



EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON INDIANA JAIL POPULATIONS & OPERATIONS

BACKGROUND

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared SARS-CoV-2, commonly referred to as coronavirus, to be a global pandemic. The coronavirus causes COVID-19, a highly contagious disease with a variety of symptoms including fever, cough, difficulty breathing, fatigue, and others. Prolonged physical proximity to a contagious person, especially indoors, is the primary means of spread for the virus. Consequently, strategies to prevent outbreaks, including physical distancing, frequent cleaning, and personal hygiene precautions, were implemented across the globe. However, in jail settings, the implementation of some of these precautions is not feasible. The need to reduce incarceration levels as a public health measure became apparent.^{1,2}

National trends indicate that more than 10 million U.S. residents enter jail during any given year, a majority of whom are held while awaiting court decisions.³ Additionally, jails typically operate near capacity with about 4 of every 5 available beds occupied. Further, incarcerated people are disproportionately likely to suffer from preexisting comorbidity factors and immunodeficiency that make them especially vulnerable to infectious diseases.^{4,5} As of August 2020, outbreaks in U.S. correctional facilities accounted for the 15 largest COVID-19 outbreaks in the country.⁶ These factors can make jails hotspots for the spread of the disease, so five days after the March 11 WHO pandemic declaration, the Indiana Supreme Court encouraged lower courts to implement emergency operations to (1) ensure continuity of operations, (2) suspend nonemergency detentions, (3) review the sentences of nonviolent offenders and juveniles, and (4) to consider population reductions in local facilities.⁷ Court systems and county jails then began working to temporarily reduce inmate population levels.

KEY FINDINGS

- During the early stages of the pandemic (February 2020 through April 2020), jails across the country reduced inmate population levels by about 27 percent. The 19 Indiana counties in our sample saw reductions of more than 30 percent.
- As of mid-June, U.S. county jail population levels were still about 25 percent below pre-pandemic levels, while Indiana jail population levels remained about 30 percent below pre-pandemic levels.
- Stakeholders from Indiana sheriffs' offices described several common changes in jail operations during COVID-19, including the creation of quarantine areas, adoption of enhanced cleaning procedures and equipment, integration of health screenings, personal protective equipment, and COVID-19 testing, changes in staff shifts, modification to court-related proceedings, restriction of programs and services, changes in meal preparation and laundry services, and implementing inmate education and communication efforts.
- County courtroom workgroups (i.e., judges, prosecutors, probation officers) were primary decision makers in the process of reducing jail populations, though sheriffs' office representatives also served a variety of roles to inform release decision making.
- The majority of stakeholders from Indiana sheriffs' offices did not believe that COVID-related releases will affect crime rates in their jurisdiction.
- Looking forward, stakeholders from Indiana sheriffs' offices indicated several changes in jail operations that will continue beyond the pandemic, including an increased use of technology, changes in inmate booking and housing procedures, and enhanced cleaning measures.

In June 2020, with support from the IUPUI Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research, researchers from the Center for Health and Justice Research proposed to examine the effect of COVID-19 on Indiana jail populations and operations. This brief, divided into two sections, summarizes the findings from those efforts. In the first section, changes in Indiana county jail populations were assessed to estimate the size of jail population reductions. Nationwide county jail data is also provided for context. The second section of this brief focuses on interviews conducted with stakeholders from Indiana sheriffs' offices described the challenges and achievements of operating county jails during a pandemic. This portion of the study explores policy and practices used to manage populations and the anticipated effects on jail operations during and after the pandemic.

U.S. & INDIANA COUNTY JAIL POPULATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

This portion of the brief provides a general overview of national and Indiana efforts to reduce jail populations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective of this portion of the study is to estimate the size of jail population reductions and explore how much variation exists between jurisdictions at multiple points of time into the pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, we narrowed our focus to a subsample of 588 county jails nationwide in the dataset that had at least one data point during each of the following periods: February 15 through February 29, the “pre-pandemic” period; April 15 through April 30, the “first COVID-19 peak” period; and June 15 through June 30, the “current” period. The “current” period reflects our most recent available data. The resulting sample was 581 counties across 41 states, accounting for just under 20 percent of all U.S. counties.

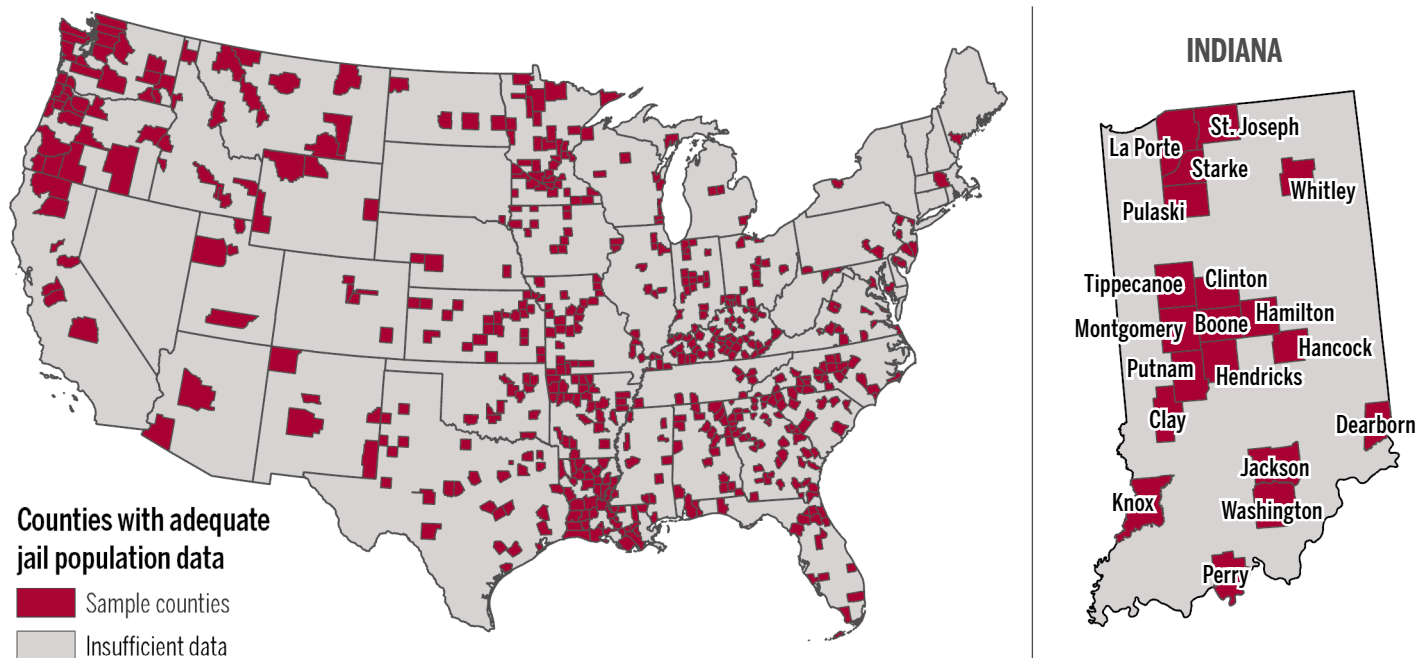
After describing national trends, we focus on Indiana. We report on trends specific to Indiana counties and examine how Indiana compares to the rest of the nation in responding to the call to reduce jail populations.

FINDINGS

National trends

In our sample of 581 counties, individual pre-pandemic county jail inmate populations ranged from less than five to more than 2,000 (Figure 1). The average pre-pandemic jail population among all sample counties was about 262 inmates. At the time of the first COVID-19 peak in April, that figure dropped to about 191 inmates. This change reflected an overall reduction of about 27 percent. All regions of the country saw reductions in jail populations between the pre-

FIGURE 1. Geographic context of counties in study sample



Data sources: U.S. Census Bureau, NYU Public Safety Lab
 Note: No facilities in AK, HI, or any other U.S. territory were included in the sample.

pandemic period and the first peak, but after that point in time the picture was much more mixed. While overall jail populations only rose slightly through the most recent period in June, to about 195 inmates, the local responses to the pandemic appear to have significantly diverged during this period. After the first peak in April, about 60 percent of all sample counties increased jail population levels from their earlier lows. In the Midwest specifically, jail populations have risen almost 9 percent since April, highlighted by rates of increase of greater than 10 percent in Iowa (10.6 percent) and Missouri (12.2 percent); greater than 15 percent in Michigan (16.5 percent) and Ohio (15.8 percent), and greater than 20 percent in North Dakota (20.2 percent).

INDIANA TRENDS

The Indiana subsample consisted of 19 Indiana counties (Figure 1 and Table 1). The pre-pandemic figure of 4,425 inmates represented about 22 percent of Indiana's total jail population on a typical pre-pandemic day. Jail populations in Indiana generally fell at a quicker rate than regional and national averages, and remained lower through the current period. While all Indiana counties in our sample experienced some degree of a reduction in jail populations between the pre-pandemic (February) and current (June) periods, there was significant variation in terms of the magnitude of those reductions. Clay and La Porte counties lagged behind regional and national reduction trends at each time point,

TABLE 1. Jail populations in Indiana counties

	PRE-PANDEMIC (FEBRUARY)		1ST COVID-19 PEAK (APRIL)			CURRENT DATA (JUNE)			% CHANGE OVERALL
	TOTAL	PER 10K PEOPLE	TOTAL	PER 10K PEOPLE	% CHANGE SINCE PRE- PANDEMIC PERIOD	TOTAL	PER 10K PEOPLE	% CHANGE SINCE 1ST COVID-19 PEAK	
Indiana (19 counties)	4,425	28.3	3,006	19.2	-32.1%	3,101	19.8	3.2%	-29.9%
Boone	167	25.9	113	17.5	-32.4%	91	14.1	-19.3%	-45.5%
Clay	160	61.1	131	49.9	-18.4%	132	50.3	0.9%	-17.6%
Clinton	155	47.9	114	35.4	-26.2%	112	34.7	-2%	-27.6%
Dearborn	262	52.9	184	37.2	-29.7%	227	45.9	23.5%	-13.1%
Hamilton	325	10.3	182	5.7	-44.2%	203	6.4	11.6%	-37.7%
Hancock	293	39.7	182	24.6	-38%	111	15	-39%	-62.2%
Hendricks	271	16.9	166	10.3	-38.8%	188	11.7	13.2%	-30.7%
Jackson	260	59.2	154	35.1	-40.7%	170	38.6	10.1%	-34.7%
Knox	195	52.1	158	42.3	-18.9%	143	38.3	-9.5%	-26.6%
La Porte	330	29.8	249	22.5	-24.4%	277	25.1	11.2%	-15.9%
Montgomery	203	53.2	103	26.8	-49.6%	97	25.2	-5.9%	-52.5%
Perry	57	30	39	20.6	-31.3%	44	23.2	12.5%	-22.7%
Pulaski	93	73.5	86	67.6	-8.1%	67	53	-21.6%	-28%
Putnam	92	24.5	57	15.1	-38.5%	84	22.2	47.6%	-9.2%
St. Joseph	627	23.3	433	16.1	-30.9%	425	15.8	-1.8%	-32.2%
Starke	126	54.9	98	42.8	-22%	92	40.1	-6.3%	-27%
Tippecanoe	494	26.1	355	18.7	-28.2%	385	20.3	8.6%	-22%
Washington	127	45.6	127	45.7	0.2%	122	43.9	-3.9%	-3.7%
Whitley	188	55.9	76	22.7	-59.4%	132	39.2	72.7%	-29.9%

while Dearborn, Putnam, and Whitley counties appeared to aggressively normalize their jail populations after the first COVID-19 peak in April. Overall, Indiana jail populations fell by more than 30 percent between the pre-pandemic and first peak periods, but have since risen by about 3 percent through the current period, through June 1.

INTERVIEWS WITH INDIANA SHERIFFS' OFFICE STAKEHOLDERS

This portion of the brief focuses on interviews conducted with stakeholders from Indiana sheriffs' offices who described the challenges and achievements of operating county jails during a pandemic. Stakeholders included sheriffs, chief deputies, deputy chiefs, jail commanders, assistant jail commanders, and jail administrators who could provide insight about how jail operations have changed during COVID-19 and which changes may persist beyond the pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

With assistance from the Indiana Sheriffs' Association and Justice Reinvestment Advisory Council, 12 Indiana sheriffs' offices (24 total stakeholders) were recruited to participate in the study. Interviews took place between September 22, 2020, and November 23, 2020, via Zoom and were subsequently transcribed for thematic analysis.

FINDINGS

Interviews with stakeholders were broken up into three distinct topics: changes in jail operations during COVID-19, changes in jail populations and decisions to release incarcerated individuals during COVID-19, and global perceptions of COVID-19.

Changes in jail operations during COVID-19

One common and critical change stakeholders made in the early days of the pandemic was the creation of quarantine areas within facilities. Despite space limitations, many county jails were able to set aside specific blocks or cells in which to house new inmates or inmates reporting symptoms of COVID-19. Sometimes, this involved the conversion of other jail space into holding cells. Generally, quarantined inmates are held in these separate spaces for up to 14 days before being cleared by jail medical staff and integrated into the general population. Given the chronic

overcrowding of some county jails, creating these spaces was sometimes difficult, and maintaining them will be almost impossible as jail populations tick back up toward pre-pandemic numbers.

Another change in jail operations explained by stakeholders was the implementation of enhanced cleaning procedures and procurement of specialized cleaning equipment. Enhanced cleaning procedures include things like spraying down entire areas with disinfectant and hiring new civilian employees—known as COVID cleaners—whose sole duty is sanitizing common areas throughout the day. Stakeholders also described different types of equipment they procured to help keep community areas sanitized, such as UV light sanitizers, which may be utilized beyond COVID. Several offices stated that the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act will allow them to be reimbursed for some, if not all, of these cleaning equipment-related expenses.

Sheriffs' offices also integrated health screenings and PPE into jail operations. Health screenings generally consist of asking or answering a standardized set of questions related to COVID-19 symptoms and exposure, as well as the taking of temperatures either once or multiple times a day. These screenings are done on employees and inmates, though inmate screening is more widespread and frequent in some jails than others.

Beyond health screenings, all facilities have implemented the use of PPE—especially masks and/or face shields—for officers, inmates, and other jail staff. Facilities also outfit inmates with masks, which they are required to wear when outside their cell. One county even provided masks for inmates upon release from jail.

Most stakeholders interviewed discussed testing inmates for COVID-19 in some capacity. Most facilities tend to test inmates who are symptomatic, have been exposed while residing in jail facilities, or respond to COVID-19 screening questions that identify them as at risk for COVID-19 when introduced into the facility. One facility tested its entire jail population though stakeholders from this office cautioned that testing an entire facility may not make sense, especially in facilities where space and ability to quarantine inmates who test positive are limited.

Several stakeholders also discussed testing employees for COVID-19. Generally, COVID-19 tests for officers tend to be reserved for individuals who are symptomatic or have had close contact with someone who tested positive, but some facilities have implemented more widespread, regular mitigation testing. Receiving test results back in a timely manner has been a barrier for both inmate and officer testing.

Another challenge that has been especially difficult for sheriffs' offices during the pandemic has been jail staffing issues, including increased overtime, extra duties, and low morale. Many facilities reported implementing some type of cohort shift system, where officers are assigned to work only with one specific workgroup of officers. In the event of an officer in that cohort contracting or being exposed to COVID-19, that officer's entire cohort is put on quarantine leave, placing the responsibility on other cohorts to cover their shift. This type of quarantining has put a strain on sometimes already understaffed and underfunded facilities. In addition to overtime, officers are often being asked to do things well outside their regular job duties. This, coupled with the added worries of COVID-19 and the current political climate for law enforcement, can lead to low morale.

Another significant change in jail operations during COVID-19 included modifications of court-related proceedings, including the transport of individuals to and from physical courtrooms. During the pandemic, many courtrooms canceled all in-person sessions and transitioned hearings and other legal events to a virtual format (known in jails as video court). Office stakeholders had positive impressions of video court, stating this process reduces or eliminates staffing and security concerns around transporting individuals to and from court. However, judges in some jurisdictions have expressed disinterest in video court. Stakeholders are hopeful that in light of the pandemic, judges will adapt and expand video court over time.

Similar to court-related proceedings, in-house jail programs and services were halted across all stakeholder facilities. This includes programming delivered by agencies and nonprofits within jails (some of which is court ordered) and visitations by attorneys and family members. Examples of suspended programming include addiction counseling, anger management, life skills classes, and religious

services. Some services, such as church services and behavioral health services, were able to be translated into virtual content for inmates. The majority of stakeholders expressed a desire for more infrastructure to make virtual services feasible in their facility, even after the pandemic is over.

The majority of stakeholders interviewed explained that, generally, meal preparation and laundry services were operating as usual in their facility. However, small changes were made in several facilities in order to reduce the risk to inmates and prison staff. Changes include using disposable trays and utensils in the kitchen, doing laundry more frequently, creating special procedures for laundry coming out of quarantine, and providing additional PPE for inmates who process laundry.

A final but important response to COVID-19 in facilities has been a concerted effort to educate and communicate with inmates about the pandemic and its effect on jail operations. Several stakeholders have made these efforts out of a desire for transparency and compliance with requests like social distancing and mask wearing.

Changes in jail populations and decisions to release incarcerated individuals during COVID-19

All sheriffs' office stakeholders indicated that their daily jail populations decreased dramatically during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (specifically, March and April 2020). Stakeholders explained that, generally, a small portion of their jail population was released at the start of the pandemic and, coupled with fewer people being arrested during lockdowns across the state, jail populations were down from pre-pandemic numbers.

At the time of interviews in October and November 2020, however, about half of sheriffs' offices interviewed indicated that their facility's daily jail population was either nearing or at its pre-pandemic level. Stakeholders suspected this was due to judges and law enforcement returning to pre-pandemic practices. As a result, stakeholders expressed doubts about whether lower jail populations could be maintained long-term, generating concern about the ability to continue quarantining inmates with suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19.

All sheriffs' offices interviewed indicated that the courtroom workgroup—specifically judges and prosecutors—were in charge of decisions to release inmates during the pandemic. However, in some counties, judges and prosecutors brought other agencies to the table during discussions, including sheriffs' offices and probation departments. Although the final decision was made by judges and prosecutors, several stakeholders indicated that their input was requested and relied upon regarding who should be released. However, their input was not always followed.

Some stakeholders were informed of the criteria being used by courtroom workgroups to make release decisions. Seriousness of charge and criminal history were indicated as main considerations for release though other factors, such as bond amounts and inmate health risks, were utilized as well.

The overwhelming majority of stakeholders indicated that they did not believe COVID-related releases from their jail would have an impact on crime rates in their jurisdiction. Not all sheriffs' offices agreed, however. A few stakeholders indicated that they were worried about the effects of COVID-related releases in the future.

Global perceptions of COVID-19

First, stakeholders were asked whether they believed social distancing measures—such as quarantining and maintaining a distance of 6 feet apart—are helping to slow the spread of COVID-19, with answers ranging from not at all to a lot. The vast majority of stakeholders indicated they believed social distancing measures were slowing the spread of COVID-19 “a little” or “a lot.” Many stakeholders indicated that this belief was dependent on whether or not communities were actually following social distancing guidelines.

Next, stakeholders were asked to rate reasons for new cases of COVID-19 in the United States as “major,” “minor,” or “not a reason” for new cases. All stakeholders indicated that “Coronavirus spreads more easily than other infectious diseases” and “Not enough people are following social distancing measures” were major or minor reasons for new COVID-19 cases. Stakeholders were split evenly on whether “There is not enough testing for coronavirus” was a major or minor reason for new cases.

The overwhelming majority of stakeholders indicated that they believed there would be a treatment or vaccine for COVID-19 developed, several weeks ahead of many pharmaceutical companies' announcements of successful vaccine trials in the United States. However, some stakeholders expressed concern about how effective a treatment or vaccine will be.

Sheriffs' office stakeholders were asked to rate their local, state, and federal governments' reactions to the pandemic, from “overreacting” to “not taking the pandemic seriously enough.” Most stakeholders agreed that their local, state, and federal governments were “reacting about right” to the pandemic. However, several stakeholders expressed concern that their local, state, and/or federal governments may be overreacting or inconsistent in their COVID-related practices.

The vast majority of stakeholders indicated that they were “very confident” in their local hospitals and medical centers to handle the medical needs of people who are seriously ill during the pandemic. However, most stakeholders were only “somewhat confident” in the ability of hospitals and medical centers around the country to handle the medical needs of individuals with COVID-19. Stakeholders who were less confident in their local health care facilities generally explained that individuals with serious medical conditions get sent to larger hospitals farther away.

Finally, stakeholders were asked to describe the sources of their knowledge and news on COVID-19. Virtually every stakeholder indicated that their local county health department has been an invaluable source along with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other government websites. Other sources included law enforcement and corrections organizations, such as the Indiana Sheriffs' Association and the Indiana Department of Correction. Stakeholders were skeptical of local and national news, as well as social media coverage.

Changes in jail operations that will continue beyond the pandemic

The majority of stakeholders expressed their desire for the sustained use of technology in their facility even after the pandemic is over, including video court and telemedicine.

Stakeholders explained that virtual programming reduces security risks in facilities, including diversion and trafficking. Sheriffs' offices also described how changes in booking and housing procedures have improved facility operations and will likely continue beyond COVID-19. Examples of changes include booking inmates in the jail's sally port, utilizing body scanners over manual searches, and housing new or symptomatic inmates separate from the general population. Though stakeholders believe these practices will create an overall safer and healthier environment for inmates and staff, some stakeholders indicated some of these modifications might not be sustainable if jail populations rise to pre-pandemic levels.

Although all stakeholders agreed that sanitation had been a priority in their facility before the pandemic, an added emphasis has been placed on it now. Stakeholders described several additional types of sanitation procedures they will continue beyond the pandemic, include disinfecting common areas multiple times a day, and utilizing UV disinfecting lights. Additionally, some sheriffs' offices indicated that they would continue to encourage or mandate staff to use various PPE when interacting with new inmates, such as wearing masks, to mitigate health risks and the spread of other infectious diseases.

RECOMMENDATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

The unprecedented circumstances presented by the COVID-19 pandemic have the potential to shape future justice system policy and practice as some of the old ways of administering justice may no longer be feasible. Lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic point to the persistence of systemic justice system challenges, especially with regard to accessing and integrating routine data collections in order to inform operations. Additionally, interviews suggest that, although jail staff have made many changes necessary to weather the pandemic, their ability to do so may diminish as jail populations rise and the rest of the justice system attempts to return to its pre-pandemic activities. Future research should examine the long-term effects of COVID-19 on jails and propose solutions to challenges identified by this research, such as jail overcrowding and the recruitment or retention of jail deputies.

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[Follow this link to read the previous CHJR brief from June 2020. The brief also examined inmate populations in U.S. county jails in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.](#)



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The Center for Health and Justice Research (CHJR) works with public safety agencies, social service organizations, and residents to conduct impartial applied research on public and justice system policy choices. CHJR is housed within the IU Public Policy Institute (PPI), a multidisciplinary institute within the Paul H. O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs. PPI also supports the Center for Research on Inclusion & Social Policy (CRISP), the Manufacturing Policy Initiative (MPI), and the Indiana Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (IACIR).

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