



DATA BRIEF:

Allegheny County Jail Population Decreased During COVID-19 Without Increased Risk to Public Safety

April 2021

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many jurisdictions across the country took measures to reduce their jail populations as a way of lessening the risk of disease spread.¹ This included Allegheny County, which decreased the Allegheny County Jail (ACJ) population by considering for release older and health-compromised individuals, individuals sentenced to the jail who could be paroled early, and individuals awaiting trial or probation violation hearings who could safely be released.

This data brief explores the decrease of individuals held in the ACJ between March 16, 2020, and June 1, 2020, and the outcomes of individuals released during this period.

BACKGROUND

Individuals can be held in the ACJ for numerous reasons. This includes being sentenced for a crime, being held on a detainer as a result of a parole or probation violation, or being held on bond conditions while awaiting trial. Most individuals are held awaiting resolution of a charge or probation violation.

Prior to COVID-19, criminal justice stakeholders were already working together to safely decrease the jail population. This existing partnership enabled a rapid response at the outset of the pandemic to identify and screen individuals who could be released from the jail through bail modifications, detainer lifts or early parole. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pretrial Services² reviewed the bail status of individuals in the ACJ identified as medically high risk, as well as all cases where a bail modification request was initiated by the Office of the Public Defender (OPD)³ or private counsel. Cases that were appropriate for release were brought to a daily motions court. Criminal Division judges also prioritized the review of motions for probation detainer lifts, and Adult Probation conducted a review of all people detained in the jail to develop release plans for detainees that might be eligible for lifts. Judges were also provided lists of every individual they had sentenced to facilitate a comprehensive review of those who could be eligible for early parole. With this information, judges decided which individuals were appropriate for release.

1 "Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic" (September 11, 2020). Prison Policy Initiative. Retrieved at: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/virus/virusresponse.html>

2 Pretrial Services provides information to assist the Court in making informed decisions regarding bond, competency, and treatment. They also supervise and monitor defendants and promote compliance with court orders and court appearances.

3 The OPD is responsible for providing legal counsel to any person who lacks sufficient funds to obtain legal counsel in any proceeding where representation is constitutionally required.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

The data used in these analyses were from the Allegheny County Offender Management System (OMS) — which provides information on individual demographics, bookings, releases and daily jail population⁴ for both the ACJ and its alternative housing facilities — and the Allegheny County Data Warehouse,⁵ which integrates client and service data from a wide variety of sources and was used for additional demographic information. In addition, the OPD and Pretrial Services provided records of cases for which actions were taken between March 16, 2020, and June 1, 2020.

We examined the population that was in jail during the following date ranges:

- **COVID-19 period:** March 16, 2020, through June 1, 2020
 - **Initial COVID-19 period:** March 16, 2020, through April 15, 2020
 - **Late COVID-19 period:** April 16, 2020, through June 1, 2020
- **Baseline period:** March 16, 2019, through April 15, 2019. This data from the previous year was used as a comparison.

FINDINGS

Between March 16, 2020, and June 1, 2020 (the date on which Allegheny County Courts reopened), the ACJ population declined from 2,170 to 1,511 individuals, a 30% decrease (**Figure 1**). This decrease was the result of a steep decline in jail bookings as well as efforts by the judiciary, Pretrial Services, Adult Probation and the OPD to quickly facilitate releases while maintaining public safety.

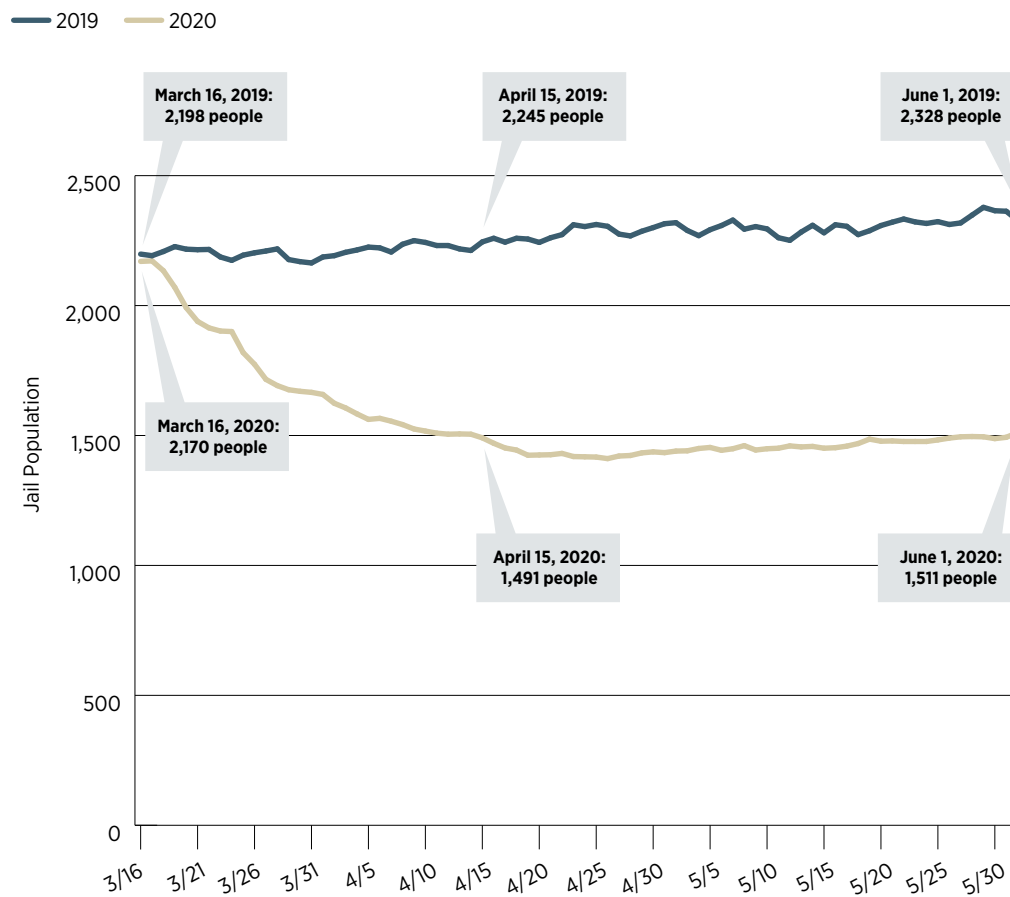
The size of the jail population decline in this period was significant; as a point of reference, in the previous two calendar years, the end-of-month jail population averaged 2,370 individuals and never fell below 2,100.⁶ The same period in 2019 saw a 6% increase, from 2,198 to 2,328 (**Figure 1**).

4 Daily jail population includes all individuals housed in the ACJ or alternative housing managed by ACJ as of 12:30am that day, excluding individuals being held on behalf of the federal government.

5 For more information about the Data Warehouse, see <https://www.alleghenycountyanalytics.us/index.php/dhs-data-warehouse/>

6 Allegheny County Offender Management System data accessed July 20, 2020.

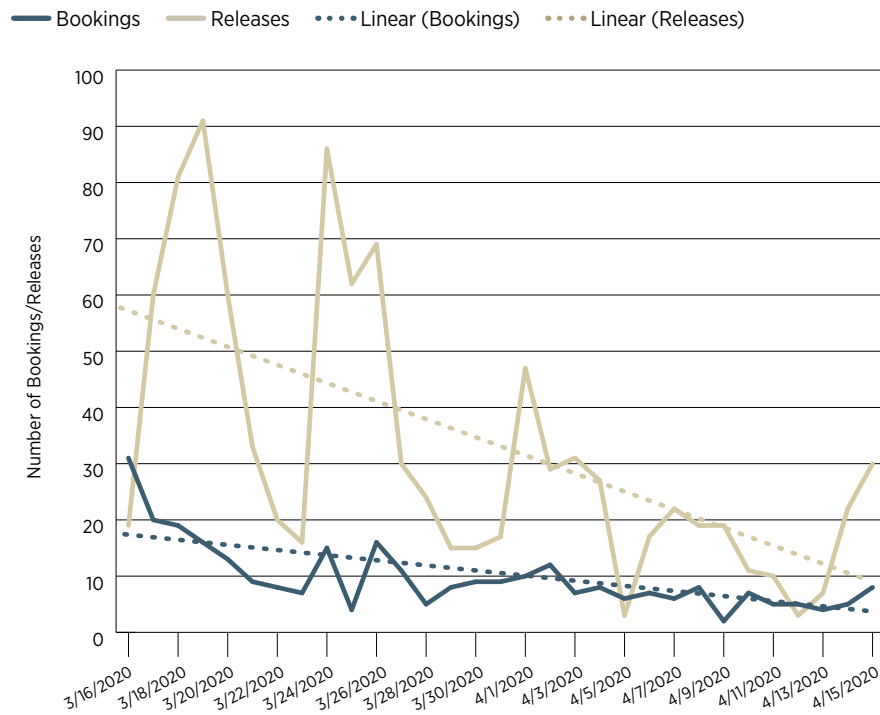
FIGURE 1: Jail population by day, March 16 through June 1, 2019 vs. 2020



JAIL BOOKINGS AND RELEASES, INITIAL AND LATE COVID-19 PERIODS

The most dramatic decline during the COVID-19 period came in the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic (3/16/2020–4/15/2020). This reduction was due to both a decrease in the number of new bookings and a larger increase in the number of releases (**Figure 2**). During this period, the release-to-booking ratio (R/B ratio) was 3.3 — that is, more than three times as many people were being released than were being booked. In comparison, the baseline period (3/16/2019–4/15/2019) and the late COVID-19 period (4/16/2020–6/1/2020) both had an R/B ratio of 1. An R/B ratio close to 1 means that roughly as many people are being booked as are being released.

FIGURE 2: Allegheny County Jail releases and bookings per day, initial COVID-19 period



RELEASES AND BOOKINGS, INITIAL COVID-19 PERIOD

The following analysis will focus on the cohort of individuals released during the initial COVID-19 period (March 16–April 15), as they best represent the individuals whose releases were directly related to the pandemic.

As previously noted, individuals in jail can be held due to a sentence, a violation of probation or awaiting trial; these reasons are referred to as a person’s holding status. Analysis of the R/B ratio showed that the ratio was higher during the initial COVID-19 period than the baseline period for all holding statuses⁷ (Table 1), implying that the reduction of the jail population was not isolated to individuals of exclusively one holding status.

7 Holding status is a designation developed internally by Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS). This designation defines a primary reason for a person’s detention in jail, namely when there are multiple possible reasons a person is

detained (e.g., an individual who violated probation and is awaiting a new trial). See Appendix A for holding status definitions.

TABLE 1: Release/booking ratio comparison between baseline period (3/16/19–4/15/19) and initial COVID-19 period (3/16/20–4/15/2020)

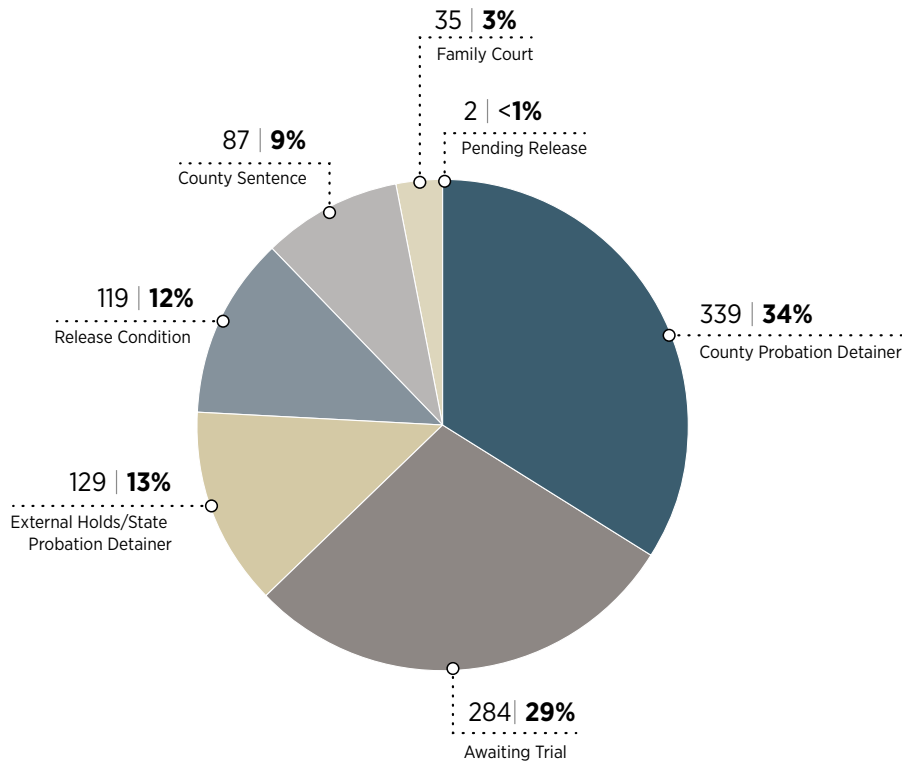
HOLDING STATUS	BASELINE RELEASE	BASELINE BOOKING	BASELINE R/B RATIO	INITIAL COVID RELEASE	INITIAL COVID BOOKING	INITIAL COVID R/B RATIO
County Sentenced	42	33	1.3	87	1	87.0
County Probation Detainer	179	262	0.7	339	106	3.2
Awaiting Trial	401	583	0.7	284	146	1.9
External Holds/State Probation Detainer	250	162	1.5	129	34	3.8
Family Court	93	74	1.3	35	9	3.9
Pending Release	4	8	0.5	2	3	0.7
Release Condition	110	2	55.0	119	1	119.0
Total	1,079	1,124		995	300	

Note: list of holding statuses above is not exhaustive. See **Appendix B** for release and booking data for the late COVID-19 period.

A further look into the population released during the initial COVID-19 period showed that most releases were of individuals held on a local probation detainer (339 people or 34%), followed by individuals awaiting trial (284 people or 29%), and individuals with an external hold/state probation detainer (129 people or 13%) (**Figure 3**).⁸

8 See Allegheny County Holding Status Dashboard Definitions for holding status determination logic. <https://www.alleghenycountyanalytics.us/index.php/2021/03/04/allegheny-county-jail-population-management-dashboards-2/>

FIGURE 3: Distribution of holdings statuses of individuals released during the initial COVID-19 period

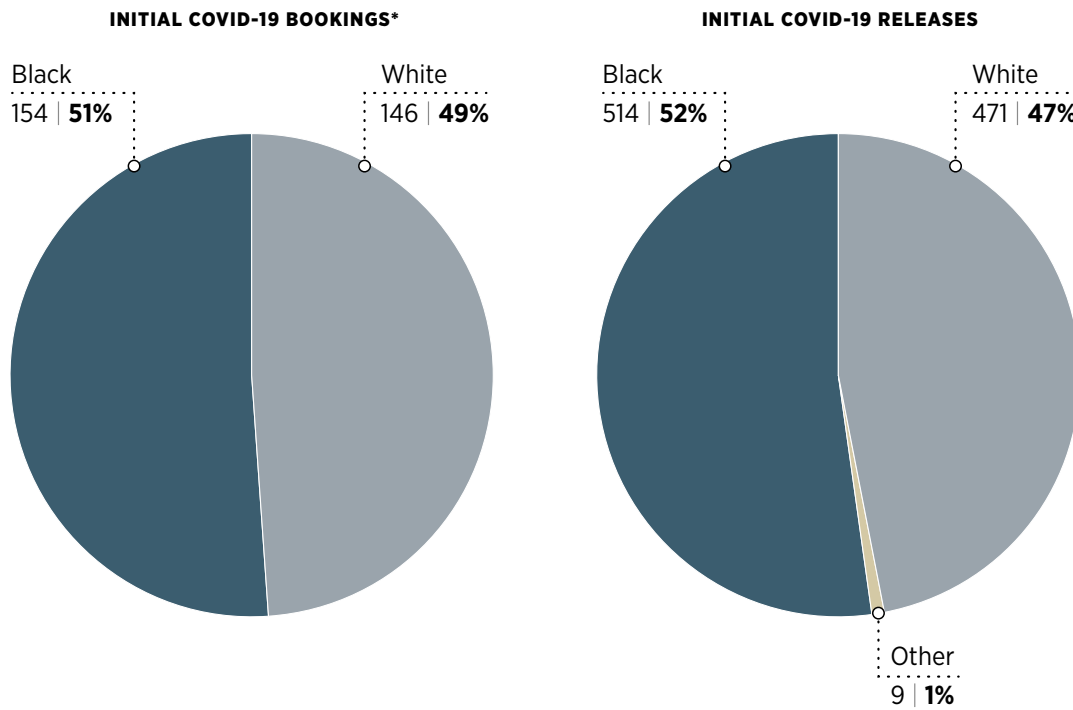


DEMOGRAPHICS OF JAIL POPULATION, INITIAL COVID-19 PERIOD

The gender distribution of the release cohort was roughly the same as that of the booking cohort, with males making up 81% and 82% respectively.

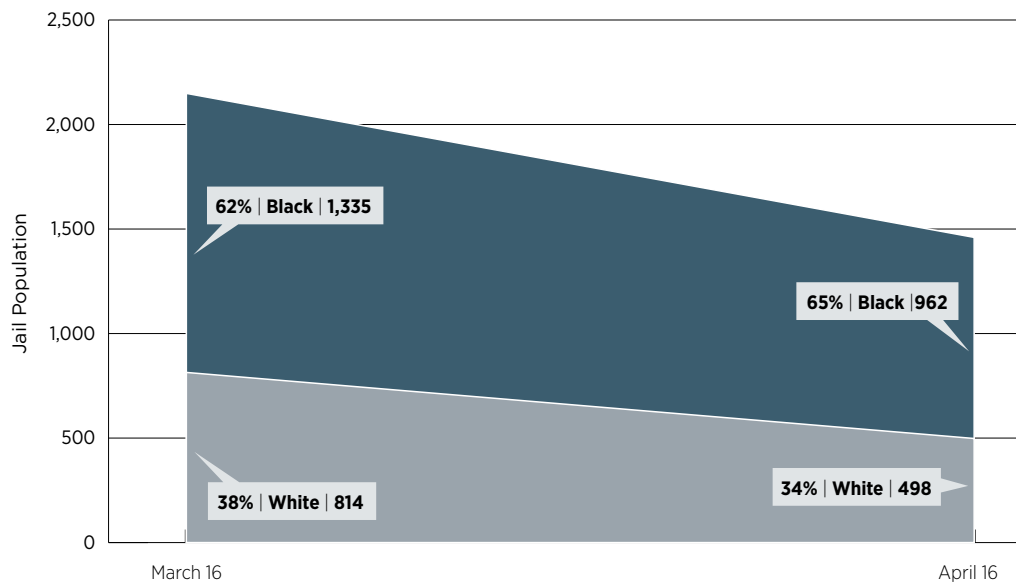
Black defendants were a slight majority (51%, n=154) of bookings as well as releases (52%, n=515) (**Figure 4**) during the initial period. This resulted in a larger numerical decrease in the Black population than the White population. However, as a percentage of the jail population, the proportion of Black individuals grew by 3 percentage points, from 62% to 65% (**Figure 5**).

FIGURE 4: Initial COVID-19 period releases and bookings by race



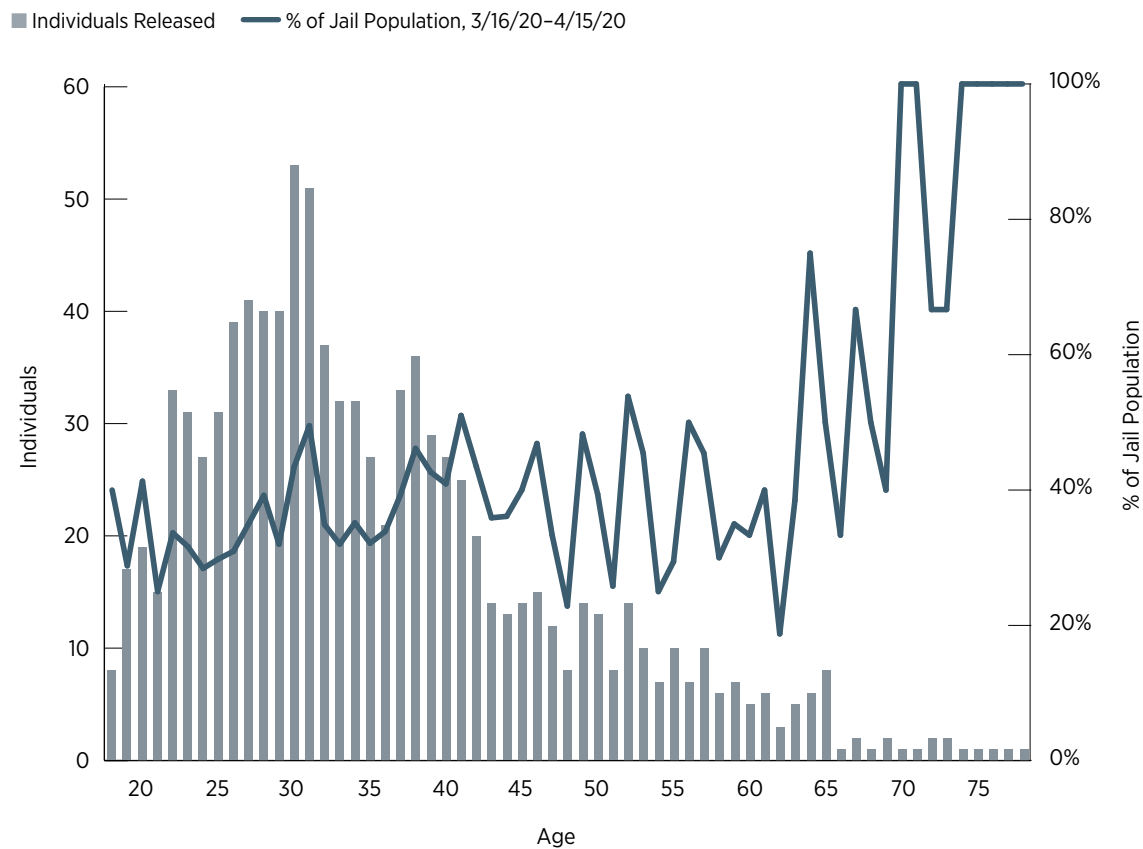
* There were no individuals of races other than White and Black booked during the initial COVID-19 period.

FIGURE 5: Change in Allegheny County jail population by race, March 16 through April 16, 2020



The booked population skewed slightly older than the released population during this phase, with the median booked age at 34 years old versus 33 for the released population. The majority of individuals released during this period were clustered between 20 and 40 years old, which accounted for 15% to 20% of the population at each respective age. Although individuals 60 years old or older accounted for a smaller portion of the release population, older inmates were more likely to be released, with 46% of this age cohort released during this period (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6: Age distribution of the released cohort during the initial COVID-19 phase



HIGHEST CHARGES OF PEOPLE RELEASED FROM JAIL

Public safety was the primary consideration in making release decisions during the initial COVID-19 period, and the severity of pending and previous charges was a key factor in determining whether an individual could safely be released from the jail.

To understand how charge type factored into release decisions, this part of the analysis looks at the highest charge associated with each person in jail before and after the initial COVID-19 period. An individual’s highest charge was determined by looking at all charges for which a person was currently sentenced, all charges for a pending case, and all charges for which a person was on probation. A high-charge individual was defined in our analysis as someone whose highest charge was a homicide or a person- or weapon-related felony; all individuals

not defined as high charge were defined as low charge. While the severity of charges was not the sole criteria in making release decisions, it was a significant factor in that determination. During the initial COVID-19 period, 470 low-charge individuals were released compared to 181 high-charge individuals. This resulted in the percentage of individuals in the jail considered to be high charge increasing from 44% to 52% of the total jail population.

It should be noted that 55% of Black individuals in the jail were in the high-charge category on March 16, 2020, compared to 27% of White individuals. Although other factors such as victim impact and number of pending charges were also used in making release decisions, it appears the higher rate of Black individuals in the high-charge category may have been a contributing factor in the proportional increase of Black individuals between March 16 and April 16 (see **Figure 5**, above; for more details on jail population by race and charge, see **Appendix C**).

POST-RELEASE ANALYSIS: INDIVIDUALS RELEASED DURING INITIAL COVID-19 PHASE

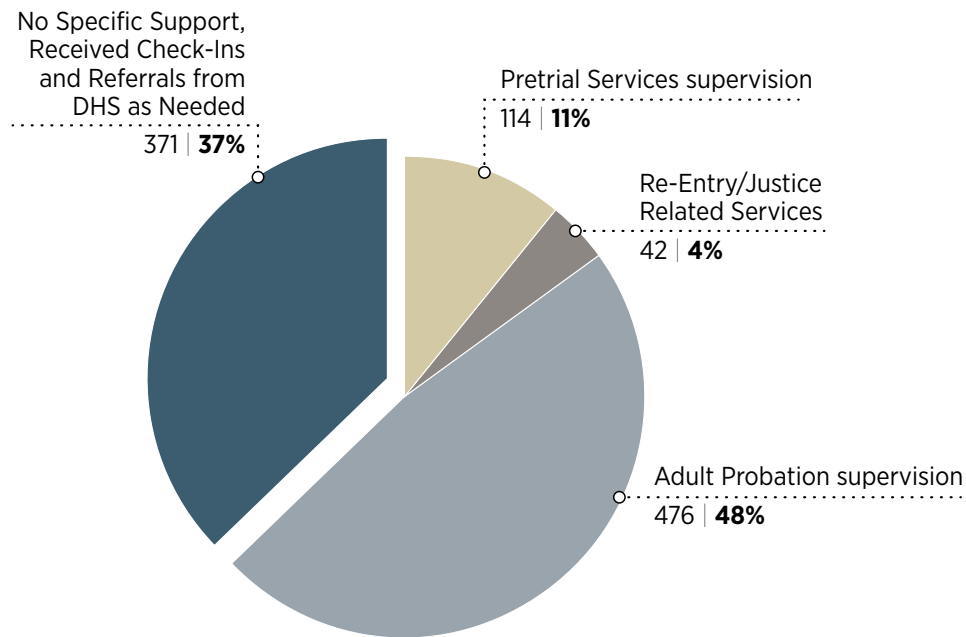
Analysis was done to determine the Pittsburgh neighborhoods and Allegheny County municipalities that individuals in the jail returned to after release (**Table 2**). This data was aggregated from release data from the Allegheny County Offender Management System as well as the most updated address information in the Allegheny County Data Warehouse. It should be noted that the percentage in **Table 2** is out of all individuals for whom address data was available. Twelve percent of the released population were excluded because no return home address was available in our records. The municipalities that saw the largest number of released individuals were McKeesport (55 individuals), Penn Hills (30 individuals) and Wilkinsburg (30 individuals); the frequency of these locations is expected given the addresses of the population housed in the ACJ.

TABLE 2: Top 10 Pittsburgh neighborhoods and Allegheny County municipalities to which individuals in the ACJ were released, initial COVID-19 period

	MUNICIPALITY/ NEIGHBORHOOD	COUNT	PERCENT
1	McKeesport	55	6%
2	Penn Hill	30	3%
3	Wilkinsburg	30	3%
4	Pittsburgh — Bluff	29	3%
5	McKees Rocks	20	3%
6	Clairton	19	2%
7	Duquesne	19	2%
8	Pittsburgh — Golden Triangle	17	2%
9	Shaler	16	2%
10	Pittsburgh — Perry South	15	2%
	Total	250	28%

Of those released during the initial COVID-19 period, 4% were receiving support from the Re-Entry Program⁹ or Justice Related Services¹⁰ at the time of release. These programs help to reduce the likelihood of qualifying individuals from recidivating and connect those with behavioral health needs to treatment providers. In addition, 11% of the released cohort were supervised by Allegheny County Pretrial Services,¹¹ which maintains contact with individuals prior to adjudication of their case and manages compliance of bond stipulations. Forty-eight percent of the released cohort were supervised by Allegheny County Adult Probation,¹² which works with individuals to ensure compliance with probation and parole terms. Thirty-seven percent (371 individuals) did not have specific supports or supervision upon release; DHS resource specialists conducted check-in phone calls to this group of individuals whenever contact information was available and offered referrals or information as needed (Figure 8).

FIGURE 8: Proportion of the initial COVID-19 release population who received support services or supervision upon release



9 <https://www.alleghenycounty.us/jail/re-entry-program.aspx>

10 <https://www.alleghenycounty.us/Human-Services/Programs-Services/Disabilities/Justice-Related/JRS---MH-Programs.aspx>

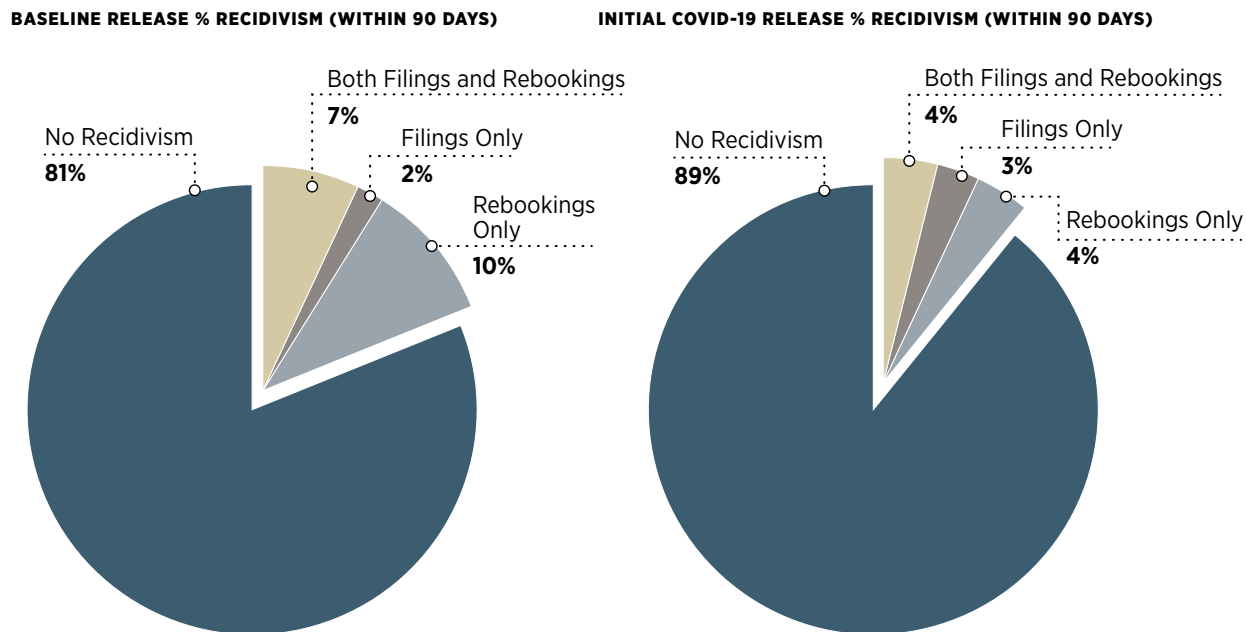
11 https://www.alleghencourts.us/criminal/pretrial_services/default.aspx

12 https://www.alleghencourts.us/criminal/adult_probation/

13 Note: The new filing and booking are likely for the same offense.

When exploring recidivism, defined as an individual having (1) a new criminal filing, (2) a new booking, or (3) both a new filing and a new booking in Allegheny County within 90 days of release from jail,¹³ we found that the recidivism rate of the population released during the initial COVID-19 period was 11%. This was 8 percentage points lower than the 19% recidivism rate of the comparative cohort released during the baseline period (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Recidivism rate of baseline and initial COVID-19 releases



CONCLUSION

To prevent the spread of COVID-19 and protect the health and lives of jail staff, individuals being held in the jail, and others involved with the criminal justice system, the jail population was significantly reduced during the initial phase of the pandemic. This reduction was the result of concerted efforts by numerous parties throughout the criminal justice system to identify individuals eligible for release, expedite the review process, and quickly hear motions throughout this period. These actions resulted in a 30% drop in the jail population.

Efforts were made to maintain supervision of the released cohort, with 11% being supervised by Pretrial Services and 48% by Adult Probation.

The careful identification of those eligible for release resulted in a 90-day recidivism rate of 11%, eight percentage points lower than the released cohort in the same time frame the previous year. Despite the accelerated process in identifying and releasing individuals, this result indicates that the releases had no negative impact on public safety.

Although more Black individuals were released than White, the Black population in the jail increased during the initial COVID-19 period, from 62% to 65%. Although no single factor alone determined release eligibility, it appears that the highest charge associated with an individual was a significant contributing factor to this demographic change, as Black individuals were more likely than White individuals to be held in jail for high charges.

Since the end of the initial COVID-19 period, the jail population has slowly increased, though the population remains lower than the same period in 2019 (for details about the jail population, see [Allegheny County's Jail Population Management Interactive Dashboards](#)). Efforts to reduce the jail population undertaken in response to COVID-19 can help inform broader initiatives by laying the groundwork for identifying and prioritizing individuals for release.¹⁴ The data showing that individuals released in the early days of the COVID-19 epidemic — though a small cohort that would benefit from further analysis — were no more likely than a matched group to recidivate demonstrates that Allegheny County can reduce incarceration and maintain a smaller jail population without risking public safety.

ANALYSIS

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14 For more information about the County's ongoing efforts to safely reduce the jail population as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge grant awarded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, see <https://www.alleghenycountyanalytics.us/index.php/2019/12/09/safety-and-justice-challenge-allegheny-county-year-one-report/>

APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A: HOLDING STATUS DEFINITIONS

The following holding status types are listed in order of primacy when determining the primary holding status of an individual in jail:

- 1) County Sentenced:** The individual is serving a county sentence of up to 23 months on a criminal charge.
- 2) County Probation Detainer:** The individual is being held on a county probation detainer because they are alleged to have violated a term of their county probation sentence and are awaiting a probation violation hearing. Violations could be for a new arrest or for technical violations such as a failed drug test.
- 3) State Probation Detainer:** The individual is being held on a state probation detainer because they are alleged to have violated a term of their state-supervised probation sentence and are awaiting a probation violation hearing. Violations could be for a new arrest or for technical violations such as a failed drug test.
- 4) Awaiting Trial:** The individual has been arrested and is being held awaiting trial on a criminal charge, either for a short period until they are released to await trial in the community, or until their case(s) have been resolved in court.
- 5) External Holds:** The individual has external holds from another county, a state correctional institution, the Pennsylvania Parole Board, or federal authorities. In some cases, people are being held while awaiting transportation to another correctional institution, or they have Allegheny County charges or violations that must be resolved prior to release to the other correctional facility. An individual can have a federal hold if they are being held at the Allegheny County Jail for a U.S. government agency, for example the U.S. Marshals Service.
- 6) Family Court:** The individual has been ordered to the jail by family court because of violations of child support orders or protection from abuse orders.
- 7) Pending Release:** The individual is pending release. Their holds have been resolved and they should be released soon. Prior to leaving, all individuals must go through the Jail's Discharge and Release Center, where the individual can coordinate transportation from the Jail and obtain needed medications.
- 8) Release Condition:** The individual is being held on a release condition which permits their release to a particular entity only. These entities include Allegheny County Justice Related Services (JRS), treatment providers or a juvenile detention facility (juvenile hold), among others.

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX B: RELEASE/BOOKING RATIOS IN DETAIL

TABLE 3: Release/booking ratio by holding status across baseline, initial COVID-19, and late COVID-19 periods

HOLDING STATUS	BASELINE RELEASE	BASELINE BOOKING	BASELINE R/B RATIO	INITIAL COVID RELEASE	INITIAL COVID BOOKING	INITIAL COVID R/B	LATE COVID RELEASE	LATE COVID BOOKING	LATE COVID R/B RATIO
County Sentenced	42	33	1.3	87	1	87.0	38	0	-
County Probation Detainer	179	262	0.7	339	106	3.2	117	192	0.6
Awaiting Trial	401	583	0.7	284	146	1.9	211	272	0.8
External Holds/ State Detainer	250	162	1.5	129	43	3.8	65	43	1.5
Family Court	93	74	1.3	35		3.9	18	11	1.6
Pending Release	4	8	0.5	2	3	0.7	0	2	-
Release Condition	110	2	55.0	119	1	119.0	76	1	76.0
Total	1,079	1,124	-	995	300	-	525	521	-

APPENDIX C

APPENDIX C: JAIL POPULATION BY RACE AND CHARGE DETAIL

TABLE 3: Jail population by race and highest charge

DATE	BLACK				WHITE			
	LOW CHARGE		HIGH CHARGE		LOW CHARGE		HIGH CHARGE	
	COUNT	%	COUNT	%	COUNT	%	COUNT	%
3/16/2020	568	45%	690	55%	563	73%	210	27%
4/16/2020	351	38%	562	62%	317	67%	157	33%
6/1/2020	344	37%	584	63%	304	65%	165	35%

Note: Above analysis of jail population excludes all individuals being held on an external detainer.