

EATING BEHIND BARS:

Ending the Hidden Punishment of Food in Prison



A report in six parts exploring the quality and consequences of food in America's prisons.

Produced by **IMPACT/JUSTICE**

About Impact Justice

As a national nonprofit innovation and research center, Impact Justice's mission is to foster a more humane, responsive, and restorative system of justice by preventing systems entrenchment, eliminating cruel and inhumane confinement conditions, and reducing barriers to societal reentry so that all people can live productive and fulfilling lives. Our work seeks to dismantle the prejudicial and discriminatory policies and practices in our justice system through a unique combination of research, pilot projects, evaluation, replication, advocacy, and education.

About the Food in Prison Project

The Food in Prison Project uses research, data, and the experiences of individuals and loved ones who have been impacted by incarceration to frame a national dialogue and foster collaboration among a wide array of groups in order to bring about comprehensive and transformative change to the food and the experience of food in America's prisons.

Authors

Leslie Soble, Research Fellow

Kathryn Stroud, Research Analyst

Marika Weinstein, Program Manager

IMPACT/JUSTICE

To cite this report: Soble, L., Stroud, K., & Weinstein, M. (2020). *Eating Behind Bars: Ending the Hidden Punishment of Food in Prison*. Impact Justice. impactjustice.org/impact/food-in-prison/#report

Food in Prison Project Advisory Board

José Andrés

Chef/Owner, ThinkFoodGroup
Founder, World Central Kitchen

Beatriz Beckford

Co-Founder of National Black
Food and Justice Alliance
National Director of
MomsRising.org

Lupa Brandt

Community Outreach Coordinator
at TRANScending Barriers Atlanta

Baz Dreisinger

Professor at John Jay College of
Criminal Justice
Executive Director of the
Incarceration Nations Network
Founder of the Prison-to-College
Pipeline

Dan Giusti

Founder and CEO of Brigaid

Kenneth E. Hartman

Author & Prison Reform Activist

Jennifer Kaplan

Food Writer
Instructor at the Culinary Institute
of America-Greystone

Sam Lewis

Executive Director of the Anti-
Recidivism Coalition

Adrienne Markworth

Executive Director of Leah's
Pantry

Katherine Miller

Founding Executive Director of
the Chef Action Network

Puzzle Nesbitt

Program Associate for Criminal
Justice Initiatives
at Borealis Philanthropy

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to the many individuals who contributed to this report, either directly or indirectly. In particular, we want to thank the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals who shared their stories and insights with us, creating the foundation for this report. The depth this investigation reached would also not have been possible without the corrections officials who gave us their time, expertise, and access – we appreciate their willingness to engage with us. Thank you to the many experts in a wide variety of fields who helped deepen our understanding of the many intersections prison food has with different disciplines and sectors, including Lucy Flores from FoodCorps and Amanda Berger from Insight Garden Program. We are also grateful to numerous Impact Justice staff members, our Food in Prison Project advisory board, and the amazing professionals listed below who supported this investigation and report. Finally, we want to provide a special thanks for the support and time we received from Mark McBrine, Kanav Kathuria, and Lois Fegan.

Contributions

Study design

Umbreen Bhatti

Illustrations

Melissa Garden

Editor

Jennifer Trone

Graphic design

Elefint Designs

Copy editor

Christopher Cook

Media outreach

The Outcast Agency

INTRO

PART 1

PART 2

PART 3

PART 4

PART 5

PART 6



INTRODUCTION

Eating Behind Bars

"I can't express enough how much people are aware of the terrible food they are exposed to and how much that awareness takes a toll on their mental and emotional health. It is depressing...brings down morale, increases stress, and leaves people hopeless."

- loved one of someone who is incarcerated

It's well known that good food nourishes and sustains the body, and does more than that. We look to food for pleasure and comfort. What we cook and eat affirms who we are as individuals and as members of families and cultures. Through shared meals, food connects us, expanding and strengthening the web of relationships on which we depend; there is a reason people have been breaking bread together for ages. Preparing a meal or enjoying one that someone else has cooked is part of being human. Yet a positive relationship with food, so elemental to the human condition and vital to health, is denied every day to people in prison.

The idea that nourishing food should be available to everyone as a fundamental human right has been gaining traction in the United States over the past decade.

Impact Justice's multi-part report, *Eating Behind Bars: Ending the Hidden Punishment of Food in Prison*, is the first national look at food in prison of its kind. In six installments released over the course of a week, we explore troubling and harmful trends in prison food through personal perspectives and recollections that bring these issues to life. We examine why and how food, which should nurture life, has become yet another means of denigrating incarcerated people. We discover what's at stake—for them, the communities they return to, and ultimately all of us. We also identify policies and practices that must change, and in that context, what we can learn from select prisons around the country where nourishing food is becoming more of a priority, and on better days a reality. We hope this report sparks a national dialogue about the role of food in our justice system and illuminates how better food can support goals everyone can agree on: creating safer and healthier communities, spending less on health care in the long run, and treating all people as human beings.

The idea that nourishing food should be available to everyone as a fundamental human right has been gaining traction in the United States over the past decade. From urban farms and mobile farmers' markets to land co-ops and the revitalization of school lunch, new initiatives are cropping up across the country. There is still much work to do, however, and the glaring discrepancies in access to nourishing food have become especially visible amid COVID-19.

The growing commitments to provide healthy food to everyone and to end excessive punishment overlap, in large part because the stakes in both of these areas are highest for Black and brown Americans. It is in lower-income communities of color where affordable healthy food is least available, and these same communities disproportionately lose members to mass incarceration and then are challenged to support them when they exit a harmful prison environment. Prisons function as out-of-sight food deserts, perpetuating patterns of ill health amongst populations that already experience profound inequities.¹



While we use the term “food desert” here in consistency with the existing research, this designation does not capture the fact that access to food is the result of systems designed by people. “Food desert” implies a natural phenomenon and removes agency. The term “food apartheid,” preferred by many food justice advocates, more precisely describes the systemic racism and underlying causes of inequity that permeate our food system.

RACIAL DISPARITIES

Black Americans are incarcerated at five times the rate of white Americans, and the rates are three and two times as high for Native Americans and Latino/a people respectively (though the data is known to be insufficient on this front). The U.S. justice system has a specific, historically rooted anti-Black bias.

38%

of state prisoners are Black, compared with 13% of the full US population

1 in 9

Black children have a parent behind bars

52%

is the probability that a low-income Black man has been incarcerated

Source: Gramlick, J. (2020). *Black imprisonment rate in the U.S. has fallen by a third since 2006*. Pew Research Center. [Link here](#)

Nellis, A. (2016). *The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons*. The Sentencing Project. [Link here](#)

A clear picture of mealtime in prison emerged from our surveys and interviews with scores of formerly incarcerated people, and from many corrections officials as well: the substandard quality of food in most prisons and the typically harsh conditions under which it's served are neither physically nourishing nor life-affirming. Indeed, the experience of eating in prison is one of the most common yet virtually unexamined ways that prison routinely treats people as less than human.

That food has become another form of daily punishment is a casualty of mass incarceration. There is no bygone golden age of prison food, but with a skyrocketing number of people to feed—from half a million people incarcerated in 1980 to 2.3 million behind bars in prisons and jails two decades later—the quality of the food has sunk to new lows.² With only a few notable exceptions, our investigation found that a nationwide pattern of poor and declining quality has continued unabated. Budget cuts and stagnant spending have led to fewer hot meals, smaller portions, lower-quality protein, fewer fresh fruits and vegetables, and more ultra-processed foods, as well as poorly equipped and ill-supervised kitchens that further compromise quality. And although the media have revealed appalling conditions in prisons operated by corporations like CoreCivic and the GEO Group, the problem runs much deeper than privatization.

A person sentenced to prison in the United States serves three years on average—that's more than 3,000 meals behind bars—and hundreds of thousands of people are incarcerated for much longer periods of time.³ All the while, they are consuming meals high in salt, sugar, and refined carbohydrates and low in essential nutrients. People in prison are fed a diet that everyone else has been advised for decades to avoid for health reasons.

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.⁴ An unhealthy diet also suppresses the immune system, making incarcerated people

LENGTHY SENTENCES

While many people cycle through the prison system on short sentences, hundreds of thousands of people spend decades in prison. In many cases, prison food will be the main source of someone's nutrition for the majority of their life.

1 in 7

people in prison are serving life or "virtual life" (50 years or more)

38%

is the average increase in sentence length between 1992 and 2016 for violent offenses (that's an additional 3,066 meals per person)

56%

of people sentenced before the age of 25 and serving the longest sentences are Black

Source: Nellis, A. & Anderson, C. (2017). *Still Life: America's Increasing Use of Life and Long-Term Sentences*. The Sentencing Project. [Link here](#)

Courtney, L., et al. (2017). *A Matter of Time: The Causes and Consequences of Rising Time Served in America's Prisons*. Urban Institute. [Link here](#)

more vulnerable to viruses, including COVID-19 and other contagions.⁵ Along with declines in physical health, nutrient deficiencies contribute to a wide range of mental health and behavioral issues.⁶ In this way, the poor quality of breakfast, lunch, and dinner, day after day, profoundly influences the overall environment and safety of a facility.

While some people enter prison in far less than optimal health, the food they consume while incarcerated practically ensures they will leave prison even less healthy, while those who begin their sentence in better shape are likely to deteriorate. Given that 95% of incarcerated people are eventually released, their physical and mental health is ultimately a community and societal concern.⁷

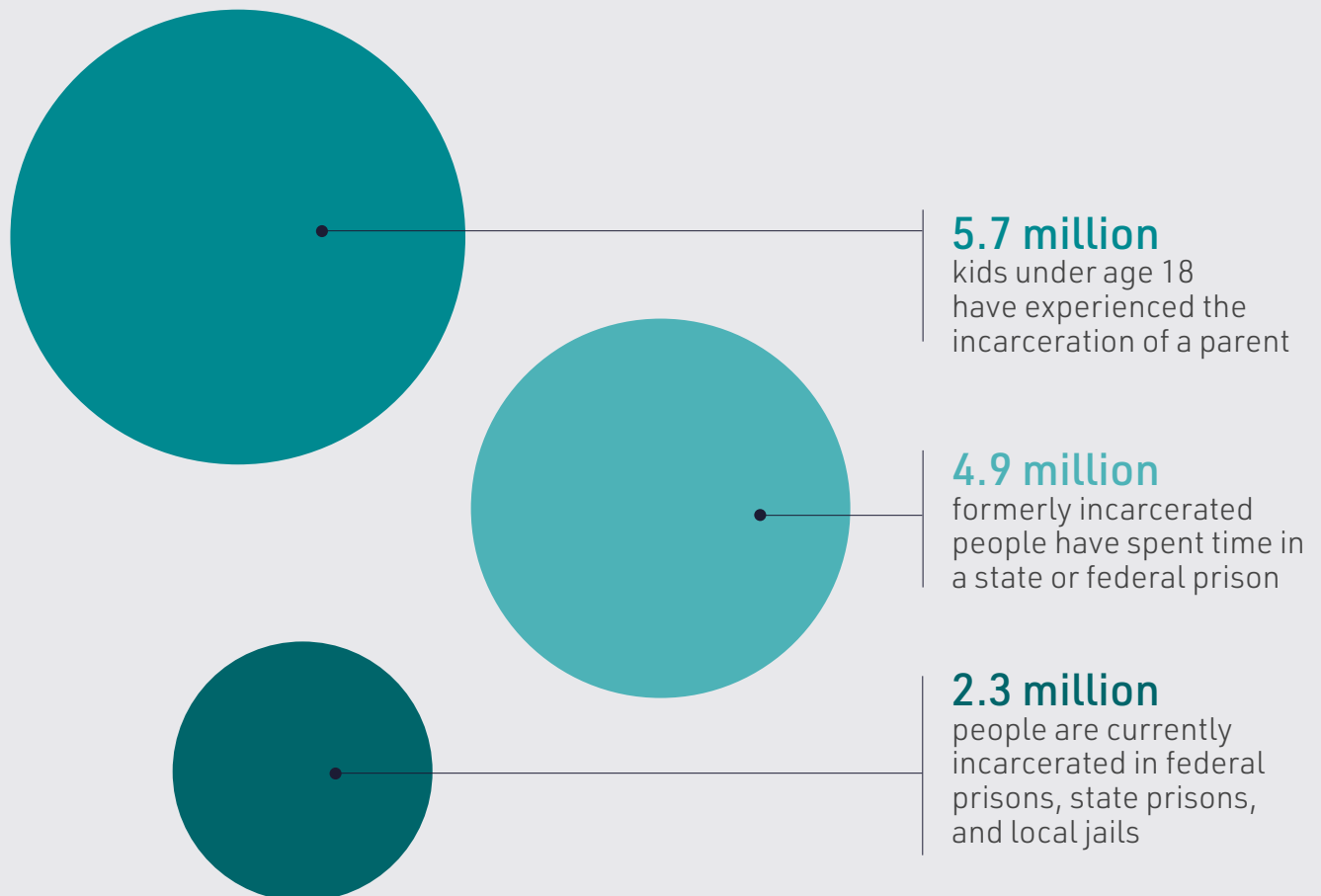
This Introduction, along with "Part 1: Food On a Tray," is the first installment of *Eating Behind Bars: Ending the Hidden Punishment of Food in Prison*. This report series is the product of 18 months of fact-finding, focused on the state prison systems in which over half of America's incarcerated people are held. We began by thoroughly reviewing the small body of prior research and other scholarly literature, food-related litigation, and media reports. We then conducted our own investigation to fill in the significant gaps, beginning with learning about the experiences of those most impacted: currently and formerly incarcerated people and their loved ones, whose input is vital to any discussion on the topic. In addition to surveys and interviews, we conducted focus groups with currently incarcerated people in two facilities and spoke informally with incarcerated people at the facilities we visited, noted below.

We also wanted to understand the operational realities of serving food in prison. We completed a systematic review of food-related policies and practices in all 50 states by analyzing publicly available information and surveying state correctional departments to fill in gaps, as well as interviewing 43 corrections professionals. We also observed food service operations ourselves by visiting prisons in California, Maine,

The reach of mass incarceration

The millions of meals being fed to people in U.S. prisons each year do not just impact those who are eating them. The huge number of people who have been cycled through the system and their family members experience the impacts in ongoing or indirect ways.

1 in 3 ADULTS IN THE U.S. HAS AN IMMEDIATE FAMILY MEMBER WHO HAS BEEN TO PRISON OR JAIL



Source: Sawyer, W. (2020). "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie." Prison Policy Initiative. [Link here](#)

Gotsch, K. (2018). "Families and Mass Incarceration." The Sentencing Project. [Link here](#)

Impact Justice national assessment



230

surveys from friends
and family members of
incarcerated people

11

in-depth interviews
with formerly
incarcerated people

250

surveys from formerly
incarcerated people in
41 states

43

interviews with
current and former
corrections staff in
12 states

50

state policies reviewed
& 35 state agencies
surveyed

Virginia, and Washington. We would have visited prisons in other states had our requests been granted. In that regard, it's important to note that our efforts to understand and document the state of prison food nationwide reinforce that the majority of correctional agencies still operate as opaque institutions. In addition, because each state runs its own autonomous prison system, drawing comparisons across states is fraught with challenges and limitations.

Our deep dive into the unique experience of eating in prison is complemented by our study of nutrition, the role of food from a social and cultural perspective, and the growing food justice and racial justice movements. More information on our investigation is available in the Methodology. While the exploration phase of this project ended before the current public health crisis, we continued to monitor the media for articles through August 2020 to learn how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting food in prison, information that we've incorporated in brief.

Better food can support rehabilitation and improve facility atmospheres, ultimately reducing recidivism and increasing community safety both inside and outside prison walls.

During the course of our work, we met corrections officials whose level of concern about the poor quality of food in prison matches our own. Most food service managers are trying to do the best they can with limited resources and working within deeply entrenched systems. We also encountered a few leaders who are challenging the status quo in the facilities and systems they oversee. Because our goal all along was to do more than just document the problem, we highlight promising practices throughout the report as hopeful counterpoints to the predominantly disturbing trends. We hope this report inspires corrections leadership and staff to leverage the power of food to support rehabilitation and improve facility atmospheres, ultimately reducing recidivism and increasing community safety both inside and outside prison walls.

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. While Impact Justice dreams of a justice system that does not use incarceration as its answer to every problem and instead relies on community-based restorative justice models, we recognize that people locked up today deserve to be treated with dignity now—and that includes having access to nourishing food. There are changes that can and should be made immediately, even as we work to dismantle the structures that drive mass incarceration. Our own work does not conclude with this report; we plan to use what we have learned to drive meaningful changes in food-related policies and practices in correctional facilities nationwide. We invite advocates working in any number of intersecting movements—racial justice, food justice, environmental justice, and justice system reform—to join us in this undertaking.

Food in prison can be a powerful tool for restoring health, cultivating self-esteem, and nurturing people's potential. Whatever hats you wear as a reader of this report—corrections staff, advocate, formerly or currently incarcerated person, policymaker, family member, journalist, researcher, concerned

POINTS OF INTERVENTION

Our investigation turned up a number of points at which interventions could occur. Throughout the report, you will see icons to signal promising practices or ideas in the field that pertain to these points of intervention:



Procurement



Menu planning & meal preparation



Eating environment



Commissary



Visitation



Education & awareness



Programming



Reentry



Oversight & feedback

citizen—we hope this series brings fresh insight and urgency to a long-overlooked and particularly degrading aspect of life in prison. Unhealthy and unsafe prison food harms people while they are incarcerated and potentially for the rest of their lives, with ripple effects that impact us all.

NEXT UP

PART 1: FOOD ON A TRAY

In the first installment, we provide a vivid portrait of mealtime in prison, characterized by food that is unappetizing, poor in quality, and sometimes unsafe.



PART 1

Food on a Tray

"Food in prison sucks. Period."

—formerly incarcerated person

Theo, who was incarcerated in a Northwestern state prison, still remembers the time they served boiled cabbage every day for a month. Across the country, Nate recalls a friend sighing as he sat down to his "four-hundred-somethingth" spaghetti dinner in their Northeastern facility.

Like every other aspect of life in prison, the food is dreary and monotonous and, with rare exceptions, relentlessly bad: two slimy pieces of bologna sandwiched between flimsy slices of white bread, a packet of mustard, and a handful of potato chips one day; two boiled hot dogs, the same white bread, and a scoop of under-baked beans the next. There are concoctions too similar to differentiate, in which chunks of mystery meat swim in a dull gravy, sometimes atop mushy white rice, and as Nate's friend experienced, a clump of pasta with the same watery tomato sauce week after week. Served on a tray and posing as spaghetti, stew, or a sandwich, the food in prison bears little resemblance in color, aroma, taste, and texture to real food—food that people crave because it's actually nourishing.

"There is no one here who would eat this [food] three times a day by choice or feed it to their family on the outside," Joshua told us, summing up the general sentiment among people who have lived in prison. Another person put it more bluntly: "Food in prison sucks. Period."

From unappetizing to inedible

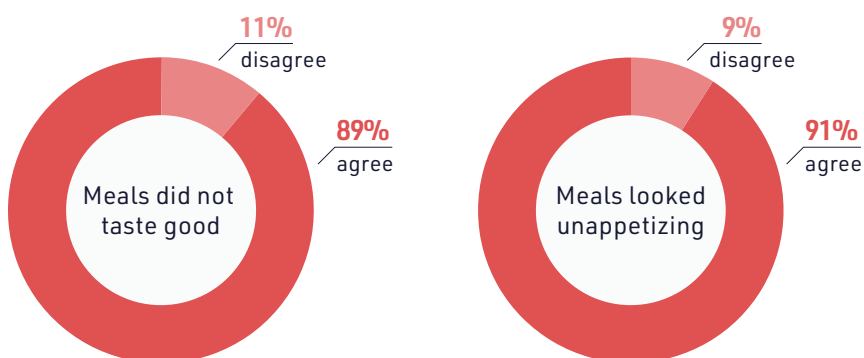
While many correctional facilities prepare special better-tasting meals on holidays—turkey and mashed potatoes on Thanksgiving, hamburgers and watermelon on the Fourth of July—the everyday fare tends to range from bland to awful. More than 80% of the 250 formerly incarcerated people we surveyed report that the food they were served was unappetizing in taste and smell. When asked to describe the food in their own words, one person we surveyed wrote, a “nasty, mushy, goulash-type mixture”; another recalled “rubbery, chewy, slop on a plate.” While a few formerly incarcerated people told us they encountered food that was “not great but edible enough,” or “not terrible,” the overwhelming sentiment was one of disgust. Even corrections officers described the food as “monotonous,” “poor quality and highly processed,” and “detrimental to the well-being of the inmate population.”

Unappealing to the senses

Source: Impact Justice (2020).

28%

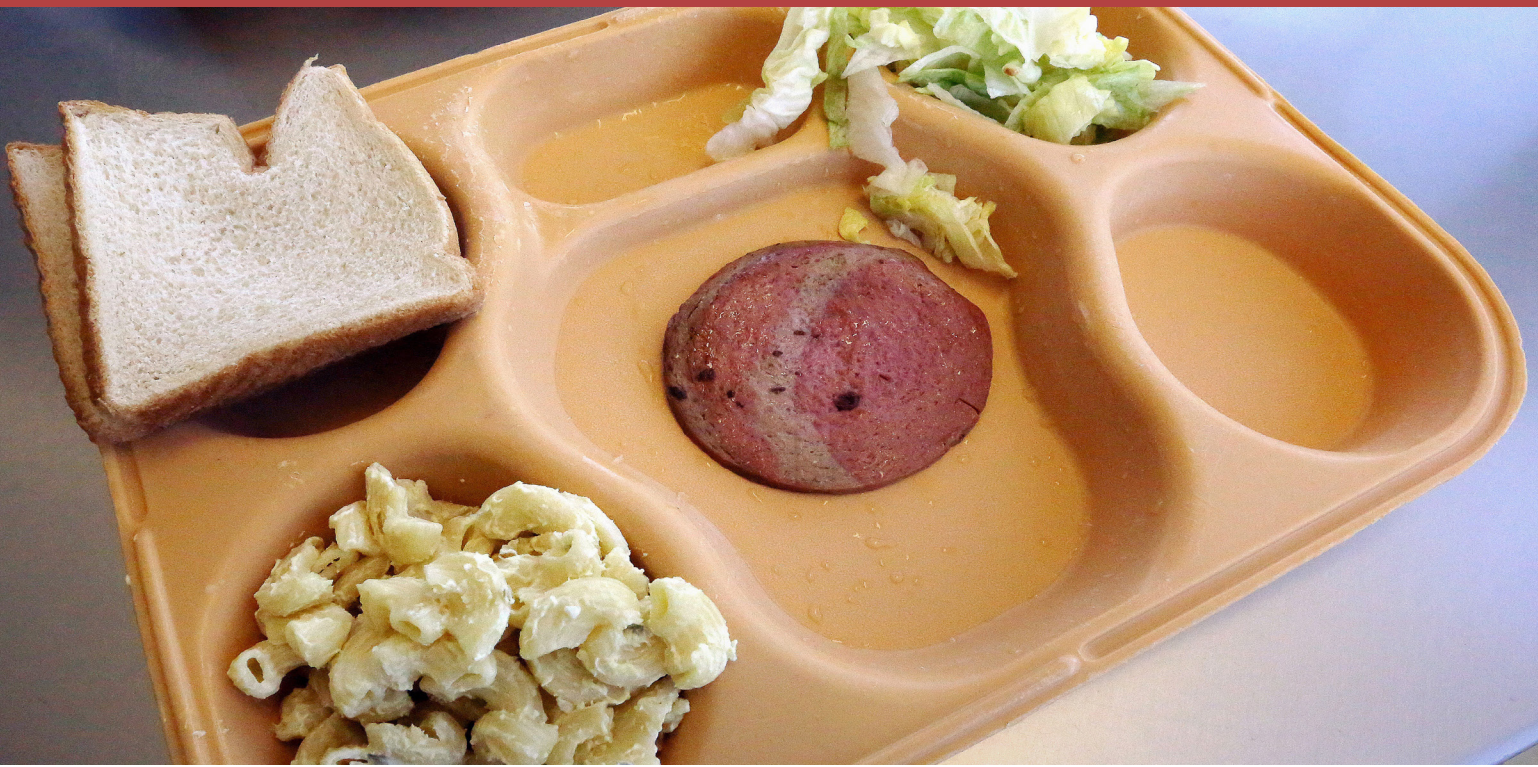
of survey respondents agreed that foods were served at the appropriate temperature



Even temperature can be an issue: Food that should be served hot is lukewarm at best, while cold items such as milk may sit out for hours before mealtime. The farther away from the kitchen a meal is served, the less likely the food will arrive at the right temperature. This can be a constant problem in prisons where residents eat in their unit’s dayroom as opposed to in a central dining hall, and when delivering meals to people confined to their cell in a special housing unit. The result is food that’s even less palatable and quite possibly spoiled.



All names of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people have been changed to respect their privacy.



↑ A lunch of fried baloney, bread, lettuce, and macaroni salad is offered in a South Carolina prison in 2016

Source: *The Post and Courier*

Our surveys and interviews document accounts of weevils in grits, rocks in turnip greens, maggots in meat, a rat tail buried in one day's entree, and oatmeal ladled up with human hair, pieces of metal, or cockroaches.

Sometimes—and routinely in some facilities—the food provided is far worse than unappetizing. In a 2018 survey of incarcerated people conducted by the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, 66% of respondents reported that in the last year they had been served food that contained bugs, was moldy or spoiled, or that was not intended for humans.⁸ Our surveys and interviews document accounts of weevils in grits, rocks in turnip greens, maggots in meat, a rat tail buried in one day's entree, and oatmeal ladled up with human hair, pieces of metal, or cockroaches. People describe water running brown from the tap, which they naturally find repulsive and undrinkable. One person noted that while staff are provided bottled water, brown water from the tap is apparently good enough for people who are incarcerated.

Our surveys include accounts of food prepared in ways that render it inedible and in some instances unsafe: crunchy rice and undercooked beans likely to cause gastrointestinal distress, and chicken dangerously pink or so parched it's like cardboard, for example. Then there's the practice of serving obviously spoiled food, something that three out of four formerly incarcerated people we surveyed had personally experienced. They list, for example, moldy bread, sour milk, rotten meat, slimy bagged salad mix, and canned or packaged products years past their

75%

of survey respondents said they were served rotten or spoiled food while they were incarcerated

“The only time we’d get chocolate milk was when the milk was spoiled and they’d add chocolate flavor.”

— Rosa, incarcerated for 33 years

expiration date. Rosa served 33 years in a Southern prison before being released in 2015. “The only time we’d get chocolate milk was when the milk was spoiled and they’d add chocolate flavor,” she recalled, so “you might get chunky chocolate milk.” Kayla, who was pregnant during part of her two-year sentence in another Southern state, remembers thinking, “I know I have to eat to survive and stay as healthy as possible, but what do you do when it’s not really edible?” Several corrections officers we interviewed told us they have witnessed spoiled food served to people in the facilities where they work. “Guys show me expiration dates two years old on their meat products,” one concerned officer informed us.

Numerous formerly incarcerated people who were assigned to work in their prison’s kitchen recall being required to cook and serve packages of chicken and beef marked “not for human consumption,” and, in one case, to incorporate a soy-based dog food filler—a practice discontinued only after someone stole the label and filed a complaint. One incarcerated person wrote to the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, “It says on the bags of hot cereal ‘not for human consumption’ and has the picture of the head of a horse.”⁹ Such abuses have a long history. Rosa remembers being served VitaPro, a substance intended as cattle feed, in the 1990s. “Texas was being sued for serving it to their inmates, but [our state] continued to serve it to us, and did so until they got sued as well,” she told us.¹⁰ Another formerly incarcerated person remembers seeing egg crates with “for prison use only” stenciled on them, adding “it doesn’t do well for the mind to see things like that.”

Drop-off in quality amid COVID-19

There is evidence that food quality in prisons plummeted rapidly when COVID-19 began spreading inside correctional facilities at the end of March 2020. Unsurprisingly, some of the biggest outbreaks nationally have occurred in prisons due to overcrowding and confined living spaces. Increased exposure

to the virus became an immediate concern as kitchen workers exhibiting symptoms were told to continue preparing meals while waiting for test results, and incarcerated people were still gathering in crowded chow halls for meals even after stay-at-home orders took effect.¹¹

Instead of releasing enough people to enable some semblance of social distancing as the pandemic grew, prisons in many states reverted to lockdown, which included closing dining halls. The strategy has done little to stem the spread of the virus but makes it easier to operate facilities with fewer staff as employees become infected and sick.¹²

One former Texas prison official explained that these lockdown meals, known as “johnny sacks,” have always been “subpar.” He added: “They’re shitty.”

Both the quantity and quality of food have been compromised as facilities struggle to manage the pandemic. In Ohio, meals were reduced to two a day.¹³ Florida and Georgia replaced hot meals with sandwiches and little else for both lunch and dinner.¹⁴ According to a report by the Marshall Project released in mid-May and documented with photos, meals in the 40-plus Texas state prisons had been arriving “in paper bags, cold, mushy and without a hint of green (except perhaps for some iffy-looking hot dogs).”¹⁵ One former Texas prison official explained that these lockdown meals, known as “johnny sacks,” have always been “subpar.” He added: “They’re shitty.” The bags reportedly were delivered at odd hours: two boiled eggs and a peanut butter sandwich at 3 a.m., according to one incarcerated person, and then, 13 hours later, the next bag arrived with sloppy joes or peanut butter sandwiches that were nearly indistinguishable. By early May, people—including those who were sick—hadn’t eaten a warm meal in weeks.

As of early June, according to Virginia Public Radio, several prisons in the state were relying on “emergency menus,” deployed when there isn’t enough staff to prepare regular meals.¹⁶ One woman they interviewed said that her husband “gets potato chips, moon pies and gummy candies, but apples are often rotten, a fresh vegetable usually means a couple of carrot or celery sticks.” Only a few main dishes, like hot dogs,



↑ A sloppy joe and a hot dog are served to a person incarcerated in Texas during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: [The Marshall Project](#)

One man in Texas wrote to his daughter in a letter she shared with the Marshall Project: “We will not die by COVID19 but we die by hunger!! TRUTH!”

bologna sandwiches, or a fried processed chicken patty are now served. Religious and medical diets are no longer being respected, so a person with diabetes might be served pancakes already covered with syrup, for example. The state says that the modified meals still meet American Correctional Association standards.

In some facilities, commissary access has been limited or banned altogether, and shortages of popular items like ramen noodles, which many rely on to stave off hunger, have left people anxious about getting enough to eat.¹⁷ One man in Texas wrote to his daughter in a letter she shared with the Marshall Project: “We will not die by COVID19 but we die by hunger!! TRUTH!” The situation has become so dire that food strikes have broken out in Ohio and Massachusetts, and led to a riot in Arkansas.¹⁸ These reports are especially disheartening given that tens of millions of pounds of fresh food have gone to waste around the country as producers have been unable to sell their goods to shut-down restaurants and schools.¹⁹

More than mere survival

Humans are hard-wired and acculturated to imbue food with meaning far beyond mere survival. Psychologically and emotionally, people naturally connect food with places, events, cherished memories, the common rhythms of life, and a sense of

belonging. Chicago is famous for deep-dish pizza, New Orleans for gumbo, New Mexico for vibrant red and green chiles. For many, drinking hot chocolate on a cold winter's day or lighting candles on a birthday cake is a cherished ritual. Homemade bread warm from the oven may bring to mind a beloved grandmother, and a popsicle fresh out of the freezer recalls the endless summers of childhood. There's a simmering pot of black-eyed peas to mark the new year in many Southern homes, the sizzle of Chanukah latkes frying in oil, the sticky sweetness of dates to break the Ramadan fast, and the pillowy softness of pan de muerto to welcome ancestral spirits on Día de los Muertos. Across the country, there are innumerable variations of chicken soup for the flu and comforting dishes after funerals. There are pints of ice cream to soothe a broken heart and steaming cups of coffee to greet a new day.

Most meals not only taste bad, but also send the clear message that no one cares and that the people eating them don't matter.

Food blurs the boundaries between our biological, social, and cultural selves; even simple food, if it tastes good and is made with care, makes us feel whole. On March 18, 2020, as the COVID-19 crisis took hold, Sam Sifton titled his daily *New York Times* food column, "Deliciousness Matters." In it, he wrote, "deliciousness improves moods, and inspires hope. Deliciousness sends a message. Someone cares."

Food served to the 1.3 million people in state prisons across America typically has the opposite effect. Most meals not only taste bad, but also send the clear message that no one cares and that the people eating them don't matter. Alicia, who was incarcerated for 15 years in West Coast facilities, summed it up well: "It devalued me, and I still devalue myself because of it."

NEXT UP

PART 2: WHEN FOOD HARMS

In this second installment, we take a close-up look at the nutritional value and quantity of food served in prison and its effects on health.

Endnotes

- 1 Benoit, E. (2020). *Exploring Connections Between Prison Food and Food Deserts: An Analysis of Formerly Incarcerated People's Experiences*. [Master's thesis, The Evergreen State College.] Malcolm Stilson Archives and Special Collections.
- 2 Schiraldi, V., & Ziedenberg, J. (2000). *The Punishing Decade: Prison and Jail Estimates at the Millennium*. Justice Policy Institute. [Link here](#)
- 3 Kaeble, D. (2018). *Time Served in State Prison, 2016*. U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics. [Link here](#); Jones, A. (2018). *Correctional Control 2018: Incarceration and supervision by state*. Prison Policy Initiative. [Link here](#)
- 4 Ernersson, A., Nystrom, F. H., & Lindstrom, T. (2010). Long-term increase of fat mass after a four week intervention with fast food based hyper-alimentation and limitation of physical activity. *Nutrition & Metabolism*, 7(68). [Link here](#)
- 5 Childs, C. E., Calder, P. C., & Miles, E. A. (2019). Diet and Immune Function. *Nutrients*, 11(8), 1933. [Link here](#)
- 6 Gesch, C. B., Hammond, S. M., Hampson, S. E., Eves, A., & Crowder, M. J. (2002). Influence of supplementary vitamins, minerals and essential fatty acids on the antisocial behaviour of young adult prisoners. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 181(1), 22-28. [Link here](#)
- 7 Hughes, T., & Wilson, D. (2002). *Reentry Trends In The U.S.* Bureau of Justice Statistics. [Link here](#)
- 8 Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee & Research Action Cooperative. (2018). *Cruel and Usual: A National Prisoner Survey of Prison Food and Health Care Quality*. [Link here](#)
- 9 Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee & Research Action Cooperative. (2018).
- 10 Draper, R. (1996, May). The Great Texas Prison Mess. *Texas Monthly*. [Link here](#)
- 11 Gill, L. (2020, June 15). *Grim stories from inside an Arkansas prison capture the toll of COVID-19*. The Appeal. [Link here](#); Associated Press. (2020, March 26). Indiana's inmates still eating meals together amid pandemic. KRCR News. [Link here](#)
- 12 Hausman, S. (2020, June 4). *Prison Food and Medical Care Suffer During COVID-19 Pandemic*. WVTF. [Link here](#)
- 13 Grego, B. (2020, April 16). *Family members express concern about conditions at Belmont correctional institution*. WTOV9. [Link here](#). The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections stated to us that they moved to two meals to reduce movement and opportunities for infection, and that this change was accompanied by an overall increase in daily calorie counts and a focus on offering the most popular items.
- 14 Ceballos, A. (2020, July 24). *COVID-19 toll passes 1,000 at Columbia Correctional*. News4JAX. [Link here](#); Ford, H. (2020, August 6). *More families allege inmates in Georgia prisons have little access to proper food and hygiene*. 11Alive. [Link here](#)
- 15 Blakinger, K. (2020, May 11). *Ewwwwww, what is that?* The Marshall Project. [Link here](#)
- 16 Hausman, S. (2020, June 4).
- 17 Egan, P. (2020, June 18). Coronavirus sharply reduces supply of popular ramen noodles in Michigan prisons. *Detroit Free Press*. [Link here](#)
- 18 Aviv, R. (2020, June 15). Inside a prison where the coronavirus pandemic has become a death sentence. *The New Yorker*. [Link here](#)
- 19 Brody, J. (2020, April 20). How Poor Diet Contributes to Coronavirus Risk. *The New York Times*. [Link here](#)

Methodology

The goal of this investigation was to generate a deep understanding of the landscape, experience, and human impacts of prison food in the United States.

In particular, we wanted to examine the factors that play a role in what food is served in prisons, identify the barriers for agencies or facilities that want to provide better food, and learn about existing best practices. Through this investigation, the research team wanted to examine how the quality, quantity, and experience of food in prison affect physical health, mental well-being, and human dignity; and to explore how food can be used as a tool for encouraging rehabilitation, supporting reentry, and reducing recidivism.

This report focuses on state facilities; however, there are many different facility types, including federal, local, immigrant and juvenile detention facilities, and lockups. Some of the individuals surveyed, interviewed, and engaged in focus groups had exposure and experiences in facilities other than state adult facilities. Throughout this process, our research team visited two jails and one juvenile detention facility to develop context and information. Although our data collection focused on state facilities, it is important to acknowledge that some information provided by respondents may have been impacted by their experiences with various correctional institutions.

Our data

We relied on a myriad of data sources for this report, including:

- Interviews, focus groups, and surveys conducted with those who have experienced incarceration firsthand, as well as their families and loved ones.
- A systematic review of food-related policies, procedures, and practices at correctional agencies across the U.S.
- 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, and those transforming institutional eating in other sectors and countries.

Interviews and surveys with individuals who have experienced incarceration, and their families

In our investigation, we wanted to center and amplify the voices of those most impacted by the system: people who have experienced

incarceration, and their loved ones. To that end, we created a survey and conducted in-depth interviews and focus groups to understand their experiences regarding food in prison.

The survey asked formerly incarcerated people and their loved ones about their (or their loved ones') experiences eating food in prison and how that impacted their lives both during and after incarceration. We received 250 responses from formerly incarcerated people and 230 responses from family members and loved ones. The survey responses included people who served time in state, federal, or local facilities across 41 states, the majority of whom had been released within the last five years.

We used the survey to identify formerly incarcerated interviewees from around the country. While the survey was anonymous, we included an optional question at the end for those interested in being interviewed to leave their name and contact information. We selected interviewees across age, incarceration length, geographic location, race, ethnicity, and gender, as well as those who indicated they had certain experiences like working in the kitchen, obtaining a special diet, or serving time in solitary confinement. Through this process, we conducted 11 in-depth interviews. In these interviews, which ranged from 60 to 90 minutes, we explored the nuances of eating in prison and its physical, mental, social, and emotional consequences, as well as suggestions for how to change it. All interviewees were compensated for their time. In one state, after authorization by facility leaders and the deputy commissioner, we conducted focus groups in two facilities.

Systematic review of food-related policies

To understand the operational landscape of food in prison, we completed a thorough review of food policies and practices in all 50 states. We focused specifically on state facilities, which hold more than half of the U.S. incarcerated population. We studied the available information regarding food service operations and menu planning, procurement, commissaries, and handbooks provided to incarcerated people.

While this information gave us a basic understanding of the operational parameters of serving food in prison, the policies provide an incomplete picture. Most policies are publicly available online (though some are only available by request); however, the amount of details provided can vary greatly by state. Because of this, with the support of the Correctional Leadership Association, we created and administered a survey raising the questions to which we could not find answers in policy documents. The association includes representation from all state correctional departments, and we received responses from 35 states.

Site visits and interviews with state corrections staff

To complement formal documentation and research, we interviewed 43 corrections officials in 12 states, including frontline staff (including food service workers and corrections officers) and corrections leaders, as well as doctors, nutritionists, and dieticians who had worked in correctional facilities or departments. To observe

prison food service ourselves, we visited ten facilities in California, Washington, D.C., Maine, Virginia, and Washington State. We were given tours of these facilities that included the kitchen, food operations, and other food-related areas. While this varied from facility to facility, we were sometimes allowed to ask questions of staff and incarcerated people. These site visits and interviews helped us better understand how decisions are made, what motivates change, and how policies translate to practice.

Cross-disciplinary literature review and consultations

Our deep dive into the unique experience of eating in prison was complemented by our study of nutrition, the social and cultural role of food, and the growing food justice and racial justice movements. We began this project by assessing the available data through a cross-disciplinary literature review, analyzing information from nutrition, mental health, public health, law, economics, sociology, and cultural studies, as well as looking at institutional eating in other sectors and countries.

Additionally, we met and consulted with more than 50 people from different sectors and professions. These include experts in new approaches to nutrition; people and organizations running innovative programs or operations centered around food in prison, including Inside Out Goodness, the Sustainability in Prisons Project, and Quentin Cooks; and those working on broader criminal justice reform, such as Worth Rises, The

Marshall Project, and the Prison Policy Initiative. We also talked with chefs who are changing how and what food is served in K-12 schools and healthcare facilities.

Limitations

Over the past two years, we have been able to compile the most comprehensive review of food in U.S. prisons that exists to date. However, we readily acknowledge that there is still much to learn, and there are limitations within our data as discussed below.

In our experience, prisons and correctional departments are notoriously arcane when it comes to sharing information, which presented several barriers as we conducted our research. One major impact was our limited ability to solicit input directly from those incarcerated. Conducting research or gathering data from currently incarcerated people requires an extensive research review process that is different in each state. We understand that these practices have been instituted due to the shameful history of unethical research studies conducted on incarcerated people; however, these processes also contribute to prisons continuing operating as opaque institutions. Due to these obstacles, we were only able to interview individuals from institutions that provided us formal permission.

As noted above, we conducted site visits at facilities. However, it is important to acknowledge that we believe the facilities we visited prepared

for our presence. During some of our visits, the people incarcerated informed us immediately that what we were viewing did not necessarily reflect the norm. Everything we were shown during the site visits was controlled by those operating the facility and department. We appreciate the agencies that allowed us into their facilities, since many agencies we contacted would not speak with us, let alone allow us inside a facility. We recognize the limited vantage point of our observation due to the somewhat contrived nature of the visit.

Our survey has limitations due to its size, representation, and likely response bias. While the survey was sent to dozens of organizations across the country, the responses were not demographically representative of the reentering population. Nearly half of the

formerly incarcerated respondents identified as female, although females are only 10% of the incarcerated population. Additionally, more white people and Native Americans responded than are demographically represented in state prison populations. It is also possible that our survey was subject to response bias, meaning that people who have strong feelings about their experience with food in prison were probably more likely to complete it, skewing the overall results. Given these limitations, we do not attempt to generalize our findings to the entire reentry or incarcerated population. Throughout the report, we also do not make statements regarding specific states or demographics identified by respondents. Instead, we share overall trends and the experiences of those who responded.



Learn more at
impactjustice.org/impact/food-in-prison/#report