

# **Rising Violence in Illinois Youth Centers: Causes & Cures**



July, 2018

## Introduction

The Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ) operates five centers charged with rehabilitating youth who have committed serious crimes. IDJJ's mission is to "enhance public safety and positive youth outcomes by providing strength-based individualized services to youth in a safe learning and treatment environment."

Normally youth are not committed to a DJJ facility for a first offense. Most often youth who are committed are repeat offenders who have previously been sentenced to less restrictive alternative community programs. Rehabilitation of such repeat offenders poses particular challenges, as does maintaining order, safety and security among this population.

Due to a variety of changes in DJJ policy and procedures, in recent years violence in these facilities has been steadily increasing—especially assaults on staff. DJJ, which requires newly hired staff to have a college degree, has completely revised its new employee training and shifted to a model in which frontline staff is required to play a more therapeutic, less security-based, role. At the same time, penalties to youth for rule violations were greatly reduced.

Thus far there is no indication that these changes have resulted in fewer mental health issues among incarcerated youth or in less recidivism among this population, though certainly such improvements may develop over time. Unfortunately, in the more immediate term, the effect of these changes has been a growing number of violent outbreaks—riots, destruction of property, fights among youth, and very serious assaults on staff.

AFSCME Council 31 represents nearly all the staff who secure, educate and counsel at Illinois Youth Centers (IYC). These employees are facing a near-endemic lack of safety and respect three of the state's youth centers that house male offenders. Our union believes it is unacceptable that anyone's job would include being groped, spit on, splashed with urine and feces, punched, stabbed, beaten or otherwise assaulted.

Employee morale is exceedingly low and employee turnover—especially of younger, newly-hired staff—is extremely high. The problem is a circular one: Rising violence causes staff turnover and the lack of staff stability makes it difficult to develop the kind of experienced workforce that can successfully foster youth rehabilitation.

IDJJ leadership has acknowledged the need to respond more effectively to the type of highly involved youth the IYCs are managing now. Our union has called for an increase in programming—educational, therapeutic, and recreational—to better engage youth, combined with reinforcement of positive behaviors and consistent consequences for negative behaviors. Yet there has been no progress in addressing these issues. IYC staff remains under assault.

This report is intended to document the full scope of this problem in order to impel changes in policies, programs, equipment and staffing patterns that can bring an end to the culture of violence that is growing daily in state youth centers.

## Changing Population of Illinois Youth Centers

In recent years Illinois has revamped juvenile justice policies and procedures consistent with the current national trend towards less incarceration and more community-based interventions for justice-involved youth. These programs, such as Redeploy Illinois, have significantly reduced the population of the Illinois Youth Centers (IYCs).

Illinois Youth Centers	Population*	Average Age of Youth**
Chicago	64	17.3
Harrisburg	130	17.4
Pere Marquette	40	17.0
St. Charles	144	17.4
Warrenville (female)	38	16.3
<b>System Total/Average</b>	<b>416</b>	<b>17.0</b>

\*From IDJJ Monthly Report Nov. 17

\*\*From IDJJ FY 17 Annual Report

The youth who are still committed to IYCs have generally had more opportunities to alter their behavior prior to their sentencing and data shows a growing proportion of them were convicted of the most serious crimes.

While youth committed to IYCs have perpetrated more serious crimes, average time served in IYCs is falling. There are now additional forms of “good time” awarded,

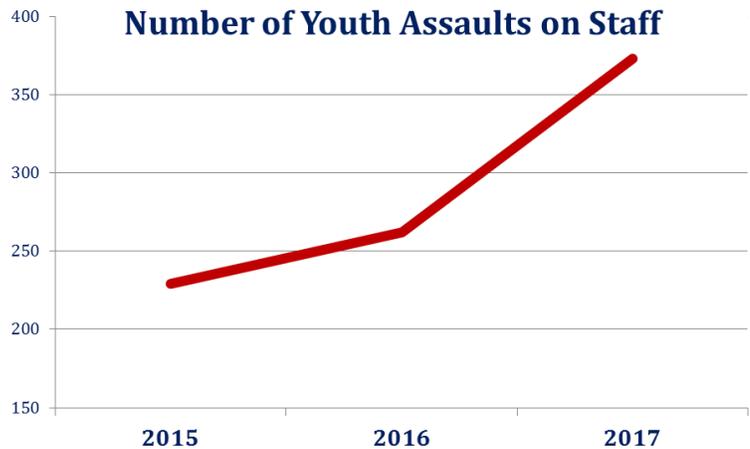
including credit for time served in detention while awaiting trial. In FY 17, committed youth spent an average of six months in an IYC, while in FY 13 it was nine months. DJJ has very little time to bring about a change in the youths’ behavior to ensure their success upon release. And the violent atmosphere of the IYCs makes that task even more difficult.

**Percentage of Youth Committed for Murder or Class X Felony**



## Rising Violence

IDJJ collects data on physical assaults on staff by youth. While our union does not believe that all such assaults are appropriately documented, the available data still shows a steady and deeply disturbing increase in such assaults. Comparing calendar year 2015 to 2017, this data shows a system-wide increase in assaults of 63%. Note that the number of assaults on staff increased even though the youth population declined.



Things have not improved this year. There was an additional 16% increase in assaults on staff system-wide in the first three months of 2018, compared to the same months in 2017.

The closure of IYC Joliet (the only maximum security facility for males) and IYC Kewanee (a treatment program for sex offenders and youth with severe mental health issues) means three facilities are experiencing the worst of these assaults: IYCs St. Charles, Harrisburg and Chicago.

## Impact on Youth

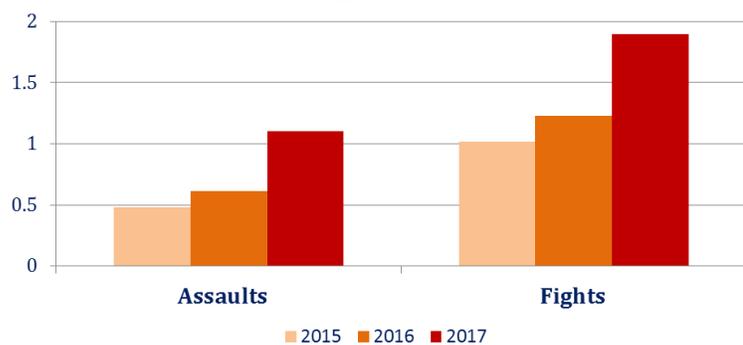
Increasing violence within DJJ facilities impacts incarcerated youth in at least two ways: directly as victims of violence; and indirectly as their environment is reshaped by a growing culture of conflict.

Taking into account the falling population in the IYCs, there were far more youth-on-youth assaults and fights in calendar 2017

compared to calendar 2015. In 2015

the total number of fights per average daily census was just over 1 per youth. In 2017 it was 1.9 per youth, an 86% increase. There was an even greater increase in youth-on-youth assaults, from less than .5 per average daily census to more than 1 per average daily census--a 129% increase.

**IYC Youth-on-Youth Assaults & Fights per Average Daily Census**



Among the indirect impacts of rising violence are increased staff turnover and high staff vacancies. These in turn mean youth have greater difficulty accessing programs and supports they need to prepare for successful reintegration into their communities.

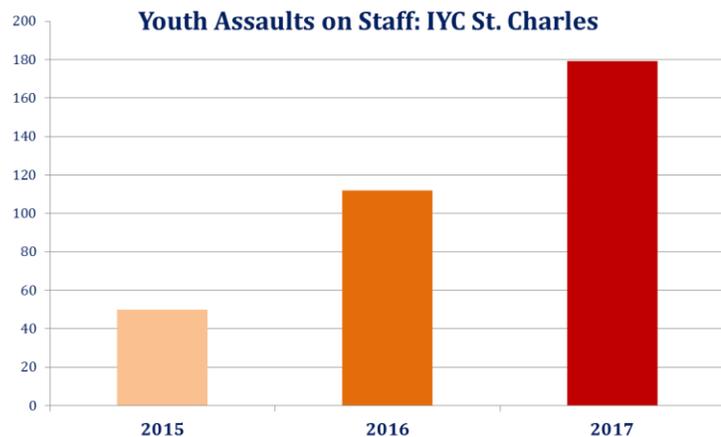
The John Howard Association reports annually on conditions in Illinois Youth Centers. Several of the concerns listed in JHA’s recent report on IYC St. Charles reflects how violence leads to less security and program staff, which leads to youth unable to access all needed services and supports.

- “Conflicts between youth and staff have led to unfilled and increased staff vacancies...”
- “...youth remained in their cells because staffing shortages could not allow for youth to be released...”
- “Staff vacancies has impacted the ability for cottages (housing units) to have youth outside of their cell.”
- “...paired with staffing shortages, this creates increasing difficulty to provide youth programming and recreation”
- “...teachers also reported challenges in controlling youth behavior, stating that they no longer had the authority to remove disruptive students from the classroom. ... disruptive and disengaged students roamed around the classroom...detracting from the learning from those students actively engaged in their work... It is also not surprising that given these challenges, there are continued shortages in teaching staff at the facility.”

## IYC St. Charles

Staff at IYC St. Charles describe an operational model that has devolved over the last four years, so that there is less structure and a lot more problems.

As a result, there are significantly more assaults on staff, including counselors, teachers, nurses and mental health staff. The number of assaults on staff in 2017 was 258% greater than the total in 2015.



Frequent assaults are driving high staff turnover, making it difficult to provide security and programs to youth. Staff turnover was 21% last year, more than one out of every five positions. In addition there are currently some 50 IYC St. Charles staff off work due to injuries. The number of injuries resulting in time off work at St. Charles increased 54% in 2017 compared to 2015.

The remaining staff at the facility are working short. There is sometimes only one security staff working with 20 or more youth on a cottage. Moreover, employees are required to work excessive amounts of overtime in order to provide even this minimal coverage. Staff at nearby IYCs were

offered overtime at St. Charles, but few were willing to work in what is considered an extremely dangerous environment.

Youth spray staff with urine, fecal matter, semen, and spit almost daily. Even facility administration is getting spit on or splashed with urine or feces. At one point management bought raincoats for the staff in an effort to protect them from the urine. The raincoats may have been kindly meant, but fit a pattern at DJJ where leadership has completely failed to establish and enforce reasonable standards for youth behavior—an essential component of any rehabilitation program.

There are more youth fights, including fights involving several boys beating on one youth. DJJ data shows youth fights at St. Charles were up 34% in 2017 compared to 2015.

DJJ should strive to operate facilities where youth learn to function within the norms of society, so that when they are released they have a chance at remaining out of the criminal justice system. Instead, in the IYCs there are seldom lasting consequences for even serious rule violations or dangerous behavior. Youth may be told they have to serve a longer amount of their sentence, but this has lost its meaning. Management is committed to releasing youth earlier, so they pressure staff to accept the youth's written apology, and then restore whatever "good time" was taken away because of the offending behavior.

Because there are no significant consequences for bad behavior, youth routinely refuse to follow even the most routine directives. Even when they are engaged in behaviors like climbing on the cottage roofs or destroying state property, staff are told not to engage and just wait them out.

Staff report that far too often youth who have received no check on their behavior while at IYC St. Charles are released early only to commit more crimes and end up back at St. Charles. As one counselor said, "You watch the news, you see our kids every night."

There is much more sexual misbehavior by the youth. Male security staff must now accompany nurses to cottages when they pass medications because of the threat of sexual assaults against any female staff member. Youth will routinely expose their genitals to female staff, make sexual comments, and masturbate in front of female staff.

DJJ management insists that female staff must accept such hostile acts as part of their job—and youth are not penalized in any way for such behavior. The only kind of sexual behavior that is considered to be an "assault" for which youth are penalized is actual groping or other direct physical contact. This is traumatizing for female staff, and is not healthy for the youth. Staff point out the irony of the signs posted all over the health unit urging reporting of sexual abuse and stating DJJ's zero tolerance policy. Unfortunately, the policy does not extend to sexual abuse of staff.

Due to the violence and sexual aggression, IYC St. Charles has difficulty hiring and retaining staff, which also harms the youth. A St. Charles teacher—a 25 year veteran—remarked on the loss of eleven educators in one year, while they were only able to hire three. They lost one teacher after only a month. She said it was too dangerous to come to work.

In a two-month period in late 2017, IYC St. Charles lost some 30 staff – some veterans, some who had been there a few months, at least one who only lasted a week. Juvenile Justice Specialist (JJS) Nicole Speizio was one of them. Speizio explained why she was leaving in a letter (attached). To work for DJJ, she and her fiancé relocated from New York shortly after she earned her BA in Criminal Justice with a double minor in mental health and juvenile justice. Speizio thought she was starting her dream job and that it was the start of a long career.

She soon felt very differently. There was no discipline for the youth and no rewards, so youth learned they can do anything with no consequences. Sexual harassment and verbal abuse of staff was near constant, and facility administrators weren't doing anything about it. "I feel that as a department we are failing [the youth]...We are failing to teach them right from wrong...we are failing to hold them responsible for their actions both good and bad. We are also failing to give them the proper therapy and programs to really help them with their rehabilitation process."

Giving staff raincoats in response to the incessant shower of urine and feces exactly fits the current attitude of DJJ leadership, where staff have to adjust to whatever youth throw at them (too often literally), and youth are appeased and discharged as quickly as possible. Allowing youth to act out when they are supposed to be learning better behavior just increases the chances those youth will wind up committing more crimes, eventually ending up in the adult criminal justice system.

Two recent violent outbreaks at IYC St Charles provide compelling examples of the breakdown of order and security at the facility.

### **April 2018**

Two youth in Williams Cottage broke through the door of the "secure" command center, wrestled security staff to the floor, and hit an emergency evacuation button that opens up all the doors on the cottage. The Williams Cottage youth had stockpiled homemade weapons including sticks, broom handles, and socks filled with rocks for a planned attack on a rival gang in Cleveland Cottage.

About 20-25 youth escaped from Williams Cottage and headed towards youth from Cleveland Cottage who staff had been walking back from dinner. Against all the rules of sound corrections policy, IYC St. Charles has been housing youth according to their gang affiliations. If you house youth from rival gangs together you may have two kids fighting. If you house them by gang you end up with whole cottages fighting, which is exactly what happened.

There were five staff responding to these dozens of youth: two security staff from each cottage and one security staff who drives the transport van. The only responding staff with any kind of weapon was the driver, who had a chemical spray. He was surrounded by youths while one came up behind and struck him in the head with a mop handle, causing a gaping wound on his head. He fell to the ground bleeding profusely.



The head wound required deep sutures and 17 staples. DJJ later downplayed the injury in local newspaper coverage of the melee, saying it was, “non-life threatening.” The AFSCME local union president sees it very differently: “A piece of his scalp was hanging off like a fish hook. They split his head open all the way to the skull.”

It took more than four hours to regain control of the facility. Control staff called for ambulance response. The responding dispatcher apparently called for police response as well. But St. Charles command staff refused to allow local police or state police on the ground.

### **November 2017**

A youth who was being written up for inappropriate behavior was angry and attempted to force his way into the command center where two female staff were situated. Staff called for assistance. The youth began kicking the door to break it down, while threatening to kill one of the staff members. Staff tried to hold the door shut but the lock gave way, and the youth entered the office. The cottage command centers are supposed to be provide a safe space during incidents like this, but youth can and do kick in the doors.

The youth swung on the first female staff, punching her on the right side of face with such force she was bent over. The second female staff tried to push the assailant away but he shoved her. When the first staff was upright, the youth hit her again. The second staff continued to try to restrain the youth as well as call for assistance. Other staff eventually responded but it took a long time from the first call for assistance.

### **June 2017**

At the start of class a teacher noted she had two new youths on her class roster. She stepped out of the classroom for a minute and as she returned, one of the new youths cold-cocked her in the face. She was punched in the face three times, but after the first punch fell straight back and hit her head so she only remembers the first punch.

The youth had arrived at IYC St. Charles the day before, sent from IYC Chicago because he had assaulted staff. Within 24 hours of his arrival at St. Charles the youth was in a classroom, with no warning to the teacher about his past assaults.

The security staff got control of the youth. The teacher regained consciousness but was dazed and her glasses were broken. She was taken to the hospital where they determined she had a concussion. Months later she still had pain and swelling in her face and neck, headaches, and post-concussion syndrome. She needed physical therapy and also counseling for PTSD for both this assault and a sexual assault she experienced six months previously, when a youth in her classroom grabbed her between the legs so hard she had contusions. She has still not been able to return to work.

## IYC Harrisburg

Like IYC St. Charles, assaults on staff have spiked at IYC Harrisburg. The number of assaults have more than doubled since 2015, and the number of injuries to staff resulting in time off work increased by 131%.

Staff find the lack of consistency in discipline frustrating. Management will ignore the direct experience of frontline staff and instead actually cut deals with the youth to try to

cajole them into improving their behavior. This undermines frontline staff. In some cases these side deals end up rewarding the worst behaved youth with the most “good time”, which leads to youth who act out getting released sooner than youth who behave. This sends a confusing message to youth.

As one female JJS at Harrisburg said: *“Juvenile male inmates constantly expose themselves to you, often masturbating and making vile, uncalled for comments to you. Your only weapon? Youth Disciplinary Reports, which are usually not responded to by administration. A youth “may” receive 2 days of curfew, which means he goes into his room an hour or so earlier than normal for those 2 nights. This is a discipline that most youths honestly don’t care anything about.”*

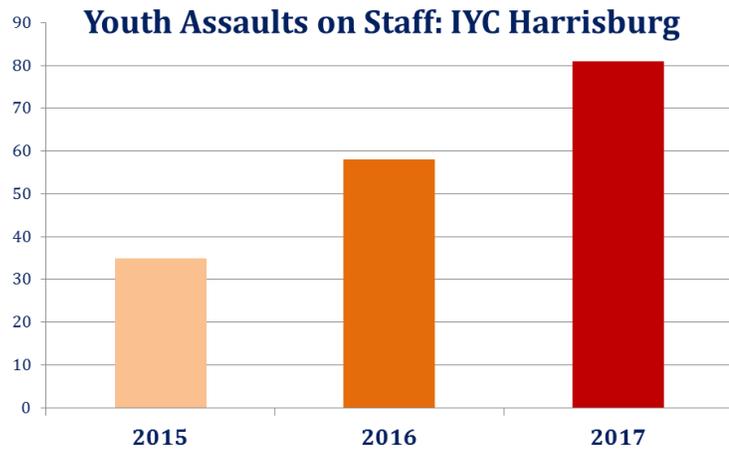
Examples of assaults at IYC Harrisburg include:

### March 2018

A female JJS was escorting a group of youth back to her unit from breakfast. A male intern was walking towards the front of the line and the female JJS was in the back. They came to an area that was out of the view of any cameras. One of the youth suddenly jumped out of line and struck the female JJS in the side of the head with a closed fist. It threw her off balance as she attempted to reach for her radio and shield herself from another strike. The youth struck her once again in the forehead, causing her to fall to the ground. The youth jumped on top of her and continued punching her in the face and head. The intern called for help on the radio, but it was the wrong code. One of the other youths from the unit pulled the attacking youth off the female JJS and began fighting him. Meanwhile, other help arrived.

The JJS was taken to the ER with a bloody nose, an ear “on fire” and her entire head aching all over.

The youth admitted he was paid to attack the JJS by an older youth she had written up. They planned the attack where they knew there were no cameras. The IYC Harrisburg discipline team requested the youth serve an additional year of his sentence for the attack. The Harrisburg facility



superintendent approved only 6 months. The older youth who initiated the attack received no discipline.

### September 2017

A nineteen year old with a history of sexual misconduct was allowed to stay overnight on a behavioral unit because he was acting up. He was allowed to sleep in the recreation room, where he urinated and smeared feces all over the room. The next morning an officer was trying to get him to clean up the mess. When a female supervisor came in, the 19-year-old pulled out his penis and began masturbating, saying to her, "I bet you want this." Staff are told youth masturbating are not an imminent threat, so they are not to interfere.

A manager got involved. Instead of holding the youth accountable for his behavior, and over the protest of the female supervisor, the manager said if the youth went back to his assigned unit he wouldn't have to go to school that day, and could instead stay in the rec room. The manager and female supervisor walked the youth over to his assigned unit.

On that unit the youth kept acting out. The manager let the youth walk around the unit, complaining about the rules, stirring up the other youth. The supervisor told the manager that the youth was too agitated and said, "He needs to go back to the behavior unit."

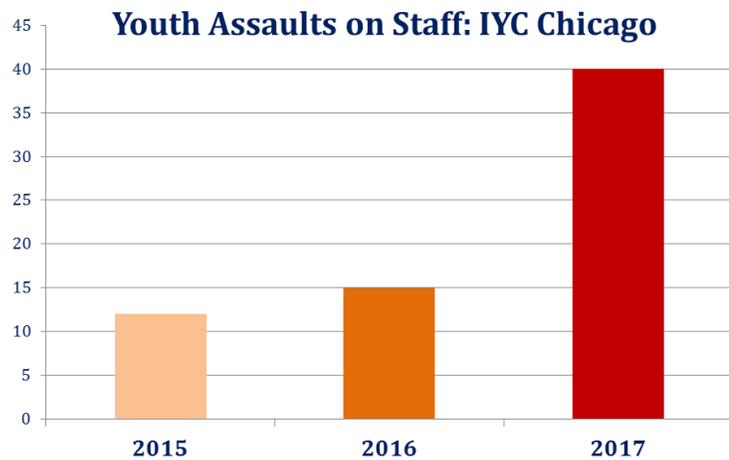
Instead of assisting the female supervisor with the escort, the manager left the female supervisor, who the youth has already sexually harassed, to take the youth back to the behavior unit by herself.

When they were back on the behavior unit, the youth again began masturbating in front of the female supervisor. He suddenly tried to pull her down on top of him with his erect penis out of his pants, then tried to drag her into the rec room. She disbursed chemical spray and was able to call on the radio. An officer responded quickly and got between the supervisor and the youth.

## IYC Chicago

IYC Chicago was formerly considered a minimum security youth center. There is no fencing around the facility, which is in the middle of a city neighborhood. Unlike other youth centers, all programs are enclosed in one multi-story building.

Now DJJ considers IYC Chicago to have the same security level as St. Charles or Harrisburg. As youth act out, IDJJ transfers them among

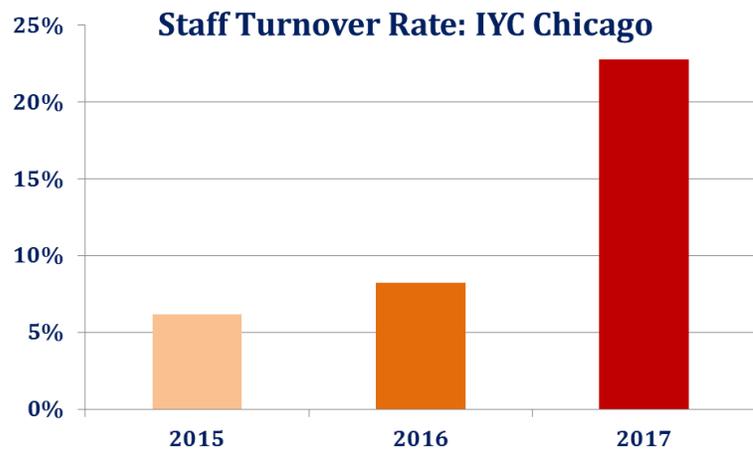


facilities including IYC Chicago. And when IDJJ temporarily closed admissions at IYC Harrisburg, IYC Chicago began housing youth who would have gone to Harrisburg.

The population at IYC Chicago is much more behaviorally challenged than in previous years, even more so than other facilities. At the same time, new policies and procedures lead to less control over youth and more chaos. Staff report that in the last year there has been a loss of control at the facility which continues to get worse.

That impression is borne out by the data. Assaults on staff in 2017 were more than three times the level in 2015, and most of that spike occurred in one year.

Loss of control is exacerbated by short staffing, which is in turn made worse by high staff turnover. In FY 15 the facility had only a 6% staff turnover rate. By FY 17 it had increased by nearly four times—to 23%, the highest of any IYC. Veterans and new hires are leaving for safer jobs elsewhere—or just don't return after a beating.



This leads to a downward spiral, as short staffing makes it harder to hold youth accountable for assaults on staff.

Youth at IYC Chicago are now engaged in the same negative behaviors as youth at Harrisburg and St. Charles—including sexual assaults and assaults on staff. Staff write tickets for negative behavior, which are supposed to result in discipline. There is a multi-step process that must take place before youth see a consequence from a ticket: it must be served on the youth, signed by the shift supervisor, heard by the Adjustment Committee (which suggests a consequence), reviewed by the Superintendent (who often reduces the Committee's recommendation), and then sent to the youth's counselor. The facility has seven days to process the ticket through these steps. It is expunged if not acted upon timely.

On May 6, 2018 IYC Chicago staff learned that 106 tickets had not been served on youth. Because of short staffing, all security staff were needed for coverage on the units so there were not enough staff to serve tickets on youth. These tickets dated from April 21, 2018 and many were no longer timely and were expunged. Charges included dangerous disturbance, damage/misuse of property, sexual harassment, and fighting. Staff are frustrated that management doesn't even process the tickets staff write, so youth who expose themselves to female staff or fight with other youth receive no consequence for these actions. It emboldens the youth to act out again.

Examples of assaults at IYC Chicago include:

## **March 2018**

A JJS was assaulted by a youth with a history of threatening staff, aggression, and exposing himself. On this occasion the youth exposed himself to a female JJS. She wrote him up for the infraction, and 15 minutes later he threw a heavy metal object at her. It would have seriously damaged her eye had she not been able to turn in time. As it was, it bruised her cheek and arm where it struck.

On two earlier occasions the youth had thrown objects at this particular female security staff member after exposing himself and being written up for the infraction. He had engaged in the same pattern at least two other times with other female staff—exposing himself, and after being written up, assaulting the female staff who was the victim of that sexual assault.

## **November 2017**

A school counselor had an office on a wing that housed a youth who has verbally threatened and assaulted staff, including sexual assaults. The young man is large—6 foot 4 inches and about 200 pounds. Near the end of the counselor's shift he approached her in the hall outside her office and asked to speak alone in her office.

She observed that the youth had been volatile the whole day. She had just found out she was pregnant and was concerned about being alone with the youth given how he was behaving. She suggested they speak in the hallway, which still afforded him privacy.

He walked up on her and yelled threats "I'll beat your a--, f--- you up." She got into her office and locked the door. The youth began kicking the door and continued to shout threats such as, "I'll kill you b----. I'll kill your husband." He was trying to kick down the door – something youth at IYC Chicago have done already. The counselor was very fearful for her safety and for her unborn child.

There were no repercussions for his behavior. The youth continued to target the counselor. She moved her office off that wing. Given the youth's history she spoke to management about moving the youth out of IYC Chicago to a more secure facility, but was told it would take someone getting killed to get him moved out.

# **Recommendations**

IDJJ must prioritize staff safety. Addressing assaults on staff is necessary for the good of the youth as well as the staff. As long as working conditions in the IYCs remain so dangerous, it will not be possible to attract and retain dedicated, qualified staff, especially the clinicians needed to address the deep and chronic problems of the very involved youth DJJ is now managing.

Patterns emerge from the accounts at each of these three facilities: Youth are always searching for limits. They will keep upping the ante on their behavior until IDJJ addresses it.

**The following initiatives would increase safety in IDJJ facilities:**

- **Establish commensurate consequences for infractions and be consistent in their application.** The assault rate shows the current DJJ behavior management plan is not effective. Correctional systems require consequences for breaking the rules which are proportionate, fair and consistent. That is not happening in DJJ; instead there are examples of youth who act out the most getting the most rewards.
- **Stop forcing employees to take undue risks.** IDJJ management pressures staff working short to continue youths' usual routine of school, recreation, showers, etc. It's not unusual at IYC St. Charles for a single JJS to be told to escort 22 youths across campus to school, or at Chicago for a single JJS to be told to let 21 youth out for recreation.
- **Identify the offenders with the most problematic behaviors and focus on that behavior.** Management and front line staff jointly at the facility level should identify the offenders with the most problematic behaviors and focus on those offenders with an intensive and consistent program with no deviations.
- **Train to ensure consistent adherence to policies and procedures.** IDJJ agreed to the RJ v Mueller consent decree which necessitated changes in policies like confinement. But at times the agency or facility leadership has gone beyond the consent decree and made additional changes in regards to reducing confinement and the use of other forms of discipline. These changes inarguably limited the tools staff can use to maintain order. Staff need new tools and effective training to actualize those tools.
- **Increase staffing levels—security, treatment, and program staff.** A lack of appropriate mental health treatment and too much idle time because of inadequate education and programming staff contributes to youth misbehavior. IDJJ management has publicly agreed with our union's assessment that chronic understaffing and a need for more programming and behavior supports is a significant cause of increased assaults. The department should act to address this serious shortcoming.
- **Replace problem equipment.** Faulty equipment exacerbates dangerous situations and lengthens response times when an assault does occur. IYC St. Charles - a campus spread out over some 120 acres of land - should have at least two working vans to transport staff and youth around campus, make deliveries, and be available immediately to respond to emergencies. Doors on offices and command centers that are intended to lock should not yield easily to a youth's kicks.
- **Involve the courts.** IDJJ must make the judges and monitors in the consent decree court aware of the increasing assaults on staff and the need to identify solutions.
- **Require DJJ to work with law enforcement agencies on charging and prosecuting youth for assault and letting the Illinois State Police onto the grounds when violence breaks out.**
- **Establish a system to log staff complaints, rate their severity, and establish time lines for responses.** It should be accessible to the union and always current.
- **Develop a joint labor-management health and safety committee at each facility that meets regularly to evaluate conditions and make recommendations for further change.**

## Conclusion

At a legislative hearing regarding safety in IDJJ last December, lawmakers asked DJJ leadership to assess how far along Illinois is on the path to juvenile justice reform. The response was “sixty percent of the way.” This is a highly questionable assertion in many respects. What does real reform look like and how is it measured?

Certainly from the perspective of staff who routinely face workplace violence – from the indignity and health risks of urine and feces thrown in their face, to daily sexual assaults, to attacks which result in concussions, stitches and time off work—the picture is far more challenging.

IDJJ must feel the urgency of this problem and take action. The employees of DJJ and the youth in their charge deserve no less.