

PENNSYLVANIA
PRISON SOCIETY
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Prison Conditions During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Preliminary Findings from a Survey of People in Pennsylvania State Custody

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Executive Summary

Prisons, nursing homes, and other congregate settings are at the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic. Once the virus enters a prison, it can easily spread among people confined in close quarters and travel back into the community, fueling the spread of the virus outside prison walls. That means protecting against COVID-19 in prisons is not just a matter of caring about people who live and work in those facilities — it's a matter of community safety.

The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (DOC) introduced measures early on in the pandemic to prevent and mitigate outbreaks of COVID-19 in the Department's 23 state prisons, including measures recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. As the state's independent corrections monitor, the Pennsylvania Prison Society set out to find out how well those measures were being implemented. Starting in April, we distributed a survey to people living behind bars to assess this and illuminate the experience of being in a Pennsylvania state prison during the pandemic.

What we found was mixed:

- On questions of hygiene and sanitation, large majorities of respondents said prisons are facilitating daily handwashing and are regularly cleaning communal areas. But many residents reported being unable to sanitize their cells on a regular basis, even though the Department's policies require it to distribute supplies to enable daily cleaning of cells.
- Even with increased hygiene, 56 percent of respondents said they did not feel safe in prison.
- The quality of the communication from prison staff to people in custody factored into whether they felt safe in prison. Even in facilities with large outbreaks of the virus, residents tended to feel safe if they perceived that guards and administrators were communicating with them about changing circumstances and working to keep them safe.
- One in six respondents said they could not access medical care. This appears to be a consequence of prisons restricting non-emergency care.

On the whole, survey findings highlight the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' success in quickly implementing needed hygienic measures. But there are several shortcomings for the Department to address.



We urge the Department to:

- Distribute enough cleaning supplies to enable people in custody to sanitize their cells thoroughly and regularly.
- Foster a sense of safety in prisons through better communication.
- Ensure that everyone can access essential medical care in a timely manner.

The Department should act on these findings and redouble its efforts to stem the pandemic.

Background

A recent study in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* found that people incarcerated in state and federal prisons have died from COVID-19 at three times the rate of the general U.S. population and have an infection rate 5.5 times as high.¹ Moreover, the 15 largest coronavirus clusters in the United States have all occurred in prisons, according to data compiled by the *New York Times*.² These realities make it especially important for prisons to follow recommended practices for preventing and mitigating the spread of the virus.

In Pennsylvania, the first outbreak of COVID-19 in a state prison began on March 29, 2020 when an incarcerated individual tested positive at State Correctional Institution (SCI) Phoenix. By April 13, that outbreak had led to the first death of a person in DOC custody.³ A second outbreak began a week later at SCI Huntingdon, with four corrections employees and one incarcerated person testing positive.⁴ It would become the state prison system's worst outbreak, infecting nearly 500 people and killing five of them to date. All told, over 1,000 people who live or work in PA DOC prisons have contracted the virus that causes COVID-19, and 12 have died from the disease.⁵ All but one of those deaths were incarcerated people.

Since March, the Department of Corrections has taken steps to prevent and mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in its prisons, including suspending visits from outsiders, implementing a system-wide lockdown, testing and quarantining new admissions, temperature screening staff, providing free soap and masks to people in custody, and increasing sanitation of facilities. In addition, on April 10, Governor Wolf established a program making some people in custody eligible for temporary reprieves, under which 123 have been released.⁶

¹ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2768249>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html#clusters>

³ <https://www.inquirer.com/health/coronavirus/coronavirus-prisons-philadelphia-sci-phoenix-inmate-dies-20200413.html>

⁴ <https://radio.wpsu.org/post/updated-new-covid-19-deaths-centre-cambria-and-warren-sci-huntingdon-reports-5-positive-cases>

⁵ "COVID-19 Dashboard", Pennsylvania Department of Corrections website: <https://www.cor.pa.gov/Pages/COVID-19.aspx>

⁶ The number of reprieve releases is taken from the DOC's population report as of September 17, 2020.

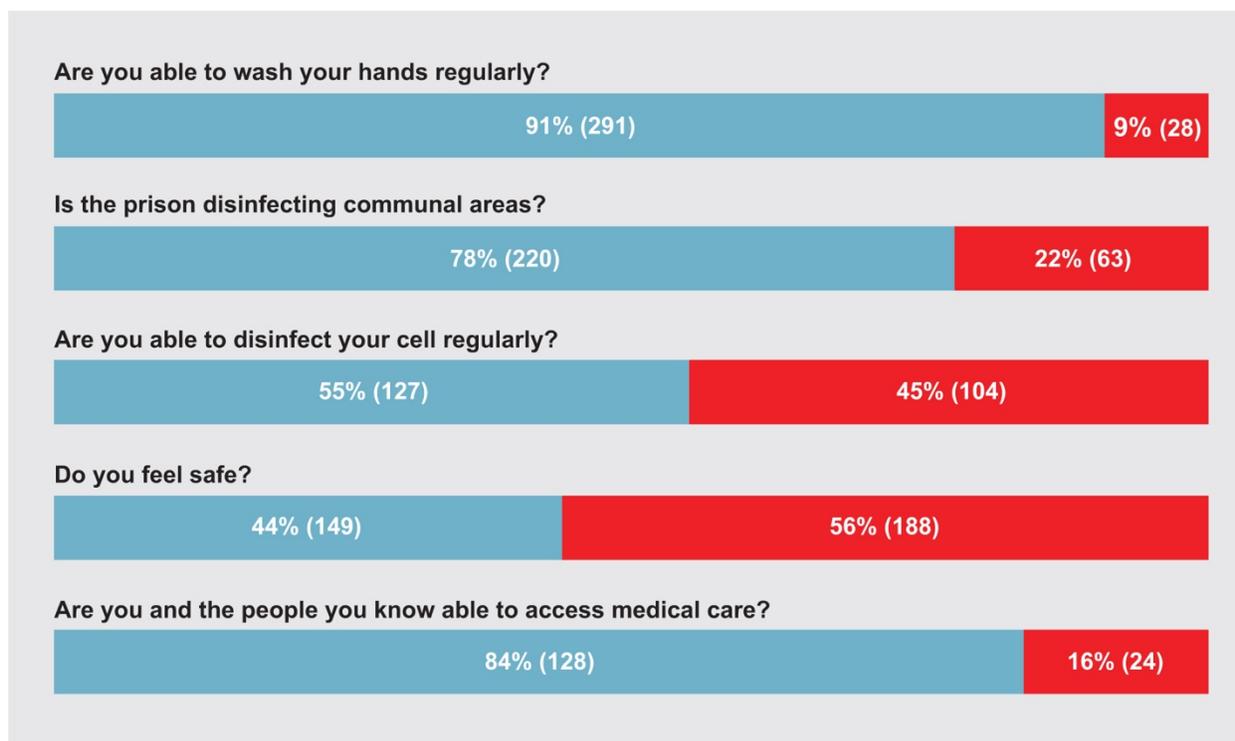


The Prison Society has been monitoring all of these developments. In order to get a first-hand perspective, the Prison Society conducted its first ever survey of incarcerated people.

Detailed Findings

Some 345 people in Pennsylvania state custody filled out the Prison Society survey between April 15 and September 8, 2020. While that number represents only about one percent of the overall state prison population, we believe it is enough to make general inferences about how the system is performing on the main issues our survey investigated.⁷

Overall responses to key survey questions are displayed in the graph below:



Hygiene measures largely implemented, but room for improvement

Large majorities of people in custody report that prisons are following basic hygiene practices for stopping the spread of COVID-19. Ninety-one percent could wash their

⁷ Percentage based on the DOC's population report as of September 17, 2020. Surveys were distributed in mailings responding to letters that the Prison Society received from people in custody. The survey was also included in the Society's newsletter for incarcerated people, [Graterfriends](#).



hands regularly, and 78 percent say that prison staff are disinfecting communal areas regularly.

Only about half (55 percent), however, report being able to clean their cells regularly. Many of the people who said they could disinfect their cells regularly explained that “regularly” meant only once or twice a week. This falls short of the statement on the Department’s [“COVID-19 and the DOC”](#) webpage, which states that “Inmates are being provided materials to clean their cell daily,” and “materials will be provided to them on a daily basis.” One person wrote:

“I think we should be able to have our cells cleaned — as in swept, mopped, and toilets cleaned — at least once a week. They only spray a washcloth with cleaner and that’s it once a week.”

Less than half of people surveyed report feeling safe

Although majorities of survey takers reported that sanitation and hygiene practices are largely being followed, fewer than half — only 44 percent — reported feeling “safe.” Most respondents who did not feel safe had concerns about the general attitudes and conduct of staff, such as the failure to wear masks. Conversely, there were 27 responses in which the individuals complimented staff conduct or characterized the atmosphere as “peaceful” or “calm,” and in each of those instances, the respondents also reported feeling safe.

Although the survey did not ask specifically about masks, 121 respondents left comments about the issue. Of these, about 45 percent wrote that staff members wear masks rarely or only some of the time:

“We are worried because the staff doesn’t wear their masks unless [a supervisor] comes onto the housing unit.”

“Staff should keep their masks on while walking around in our population. ‘Cause they are the only possibility that the prison could get infected.”

The issue of correctional officers not wearing masks is not unique to Pennsylvania prisons. Our sister organization, the [Correctional Association of New York \(CANY\)](#), conducted a structured monitoring visit to the Fishkill Correctional Facility in July. During that visit, CANY interviewed 162 people in custody and asked about mask-wearing. Forty percent reported that correctional staff were not regularly wearing masks.

Communication about the pandemic and its impact on prisons also appeared to contribute to the perception of safety. Twenty-eight percent of respondents (65 total) wrote comments about the job the Department was doing to keep them informed. Most of the 48 who complained prison staff were not keeping them informed reported feeling unsafe. One person wrote:



“I do not feel safe because it feels like I am on a rudderless ship. It feels like there is no reasoning behind the decisions being made. Overall, everyone feels tense, on edge.”

Similarly, the majority of the 17 people who reported being given sufficient information said they felt safe. This group included people living in facilities that have experienced large outbreaks of the coronavirus.

1 in 6 say they can't access medical care

While 84 percent of respondents reported being able to access medical care, that still leaves about 1 in 6 people who say they haven't been able to get health care during the pandemic. Comments written by survey participants suggest that prisons have restricted non-emergency medical visits, resulting in delays accessing services and, in some cases, people going without needed medical treatment altogether:

“Only emergency health services until further notice.”

“The waiting time could be weeks.”

“They say if it is not an emergency to wait. My neighbor has an abscessed tooth and they won't let him see a dentist.”

Even in the best of times, access to health care behind bars can be difficult. The survey results suggest that the availability of basic health care services in prisons may have decreased during this public health emergency.

Pennsylvania appears to be doing a better job on prison hygiene than Illinois

How do Pennsylvania's prisons stack up to other states? The only other jurisdiction for which comparable data is available is Illinois. The Prison Society's sister organization, the [John Howard Association](#) (JHA), conducted a similar survey of people living in Illinois state custody. The Illinois Department of Corrections provided assistance distributing the survey to all 38,000 people in Illinois custody. The JHA has analyzed surveys from more than 16,000 respondents to date.

The Illinois survey asked several similar questions about prison hygiene that can be used as points of comparison with the Prison Society's survey:

- *Hand-washing:* 61 percent of Illinois respondents said they could regularly wash their hands, compared to 91 percent in Pennsylvania.
- *Cleaning cells:* 15 percent of Illinois respondents reported having enough cleaning products to thoroughly clean their cell or sleeping area in the past week. In Pennsylvania, 55 percent reported being able to disinfect their cells regularly.



- *Sanitation of common areas:* 63 percent of Illinois respondents reported that at least some if not all, common areas were cleaned two times a week. In Pennsylvania, 78 percent said that prison staff are disinfecting communal areas regularly.

Overall, the Pennsylvania DOC appears to be doing a better job than Illinois on the hygiene measures studied in both surveys.

Using the findings to improve public health

The goal of the Prison Society's survey was twofold: to keep the public informed about what is happening in prisons during the pandemic and to assist the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections in improving its practices. What goes on in prisons during the pandemic affects not just the people who live and work there but the surrounding communities as well.

We shared our survey results with the Department along with findings related to individual facilities. Even in the best of times, the 23 Pennsylvania state prisons often operate as individual units, lacking consistency and uniformity. Our initial survey results confirmed a lack of consistency during the pandemic, with some facilities receiving much more favorable responses than others. Our facility-level findings, however, were limited by our response size. For some facilities we only received 5 responses, for others we received more than 30.

Accordingly, we asked the Department to both comment on what it was doing to correct the deficiencies brought to light by the survey, and we asked if the Department would assist in future survey dissemination. As noted earlier, the Illinois Department of Corrections aided the John Howard Association in distributing surveys system-wide.

The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections declined to comment on this survey and the steps it was taking to improve. In addition, the Department declined to assist with further survey dissemination.

The pandemic continues, and so does our work advocating for the safety and health of those living and working behind bars. We continue to survey people in custody and will continue to update our findings, sharing them with the public and with the Department of Corrections. Additionally, the Prison Society's [COVID-19 Tracking Project landing page](#), completed with the Vera Institute, combines state and county data on the spread of coronavirus in Pennsylvania prisons and jails, providing timely and credible information for families of incarcerated people, journalists, legislators, and concerned citizens.

Additional measures to stop the spread of coronavirus in prisons

While our survey focused on hygiene and other aspects of COVID-19 mitigation best observed by people in custody, we know there are other steps the State could and



should be taking to stem the spread of COVID-19 behind bars, and by extension, in the community:

- **Expand efforts to safely reduce the number of people in custody.** The Governor's temporary reprieve program has led to the release of 123 people out of a population of more than 40,000. Providing reprieves to more incarcerated people who are medically vulnerable and not a threat to public safety would get vulnerable people out of harm's way, permit greater social distancing behind bars, and ultimately promote public health.
- **Implement weekly, rapid testing of all staff that come into contact with people in custody.** When prisons are in lockdown, corrections staff are the only people coming and going from the facility who could potentially introduce the virus. While the Department screens staff for symptoms before entering, that is not sufficient to stop a virus known for asymptomatic spread. We call on the Department to adopt the mandatory staff testing protocols currently required for all nursing homes. These protocols require monthly, weekly, or bi-weekly rapid testing of all staff in contact with residents, based on the level of community spread.

ABOUT THE PRISON SOCIETY

Founded in 1787 by Benjamin Rush and Benjamin Franklin, the Pennsylvania Prison Society is the nation's oldest human rights organization. For 233 years we have worked to ensure humane prison conditions and advocate for restorative criminal justice policies.

For media inquiries, please contact Executive Director, Claire Shubik-Richards at cshubik@prisonsociety.org and 215-910-4573.

