



INTRO

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## PART 6

# A Path Forward

**"Food is a universal comfort and basic necessity."**

*—loved one of someone who is incarcerated*

*You walk into the prison chow hall and the smell hits you first: peaches and cinnamon. You make your way across the sunlit room toward the serving line, chatting with someone as you wait. When it's your turn, you survey the offerings and request the brown rice, sautéed vegetables, a piece of roasted chicken, and a large portion of fresh green salad. You thank the servers and reach for a small dish of peach crisp to round out your meal. Before joining a friend at a nearby table, you fill your cup with cold filtered water from the dispenser.*

*An officer asks if the seat across from your friend is taken; you say no and he pulls out the chair and sets down his tray. Over the next half hour, you each get up for second helpings and the conversation shifts from sports to the meal: Is the eggplant from the kitchen garden? Is that fresh basil in the vinaigrette? The meal is just what you need after your morning work shift and before class begins. After clearing your plate, you stop by a table near the door to take a nectarine and some carrots for a late afternoon snack.*

## POINTS OF INTERVENTION

Our investigation turned up a number of points at which interventions could occur. Throughout the report and particularly in this section, 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



As stated by the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25, "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food."

Could this be lunchtime in prison? As we asked systems-impacted people and corrections staff around the country what changes they would like to see in the experience of eating in prison, they painted a clear vision that aligns with the scenario above. More fresh vegetables and fruits, real meat, fish, and eggs, providing essential nutrients in the form of whole foods rather than relying on heavily processed foods and fortified beverages. Food that's appetizing and in portions large enough so that no one goes hungry or feels compelled to engage in illicit activities to get enough to eat. Some choice in what to eat to fit personal preferences, cultural heritage, and health concerns. Kitchens that are suitably staffed, equipped, and sanitary, and chow halls as pleasant as officers' dining areas. And to complement this vision of food service: healthy and affordable commissary items alongside access to basic kitchen equipment to safely prepare snacks and simple meals, and space for families to eat good meals together during visitation.

People who have spent years or decades in prison—and their loved ones—recognize that this is what incarcerated people need and deserve. As one person we surveyed emphasized, "Nobody is looking for surf and turf in prison, but a basic nutritional meal is a human right." Healthy food *is* a human right, and the stakes are especially high in confinement where a person's access to food is controlled and limited. Many of the corrections staff and leadership we interviewed understand what constitutes a nourishing meal (one they themselves would eat) but feel they lack the resources and public mandate to make a significant change. On top of this, the prevailing attitude within corrections—and for that matter, in our broader culture—is that the status quo is acceptable when it comes to the prison eating experience.

This vision of lunch in prison, neither outlandish nor unreasonable, is still a world apart from mealtime in most facilities across the country. As this series demonstrates, food standards in prison are routinely lower compared with standards in the free world. Nutritional guidelines and other policies considered "adequate" are often far less than what a layperson

**When incarcerated people routinely feel humiliated by the food available to them and are often hungry and malnourished, the baseline by which the profession measures itself is clearly too low.**



would tolerate when selecting food for themselves or their family. The fact that the quality of food in prison isn't an issue of public concern helps preserve the status quo. During the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exposed the health perils and degradations of mass incarceration for all to see, food and its connection to physical health and overall well-being has been barely a footnote—even as the quality, safety, and availability of food in prisons plummeted, in some cases sparking riots.<sup>1</sup>

In prison, a person's relationship with food is typically an additional form of punishment on top of the penance of confinement itself. Someone with a loved one in prison wrote to us, "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 brings down morale, increases stress, and leaves people hopeless."

It's not surprising that prison food is so awful: prison populations are unjustifiably large (which is beyond the control of facility officials), there is constant pressure to cut costs, and still a sizable portion of the public believes incarcerated people "deserve what they get." Corrections professionals who believe they're doing the best they can feeding people amid a host of constraints are not wrong. But when incarcerated people routinely feel humiliated by the food available to them and are often hungry and malnourished, the baseline by which the profession measures itself is clearly too low. Furthermore, the current approach to food in prison misses key opportunities to use food proactively as a tool for genuine rehabilitation and successful reentry.

**No model for an optimal—or even acceptable—prison food experience currently exists in the United States.**

## **Raising standards, breaking with convention**

While much of this series is dedicated to documenting the poor quality of food in prison, and the policies and practices that determine what ends up on a person's tray, the report also draws attention to individual facilities and state systems where leaders are breaking with convention. They're buying whole, fresh foods from local producers; rethinking the chow hall atmosphere; creating opportunities for families to cook and eat together as part of visitation; and investing in food-related programming to facilitate healing, encourage life-long healthy eating habits, and, for those interested, to build marketable job skills.

No model for an optimal—or even acceptable—prison food experience currently exists in the United States. It's not sufficient to make a few small improvements and call it good enough. A genuinely rehabilitative prison food experience must not only foster physical and mental well-being, but also restore agency to incarcerated individuals. Each of the promising initiatives we highlight addresses just pieces of the problem, but each calls attention to key points of intervention and to how we can reshape the experience of eating in prison so that food becomes the source of healing, health, and dignity that it's supposed to be. We hope this provides a helpful starting point for corrections leaders who are inspired to raise standards and break with convention.

## **Inspiration from across the globe**

MENU PLANNING &  
MEAL PREPARATION



EATING ENVIRONMENT



COMMISSARY



Corrections reformers across the U.S. have looked to Scandinavian prisons, which approach incarceration with a philosophy emphasizing humanity and healing, as potential models for change. While these countries have vastly lower incarceration rates—allowing them to focus their investments in an intentional way, rather than doing the best they can to warehouse thousands of people at low cost—we can still look to them as examples of what is possible. Norway's "radically



humane” Halden Prison is famous for allowing people convicted of violent crimes access to sharp knives to cook their own meals.<sup>2</sup> The healthy, whole ingredients the prison supplies, such as fresh salmon and broccoli, are less well-known but just as important. The guiding philosophy in Norway is that healthy food is essential for healthy lives, and that one important function of prison is to normalize healthy eating.

Residents prepare meals in open kitchens that form the heart of the small-scale housing units where they live. One resident in each unit is the designated cook and is paid as he would be for any other job in the facility. Each person can also supplement the food provided with items purchased from the prison commissary, which stocks fresh produce, frozen meat, and an array of other foods available at any Norwegian grocery store.

Secure prisons in Finland have dining halls that serve three meals a day prepared by the same government entity that feeds the military—food that is reportedly quite good and that prison staff eat as well. Each housing unit also has a fully-equipped kitchen where residents can cook for themselves with food purchased from a well-stocked commissary.<sup>3</sup>

#### COMMISSARY



**“Security risks are always weighed, but there is real value in a person preparing food on their own terms.”**

— Tim Buchanan, former warden of Noble Correctional Institution

To some U.S. corrections officials these may sound like fantasy worlds, but others are taking small steps in this direction. At the Noble Correctional Institution in Ohio, each housing unit has its own small garden that residents plant, tend, and harvest, sharing the produce and eating it when they wish. Some units have George Foreman grills, toaster ovens, and prep tables that accommodate more cooking from scratch than microwaves and electric kettles, which are the only equipment available to people in most prisons. “Security risks are always weighed, but there is real value in a person preparing food on their own terms,” explains Noble’s former warden, Tim Buchanan.

**“Now that people  
are getting better  
nutrients, they sleep  
better, eat better, feel  
better, work better,  
everything.”**

*— Commissioner Randall Liberty*

### **What’s to be gained by transforming prison food**

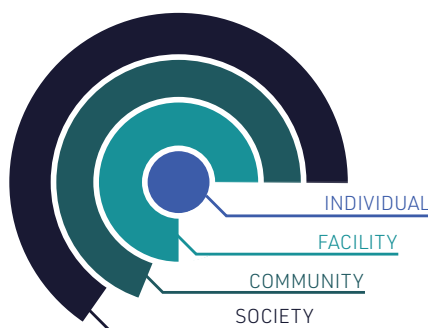
Serving healthy, appealing meals for bodies with different needs; harnessing the emotional benefits of an enjoyable meal, especially one shared with others; and supporting initiatives that make food the center of learning, healing, and health can greatly improve people’s life outcomes both in prison and after release. There are obvious health benefits. Healing nutritional deficiencies, satiating hunger, nourishing the senses, and restoring agency by giving people some choice in what they eat can profoundly improve physical and mental health, which in turn supports other rehabilitative efforts—improving people’s chances for success after release. Commissioner Randall Liberty, who has overseen positive changes in the amount of fresh, local food served in the Maine Department of Corrections, explained, “Now that people are getting better nutrients, they sleep better, eat better, feel better, work better, everything.”

Beyond the benefits of consuming nutritious food, incarcerated people who participate in high-quality food-related programs, such as the gardening and culinary training programs described in this report, find the process restorative and emerge with marketable job skills. These positive effects ripple out to benefit the communities people rejoin after release. Individuals in sound physical and mental health are better able to find and retain employment and contribute to their communities as parents, family members, neighbors, and colleagues.<sup>4</sup> Good health and better eating habits among returning citizens lead to improvements in community health that could lower local healthcare costs.<sup>5</sup>

As we work to transform the ordeal of eating in confinement into an experience that promotes health and wellness, we also need to ensure that access to nutritious food and healthy eating practices is supported after an individual walks out the prison gates. A 2013 study of recently released individuals found that 91% of respondents were food insecure, and noted an association between food insecurity and engaging in

## What's to be gained

Significant improvements to the prison food experience could spark the following potential ripple effects.



### INDIVIDUAL

- Enhanced physical and mental health
- Restored sense of agency over one's own body/health; increased self-worth
- Increased understanding of healthy relationship with food
- Stronger connections to family/loved ones on the outside
- New/improved food-related skills (cooking, gardening) that increase employability
- Overall, better equipped to rejoin communities upon release

### FACILITY

- Decreased spending on medical care and psychological services
- Reduction in disciplinary issues
- Safer and more secure facility
- Less stressful environment for both incarcerated people and staff
- Decreased spending on waste removal and a more sustainable facility
- Potential for reduced rates of recidivism

### COMMUNITY

- Returning citizens more prepared to take their places as parents, family members, neighbors, employees, community members
- Decreased health care costs borne by families and taxpayers
- Stronger local economies through sourcing local food products
- Safer communities

### SOCIETY

- Improved public health
- Increased public safety
- Lighter environmental footprint
- Shift in cultural attitudes toward incarcerated people (humanization, reduced stigma)

**A 2013 study of recently released individuals found that 91% of respondents were food insecure.**

REENTRY



behaviors like drug use and exchanging sex for money that not only put one's health at risk, but also increase chances of re-arrest.<sup>6</sup> Even so, some states still enforce limits on eligibility for food stamps and other forms of financial assistance for those with certain types of convictions.<sup>7</sup> A system genuinely committed to rehabilitation and recidivism reduction must work with local policymakers, organizations, and businesses to establish consistent access to healthy food for returning community members. This can be achieved through multiple channels, including government-supported programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and community-based initiatives like Vermont's [Dismas Houses](#), where formerly incarcerated individuals live, cook, and eat alongside community members who have never experienced incarceration.<sup>8</sup>

**Many food-related security concerns, such as exploitative bartering and stealing food from the kitchen—actions motivated by deprivation—are less likely once incarcerated people have access to satisfying meals.**

Improving the prison food experience reaps significant benefits for facilities as well. Research demonstrates a link between proper nutrition and lower levels of violence and aggression, and suggests that when food in prison satiates hunger and fulfills nutritional needs, incarcerated people are less inclined to act out in anger, or to harm staff and one another, or to disrupt facility operations.<sup>9</sup> Many food-related security concerns, such as exploitative bartering and stealing food from the kitchen—actions motivated by deprivation—are less likely once incarcerated people have access to satisfying meals. A healthy relationship with food, for both incarcerated people and staff, is a foundation for healthy relationships with people and a more positive environment in general.

### **How do we get there?**

**Mass incarceration itself heavily incentivizes a certain kind of meal—one that prioritizes low cost and efficiency at the expense of health and dignity.**

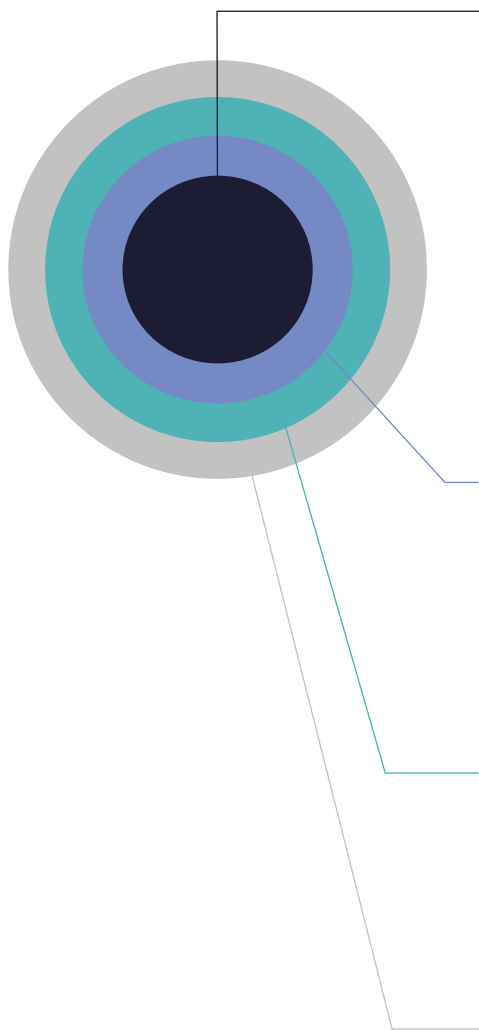
This report details the inadequacies and degradation of food in prisons nationwide to a degree never done before. While there are examples of promising practices that give us hope, the magnitude of the problem is immense—without even accounting for the thousands of jails and community confinement facilities that fall outside the scope of this project and merit their own attention and examination. The core of the problem is not overly punitive or negligent leaders (though there are some). Mass incarceration itself heavily incentivizes a certain kind of meal—one that prioritizes low cost and efficiency at the expense of health and dignity.

In our dozens of conversations with corrections staff and leadership, we asked what they perceived as the biggest barrier to providing better food in prison. While a few stated that they were content with their food service operations, we most frequently heard that departments were constrained by financial resources—preventing them from purchasing better and fresher food, adequately staffing kitchens, updating or purchasing new equipment, or all of the above. Given these realities, and the fact that these leaders lack the power to lower incarceration rates,



## How to reshape the experience of eating in prison

We suggest the following strategies for sparking, advancing, and sustaining a new approach to food in prison.



### CORRECTIONAL CULTURE

- Solicit feedback from incarcerated people and allow their concerns to guide changes.
- Incentivize a food experience that supports wellness and rehabilitation.
- Educate all stakeholders about the role food plays in physical, mental, and emotional well-being.
- Partner with allied professions and fields.
- Empower staff at all levels to be creative problem-solvers.
- End all food-related punishments.
- Request external oversight to ensure daily practice measures up to policy, and ensure transparency by making reports accessible to the public.

### AGENCY POLICY & PRACTICE

- Raise standards and change food policies accordingly.
- Develop menus featuring whole foods that are appealing and nourishing, and that draw on the cultural heritages of incarcerated people.
- Buy more fresh foods locally and regionally.
- Commit to fair labor and food consumption practices on prison farms.

### FACILITY POLICE & PRACTICE

- Do more cooking from scratch in suitably equipped kitchens.
- Serve staff and incarcerated people the same healthy, good-tasting food.
- Make dining halls and other environments welcoming, hospitable places where eating is a pleasure.

### BEYOND THE CHOW HALL

- Sell fresh and healthy foods at affordable prices in commissaries, and provide incarcerated people with access to simple kitchens where they can cook for themselves and others.
- Invest in nutrition education, gardening, and culinary programming as practices for healing and long-term health, as well as job training.
- Make family meals a part of visitation practices.

While this might seem like a daunting undertaking, corrections officials don't have to (and can't) do it alone. There are untapped resources at every level to support the process.

it would be easy to turn to increased spending as a convenient answer for solving the problem. However, we have seen that as with any other attempt to reform the U.S. criminal justice system, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Some states will need to spend more in the short term to significantly raise the standard of food in prison, ideally by reallocating existing resources; others can do far better with the resources already at their disposal, and perhaps even save money.

As we have shared throughout this report, we believe there are important reasons to create meals that are abundant in nutrition, taste good, and are served with dignity. In this final section of *Eating Behind Bars*, we offer steps that can get us closer to that vision—an objective that will benefit all of us. While this might seem like a daunting undertaking, corrections officials don't have to (and can't) do it alone. Fortunately, there are untapped resources at every level to support the process.

### Starting from within

Given the hierarchical nature of corrections, shifts in culture tend to come from leaders at the highest ranks. Only they have the authority to enact policies and directives that break with ingrained practices and habits. The fresh, local approach to food service in the Maine Department of Corrections, for example, was codified in January 2019 when Randall Liberty, who grew up with an incarcerated parent, became Commissioner. A Master Gardener and beekeeper, his efforts to integrate these practices in the Maine State Prison during his time as warden met with resistance and were small in scale. Liberty has taken advantage of his position as Commissioner not only to expand the gardening programs but also to increase the amount of food that prisons statewide are required to purchase from local producers—getting fresh, whole foods onto the trays of incarcerated people while strengthening local economies. Commissioner Liberty emphasized, “Our job is

**“Our job is about rehabilitation, redemption, and getting busy healing those wounds. Our job is to reduce the frequency of future victims. Our job is to help these men and women back to society.”**

— Commissioner Randall Liberty

about rehabilitation, redemption, and getting busy healing those wounds. Our job is to reduce the frequency of future victims. Our job is to help these men and women back to society.”

The corrections leaders taking steps toward providing nourishing food in a positive environment are part of a small but growing number of high-ranking professionals rejecting command-and-control style management for a “client-oriented” approach that promotes healing and personal transformation. As Ohio Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Director Annette Chambers-Smith told us, “I believe in ‘There but for the grace of God go I’. ... I’m trying to run this prison a little bit more like my family.” A healthy relationship with food is at the center of any thriving family.

A champion at the top is essential but not enough. For real change to occur, staff at all levels need to be on board. As in any profession, staff respond more positively to leaders who solicit their input, listen with an open mind, and support promising ideas—providing compliments and credit where credit is due. When staff are invited to contribute, they not only bring fresh ideas to the table, but also are more likely to buy into new initiatives and become invested in their success. “I believe that people are quicker to do what they come up with themselves,” explained Chambers-Smith, who challenges staff to think outside the box. That’s how the warden of one prison decided to enhance family visitations by organizing a cookout where everyone cooks and eats together. Chambers-Smith makes it clear that she is open to adopting ideas that might be considered unconventional in a prison. Some Ohio facilities now allow residents to paint their cell a color of their choosing and welcome family members to attend prison religious services. In one higher-security facility, staff are beginning to implement naturally soothing lavender-based aromatherapy in the hallways to help relieve tension.

#### VISITATION



Perhaps most importantly, corrections leaders should listen—really listen—to the people most impacted by the systems they run. Anecdotally, this seems to happen more in smaller

**A culture that trains corrections staff to detach from the people in their care has been the status quo for generations.**



**“You had those inmates who would say stuff like, ‘I’m losing weight; y’all need to give us more food!’ but I just saw it as conversation. I didn’t equate that to what was really going on.”**

*—former corrections staff*

facilities, which may have the ability to be more responsive. Regardless of the size, however, a culture that trains corrections staff to detach from (and despise or distrust) the people in their care has been the status quo for generations, leading to the dehumanization of incarcerated people and the widespread dismissal of their individual needs and collective concerns.

Research shows that corrections officers who approach their work with a rehabilitative rather than punitive mindset find the job less stressful.<sup>10</sup> However, current and former corrections staff told us how their professional training, both formal and informal, cultivates a wariness of incarcerated people, drumming into their heads that people who end up behind bars are not to be trusted and will take advantage of officers who appear soft. Staff are enculturated with the idea that any complaint from someone who is incarcerated is the product of bias against all staff and the prison itself, not something to be taken seriously. This mindset instilled in corrections staff is rooted in a system of “us versus them,” establishing an emotional distance that allows abuse, including awful food, to go unchecked.

Such training directly impacts the way many corrections staff and leaders understand the issue of food in prison. A common refrain among corrections staff is that “all inmates lie.” One former officer explained, “I don’t think I connected the dots [at the time]. You had those inmates who would say stuff like, ‘I’m losing weight; y’all need to give us more food!’ but I just saw it as conversation. I didn’t equate that to what was really going on.” Her thought process, she shared with us, was that if a dietitian said that the portions were adequate, then the dietitian was to be trusted over the incarcerated person.

Any initiative to create a healthier, more rehabilitative eating experience in prison must start by treating incarcerated people as full human beings. Soliciting input in meaningful ways, genuinely listening to their concerns, and taking concrete actions for change can humanize incarcerated people and foster a safer and less contentious environment for all.



## Working in partnership

### EDUCATION & AWARENESS



### PROGRAMMING



### PROCUREMENT



### EDUCATION & AWARENESS



External institutions provide expertise, community connections, and in some cases funding to create and support innovative food practices and food-related programming. Potential partners range from other government agencies, to schools, local food cooperatives, and trade associations. Corrections officials in Washington State are working with the department of health to educate staff and incarcerated people about the role of good nutrition. The Master Gardener program at the Maine State Prison operates in collaboration with the University of Maine's Cooperative Extension. Incarcerated participants produce fresh vegetables for use in the prison kitchen and along the way accrue knowledge, marketable skills, and a certification that can help them find work in Maine's diverse agricultural industry after release. At Mountain View Correctional Facility, another prison in Maine, a partnership with the nonprofit trade group Hospitality Maine provides apprenticeships for graduates of the prison's esteemed culinary training program. And in Maryland, the new [Farm to Prison Project](#) is helping to link correctional facilities statewide to local urban and small-scale farms to source fresh seasonal produce, for a three-fold impact: incarcerated individuals will receive healthier, more appealing food; partnerships based on food will humanize incarcerated people; and supporting urban agriculture will help build capacity for self-determination in communities affected by food apartheid.

Creating partnerships to run or facilitate culinary and other food-related programming is an established practice in prison, but more can be done. In tandem with nourishing meals, culturally-relevant nutrition education can make a life-long contribution to better health for many incarcerated people and the families they'll eventually rejoin. Community-based models that could be adapted for a correctional setting include that of [Oldways](#), a Boston-based nonprofit that develops interactive cooking and nutrition programs, using reimagined food pyramids that highlight healthy eating from different cultural traditions, including the African Heritage Diet and the Latin American Heritage Diet.

## PROGRAMMING



Even programs not specifically focused on food can become pathways to better eating. [Motherhood Beyond Bars](#) provides compassionate prenatal and postpartum support for pregnant incarcerated women in two of Georgia's state prisons. Diet is a critical factor in giving a baby a good start in life. While staff advocate for improvements in the meals the prison serves, they're making a small difference by bringing healthy food to the monthly baby shower celebrations. "They don't get a noon meal on Fridays, so we do a kale salad, fresh fruit, yogurt, plus cake," explained Amy Ard, the program's executive director.

## PROCUREMENT



The [Center for Good Food Purchasing](#), which provides structured support to help public institutions shift to more local, healthy, fair, and environmentally sustainable procurement practices, has begun partnering with a few correctional agencies. The program encourages not only a commitment to better procurement practices, but also a dedication to public transparency—something sorely lacking in the corrections food world. While improving procurement, clients become part of a movement leveraging collective power to shift vendor practices.

## RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT GOOD NUTRITION



EDUCATION &  
AWARENESS

The Washington Department of Corrections has joined forces with the state department of health to bring nutrition education inside prison walls. With a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the department of health developed a toolkit to help food service managers bring meals into alignment with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. It also contains information about how to manage chronic disease through diet and how food affects energy levels and mood. In the future, the department of health hopes to offer educational sessions to incarcerated people as an investment in long-term healthy eating—nutritional knowledge they can share with their families and communities upon release.

## Replicating others' success

Prisons aren't the only American institutions that routinely serve unhealthy, unappetizing food, much of which ends up wasted. The same is true of many public schools and hospitals, for example. Food-related reforms in these and other large-scale, bureaucratic institutions can be sources of inspiration and concrete ideas. Many resources have already been dedicated to improving the health profile of K-12 school meals, especially in the wake of Michelle Obama's Let's Move campaign. [FoodCorps](#), a national service program established in 2010, has placed service members in hundreds of schools across 18 states and in Washington, D.C. to provide hands-on gardening and cooking lessons, team up with cafeteria staff to promote healthy options, and advance a schoolwide culture of health. They report that 73% of the schools they serve had healthier school food environments at the end of the year. Schools across the country have discovered simple initiatives to make meals more appealing, such as flavor stations, which offer a variety of low-sodium spice blends and condiments that allow students to season food to their own tastes.

MENU PLANNING &  
MEAL PREPARATION



MENU PLANNING &  
MEAL PREPARATION



OVERSIGHT &  
FEEDBACK



When chef Dan Giusti wanted a new challenge after cooking at some of the most famous restaurants in the world, he decided to transform public school food. His organization, [Brigaid](#), places culinary professionals in school kitchens to train local staff in whole-foods scratch cooking that looks, smells, and tastes delicious. Students can choose between the daily entrée, a pasta dish, a salad, or a sandwich, all of which come with vegetable and fruit side dishes. Giusti understands the barriers—similar to those in the prison context—that make this a difficult undertaking: a tight budget, strict nutritional guidelines, and a wide range of palates to satisfy. Through trial and error, building strong partnerships with school district officials, and engaging with students, families, and staff every step of the way, Giusti is succeeding. Brigaid's approach to kitchen staff training, meal choice, and taste-tasting, and its careful consideration of feedback, could be adopted by prisons.

MENU PLANNING &  
MEAL PREPARATION

These reforms may even save agencies money, depending on current levels of spending. Isaiah Ruffin, a professional chef who took on the challenge of improving public school food in Alexandria, Virginia, showed that you can produce better food at a substantially lower cost. In a trial program at one elementary school, kitchen staff prepared all school breakfasts from scratch. Ruffin found that 30% more students were eating breakfast and that food costs dropped 85% thanks to the purchase of raw ingredients like sweet potatoes, eggs, and apples rather than prepackaged, highly-processed meal components.<sup>11</sup>

MENU PLANNING &  
MEAL PREPARATION

Food in some hospitals is undergoing a similar transformation. Northwell Health, New York's largest healthcare provider, recently revamped its approach to hospital food. The company hired an experienced executive chef who retrained hospital food service staff in restaurant-quality culinary skills, and brought in professional chefs who underwent nutritional training. Chef Bruno Tison described challenges similar to those faced by schools and correctional facilities: working with a limited budget, creating recipes and menus that meet strict nutritional guidelines, and managing initial resistance from staff accustomed to old ways of doing things. The food has received rave reviews from staff and from patients and their family members who are grateful for a comforting meal during a difficult time. And for low-income patients returning to communities where fresh food is scarce, an on-site "food pharmacy" provides imperfect fruits and vegetables sourced from local vendors to anyone whose doctor prescribes more fresh produce in their diet—a model that could be adapted to smooth the re-entry process for people leaving prison.

## REENTRY

MENU PLANNING &  
MEAL PREPARATION

Even some providers of food assistance are taking a new approach. [Miriam's Kitchen](#) serves meals to people without stable housing and works to end chronic homelessness in Washington, D.C. Executive Chef Cheryl Bell understands the effect of good food on a person's outlook and on their physical health. When someone is "not in a great space" and is preparing to meet with their caseworker, Bell explained, a nourishing meal



**“Food facilitates good moods, good memories, good emotions, which steamrolls into something positive and productive rather than negative.”**

— Chef Cheryl Bell

can change their attitude entirely: “Food facilitates good moods, good memories, good emotions, which steamrolls into something positive and productive rather than negative.” In contrast to many shelters and soup kitchens, Bell and her team prepare delicious dishes that she herself enjoys: orange-cardamom French toast with fresh fruit, for example, and peri-peri turkey with curry rice and salad. Her “restaurant-quality comfort food” routinely features salads, whole grains, flavorful cooked vegetables, high-quality protein, and seasonal fruit; and people are afforded the dignity to choose which items go on their plates.

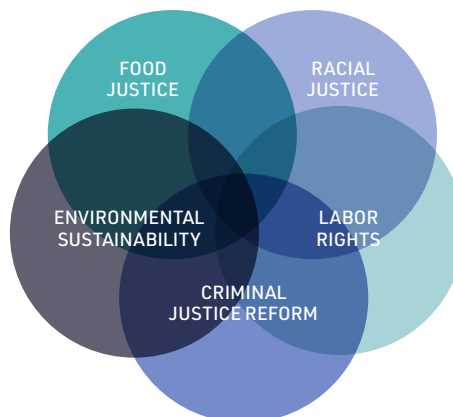
### Joining forces with potential allies

The need to change prison food resides at the crossroads of several active social movements, yet has received little attention or urgency. This work connects closely with the movements for environmental sustainability, racial justice, labor rights, criminal justice reform, and food justice. The food justice movement is expanding access to healthy foods that are affordable and culturally resonant under the banner of food sovereignty—the idea that all people should have access to nourishing food and be able to define their own food systems.<sup>12</sup> While this movement has not yet reached widely inside correctional facilities, the community gardens, mobile farmer’s markets, incubator kitchens, food co-ops, and other initiatives in outside communities could be adapted to work in prisons with broadly shared benefits. When correctional facilities purchase fresh food from local producers, they are also protecting the environment and strengthening local economies.

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### Intersecting movements

Prison food sits at the nexus of many movements for justice



**People of color are disproportionately incarcerated and also more likely to experience food insecurity both before and after incarceration.**



To date, advocates working to improve conditions of confinement have focused on other abusive practices—notably solitary confinement, egregiously poor healthcare and exploitative co-pays, and exorbitant fees for phone calls and emails. But it is abundantly clear from our research that prisons’ poor quality of food and degrading eating environments are just as important to the health and dignity of incarcerated people. People of color are disproportionately incarcerated and also more likely to experience food insecurity both before and after incarceration—forms of structural racism well known at this point.

Black and brown communities also have a rich history of embracing healthy food to resist oppression, organize for change, and reclaim wellness—and they continue to do so today. The [Black Church Food Security Network](#) currently connects congregations to resources to advance food and land sovereignty.<sup>13</sup> Sean Sherman, the lauded “Sioux Chef,” and other Native food activists have ignited [a movement](#) to facilitate indigenous food access and reclaim health and wealth in Native communities through food-related enterprise.<sup>14</sup> A wave of Latinx entrepreneurs in California has popularized traditional plant-based foods as an antidote to the soaring rates of diabetes, hypertension, and cancer in their communities—consequences of an imposed diet high in sugar and white flour.<sup>15</sup> And Sikh gudwaras (places of worship) regularly feed crowds in need of nourishment. As of June 2020, one gudwara in Queens, New York, had served more than 145,000 free healthy, homemade meals over the course of ten weeks to healthcare workers, people experiencing food insecurity, and protestors marching against police brutality.<sup>16</sup> Leaders from these communities have a wealth of expertise in providing the kind of real nourishment that heals bodies, minds, and spirits, and they offer valuable insights and actionable strategies for change.

## **Coda: Why focus on food when the underlying problem is mass incarceration?**

The quality of the food we eat, and the role of food in our lives, affects every aspect of our being: our physical health, mental acuity, emotions, identity, self-worth, relationships with others, and more. Quite simply, a person cannot grow and evolve without meals that nourish body, mind, spirit, and human relationships.

Making food a source of health, healing, and dignity in prison won't stop the fundamental injustice of mass incarceration and the racism that underlies it. But focusing on food isn't a distraction. Providing far better food to the more than one million people confined in prisons across the country is first and foremost a basic human right.

Garnering the public support necessary to reshape the prison eating experience will also humanize incarcerated people, perhaps especially the Black and brown people who are routinely dehumanized both in prison and in the dominant culture overall. And human dignity is the foundation upon which we can build a far less punitive country, one in which no one is defined by the worst thing they've ever done, and where society is capable of embracing people who have caused harm. Disrupting the narrative that everyone in prison is a menace to society is a necessary step in shifting resources away from incarceration to prevention, harm reduction, and community needs.

Currently, the prison food experience functions as a cog in a debilitating and degrading justice system. All of society can gain by using food as a tool to restore health and support rehabilitation instead. This report is just one step toward ending the hidden punishment of food in prison. We intend to take what we've learned to departments of correction, policymakers, advocates, and others across the country to help raise awareness about what's at stake and to advocate for meaningful change to food-related policies and practices in correctional facilities nationwide. Even as we work toward dismantling a system that relies on incarceration to address harm, we will support incarcerated people in getting the quality of food and eating experience they need and deserve.

## Endnotes

- 1 The following stories by the Marshall Project and *The New Yorker* are notable exceptions: Blakinger, K. (2020, May 11). *Ewwwwww, what is that?* The Marshall Project. [Link here](#); Aviv, R. (2020, June 15). Inside a prison where the coronavirus pandemic has become a death sentence. *The New Yorker*. [Link here](#)
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- 11 Ruffin, I. (personal communication, January 21, 2020).
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- 13 The Black Church Food Security Network. (2020). *Home Page*. [Link here](#)
- 14 North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems (NāTIFS). (2020). *Home Page*. [Link here](#)
- 15 Medina-Cadena, M. (2017, August 7). La Cultura Cura: How Latinos Are Reclaiming Their Ancestral Diets. *Smithsonian Center for Folklife & Cultural Heritage Magazine*. [Link here](#)
- 16 Krishna, P. (2020, June 8). How to Feed Crowds in a Protest or Pandemic? The Sikhs Know. *The New York Times*. [Link here](#)





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