
Facility Report



Monitoring Visit to Illinois Youth Center - Harrisburg 2021

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Key Observations

1. Youth at Harrisburg were benefiting from the low population resulting in increased individual attention.
2. The decreased population allowed for smaller groups and less mixing of housing units, which led to a decrease in youth fights and assaults.
3. While there had been substantial investment in some physical plant upgrades since prior JHA visits, several maintenance issues remained including cracked windows, graffiti, and peeling paint in areas in use by youth, which created an impression of neglect.
4. Harrisburg has taken advantage of technology to expand both programming options and opportunities for family engagement.
5. Given COVID restrictions observed in adult prisons, JHA was happy to see programming taking place and was impressed with the activities run through the library.
6. A youth at Harrisburg with an adult felony conviction had been granted clemency through a partnership with a legal clinic at Northwestern University. There were reportedly two other clemency cases out of Harrisburg pending. JHA hopes to see more youth benefit from such second chances and avoid the harms of the adult prison system.
7. JHA visitors observed outdated postings and practices for youth to be able to contact our organization and requested this be updated. JHA has since sent new posting to be displayed inside IDJJ facilities to ensure that youth have accurate and updated information on what JHA does and how to contact us. However, at the time of the Harrisburg visit, youth could contact the [IDJJ Independent Ombudsman](#) via the hotline.

Recommendations

1. Continue to use video visitation to help youth whose families cannot travel to Harrisburg maintain regular contact.
2. Continue to expand educational and programming opportunities through the use of video conferencing.
3. Calls to loved ones should not be restricted as a form of discipline. JHA notes that current incentive levels still state that youth phone privileges are tied to positive behavioral points accumulated.
4. IDJJ should weigh the continued expense of maintaining a youth prison at Harrisburg against the possibility of transferring youth to other youth centers.

Introduction

Illinois Youth Center – Harrisburg (Harrisburg) is a male medium-security prison for the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ). It is located in southeastern Illinois about 30 minutes from the Illinois-Kentucky border. Harrisburg also serves as the southern reception and classification center for IDJJ male youth. The John Howard Association of Illinois (JHA) visited Harrisburg on July 15, 2021. This was JHA's first monitoring visit to an IDJJ prison since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the date of the visit, 34 youth were incarcerated at Harrisburg. In July 2021, there were on average about 114 youth total incarcerated in IDJJ.



Executive Summary

On July 15, 2021, Harrisburg's population was around only 10% of the capacity reported to JHA visitors by administrators. Administrators expressed confidence that this was due in large part to IDJJ's effort to lower the youth population at the beginning of the pandemic. Data [published by IDJJ](#) shows that Harrisburg's population in June 2021 was less than half of what it was in February 2020, immediately pre-pandemic, averaging around 32 youth compared to 79. Youth

seemed to be benefiting from the lower population in the form of more individualized attention from staff.

At the time of [JHA's last visit](#) in May 2018, Harrisburg had a higher population of 13 and 14-year-old youth than any other IDJJ prison, but administrators reported that this was no longer the case due to an agencywide effort to send younger youth to smaller facilities or to put them on Authorized Absence, meaning that they are transferred to residential treatment placements.

Reportedly, Harrisburg's remaining population had greater mental health needs in 2021 than the 2018 population. Administrators speculated that this was the result of new mental health assessments that were more responsive to a broader range of mental health issues including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other effects of trauma.

Harrisburg had access to the Pfizer vaccine through the local health authority and reportedly could vaccinate youth who requested it and were old enough to not need parental consent within a day. The prison had implemented rapid testing procedures that allowed them to take youth on trips into the community and have volunteers and visitors come into the prison. It appeared youth still had opportunities to take part in regular activities. Harrisburg seemed well placed to continue managing the pandemic while minimizing the disruption it caused to the youth's day-to-day schedules.

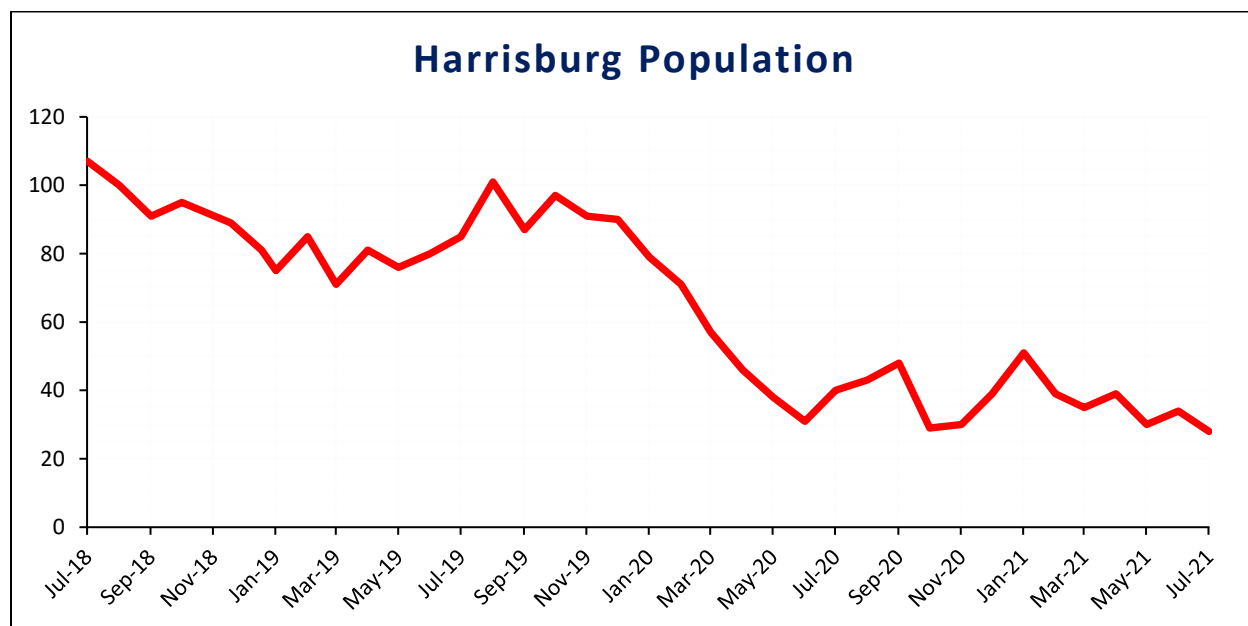
Programming at Harrisburg was running at reduced capacity at the time of our visit. This meant that the maximum size for a class or group was smaller than it was prior to the COVID pandemic. Staff at Harrisburg told JHA visitors that group size was capped at ten youth. The IDJJ programming staff was back fulltime after being in the prison on a rotating basis for a year, and the vocational programs run through Lake Land College, which had been on hiatus, were also running again. Youth and staff seemed engaged in the programming areas.

Administrators reported that since prior JHA visits, Harrisburg had maintenance upgrades, including reroofing the housing units, upgrading the electrical system, and installing a chilling system, which is similar to air conditioning. However, substantial additional maintenance work was needed. Multiple areas of the prison were graffitied or had chipped or peeling paint. JHA visitors also noticed that windows in the doors of inhabited cells on multiple housing units throughout the prison were broken and in need of replacement.

On the day of JHA’s visit, Harrisburg also had a Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) audit, which had ended by the time we arrived, and the safety and security monitor under the [R.J. v. Mueller](#) consent decree was also visiting the prison. While this kept some administrators busy, we were able to conduct a thorough visit. We appreciated the opportunity to speak with the monitor and exchange information about programming and the implementation of the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program, which is meant to address misbehavior.

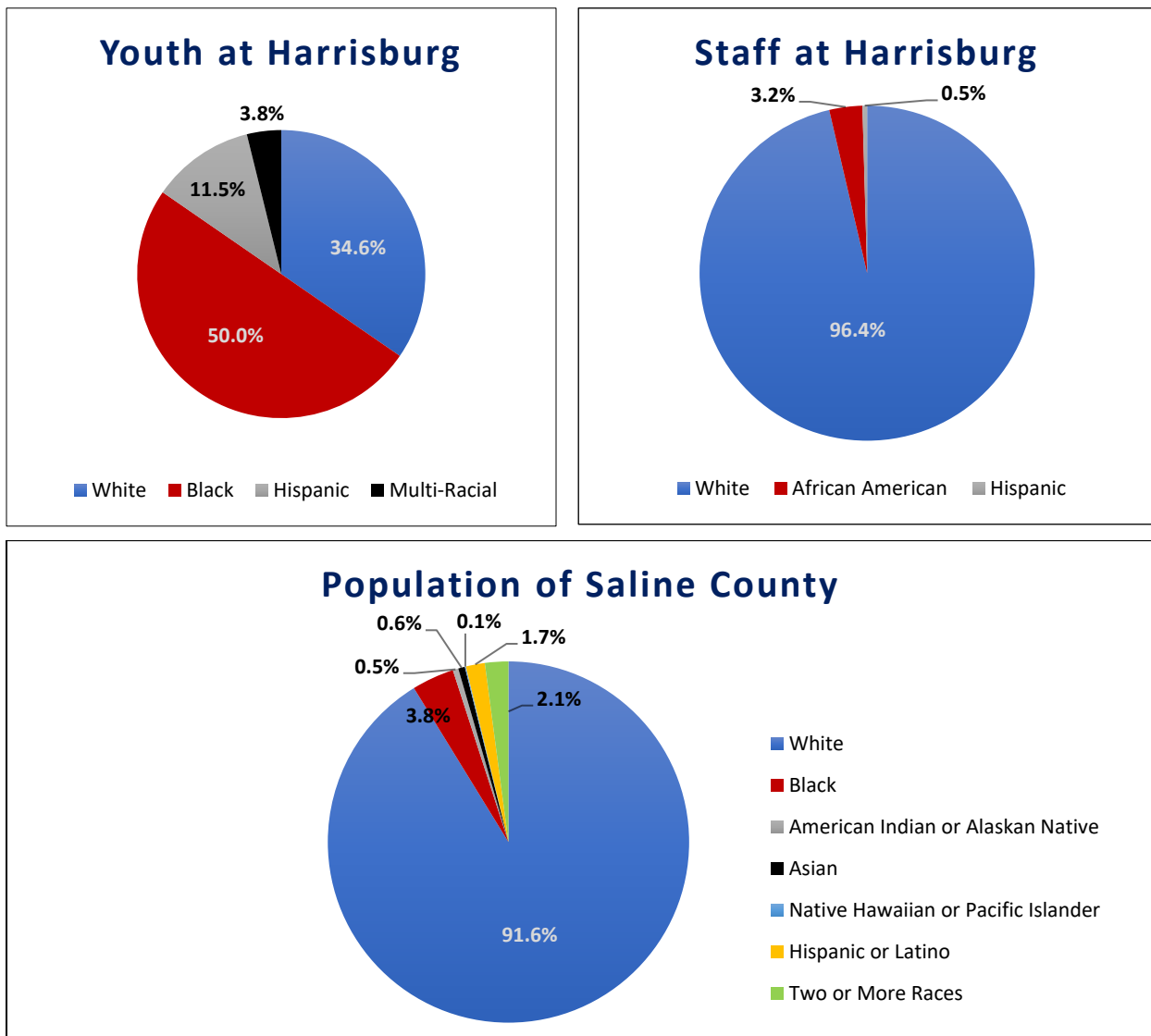
Population

At the time of JHA’s 2021 visit, the prison held 34 youth. From January through July 2021, Harrisburg’s average population was 36.5 youth, compared to an average population of 49 youth in 2020 and 85 youth in 2019. At the time of JHA’s 2018 visit, Harrisburg’s population was 136, and in February 2020, immediately pre-COVID, IDJJ’s [monthly report](#) listed the population at 71, meaning the population had decreased by 75% in the past three years and 52% in the past sixteen months. The July 2021 population of 34 youth indicates that the prison was at 10.5% capacity.



According to information provided by administrators after the visit, the average age of youth incarcerated at Harrisburg was 16.6. 34.6% of youth at Harrisburg were White, 50% were Black,

11.5% were Hispanic, and 3.8% were multiracial.¹ In contrast, 96.4% of staff at Harrisburg were White, 3.2% were African American, and .5% were Hispanic. The demographics of staff at Harrisburg are about 5% whiter than the demographics of the population of Saline County, where Harrisburg is located, according to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#). The disparity between the staff and the population has the potential to cause tension, as evidenced by the allegations of racism against youth at Harrisburg consistently noted in the [Office of the Independent Juvenile Ombudsperson's \(OIJO\) Annual Reports](#).



¹ Racial categories are taken from data provided by IDJJ.

JHA received demographics regarding the counties from which youth were committed to IDJJ for Harrisburg in mid-October 2021. A breakdown of those youth show that 11.5% came from the area north of Peoria (northern Illinois), 42.3% came from the area between Peoria and Springfield (north central Illinois), 30.7% came from the area between Springfield and East St. Louis (south central Illinois), and 15.4% came from the area south of East St. Louis (southern Illinois).



However, more than half of the population was still from the northern half of the state, and nearly a third of the youth at Harrisburg were from either Peoria County or Champaign County, both of which are closer to all four of the other Illinois youth centers than they are to Harrisburg.

An administrator reported that the prison could house 324 youth in a single-bunking capacity, nearly ten times the number of youth housed there on the date of JHA’s 2021 visit.

Reportedly, the 2021 capacity is a significant reduction from a capacity of 520 when youth were double bunked, which has not been the case since 2019 throughout IDJJ.

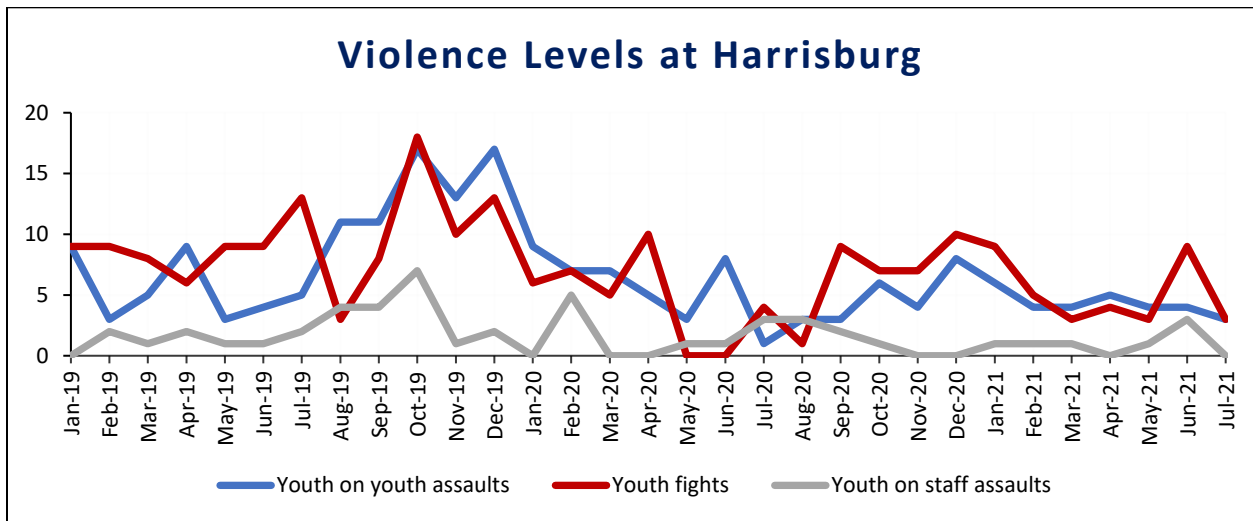
Administrators told us that single bunking helped staff manage behavioral issues and reassured parents about their children’s safety during the COVID pandemic. Administrators

estimated that the average stay for a youth at Harrisburg in 2021 was between three and six months.

Administrators told JHA that Harrisburg’s population was not projected to increase in the next year, and according to IDJJ’s [July 2021 monthly report](#), the population continued to decrease after our visit to only 28 youth at the end of July.

Notably, in October 2021, no youth who were incarcerated at Harrisburg at that time were reported to be from Cook County or the collar counties – an improvement over previous years when Harrisburg housed many youth from those areas.

IDJJ’s monthly reports show that the number of youth-on-youth assaults dropped from an average of 12.3 per month in the six months preceding [February 2020](#) to 4 per month in the six months preceding July 2021. Youth fights similarly dropped from an average of 10.3 per month to 4.5 per month, and youth-on-staff assaults dropped from an average of just over three per month to one per month. According to administrators, most fighting occurs during class changes at school, but administrators also noted that the lower population helped prevent fights.



As mentioned above, at the time of JHA’s 2018 visit, Harrisburg housed the largest number of 13 and 14-year-olds of any IDJJ prison. Administrators reported that this was no longer the case and all 13 and 14-year-old youth were reviewed on intake for transfer to Warrenville or Pere Marquette. These prisons, according to IDJJ’s July monthly report, had average daily populations of 15.5 and 8.2 respectively, compared to Harrisburg’s 33.3. Administrators told

JHA that the only youth of these ages currently housed at Harrisburg were either participating in a Harrisburg-specific program, such as the Juvenile Sex Offender (JSO) program, or were from the area and were placed at Harrisburg in an effort to keep them close to family. While youth aged 13 and 14 largely do not belong in any state-run prison, routing most younger youth to the smaller, lower-security youth centers is an improvement.

Staff

According to [documents](#) published by IDJJ, there were 130 security staff employed at Harrisburg as of March 2021, meaning that there were 3.7 security staff for each youth. The number of security staff was down from 141 in February 2020, but the ratio of security staff to youth was lower in February of 2020 (two security staff per youth) due to the youth population being twice its current size.

Administrators reported that the prison was well-staffed with few vacancies. Many of the staff JHA visitors spoke to had worked at Harrisburg for three years or more, which allowed for stability in implementing and carrying through projects, and more than half of the administrators we spoke to told us that they had been at Harrisburg for over ten years. As of July 2021, the current superintendent had worked at Harrisburg for more than 20 years in various capacities.

JHA notes that historically, Harrisburg has had a persistent problem with staff reluctance to transition away from an adult model to a more adolescent-centered rehabilitative model. OIJO's [2018 report](#) discussed disgruntled staff members who had pursued individual criminal charges against youth for misbehavior that took place in the prison and could have been handled internally. JHA noted the same behavior in our [2018 site visit report](#). During the 2021 visit, JHA observed that relations between youth and staff seemed to be improved or at least that any animosity was less noticeable; this change may be in part attributable to the lower population. Other changes, such as staff retirements, changes in union leadership, and the better implementation of the PBIS system may also have contributed to alleviating conflict between staff and youth somewhat.

COVID-19

The COVID pandemic had a significant impact across IDJJ's operations. According to [data published by IDJJ](#), as of September 15, 2021, Harrisburg had seen eight cases of COVID-19 among youth and 46 cases among staff. An administrator noted during JHA's visit that COVID-19 spread "*like wildfire*" within the prison. According to information received from Harrisburg in mid-October 2021, at that time, the last youth to test positive at Harrisburg did so on March 25, 2021 and the most recent staff positive was on September 21, 2021. Harrisburg does not have an infirmary, and youth who are severely ill are reportedly taken to neighboring hospitals. However, while some staff at Harrisburg had been hospitalized for COVID-19, administrators reported that no youth had been.

As noted above, Harrisburg's population decreased significantly in the early months of the pandemic. In February 2020, the population was 71. By April 2020, the population was 46, a 35% decrease, and has fluctuated in the 30s for most of 2021. JHA applauds this concerted effort to release youth during a time when living in a congregate facility away from family was both more dangerous and more stressful than usual.

Youth who remained at Harrisburg experienced significant disruption. Administrators reported that some staff had rotated between being in the prison and working remotely until April 2021. Mental health groups reportedly were not run for a few weeks early in the pandemic, and vocational programming through Lake Land College experienced a year-long disruption. Staff told us that Leisure Time Services (LTS) used to hold large-scale events pre-COVID, but were still not able to at the time of our visit in July 2021 because of restrictions on mixing youth from different cohorts and because they cannot have youth in groups of more than ten.

IDJJ suspended visitation system-wide [throughout spring 2020](#) and again in [mid-November 2020](#), but administrators reported that they were quickly able to obtain webcams and tablets to increase connectivity between youth and their loved ones. As of July 2021, Harrisburg had resumed visitation with safety protocols in place. Reportedly, visitors were not allowed to use vending machines and each youth-visitor group was required to maintain social distancing from the others. Unlike at adult prisons, youth are not separated from their visitors by plexiglass. Upon arrival, each visitor can choose between showing a vaccine card or taking a rapid COVID-19 test. IDJJ utilizes an online reservation system to manage the number of visitors at any

prison at a given time. JHA notes that the [visitation page](#) on IDJJ's website did not reflect pandemic-related changes to the visitation policy as of October 6, 2021.

JHA informed administrators ahead of our visit that we required anyone visiting with us to be fully vaccinated. Before entering the prison, we had our temperatures taken with a laser thermometer mounted on a stand and were asked screening questions that were in line with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) verbal screening and temperature check recommendations for correctional facilities.

COVID Isolation and Quarantine

According to administrators, a youth who has had possible exposure to COVID-19 but has not yet tested positive is placed in quarantine. Reportedly, youth on quarantine were largely restricted to their own housing unit. They could go with their unit to the outdoor basketball court or the baseball field for recreational time, but they did not visit any shared indoor spaces, such as dietary, the school, or the gym.

Isolation is used for youth who have tested positive for COVID-19. Youth in isolation were confined to their cells unless they were on a housing unit by themselves, in which case they are allowed to go out into the dayroom. Youth in isolation had their vital signs checked by a nurse twice a day. If a youth in isolation needed to see a physician, that visit also took place on the housing unit.

Harrisburg has used cohorting to minimize the risk of spread should COVID-19 enter the prison. Youth attend dietary and "zones"—recreational time on either the basketball court, baseball field, or in the gym—with their housing units. However, students from different housing units still attend classes together. Administrators stated that the rationale for mixing housing units as school was to ensure equal opportunity, as would be the case at a public school. JHA notes that this mixing between cohorts is not ideal but acknowledges that, given both the small number of youth currently on each housing unit and the small number of youth at Harrisburg who are working towards a high school diploma, separating housing units at school may not be practical.

Vaccinations

According to documents provided to JHA by Harrisburg administrators, 66% of youth and 62% of employees (including contractual and Aftercare staff) across IDJJ had been vaccinated against COVID-19 as of July 14, 2021. At Harrisburg, at the time of JHA's visit, 112 staff and 27 youth had been fully vaccinated onsite. Reportedly 68% of youth and 52% of employees at Harrisburg had received the vaccine by that date. The vaccination rate among staff was lower than average within IDJJ, but significantly higher than the average across

Saline County, which was under 40% according to the CDC. Unwillingness from staff to get vaccinated has been an ongoing issue at Illinois correctional facilities, and **JHA recommends that IDJJ continue to find ways to incentivize vaccination pending the governor's [vaccination mandate](#)**, which initially required state employees working in congregate facilities including youth centers to receive the COVID-19 vaccine by October 4, 2021. The deadline for vaccination has since been [extended](#).

Documents provided by IDJJ indicate that incentives for youth to get vaccinated have included the opportunity to get a meal from Buffalo Wild Wings and the ability to play intermural basketball against youth at other IDJJ youth centers.

An administrator told us that Harrisburg was able to procure the Pfizer vaccine on demand from the local health authority, so if a youth who is of age to consent asks to be vaccinated, he can usually expect to receive the first dose by the next day. Harrisburg is not able to keep a stock of COVID-19 vaccines onsite because the prison does not have the capability to store it at the required temperature. Administrators and staff reported that the vaccine rollout at Harrisburg ran smoothly and that they have not experienced any supply issues.

IDJJ must receive parental consent to administer the COVID-19 vaccine to youth under 18 years old. At the time of our visit, there were reportedly some youth at Harrisburg who were waiting to turn 18 to receive the vaccine because, although they wanted it, their parents would not consent.

Reception and Classification Protocols

Harrisburg is responsible for intake for male youth coming from the region south of Peoria. IDJJ halted intake in March 2020, and according to administrators, Harrisburg did not resume regular intake until around June of that year. According to administrators, Harrisburg does intake every few weeks. Reportedly, at the time of JHA's visit, youth would receive a COVID-19 rapid test upon arrival and then a full COVID-19 lab test within a few days. Unvaccinated youth were then quarantined for fourteen days on the intake unit. Vaccinated youth were not required to quarantine, which appears to conform with CDC guidance for correctional facilities.

Youth usually do not attend school while they are in intake, but staff told us that exceptions are sometimes made when a youth is only a few credits away from graduating high school and is expected to be released soon. This way, these youth can graduate while at Harrisburg.

Physical Plant

At the time of JHA's visit, in addition to having three empty housing units, there were two units that only housed a single youth. Harrisburg contains twelve housing units, including A-House (the unit that was formerly used for confinement) which was empty at the time of the visit and, according to administrators, had not been used for confinement in more than six years. Reportedly, A-House is sometimes used for youth who come to Harrisburg from another youth center for a court appearance and have to stay overnight. A-House contains several observation rooms, one of which has a restraint bed that reportedly is used very rarely and use of which must be approved by departmental administrators above the prison level.

An administrator told us that confinement was rarely used because staff were good at de-escalation. Confinement is now used primarily for behavioral, medical, or investigative holds, and is used for shorter periods. According to administrators, confinement could be done anywhere in the prison rather than exclusively in A-House, including a youth's regular cells.

According to IDJJ's [July 2021 monthly report](#), Harrisburg used behavioral holds an average of 24.5 times per month between January and July and had the highest average other than Warrenville. In the six months immediately preceding February 2020, Harrisburg used behavioral holds an average of 77.3 times per month. The average length of behavioral holds in

July 2021 was 134 minutes, or just over two hours. The length of behavioral holds imposed at Harrisburg were an average of about 50 minutes longer than those imposed at Pere Marquette, 80 minutes longer than those imposed at Warrenville, and 20 minutes shorter than those imposed at St. Charles. Harrisburg reported one medical hold and six investigative holds between January 2021 and July 2021.

Nine of the housing units housed youth at the time of our visit, two of which housed only one youth each. Seven were general population units, one was used for intake, and one was used for reception and quarantine. Administrators told JHA during the visit that Housing Unit 8 had the largest population and was where most youth convicted of felonies were housed. Four youth were housed in the Special Treatment housing unit, for those with greater mental health needs, while seven were on the Honors unit.

At the time of our visit, administrators told JHA that Harrisburg had recently upgraded the emergency generators and had installed a chiller system. Buildings A through D had recently been reroofed, and a rusted-out boiler from Building C had been replaced. An administrator also noted that other components of the prison, like the cooling tower, were old and in need of maintenance or replacement, and that Harrisburg has needed computerized temperature control for the better part of ten years. An administrator also told us that window and door repairs were slated to be done after the current reroofing project was finished. JHA visitors noticed that multiple housing units had cell doors with broken windows in them, and on some unit including the honors unit, youth were housed in these cells despite there being other unused cells. JHA visitors also noted a broken window in dietary. According to administrators, the need to acquire funding hindered their ability to stay up to date on maintenance. The prison can pay for some cheaper repairs and maintenance out their own maintenance budget but needs Capital Development Board approval for more expensive updates.

Administrators additionally reported they were unable to keep up with needed repainting due to a two-year painter vacancy, and JHA visitors noticed chipped and peeling paint throughout the housing units, especially in shower areas, which we were told lacked ventilation. There was reportedly a drainage problem in the dietary building resulting from a collapsed water line and the insulation sheeting in the roof of the gym needed repairs.

As of July 2021, Harrisburg housed about 30 youth, many of whom are far from their homes in northern and north central Illinois. **Every IDJJ youth center is running significantly under capacity, and the need for these maintenance resources could be eliminated by transferring Harrisburg’s remaining population to other youth centers.**

Programming

As noted above, according to administrators, Harrisburg initially rotated all programming staff between working onsite and working remotely in response to the pandemic. At first this rotation was for two weeks onsite and two weeks offsite, then this moved to rotating out staff every week and then, in April 2021, the entire staff was brought back fulltime. Teachers at Harrisburg had the option to come in person on a volunteer basis during summer 2020 and, reportedly, enough teachers opted to come that youth were able to attend school in person. According to [monthly reporting](#) by IDJJ, students at Harrisburg have missed fewer whole school days than students at any of the three northern youth centers.

Administrators reported that there was a period of a few months early on in the pandemic when they were not able to hold mental health groups, but that mental health staff met with each youth every week. Reportedly, they have also increased family engagement activities, promoted by use of technology adopted during the pandemic, such as video visitation. **JHA strongly supports programming that involves the families of incarcerated youth, as strong family engagement is integral in preventing recidivism. JHA hopes that any increase in opportunities for family engagement that have taken place during the pandemic will be permanent.**

Education

According to [data published by IDJJ](#), in July 2021, there were 27 students enrolled in school at Harrisburg and 15 teachers employed, including seven special education teachers. The *R.J. v. Mueller* [consent decree](#) requires youth centers to have a ratio of no more than ten youth per teacher and for special education, no more than six youth per teacher. Harrisburg currently has a student-to-teacher ratio of less than two youth per teacher. According to [IDJJ reporting](#), the number of students enrolled in school at Harrisburg has been hovering around 30 and has not exceeded 40 since March 2020.

IDJJ's monthly reports indicate that the percentage of students requiring special education services at Harrisburg fluctuated in the 60s between January and June 2021 before suddenly dropping to 7.4% in July 2021. Between January and June 2021, Harrisburg routinely had a higher percentage of special education students than average across IDJJ's five youth centers.

Staff in the school told JHA that classes were conducted on computers with assistance from classroom teachers in order to accommodate students at different grade levels, as one staff member described having Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II students in the same class. We visited a math classroom which contained at least ten computers and had educational posters about mathematical concepts on the walls.

JHA reiterates that on the date of our visit, there were fewer than thirty students attending school at Harrisburg, and IDJJ's monthly reports show that no youth center was close to exceeding the maximum allowed student-to-teacher ratio. IDJJ could eliminate the need to replace or update Harrisburg's computers by sending these students to another youth center.

Administrators told us that four youth had graduated from high school the month of our visit, July 2021. According to staff, Harrisburg has started live streaming high school graduations so family members can watch from home. **This is a very positive development that hopefully will continue post pandemic to allow more family to attend.** JHA visitors were shown a written copy of the graduation speech given by the elected class speaker at the most recent graduation ceremony, excerpted on the next page:

Staff told us the computers were nearly a decade old, 2012 models, and expressed a desire for newer, faster computers. They told us that students often complained to them about the speed of the computers as well. Given that classes are conducted on the computers, this seems like an important update.

They say one is only confined by the walls you build yourself
And limitations only exist inside your own *head*
One who won't read is no better off than one who *can't*
You must water what you *plant*
So, exercise your knowledge daily and continue to let it *spread*

They say education is the best way to prevent incarceration
And that he who opens a school door - closes a *prison*
You were once planted in the darkness of these *walls*
I've heard your apologetic *calls*
But, now, each one of you have *risen*

IDJJ's monthly reporting shows that Harrisburg awarded a total of 36 high school diplomas in 15 months between the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 and our visit in July 2021. For comparison, Harrisburg awarded 54 high school diplomas in 2019.

Harrisburg offers three vocational programs through Lake Land College: custodial arts, culinary arts, and horticulture. Lake Land halted these programs during the pandemic, but they resumed in April 2021. We were able to visit the culinary arts program and the horticulture program. The culinary arts class was conducted in a small secondary kitchen and JHA observed three or four students engaged in the process of cooking a meal. According to staff, culinary arts is budgeted for just enough food for youth to learn to cook with, so the food is rarely served to other youth. JHA visitors spoke with three youth in the horticulture program, which was just about to start when we last visited Harrisburg in 2018. The youth were working on repotting a large plant and were excited to show us the greenhouse and appeared to have good rapport with the instructor. There is also a high school vocational class in construction that teaches carpentry, masonry, plumbing, and electric. Unfortunately, we were not able to see this class in session.

At the time of our visit, youth at Harrisburg had the option to take a writing class taught remotely through Northwestern University for college credit. Two youth were enrolled in this class. A staff member also told us about a six-week law class that Northwestern had previously offered. **JHA**

hopes to see IDJJ continue to expand educational opportunities for youth through remote learning.

Library

Harrisburg’s library contained books for a variety of reading levels categorized by genre, starting at middle grade chapter books, and had a small collection of law books. The library was not equipped with computers. A member of staff told us that they had applied for a grant to fund the purchase of library computers with limited internet capabilities as allowed by IDJJ. Staff told us that they are able to do interlibrary loans with the Harrisburg town library in some cases, but this capacity is limited. According to staff, youth have been interested in reading about world religions, so procuring more books on the subject was a priority. They welcomed donations.

The librarian at the time of the visit had been in her position since 2019 and worked with an incarcerated student librarian, who learned how to run the circulation desk and help other youth find books. Staff told us that the library ran a scavenger hunt to help youth learn how to locate books. The library was also developing a “crisis skills” book collection, including books on conflicts and solutions. The library also had collections of books on substance abuse, emotional intelligence, and a shelf of books on LGBTQ+ issues. The library ran clubs on poetry, culture, and life skills. Work from these clubs was displayed on bulletin boards in the library. JHA visitors read written work from youth in the culture club discussing what country they wanted to visit and why.

The librarian also publishes a monthly Author Spotlight highlighting authors who are popular with youth and the alternatives paths they took to writing. The library had hosted a remote author event where youth had the opportunity to read a book and interview the author. For Black History Month, students read books about Black trailblazers. The library also reportedly runs events where youth can read a book or recite poetry in front of their peers in exchange for rewards. JHA commends the active and creative programming put in place through Harrisburg’s library.

Leisure Time Services

Administrators told JHA that youth go to one of three recreational zones after dinner. These zones are the gym, the baseball diamond, and the basketball court. JHA visitors also noticed a

soccer net, but it was not clear whether it was in use. The gym contained a basketball court and a weight room with pull-up and dip bars and free weights. The equipment appeared old but in good condition. Apart from zone time, youth reportedly sometimes went to the gym during school hours.

Harrisburg also has a Teen Center, which youth are allowed access to based on good behavior, further explained below in the PBIS section. The Teen Center was equipped with a ping pong table, a pool table, and two televisions with video game systems. A foosball table and a second pool table were pushed off to the side and did not appear to be in use. Staff told us that they have put in a request for a basketball arcade game and for funds to repair one of the pool tables. According to staff, youth get a soda when they visit the Teen Center, and popcorn used to be available on Fridays but was not at the time of our visit because the popcorn machine was broken. Leisure Time Services (LTS) was also awaiting approval for funds for a new popcorn machine.

We were told by staff that there has not been a chaplain at Harrisburg for two or three years and there are no plans to hire one. Reportedly, LTS staff have been filling the roles that a chaplain would normally fill, including volunteer coordination. The prison relies on volunteers to come in and run religious services. At the time of the visit, volunteers were running church services, a Bible study, and a program called Celebrate Recovery. According to staff, volunteers were not required to be vaccinated in July 2021.

Mental Health Treatment

IDJJ assigns youth a mental health level numbered 0 through 4, with youth at mental health level 0 requiring no mental health services and youth at mental health level 4 requiring in-patient treatment at a mental health facility. According to IDJJ's public monthly reporting, no youth had been determined to have a mental health level higher than level 3 (when 0.4% were designated level 3.5) since February 2020. According to data [published by IDJJ](#) in July 2021, 91.6% of youth in IDJJ custody were mental health level 1 or 2. An administrator told us that Harrisburg has historically housed mostly youth at mental health level 1, but at the time of our visit, housed mostly youth at mental health level 2. An administrator speculated that this difference may result at least partially from changes in IDJJ's mental health assessment procedures, which were

made more responsive to trauma-related mental health issues and stress disorders. Reportedly, adjustment issues are the most common mental health issues among youth at Harrisburg. JHA notes that based on IDJJ's monthly reporting, the release of a large portion of the population between March and June 2020 does not appear to have significantly affected the distribution of youth in IDJJ custody across different mental health levels.

The frequency with which youth are scheduled to meet with a mental health professional corresponds to their mental health level. However, according to staff, all youth have an assigned therapist and the opportunity to participate in mental health groups and are able to meet with a mental health professional if they make a request. Staff told us that while mental health staff are assigned to units, accommodations are made for youth who are moving to a new unit but want to stay with their current mental health counselor. This ability to work with therapists assigned to other housing units is a positive development, as JHA noted concern in our [2018 visit report](#) that youth who do not work well with the therapist assigned their unit would not benefit as much from mental health treatment as they would if they could work with a different therapist.

Administrators told JHA that Harrisburg employed seven fulltime mental health professionals, all of whom had master's degrees in social work or clinical services, and that all were licensed except for one who was seeking licensure at the time of our visit. This averages out to a caseload of five youth per mental health professional. Administrators also told us that 75% of youth participated in family therapy. Reportedly, a psychiatrist was onsite ten hours a week. According to data published by IDJJ, 72.7% of youth at Harrisburg were taking psychotropic medication in July 2021, compared to an average of 54.3% of youth across Illinois youth centers.

Staff have reportedly been making efforts to include mental health Aftercare in each youth's release plan. According to administrators, youth can now maintain support with their therapist at the prison after release if they refuse to participate in community-based services or are going back to an area without the appropriate resources. **JHA notes that a trust-based relationship between a patient and a therapist is crucial to successful mental health care and supports the ability of youth to continue treatment with mental health professionals with whom they have already established this relationship.**

At the time of our visit, there were four youth on Unit 11, the Special Treatment Unit. JHA visitors noticed that some cells on this unit were heavily graffitied and noted that some of the graffiti said things like “die,” “kill,” and “fuck,” which seem counterproductive to Special Treatment Unit programming and creating a positive constructive environment. JHA visitors also noticed that there were cells with broken windows in the doors, although there were no youth housed in those cells at the time of our visit. Youth on this unit met with a mental health professional every day in an office on the unit. According to staff, the therapist assigned to the unit worked 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM on Tuesday through Saturday and was covered by another therapist on her days off. Her office was decorated with colorful ceiling hangings and artwork done by youth. There was an area rug and beanbag chairs in the office, and it was lit partially with natural light.

The unit also had a cooldown room, which was a windowless room with a table, a shelf of board games, and a pull-up bar. JHA visitors noticed two or three dead cockroaches on the floor. The showers in this unit looked clean, but staff told us that there was little ventilation, and the ceiling was badly in need of new paint, and visitors observed that there was paint peeling off the ceiling and hanging down in strips.

Harrisburg has a dedicated substance abuse treatment unit, which a staff member told us is often the second largest housing unit and usually has a waitlist. JHA made multiple requests for additional information regarding the substance abuse treatment program but did not receive the requested information.

Juvenile Sex Offender Treatment

Harrisburg also houses the Juvenile Sex Offender (JSO) treatment program, which moved from IYC-Kewanee when that prison closed in 2016. At the time, there were between 30-40 youth in the program. During the July 2021 JHA Harrisburg visit there were just four youth in JSO treatment.

According to documents provided to JHA by administrators after our visit, youth can be identified for JSO programming in various ways. Youth will be identified after receiving a JSO evaluation after being adjudicated or convicted of an offense designated by law as a sex

offense; after being recommended for an evaluation by a mental health professional under certain circumstances, such as having plead down from a sex offense; or after being committed to IDJJ custody for a sex offense, being released, and then returning to IDJJ custody for violating the terms of their Aftercare. Notably, the JSO evaluation is not a mental health assessment but a standardized worksheet confirming that a youth meets one or more of the above listed enrollment criteria. IDJJ's policies apparently do not require youth returning to custody for Aftercare violations to be reevaluated, nor do they require the Aftercare violation to be related to problematic sexual conduct before the returning youth is placed back in JSO treatment. This has the potential effect of placing youth back into a program they have already completed absent any indication of further need.

Reportedly, program completion is determined based on a licensed treatment provider's assessment that a youth has met their mental health treatment goals or when a JSO evaluation indicates that treatment is no longer needed. Documents provided to JHA indicate that youth who have completed the JSO program who violate "expectations" at an IYC facility or during Aftercare may be placed back in the program based on a needs assessment or treatment plan goals. These documents do not specify that the violation must be related to problematic sexual conduct and suggest that a JSO reevaluation is not necessary for placement on this basis. This, again, has the potential force youth who have completed the program back in it for technical Aftercare violations or other unrelated conduct without a clear indication of need, creating the perception of a never-ending cycle where completion of the program never really means full completion, causing frustration and increasing disengagement with programming that likely leads to diminishing returns.

Furthermore, according to the OIJO, youth who have completed JSO programming at Harrisburg are often sent to JSO programs in the community as part of their Aftercare that have a great deal of overlap in substance with the JSO programming they have already completed with IDJJ. This creates the perception of being forced to start over that can lead youth to disengage with their Aftercare programs, violate their Aftercare expectations by failing to attend or participate in the mandated community JSO programming, and be taken back into IDJJ custody, where they are, again, placed back into the JSO program. This cycle leads to youth spending much more time in IDJJ custody than they were originally expected to.

As mentioned above, in July 2021, there were just four youth in the JSO program at Harrisburg. Administrators attributed this drop in numbers to more appropriate criteria for placement and the fact that the program is now voluntary for some youth. When we visited, three youth were living on the JSO unit, and one other youth was being housed on a unit by himself because of problems being around others. Housing availability and staffing levels allowed for this accommodation. An administrator expressed that they were hoping to reintegrate him onto a unit with other youth in the near future.

According to administrators, the JSO curriculum was developed in cooperation with [Nexus-Indian Oaks Family Healing](#), a residential treatment program for youth in Manteno, Illinois, to be equivalent to programs available to youth in the community and ensure continuity when youth moved to residential treatment outside of IDJJ. This step was reportedly meant to address feelings from youth that they were starting over in residential treatment. Although administrators indicated they have attempted to conform JSO programming with community-provided treatment to avoid feelings of redundancy and starting over, the reported lack of ability to have finality or completion of the JSO program and cycling between Aftercare treatment and the JSO in-custody program, where youth do not have behavior indicating further need, appears problematic.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Point Level System

The Youth Orientation Manual provided to JHA for Harrisburg states that the PBIS system allows youth to “*earn daily points for appropriate behavior and for participating in assigned programs.*” The manual outlines that in order to maintain good behavior, youth should be:

- *Showing respect for staff and other youth*
- *Responding to staff direction to sit on the ground or against the wall during a disturbance*
- *Having respect for property*
- *Regularly attending and participating in programs and work assignments*
- *Keeping their room neat and clean*
- *Having self-respect and keeping themselves clean and well groomed*

The manual indicates that youth can earn up to 28 points per day. The amount of points a youth earns each day corresponds to the level they are on. Youth start out on C-level and must earn more than 20 points a day for one week to move to B-level. Youth on B-level must earn more than 25 points a day for two weeks in a row to move to A-level. Youth on A-level must earn more than 25 points for six weeks in a row to move to Honors. The Honors level entails greater privileges including opportunity to live on the Honors housing unit. One youth on the Honors unit told a JHA visitor that to remain on Honors, you *“have to be perfect.”*

The manual lays out the privileges available to youth on each level. Youth on C-level have no ability to buy commissary, can receive no work assignments, and can make one 30-minute phone call per month, whereas youth on Honors level have a \$90 commissary limit, can make two 30-minute calls per week, have no restrictions on their work assignments, and can participate in additional activities such as movie nights, weekly off-grounds field trips, and Teen Center. **JHA again recommends that a youth’s ability to speak with their loved ones not be tied to disciplinary status, given the important link between strong family ties and successful rehabilitation.** During our visit it appeared that during COVID, Harrisburg was not limiting youth phone calls by level. Administrators told us that all youth generally have unlimited phone access on housing units but may receive a “phone restriction” as a consequence for a disciplinary report or ticket.

JHA visitors visited the Honors unit, Unit 9, which is adjacent to the Teen Center. The Honors unit housed seven youth at the time of our visit. The unit is capped at eight due to PREA requirements that each housing unit maintains a ratio of no more than eight youth to one staff. The dayroom in the Honors unit was the only one that had upholstered furniture as opposed to molded plastic. The dayroom was equipped with a refrigerator, a microwave, an air fryer, and a PlayStation 4, on which two youth were playing a first-person shooter game. Staff told us that youth on the Honors unit have the opportunity to order groceries from Walmart, which their counselor will bring to them on the unit. JHA visitors noticed several bags of frozen chicken tenders and bottles of ranch dressing in the refrigerator.

Youth on the Honors unit also had televisions in their cells and could access other electronics, such as an MP3 player. One youth on the unit told a JHA visitor that the ability to have an MP3 player was his favorite thing about being Honors level. Another youth told a JHA visitor that youth on the Honors unit could get smart watches, but JHA does not believe this to be accurate.

Smart watches do not appear on the commissary order form provided to JHA by Harrisburg and use of internet enabled or recording devices is generally prohibited within correctional facilities.

The Honors unit was one of the units where youth were living in cells with broken windows. We were confused about why this occurred, given the large number of empty cells on the unit.

Another implication of PBIS level is access to the Teen Center, which is available to youth on A-level for at least one hour per week and to youth on Honors for at least two hours per week, although staff told us that youth were usually given more time than that. Reportedly, Honors youth were often allowed access to the Teen Center during their dayroom time if there was not another group already there and this was observed during our visit.

Dietary

Harrisburg was only using a quarter of the dining room at the time of our visit. According to an administrator, youth come to dietary one housing unit at a time entering the building through the front door and when the unit is finished eating, they leave out a side door that leads to a staging area, where they wait until the next unit is in the building before going back to their housing unit. Staff told us that the purpose of this process was to keep youth from different housing units apart from each other and that this was effective at preventing fights.

An administrator told JHA visitors that the quality of the food served at dietary has improved since IDJJ moved away from getting their food through the Illinois Department of Corrections' Illinois Correctional Industries program and towards using school nutritional guidelines for meals. Reportedly, complaints about the quality of the food are now rare.

Grievances

Administrators reported that youth do not file many grievances and attributed this to their ability to contact the Office of the Independent Juvenile Ombudsman (OIJO). The OIJO was established in 2014 and according to IDJJ's website, its role is to *"ensure that the rights of youth committed to the independent department of juvenile justice are fully observed, and to assist in pursuing services for committed youth and their families determined to be in need of*

assistance.” OIJO is independent within IDJJ and the ombudsperson reports directly to the Governor. Youth are able to call OIJO from their units irrespective of the phone privileges associated with their PBIS level. JHA is somewhat concerned that youth’s circumvention of the grievance system via the OIJO, which should track and respond to youth’s issues, stems from a negative perception about the functionality of the grievance process but acknowledges that being able to speak to someone on the phone about their problems is probably more satisfying to youth than submitting a paper grievance.

There were two locations where JHA noticed a drop-box labeled with JHA’s name where youth could put privileged mail to our organization. We were told that only one administrator had the key to the box and sent everything in it to us. However, JHA has asked the prison to remove our name from the drop-boxes, as the best way for youth to contact us is to send a letter to us directly to ensure receipt, and we are unaware of mail reaching us through this method historically. Administrators indicated that they have removed the drop box label.

Additionally, JHA visitors noticed that the postings instructing youth on how to reach advocacy organizations listed an address for JHA that was several years out of date, despite JHA having asked IDJJ to update the postings repeatedly since 2015. JHA sent the youth centers updated postings after the visit but has not received confirmation that they have been posted. JHA visitors also noted an out-of-date address for another advocacy organization listed on other postings.



This report was written by JHA staff. Media inquiries should be directed to JHA's Executive Director Jennifer Vollen-Katz at (312) 291-9555 x205 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 are reading every letter and tracking 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 persons who agreed to be interviewed for this report and who graciously shared their experiences and insights with us.



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