

FOOD ACCESS AND QUALITY IN NEW YORK'S PRISONS

Incarcerated people in New York's prisons are entitled to **three meals per day**. These meals are required to maintain certain **standards of nutritional content and sanitation**.



Incarcerated people in New York's prisons can access food from three sources:

The Mess Hall

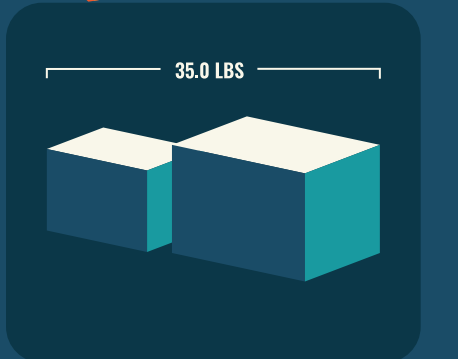
which serves meals processed and distributed from centralized Cook/Chill Production Centers.

The Commissary¹

through which incarcerated people can purchase prepackaged food (and other) items.

Food Packages²

Incarcerated people can receive two food packages up to a total of 35 lbs. from the outside, a way for families to deliver food into the prison



CANY found significant problems with food access and quality in New York's prisons. This fact sheet provides **key facts and issues related to these problems**.

¹ New York Departments of Corrections and Community Supervision, "Commissary Operating Procedures Manual," Rev. (2-2020), p. 3 (obtained through FOIL request)

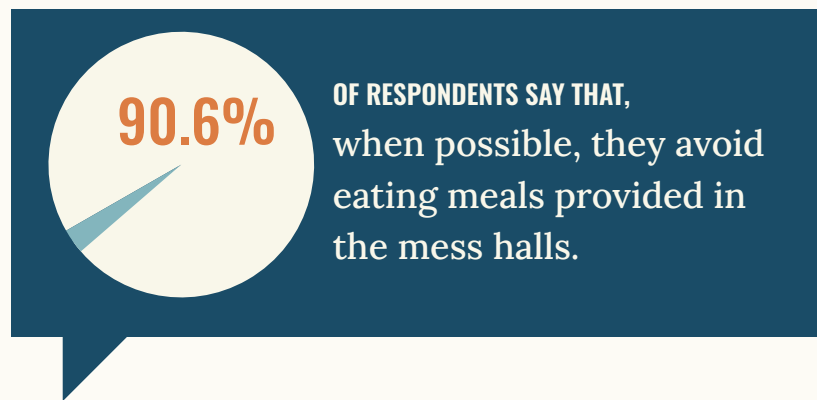
² DOCCS Directive #4911, retrieved from <https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2020/11/4911.pdf>

THE PROBLEM IS: FOOD IS INACCESSIBLE.

FOOD IS INACCESSIBLE

FOOD IS UNHEALTHY

FOOD IS PUNISHMENT



One reason for this avoidance of the mess halls is the poor food quality.

In the Cook/Chill method of food preparation, food products are quickly steam or water-cooked and then frozen at a central processing plant, in which they are packaged and then distributed across the state prisons.

FINDINGS

Incarcerated people complain about their food options in the mess halls, which provide meals prepared by the Cook/Chill method.



92.4%

of respondents complain that the food is too bland or tasteless.



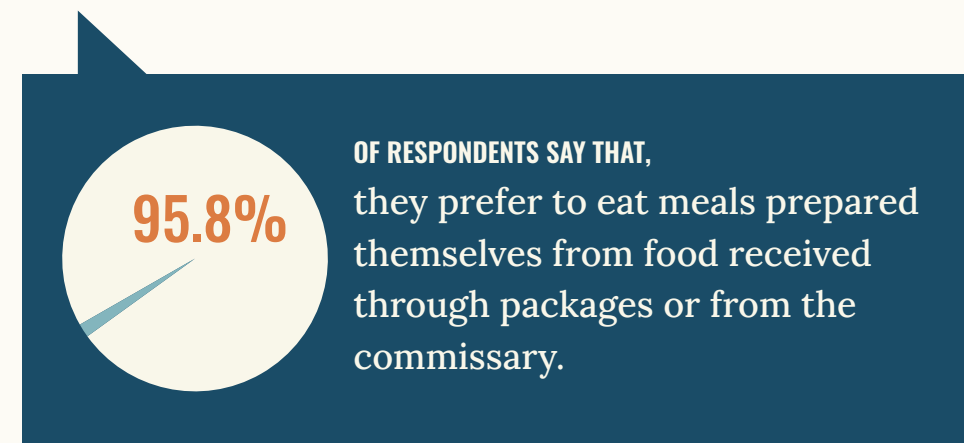
93.3%

of respondents say they skip meals because of the poor food quality.

WHEN MESS HALL FOOD IS UNDESIRABLE

Incarcerated people must rely on food either purchased from the commissary or received via packages from home. But...

these sources also present problems, because unlike the mess hall provisions, food from these sources can place a significant financial burden on incarcerated people and their families.



37.9%

say they can afford to buy healthy food options at the commissary.

AT THE COMMISSARY,

Many incarcerated people must use their limited funds to buy food products, many of which are unhealthy, processed items.

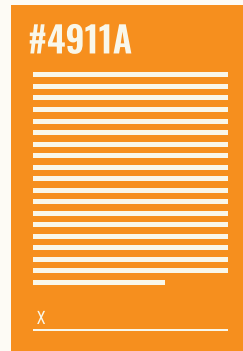
74.6%

say that the healthy food options cost more than the less-healthy options.

RELIANCE ON MAILED PACKAGES ALSO

worsens socioeconomic inequalities, as the families of incarcerated people must either pay to send packages or travel hours to visit the prison in order for essential food items to reach their loved ones on the inside.

And in recent years, DOCCS has tried to prohibit the direct mailing of packages to incarcerated people. Implemented in a pilot program in 2018, DOCCS' Directive #4911A mandated that families, friends, and organizations that wanted to send food packages to incarcerated people had to rely exclusively on a list of six approved food vendors, whose items were generally low quality and unhealthy.



Due to backlash, Governor Andrew Cuomo has since suspended Directive #4911A, but full termination of the program has not yet happened.

Source: Worth Rises, "Packaging Love: Protecting Incarcerated People and their Loved Ones from Draconian Package Restrictions" (2018).

AS A RESULT OF THESE NUMEROUS SOCIOECONOMIC BARRIERS TO FOOD ACCESS

- ▷ 85.8% of incarcerated respondents say that the quality of food that they have access to is limited by their or their family's finances.

These barriers are leaving incarcerated people hungry, poorly nutritioned, humiliated, isolated from their loved ones, and **at higher risks for mental and physical health issues stemming from unacceptable food accessibility and quality standards.**

THE PROBLEM IS: FOOD IS UNHEALTHY.

PREVIOUS CANY RESEARCH HAS SHOWN

that "people in prison have historically had poor access to health care **even before incarceration,**"

and that the systemic problems with health care services in prison leaves incarcerated people at a higher risk of developing or worsening chronic health conditions.

Source: Correctional Association of New York, "Fact Sheet: Key health needs and challenges in New York's prisons" (2019)

POOR FOOD QUALITY

plays a significant role in the health of incarcerated people.



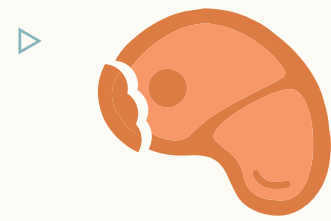
One of the most glaring issues is the lack of access to fresh produce in prisons. Most often, it is replaced by highly processed items that lack the nutritional value of fresh food.



90.6%

of respondents say that, they would like more fresh fruits and vegetables.

INCARCERATED PEOPLE ALSO LACK ACCESS TO FRESH PROTEIN SOURCES.



89.9%

an overwhelming majority of respondents, call for more protein-rich food, specifically citing the increase in soy-based foods — as opposed to meat — as an inadequate source of nutrition.



95.8%

of respondents have concerns about the soy content in food, in fact.

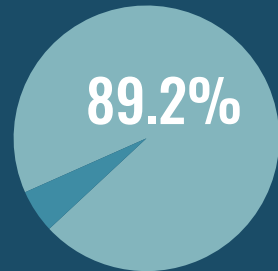
GREAT CONCERN

Incarcerated people have expressed great concern about the health quality of soy-based meals, and while research does not reveal conclusive links between soy and significant health issues,

the extremely high incidence of anxiety over soy products in prison, and the complaints about its low quality, must be taken seriously.

IN ADDITION TO THE COMPLAINTS

About the poor nutritional content of food in the mess halls, incarcerated people report that food in the prisons is unsafe.



89.2%
OF RESPONDENTS SAY THAT, DUE TO ISSUES SUCH AS the poor handling of COVID-19 in the prisons and a general lack of cleanliness, there are times when they have concerns about the safety of the food served to them, including concerns about food temperature or food-borne illnesses.

THE PROBLEM IS: FOOD IS PUNISHMENT.

Though incarcerated people are entitled to adequate amounts of nutritious and safe food as a right survey data suggests that food has been systematically used as a tool of punishment in New York’s prisons.

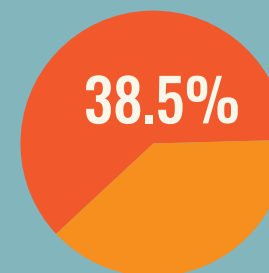
The inaccessibility of healthy food often forces incarcerated people to take desperate measures to ensure that they get essential nutrition.

These desperate measures put people in prison at a **higher risk for even more** punitive consequences.



61.9%

of respondents say they have to violate rules to get access to more healthy food than is provided.



38.5%
OF THE INCARCERATED RESPONDENTS WHO HAVE WORKED IN FOOD SERVICE IN THE PRISONS, SAY they’ve been instructed not to feed another incarcerated person.

FINDINGS

Data also suggests that food is being deliberately withheld from incarcerated people.



The use of food as punishment extends beyond the time spent incarcerated. It can impact the lives of formerly incarcerated people and their families.

Recent research done in New York City shows that a history of personal involvement with the criminal justice system **approximately doubles the likelihood of moderate-to-severe food insufficiency**, which in turn further worsens health and socioeconomic inequalities.

Source: [Journal pre-proof] Alexander Testa and Dylan B. Jackson, "Criminal Justice System Involvement and Food Insufficiency: Findings from the 2018 New York City Community Health Survey," *Annals of Epidemiology* (2020)

OUR MISSION

CANY provides independent oversight of prisons in New York State in order to promote transparency and accountability; safeguard the human and civil rights of incarcerated people; eliminate harmful practices and policies; and decrease the use of incarceration in New York.

OUR VISION

CANY envisions a future in which our criminal justice system uses an entirely different approach to responding to violence and social concerns. In this vision, prisons look nothing like they do today: far fewer people are held for much shorter sentences in transformed conditions that promote health, safety, and justice for incarcerated individuals, communities, and society at large.



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