

# **Priorities of Incarcerated Individuals Within Texas Prisons**

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***Abstract***

This study explores the concerning conditions and policies faced by incarcerated individuals within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) prison system. Utilizing surveys distributed by the Texas Prisons Community Advocates (TPCA), the resulting research reveals that the incarcerated individuals perceive that the system is failing to meet their basic needs while also violating their human and constitutional rights. Inadequate access to healthcare, mental healthcare, nutritious food, clean water, and poor legislation are a few of the areas of priority found in this study. The lack of air conditioning in many of these prison units exposes incarcerated individuals to potentially higher risks of mortality and fatal heat-related illnesses. Limited access to educational and rehabilitative programs is another area of concern that hinders the chances of an incarcerated individual's successful reentry. These areas of priority are pertinent, for they have detrimental impacts on both the physical and mental well-being of the incarcerated individuals, which potentially leads to a cycle of recidivism. Addressing and identifying these issues is crucial for the incarcerated individuals within Texas to have a chance at a safe and healthy prison environment.

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## ***Introduction***

Currently, most incarcerated individuals in the Texas prison system are subjected to inhumane temperatures within the prison walls where they are confined, with some facilities reaching over 90 to 95 °F for hours a day (Mcgaughy, 2023). The United States houses more incarcerated people than any other country, accounting for roughly 25 percent of the world's total incarcerated population, and Texas leads the United States for a total number of individuals, with over 133,771 incarcerated as of 2021 (Beattie, 2023). One of the biggest problems concerning this is that 70 percent of them do not have air conditioning, and a one-degree increase above a temperature of 85 °F without air conditioning results in a 0.7 percent increase in the risk of daily mortality (Skarha et al., 2022). In addition to the temperature issues, there are a plethora of other concerns within the current Texas prison system's environment, a notable one being a lack of accessibility to water, especially cold water; this is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg regarding the stresses these incarcerated individuals face daily. Most incarcerated individuals are subjected to other deplorable environmental problems, such as contaminated water, rotten food, and unsanitary living quarters (Bingamon, 2023). Furthermore, exposure to extreme heat and cold within incarceration settings increases mortality rates within prisons (Skarha et al., 2020). Endeavors to spotlight the challenges incarcerated individuals face may reveal urgency in the need for reformation in this sector.

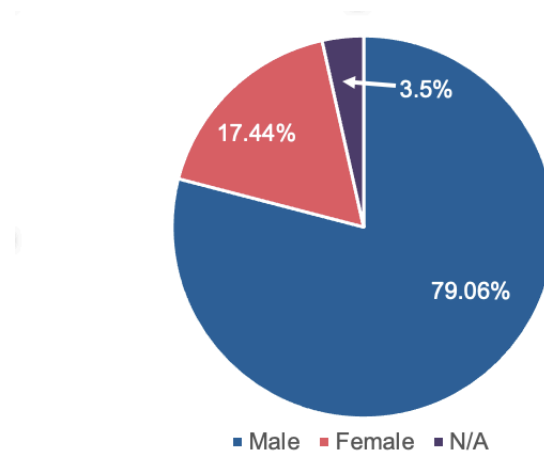
The primary objective of this research is to uncover and understand the main priorities of incarcerated individuals within the scope of the survey handed out by the Texas Prisons Community Advocates (TPCA) while simultaneously highlighting the culmination of human rights violations found within these Texas prisons. This study will employ a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to achieve this objective. In addition, the study will

also review existing literature to inform the discussion of the results found within the surveys. All of these tools are used to ensure that a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by these incarcerated individuals is provided—from their daily environment within the prison to the intense physical distress these incarcerated individuals face due to not having universal air conditioning within Texas prisons (Purdum et al., 2022). This research is significant because it sheds light on past and novel issues within the prison system from those victimized by it today. This research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on prison reform and advocate for more humane and equitable living conditions within United States correctional facilities. These individuals are experiencing heinous realities through the instated policies of the United States and the Texas State Government: How often, how horrendous, and how the incarcerated individuals perceive their human and environmental rights being violated is what this thesis strives to uncover.

### ***Methodology***

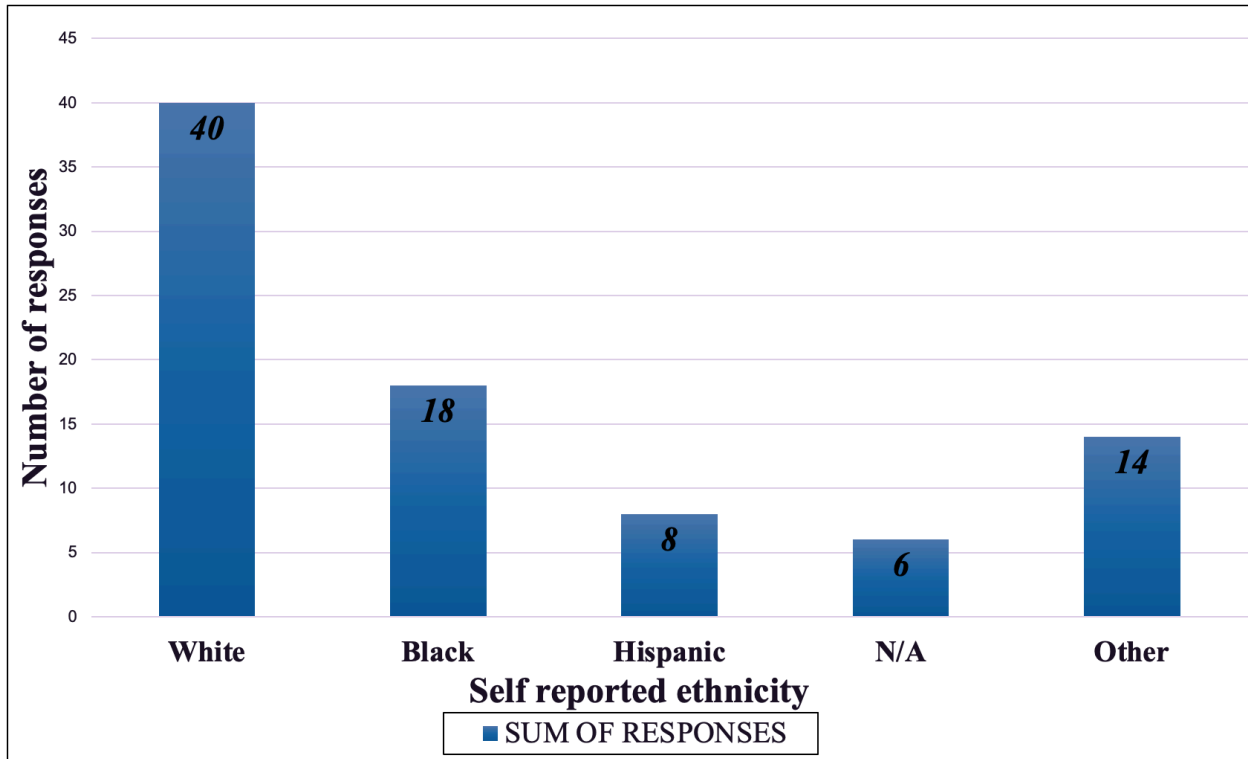
For this report, 86 TPCA surveys were analyzed. The TPCA distributed these surveys to incarcerated people housed across various Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) prison units from late 2021 to early 2023. The TPCA distributed these surveys with the intention of gleaning what the incarcerated individuals perceive as the most important areas of priority and their perspectives. Within some of these surveys—21 of them—incarcerated participants included attached letters to answer some of the write-in questions further and to reach out to the TPCA for help on a wide range of issues. These included abusive guards and officers, the heat in their cell being so bad they thought they were going to die, not enough fresh food, lack of access to water, and many more, which will be discussed further. Survey data was stripped of

information identifying incarcerated people before the data from these letters was tabulated or analyzed. Personal data from the survey was anonymized and redacted, and since the TPCA was the group that collected this data, these surveys can be treated as public data, so International Review Board approval was not needed. Even though the names of the incarcerated participants were redacted, their respective unit names, ethnicity, birthdate, and TDCJ numbers were not. As such, a demographic analysis of the participants' self-reported genders could not be done, as this process does not allow the individual participant to self-report their gender. The type of unit, either male or female, was then used as a proxy, which was done using the TDCJ's "Unit Directory" dataset. If a participant did not identify their residence unit, their gender was recorded as non-assessed, N/A (See Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Comparison of Gender Demographics**

An analysis was also done to compare the survey participants' self-reported ethnicities for data-processing and archiving purposes for the TPCA (See Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Comparison of Ethnicity Demographics**

This research focuses on two primary data sources: the surveys from the TPCA and the attached letters. The survey has 15 total questions; three of the last four are open-ended questions. The open-ended questions are 12, 14, and 15, respectively. Questions 1 through 11 ask the participants to rank their priorities out of a set of options based on the topic. Question 1 was ranked 1 through 14, a 1 being the "most important topic for me" and a 14 being "the least important," and is the overarching question that asks the participants to rank which of the topics throughout the survey are the most important. The rest of the questions, questions 2 through 11, are ranked 1 through 5, 1 still being the most important while 5 is now the least important. This is where errors and biases in the rank order questions reside in the survey. The source of the errors is either non-responses, which are visualized and recorded as N/A, or incorrect answers. Incorrect answers from this survey include things such as an individual filling in questions 2



through 11 as they did for question 1, filling in question 1 as though they were questions 2 through 11, and marking topics with zeros. Question 13's answers are the only set of yes or no answers. Each of the ranked questions from the survey was tabulated by hand in Microsoft Excel to visualize the incarcerated participants' priorities and allow visualization of their demographics.

For the figures and tables, Microsoft Excel was used to either total up the ranked scores (e.g., this was done for question 1) or tally the "most important" and "least important" categories to juxtapose them for visualization (e.g., this was done for question 2). Due to question 1 being ranked differently than the rest of the questions, a sum of the total ranked scores of each of the answers was done alongside the juxtaposition graph that tallies the most and least important responses solely as a means of revisualizing the data of question 1 for sensitivity analysis purposes. That is to say, question 1 deals with all of the topics of the survey, so the top three priorities of question 1 should reflect the main priorities expressed by the survey participants. A sensitivity analysis of the incarcerated individuals' responses to question 1 was needed to ensure more confidence that the top three priorities expressed are appropriate visualizations of the data from the TPCA surveys. In both figures of question 1, the top three priorities of the incarcerated individuals were found to be the same. Using a sensitivity analysis on question 1 is essential as it raises the confidence of the figures for the remaining questions as they were all analyzed similarly. The totals were inversed due to the ranking scale of having an answer of 1 as the most important for visualization purposes and to, more importantly, minimize the incorrect answer biases when analyzing results to ensure the top priority of the incarcerated participants was preserved and understood. In this way, identifying incorrect answers as neither most important nor least important minimizes the common biases of incorrect answers from this survey.

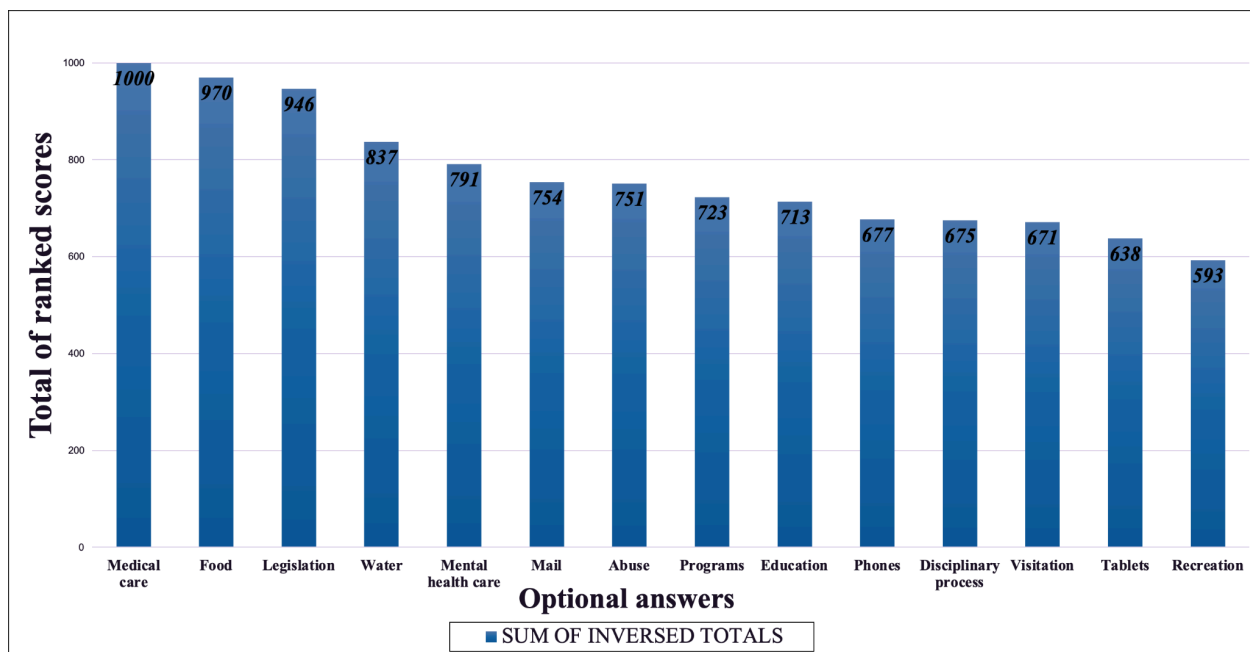
Additionally, the 21 attached letters and write-in questions were analyzed using qualitative data analysis (QDA) and optical character recognition (OCR) software, mainly for quotes. Still, they were also coded for common themes, trends, and archetypes. Thematic qualitative coding of the written portions of the survey was done to create a framework using main codes and sub-category codes to extract impactful quotes and firsthand perspectives. NVivo and Dedoose are the QDA software used in this thesis, and Google Pinpoint is the OCR software used to ensure that the incarcerated participants' voices, comments, and letters are heard and not stifled. Lastly, the results of the survey are presented according to each question and the answers are arranged in order of most importance for better visualization.

## ***Results***

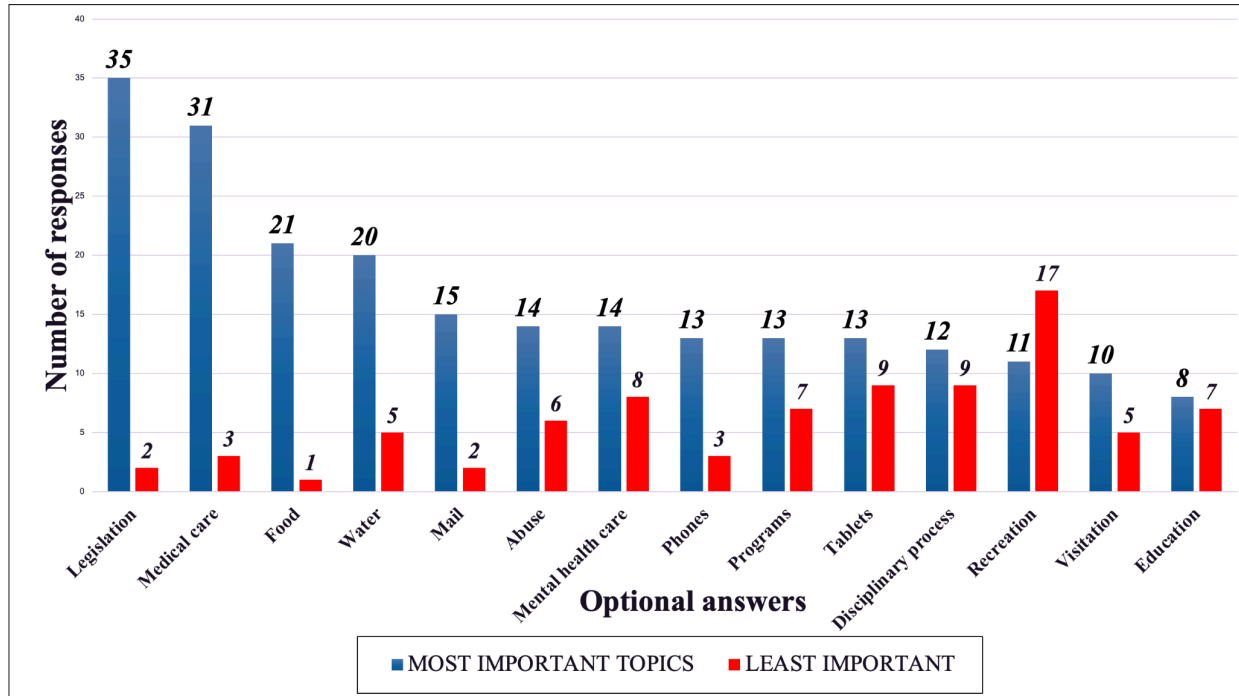
### ***Question 1: What are the Most Important to Least Important Topic Rankings?***

Question 1 asks the incarcerated participants to rank all the topics discussed in this survey from 1 to 14. The top three priorities of the incarcerated participants from over 35 TDCJ prison units, 39 separate units with individuals who answered the TPCA's survey, are legislation, medical care, and food (See Figure 3). This figure was made to be the sensitivity analysis of the results from this survey. Medical care within the prison system of Texas is the number one priority for incarcerated individuals from this survey. This may coincide with the recent COVID-19 pandemic and Texas prisons, facing record temperatures, being fatally hot with little to no air conditioning (Purdum et al., 2022). The prison food is the second priority of those who filled out the TPCA's survey. An incarcerated participant from the William McConnell Unit claims that the food "is not nutritious enough, not fresh, and horrible to eat." The third top priority is the TDCJ's legislation overall; this could be because the incarcerated participants

disagree with specific policies proactively being used and followed by the state's correctional officers. It could also be because TDCJ prisons have been criticized for treating their incarcerated individuals inhumanely while simultaneously having to deal with staff shortages, as defined by the first National Lawyers Guild Prison Chapter (NLG). The NLG submitted four petitions, which they call Project Blitz, to the United Nations Human Rights Council concerning the inhumane treatment in TDCJ prisons (National Lawyers Guild, 2022). There is only one topic deemed the least important, recreation, for it received more "least important" rankings, 14s, than any other topic (See Figure 4). It is also the only topic that received more 14s than 1s, so recreation is solely the least important topic for the incarcerated participants of the survey.



**Figure 3. Main Issues Expressed in the Survey**

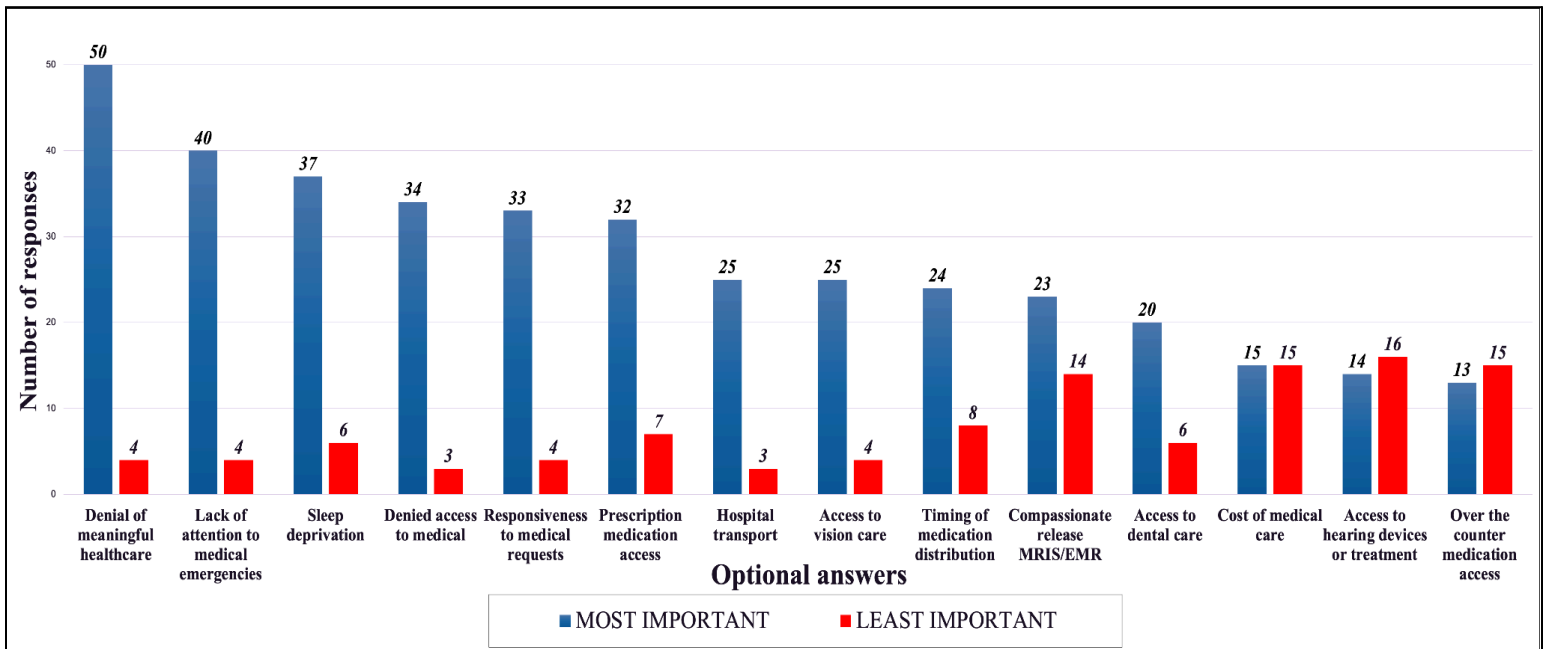


**Figure 4. Ranking Most Important to Least Important Topics**

**Question 2: What are the Areas of Priority in Medical Care?**

Question 2 deals with areas of priority in TDCJ's medical care. The top priorities deal with the fact that the incarcerated participants have been perpetually denied access to meaningful healthcare (See Figure 5). Since denial is the top priority, the second priority is the lack of attention to medical emergencies. This denial and lack of attention are prevalent throughout the letters and write-in portions of the survey; precisely, dental issues seem to be ignored. One incarcerated individual from the French Robertson Unit states, "Dental is no better. I was tested and approved to have my teeth cleaned over six months ago, but I still have not had a cleaning. Some folks are waiting months for needed dental surgery to fix or remove teeth." This is just one priority area for these incarcerated individuals, among many others. A prevalent example of medical care being denied is the inhumane treatment many incarcerated individuals in Texas face

daily. It is a fact that Texas policies state that chewing is not a medical necessity, and many of them are denied denture requests and must swallow food whole (Beattie, 2023).

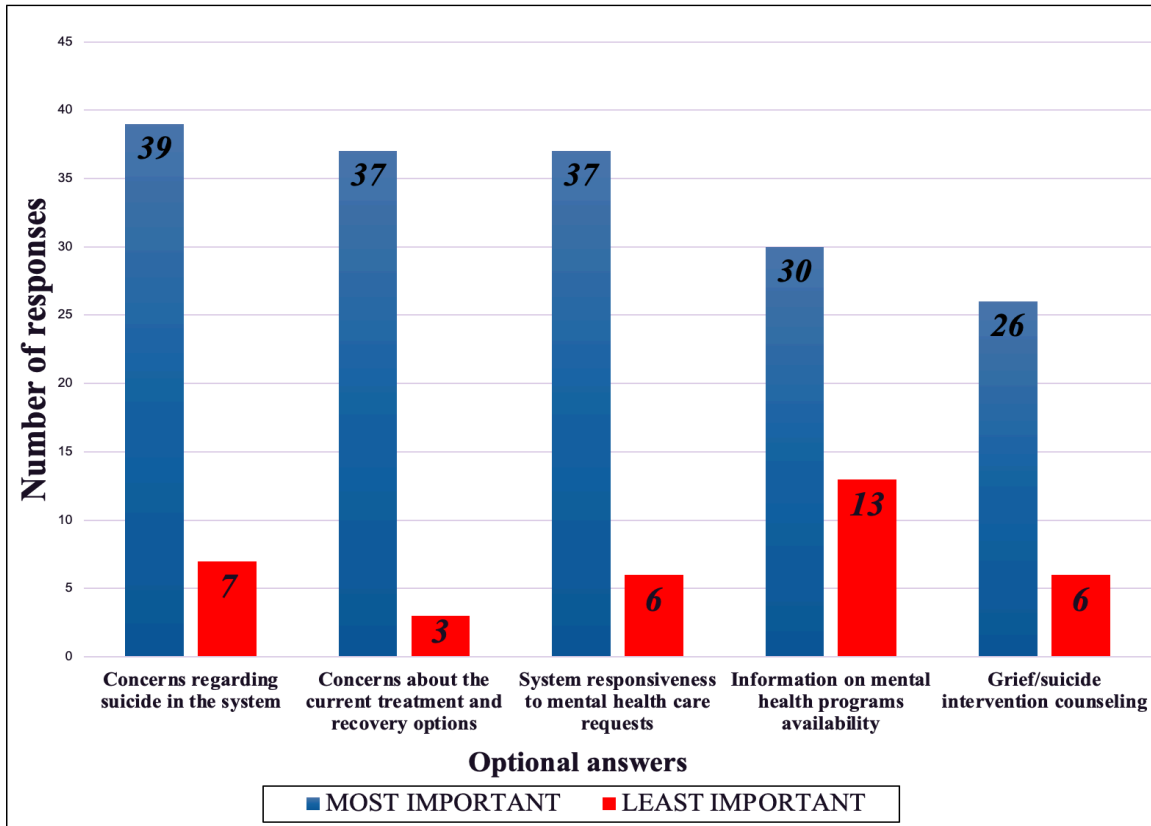


**Figure 5. Areas of Priority in Medical Care**

**Question 3: What are the Areas of Priority in Mental Healthcare?**

Question 3 deals with the TDCJ's mental healthcare system. The top 3 priorities of concern to the incarcerated participants of this survey are, in increasing order, concerns about the current treatment and recovery options, system responsiveness to mental healthcare requests, and concerns regarding suicide in the system (See Figure 6). The prison mental healthcare system responsiveness being reported as not timely is not a new trend in how the incarcerated individuals' mental healthcare rights are being unjustly treated. One study finds that individuals not receiving timely mental healthcare services are more likely to experience prison reincarceration overall and specifically for technical violations 12 months postrelease (Domino et al., 2019). This highlights how important this priority is not only to the incarcerated

individuals but also to reducing recidivism for those released. An increase in system responsiveness of the TDCJ mental healthcare system does not seem possible anytime soon under the current staffing challenges of the TDCJ itself—the TDCJ has continually operated for years under "critical staffing levels"—while the TDCJ's incarcerated population continues to increase (Huey, 2023). As of October 2023, the TDCJ incarcerated data shows that the population passed its 2022 population of 125,000 and has now grown to around 130,000 (Huey, 2023). Some relevant statistics from a study of 25 suicides that occurred in the Texas prison system from 1996 to 1997 reported, "44 percent of the suicide victims had a psychotic disorder diagnosed while they were incarcerated, and 64 percent had a mood disorder; 24 percent had no history of psychiatric disorder" (Baillargeon et al., 2009). The increasing number of incarcerated individuals in Texas prisons means that system responsiveness, concerns about the current treatment and recovery options, and concerns regarding suicide in TDCJ's mental healthcare system are likely to get worse.



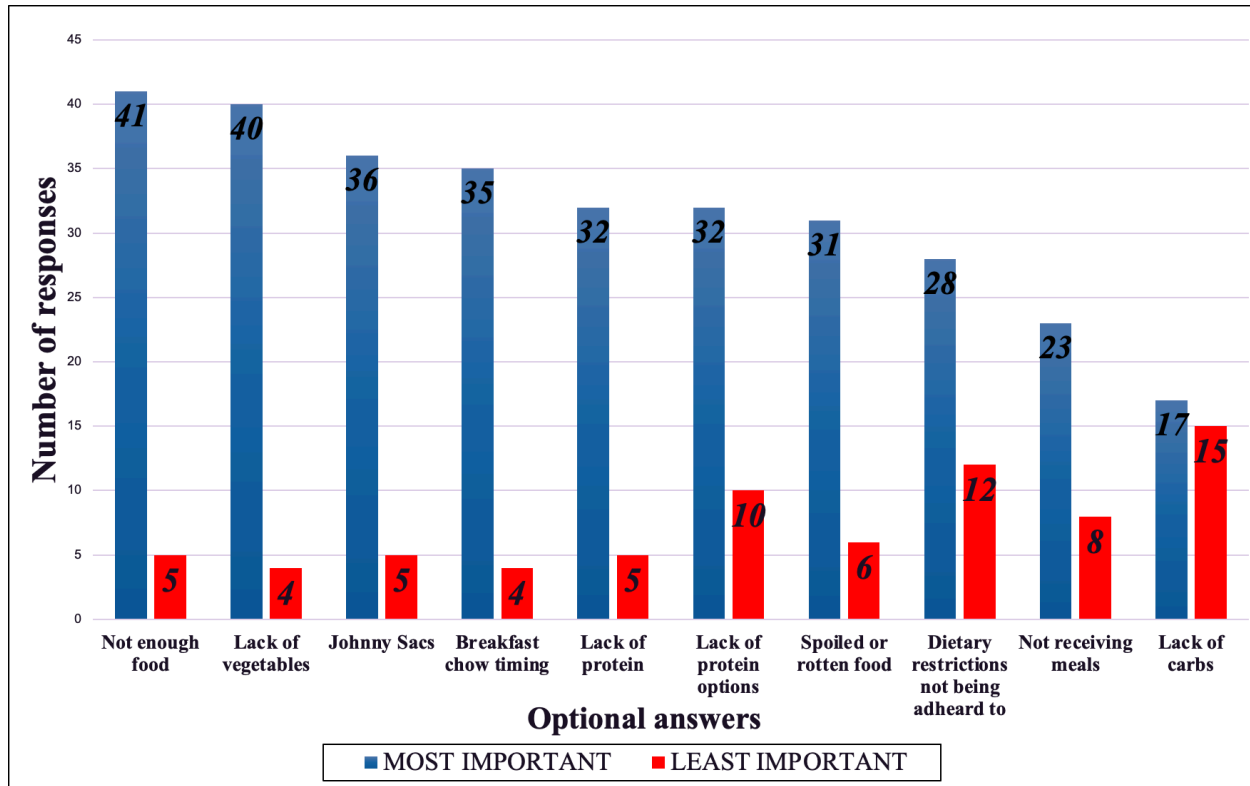
**Figure 6. Areas of Priority in Mental Healthcare**

**Question 4: What are the Areas of Priority Regarding Food?**

Question 4 asks the incarcerated participants to rank what they thought was a priority concerning the prison food they consume. According to the survey results, the two most important priorities are the lack of food and a lack of vegetables in their meals (See Figure 7). National dietary guidelines exist throughout the country, yet they are not adhered to by the current incarceration systems. A month-long study of Georgia prisons found that the average cholesterol intake of incarcerated individuals was 156 percent of the recommended amount issued by the National Academy of Sciences, and sodium was 303 percent of the recommended amount (Afsharian, 2023). The top 3 concerns of the survey participants could grow into worries if Texas prisons were to go into a statewide lockdown. As of September 6, 2023, TDCJ prisons

instituted statewide lockdowns that lasted over a month until October 16, 2023 (Texas Department of Criminal Justice, 2023). These lockdowns garnered attention because incarcerated individuals were provided sack lunches with meager amounts of food during the lockdown, some of which were inedible, according to the incarcerated individuals (Bingamon, 2023). These sack lunches were reported as horrendous and did not have enough food, which caused them to reach out to their families, who then shared their message with *The Austin Chronicle*. All the statements from the families of the victims described poor access to food—they were given a hard-boiled egg and a peanut butter sandwich most of the lockdown—in prison units across the entire state of Texas; one of these statements is as follows, "My son just called me from Telford Unit. He is starving, not eating or getting water. I'm scared" (Bingamon, 2023). These concerns from the family members of the victims go hand-in-hand with what the victims state are their top priorities concerning prison food. The fact that there is not enough food and the lack of vegetables is brought up again through some of the attached letters and open-ended questions. A victim from the Lane Murray Unit states, "We should be given fresh vegetables and fruit. We should also ALL be able to get dentures even if we have to purchase them."



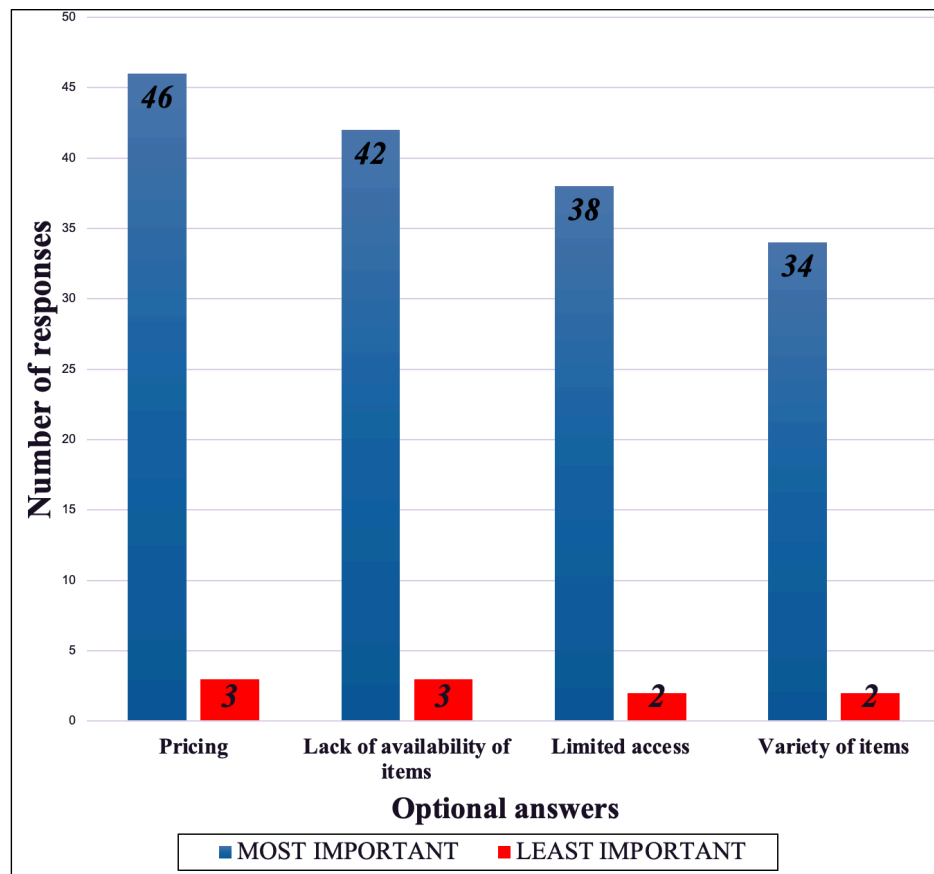


**Figure 7. Areas of Priority Regarding Prison Food**

**Question 5: What are the Areas of Priority in the Commissary?**

Question 5 deals with the areas of priority in the prison commissary. All four options for this question have very low counts for "least important," which may indicate that this is indeed an area most incarcerated individuals in Texas deem to be an essential area of priority regarding their environment in prison (See Figure 8). The top priority of these four options is the pricing of the commissary, which is closely followed by the lack of availability of certain items. This becomes a bigger problem when considering Texas is one of five states that do not pay incarcerated individuals for most of their prison jobs (Camarillo, 2019). Simultaneously, inflation throughout the country continues to rise, and incarcerated individuals who work for private companies through the Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program are not receiving

raises, which makes purchasing anything at the commissary that much more inaccessible to many incarcerated individuals (Camarillo, 2019).

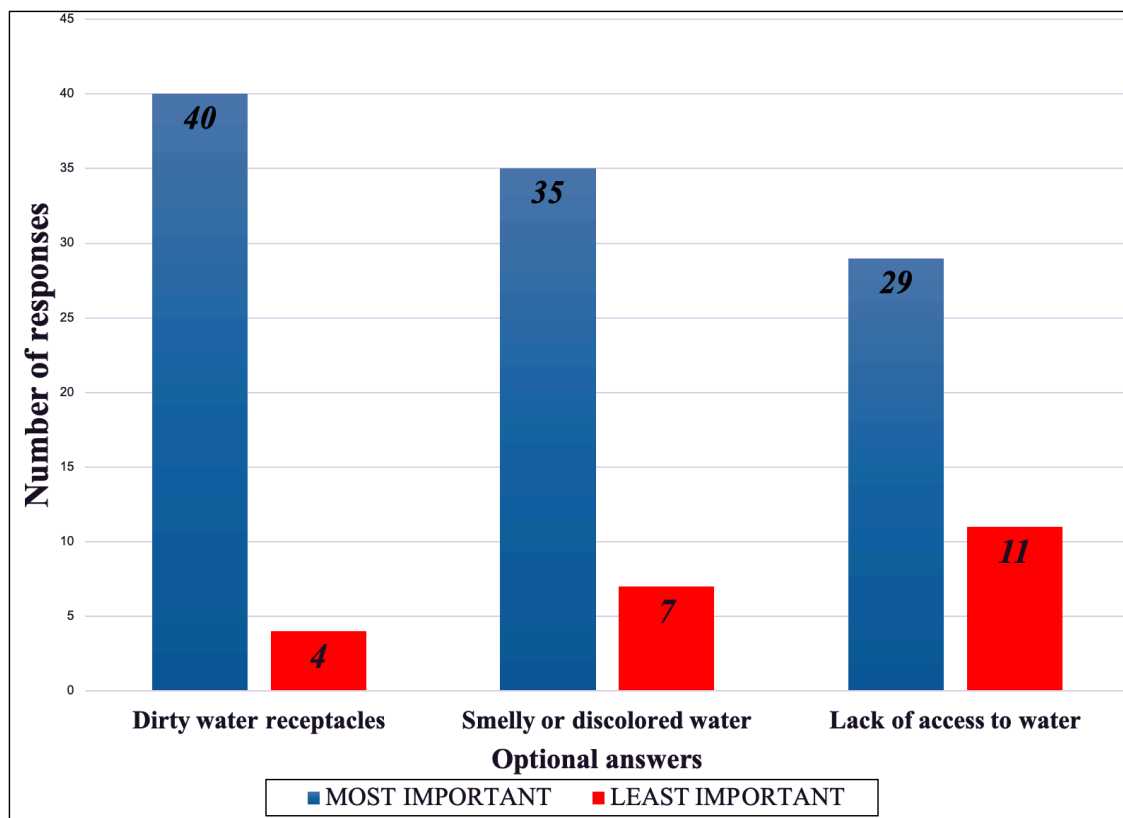


**Figure 8. Areas of Priority in the Commissary**

**Question 6: What are the Areas of Priority Regarding Water?**

Question 6 asks the incarcerated participants to rank the three options concerning their access to water, dirty water receptacles, and smelly or discolored water. One report on the toxicity of prison environments found that Keith Cole, the lead plaintiff in a class-action lawsuit challenging conditions in a unit this survey got results back from, was a victim of toxic water receptacles at the Wallace Pack Unit in Navasota, Texas (Bernd et al., 2017). The incarcerated individuals, as a part of this class-action lawsuit, were exposed to unbearable heat and were left

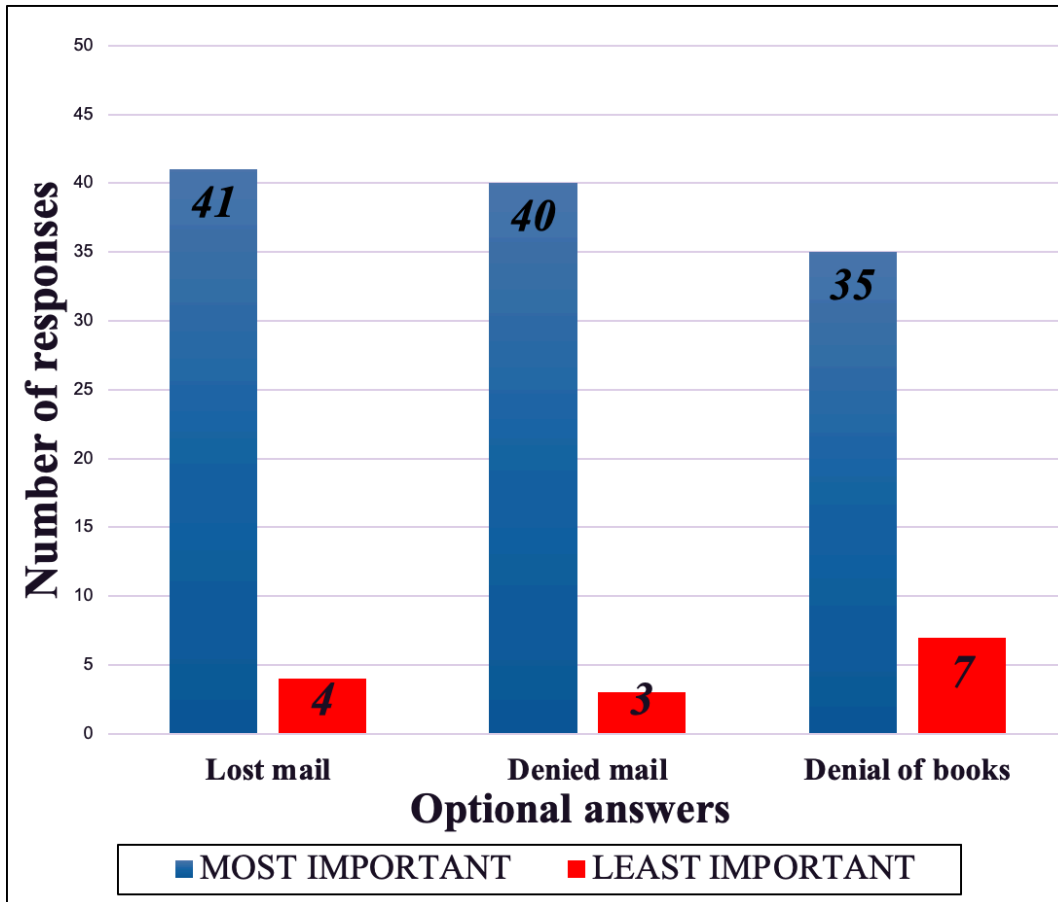
to drink arsenic-contaminated waters for years (Bernd et al., 2017). The toxic water and dirty water receptacles in Texas prisons are the primary concern of the incarcerated participants of this survey and an essential concern for incarcerated individuals throughout Texas (See Figure 9). A lack of access to water is also a consequential priority, as it was brought up in the open-ended questions and attached letters by some incarcerated participants. An incarcerated individual from the Clements Unit states, "Prisons are too hot and too cold, because of no A/C, most people pass away...due to lack of water." An incarcerated individual from the Mountain View Unit stated that they are victims of the dirty water receptacles and smelly or discolored water as well, "We have to walk fast through sewer-contaminated water to get from building to building."



**Figure 9. Areas of Priority Regarding Water**

**Question 7: What are the Areas of Priority Regarding Mail?**

Question 7 covers the incarcerated participants' priorities regarding the mail they receive. Two of the three options stand out as the top priorities, with equal concern for both. The first of the main priorities is lost mail, and the second is denied mail (See Figure 10). Denial of books has fewer recorded answers for it being the "most important" while also having more recorded "least important" answers than the other two options. The fact that lost and denied mail seem to be such a high concern for the incarcerated participants is a testament to just how vital the mail that these people receive is. Incarcerated individuals' human rights seem not to be upheld within TDCJ prisons; one study highlights how, once incarcerated, a person loses their right to legal mail. This study states that mail is the primary form of communication for incarcerated people; alternatively, the legal mail they receive is sacred and interference or prevention of that mail restricts the only avenue through which an incarcerated person may implement their constitutional rights to access the court and receive their legal mail (Lapin, 2009). This denial and loss of mail directly violates the First Amendment rights of those incarcerated. One example of this egregious violation of rights is from an attached letter from one of the surveys of an individual residing in the Huntsville Unit: "An officer took my writing supplies away. So what this officer is doing is stopping me from my legal work as I have filed on an officer for sexual assault and have limited time to get it done."



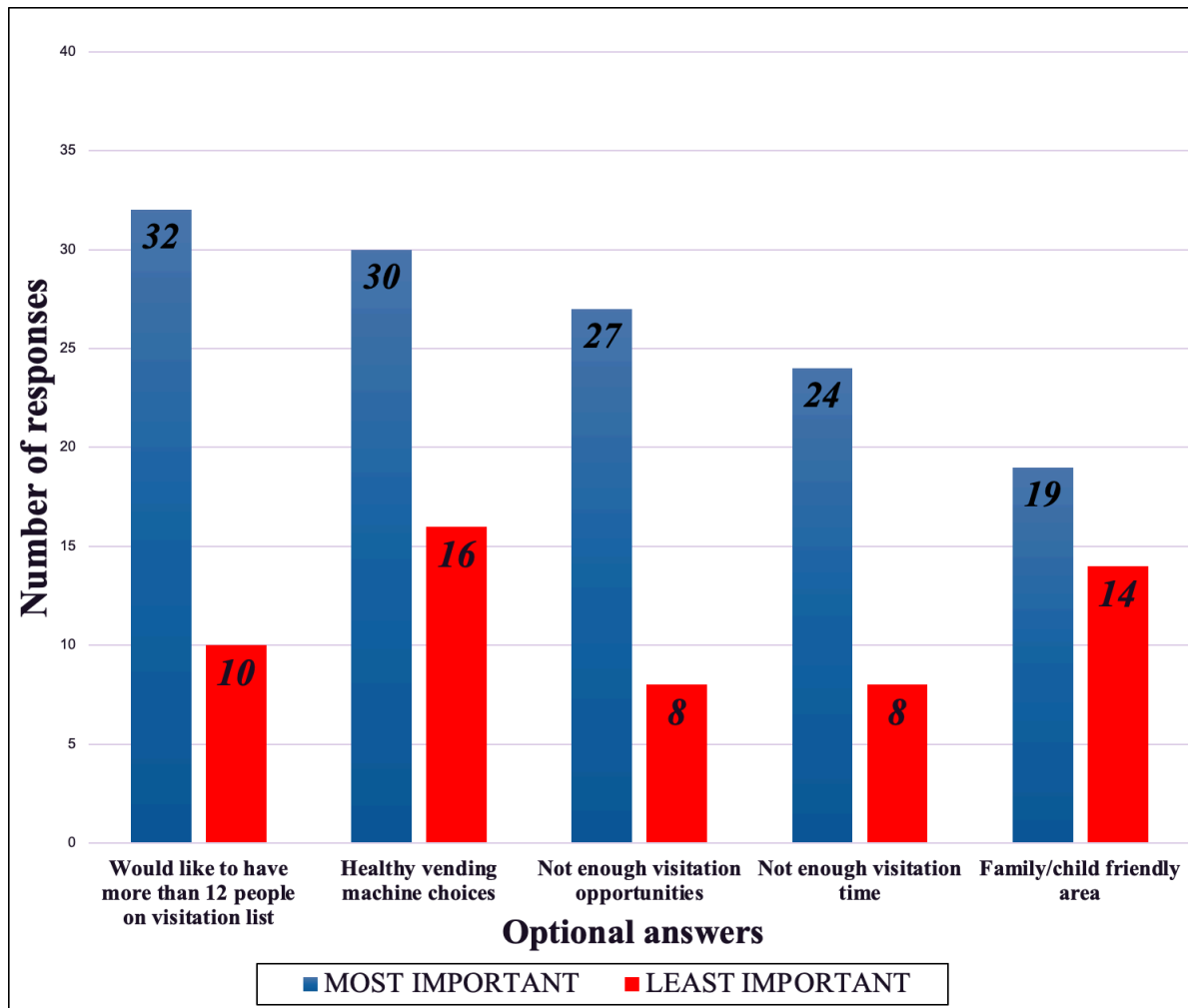
**Figure 10. Areas of Priority Regarding Mail**

**Question 8: What are the Areas of Priority Regarding Prison Visitation?**

Question 8 of the survey asks the participants to rank the topics regarding visitation within TDCJ prisons. Basing the top concern of the incarcerated participants on the option with more "most important" answers recorded, it seems that the most essential priority regarding visitation is that the incarcerated participants would like to have more than 12 people on their visitation list (See Figure 11). This priority area is closely followed by concerns over healthy vending machine choices and the fact that the survey participants perceive they need more visitation opportunities. This is an imperative priority because studies show that frequent, high-quality visitation can reduce prison violence, maintain family bonds, break the

intergenerational cycle of incarceration and smooth the reentry process (Boudin et al., 2013).

According to the survey results, the individuals within the TDCJ prison system have reported feeling as though they are not getting the benefits from frequent high-quality visitations.

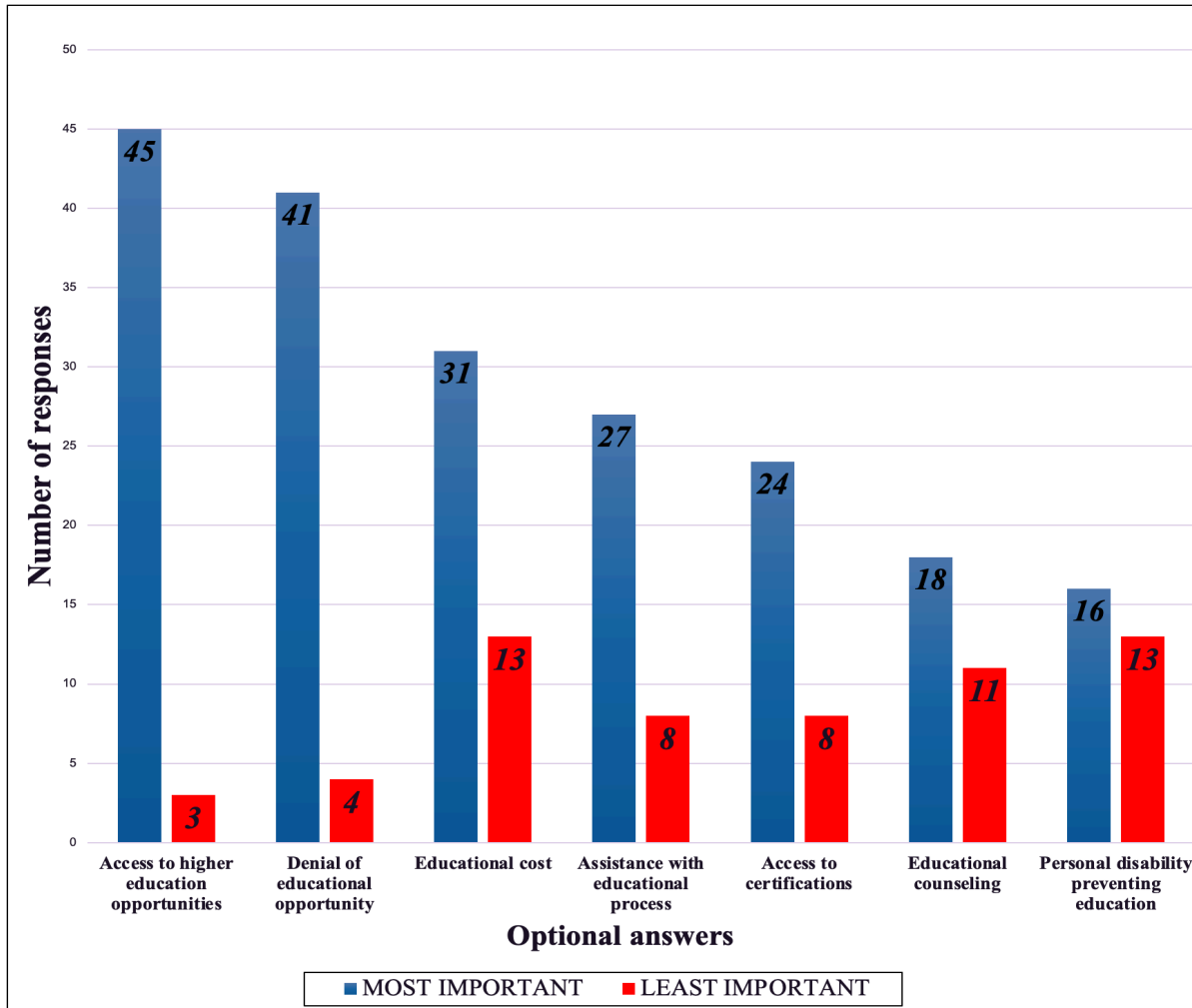


**Figure 11. Areas of Priority Regarding Prison Visitation**

**Question 9: What are the Areas of Priority Regarding Prison Education?**

Question 9 of the TPCA survey asks the participants to rank their priority areas regarding the education they may receive. Two answers from this close-ended question garnered over forty responses, labeling them as most important. The incarcerated individuals' ability to access higher

education opportunities received forty-five "most important" areas of priority rankings with only three "least important" areas of priority; similarly, denial of educational opportunities received forty-one answers stating it is the "most important" area of priority and only four answers that it is the "least important" (See Figure 12). Increasing the number of people who can access higher education within prisons is a transformative experience that assists in many beneficial related statistics, such as the reduction of recidivism, saving taxpayer dollars, and increasing safety and security within and outside of prisons (Gould, 2018). Regarding prison education, the TDCJ prison system is unjust for a myriad of reasons. With this in mind, an article from Texas states that in Texas prisons, "Men have more than triple the access to higher education degrees that women do. Incarcerated men can also pursue their master's, while women can only obtain a bachelor's degree" (Ament, 2022). The TDCJ prison system will need to minimize its apparent denial of educational opportunities and increase accessibility if it wants to improve in any of the aforementioned statistics.



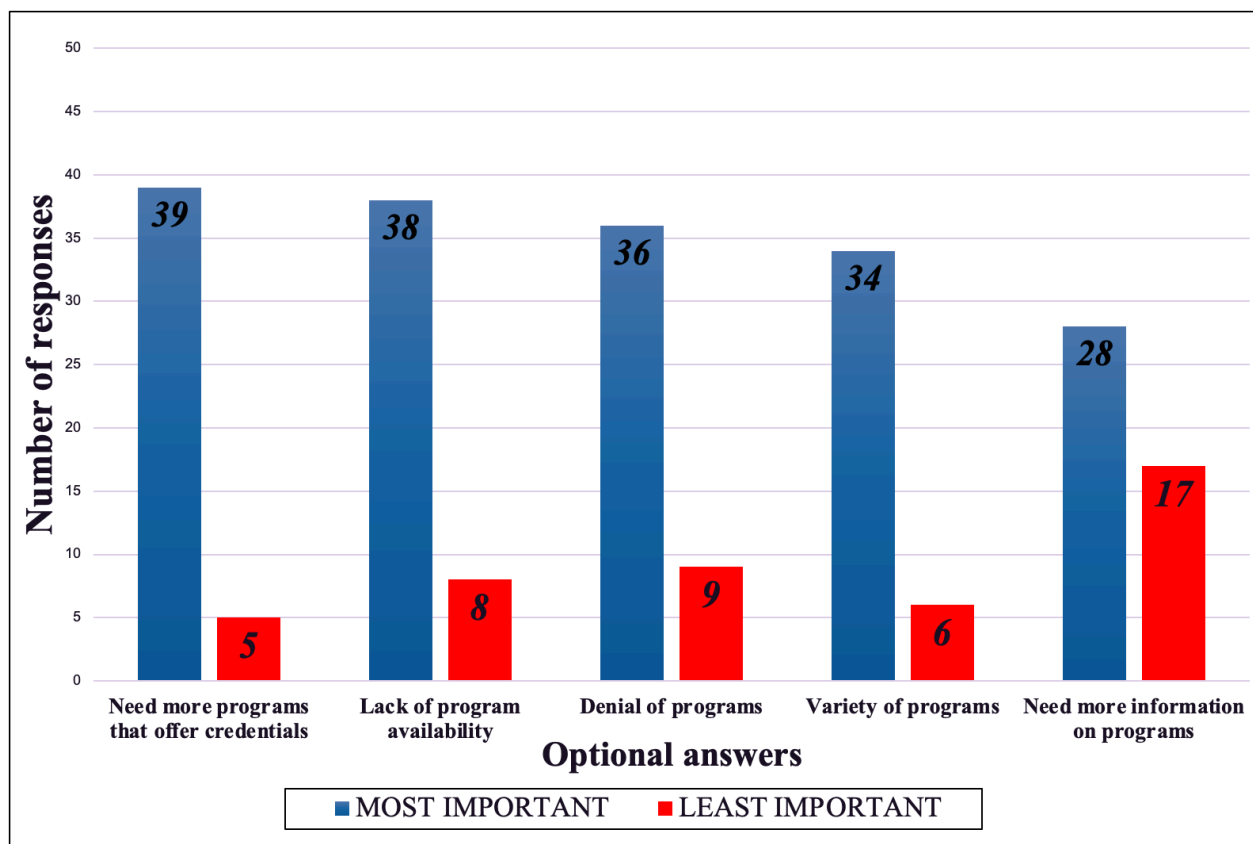
**Figure 12. Areas of Priority Regarding Prison Education**

**Question 10: What are the Areas of Priority Regarding Prison Programs?**

Question 10 of the survey asks the participants to rank what they think is their most important area or priority regarding prison programs. The resulting figure from this question's recorded data highlights how four of the five options are nearly all equally as important of an area of priority as the others (See Figure 13). Interestingly, one of the four options stands out, however slightly. The need for more TDCJ programs that offer credentials seems to be the option with more "most important" rankings, thirty-nine total, with the fewest "least important"



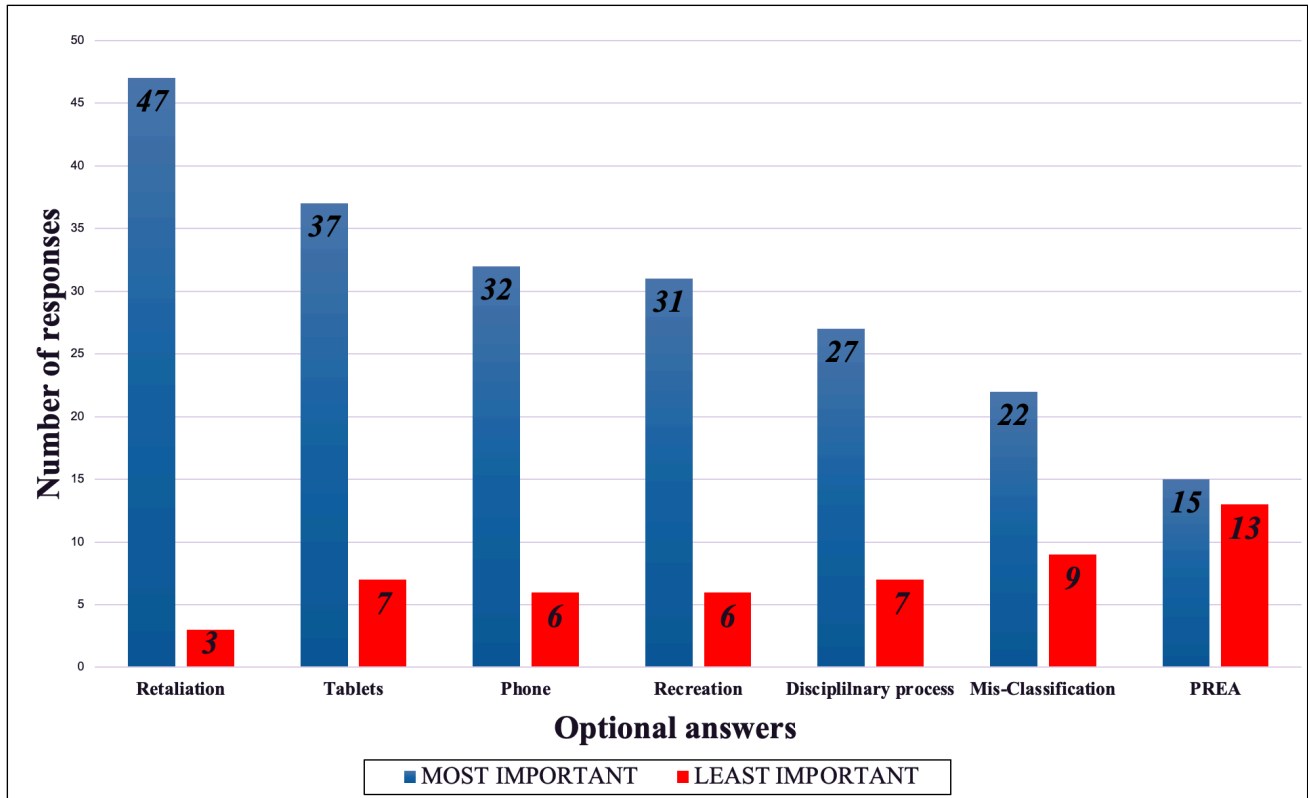
rankings, only five. The other three areas of priority, the lack of program availability, the denial of programs, and the variety of programs, respectively, have similar "most important" ranking totals but have more "least important" rankings, thereby making the need for more programs that offer credentials the number one area of priority regarding prison programs. The want for more programs with credentials is not a new form of thought when discussing prison policy reformation. Studies state that nondegree credentials can help formerly incarcerated individuals find employment because employers find that these credentials prove that the individual has the skills and motivation for the job (United States Department of Education, 2016).



**Figure 13. Areas of Priority Regarding Prison Programs**

**Question 11:** What are the Areas of Priority Regarding Miscellaneous Topics?

Question 11 asks the participants to rank a multitude of unrelated topics that did not fit in the categories of the other questions. There is one clear area of priority that overshadows its counterparts. The number one area of priority of the incarcerated participants regarding these miscellaneous topics is the retaliation found within TDCJ prisons (See Figure 14). Many law reform studies have delved into why this may be so prevalent and ingrained within the correctional officer subculture; one study even goes as far as to say that it may well be a normative response when an incarcerated individual files a grievance, which is a statutory precondition for filing a civil rights action (Robertson, 2009). It seems more safeguards should be put in place to ensure that the rights of the incarcerated participants are protected, especially when filing grievances. One individual from the Smith Unit spoke out about the horrific abuse the incarcerated in TDCJ units must live with and suffer daily, "I have forty-plus years of knowledge of the dirty deeds done against state prisoners by the officials of TDCJ. You would be amazed at the millions of dollars that the TDCJ officials have pocketed... While prisoners die from neglect, negligence, indifference, and just don't care attitudes by state employees." Another example of the abusive nature of the TDCJ prisons is from an individual from the Polunsky Unit who seems scared they will be retaliated against if guards see their attached letter, "Please see attached—WAIT!—maybe next time, don't want them (TDCJ officials) any angrier at me right now! Retaliation rules this nation..."



**Figure 14. Areas of Priority Regarding Miscellaneous Topics**

***Question 12: What are the “BEST” Programs at TDCJ?***

Question 12 is the first of the write-in questions, and as such, Google Pinpoint, the OCR tool, Dedoose, and NVivo, the QDA tools, were used to find common trends recorded in this question. There was not a significant trend amongst the incarcerated participants of the survey that focused on one sole program within the TDCJ; however, some programs were mentioned more than once. The programs within TDCJ prisons include Bridges To Life, college education, Cognitive Intervention Transition, religious and familial programs like Life Skills, and any vocational program like plumbing, welding, and cooking. These are just some of the rehabilitation programs offered by the TDCJ, and they seem to have loyal supporters. One participant from the Wallace Pack Unit is a proponent of the Bridges To Life program, "Bridges

To Life helps you identify with your victim and also look into your own victimization and explores how to heal that so you create no more victims." Another participant thinks that Cognitive Intervention Transition is the best program offered, "Cognitive Intervention teaches you how to change wrong thinking habits." Lastly, this is not a program offered but an issue with accessibility to said programs. Participants of this survey claim that people who are in administrative segregation, also known as ad seg or solitary confinement, do not get access to any program offered, which is a shame. One participant from the Ferguson Unit states their perspective on the lack of access to programs, "I'm in ad seg, we have no programs."

**Question 13: Would you like ALL TDCJ Units to have Video Surveillance Throughout the Facilities?**

Question 13 of the survey asks the incarcerated individuals a yes or no question regarding TDCJ Units having more video surveillance systems throughout their facilities. Through tabulating the results from this question, there is overwhelming support from the surveyed incarcerated individuals for having more surveillance within TDCJ units. Approximately 79 percent of incarcerated individuals expressed a strong desire for increased surveillance within their units, driven by concerns surrounding safety, security, and personal well-being (See Table 1). These respondents highlighted the potential risks posed by the absence of surveillance systems in certain areas within their units, emphasizing a further need for enhanced monitoring to mitigate harm to both themselves and others. Many incarcerated individuals perceive surveillance systems as a crucial tool in fostering a safer environment, as they believe increased accountability, through surveillance, of the officers and guards within the prison would reduce potential abuses of power (Allard et al., 2006). By installing surveillance systems, incarcerated

individuals hope it will deter guards from exploiting their privileges, promoting a more equitable and secure prison environment.

**Table 1. Count and Percentage of Answers For Surveillance Question 13**

Answer	Count	Percentages
Yes	68	79.07%
N/A	11	12.80%
No	6	6.97%
Both	1	1.16%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>86</b>	

*Note:* People who did not answer question 13 were marked N/A, and only one answered yes and no.

**Questions 14 and 15: Suggestions for Making Visitation Experiences Better & Anything Else That You Would Like to Share?**

These two questions are the last questions on the survey and are both write-in questions, so it was rare for there to be any one area of priority or topic that stood out amongst all surveys. However, there were some similar suggestions for making visitation experiences better for question 14. One participant from the Boyd unit states, "Vending machines are always broken and empty every single time." This correlates with the second area of priority of question 8, with 30 people agreeing there is a need for better, healthier vending machine choices. Another participant from Gatesville agrees, "I do not receive many visits...But what I hear most are for sandwiches and salads to be in the vending machine." Studies have continually shown that

visitation has positive benefits, as discussed in question 8. One study conducted by the Ohio Department of Corrections concluded that there is a statistically significant relationship between increased visitation and decreased rule infractions; even one visit was found to have a positive correlation (Boudin et al., 2013). Question 15 is the space on the survey for participants to write in anything they would like to share. The QDA and OCR software tools were also used to find impactful quotes for this question. These shared comments range from concerns over the staff shortage to sleep deprivation from the TDCJ prison schedule. A victim of the shortage of staff issues from the Robertson Unit states, "Short staffing, better characterized as overcrowding, is a big issue here." Simultaneously, an incarcerated individual residing in the Coffield Unit states, "Showering between 12 a.m. and 2 a.m. and then breakfast chow soon thereafter causes sleep deprivation because around 6 a.m. the unit comes alive and correction officers slam doors and wake us up to make sure we are alive. So that two to four hours of sleep max is all we get at one time without interruption."

### ***Research Summary and Implications***

This thesis sheds light on the priority areas faced by incarcerated individuals within the TDCJ prison system. Prioritizing medical care emerged as the top concern of most participants from the overarching first survey question, followed by concerns over prison food and legislation, respectively. The prioritization of medical care is likely linked to the lack of air conditioning in many TDCJ facilities, which raises the potential for heat-related illnesses.

Due to the extreme heat conditions in Texas, some incarcerated individuals sabotage the toilets in their cells to make the water overflow and wet the floor, which they then sleep in (Alorinde, 2023). The lack of air conditioning in TDCJ prisons was the subject of a civil rights

lawsuit in 2018; alternatively, a bill by Edinburg Democrat Terry Canales requires TDCJ to keep its units between 65 and 85 °F, but the bill was dramatically rewritten, swapping the harsh limit of 85 °F with a mandated government study to see how much it would cost to reduce the temperatures of all TDCJ units (Camarillo, 2019). This change in the bill directly opposes the study that shows that with every single degree above 85, there is a positive correlation with the risk of mortality (Skarha, 2022). The TDCJ medical care system is filled with areas of concern from the participants of this survey.

One of the areas of priority within the TDCJ medical care system deals with dental care and dentures. Denial of dental care and prosthodontics adds another layer of healthcare challenges for incarcerated individuals. Texas policy dictates that dentures and orthodontics only be given out to those they deem "medically necessary," which had resulted in a significant decline in medical treatments; before this policy was in effect, over a thousand prosthodontics were provided each year (Beattie, 2023).

Inadequate food and water are also priorities for the survey participants. The quality and quantity of the food and water are a concern, especially when insufficient rations are handed out during lockdown. When considering that these individuals are being fed insufficient amounts per meal while also being forced to drink arsenic-contaminated water, one can see the abhorrent conditions these individuals face on a daily basis (Bernd et al., 2017). The rising prices within the commissary are the main concern for the participants since Texas is one of a handful of states that does not pay its incarcerated individuals for forced work, so certain necessary items for a living are out of reach for most in the TDCJ system (Camarillo, 2019). Denied and lost mail is a vital area of importance for those incarcerated, for as stated, denying an individual's legal mail violates the First Amendment, making it a constitutional right violation (Lapin, 2009).

The areas of priority within prison visitation highlight how many incarcerated participants do not seem to be getting meaningful, high-quality visits because of the vending machines not being appropriately stocked and that the TDCJ limits incarcerated individuals to 12 people on their visitation lists. Lack of access and denial of higher education opportunities is the top priority concerning prison education. This concern over the lack of prison education is prevalent, especially when considering that TDCJ has sexist policies not allowing females to pursue their master's while males can (Ament, 2022). This further pushes the denial and lack of access across TDCJ prisons. The main priority of incarcerated individuals concerning the prison programs is that there is a need for more of the TDCJ rehabilitation programs to offer credentials. This would equate to more individuals having a smoother and more successful reentry process (United States Department of Education, 2016). Retaliation from TDCJ officials continues to be a critical area of priority for the incarcerated participants of the survey. Some even report being scared of issuing grievances due to the reputation to which they will succumb. The best rehabilitation programs in TDCJ prison units are those that require the incarcerated individual to self-reflect and those that come with credentials. Bridges To Life, Cognitive Intervention, and any vocational program are just some of the programs named by the participants of the survey. When asked if all TDCJ prison units should have video surveillance, the participants answered with a strong yes; 79 percent of those surveyed wanted more video surveillance in their prison units. When considering how to make visitation visits better, some participants stated that the vending machines are never stocked well and would prefer healthier options for themselves and their loved ones.

Other comments written at the end of the survey include concerns over the staffing shortages of the TDCJ itself. Another victim of this shortage of staff issue from the Connally



Unit states, "Due to lack of officials, we inmates get it real bad. NO showers, NO hot meals, NO dayroom, NO phone or anything for that matter. How can we as inmates do what we are supposed to do if the small things we look forward to are being denied to use?" Incarcerated individuals within the TDCJ prison system are having their rights violated daily. This does not seem to be a concern of the TDCJ prison system as a whole because the Texas Correctional Industries continues to make Texas one of the most profitable prison systems in the nation; with the help of free labor, they made \$84 million of profit in 2017 (Camarillo, 2019).

This survey's results did have limitations. The non-responses and incorrect answers contributed to the biases of these survey results, which is not uncommon for these types of surveys. One study found that even national surveys given out by the government, in this case, Sweden, have the same errors and biases even when reporting something as important as their social security number; consequently, they found that "Scientific reports that include questionnaire surveys must describe the situation carefully. If possible other sources of information should be considered" (Sjöström et al., 2009). To minimize the survey results' biases from non-response answers, the N/A's were not tabulated as anything when totaled, and if they were, they were shown visually as N/A to minimize biases from non-responses, such as question 13's results.

### ***Conclusion***

This study, over surveys distributed by the TPCA, has shed light on the concerning conditions incarcerated individuals perceive throughout the TDCJ prison systems. The participants' responses prioritized areas of concern over the medical care system, mental healthcare system, inadequate food and water, denial of their legal mail, limited access to

education and rehabilitation programs, and the daily retaliation from TDCJ officials. Key findings of this study include the lack of air conditioning units within TDCJ facilities, potentially leading to increased heat-related illnesses and fatalities. Participants noted that during the statewide mandated lockdown of late 2023, they received insufficient food rations and lacked access to drinkable water. Limited access to higher education, sexist education policies, and a lack of rehabilitation programs with credentials are other prominent areas of concern for these incarcerated individuals. Furthermore, these conditions faced by incarcerated individuals can have a detrimental impact on the physical and mental health of incarcerated individuals, potentially hindering their success in reentry. Policies within the TDCJ prison system seem to be the leading cause of issues in the areas of priority recorded in the surveys. This research also has broader implications because these findings extend beyond the state borders of Texas. They also contribute to the ongoing discussion of prison reform nationwide, with environmental justice as a focal point. By supporting legislation that mandates improved living conditions, more air conditioning, less denial of educational opportunities, sufficient food, and clean water, some of these priority areas identified by the survey participants may one day be fixed.

Future research on these areas of priority should focus more on the handwritten aspects of the surveys and letters. Coding letters and written responses sent in by incarcerated individuals, line by line, is what future studies should entail. By doing so, the incarcerated individuals' first-person perspectives can be further asserted, and more concerns and areas of priorities may be found that this study did not cover. Finding and identifying the overarching trends of what is written by incarcerated individuals is a crucial aspect of future research when considering incarcerated individuals' unjust treatment and poor environmental conditions within the prison.

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## Appendix A: Survey Example

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 TDCJ Number \_\_\_\_\_  
 Unit Name \_\_\_\_\_



Date \_\_\_\_\_  
 Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_  
 Birth Date \_\_\_\_\_

As TPCA grows we would like to address some of the issues that are most important to you all as they fall within our organization's agenda. As many of you have already responded to our heat survey we did not include that topic here.

1. Please rank the following topics in order of priority for you using numbers between 1-14 (1 being "most important topic for me" and 14 being "the least important").

- |   |                                     |                                      |
|---|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Medical care         | <input type="checkbox"/> Visitation | <input type="checkbox"/> Education   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mental Health Care   | <input type="checkbox"/> Tablets    | <input type="checkbox"/> Programs    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Disciplinary Process | <input type="checkbox"/> Phones     | <input type="checkbox"/> Legislation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Food                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Mail       | <input type="checkbox"/> Recreation  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Water                | <input type="checkbox"/> Abuse      |                                      |

Please rate the following areas in order of priority for you using numbers between 1-5 (1 -most important, 2 -very important, 3- somewhat important, 4 -not really important, and 5- the least important).

### 2. Medical Care

- |  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prescription medication access  | <input type="checkbox"/> Sleep deprivation     | <input type="checkbox"/> Access to Hearing devices or treatment   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Denial of meaningful healthcare | <input type="checkbox"/> Access to vision care | <input type="checkbox"/> Over the counter medication access       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Compassionate release MRIS/EMR  | <input type="checkbox"/> Cost of medical care  | <input type="checkbox"/> Responsiveness to medical requests/I60s  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hospital transport              | <input type="checkbox"/> Access to Dental care | <input type="checkbox"/> Timing of medication distribution (KOPS) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Denied access to medical        |  | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of attention to medical emergencies |

### 3. Mental Health Care

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> System responsiveness to mental health care requests      | <input type="checkbox"/> Information on mental health programs availability |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Concerns regarding suicide in the system                  |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Concerns about the current treatment and recovery options | <input type="checkbox"/> Grief counseling/Suicide Intervention counseling   |

### 4. Food

- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not enough food       | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of Protien                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of Protien options |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not recieveing meals  | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of carbs                             | <input type="checkbox"/> Spoiled or rotten food  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Breakfast chow timing | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of Vegetables                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Johnny sacs             |
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> Dietary restitutions not being adheard to |  |

### 5. Commissary

- Variety of items  
 Lack of availability of items  
 Limited access  
 Pricing

### 6. Water

- Lack of access to water  
 Dirty water recepticles  
 Smelly or discolored Water

### 7. Mail

- Lost mail  
 Denied mail  
 Denial of books

## Appendix B: Survey Example Continued

### 8. Visitation

- Not enough visitation time
- Not enough visitation opportunities
- Family/child friendly area
- Would like to have more than 12 people on visitation list
- Healthy vending machine choice

### 9. Education

- Access to higher education opportunities
- Denial of educational opportunities
- Assistance with educational process
- Educational Cost
- Access to certifications
- Personal disability preventing education
- Educational Counseling

### 10. Programs

- Lack of program availability
- Need more programs that offer credentials
- Need more information on programs
- Denial of programs
- Variety of programs

### 11. MISC

- Retaliation
- Disciplinary process
- Miss classification
- PREA
- Phone
- Tablets
- Recreation

12. What are the "BEST" programs at TDCJ? Why do you consider those programs to be the "BEST"?

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13. Would you like ALL TDCJ units to have video surveillance systems throughout the facilities?

- Yes  No

14. Tell us your suggestions for making your visitation experiences better. \_\_\_\_\_

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15. Is there anything else that you would like to share \_\_\_\_\_

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