

INSIDE ILLINOIS JAILS

Escapes. Fires. Rebellions. Trove of records reveals chaos inside Illinois county jails.

Illinois county jails report thousands of “extraordinary or unusual” incidents every year, but the state doesn’t keep track. So we stepped in to shed light on what’s happening inside.

By [Grace Hauck](#), [Andrew Adams](#) & [Meredith Newman](#) • September 15, 2026

A man being held in Sangamon County Jail in the fall of 2024 mixed in with a group getting processed for release and walked out in broad daylight, spurring a brief manhunt.

The following May, two people in Cook County Jail were rushed to a nearby hospital after a fire broke out in their cell, one of more than a dozen at the jail last year.

After a group of men incarcerated in Will County Jail wouldn't leave the day room one evening this past February, a guard filled the air with chemical irritants, leaving three of them requiring medical help.

These are just a handful of thousands of “extraordinary or unusual occurrences” Illinois county jails — which detain people who are awaiting trial or serving short sentences — reported to a state monitoring unit in recent years. The reports, which the Illinois Answers Project obtained through public-records requests, document jail staff pepper-spraying and forcibly medicating detained people, many of whom had a mental illness, and describe fires, riots, assaults on staff and escapes.

Hundreds of people detained in county jails also died, often in ways their families say were preventable.

Jail staff are supposed to report any “extraordinary or unusual occurrences” to the Jail and Detention Standards Unit (JDSU) within the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC). But jails have been haphazardly reporting for years, and some incidents were never disclosed to the JDSU. Even when jails do report incidents, the unit only reviews a handful of cases. The agency does not make the reports public online, track trends or share data.

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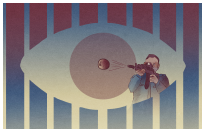
State oversight agency missed dozens of deaths in Illinois jails

An Illinois Answers Project analysis revealed that 63 people who died in jails were missing from state data on in-custody fatalities. Now the state is auditing its records.



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Winnebago County guards fire pepperballs more than any other Illinois jail — often on people with mental illnesses



Use of pepperball guns in Illinois jails is not the norm. Of the 90 jails, 11 reported using them in recent years, and 9 others have them on hand. But one, the state's second-largest county jail, stands out for its repeated use.

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Unsanitary, unsupervised, understaffed: Most Illinois jails aren't meeting minimum state standards



Jails that routinely fail inspections can be referred to the attorney general — but the Department of Corrections hasn't done so in over a decade.

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State standards designed to prevent jail suicides don't always work



Dozens of people have died by suicide in Illinois jails in recent years. Advocates say a multipronged approach could prevent such deaths.

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Two years after Illinois Answers exposed restraint-chair abuse, jails are doing better



County jails were restraining people in chairs for long periods and underreporting it. Now, three counties that used them the most report doing so less, and other jails started reporting such incidents for the first time.

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“We do not have very much transparency over our carceral spaces in the state of Illinois, which is deeply concerning,” said Jennifer Vollen-Katz, executive director of the John Howard Association, a prison watchdog group. “There is very little authority to demand access, to demand documents to do independent investigations.”

Illinois Answers stepped in to make this information accessible to Illinoisans and to hold state and local officials accountable. Illinois Answers reporters filed public-records requests for all of the “extraordinary or unusual occurrences” forms jails submitted from 2019 through 2025, then partnered with the University of Chicago’s Mansueto Institute for Urban Innovation to turn more than 30,000 pages of records into a user-friendly database.

The [database](#) provides insights into the inner workings of Illinois county jails, revealing a pattern of events that are extraordinary — but hardly unusual.

Here's what we found:

- Illinois undercounts jail deaths by the dozens. At least 63 people who died in the custody of a county jail from 2019 to 2025 do not appear in official state data.
- Eleven jails reported firing pepperball launchers at incarcerated people, sometimes causing bruising, raised welts, coughing and irritation. Many of these incidents involved people who are mentally ill and awaiting transfer to state psychiatric facilities.
- [Jail staff forcibly medicated detained people in hundreds of incidents.](#) One man was forcibly medicated 14 times.
- At least ten jails have started reporting the use of restraint chairs to the state, and three jails have reduced their use after Illinois Answers revealed facilities were dramatically underreporting incidents and, in some cases, restraining people for many hours.

Meanwhile, many of these events are happening inside facilities that aren't meeting the state's standards for operating jails. A majority of jails in Illinois fail inspections every year, often for insufficient staffing and supervision. Others violate standards for sanitation, medical and mental healthcare, food services, juvenile detention and more.

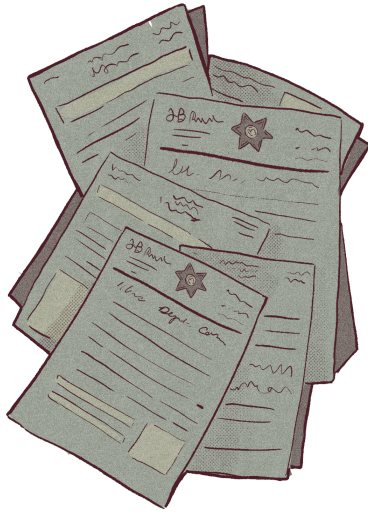


See what's happening in your county here.



Jails report thousands of 'extraordinary or unusual' events each year

Since at least 1980, the state has required jails to report "extraordinary or unusual occurrences" to track statistics and monitor compliance with jail standards. Initially, the



standards enumerated a dozen types of “unusual incidents which involve or endanger the lives or physical welfare of jail officers or detainees.”

Over time, the list has grown to 17 different event types, including involuntary medication, discovery of weapons and the use of chemical agents or restraint chairs. The forms that jails use to make reports include checkboxes for 16 different categories, along with an “other” catch-all.

Downstate jails have seen a steady rise in reported 'extraordinary and unusual' incidents

Increased awareness of reporting requirements and changes to state enforcement explain some of the increase in reported incidents. State records for Cook County are spotty, but suggest a decrease in reported incidents over the past year and a half.

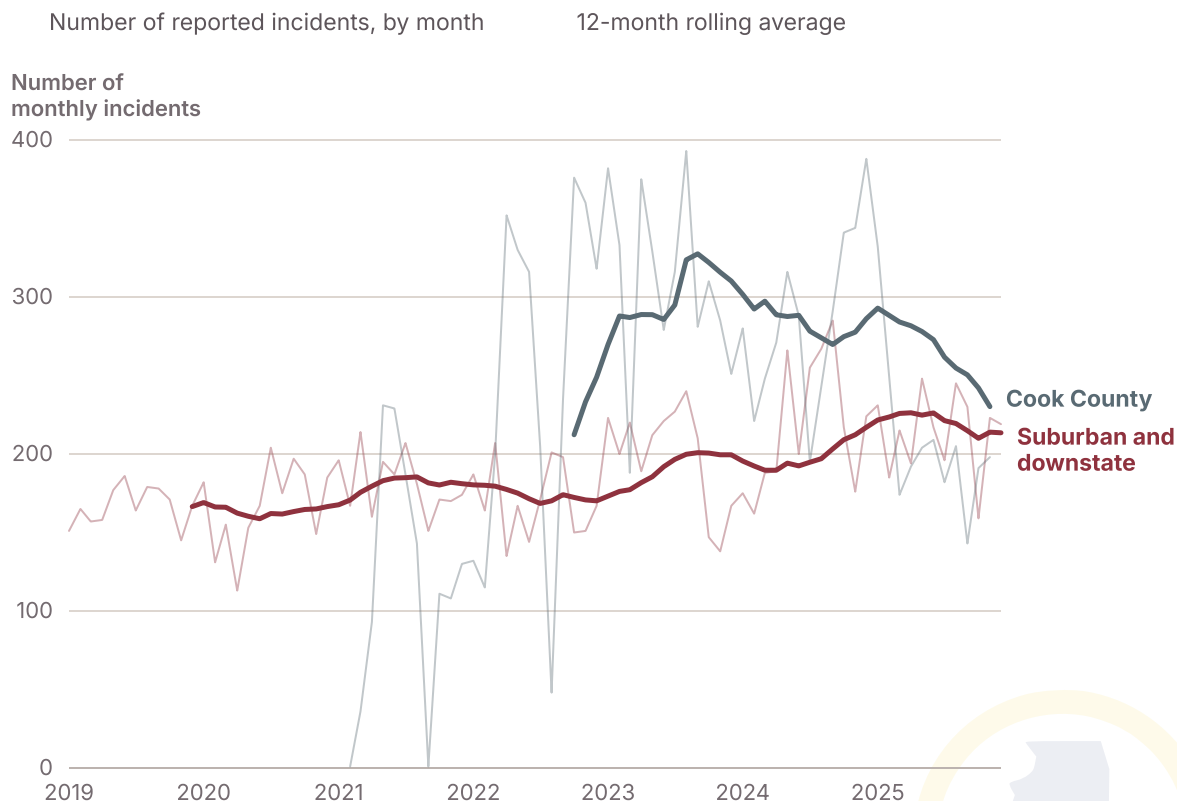


Chart: Andrew Adams, Illinois Answers Project · Source: Illinois Answers Project analysis of Illinois Department of Corrections records · [Download the data](#)

In the reports, staff are required to include information about what happened and who was involved. They're supposed to indicate if a detained person was injured, died or taken to a hospital. The reports also require officers to provide recommendations to prevent future occurrences, but jail staff rarely fill that section out.

Here's what happened in Illinois jails from 2019 to 2025.

300+ REPORTED FIRES

Fires

Illinois jails reported more than 300 fires, with the vast majority in Cook County. The jail was reporting nearly a fire every other day in 2022 and 2023, but that trend tapered off in 2024. In some cases, people who started fires, or whose cellmates started fires, ended up in the hospital. At least one incident was fatal: Last November, [Martinez Duncan](#), 24, died after his cellmate started a fire. Officers removed Duncan from the cell and restrained him to a bench, where he fell unconscious. The coroner ruled the death a homicide, and the autopsy revealed soot on Duncan's body.



216+ ESCAPES AND
ATTEMPTS

Escapes and escape attempts

Jails reported at least 140 escapes and another 76 escape attempts. The man in Sangamon County who walked out of the jail as other people were exiting was captured soon after and charged with escaping. In Adams County, a man participating in an alternative work program walked out the back door of a grocery store when his group stopped for a bathroom break. Lake County Jail accounted for nearly one-third of the total number of escape attempts, in part because that county includes people absconding from electronic monitoring in its count.

14 JAILS REPORTED ONE

Riots or rebellions

Reports of riots or rebellions weren't common; only 14 jails reported one. It's possible other facilities categorized similar events as fights or assaults. In Vermilion County in 2024, a dozen detained people "threw lunch trays, refused to lock up and damaged sprinkler heads" because their digital tablets weren't charged. Additional officers and K-9 units responded to the scene and restrained them. In Macon County last year, 14 detained people refused to return food trays until they received the TV remote to change the channel, so "multiple officers" came to the scene as a "show of force."

2,200+ DOCUMENTED
INCIDENTS

Suicide and suicide attempts

Reports of suicide attempts and suicidal comments were prevalent, with more than 2,200 documented incidents in jails statewide. At least 65 people died by suicide between 2019 and 2025. In some cases, families sued, with settlements totaling nearly \$12 million. In Cook County, one mother alleged the jail failed to provide her son with adequate mental healthcare, and she settled for \$1.5 million. The sister of another man who died by suicide in Cook County Jail settled for \$4.5 million. Peoria County appeared to report every single time someone verbally threatened self-harm as an attempt.

14+ PEOPLE DIED BY
HOMICIDE

Homicide and homicide attempts

Reports of homicides and homicide attempts weren't common. At least 14 people died by homicide. Most of the victims were detained in Cook County Jail. In McDonough County Jail, one man battered another, causing blunt force trauma head injuries that killed him, state and county coroner reports show. In Vermilion County, an officer shot a man who had stabbed him with an ink pen, state and county coroner reports show. In Sangamon County, a man died after officers tased and restrained him, state and county

coroner reports show. Cook County paid settlements of \$1 million each in two homicide-related lawsuits related to deaths in 2020 and 2022.

1,000+ REPORTED ASSAULTS

Assault on staff

There were more than 1,000 reports of assaults on staff. In Tazewell County, a detained person punched an officer in the mouth, cutting their lower lip and requiring stitches, according to one “extraordinary or unusual” report. In Kane County, a detained person pushed an officer to the ground, scratching their legs and arm, according to another such report. And in Jefferson County, a man pinned an officer behind a cell door, injuring them, another report states.

450+ REPORTED INCIDENTS

Sex offenses

There were more than 450 reports where staff checked a box for “sex offense” or tagged a record under the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), the federal law that seeks to eliminate sexual assault and misconduct. In DuPage County, a woman reported

she had been assaulted by an officer while in police custody, according to one “extraordinary or unusual” report. In McHenry County, a woman reported an assault by another detained person, according to another such report. And in McLean County, a report states that a staff member “engaged in a sexual act” with a detained person; she was later fired and charged with custodial sexual misconduct and official misconduct.

13,800+ REPORTED EVENTS

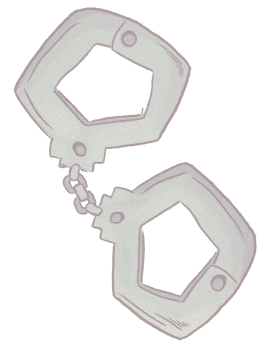
Battery, fights, assaults

Reports of batteries, fights and assaults among detained people were some of the most common events, with jails often reporting these types of events interchangeably. There were more than 13,800 over the seven-year period. Some happened between people being held in a single cell; others happened in dayrooms or bathrooms. Fights sometimes resulted in serious injuries or hospital visits.

4,500+ REPORTED INCIDENTS

Restraints used

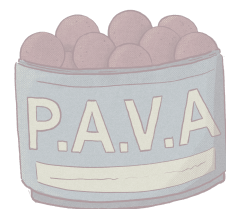
There were more than 4,500 incidents of restraint statewide. Jail staff used a variety of devices, such as handcuffs, wall rings and WRAP restraints. In thousands of cases, staff strapped people down to restraint chairs. Dozens of incidents lasted over ten hours, and some went on for days, Illinois Answers found.



3,800+ REPORTED USES

OC spray

There were more than 3,800 reported uses of OC (Oleoresin Capsicum) spray, also known as pepper spray. Officers often used the spray to compel detained people to comply with orders, such as to put on handcuffs or stop fighting. At least 11 jails fired pepperball guns.



800 SERIOUS-INJURY
INCIDENTS

Serious injury

There were thousands of reported injuries inside jails, including nearly 800 documented incidents of “serious injuries.” Detained people and staff suffered forehead cuts, broken bones and dislocated joints, as well as self-inflicted wounds and injuries from seizures. Some went to the hospital: Statewide, jails reported more than 1,200 hospital runs.

HOW WE DID IT

How we built the biggest database of Illinois jail records ever — and how you can use it to do your own digging

More than four years in the making. Over 65,000 pages of government documents. Nearly a thousand records requests and over a hundred interviews. This is what it took to create the largest and most comprehensive database of conditions inside Illinois county jails .

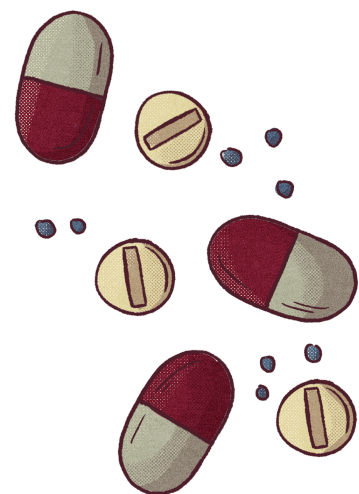
[Read our methodology](#)



What is ‘other’? Irregular reporting, strange events

The categories listed on “extraordinary or unusual” forms don’t always match the realities inside jails. Each county describes incidents in its own way, and staff often used the “other” box in reports as a catch-all for any kind of strange incident, according to an Illinois Answers review of the records. For example, counties checked the “other” box to report falls, seizures, pregnancies, childbirth, bullying, hunger strikes, chest pain, kidney stones, ear infections and air pollution. St. Clair County regularly checked the “other” box and described incidents vaguely as “response to resistance.” Taser use and hospital transports were common, with thousands of reported incidents.

Six jails reported forcibly medicating detained people, accounting for more than 300 incidents. Staff, in some cases, strapped people down to a restraint chair, and then medical personnel injected psychotropics. Illinois standards state “psychotropic medicines shall not be used as a disciplinary device or control measure.” Records show that in a handful of cases, staff forcibly medicated people labeled “combative,” “disruptive” or “erratic.” Many were struggling with mental health issues. Some had just attempted to take their life.



Cook County recorded the highest number of forced medication incidents between 2019 and 2025. Will County reported the second-highest number over that seven-year period. One man there was forcibly medicated 14 times over the course of 2018. Of these instances, in the course of 12 months, he was pepper sprayed six times. He was restrained in a chair every single time prior to being medicated.

Forced medication “should be a pretty rare thing,” said Amanda Antholt, a civil rights attorney with Equip for Equality, a nonprofit that advocates for people with disabilities. She added that its use “raises a ton of questions for me.”

Some agencies used the “extraordinary or unusual” forms to report events that happened outside of jails. Jeffrey Parrish, 41, died of head wounds in 2023 after he jumped out of a

moving Marshall County Sheriff deputy's vehicle while being driven from a hospital in Princeton to Marshall County Jail. According to records obtained by Illinois Answers, Parrish unbuckled himself, kicked out the rear passenger window and pulled himself out feet first while still handcuffed.

His father, Marty Parrish, called it a “freak accident.”

“I didn’t dig that far into it because it tore my heart out and it’s rough to talk about,” he said.

State monitoring unit reviewed few incidents, found violations



The Jail and Detention Standards Unit (JDSU) is a six-person team that includes a manager, four inspectors and an administrative assistant. The unit annually inspects each of the state’s 90 county jails, along with occasional inspections of municipal lockups.

In state fiscal year 2025, the unit received nearly 6,500 “extraordinary or unusual” reports and reviewed only 14, according to IDOC’s [annual report](#).

That “seems like an exceedingly low rate of investigation,” Vollen-Katz said. “It just points to the fact that we don’t have the right mechanisms in place to protect people and to create transparency around what’s happening in our jails.”

Daniel Sheline, past president of the Illinois Correctional Association, said the JDSU should review more of the reports and track trends. “If it’s required for us to go through all that paperwork ... then they should be reviewing it on their end,” he said.

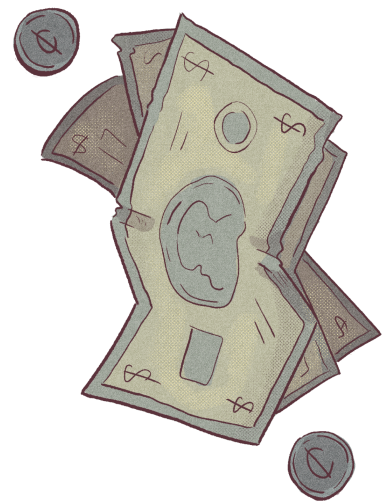
Neither IDOC nor the office of Governor J.B. Pritzker, which oversees the department, responded to requests for comment. In a statement, IDOC previously said the unit has no

statutory responsibility to investigate occurrences but “makes every effort to ensure reports are reviewed individually and handled dependent on its content.” The unit also offers recommendations to jails on how to improve outcomes.

Through public-records requests, Illinois Answers obtained documentation of the 14 incidents the unit reviewed. Nearly all were jail deaths. In their reports, inspectors described reviewing an array of documents to determine if facilities violated state standards. Inspectors found that two jails had violated standards: Marshall County Jail and the Rock Island Police Department’s municipal lockup.

In Marshall County Jail, a 66-year-old man died from bacterial sepsis. The court had ordered an evaluation to determine if he was fit to stand trial. The jail inspector reviewing the case concluded the jail was understaffed: “The officer had to call for backup to enter the cell because there was only one officer on duty at the time of the incident.” The inspector didn’t say if the understaffing contributed to the death, but she urged the jail to provide sufficient staff.

The same inspector also identified violations at the Rock Island Police Department’s municipal lockup. “A tour was being conducted of the facility and a civilian located a firearm hidden inside a pillow case in a holding cell in the booking area,” she wrote. She concluded the facility failed to properly search a person being processed for intake and promptly report the incident. “Jail staff addressed the issue by disciplining the staff involved in the incident, implementing additional training for searching detained people, and updating the policies and procedures to reflect future expectations,” she wrote.



Tim Muehler, deputy chief of the Rock Island Police Department, said his agency initiated the discipline, training and policy changes independently of the state monitoring unit. He declined to comment further.

Many incidents aren't even reported

Not all “extraordinary or unusual” incidents are reported to the state. Illinois Answers previously revealed jails [never reported thousands of incidents](#) in which staff restrained someone in a chair. Meanwhile, jail inspectors regularly checked a box on annual inspections saying facilities were properly submitting reports, even when they were not.

As a result of Illinois Answers' investigation, state inspectors began citing jails for failing to report incidents, and jails [began reporting](#) to the state. Crawford County, for example, hadn't submitted a single report in years. “No extraordinary or unusual occurrence forms have been received since November 2023,” an inspector [wrote](#) in that county's annual inspection last year.

Other states publish data, have independent oversight

Other states [have systems in place](#) to improve transparency, oversight and accountability of county jails.

In [Pennsylvania](#), the department of corrections collects data on “extraordinary occurrences” for “statistical, analytical and trending purposes” and publishes detailed information online. Journalists and policymakers rely on the data. Jail officials compare their trends to similarly sized facilities. And residents have used the information to advocate for change.

In [Iowa](#), the Office of Ombudsman, an independent agency in the legislative branch, has investigated complaints against county jails. Illinois has an independent ombudsperson with jurisdiction over state and county juvenile detention facilities — but not adult county jails.

And in [California](#), an independent statutory agency known as the Board of State and Community Corrections reviews jail standards every two years. Illinois, meanwhile, hasn't updated standards since 2014.

“There are things that can be done differently,” Vollen-Katz said. “I think it starts with improving the standards that you’re using for inspections.”

[See our methodology here.](#) Ganon Evans and Andres Camacho Baquero contributed to this database with the Mansueto Institute for Urban Innovation. University of Chicago students assisted in fact checking the database, including Christine Tsai, Eliana Nowlis, Aashni Jain, Maggie Larson and Brock Sauvage. This story was made possible by a grant from The Richard H. Driehaus Foundation.



The Illinois Answers Project is the nonprofit, investigative news arm of the Better Government Association. Our mission is to hold powerful forces accountable and drive reform.

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