
Survey Report



Analysis of 2023 MQPL Survey Comments

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

Pontiac Correctional Center

Pontiac Correctional Center is a maximum-security male prison within the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) that housed 736 people on March 27, 2023. Pontiac housed approximately 34 people in designed mental health housing, including a Behavioral Management Unit (BMU). It also housed some medium-security individuals in the maximum-security part of the prison after the closure of the Medium Security Unit (MSU) in early 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 Pontiac had an opportunity to participate in the voluntary and anonymous survey if they chose to do so. JHA received 243 responses to the MQPL survey from people at Pontiac through July 19, 2023, representing approximately 33% of the static population. JHA visited Pontiac in November 2023.

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 Pontiac can be found in our [2023 MQPL Survey Comments report](#). Quantitative survey results can be found in our [Pontiac 2023 Survey Results report](#).

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.

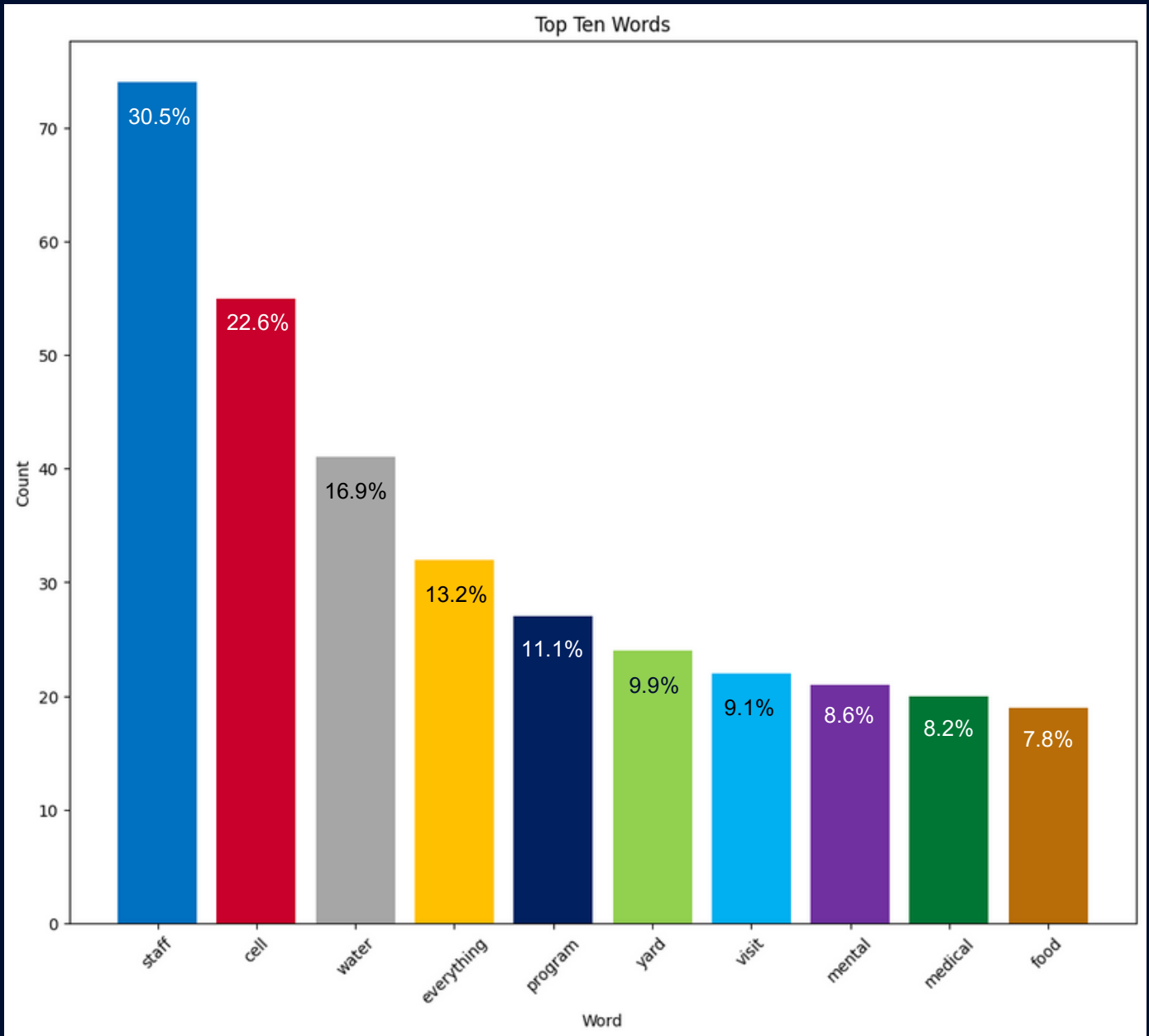
There are limitations with this method, such as sentiment analysis. For example we are unable to distinguish statements such as "The doctor is good" and "I haven't seen a doctor." However, it is reasonable to conclude that instances of "doctor" are in a negative context in response to the question. Additionally, 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.

Top 10 Indicator Words

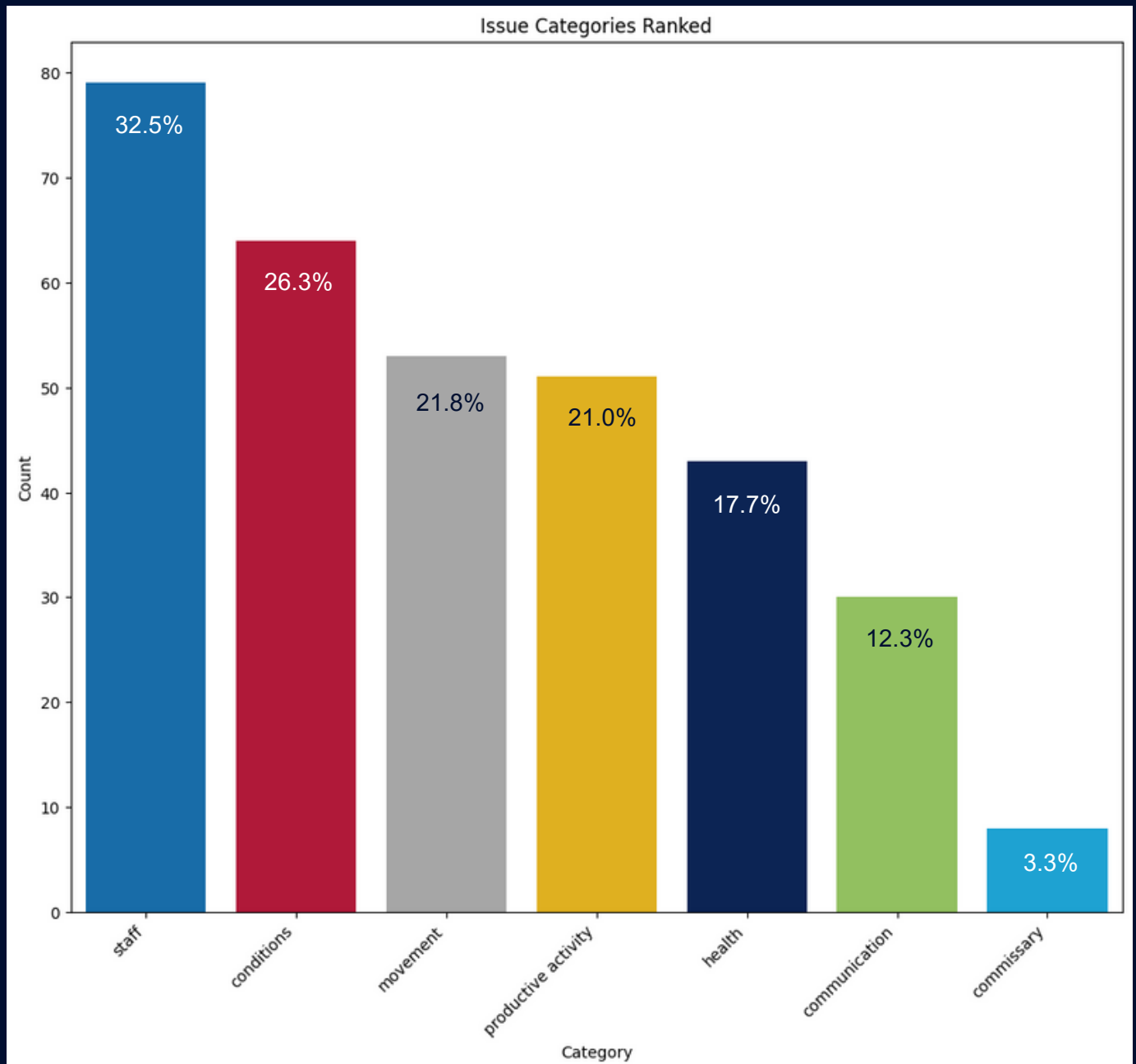
Used in responses to "What are the most negative things about life in this prison?"

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 Pontiac survey responses

1

STAFF

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

prison staff are not held accountable.
They don't get discipline

When theres a serious situation staff
doesn't take things serious

The staff and mental health staff dont listen to inmates concern or problem. If they did, they will ask the inmate how can they help to resolved the problem before staff make a decisions. The staff dont give all the inmates the equally treatment.

Staff here are lazy, antagonistic (this includes Intel & IA officers) and all good ideas suggested to improve this prison & relationships between incarcerated persons and staff are ignored. Very few staff care!

The treatment by staff which is inhumane, degrading & super disrespectful. They purposely try to bring out the worst in everybody here

2

CONDITIONS

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

The water has black stuff floating in it.
Looks like lead from paint but it black stuff that comes from the pipes.

conditions, water, cleanliness, mold in cells and tunnels behind cells where we breathe 24/7

THE CLEANLINESS IS POOR. THE SHOWERS DON'T GET CLEANED REGULARLY. AND THE GALLERY HASN'T BEEN MOPPED IN A MONTH.

The maintenance is horrible. A lot of cells do not work properly as far as plumbing issues are concerned. And you barely ever see a plumber to fix anything.

cell size, Plumbing doesn't work.
I have no Hot water in my cell.

3

MOVEMENT

Includes concerns about time spent out of the cell or sleeping area and yard/dayroom availability

Locked in the cell 24 hours a Day
5 Day's out the week...

We only come out for showers, visits, library, &
2 hrs of yard 2 times a week
if they don't cancel it.

INSIDE OF CELL WITH ANOTHER INDIVIDUAL ALMOST EVERYDAY FOR
24 HRS WITH NOTHING CONSTRUCTIVE TO DO

No movement in the call 24 hrs day day, so in bed
maybe 16 to 20 hrs, may get yard 2 times wk.

If anything bad happens, any where at all in this
prison, every single person is punished. No phones,
no rec yard, no school, no library, no work,
no showers, no video or in person visits.

4

PRODUCTIVE ACTIVITY

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

Job assignment pay. Less programs.
No advance schooling.

jobs being offered to the same inmates ad nauseum
on a continuous loop leaving no opportunities for
rehabilitation or acquiring skills for anyone else.

Locked in cell 24 hrs a day,
I'm eligible for EPSC, and there are no programs (hardly any)
and there is no school at all.

Constantly using "short-staffing" as an excuse
to cancel programs + recreation.

There are very few programs offered and only a
GED course. We are in our cells pretty much all day.

5

HEALTH

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

it took more than 3 yrs to have a diabetes bloodwork follow up

Mental Health staff bordering on "useless"

Poor Healthcare. It can take a month to be seen for a medical request sometimes longer. We have to keep putting in requests, and complaining to be treated only to be put on waiting lists, and neglected.

Mental Health pushes pills on to inmates but the counseling is almost none existent.

they dont show up for sick calls

6

COMMUNICATION

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

The administrations write us tickets for minute things such as having empty soda bottles in our cell and then restrict us from using the phone. which is entirely disproportionate.

Visits are behind glass no matter your status so we don't have access to food especially visitors who travel to yet here on time then have to sit for 2 1/2 hours.

When we go on lockdown they take the phones away so it hurts our communication with our people.

For me seeing my family is everything. But I can't enjoy visits with my family thru a glass window.

Emails take days sometimes a week to go out and/or be recieved

7

COMMISSARY

Encompasses issues such as frequency of shopping opportunity and item availability.

commissary Ran unfairly (some people shop \$600.00 Per month when I only shop \$200.00 per month)

Commissary is breaking the law with sick price hikes, sometimes double at once.

Needs Better Mental Health care, the visiting room, is non-contact, Being that this is (PC) protect custody we should have option to receive commissary in our cells.

Our commissary used to be good, BY COVID, now it sux. Buncha draconian limits, snack size items only

They charge us triple for commissary products the normal price



This report was compiled 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.