

# Isolated Amidst Illness: Pandemic Responses in Ohio Correctional Facilities

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In June, Ohio saw two of the largest COVID-19 outbreaks in the nation, both of which were in prisons. Through conversations with inmates in the Toledo Correctional Institution as well as professionals in the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections, Midstory takes a look at what life looks like in some of Ohio's carceral facilities during the pandemic.

By

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Jason Goudlock is used to being alone. Much of his 27 years in prison has been spent in solitary confinement, oftentimes voluntarily in order to avoid conflict with other inmates.

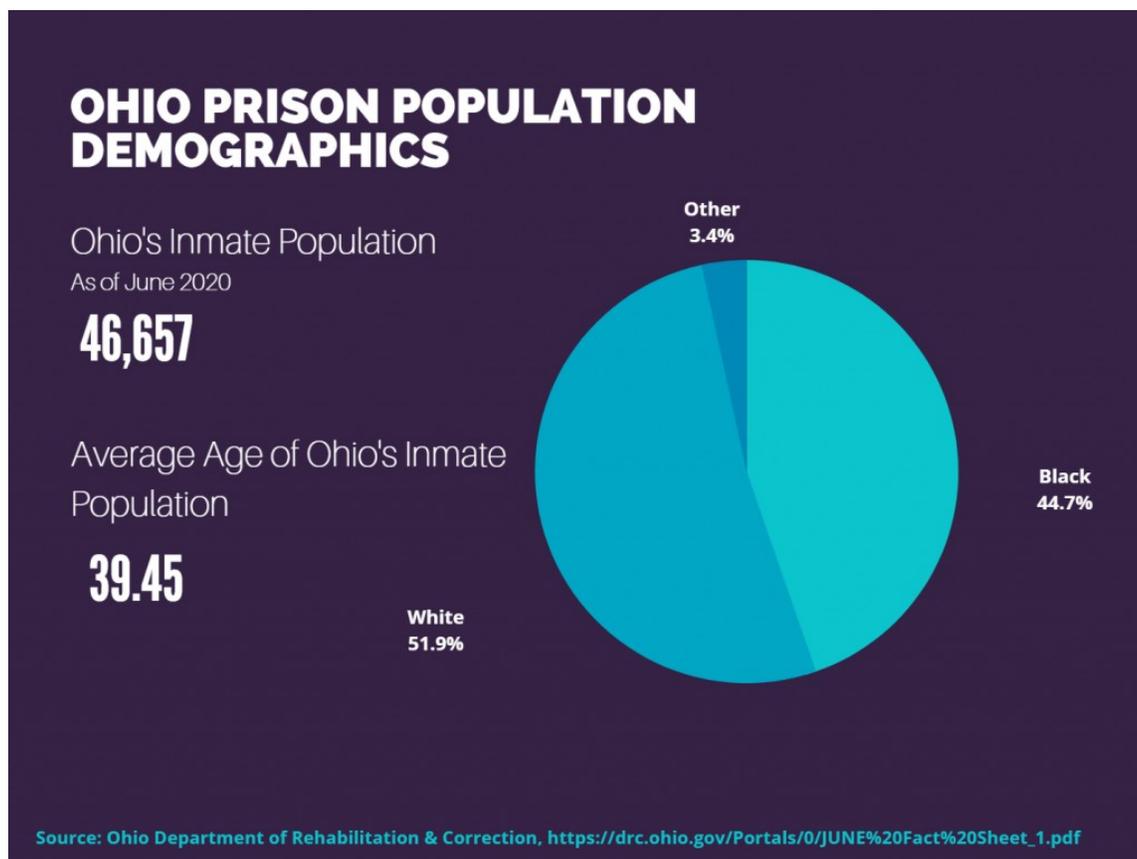
But new policies brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have left Goudlock and other inmates at the Toledo Correctional Institution (ToCI) feeling an acute sense of loneliness. “[E]ven the strongest person doesn’t go unscathed in some fashion from being isolated,” Goudlock wrote in an email to Midstory.

An unprecedented health crisis has led to drastic change in many social and political realms, and carceral facilities have not been spared. Severe outbreaks of COVID-19 in prisons—perfect [super-spreading environments](#)—have forced correctional institutions to take swift action to mitigate viral transmission. In Ohio, correctional institutions have introduced new internal regulations while also working to reduce the incarcerated population (which decreased by over 2,000 people between [April](#) and [June](#)), opening up a unique opportunity for debate on the politics and policies of punishment in the state.

At ToCI and other carceral facilities in Ohio, reactive measures have likely prevented much larger and more sustained outbreaks. But these same policies have complicated life on the inside, exposing the psychological strains of incarceration during a pandemic.

Though few inmates openly share their fears of getting sick from COVID-19, Goudlock feels confident that people are nervous.

“Having fears in prison is something that’s viewed as a weakness, which someone will almost certainly try to exploit to their advantage. But being incarcerated during a deadly global pandemic is something that can’t be ignored,” he said.



*Graphic by Marissa Michaels for Midstory.*

Goudlock isn't alone in his feelings. Just as isolation and anxiety surrounding the virus have exacerbated mental health concerns beyond prison walls, those factors have taken a toll on inmates already struggling to keep afloat.

“Mental health had [sic] become a disaster,” Patrick Rafferty—another inmate at ToCI—wrote in an email to Midstory. “I can tell you from personal experience it is next to impossible to get any type of treatment,” he added, alluding to his struggles with depression.

## **Daily Life in Toledo Correctional Institution During COVID-19**

As a state maximum security prison [housing 877 inmates](#), ToCI has instituted a number of new policies to enforce social distancing. Rafferty wrote that 6-foot perimeters are drawn around each correction officer’s desk, as well as 6-foot markers wherever there are lines in the prison, like in the cafeteria.

These requirements have eliminated the normal cafeteria crowds at breakfast, lunch and dinner; now, only one person is allowed at each table during meals. Even so, Goudlock—generally a hygiene-conscious person—has found himself especially stressed out by staff serving food trays without lids, increasing the potential for COVID-19 spread.

Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections (ODRC) spokeswoman JoEllen Smith stated in an email to Midstory that prices in the commissary have been reduced to make food purchases more affordable, and that the current food regimen provides 2,700 calories (which falls within the [standard range](#) of caloric needs for adult men). But movement restrictions and limited-contact distribution have changed the content of meals as well, leaving some inmates unsatisfied; after receiving a hot breakfast and lunch, inmates are given a dinner to bring back to their cells.

“The meal quality has definitely deteriorated due to the elimination of ‘cooked’ dinner trays, which have been replaced by refrigerated bag dinners,” Goudlock wrote.

In addition to mealtimes, ToCI normally allows two to three hours of social time each day for inmates. During the coronavirus pandemic, that time has been reduced.

“Restricting that even more for this long of a period of time, it’s really hard on them. And humans, we’re social creatures,” Shiloh Logan, Rafferty’s fiancée, said.

During outdoor recreation time, only one housing unit is permitted to be out at a time, as opposed to the usual three. Units are kept completely to themselves in order to prevent spread of the disease. Few inmates have been able to continue working and earning money in the prison, according to Rafferty.

Traffic in and out of the prison is also limited; Smith says that only critical staff are allowed in the facility, meaning that regular volunteers have not been permitted inside for months. Even doctors’ visits are conducted virtually. As family visits have come to a halt, inmates have gone months without seeing their loved ones in person. In lieu of physical closeness, many have relied on a small number of free phone and video calls (though, notably, more than were afforded to them before the pandemic began) to facilitate digital reunions.

While Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is still not widely available, some supplies have been distributed among inmates. According to Smith, each ODRC inmate has been given at least four masks and a hygiene kit. Rafferty confirmed that inmates are required to wear masks any time that they are outside of their cells, writing that “[m]asks are given and they are enforced, and you lose privileges if you are caught without your mask.”

Though prisons across the country have been slow to permit [hand sanitizer](#) out of fear that inmates would abuse it for its alcohol content, ToCI has come to provide cleaning supplies for its inmates and now places hand sanitizer throughout the facility. Smith wrote that “high-touch” areas like doorknobs are supposed to be cleaned every 30 minutes.

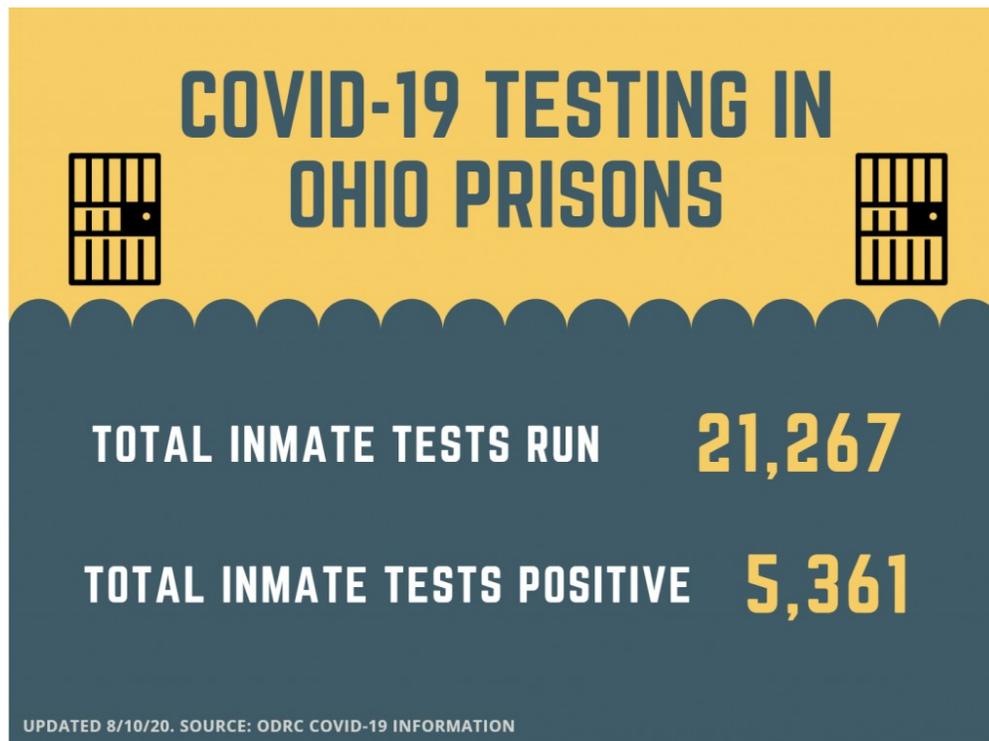
Precautions for the inmates themselves include both health monitoring and isolation for suspected cases. Smith wrote that staff perform regular temperature, verbal and pulse-oximeter checks, and that medical co-pays are waived for inmates who exhibit flu-like symptoms. ToCI has now also converted an entire cell block into a quarantine unit for inmates exposed to the virus.

But Rafferty alleges that a form of solitary confinement, otherwise known as administrative segregation, was initially used to isolate those that became sick. His fiancée said that “[a] lot of people, if they’re not feeling well, they’re not saying anything because they don’t want to get stuck in the hole [solitary confinement] and have the small amount of privileges that they do have taken away. And it’s pretty much become a punishment to get sick.”

Goudlock also indicated that people are hesitant to report symptoms out of fear of being isolated without their property.

“I’ve heard that some prisoners were being placed in quarantine units without their property. This retaliatory behavior puts everybody at risk because prisoners aren’t going to report their symptoms [sic] if they think they’re going to be retaliated against,” he wrote.

Another challenge is that ToCI’s population is not stagnant; administrators have had to develop protocols for managing new transfers from jails, too. If a jail sends over symptomatic inmates, they are sent back. All other transfers are kept in units together based on the date of their entry.



Graphic by Marissa Michaels for Midstory.

# COVID-19 at the Lucas County Corrections Center

Jails have found themselves more vulnerable to outbreaks than prisons like ToCI because of crowding and population transiency. The Lucas County Corrections Center (LCCC), for example, serves mainly as a pre-trial detention facility and a jail for people facing sentences of less than a year.

According to Renee Heberle, a University of Toledo professor and educator at ToCI, “maximum security single-cell prisons have far less movement among the people residing there—incarcerated people—and far less contact between staff, volunteers and incarcerated individuals. So it ironically makes maximum security prisons a so-called safer place to be in the context of the pandemic.”

As of July 2, LCCC Captain Tricia White estimated that 10-12 people had contracted COVID-19 while incarcerated at the facility. 21 staff members had also tested positive.

“The jail itself is too old and way overcrowded,” Heberle said. “The population there tends to be much more transient, much more unstable in terms of not the individuals, but just the sort of sense of place. And [inmates] often get in really deep trouble when they’re there, either because of mental illness [or] because of addiction.”

To mitigate the risks of population turnover and close living quarters, LCCC administrators have tried to maintain a reduced occupancy during the public health crisis, operating at approximately 75% capacity with between 270 and 330 inmates and about 180 employees each day. Before the virus began to spread, the jail was operating much closer to 100% capacity.

According to White, local judges “have worked really well with us in terms of trying to help us keep our population down so that we can enforce things like social distancing better.” At the law enforcement level, police have aided depopulation efforts by opting for subpoenas over arrests for technical and parole violations. In this vein, correctional facilities have sought to determine candidates for early release while instituting electronic monitoring for those who are let out.

As at ToCI, life inside LCCC has changed significantly: visitation is virtual, recreation is limited to those in the same housing units, inmates are encouraged to wear the masks provided to them and staff are mandated to do so. Inmates reporting high temperatures or COVID-19 symptoms during their twice-daily medical checks are isolated; those who test positive are placed in one of 24 “medical cells.” Constantly-changing dynamics surrounding the virus have continued to provide obstacles to stability for administrators and inmates alike.

## Pandemic Policies and the Future of Ohio Corrections

Viral transmission in prison and jail environments has proven difficult to control, leading to major outbreaks in carceral facilities across the U.S., especially in the early stages of the pandemic. For its part, following two particularly severe outbreaks at the [Marion](#) and [Pickaway](#) Correctional Institutions, Ohio has become the state with the fifth-highest [number](#) of inmate deaths from COVID-19.

In light of these troubling statistics, White worries that jails and prisons have been ignored in the state’s COVID-19 recovery plan.

“I think that corrections has been an overlooked area in terms of an area that has severely been impacted by the coronavirus,” she said. “Social distancing in a corrections environment is our biggest hurdle to try to overcome just because we are so limited in space and typically so overcrowded with population.”

The unique challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic presents to corrections have prompted rapid and unprecedented policy shifts intended to adjust Ohio’s criminal justice system to a public health crisis. But some of the policies adopted by prisons have seemed like a double-edged sword.

While in-person visits have all but disappeared, inmates have been allotted extra opportunities to reach the outside world—one free video visit and two free phone calls per week, as well as eight free emails per month. Still, the disruption of volunteer programs has stripped inmates of educational and rehabilitative opportunities that normally provide a break from the monotony of prison life.

As single-person cells have proven most hygienic, inmates have sometimes found themselves with more personal space. At the same time, the need for social distancing has led to less communal time in an already-isolating environment.

Fears of the virus have created a stronger culture of health education and a wider implementation of basic hygiene measures, including the distribution of hand sanitizer. According to Smith, the ODRC has been in frequent communication with staff and inmates about health education through posters, emails and videos encouraging them to wash their hands and socially distance. But health concerns have also facilitated a culture of fear and mistrust coupled with a reluctance to disclose health issues for fear of hostility or forced seclusion (sometimes in the form of solitary confinement).

The state’s virus prevention strategy, including thinning out the prison population in order to reduce the chances of an outbreak, has required novel approaches to law enforcement and punishment through every part of the process. Captain Tricia White noted that other actors in the criminal justice system had become more “cognizant of the fact that what they do in their arena does have a bigger effect on jail populations,” explaining that more “manageable” numbers of detainees made virus response plans much easier; according to Smith, decreases in the incarcerated population as of July led to ODRC’s smallest inmate population since 2006.

Undeniably, COVID-19 has shaken up the inner workings of Ohio’s penal system. As the pandemic has prompted growing concerns about the health of the state’s prison population, long-standing calls for prison reform have been met with real policy shifts. While the ethics and effectiveness of these decisions remain up for debate, the pandemic has abruptly thrust a centuries-old system into the spotlight—and opened up opportunities for unprecedented change.



OHIO DEPARTMENT OF REHABILITATION & CORRECTIONS

# STAFF

OHIO POSITIVE

970

OHIO DEATHS

5

TOLEDO POSITIVE

19

TOLEDO DEATHS

0

Updated 8/10/20. Source: ODRC COVID-19 Information and Marshall Project Data



OHIO DEPARTMENT OF REHABILITATION & CORRECTIONS

# STAFF

The rate of known **cases** among Ohio prison staff is

**878%**

higher than the Ohio population overall.

The rate of Ohio prison staff death from COVID-19 is

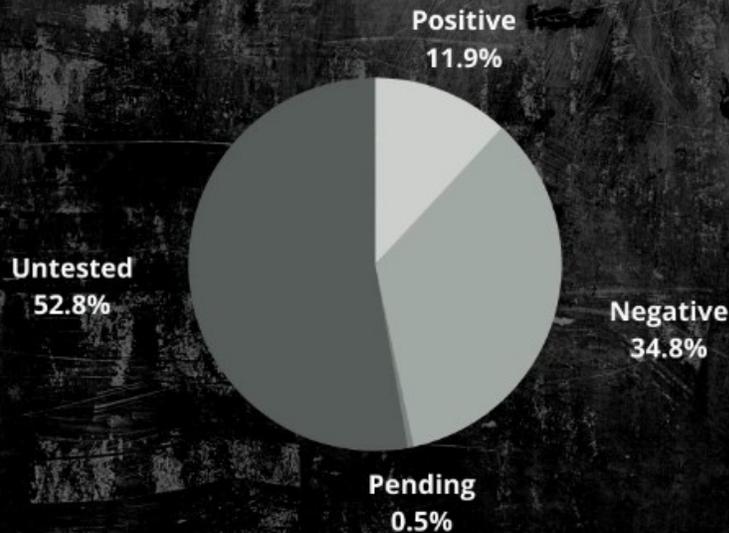
**34%** higher than Ohio overall.

Updated 8/10/20. Source: ODRC COVID-19 Information and Marshall Project Data



OHIO DEPARTMENT OF REHABILITATION & CORRECTIONS

# INMATES



## COVID-19 Testing Results

Updated 8/10/20. Source: ODRC COVID-19 Information



OHIO DEPARTMENT OF REHABILITATION & CORRECTIONS

# INMATES

## Among Ohio prison inmates...

the rate of known COVID-19 cases is

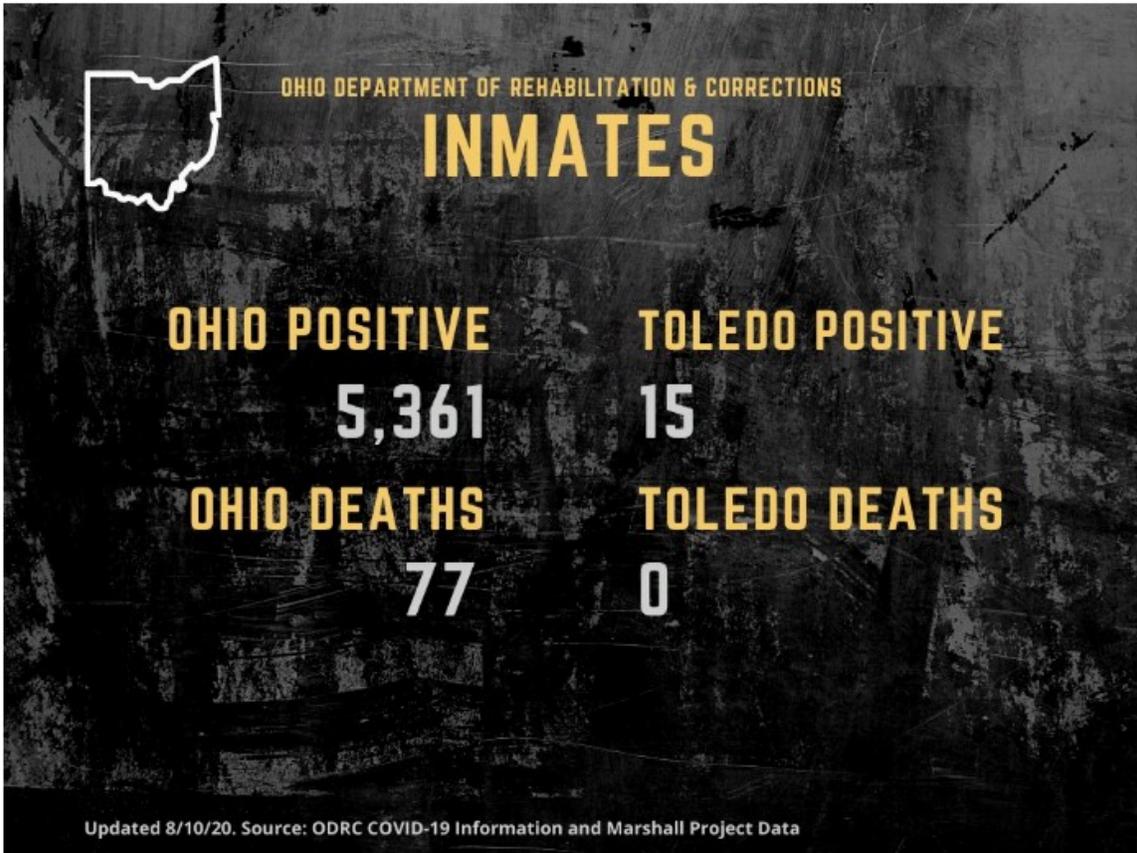
**1,305%**

higher than the rate for Ohio overall.

...on August 5, the death rate was **558%** higher than Ohio citizens overall.

...the testing rate is **233%** more than Ohio's overall.

Updated 8/10/20. Source: ODRC COVID-19 Information and Marshall Project Data



*Graphics by Marissa Michaels and Ruth Chang for Midstory.*