From the last week of March to mid-April...we only came out of cells for 30 mins a day to use the phone and shower. – Menard MSU*

*The dayroom schedule is a joke. Because we supposed to get 2 hr as stated, but they force us off the phone when the med line comes or feeds and commissary*

– Graham

*We never get all our time out they keep locking us up every other couple of minutes, soon as we get on the phone with our family, they want us to hang up. We always get threaten with an IDR [disciplinary ticket] if we don't off the phone. – Graham*

These lack of out-of-cell time conditions likely meet the United Nations definition of [prolonged solitary confinement](#), i.e. more than 22 hours confined without meaningful human contact for more than 15 days, which is considered torture, as well as the Department of Justice's definitions for [restrictive housing](#), which is recommended be minimized and not be used with certain populations. IDOC reports that they are in the process of revising their restrictive housing practices to conform to the federal guidance and other best practices.

*Menard keeps these inmates locked in cells, which causes the inmate to develop anxiety and frustration that inmates act out. Because they have nothing to do.*

– Menard

*Continued denial of yards, dayrooms and gym no longer keeps us safe. In fact it endangers our mental health because it is not healthy for human beings to only be allowed to go outside for only 90 minutes every two weeks. – Pinckneyville*

Experts also have issued specific [guidance](#) on how to prevent COVID-19 restrictions from approximating and having the same ill-effects of solitary confinement. **JHA again recommends that IDOC review their overly restrictive practices and increase out-of-cell time.** Of the 12,780 people who responded to [prior JHA surveys](#) at 21 facilities between April 2018 and May 2019, 55% of people disagreed that there was enough recreation prior to the pandemic.

JHA also recommends that access to the outdoors, sunlight, and fresh air be considered for individuals in quarantine and medical isolation status where this can be accomplished safely.

*Is there any way that we can be allowed to go to the yard to get some exercise? We just sit around all day, and I feel sluggish and depressed. No inmate has been sick here and yet we feel as if we are being punished. We want to at least be able to run around, get some exercise, and feel the fresh warm air.*

– Kewanee

*Inmates are not getting enough yard time outside their cells. It's making us crazy. Inmates are all stressed out and on the verge on snapping. Some try to exercise in the halls, but the COs always kick us out of the hallway and make us go back into our cells, where there's nothing to do but either sleep or watch tv. – East Moline*

*I could really use a yard I like to exercise, and it is important to my mental and physical health. They are having rumors we will go outside not the yard and just stand in front of the house in place of yard for ½ hr. I do not feel this is equal to yard or gives me a chance to run. – Illinois River*

*I do not believe that yard only being once a week is enough. Medical professionals have stated that being outside helps in many different aspects such as, improved immune system, mental health, and other physical needs. – Graham*

*We are only getting 30 minutes once every two weeks, that's nothing we need to be able to exercise and workout. Sitting in a cell all day is not healthy for us.*

– Big Muddy

*We are not allowed to go to yard for routine exercise. We are only allowed to sit or lay in our bunks 24/7 unless going to the bathroom. This has been causing me much back pain.* – Southwestern

*I'm stiff and sore from NO movement. Exercise is important to staying healthy.*

– Sheridan

Many people commented that they need outdoor exercise. The benefits of fresh air and sunshine for immune system health are supported by COVID-19 research. IDOC has promoted in-cell exercising, including yoga. However, several survey respondents commented that they cannot exercise in cells for fear of bothering cellmates in cramped quarters. At Logan, some people reported getting threatened with moves to segregation and C-grade tickets, which were perceived to be threats of also cutting people off from communications, for trying to walk in the halls for some exercise.

*A yard schedule was posted then removed on same day, our unit is supposed to get yard on Wednesday, but it has not been given to us. Dorm 6 (which is considered general pop) has had gym multiple times. I know this because I can see the yard.*

– Joliet

Again, people in certain housing areas thought that others had more privileges than they did. Explaining what is happening and why a certain restrictive policy is being followed, e.g. yard is not being run because there are positive cases in a housing unit and ensuring that that restrictive policies are uniform and time or condition-limited, would help. **JHA also continues to recommend trying to cohort people so that necessary restrictions can be more localized**, e.g. isolating and restricting a wing, housing unit or part of a facility instead of the entire facility.



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Learn more about JHA at our website [www.thejha.org](http://www.thejha.org).

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