



# Responding to the Pandemic

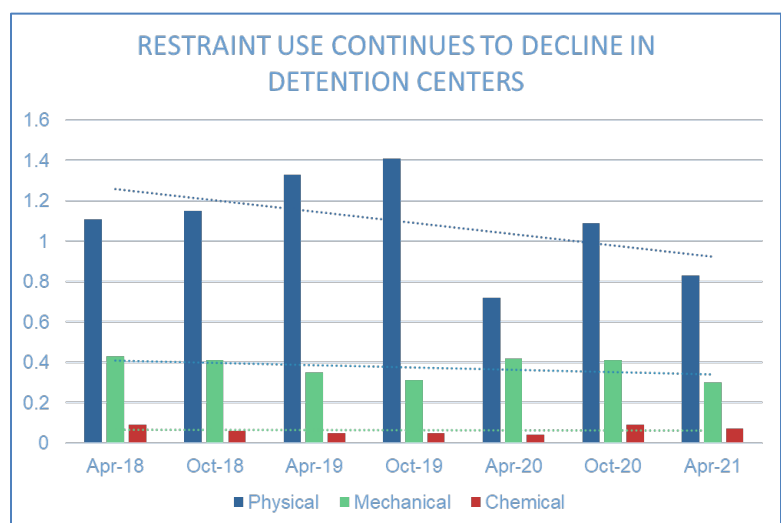
*PbS Issue Brief 5: Use of Restraints and Staff-Youth Relationships*  
August 2021

In the early months of the pandemic, we saw the number of young people in juvenile justice facilities decrease. We also saw other positive changes that may or may not be related to fewer young people in facilities that we want to learn more about: There were fewer uses of restraints in facilities and more youths reported positively about their relationships with the staff. That data supports the belief and approach we've seen borne out [of several facilities](#) that trusting, caring and mutually respectful relationships between young people and staff create healthy and nurturing facility cultures that prevent incidents that result in using restraints.

The [Performance-based Standards \(PbS\) Learning Institute, Inc.](#) data reflects single points-in-time (each April and October) and is intended for participating agencies to use to improve their practices and programs to achieve better outcomes. The pandemic impacted many PbS outcomes and raised questions we want to learn more about, such as: What's the impact of fewer youths in custody? Are fewer restraints correlated to better staff-youth relationships? The [PbS Database for Researchers](#) is available to help those answer questions and others to add to our knowledge about what works to improve the lives and life opportunities for young people with lived experience in juvenile justice. This PbS Issue Brief offers information from April 2021 on use of restraints and youths' perceptions of staff and joins four others as PbS' contribution to continuously improving juvenile justice outcomes.

**In April 2021, the use of restraints continued to decline in detention centers after climbing to a high in 2019.**

PbS facilities are asked to report all incidents that involve the use of any form of restraint during the months of April and October. The data is analyzed to reflect rates of restraint use and establish a national field average. Restraints are an indicator that a facility's behavior management system is not working and puts youths and staff at risk for injury. The PbS standards are clear: To operate safe and effective facilities, agencies maximize opportunities for youths to behave responsibly and participate in programming and minimize use restrictive practices when responding to misbehavior. Restraints should be used only as a last resort to protect a young person from harming themselves or others or to protect property from significant damage. The standards also emphasize that restraints should only be used by trained and authorized

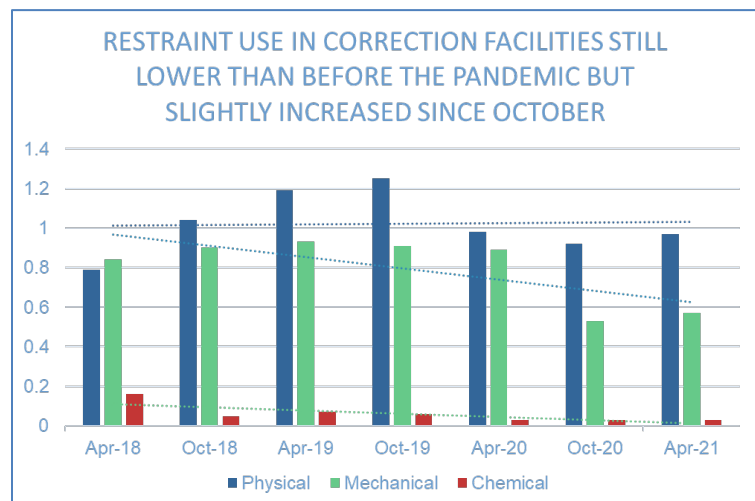


staff for short periods of time with medical supervision and not used for punishment. Collecting data on why, how and when restraints are used gives agencies the information they need to ensure restraints are used minimally, as a last resort and with proper training, approval and follow up. The data also helps us to understand the alternatives that work. The PbS restraint data in this brief comes from more than 55,000 incident reports from 2018-2021.

Detention centers — designed for short stays for young people awaiting a court hearing — historically have shown greater use of restraints compared to long-term placement or correction facilities. However, the data reported in April 2021 showed detention centers used restraints at a lower rate than correctional facilities, where young people stay for months and sometimes years. Adjusting the PbS field average to the average size of all detention centers participating in PbS of 30 beds, the data shows that physical restraints<sup>1</sup> were used seven or eight times during the month of April 2021 and mechanical restraints<sup>2</sup> were used less than three times. During the same time, in an average 39-bed correction facility, physical restraints were used 11-12 times and mechanical restraints six to seven times.

**Correction facilities saw a slight increase in the rate of restraint use in April 2021 but the rate of use remained lower than before the pandemic.**

Research has proven that using restraints has an independent and negative affect on facility climate and safety and is ineffective in preventing future incidents involving restraints. Many juvenile justice agencies have focused their efforts over the past few years to improve staff and youth relationships by providing training on adolescent development, strategies to engage young people and relationship-building techniques. Yet before the pandemic, the rate of restraints usage was steadily climbing. What also happened as a result of the pandemic that helped create the positive change? Research over the last decade has pointed to the importance of relationships as a key contributor to healthy adolescent development and we when looked at the October 2020 data describing the young peoples’ perceptions of staff, that also changed positively during the pandemic.



<sup>1</sup> Physical restraints are facility-authorized holds used by trained staff to subdue an otherwise uncontrollable youth to prevent them from injuring themselves or others.

<sup>2</sup> Mechanical restraints are devices used to prevent an uncontrollable youth from injuring themselves or others.

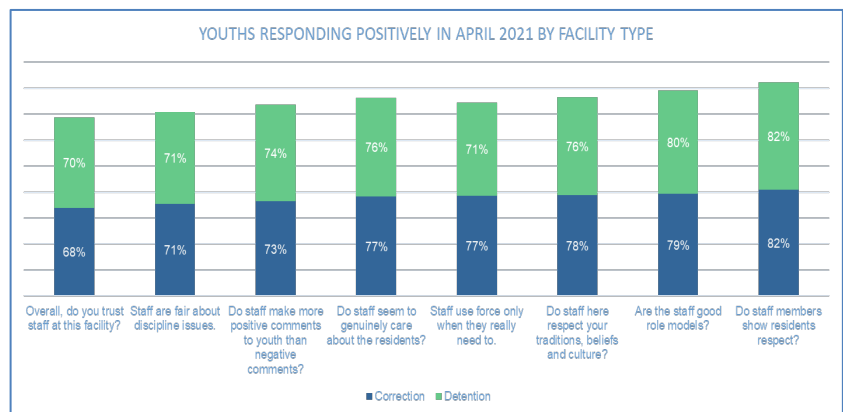
**In April 2021, some of the positive gains in youths' perceptions of staff and staff-youth relationships slipped slightly.**

PbS data is used to determine shifts in trends in a timely manner so agencies can quickly adjust. In addition to reporting incident data, PbS participating facilities survey youths, staff and families to understand their experiences and concerns and to gain a holistic picture of how facilities are performing. The PbS Youth Climate Survey asks young people in facilities 52 questions every April and October about their safety, perceptions of fairness, the quality of school and services, general conditions and daily life. The survey also includes eight questions used to reflect the perceptions youths have of their relationships with staff. More youths responded positively to all eight questions in October 2020 than in the previous two years, during the same time period as the reduction in the number of youths in facilities and use of restraints. The increases were small (2-4%) but the fact that responses to all eight questions moved in a positive direction was worthy of attention. In April 2021, that positive trend continued in only four of the questions. Slightly fewer young people (1-2%) reported:

- Trusting staff
- Staff are fair about discipline
- Staff only use force when they need to
- Staff were good role models.

Youths responded similarly in both detention and correction facilities to all the questions except for one: Do

staff use force only when they really need to? About 6% more youths in correction facilities answered “yes” or “sometimes” compared to young people in detention centers. Given the restraint data showed more use of restraints in correction facilities than detention centers, the young people’s perceptions raise many questions about the impact of positive staff-youth relationships and the need for more research and understanding about what works in juvenile justice.



Thank you to all the facilities across the country who volunteer to join PbS and commit to achieving 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](#).

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



Performance-  
based  
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### **About the Author**

*Kim is the executive director of the PbS Learning Institute. Kim was hired when CJCA incorporated in 1994 and has worked since its inception to create the PbS system of continuous improvement to help facilities and agencies raise the quality of life and better conditions of confinement in youth facilities nationwide. She earned two master's degrees: in journalism (Northwestern University) and criminal justice (Northeastern University.) She worked as a newspaper reporter for seven years prior to joining CJCA.*

### **About PbS**

*For over 25 years, PbS has been integrating data and research into juvenile justice standards and performance measures to produce better outcomes for young people, their families, the staff and communities. We help youth facilities, residential programs and reentry services to continuously improve by integrating proven practices into daily operations and management and using data to measure and monitor conditions of confinement, quality of life, education and programming, engagement of families, staff-youth relationships, safety and fairness and connection to community – all keys to preventing subsequent offending and most likely to put young people on their paths to becoming purposeful, productive, healthy and contributing citizens.*