

# 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.

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## 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.

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### 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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