



THE FINANCIAL
JUSTICE PROJECT
SAN FRANCISCO

Survey of People Incarcerated in San Francisco County Jails:

The Impact of the Cost of Phone Calls and Commissary Items

**San Francisco County Jail
Jail Telephones & Commissary Survey**

Participation in this survey is anonymous. Individual survey results will not be shared in any way that will make it possible to identify the participants. All questions are optional - you do not need to answer any of the questions that you are not comfortable answering. Survey results will be used by organizations working to make phone calls free and lower the cost of commissary items in San Francisco County Jails and jails across the state. The groups who are involved in this effort, and managing this survey are: Young Women's Freedom Center, Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, Community Housing Partnership and Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, with the support of the San Francisco Sheriff's Department.

San Francisco Mayor London Breed and Sheriff Nemecy announced in June 2019 their plan to make county jail phone calls free and to end markups on commissary items. The Sheriff's Department is rolling out these changes over the coming year, and no later than June 2020.

If you would prefer not to participate in this survey, please mark this box: Decline to participate

OPTIONAL

55 Female African American 216 0
Age Gender Race Current Length of Stay Jail/Unit/Room

What is your current housing status? General Population Ad Seg Lock Up Other

Telephone Questions

How many people are in your unit (how many people do you have to share the phones with)? 40
How many phones are in your unit? 10 Is that enough? Yes No

Are these phones rolling or fixed? Rolling Fixed

Do all the phones in your housing unit regularly work? Yes No If no, can you estimate how often they are not working? Yes No

Do you have any trouble getting access to a phone? Yes No
If yes, can you please provide details about this issue? sometimes were denied phone time

What is the connection quality of the phone calls? ok How many phone calls/minutes do you get per day? 2
How many calls do you currently make per day? 2 How many phone calls/minutes per day would you like to have? 6

Do you purchase calling cards? phone time Yes No
Do your loved ones have to set up accounts with phone providers to accept your calls? Yes No

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**San Francisco County Jail
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Are you ever able to use the phone outside of the usual phone time? Yes No
(Please explain) only able to use during free time and once in the day where you have to sign up for the time

When are you able to make phone calls? (Please specify between Mon - Fri, Sat - Sun, and Holiday schedules) Mon-Fri: 1x in day w/sign up for time w/sign up SAT Sun: 2x per day during free time only

What is the best time for you to get in touch with friends and/or family members via phone? 5-8am 8-11am 11-2pm 2-5pm 5-8pm 8-11pm

Are you given a free call if there is a family emergency? Yes No Are there any signs letting you know your rights to phone calls? Yes No

On average, how much money do you and the people you call spend on phone calls per week in total? \$25-\$40

Do you receive any notice that your telephone calls are being recorded? Yes No

If yes, is there a clear exception stated for phone calls with your attorney? Yes No

Who do you make phone calls to? Parent Child Sibling Significant Other Other (please explain) 16-15 mins

How much time are you provided for phone use each day? 10-15 mins

What does the ability to make phone calls while in jail mean to you? it means to be back in the outside world that my family knows I'm alright it means I can get things handled through them means love

How would free phone calls impact your time in jail? it would be such a hardship on me due to lack of funds the spouse who family have to chase commissary/phone time

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**San Francisco County Jail
Jail Telephones & Commissary Survey**

Commissary Questions

Are you able to order Commissary? Yes No

If yes, how do you pay for it? my family sometimes send me money

If no, please explain

On average, how much do you spend a week on Commissary items in total? 25-45

Is there a limit to what you can spend on Commissary, weekly or monthly? Yes No

If yes, what is the limit? \$100

Please explain any other limits to your buying Commissary items You can buy only 900 commissary at any given time

What kinds of Commissary items do you purchase? chips, noodles, candy, chicken, cookies, kool-aid

Do you believe Commissary items are expensive? Yes No
If yes, please explain. noodles are more in stock 25

Are there times when you don't buy necessities because you can't afford them? Yes No
What items do you consider necessities? noodles, chicken, sausage, brown rice

How often is there an error on your order? Always Usually Rarely Never

How often does the vendor provide support when there's an error on your order? Always Usually Rarely Never

Please explain There is no way to contact vendor personally

When there is an error, does the company provide a reimbursement on your package? Yes No
What other items would you like to see offered in the commissary? Healthy snacks, dried fruits, seasonal produce, frozen hot dogs, beef jerky, farm kits, Real Soap (Dove), Dove washable deodorant, Tropicana orange juice, cream cheese, low fat cereals, food, fresh fruit

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In June 2019, San Francisco announced it would become the first county in the nation to make all phone calls from jail free and end all county markups on jail store items. San Francisco took this action to ease the financial burden on incarcerated people and their families and improve reentry outcomes.

The San Francisco Jail Justice Coalition drafted a survey to get feedback from incarcerated people on the impact of the cost of phone calls and commissary items in San Francisco County Jails and to inform implementation of these reforms. In August 2020, a new contract was implemented and all phone calls became free in San Francisco jails. The [People Over Profits ordinance](#) was unanimously passed by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and enacted to make these reforms permanent.

The economic burden of phone calls and commissary costs primarily fall on low-income women of color who are supporting loved ones inside. In San Francisco, we estimate that 80% of phone call costs are paid by incarcerated people's support network. [Research](#) shows that increased communication between incarcerated people and their loved ones increases safety within jails, decreases recidivism, and improves reentry outcomes after release. Phone calls are people's lifelines to their support networks.

We are sharing the results of this survey to inform other counties that are considering similar reforms.

METHODOLOGY

637

completed surveys

The San Francisco Jail Justice Coalition collaborated with the San Francisco Sheriff's Office and The San Francisco Financial Justice Project and distributed and collected paper surveys across all jails between July 22 and August 1, 2019. There were more than 750 surveys collected. 637 completed, and 100+ declined to answer. Five organizations from the San Francisco Jail Justice Coalition entered the written responses into SurveyMonkey for analysis.

\$300+

Prior to these reforms, if an incarcerated person made a 15-minute call in the morning and evening, these

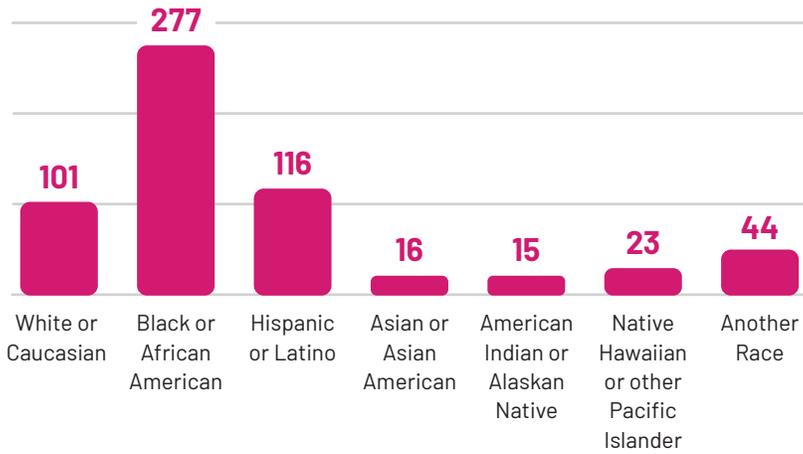
calls would cost \$300 over the average jail stay. Items in the jail store were marked up an average of 43%.

↑ 43%

DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENTS

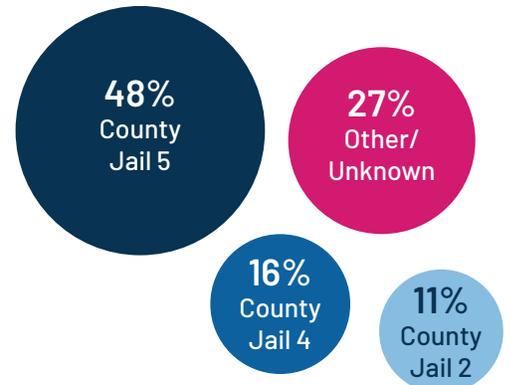
Race

Answered: 567 Skipped: 70



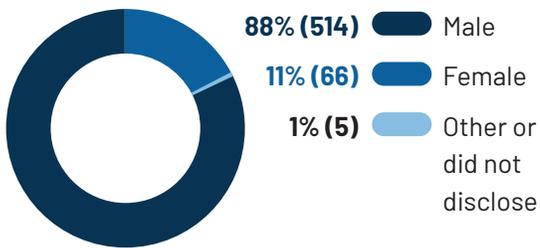
Jail Location

Answered: 586 Skipped: 51



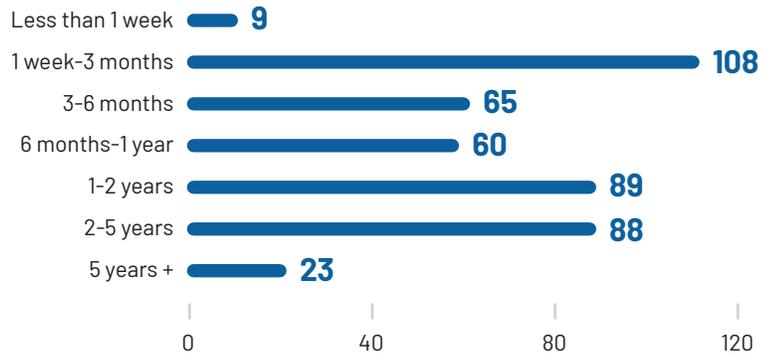
Gender

Answered: 585 Skipped: 52



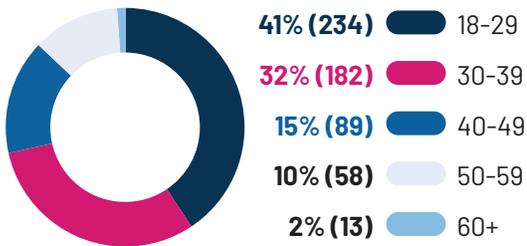
Current Length of Stay

Answered: 442 Skipped: 195



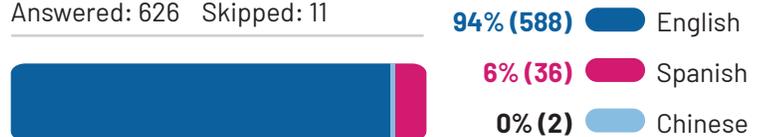
Age

Answered: 576 Skipped: 61



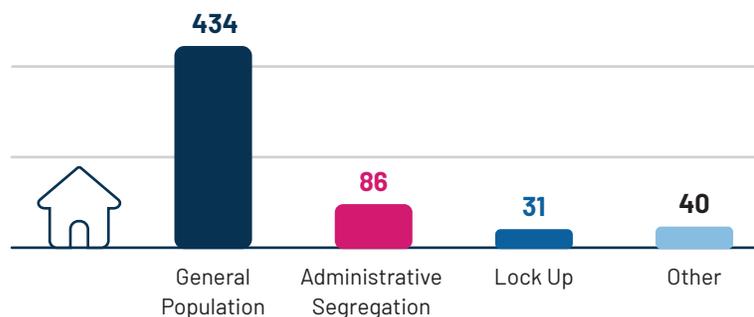
Language of Survey

Answered: 626 Skipped: 11



What is Your Current Housing Status?

Answered: 591 Skipped: 46



KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE AUGUST 2019 SURVEY

Phone Access



On average there were **4 phones** for approximately **48 people**.



86% of incarcerated people believed there are **not enough phones**.



Do you have any trouble getting access to a phone? **58%** said yes.

Phone Connection Quality

Do all the phones in your housing unit regularly work?



25% said no

Phone Usage



PER WEEK ON PHONE COSTS

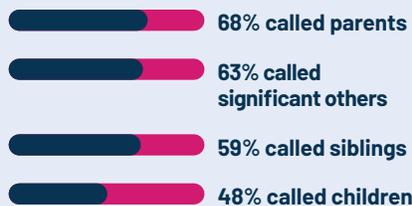
On average, how much money do you and the people you call spend on phone calls per week in total?

- Incarcerated people and their loved ones spent an average of \$50-100 per week on phone costs.
- On average, **incarcerated women** and their loved ones spent \$20-\$50 per week. **Incarcerated males** and their loved ones spent \$50-100 per week.



How many calls do you currently make per day? Most incarcerated people made **2 calls or less per day**.

Who do you make phone calls to?



Women were more likely to call children. Men were more likely to call parents, significant others, and siblings.

How many calls / minutes per day would you like to have? More than half indicated **30-100 minutes** of phone time per day.

How many phone calls / minutes do you get per day? Most reported getting **15-30 minutes** of phone calls per day.

What does the ability to make phone calls while in jail mean to you?

“ Everything.

“ It is my only means to communicate with my son each day, as an active father, while I am awaiting trial and my release. It allows me to work on relationship issues with my partner.

How would free phone calls impact your time in jail?

“ It would allow me to contact more loved ones who cannot afford to access collect calls like my sister who currently has custody of my daughter.

“ It would help me put less of a burden on my family.

Phone Safety and Privacy

Do you feel like you can speak openly on phone calls to your attorney?



Do you feel like you can speak openly on phone calls to other people in your life?



Are there any signs letting you know your rights to phone calls?



Are you given a free call if there is a family emergency?



Commissary Costs

Are you able to order commissary?



Incarcerated men were more likely to be able to order commissary (**80% yes, 20% no**) than incarcerated women (**70% yes, 30% no**).

On average, how much do you spend on commissary items in total?

On average, incarcerated people and their loved ones spend **\$70-\$100 per week** on commissary items.

Incarcerated men and their loved ones spent more (\$71-\$100 on average), and incarcerated women and their loved ones spent \$50-\$100 on average.



What kinds of commissary items do you buy the most? Responses by category, in order of frequency

Food	Hygiene/Cosmetics	Other
1. Soup, chips	1. Soap	1. Phone Cards
2. Rice, beans, meat, fish	2. Deodorant	2. Stationary (envelopes, stamps, holiday cards)
3. Coffee, sweets, snacks	3. Shampoo	3. Glasses/Shoes
4. Oatmeal, cheese, tortillas	4. Toothpaste	4. Books

Do you believe commissary items are expensive?



- Many people complained that even when they do spend the maximum of \$100 per week, they still don't feel they are able to purchase enough food.
- "I understand it's a business but feel exploited. This is jail not a 7-Eleven."
- "I'm so hungry here and commissary would help tremendously—the hardest thing is going hungry to sleep."



Are there times when you don't buy necessities because you can't afford them? **89% said yes.**

3X

People's most common estimate of the price markup was **3 times** above cost.

What items do you consider necessities?

- “ Anything to satisfy the hunger.
- “ Hygiene, lotion, hair gel (for court appearances).

Incarcerated people would like to see higher quality, fresh, and healthier options available for purchase.

- “ More healthier items, whether dried vegetables, nuts and fruits, plum, cranberry juice.
- “ Omega 3's and vitamins.

How do you pay for commissary?

- “ Wife/family
- “ I have to wait until outside family has enough to send me money.

Many respondents stated that with limited funds, they were choosing between:

- staying in touch with their families
- eating enough, and
- staying clean

In Person Visits



Do you receive in-person visits?
56% said no.



Does your family have trouble getting visiting time slots?
60% said yes.



Many noted the lack of contact during visits.



FREE



Many believed **free phone calls would increase the number of in-person visits** due to increased connection and increased ability to coordinate with loved ones.

What do in-person visits mean to you?

- “ In person visit means a lot to me because I am a father and seeing my kids is everything to me.
- “ In person visits mean the world. To see someone face to face (albeit through the plexiglass) changes my week. Only thing I look forward to. Connects me to my life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the organizations in the San Francisco Jail Justice Coalition who collaborated with us to develop the survey and analyze the results. We would also like to thank the San Francisco Sheriff's Office for their input to the survey, as well as their work to distribute and collect the surveys.



This report was made possible with philanthropic support for The San Francisco Financial Justice Project, provided by: Crankstart, Arnold Ventures, The San Francisco Foundation, and The Walter and Elise Haas Fund.