



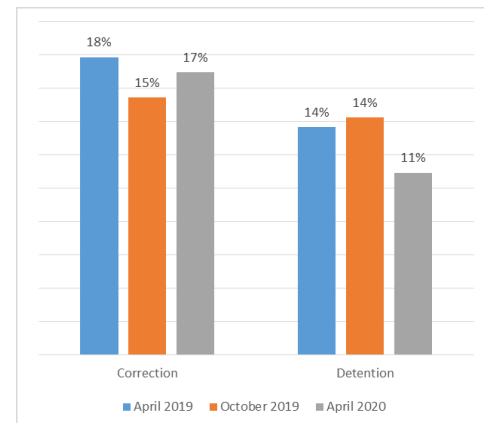
# COVID-19 Data Snapshot

Keeping Youths Safe  
September 2020

Keeping youths in custody safe is the primary goal for juvenile agencies and the necessary foundation for learning and changing behavior. Facility safety for youths and staff in our nation's secure facilities took on new meaning with the COVID-19 pandemic. It required agencies to immediately and daily change operations, practices and policies and it called on everyone – youths, staff, agency leaders, families – to work together to stay safe and healthy. Lessons were learned and new ways of doing business emerged. [Performance-based Standards](#) (PbS)<sup>1</sup> offers this COVID-19 Data Snapshot to help agencies move into the next era informed and able to create a better future for juvenile justice.

[As PbS reported earlier](#), the average daily population fell by more than 9% in detention centers and 5.5% in correction facilities from April 1 – April 30, 2020. In the [PbS COVID-19 Stories series](#), we learned from leaders and staff how they focused on safety and health through increased communication, understanding and honoring the work of staff who showed up to keep operations going. In this snapshot, we add data describing the pandemic's impact on efforts to keep youths safe.

**Overall, there was not a spike in youths reporting they feared for their safety in April 2020.** PbS asks youths' about their perceptions of safety based on research showing it is an effective indicator of a youth's likelihood of reoffending.<sup>2</sup> Data from the correction and detention centers participating in PbS over the last year<sup>3</sup> showed about 15% of all youths said they feared for their safety at the facility. However, slightly more youths in correction facilities reported fearing for their safety, reversing a decline from six months earlier and fewer youths in detention centers reported fearing for their safety, reversing an increase six months earlier.



*Different perceptions of safety*

**The data showed a significant increase in suicidal behavior in detention centers.**<sup>4</sup> COVID-19 added additional the stressors and fear of illness, uncertainty and a temporary end to in-person family visits for youths. Combined with reduced or eliminated education, recreation and activities, youths were in

<sup>1</sup> A total of 87 correction, 44 detention and nine assessment centers and 26 community residential programs in 34 states voluntarily participate in PbS and commit to using data to improve conditions of confinement, facility quality of life and outcomes for youths. The data presented here reflects a snapshot of the youths in correction and detention facilities as was reported in 16,237 incidents reports and 10,244 surveys of youths in April 2020.

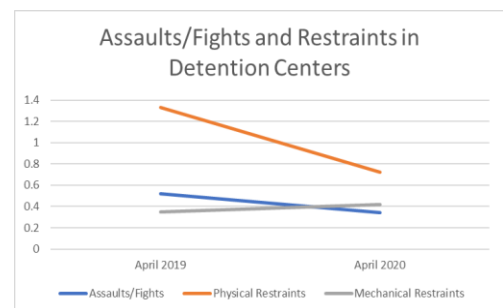
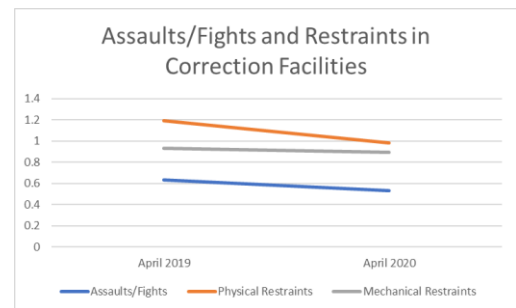
<sup>2</sup> Schubert, C., Mulvey E. et al. 2012. *Perceptions of Institutional Experience and Community Outcomes for Serious Adolescent Offenders*. Criminal Justice and Behavior- CRIM JUSTICE BEHAV. 39. 71-93.

<sup>3</sup> Data includes only the sites that participated in each of the following data collection periods: April 2019, October 2019, April 2020.

<sup>4</sup> PbS defines suicidal behavior as: attempted suicides, suicidal gestures, overt actions taken indicating an intent to injure; PbS counts all instances unless declared otherwise by a mental health/licensed/trained professional.

their rooms more. Sometimes they acted out or misbehaved, sometimes they requested to be there because they felt safer. Youths also were placed in their rooms because so many staff were unable to come to work due to illness or exposure to the virus that not enough staff were available to provide appropriate supervision or run activities. The risk for suicidal behavior when youths are isolated and/or confined to their rooms is well documented<sup>5</sup> and instances are relatively few in facilities – maybe one every three-four months. However in detention centers, where the usual average daily population of 40 was cut in half to about 20 in April 2020, **the incidents of suicidal behavior with injury increased by about 33% and incidents of suicidal behavior without injury increased by about 233% since October 2019.** Please note: The spike in suicidal behavior without injury could be reflecting the youths’ behavior or staff behavior as fewer youths allowed for increased supervision and reporting.

**There were fewer fights and assaults and fewer instances of youths being restrained.** Somewhat unexpected, the April 2020 data showed a reduced number of fights and assaults and uses of restraints<sup>6</sup>. There were about 5% fewer fights and assaults in correction facilities and 3% fewer in detention centers than in April 2019. Research on facility safety has shown use of restraints impacts other safety measures: youth fear, suicidal behavior without injury, rates of injuries to youths and staff and sexual assault<sup>7</sup>. The reasons for the decline in fights, assaults and restraints likely vary from location to location. The data could be reflecting better staff-youth relationships, fear about physical contact spreading the virus or the benefits of increased virtual and phone contact with families. We will look to future data to better understand the positive impacts of COVID-19.



PbS data comes from a subset of all facilities across the country who volunteer and commit to improving youth outcomes and striving to meet PbS’ vision that all youths are treated like one of our own. We will continue to share the data to help shape a brighter future for juvenile justice. For more information please visit the [PbS website](https://pbstandards.org) or send an email to: [help@pbstandards.org](mailto:help@pbstandards.org).

*This PbS Data Snapshot was written by Kim Godfrey Lovett, PbS Executive Director, and published by the PbS Learning Institute, Inc. All rights reserved.*

<sup>5</sup> Hayes, L. 2009. *Juvenile Suicide in Confinement: A National Survey*. Washington, DC. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>6</sup> PbS uses rates for certain outcome measures to allow for comparison among different sized facilities. The rates are based on 100-person-days of youth confinement.

<sup>7</sup> Performance-based Standards for Youth Correction and Detention Facilities, 2011 Research Report. New Amsterdam Consulting, Inc. Internal document.