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 loves 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.

![San Francisco Jail Justice Coalition](https://example.com/sanjac55.png)

**Survey of People Incarcerated in San Francisco County Jails: The Impact of the Cost of Phone Calls and Commissary Items**

**METHODOLOGY**

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.

![SurveyMonkey](https://example.com/surveymonkey.png)

**Survey Results**

- **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%.**

- $300+
DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENTS

### Race
- White or Caucasian: 277
- Black or African American: 116
- Hispanic or Latino: 16
- Asian or Asian American: 15
- American Indian or Alaskan Native: 23
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander: 44
- Another Race: 101

### Gender
- Male: 88% (514)
- Female: 11% (66)
- Other or did not disclose: 1% (5)

### Age
- 18-29: 41% (234)
- 30-39: 32% (182)
- 40-49: 15% (89)
- 50-59: 10% (58)
- 60+: 2% (13)

### Jail Location
- County Jail 5: 48%
- Other/Unknown: 27%
- County Jail 4: 16%
- County Jail 2: 11%

### Current Length of Stay
- Less than 1 week: 9%
- 1 week-3 months: 108%
- 3-6 months: 65%
- 6 months-1 year: 60%
- 1-2 years: 89%
- 2-5 years: 88%
- 5 years+: 23%

### Language of Survey
- English: 94% (588)
- Spanish: 6% (36)
- Chinese: 0% (2)

### What is Your Current Housing Status?
- General Population: 434
- Administrative Segregation: 86
- Lock Up: 31
- Other: 40
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

Who do you make phone calls to?
- 68% called parents
- 63% called significant others
- 59% called siblings
- 48% called children
Women were more likely to call children. Men were more likely to call parents, significant others, and siblings.

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

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.

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.

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.
Phone Safety and Privacy

Do you feel like you can speak openly on phone calls to your attorney? 76% said no

Do you feel like you can speak openly on phone calls to other people in your life? 75% said no

Are there any signs letting you know your rights to phone calls? 80% said no

Are you given a free call if there is a family emergency? 92% said no

Commissary Costs

Are you able to order commissary? 79% said yes

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? $70-$100 per week

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food</th>
<th>Hygiene/Cosmetics</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Soup, chips</td>
<td>1. Soap</td>
<td>1. Phone Cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Rice, beans, meat, fish</td>
<td>2. Deodorant</td>
<td>2. Stationary (envelopes, stamps, holiday cards)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you believe commissary items are expensive? 96% said yes

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

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

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.

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.

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.

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.
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.

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