



Prison Communications 2020 Summary

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The following provides data on calls, emails and letters received by JHA during the 2020 calendar year.

John Howard Association's Prison Communications work shifted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As of March of 2020, the immediate priority was protecting the health and safety of those who live and work in prison. Due to coronavirus restrictions JHA was unable to enter prisons after March 14th 2020; thankfully, the information received from people incarcerated in Illinois provided direct information about current conditions and evolving concerns.¹ More than ever, the calls and emails JHA received from the loved ones and advocates of people incarcerated in Illinois served to inform our monitoring and advocacy work while we communicated regularly with IDOC and IDJJ leadership and administrators, collaborated with other criminal justice advocates and used external pressure to push for needed pandemic response and ongoing reform. The information provided through JHA's Prison Communications aided JHA in advocating for the release of as many incarcerated people as possible; pushing for adequate PPE, social distancing, cohorting and healthcare for those working and living in prisons; calling for more data transparency on COVID-19 protocols, testing, positive cases, hospitalizations, and deaths; and seeking the prioritization of vaccines for those behind prison walls.

Prior to March 2020, JHA provided over 350 responses to people writing to (1) Report an issue or problem; (2) Ask a question about prison policies and practices or ask other criminal justice related questions; and (3) Request content created by JHA, including JHA's public statements, reports, and survey results.

In 2019, 68% of letters written to JHA included requests for information, with 32% of letters providing a report about prison conditions and concerns. As the pandemic began and spread

¹ As articulated in [Illinois' Administrative Code](#), individuals incarcerated in Illinois may send privileged mail to JHA. This allows people who are incarcerated to communicate with JHA confidentially. "Privileged mail" simply means that mail marked as such can be sent to or from a prison or jail in Illinois in a sealed envelope and is not supposed to be read by correctional staff. "Privileged mail" does not mean it is a legal communication; correspondence between an attorney and their client is "legal mail."

through the state and its prison facilities, we saw a reversal in those numbers with 74% of letters communicating information about and concerns related to the experience of being in prison during a pandemic. We read each letter closely and responded with a confirmation of receipt. JHA tracked the issues in letters to identify trends and outliers, and used the information reported in several ways: to raise issues with IDOC administrators; to inform our monitoring and advocacy efforts; and to share first-hand accounts with stakeholders and the public in order to promote transparency. JHA received 2,571 letters in 2020, with an average of approximately 50 letters per week. This is about half as many letters received in 2019. From the communications we received, we know there were several contributing factors behind the decrease in volume, including people prioritizing communications with family as well as the purchase of food and hygiene supplies during commissary shops, which were more restricted in frequency (additionally, new spending caps were implemented due to the pandemic).

Another significant factor behind the decrease in mail was that [JHA successfully executed our first IDOC-wide survey](#). Voluntary and anonymous surveys that asked about peoples' experience in prison during COVID-19 were made available to each incarcerated person, along with pre-paid return envelopes marked "privileged." We saw an incredible 49% return rate with 16,351 responses and more than 6,000 pages of individual, handwritten comments. During April 2020, JHA received nearly three times the number of letters we had been getting up until that time, but in May of 2020 people in prison utilized the pre-paid envelopes and the blank page for comments that accompanied the surveys to share information with us rather than writing traditional letters to JHA.



With a total of 1,416 calls and emails in 2020 as compared to 766 in 2019, the number of communications received by JHA nearly doubled last year. Early on, we attempted to track whether calls and emails were COVID-19 related or not but realized nearly all communications were in some way connected to COVID-19. In the midst of the isolation, despair and anxiety created by the impact of COVID-19 in prisons, we chose to respond to those concerns and did not focus as specifically on our traditional method of tracking issues raised in incoming communications. These calls and emails provided critical information about the issues and fears most concerning to both people who were incarcerated as well as their loved ones. The issues we heard most about involved questions related to early release, medical furlough, and

**From the loved one of someone in IDOC
in March 2020:**

“With COVID-19 things can change in minutes, hours and no one can provide information or be held accountable. We as family members need to hear from our loved ones, if only for a minute to know they are okay and what’s going on.”

sentencing credits; concerns about out-of-cell time, quarantine, medical isolation, social distancing, medical and mental health care, use of personal protective equipment, and dietary; and reports about the lack of access to communications with family, commissary, hygiene, and cleaning supplies, along with expressing need of and requests for updated information.

The information and concerns communicated through calls and emails, advanced our understanding of the issues and enhanced our ability to address areas of need with specificity. Using this information, JHA issued our [Recommendations for Prisons](#) in April, shared [regular communications reports](#) highlighting what we had been hearing from those in prison and their loved ones outside, issued a number of [statements on COVID-19](#), was able to raise issues directly with IDOC and IDJJ, shared information and resources [on our website](#), and used our relationship with the [media](#) to increase focus on how the pandemic impacted people in prison.

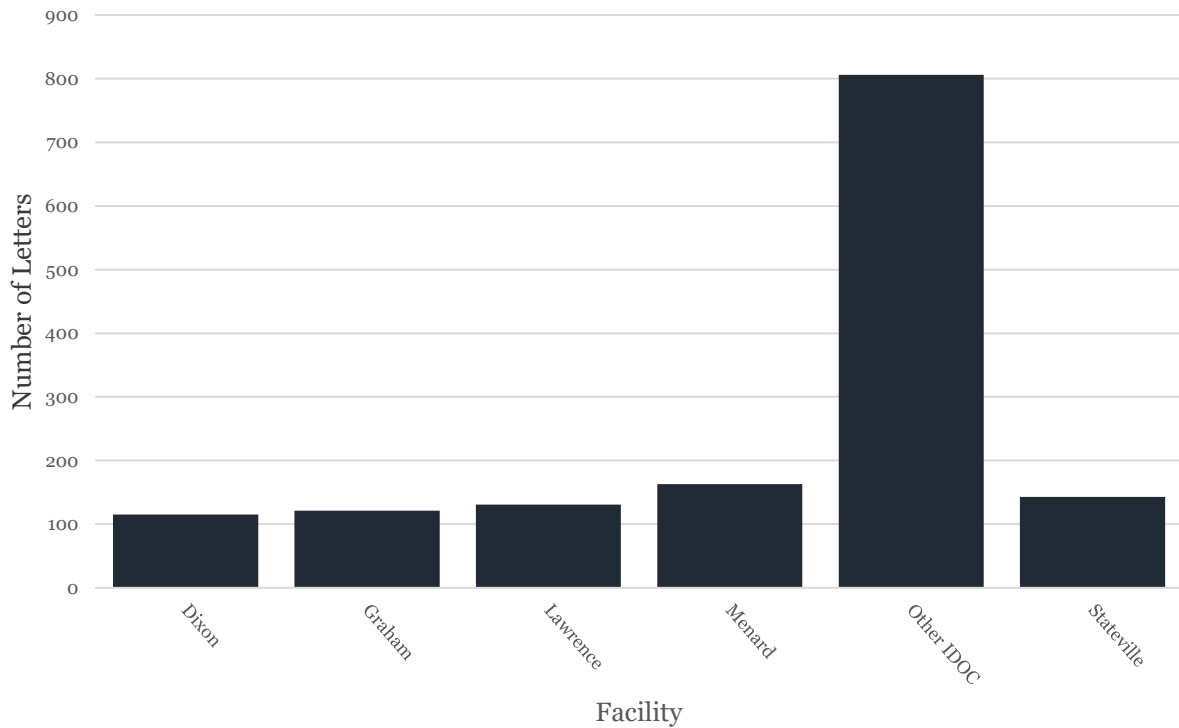
2020 Prison Communications by the numbers

2,571 letters received from individuals who were housed in a prison or jail

1,416 calls and emails received from people in the community with concerns and questions

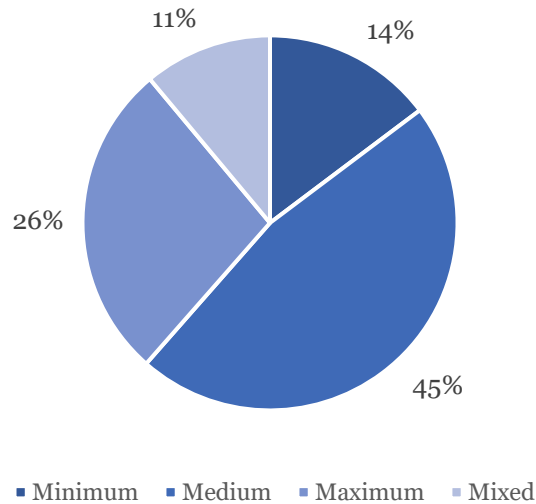
74% of letters reported issues to JHA while **26%** requested information

Letters to JHA from incarcerated people by facility



Note: The “Other IDOC” category is composed of all IDOC facilities other than the five most frequently heard from IDOC facilities in 2020 (Dixon, Graham, Lawrence, Menard, and Stateville).

Letters to JHA from incarcerated people by facility security level



Note: The “Minimum” category is composed of the following IDOC facilities: Decatur, East Moline, Jacksonville, Lincoln, Robinson, Taylorville, Vandalia, and Vienna. The “Medium” category is composed of the following IDOC facilities: Big Muddy, Centralia, Danville, Graham, Hill, Illinois River, Lawrence, Pinckneyville, Shawnee, Sheridan, and Western. The “Maximum” category is composed of the following IDOC facilities: Menard, Pontiac, and Stateville. The “Mixed” category is composed of the following IDOC facilities: Dixon and Logan.

In 2020, JHA received an increased number of letters from people who were incarcerated at minimum security level facilities across Illinois over past years. The impact of the pandemic was felt in facilities across the state, regardless of security level, and people in dormitory-style housing reached out to JHA in higher numbers expressing fear and concerns related to the ability to social-distance and quarantine.



This report was written by JHA staff. Media inquiries should be directed to JHA's Executive Director Jennifer Vollen-Katz at (312) 291-9183 x205 or jvollen@thejha.org

People who are incarcerated may send privileged mail to
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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 persons who graciously shared their experiences and insights with us, and how helped to make this report possible.



The John Howard Association was the proud recipient of the 2015 MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions