



COVID-19 and Iowa's Prison Population

September 2020 Impact Report

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Executive Summary

- **This impact report provides a summary of COVID-19 and Iowa's prison population through June 30, 2020.** Specifically, it details the spread of COVID-19 among incarcerated individuals and correctional staff, the characteristics of the current Iowa prison population, and the change in admissions and releases since the proclamation of the COVID-19 emergency on March 13, 2020. The report relies on publicly available data from the Iowa Department of Corrections (DOC).
- **As of June 30, a total of 35 incarcerated individuals and 23 correctional staff tested positive for COVID-19. Zero deaths were reported.** Positive cases, especially among incarcerated individuals, were largely isolated to the Iowa Medical and Classification Center (IMCC). The first cases of COVID-19 were reported in early April, which were followed by expanded testing. By June 30, the DOC conducted 2,290 tests among incarcerated individuals – 64.9% were conducted at IMCC.
- **The number of incarcerated individuals in Iowa decreased by 10.6% from January 31 to June 30. The rate of decrease in the incarcerated population was highest among incarcerated females, and individuals incarcerated for low level and non-violent offenses.** The number of incarcerated individuals aged 55 and over decreased by 3.9%, while incarcerated individuals aged 17 to 54 decreased by 11.6%. As of June 30, there were 7,528 individuals incarcerated in Iowa's prisons.
- **Since July 2008, February 2020 was the first month in which there were more releases than admissions. In April 2020, there were three times the number of releases than admissions.** Monthly admissions were at record lows in April 2020 (223 admissions) and May 2020 (102 admissions). In April 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic response, a record number of 632 individuals were released from Iowa prisons.
- **In 2020, average daily admissions were down 52.9% after the national COVID-19 emergency proclamation.** Prison admissions in May 2020 fell by 80.9% compared to the 2017-2019 average. Compared to the 60 days before the national proclamation, the largest drop in admissions in the following 60 days occurred among individuals aged 55 and over, new admissions, and individuals admitted for aggravated misdemeanors.
- **After an increase in prison releases in April 2020, average daily releases have returned to levels before the national COVID-19 emergency proclamation.** Increases in prison releases has been part of a longer historical trend; however, there was a spike in growth in April 2020. There was notable variation in the change in releases across race and ethnicity and offense type. Compared to other categories, the smallest increase in releases were among Black and Hispanic individuals and individuals incarcerated for violent offenses. In the 60 days after the national proclamation of emergency, releases increased for white individuals, while releases of Black and Hispanic individuals stayed the same or decreased from the 60 days before the proclamation. The increase in releases was driven by an increase in granting parole (or probation).

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Overview

On March 13, 2020, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic was declared a national emergency. Prisons and jails quickly became a focus of attention given the difficulties of containing infectious diseases, such as overcrowding and limited access to care and hygienic supplies (Doleac, Harvey, and Kaplan 2020; Nowotny et al. 2020).

A critical recommendation from public health experts to reduce risk of COVID-19 has been to reduce prison populations (Sears et al. 2020). Advocates in Iowa have similarly called to halt new admissions and ramp up releases from prison facilities (Payne 2020; Rizer and Jackson 2020). An emphasis was placed on individuals convicted for low level non-violent offenses and individuals at greater risk for adverse outcomes, such as those over age 55 or with underlying health conditions. Some, however, expressed concerns about public safety and for victims of violent and sexual crimes (Davis 2020). Others highlighted practical considerations, including the challenges of finding housing for released parolees to stay (Ta 2020).

This impact report provides a summary of COVID-19 and Iowa's prison population through June 30, 2020. Specifically, it details the spread of COVID-19 among incarcerated individuals and correctional staff, the characteristics of the current Iowa prison population, and the change in admissions and releases since the proclamation of the COVID-19 emergency on March 13, 2020. The report relies on publicly available data provided by the Iowa Department of Corrections (DOC) on its main webpage (<https://doc.iowa.gov/>) and the State of Iowa's data portal (<https://data.iowa.gov/>). You can also find up-to-date statistics and trends at ppc.uiowa.edu/iowa-corrections/.

About Us

About the Public Policy Center

The Public Policy Center (PPC) is the only interdisciplinary research center in the central administration of the University (Office of the Vice-President for Research) with a large, intramural research program and a University-wide research development program, emphasizing but not limited to the social sciences. PPC researchers investigate some of the most important issues affecting our daily lives in Iowa and beyond. We also share the resources and expertise of the University with policymakers and the public through our engagement activities. Student involvement and training in research is emphasized, as is the development and support for interdisciplinary research across all Colleges.

About the Crime & Justice Policy Research Program

The Crime and Justice Policy Research Program conducts research on the causes and consequences of crime, interpersonal violence, and antisocial behavior. The program also considers the implementation and implications of public policies designed to prevent and control criminal offending.

About the Authors

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COVID-19 in Iowa's Prisons

Key Finding #1: As of June 30, a total of 35 incarcerated individuals and 23 correctional staff tested positive for COVID-19. Zero deaths were reported.

On April 7, 2020, the Iowa DOC began reporting COVID-19 statistics at doc.iowa.gov/COVID19. Data included tests, positive cases, and recoveries among incarcerated individuals, as well as positive cases and recoveries among correctional staff.¹ **Figure 1** illustrates the change in the weekly number of new tests among incarcerated individuals from April 7, 2020 to June 30, 2020. **Figure 2** reveals the weekly number of new positive COVID-19 cases among incarcerated individuals and correctional staff during the same period.

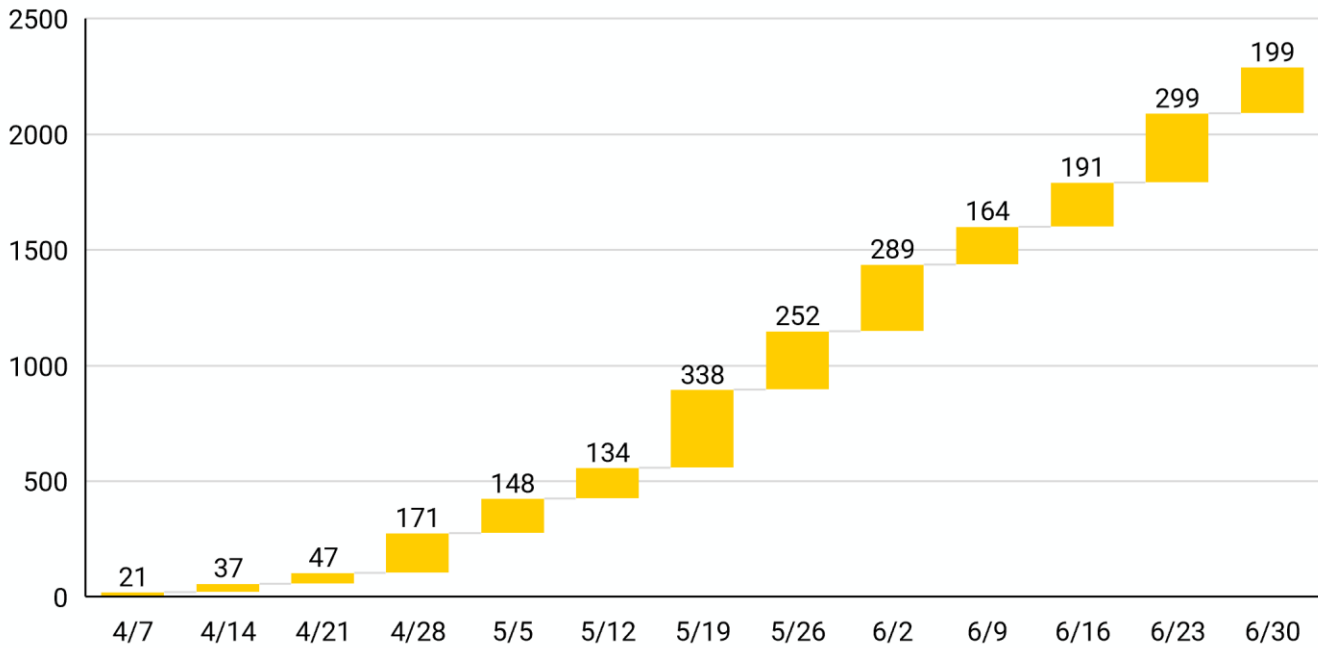
The DOC reported 21 tests of incarcerated people and zero positive cases among either incarcerated individuals or correctional staff on April 7, 2020. The first positive case among correctional staff was reported on April 10 and the first positive case among incarcerated individuals was reported on April 18. Both positive cases were located within Iowa's male intake facility – the Iowa Medical and Classification Center (IMCC).

On April 22, the DOC announced that it began implementing expanded testing at the IMCC. This is reflected in the large increase in tests on April 28 (↑263.8% from previous week). In the same week, thirteen new positive cases among incarcerated individuals and two new positive cases among correctional staff were reported.

By June 30, the DOC conducted a total of 2,290 tests among incarcerated individuals – 1,486 tests were conducted at IMCC (64.9%). Most positive cases among incarcerated individuals were also within IMCC (34 of 35). One positive case was identified in the Clarinda Correctional Facility. Positive cases among correctional staff totaled 23 on June 30. Ten cases among staff were identified within IMCC, while the remaining 13 cases were identified at six other DOC facilities. Zero COVID-19 related deaths were reported as of June 30, 2020.

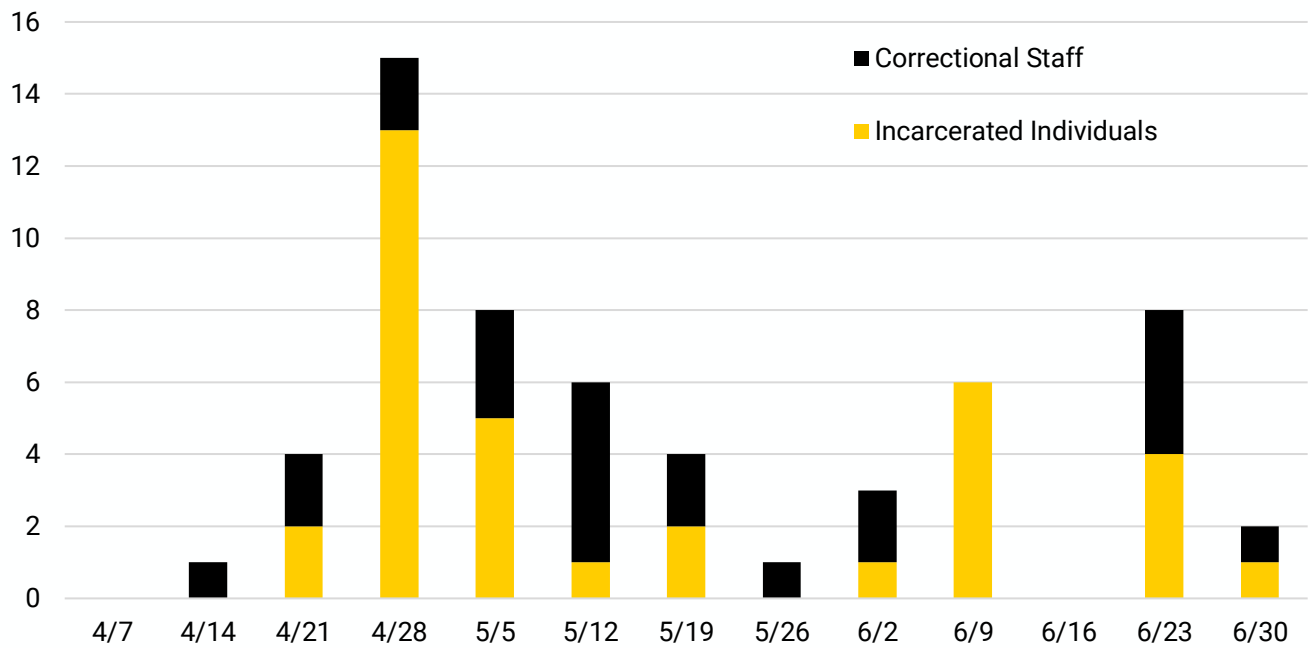
¹ According to the Iowa DOC, some staff data is reliant on self-reporting.

Figure 1 | Weekly Tests among Individuals Incarcerated in Iowa's Prisons, April 7, 2020 through June 30, 2020.



Source: Iowa Department of Corrections, doc.iowa.gov/COVID19.

Figure 2 | Weekly Positive COVID-19 Cases in Iowa's Prisons, April 7 - June 30, 2020.



Source: Iowa Department of Corrections, doc.iowa.gov/COVID19.

Iowa's Prison Population

Key Finding #2: The number of incarcerated individuals in Iowa decreased by 10.6% from January 31 to June 30.

The number and rate of individuals in the physical custody of Iowa's prisons on January 31, 2020 and June 30, 2020 are shown in **table 1**. As of June 30, there were 7,528 individuals incarcerated in Iowa's prisons, down by 888 individuals from January 31 (↓10.6%). On June 30, Iowa's incarceration rate was approximately 239 individuals per 100,000 Iowa residents.

- **Sex.** Most incarcerated individuals in Iowa's prisons on June 30 were male (92.2%). The rate of incarceration was also higher among men (442 per 100,000) compared to women (37 per 100,000). Since January 31, the incarcerated population decreased by 721 men (↓9.4%) and 167 women (↓22.1%).
- **Race or ethnicity.** While the majority of Iowa's incarcerated population is white (65.0%), Black individuals are incarcerated in Iowa at higher rates (1,490 per 100,000) than white (183 per 100,000), Hispanic (254 per 100,000), and Asian and American Indian or Alaska Native individuals (198 per 100,000). Decreases since January 31 ranged between 8.3% and 12.7%.
- **Age group.** One thousand and sixty-eight incarcerated individuals are aged 55 and over as of June 30 (14.2% of the total incarcerated population). The incarceration rate for those aged 55 and over is roughly one-fourth the rate for those aged 17 to 54 (110 vs. 431 per 100,000). The number of incarcerated individuals aged 55 and over decreased by 43 since January 31 (↓3.9%). Individuals aged 17 to 54 decreased by 845 (↓11.6%).

Table 1 | Number and Rate of Incarcerated Individuals, by Demographic Characteristics, January 31 and June 30, 2020.

Variable	July 2019 Iowa Pop ^b	Incarcerated, Jan 31			Incarcerated, Jun 30			Change Jan-Jun
		n	%	rate	n	%	rate	
Total	3,155,070	8416	100.0%	267	7528	100.0%	239	-10.6%
Sex								
Male	1,571,225	7659	91.0%	487	6938	92.2%	442	-9.4%
Female	1,583,845	757	9.0%	48	590	7.8%	37	-22.1%
Race								
White	2,681,810	5505	65.4%	205	4897	65.0%	183	-11.0%
Black	129,358	2116	25.1%	1,636	1927	25.6%	1,490	-8.9%
Hispanic	198,769	577	6.9%	290	504	6.7%	254	-12.7%
Other ^a	100,962	218	2.6%	216	200	2.7%	198	-8.3%
Age Group								
17-19	130,111	77	0.9%	59	66	0.9%	51	-14.3%
20-24	224,211	954	11.3%	425	830	11.0%	370	-13.0%
25-29	206,055	1353	16.1%	657	1155	15.3%	561	-14.6%
30-34	192,095	1410	16.8%	734	1284	17.1%	668	-8.9%
35-39	202,273	1262	15.0%	624	1116	14.8%	552	-11.6%
40-44	182,942	939	11.2%	513	859	11.4%	470	-8.5%
45-49	178,216	722	8.6%	405	614	8.2%	345	-15.0%
50-54	184,293	588	6.9%	319	536	7.1%	291	-8.8%
55-59	210,834	529	6.3%	251	442	5.9%	210	-16.4%
60-64	204,862	268	3.2%	131	304	4.0%	148	13.4%
65+	552,954	314	3.7%	57	322	4.3%	58	2.5%

^a Includes Asian and American Indian or Alaska Native.

^b Iowa population estimates collected from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Source: Iowa Department of Corrections, *Current Iowa Correctional System Prison Population*.

Key Finding #3: The rate of decrease in the incarcerated population was highest among incarcerated females, and individuals incarcerated for low level and non-violent offenses.

The number of individuals in the physical custody of Iowa’s prison, by offense characteristics, on January 31, 2020 and June 30, 2020 are shown in **table 2**.

- **Offense class.** Most incarcerated individuals on June 30 were in custody for a class C or D felony (60.4%), followed by a class A or B felony (30.4%) and an aggravated misdemeanor (5.3%). The rate of decrease from January 31 was larger among lower offense classes and smaller among higher offense classes. For example, the number of incarcerated individuals in custody for an aggravated misdemeanor decreased by 36.7% while the number in custody for a class A felony increased by 0.8%. The “other” offense class includes special sentences, serious misdemeanors, and felony enhancements.
- **Offense type.** On June 30, over half of all incarcerated individuals were in custody for a violent offense (53.3%). Since January 31, the rate of decrease for violent offenses (↓5.2%) was nearly one-third the rate of decrease for all other offenses, including property offenses (↓14.8%), drug offenses (↓16.3%), and public order offenses (↓18.9%).

Table 2 | Number of Incarcerated Individuals, by Offense Characteristics, January 31 and June 30, 2020.

Variable	Incarcerated, Jan 31		Incarcerated, Jun 30		Change Jan-Jun
	n	%	n	%	
Offense Class					
Felony A	739	8.8%	745	9.9%	0.8%
Felony B	1593	18.9%	1548	20.5%	-2.8%
Felony C	2596	30.9%	2376	31.6%	-8.5%
Felony D	2495	29.6%	2168	28.8%	-13.1%
Aggravated Misdemeanor	629	7.5%	398	5.3%	-36.7%
Other	364	4.3%	293	3.9%	-19.5%
Offense Type					
Violent	4228	50.2%	4009	53.3%	-5.2%
Property	1677	19.9%	1429	19.0%	-14.8%
Drug	1623	19.3%	1358	18.0%	-16.3%
Public Order	634	7.5%	514	6.8%	-18.9%
Other	254	3.1%	218	2.9%	-14.2%

Source: Iowa Department of Corrections, *Current Iowa Correctional System Prison Population*.

Historical Trends in Iowa Prison Admissions and Releases

Key Finding #4: Since July 2008, February 2020 was the first month in which there were more releases than admissions. In April 2020, there were three times the number of releases than admissions.

Admissions

Prison admissions in Iowa averaged around 436 admissions per month from July 2008 through December 2016 (see **black trendline in figure 3**). The average from January 2016 through December 2019 was approximately 510 admissions per month.

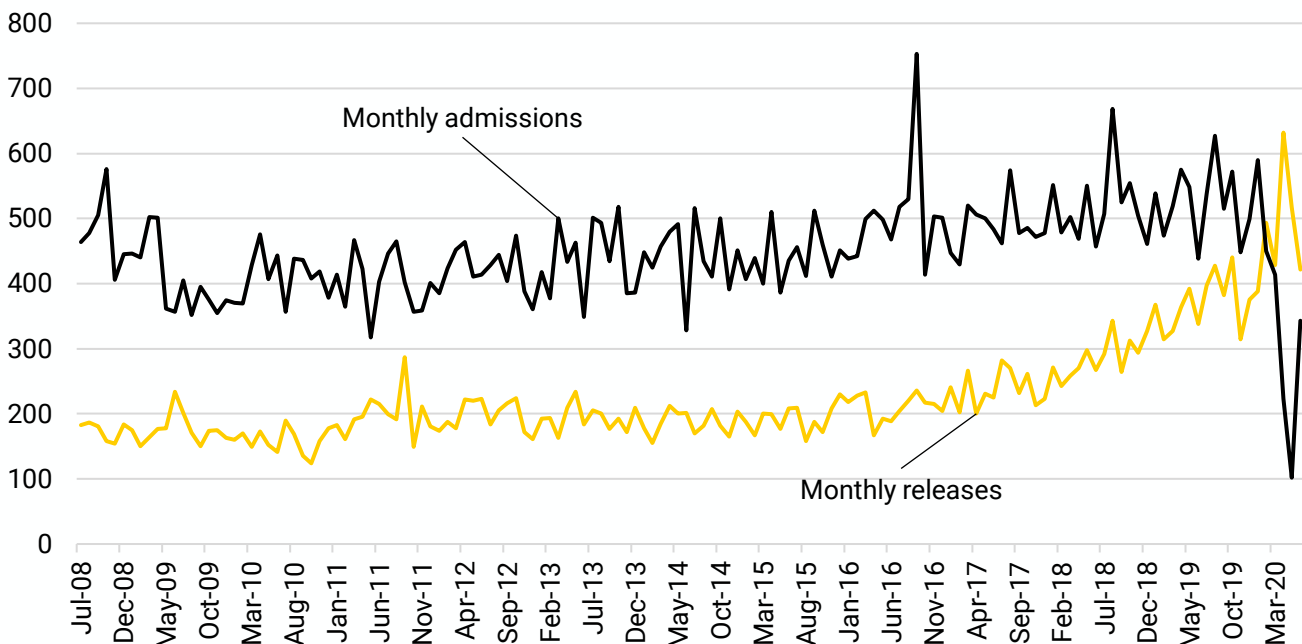
In 2020, there have been 354 admissions per month, on average. The drop in the number of admissions is driven by record lows in April 2020 (223 admissions) and May 2020 (102 admissions). Admissions in May 2020 were down 82.7% from January 2020 and were less than one-third the number of admissions in any month since July 2008. In June 2020, there were 343 admissions – a large increase from May 2020 (↑236.3%), though still the fifth lowest number of monthly admissions since July 2008.

Releases

Prison releases in Iowa were relatively stable from July 2008 (183 releases) through December 2016 (204 releases, see **gold trendline in figure 3**). Releases have since increased steadily over the past 3 years. There were 147 more releases in January 2020 (388 releases) than in January 2017 (241 releases, ↑61.0%).

In April 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic response, a record number of 632 individuals were released from Iowa prisons – an increase of 62.9% from three months prior (January 2020). Releases have since decreased in May 2020 (517 releases) and June 2020 (422 releases). Releases in June 2020 have returned to the average number of releases in the first three months of 2020 (437 releases per month).

Figure 3 | Monthly Admissions to and Releases from Iowa Prisons, July 2008 – June 2020



Sources: Iowa Department of Corrections, *Offenders Released from Iowa Prisons*, and *Iowa Prison Admissions*.

Iowa Prison Admissions during COVID-19

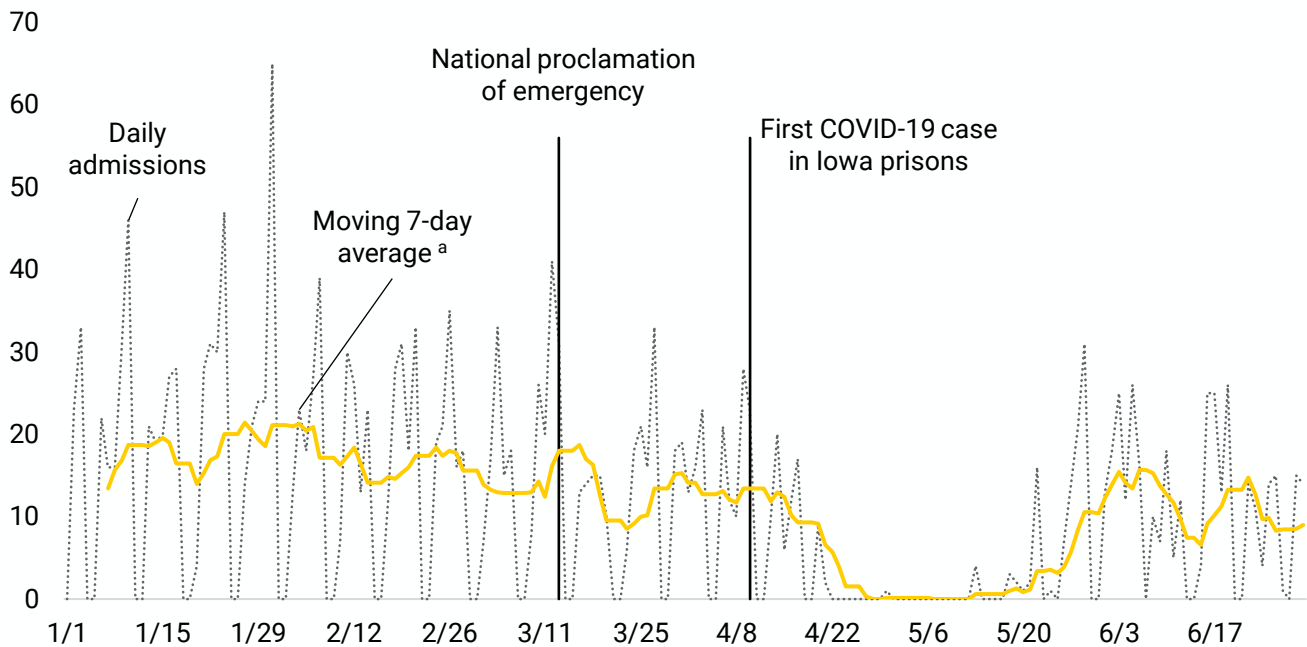
2020 Daily Trend

Key Finding #5: In 2020, average daily admissions were down 52.9% after the national COVID-19 emergency proclamation.

From January 1 to March 13, 2020 (the date of the national COVID-19 emergency proclamation), there were 17 admissions per day on average (see **figure 4**). From March 14 through June 30, there were 8 admissions per day on average (↓52.9%).

The decline in admissions occurred shortly after the national proclamation. In the first 30 days after the proclamation, there were 11 admissions per day (↓35.3%). The fewest number of admissions occurred in the second 30 days with an average of 3 admissions per day (↓82.4% from before the proclamation). From May 13 through June 30, admissions increased to 9 admissions per day, on average.

Figure 4 | Daily Admissions, January 1 to June 30, 2020.



^aA moving 7-day average (solid gold line) is used to create a smoothed trendline that adjusts for daily fluctuations. As shown in the daily admissions (dotted black line), the number of admissions drops during the weekends and peaks in the middle of the weeks.

Source: Iowa Department of Corrections, *Iowa Prison Admissions*.

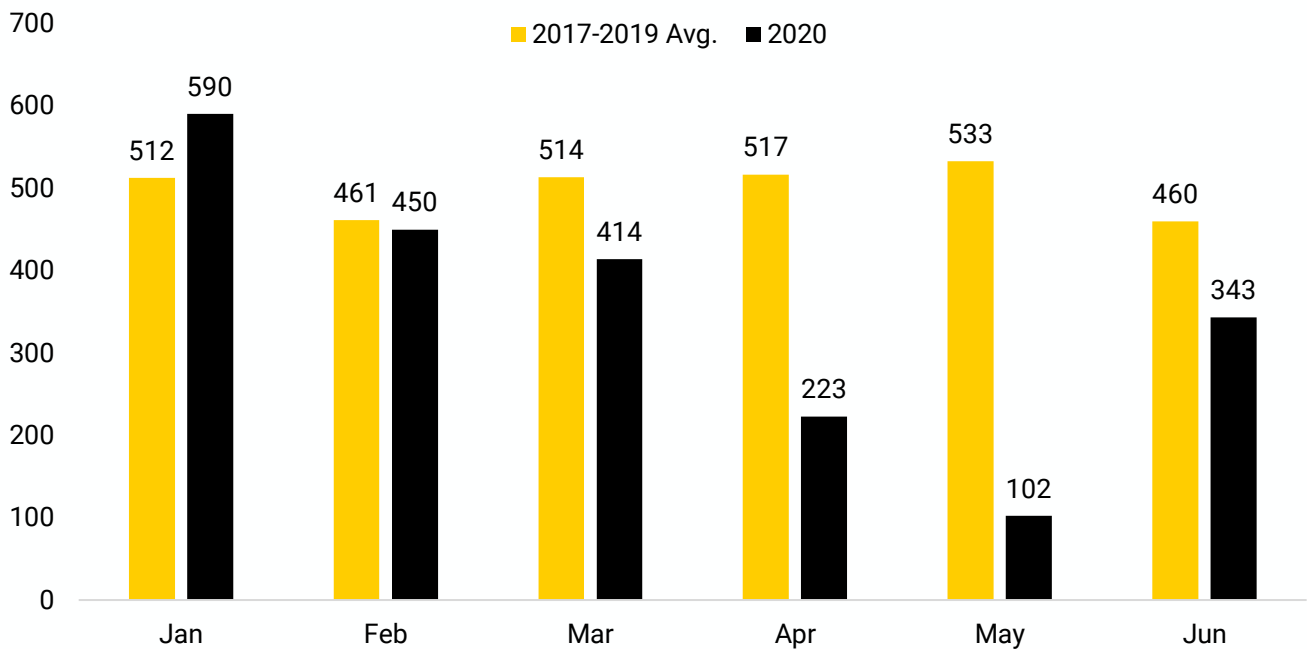
2020 vs. 2017-2019

Key Finding #6: Prison admissions in May 2020 fell by 80.9% compared to the 2017-2019 average.

The reductions in prison admissions after the national proclamation of emergency does not appear to reflect a seasonal pattern (see **figure 5**). The 2017-2019 average number of monthly admissions remained relatively stable from January through June, ranging from 460 to 533 admissions per month.

Compared with the 2017-2019 average, prison admissions rose in January 2020 (↑15.2%) and stayed the same in February 2020 (↓2.4%), but have declined in the remaining four months. Admissions fell, compared to the previous three-year average, in March 2020 (↓19.4%) and considerably so in April 2020 (↓56.8%) and May 2020 (↓80.9%). Admissions in May 2020 were one-fifth the average number of admissions in the previous three years. The drop in admissions then waned in June 2020 (↓25.4%).

Figure 5 | Monthly Admissions in 2020 Compared to 2017-2019 Average.



Source: Iowa Department of Corrections, *Iowa Prison Admissions*.

Subgroups

Key Finding #7: Compared to the 60 days before, the largest drop in admissions in the 60 days after the national proclamation occurred among individuals aged 55 and over, new admissions, and individuals admitted for aggravated misdemeanors.

In this section, the change in admissions from the 60 days before the national proclamation to the 60 days after the national proclamation are summarized by subgroups (see **table 3**).

- **Sex.** In the 60 days before the national proclamation of emergency, 905 males and 143 females were admitted to Iowa prisons. During the 60 days after the proclamation, 353 males (↓61.0%) and 68 females (↓52.4%) were admitted.
- **Race or ethnicity.** Seven hundred and fifteen white individuals were admitted in the 60 days before the national proclamation. During the following 60 days, 310 white individuals were admitted (↓56.6%). The decrease in admissions was larger for Black (↓63.5%), Hispanic (↓74.6%), and Asian and American Indian or Alaska Native individuals (↓73.2%).
- **Age group.** The decrease in admissions from the 60 days before to the 60 days after the proclamation was largest among individuals aged 55 and over (↓75.7%).
- **Admission.** New admissions fell after the proclamation of emergency at a larger rate than admissions due to return or revocation. In the 60 days before the proclamation, there were 437 new admissions and 605 return admissions. After the proclamation, there were 122 new admissions (↓72.1%) and 299 return admissions (↓50.6%).
- **Offense class.** One hundred and forty-seven individuals were admitted for an aggravated misdemeanor during the 60 days before the national proclamation, while 34 were admitted during the 60 days after (↓76.9%) – the largest drop by offense class. The “other” offense category includes special sentences, serious misdemeanors, and felony enhancements.
- **Offense type.** There was little variation in admission decreases by offense type. The largest drop, however, was among violent offenses – from 228 admissions before the proclamation to 72 admissions after the proclamation (↓68.4%).

Table 3 | Number of Admissions Before and After National Proclamation, by Subgroups

Variable	60 Days Before	60 Days After	Percent Change
Sex			
Male	905	353	-61.0%
Female	143	68	-52.4%
Race			
White	715	310	-56.6%
Black	233	85	-63.5%
Hispanic	59	15	-74.6%
Other ^a	41	11	-73.2%
Age Group			
16-24	149	69	-53.7%
25-29	192	73	-62.0%
30-34	216	93	-56.9%
35-39	183	64	-65.0%
40-44	106	56	-47.2%
45-49	81	22	-72.8%
50-54	51	27	-47.1%
55+	70	17	-75.7%
Admission			
New	437	122	-72.1%
Return	605	299	-50.6%
Offense Class			
Felony B/A	61	22	-63.9%
Felony C	256	116	-54.7%
Felony D	467	199	-57.4%
Aggravated Misdemeanor	147	34	-76.9%
Other	117	50	-57.3%
Offense Type			
Violent	228	72	-68.4%
Property	314	121	-61.5%
Drug	267	118	-55.8%
Public Order	128	59	-53.9%
Other	111	51	-54.1%
Total	1,048	421	-59.8%

^a Includes Asian and American Indian or Alaska Native.

Source: Iowa Department of Corrections, *Iowa Prison Admissions*.

Iowa Prison Releases during COVID-19

2020 Daily Trend

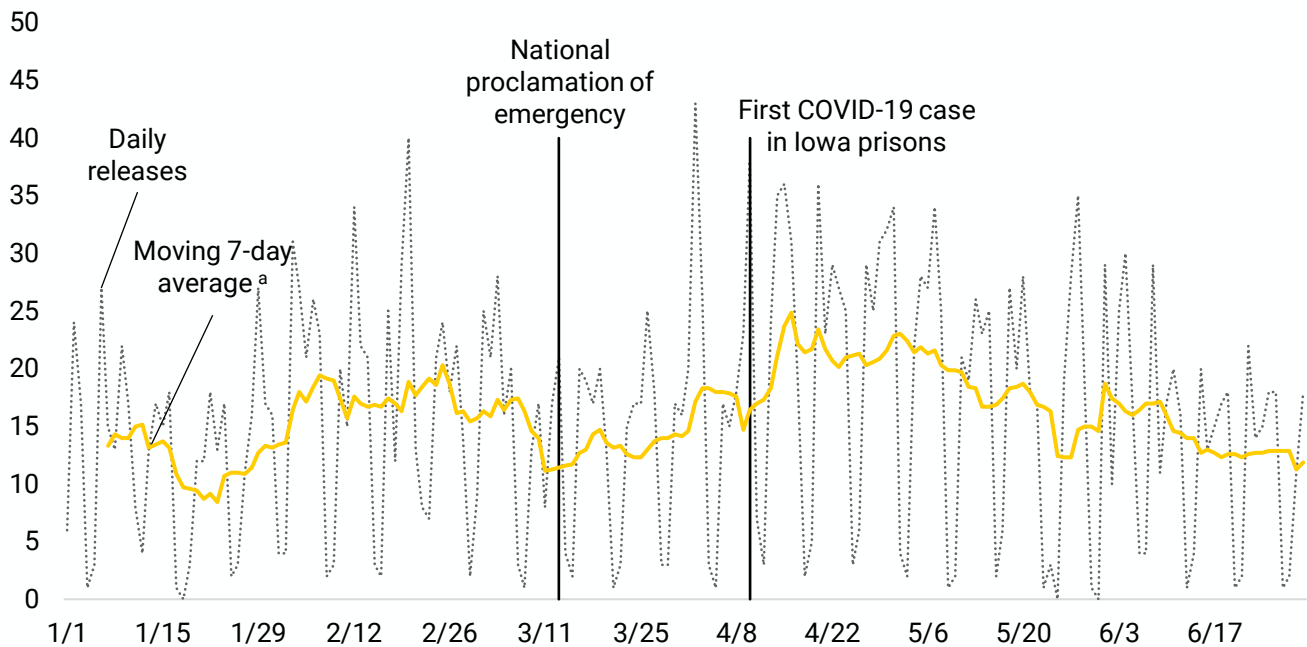
Key Finding #8: After an increase in prison releases in April 2020, average daily releases have returned to levels before the national COVID-19 emergency proclamation.

On average, there were 15 releases per day from January 1 to March 13, 2020 (see **figure 6**). Since the proclamation through June 30, the average number of releases has been 17 per day (↑13.3%).

The proclamation-to-date trend, however, conceals variation in release during this time period. In the first 30 days after the proclamation, there were 15 releases per day – indicating little immediate change in release practices. In the second 30 days, however, the average number increased to 21 releases per day (↑40.0%).

The increase in releases appear to have waned since mid-May. From May 13 through June 30, the average number of releases returned to 15 releases per day – the rate before the proclamation of national emergency.

Figure 6 | Daily Releases, January 1 to June 30, 2020.



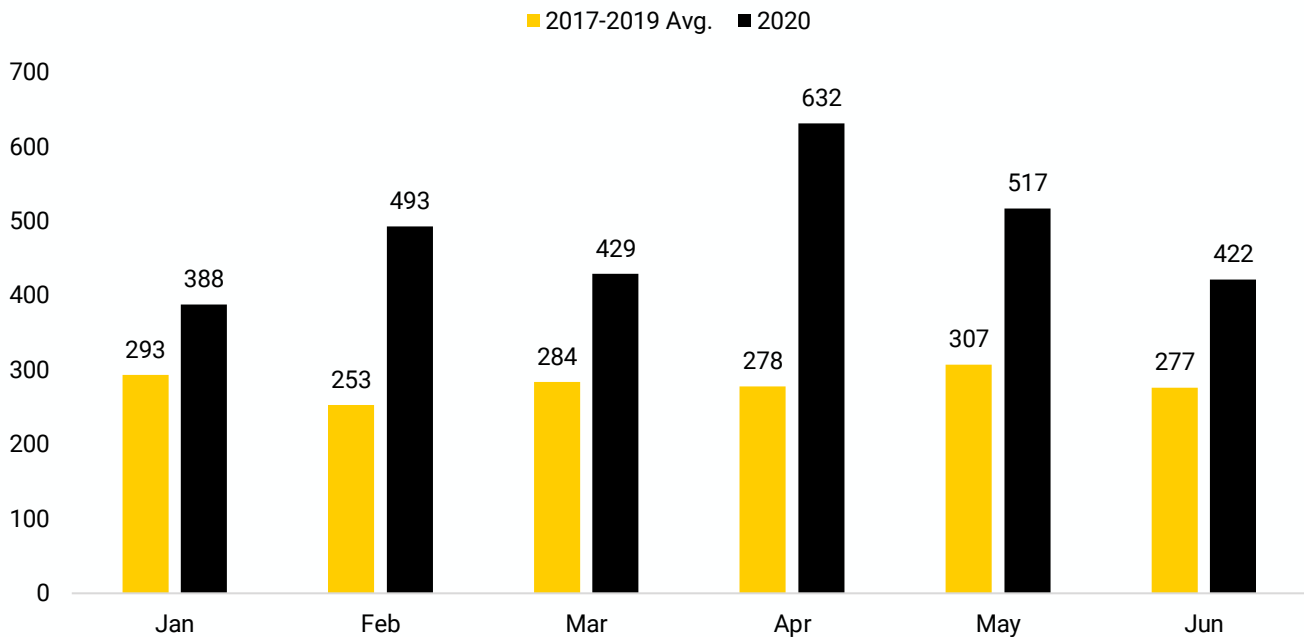
^aA moving 7-day average (solid gold line) is used to create a smoothed trendline that adjusts for daily fluctuations. As shown in the daily admissions (dotted black line), the number of admissions drops during the weekends and peaks in the middle of the weeks. Source: Iowa Department of Corrections, *Offenders Released from Iowa Prisons*.

2020 vs. 2017-2019

Key Finding #9: Increases in prison releases has been part of longer historical trend; however, there was a spike in growth in April 2020.

Releases have grown in every month of 2020 compared to the 2017-2019 average (see **figure 7**), indicating an increase in releases that is consistent with historical trends. The size of the growth, however, is larger in April 2020 (↑127.3%) than previous months: January 2020 (↑32.3%), February 2020 (↑94.9%), and March 2020 (↑51.2%). The size of the growth in May 2020 (↑68.4%) and June 2020 (↑52.5%) is similar to the growth in months before the COVID-19 proclamation.

Figure 7 | Monthly Releases in 2020 Compared to 2017-2019 Average.



Source: Iowa Department of Corrections, *Offenders Released from Iowa Prisons*.

Subgroups

Key Finding #10: There was notable variation in the change in releases across race and ethnicity and offense type. The increase in releases was driven by an increase in granting parole (or probation).

In this section, the change in releases from the 60 days before the national proclamation to the 60 days after the national proclamation are summarized by subgroups (see **table 4**).

- **Sex.** In the 60 days before the national proclamation of emergency, 794 males and 116 females were released from Iowa prisons. During the 60 days after the proclamation, 925 males (↑16.5%) and 156 females (↑34.5%) were released.
- **Race or ethnicity.** Six hundred and twenty-two white individuals were released in the 60 days before the national proclamation. During the following 60 days, 813 white individuals were released (↑30.7%). Releases also increased for Asian and American Indian or Alaska Native individuals (↑24.0%). Releases for Black individuals remained stable (↑3.5%), while releases for Hispanic individuals decreased (↓100.0%).
- **Age group.** The increase in releases from the 60 days before to the 60 days after the proclamation was largest among individuals aged 35 to 39 (↑35.1%). Releases decreased for individuals aged 45 to 49 (↓10.9%).
- **Closure.** The increase in releases was driven by an increase in granting parole (or probation). In the 60 days before the proclamation, 375 individuals were granted parole. In the 60 days after, that number nearly doubled (735 individuals, ↑96.0%). Releases by all other mechanisms decreased. For example, the number of work releases was cut in half (238 to 126, ↓47.1%).
- **Offense class.** There was little variation in the change in release by offense class. The largest increase in releases, however, was among those incarcerated for B or A felonies (↑24.1%). Only one release involved an A felony.
- **Offense type.** Releases increased after the national proclamation for individuals incarcerated for property offenses (↑28.9%), drug offenses (↑25.5%), and public order offenses (↑21.8%). Releases remained stable for individuals with violent offenses (↑1.4%) and decreased for individuals with other offenses (↓15.2%).

Table 4 | Number of Releases Before and After National Proclamation, by Subgroups

Variable	60 Days Before	60 Days After	Percent Change
Sex			
Male	794	925	16.5%
Female	116	156	34.5%
Race			
White	622	813	30.7%
Black	229	237	3.5%
Hispanic	34	0	-100.0%
Other ^a	25	31	24.0%
Age Group			
16-24	102	126	23.5%
25-29	166	202	21.7%
30-34	165	202	22.4%
35-39	151	204	35.1%
40-44	122	133	9.0%
45-49	92	82	-10.9%
50-54	57	64	12.3%
55+	55	68	23.6%
Closure			
Parole	375	735	96.0%
Work Release	238	126	-47.1%
Discharge	156	133	-14.7%
Other	141	87	-38.3%
Offense Class			
Felony B/A	54	67	24.1%
Felony C	246	291	18.3%
Felony D	413	497	20.3%
Aggravated Misdemeanor	150	178	18.7%
Other	47	48	2.1%
Offense Type			
Violent	216	219	1.4%
Property	270	348	28.9%
Drug	267	335	25.5%
Public Order	124	151	21.8%
Other	33	28	-15.2%
Total	910	1081	18.8%

^a Includes Asian and American Indian or Alaska Native.

Source: Iowa Department of Corrections, *Offenders Released from Iowa Prisons*.

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