



Report Highlights

Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Secure Care Facilities

Office of Juvenile Justice

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Audit Control # 40200019
Performance Audit Services • May 2021

Why We Conducted This Audit

The purpose of this report is to provide information on the Office of Juvenile Justice’s (OJJ) response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Congregate living facilities, like OJJ secure care facilities, are at especially high risk for outbreaks of COVID-19. In OJJ secure care facilities, youth in custody live, eat, attend school, and engage in other activities together, which creates an environment in which COVID-19 can easily spread.

What We Found

Overall, OJJ faced multiple issues and challenges in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. These issues and challenges include the following:

- **OJJ’s protocols generally complied with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance in the areas of medical isolation, screening, visitation, PPE, and social distancing.** However, in an attempt to reduce the spread of the virus throughout facilities, OJJ suspended onsite visits and quality assurance audits from March through September 2020. As a result, OJJ was unable to verify whether the facilities consistently followed these protocols.
- **The CDC recommended testing all individuals in close contact with a positive COVID-19 case. However, OJJ was not always able to meet this guidance, as some youth refused testing until OJJ was able to get the rapid, less invasive tests in December 2020.** To address this challenge, OJJ quarantined all asymptomatic youth who had been in close contact in a dorm instead of testing them. This increased the risk that a positive, but asymptomatic, youth could spread the virus to the rest of the dorm and staff.

Youth and Staff COVID-19 Test Statistics • March 2020 through December 2020

Description*	Acadiana	Bridge City	Swanson - Monroe***	Swanson - Columbia	Ware	Grand Total
Youth Positive	9	23	10	12	6	60
Youth Negative	11	9	2	0	2	24
Total Youth Tested	20	32	12	12	8	84
Youth Housed at Facility**	112	133	242	100	32	384
Percent Youth Tested	17.9%	24.1%	5.0%	12.0%	25.0%	21.9%
Percent Youth Positive	8.0%	17.3%	4.1%	12.0%	18.8%	15.6%
Positive Staff****	21	37	35	14	N/A	107

*Ninety-seven tests were administered to 84 youth.

**Some youth were housed at more than one facility during the pandemic.

***All youth go to Swanson Center for Youth - Monroe to quarantine before going to another facility.

Therefore, the percentage of youth tested at Swanson may not reflect youth assigned to dorms at that facility.

****As of March 2021

Source: Prepared by legislative auditor’s staff using information provided by OJJ.

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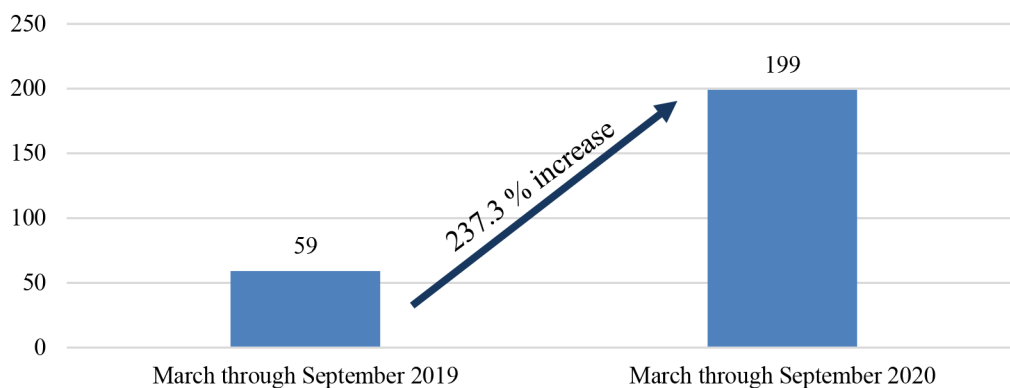
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What We Found (Cont.)

- **OJJ did not meet CDC guidance that recommended limiting transfers of youth between facilities during the pandemic. Youth transfers increased by 237.3%, from 59 transfers from March through September 2019 to 199 transfers from March through September 2020.** Of the transfers that occurred in 2020, 104 (52.3%) were transfers to place youth in behavioral intervention, which is a form of room confinement. Routinely placing youth in room confinement is not in line with juvenile justice best practices.

**Number of Youth Transfers between Secure Facilities
March - September 2019 and March - September 2020**



Source: Prepared by legislative auditor's staff using data from OJJ.

- **COVID-19 presented challenges for OJJ in providing services to youth while restricting contact between dorms and not allowing visitors into the facilities.** While OJJ continued to provide some treatment services, OJJ provided less treatment during COVID-19 in areas such as counseling sessions. In addition, OJJ halted in-person visitation and furloughs, as recommended by CDC guidance, which limits family engagement and makes rehabilitation and reentry into society more challenging.
- **Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, OJJ had ongoing staffing challenges that were further exacerbated by the pandemic.** High turnover and staff taking leave resulted in OJJ not always being able to meet the Prison Rape Elimination Act standards for staff to youth ratios throughout the pandemic.