



The Critical Need for Public Restrooms in the District of Columbia: **A Business Perspective**

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Executive Summary

Public restroom access has become a critical infrastructure challenge across American cities. The District of Columbia has only one public restroom per 10,000 residents. A survey conducted by Throne and the Department of Public Works found that 96% of DC residents and visitors believe the District needs more public bathrooms. This severe shortage forces residents and visitors to rely on local businesses for restroom access, creating significant operational challenges for these establishments.

This report examines restroom accessibility in Washington, D.C. from a business perspective, based on a survey of 33 businesses across six neighborhoods. Three neighborhoods currently have Throne restrooms—Columbia Heights, Downtown/Indiana Plaza, and Eastern Market. The other three—Shaw, Mt. Vernon Triangle, and Congress Heights—were identified as comparable sites due to high foot traffic, business density, and lack of public restrooms.

The survey captures three key insights:

- **Businesses are overwhelmed when filling gaps in public restroom access:**
 - Only 35% of businesses surveyed allow non-customers to use their restrooms.
 - 77% would not open their restrooms to the public, regardless of city incentives.
 - 100% cite safety, cleanliness, vandalism, and/or illegal activity as concerns when allowing non-customers to use restrooms.
- **Public restrooms have a positive impact on business operations:**
 - Businesses report that not managing restrooms allows staff to focus on core business activities.
 - 50% of businesses near Thrones report less demand on their facilities.
 - 14% decrease in public urination and defecation was observed near businesses with Thrones.
- **Businesses strongly support expanding public restroom options:**
 - Businesses report frequent incidents of vandalism, property damage, and lowered staff morale when forced to serve as de facto public restrooms.
 - 97% support adding more public restrooms to reduce strain on businesses.

Introduction

Public restroom access has reached a crisis point across American cities, with far-reaching implications for businesses, residents, and visitors alike. A [2024 Insights Survey by Tork](#) revealed that 44% of people feel anxious about using restrooms outside their homes, with 38% avoiding eating or drinking while away from home to limit restroom needs. This anxiety affects quality of life, public health, and economic activity.

The U.S. averages only [eight public toilets per 100,000 people](#), forcing private businesses to become the de facto public restroom infrastructure. Until recently, Starbucks served as America's unofficial public restroom network, but its [2024 decision to end its open-door policy](#) has exacerbated an already critical shortage. This trend of restricting access continues to spread as businesses weigh the costs: Bradley Company's 2024 survey found that [nearly 60% of consumers report that an unclean restroom tarnishes their opinion of a business](#), with half vowing not to return. For businesses, maintaining public restrooms means dedicating staff time to cleaning, security, and management—resources many establishments prefer to allocate elsewhere.

Washington, DC faces particularly acute challenges, with only [one public restroom per 10,000 residents](#). According to the [DC Fiscal Policy Institute](#), "Off the [National] Mall, DC has five public restrooms available during the day, and only two available 24/7—there are no signs to tell you where they are." This severe shortage disproportionately impacts vulnerable populations, including the elderly, people with medical conditions, parents with young children, pregnant women, and the city's unhoused residents. A survey conducted as part of the DC Department of Public Works' Public Restroom Pilot Program found that an overwhelming 96% of DC residents and visitors believe the District needs more public bathrooms.

In response to this crisis, the District launched a Public Restroom Pilot Program in March 2024, installing Throne restrooms in strategic locations across the city to provide relief and collect insights on the impact of additional public restrooms.

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This report examines restroom accessibility in Washington, DC from a business perspective, investigating how local establishments manage bathroom access and the challenges they face when serving as de facto public restrooms. Through a survey of 33 businesses across six neighborhoods—three with Throne public restrooms and three without—the study analyzes how businesses approach bathroom access policies, the operational and financial impacts of these policies, and the measurable differences in business operations when public restrooms are available nearby.

The findings highlight the significant burden placed on businesses without nearby public facilities, documenting improvements in areas with Throne restrooms including reduced bathroom-related incidents, less public urination and defecation, and decreased staff time spent managing non-customer bathroom requests. By comparing neighborhoods with and without accessible public restrooms, the report demonstrates the tangible benefits of public restroom infrastructure for business operations, customer experience, and community health.



"On weekends, we're basically a public restroom for U St. That means half my job is managing the store, and the other half is cleaning the restrooms. You can't imagine what we have to deal with here: fights, defecation, drug use... it scares real customers away. I wish we had another place to send them."

- Jamar C., Manager at popular fast food chain on U St.

DC's Public Restroom Pilot

In response to the critical shortage of public restrooms in the District, the DC Council passed legislation in late 2023 establishing a Public Restroom Pilot Program. The Department of Public Works (DPW) awarded a contract to Throne Labs to provide and maintain free public restrooms across strategic locations in the city. Beginning in March 2024, the program initially installed five restroom units in diverse areas including Oxon Run Park, Columbia Heights Civic Plaza, DuPont Circle, and the Downtown BID catchment area. Eastern Market Metro was added as a sixth location as a result of community requests. Based on preliminary positive results and community feedback, the DC Council voted in December 2024 to extend the pilot through FY2025 with potential expansion to additional neighborhoods depending on budget allocations.

Throne is a self-contained, tech-enabled public restroom solution that is a cost-effective alternative to traditional infrastructure. Throne offers a turnkey service model that eliminates impact on District resources and introduces accountability to the public restroom.

Each unit features a flushing toilet, running water sink, and touchless fixtures in an

ADA-accessible design. Throne's smart technology collects comprehensive usage data and real-time cleanliness ratings, enabling continuous optimization of service and user accountability. In a year of operations there have been 5 instances of vandalism (primarily graffiti) and zero response required from law enforcement.



Survey Methodology

This report analyzes the impact that having a public restroom near a business corridor has on local businesses, from a local business perspective. To understand the short-term impact of a public restroom, the survey focused on gathering data from businesses in three neighborhoods with Throne restrooms and three neighborhoods without a Throne restroom to assess the sentiment of business owners, managers, and staff regarding the different restroom usage patterns. The survey focused on areas with public restrooms and areas where restroom access relies solely on private businesses.

The survey consisted of 33 businesses across six neighborhoods:

Three neighborhoods with a Throne restroom

- Columbia Heights (NW)
- Downtown/Indiana Plaza (NW)
- Eastern Market (SE)

Three neighborhoods without public restroom access

- Shaw (NW)
- Mt. Vernon Triangle (NW)
- Congress Heights (SE)

Eateries, particularly fast-casual restaurants and coffee shops, were prioritized because they are the types of businesses residents and tourists are most likely to enter when seeking a restroom. Businesses near Throne restrooms were selected within a five-minute walking radius, while businesses in areas without public restrooms were chosen based on foot traffic volume.

"I had to close my restroom here because of the damage people were doing to it, but I feel bad turning people away because all people need restrooms.

I own another Subway near a Throne and it has completely changed the demand for the restroom there! I really hope a Throne opens here."

- Rahul K., Owner of Mt. Vernon Subway

Survey Findings

#1 Businesses Are Reluctant to Provide Public Restroom Access

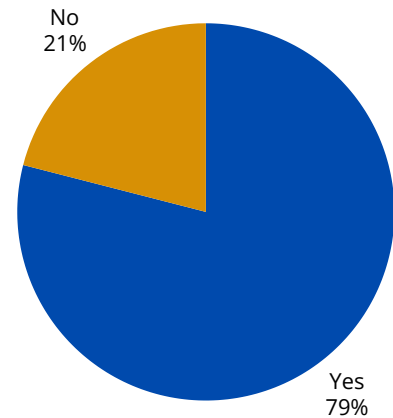
The survey reveals a strong preference among business owners to restrict restroom access to customers only. Of the 33 businesses surveyed:

- Only 35% of businesses open their restrooms to non-customers consistently.
- 23% will occasionally make exceptions and allow non-customers to use their restroom if they are city staff, delivery workers, parents with small children, or those undergoing an emergency, opening up restroom access to bias.

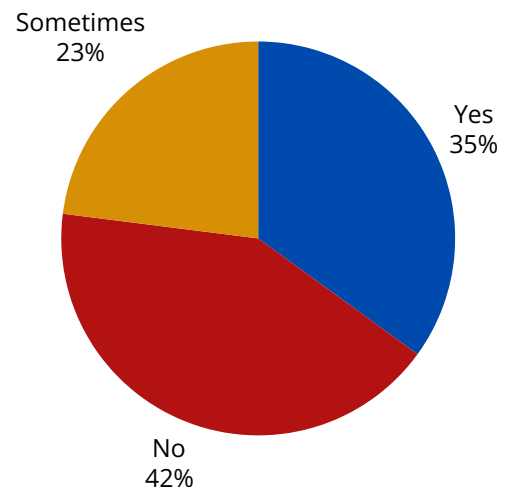
Business owners explained that public restroom access creates multiple operational challenges:

- Longer wait times for paying customers
- Disruptions to normal business operations
- Increased maintenance and cleaning costs
- Vandalism and property damage (including broken locks and defaced walls)
- Theft and drug use on premises
- Unsanitary conditions, including instances of human waste left on floors and walls

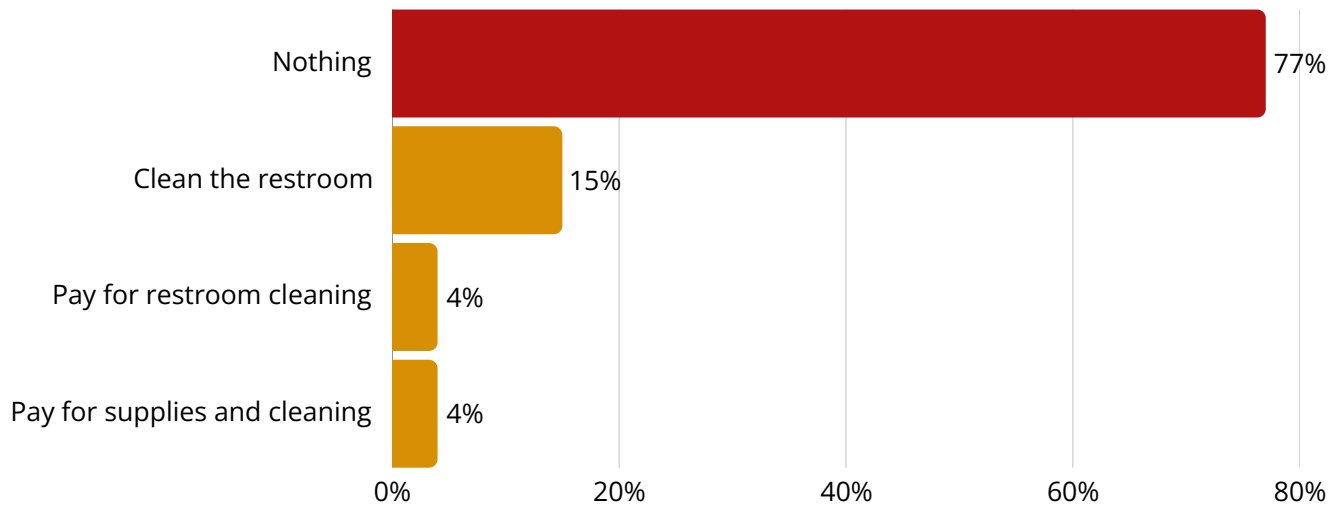
Does your business offer restrooms?



Are your restrooms open to the public?



What could the District provide to incentivize you to open your restroom to the public?



When asked why they restrict access, **100% of businesses cited concerns about safety, cleanliness, vandalism, or illegal activities.** More concerning for city planners, **77% of businesses stated that no city incentive would convince them to open their restrooms to the public.** These findings underscore the significant burden placed on businesses when public restroom infrastructure is inadequate.

#2 Businesses Face Significant Burden Managing Restroom Requests

The survey reveals that DC businesses are forced to act as de facto public restroom providers, creating substantial operational burdens. Over half of business owners reported public defecation and/or urination in their immediate business area and being overwhelmed by the constant stream of non-customer restroom requests, diverting valuable staff time away from core business activities.

This misallocation of resources has far-reaching consequences:

- **Core business functions suffer:** Employees hired to serve customers, prepare food, or manage inventory are instead spending significant portions of their workday monitoring bathroom access and denying requests, directly impacting business productivity and customer service.

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- **Staff face hazardous cleaning duties:**

When incidents occur inside or immediately outside a business, employees are forced to clean biohazards—a task far outside their job descriptions that requires specialized training and equipment. This creates workplace safety concerns and significant staff dissatisfaction.

- **Confrontational situations create unsafe work environments:**

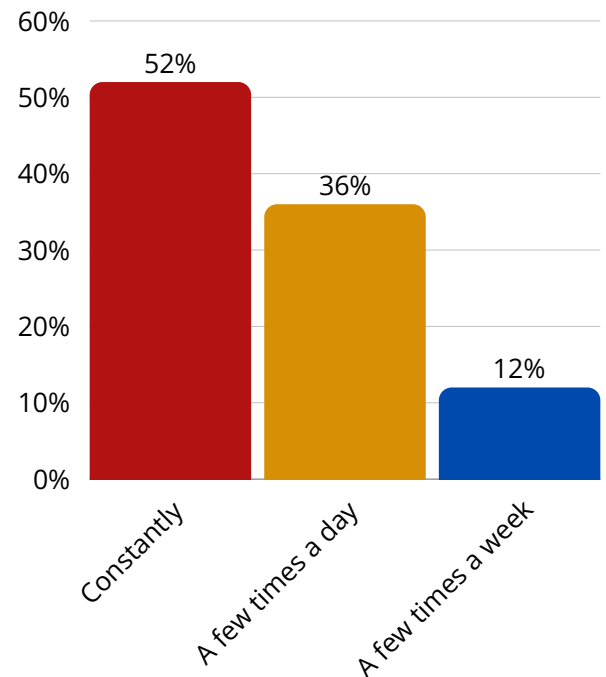
Multiple businesses reported encounters that turned hostile or violent when denying restroom access. A fast food manager described an incident where a denied visitor broke the restroom door lock in retaliation.

- **Public health incidents damage business reputation:**

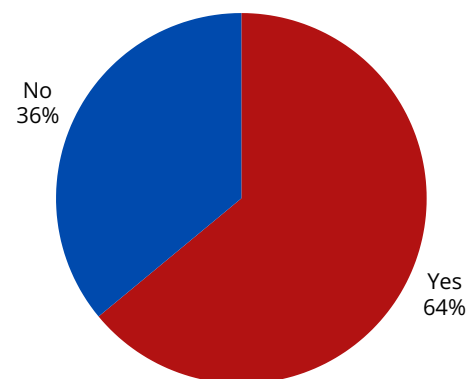
One manager recounted how a homeless woman, after being denied restroom access, defecated on the restaurant floor out of frustration. Such incidents can drive away customers, harm a business' reputation, and create lasting negative impressions.

These testimonials highlight how the lack of public restrooms creates a substantial operational burden for local businesses, lowering staff morale, increasing maintenance costs, and potentially creating unsafe environments for both employees and customers.

How often do non-customers ask to use your restroom?



Do you regularly encounter public defecation/urination near your business?



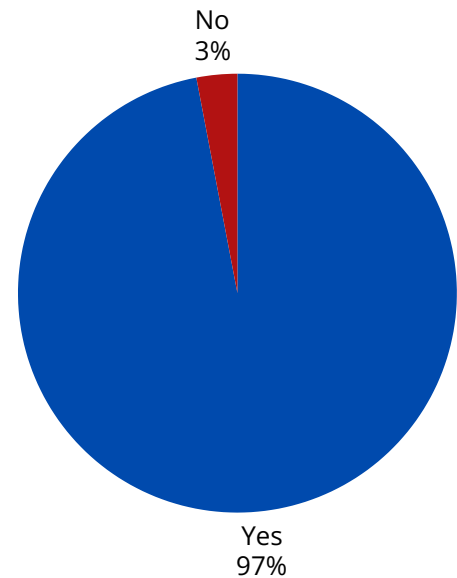
#3 Public Restrooms Significantly Reduce Business Burdens

The analysis between neighborhoods with and without Throne restrooms reveals compelling evidence of bathrooms' positive impact on local businesses:

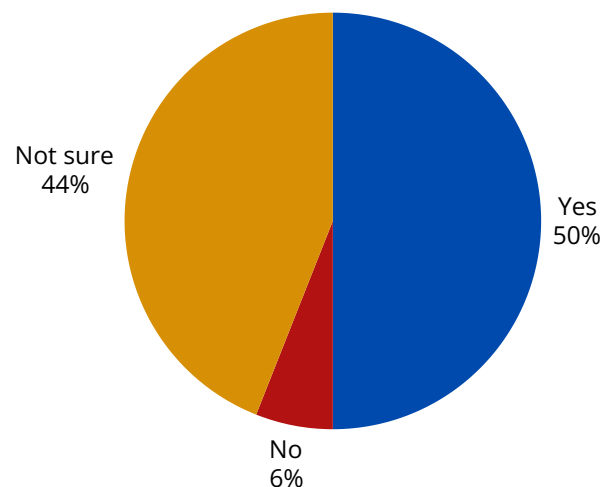
- **There is near-universal support for more public restrooms:** An overwhelming 97% of surveyed business owners support adding more public restrooms to reduce strain on their establishments, recognizing the operational benefits facilities provide.
- **Bathrooms reduced operational pressure:** 50% of businesses near a Throne restroom reported a reduced burden on their facilities. These business owners directly attributed this improvement to the availability of a public restroom within walking distance. This reduction allows staff to focus on core business operations rather than managing the restroom.

These findings demonstrate that strategically placing public restrooms creates a more favorable business environment by alleviating the responsibility businesses currently shoulder as de facto public restroom providers. When this burden is removed, owners can redirect resources toward customer service and business growth rather than restroom management.

Do you want more public restrooms in your area?



Has having a Throne nearby helped reduce the burden on your business?



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The presence of public restrooms decreased public sanitation issues. The data shows a measurable improvement in neighborhood conditions: Only 56% of businesses in areas with Throne restrooms reported exposure to public urination and defecation, compared to 70% in areas without public facilities—an 14% reduction in these public health and sanitation issues.

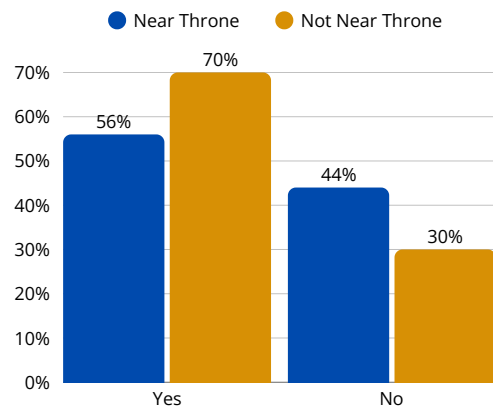
Conclusion

Based on comprehensive feedback from business owners, this survey demonstrates that Washington DC's severe public restroom shortage creates significant operational challenges for local businesses. The overwhelming support—97% of surveyed businesses favor increasing public restroom availability—reflects a recognition that proper infrastructure would allow establishments to focus on their core business activities rather than managing restroom access.

The comparative analysis between neighborhoods within the Public Restroom Pilot area and outside the Pilot area, reveals the tangible benefits additional public restroom infrastructure has for both businesses and community health. In areas with public facilities, businesses report fewer disruptions, reduced instances of public urination and defecation, and decreased confrontations over restroom access. Staff no longer face the difficult position of denying basic human needs or dealing with the consequences when access is refused—which can include property damage, biohazardous waste cleanup, and potentially volatile interactions. The Public Restroom Pilot Program shows promising results in addressing these concerns in neighborhoods where facilities have been installed. Expanding the Public Restroom Pilot Program is an innovative approach and a practical solution to bridge the gap between restroom supply and demand throughout the city.

Expanding public restroom access would create a more equitable environment where residents and visitors can meet basic needs with dignity and lower stress. This would particularly benefit vulnerable populations including families with young children, seniors, people with medical conditions, and unhoused individuals. Simultaneously, it would support local businesses by removing an undue burden they currently shoulder. The data from this survey provides a clear direction: strategic placement of additional public restrooms would enhance public health, improve the business environment, and create a more accessible and welcoming city for everyone who lives in, works in, or visits the District of Columbia.

Is public defecation a problem near your business?



About This Report

This report was commissioned by Throne Labs but independently researched. The findings represent an independent and objective assessment of how public restroom infrastructure impacts local businesses in the District of Columbia, based on surveys conducted in early 2025.



About The Author

Amma Boateng, Esq. is a DC resident, attorney, and consultant in Washington, DC with more than seven years of experience in policy advocacy. Her Capitol Hill experience includes Microsoft IP & Technology Law Fellow with the House Committee on Homeland Security, a Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Fellow for Rep. Yvette D. Clarke, and currently as a Legal Fellow with the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

Amma holds a B.S. in Biology and J.D. from Howard University. Through her consulting firm, she has worked with organizations including Project Ready, SeedAI, and The Wilson Center, demonstrating her commitment to equitable, forward-thinking policy solutions.

