
Facility Update



Monitoring Visit to Illinois Youth Center – Chicago 2023

Key Findings

1. Youth's perceptions of their relationships with staff were more negative than on JHA's 2021 and 2022 visits, and were mixed overall.
2. Increased in-person education was sought by youth at the facility, with reports of school cancelations coming from them.
3. Some youth at Chicago had the opportunity to spend time with their loved ones outside the facility, including home visits and visiting their newborn children in the hospital.
4. Youth who are in school reported increased program opportunities and feeling they had enough activities. However high school graduates reported that they were often bored despite being involved in programming.
5. Lack of outdoor recreation remains an issue at this facility. Physical plant issues such as lack of outdoor space and control over the building's water supply continue to be problems.

Updates

IYC-Chicago is a male youth center located within the city of Chicago. It does not operate as a reception and classification facility.



When JHA visited Chicago on August 9, 2023, the population was 34. Data from Chicago reflects that 28 of the youth were Black, one was White, and five were Hispanic. 16 youth were 18 years or older, 18 were between the ages of 15 and 17, and none were younger than 15. 13 youth had been convicted of adult felonies. 20 youth had been committed from Cook County, two were from collar counties, two were from other counties in Northern Illinois, eight were from Central Illinois, and two were from Metro East. Five youth at Chicago were from Champaign County and one was from Peoria County. In the past, JHA has recommended against housing youth from the northern portion of Central Illinois—including Champaign and Peoria Counties—at Harrisburg (IDJJ’s southern-most facility) by default, given that both areas are closer to Chicago than to Harrisburg, so we were pleased to see some youth from that part of the state in the northern IYCs.

Youth's perceptions of their relationships with staff were more negative than on JHA's 2021 and 2022 visits and were mixed overall. Some youth reported that they had never had a problem with staff at Chicago. However, others (primarily those on one specific living unit) felt that staff did not approve of the increased opportunities they were getting and were taking it out on them by being overly punitive and holding points—which are awarded to youth based on good behavior and can be used to buy things at a shop in the youth center—over their heads. JHA also heard about two uses of physical force by staff, which reportedly resulted in injuries to youth. These incidents were known to youth throughout facility and seemed to be a source of tension.

At the time of the visit, Chicago had a recent physical education teacher vacancy, and youth reported they were not having P.E. class. While they clarified that they regularly had recreation in the gym after school hours, they missed the opportunity to burn off energy during the school day. Many youth who spoke with JHA also expressed a desire for more in-person instruction in school, which administrators reported they were working on implementing. A couple of youth additionally reported that school had been cancelled more often recently than it had been earlier in the year. JHA reached out to Chicago to request data on school cancellations but did not receive a response.

Chicago, like St. Charles and Warrenville, was preparing to offer a technical manufacturing program and to restart Larry's Barber shop. The facility was also planning to start offering a certificate-yielding training program in shipping and receiving and forklift operation. There were reportedly several paid internship opportunities available to youth at Chicago: in the IDJJ Director's office, at Kurt's Café, and with SkyArt. These internships reportedly paid stipends in the high three- to low four-figures. The internships in the Director's office and at Kurt's Café offered youth the opportunity to leave the facility and work onsite. Administrators told JHA that when a youth started a paid internship, they would take them to a bank to open an account so the money they earned would be available to them upon release.

IDJJ had implemented home visits for youth and, at the time of JHA's 2023 visit, had reportedly conducted visits with youth at Chicago, Harrisburg, and Pere Marquette. According to [IDJJ's 2023 Q3 Transformation Report on Family Engagement](#), this program was developed out of recognition that youth who have been incarcerated for a long time often experience challenges readjusting to a home environment, with the intention for youth to be able to interact with their

family in a more natural setting and then debrief on the experience with IDJJ staff after arriving back at the facility. Administrators said that they done six or seven home visits with three youth at Chicago, and that visits started at three hours and increased in duration the more visits a youth went on. According to administrators, youth started off with supervised visits and eventually moved to unsupervised visits with GPS monitoring. Reportedly, visits were not restricted to youth who lived locally, as IDJJ administrators said that a youth at Harrisburg had been taken to visit family in Springfield, approximately 200 miles away.

Administrators also stated that they had taken three youth to the hospital to see their newborns within 24 hours of birth and that when a youth's loved one died while they were incarcerated at Chicago, they were able to go view the body in person and participate in the funeral via video. JHA visitors spoke with a youth who had been taken to see his daughter at the hospital after her birth and who said that he was excited to be going home before her first birthday.

Programming has historically been a strength for Chicago, which has access to volunteer organizations in the city. JHA spoke with youth who were participating in a variety of programs including [Project FLEX](#), a fitness program offered through the Northern Illinois University School of Kinesiology at the three northern youth centers; Stomping Grounds, offered through the [Chicago Human Rhythm Project](#); [SkyArt](#); and [Storycatchers Theatre](#). Youth reported that they enjoyed the programming they were involved in and felt like they had enough to do. The exception was high school graduates, who reported that they were often bored despite being involved in programming. IDJJ has long struggled with keeping youth who are no longer in high school programmed during the school day. JHA hopes that the upcoming vocational programs will help address this issue.

Muslim youth told JHA that they would like to see more regular religious programming in the facility. Administrators acknowledged that this was a need and said that while they were able to bring in an Imam to conduct services on holidays, they had not yet been able to identify anyone who was willing to come regularly.

Youth reported that, at the time of the visit, they had not had outdoor recreation in several weeks. Due to its location in a retrofitted warehouse, lack of available space for outdoor recreation is a longstanding issue at Chicago. Outdoor activities take place in a sally port in the parking lot. Youth reported that outdoor recreation had stopped because of an escape from the

sally port, which administrators confirmed was accurate. They said that they were starting to use the sally port again but were not doing outdoor recreation as often as they had before the escape. Administrators reported that the youth was now back at Chicago and had been doing well. JHA spoke with the youth, who reported that he was back in programming and had had no issues with staff.

At the time of the visit, three youth were living in one of Chicago's two former confinement wings and one was temporarily assigned to the other while staff determined which housing unit to move him to. The youth on these units during our visit were not confined. The youth who had been temporarily moved to a unit by himself told JHA visitors that he had arrived on the wing earlier that day and did not expect to be there overnight. On the other confinement unit, one youth was at Chicago for a short period of time on a parole violation, and the other two had been involved with in altercations with other youth on their units. This was the first time since 2020 that these units were occupied during a JHA visit. The difference between the former confinement wings and the other wings at Chicago is that the former confinement wings lack space for a dayroom. Both units had a makeshift dayroom set up with a table and chairs and a TV, and the youth on the units were out of their cells. With only four regular housing units, Chicago has less flexibility than most of the other youth centers in terms of separating youth who do not get along. While the dayroom space was cramped, the facility had somewhat mitigated this issue by keeping the populations on these units small.

Youth additionally expressed concern about issues with Chicago's physical plant that have been longstanding, such as cold water in the shower in one of the housing units and damage to the walls in dayrooms. Youth acknowledged that the facility was clean and that administrators seemed to be doing their best to maintain it, but ultimately said that the building was falling apart. The physical plant issues as well as the escape during outdoor recreation highlight both that Chicago's building is not well suited to house youth and the urgency with which IDJJ should search for a replacement.



This report was written by JHA staff. Media inquiries should be directed to JHA's Executive Director Jennifer Vollen-Katz at (312) 291-9183 or jvollen@thejha.org

Incarcerated individuals can send privileged mail to report concerns and issues to the John Howard Association, P.O. Box 10042, Chicago, IL 60610-0042. JHA staff read every letter and track this information to monitor what is occurring behind prison walls and to advocate for humane policies and practices. Family and friends can contact JHA via our website www.thejha.org or by leaving us a voicemail at (312) 291-9183.

Since 1901, JHA has provided public oversight of Illinois' juvenile and adult correctional facilities. Every year, JHA staff and trained volunteers inspect prisons, jails, and detention centers throughout the state. Based on these inspections, JHA regularly issues reports that are instrumental in improving prison conditions. JHA humbly thanks all the people who agreed to be interviewed for this report and who graciously shared their experiences and insights with us.

