



PENNSYLVANIA  
**PRISON SOCIETY**

*justice & compassion*

# **In-Cell Dining During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Survey of People in Pennsylvania State Custody**

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## Executive Summary

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When the COVID-19 pandemic struck Pennsylvania state prisons, the Department of Corrections closed prison dining halls and began delivering all meals to the cells or housing units of people in custody. It was one of many new restrictions meant to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus behind bars that radically changed the day-to-day life of incarcerated people. But unlike other temporary measures to mitigate viral spread, eating in the relative isolation of their cells or housing units could become part of their new normal. Two years after the pandemic began, meals are still being delivered to incarcerated people, and the department is considering closing dining halls permanently.

The Prison Society is concerned about the impact this policy would have on the health and well-being of people confined to Pennsylvania state prisons. Since the dining halls shut down, we have heard an increased number of complaints about food service in the state prisons. In order to better understand the experience of incarcerated people under the new dining policy as the DOC considers such a major change, we conducted a survey of people in custody in state prisons.

**The Prison Society’s survey found that the majority of incarcerated people are unhappy with the closure of dining halls and shift to meal delivery.** “It’s as if we are being treated as animals contained in a stall,” wrote one participant from State Correctional Institution (SCI) Phoenix. “The current practice has the feel of being in solitary confinement.”

**In addition, there are systematic problems with the quality of the food being served since meals began to be delivered to housing units.** “At best the food is room temperature,” wrote a respondent from SCI Albion. “Everything is soggy. At breakfast time the carts are on the block at 6:15am. They don’t start passing out meals until at least 7:00am.”

### Specifically, the survey found:

- 62% of respondents want to return to eating in dining halls.
- Hot meals are frequently served cold, in apparent violation of DOC food safety policy. 73% of respondents report receiving fewer hot meals than before.
- 74% report being served rotten fruits, vegetables, or other food in the last month.
- 72% report smaller portions compared to before the pandemic.
- The minority of respondents (29%) who said they prefer having meals delivered to their cell or housing unit overwhelmingly cited problems relating to how the DOC administers mealtimes in the dining hall, rather than any intrinsic benefits of meal delivery.

Given these findings, the Prison Society recommends that the DOC:

- **Resume serving meals in the dining hall as soon as it is safe to do so.** This would help address the food quality issues that have worsened while meals have been delivered to cells, provide more movement and social stimulation, and contribute to a greater sense of dignity among prison residents.



- **Assist facilities in creating dining hall protocols with the aim of designing a calmer, healthier, more enjoyable eating experience.** This starts with simple changes like giving incarcerated people enough time to eat.
- **Improving overall food quality to consistently provide nutritious, filling, and flavorful meals.** We hope these findings lend urgency to the need to improve food quality across all facilities, including providing more fresh fruits and vegetables and favoring food cooked from scratch using whole-food ingredients.

## Background

Pennsylvania's DOC has, in many ways, been more proactive, thoughtful and successful in mitigating COVID than many state correctional departments.<sup>1</sup> Eliminating shared meals was one of the first steps the department took to stop viral spread. It was a major move, requiring new equipment and changing of staff deployment. Not many other state departments of corrections followed Pennsylvania's lead, and no other state has moved to close dining halls permanently.

But in the spring of 2021, when many COVID restrictions were being lifted, Pennsylvania's head of corrections said that the state planned to make meal delivery, rather than group dining, the new status quo across the state prisons.

"Frankly we intend to keep that forever, other than a couple old prisons," the secretary of corrections at the time, John Wetzel, said while testifying before the state legislature.<sup>2</sup> Wetzel cited two main benefits of eliminating dining halls: avoiding fights and controlling portion sizes. He also claimed that incarcerated people preferred meal delivery.

The Prison Society was alarmed by these statements, as we had received a flurry of complaints from people in custody about prison food and meal service since the dining halls were closed. The plan to eliminate them permanently seemed ill-advised given this early feedback. Indeed, our survey later showed that, in fact, a large majority of incarcerated people would prefer to eat in the dining halls and that there have been widespread problems with food quality since the shift to meal delivery.

We have shared the results of our survey with the DOC, and the department's position has evolved from Wetzel's comments last year. In conversations with the Prison Society, the new acting secretary of corrections, George Little, has acknowledged the importance of dining halls as a social outlet and the fundamental human desire to share a meal with one another. In his own recent testimony before the legislature, Little has indicated more of a willingness to reinstate "mainline" food service in dining halls.<sup>3</sup> But the department has yet to make an unequivocal commitment to reopening the dining halls.

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<sup>1</sup> Three State Prison Oversight During the Pandemic.

[https://www.prisonsociety.org/files/ugd/4c2da0\\_d039019f12824020b2712eae7d976d4a.pdf](https://www.prisonsociety.org/files/ugd/4c2da0_d039019f12824020b2712eae7d976d4a.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Pennsylvania Senate Appropriations Committee hearing for the Department of Corrections/Board of Probations and Parole, March 22, 2021. <https://www.pasenategov.com/blog/corrections-probation-parole/>

<sup>3</sup> Pennsylvania Senate Appropriations Committee hearing for the Department of Corrections/Board of Probations and Parole, February 24, 2022. <https://www.pasenategov.com/blog/corrections-probation-parole-2/>



The DOC's full response to the survey findings is summarized in the closing section of this report.

## History Repeating Itself

In the 1800s, Pennsylvania's first prison, Eastern State Penitentiary, delivered food to people in their cells as part of an overall practice of keeping incarcerated people isolated. In 1923, after much public debate, that practice ended, and the prison began serving meals in dining halls. According to the archivist at Eastern State, the change "curbed favoritism in meal distribution [. . .] reduced waste since each person could choose which dishes they wanted and did not want [. . .] and ensured that each meal was hot, from the first to the last."

Our survey findings indicate that some of the problems that prompted the introduction of dining halls 100 years ago have arisen again with the switch to meal delivery during the pandemic.

## Methodology

Some 429 people incarcerated in all 23 SCIs completed the Prison Society's survey between April 20, 2021, and August 22, 2021. The survey was included in *Graterfriends*, the Society's newsletter for people in custody, which has approximately 900 subscribers throughout the state prisons. Respondents mailed completed surveys back to the Prison Society.

In addition to answering multiple-choice prompts, the surveys gave incarcerated people space to write comments expanding on their responses. The Prison Society read all of the comments, and this qualitative feedback complements and informs the quantitative findings of this report.

## Detailed Findings

### *A wide majority want to return to dining halls*

Sixty-two percent of respondents want to go back to having meals in dining halls. For almost half of respondents, this was a strong preference. 44% percent "strongly prefer" the dining hall.

More than 200 respondents answered a question about the reason for their preference, in which they could select more than one option. The reasons we listed were based on feedback from a beta-test of the survey as well as the input of the Prison Society's Community Advisory Council composed of formerly incarcerated Pennsylvanians.

Among people who prefer eating in a dining hall, the top cited reasons were:

- "There is more hot food available in a dining hall." (88%)
- "I like the movement of going to a dining hall several times a day." (77%)



- “I see this as part of a bigger plan for the DOC to take away people’s privileges.” (68%)

Many respondents elaborated on their reasons in written comments:

*“Hot meals have been reduced to cold substitutes--grilled cheese is now cheesed sandwich [sic]; pancakes are now a third hard-boiled egg breakfast. Breakfast[s] are usually already sitting on the block at count time--over an hour before they're served.” -- SCI Albion*

*“It is important for every man and woman who is incarcerated to get up, get dressed, and go get their meals every day. They have a sense of purpose and duty in doing that.” -- SCI Greene*

In addition to the above reasons, about two-thirds liked the dining hall because of the opportunities for social stimulation, and another two-thirds preferred the dining hall because it allows them to more easily get a replacement for unpalatable or spoiled food.

Other common reasons come through in written comments. Many respondents mentioned how the overall quality of prison food has been worse when served in-cell.

*“It’s mixed up by the time it is served. The portions are smaller, and the quality is poor.” - -SCI Fayette*

*“The food [in the dining hall] was fresher, warmer and more palatable, servings are cleaner, because the trays are not as shaken or jostled.”*

A chorus of incarcerated people also mentioned the unpleasant experience of having to eat near a toilet when meals are served in-cell. Unprompted, more than 50 respondents wrote about this in their comments. Many said that it made them feel degraded, in addition to being unsanitary and disgusting.

*“Smelling your cellies odors it’s just plain sickening to eat breakfast, lunch and dinner in our cells. We live in one big bathroom now as it is.” -- SCI Somerset*

*“[In the dining hall] I get to sit and eat a meal at a table like a human, and not on my bed next to a toilet.” -- SCI Frackville*

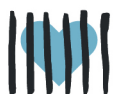
*“I think it isn’t right to make me eat where I poop, my three meals.” -- SCI Somerset*

The toilet issue contributes to the larger sense articulated by many respondents that eating in their cells deprives them of their dignity and humanity. These feelings may help explain why more than two-thirds of respondents to the multiple-choice question about why they prefer the dining hall selected “I see this as part of a bigger plan for the DOC to take away people’s privileges.” As with other pandemic restrictions on movement, some report that eating in confinement has a detrimental impact on their mental health:

*“Mentally, it is a feeling of [...] gloomy emotions by being forced to sit in your living quarters with your tray as if you are in the RHU. It feels so depressing, and it encourages laziness. We will just sit in our beds, sleep, eat, sleep.” -- SCI Greene*

### **People who prefer eating in-cell see to avoid issues with dining hall**

A minority of respondents (29%) said they prefer having meals delivered to their cell or housing unit.



Avoiding the chaos and stress of the chow hall experience appears to be the dominant reason this group prefers eating in their cells. Seventy percent who prefer the new policy of eating in-cell selected “The dining hall can be hectic or chaotic” to explain their preference, and 65% selected “You don’t get enough time to eat in the dining hall.” A number left comments describing similar motivations:

*“There is no chance of being caught up in fights which frequently occurred at/ on the way to and from the dining halls. Also, I don’t have to worry about bringing my food back to recook it or having to go out in inclement weather.” -- SCI Coal Township*

Many incarcerated people said the food that was served in dining halls was also subpar. They liked how dining in-cell allows them to add their own seasonings to make unappetizing food palatable:

*“The quality of food here, even before the pandemic, is very poor[...]so when the food is brought to my cell, I can add to it to try to make it better.” -- SCI Greene*

Overall, the reasons incarcerated people gave for preferring meal delivery speak more to underlying issues with the dining hall experience and prison food service than to a preference for in-cell dining on its own merits. For some incarcerated people, their preference for either the dining hall or eating in-cell comes down to what they consider to be the lesser evil. This may explain the ambivalence of the 9% of respondents who were “indifferent” about the two options, and why about 40% did not “strongly prefer” one system over the other. One of the “indifferent” respondents wrote, “I’d prefer delivery to eating in the loud, hectic chow hall,” but then added:

*“But I don’t think it’s healthy or right for it to be taken away. Especially for us long term inmates. How much isolation do they expect us to take? We need the walk to get that food. We need that air. We need that human contact.” -- SCI Cambridge Springs*

### **Significant decline in food quality since the move to food delivery**

Almost three-quarters (72%) of the incarcerated people who completed the surveys report that food quality has declined since the switch to in-cell meal service during the pandemic.

They are in similarly broad agreement about the specific ways in which the quality has declined:

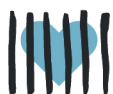
--74% report being served rotten fruits, vegetables, or other food in the last month.

--72% report smaller portions compared to before the pandemic.

--73% report receiving fewer hot meals than before.

The lack of hot meals was one of the biggest concerns respondents wrote about. Many recounted that fewer hot meals are being served, and even dishes that are supposed to be hot are already cold by the time they arrive. This violates the DOC’s own Food Services Policy (DC-ADM 610), which states:

*“Cooked, prepared hot food shall be covered and stored in a hot holding unit or by other method that will maintain the temperature of the food at 140°F or above until served. Cooked, prepared cold food will be covered and stored in a cold holding unit or*



*refrigerator that will maintain the temperature of the food at 40°F or below until served.”*  
(DC-ADM 610 Procedures Manual, Section 1, Part D, No. 4)

Contrary to the DOC’s policy, some observed that meals sit in their housing blocks for an extended period before they are served:

*“Food served in our cell is always cold by the time we get it. We have not had a hot breakfast in over 1 year.”* -- SCI Fayette

Many also complained that different components of a meal often get mixed together while in transit to cell blocks:

*“Imagine a slice of cold pizza completely soaked in red beet juice because the tray was not kept level and all the juice washed into the pizza compartment. Bread is most commonly affected by this situation.”* -- SCI Huntingdon

While this survey was being conducted, the DOC invested in new, insulated food trays and carts which may have helped mitigate some of the problems with food being served cold and components of meals getting mixed together. Still, several comments that came in after the new equipment was deployed stated they had not improved these issues:

*“They spent a lot of money on heatable hot carts to transport the food to the blocks where it made it worse. The food came hotter in styrofoam trays than it does now.”*  
– SCI Phoenix

*“They have purchased heated food carts which are supposed to keep the food hot. However, each cart has to be filled with the specific number of trays for each block. This process doesn’t allow for the food to hold its temperature, because it takes about 20 minutes to fill the cart. Which makes the temperature of the food drop dramatically.”* –SCI Somerset

In addition to these problems, the majority of incarcerated people who completed the survey (59%) also report that there is less variety in the food being served since the pandemic began. Several wrote that there weren’t always alternate options available for people with food allergies or special religious diets.

More than one-third of respondents (36%) report receiving fewer fruits and vegetables compared to before the pandemic.

### **Three-quarters are spending more on food from the commissary**

Nearly three-quarters (73%) of respondents report spending more money on food from the commissary since the start of the pandemic, matching closely the proportion who complain of poor-quality meals. The likely causes of this increase are the decline in food quality and the pandemic-driven temporary increase in commissary spending limits for most incarcerated people in effect during the survey period. The burden of paying for commissary often falls on impoverished families in the community who provide financial support to their incarcerated loved ones.





## The DOC's Response

Prior to the publication of this report, the Prison Society provided the DOC with a memo detailing the findings of the survey and asked for its feedback. Acting Secretary of Corrections George Little responded in a letter addressing our concerns about the pandemic dining policy and a number of other major findings.

“The change to in-cell meals was driven by the need to mitigate the spread of COVID to protect our population,” he wrote. “We also agree that the resumption of dining hall meals is of value and will be a future consideration based upon facility reviews and recommendations as we transition to a more manageable place with COVID mitigation requirements.”

In response to the issues with food temperature and preparation, Little pointed to the insulated meal trays and delivery carts discussed above, saying the DOC had procured 416 new insulated meal delivery carts and 56,000 insulated trays as of mid-2021. “Even with insulated trays and carts, there may still be some temperature loss or spills/comingling due to food types,” he stated. As a result, “modifications were made to reduce those incidents,” but he did not specify what those modifications were.

The acting secretary also denied that the department's practices were in violation of its food safety policies. He argued that the meals are considered “served” when placed in a serving tray, rather than when they are delivered to people in custody. Therefore, he contended, the department was complying with the directive to “maintain the temperature of the food at 140°F or above **until served**.” This is hardly a reasonable definition of what it means to “serve” a meal. Once meals are placed on trays, they still have to be loaded into a cart and transported to housing units. There, they often sit for extended periods of time before being distributed, as numerous incarcerated people reported in the survey.

“Trays are packed in insulated transport carts but there is a 2-hour delay from the time of the 1st tray preparation until delivery to the housing unit or more,” one respondent from SCI Camp Hill wrote. The survey generated many more such comments from incarcerated people. Despite the evidence that delays in meal delivery are widespread and commonplace, Little claimed that “barring an emergency or unexpected delay (such as reduced staffing), the maximum length of time reported from tray make-up, to on-unit delivery, and return of dirty trays/carts to the kitchen has been 2.5 hours.”

Little also stated that, according to the DOC's own records, food related grievances and complaints had decreased during the pandemic.

We are encouraged by the acting secretary's comments recognizing the importance of providing a social dining experience in prisons and his recent statements suggesting that the department may reopen dining halls in the SCIs. We urge him to address the issues the Prison Society's survey identified regarding the dining hall experience and to commit to reopening dining halls in all facilities as soon as it is safe to do so.





#### ABOUT THE PRISON SOCIETY

*Founded in 1787 by Benjamin Rush and Benjamin Franklin, the Pennsylvania Prison Society is the nation's oldest human rights organization. For 233 years we have worked to ensure humane prison conditions and advocate for restorative criminal justice policies.*

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