

Food Insecurity Behind the Walls of D.C.'s Jails

“We’re Hungry in Here”

**D.C. Department of Corrections
Food Survey Results**

November 2023

“ We’re Hungry in Here ”

D.C. Department of Corrections Food Survey Results

Published by:

dcgreens

Compiled by: Daniel Rosen

Surveys collected by: ANC Commissioner Leonard Bishop

Graphic Design by: Purpuhs

Survey Background and Methodology

In response to concerns raised by D.C. community members about the state of food nutrition at the DC Department of Corrections' (DOC) facilities, a group of non-profit/non-governmental organizations and returned citizens (the "D.C. Jail Food Working Group") developed a survey that would help advocates better understand the need for reform by hearing what was and was not working directly from incarcerated residents themselves. The survey was developed with guidance from researchers at Impact Justice (IJ), drawing on IJ's experience with a previous national survey on food in correctional settings.

Former Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner (ANC 7F07) and resident of the jail Leonard Bishop administered both electronic and hard copies of the survey between June and July of 2023. Roughly one-quarter of the jails' residents (330 persons) responded to the surveys, the summary of which makes up the body of this report. Data entry and analysis for the report was conducted by returned citizen and former D.C. jail resident Daniel Rosen, with assistance by the Sumner M. Redstone Global Center for Prevention and Wellness, a working group member. Completed surveys were also entered into record for the D.C. Council Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety hearing on the Food Regulation Ensures Safety and Hospitality Specialty Training Aids Reentry Transition and Success (FRESH STARTS) Act of 2023.

**"I had a dead mouse
in my food."**

**"The food is unhealthy, inhumane, the
worst food I've ever seen in a jail."**

**"No one should be forced
to eat unhealthy food just
because they're incarcerated."**

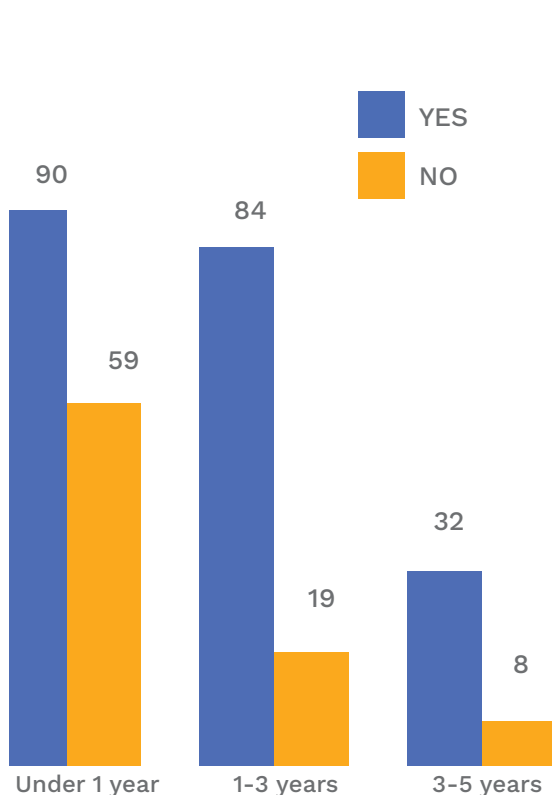
Key Findings



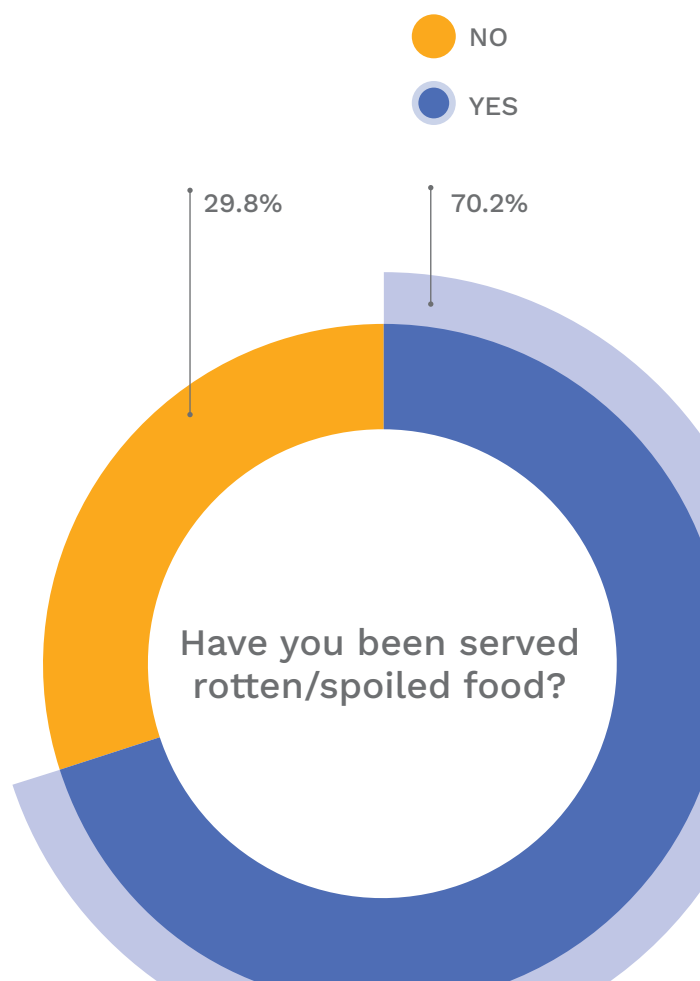
Spoiled food

An astonishing seven in ten DC DOC residents reported having been served spoiled or rotten food – a number that rises to over eight in ten for those who have been incarcerated for over one year. “This food is risky,” one respondent declared. The most common food items reported as spoiled or unfresh were milk, bread, lunchmeat, eggs, and fruit. Unlike on the outside, there are no returns or exchanges for spoiled food. Many respondents included some version of, “You get what you get, and don’t get upset,” in response to questions about food freshness or spoilage incidents.

“We had moldy bread and spoiled milk that had me throwing up everything for a week, even water.”



Served rotten/spoiled food
(by length of stay)



Have you been served
rotten/spoiled food?

Food waste and nutritional insufficiency.

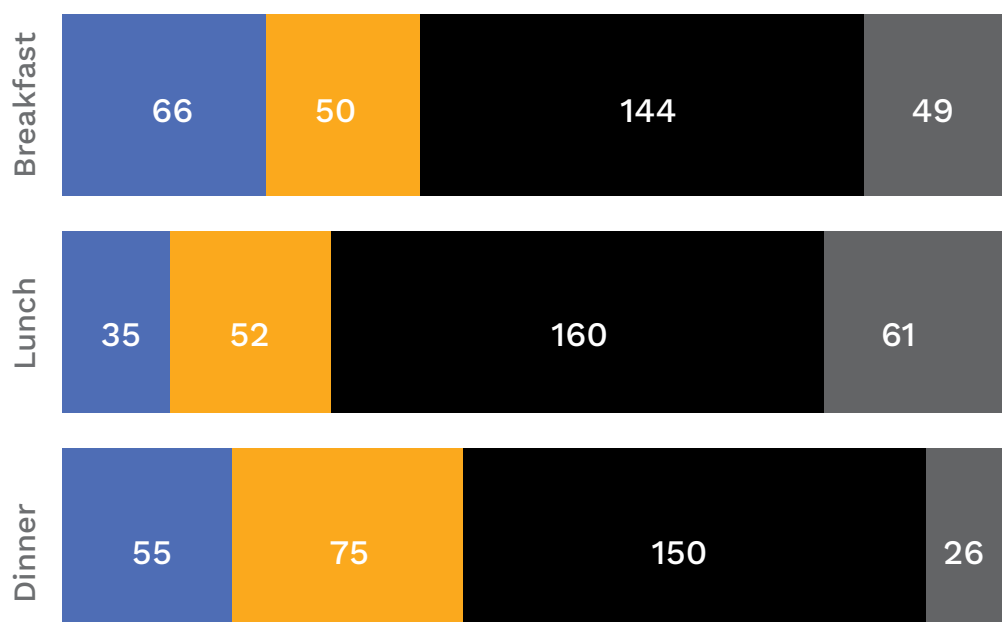
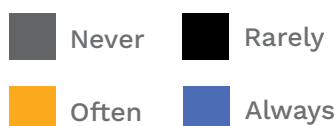
The number of food trays dumped in the trash tells an alarming story about the amount of food and financial waste at D.C.'s jails. "More meals are thrown away than eaten," one respondent attested. Six in ten residents responded that they "rarely" or "never" eat breakfast, which is served so early that many sleep through it. Seven in ten "rarely" or "never" eat lunch (most commonly bologna sandwiches) and six in ten respondents reported "rarely" or "never" eating dinner. Meal trays are brought automatically to all residents in their housing units or in their cells according to the daily count (there is no dining facility), leading to an inordinate amount of food waste, as well as a waste of taxpayer dollars.

Though the DC DOC claims to provide meals that meet federal nutrition standards, the reality is that the food served is so unappetizing that many residents refuse to eat it, leading to rampant rates of hunger and undernourishment. 85% of respondents reported avoiding the provided meals whenever possible and 94% of respondents said they feel hungry between meals. Those who can afford it typically rely on commissary purchases to help them feel full – most commissary items are high-sodium and/or high-sugar items, like instant ramen soups or cookies. One resident asked on their survey, "What good is it doing to meet the (daily) calorie intake with food that is not eaten? The inmates that have monetary support depend on the commissary purchase to eat weekly. Those without support, suffer."



“The quality of food is very poor – it forces me to spend more money on canteen and the canteen food gives me high blood pressure, so I feel like I’m in a lose-lose situation.”

Food waste:
How often do you eat the breakfast/lunch/
dinner provided?



Food and nutrition insecurity.

89% of respondents reported they are never served enough to feel full and that they are served processed foods “often” or “always”. Diets high in ultra-processed foods like white bread, soft drinks, meat patties, and soy-based textured vegetable protein (“TVP”) are known to cause weight gain and may have long-term negative effects on health.¹ One resident pleaded for change, “More fresh raw vegetables and fruits with EVERY MEAL. Stop serving cake, noodles, and sliced bread all in the same tray and telling us it is a rounded and nutritious diet.”

Almost 90% of residents said they “rarely” or “never” have access to fresh fruit, 75% say they “rarely” or “never” have access to fresh

vegetables. Fruits and vegetables are considered critical elements of a healthy diet according to the federal government’s Dietary Guidelines for Americans.² While frozen and canned fruits and vegetables can be cost-effective and equally nutritious, incorporating fresh produce into meals regularly is important for variety and palatability. Multiple residents echoed these concerns in their written comments, calling on the DC DOC to “stop serving us processed foods” and to “provide us with fresh uncooked fruit and vegetables every single day.”

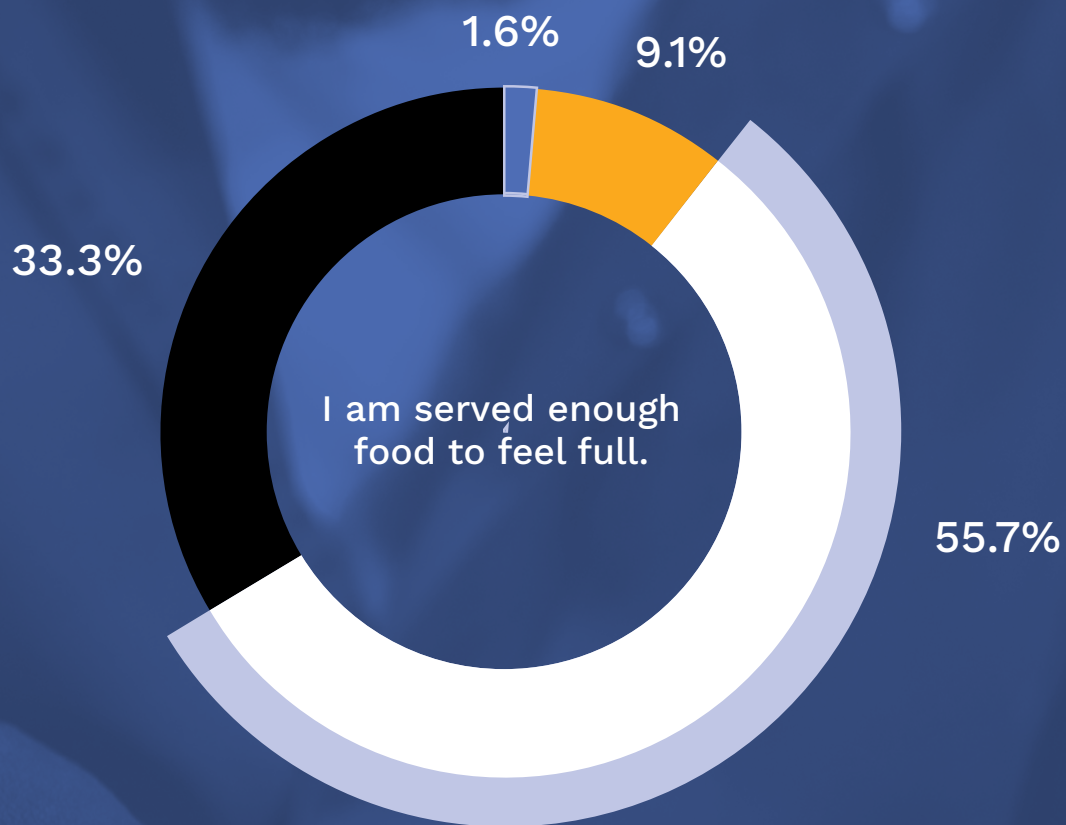
Neglecting the health and wellness of incarcerated residents is particularly harmful for the jail’s population of predominantly young, Black men from Wards 5, 7 and 8,³ many of whom come from and will eventually return to communities already struggling from lack of access to resources and systemic health inequities.

“It’s to the point that some of us go to sleep hungry, refusing to eat the food provided to us, and that’s not by choice.”

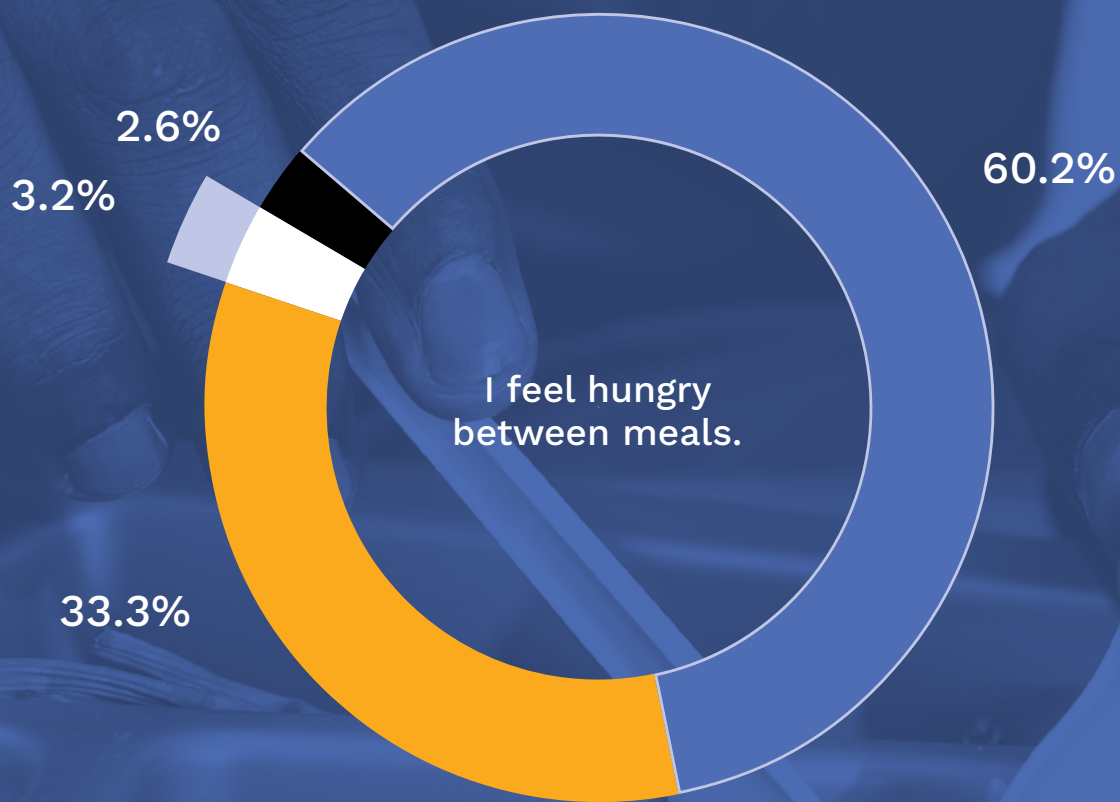
¹ D.C. Department of Corrections, Facts and Figures July 2023, 17, https://doc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/doc/publication/attachments/Facts%20and%20Figures%20PPT%20Workbook%20_%20Q3%20July%20FY2023.pdf; District Task Force on Jails and Justice, Jails & Justice: A Framework for Change, October 2019, 16, <https://www.courtexcellence.org/uploads/publications/FrameworkForChange.pdf>.

² Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2020-2025. December 2020. https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2021-03/Dietary_Guidelines_for_Americans-2020-2025.pdf

³ Hall KD, et al. Ultra-Processed Diets Cause Excess Calorie Intake and Weight Gain: An Inpatient Randomized Controlled Trial of Ad Libitum Food Intake. *Cell Metabolism*. 2019;30:67-77.



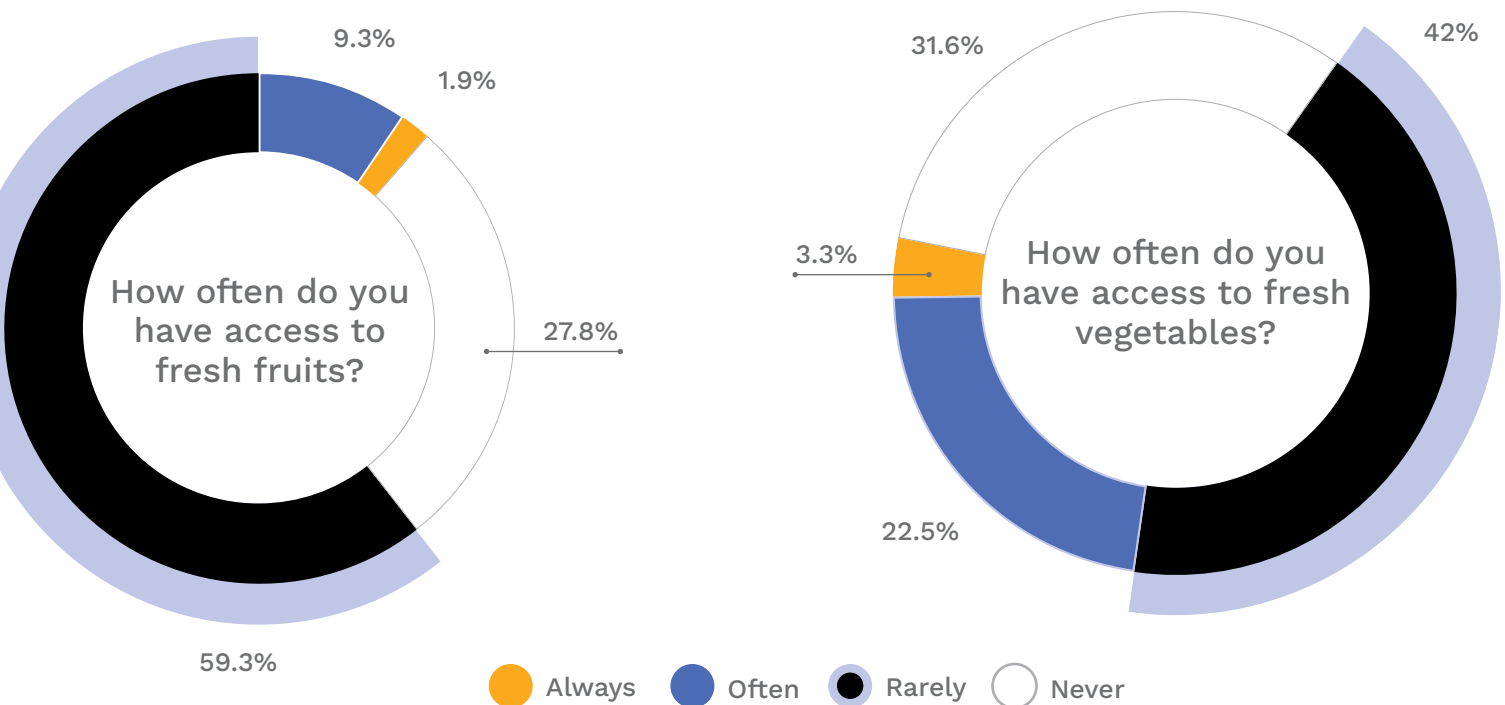
Agree Strongly Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree



“There are too many empty calories, carbs, etc...We are not provided with enough fresh fruits and vegetables, and I am concerned about the lack of nutritional content in the food overall.”

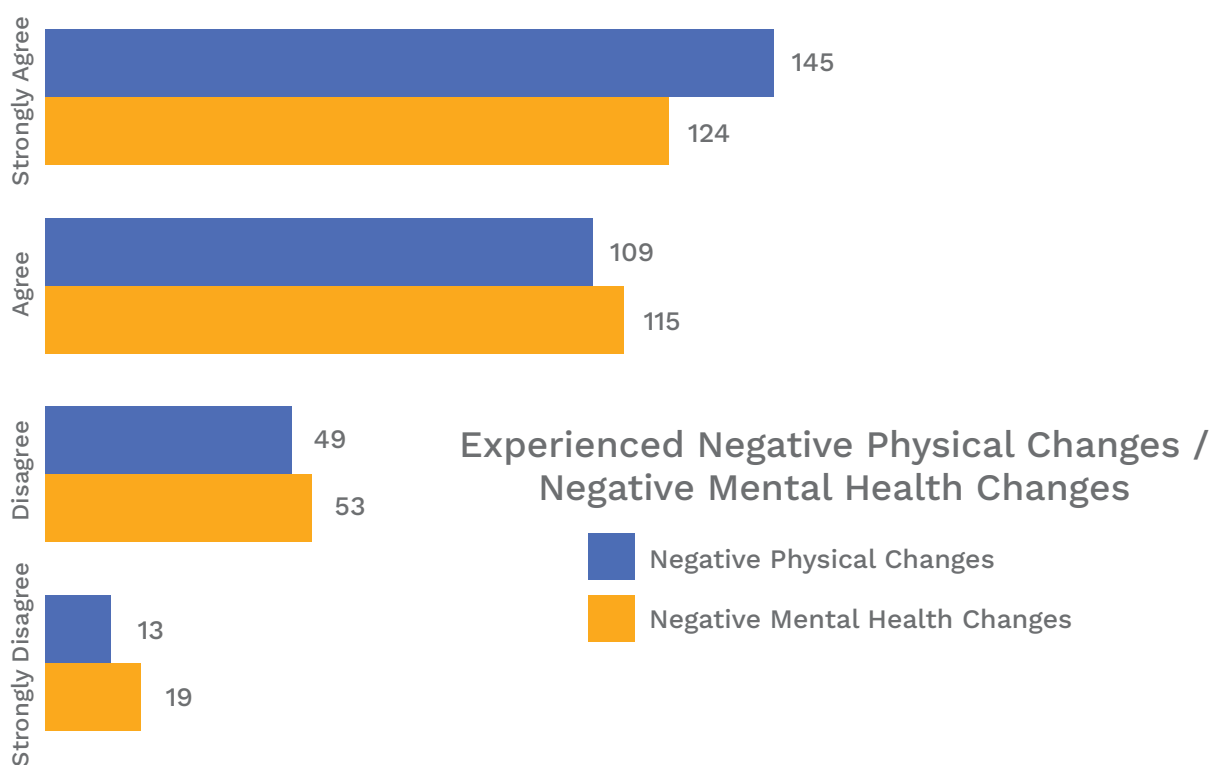
Access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

Almost nine out of ten residents said they “rarely” or “never” have access to fresh fruit, and three out of four say they “rarely” or “never” have access to fresh vegetables. Fruits and vegetables are considered critical elements of a healthy diet in the federal government’s Dietary Guidelines for Americans. While frozen and canned versions can be cost-effective and equally nutritious, incorporating fresh produce into meals regularly is important for variety and palatability. Multiple residents echoed these concerns in their written comments, calling on the D.C. DOC to “stop serving us processed foods” and to “provide us with fresh uncooked fruit and vegetables every single day.”



Negative changes to physical and mental health.

Four out of five residents reported having experienced negative changes to their physical health while incarcerated as a result of the food served. “Since being locked up here I have been diagnosed with high blood pressure and am borderline diabetic,” one respondent shared. Another stated, “I feel sick all the time.” Over 75% of residents noted having experienced negative changes to their mental health while incarcerated as a result of the food served and roughly 25% reported being on a medical diet. “I feel like an animal with the food they feed us,” one resident wrote. Another added, “The quality of food served in this place is humiliating.” The impacts of a dehumanizing food experience, especially over the course of weeks or months, can erode not only an individual’s health, but also their mental state and sense of self-worth.



“I want the staff that work and cook in the kitchen to ask themselves: If I or a loved one was being served or forced to eat this, how would that affect me?”

If you could change one thing?

If you could change one thing to improve eating at the D.C. Jail, what would it be?



**“Just make these surveys
matter so that the food can
really be better.”**

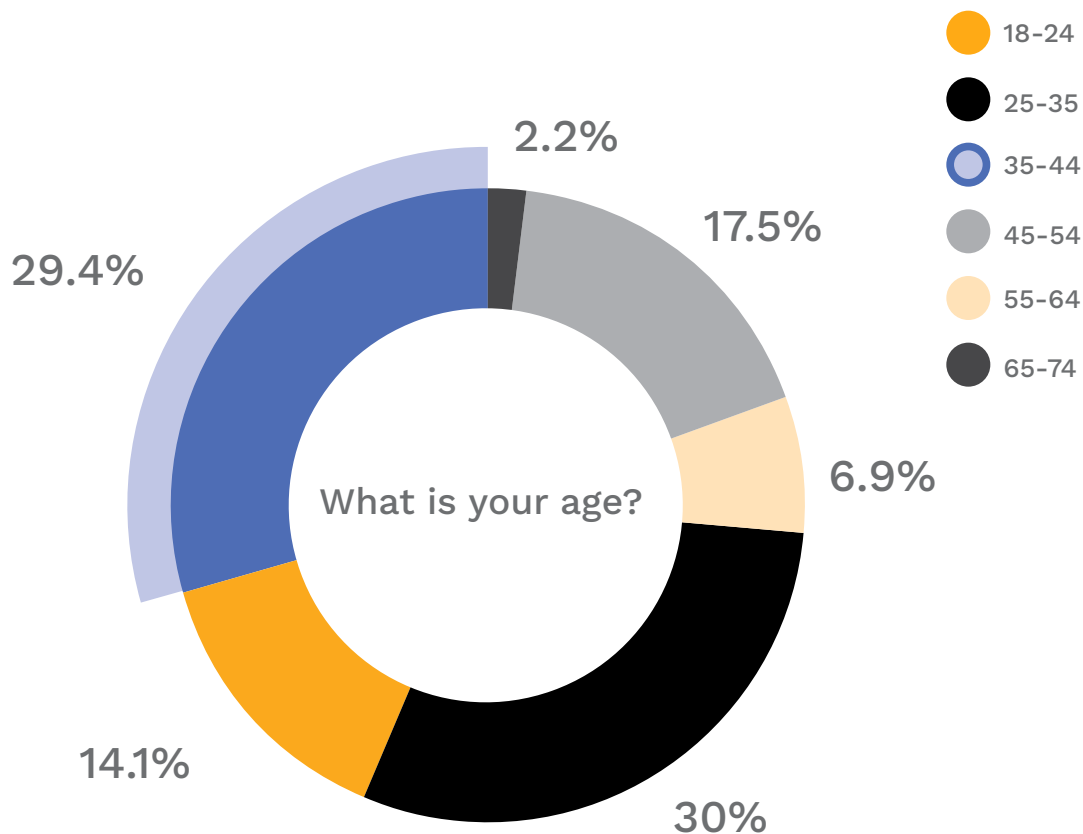
“Serve us meals you would eat.”

In their own voices.: Survey Results (Word Cloud) - "Describe the current meal options at the D.C. jail in three words."



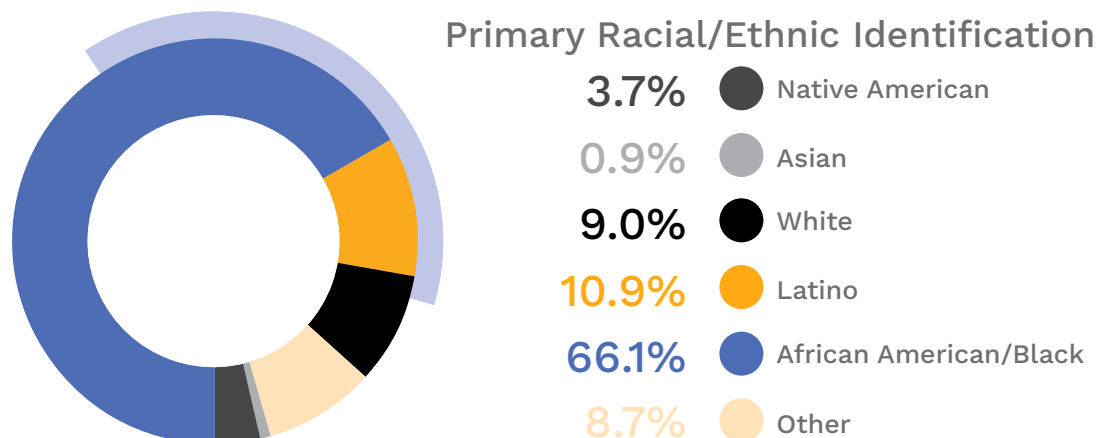
Respondents' Demographic Data.

AGE

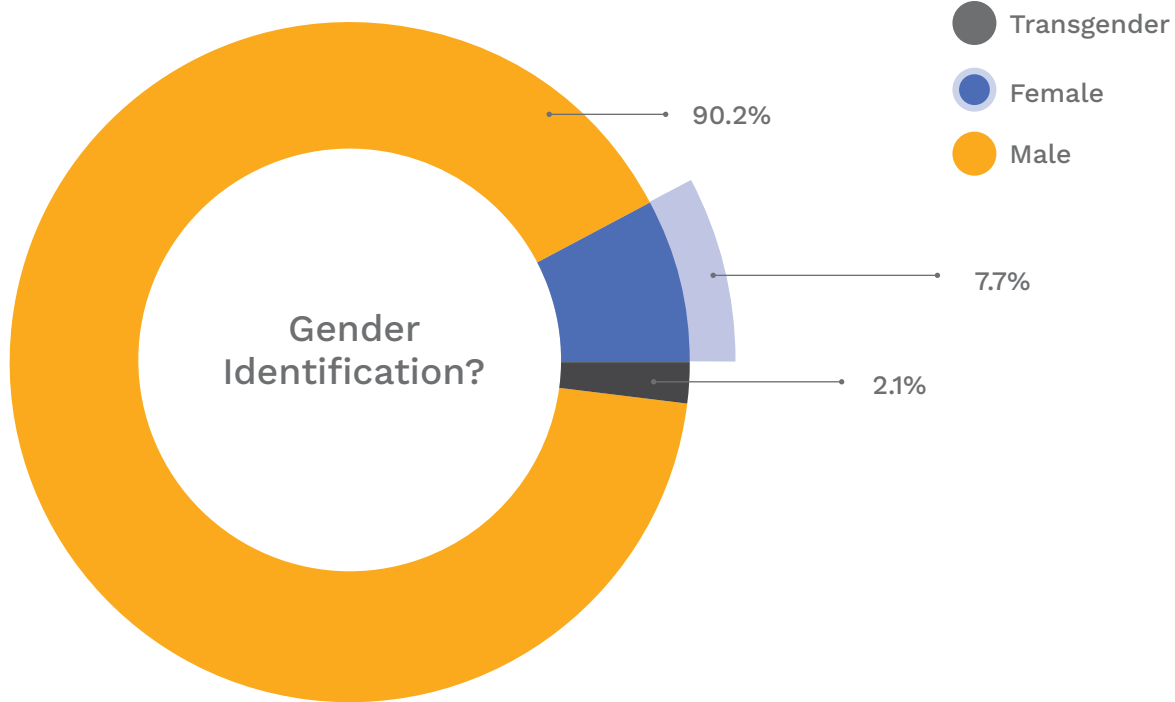


RACE

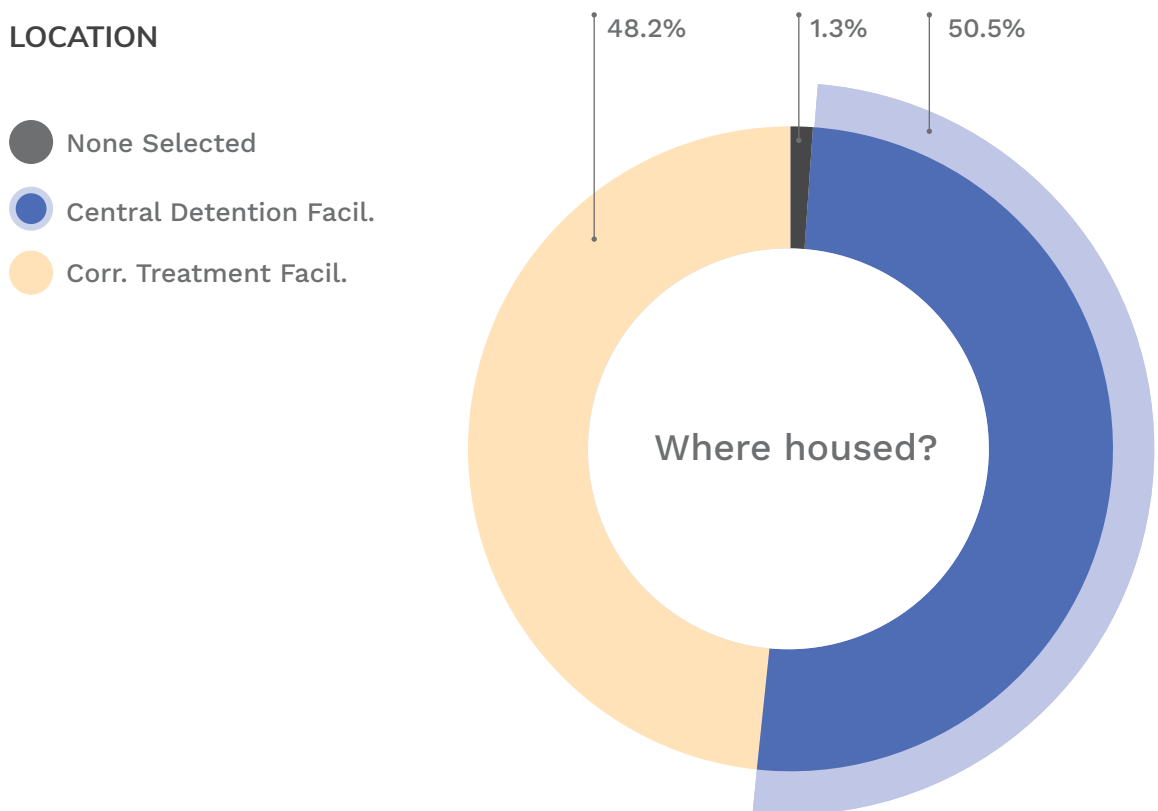
Note: The racial makeup of survey respondents does not correspond precisely to the jail's demographics, which are usually over 90% Black.



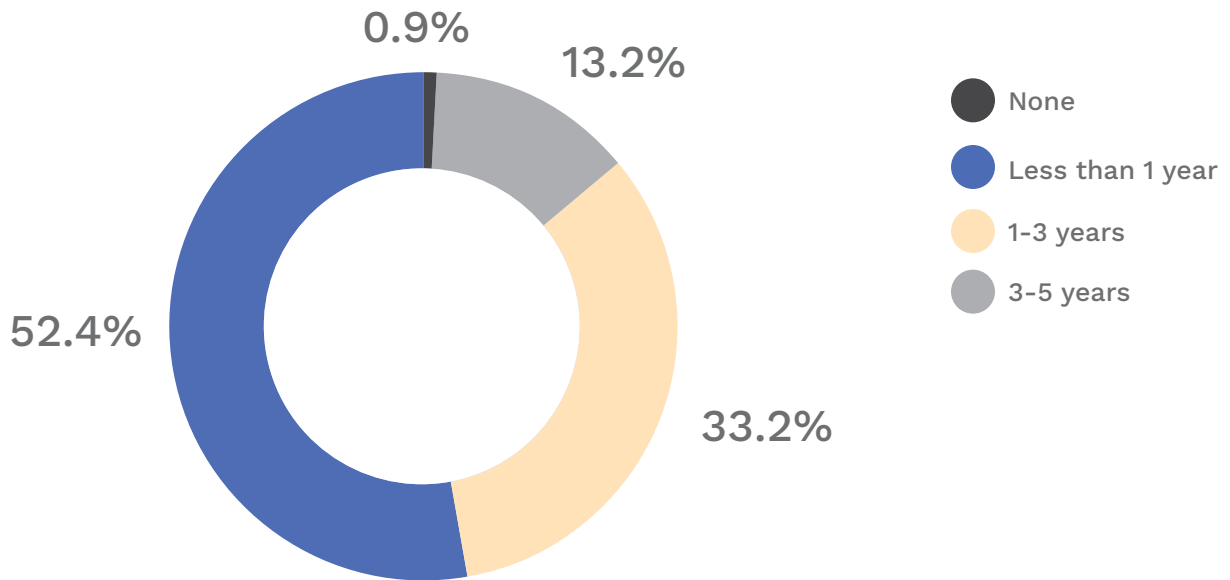
GENDER



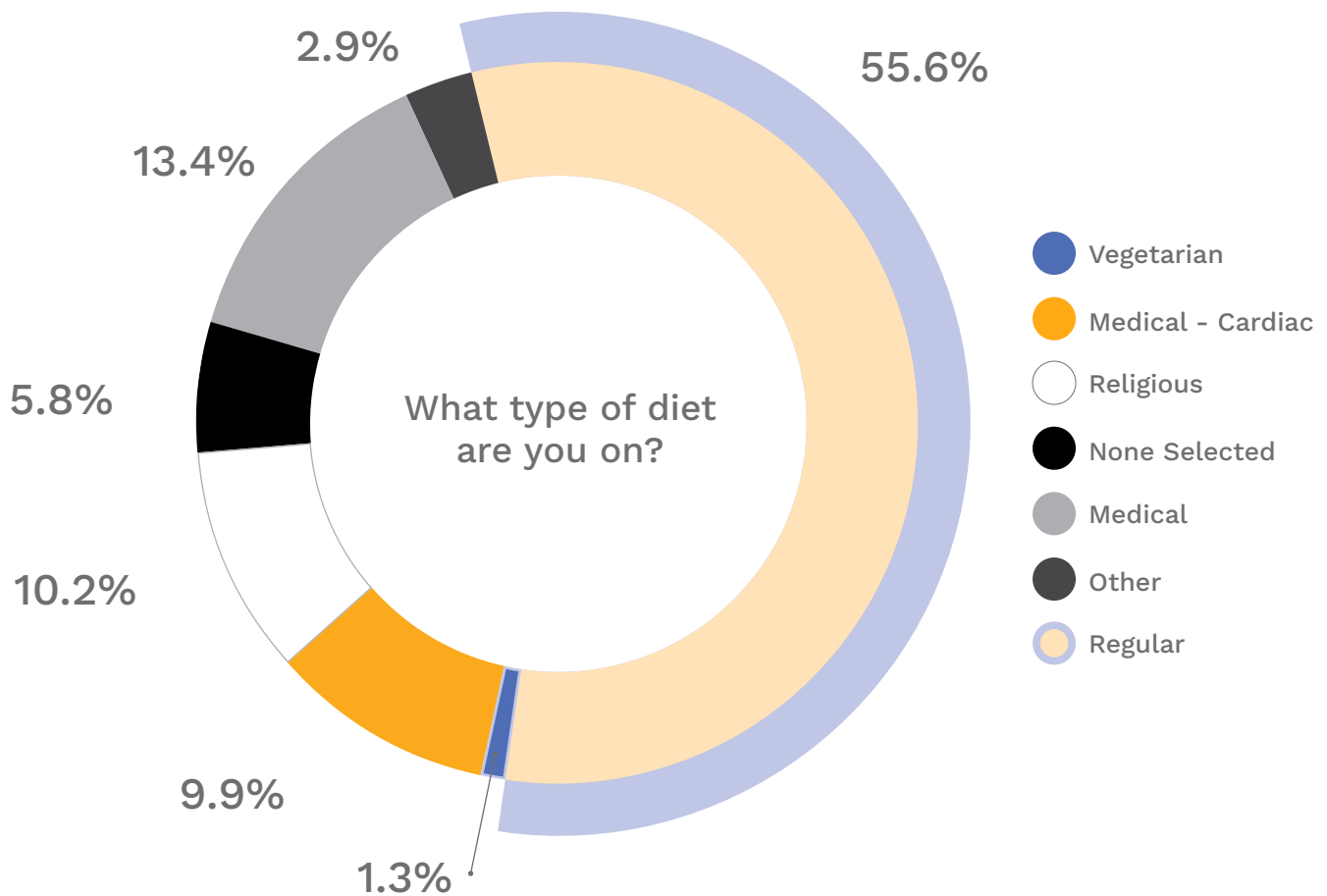
LOCATION



LENGTH OF INCARCERATION



DIET



dcgreens

810 7th Street NE
Washington, DC 20002 • 202.601.9200 • info@dcgreens.org



d cgreens.org



DC Greens



[dc_greens](https://twitter.com/dc_greens)



[dc_greens](https://www.instagram.com/dc_greens)