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“We're Hungry in Here”: New Report Shines a Light on Rampant Hunger, Food Waste, and Unsafe Eating Conditions in DC's Jails

WASHINGTON, D.C., Nov. 6, 2023 - Rancid milk, moldy bread, and green bologna – when 330 residents of the D.C. jails were surveyed about food and nutrition, the vast majority reported being served spoiled or otherwise unsafe food on an occasional to frequent basis. Roaches or rodents in meals, food poisoning, and gastric distress were also widely reported. The report, [“We're Hungry in Here” – Food Insecurity Behind the Walls of D.C.'s Jails.](#) paints a damning picture of rampant hunger, inedible food that often goes to waste, and rare access to fresh fruits and vegetables inside D.C.'s jails. The report was compiled by local nonprofit organization [DC Greens](#) with support from returned citizen Daniel Rosen, who spent a year in the jail, using survey data collected by former jail resident and Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner Leonard Bishop.

Key findings include:

- **Hunger is ubiquitous behind bars, and most residents attribute negative physical and mental health changes to the food served.**
 - 89% of incarcerated residents report they never feel full after a meal and 94% say they feel hungry between meals.
 - 80% report experiencing negative changes to their physical health as a result of the food served and 75% report negative impacts on their mental health.
- **Highly processed food is served in excess, while fresh and healthy produce is rare.**
 - 90% of residents say they “rarely” or “never” have access to fresh fruit and 75% report they “rarely” or “never” have access to fresh vegetables.
 - 89% report being served highly processed food “often” or “always,” with “Textured Vegetable Protein” (TVP), bologna, and unidentifiable meat patties as staples.
- **Residents avoid eating the meals provided, contributing to high rates of hunger and food waste.**
 - 85% of respondents say they avoid eating the meals provided, whenever possible. 60% of residents report “rarely” or “never” eating breakfast, 70% “rarely” or “never” eat lunch, and 60% “rarely” or “never” eat dinner.
 - 70% of D.C. jail residents report having been served spoiled or rotten food.

The report will be discussed as part of a [“Community Conversation” event](#) on November 7, 2023, at 5:30 p.m., at 1101 Connecticut Avenue NW.

“Three times a day, we tell the District’s sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, sisters and

brothers in D.C.'s jails that we don't care about them, when they're handed inedible, unhealthy food trays," said Daniel Rosen. "These surveys make clear what's usually hidden behind jail walls. We can do a lot better than this, and public health and public safety demand that we must – because our loved ones in the jail are coming home to our communities, and it's to everyone's benefit that they be healthier, not sicker, when they do."

"We're hungry in here – HELP!" wrote one survey respondent, underscoring the urgent need for reform within the jail food system.

Roughly one quarter of incarcerated residents in the D.C. jails responded to the survey on food service, which was conducted as part of a collective effort by the Redstone Center at George Washington University, DC Justice Lab, DC Greens, and other groups to inform D.C. Council deliberations and public dialogue around the [FRESH STARTS Act](#). Introduced by Councilmember Brooke Pinto in February of 2023, if passed, the Act would significantly reform DC's jail food service and create a healthier and safer system with less waste.

"To create long-term safety, we need to look at the whole life cycle of violence – from preventing crime to putting an end to recidivism," says DC Councilmember and FRESH STARTS Act sponsor Brooke Pinto. "The food options at the DC Jail must be improved to ensure proper nutrition and that people in the District's custody have the best chance for rehabilitation. FRESH STARTS will ensure access to meals that provide nutrition while also providing incarcerated residents hospitality job training so that upon exiting Department of Corrections facilities, they can re-enter community with training and opportunity, effectively interrupting cycles of violence."

The survey's reports of widespread hunger, food waste, and spoiled and unappealing food come despite the District spending more than \$6 million dollars annually on its contract with Aramark for food service in D.C. jail facilities.

"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," wrote one survey respondent.

"The neglect in our jail food system is borne disproportionately by community members who already see the least investment in their neighborhoods and have the least access to resources," said DC Greens Policy Director Reana Kim. "Numerous [studies](#) show the harm of serving inadequate, unhealthy food and the many benefits of healthy meal programs for wellness and rehabilitation. The FRESH STARTS Act will lead to positive outcomes for incarcerated residents, jail staff, and the community at-large."

"Just make these surveys matter so that the food can really be better," wrote one survey respondent.

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ABOUT DC GREENS

DC Greens advances health equity by building a just and resilient food system. Founded in 2009, DC Greens is a multiracial organization that focuses on creating cross-sector collaborations, advancing equitable, city-wide policy solutions, and working in solidarity with marginalized communities experiencing poverty and food insecurity. Our vision is a capital city in which health equity is a central value, healthy food is a human right, and all residents have the resources to shape and control policies and programs for their own communities. Learn more at dkgreens.org.

ABOUT DC JUSTICE LAB

[DC Justice Lab](#) is a team of law and policy experts researching, organizing, and advocating for large-scale changes to the District of Columbia's criminal legal system. We develop smarter safety solutions that are evidence-driven, community-rooted, and racially just. We aim to fully transform the District's approach to public safety and make it a national leader in justice reform.

ABOUT THE SUMNER M. REDSTONE GLOBAL CENTER FOR PREVENTION AND WELLNESS

Located within the Milken Institute School of Public Health at The George Washington University, the [Sumner M. Redstone Global Center for Prevention and Wellness](#) recognizes that chronic disease, health inequities, and climate change are all interconnected and share common drivers. The Redstone Center works within the University and with community partners to support research, share expertise, and advance evidence-based policy solutions to address these interlinked public health threats.

ABOUT DANIEL ROSEN

[Daniel Rosen](#), 53, is a returned citizen and longtime DC resident. He is a DC-based writer and justice reform advocate who was incarcerated in both Virginia and Washington, D.C. from 2015 to 2021. A year of that time was spent in the DC Jail's CTF and CDF facilities, where he taught GED classes. Prior to incarceration, he spent almost twenty years in public service, in both the non-profit and governmental sectors.