

The Food in Prison Project: A Fact Sheet

Healthy food does more than nourish our bodies. Sitting down to a meal is part of being human, and sharing good food with others connects us. This fundamental role of food in people's lives is denied every day to men and women in prison when meals become another form of punishment -- unhealthy, unappealing and sometimes inedible. The adverse impacts of eating while incarcerated affect people long after their reentry into the community. It is time to re-examine the message we are currently sending to and about some of the most vulnerable members of our society through the prison food experience.

On average, people incarcerated in US prisons will serve about three years of time and eat more than 3,000 meals behind bars; those with longer sentences will be exposed to many thousand more meals likely to be insufficient in quantity and excessive in sugar, salt, and carbohydrates. The public health impact is significant. Research shows that just one month of unhealthy meals can result in long-term increases in cholesterol and body fat, increasing risk of dietary-related diseases. One 2016 report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that 44% of people who are incarcerated suffer from chronic illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, and high blood pressure, conditions they take with them when they walk out the prison gates. For women who are pregnant during their incarceration, the negative effects on their health are also handed down to the next generation.

In addition to deterioration of physical health, the critical nutrient deficiencies of prison food have been shown to contribute to psychiatric issues like brain fog, heightened aggression, and a general decline in emotional stability. Other common prison food practices, like unreasonably early meal times, hostile eating environments, and lack of control over food choice further disrupt connection to life on the outside. Poor food and negative eating experiences not only impact individuals, but also lead to less secure facilities and to financial and social costs that too often must be borne by the families and communities who can least afford it.

Food in prison is also a multi-faceted racial justice issue. Communities of color are affected disproportionately both by mass incarceration and food access issues. Current prison food practices not only compromise the health of individuals in confinement, but also perpetuate damage to the social fabric of black and brown communities as the effects ripple outward. Historically, the relationship between prison labor and agricultural work can be traced back to slavery and convict leasing. Today, over 30,000 incarcerated people - disproportionately people of color - currently work in farming or food-related jobs within the prison system, where they often face substandard working conditions and earn meager wages of less than \$3 a day.

95% of people who are incarcerated eventually will be released. It is in everyone's interest to ensure these returning citizens are physically, mentally, and emotionally ready to rejoin their communities. Food can be used as a powerful tool to restore health, renew self-esteem, rebuild relationships, and revive connection to community.

The Food in Prison Project Scope

Impact Justice is conducting the first-ever comprehensive study focused on the food served in the nation's prisons. Over the next year, the Food in Prison Project will document the short and long-term effects of eating in confinement, analyze the structures that created our current system, and identify opportunities for change.

Our research will include:

- Interviews and surveys conducted with those who have experienced incarceration firsthand, as well as their families and community leaders;
- Site visits and interviews with leaders of correctional facilities and key decision-makers at the state level;
- A cross-disciplinary literature review and consultations with experts in nutrition, mental health, public health, law, economics, sociology, and cultural studies;
- An inquiry into the process of transforming institutional eating in other sectors and countries;
- Documentation of promising practices in the field and discussions with advocates in the criminal justice reform and food justice spheres.

This project will cut across a multitude of movements, including racial justice, economic justice, environmental justice, and food justice. Our goal is to use our research to frame a national dialogue and foster collaboration among a wide array of groups to bring about comprehensive and transformative change. Based on our research, the Food in Prison Project also plans to explore and launch innovative pilot programs designed to address this multifaceted problem.