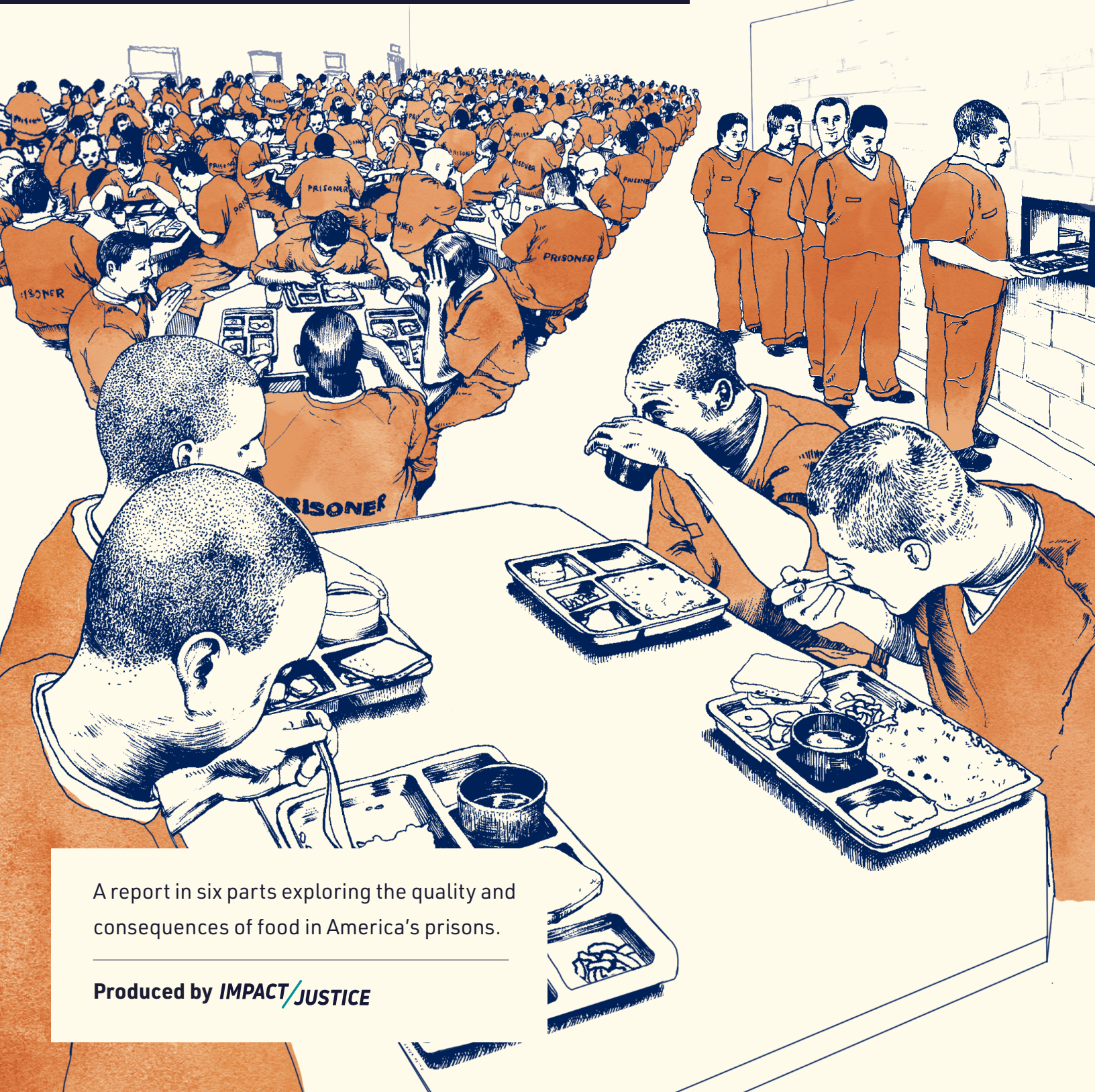


EATING BEHIND BARS:

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.

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IMPACT/JUSTICE

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Table of Contents

	Executive Summary	06
	Introduction	14
<hr/>		
PART 1	Food On a Tray	22
	A vivid portrait of mealtime in prison, characterized by food that is unappetizing, poor in quality, and sometimes unsafe	
<hr/>		
PART 2	When Food Harms	29
	An up-close look at the nutritional value and quantity of food served in prison, exploring the relationship between diet and physical and mental health for incarcerated people	
<hr/>		
PART 3	From the Chow Hall to “Home Cooking” in Prison	54
	A deeper look at the physical environments where prison meals take place and their effects on the health and well-being of incarcerated people	
<hr/>		
PART 4	The Prison Food Machine	69
	A map of the operational landscape – the state-level policies and food service practices inside prisons that determine the quality of food in prison	
<hr/>		
PART 5	Who’s Looking? Who’s Listening?	93
	A study of the systems and avenues that should function to hold departments of correction accountable for the quality of food in prison	
<hr/>		
PART 6	A Path Forward	107
	A framework of key insights to encourage and guide change toward a more positive and nourishing eating experience in prison	
<hr/>		
	Endnotes	126
	Methodology	133

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

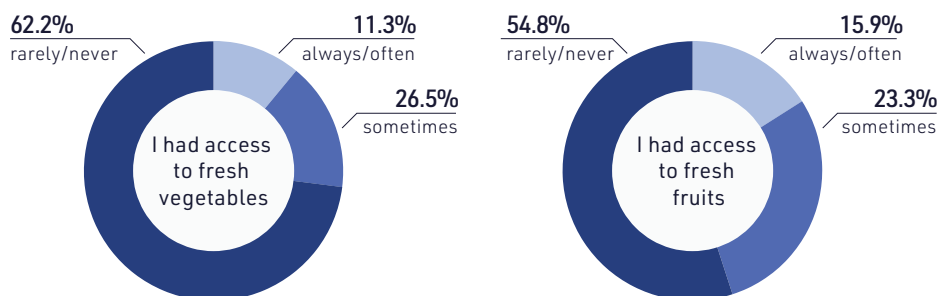
The current system has unacceptably low standards that sacrifice people's health for the lowest cost and highest efficiency.

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

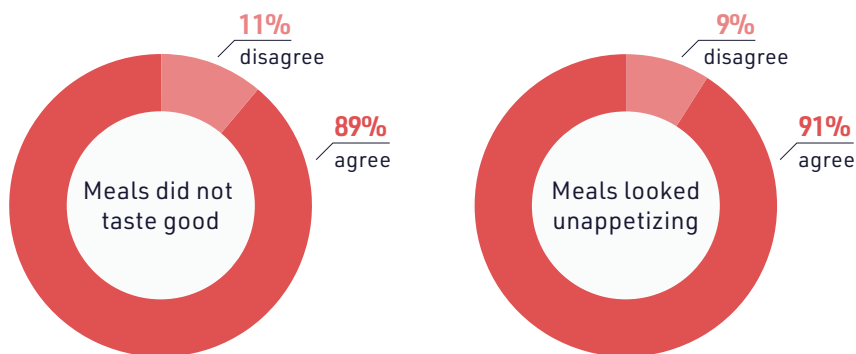
02

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.

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

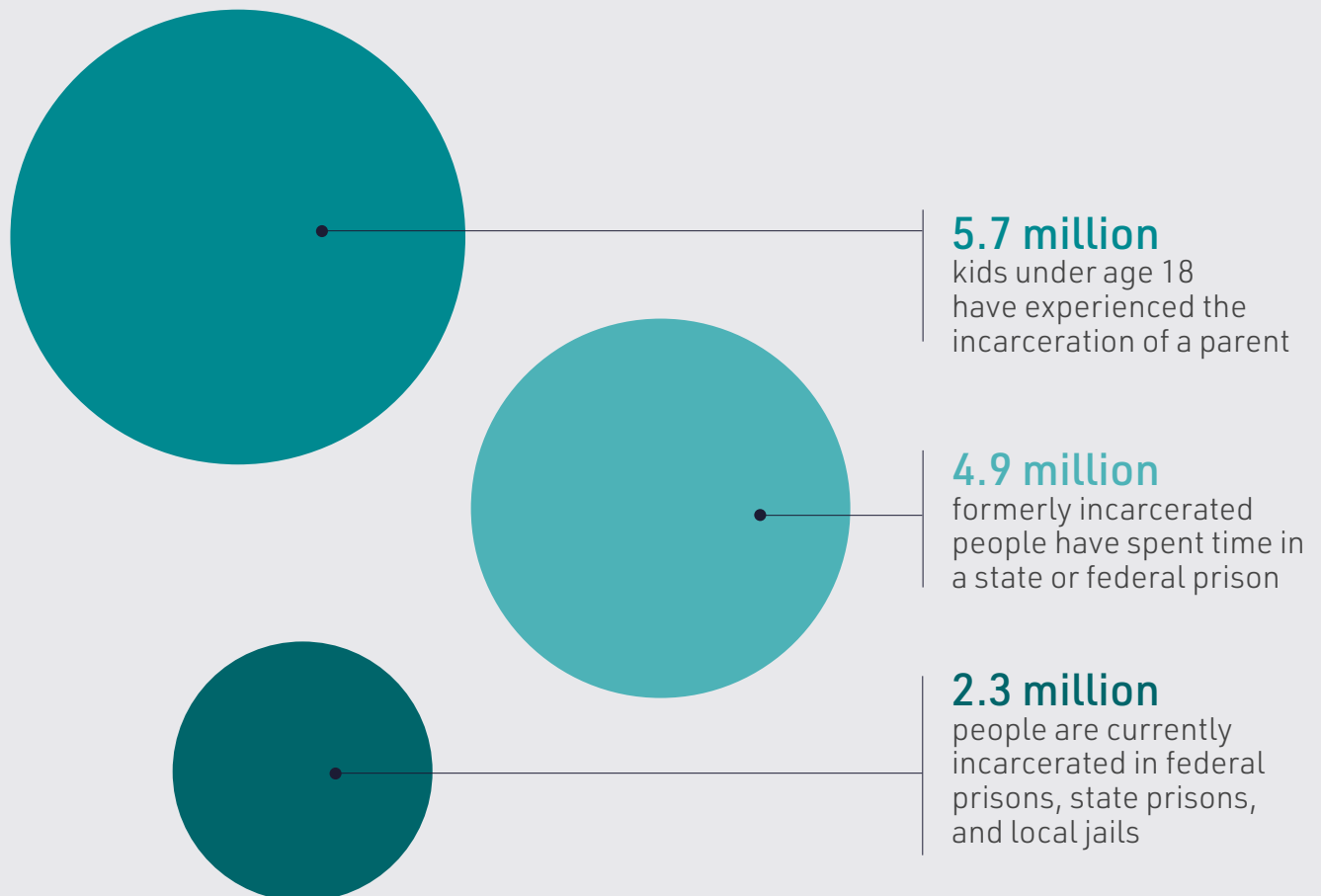
This Introduction, along with "Part 1: Food On a Tray," is the first installment of *Eating Behind Bars: Ending the Hidden Punishment of Food in Prison*. This report series is the product of 18 months of fact-finding, focused on the state prison systems in which over half of America's incarcerated people 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.

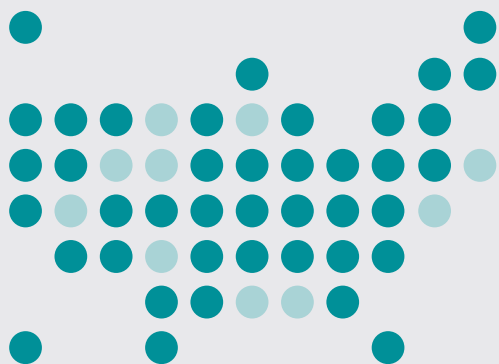
1 in 3 ADULTS IN THE U.S. HAS AN IMMEDIATE FAMILY MEMBER WHO HAS BEEN TO PRISON OR JAIL



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

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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

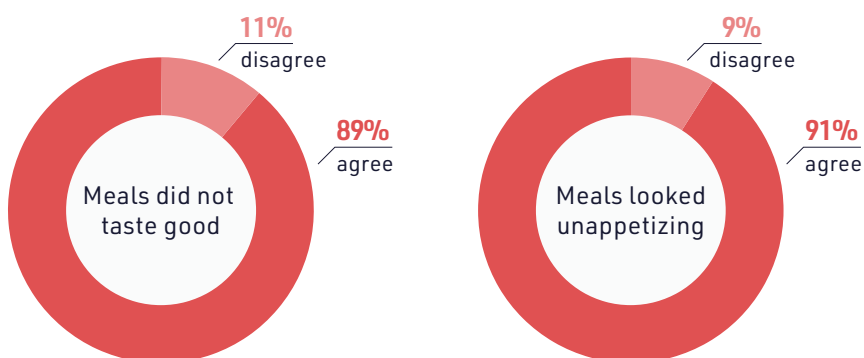
While many correctional facilities prepare special better-tasting meals on holidays—turkey and mashed potatoes on Thanksgiving, hamburgers and watermelon on the Fourth of July—the everyday fare tends to range from bland to awful. More than 80% of the 250 formerly incarcerated people we surveyed report 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%

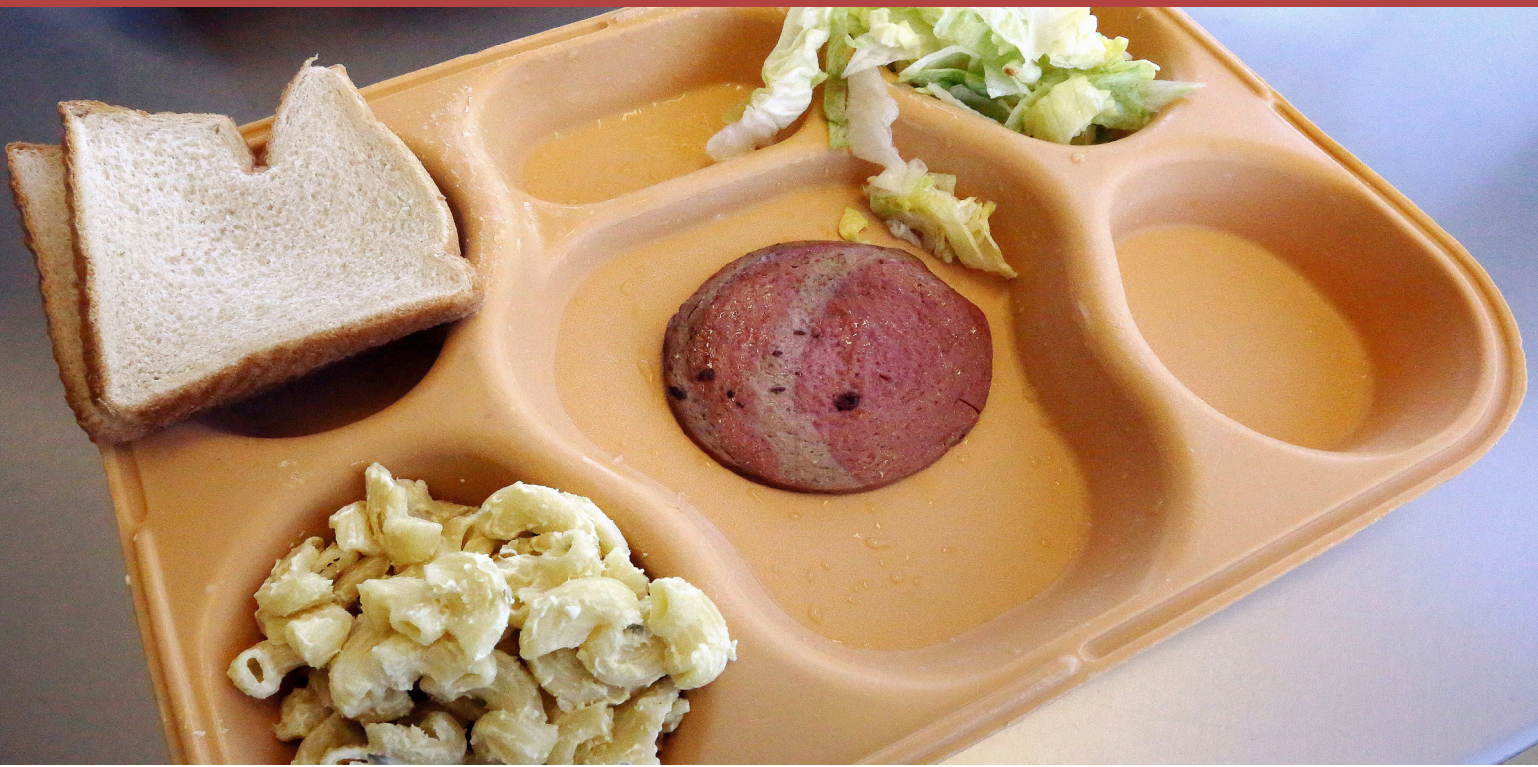
of survey respondents agreed that foods were served at the appropriate temperature



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.

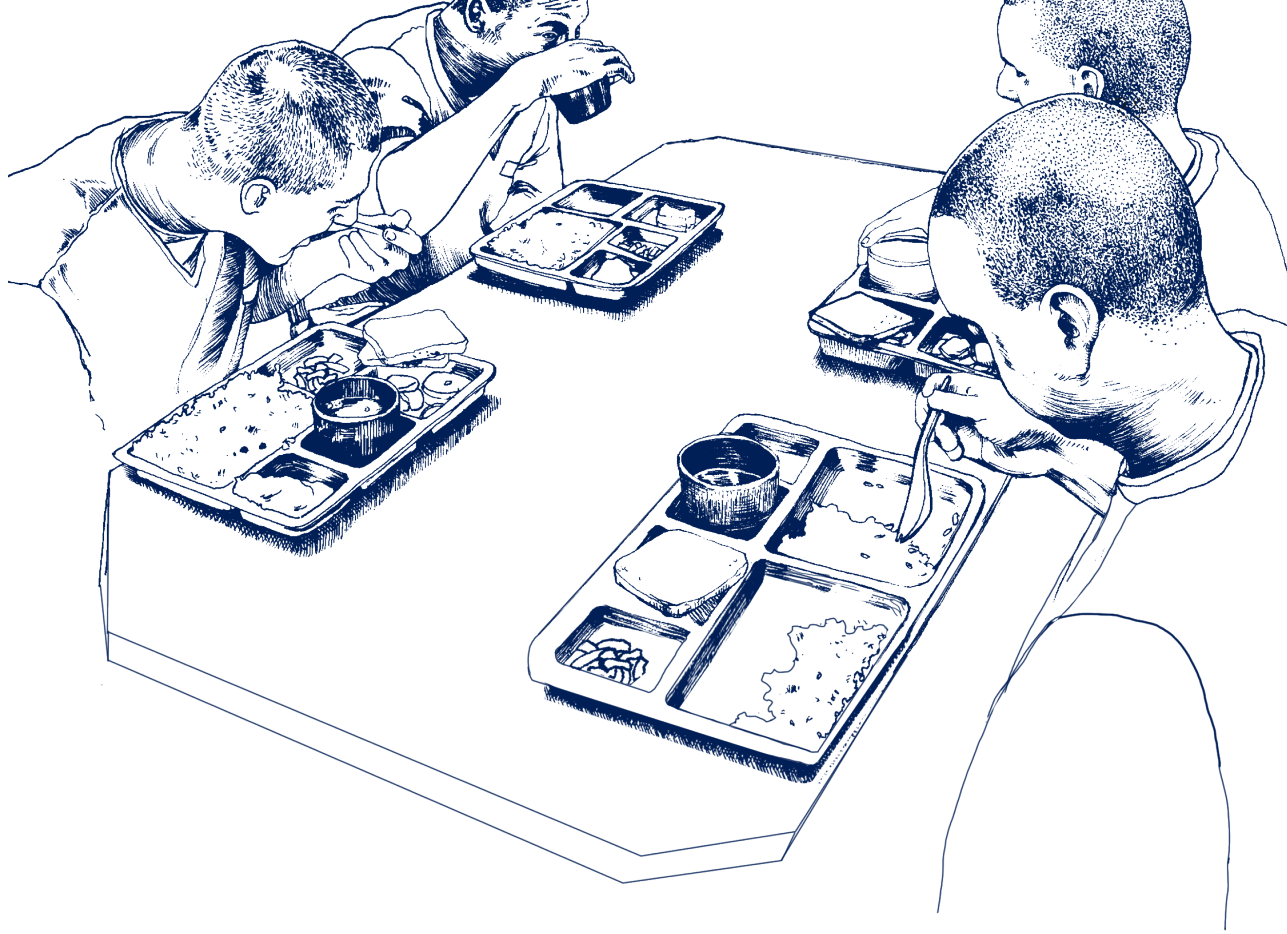
Food blurs the boundaries between our biological, social, and cultural selves; even simple food, if it tastes good and is made with care, makes us feel whole. On March 18, 2020, as the COVID-19 crisis took hold, Sam Sifton titled his daily *New York Times* food column, "Deliciousness Matters." In it,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



PART 2

When Food Harms

"There are a lot of people who think, 'Oh, you're in prison, you don't deserve the best or to be comfortable.' But it isn't about the best or comfort, it's about providing the proper things that our body needs."

— formerly incarcerated person

Part 1 of *Eating Behind Bars* provides a vivid portrait of mealtime in prison as a daily degradation, characterized by food that is unappetizing at best. But even the somewhat better tasting meals served in prison barely meet people's minimum nutritional needs—something painfully obvious to the people who must eat these meals day after day.

In our surveys and interviews with formerly incarcerated people, the word most commonly used to describe prison food is "unhealthy." Other descriptors include "processed," "junk food," "non-nutritious," and even "malnourishing."

Incarcerated people are fed a diet that everyone else has been advised to avoid for decades.

Nationwide, the prevailing trends are clear: prisons serve mostly carb-heavy meals high in salt and sugar, with few or no fresh fruits and vegetables and a scarcity of quality protein. Incarcerated people are fed a diet that everyone else has been advised to avoid for decades.

Carb loading

Virtually everyone we surveyed and interviewed describes meals in which a combination of breads, biscuits, rice, pasta, cake and cookies comprises the bulk of food on the tray. Carb loading begins at breakfast, according to Miguel, who described a typical morning meal at the West Coast facility where he was sent to serve time: “Sometimes they serve a giant slab of coffee cake as the breakfast entree. It must be like a thousand calories.” Prisons in Washington State became notorious for the daily “breakfast boat,” a carton containing dry cereal, sliced white bread, a bran bar, and a muffin—four different highly-processed grain products—along with jelly packets, but no fresh fruit and only a small amount of powdered milk and a packet of peanut butter for protein.²⁰

Breakfast is not the only meal abundant in empty calories; lunch and dinner are much the same. One might be served a four-by-four square of frozen pizza and a scoop of pasta in the same meal. “They tend to starve us on protein,” Jonah told us regarding his time in a Northeastern prison. “They say it will be four ounces, but it’s actually two ounces, because half of it is the breaded covering.” Prior to 2007 in Ohio, trays featured four slices of bread per meal. “That’s almost a loaf of bread per person per day! No one needs that!” insists Annette Chambers-Smith, the current Director of the Ohio Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. This example (see “Today’s Menu,” below) from Idaho’s state-wide prison system menu highlights the preponderance of carbohydrates.



Technically, any food that has been changed from its natural state is processed. Many forms of processing (e.g., cooking, freezing, chopping) do not negatively impact a food’s nutrient profile.




Throughout this report, we use the colloquial terms “highly-processed” and “ultra-processed” to refer to food that has been refined to a point where its nutrients have been significantly compromised and the resulting product is likely to have a negative impact on health.

Today's menu

This example comes from Idaho's Department of Corrections state-wide menu

Source: Idaho Department of Corrections. IDOC food service menu 6.9 - Mainline.

[Link here](#)

	 BREAKFAST	 LUNCH	 DINNER
SUNDAY	Bran flakes, Biscuits, Country gravy, Hash browns, Sugar, Milk	Muffin or cereal bar, Sunflower seeds	Chicken patty, Noodles, Mixed veggies, Bread, Margarine, Iced choc. cake, Tomato sauce, Cheese
MONDAY	Oatmeal, PB pancakes, Syrup, Margarine, Sugar, Milk	Turkey salad, Bread, Tortilla chips, Cookie	Beef tacos, Lettuce/tomato/onion, Salsa, Cake or brownie, Beans
TUESDAY	Farina, French toast, Margarine, Sugar, Milk, Syrup	Peanut butter, Jelly, Bread, Veggie sticks, Potato chips	Scalloped potatoes/ham, Bread, Broccoli, Fruit crisp, Margarine
WEDNESDAY	Oatmeal, Coffee cake, Scrambled eggs, Sugar, Milk, Margarine	Ham salad, Bread, Tortilla chips, Bar cookie	Taco macaroni, Bread, Margarine, Green beans, Applesauce, Cake or brownie
THURSDAY	Farina, Pumpkin bread, Margarine, Sugar, Milk, No-pork sausage	Peanut butter, Jelly, Bread, Veggie sticks, Potato chips	Beef burrito, Corn, Salsa, Mexican rice, Pudding, Lettuce/tomato/onion, Banana
FRIDAY	Oatmeal, Banana pancakes, Sugar, Milk, Syrup, Margarine	Deli meat, Bread, Mayo/mustard, Tortilla chips, Cookie	Turkey ala king, Broccoli, Biscuits, Margarine, Fruit, Cake or brownie
SATURDAY	Bran flakes, Breakfast hash, Bread, Margarine, Sugar, Milk	Peanut butter, Jelly, Bread	Meatloaf, Parsley potato, Tossed salad, Vinaigrette, Bread, Margarine, Fruit, Iced cake

DAILY SNACK: Fresh Fruit

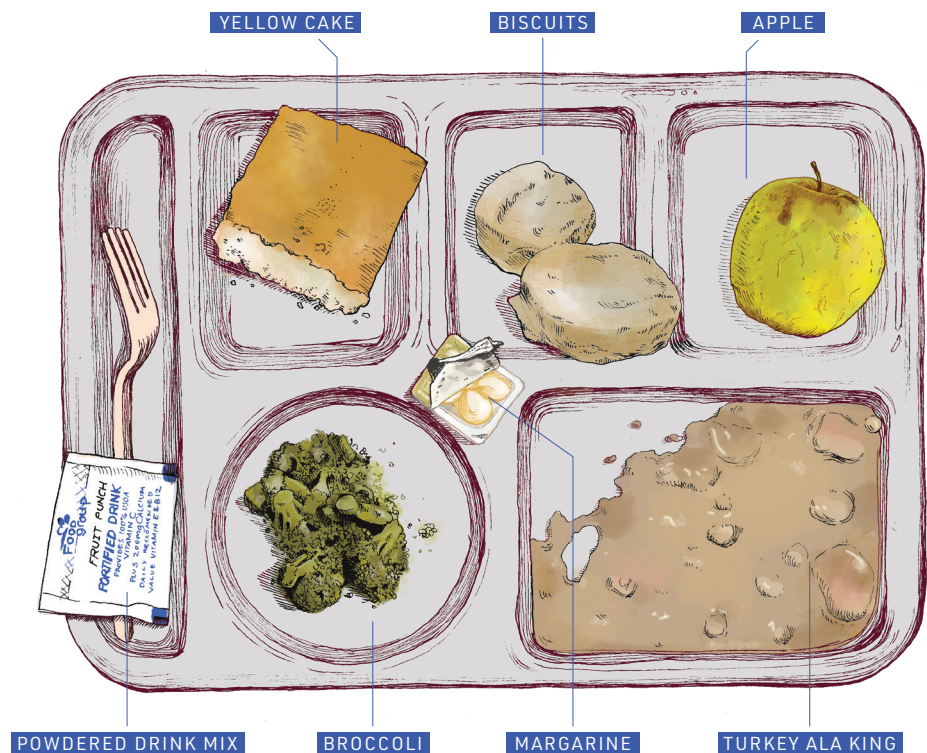
Our surveys and interviews with formerly incarcerated people, roughly half of whom were released from prison in the past five years, suggest a significant expansion of ultra-processed soy products added as filler to entrees described as meat (e.g., turkey casserole) or served instead of meat. While many vegetarians and others interested in decreasing meat consumption welcome these plant-based meat substitutes, people in prison don't get to choose whether to include soy products in their meals. In some facilities, the near-daily use of ultra-processed soy products without a protein alternative

leaves incarcerated people worried about the potential health effects of consuming so much soy, and they don't have access to updated scientific research to dispel rumors or make informed choices for themselves.

The surveys include numerous comments suggesting declining availability of fresh cow's milk, which many incarcerated people rely on to get their protein, calcium, and vitamin D. There are also complaints about the lack of plant-based substitutes for people who are lactose intolerant or who choose not to consume dairy for religious or ethical reasons.

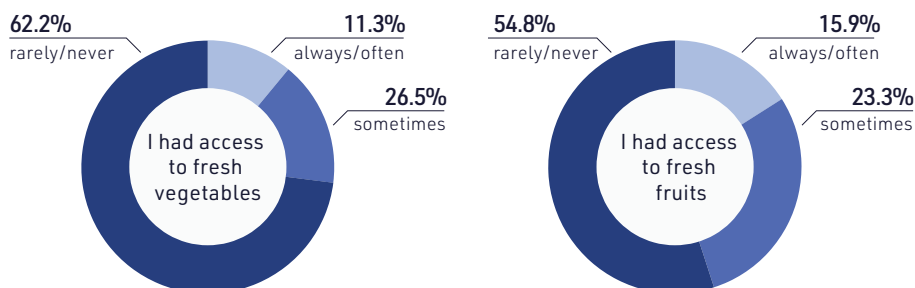
A typical meal tray

Prisons serve mainly carb-heavy meals high in salt and sugar, with few or no fresh fruits and vegetables, and a scarcity of quality protein. See this meal listed as Friday's dinner on the Idaho state-wide menu above.



A scarcity of fresh produce

Source: Impact Justice (2020).



70%

of survey respondents reported breaking policy in order to get access to more or higher quality food

Nothing fresh or flavorful

Fresh vegetables and fruit, the essence of a healthy diet rich in both nutrients and fiber, are exceedingly rare in prison. Three-fifths of the formerly incarcerated people we surveyed responded that they “rarely or never” had access to fresh vegetables in prison (see “A scarcity of fresh produce,” above). According to our investigation, incarcerated people are so desperate for anything fresh that those with access to the kitchen will steal even onions and peppers.

Canned vegetables, high in sodium and other preservatives, appear far more frequently than frozen vegetables, explain formerly incarcerated people who have worked in facility kitchens. Both are typically served “boiled beyond recognition,” Theo described, which diminishes their taste and nutritional value. Although the occasional facility has a salad bar, they tend to be meager in their offerings: typically iceberg lettuce and a few lackluster accompaniments like shredded carrots and high-calorie dressings.

Fresh fruit is also extremely limited: Only one in six formerly incarcerated people we surveyed report that they “always” or “often” had access to it. Their comments indicate that when fresh fruit is available, it’s mostly apples and the sporadic orange or banana, all three of which are often either unripe or turning rotten. The scarcity of fresh fruits and vegetables aligns with the fact that almost everyone surveyed said their meals were not nutritious.



↑ Photos obtained by *The Frontier* and taken with contraband cell phones show meals served in Oklahoma state prisons in 2020

Source: [The Frontier](#)

Because most prison meals are low in naturally-occurring essential vitamins and minerals, powdered fortified beverage mixes are routinely used to meet daily minimum nutritional requirements.²¹ Health and nutrition professionals overwhelmingly argue that supplements cannot replace fresh, healthy food, which also contains fiber, antioxidants, and complex compounds that help the body better absorb the nutrients it needs. In addition, comments by formerly incarcerated people suggest these artificial fruit-flavored drinks have a chemical taste so unpleasant that many people do not drink them, so those people are getting even fewer essential nutrients in their daily diet. Others expressed concern about the sugar or artificial sweeteners and dyes in these fortified beverages.

It's important to emphasize that providing the recommended minimum amount and type of nutrients is not adequate for everyone or under all conditions. Depending on body size, age, gender, activity level, and personal health concerns, people need different levels of essential nutrients. We heard from very active people who were worried about getting enough protein, for example, along with older women who were troubled by lack of access to foods rich in calcium, and younger women who were anxious about iron intake. Also, for people in prison, it's often not possible to adjust one's diet if, for instance, an individual feels a cold coming on and wants to consume more foods with vitamin C. Additionally, just because the ingredients of a meal meet the minimum requirements, that doesn't mean the meal itself does. Nutrients (such as vitamins B and C) can be significantly depleted in the process of cooking, storing, and reheating food.

Given that food in prison has so little intrinsic flavor, it's not surprising that many people describe it as excessively salty or sweet—sometimes the only discernible tastes. Independent analyses of prison meals echo their comments. In 2016, the food administrator for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation admitted the sodium content of general population meals averaged 3,500 milligrams per day, far

exceeding the limit of 2,300 milligrams under the USDA's 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.²² An older but independent nutritional analysis of food in South Carolina correctional facilities, conducted in 2012, found much the same. On average, a day's meals contained 3,420 milligrams of sodium, more than double the department's goal of no more than 1,500 milligrams; the 97.5 grams of sugar per day was more than double what the department intended to serve male residents (37.5 grams) and more than triple the target amount for female residents (25 grams).²³ The meals were also high in cholesterol and low in potassium, magnesium, and vitamin E, nutrients that protect against heart disease, stroke, and cognitive decline.

The link between diet and health

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.

Vague and confusing slogans like "Eat a balanced diet" and "Breakfast is the most important meal of the day" contribute to the poor grasp most Americans have of nutrition and its impact on health. At the most rudimentary level, food functions as fuel for our bodies in the form of calories derived from protein, fat, and carbohydrates. But fuel alone is not enough. We also need vitamins, minerals, and other naturally occurring micronutrients to keep our heart pumping, bones strong, and muscles flexing, and to support our body's other vital systems. Without these nutrients, our systems begin to deteriorate. A malnourished person is often portrayed as emaciated, but someone can be both malnourished and overweight, even obese, if they consume an excess of calories lacking critical nutrients.

This is why a diet rich in fresh fruits and vegetables, high-quality protein, whole grains, and healthy fats is so important. It not only provides the most efficient fuel to maintain healthy body weight, but also supplies the range of micronutrients essential for good health. A 2017 study of dietary habits and longevity in 195 countries reveals that consuming vegetables, fruit, whole



↑ Produce grown at Mountain View Correctional Facility (Charleston, Maine)

Source: Mark McBrine

FRESH FOOD GROWN ON SITE



PROGRAMMING



MENU PLANNING &
MEAL PREPARATION

WHEN IT COMES TO FRESH FOOD, MOUNTAIN VIEW CORRECTIONAL FACILITY IN CHARLESTON, MAINE, IS A NOTABLE EXCEPTION TO THE PREVAILING NATIONAL TREND OF MINIMAL FRESH PRODUCE.

In 2018, the facility grew 150,000 pounds of vegetables, herbs, and fruit by farming its own two-and-a-half acre garden and managing a seven-acre apple orchard with 18 heirloom varieties on a leased plot of land nearby. The produce goes straight to the facility kitchen, providing Mountain View residents with vibrant, substantial salads and other nutrient-rich vegetables during the growing season. The surplus of apples is distributed among Maine's other prisons. In the future, the state department of corrections hopes to invest in equipment that will allow this facility to flash-freeze produce for use over the winter.

In 2019, through a partnership with the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, Mountain View doubled its garden acreage, making space for planting 200 new fruit trees that in time will add fresh plums, peaches, pears, and cherries to the bounty of fresh apples. Mountain View's approach to providing fresh produce to support the health of residents and staff is one that other rural prisons could adopt.

grains, and fish is strongly associated with a longer life, while those whose diets include few of these foods and are heavy in sugar, salt, and trans fats are more likely to die early.²⁴ The study also reports that consuming more healthy foods is a more effective way to reduce mortality than cutting back on sugars and fats.²⁵

Consuming a diet of empty calories, on the other hand—even for short periods of time—can lead to a plethora of physical and mental health problems, some with lasting consequences.²⁶ 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.²⁷

Gaining weight or wasting away

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

— corrections officer

Michael was sent to prison at age 20. In fewer than three years in a West Coast facility, he had gained over one hundred pounds and was diagnosed with hypertension. Eli told us he had never weighed more than 180 pounds, but within a year of being incarcerated in a Northeastern prison he weighed 240. “I struggle to stay at 240. And I work the grounds,” he told us. While it is possible to be healthy at a range of sizes, there is a documented link between excess weight and chronic illness, and the prison environment is not conducive to eating nourishing meals and engaging in physical activity, both protective factors at any weight.

A 2016 report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that incarcerated people suffer from higher rates of diabetes and heart disease (both often associated with metabolic issues that stem from excess weight) than the general public (see “Health Disparities”).²⁸ Whether people enter prison with these health issues or develop them while incarcerated, the typical prison diet exacerbates those conditions. Many corrections officers have noted this with concern. “Over the last two decades I’ve

What exactly is a healthy diet?

There isn't one single definition of a healthy diet. Individuals have different requirements based on age, gender, genetics, activity level, personal health conditions, moral and religious concerns, cultural conceptions of wellness, and other factors. An optimal diet for one body, like going vegan or eating a hearty breakfast each day, might not be ideal for another. Moreover, some common precepts of "proper" nutrition in the United States (such as drinking milk each day) are rooted in white and Westernized constructions of a healthy diet, neglecting the needs and customs of people from marginalized communities. In our survey, more than four out of five formerly incarcerated people reported that they never had any choice or input regarding the food on their meal trays, taking away their agency to tailor their diet according to their needs. Ways of eating that promote well-being can be rooted in any number of dietary patterns and cultural traditions from around the globe, but the science and traditional wisdom are clear: a diet abundant in whole foods and low in sugar, salt, refined starches, and trans fats is a good path to health.

witnessed a weight gain in the offender population and more offenders become insulin dependent," one officer wrote to us. Another reported observing an "increase in high blood pressure and diabetes amongst the prison population." Medical professionals typically recommend dietary modifications to treat health problems like diabetes, heart disease, and hypertension, but medical diets (discussed later in this section) aren't always accessible, and incarcerated people don't have the option of modifying the food on their trays.

While far less common, rapid and drastic weight loss is a problem for some incarcerated people, particularly those who can't afford to purchase commissary items, and individuals in solitary confinement where the quality and quantity of food is

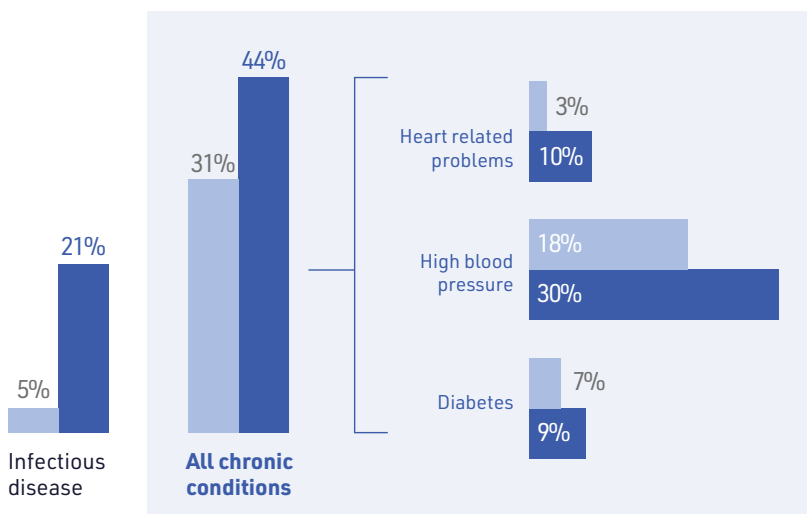
Health disparities

Data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics shows that incarcerated people experience higher rates of both chronic conditions and infectious disease, some of which are diet-related.

Incarcerated people

General public

Source: Maruschak, L., Berzofsky, M., & Unangst, J. (2016, October 4). *Medical problems of state and federal prisoners and jail inmates, 2011-12*. Bureau of Justice Statistics. [Link here](#)



even worse. Rapid weight loss can put individuals at risk of many health problems, including muscle loss, severe dehydration and electrolyte imbalances, gallstones, and a slowed metabolism; individuals who become underweight are also more susceptible to cardiovascular disease and early death than those of normal weight.²⁹ Shawn's 11-year sentence in a Northeastern prison included a stint in solitary confinement, where her weight quickly dropped from 136 to 122; she later struggled to regain the weight. "I was skinny in a facility that has a lot of violence," she told us. "My body was not my weapon anymore, and people could take me."

A wide range of diet-related diseases

Gastrointestinal issues are another common ailment. A 2018 survey of incarcerated people conducted by the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee (IWOC) reveals that nearly two-thirds of respondents replied affirmatively to the question, "Has the food made you sick in the last year?"³⁰ In our surveys and interviews, formerly incarcerated people describe the constant gnawing pain of gastritis and acid reflux, as well as facility-wide outbreaks of pathogens such as salmonella and *E. coli*. A 2017 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that incarcerated men and women are six times more likely than



↑ A corrections officer holds up a tray of food for incarcerated people at a prison near Houston, Texas in 2013

Source: Alamy

The reality of poor nutrition in prison and how it contributes to the spread of disease and to poor metabolic health has been overlooked.

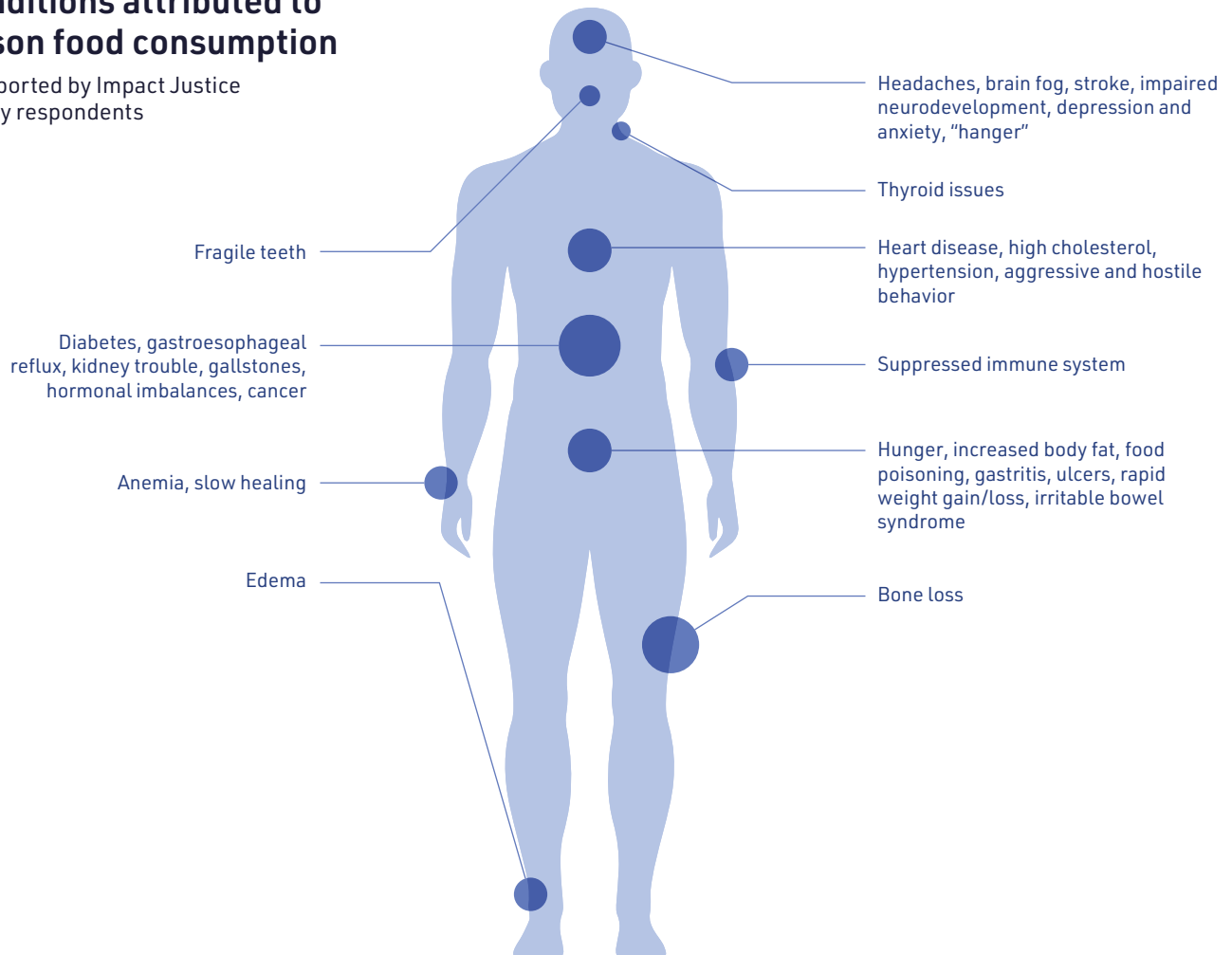
the general public to contract a foodborne illness.³¹

People also told us about being diagnosed in prison with anemia due to insufficient iron, and with bone loss from inadequate calcium. One family member wrote, “My husband has been showing signs of edema, headaches, high blood pressure, diabetes, due to the foods being unhealthy and unbalanced.” Another wrote that an incarcerated loved one’s teeth displayed signs of malnutrition.

More generally, a diet lacking in critical vitamins and minerals weakens the immune system, contributing to the spread and severity of infectious diseases. “When the flu runs around here, it doesn’t matter how much medicine we have, we need nutrition,” one corrections officer explained to us, adding, “It’s just common sense.” COVID-19 revealed to the general public how quickly a virus spreads in prisons and jails, proving especially lethal among people with underlying health problems. But the reality of poor nutrition in prison and how it contributes to the spread of disease and to poor metabolic health—the underlying root of many serious health conditions—has been overlooked.³²

Conditions attributed to prison food consumption

As reported by Impact Justice survey respondents



From depression to aggression

Along with declines in physical health, nutritional deficiencies have been shown to contribute to mental and behavioral health issues ranging from brain fog to violence. A 2015 study of incarcerated men in Australia connects low levels of omega-3 fatty acids (found in oily fish, seafood, nuts, and seeds) with more aggressive behavior.³³ Improper levels of cholesterol, tryptophan, phytoestrogens, carbohydrates, sugars, zinc, and protein also appear to increase aggression, other studies show.³⁴ The connection between meals and behavior doesn't

“Mentally, I’m not the same. I’m emotionally detached. My mental and emotional health are damaged.”

— formerly incarcerated person

go unnoticed by corrections staff. One officer suggested that serving more “meals consisting of carbohydrates increases aggression in the offender population,” while another remarked that the prison food experience triggers “emotional upheaval, hostility, anger and hatred for prison staff.”

Perhaps most commonly, being served unappetizing and sometimes downright awful food day after day is depressing. The partner of one incarcerated person wrote, “I have never seen my husband this depressed.” While virtually every aspect of prison is depressing, and for many anxiety-provoking, a poor diet makes it even harder to cope.³⁵ One formerly incarcerated man wrote to us that after the experience of eating in confinement, “Mentally, I’m not the same. I’m emotionally detached. My mental and emotional health are damaged.”

Common practices such as unreasonably early or brief mealtimes, hostile and degrading eating environments, and total lack of control over food options can heighten these psychological effects.³⁶ The director of a women’s reentry organization told us about clients who were retaliated against for advocating for their dietary needs, leading to chronic anxiety and aggravated health conditions even after their release. She added, “So many women go in a size four and come out a size twelve. These women are suffering from depression because they don’t feel like the same person, they can’t wear the same clothes.”

Exacerbating factors: trauma and substance use

There is also evidence that factors like trauma and substance abuse are closely linked to an unhealthy relationship with food. Trauma can impact eating habits and the way the body processes food, and conversely, food insecurity and malnutrition can cause lasting trauma. The current prison eating experience can retrigger trauma and fails to take advantage of opportunities to support resilience, which could improve rehabilitative outcomes.



Adverse childhood / community experiences (ACES)

Trauma from ACES translates into negative physiological impacts, which in turn have social, emotional, and cognitive impacts. This graphic lists some of the ACES that can impact one's relationship with food.

Source: Leah's Pantry (2019).



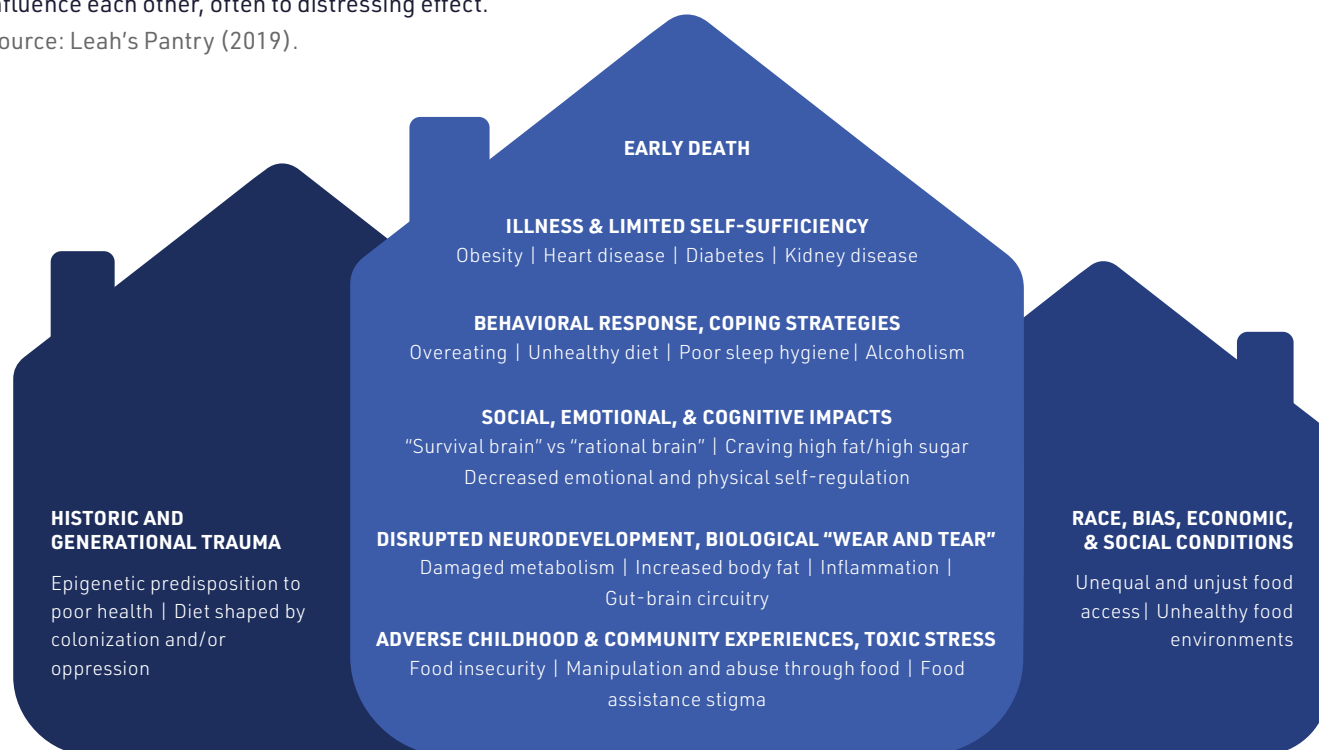
Having a history of trauma is widespread among individuals entering the justice system, even before the potentially traumatizing experience of incarceration.³⁷ Trauma frequently stems from the social and environmental factors commonly referred to as adverse childhood/community experiences, ACES for short (see above).³⁸ [Leah's Pantry](#), a California-based nonprofit that focuses on trauma-informed nutrition initiatives, describes trauma as the neurological and biological residue of toxic stress resulting from ACES, and explains that such stress disrupts positive relationships with food.³⁹

Food insecurity, the social stigma of relying on food stamps, and experiencing food as a weapon of control, manipulation, or punishment all fall under the heading of ACES; however, the relationship between trauma and food is not limited to these direct factors.⁴⁰ Leah's Pantry uses the metaphor of a house to explain how trauma and nourishment are inextricably linked (see "How trauma disrupts our relationship with food," below). When ACES are built into the foundation, they can lead to impaired neurodevelopment and can negatively affect the body in numerous ways, including chronic inflammation, increased body

How trauma disrupts our relationship with food

Just as a shaky foundation causes instability throughout a house, trauma from ACES translates into negative physiological impacts, which in turn have social, emotional, and cognitive repercussions. This graphic illustrates the ways that trauma and one's relationship to food influence each other, often to distressing effect.

Source: Leah's Pantry (2019).



fat, damaged metabolism, and disrupted gut-brain circuitry, which controls satiety cues, for example. These physiological harms have social, emotional, and cognitive impacts that can make people feel anxious and lacking in control, leading many to adopt unhealthy behaviors as coping mechanisms—which have their own negative impacts on health and can perpetuate the conditions that give rise to ACES.

Public health initiatives often fail to recognize the connection between underlying harms and people’s overall relationship to food, positioning unhealthy eating as a discrete issue rather than a symptom of a larger problem.⁴¹ Providing access to nutritious food and positive eating experiences is one important way to

For the 85% of people in prison who wrestle with substance use, the typical prison diet may fuel cravings for highly palatable sweets and snacks.

address those underlying harms, to begin bringing body and mind into a state of wellness, and to interrupt patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving that may have led to incarceration.

Substance use is a common coping mechanism and a frequent pathway to incarceration. Groundbreaking research on substance use and its relationship to gut health shows that individuals with substance use disorder (SUD) may be malnourished not only due to social and financial factors, such as homelessness or lack of money for food, but also as a result of biochemically-induced cravings for sweets and other ultra-processed foods that are easily digestible.⁴² Those struggling with SUD can experience micronutrient deficiencies that stem from both inadequate intake of healthy food and malabsorption of vitamins and minerals due to compromised function of the digestive system and disruption of the gut's microbiome. As we discuss above, these micronutrient deficiencies can significantly impact multiple facets of physical and mental health. For the 85% of people in prison who wrestle with substance use, the typical prison diet may fuel cravings for highly palatable sweets and snacks and therefore miss an opportunity to support recovery through exposure to nutrient-dense, fiber-rich food.⁴³

GARDENING & COOKING FOR HEALTH



PROCUREMENT



REENTRY

GETTING ONE'S HANDS IN THE DIRT, TENDING PLANTS, AND COOKING FOOD OFFER SENSORY AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES THAT CAN STIMULATE THE BRAIN IN NEW AND POSITIVE WAYS, IMPROVING ATTITUDES, BEHAVIORS, AND OVERALL MENTAL HEALTH.

Gardening and culinary education programs in prison are associated with boosts in self-esteem and resilience, reductions in violence, and the fostering of positive relationships.⁴⁴ While these programs teach skills that make people more employable after release, the best programs go beyond basic skills and help people learn and grow, even within the constraints of prison.

Though the history of incarcerated people working the soil is fraught with connections to slavery and convict leasing (which we'll discuss in Section 4 of *Eating Behind Bars*), there are some laudable gardening programs in prisons across the country that include extensive educational components. At the Maine State Prison, people working on the grounds and gardens crews are encouraged to take the Master Gardener course, run in partnership with the University of Maine Cooperative Extension. The program allows incarcerated people to complete their course volunteer hours during their sentences so they can be fully certified before they are released. [Insight Garden Program](#), which operates in prisons throughout California and in Ohio, integrates transformational tools like meditation, emotional process work, and ecotherapy into its courses on organic gardening and sustainable systems. And the [Sustainability in Prisons Project](#) (SPP), a partnership between the Washington Department of Corrections and The Evergreen State College, equips participants with the scientific knowledge and practical skills to maintain various environmental initiatives, including conservation efforts, beekeeping programs, and ample food gardens—bringing incarcerated individuals together with scientists, college staff, and students on the outside. In 2018, SPP sites produced more than 246,700 pounds of fresh produce, a harvest shared among prison kitchens and local food pantries.

The better prison culinary programs also go above and beyond safe food handling and other basics. *Quentin Cooks*, a culinary training course at San Quentin State Prison in California run by professional chefs, teaches people where food comes from, how to prepare delicious meals with high-quality ingredients, and how to function as part of a team of kitchen professionals with different roles, along with budgeting and other restaurant management skills. Participants talk about how the program not only prepares them to work in an upscale professional kitchen but also lights up their lives in prison. Program staff “treat us like humans and not like caged animals,” one person observed, which restores individual dignity and builds self-confidence.

The experience of cooking and eating together forges relationships across racial and other differences that are typically barriers in prison. A participant named Max perhaps captures it best: “It breaks down the walls we put up as prisoners to protect ourselves.” *Quentin Cooks* is currently working with employers in the hospitality industry to create a pipeline to jobs for program graduates once they leave prison, and lead instructor Chef Huw Thornton hopes to expand the program to prisons statewide.



↑ Incarcerated people with approved special diets receive a modified version or alternative to the mainline meal. For example, someone on a gluten-free diet in Washington would receive an alternative to the pasta and tortilla wrap shown above.

Source: Impact Justice

Even something as simple as synchronizing the distribution of medications that must be taken with food with facility mealtimes may not occur routinely or ever.

Special diets

For individuals with special dietary needs, the challenge of eating well in prison becomes even more fraught because incarcerated people have little choice or control over what they eat. Although prisons are required to provide meals that accommodate a person's diagnosed medical needs and religious beliefs, in practice those needs may go unmet. In a survey, the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee found that half of respondents had special dietary needs, and nearly three-fourths of those people did not get their needs met.⁴⁵ We heard from a number of formerly incarcerated people about special diets being denied, delayed, or revoked without reason or upon transfer to a new facility (in the latter case, taking months to be reinstated).

Aaron, who is allergic to beans, remembers undergoing allergy testing while he was incarcerated in a Southwestern prison and waiting a year and a half before being approved for a special diet. In the interim, he suffered severe gastrointestinal distress from regularly eating beans, an element of many daily meals, "because they didn't feed us enough," he told us. "I ate them and I suffered ... I was clutched up in my cell in pain." Once his special

We documented accounts of facilities failing to provide adequate meals for diabetics—instead serving them the same white bread and white rice everyone else receives, and telling diabetics to eat around them because “that mirrors the real-world experience.”

diet was finally authorized, Aaron learned that pasta, not an alternative source of protein, would be replacing beans on his tray.

In our investigation, we documented accounts of facilities failing to provide adequate meals for diabetics—instead serving them the same white bread and white rice everyone else receives, and telling diabetics to eat around them because “that mirrors the real-world experience”—and of pregnant women going without prenatal vitamins and getting insufficient supplemental foods. Even something as simple as providing medications that must be taken with food during facility mealtimes may not occur routinely, if ever. And if a medically recommended dietary change doesn’t match the kind of food on hand in the facility—eating more red meat to improve hemoglobin levels, for example—it’s highly unlikely to be met.

People whose religion dictates certain dietary restrictions may have to jump through many bureaucratic hoops simply to follow their beliefs, and sometimes the food they are provided is even more meager than the standard fare. When Michelle, a practicing Buddhist, asked her prison’s Catholic chaplain to approve her request for vegetarian meals, he demanded proof that her faith espouses vegetarianism. A Protestant chaplain eventually helped her, but many of the meals she received consisted of a rubbery soy hot dog, a scoop of canned fruit cocktail, and nothing else. On other occasions, she was served a portion of onions and peppers spooned out of beef stew, or chicken in gravy minus the chicken.

Recent news reports reveal that incarcerated Muslims in Arizona prisons are being served vegetarian trays instead of halal meals.⁴⁶ Muslims in Virginia and Alaska prisons have sought legal recourse after being denied an alternative meal schedule to accommodate fasting during the daylight hours of Ramadan.⁴⁷

94%

of survey respondents
couldn't eat enough in
prison to feel full

93%

of survey respondents
were hungry between
meals

**“Being hungry as a result
of small portions leads
to inevitable anger. It’s a
source of grief, sadness,
anger.”**

— loved one of someone who is incarcerated

We also learned from Alicia, who spent 15 years in a West Coast prison, that in some facilities kosher meals are in such high demand that people lie about their faith to get one. The meals typically come prepackaged and sealed, making them appear more sanitary, and are thought to taste better. Meanwhile, people who are actually Jewish may sell their kosher meal because they need money, perhaps to buy soap, toothpaste, or something else essential, Alicia told us.

Always hungry

A reporter who visited a South Carolina prison in 2016 described the day’s lunch: “Only four of the plastic tray’s six molded compartments were occupied. In addition to the warmed-over round of bologna streaked with a half-inch band of gray, there was a sour-smelling heap of macaroni salad, two misshapen pieces of bread and shredded iceberg lettuce.”⁴⁸

With a preponderance of food that doesn’t function as food should—taste good, satiate hunger, and nourish body and mind—nearly everyone we surveyed said they couldn’t eat enough in prison to feel full (94%) and were hungry between meals (93%). One person described it as a “constant hunger gnawing at you.” Another mentioned “hanger,” the anger that results from being hungry nearly all of the time. The IWOC survey reports similar statistics, with four out of five respondents stating they were denied meals or given too little food in the previous year. “I am hungry every day and I eat everything on every tray,” one person wrote in reply.⁴⁹

That degree of hunger can make people desperate. When Aaron worked in the prison library, he got to know his staff supervisor’s lunch schedule and that she normally threw away half her meal. He’d put a fresh liner in the trash can before lunch and later retrieve what she discarded: “Fresh fruit, a sandwich, a lot better than what [we were served].”

**“It’s as if someone
handed you two
Snickers bars and
called it dinner.”**

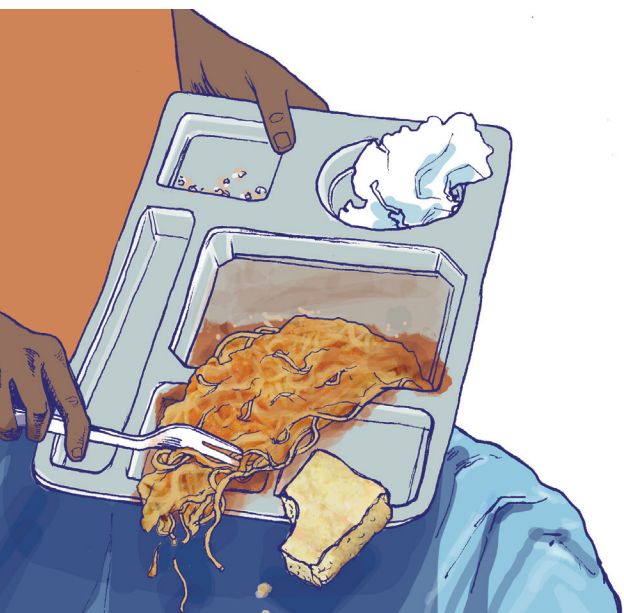
— Theo, incarcerated 8 years

Small portions compound the problem of hunger. Numerous people compared serving sizes to trays in an elementary school cafeteria. Marcus, who spent 22 years in different West Coast prisons, described the amount as “just enough to keep you alive. I never felt full.”

Although daily calorie intake, along with other nutritional guidelines, is mandated at the state agency level and approved by a dietitian, calories alone are not enough when they are concentrated in the form of white bread and squares of cake. As Theo said, it’s as if someone handed you two Snickers bars and called it dinner. Serving sizes can be so meager that the required calorie count can only be reached by adding pats of margarine. “To hit the calories required, you would have to eat every single thing, including condiments,” Eli explained to us regarding the Northeastern prison where he was sent to serve time.

When the incarcerated population was a fraction of its current size, many facilities allowed second helpings at meals—few do today. While agencies limit portions to control costs, some also use portion control as the primary or only defense against growing rates of high blood pressure and other diet-related diseases. But universal portion control leaves many incarcerated people, particularly those with larger physiques and more active individuals, without the fuel their bodies require.

Quantity can also be inconsistent, varying from meal to meal, depending on the kitchen staff’s capacity for planning and preparation, and from tray to tray. We learned from James, a Black man recently released after 22 years of incarceration in the Southeast, that racism among kitchen workers can result in white people getting larger helpings, while as a person of color, “you’re not going to get anything extra.” Unfortunately, the prevalent solution to this problem—“blind feeding,” in which there’s a barrier between the kitchen server and recipient, and a tray is pushed through a slot—adds to the dehumanizing environment in the dining hall.



Both corrections staff and those who have experienced incarceration say that much of what lands on the tray is thrown away, either because people are required to take an entire meal even if they only want select items, or because the food is simply inedible. This is a poor use of limited resources, and this extensive food waste has consequences for the environment.⁵⁰

Lasting effects

For some people, the ill effects of a poor diet in prison linger long after they are released. Eating habits once required for survival, or ones that brought a modicum of pleasure in an otherwise punishing environment, can be hard to break; the trauma of prison can manifest in both physical and psychological reactions to food. Many formerly incarcerated people we surveyed and interviewed described ongoing struggles to maintain a healthy weight and a positive relationship with food. People also described a series of health problems they believe stem at least in part from the food they ate in prison: persistent hypertension, diabetes, gastroesophageal reflux, ulcers, kidney problems, high cholesterol, hormonal imbalances, irritable bowel syndrome, gallstones, thyroid issues, fragile teeth and bones, cancer, and more.

As one person we surveyed explained, “It’s hard to get in the habit of eating healthy when a person just ate what was handy by habit. To be able to shop healthy is also expensive. And I have no clue how to.”

— formerly incarcerated person

Cuts and bruises, sprains and strains are slow to heal for Natalia after decades in prison eating meals lacking essential nutrients.⁵¹ Others mentioned addiction to sugary and salty foods. Jordan worries about his health and that of his wife Rosa, who spent 33 years in prison: “She’s had a stroke, but hasn’t laid off the soda, the chips, snacks. I’ve told her, I don’t want anything fried, don’t fry anything, but she does, and I’ve gained weight because of it. A lot of salt, it’s an unhealthy way of cooking. She’d rather eat a bowl of [ramen] soup than anything else, even in the morning for breakfast.” As one person we surveyed explained, “It’s hard to get in the habit of eating healthy when a person just ate what was handy by habit. To be able to shop healthy is also expensive. And I have no clue how to.”

Several people mentioned a tendency to hoard food because, as one individual wrote, “I have an ingrained fear of not knowing what I will be eating next.”

Several people mentioned a tendency to hoard food because, as one individual wrote, “I have an ingrained fear of not knowing what I will be eating next.” Many others described a habit of eating too quickly, for reasons such as “I am used to trying not to taste it,” or “because of the way the guards would yell at me to hurry up.” This is often coupled with overeating. For months after being released, Michelle ate so quickly she couldn’t taste the food. Her tendency to overeat became so extreme that a doctor prescribed medication to suppress her appetite. Even now her wife frequently admonishes her to slow down during meals.

Our survey respondents and interviewees also frequently mentioned a chronic compulsion to control what goes into their bodies. “I still would rather be the one in the kitchen or doing the grocery shopping,” one individual wrote, adding “It terrifies me that I may be stuck at home, with food I hate, allergic to, etc. ... I HAVE to be in control of the food in my home.” Others added, “I’m traumatized with food and extra careful to see where it comes from,” and “Nothing others cook unless I’m there to see how it’s prepared.”

The physical and psychological impacts are profound on people of all ages, but the consequences of prison food can be particularly damaging for young people. James, who spent over 22 years in prison after being incarcerated as a juvenile, pointed out that the majority of violent offenders are young people under 25, before the age when impulse control typically solidifies in the brain.⁵² He is concerned that years—and sometimes decades—of prison food have an especially detrimental effect on the brain development of those locked up in their youth: “You’re going to return them back to society and people expect them to conduct themselves like they’re 38, but what if their brain has never developed due to [lack of] nutrition?”

As we’ve detailed throughout this section, good nutrition is critical for a healthy mind and body. Our relationship with food,

however, goes beyond nutrients. If food doesn't taste good, it doesn't fully nourish us (and conversely, snack foods designed to be "hyperpalatable" aren't fully satisfying to our bodies either). A truly nourishing relationship with food balances nutrition and pleasure, whether through the enjoyment of cooking, savoring the occasional treat, or connecting with others over meals—all of which people continue to need when they're confined in prison.

NEXT UP**PART 3: FROM THE CHOW HALL TO "HOME COOKING" IN PRISON**

In this third installment we focus on the physical environments where meals take place and the effects of those environments on health and wellness. We also explore "home cooking" in prison.



PART 3

From the Chow Hall to “Home Cooking” in Prison

“The minute you walk through that area, it smelled like something was rotten and dying.”

— formerly incarcerated person

The first two installments of *Eating Behind Bars* focused on the quality of the food itself. This section begins by examining the bleak physical environments and fraught dynamics in which prison meals take place, and why those environments matter.

People have been eating together throughout history. Ancient archaeological sites show evidence of this in the arrangement of the hearth, food-related tools and equipment, and even preserved fragments of food. Quite simply, sharing a meal is part of being human. In prisons that house hundreds if not thousands of people, official mealtime is inherently a collective affair, except of course for people confined to their cell. But the typical prison chow hall bears little resemblance to a shared meal in the free world.



↑ Men eat in a dining hall at Lakeview Shock Correctional Facility in upstate New York in 2013

Source: Getty Images

“You have guns and guards on you at all times. You don’t know if it’s even safe. Your enemy can be sitting right next to you.”

— Marcus, incarcerated 22 years

85%

of survey respondents stated that the place where they ate most meals was not welcoming or social

Eating en masse: the chow hall

Marcus described the chow hall in the West Coast prison where he was incarcerated as a “very scary” and “nerve-wracking” environment. “You have guns and guards on you at all times. You don’t know if it’s even safe. Your enemy can be sitting right next to you.” As his recollections suggest, incarcerated people have to navigate complex social norms defined by the residents—eyes cast down on your own tray unless engaging a friend, and not sharing food with someone of a different race, for example—and by the official rules.

Such a crowded, stressful environment combined with unpalatable food creates conditions in which tensions run high and fights can break out with little or no warning. Corrections officials told us that in an effort to keep the peace and protect especially vulnerable residents from “grooming” or outright intimidation by residents with more power, some prisons prohibit talking during mealtime or the sharing of food with anyone, even if it will otherwise go to waste—rules that might be enforced inconsistently, depending on who’s on duty in the dining hall that meal.



Fight-or-flight states not only inhibit digestion, but also increase the likelihood of misinterpreting social cues as hostility, which heightens security risks for both staff and incarcerated people.

During our investigation, we learned that personal spices or sauces that people might use to enhance the bland food or cover up an unpleasant taste are often banned from dining halls for the same reason. That someone’s hot sauce, and the envy or resentment it might spark in others, could cause a fight or be used as a weapon says a lot about the environment in the typical prison chow hall.

The people we surveyed and interviewed who have endured thousands of mealtimes in prison almost uniformly described the chow hall as drab and bleak, lacking in natural light, loud, and often uncomfortably hot or cold. As Marcus said, “It’s a box. Everything is metal. It’s cold.” While these qualities describe prison in general, they seem to feel especially harsh when coupled with food, which people look to for comfort. The worn-out trays and dull plastic sporks used in the name of security add to the degradation.

Science is beginning to reveal the deeper effects of such obviously unpleasant environments and how they can exacerbate a negative relationship with food. The quality of light, for example, affects how the body processes food. While natural daylight supports metabolic health, lack of exposure to natural light, as well as exposure to artificial light in the evening, appears to impact blood glucose levels and insulin sensitivity, therefore increasing the risk of obesity and diabetes.⁵³ Researchers have also documented a correlation between ambient noise, what people choose to eat, and how much they enjoy a meal: In louder environments, people tend to eat fewer fruits and vegetables and derive less pleasure from a meal.⁵⁴ Other research shows that noisy environments often signal danger, particularly to those with histories of trauma and victimization. When such environments are combined with other perceived threats (such as armed guards or past experiences of violence in that location), this can prompt people to enter a fight-or-flight mode without realizing it.⁵⁵ Fight-or-flight states not only inhibit digestion, but also increase the likelihood of misinterpreting social cues as hostility, which heightens security risks for both staff and incarcerated people.

LETTING THE LIGHT IN



EATING ENVIRONMENT



↑ Las Colinas Detention and Reentry Facility

Source: Lawrence Anderson

Photography, Inc. and HMC Architects



Las Colinas Detention and Reentry Facility is a county facility operated by the San Diego County Sheriff's Department. We include Las Colinas here because it was the only example we encountered of a facility with an eating environment that aims to mirror life on the outside.

The chow hall at Cedar Creek Corrections Center in Littlerock, Washington, has a wall of windows that fill the space with natural light. There is also an adjacent outdoor eating area accessible to all residents and staff, weather permitting, and those tables are reportedly packed in the summer as people enjoy the fresh air.

The dining hall at Las Colinas Detention and Reentry Facility in Santee, California, is similarly light-filled. In 2014 a local architecture firm had a vision for transforming what was a particularly unpleasant area in this facility into a warm and inviting place for women to gather and eat. Today, sunlight beams through a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows, enhancing the light greens and soft earth tones of the new space. Regular chairs and tables have replaced the conventional bolted-down metal tables and stools, giving the room the air of a museum cafeteria. While movement through the meal line is still regimented, rules have changed to allow conversation and the sharing of food between women seated at the same table. Staff and residents report feeling more relaxed and less stressed during meals, leading to a positive shift in atmosphere throughout the facility.

The unpleasant and sometimes threatening atmosphere of the chow hall is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Chow halls and their rules are designed with assumptions of misconduct and uncivil behavior in mind. Sociologists have found that such expectations actually can become determinants of behavior for incarcerated individuals.⁵⁶ If incarcerated people are treated as though they can't handle eating in a less-regimented environment, they are more likely to meet that expectation. Conversely, loosening unnecessary restrictions and making the dining area feel more welcoming, like better eating environments outside prison, can actually enhance safety, while creating a more satisfying eating experience (see “Letting the light in,” above).

Some of the worst chow halls are flat-out unsanitary. Our surveys and interviews reveal accounts of visible mold on walls, swarms of insects buzzing overhead, and odors of “something rotten and dying.” In one case, people ate for years in a space that was eventually shut down because of exposure to toxic mold and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), both of which can cause a host of serious health issues.⁵⁷

Eating in prison is typically a regimented, impersonal, and rushed affair. “It always felt like feeding us was more like a duty,” explains Natalia, who served time on the East Coast. “They don’t care if people are really nourished. That affects you mentally.” While incarcerated people are supposed to have 15–20 minutes to eat a meal, they can spend much of that time waiting in line until it’s their turn to receive a tray. Scarfing down food, especially in a state of anxiety or fear, obviously hinders digestion. So do breakfast calls in the middle of the night, unnaturally early dinner times, and reported lapses between meals of more than 14 hours during the weekend when there are fewer staff.⁵⁸

Formerly incarcerated people also describe the shame of eating in front of staff who look at them in disgust; tension with staff keeps some people from going to the chow hall at all.

Formerly incarcerated people also describe the shame of eating in front of staff who look at them in disgust; tension with staff keeps some people from going to the chow hall at all. A parent we surveyed wrote that his incarcerated son skips dinner to avoid “an aggressively antagonistic” staff member, and is perpetually hungry and losing weight as a result.

We also heard multiple accounts of officers teasing or taunting incarcerated people with food. Alicia, who spent 15 years inside, told us that corrections staff would frequently hold office parties with pizza or cake, and that “more often than not, they would intentionally trash the leftover food so it wouldn’t be edible [for us].” A corrections officer in another state confirmed that this is not an unusual occurrence: “There’s some staff that can be vindictive and eat pizza or lunch right in front of inmates. There’s definitely a difference between what we bring to work and what they’re being fed. They see when we have our potlucks.”

“Being served inedible food in a chow hall full of insects, being told you have five minutes to eat it with your sweat dripping into the food ... That was truly horrific.”

—Rosa, incarcerated for 33 years

Not all prisons have central chow halls. As noted above, in some facilities people eat in the communal dayroom of their housing unit—a smaller space where the faces are mainly familiar, but not free of tension and not necessarily pleasant. Despite the name, there may be little or no natural light. As for people confined to their cells—either temporarily as punishment or over the long term in special housing units—their eating experience is demeaning in a different way. Trays are often delivered through a slot in the cell door, and meals are eaten sitting right next to the odors and germs of the toilet. And of course, they have no choice of dining companion, regardless of whether they are housed individually or live with a cellmate.

Whether in dining halls, dayrooms, or cells, 85% percent of the released people we surveyed indicated that the environment where they ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner in prison was neither “welcoming” nor “social”—things we expect in the places where we eat food. As Rosa summed up, “Being served inedible food in a chow hall full of insects, being told you have five minutes to eat it with your sweat dripping into the food because it’s not air-conditioned, not being allowed to talk or trade for something that somebody else doesn’t want ... That was truly horrific.”

Staff dining: not much better

The people who staff prisons obviously go home at the end of their shift and have access to a much wider range of food in their lives compared with incarcerated people. But at work they’re often not eating well either. Rules, routines, and geography can get in the way of healthy eating habits. Some facilities don’t allow staff to bring their own food past the security checkpoint, making that food less accessible during the short breaks in their shift. And in rural areas where the prison is miles from the nearest grocery store or restaurant, going out for food in the middle of a shift is impossible. As a result, many prison employees are reliant on the staff dining hall, where they might be served the same unappealing, unhealthy food as the

Staff dining in U.S. prisons

Most states provide the same meals to staff as incarcerated people.

Same menu as incarcerated people*

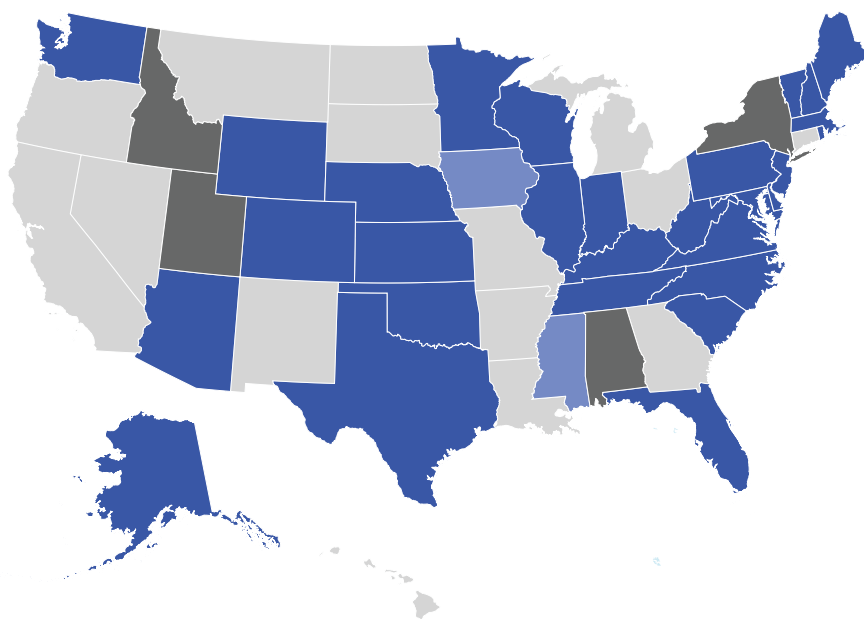
Staff meal provided, different menu

No staff meal provided

No data available

* While the primary meal is the same as what is served to incarcerated people, staff in Washington, Illinois, and Tennessee also have access to a healthy alternative (i.e., salad bar or grilled chicken).

Source: Impact Justice (2020).



residents, or fare that’s not much better. One corrections officer described “constant weight gain” as part of the job.

The corrections staff we spoke with also described a significant decline in food quality over the course of their careers, and some of them no longer feel comfortable or safe eating the food cooked on site. One corrections officer told us that the food in her facility used to be good, explaining, “It was fresh, and the cooks cared about what they put out.” Since a statewide shift to centralized food production, however, she no longer eats the meals provided, explaining, “Once or twice I tried, but I couldn’t eat it. ... It’s poor quality.” People told us they depend heavily on snacks from vending machines to get them through the day. Beyond the food itself, eating on the inside is a hurried, uncomfortable experience, staff report. People said they don’t have time to sit down to a meal and eat at a natural pace. One former officer who worked in a Southern facility said that she frequently skipped breakfast or lunch entirely because of the heavy workload on a shift. We learned of one facility lacking a designated lunch break for officers, who instead must carry a lunch bag with them all day and grab bites when they can.



↑ While many people can't afford to eat from commissary, and the options are mostly unhealthy, some of our interviewees described positive and meaningful memories associated with cooking and eating with friends

'Home cooking' in prison

The counterpart to the generally tasteless (or worse) big batch food prepared in prison kitchens are meals that incarcerated people make for themselves and others with supplies purchased at the facility commissary, known in some prisons as the canteen. A typical commissary sells common snack foods (e.g., candy bars, honey buns, cookies, chips), non-perishable condiments (e.g., soy sauce and hot sauce), and some more substantial packaged foods (e.g., macaroni and cheese, pouches of tuna, tortillas, the ever-popular ramen noodle soups), as well as basic toiletries, over-the-counter medications, extra clothing, and postage stamps. While a commissary might stock a few different varieties of especially popular items, in general brands and options are extremely limited. We didn't encounter any facilities that offer fresh produce or other perishables like eggs and milk in their commissary.

Commissary Prices

This graphic shows how many hours someone incarcerated in the labeled state would need to work in order to afford the purchase listed.



Hawaii

\$0.75 = **3 hrs**
3 oz package of chicken ramen of work

If someone worked minimum wage outside of prison, they could buy close to 100 ramen packs with three hours of work.



Minnesota

\$7.92 = **8 hrs**
8 oz Folgers instant coffee of work

Based on the average pay in the state.



Pennsylvania

\$2.49 = **13 hrs**
10 oz salted mixed nuts of work

For incarcerated people who at the low end get paid \$0.19 per hour.

Typically once a week, although in some prisons less often, people with money in their accounts have the opportunity to purchase a limited dollar amount of food and other items, either by filling out a commissary form and waiting for delivery or visiting the commissary window. Many facilities also permit family members and friends to send packages to incarcerated people through approved vendors whose catalogues feature items similar to what the commissary stocks.

With what people can afford to buy at the commissary, and by creatively using plastic garbage bags as mixing bowls, ID cards as knives, an immersion heater in a bucket of water, and other improvised devices, incarcerated people partake in culinary rituals that echo those on the outside: cobbling together daily comfort foods, preparing holiday fare, and laboring over special desserts for birthdays and other celebrations. Many formerly incarcerated people we surveyed and interviewed recalled these “home-cooked” meals as some of the only positive moments during their time in prison.

The sharing of food—taking in something that literally becomes a part of us—can be a deeply symbolic act that affirms our common humanity. And through food, we can communicate without speaking: “I’m sorry,” “Feel better,” “I love you.” Aaron remembered making a big spread of nachos with tortilla chips and processed cheese to eat while watching the Super Bowl inside prison. Rosa, a trans woman, recalled the time she and some friends started purchasing ramen soups, chips, and other items weeks in advance of Christmas to make a huge “pocket,” a mash-up of savory snacks blended together in a trash bag. She still feels the pride of being able to share that pocket with almost 80 men, many of whom couldn’t afford to purchase items from the commissary.

Commissary items are not cheap. In some prisons, prices are inflated compared to identical products in grocery stores. But even if the price is the same, a \$0.40 package of ramen is expensive for someone earning \$0.10 an hour at a prison job.

Sample commissary list

This is one page of 14 from the Kansas Correctional Industries Commissary Menu

Source: Kansas Department of Corrections. (2019) *Kansas Correctional Industries Commissary Menu*. Topeka, KS: Kansas Department of Corrections.

KANSAS CORRECTIONAL INDUSTRIES COMMISSARY MENU TOPEKA CORRECTIONAL FACILITY COMBINED MENU G=GEN. POPULATION, A=ADMIN. SEG. D=DISC. SEG R=GEN. RESTRICTION, Z=LEVEL "0" CANTEEN PRICE DOES NOT INCLUDE SALES TAX @9.15%											
ITEM	GROCERIES	SUGAR	SALT	K/H	SIZE	PRICE	"G"	"A"	"D"	"R"	"Z"
MEATS - SEAFOOD											
6586	BACK COUNTRY BEEF STEW				11.25 OZ	\$2.19	G	A			
6614	COMAL SHREDDED CHICKEN w/ GREEN SAUCE				8 OZ	\$3.95	G	A			
6618	BACK COUNTRY BEEF BURGER				4 OZ	\$3.30	G	A			
6623	PANCHO'S CANTINA SHREDDED BEEF			H	7 OZ	\$3.84	G	A			
6630	RIP N READY MEATBALLS IN TOMATO SAUCE				10 OZ	\$4.00	G	A			
6637	BACK COUNTRY TACO FILLING				11.25 OZ	\$2.60	G	A			
6639	SIAM CHINESE PORK SAUSAGE				4.5 OZ	\$2.50	G	A			
6645	HORMEL SPAM CLASSIC SINGLE				3 OZ	\$1.84	G	A			
6655	BACK COUNTRY PREMIUM CHICKEN WHITE MEAT IN A POUCH				4.5 OZ	\$2.30	G	A			
6686	LEGENDARY MEAT SNACKS HOT BEEF SUMMER SAUSAGE				5 OZ	\$1.74	G	A			
6693	LEGENDARY MEAT SNACKS BEEF SALAMI				5 OZ	\$1.66	G	A			
6697	BACK COUNTRY PEPPERONI PRE SLICED				3.5 OZ	\$1.86	G	A			
6715	O'BRIEN'S HOT SHOTS MEAT SNACKS				1.125 OZ	\$0.60	G	A			
6830	FISHERMAN'S PARADISE LIGHT TUNA w/ DICED JALAPENOS	LOW		K/H	3.53 OZ	\$2.04	G	A			
6831	FISHERMAN'S PARADISE FRIED CATFISH IN SOUTHERN SAUCE			K/H	3.53 OZ	\$1.98	G	A			
6836	FISHERMAN'S PARADISE MACKEREL FILLET IN OIL			K/H	3.53 OZ	\$1.58	G	A			
6848	FISHERMAN'S PARADISE SARDINES IN OIL			K/H	3.53 OZ	\$0.94	G	A			
6868	FISHERMAN'S PARADISE SMOKED OYSTERS				3 OZ	\$2.28	G	A			
6874	FISHERMAN'S PARADISE FISH STEAKS IN LOUISIANA HOT SAUCE			K/H	3.53 OZ	\$0.93	G	A			
SOUP - PASTA - TORTILLA											
6550	HOSPITALITY MACARONI & CHEESE DINNER			K	7.25 OZ	\$0.73	G	A			
6912	NISSIN BEEF CUP - Combined Limit 30			NO	2.25 OZ	\$0.65	G	A			
6925	ALLEGRA ANGEL HAIR PASTA - Combined Limit 30	LOW	NO	K	16 OZ	\$1.34	G	A			
6933	DRAGON EXPRESS SPICY VEGETABLE RAMEN - Combined Limit 30			H	3 OZ	\$0.33	G	A			
6939	NISSIN CHILI RAMEN - Combined Limit 30				3 OZ	\$0.29	G	A			
6941	NISSIN CHICKEN RAMEN - CLEAR - Combined Limit 30				3 OZ	\$0.29	G	A			
6943	NISSIN ORIENTAL RAMEN - Combined Limit 30				3 OZ	\$0.29	G	A			
6996	WHEAT TORTILLA 6 CT	LOW	LOW	K/H	7.8 OZ	\$1.05	G	A			
6997	BUTTER TORTILLA 6 CT	LOW	LOW	K/H	7.8 OZ	\$1.00	G	A			
VEGETABLES											
6552	HOSPITALITY INSTANT MASHED POTATOES			K	13.3 OZ	\$2.86	G	A			
6749	TEXAS TITO'S BIG FAT JUICY DILL PICKLE K				6 OZ	\$0.77	G	A			
6756	EL PATO SLICED JALAPENO WHEELS PLASTIC JAR			K	12 OZ	\$1.64	G	A			
6761	STAR SPANISH OLIVES STUFFED WITH MINCED PIMIENTO				2.5 OZ	\$1.95	G	A			
SWEETENER											
6266	SWEETMATE PACKET - BLUE - ASPARTAME	NO	LOW		100 CT	\$1.85	G	A			
6267	SWEETMATE PACKET - PINK - SACCHARIN	NO	LOW		100 CT	\$1.85	G	A			
POPCORN - NUTS - TRAIL MIX											
6992	MR. NATURE PEANUTS ROASTED & SALTED	NO		K	3.5 OZ	\$0.75	G	A			
7005	ACT II BUTTER LOVERS POPCORN			K	2.75 OZ	\$0.64	G	A			
7007	ACT II KETTLE CORN			K	2.75 OZ	\$0.61	G	A			
7020	KAR'S MIXED NUTS WITH PEANUTS			K	10 OZ	\$3.90	G	A			
7026	KAR'S SUNFLOWER KERNELS			K	2 OZ	\$0.79	G	A			
7542	KAR'S ALL ENERGY TRAIL MIX			K	2 OZ	\$0.92	G	A			
PROTEIN BARS											
7440	PROMAX CHOCOLATE PEANUT CRUNCH BAR			K	2.64 OZ	\$1.48	G	A			
7447	PROMAX DOUBLE FUDGE BROWNIE BAR			K	2.64 OZ	\$1.48	G	A			

ATTN: Combined Max 4 pair of shoes equals: 1 pair of shoes, 1 pair of sandals, and 2 pairs of boots.

K=Kosher, H=Halal

Page 2 of 14

Canteen Tools

Incarcerated people use accessible items to prepare meals.



ID card

=



Knife



Chip bag

=



Mixing bowl



Toilet

=



Refrigerator



Hair dryer

=



Oven

60%

of survey respondents said they could not afford commissary purchases

Corrections officials told us that inflated commissary prices are indispensable because the profits pay for things like gym equipment, educational programming, and other resources for incarcerated people that otherwise might not be funded.

Three-fifths of the formerly incarcerated people we surveyed said they could not afford commissary purchases, and 75% reported that access to food, including commissary items, was limited by their own or their family's finances. Many people have to choose between buying food and purchasing necessities such as toothpaste, tampons, and ibuprofen, or they go without extra food so they can make expensive phone calls to loved ones.⁵⁹ We heard stories of people so desperate for palatable food that they would trade sex for commissary items, form romantic relationships with others who could afford to shop at the commissary, or get involved in gang activity when commissary items were a reward. As one formerly incarcerated person said, “If you didn’t cook ... you starved.” One’s ability to participate in the informal prison economy also depends upon their ability to buy commissary items. Ramen soups are one of the popular forms of currency, for example, and are often used to “purchase” goods and services (such as homemade food items or bunk cleaning) from fellow residents.⁶⁰

According to our surveys and interviews, people who could afford weekly trips to the commissary, thanks to support from loved ones on the outside, opted to skip the chow hall as often as possible. The packaged food they bought seemed safer and tasted better than the meals the prison provided. 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 improve access to healthy food.⁶¹ Most of what’s available for purchase is ultra-processed, filled with preservatives, and high in carbohydrates, salt, and sugar. Although many frontline staff in prisons and some corrections leaders assert that incarcerated people “only want to eat junk food,” our examination suggests that the poor quality of items for sale in the commissary is a big concern to incarcerated

Many people want healthier options, but when they inquire about stocking fresh fruits and vegetables they are told that it's impossible to safely store such items.

people. Many people want healthier options, but when they inquire about stocking fresh fruits and vegetables they are told that it's impossible to safely store such items and that healthier non-perishable foods would be so expensive that no one would buy them. During her time served in a West Coast facility, Alicia surveyed her peers about canteen inventory preferences on multiple occasions, gathering more than 1500 responses. But after compiling all that data and writing up a summary for the canteen manager, she was informed that the manager didn't have time to adjust the canteen product list.

The widespread belief that people in prison want only junk food is rooted in racist and classist stereotypes that Black and brown people, as well as people of any race from low-income communities, prefer unhealthy food.⁶² When high-priced nuts, dried fruit, and the few healthier items commissaries occasionally stock don't sell, it seems to confirm this myth, but our research suggests that most incarcerated people simply can't afford them.

AN ARGUMENT FOR INCUBATOR KITCHENS



COMMISSARY



PROGRAMMING



VISITATION



REENTRY

Some people turn cooking in prison into a thriving enterprise, albeit one that operates unauthorized by corrections staff. Longing for healthy, protein-rich snacks while serving time in a federal facility in California, former NBA basketball player Seth Sundberg concocted protein bars out of oatmeal, peanut butter, and nuts he purchased from the commissary. Before long, the bars were in high demand on the prison yard.

After his release, Sundberg started [Inside Out Goodness](#), a company that makes probiotic- and protein-packed snack bars for sale to the public. Sundberg is trying to persuade commissary supply companies to distribute the bars as a healthier alternative to most of what's sold inside prisons. There are numerous stories of creative individuals like Seth who fill a need for tasty food on the inside. Instead of suppressing their

hard work and contributions as illicit activities, why not sanction and support them by creating kitchen incubators inside prisons that give incarcerated people the space, equipment, and encouragement to exercise their culinary and business skills?

In a similar vein, prison restaurants open to the public, such as the Fife and Drum at Northeastern Correctional Center in Concord, Massachusetts, provide opportunities for culinary trainees to take pride in serving food made with care to others while re-humanizing incarcerated people in the eyes of the outside world. InGalera, a fine-dining restaurant at Bollate Prison in Milan, Italy, offers a space for its incarcerated staff to practice their culinary skills and interact with the public. It's run by a chefs' cooperative, expanding the program's capacity to empower participants with business knowledge and self-confidence to prepare them for their return to the community. Could these programs be expanded to include an in-facility restaurant where incarcerated people could spend their commissary dollars on well-prepared food while supporting their peers, or a café where families could purchase appetizing meals to share during visitation?

In most visitation areas the only food available is from vending machines stocked with unappealing, unhealthy, and overpriced snacks.

Food and family

There is another place and time in prison where food plays a role in the life of an incarcerated person: during family visits. In life on the outside, members of a family routinely connect over food—from nightly dinners to elaborate holiday meals. When people visit a loved one in prison, sometimes traveling great distances, it is a special occasion, one that a shared meal would greatly enhance. Unfortunately, in most prisons visitors are not allowed to bring outside food into the facility, and the few exceptions to that rule can have strict and confusing limitations.⁶³

In most visitation areas the only food available is from vending machines stocked with unappealing, unhealthy, and overpriced snacks. “There were chips, honey buns, sometimes sandwiches your family could buy and heat up in the microwave, but there was no telling how long they’d been sitting there,” or if the vending machine would be working, Rosa recalled. The whole experience, she said, could end up becoming just another source of disappointment, guilt, or shame.

A REAL FAMILY DINNER



VISITATION



REENTRY

Some corrections leaders recognize that family meals can play an important role in the lives of people while they're in prison. Annette Chambers-Smith, Director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, believes that “sitting down at a table with food and having conversation is what maintains healthy relationships.” When Tim Buchanan, then warden of Noble Correctional Institution in Caldwell, suggested holding a cookout for soon-to-be-released individuals and their families, Chambers-Smith applauded the idea.

In September 2019, Buchanan invited relatives of five incarcerated men to an outdoor lunch they would prepare and eat together. As partners, children, parents, and siblings joined their incarcerated loved ones to grill, eat, and clean up, the experience strengthened their relationships. Pleased with the success of the inaugural cookout, Buchanan hopes it will be repeated.

Chambers-Smith sees this cookout as just the beginning. She envisions trailers for families to come together for an entire day, cooking meals together, cleaning up afterwards, just enjoying one another's company, and “Grandma can show you how to make that strudel or whatever the case may be.” Providing an opportunity to come together regularly with loved ones over a meal is a practice that could be widely adopted. Sustaining strong connections between incarcerated people and their families can boost well-being for both parties, and maintaining such connections has been shown to reduce rates of recidivism after release.⁶⁴

Incarcerated individuals and their families deserve more than sodas and overpriced chips during the time they have together. Affordable, healthy meals should be available during visitation. Likewise, creating a pleasant, cafe-like atmosphere in the visitation room would increase a sense of normalcy and dignity. Activities like parent-child cooking classes could also strengthen family bonds and provide an opportunity to reinforce healthy eating practices.

The fundamental human urge to offer support and comfort through food persists inside the prison gates.

“Everything in prison revolves around food”

One of the many ironies of prison is that in an institution where the food is generally awful, food is still at the center of life. “Everything in prison revolves around food,” Alicia emphasized. In a bleak, regimented environment where both boredom and tension reign, mealtimes break the monotony and structure the day. For better and worse, food is woven into the tribulations and tiny respites of life behind bars. It is taken, given, traded, and occasionally savored. Michelle still thinks about her birthday in prison when a few friends threw her a surprise party with a cake made of pudding stolen from the kitchen and crushed cookies from the commissary.

For a time while Alicia was incarcerated, she ran an unsanctioned business cooking and selling churros and other desserts, for which the other women eagerly traded their own practical services and commissary goods. “Food brings people together,” she said. The fundamental human urge to offer support and comfort through food persists inside the prison gates, Alicia reminded us: “When someone is sick, you want to bring them soup; when someone is sad you want to bring them cake.” Food takes its usual place in the rituals of mourning and celebrating those who have passed on. On June 22, 2020, Michael Thompson, Robert Cannon, Jr., Parker Sineora, and William Welch—all incarcerated at the Muskegon Correctional Facility in Michigan—spent hours preparing an elaborate, physically-distanced meal for 50 of their peers to honor the lives of George Floyd and countless others lost to police brutality.⁶⁵ Thompson reflected, “We are not allowed to protest. However, food has a way of bringing about three words, Love, Peace, and Happiness.”

NEXT UP

PART 4: THE PRISON FOOD MACHINE

In the next installment of Eating Behind Bars, we look behind the scenes at the operational policies and practices that determine the quality of food in prison.

INTRO

PART 1

PART 2

PART 3

PART 4

PART 5

PART 6



PART 4

The Prison Food Machine

"Food service is the most important. You can skip other services for a day—visitation, mail, etc. Try skipping food service for a day."

— food services director

The first three segments of *Eating Behind Bars* detail the prison food experience from the perspective of the eater. In this installment, we look behind the scenes at the policies and practices that determine the quality of breakfast, lunch, and dinner for nearly 1.3 million people incarcerated in state prisons, the institutional focus of this report.

For change to occur, advocates need to understand where decisions are made, what factors are taken into account, and what policies are currently in place. As one corrections leader told us, "It's very difficult in prisons to change things if you've never worked in them or don't understand how they work."

It's important to note that in food service, as in all other aspects of correctional practices, states operate autonomously, with no two exactly alike.

Those policies and practices encompass nutritional standards and menu planning, procurement of food (i.e., buying in bulk), preparation of meals in prison kitchens relying heavily on labor by incarcerated people, and in some states, the decision to contract with private companies to handle many aspects of food service. It's important to note that in food service, as in all other aspects of correctional practices, states operate autonomously, with no two exactly alike. Nevertheless, in our exploration we found considerable overlap in food service policies and practices, in part because states look to one another for guidance and consider standards issued by the American Correctional Association.⁶⁶

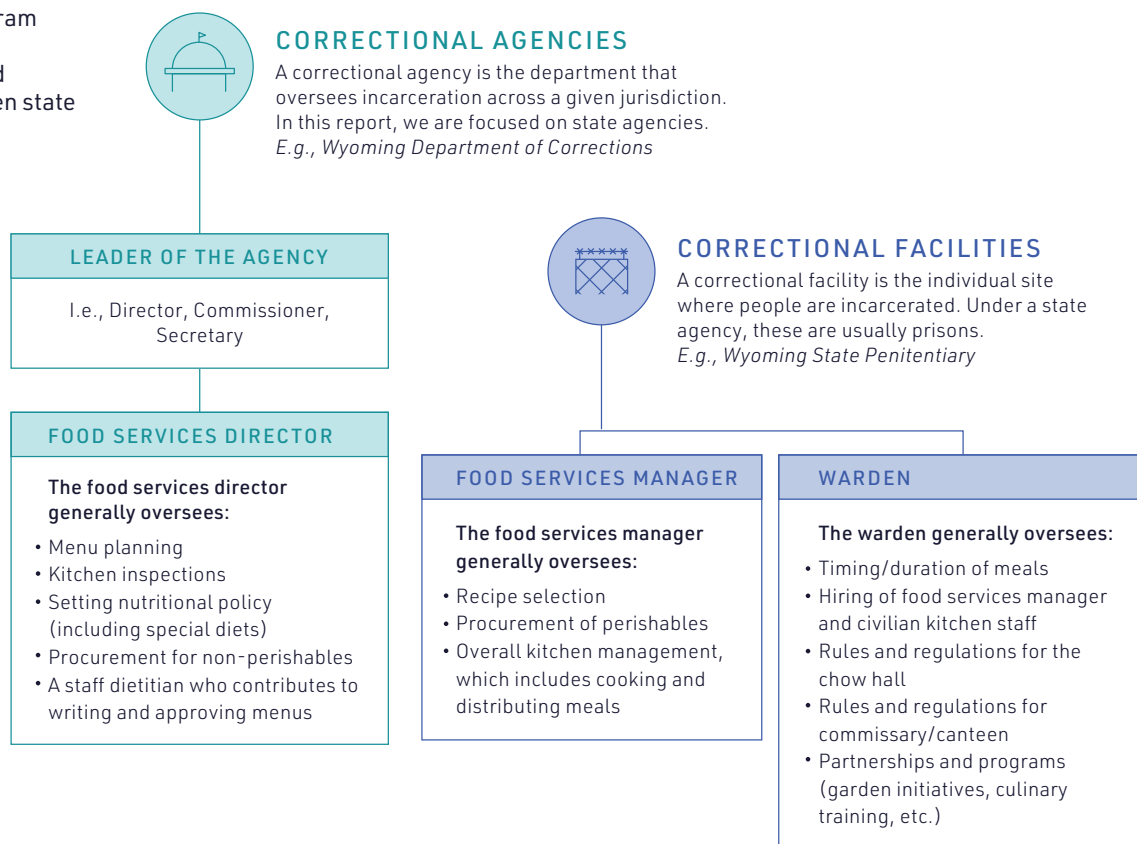
'Cooking' from the top down

Decades ago, when there were far fewer Americans incarcerated, individual prisons controlled most or all aspects of food service. Formerly incarcerated people and long-time staff described to us how head cooks planned menus featuring locally available ingredients and foods that reflected regional cuisine, and oversaw kitchens in which dishes were cooked largely from scratch. The food wasn't good, or even decent, in every prison; it wasn't consistent from day to day and it wasn't always as nourishing as it should have been. Still, meals were more likely to resemble what people might eat at home. Under mass incarceration, by contrast, the food served to most incarcerated people is produced on an industrial scale, sometimes far from where it's eaten.

Nowadays, state corrections officials control most of the process, from developing statewide menus (typically in consultation with a dietitian) to sourcing much of the food.⁶⁷ (For an example of a comprehensive food service policy, see the [Alaska Department of Corrections](#).⁶⁸)

State prison food service roles

While there is variation from state to state, this diagram represents a common breakdown of roles and responsibilities between state and facility-level staff.



In most states, meal standardization is the goal. Menus are designed to serve the largest number of incarcerated people across facilities with minimum modifications. The food tends to be bland—some describe it as tasteless—so that, in theory, it will be suitable for everyone, although in reality it often doesn't appeal to anyone. Some states have taken to serving everyone a low-sodium, "heart-healthy" meal to reduce the number of medical meals needed.

While centralizing at least some aspects of correctional food service can have advantages—and some state agencies handle the process better than others—if standardization and cost-cutting are the driving considerations, low-quality food will likely be the result. Some of the corrections officials we

interviewed, as well as some formerly incarcerated people we surveyed, have observed a troubling decline in food quality as the process has become more centralized and rigid. While the total spending on food service rose with the growth in prison populations, states now typically spend far less in real dollars to feed each incarcerated person (see “Historical daily amount spent on prison food per person,” page 86).

Ultra-processed: how prison policies deplete nutrition

Chili served over macaroni, two slices of white bread with a pat of margarine, peas, a scoop of canned fruit, a square of chocolate cake for dessert, and a powdered vitamin beverage to mix with water: it’s familiar fare, served as often as once a week. Every item comes from a can, box, or bag. Prisons’ reliance on ultra-processed, pre-made foods (e.g., breaded chicken patties or instant mashed potatoes) prepared by large manufacturers such as Sysco is now common because they can be heated and ready to serve quickly in the significant number of prison kitchens where equipment is limited to ovens and steam kettles and staff might not have even basic culinary skills.

When a registered dietitian is involved in the process, that professional’s approval may function more like a rubber stamp than a genuine endorsement.

A typical prison meal, like the one described above, was planned months or even years ago by the state agency’s head of food services to be served on a rotating basis in prisons statewide. It’s designed to supply the required calories and nutrients, but nothing more. When a registered dietitian is involved in the process, that professional’s approval may function more like a rubber stamp than a genuine endorsement. One dietitian described her role as ensuring that menus comply with the agency’s own policies, even if she doesn’t fully agree with them. “I write disclaimers such as ‘The fiber is lower than desired,’” she told us, and “I sign off on menus that don’t include fruit, which doesn’t make me happy.” Other dietitians working in corrections also told us they wish prison meals included more fresh fruits and vegetables instead of relying on fortified powdered beverages to supply essential nutrients, and had fewer carbohydrates, which is the least expensive way to reach the required calorie count.

While many state agencies are in compliance with their own standards, the standards themselves do not necessarily align with well-regarded dietary recommendations.

Our own investigation suggests that nutritional policies developed by state correctional agencies range from the vague (meals will be “nutritionally adequate”) to the highly specific (e.g., two cups of fluid milk per day). While many state agencies are in compliance with their own standards, the standards themselves do not necessarily align with well-regarded dietary recommendations. This includes governmental guidelines that many correctional policies originate from, such as the USDA’s Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the Dietary Reference Intakes issued by the National Academy of Sciences. The top-level advice from each of these agencies is clear: a healthy diet focuses on consuming a variety of nutrient-dense foods including vegetables, fruits, whole grains, seafood, eggs, beans and peas, nuts and seeds, and some dairy and meat products—prepared with little or no added solid fats, sugars, refined starches, and sodium.⁶⁹ USDA’s MyPlate recommends that half the plate be filled with vegetables and fruit, and offers personalized serving recommendations based on age, sex, weight, height, and level of physical activity.

Rather than looking at the food itself, correctional agencies generally focus on hitting minimum nutrient amounts over the course of a day or throughout the week. For example, meals provided by the Florida Department of Corrections contain 2,691 calories a day on average, using a “4-week cycle master menu that meets the Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs) established by the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Sciences.”⁷⁰ While this approach may appear to meet professional recommendations, in practice it flouts the most basic dietary and nutrition guidance. “Comparing trays” below contrasts a tray with standard prison fare and a tray that follows the USDA’s MyPlate proportion recommendations.

Several corrections officials we spoke with reason that people outside of prison tend to eat much more protein, for example, than they actually need. But there’s no denying that prison meals lack nutritional balance. As discussed previously in this series (see Part 2), only a small proportion of the food on a typical

Comparing trays

A typical prison tray (top) is high in refined carbohydrates and low in produce. The tray below depicts a meal we've designed to align with the USDA's MyPlate guidelines, including vegetables and fruit filling at least half the tray.

TYPICAL PRISON TRAY



USDA'S MYPLATE GUIDELINES



The sheer number of people in prison means that recipes must be easily scaled to efficiently feed hundreds, if not thousands, of people over the course of a single meal.

prison meal tray contains essential nutrients and the minimum requirements are often met by adding a fortified beverage; the remaining calories are provided in the cheapest way, with carbs. Moreover, as we also highlighted in Part 2, agencies calibrate their minimum nutrient requirements to meet the most basic needs of the “average” person. By definition, that means that people with higher nutrient needs are not getting sufficient nourishment.

Menus are also shaped by factors that have nothing to do with nutrition. Most notably, the sheer number of people in prison means that recipes must be easily scaled to efficiently feed hundreds, if not thousands, of people over the course of a single meal. For this reason, many recipes come from the Armed Forces Recipe Service. They must also be feasible to prepare in prison kitchens with limited or outdated equipment. Storage is another concern, since many facilities don’t have the space to hold large quantities of fresh produce.

Corrections officials also consider whether particular foods pose security concerns. Bone-in cuts of meat, whole stone fruits, hot peppers, and other foods that could be made into weapons are prohibited in some prisons. Views on this subject are far from uniform, however. While many prisons sharply limit or in rare cases completely exclude fresh fruit because it can be fermented into alcohol, for example, one food service manager we interviewed scoffed at the idea of banning fruit when bread can easily be turned into alcohol and is widely available. What’s clear is that eliminating specific foods for legitimate safety reasons is not at odds with serving meals that are nutritious and palatable.

Sourcing ingredients

State correctional agencies generally purchase much of the food served in prisons, following their own procurement policies. Some agencies adhere to a strict competitive bidding process in selecting vendors—seeking the lowest-priced goods that meet their requirements—while other agencies encourage purchasing local products and buying from minority-owned or women-

18th century

In his 1777 treatise, English reformist John Howard prescribes a diet that's simple but healthful and sufficient in amount to aid rehabilitation—but in practice food is considered part of a person's punishment and is generally scarce and awful, both in English prisons and in newly created prisons in the United States.

Early 20th century

The emerging science of nutrition leads to a more diversified diet and standard portions in many prisons. Prison plantations (large farms worked by incarcerated people for little or no pay) spread across the South—a practice that continues to serve as a source of food for prisons today—as convict leasing is phased out.

1970s

Toward the middle of the decade, the shift to a punitive mindset emphasizing retribution over rehabilitation coincides with the beginning of mass incarceration and the routine dehumanization of incarcerated people. State departments of correction begin to centralize food procurement and menu planning to follow nutritional guidelines and control costs.

A brief history of prison food in the United States⁷²

19th century

People in prison are often malnourished and served food that is bland or spoiled, and some get merely bread and water until they earn the right to more food. The practice of convict leasing peaks around 1880—a system under which incarcerated people (overwhelmingly Black men) are worked and starved to death by private businesses that profit from their labor.

Mid 20th century

Individual prisons have near complete control over what to buy, cook, and serve, with quality ranging from meals that are relatively good—in the otherwise notorious Alcatraz prison, for example—to those that are inedible. Instead of withholding food, prisons are more likely to intentionally overfeed people to make them lethargic and docile, and more compliant.

Late 20th century to present

With well over one million people to feed every day, state prison systems allocate fewer resources per person, rely heavily or exclusively on factory-produced and ultra-processed food, and in many cases outsource food service to large corporations—policies and practices that produce the declines in food quality, quantity, and essential nutrition that are documented in this series. Poor nutrition and a degrading relationship with food compromise the health and well-being of individuals while they're incarcerated and often long after their release, consequences that disproportionately affect people of color and the low-income communities to which they return.



A formal meal set up at Alcatraz Prison in California

Source: National Park Service



↑ The right side shows what you will find in a typical prison walk-in fridge: lots of processed and packaged carbs, meats, and produce. The left side shows more whole foods, similar to what you would expect to see in a restaurant walk-in that prepares meals from scratch

MENU PLANNING & MEAL PREPARATION



owned businesses, also at a competitive price. Agencies have leeway to participate in “special buys” or deals outside of their contracts with approved vendors—frozen apple pies made for McDonald’s that are too big for the sleeve and sold at a deep discount, for example. Most state correctional agencies procure dry goods and frozen items for all facilities statewide, using their purchasing power to buy in bulk at low prices. They rely on food service managers in each facility to order smaller quantities of fruit, vegetables, dairy and other perishables on a weekly basis.

Small gardens exist in prisons around the country, but with just a few exceptions, they don’t necessarily lead to fresher, better meals. In some states, facility food service managers can decide how to use garden produce in the kitchens they oversee—maybe preparing a fresh salad to accompany lunch or adding flavorful herbs to the evening spaghetti sauce. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice, for example, has been operating a unique program called Herbs Behind Bars since 2007. Nearly 60 facilities across the state create and maintain herb gardens that provide fresh cilantro, basil, garlic, oregano, and other herbs for their meal service. Each year there is a competition between units that engenders a sense of pride for all involved, and has reportedly led to better-tasting food.⁷¹ Other states don’t allow correctional facilities to serve any fruits or vegetables that haven’t gone through a formalized inspection process, however, and many gardens don’t yield a harvest large enough to prepare a dish to serve the whole facility.

A history rooted in slavery

In 2017, incarcerated people in Texas:



Harvested

123.7M POUNDS

of cotton, grains, grasses



Produced

11.7M POUNDS

of food



Produced

5M EGGS

from chickens they tended



Canned

297,143 CASES

of vegetables



Processed

22.7M POUNDS

of meat

The state “operates its own miniature food system that feeds people who are incarcerated there (the Texas Department of Criminal Justice boasts about being ‘self-sufficient’) as well as commercial sales of food to the public.”⁷³ Agribusiness sites administered by the Virginia Department of Corrections and dairy farms run by the state correctional agency in Wisconsin also use what they produce in at least some prisons statewide. In Virginia, for example, prison gardens and greenhouses provide copious quantities of fresh lettuce, tomatoes, and other produce directly to facility kitchens during the growing season, and the DOC operates its own flash-freeze plant to ensure a steady supply of vegetables throughout the year. The state’s correctional facilities also feature dairy and beef cattle operations, apple orchards, and a tilapia farm.

There are, however, historical injustices to consider. The system in Texas, as in many other states, stems from the legacy of convict leasing, a practice that proliferated after the Civil

War as an extension of slavery. Convict leasing allowed prisons to provide the labor predominantly of Black men to private companies, including plantations, in “one of the harshest and most exploitative labor systems known in American history.”⁷⁴ This was a highly common—and for states profitable—form of racial oppression and violence. In 1898, almost 75% of Alabama’s entire state annual revenue came from convict leasing.⁷⁵ Although Texas legally ended the practice in 1910 (it was outlawed nationally in 1941), today, according to Civil Eats, “some of those former plantations make up the 130,000 agricultural acres currently maintained and operated by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.” The 13th Amendment abolishing slavery makes a notable exception for “punishment of a crime,” which is still exploited today. When one member of the “Hoe Squad” at Cummins Unit, a prison farm in Arkansas, asked an officer why they continued to use garden tools rather than modern farming technology, the officer replied, “We don’t want your brain. We want your back.”⁷⁶

Jobs working the land are considered one of the more appealing assignments in many prisons because they offer time outdoors and because growing food can feel more purposeful than other available options. But it’s hard labor with only nominal wages—and in at least seven states, no pay at all. Compelling incarcerated people to work large farms without fair financial compensation is an injustice of its own, but in Arkansas, Indiana, and other states they don’t even get to eat what they grow. These prison farms are solely revenue-generating enterprises. The correctional agency sells what the farm produces, purchasing canned vegetables and food of lower quality to serve in prison. Members of the “Hoe Squad” grow cucumbers by the bushel, but may go years without tasting one. Instead, one incarcerated person who works in the prison’s kitchen described pouring cans of vegetables into a 55 gallon pot and stirring them with a “boat paddle.”⁷⁷ A former food services manager at a facility in another Southern state described something similar, telling us, “We used to have a cattle ranch for Grade A meat, and we sold that off. We purchased Grade B meat [to serve in the prison].”



Men work the fields of the Ferguson Unit's prison farm in 1997 in Midway, Texas

Source: Getty Images

Prison food production across the U.S.

Many states still grow or produce food using prison labor today. Whether or not incarcerated people get to eat the food produced varies widely.

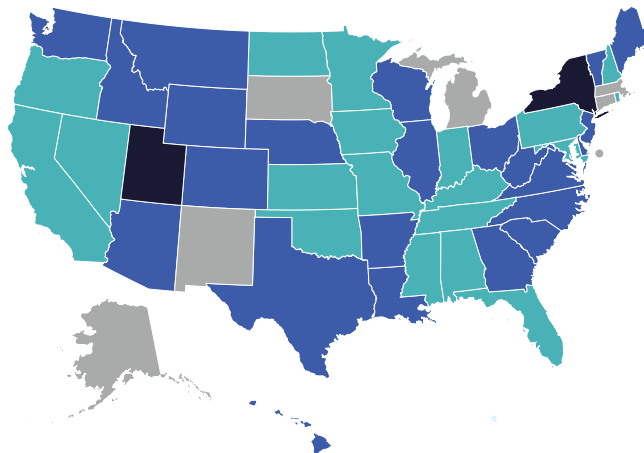
Source: Impact Justice (2020).

Farm production, no confirmed use in meals

States with farm production, and used in meals

No production

No data available



Managing the kitchen: who calls the shots?

The balance of power between the head of food services for a state correctional agency and facility-based food service managers varies. In some states, the food services director holds nearly all the power over what ends up on each tray. Such an agency might prohibit even minor modifications such as adding extra spices. Corrections leaders defend this approach as a way to ensure uniform food quality across facilities, but uniform doesn't equal good.

Fifteen states reported in our survey that their facility-based food service managers have a voice in the menu planning process, and some have even more discretion. During our inquiry we encountered a few highly dedicated facility food service managers who take advantage of this flexibility to create their own flavorful recipes or incorporate seasonal vegetables, using state menus as more of a guide. At the leading edge of better practice, the Maine Department of Corrections gives some facility food service managers considerable control over menu planning and food purchasing in consultation with the department's contracted dietitian, greatly improving the quality of ingredients and of meals overall (see "Buying locally and cooking from scratch"). This is perhaps easier to do in Maine, a state that operates one of the smallest prison systems in the country with just six facilities holding roughly 3,000 people total.

Regardless of how much influence facility-based food service managers have in menu planning and procurement, their primary role is to oversee the prison kitchen.

BUYING LOCALLY AND COOKING FROM SCRATCH



PROCUREMENT



MENU PLANNING & MEAL PREPARATION

Mark McBrine, the food service manager at Mountain View Correctional Facility in Maine, has spent years cultivating relationships with local producers to source grains, dairy, eggs, and other products at a mutually agreeable cost. McBrine, who believes that “food can be medicine or it can be poison,” invests time in teaching his kitchen staff how to cook and bake from scratch, and shares his original recipes and ideas with food service managers in Maine’s other prisons.

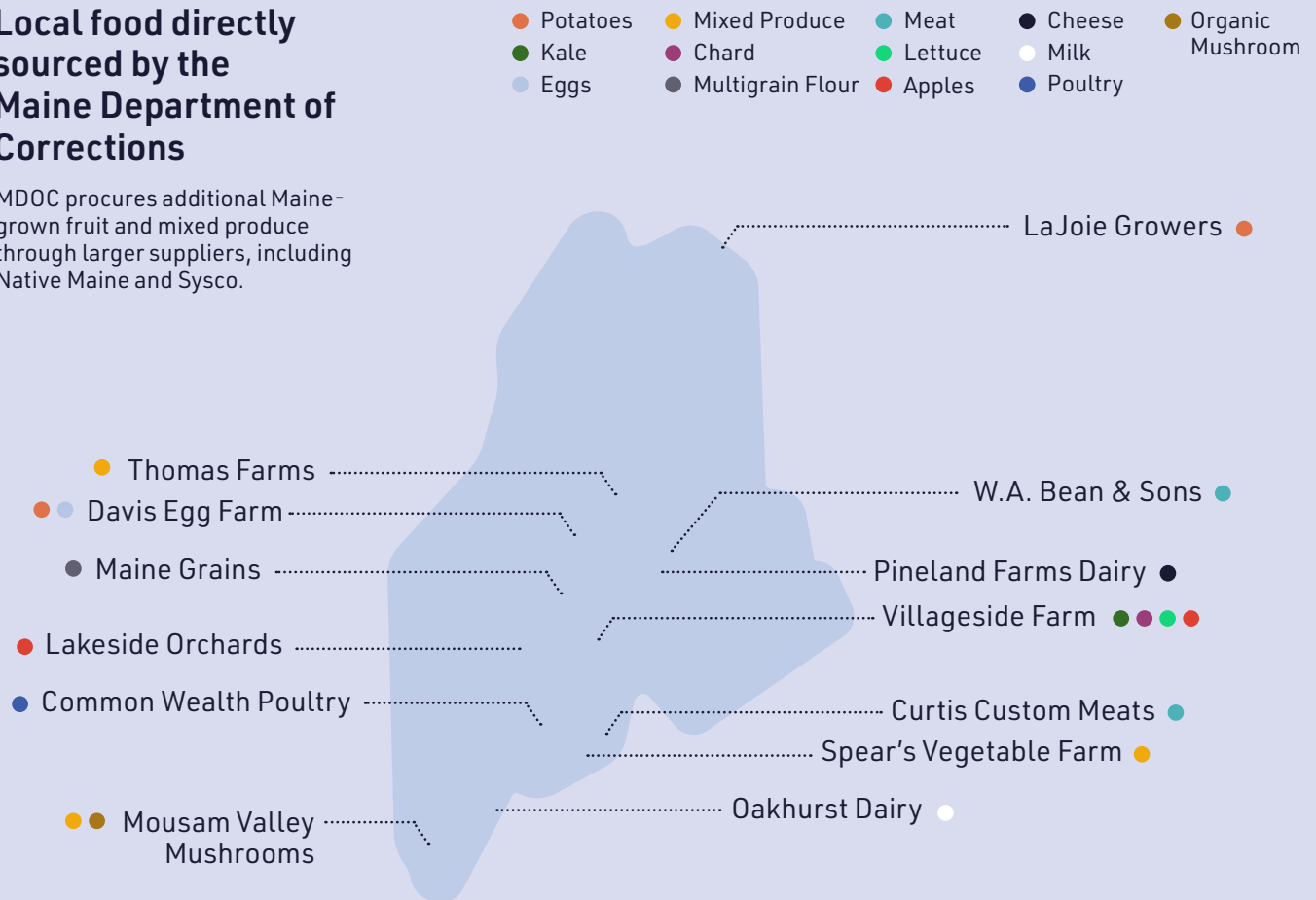
An organic farmer himself and veteran of the hospitality industry, McBrine’s work demonstrates that a willingness to innovate and advocate for better food not only benefits people in prison, boosting health and morale, but also pays off economically. For the last three years, Mountain View’s kitchen has averaged over 30% local food purchases while coming in more than \$100,000 under budget. The practices McBrine pioneered align with Commissioner Randall Liberty’s recent commitment to source 20% of all food purchased by the Maine Department of Corrections from local producers by 2025.⁷⁸

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, McBrine immediately reached out to local producers who would normally sell their goods to restaurants, and negotiated the purchase of high-quality meat, poultry, and vegetables. While other facilities around the country struggled to maintain regular meal service and safe dining options, Mountain View’s residents ate dishes like roasted turkey, heirloom carrots, and homemade morning glory muffins in physically-distanced rotations.

In other states, efforts to increase access to fresh, local food have begun to include correctional agencies. Through The Common Market, a nonprofit regional food distributor, small farms that on their own can’t win competitive bidding are brought together as viable contenders. They successfully won a contract to provide fresh eggs to a number of prisons in New York. Farm to Institution New England (FINE), a six-state network of non-profit, public, and private entities working to transform the region’s food system, has expanded beyond the K-12, college, and healthcare sectors to engage with a growing farm-to-corrections movement.

Local food directly sourced by the Maine Department of Corrections

MDOC procures additional Maine-grown fruit and mixed produce through larger suppliers, including Native Maine and Sysco.



Instead, they line up for a pat-down to make sure they aren't hiding food before returning to their dorms or cells after another work shift in prison.

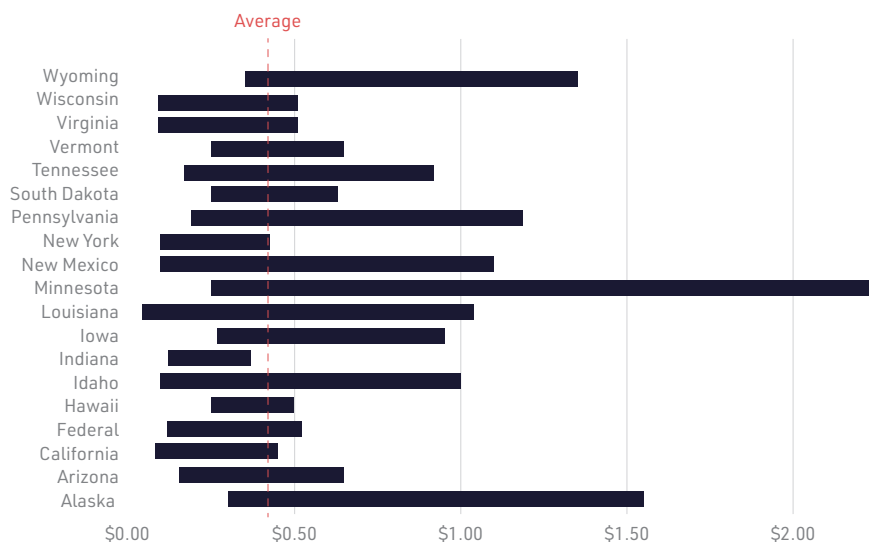
Back of house

"Right behind you!" An aproned cook dodges a colleague as he swiftly transfers the first of many large baking pans from prep table to oven. The steamy heat of the kitchen is punctuated by a blast of cold air as another worker hurries out of the walk-in cooler, arms full. The air rings with the clatter of metal spoons against serving pans as staff prepare for the lunchtime rush. This could be any busy restaurant kitchen in America, but it's not. A closer look reveals knives tethered to the prep tables by heavy-duty chains. There are no ranges, only ovens and steam kettles. And those aproned cooks won't go home after their shift. Instead, they line up for a pat-down to make sure they aren't hiding food before returning to their dorms or cells after another work shift in prison.

Hourly wages for incarcerated people by state

Tracking wages is not consistent between states. States most commonly track on an hourly basis, but some use daily, weekly, or even monthly rates. This graphic shows the possible hourly wages someone who is incarcerated could earn on the low or high end in the states listed.

Source: Sawyer, W. (2017). *How much do incarcerated people earn in each state?* Prison Policy Initiative. [Link here](#)



Visit any prison kitchen in America and almost everyone at work is a resident of the prison. Although kitchen jobs pay incarcerated people pennies per hour—if they pay at all—for intensive labor in a fast-paced and sometimes unsafe environment, they can be some of the more desirable jobs in prisons.⁷⁹ A background in kitchen work can increase a person's chances of finding employment after release. Also significant in an environment where people are hungry much of the time: kitchen work provides access to extra food, and in many facilities to raw ingredients and equipment people can use to whip up a personalized meal on the job.



↑ A large kettle is used to cook meat in Washington state

Source: Impact Justice

This same access can lead to illicit side hustles. Michelle, who was incarcerated in the Northeast, explains, “A block of butter goes for ten dollars. People would take fresh chicken from the officers’ freezer and hide it down their shirt or pants. ... And people will pay!” Or according to James, they’ll trade it for expensive commissary items. In the Southeastern facilities where he was incarcerated, James remembers going to the dining hall in the morning, “not to eat the meal but because the kitchen guys might be selling something [better], like breakfast sandwiches. The currency was stamps.” The most exploitative side hustles siphon away food intended for other incarcerated people. Michael, who was incarcerated in a West Coast facility, told us: “When there’s a dish like beef and cabbage, the kitchen workers will strain the meat out so that the stuff on the tray is

We heard stories from formerly incarcerated people about kitchens that lacked even soap and hot water; had roaches crawling out of the drains and rats scurrying across the floor; and routinely served spoiled food.

mostly potatoes and cabbage. They put the meat in a bag and [smuggle] it back [to the dorm] and sell it.”

In some prisons, the only professional on staff is the facility food services manager, and even the larger prisons might not have more than a few civilian staff to help with kitchen tasks and to supervise incarcerated workers. What these professionals bring to the job varies widely. Some state agencies require all food service staff to have previous experience and valid credentials such as a ServSafe Food Handler certificate. Other states don’t require any related experience or credentials—sometimes because they simply can’t compete with restaurants, hotels, and other commercial food service environments in hiring and often lose staff to these more appealing jobs.

As for incarcerated kitchen workers, some have years of experience cooking in restaurants, while others have never even cooked much for themselves. Those with low literacy or for whom English is their second language may struggle to read a recipe or communicate with the rest of the kitchen team. Complicating the situation, in some prisons, incarcerated people are required to rotate jobs or may have to switch jobs or change their shift schedule on short notice to accommodate educational and therapeutic programming, which is the top priority. The bottom line according to corrections leaders around the country: keeping prison kitchens staffed with skilled workers is a challenge that affects food quality and safety.

We visited one East Coast facility with spotless countertops that could have easily passed military inspection. That kitchen also has a state-of-the-art touchscreen oven. At the other extreme, we heard stories from formerly incarcerated people about kitchens that lacked even soap and hot water; had roaches crawling out of the drains and rats scurrying across the floor; and routinely served spoiled food. As one person reported to the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, “Our containers we have our juice made and served in are often moldy. We do not have proper chemicals, like bleach, to clean them out. Our trays and cups are often dirty also. There are rats and roaches in the kitchen too.”⁸⁰

Walk-in coolers, large pantries, and other secluded spaces in poorly supervised kitchens are unfortunately ideal sites for predatory acts by staff or other incarcerated people.

Marcus, who worked in restaurants before he was incarcerated in a West Coast prison, took the lead in establishing safer food handling practices, explaining, “Prior to me becoming lead cook ... They didn’t heat and cool [food] at the proper temperatures, which could cause E. coli.” Also, when incarcerated people with bacterial and viral infections are required to report to work and handle food and serving vessels without taking additional precautions, they can spread disease throughout a facility.

Lax kitchen oversight can result in dangers beyond food safety. Walk-in coolers, large pantries, and other secluded spaces in poorly supervised kitchens are unfortunately ideal sites for predatory acts by staff or other incarcerated people. A 2009 report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that of incarcerated people who were sexually victimized by staff, about a third of reported incidents took place in the kitchen or workshop.⁸¹ In cases where the assailant was another resident, 20% of those assaults occurred in the prison kitchen. James, who “got tired” of working in the kitchen, told us, “If they want to attack somebody, they don’t do it on the yard, they do it in the kitchen.” And the facility’s response can be dangerous to bystanders. Once when a kitchen worker was stabbed on the job, according to James, the security staff responded with tear gas.

What about the money?

In 2016, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation spent just \$3.14 a day to provide breakfast, lunch, and dinner for each person confined in a state prison—roughly one dollar per meal.⁸² That same year, the City of San Diego, which runs the state’s second-largest school district, spent \$2.25 per child for lunch alone.⁸³ And the California Department of Veterans Affairs allocated about \$8.25 per day to feed the residents of its long-term care facilities.⁸⁴

Good food isn’t cheap, especially when provided on a massive scale. Many corrections leaders report that their agencies

Historical daily amount spent on prison food per person

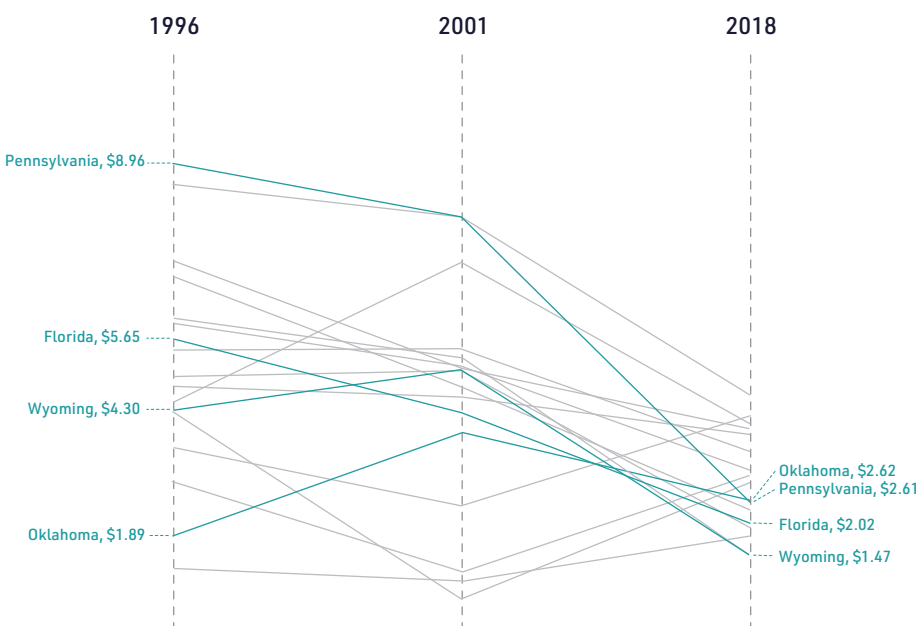
This graphic shows the historic daily amounts spent on prison food (prices adjusted for inflation.) Each line represents one of the 33 states that had available data.

Source: Impact Justice(2020).

Stephan, J. J. (2004). *State Prison Expenditures, 2001*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

[Link here](#)

State Prison Expenditures, 1996. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics. [Link here](#)



“The cost of food goes up, and it’s a challenge for elected officials who approve our budgets to recognize how inflation directly impacts food,” explained the head of one state’s department of corrections.

simply don’t have the money to improve the quality of meals, especially given rising food prices. What seems like a minor change, such as adding two more ounces of protein at dinner or a banana at breakfast, adds up quickly. When the governor of Washington issued an executive order in 2013 to improve access to healthy foods in all state agencies and facilities, the department of corrections struggled to get additional funds from the legislature to implement the required changes. “To add one fresh fruit per day to the entire population for a year is \$1.1 million,” a Washington Department of Corrections food services administrator explained.

“The cost of food goes up, and it’s a challenge for elected officials who approve our budgets to recognize how inflation directly impacts food,” explained the head of one state’s department of corrections. Another agency’s operations manager added, “Our food budget has been status quo for eight years. Prices go up but that’s all we have.” For some lawmakers, the resistance is deeper than that. “No one wants to give us tax dollars because we house incarcerated people,” one agency’s outreach director told us. Many states have turned to “pay to stay” policies that allow departments of correction to charge

Food cost: per day breakdown (2018)

States report the amount spent on food per incarcerated person per day, but there is no standardized measure for what is included in that cost. This table shows the costs reported and what costs other than food ingredients are factored in.

Source: Impact Justice (2020).

incarcerated people fees for their room and board. Unlike fines and restitution, whose purpose is to punish or compensate victims, fees are intended to raise revenue.⁸⁵

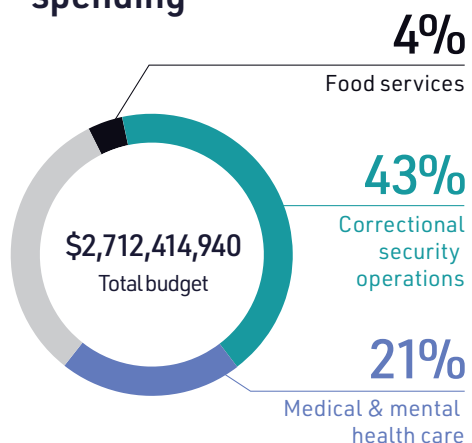
These corrections leaders aren't wrong in describing the challenges around food budgets, and yet the money spent on food services is typically just a tiny sliver of the department's total budget. For example, the \$1.1 million required for extra fruit in the example above is only .04% of the Washington Department of Corrections budget.⁸⁶ Logically, shifting the budget to invest more in healthier food would likely decrease reliance on medical services (which are often severely underfunded to the point of gross negligence).⁸⁷ Although formal research hasn't been done specifically in prisons, there is plenty of evidence that

STATE	FOOD COST	
Alabama	\$1.90	
Arizona	\$3.81	● ●
California	\$2.45	
Colorado	\$3.43	● ● ● ●
Delaware	\$3.08	
Florida	\$2.02	
Idaho	\$2.75	
Illinois	\$2.21	
Indiana	\$3.83	● ● ● ●
Kansas	\$1.53	● ● ●
Kentucky	\$3.28	●
Maine	\$4.05	
Maryland	\$4.18	● ●
Massachusetts	\$4.06	
Minnesota	\$3.45	
Mississippi	\$3.00	● ●

STATE	FOOD COST	
Nebraska	\$2.92	
New Hampshire	\$2.84	●
New York	\$2.84	
North Carolina	\$2.82	
Oklahoma	\$2.62	●
Pennsylvania	\$2.61	●
Rhode Island	\$3.93	●
Tennessee	\$4.42	● ●
Texas	\$2.49	●
Utah	\$3.79	● ● ● ●
Virginia	\$2.10	
Washington	\$4.50	
West Virginia	\$1.55	
Wisconsin	\$1.02	
Wyoming	\$1.47	● ●

● STAFF (Incarcerated) ● STAFF (Non-incarcerated) ● UTENSILS ● PACKAGING ● EQUIPMENT + OTHER COSTS

Food budget as a proportion of DOC spending



Source: Texas Department of Criminal Justice. (2018). *Fiscal Year 2019 Operating Budget*. [Link here](#)

consuming a healthy diet rich in fresh fruits, vegetables, and other whole foods could yield billions of dollars in savings nationwide each year on treatment for heart disease, diabetes, cancer, hip fractures, and Alzheimer's disease.⁸⁸ A new approach to diabetes treatment and prevention called the Fresh Food Pharmacy predicts that spending about \$1,000 over one year on healthy food for one low-income diabetes patient will result in \$24,000 in health care cost savings over that same period.⁸⁹

Observational evidence suggests that improving food in correctional facilities can have a similar impact. Before taking up her current post as Director of the Ohio Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Annette Chambers-Smith served as the Chief of the Bureau of Medical Services, where she oversaw the budget as the department modified their mainline meals to meet new "heart-healthy" standards. "I saw the spending for certain blood pressure medications and diabetes medications decrease," she told us.

As we noted in Part 2, when bellies are full and micronutrient requirements are met, people are less likely to behave in ways that are aggressive, violent, or otherwise anti-social. Complaints about food are frequently cited during prison strikes and riots, events that are very costly from a security perspective. Food that tastes good and promotes health is less likely to end up dumped in the garbage can, potentially saving money on waste removal. In 2019, Mountain View Correctional Facility in Maine saved over \$125,000 in waste hauling fees by improving food quality and composting food scraps.

PROCUREMENT



It is possible to purchase higher-quality ingredients and prepare better meals without spending more money—sometimes even saving it. By negotiating with a local dairy to purchase oddly-shaped cheese for just \$2 per pound, the Maine Department of Corrections not only procured a better product but also saved money (it previously paid \$2.29 per pound to a national supplier). The DOC also purchases locally-milled flour, mushrooms, and other ingredients from Maine producers at

MENU PLANNING &
MEAL PREPARATION

Maine's Mountain View Correctional Facility, for instance, bakes all of its bread (including whole-grain loaves, rolls, and buns) in-house, saving \$80-100 each day just on bread products.

equal or lower cost than from a national supplier. While some facilities around the country choose to pay more for convenience (spending extra dollars on instant mashed potatoes or on liquid egg product rather than whole eggs, for example), preparing food from scratch can result in both tastier meals and significant cost savings. Maine's Mountain View Correctional Facility, for instance, bakes all of its bread (including whole-grain loaves, rolls, and buns) in-house, saving \$80-100 each day just on bread products.

Government officials acknowledge the challenge of trying to direct money toward improving prison food. "It's so unfortunate that the public perception of quality of life is like, 'Why are you improving things for adults in custody?'" a public health expert in one state's government told us. "Framing it as saving money is the only way to get people to hear you."

Outsourcing food service

While only about 9% of incarcerated people in the U.S. are housed in private prisons, many more are served meals planned, sourced, and provided by private companies such as Aramark, Trinity, and Sodexo.⁹⁰ Of the 35 state correctional agencies we surveyed, one in three currently uses privatized food service (not all states privatize for every facility). These companies often employ their own dietitians to assist with menu planning, and the on-site food service manager and any other civilian staff working in the prison kitchen are also likely to be employees of the company.

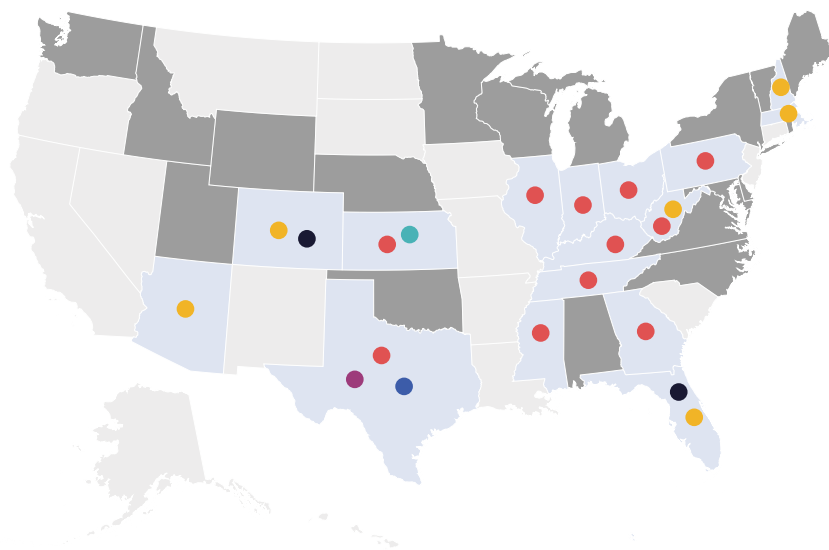
With other institutional clients ranging from public school districts and college campuses to hospitals and corporate cafeterias, these companies wield immense purchasing power and can negotiate rock-bottom prices from food suppliers around the country—savings they pass along, at least in part, to the state departments of correction that hire them, often specifically to cut costs.

States with privatized food service

From our survey and policy research, we found that at least 15 states rely on some amount of privatization for their food service. This ranges from statewide privatization to one or two facilities. This map shows which states use privatized food service in at least one facility. This map does not include instances where the entire facility is operated by a private entity.



Source: Impact Justice (2020).



Although the privatization listed here refers to food served in prison kitchens, it should be noted that there is a great deal of commissary privatization. Only four states that completed our survey stated that they do not contract with a private commissary vendor, whereas 16 states contract with Trinity or Keefe Group (which are both subsidiaries of the same company: TKC Holdings, Inc.) and four states contract with Trinity for both commissary and kitchen service.

Some corrections officials believe these large companies end up providing better quality than state-run meal services because they are subject to many more inspections as part of their contract monitoring. We spoke with a warden at a Midwestern prison who told us the state department of corrections actively oversees their food services provider, levying financial penalties if the company strays from the department's nutritional and other food service standards.

Rigorously comparing food services provided by private companies with those of state correctional agencies was beyond the scope of our research, but several people we surveyed or interviewed were far less sanguine than the Midwestern prison warden. Current and formerly incarcerated people who have spent time in multiple facilities report that food from private providers is significantly less palatable, nutritious, and plentiful—and sometimes even worse if the kitchen and commissary are run by subsidiaries of the same company. Many people who have encountered this situation believe meals are intentionally unappetizing so that people will purchase more

“When you go to a privatized model, dignity for inmates takes a backseat,” one food services director told us.

from the commissary. Corrections leadership and frontline staff in some states expressed similar concerns that prioritizing a company’s bottom line results in lower-quality food and the use of underpaid and under-supervised workers. “When you go to a privatized model, dignity for inmates takes a backseat,” one food services director told us.

Michigan is now notorious in this regard. The state correctional agency hired Aramark in 2013 to handle food service in all prisons, motivated by the projected \$16 million in annual savings (mostly achieved by replacing unionized state employees with contract workers).⁹¹ Officials could not have imagined the disastrous problems that would ensue. Kitchens regularly ran out of ingredients, and meals were routinely served late and lacked the required calories—and these were the least egregious failures. Kitchen staff employed by Aramark were knowingly serving rotten food and even fishing food out of trash cans for the next round of trays. There were maggot infestations and outbreaks of foodborne illness. Staff showed up to work intoxicated, smuggled drugs into prisons, and assaulted some residents and had sexual relations with others.⁹²

Perhaps the most cautionary aspect of this tale is that many of the problems recurred after the agency fired Aramark in 2015 and switched to Trinity. Less than a year later—but after years of awful and unsafe food—incarcerated men and women in facilities throughout the state protested, and at one facility, rioted. In 2018, the governor directed the agency to resume food service operations in-house despite the \$13.7 million increase in the budget for prison food that year.

One correctional dietitian pointed out that there are a number of factors that can influence the quality of food on any given day, ranging from supply chain interruptions to staff shortages and facility lockdowns. Our investigation suggests, however, that the appalling food and other substandard conditions described in this report are not anomalies; in many facilities, it is a daily

experience. This is particularly grievous in an environment where people don't have any alternative source of food. Unlike a restaurant that gets shut down if it fails its department of health inspection, a prison kitchen can continue to operate with flagrant health violations and only a promise to do better.

NEXT UP

PART 5: WHO'S LOOKING? WHO'S LISTENING?

In Part 5 of Eating Behind Bars, we'll examine the systems that should—but too often don't—function to hold departments of correction accountable for the quality of food in prison.



PART 5

Who's Looking? Who's Listening?

"One day every three months it would be good; [the trays] would be full because they had a kitchen inspection."

— *formerly incarcerated person*

This section examines the meager systems of accountability that have often failed to ensure food safety and quality, allowing the violations of health and dignity we've detailed in the earlier installments of *Eating Behind Bars*.

In the world beyond the prison gate, commercial and other large-scale kitchens are subject to rigorous health inspections. Inspectors show up without advance notice, are not shy to document violations, and can force kitchens to close until the problems are remedied. In this way, health departments protect the dining public. Kitchens in prisons are not subject to anywhere near the same degree of independent external oversight.

A quick clean-up

Prisons that are subject to health department inspections—and in some states they aren't—typically know ahead of time when an inspection will take place. The same is true of an audit by the American Correctional Association and internal reviews by the correctional agency itself. As Theo told us, “When they do come in, the kitchen is spotless, the correct portion sizes are served. One day every three months it would be good, [the trays] would be full because they had a kitchen inspection.” Our surveys and interviews suggest that a quick clean-up to present a sanitary kitchen and safe food handling is routine in both public and private correctional facilities.

Internal monitoring may also be lax, but it's impossible to know because there's little transparency in this regard.

In our survey of state correctional agencies, we requested examples of health inspections. The 20 copies we received were uniformly favorable reviews incompatible with the food safety issues revealed in our own investigation. In South Carolina, for example, the Department of Health and Environmental Control inspects prison kitchens. In 2016, Turbeville Correctional Center received a score of 93%—yet a video recorded in the same year showed maggots crawling in the facility's cornmeal.⁹³

While about 80% of all state correctional facilities are accredited by the American Correctional Association, which requires meeting certain food service standards, those standards are vague. Maintaining accreditation requires an audit just once every three years, always with advance notice. Our investigation did not indicate that ACA accreditation adequately addresses any of the many problems with food quality and safety that this report raises.

Internal monitoring may also be lax, but it's impossible to know because there is little transparency in this regard. Like restaurants, facilities are required to make a range of daily or weekly checks regarding food freshness, food temperature, sanitation and hygiene, etc. Many state agencies require facilities to log and report these numbers, but rarely share data with the public.

Examples of ACA standards⁹⁴

These are three of the 16 ACA standards that pertain to food service in adult correctional facilities.

4-4313

Food service operations are supervised by a full-time staff member who is experienced in food service management.

4-4317

Written policy, procedure, and practice require that food service staff plan menus in advance and substantially follow the plan and that the planning and preparing of all meals take into consideration food flavor, texture, temperature, appearance, and palatability.

4-4326

Written policy, procedure, and practice provide that meals are served under conditions that minimize regimentation, although there should be direct supervision by staff members.

“Some facilities I go into once a year; some it’s in the contract but they tell me not to come because of the budget [or] because there are no problems.”

— corrections dietitian

The monitoring and inspections that do occur focus narrowly on sanitation, safety, and equipment—not the nutritional quality of the food and certainly not the degree to which the food served is appetizing. While most state correctional agencies—nearly two-thirds of the 35 that responded to our survey—report that they require a nutrition professional to review planned menus, there was far less consistency in using those professionals to monitor the nutritional quality of the meals that are actually served. As one corrections dietitian explained, “Some facilities I go into once a year; some it’s in the contract but they tell me not to come because of the budget [or] because there are no problems.” Another dietitian points out that because the nutritional quality of food deteriorates over time, meal components that have been sitting in storage for months or even years don’t necessarily offer the same nutrient profile as the approved menus do. Quality control in many prisons comes down to a conscientious food service manager or a concerned warden.

The gap between policy and practice

This graphic contrasts the language that is commonly used in official DOC policy with the observations of people who have been incarcerated, to demonstrate the considerable gap between what is stated in policy and what happens in practice.

Meals that are nutritious and appealing

POLICY	PRACTICE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "provides or makes available nutritious, visually appealing and cost effective meals" - Arizona DOC • "to provide all inmates with nutritionally adequate meals that are of appropriate quantity and quality" - Massachusetts DOC • "nutritionally balanced and served in an appetizing manner" - New Mexico DOC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "In most institutions, the food was barely edible." • "Always hungry." • "Inadequate, gross, unappetizing." • "No one deserves undercooked food." • "It doesn't have to be exotic, just edible and nutritious."

Meeting safety and sanitation requirements

POLICY	PRACTICE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "We adhere to the highest standards of food safety and institutional security." - Idaho DOC • "prepared and served in a manner that meets established governmental health and safety codes." - Colorado DOC • "prepared under sanitary conditions and served in an appetizing manner." - Alabama DOC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Spoiled. Roaches in the kitchen." • "Never the right temperature." • "The only time that the kitchen would be cleaned is when there was an inspection by the health department."

Supporting human dignity and rehabilitation

POLICY	PRACTICE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "We know that you rely on us to make wise decisions in preparing a menu that will help you on your path toward reentering society." - Montana State Prison • "to promote the physical and mental well-being of offenders in Department facilities" - Indiana DOC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "They don't care about us as people." • "Labels that state 'not fit for human consumption.'" • "The food they serve in jails and prisons should be considered cruel and unusual punishment."

OVERSIGHT & FEEDBACK

**"Feedback? Oh no! You ate it or you didn't."**

What about the incarcerated people who rely on this food? Do their views matter? Only 12 states in our survey reported having any kind of policy (and only two with written policies) about incorporating incarcerated people's input in the menus. Those policies ranged from "word of mouth" to testing recipes in small batches and soliciting feedback from incarcerated people before integrating them into menus statewide. A few outlier agencies, including the Washington Department of Corrections, engage incarcerated people in menu development, routinely survey residents of all facilities about the appeal of the food served, and reportedly remove items with low ratings from the menu.

70%

of survey respondents said they never had a choice in what they were served

In most prisons, however, the only avenue to express discontent or make constructive suggestions is the grievance process, which our exploration suggests can be frustrating and futile.

"Feedback? Oh no! You ate it or you didn't," Kayla told us, reflecting on her years in a Southern prison. "You could put in a grievance but it was basically a waste of paper." The fact that some staff cling to the belief that incarcerated people will lie to get what they want undermines the grievance process.

**"Feedback? Oh no!
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was basically a waste
of paper."**

— Kayla, incarcerated 2.5 years

Michelle described the gamble some people take in filing a grievance: If the complaint is relayed to food service staff you might end up with even worse food on your tray, or if you encourage others to complain, you might be "written up for 'inciting a riot' and sent to the hole." Indeed, when one enterprising incarcerated person compared every meal served over the course of a month with the state's master menu and dietary requirements, revealing the considerable discrepancies, he was sent to solitary confinement for a month, then transferred to a facility a hundred miles away without explanation. His account has since been published by the Marshall Project.⁹⁵

10%

of survey respondents agreed that when they gave an opinion about a meal, it was taken seriously by the cooks or food manager

As many experts have observed, the prison grievance process is designed to protect the facility and the state, and rarely functions as a tool to aid incarcerated people—which is why the process is arduous and confusing.⁹⁶ In many states, for example, incarcerated people must first document attempts at informal resolution, such as talking to an officer in the dining hall. But that can be awkward or intimidating, and there's never a way to prove the conversation even took place. Between extensive paperwork, arbitrary rules, and complex submission procedures, filing a complaint is difficult and time-consuming, and may not spark a meaningful response.⁹⁷ Low volume of grievances, therefore, can't necessarily be equated with good food.

For members of the public seeking to hold prisons accountable, information about grievances is not easy to get. When University of Michigan law students at the school's Prison Information Project sought to obtain nationwide grievance policies and information about actual grievances filed through the Freedom of Information Act process, they faced difficult-to-find contact information, lengthy delays in response time, and exorbitant fees. Much of the information they were able to collect consisted of vague statistics, such as numbers of grievances by category (e.g., medical, property, food services, etc.) and proportion denied. Very few states provided details about the nature of the complaints. Arizona's list of [Food Grievance Appeals](#) is a notable exception, providing insight into the types of grievances lodged, such as "mice droppings in food," "time between insulin injection and meals," "food menu inhumane," and a plethora regarding "food portions."⁹⁸

A COMMITMENT TO OVERSIGHT



OVERSIGHT & FEEDBACK

In Washington State, the Office of the Corrections Ombuds (OCO) investigates and monitors complaints related to the health, safety, welfare, and rights of people incarcerated in the state. In 2019, the office reported on a food survey conducted at the Washington State Penitentiary in the wake of food strikes in 2018 and 2019. The survey results uncovered dissatisfaction with quantity ("We are grown men, we should be fed accordingly"), quality ("the worst mess I've ever tasted, smelled, and seen"), and recognition of human dignity ("They will give us hog slop just to save a nickel"). Respondents expressed concern about the decline in food quality since the centralization of food preparation by Correctional Industries. The survey also provided an opportunity for suggestions, such as increasing portion size, serving sauces and gravies on the side, and allowing some choice in meals (such as offering both a hot entree and a sandwich alternative). The report provides a level of detail and candor typically unavailable to those outside the department of corrections, and offers advocates and policymakers a degree of transparency into the prison food experience—an important step toward positive change.

Since the release of the report, the department of corrections has worked with the OCO to implement changes across the state (including switching out unpopular menu items and repairing broken equipment that contributed to burnt food), and continued to meet regularly with OCO staff to work on further solutions. The DOC is also working with a dietitian at the state's department of health to assist with the development of a quality assurance assessment and serve as a third-party reviewer of prison meals.

Across the country, the Correctional Association of New York (CANY) is an independent organization with the authority under state law to monitor prisons. Founded in 1844, CANY provides independent oversight of the 52 prisons in New York in order to promote transparency and accountability, safeguard the human and civil rights of incarcerated people, eliminate harmful practices and policies, and decrease the use of incarceration in New York.

CANY is beginning to explore the issue of food in New York's prisons. Executive Director Jennifer Scaife explains that people incarcerated in the state's facilities frequently bring up food as an area of grave concern, so the organization has distributed a survey to understand the problem further. With CANY able to scrutinize policies and practices and share its discoveries with lawmakers and the general public, the organization is poised to advocate for improvements to prison food in New York.

Cruel and unusual—a high bar to meet

Given the futility and lack of trust in the internal grievance process, in most states the courts are the only oversight and avenue to change—and the legal hurdles are high. Generally litigants have to prove that the poor quality of the food constitutes cruel and unusual punishment in violation of the Eighth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, or breaks some other state or federal law.

The judge added that to meet the legal standard of “cruel and unusual,” facility staff would have had to serve the offending food with deliberate indifference.

Unfortunately, “cruel and unusual” isn’t clearly defined and is therefore subject to the opinion of the judge hearing any given case. In 2019, a federal judge threw out a class action lawsuit by a group of currently and formerly incarcerated people in Oregon who argued that they were served food that was spoiled and labeled unfit for human consumption at four of the state’s correctional facilities. The judge dismissed the case, writing in his decision that the Eighth Amendment only requires that food be adequate to maintain health and that plaintiffs “produced no medical records corroborating any decline in health, or any evidence that they suffered from a serious medical condition as a result of the food.” The judge added that to meet the legal standard of “cruel and unusual,” facility staff would have had to serve the offending food with deliberate indifference.⁹⁹

Some lawsuits challenge the constitutionality of the daily diet. In a current case against the New Jersey Department of Corrections, Raymond Skelton, who has been incarcerated for

“[The department is] literally killing inmates from the inside out.”

– Raymond Skelton, who is suing the New Jersey DOC

nearly a decade, contends that the food in the state's prisons is medically inadvisable for more than 12,000 incarcerated people like him who suffer chronic diseases including diabetes and high blood pressure. His attorney contends that the department is depriving people of the fruits and vegetables that provide necessary nutrients for health, “literally killing inmates from the inside out.”¹⁰⁰ Such cases are difficult to win, however. In a similar lawsuit against the Virginia Department of Corrections in 2018, the judge dismissed the case on the grounds that the food provided did not “present any health risk of constitutional significance under the Eighth Amendment.”¹⁰¹

Other lawsuits focus on breaches of sanitation and hygiene in the eating environment. In 2019, incarcerated people at the California Substance Abuse Treatment and State Prison at Corcoran filed a case against the state over conditions at a facility dining hall where a seriously damaged roof meant that mice, bird droppings, dead bird parts, and maggots were actually falling onto tables and trays while people were eating. In that case, the judge ruled that the unsanitary conditions created a serious hazard to health and ordered staff to provide an alternative dining area until repairs could be made.¹⁰²

Even departments of correction occasionally seek legal remedies in food-related cases. The Washington Department of Corrections is currently suing the federal government over decades of chemical runoff from an Air Force base that has contaminated facility water sources and tainted food produced at the Airway Heights Corrections Center, one of two food factories that supplies meal items to prisons across the state.¹⁰³

Food as punishment

Perhaps the most salient example of oversight not functioning as it should 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 used as a form of punishment. The American

Nutraloaf recipe

Based on the Delaware
Department of Correction recipe

INGREDIENTS

- Pineapple chunks
- Tomato puree
- Chopped spinach
- Sliced potatoes
- Cheese sauce mix
- Nonfat dry milk
- Oatmeal
- Rice
- Carrots
- Wheat bread
- Salad oil

COOKING INSTRUCTIONS

Thoroughly mix all ingredients and
place in bread pans.

Bake at 350 degrees until done.

18

STATES STILL SERVE NUTRALOAF

Delaware, Florida, Indiana, Iowa,
Kansas, Michigan, Montana,
Nevada, New Mexico, North
Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, South
Carolina, Texas, Vermont, Virginia,
Washington, Wisconsin.

14

STATES DON'T SERVE NUTRALOAF

Arkansas, California, Georgia,
Idaho, Maryland, Massachusetts,
Minnesota, Nebraska, New York,
Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South
Dakota, West Virginia, Wyoming.

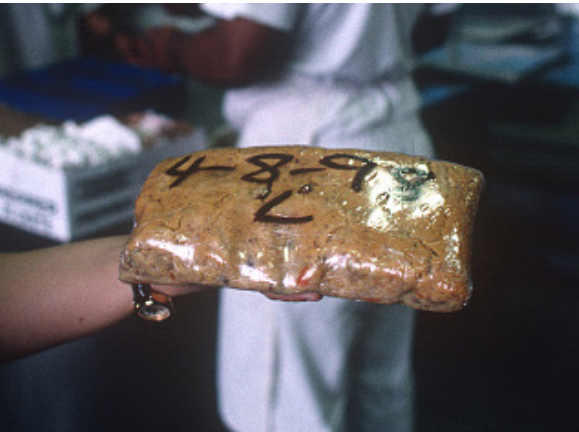
We do not have reliable data on the use ofutraloaf in the following states:
Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Kentucky,
Louisiana, Maine, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North
Dakota, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Utah.

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

— *formerly incarcerated
survey respondent*

Correctional Association, to which over 900 facilities look for guidance, urges state correctional agencies and individual prisons to provide a written policy “precluding the use of food as a disciplinary measure.”¹⁰⁴ Yet, the stories of food being used as punishment and discipline that formerly incarcerated people shared with us suggest that the age-old practice of punishing people by withholding food or serving disgusting food persists in many prisons, both in practice and in some cases enshrined in policy as well. As one person we surveyed wrote, “The food there was designed to slowly break your body and mind.”

The food service policies in at least 36 states require or allow the use of an alternative meal as a disciplinary measure. Many states are vague in their descriptions of these alternatives, mentioning, for example, that “bagged meals” or “finger foods” are to be served in lieu of the standard tray. At least 18 states



↑ A disciplinary loaf is prepared at Ferguson Unit in Texas in 1997

Source: Getty Images

“If you got sent to the hole, they would only feed you two meals a day. At 5 a.m. you’d get the first tray, and at 11 a.m. the second tray with the loaf. Then you had about 18 hours before you got to eat again. People were eating toothpaste and toilet paper just to have something in their stomach.”

—Rosa, incarcerated 33 years

still explicitly allow the use of nutraloaf—a purposely tasteless mash of ingredients such as bread, potato, cabbage, ground meat, beans, powdered milk, and oil baked into a dense loaf. Nutraloaf can be served for each meal of the day for up to a week at the discretion of staff.¹⁰⁵ While a serving of nutraloaf may technically meet the daily nutrient requirements, for many people it’s simply too disgusting to eat, or if they do eat it, they are still hungry afterwards.

Many of the people receiving these alternative meals are in solitary confinement, where at least 61,000 people are housed on any given day.¹⁰⁶ Thirty-six percent of our survey respondents who spent time in solitary confinement say they were served nutraloaf. Even if it’s not “the loaf,” the food is “horrible,” as Marcus recalled of his time in a West Coast prison. “You get eggs that are not even real eggs, and they’re all watery and not really cooked, and maybe three tablespoons of oatmeal. And they do that on purpose, like a continued punishment.” According to Marcus, this is the case whether people are in administrative or disciplinary segregation or in a secure housing unit (SHU) for their own protection.

Michelle, who was incarcerated in the Northeast, also describes the way mealtime is perverted in solitary confinement. “We would have to wait for officers to finish their own food, their breaks, their card games, and then when they decide they want to, we would get fed. You almost always got cold food ... No toast, just a hard piece of bread. Also, the trays for solitary need a lid that shuts to fit through the slot, so they don’t fit the proper portion size.”

Rosa shook her head as she painfully recalled eating in solitary confinement in a Southern facility: “If you got sent to the hole, they would only feed you two meals a day. At 5 a.m. you’d get the first tray, and at 11 a.m. the second tray with the loaf. Then you had about 18 hours before you got to eat again. People were

61%

of survey respondents reported they received less food while in a solitary housing unit than they did in the general population

eating toothpaste and toilet paper just to have something in their stomach."

More than half (61%) of the people we surveyed reported that they received less food while in a solitary housing unit than they did in the general population. Those in solitary confinement are generally unable to supplement this meager fare; commissary access tends to be significantly limited or prohibited altogether.

Our inquiry suggests that the eating experience for people in designated mental health units can be even worse. One woman who spent time in the mental health unit of an East Coast prison was shocked at the lack of basic sanitation: "Women who were menstruating had to hold pads to their bodies with their hands since no underwear was allowed, while they had to eat with their hands because no flatware was allowed."



Food-related disciplinary measures are not limited to people in special housing. Several people told us that getting caught sharing or trading food in the chow hall would result in both parties having to throw away their trays mid-meal, while other officers might be giving out disciplinary tickets to people for "wasting food," because they couldn't or didn't want to eat all the food on their tray. We were told that a housing unit deemed to be disruptive might be fed last, after the food was cold.

Possessing "contraband food"—something as benign as carrying a piece of fruit or bread out of the chow hall to eat as a snack later on—can result in consequences such as extra work detail, losing one's job, or even getting sent to solitary confinement, we were told. We documented accounts of officers smashing and ruining an individual's stash of food from the commissary as punishment for trading snacks on the yard. In one Alabama prison, the warden threatened to withhold food from men whose hairstyles were not in compliance with facility regulations.¹⁰⁷

Food as a mechanism of control

Precisely because food is integral to our identities, it has been deliberately used to dehumanize, humiliate, punish, and control groups of people throughout human history. In Spain during the Inquisition, Nazi Germany, and other anti-Semitic purges, Jewish people were coerced into eating pork, often considered the most offensive of non-kosher foods. Native American tribes, removed from their own land, were severed from their traditional food sources and forced to subsist on government commodities like white flour and lard. Progressive Era reformers in the early 20th century campaigned against the “ethnic” food of immigrants as dangerous to the health and modernization of the American nation. More recently, as thousands of unaccompanied Central American children crossed the southern United States border in 2014 to escape violence in their home countries, many Americans resented tax dollars being used to buy them corn tortillas when the Federal Emergency Management Agency had already purchased flour tortillas. Xenophobia turned a culturally appropriate food staple for already traumatized children into a “luxury” item.

A number of corrections leaders told us that for many years the prevailing attitude among staff was “Fill them up so they go to sleep” by providing plenty of sugary and fat-heavy calories to encourage lethargic and docile behavior.

The appalling instances of food used deliberately as a disciplinary measure in prison are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to shaming and controlling incarcerated people through food. A number of corrections leaders told us that for many years the prevailing attitude among staff was “Fill them up so they go to sleep” by providing plenty of sugary and fat-heavy calories to encourage lethargic and docile behavior. From references to “feeding times” to the routine appearance of items that arrive marked “Not for human consumption,” food in prison serves as a language that speaks to and about incarcerated people: *You are not worthy. You are less than human.*

These stigmatizing messages ring in the ears of the incarcerated and seep into the larger culture: the grimy tray with unidentifiable slop is not just a caricature in the media, but also a widely recognized symbol of life in prison. When faced with a

Any meaningful improvement in prison food requires listening to incarcerated people and restoring their agency regarding what they eat.

particularly unappetizing meal in a school cafeteria, both kids and adults are likely to compare it to prison food. As a nation, we've come to accept a demeaning correctional food experience as normal, which only further distances us from the actual human beings in prison.

In response to the dehumanization of the prison experience, incarcerated people have long relied on hunger strikes and meal strikes as a symbol of resistance and a tool in the struggle to be treated with respect. Any meaningful improvement in prison food requires listening to incarcerated people and restoring their agency regarding what they eat.

NEXT UP

PART 6: A PATH FORWARD

In the next and final installment, we offer a framework of key insights to encourage and guide change toward a more positive and nourishing eating experience in prison. We share the many benefits of making food a source of healing, health, and dignity in prison.

An illustration of a prison chow hall. In the foreground, several inmates are seated at long wooden tables, eating from blue trays. They are engaged in conversation. In the background, more inmates are visible at similar tables, and a fenced outdoor area with trees is visible through the windows. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

INTRO

PART 1

PART 2

PART 3

PART 4

PART 5

PART 6

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.¹⁰⁸

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.¹⁰⁹ 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.¹¹⁰

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

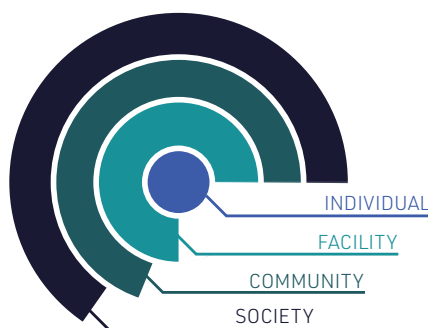
Serving healthy, appealing meals for bodies with different needs; harnessing the emotional benefits of an enjoyable meal, especially one shared with others; and supporting initiatives that make food the center of learning, healing, and health can greatly improve people’s life outcomes both in prison 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.¹¹¹ Good health and better eating habits among returning citizens lead to improvements in community health that could lower local healthcare costs.¹¹²

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.¹¹³ 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.¹¹⁴ 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.¹¹⁵

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.¹¹⁶ 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?

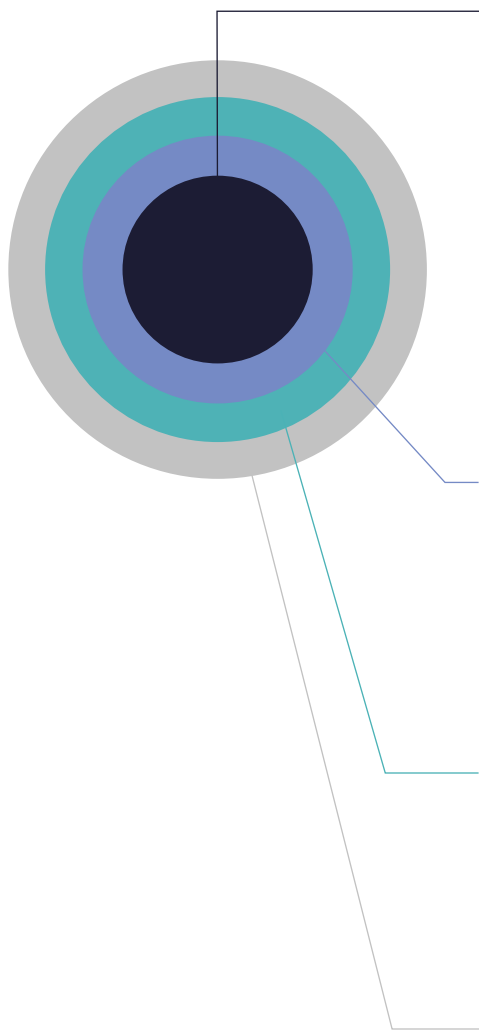
Mass incarceration itself heavily incentivizes a certain kind of meal—one that prioritizes low cost and efficiency at the expense of health and dignity.

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.¹¹⁷ 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.¹¹⁸

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

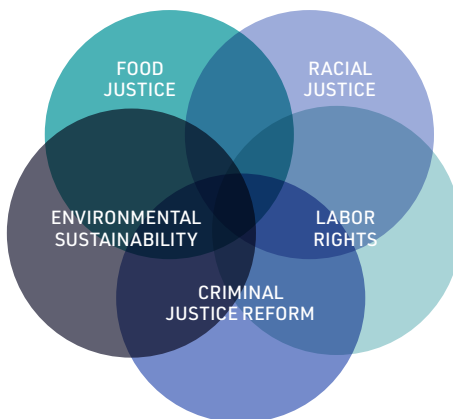
can change their attitude entirely: “Food facilitates good moods, good memories, good emotions, which steamrolls into something positive and productive rather than negative.” In contrast to many shelters and soup kitchens, Bell and her team prepare delicious dishes that she herself enjoys: orange-cardamom 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.¹¹⁹ 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.

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.¹²⁰ 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.¹²¹ 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.¹²² 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.¹²³ 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.

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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.



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