
Survey Report



Analysis of 2022 MQPL Survey Comments

**Top issues reported by
respondents at Decatur
Correctional Center**

Decatur Correctional Center

Decatur Correctional Center is a minimum-security female prison within the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) that housed 411 people on July 15, 2022. The John Howard Association of Illinois (JHA) conducted a modified short [Measuring the Quality of Prison Life](#) (MQPL) survey by providing enough survey packets (consisting of the [MQPL survey](#), an informed consent notice/instruction sheet, and a privileged mail prepaid business reply envelope addressed to JHA) so that every person incarcerated at Decatur had an opportunity to participate in the voluntary and anonymous survey if they chose to do so. JHA received 204 responses to the MQPL survey from people at Decatur through the end of 2022, representing approximately 49.6% of the static population. JHA planned to conduct a monitoring visit of the prison close in time to survey distribution in August; however, the visit was rescheduled to October due to a COVID lockdown.

This report highlights some of the most common issues raised in response to our MQPL survey question **"What are the most negative things about life in this prison?"** We selected this question to analyze because it is where most survey respondents chose to report the issues that they were experiencing while incarcerated. All survey comments for Decatur can be found in our [2022 MQPL Survey Comments](#) report. Quantitative survey results for Decatur can be found in our [2022 MQPL Survey Results](#) report. Our [2022 Decatur Monitoring Report](#) provides more insight into the lives of people incarcerated at this prison.

Methodology

To identify the most common issues, we identified the most common words people used in response to the question "What are the most negative things about life in this prison?" For the Top Ten Words, all instances of each word and its plural form were counted (e.g., "program" and "programs.") Hyphenated words were counted as one word. Words like "the" and "not" were filtered from the analysis. Then, indicator words were counted under seven issue categories to determine top issues in each facility's survey responses. When an indicator word appeared within a longer word, the longer word was included. For example: the indicator word, "medic," picked up both "medical" and "medication." Prior to the issue analysis, the language in each report was standardized so that indicator words consistently appeared in a form that would be picked up by our software (e.g. "CO" was changed to "C/O," "good time" was changed to "good-time"). The indicator words by issue can be found [here](#).

To avoid double-counting issues, issue categories were only counted once per response. This means that the response "the cells are cold and dirty" would count as raising only one issue related to conditions, even though two indicator words ("cold" and "dirty") are used in the response.

There are limitations with this method, such as sentiment analysis. For example we are unable to distinguish statements such as "The doctor is good" and "I haven't seen a doctor." However, it is reasonable to conclude that instances of "doctor" are in a negative context in response to the question. Additionally, some indicator words that were frequently applied to multiple issue categories were removed. For example, we did not include "job" under productive activity because we could not distinguish statements relevant to the issue area, like "I can't get a job," from statements relevant to other issue areas, like "Staff don't do their jobs." Nor did we include "cell" under movement, e.g. "I am in my cell 24/7," because we could not distinguish from "School is always cancelled" or "The cells are too small" under this method of counting.

This report includes quotes from survey responses that we found to be either representative of the diversity of issues raised for each category or particularly insightful. Some quotes have been abbreviated to highlight the relevant issue.

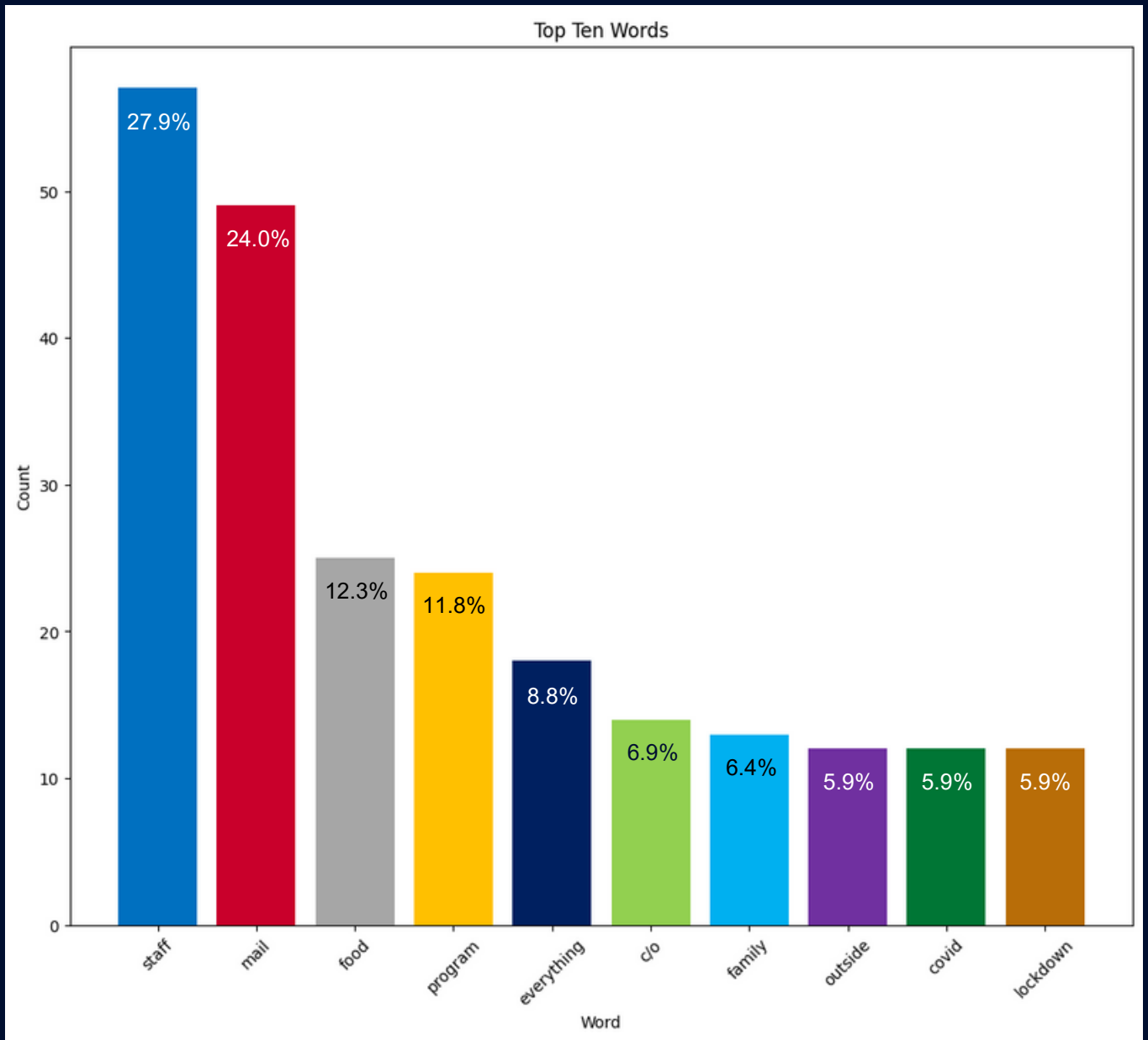
Word Cloud



Word cloud generated using the most common words used in Decatur survey responses to the question "What are the most negative things about life in this prison?"

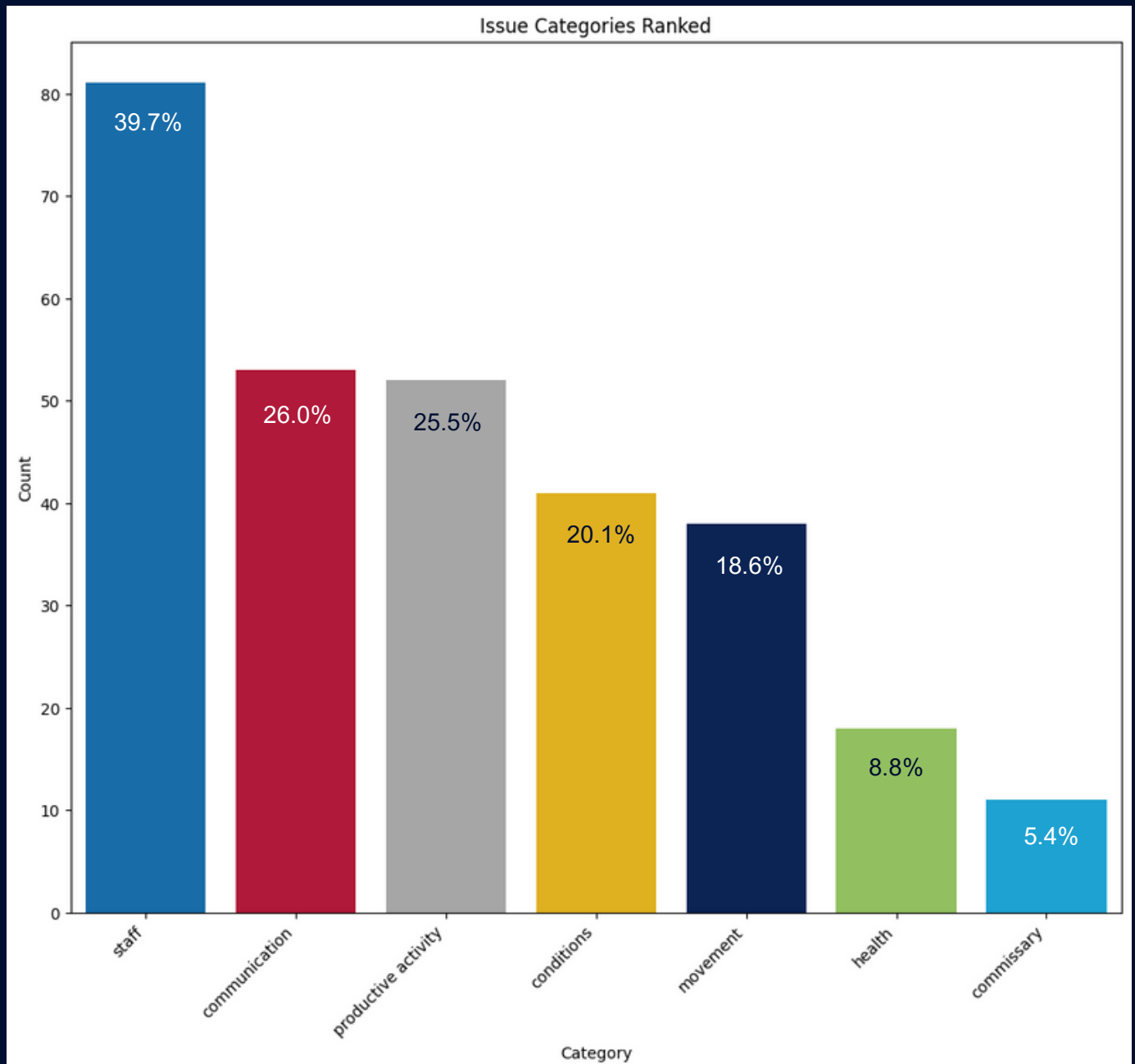
Top 10 Indicator Words

Used in responses to "What are the most negative things about life in this prison?"
Percentages are of the survey responses in which the word appeared.



Issue Categories Ranked by Prevalence

Issue rankings are determined by indicator word frequency. Common words used in survey responses have been sorted into seven issue categories. When a survey response uses one of a category's indicator words, it is tallied as raising an issue in that category. For example, a survey with the words "medical," "nurse," or "infection" is tallied as raising an issue related to health. Survey responses may include more than one issue. Percentages are of the survey responses in which an issue was raised.



Selected direct quotes from Decatur survey responses

1

STAFF

Encompasses issues related to prison staff, such as lack of staff or staff conduct.

You can drop a million slips with no answer back. They are short staffed. You are degraded daily. They show favoritism.

Neglect of duties from the staff not putting our paperwork in for house arrest, work release, or SSC Days and then waiting till we are too short to not be eligible.

The Staff members. If you're being bullied or ostracized they do not care. All they want to do is take days from people. They want people to get in trouble.

Certain COs how they treat us. Rules always change that we don't know.

Some of the COs are degrading, mean and say inappropriate things.

2

COMMUNICATION

Includes issues related to phone availability, visitation, mail, and other means of communication.

We are not allowed to get video visits or reg visits because of COVID, which effects mental health. We don't get mail on a regular basis.

They never give us mail. When we receive it, it is from months previous, and legal mail is always opened. They make it impossible to have visits

Never getting mail b/c there is no mail office - only getting mail once a week

They make it hard to visit with your support and family. It takes a long time to get approved and the visitor restrictions are harsh especially for people whose family members have been an inmate before.

lack of communication with support (mail, phone, video visits, physical visits). Staff do not care if communication is maintained or not. It is not their life.

3

PRODUCTIVE ACTIVITY

Includes issues related to productive activities, such as work assignments, education, or programming.

People that have more than a year or 2 to do can't get into school if they are mandated for school. They have no programs for people with 4 or more years to do.

I feel like that this place should have more programs to help us reconnect with our children and family

Schooling, programing etc. is not fair to those with later outdates. If your outdate is later than others you can spend a lot of time doing nothing, leading to depression and a sense of unworthiness.

There are no programs that can even help anyone here to start rehabilitation. They'll make a group and then it'll get cancelled or even only allow an inmate whom getting ready leave the option to participate.

No classes. No way to get more good time all we do is stay locked up.

4

CONDITIONS

Encompasses issues related to living conditions, such as food, water, temperature, and sanitation.

It's very unclean, dishwasher has been down for almost 2 years.

There are ants in the rooms. The area we can go outside is very sterile—no flowers or beauty just grass and cement walls. Rooms are very small and overcrowded.

The food quality is absolutely disgusting

There has been Rat Poop in the food.
Mold in the showers.

the grounds are so overgrown, you get bugs (ticks) when you try to go outside for fresh air.

5

MOVEMENT

Includes concerns about time spent out of the cell or sleeping area and yard/dayroom availability. Note: Many Decatur surveys were completed during a facility-wide quarantine.

being on lockdown because of Covid, and not getting out of our room but for 20 min a day.

Being locked in our rooms all day. No exercise. Not good for mental health.

Being locked in your self from the time you wake up til the time you go to bed

We only get 20 mins out, no yard, no gym, no church.

We never get yard or gym.

6

HEALTH

Includes issues related to healthcare, mental health services, and COVID-19 concerns.

There medical is horrible. There treatment of the elderly those with medical issues is uncalled for.

There are struggles with medications that I need, and healthcare the nurses and the doctors don't/cant do a lot Im very ill need to see an outside doctor cant feel my hands or feet

mental Health care
Health care
Dental care
Not being able to talk to someone that will help you or take you seriously

In the 3 yr I have been here I haven't had my teeth cleaned, a filling, no proper dental, I haven't seen a OB dr. for a yearly check up

COVID quarantining for months/weeks at a time

Not having Quality Hygiene Items or sizes in commissary, no shoes to fit me.

Commissary options and personal care products are terrible.

commissary - ~~no~~ there are no quality hygiene products, we're told that ~~we~~ we get only the cheapest available product - even if it makes my hair fall out.
We were NOT treated as people -

The commissary if you can afford it.
Prices change every week.

I'm too broke to afford food snacks hygiene



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

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 everyone who graciously shared their experiences and insights with us.



Defying Injustice. Defending Humanity.