



Responding to the Pandemic

PbS Issue Brief 3: Fewer Youths in Custody

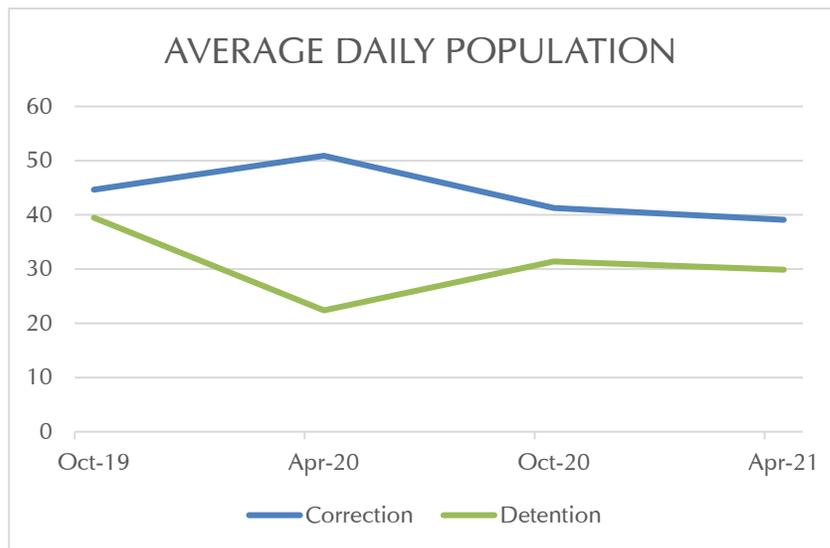
June 2021

One of the immediate responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by juvenile justice agencies was to try to reduce the number of young people in closed, congregate care facilities. Most juvenile justice facilities are the last stop for a young person who has fallen through the cracks of other child-serving agencies and cannot refuse to accept a youth referred by the court or dropped off by police. Similarly, not all agencies have the authority to decide when a committed youth is released from their facility. Yet coordinated efforts among all juvenile justice partners – courts, community supervision, attorneys – contributed to data showing fewer youths are in custody than before the pandemic.

[Performance-based Standards](#) (PbS) continues to share its data to better understand the impact, presence and prevalence of COVID-19 in juvenile justice programs and the strategies used to reduce its spread. The data PbS shares is reported voluntarily by 148 correction, detention, assessment and community-based residential programs in 32 states and provides a unique and timely snapshot of conditions of confinement and facility quality of life. PbS has worked with facilities and agencies since 1995 to implement a set of national aspirational performance standards for operations, services and programs and coaches agencies to collect and use data to implement best practices and achieve positive outcomes for young people.

In April 2021, the average daily population in detention centers and correction facilities continued to decline slightly and remained below pre-pandemic numbers.

In October 2019 the average daily population of detention centers hit a high of 44 youths. Six months later as COVID-19 spread and shortly after the World Health Organization declared it was a pandemic, [that number halved to an average of 22 youths](#). The population in detention centers increased in October 2020 as protection and prevention measures were put into place but then slightly decreased in April 2021 to an average daily population of 30 youths.

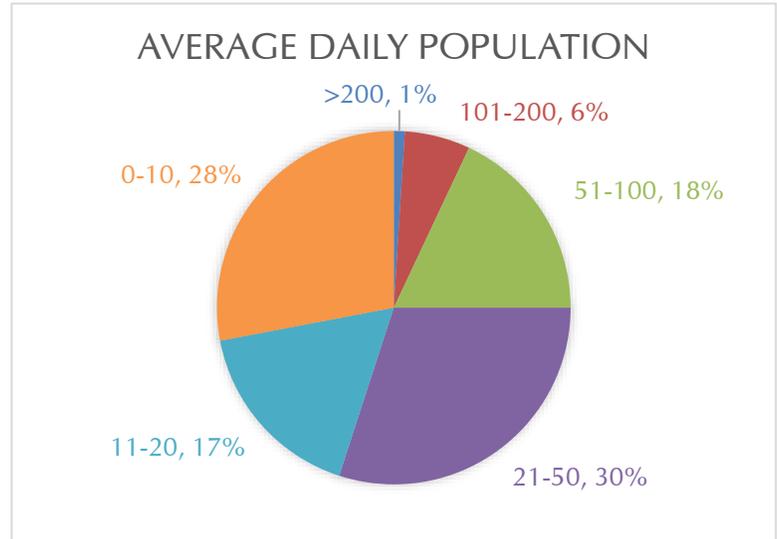


The average daily population in correction facilities rose slightly in April 2020 but then continued to drop marginally from 41 in October 2020 to 40 youths in April 2021, sustaining the downward trend from about 45 in October 2019 and an average of 63 youths in October 2015.





About half of the correction and detention facilities had average daily populations of 20 youths or less and about three quarters averaged 50 youths or less. Only one facility had more than 200 youths during the month of April 2021. One facility reported zero youths for six days during April and a high of six youths for eight days. It was not too long ago twice as many young people were in custody and many more facilities held 100 or more youths.



Policy changes to admission, transfers and releasing youths may have contributed to fewer youths in custody.

To learn more about what may have contributed to the reduced population and what can be sustained to continue that trend, PbS asked facilities to report changes made to policies for admitting, transferring and releasing youths. Most facilities reported changes in admissions policies in response to the pandemic, some of which likely contributed to the reduced number of youths. Several facilities were able to put new admissions on hold and many required quarantining and/or negative COVID-19 tests before admission. Some facilities reported changes to policies that limited transfers to other facilities only to emergencies and many facilities developed policies requiring quarantining and negative test results before transfers. Lastly three facilities reported policy changes to forgo certain requirements to allow for early releases to families and communities.

[As reported earlier](#), the first PbS data published from the April 2021 data collection on COVID-19 testing in juvenile facilities showed 4% of youths tested were found to be positive for the virus and 7% of staff tested were found to be positive.

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