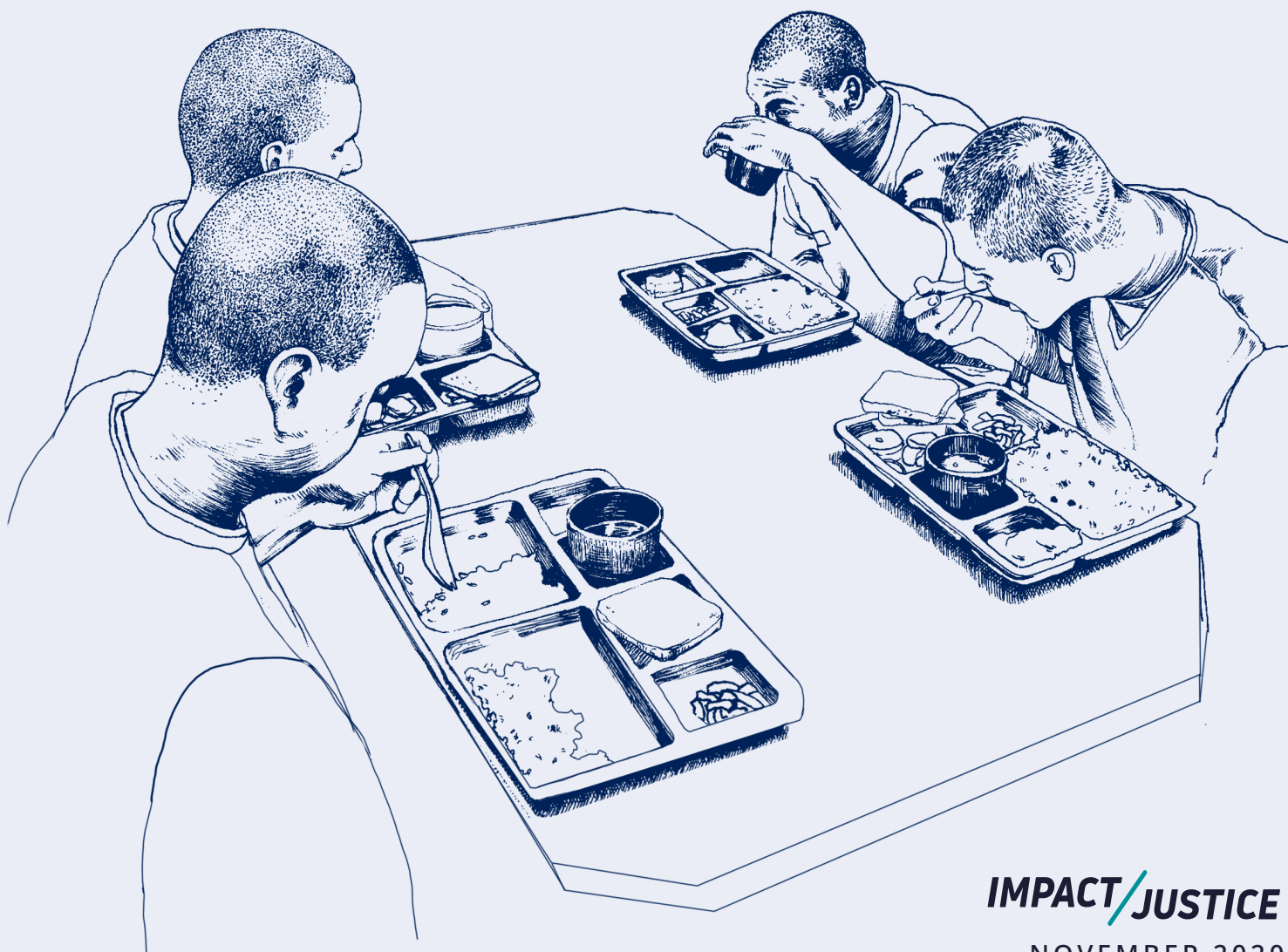


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EATING BEHIND BARS:

Ending the Hidden Punishment of Food in Prison



IMPACT/JUSTICE

NOVEMBER 2020

Executive Summary

Good food nourishes and sustains the body—and does more than that. What we cook and eat affirms who we are as individuals and connects us to people, places, and cultures. Yet a positive relationship with food—an essential part of being human—is denied every day to incarcerated people when the food made available to them functions as another form of punishment.

A person sentenced to prison in the United States serves three years on average. That's more than 3,000 meals behind bars (far more for people serving longer sentences), all typically high in salt, sugar, and refined carbohydrates and low in essential nutrients—a diet that for decades everyone else has been advised to avoid. The food itself and the conditions under which it is served are harmful to physical and mental health and can erode self-esteem, with immediate and long-term impacts.

Prisons function as out-of-sight food deserts, perpetuating patterns of poor health in communities that already experience profound inequities.

The damaging and degrading prison food experience is a symptom of a larger systemic malady: our dependence on a dehumanizing criminal justice system to address harm. Like every other aspect of mass incarceration, this is an issue of racial and economic injustice: Lower-income communities of color, where affordable healthy food is scarce, disproportionately lose members to prison and then struggle to support them when they return home in worse health. In this way, prisons function as out-of-sight food deserts, perpetuating patterns of poor health in communities that already experience profound inequities.

This six-part report, the first national investigation of its kind, explores these and other troubling trends in prison food. Resulting from 18 months of fact-finding by Impact Justice, our report centers the perspectives of people who have been incarcerated while also examining food service policies and practices that affect 1.3 million people incarcerated in state prisons nationwide. The report also highlights some promising

Impact Justice national assessment

250

surveys from
formerly
incarcerated
people in 41 states

230

surveys from
friends and
family members
of incarcerated
people

11

in-depth
interviews
with formerly
incarcerated
people

43

interviews with
current and former
corrections staff in
12 states

50

state policies
reviewed
& 35 state
agencies surveyed

emerging efforts in a handful of prisons where nourishing food is becoming a priority, illuminating the potential for change.

The broadening awareness that access to good food is a fundamental human right has spawned urban farms, mobile farmers' markets, and land co-ops, revitalized school lunch, and more. This report makes clear that the growing food justice movement must incorporate the millions of people inside prison walls, and shows how diverse stakeholders can work together in common purpose.

Key takeaway

01

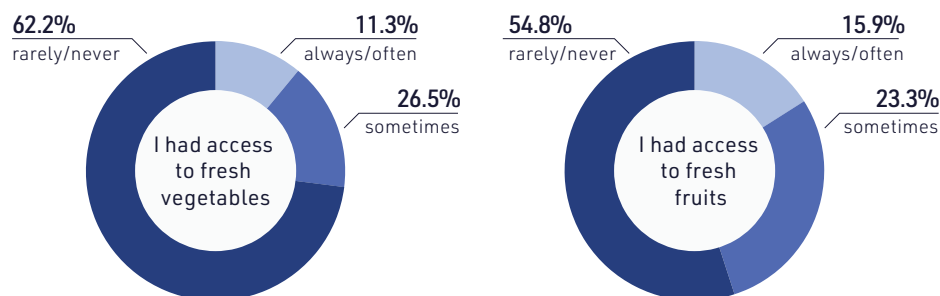
The current system has unacceptably low standards that sacrifice people's health for the lowest cost and highest efficiency.

With a staggering number of incarcerated people to feed, states now spend far less per person—under \$3 a day in the majority of states and as little as \$1.02 in one state—leading to nationwide patterns of unacceptable and declining food quality. Cuts or stagnant spending in what already comprises a minuscule portion of a prison system's overall budget (e.g., just 4% in

Texas in 2019) have led to fewer hot meals, smaller portions, lower-quality protein, and more ultra-processed foods that can be quickly heated and served; along with poorly equipped and ill-supervised kitchens that further compromise food quality and safety. Fresh fruits and vegetables—central to a healthy diet rich in nutrients and fiber—are exceedingly rare in prison. Most prisons now rely on refined carbohydrates (e.g., white bread, biscuits, and cake) to reach the mandated calorie count, and many have turned to fortified powdered beverage mixes as the primary source of essential nutrients—a cheap but woefully inadequate alternative to nutrient-dense whole foods.

A scarcity of fresh produce

Impact Justice (2020).



“Over the last two decades I’ve witnessed a weight gain in the offender population and more offenders become insulin dependent,” one officer wrote to us.

The consequences of these prison practices are clear. Research shows that just one month of unhealthy meals can result in long-term rises in cholesterol and body fat, increasing the risk of diet-related diseases. A recent report from the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics found that incarcerated people suffer from higher rates of diabetes and heart disease than the general public, conditions caused or at minimum exacerbated by the typical prison diet. A poor diet also suppresses the immune system, making incarcerated people even more vulnerable to viruses such as COVID-19 and other contagions. Along with declines in physical health, nutrient deficiencies contribute to a wide range of mental health and behavioral issues, including depression, aggression, and antisocial behavior. Given that 95% of incarcerated people are eventually released, their physical and mental health is ultimately a community and societal concern.

Key takeaway

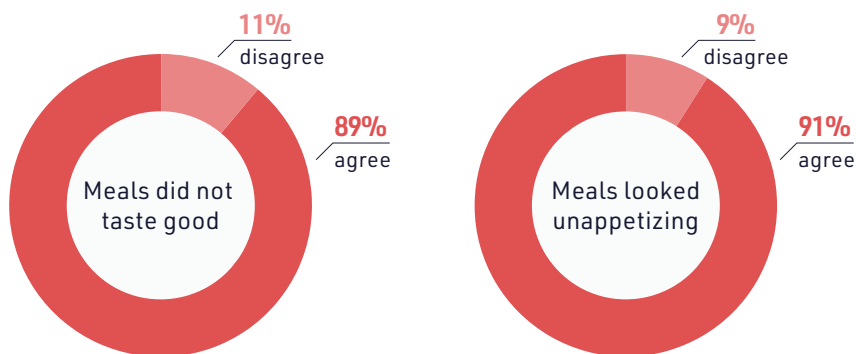
02

Incarcerated people are routinely humiliated by the experience of eating in prison, with both immediate and long-term consequences.

Humans are hard-wired and acculturated to imbue food with meaning far beyond survival; we use food to communicate our relationships and values. Most food served in prison sends a clear message that the people eating it don't matter. Not only is the food generally unappetizing, it's also a source of disgust and humiliation—three out of four formerly incarcerated people we surveyed reported receiving trays with spoiled food (e.g., moldy bread, sour milk, rotten meat, slimy bagged salad mix, and canned or packaged products years past their expiration date). Numerous formerly incarcerated people who were assigned to work in their prison's kitchen recalled being required to cook and serve packages of chicken and beef marked “not for human consumption.”

Unappealing to the senses

Impact Justice (2020).

**94%**

of survey respondents reported that they did not have enough food to feel full

Served mostly food that doesn't function as food should—taste good and nourish the body and mind—nearly everyone we surveyed said they couldn't get enough to eat in prison. One person described a “constant hunger gnawing at you.” Another mentioned “hanger,” the anger that results from being denied food.

“It always felt like feeding us was more like a duty. They don’t care if people are really nourished. That affects you mentally.”

– Natalia, who served time on the East Coast

The prison eating environment matters as well. Chow halls are frequently described as bleak, stressful, and potentially dangerous places where mealtime is a regimented, impersonal, and rushed affair. Formerly incarcerated people also described the shame of eating in front of officers who view them with contempt, a dynamic that caused some to skip meals. Some of the worst chow halls are also unsanitary (e.g., visible mold on walls, swarms of insects, and odors of “something rotten and dying”).

Science is beginning to reveal the deeper effects of eating in such an unpleasant environment. For example, lack of natural light and high noise levels negatively affect how the body processes food, with both immediate and long-term consequences for physical and mental health. Several formerly incarcerated people we surveyed described their struggle, both in prison and after release, to maintain a healthy weight, functioning body, and positive relationship with food.

Key takeaway

03

“Home cooking” in prison is an important form of resistance within a dehumanizing system— but most commissary offerings are unhealthy and unaffordable.

“Food brings people together ... When someone is sick, you want to bring them soup; when someone is sad you want to bring them cake.”

– Alicia, formerly incarcerated on the West Coast

The alternative to the tasteless (or worse) big-batch food prepared in prison kitchens is meals that incarcerated people make for themselves and others with supplies purchased at the facility commissary. Many formerly incarcerated people recall these “home-cooked” meals as some of the only positive memories associated with food during their time in prison.

While cooking in prison with items purchased from the commissary has gained attention as a form of creative resistance to the depersonalization of prison, it doesn’t typically increase access to healthy food. Food items sold by commissaries (such as instant ramen soups or macaroni and cheese) are heavily

71%

of survey respondents stated they had to do things that were against policy or rules to get access to more food

processed, typically high in sodium, sugar, refined carbs, and unhealthy fats—and they're expensive. Three in five formerly incarcerated people we surveyed said they could not afford commissary purchases, and many people are forced to choose between buying food and purchasing necessities such as toothpaste or making costly phone calls to loved ones. We heard stories about people going to great lengths, including engaging in gang activity or sexual relationships, to gain access to commissary food because they were so hungry. We also learned that food inequities in prison mirror those on the outside, with people from low-income backgrounds (often people of color) less likely to have the finances to afford commissary items.

Key takeaway

04

Greater transparency and accountability are essential.

75%

of survey respondents stated that they had been served rotten or spoiled food

Unlike commercial and other large-scale kitchens, prison food facilities are not routinely subject to rigorous independent oversight—and the results of inspections that do occur are rarely shared with the public. In our interviews, formerly incarcerated people recalled kitchens that lacked even soap and hot water, had roaches crawling out of the drains and rats scurrying across the floor, and that routinely served spoiled food—except on inspection days, when a quick clean-up to present a sanitary kitchen and safe food-handling took place. It's no surprise that incarcerated people are six times more likely than the general public to become sickened by foodborne illness. For those who wish to express discontent, typically the only avenue is the grievance process, which can be complex, time-consuming, and ultimately futile.

Perhaps the most salient example of poor oversight is the widespread use of food as a disciplinary tool. We spoke with a number of leaders and frontline staff in the corrections profession who assured us that food is not and should never be

“The food there was designed to slowly break your body and mind.”

—a formerly incarcerated person

used as a form of punishment—yet formerly incarcerated people shared many accounts suggesting that the age-old practice of punishing people by withholding food or serving disgusting or inedible food persists in many prisons. This is especially true for those placed in segregated housing as a disciplinary measure: At least 36 states require or allow the use of an alternative meal as a disciplinary measure, including at least 18 states that permit the use of nutraloaf, a purposely unappetizing mash of incompatible foods baked into a loaf and served in slices.

Key takeaway

05

The food available to people in prison could promote rehabilitation and support successful reentry—and that requires a new approach to food service that’s grounded in dignity and health.

There are obvious benefits to rethinking and dramatically improving the experience of eating in prison. Addressing nutritional deficiencies, satiating hunger, nourishing the senses, and restoring human agency by giving incarcerated people some choice in what they eat can profoundly improve physical and mental health. This will help people prepare to become fully engaged parents, family members, neighbors, and work colleagues after their release. These outcomes could very well spur larger improvements in public health and public safety, strengthening entire communities.

There are benefits for correctional agencies as well. Improving prison food can lead to safer facilities and less spending on diet-related illnesses and diseases. There’s also evidence that agencies can make meaningful improvements in food quality and the eating experience while controlling their spending. Adopting creative local purchasing agreements, partnering with allied institutions and movements, and adapting strategies that have succeeded in other sectors (e.g., hospitals and schools) are all promising pathways to change. Also important: prison

officials should seek out and seriously consider the views and suggestions of incarcerated people, a process that itself would improve the culture in facilities.

While Impact Justice works toward a justice system that does not use incarceration as its answer to every problem and that instead relies more on community-based restorative justice models, we recognize that the people who are locked up today deserve to be treated with dignity now—and that includes access to nourishing food.

Promising practices

These are just a few of the promising practices highlighted throughout *Eating Behind Bars*:



At Mountain View Correctional Facility in Charleston, **Maine**, large onsite gardens and a 7-acre apple orchard provide fresh produce that goes directly to the facility kitchen for use in meals. Additionally, facility food service manager Mark McBrine has established partnerships with local producers to source high-quality meat, dairy, and whole-grain flour, as well as more fresh vegetables—a win-win for the prison and the local farming economy.



Las Colinas Detention and Reentry Facility in Santee, **California**, provides a dining hall replete with natural light, soft earth tones, and normal chairs and tables. Updated in 2014 by a local architecture firm, the redesign has positively affected the facility atmosphere, with both residents and staff reporting less stress during meals.



In September 2019, Noble Correctional Institution in Caldwell, **Ohio**, piloted a visitation cookout where the families of a handful of incarcerated men were invited to join their loved ones to grill, eat, and clean up. Pleased with the success of the inaugural lunch, department leaders hope to repeat and expand the initiative.

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