



JUSTICE AND SAFETY

Living and Working Conditions in Five State Prisons

According to Incarcerated People and Corrections Staff

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RESEARCH REPORT

October 2025



ABOUT THE URBAN INSTITUTE

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Acknowledgments

This report was funded by Arnold Ventures. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute’s funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.

The authors extend their deepest gratitude to the incarcerated-person research and innovation teams and the staff research and innovation teams for their collaboration and insights during this project. We thank the leadership at each of the pilot prison facilities and departments of corrections in Colorado, Delaware, Iowa, Missouri, and Vermont for their support and continued commitment to the Prison Research and Innovation Network (PRIN) and the research partners. We extend special thanks to the prison research and innovation managers (PRIMs) who were research-corrections liaisons embedded in the facilities; their holding office hours, walking the yard, and serving as consistent, trusted points of contact made worlds of difference in the success of the participatory research approach. We also thank the research teams at the University of Delaware, the University of Denver, the Iowa Department of Management, the University of Missouri, and the University of Vermont, and also those at the University of Arizona, Crossover Research, and the University of New Haven, for their dedication and extensive work on this project collecting data and collaborating directly with facility leadership, research and innovation teams, and each prison’s PRIM.

Lastly, the following people also assisted with the project, and we thank them: Will Engelhardt, Storm Ervin, Lauren Farrell, Jocelyn Fontaine, Nell Godellas, Azhar Gulaid, Jesse Jannetta, Aristotle Jones, Alexandra Kurland, Nancy La Vigne, Collette Marcellin, Andreea Matei, Rudy Perez, Cassandra Ramdath, Travis Reginal, Katie Robertson, Jeremy Travis, Emily Wright, and Bethany Young.

Executive Summary

Millions of people are directly affected by state prisons each year, whether because they are incarcerated in them, work in them, or have family members or loved ones incarcerated or working in them. Despite their reach, prisons are among the least transparent and studied public institutions in the United States. In 2019, the Urban Institute launched the Prison Research and Innovation Initiative (PRII), a comprehensive effort to build evidence and spur innovation to make prisons more humane, safe, and rehabilitative. Funded by Arnold Ventures, this six-year project leveraged research and evidence to shine a much-needed light on prison conditions and pilot strategies to promote the well-being of incarcerated people and corrections staff.

Under this initiative, the five state departments of corrections (DOCs) and local research partners in Colorado, Delaware, Iowa, Missouri, and Vermont each worked to establish a model of transparency, accountability, and innovation in one state prison. The local research partners (the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services, the University of Delaware, the University of Denver, the University of Missouri, and the University of Vermont) developed and applied participatory research approaches to understanding prison living and working conditions, conducting three waves of climate surveys of incarcerated people and corrections staff to learn from their perspectives.

Though each site's research partner developed its own climate survey questions using participatory methods, they were asked to incorporate a series of cross-site questions into their surveys. These cross-site questions focused on the purpose of prison, prison conditions and environment, perceptions of personal safety, corrections staff and practices, prison activities, contact with family and friends, interactions between staff and incarcerated people, workplace culture, job satisfaction, and COVID-19. Incarcerated people and corrections staff were asked a total of 17 identical or similar questions, allowing for comparison across groups.

What We Learned from Comparing the Perspectives of Incarcerated People and Corrections Staff

On the four proposed purposes of prison—punishment, public safety, crime prevention, and personal transformation—staff increasingly emphasized rehabilitation, public safety, and crime prevention, whereas incarcerated people's faith in these purposes declined. Both groups consistently agreed that punishment was at least one core purpose of the prison system.

Staff and incarcerated people did not perceive prison living conditions the same. In fact, staff saw living conditions for incarcerated people more favorably than incarcerated people themselves. For example, by the third survey wave, 59.6 percent of incarcerated people overall disagreed that they received enough to eat, whereas staff disagreement increased but never surpassed 40 percent.¹ Access to personal hygiene products showed the widest divide in wave 1: only around 35 percent of incarcerated people overall agreed that they received what they needed for free, compared with 82.0 percent of staff in the first and second survey waves, but that gap narrowed by wave 3. Differences between incarcerated people and staff on questions about prison conditions were all statistically significant.

Most incarcerated people and staff agreed that their prisons fall short in preparing people for release, with responses improving. Views on whether staff treat incarcerated people with respect also diverged, with staff demonstrating consistent overall agreement a statistically significant 25 or more percentage points higher than incarcerated participants. Findings also reveal notable differences in attitudes toward the use of administrative segregation.

Around 40 percent of incarcerated people reported that communication from staff about COVID-related changes was clear, whereas staff rated communication from their leadership more favorably. Similar gaps appeared around COVID case updates and pandemic-related practices, including mask wearing, phone access, and segregation, with statistically significant differences between incarcerated people and staff across all survey waves.

What We Learned from Incarcerated People's Reflections on Prison Living Conditions

Over 60 percent of incarcerated people overall disagreed that staff made them feel safe across all waves. Perceptions of issues concerning sexual assault differed: incarcerated people increasingly overall agreed that assault by staff was a problem, whereas overall agreement that assault between incarcerated people was a problem fell nearly 10 percentage points by the third survey wave.

Incarcerated people's responses also suggested that racial tension eased slightly, whereas more respondents overall agreed that victims of bullying were receiving help between wave 1 and wave 3.

¹ In this report, when we refer to overall agreement, we mean the two categories of "agree" and "strongly agree." Likewise, when we refer to overall disagreement, we mean the two categories of "disagree" and "strongly disagree."

Still, trust in staff remained low, with no more than 4 percent of respondents strongly agreeing that they felt safe raising concerns with staff.

Incarcerated people perceived the use of sanctions to be unfair—over 40 percent strongly disagreed that sanctions were applied fairly in wave 1, and overall disagreement never fell below 75 percent. Grievance procedures were also viewed unfavorably, with high levels of disagreement that the grievance process was a useful tool.

Incarcerated people also reflected on their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas most agreed they had access to masks and hygiene items, a far smaller percentage felt that leadership showed care for their well-being.

Incarcerated people reported limited access to medical and mental health care: across all waves, over 65 percent overall disagreed they could get the medical health care they needed, and overall agreement that they can access mental health care when needed never reached 50 percent. Although nearly half of survey participants initially agreed they had access to activities that promoted well-being, the share declined between the first two survey waves and only slightly recovered by wave 3. Most also felt that phone and video calls were unaffordable and that visiting opportunities were limited even before the COVID-19 pandemic.

What We Learned from Corrections Staff’s Reflections on Prison Working Conditions

On safety and well-being, staff increasingly agreed that they felt safe speaking up about misconduct, with overall agreement rising 10 percentage points from the wave 1 baseline of 53.4 percent.

Trust among staff also improved slightly, and around two-thirds of staff overall agreed that they could rely on their coworkers. Perceptions of facility leadership’s commitment to staff safety showed particularly encouraging improvements with each survey wave. Despite these improvements, stress remained high: 74.6 percent of respondents in wave 1 said coworkers “often” or “always” showed signs of stress, and this dropped slightly to 68.0 percent by wave 3.

Staff also expressed strong belief that they positively impacted incarcerated people. A strong majority of staff overall agreed that they positively influenced incarcerated people’s lives through their work and that staff maintained appropriate boundaries with incarcerated people. Overall agreement

that rehabilitation for incarcerated people was possible declined, however, from 82.8 percent in wave 1 to 65.3 percent in wave 3.

Though pride in their work was high and increased across survey waves, staff members agreed that they looked forward to coming to work at much lower rates, with overall agreement breaching 50 percent only on the final wave, though staff consistently felt confident they had the skills to carry out their duties.

Regarding their facilities' COVID-19 responses, staff overwhelmingly agreed they had access to masks, hygiene items, and cleaning supplies during the pandemic. But perceptions of leadership's care for staff well-being were less favorable, though they showed signs of improvement across waves.

Introduction

On average, about 1.1 million people are incarcerated annually in the United States in state prisons (Kang-Brown and Zhang 2024), which employ more than 180,000 people and cost significant taxpayer money.¹ Yet they are among the least transparent and studied public institutions in the country. In recent years, US prisons have been the subject of calls for further oversight and transparency and an increased focus on humane, innovative models of confinement. Similarly, amid a national corrections staffing crisis, there are demands to improve working conditions in corrections environments. In particular, research on prison climate—the social, emotional, organizational, and physical characteristics of a prison as perceived by incarcerated people and prison staff—is a vital part of this work. Yet prison climate continues to be an understudied area of the criminal legal system.

To bridge this gap, in 2019 the Urban Institute launched the Prison Research and Innovation Initiative (box 1), a comprehensive effort to build evidence and spur innovation to make prisons more humane, safe, and rehabilitative. Funded by Arnold Ventures, this six-year project leveraged research and evidence to shine a much-needed light on prison conditions and pilot strategies to promote the well-being of people who are incarcerated in prisons and those who are working in them. The initiative sought to answer the following questions: What would it mean for prisons to open their doors to researchers and supply them with data on all facets of prison culture, climate, and safety? How might research promote the transformation of prisons? And which principles should guide decisions about what research is necessary, how it is conducted, and how it is disseminated to promote innovation?

BOX 1

The Prison Research and Innovation Initiative’s Theory of Change

If corrections leaders open their doors to researchers; support participatory research partnerships in their facilities and become willing partners in the systematic and rigorous documentation of prison life; partner on innovations that are born from an empirical understanding of prison climate, culture, and context; and implement changes that are rigorously evaluated, prisons can be transformed into safer, more humane, rehabilitative, and equitable environments for the people who are confined and work in them.

Five states—Colorado, Delaware, Iowa, Missouri, and Vermont—formed the Prison Research and Innovation Network (PRIN), each establishing a model of transparency, accountability, and innovation in one state prison with the support of a research partner to enhance local research and data capacity. Each of the five state departments of corrections (DOCs) collaborated with local research partners (the University of Delaware, the University of Denver, the Iowa Department of Management, the University of Missouri, and the University of Vermont) that conducted annual climate surveys in their respective state prisons to measure prison climate according to incarcerated people and corrections staff. Over the course of the project, each site conducted a total of six climate surveys: three waves of the climate survey for incarcerated people and three waves of the climate survey for corrections staff. Although each site developed its own climate survey questions using participatory research methods, the research partners were asked to incorporate a series of cross-site questions into their surveys.

This report summarizes the responses to the cross-site questions asked across three waves of surveys of both incarcerated people and corrections staff in the five states participating in PRIN. First, we describe the methodology. We then compare the responses of incarcerated people and corrections staff, provide descriptive analysis of responses to questions only asked of incarcerated people, and provide descriptive analysis of responses to questions only asked of corrections staff. We conclude with some takeaways from the climate survey data across the five states.

Methodology

The study sample comprises corrections staff and incarcerated people at five state prisons in five states (Colorado, Delaware, Iowa, Missouri, and Vermont). Across the five states and 28 administered surveys (with three survey waves in each state), there were a total of 7,018 responses, of which 5,268 were from incarcerated people and 1,750 were from corrections staff (table 1). The sample was surveyed by local research partners (the University of Denver, the University of Delaware, the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services, the University of Missouri, and the University of Vermont). Each site conducted six surveys: three waves of surveys for incarcerated people and three waves of surveys for corrections staff.² Wave 1 was conducted in 2021, wave 2 largely in 2022 (with one site conducting surveys in Q1 of 2023), and wave 3 largely in 2024 (with one site conducting its surveys in Q4 of 2023). We are unable to link via a unique identifier across survey waves and therefore do not know the total number of unique individuals who participated in at least one of the three survey waves. We also do not know how many individuals and what corresponding percentage of the total sample participated in all three survey waves.

TABLE 1
Number of Survey Respondents, by Wave and Type
According to Urban’s analysis of climate surveys of incarcerated people and corrections staff administered across three waves in five state prisons

Wave	Incarcerated people	Corrections staff	Total
Wave 1	1,546	615	2,161
Wave 2	1,975	607	2,682
Wave 3	1,747	528	2,275
Total	5,268	1,750	7,018

Source: Urban Institute analysis of 28 climate surveys (three waves) of corrections staff and incarcerated people at five state prisons conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024.

The Urban Institute developed a series of cross-site questions and local research partners were asked to incorporate these questions into their climate surveys, in addition to demographic questions (see appendix A for the list of demographic questions and detailed descriptives for demographic data for both incarcerated people and corrections staff).

More than 5,000 respondents identifying as incarcerated people responded to the 14 climate surveys (three waves) administered by local research partners, which included the aforementioned 35 cross-site questions. The cross-site questions for incarcerated people fell into seven domains: the purpose of prison, prison conditions and environment, perceptions of personal safety, corrections staff and practices, prison activities, contact with family and friends, and COVID-19. For the full list of cross-site questions for incarcerated people by domain, see appendix B.

Meanwhile, more than 1,500 respondents identifying as corrections staff responded to the 14 climate surveys (three waves) administered by local research partners, and similarly answered a series of 32 cross-site questions. The cross-site questions for corrections staff also fell into seven domains: the purpose of prison, prison conditions and environment, interactions between staff and incarcerated people, corrections practices and sanctions, views on workplace culture, job satisfaction, and COVID-19. For the full list of the cross-site questions for corrections staff by domain, see appendix B.

Importantly, incarcerated people and corrections staff were both asked a total of 17 identical or similar questions, allowing for comparison across groups. Nine questions were identical for the two groups, and eight questions were similar, adjusting for point of view (box 2).

BOX 2

Cross-Site Questions Asked of Incarcerated People and Corrections Staff

The following nine questions were asked of both incarcerated people and corrections staff:

1. It is important that prisons punish people for the crimes they have committed.
2. It is important that prisons ensure public safety.
3. It is important that prisons prevent people from committing future crimes.
4. It is important that prisons help people make changes for a better life.
5. It's easy for incarcerated people with physical disabilities to get around in this prison.
6. This prison has adequate alternatives to segregation.
7. Staff in this prison are more likely to use segregation over other disciplinary options.
8. This prison does a good job preparing people for release.
9. Staff here have been increasing the use of segregation as a form of punishment.

The following questions were adapted for incarcerated people and for corrections staff:

Adaptation for incarcerated people:

1. I get enough to eat here.
2. This facility gives me what I need (e.g., soap, regular showers, sanitary products) for good personal hygiene for free.
3. I'm usually able to get a good night's sleep here.
4. Staff in this prison treat me with respect.
5. Most staff here have been wearing masks.
6. Correctional staff here have been letting us make more free phone calls when visits have been restricted.
7. Correctional staff here have been clearly communicating when and why our movements, activities, and visits have been restricted.
8. Correctional staff here have been clearly communicating information about COVID rates in the facility.

Adaptation for corrections staff:

1. Incarcerated people get enough to eat here.
2. This facility gives incarcerated people what they need (e.g., soap, regular showers, sanitary products) for good personal hygiene for free.
3. Incarcerated people are usually able to get a good night's sleep here.
4. Staff in this prison treat incarcerated people with respect.
5. Most staff here have been wearing masks to contain the spread of the virus.
6. This prison's leadership have been letting incarcerated people make more free phone calls when visits have been restricted.
7. This prison's leadership has been clearly communicating changes to normal operations, like new procedures for mealtimes and phone time.
8. This prison's leadership has been clearly communicating information about COVID rates in the facility.

Comparing the Perspectives of Incarcerated People and Corrections Staff

Below we share how the perspectives of incarcerated people and staff converged and diverged on the following four topics: the purpose of prison, prison living conditions, corrections policies and practices, and COVID-19 responses behind bars.

The Purpose of Prison

Across three waves of surveys, incarcerated people and corrections staff were both asked about the purpose of prison. More specifically, they were asked to rate the importance of the following purposes of prison on a four-point scale (from not at all important to very important): punishing people for crimes they have committed, ensuring public safety, preventing people from committing future crimes, and helping people make changes for a better life.

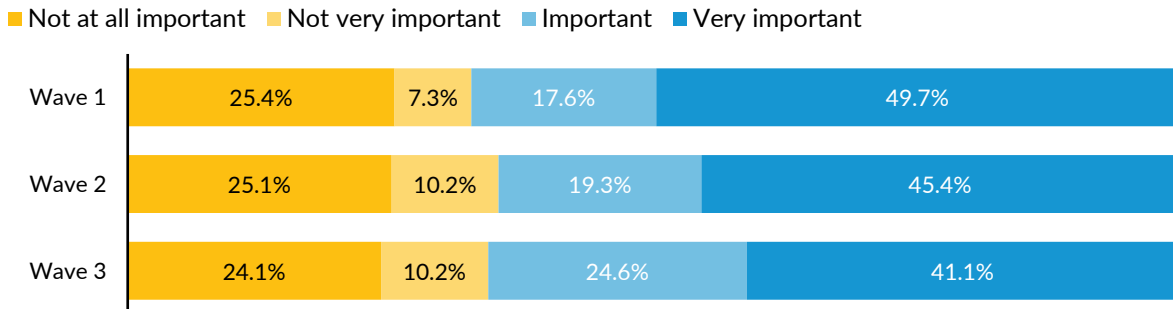
As with the other survey topics, elevating the perspectives of incarcerated people and staff on the purpose of prison offers direct and indirect benefits. First, there are the inherent advantages of asking those who most directly shape and are shaped by the prison system about what role the system serves, a process that encourages self-reflection and conveys that staff members' and incarcerated people's opinions about the goals of the prison system should affect decisions about that system. But beyond this, we know that staff members' and incarcerated people's attitudes toward the purpose of the prison system can directly affect both staff's treatment of incarcerated people and incarcerated people's experiences and priorities during their incarceration. For example, in one 2011 study, researchers found that when staff attitudes toward incarcerated people are more supportive, incarcerated people perceive their circumstances more positively (Molleman and Leeuw 2011). Other studies have demonstrated how the attitudes and priorities of incarcerated people during their incarceration can significantly shape mental and physical health outcomes (Hyatt, Andersen, and van Tiem 2024). When incarcerated people feel that they can spend their time productively and intentionally on vocational, educational, and other activities, immediate health metrics and long-term outcomes such as recidivism rates are significantly improved. The same can be said for facility staff and workers more generally, with data indicating improvements on both soft outcomes (e.g., feelings

of satisfaction) and hard outcomes (e.g., lifespan) when they feel their work serves a coherent purpose (Sauter et al. 2019). As importantly, no responsible and effective prison research aimed at improving experiences and outcomes for those directly affected can succeed without understanding the goals they want to see the system prioritize.

In the case of incarcerated people, nearly half (49.7 percent) felt it was very important that prisons help people make changes for a better life in wave 1, and this rate dropped to 41.1 percent by wave 3 (figure 1). Corrections staff, on the other hand, considered this very important at a much higher rate: 64.7 percent agreed it was very important in wave 1, and this increased to 75.6 percent by wave 3 (figure 2).

The differences in agreement between the two groups were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) in all three waves. This is a bit surprising, since one might assume that those who are incarcerated in prisons would place more importance on “making changes for a better life” than the staff who work there, who might have less stake in incarcerated people’s outcomes. On the other hand, incarcerated people may feel more fatalistic about prison—that “it is what it is”—and concern themselves less with rehabilitation.

FIGURE 1
Share of Incarcerated People Who Feel It Is Important That Prisons Help People Make Changes for a Better Life

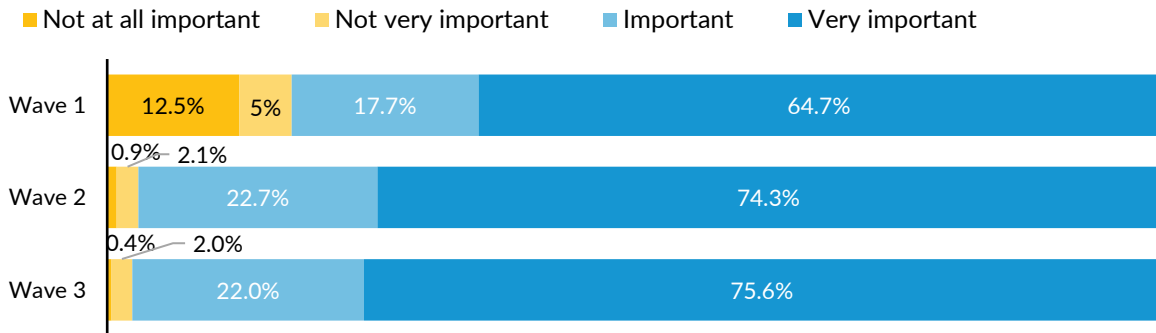


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Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 1,487 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 1,412 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 1,260 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 2

Share of Corrections Staff Who Feel It Is Important That Prisons Help People Make Changes for a Better Life



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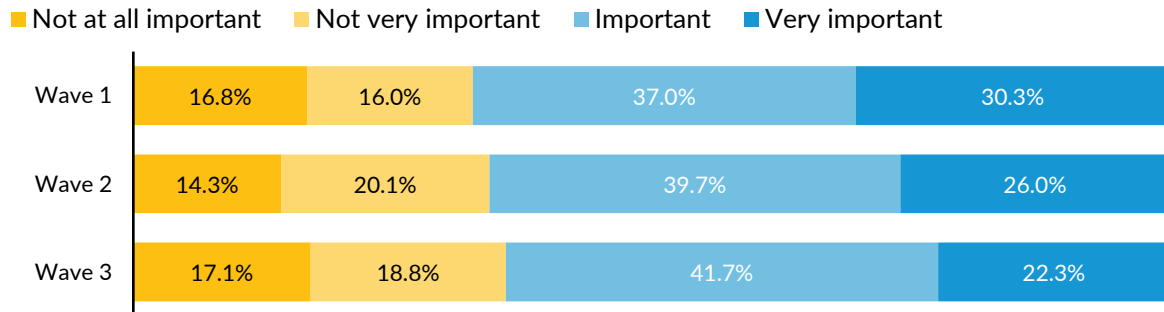
Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 558 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 440 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 250 respondents across three state prisons in wave 3.

Corrections staff elevated the importance of prisons ensuring public safety at a much higher rate than incarcerated people: 30.3 percent of incarcerated people felt this was very important in wave 1, and this rate dropped to 22.3 percent in wave 3 (figure 3). In contrast, 74.4 percent of corrections staff felt this was very important in wave 1, and 89.2 percent did by wave 3 (figure 4).

The differences between incarcerated people’s and corrections staff’s responses to this statement were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) for all three waves. Given the well-established connection between the weight people give to safety and security goals and fluctuations in levels (and perceived levels) of crime and violence, the importance to staff of ensuring public safety may be influenced by external social and political factors. That is, they may perceive crime in the community to be increasing or at least problematic, making it even more important for prisons to detain people who are currently incarcerated. Incarcerated people, on the other hand, may not believe that most people in prison are as dangerous as society does, which would obviate the need for prisons to focus on safety, or they may simply believe prisons do a poor job of protecting society given their lack of adequate rehabilitative programming.

FIGURE 3

Share of Incarcerated People Who Feel It Is Important That Prisons Ensure Public Safety

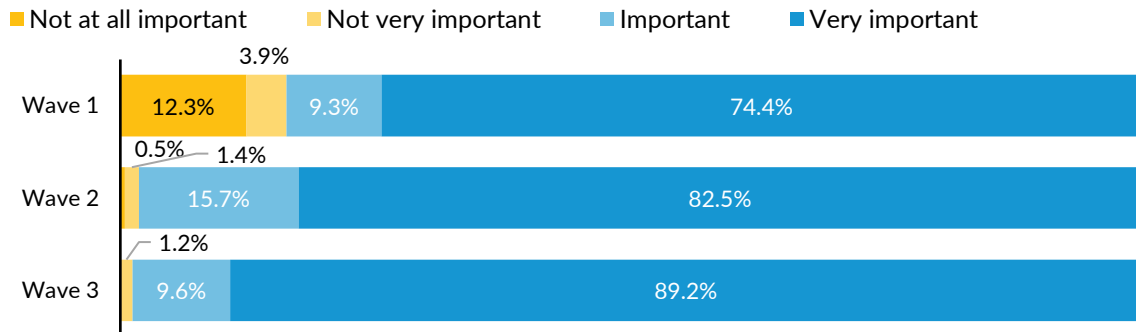


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Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 1,480 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 1,401 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 1,268 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 4

Share of Corrections Staff Who Feel It Is Important That Prisons Ensure Public Safety



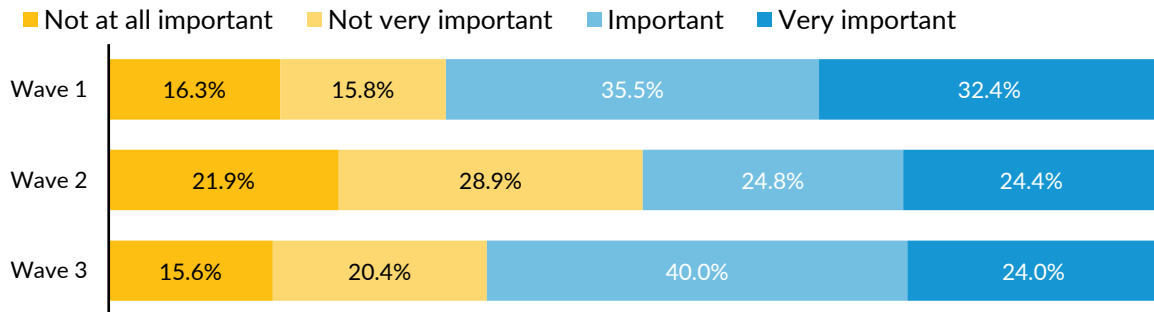
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Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 559 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 441 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 251 respondents across three state prisons in wave 3.

Corrections staff similarly agreed with the statement about the importance of prisons preventing people from committing future crimes at a higher rate than incarcerated people: 32.4 percent of incarcerated people felt this was very important in wave 1, and this rate dropped to 24.0 percent in wave 3 (figure 5), whereas 60.0 percent of corrections staff felt this was very important in wave 1, and this rate rose to 70.2 percent by wave 3 (figure 6). The differences in agreement between incarcerated people and corrections staff were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) in all three waves.

FIGURE 5

Share of Incarcerated People Who Feel It Is Important That Prisons Prevent People from Committing Future Crimes

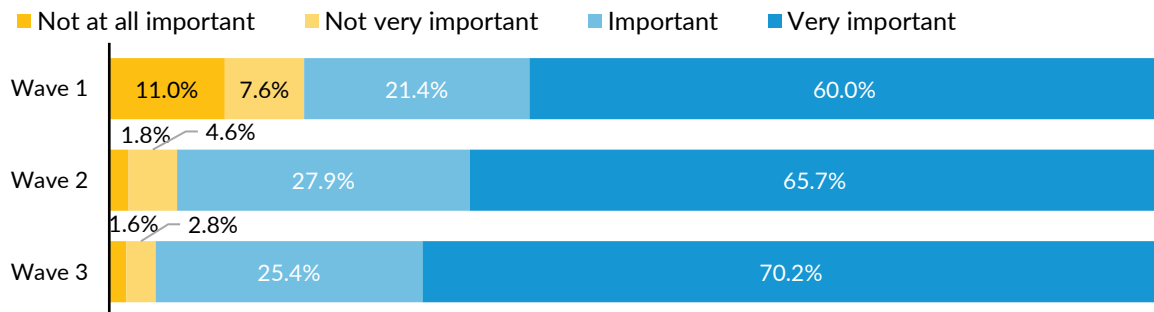


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Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 1,481 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 766 respondents across three state prisons in wave 2, and 1,273 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 6

Share of Corrections Staff Who Feel It Is Important That Prisons Prevent People from Committing Future Crimes



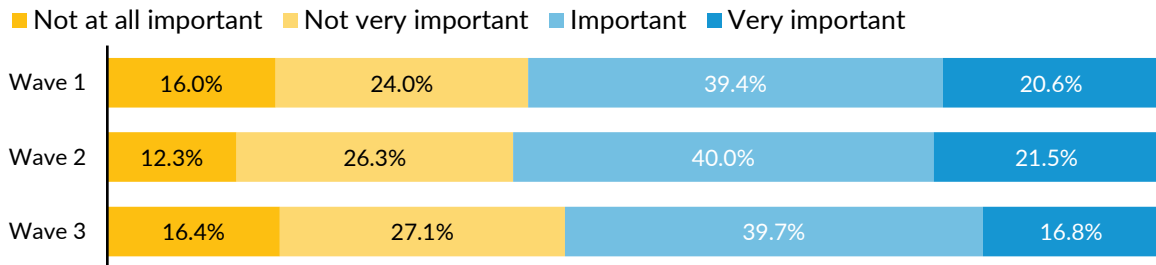
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Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 555 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 434 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 248 respondents across three state prisons in wave 3.

Lastly, when asked how important it was for prisons to punish people for the crimes they have committed, majorities of around 60 percent of incarcerated people (figure 7) and corrections staff (figure 8) reported it was important or very important on all waves. As opposed to the other three statements about the purposes of prison, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups' responses to this statement in any of the three survey waves. At first glance, this is a surprising finding. Wouldn't those who have not been convicted of a crime have, on average, a more punitive mindset than those who have? Anecdotally, however, we have found that many in prison can be just as punitive, if not more so, toward those who have committed crimes. Understanding the

punishment orientation of incarcerated people and staff—and how that orientation connects to behavior—is an important next step for research.

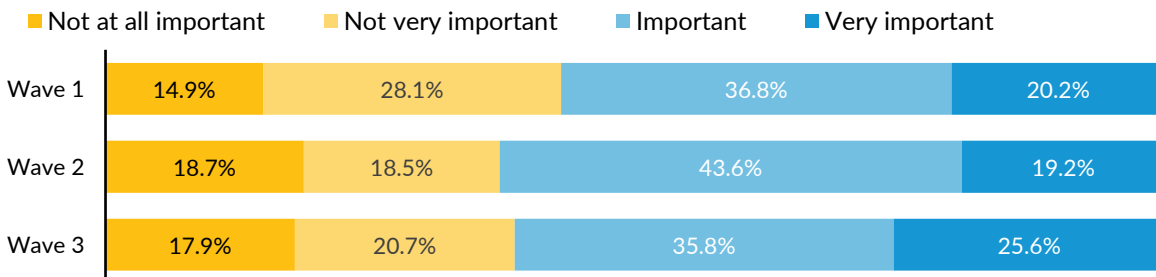
FIGURE 7
Share of Incarcerated People Who Feel It Is Important That Prisons Punish People for the Crimes They Have Committed



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Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 1,474 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 1,403 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 1,271 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 8
Share of Corrections Staff Who Feel It Is Important That Prisons Punish People for the Crimes They Have Committed



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Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 551 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 438 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 246 respondents across three state prisons in wave 3.

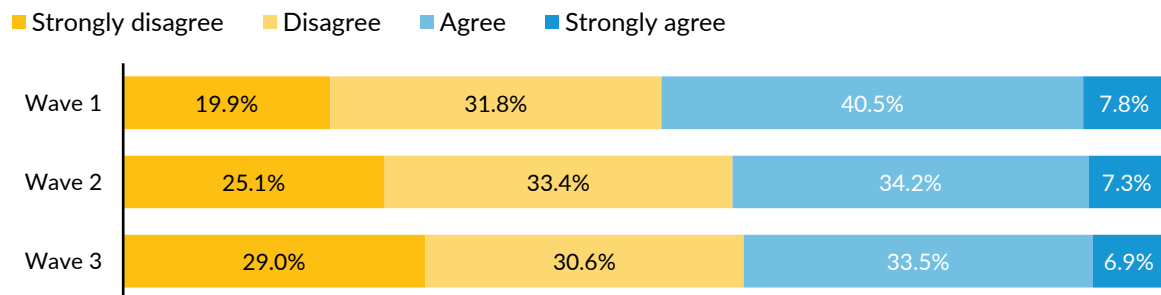
Prison Living Conditions

The next domain of questions that incarcerated people and corrections staff were asked addressed the prison environment and prison conditions concerning food, personal hygiene, sleep, and accessibility for people with physical disabilities. Some of the questions were adapted to the respondent’s point of view (as shown in box 2).

On the first question, which was whether incarcerated people get enough to eat at the prison, incarcerated people were nearly evenly split between overall agreement and disagreement in wave 1,² but by wave 3, 59.6 percent overall disagreed (figure 9). As with all the questions, it is important to keep in mind how external circumstances, such as COVID-19-related facility lockdowns, may have contributed to the responses. On this same question, 60 percent or higher of corrections staff overall agreed in each of the three waves (figure 10). Interestingly, however, the percentage of staff that overall disagreed that incarcerated people got enough to eat at the prison increased from 22.9 percent in wave 1 to 38.1 percent by wave 3, following a trend similar to the longitudinal responses from incarcerated people.

The differences between the responses of incarcerated people and corrections staff were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) in all three waves. This is unfortunate, since staff and incarcerated people see the same amount of food being allocated. An element of “deservingness” may be baked into the responses of staff, who may feel incarcerated people should eat only the minimum number of calories for a person their size. Prison nutrition is indeed an issue for advocates and policymakers in the prison reform space (Soble et al. 2020).

FIGURE 9
Share of Incarcerated People Who Agree with the Statement “I Get Enough to Eat Here”



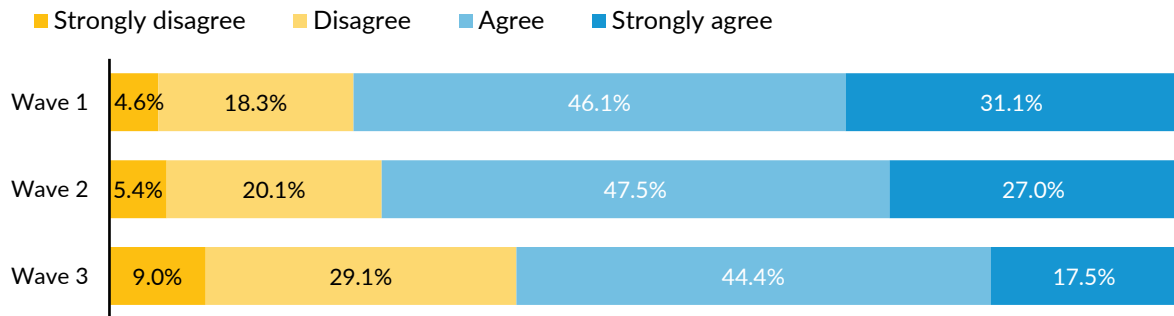
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Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 1,503 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 1,830 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 1,594 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

[‡] In this report, when we refer to overall agreement, we mean the two categories of “agree” and “strongly agree.” Likewise, when we refer to overall disagreement, we mean the two categories of “disagree” and “strongly disagree.”

FIGURE 10

Share of Corrections Staff Who Agree with the Statement “Incarcerated People Get Enough to Eat Here”



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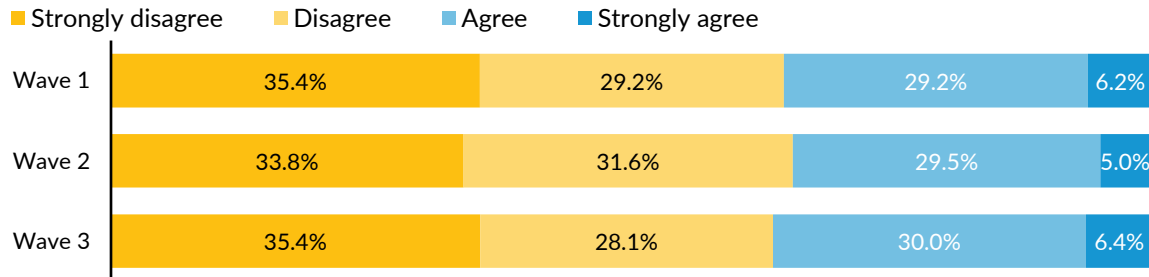
Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 547 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 467 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 457 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

Incarcerated people and corrections staff were also asked about personal hygiene for people behind bars. Only 35.4 percent of incarcerated people overall agreed that they receive what they need for good personal hygiene for free in wave 1 (figure 11), whereas 82.0 percent of corrections staff overall agreed in that same wave (figure 12), representing opposite perceptions of the same prison environments. These data suggest a sharp divide in relative attitudes toward the adequacy of access to products for personal hygiene, but what they cannot tell us is whether this difference owes to incarcerated people and staff having different understandings of “what incarcerated people need” or to genuine disagreement over access to these products. Furthermore, whereas incarcerated people’s perceptions remained similar over the three waves, a higher percentage of corrections staff overall disagreed with the statement by wave 3 (38.0 percent, compared with 18.0 percent in wave 1).

This trend in staff responses may have been influenced by several factors. Notably, wave 1 was completed in 2021 at all five sites, wave 2 was completed in 2022 at four sites (and in early 2023 at the fifth site), and wave 3 was completed in 2024 at four sites (and in late 2023 at the fifth site). The COVID-19 pandemic, and corrections policies in response to it, dramatically differed across those periods, and it may be that during waves 1 and 2 incarcerated people in certain sites were provided more personal hygiene products as a pandemic prevention strategy that was later discontinued. The differences between the responses of incarcerated people and corrections staff were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) in all three waves. Like with the responses about food, this is an unfortunate pattern, since incarcerated people and staff theoretically see the same allocation of products.

FIGURE 11

Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “This Facility Gives Me What I Need (e.g., Soap, Regular Showers, Sanitary Products) for Good Personal Hygiene for Free”

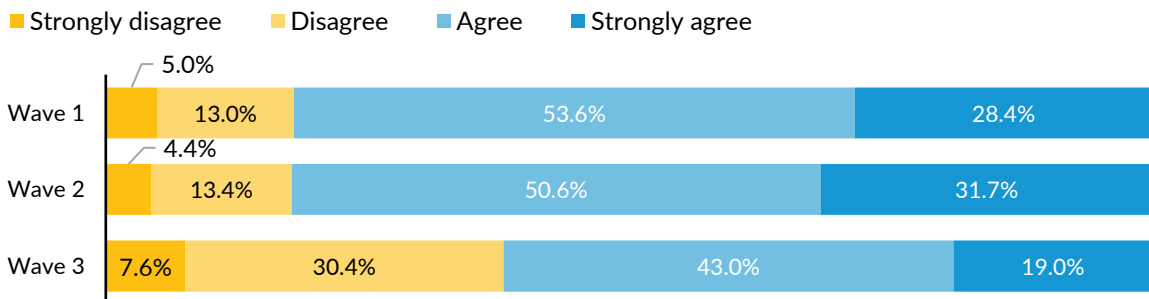


URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 1,497 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 1,814 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 1,586 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 12

Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “This Facility Gives Incarcerated People What They Need (e.g., Soap, Regular Showers, Sanitary Products) for Good Personal Hygiene for Free”



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 545 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 366 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 342 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

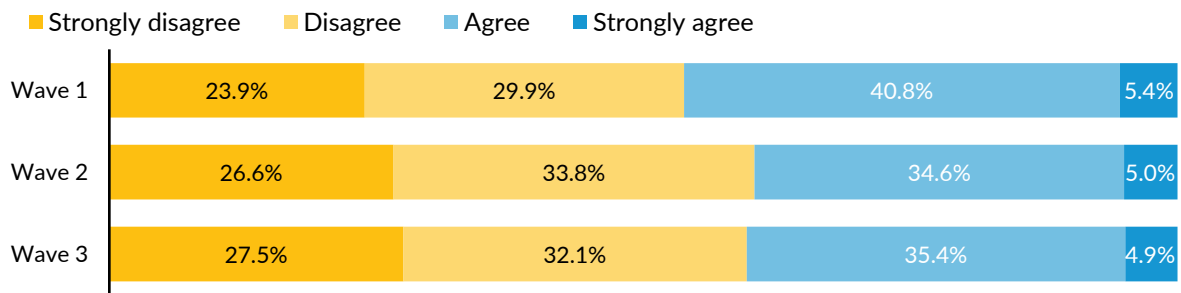
Regarding sleep, 53.8 percent of incarcerated people overall disagreed that they are able to get a good night’s sleep at their prison in wave 1, and this rate rose to 59.6 percent by wave 3 (figure 13). Corrections staff perceived sleeping conditions for incarcerated people differently, with only 26.1 percent overall disagreeing with the statement in wave 1. By wave 3, however, 37.9 percent of corrections staff overall disagreed (figure 14). This may reflect an increased awareness about sleeping conditions for incarcerated people resulting from the increased communication and trust between incarcerated people and staff in each facility as the Prison Research and Innovation Initiative

progressed (see [What We Learned about Participatory Research in Prisons: Evaluating the Prison Research and Innovation Initiative](#) for more detail).

Although the narrowing differences between the responses of incarcerated people and corrections staff are promising, the differences were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) in all three waves, indicating a troublesome divergence in how these two groups in the same environment view their reality. Given the importance of sleep and the well-documented consequences of inadequate sleep for those who are incarcerated (for instance, see Sheppard and Hogan 2022), this warrants additional research.

FIGURE 13

Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “I’m Usually Able to Get a Good Night’s Sleep Here”

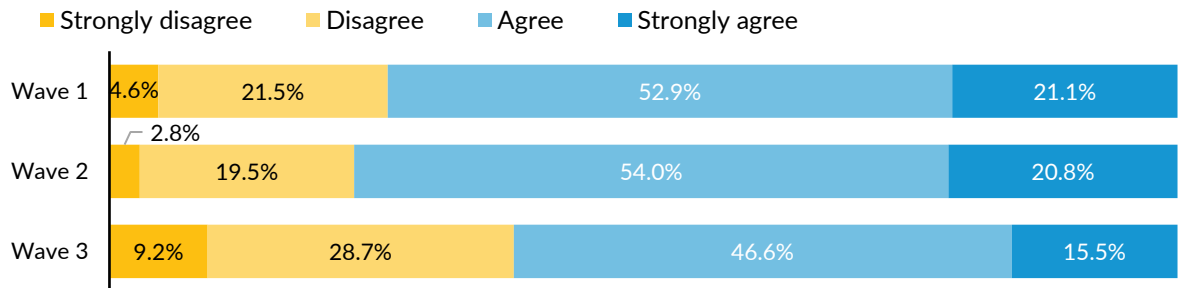


URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 1,508 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 1,825 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 1,594 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 14

Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “Incarcerated People Are Usually Able to Get a Good Night’s Sleep Here”



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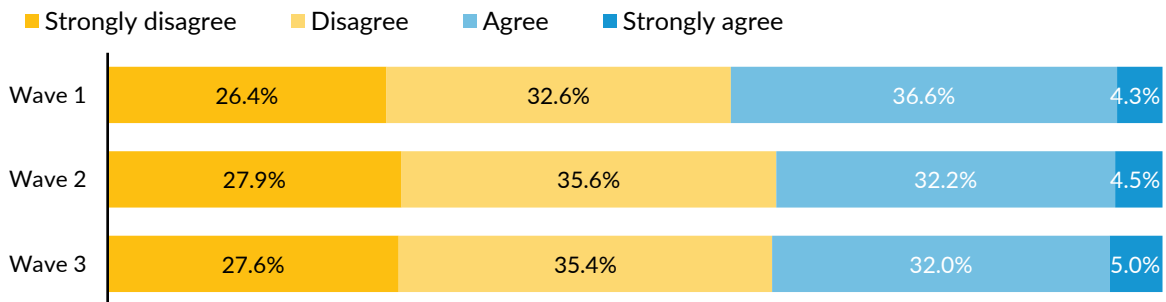
Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 526 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 452 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 457 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

On the last question about prison conditions and environments, we observed diverging perspectives about how easily incarcerated people with disabilities can get around the prison. Incarcerated people overall disagreed that it was easy for incarcerated people with physical disabilities to get around the prison across all three waves, without much variation: overall disagreement stayed from 59.0 to 63.0 percent (figure 15). Among corrections staff, on the other hand, with the exception of wave 1, when the greatest COVID-19 restrictions on freedom of movement in the facilities would have been in place, the majority overall agreed that it was easy for incarcerated people with physical abilities to get around the prison (figure 16).

The differences between the two groups' responses were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) in all three waves. Staff respondents almost certainly know they have a legal responsibility to accommodate people with disabilities and, as a result, may have painted a rosier-than-accurate picture or simply avoided the question. Indeed, this question had one of the largest numbers of nonresponses.

FIGURE 15

Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “It’s Easy for Incarcerated People with Physical Disabilities to Get Around in This Prison”

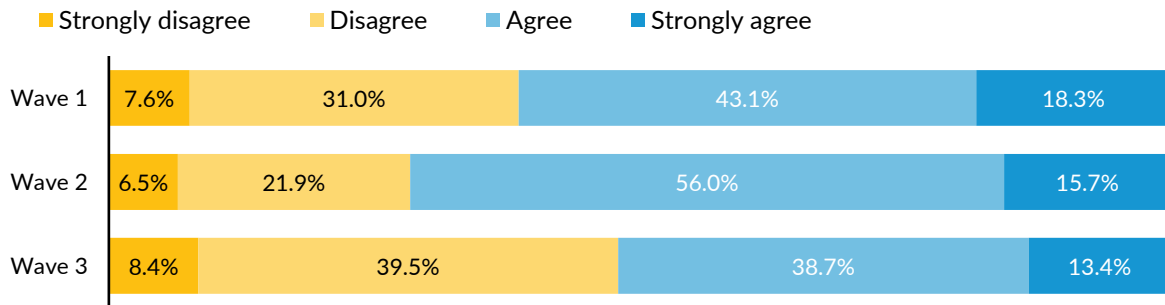


URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 972 respondents across three state prisons in wave 1, 1,583 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 1,377 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 16

Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “It’s Easy for Incarcerated People with Physical Disabilities to Get Around in This Prison”



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 290 respondents across three state prisons in wave 1, 370 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 344 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

Corrections Policies and Practices

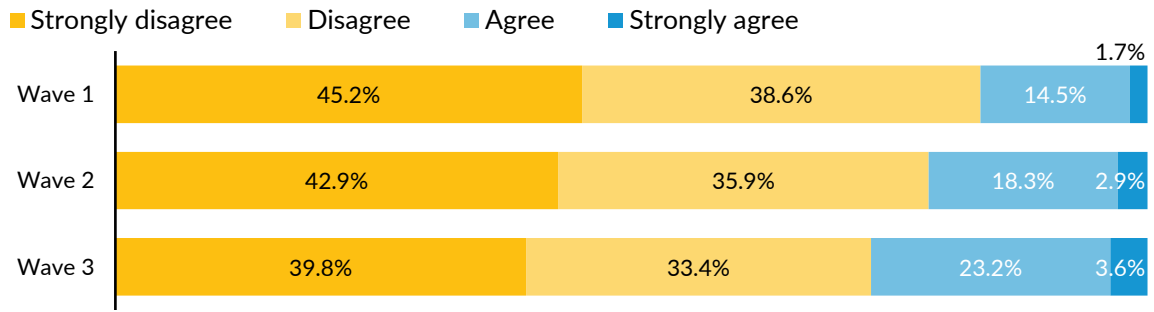
Incarcerated people and corrections staff were also asked about corrections policies and practices around reentry preparation, interactions between the two populations, and segregation practices. Some of the questions were adapted to the respondent’s point of view (as shown in box 2).

Most incarcerated people and corrections staff agreed that their prisons do not do a good job preparing people for release, a finding that is especially interesting when considering both groups’ strong agreement with the related statement that it is important for prisons to help incarcerated people make changes for a better life. Overwhelmingly, incarcerated respondents overall disagreed (83.8 percent in wave 1) that their prisons were doing a good job preparing them for release (figure 17). This rate of disagreement dropped to 73.2 percent by wave 3, still high but likely indicative of increased opportunities for programming and activities as the strictest COVID-19 policies were lifted. Still, across all waves and sites, the percentage of incarcerated people strongly agreeing with the statement remained under 4 percent. Similarly, most corrections staff overall disagreed with the statement, but to a lesser extent, with 59.1 percent overall disagreeing in wave 1 and 47.5 percent overall disagreeing in wave 3 (figure 18).

The differences between the two groups’ responses were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) in all three waves. These differences are interesting: staff, especially security staff, likely know less about what it takes to be prepared for release than incarcerated people, many of whom have been

previously incarcerated and experienced it themselves. These data are an interesting reflection of prison climate, but the more important analysis would be one that rigorously evaluates reentry programming to more objectively answer the question of incarcerated people's preparedness for release.

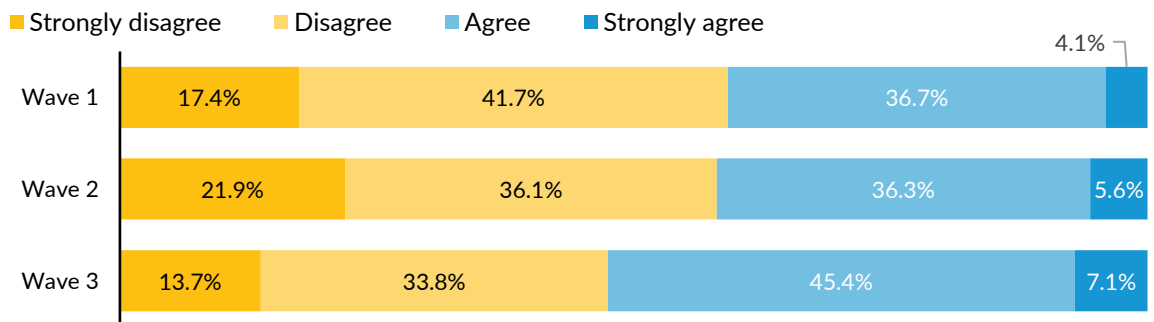
FIGURE 17
Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “This Prison Does a Good Job Preparing People for Release”



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 1,406 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 1,728 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 1,540 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 18
Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “This Prison Does a Good Job Preparing People for Release”



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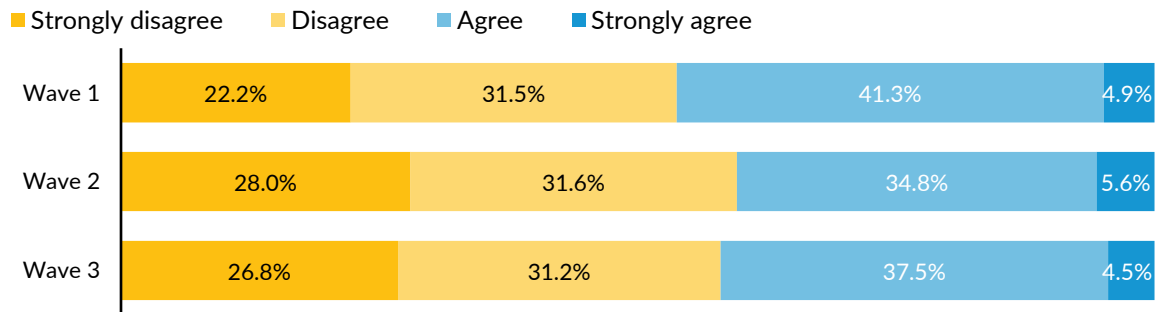
Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 539 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 465 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 438 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

Furthermore, incarcerated people and corrections staff had different views about whether staff treat incarcerated people with respect. Most incarcerated people across all three waves overall disagreed that staff treat them with respect, with the rate of disagreement increasing from 53.7

percent in wave 1 to 58.0 percent in wave 3 (figure 19). Conversely, an even larger majority of corrections staff across all three waves overall *agreed* that they treat incarcerated people with respect: in wave 1, 76.9 percent of staff overall agreed, although this decreased to 68.6 percent by wave 3 (figure 20). As with other survey items, this decrease may indicate increased awareness among staff, encouraged by PRII, of the level of respect owed to incarcerated people.

The differences between the two groups’ responses were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) in all three waves. These differences are not surprising, since if one were to ask the same question of any other dyad with differential power in society, the party with more power would likely believe it treats the party with less power with more respect than it does. In the prison setting, however, this question is perhaps more important given these facilities’ intense focus on the notion of respect. Prison culture places incredibly high value on respect, and if a person feels they are not being shown sufficient respect, it is often grounds for conflict (Butler 2008; Hulley et al. 2022). Prison safety depends on respect being shown to and from both incarcerated people and corrections staff.

FIGURE 19
Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “Staff in This Prison Treat Me with Respect”

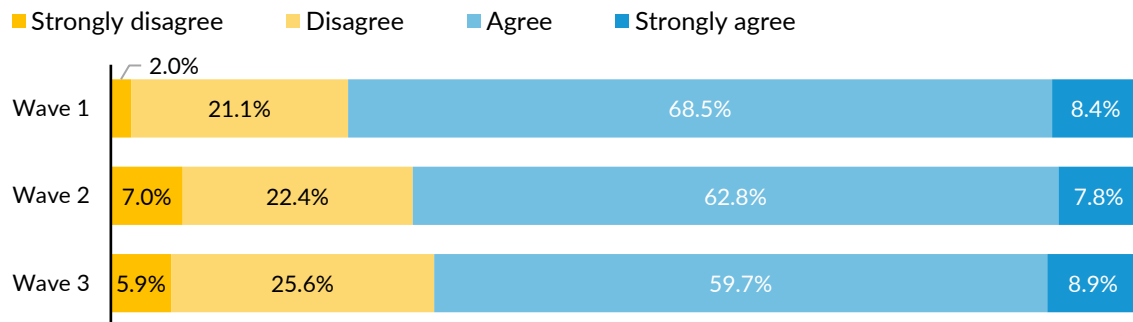


URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 1,478 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 1,803 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 1,582 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 20

Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “Staff in This Prison Treat Incarcerated People with Respect”



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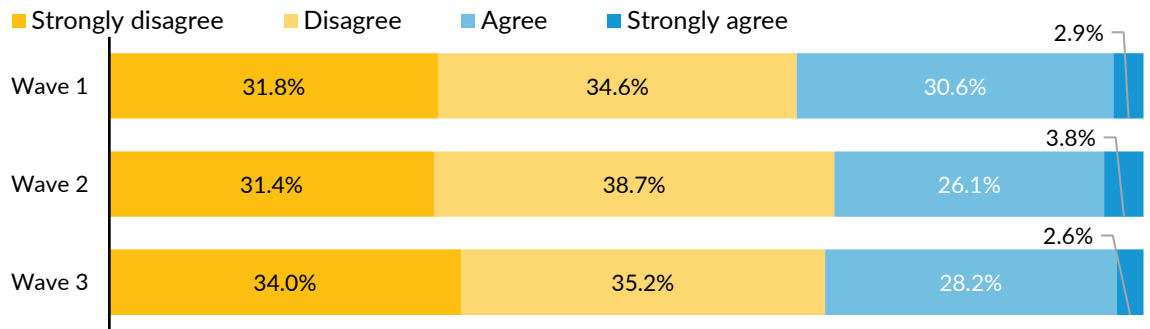
Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced 559 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 487 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 461 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

Regarding corrections policies and practices, incarcerated people and corrections staff were asked identical questions about their prisons’ use of segregation. Across all waves, less than 4 percent of incarcerated people strongly agreed that their prisons have adequate alternatives to segregation (figure 21), with remaining responses split relatively equally between “agree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree” and with little change between survey waves, an interesting finding given how prevalently segregation was used during the height of COVID-19 lockdowns. In wave 1, 66.4 percent of incarcerated people overall disagreed that their prison had adequate alternatives to segregation, and this rate rose to 69.2 percent by wave 3. Corrections staff, on the other hand, were split nearly evenly in wave 1, with 51.7 percent overall agreeing that their prison had adequate alternatives to segregation, but this percentage increased to 66.7 percent by wave 3—again, perhaps because of the decreased need to use segregation compared with when COVID-19 restrictions were in place. Simply put, most incarcerated people felt their prison did not have adequate alternatives to segregation, whereas most corrections staff felt adequate alternatives were available.

The differences between the two groups’ responses were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) in all three waves. These differences may turn on the word “adequate.” Incarcerated people would likely argue that prisons need many alternatives to segregation, whereas staff would likely argue that they need few. Segregation has long been a preferred disciplinary tool among corrections officers (Mears et al. 2021), and when segregated housing has been limited or banned legislatively, officers have struck back (Bombard 2025).

FIGURE 21

Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “This Prison Has Adequate Alternatives to Segregation”

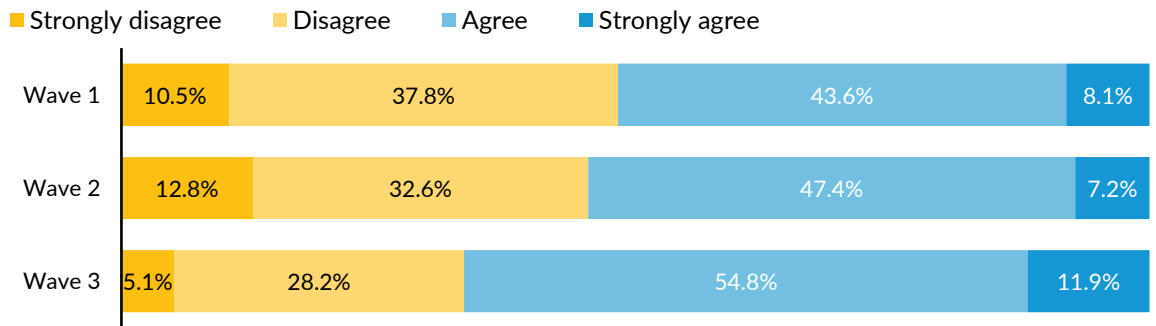


URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 917 respondents across three state prisons in wave 1, 1,543 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 1,328 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 22

Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “This Prison Has Adequate Alternatives to Segregation”



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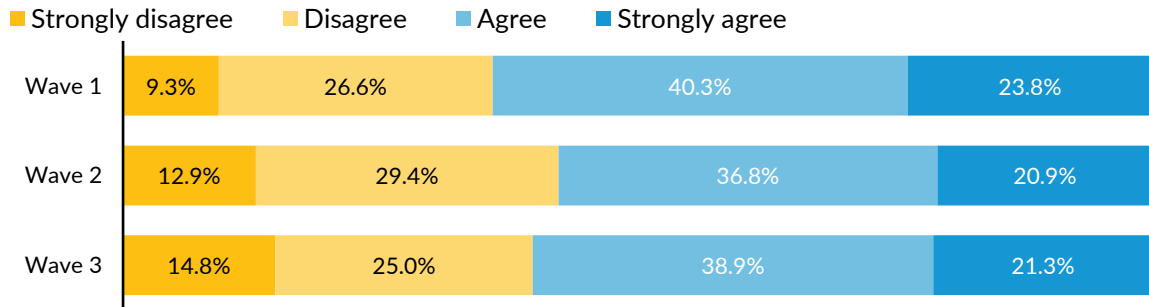
Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 296 respondents across three state prisons in wave 1, 359 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 312 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

In alignment with the previous question, a majority of incarcerated people overall agreed that staff in their prison were more likely to use segregation over other disciplinary options, though the share of respondents who overall agreed fell from 64.1 percent in wave 1 to 60.2 percent in wave 3 (figure 23). The share of respondents who strongly disagreed increased, however, from 9.3 percent in wave 1 to 14.8 percent in wave 3, a 59 percent increase. In contrast, 72.0 percent of corrections staff in wave 1 overall disagreed that they were more likely to use segregation over other disciplinary options, and overall disagreement fell to 57.2 percent by wave 3 (figure 24).

As with the previous question, these decreases in disagreement between waves 1 and 3 may reflect a decreased reliance on administrative segregation as the most restrictive COVID-19 policies and lockdowns ended. The differences between the two groups were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) in all three waves.

FIGURE 23

Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “Staff in This Prison Are More Likely to Use Segregation over Other Disciplinary Options”

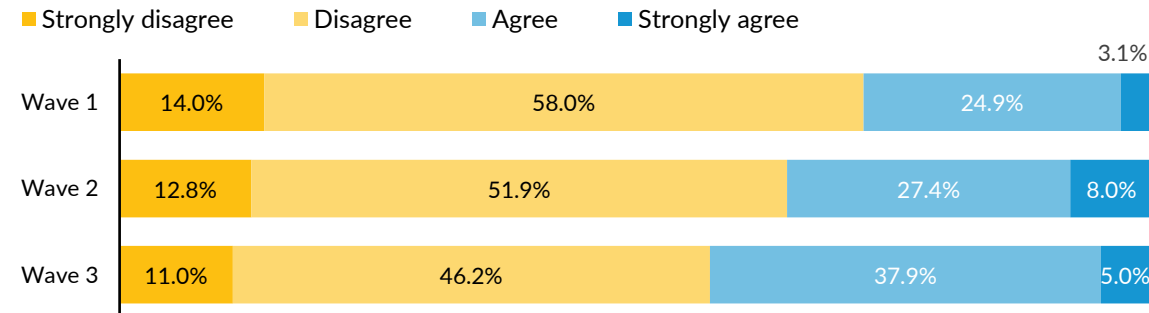


URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 911 respondents across three state prisons in wave 1, 1,540 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 1,351 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 24

Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “Staff in This Prison Are More Likely to Use Segregation over Other Disciplinary Options”



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 293 respondents across three state prisons in wave 1, 376 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 301 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

COVID-19 Responses Behind Bars

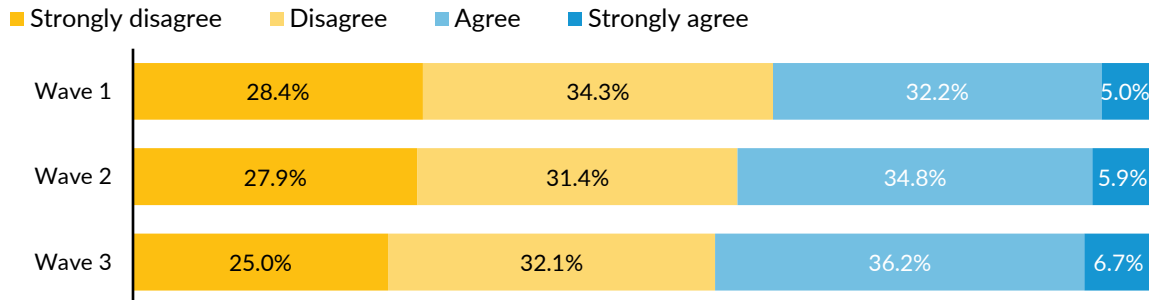
Lastly, incarcerated people and corrections staff were asked about communication from staff and facility leadership, as well as prison practices, during the COVID-19 pandemic. These are particularly important given the distinct severity and duration of practices implemented in response to the pandemic in corrections settings (Puglisi, Brinkley-Rubinstein, and Wang 2023). Some of the survey questions were adapted for the respondent's point of view (see box 2).

Both incarcerated people and corrections staff were asked whether there had been clear communication around changes to operating procedures, including changes to freedom of movement, activities, visits, mealtime, and phone calls. Only 5.0 percent of incarcerated people strongly agreed that there had in wave 1, and only 6.7 percent did by wave 3 (figure 25), though the increase may be as much a factor of hindsight and the gradual easing of COVID-19 restrictions as a reflection of changed policies. Responses were nearly evenly split across the other three responses of agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Corrections staff responded more favorably: more than half (57.8 percent) overall agreed that their prison's leadership had been clearly communicating changes to normal operations on wave 1, and 77.5 percent overall agreed by wave 3 (figure 26).

The differences between the two groups were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) in all three waves. Communication is a frequent problem in prisons, both between staff and incarcerated people and between leadership and staff. Although staff typically conduct line-ups where they make announcements at the start of their shifts, there is usually no similar juncture at which incarcerated people are notified of important information. Some prisons disseminate news by closed circuit television, but many use written flyers that may not provide a level of detail seen as adequate by incarcerated people. This is an important area for future innovation.

FIGURE 25

Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “Correctional Staff Here Have Been Clearly Communicating When and Why Our Movements, Activities, and Visits Have Been Restricted”

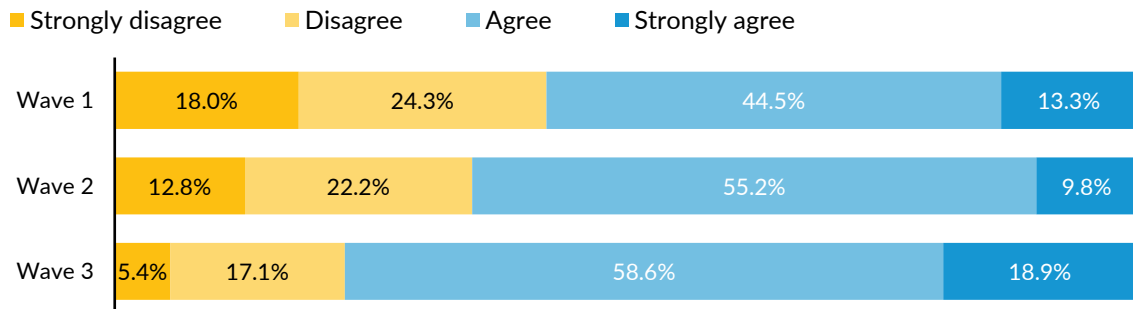


URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 900 respondents across three state prisons in wave 1, 1,093 respondents across three state prisons in wave 2, and 420 respondents across two state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 26

Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “This Prison’s Leadership Has Been Clearly Communicating Changes to Normal Operations, Like New Procedures for Mealtimes and Phone Time”



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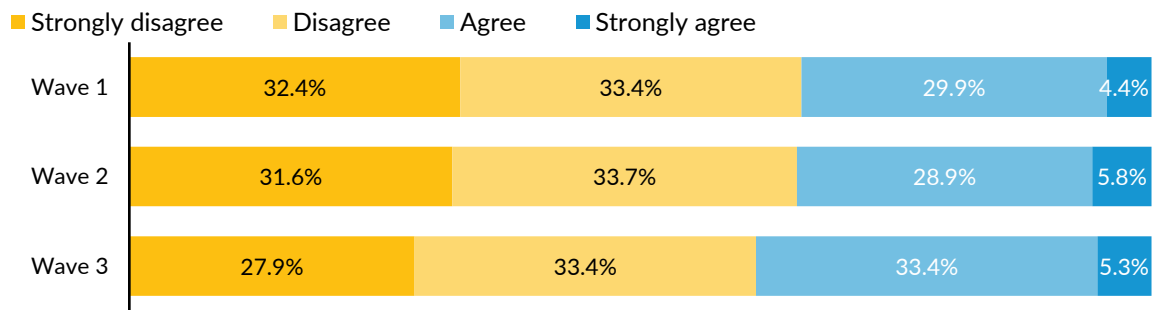
Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 400 respondents across three state prisons in wave 1, 306 respondents across three state prisons in wave 2, and 111 respondents across two state prisons in wave 3.

Incarcerated people and corrections staff were also asked how clear communication about COVID-19 rates was in their prisons. Similar to the previous question, a very small percentage of incarcerated people strongly agreed that corrections staff had been clearly communicating about COVID rates in their facility (figure 27), and responses were nearly evenly split across the other three responses of agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Again, corrections staff had a different perspective

than incarcerated people, though staff were asked about communication from leadership whereas incarcerated people were asked about communication from all prison staff. As such, we do not know whether incarcerated people felt that corrections officers were deliberately withholding information they had received from facility leadership, or that leadership itself was responsible for the knowledge gap. Most corrections staff overall agreed that leadership had been clearly communicating in wave 1 (67.5 percent), with similar overall agreement across the subsequent two waves (figure 28). The differences between incarcerated people and corrections staff were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) in all three waves.

FIGURE 27

Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “Correctional Staff Here Have Been Clearly Communicating Information about COVID Rates in the Facility”

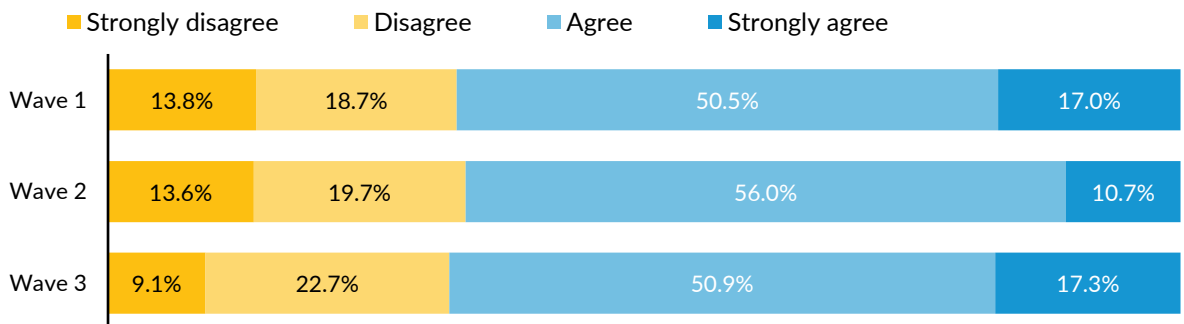


URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced 911 respondents across three state prisons in wave 1, 1,096 respondents across three state prisons in wave 2, and 419 respondents across two state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 28

Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “This Prison’s Leadership Has Been Clearly Communicating Information about COVID Rates in the Facility”



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 406 respondents across three state prisons in wave 1, 309 respondents across three state prisons in wave 2, and 110 respondents across two state prisons in wave 3.

Lastly, incarcerated people and corrections staff were asked three questions only on the first survey wave, which was administered between May 2021 and December 2021, when COVID's presence and effect on standard facility procedures most significantly disrupted standard operating procedures:

- **Staff mask-wearing:** 75.4 percent of incarcerated people overall agreed that staff at their prison had been wearing masks, compared with 88.2 percent of corrections staff. The difference between the two groups was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).
- **Phone calls:** 52.1 percent of incarcerated people overall agreed that staff were letting incarcerated people make more free phone calls when visits were restricted, compared with 83.2 percent of corrections staff. The difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).
- **Use of segregation:** 57.2 percent of incarcerated people overall agreed that staff at their prison had been increasing the use of segregation as a form of punishment, whereas only 10.1 percent of corrections staff overall agreed. The difference was statistically significant and may suggest different understandings of whether the increased use of segregation was indicative of punishment or a safety measure ($p < 0.05$).

What We Learned About the Perspectives of Incarcerated People and Corrections Staff

The findings above reflect the diverse experiences of incarcerated people and staff across five states and facilities, each contending with its own issues and priorities. Still, there are several takeaways from the different responses to the 17 survey questions asked to both incarcerated people and staff. Overall, of the 10 survey items where consistent, within-group patterns were observed, the responses of incarcerated people and staff fell on opposite sides of the spectrum, conveying several stark discrepancies across domains.

Responses concerning the four proposed purposes of incarceration—punishment, public safety, crime prevention, and personal transformation—offer a window into how those with the highest stakes in the prison system conceptualize the system's role. Staff increasingly emphasized rehabilitation, public safety, and crime prevention over time, whereas incarcerated people's faith in these purposes declined. Notably, both groups consistently agreed that punishment was a core purpose of the prison system. These findings suggest that while both constituencies see personal

growth as an important priority for the prison system when balanced against more punitive measures, incarcerated people may be growing more skeptical of the system's ability to deliver on that aim.

Responses on prison conditions reveal consistent gaps between incarcerated people and corrections staff. By wave 3, 59.6 percent of incarcerated people overall disagreed that they received enough to eat, whereas staff levels of overall disagreement rose but never surpassed 40 percent. Access to personal hygiene products showed the widest divide, with only around 35 percent of incarcerated people overall agreeing that they received what they needed for free, compared with 82.0 percent of staff in wave 1. In fact, we observed statistically significant differences in responses between incarcerated people and staff on all prison condition questions.

Most incarcerated people and corrections staff agreed that their prisons fall short in preparing people for release, with agreement increasing over time, though incarcerated people started from a much lower baseline—83.8 percent of incarcerated respondents overall disagreed in wave 1, compared with 73.2 percent by wave 3, whereas staff overall disagreement declined from 59.1 to 47.5 percent. Views on respect also diverged, with staff demonstrating consistent overall agreement a statistically significant 25 percentage points or higher than incarcerated participants. Findings also reveal significant differences in attitudes toward the use of administrative segregation.

Lastly, incarcerated people consistently reported low levels of clear communication from staff about COVID-related changes, peaking at only 6.7 percent strong agreement, whereas staff seemed to receive much better communication from leadership, with 77.5 percent overall agreeing by wave 3 that leadership communicated clearly. Similar gaps appeared around COVID case updates and pandemic-related practices, including mask wearing, phone access, and segregation, with statistically significant differences across all survey waves.

Perceptions of Incarcerated People on Living Conditions

Across survey waves, incarcerated people were asked 18 cross-site questions that were solely for them. Below we share the findings from those questions, grouping them into two sections: (1) personal safety, and (2) access to support, treatment, and family connections.

Eighteen Cross-Site Questions for Incarcerated People

The following questions were developed by the Urban Institute and incorporated into climate surveys of incarcerated people at five state prisons conducted by local research partners:

1. The staff at this prison make me feel safe.
2. Sexual assault of incarcerated people by staff is a problem here.
3. Sexual assault between incarcerated people is a problem here.
4. Racial tension between incarcerated people is a problem in this prison.
5. Victims of bullying get the help they need here.
6. I feel safe raising concerns with staff in this prison.
7. The grievance process in this prison is a useful tool to address the concerns of incarcerated people.
8. Sanctions are applied fairly here.
9. I have access to activities in this prison that promote well-being and growth.
10. I get the medical treatment in this prison when I need it.
11. I get the mental health care/treatment I need in this prison when I need it.
12. Were you incarcerated in this prison before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?
13. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, visiting opportunities were too limited in this prison.
14. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost of making or receiving phone calls or video calls was too high.
15. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, correctional officers treated visitors with respect.
16. During COVID-19, this prison's leadership has demonstrated care for the well-being of people incarcerated here.
17. People incarcerated here have had access to sanitary items like soap or hand sanitizer.
18. People incarcerated here have been given masks.

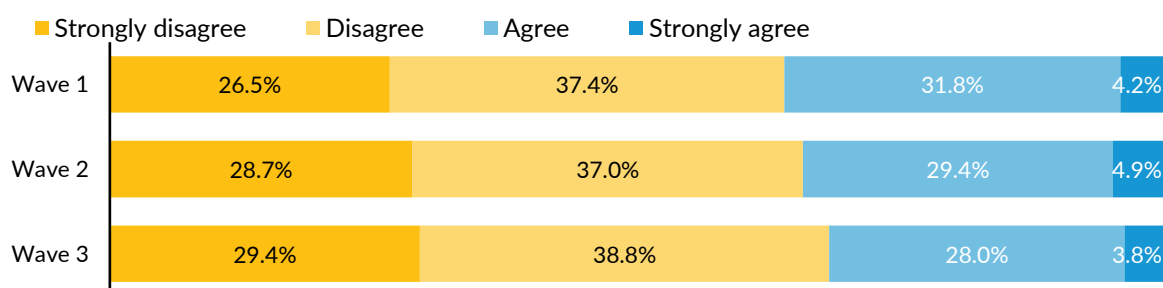
Personal Safety

Incarcerated people were asked several questions about the level of safety and security in their facilities, with questions probing safety issues between incarcerated people and staff and between incarcerated people themselves. When asked whether staff at their prisons made them feel safe (figure 29), incarcerated people’s perspectives were consistent across all three survey waves; the share of respondents who marked “disagree” stayed within 1.5 percentage points across all waves, ranging from 37.4 percent to 38.8 percent (figure 29). Furthermore, nearly 30 percent of respondents strongly disagreed that staff made them feel safe, and in none of the three waves did more than 5 percent strongly agree.

Incarcerated people were not asked whether these low ratings of safety owed to staff actions or to fundamental prison policy. But it is striking that such small numbers of incarcerated people strongly agreed that staff made them feel safe while well over half overall disagreed. This warrants additional qualitative research to identify precisely why and how officers are not making these individuals feel safe. Much of prison policy focuses on safety—occasionally to the detriment of programming or other personal accommodations that those in prison would probably prefer—so this issue should be understood with more nuance.

FIGURE 29

Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “The Staff at This Prison Make Me Feel Safe”



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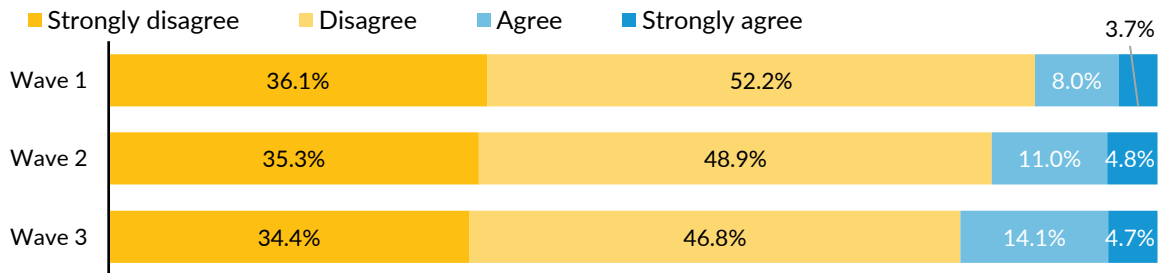
Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 1,473 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 1,863 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 1,618 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

On questions of bullying, sexual assault, and racial tension, responses from incarcerated people had some changes across waves. In wave 1, a small percentage of incarcerated respondents (11.7 percent) overall agreed that sexual assault of incarcerated people by staff was a problem in their prison (figure 30). By wave 3, however, the share nearly doubled, reaching 18.8 percent. When asked

about sexual assault between incarcerated people, a group of respondents consistently reported it was a problem. Interestingly, though, the results moved in the opposite direction, with overall agreement decreasing from the first round (34.7 percent) to the last round (26.0 percent) of data collection (figure 31). This may reflect incarcerated people spending less time in unfamiliar isolated situations after the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions began to lift. The Prison Rape Elimination Act aims to eliminate sexual assault altogether, and although a majority of incarcerated people we surveyed disagreed that this was an issue, any report of sexual assault is concerning and warrants additional research.

FIGURE 30

Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “Sexual Assault of Incarcerated People by Staff Is a Problem Here”

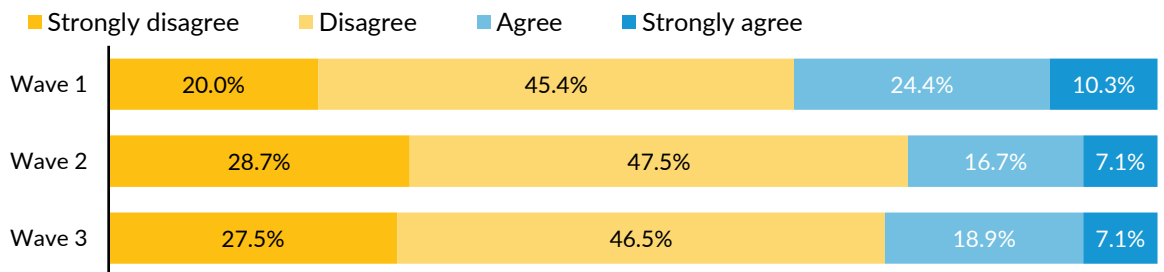


URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 942 respondents across three state prisons in wave 1, 1,699 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 1,389 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 31

Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “Sexual Assault between Incarcerated People Is a Problem Here”



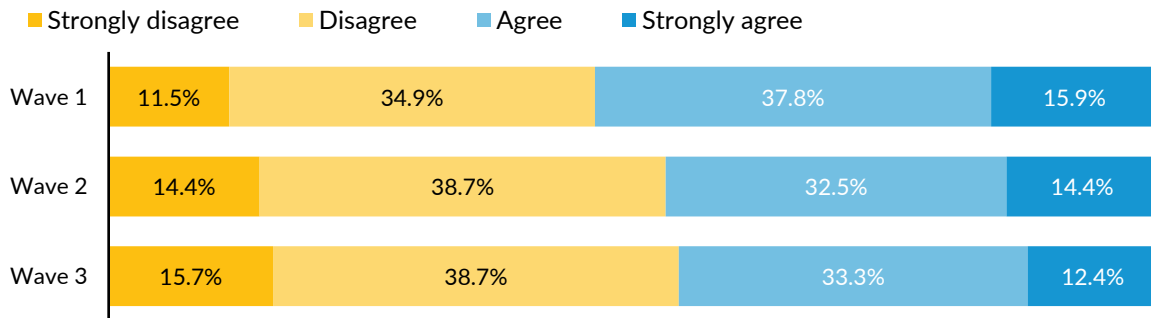
URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 932 respondents across three state prisons in wave 1, 1,688 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 1,384 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

Incarcerated respondents were also asked about racial tension in their prison (figure 32). Across waves, responses indicated that racial tension decreased, with more people disagreeing that racial tension was a problem by wave 3. It is not surprising that large shares of people agreed racial tension was a problem, given that race and ethnicity are particularly salient dimensions of identity in prison culture (Infante et al. 2023). Those dynamics often differ by state, however, if not by facility. Understanding how to improve these perceptions would require disaggregating these data to the local level and undertaking qualitative research to identify what specifically drives the tension.

Similarly, when asked whether victims of bullying get the help they need in their facility, agreement increased over time (just over 20 percent overall agreed in wave 1 compared with nearly 25 percent in wave 3; figure 33). Despite this positive trajectory, however, the percentages of incarcerated people indicating that people who are bullied are not supported are frighteningly high. Additional research needs to be undertaken to identify how prisons can better assist victims of bullying (and address safety more broadly).

FIGURE 32
Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “Racial Tension between Incarcerated People Is a Problem in This Prison”

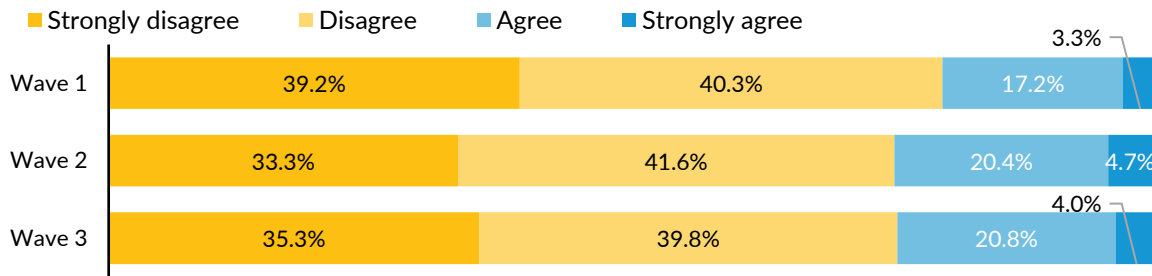


URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 1,469 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 1,842 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 1,591 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 33

Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “Victims of Bullying Get the Help They Need Here”



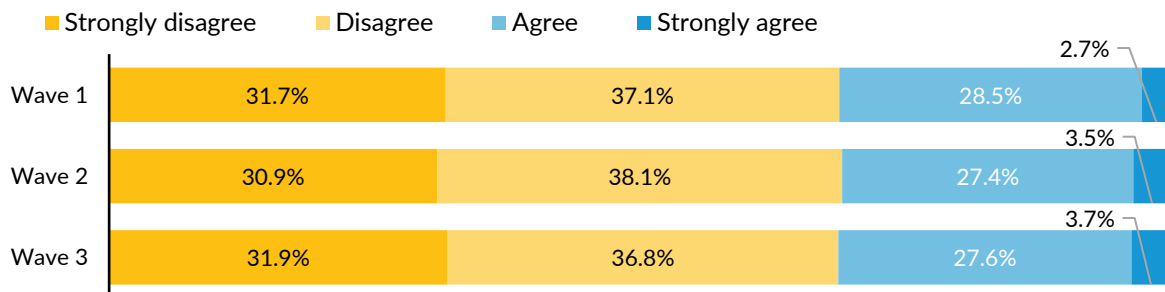
URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 1,403 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 1,403 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 1,245 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

Asked whether they felt safe raising concerns with staff (figure 34), just under one-third of incarcerated people overall agreed. Only a small share of respondents strongly agreed (the share who selected this answer never exceeded 3.7 percent) suggesting that for almost all survey respondents, there are issues with feeling safe raising concerns with staff at least some of the time. This may be reflective of how incarcerated people responded to another question: a striking 40.2 percent of incarcerated respondents strongly disagreed that sanctions were applied fairly in wave 1 (figure 35), and the rate declined only marginally to 38.3 percent by wave 3, suggesting that raising concerns may lead to people becoming the subject of unfairly applied sanctions. In other words, incarcerated people did not feel safe and secure that raising concerns with staff would not result in retaliation.

FIGURE 34

Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “I Feel Safe Raising Concerns with Staff in This Prison”

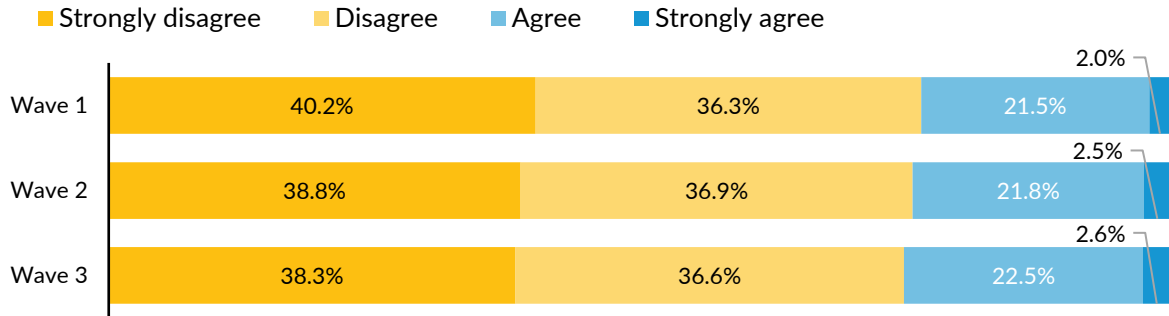


URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 1,462 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 1,748 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 1,600 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 35

Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “Sanctions Are Applied Fairly Here”



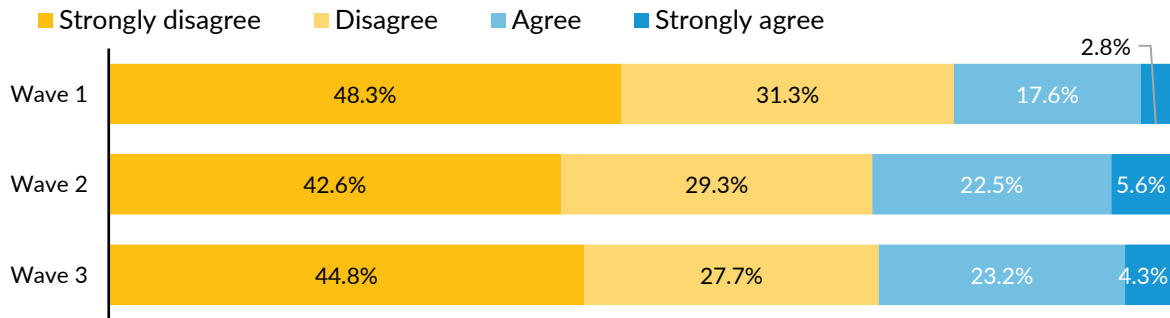
URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 1,431 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 1,738 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 1,545 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

Regarding grievance procedures—the primary means by which incarcerated people can raise concerns about their treatment with higher-ups—incarcerated people were asked whether their facility’s process is a useful tool for addressing their concerns (figure 36). A striking 48.3 percent strongly disagreed in wave 1, and this declined slightly by wave 3 to 44.8 percent. Furthermore, incarcerated people overwhelmingly overall disagreed with the statement (79.6 percent) in wave 1, and this rate declined to 72.5 percent by wave 3. Another notable finding is that, though starting from a low baseline of 2.8 percent, among all respondents, the percentage of incarcerated people who strongly agreed that the grievance process was useful doubled between waves 1 and 2, reaching 5.6 percent. Of note, grievance procedures were a core focus for innovations in one state and were discussed by incarcerated participants in all five sites. We might also consider how facility leadership, upon seeing high levels of dissatisfaction with facility grievance policies as expressed in wave 1, may have taken concrete steps to improve the process.

FIGURE 36

Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “The Grievance Process in This Prison Is a Useful Tool to Address the Concerns of Incarcerated People”



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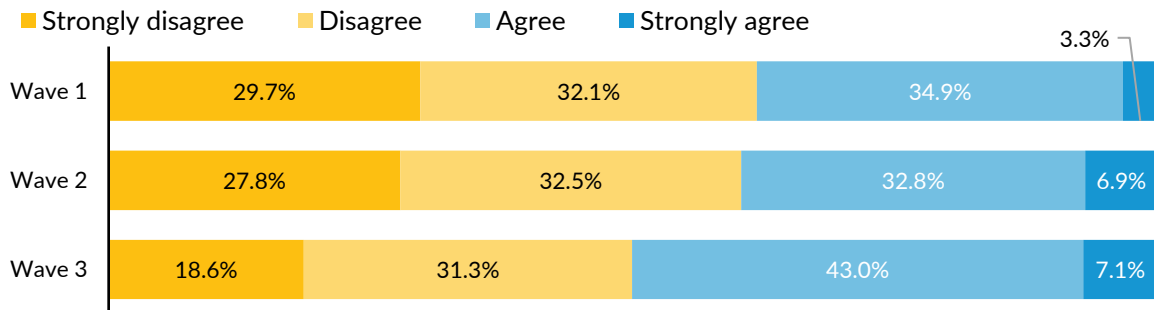
Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 1,413 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 1,619 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 1,621 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

Lastly, incarcerated people were asked three questions, specific to their experiences, about the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on various aspects of their confinement. Two of these questions were asked only during wave 1 and one was asked across all three waves. About 60 percent of incarcerated people overall agreed that incarcerated people at their prison had access to sanitary items like soap and hand sanitizer. An overwhelming majority, nearly 90 percent, agreed that incarcerated people at their prison had been given masks.

Across the first two waves, incarcerated people overall disagreed that their prison’s leadership demonstrated care for the well-being of incarcerated people during the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that mere access to personal protective equipment was not enough to make incarcerated people feel safe and supported during the pandemic. In wave 1, 61.8 percent overall disagreed, and this dropped to 49.9 percent by wave 3 (figure 37). Though COVID-19-era policies were set at the state and local levels, the dissatisfaction with facility leadership’s responses to the pandemic suggests that various approaches failed to convey safety and support.

FIGURE 37

Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “During COVID-19, This Prison’s Leadership Has Demonstrated Care for the Well-Being of People Incarcerated Here”



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 913 respondents across three state prisons in wave 1, 1,118 respondents across three state prisons in wave 2, and 435 respondents across two state prisons in wave 3.

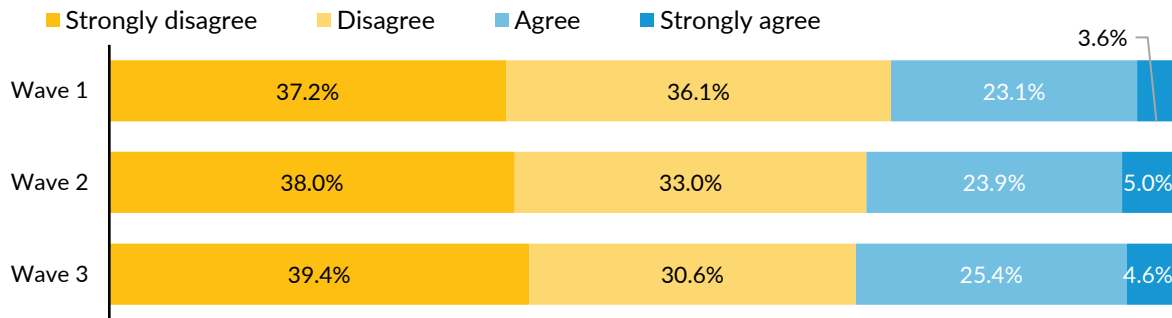
Access to Treatment, Support, and Family Connections

Incarcerated people were also asked a series of questions about their access to treatment and support during incarceration, as well as about the state of opportunities to visit with family and friends before the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked about access to medical and mental health care/treatment, incarcerated people’s perspectives diverged significantly by type of service provided. A plurality of respondents in all waves strongly disagreed (ranging from 37.2 to 39.4 percent over three waves) that they could get the medical treatment they needed in their prison when they needed it (figure 38). Asked whether they could get the mental health care/treatment they needed when they needed it, however, the trend was slightly less promising, with over 50 percent on all waves overall disagreeing (figure 39). On both questions, the response breakdowns differed little between waves, a particularly interesting finding given the salience of physical and mental health issues during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Taken together, these results suggest that prisons need to substantially improve access to both medical and mental health treatment. This issue arose in multiple conversations with incarcerated people in most of our five state DOCs. In some cases, prisons want to provide more accessible care but have contracted it out to a third party, the management of which rests with the central DOC office and not the facility. Like with corrections officers, corrections health care staff are tough to recruit and retain, and low staffing may lead to inaccessible treatment. Research has begun to understand how to

better provide care to people in custody, but much more is needed in facilities to improve on this (Rich et al. 2015).

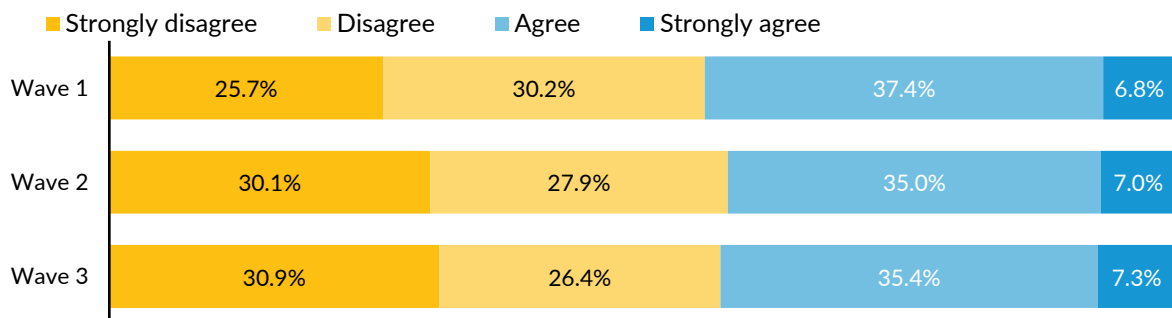
FIGURE 38
Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “I Get the Medical Treatment I Need in This Prison When I Need It”



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 1,022 respondents across three state prisons in wave 1, 1,580 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 1,308 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 39
Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “I Get the Mental Health Care/Treatment I Need in This Prison When I Need It”



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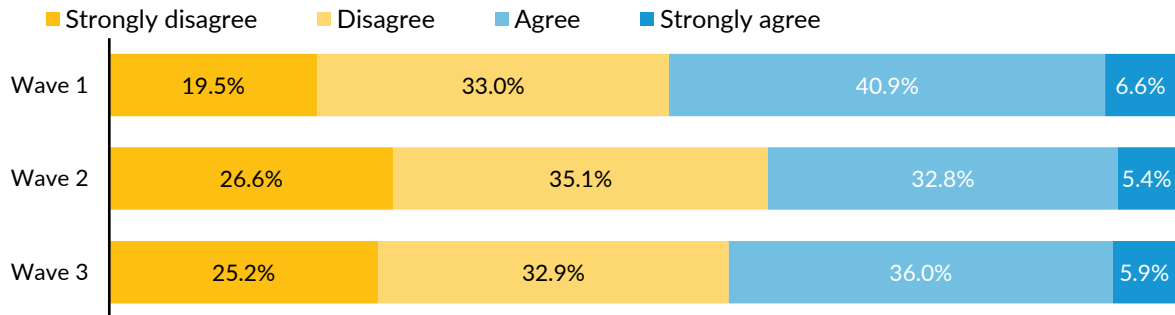
Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 985 respondents across three state prisons in wave 1, 1,520 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 1,279 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

Incarcerated people were also asked about access to activities that promote growth and well-being. In wave 1, 47.5 percent overall agreed that they had access to these types of activities, and this fell to 41.9 percent by wave 3 (figure 40). Nearly 20 percent of respondents strongly disagreed with this statement on the first wave of surveys, and the rate surpassed 25 percent by wave 3, representing

a nearly 30 percent increase in strong disagreement between waves 1 and 3. Again, it is interesting that access to activities that promote well-being and growth were *inversely* correlated with the strictness of COVID-19-related policies, assuming that these policies generally eased over time.

FIGURE 40

Share of Incarcerated People Who Agreed That “I Have Access to Activities in This Prison That Promote Well-Being and Growth”



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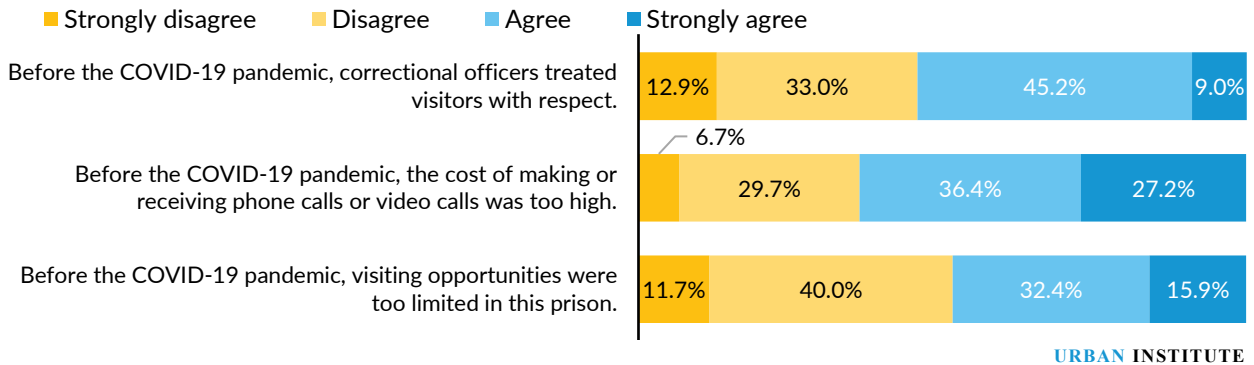
Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 1,484 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 1,784 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 1,586 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

Given the on-and-off nature of certain COVID-19 policies, it is also possible that particular facilities happened to be responding to surveys during periods of heightened limitations on access to activities and other privileges. On the other hand, the large numbers of incarcerated people disagreeing with this statement mirror our findings about the prisons preparing incarcerated people for release. Facilities should do a deep dive into their rehabilitation and reentry programming to identify where improvements can be made. Indeed, this was the focus of some of the innovation work undertaken in pilot facilities.

Incarcerated people were also asked a series of questions about their ability to contact and connect with family and friends before the COVID-19 pandemic (figure 41). The questions in this domain were only included in the first wave of surveys. When asked whether visiting opportunities were too limited before the pandemic, respondents were relatively evenly split between overall agreement and overall disagreement. We observe a similar though slightly more positive trend regarding the level of respect paid to visitors, with 45.2 percent of respondents agreeing that officers treated visitors with respect and an additional 9.0 percent strongly agreeing. On the other hand, a clear majority overall agreed that the cost of making or receiving phone calls or video calls was too high before the pandemic.

FIGURE 41

Incarcerated People’s Survey Responses on Practices in Their Facilities Before the COVID-19 Pandemic



Source: Climate surveys of incarcerated people conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and December 2021. From top to bottom, these survey questions produced the following usable responses: 870 respondents across four state prisons in question 1, 926 respondents across four state prisons in question 2, and 911 respondents across four state prisons in question 3.

What We Learned About Incarcerated People’s Reflections on Prison Living Conditions

Among the 18 questions included only in the surveys of incarcerated people, which focused on personal safety and access to support, treatment, and family connections, responses revealed persistent concerns about safety and fairness within facilities. When asked whether staff made them feel safe, over 60 percent overall disagreed across all waves, with nearly half of this being strong disagreement. Perceptions of different issues concerning sexual assault varied: overall agreement that staff sexual assault of incarcerated people was a problem started from a lower baseline (11.7 percent) but rose between waves 1 and 3, whereas overall agreement that assault between incarcerated people was a problem started at 34.7 percent but fell nearly 10 percentage points.

Incarcerated people’s responses also suggested that racial tension eased slightly over time, whereas more respondents overall agreed that victims of bullying were receiving help in wave 3 than wave 1, with agreement jumping by a quarter between waves 1 and 2 and staying at this higher level. Still, trust in staff remained low, with no more than 4 percent of respondents strongly agreeing that they felt safe raising concerns with staff. This may relate to the perceived unfair use of sanctions—over 40 percent strongly disagreed that sanctions were applied fairly in wave 1, with overall disagreement never falling below 75 percent. Grievance procedures were also viewed unfavorably: in wave 1, 79.6 percent of respondents overall disagreed that the grievance process was a useful tool,

and nearly half strongly disagreed. Though disagreement declined slightly by wave 3, overall faith in the process remained low.

Incarcerated people also reflected on their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Though most agreed they had access to masks and hygiene items, a far smaller percentage felt that leadership showed care for their well-being. In wave 1, 61.8 percent overall disagreed that leadership demonstrated care for their well-being, and this fell to 49.9 percent by wave 3, a marked decline but still concerningly high. These findings suggest that although some material needs were met, emotional and institutional support remained lacking.

Lastly, incarcerated people reported limited access to medical and mental health care, with 65 percent overall disagreeing that they could get the medical health care they needed across all waves, while over 50 percent overall disagreed they could get the mental health care they needed on all waves. Though nearly half initially agreed that they had access to activities that promote well-being, this share declined between the first two survey waves and only slightly recovered by wave 3. Most also felt that phone and video calls were unaffordable and roughly half felt that visiting opportunities were too limited even before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Perceptions of Corrections Staff on Working Conditions

Across survey waves, staff were asked 15 cross-site questions that were solely for them. Below we share the findings from those questions, grouping them into four sections: (1) safety and well-being, (2) interactions with incarcerated people, (3) job satisfaction, and (4) COVID-19 responses.

Fifteen Cross-Site Questions for Corrections Staff

The following 15 cross-site questions were developed by the Urban Institute and incorporated into climate surveys for corrections staff administered by local research partners:

1. I feel safe speaking up about staff misconduct.
2. I feel that I can rely on other staff in this facility.
3. This prison's leadership does everything possible to keep staff safe here.
4. This prison's policies and practices support staff well-being.
5. My coworkers show signs of stress.
6. People who work in this prison have appropriate boundaries with people incarcerated here.
7. I positively influence incarcerated people's lives through my work.
8. I believe rehabilitation is possible for the people incarcerated here.
9. I take pride in my job.
10. I have the skills I need to do my job well here.
11. I look forward to coming to work.
12. During COVID-19, this prison's leadership has demonstrated care for the well-being of staff.
13. Staff here have had access to sanitary items like soap or hand sanitizer.
14. Staff here have been supplied with cleaning supplies to disinfect/keep areas clean.
15. Staff here have been supplied with masks to contain the spread of the virus.

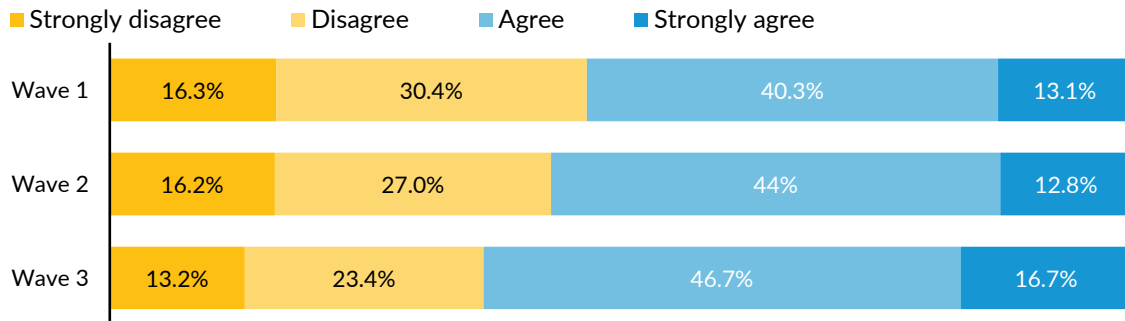
Safety and Well-Being

Corrections staff were asked a series of questions about their safety and well-being on the job. First, when asked whether they felt safe speaking up about staff misconduct, most staff agreed or strongly agreed (figure 42), and overall agreement increased over time: in wave 1, 53.4 percent overall agreed, and by wave 3, 63.4 percent did. Interestingly, from our process evaluation, we learned that improved

communication and trust among staff was a key success of the project. Corrections staff also largely agreed that they could rely on other staff (figure 43), and this overall agreement increased across survey waves.

FIGURE 42

Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “I Feel Safe Speaking Up About Staff Misconduct”

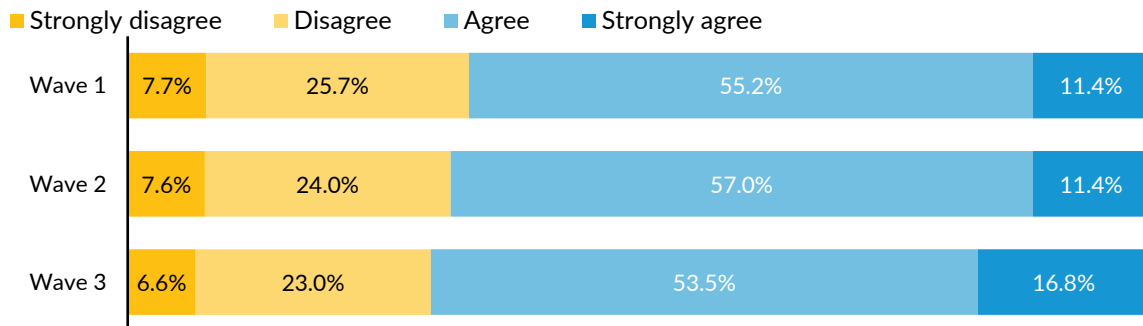


URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 559 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 514 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 484 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 43

Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “I Feel That I Can Rely on Other Staff in This Facility”



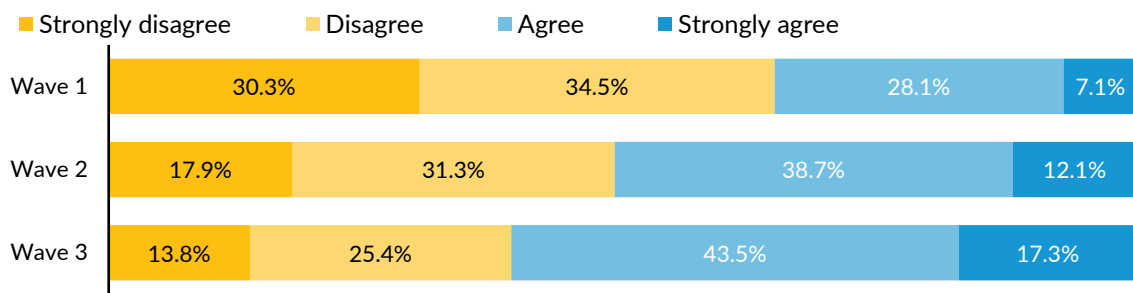
URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 560 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 516 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 482 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

Regarding safety and well-being, corrections staff members’ agreement that their prison’s leadership does everything possible to keep staff safe (figure 44) increased. In wave 1, only 35.2 percent of respondents overall agreed with the statement, whereas by wave 3, 60.8 percent did.

Similarly, across waves, the share of corrections staff who overall agreed that their prison’s policies and practices supported staff well-being (figure 45) increased from 31.6 percent in wave 1 to 54.7 percent by wave 3. Though we did not ask staff to reflect on whether the grievances they raised with facility leadership were adequately and promptly addressed, the fact that staff’s feelings of safety when speaking up improved in parallel with their perceptions that prison leadership did everything possible to keep them safe suggests that at least some staff concerns were being addressed.

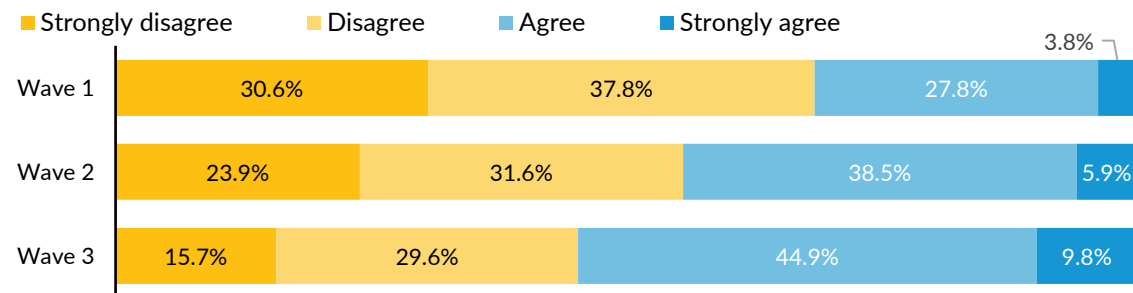
FIGURE 44
Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “The Prison’s Leadership Does Everything Possible to Keep Staff Safe Here”



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 562 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 514 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 480 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 45
Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “This Prison’s Policies and Practices Support Staff Well-Being”



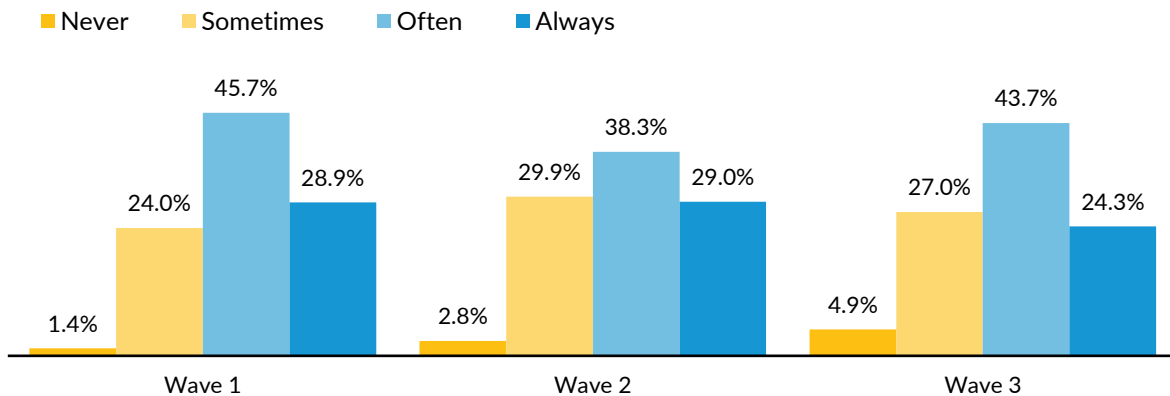
URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 555 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 493 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 470 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

Lastly, corrections staff were also asked how frequently their coworkers showed signs of stress (figure 46). Across waves, the percentage of staff who responded “often” or “always” decreased slightly. Whereas in wave 1, 28.9 percent said their coworkers “always” showed signs of stress, that share was 24.3 percent in wave 3, another finding that was likely significantly influenced by the differing presence of COVID-19 between waves. In wave 1, 45.7 percent said their coworkers “often” showed signs of stress, and that share was 43.7 percent in wave 3.

Reported levels of stress were continuously high across waves, however—74.6 percent of respondents in wave 1 indicated that their coworkers showed signs of stress “often” or “always” while 68.0 percent did in wave 3. Stress among corrections officers has been studied extensively because of its ties to burnout and turnover probability (Schwartz et al. 2023), but few scalable solutions have been identified. Not only can stress cause negative workplace outcomes, it can also have significant implications for officers’ health. Several innovations in PRIN states focused explicitly on stress, in one case creating a decompression lounge and in another creating a statewide suicide task force. These and other interventions should be implemented and evaluated to understand ways to improve these response patterns.

FIGURE 46
Frequency with Which Corrections Staff Reported Their Coworkers Showed Signs of Stress



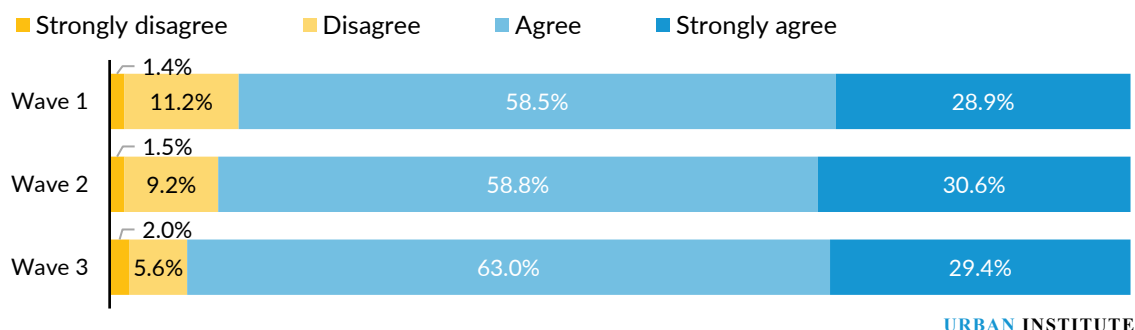
URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 208 respondents across two state prisons in wave 1, 321 respondents across three state prisons in wave 2, and 263 respondents across three state prisons in wave 3.

Interactions with Incarcerated People

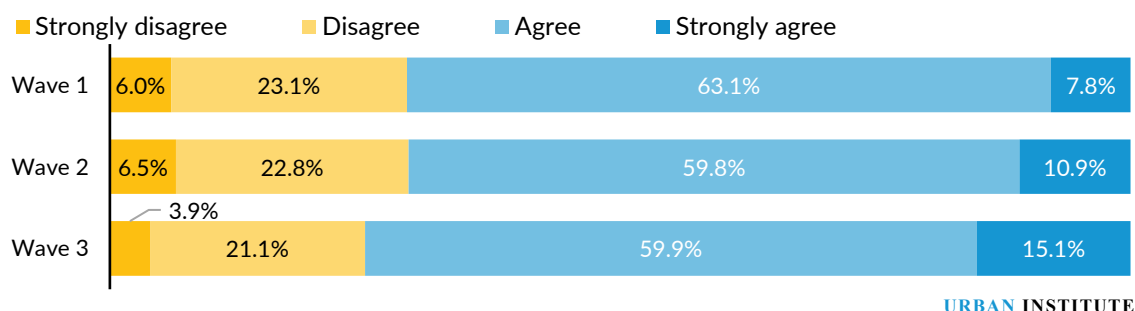
Corrections staff were also asked whether they positively influenced incarcerated people’s lives through their work in corrections (figure 47), and an overwhelming majority (87.4 percent) overall agreed that they did in wave 1, and a slightly larger majority (92.4 percent) overall agreed by wave 3. This demonstrates an overwhelming belief among corrections staff respondents across the five prisons that their jobs are having a positive impact and influence. Respondents also indicated that staff had appropriate boundaries with incarcerated people at the prisons (figure 48), with 70.9 percent overall agreeing in wave 1 and 75.0 percent overall agreeing by wave 3.

FIGURE 47
Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “I Positively Influence Incarcerated People’s Lives through My Work”



Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 554 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 480 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 462 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

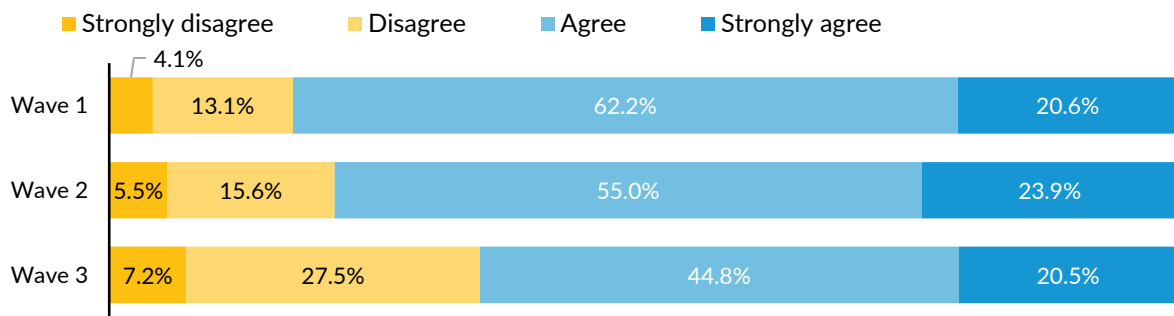
FIGURE 48
Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “Staff Who Work in This Prison Have Appropriate Boundaries with People Incarcerated Here”



Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 554 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 386 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 332 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

Across all three waves, 44.8 percent or more of corrections staff marked “agree” that rehabilitation is possible for the people incarcerated in their prisons, while around an additional fifth strongly agreed (figure 49). Importantly, though, the share that overall agreed with this statement dropped from 82.8 to 65.3 percent between waves 1 and 3, although the responses still mirror the large share of staff who reported that one purpose of prisons is to help incarcerated people make changes for a better life.

FIGURE 49
Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “I Believe Rehabilitation Is Possible for the People Incarcerated Here”



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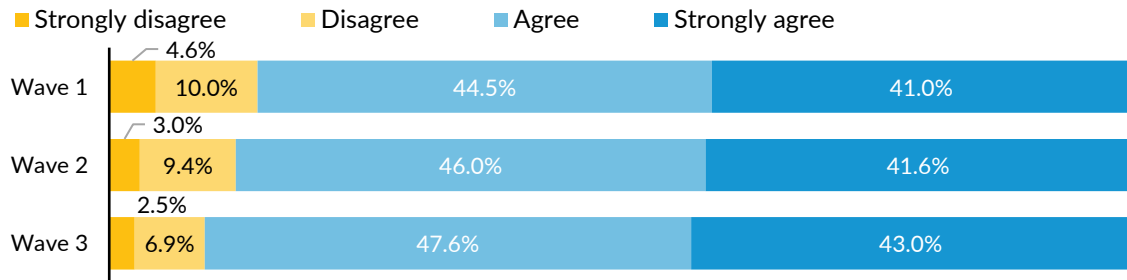
Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 564 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 422 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 415 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

Job Satisfaction

Corrections staff were also asked questions about their job satisfaction. They overwhelmingly indicated that they took pride in their job (figure 50), with 85.5 percent agreeing or strongly agreeing in wave 1 and 90.6 percent agreeing or strongly agreeing in wave 3. When asked whether they looked forward to coming to work, however, more than half (55.3 percent) overall disagreed in wave 1 and fell to 48.3 percent overall disagreed in wave 3 (figure 51). It would be tough to achieve high numbers on this statement in corrections, where the work is particularly difficult and stressful. Because many of these surveys were administered during a period when mandatory overtime was being used in some of our facilities, the uncertainty about when one would be able to return home probably also contributed to these figures.

FIGURE 50

Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “I Take Pride in My Job”

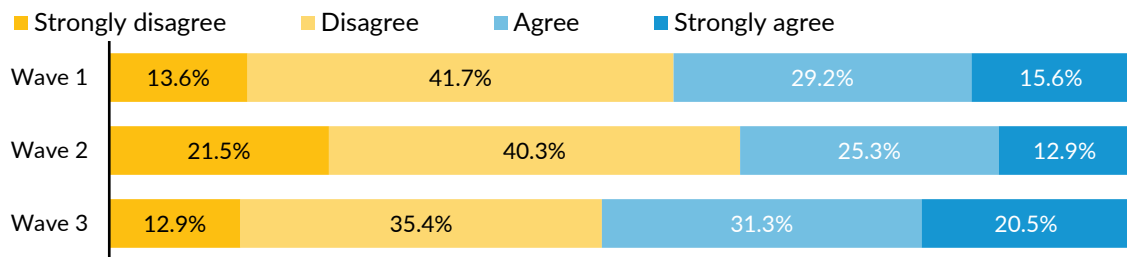


URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 571 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 500 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 481 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

FIGURE 51

Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “I Look Forward to Coming to Work”



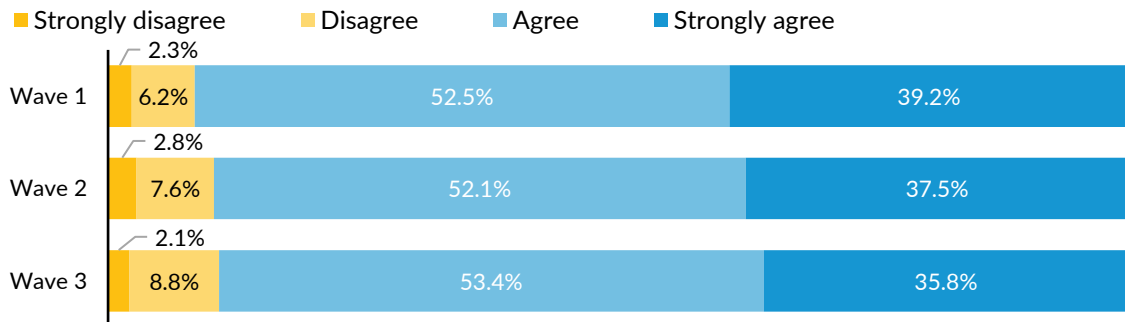
URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 295 respondents across three state prisons in wave 1, 395 respondents across four state prisons in wave 2, and 342 respondents across four state prisons in wave 3.

When asked whether they had the skills to do their job well, an overwhelming majority overall agreed across waves, with 91.7 percent in wave 1, 89.6 percent in wave 2, and 89.2 percent in wave 3 (figure 52).

FIGURE 52

Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “I Have the Skills I Need to Do My Job Well Here”



URBAN INSTITUTE

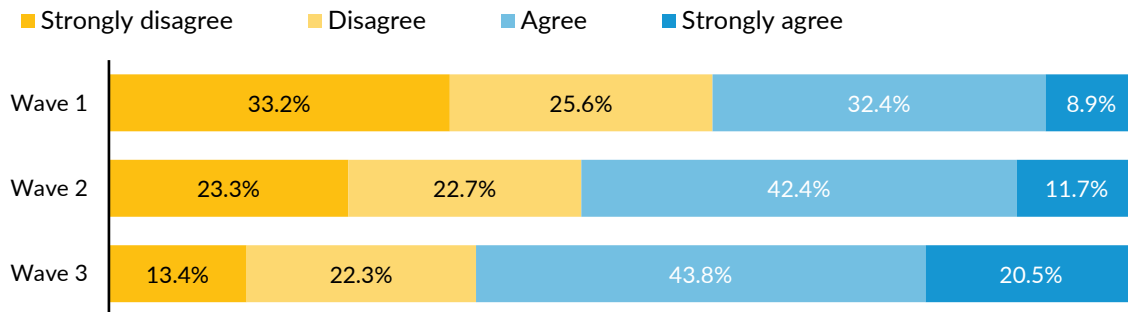
Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 564 respondents across four state prisons in wave 1, 501 respondents across five state prisons in wave 2, and 478 respondents across five state prisons in wave 3.

COVID-19 Responses

Lastly, corrections staff were asked four questions specific to them about responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Three of these questions were asked only during wave 1, and one was asked across all three survey waves. Over 90 percent of corrections staff overall agreed that staff at their prison had (1) had access to sanitary items like soap or hand sanitizer, (2) been supplied with cleaning supplies to disinfect and keep areas clean, and (3) been supplied with masks to contain the spread of the virus. When asked whether their prison’s leadership had demonstrated care for the well-being of staff, most corrections staff (58.8 percent) either disagreed or strongly disagreed in wave 1 (figure 53). The level of disagreement dropped across survey waves, however, and only 35.7 percent of corrections staff overall disagreed by wave 3, a trend that may reflect the easing of COVID-19 restrictions.

FIGURE 53

Share of Corrections Staff Who Agreed That “During COVID-19, the Prison’s Leadership Has Demonstrated Care for the Well-Being of Staff”



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Climate surveys of corrections staff conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024. This survey question produced usable responses from 407 respondents across three state prisons in wave 1, 309 respondents across three state prisons in wave 2, and 112 respondents across two state prisons in wave 3.

What We Learned About Corrections Staff’s Reflections on Prison Working Conditions

The 15 cross-site questions asked of corrections officers reveal some key insights into their experiences with safety, well-being, interactions with incarcerated people, job satisfaction, and COVID-19 responses.

On safety and well-being, staff increasingly felt safe speaking up about misconduct, with overall agreement increasing 10 percentage points from the wave 1 baseline of 53.4 percent. Trust among staff also improved slightly, and around two-thirds of staff overall agreed that they could rely on their coworkers. Perceptions of facility leadership’s commitment to staff safety showed particularly encouraging improvements with each survey wave, with overall agreement increasing from 35.2 to 50.8 percent between waves 1 and 2 and increasing 10 percentage points between waves 2 and 3. Some of these improvements may be attributable to the enhanced trust and communication that PRIN encouraged. But despite these positive signs, stress remained high: 74.6 percent of respondents in wave 1 said coworkers “often” or “always” showed signs of stress, though the share dropped slightly to 68.0 percent by wave 3.

Staff also expressed strong belief that they had a positive impact on incarcerated people. In wave 1, 87.4 percent overall agreed that they positively influenced incarcerated people’s lives through their work, a figure that only increased over time. Between 70.9 and 74.6 percent overall agreed that staff

maintained appropriate boundaries with incarcerated people. Overall agreement that rehabilitation is possible declined, however, from 82.8 percent in wave 1 to 65.3 percent in wave 3.

Responses on job satisfaction were mixed. Though pride in their work was high and growing (between 85.5 and 90.6 percent of staff overall agreed that they took pride in their work, and nearly half of the overall agreement was strong agreement. Staff members looked forward to coming to work at much lower rates, with overall agreement breaching 50 percent only on the final survey wave, though staff consistently felt confident that they had the skills to carry out their duties.

Regarding COVID-19 responses, staff overwhelmingly agreed they had access to masks, hygiene items, and cleaning supplies during the pandemic. But perceptions of leadership's care for staff well-being were less favorable, though they did show signs of improvement. On wave 1, 58.8 percent overall disagreed that leadership demonstrated care during the pandemic, and this dropped by nearly two-fifths by wave 3, suggesting improved treatment or reduced reliance on leadership as restrictions eased.

Conclusion

One of the Prison Research and Innovation Initiative's key aims was to understand prison climate from the perspectives of incarcerated people and corrections staff. This report lays out the results of three waves of climate surveys administered in five state DOC facilities. The more than 7,000 survey responses portray an environment in which staff and incarcerated people often disagree about their shared experiences, with staff typically reporting more positive experiences than incarcerated people. Responses to other questions, asked only of the incarcerated population or only of staff, call for immediate improvement in a number of areas by prison officials and call for additional research to better understand solutions.

Future work is needed to better understand the divide between staff and incarcerated people. Although staff and incarcerated people were equally likely to believe prisons should be punitive, their perceptions of prison conditions differed significantly. For example, in the final wave, 59.6 percent of incarcerated respondents reported they did not receive enough food, whereas in all waves, more than 60 percent of staff reported that incarcerated people did. The widest disparity concerned access to personal hygiene products: only about 35 percent of incarcerated people overall agreed they received necessary items for free across all waves, whereas 82.0 percent of staff agreed in the first two survey waves. Across all survey waves, incarcerated people expressed lower confidence than staff in the system's ability to prepare people for release and reported being treated with respect at lower rates, with staff responses significantly more favorable by 25 percentage points or more. Furthermore, views diverged sharply regarding administrative segregation and institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, with incarcerated participants consistently reporting poor communication and limited access to updates, protective measures, and family contact—all contrasting with more favorable assessments from staff.

Responses to the 18 items asked only of incarcerated people indicate enduring apprehensions about personal security, procedural equity, and institutional support in the participating prisons. Although more than 60 percent of respondents disagreed that staff made them feel safe, around 40 percent of this agreement reflected strong disagreement, underscoring ambivalent perceptions of safety. Incarcerated people's overall agreement that sexual assault of incarcerated people by staff was a problem in their facility increased from 11.7 percent in the first wave, whereas their overall agreement that sexual assault between incarcerated people was a problem declined from 34.7 to 26.0 percent, and perceptions of racial tension and prisons' responses to bullying modestly improved. Confidence in formal redress mechanisms remained low: less than 4 percent of incarcerated people

strongly agreed that they felt safe raising concerns with staff, at least 75 percent consistently judged sanctions unfair, and roughly 80 percent dismissed the grievance system's usefulness in wave 1, with this rate changing little between waves. Respondents reported that during the COVID-19 pandemic, provisions such as masks and hygiene supplies were available, yet in the final wave, half still doubted leadership's concern for their well-being. Access to health services was persistently inadequate—over 70 percent disagreed that medical care was adequate and over 50 percent disagreed that mental health care was—while opportunities for recreation, affordable communication, and prepandemic visitation were also judged insufficient.

On the staff side, data portray a workforce that is increasingly confident in its collective integrity and mutually supportive culture, yet still contends with persistent occupational strain and tempered optimism about rehabilitative outcomes. Gains in perceived procedural safety, managerial responsiveness, and professional pride suggest that targeted transparency and communication efforts can nurture a healthier institutional climate for staff. At the same time, the enduring prevalence of stress symptoms, concern about incarcerated people's rehabilitative prospects, and lingering doubts about leadership's concern during crises underscore the limits of incremental change and the need for comprehensive, evidence-informed strategies that integrate staff wellness, corrections training, and organizational support. Future inquiry should therefore interrogate what mechanisms can affect attitudinal shifts around operational practices, explore interventions that can mitigate chronic stress, and assess how improving staff morale might intersect with the broader goal of creating humane, safe, and rehabilitative prison environments.

Though surveys of incarcerated people and corrections staff furnish important insights into the subjective experience of imprisonment, relying solely on perception data provides only a partial picture of reality. Attitudes are shaped by individual expectations, local subcultures, and recall biases, and they can fluctuate with short-term events such as policy shifts, leadership changes, or salient incidents. Complementing these self-reports with administrative data, such as incident logs, health care records, staffing rosters, and program outcomes, allows researchers to triangulate findings, verify or qualify perceived trends, and detect discrepancies between stated experiences and measurable conditions. Moreover, objective indicators enable analyses of systemic factors (e.g., resource allocation, facility design, staffing ratios) that may underlie differences in perceptions across facilities or cohorts. Integrating subjective and objective information thus yields a more comprehensive, reliable foundation for evidence-based reforms and rigorous evaluation of interventions aimed at improving safety, well-being, and rehabilitative effectiveness in prisons.

Appendix A. Demographics of Study Sample

Across the five states and 28 administered surveys (three waves of surveys in each state), there were a total of 7,018 respondents, of which 5,268 were incarcerated people and 1,750 were corrections staff (table A.1).

TABLE A.1

Number of Survey Respondents, by Wave and Type

According to climate surveys across three waves in five facilities of corrections staff and incarcerated people

Wave	Incarcerated people	Correctional staff	Total
Wave 1	1,546	615	2,161
Wave 2	1,975	607	2,682
Wave 3	1,747	528	2,275
Total	5,268	1,750	7,018

Source: Urban Institute analysis of 28 climate surveys (three waves) of corrections staff and incarcerated people at five state prisons conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024.

The Urban Institute developed a series of cross-site questions, including demographic questions, and local research partners were asked to incorporate these questions into their climate surveys (table A.2). Cross-site demographic questions fell into three domains: (1) demographic and socioeconomic indicators, (2) incarceration history and custodial information (for only incarcerated people), and (3) employment information (for only corrections staff). Details on the demographics of incarcerated people and corrections staff are provided below.

TABLE A.2

Cross-Site Questions on Demographics of Incarcerated People and Corrections Staff, by Domain

List of 22 cross-site questions across three domains developed by the Urban Institute and incorporated into climate surveys for incarcerated people corrections staff administered by local research partners

	Incarcerated people	Corrections staff
Demographic and socioeconomic indicators		
What year were you born in?	X	X
What racial group or groups do you consider yourself to be a part of (check all that apply)?	X	X
What ethnic or cultural groups do you consider yourself to be a part of (check all that apply)?	X	X
What is your gender identity? "Gender" is social; it refers to a person's internal identity and how they present themselves to the world.	X	X
Do you identify as transgender?	X	X
Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?	X	X
What is the highest level of education you have completed to date?	X	X
How would you best describe your employment status before you were incarcerated?	X	
What is your employment status at this prison?		X
What was your annual household income before you were incarcerated?	X	
What is your annual household income?		X
Where did you live before you were incarcerated?	X	
What is your current living situation?		X
Incarceration history and custodial information		
How many years in total have you spent ever being incarcerated in any prison or jail?	X	
What was your sentence for your most recent conviction?	X	
When did you enter this facility?	X	
How long have you spent incarcerated in this facility?	X	
Employment information		
How long have you been employed by or volunteered for the DOC?		X
How long have you been employed at or volunteered in this prison?		X
What category best describes your current role in this prison? Mark all that apply.		X
Are you a contractor?		X
If security/custody staff, which best describes your current level?		X

Source: Climate surveys administered by local research partners at five state prisons between May 2021 and September 2024.

Incarcerated People

A total of 5,268 incarcerated respondents participated in the 14 climate surveys (three waves) across five state prisons.³ We describe their characteristics below.

Personal Identity

Over half of incarcerated respondents (53 percent) self-identified as white when asked which racial groups they belonged to, followed by 21 percent as Black or African American, 15 percent as multiracial (meaning they selected multiple race categories in their response), 6 percent as Hispanic/Latina/Latinx, and 4 percent as Native American/American Indian or Alaskan Native or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Less than 1 percent self-identified as either Asian, Middle Eastern, or selected prefer to self-describe.

We also asked about respondents' ethnic and/or cultural identities (table A.3).

TABLE A.3

Racial and Ethnic/Cultural Characteristics of Incarcerated Survey Respondents

According to three waves of climate surveys of incarcerated people in five state prisons

Group	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Racial group</i>		
White	2,524	52.85%
Black or African American	1,021	21.38%
Multiracial	709	14.85%
Hispanic/Latina/Latinx	277	5.8%
Native American/American Indian or Alaskan Native or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	171	3.58%
Prefer to self-describe	36	0.75%
Asian	23	0.48%
Middle Eastern	15	0.31%
Total	4,776	100.00%
<i>Ethnic and/or cultural group</i>		
White	1,950	51.53%
Black or African American	675	17.84%
Multiethnic	595	15.72%
Native American/American Indian or Alaskan Native or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	203	5.36%
Hispanic	130	3.44%
Prefer to self-describe	130	3.44%
Latino/Latina/Latinx	55	1.45%
Middle Eastern	18	0.48%
South Asian	11	0.29%
East Asian	9	0.24%
Caribbean/West Indian	8	0.21%
Total	3,784	100.00%

Source: Urban Institute analysis of 14 climate surveys (three waves) of incarcerated people at five state prisons conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024.

Fifty-two percent of respondents self-identified as white, followed by 18 percent that identified as Black or African American, 16 percent who were multiethnic (meaning that they selected multiple ethnic/cultural categories in their response), and 5 percent self-identified as Native

American/American Indian or Alaskan Native or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Three percent of respondents self-identified as Hispanic. Just over 1 percent identified as Latino/Latina/Latinx, with the remaining roughly 1 percent self-identifying as Middle Eastern, South Asian, East Asian, or Caribbean/West Indian.

Nearly three quarters (74 percent) of incarcerated respondents self-identified as men, followed by 24 percent as women (table A.4). This matches the designated genders of the five state prisons that participated in the climate surveys (four male and one female). Two percent of respondents self-identified as non-binary/third gender, and less than 1 percent preferred to self-describe. Three percent self-identified as transgender. In terms of sexual orientation (table A.4), most incarcerated respondents (78 percent) self-identified as heterosexual or straight, 12 percent as bisexual, 4 percent as asexual, 3 percent as gay or lesbian, and 3 percent preferred to self-describe.

TABLE A.4

Gender and Sexual Orientation of Incarcerated Survey Respondents

According to three waves of climate surveys of incarcerated people in five state prisons

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Man	3,590	74.05%
Woman	1,150	23.72%
Non-binary/third gender	75	1.55%
Prefer to self-describe	33	0.68%
Total	4,848	100.00%
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual or straight	3,634	77.98%
Bisexual	551	11.82%
Asexual	207	4.44%
Gay or lesbian	141	3.03%
Prefer to self-describe	127	2.73%
Total	4,660	100.00%

Source: Urban Institute analysis of 14 climate surveys (three waves) of incarcerated people at five state prisons conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024.

Indicators of Socioeconomic Status

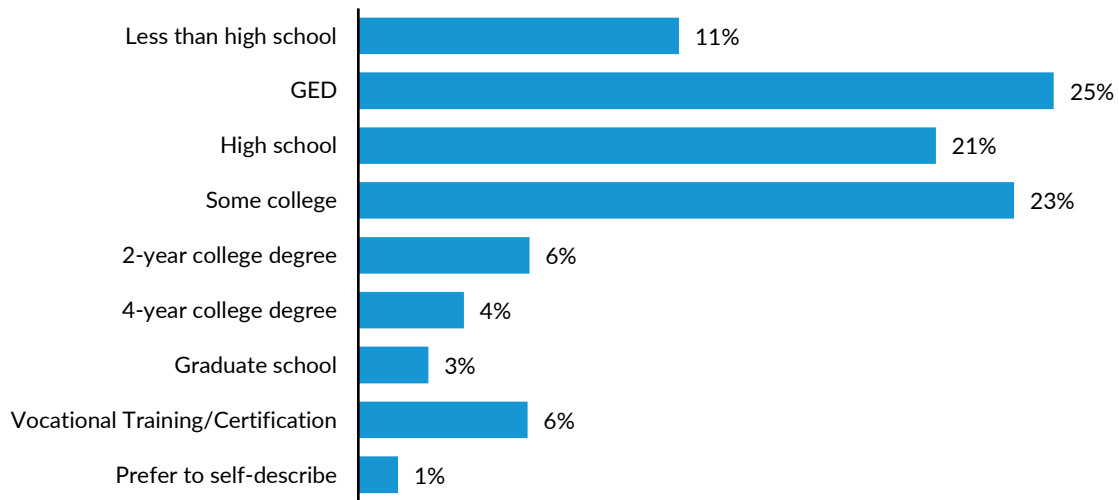
Respondents were also asked about experiences that might reflect their socioeconomic status, including the highest education level (figure A.1) they had reached. More than 1 in 10 incarcerated respondents reported having less than a high school degree. A quarter had received their GED, and an additional 21 percent had graduated high school. Just under 1 in 4 incarcerated people had at least some college experience, and 13 percent had a higher-education degree, whether from a 2- or 4-year

college or graduate school. Six percent had some form of vocational training or certification, and 1 percent selected prefer to self-describe.

FIGURE A.1

Highest Education Level among Incarcerated Respondents

According to three waves of climate surveys of incarcerated people in five state prisons



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Urban Institute analysis of 14 climate surveys (three waves) of incarcerated people at five state prisons conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024.

Two in five incarcerated people indicated that their annual household income was less than \$20,000 before being incarcerated.⁴ Thirty-five percent reported an annual household income of between \$20,000 and \$49,999. Eighteen percent reported an annual household income of between \$50,000 and \$99,999, and 5 percent earned over \$100,000 (table A.5). As for their employment status directly before incarceration, roughly 74 percent reported having employment in some capacity: 53 percent were employed full time, 8 percent part time, 8 percent had odd jobs/several jobs, and 4 percent performed contractual work. Notably, 20 percent were unemployed before incarceration. The remaining 6 percent selected prefer to self-describe.

When asked about their living situation before incarceration (table A.5), just over one-third of incarcerated respondents lived in a rental (apartment/house). Twenty-nine percent owned their own place (apartment/house), followed by 17 percent who lived with family in a place their family owned, and 6 percent who preferred to self-describe. Thirteen percent were couch surfing (6 percent), in an unsheltered homeless situation (5 percent), lived in subsidized housing (1 percent), or staying in a shelter (1 percent). Notably, 5 percent were homeless before incarceration.

TABLE A.5

Annual Household Income and Living Situations of Incarcerated Survey Respondents (before Incarceration)

According to three waves of climate surveys of incarcerated people in five state prisons

	Frequency	Percentage
Annual household income		
Less than \$20,000	1,941	40.97%
\$20,000 to \$29,999	661	13.95%
\$30,000 to \$39,999	613	12.94%
\$40,000 to \$49,999	362	7.64%
\$50,000 to \$59,999	359	7.58%
\$60,000 to \$69,999	193	4.07%
\$70,000 to \$79,999	163	3.44%
\$80,000 to \$89,999	90	1.9%
\$90,000 to \$99,999	102	2.15%
Greater than \$100,000	254	5.36%
Total	4,738	100.00%
Employment status		
Employed full time	2,519	52.72%
Employed part time	398	8.33%
Contractual work	188	3.93%
Unemployed	976	20.43%
Odd jobs/several jobs	398	8.33%
Prefer to self-describe	299	6.26%
Total	4,778	100.00%
Living situation		
Rental (apartment/house)	1,603	33.82%
I own my own place (apartment/house)	1,393	29.39%
With my family, in a place they own (apartment/house)	814	17.17%
Prefer to self-describe	297	6.27%
Couch surfing	284	5.99%
Homelessness	244	5.15%
Subsidized housing	54	1.14%
Shelter	51	1.08%
Total	4,740	100.00%

Source: Urban Institute analysis of 14 climate surveys (three waves) of incarcerated people at five state prisons conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024.

Incarceration History and Custodial Information

Lastly, incarcerated participants were asked about their incarceration history and custodial information (table A.6). Only 11 percent had spent less than 12 months incarcerated in any prison or jail. Thirty-six percent had spent 1 to 5 years in any prison or jail, followed by 33 percent who had spent more than 10 years incarcerated, and 19 percent who had spent 6 to 10 years incarcerated. Regarding time spent in their current facility (table A.6), nearly half had spent 1 to 5 years there, followed by 37 percent who had spent less than a year, 9 percent who had spent 6 to 10 years, and 7 percent who had spent more than 10 years. Most incarcerated people (70 percent) entered the facility

between 2020 and 2024, followed by 23 percent between 2010 and 2019, 5 percent between 2000 and 2009, and the remaining approximately 2 percent between 1960 and 2000. Only 8 percent had a sentence of less than 12 months. Forty-one percent faced a current sentence longer than 10 years, while 29 percent were serving 1 to 5 years and 21 percent 6 to 10.

TABLE A.6

Incarceration History and Custodial Information of Incarcerated Survey Respondents

According to three waves of climate surveys of incarcerated people in five state prisons

	Frequency	Percentage
Total time incarcerated (in any prison or jail)		
Less than 12 months	548	11.26%
1 to 5 years	1,764	36.26%
6 to 10 years	947	19.47%
More than 10 years	1,606	33.01%
Total	4,865	100.00%
Time in current facility		
Less than 12 months	1,798	37.43%
1 to 5 years	2,217	46.15%
6 to 10 years	451	9.39%
More than 10 years	338	7.04%
Total	4,804	100.00%
Facility entry decade		
1960–1969	3	0.07%
1970–1979	12	0.28%
1980–1989	23	0.53%
1990–1999	40	0.93%
2000–2009	210	4.88%
2010–2019	991	23.01%
2020–2024	3,027	70.30%
Total	4,306	100.00%
Sentence for most recent conviction		
Less than 12 months	388	8.34%
1 to 5 years	1,370	29.45%
6 to 10 years	987	21.22%
More than 10 years	1,907	40.99%
Total	4,652	100.00%

Source: Urban Institute analysis of 14 climate surveys (three waves) of incarcerated people at five state prisons conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024.

Corrections Staff Survey Respondents

A total of 1,750 corrections staff participated in the 14 climate surveys (three waves) across five state prisons.⁵ We describe their characteristics below.

Personal Identity

When asked which racial groups they belonged to, most corrections staff respondents (67 percent) self-identified as white, followed by 15 percent who self-identified as Black or African American, and 4 percent for each of the following categories: multiracial (meaning they selected multiple categories), Native American/American Indian or Alaskan Native or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and prefer to self-describe. Three percent identified as Hispanic/Latina/Latinx, 1 percent identified as Asian, and less than 1 percent as Middle Eastern (table A.7).

TABLE A.7

Racial and Ethnic/Cultural Characteristics of Corrections Staff Survey Respondents

According to climate surveys across three waves in five facilities of corrections staff

	Frequency	Percentage
Racial group		
White	960	67.32%
Black or African American	217	15.22%
Multiracial	61	4.28%
Native American/American Indian or Alaskan Native or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	57	4.00%
Prefer to self-describe	54	3.79%
Hispanic/Latina/Latinx	48	3.37%
Asian	21	1.47%
Middle Eastern	8	0.56%
Total	1,426	100.00%
Ethnic and/or cultural group		
White	641	74.45%
Native American/American Indian or Alaskan Native or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	68	7.90%
Prefer to self-describe	44	5.11%
Multiethnic	36	4.18%
Black or African American	31	3.60%
Hispanic	18	2.09%
Latino/Latina/Latinx	6	0.70%
Middle Eastern	6	0.70%
South Asian	5	0.58%
East Asian	5	0.35%
Caribbean/West Indian	3	0.35%
Total	861	100%

Source: Urban Institute analysis of a total of 14 climate surveys (three waves) of corrections staff at five state prisons conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024.

When asked about their ethnic and/or cultural identities, 74 percent self-identified as white, followed by 8 percent as Native American/American Indian or Alaskan Native or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and 5 percent who preferred to self-describe. Four percent identified as multiethnic (meaning they selected multiple ethnic/cultural categories), 4 percent as Black or African American, and 2 percent as Hispanic. Less than 1 percent responded for each of the following categories: Latino/Latina/Latinx, Middle Eastern, South Asian, East Asian, and Caribbean/West Indian.

A little over half (53 percent) of corrections staff respondents self-identified as men, followed by 42 percent as women, 3 percent as non-binary/third gender, and 1 percent preferred to self-describe. Less than 1 percent self-identified as transgender. In terms of sexual orientation, most (86 percent) self-identified as heterosexual or straight, 4 percent preferred to self-describe, 4 percent self-identified as bisexual, 4 percent as asexual, and 2 percent as gay or lesbian (table A.8).

TABLE A.8

Gender and Sexual Orientation of Corrections Staff Survey Respondents

According to climate surveys across three waves in five facilities of corrections staff

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Man	764	53.35%
Woman	599	41.83%
Non-binary/third gender	50	3.49%
Prefer to self-describe	19	1.33%
Total	1,432	100.00%
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual or straight	1,181	85.52%
Prefer to self-describe	54	3.91%
Bisexual	53	3.84%
Asexual	59	4.27%
Gay or lesbian	34	2.46%
Total	1,381	100.00%

Source: Urban Institute analysis of 14 climate surveys (three waves) of corrections staff at five state prisons conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024.

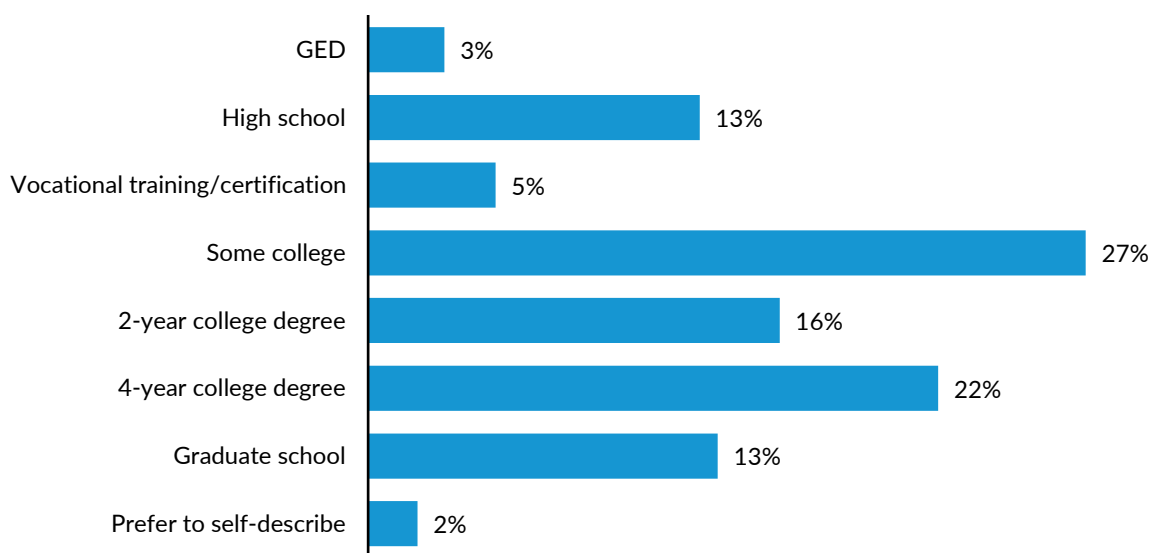
Indicators of Socioeconomic Status

Respondents were also asked about experiences that might reflect their socioeconomic status, including the highest education level they reached. About half (51 percent) of corrections staff respondents had a higher-education degree, whether from a 2- or 4-year college or graduate school. Twenty-seven percent attended some college, while 13 percent had received a high school diploma, 5 percent had completed vocational training or certification, and 3 percent had received a GED (figure A.2).

FIGURE A.2

Highest Education Level of Corrections Staff Respondents

According to climate surveys across three waves in five facilities of corrections staff



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Urban Institute analysis of 14 climate surveys (three waves) of corrections staff at five state prisons conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024.

Forty-four percent of corrections staff respondents reported their annual household income was between \$50,000 and \$99,999, 25 percent more than \$100,000, and 18 percent under \$50,000. When asked about their current living situation, 68 percent reported they lived in their own place, 21 percent in a rental, 7 percent with their family in a place they owned, and 2 percent described their living situation as “couch surfing.” One percent or less responded for each of the following categories: prefer to self-describe, subsidized housing, shelter, and homelessness (table A.9).

TABLE A.9

Annual Household Income and Living Situation of Corrections Staff Survey Respondents

According to climate surveys across three waves in five facilities of corrections staff

	Frequency	Percentage
Annual household income		
Less than \$20,000	9	0.64%
\$20,000 to \$29,999	38	2.71%
\$30,000 to \$39,999	76	5.42%
\$40,000 to \$49,999	131	9.35%
\$50,000 to \$59,999	170	12.13%
\$60,000 to \$69,999	182	12.99%
\$70,000 to \$79,999	166	11.85%
\$80,000 to \$89,999	139	9.92%
\$90,000 to \$99,999	135	9.64%
Greater than \$100,000	355	25.34%
Total	1,546	100.00%
Living situation		
I own my own place (apartment/house)	978	68.25%
Rental (apartment/house)	305	21.28%
With my family, in a place they own (apartment/house)	95	6.63%
Couch surfing	23	1.61%
Prefer to self-describe	17	1.19%
Subsidized housing	8	0.56%
Shelter	4	0.28%
Homelessness	3	0.21%
Total	1,433	100%

Source: Urban Institute analysis of 14 climate surveys (three waves) of corrections staff at five state prisons conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024.

Employment Information

The overwhelming majority of corrections staff respondents worked full-time at the prison (95 percent), with 3 percent having a contractual work status and 1 percent or less for each of the following categories: part time, prefer to self-describe, and volunteer. When asked about their tenure with the local department of corrections, 38 percent reported they had been employed for more than 10 years, 29 percent between 1 and 5 years, 20 percent 6 to 10 years, and 12 percent less than 12 months. When asked about tenure at the state prison where the survey took place, respondents gave responses similar to those about their tenure with the DOCs: 35 percent had been employed at the same state prison for more than 10 years, 31 percent 1 to 5 years, 21 percent 6 to 10 years, and 14 percent less than 12 months (table A.10).

In terms of their roles, a little over half (55 percent) of corrections staff respondents self-identified as having a security/custody role in the state prison. Nine percent served an administrative role; 8 percent worked in educational, vocational, or other programs at the prison; 7 percent preferred to self-describe; and 7 percent worked in a medical role. Less than 5 percent responded for each of the

following categories: mental health, prison maintenance/grounds keeping, substance abuse treatment/counseling, culinary, multirole, and clergy. When asked about their security level, 75 percent of security/custody staff self-identified as direct line staff (e.g., sergeant or officer), 22 percent as a supervisor (e.g., captain or lieutenant), and 3 percent as management (e.g., major or warden) (table A.10).

TABLE A.10

Employment Characteristics of Corrections Staff Survey Respondents

According to climate surveys across three waves in five facilities of corrections staff

	Frequency	Percentage
Employment status		
Full-time	1,467	94.89%
Part-time	20	1.29%
Contractual work	48	3.10%
Prefer to self-describe	10	0.65%
Volunteer	1	0.06%
Total	1,546	100.00%
Length employed by DOC		
Less than 12 months	188	11.98%
1 to 5 years	461	29.38%
6 to 10 years	320	20.40%
More than 10 years	600	38.24%
Total	1,569	100.00%
Length employed at state prison		
Less than 12 months	216	13.54%
1 to 5 years	496	31.10%
6 to 10 years	331	20.75%
More than 10 years	552	34.61%
Total	1,595	100.00%
Role		
Security/custody	844	54.84%
Administrative	141	9.16%
Educational, vocational, or other programs	126	8.19%
Prefer to self-describe	110	7.15%
Medical	103	6.69%
Mental health	61	3.96%
Prison maintenance/grounds keeping	43	2.79%
Substance abuse treatment/counseling	39	2.53%
Culinary	35	2.27%
Multirole	33	2.14%
Clergy	4	0.26%
Total	1,537	100.00%
Level of security/custody staff		
Direct line staff (e.g., sergeant or officer)	582	75%
Supervisor (e.g., captain or lieutenant)	170	22%
Management (e.g., major or warden)	20	3%
Total	772	100.00%

Source: Urban Institute analysis of 14 climate surveys (three waves) of corrections staff at five state prisons conducted by local research partners between May 2021 and September 2024.

Note: DOC = department of corrections.

Appendix B. Cross-Site Questions

Cross-Site Questions for Incarcerated People, by Domain

List of 35 cross-site questions across 7 domains developed by the Urban Institute and incorporated into climate surveys for incarcerated people administered by local research partners

Purpose of prison	Prison conditions and environment	Perceptions of personal safety
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ It is important that prisons punish people for the crimes they have committed. ▪ It is important that prisons ensure public safety. ▪ It is important that prisons prevent people from committing future crimes. ▪ It is important that prisons help people make changes for a better life. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I get enough to eat here. ▪ This facility gives me what I need (e.g. soap, regular showers, sanitary products) for good personal hygiene for free. ▪ I'm usually able to get a good night's sleep here. ▪ It's easy for incarcerated people with physical disabilities to get around in this prison. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The staff at this prison make me feel safe. ▪ Sexual assault of incarcerated people by staff is a problem here. ▪ Sexual assault between incarcerated people is a problem here. ▪ Racial tension between incarcerated people is a problem in this prison. ▪ Victims of bullying get the help they need here.
Correctional staff and practices	Prison activities	Contact with family and friends
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I feel safe raising concerns with staff in this prison. ▪ Staff in this prison treat me with respect. ▪ The grievance process in this prison is a useful tool to address the concerns of incarcerated people. ▪ Sanctions are applied fairly here. ▪ This prison has adequate alternatives to segregation. ▪ Staff in this prison are more likely to use segregation over other disciplinary options. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I have access to activities in this prison that promote well-being and growth. ▪ I get the medical treatment in this prison when I need it. ▪ I get the mental health care/treatment I need in this prison when I need it. ▪ This prison does a good job preparing people for release. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Were you incarcerated in this prison before the state of the COVID-19 pandemic? ▪ Before the COVID-19 pandemic, visiting opportunities were too limited in this prison. ▪ Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost of making or receiving phone calls or video calls was too high. ▪ Before the COVID-19 pandemic, correctional officers treated visitors with respect.

COVID-19

- During COVID-19, this prison's leadership has demonstrated care for the well-being of people incarcerated here.
- People incarcerated here have had access to sanitary items like soap or hand sanitizer.
- People incarcerated here have been given masks.
- Most staff here have been wearing masks.
- Correctional staff here have been letting us make more free phone calls when visits have been restricted.
- Correctional staff here have been clearly communicating when and why our movements, activities, and visits have been restricted.
- Correctional staff here have been clearly communicating information about COVID rates in the facility.
- Staff here have been increasing the use of segregation as a form of punishment.

Cross-Site Questions for Corrections Staff, by Domain

List of 32 cross-site questions across 7 domains developed by the Urban Institute and incorporated into climate surveys for corrections staff administered by local research partners

Purpose of prison	Prison conditions and environment	Staff-incarcerated people interactions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I believe rehabilitation is possible for the people incarcerated here. ▪ It is important that prisons punish people for the crimes they have committed. ▪ It is important that prisons ensure public safety. ▪ It is important that prisons prevent people from committing future crimes. ▪ It is important that prisons help people make changes for a better life. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Incarcerated people get enough to eat here. ▪ This facility gives incarcerated people what they need (e.g. soap, regular showers, sanitary products) for good personal hygiene for free. ▪ Incarcerated people are usually able to get a good night's sleep here. ▪ It's easy for incarcerated people with physical disabilities to get around in this prison. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Staff in this prison treat incarcerated people with respect. ▪ I positively influence incarcerated people's lives through my work. ▪ People who work in this prison have appropriate boundaries with people incarcerated here.
Correctional practices and sanctions	View on workplace culture	Job satisfaction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This prison does a good job preparing people for release. ▪ This prison has adequate alternatives to segregation. ▪ Staff in this prison are more likely to use segregation over other disciplinary options. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I feel safe speaking up about staff misconduct. ▪ I feel that I can rely on other staff in this facility. ▪ This prison's leadership does everything possible to keep staff safe here. ▪ This prison's policies and practices support staff well-being. ▪ My coworkers show signs of stress. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I take pride in my job. ▪ I have the skills I need to do my job well here. ▪ I look forward to coming to work.

COVID-19

- During COVID-19, this prison's leadership has demonstrated care for the well-being of staff.
- Staff here have had access to sanitary items like soap or hand sanitizer.
- Staff here have been supplied with cleaning supplies to disinfect/keep areas clean.
- Staff here have been supplied with masks to contain the spread of the virus.
- Most staff here have been wearing masks to contain the spread of the virus.
- This prison's leadership have been letting incarcerated people make more free phone calls when visits have been restricted.
- This prison's leadership has been clearly communicating changes to normal operations, like new procedures for mealtimes and phone time.
- This prison's leadership has been clearly communicating information about COVID rates in the facility.
- Staff here have been increasing the use of segregation as a form of punishment.

Notes

- ¹ “Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) Profiles:, May 2024: 33-3012 Correctional Officer and Jailers,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed October 2, 2025, <https://data.bls.gov/oesprofile/>; “State and Local Backgrounders: Criminal Justice Expenditures: Police, Corrections, and Courts,” Urban Institute, accessed October 2, 2025, <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/cross-center-initiatives/state-and-local-finance-initiative/state-and-local-backgrounders/criminal-justice-police-corrections-courts-expenditures>.
- ² One state was unable to share its wave 1 data with us because of its institutional review board agreement, which was amended to allow for data sharing for the two subsequent survey waves.
- ³ One state was unable to share its wave 1 data with us because of its institutional review board agreement, which was amended to allow for data sharing for the two subsequent survey waves.
- ⁴ Incarcerated people entered prison at different times, and these data are not adjusted for inflation.
- ⁵ One state was unable to share their Wave 1 data with us because of their Institutional Review Board agreement, which were amended to allow for data sharing for the two subsequent survey waves.

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