



# Unpacking the Prison Food Paradox: Formerly Incarcerated Individuals' Experience of Food within Federal Prisons in Canada

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper presents findings from a survey conducted with formerly incarcerated individuals on their experiences of food and food systems within federal prisons in Canada. Beyond affirming the many problems with the quality and quantity of food provided to incarcerated individuals, the findings discussed in this article highlight the multi-faceted and paradoxical role of food behind bars. Food was a tool of punishment and a site of conflict, yet it simultaneously provides an important source of community and camaraderie. While there can be no “just” carceral food system because carceral systems are inherently unjust systems, a conversation about food provisioning within prison helps bring into focus opportunities to improve the material conditions of incarcerated individuals in the short-term as well as openings to question the logic and legitimacy of carceral institutions more broadly. As we are all bound-up in carceral food systems, there is a collective responsibility to interrogate and make visible the realities of carceral food systems in order to work towards non-carceral futures.*

**KEYWORDS** carceral food systems; food justice; federal prisons

This paper presents findings from a survey conducted with formerly incarcerated individuals on their experiences of food and food systems within federal prisons in Canada. Correctional Services Canada (CSC) is tasked with providing “essential food services” for federally incarcerated individuals that meet the appropriate safety and nutritional standards (CSC, 2000; CSC, 2019a). However, there is growing consensus that food in prison is anything but safe and nutritious (Ellacot, 2017; Johnson et al., 2018; Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2019; Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights, 2021). Beyond its material importance for basic sustenance, food is used as a tool of punishment and resistance (Brisman, 2008; Chalit Hernandez,

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2022; Jimenez Murguia, 2018), and also plays a crucial social and cultural role within prisons (de Graaf & Kilty, 2016; Earle & Phillips, 2012; Godderis, 2006a, 2006b). While there is growing recognition of the importance of food to understanding carceral systems and experiences of incarceration, it remains an understudied topic within the academic literature, particularly within the Canadian context (Struthers Monford, 2022; Wilson, 2022). In addition, much of the existing literature exploring food in prisons does so through case studies of a particular institution. While such an in-depth approach offers valuable detail, the data presented here offers a complement in breadth, drawing on the survey responses of 43 formerly incarcerated individuals, spanning 23 federal institutions across multiple time periods.

Beyond affirming the many problems with the quality and quantity of food provided to incarcerated individuals, the findings discussed in this article highlight the multi-faceted and paradoxical role of food behind bars. The paradoxical framing of food manifests in two ways. First, the ways in which incarcerated individuals experienced food while incarcerated, show that the different meanings and symbolism ascribed to food are in many ways contradictory and in conflict. For the survey respondents, food was simultaneously a source of community and a source of conflict, a symbol of both punishment and persistence. This complex experience of food suggests multiple meanings across people with different experiences of incarceration, but also highlights the ways in which food embodies multiple meanings for the same individual. Second, an examination of these experiences and possible remedies leads us to confront the impossibility of trying to achieve “just food” within an inherently unjust system. I argue that this paradoxical positioning can serve as an opening to bring to light other inherent tensions within prisons and work towards non-carceral futures. While firmly grounded in an abolitionist perspective on carceral systems, this paper argues that a conversation about food within prison helps bring into focus opportunities to improve the material conditions of incarcerated individuals in the short-term as well as to question the logic and legitimacy of carceral institutions more broadly. Ultimately, the objectives of this paper are two-fold: first, to elevate the voices of formerly incarcerated persons and position their experiences as valuable and insightful forms of knowledge; and second, to illustrate the possibilities of food and food provisioning as a fruitful site of abolitionist actions and imaginaries.

Carceral food systems is an emerging term used to refer to the various activities, actors and relationships that encompass food provisioning and consumption within prisons as well as the ways in which food systems more broadly intersect with carceral institutions (Hatch, 2019; Kathuria, 2021, 2022; Wilson, 2022). They are emblematic of what Reese and Sbicca call the “budding field of critical food and carceral studies” (2022, p. 2). This includes the various food consumed within prisons, as well as food-based programming and food-based employment. However, the lens of carceral food systems can also be extended further, to understand the connections between prisons,

agriculture and immigration, for instance, as well as the various corporate entities that profit from contracts to provide food and food services to prisons. As Kathuria clearly articulates “understanding the contemporary crisis of correctional food means understanding how our social relationships – between ourselves and others, between land, between food – have been torn asunder, ruptured through centuries of oppression, and reconstituted along the lines of violence and alienation” (2022, n.p.). An analysis of food and food provisioning can thus help to understand the various harms and injustices at play within carceral systems. It can also be a powerful tool to challenge current realities and construct alternative possibilities.

This positioning of food parallels that of food justice theorists and practitioners, who highlight the power relationships underpinning questions of food provisioning, and the ways in which particular food systems are structured by capitalism, colonialism and white supremacy (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Sbicca, 2018). The lens of carceral food systems also draws on food systems approaches, which seek to understand food in relationship to the myriad of activities, actors and relationships involved in the production, harvesting, transportation, exchange, consumption and disposing of food (Ericksen et al., 2010; Ingram, 2011). As Levkoe et al. (2023, p. 3) articulate:

A food systems approach recognizes that these components do not operate in a vacuum but instead, influence and shape one another. It also recognizes the impact of historical and ongoing oppressions such as the institutions of white supremacy, patriarchy, and settler colonialism in shaping the dominant food system.

### **Food in Federal Prisons in Canada**

Canadian Correctional Services (CSC) currently incarcerates approximately 12,500 individuals in 54 federal institutions across Canada, who are serving sentences of more than two years (this includes multiple facilities with different security levels housed in the same complex) (CSC, 2019b). These numbers are noticeably lower than in previous years; the 2019 data puts the number of federally incarcerated persons at just over 14,000. This 10.5% drop was largely the result of decreased admissions into federal prison during the COVID-19 pandemic, as courts were delayed and not operating at their usual capacity. For instance, between March to October 2020, the federally incarcerated population dropped from 13,957 to 12,652 (Statistics Canada, 2021) While there was pressure from advocates and allies to decarcerate, the majority of prison depopulation during the pandemic occurred at the provincial level, rather than within federal institutions (Iftene, 2021; Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2021; Ricciardelli et al., 2021).

Federal prisons have one of several food service models. The first is tray service, where food is pre-portioned into individual trays and brought to

incarcerated individuals in their cells. The second is cafeteria style, where incarcerated individuals line-up to receive their food and then eat together. In an “open line,” they can see what is being served as it is added to their tray; in a “closed line,” an individual just receives a tray with the food items already added. Finally, there is Small Group Meal Preparation (SGMP), where individuals housed together in pod-style living quarters receive a grocery allowance to order food items from a pre-approved list and then cook for themselves. Individuals are “strongly encouraged” by CSC to purchase and prepare food together (CSC, 2007a; CSC, 2007b).

Following the 2014 Food Services Modernization Initiative (CSC, 2016), food in federal prisons is prepared using a cook-chill system, whereby food is cooked at regional facilities, packaged into large plastic bags and then transported to individual institutions, where it is stored and subsequently reheated.<sup>1</sup> The food served is supposed to follow a four-week National Menu, which CSC claims meets the Canada Food Guide as well as caloric requirements for an inactive male between the age of 31-50, at 2,600 calories per day. It is worth noting that previous iterations of the National Menu were found to be in excess of the Canada Food Guide recommendations on salt intake (Graham, 2019). Further, a 2019 Internal Audit of Food Services found that the National Menu did not meet the Canada Food Guide recommendations 21% of the time (six out of 28 days) (CSC, 2019c).

The failure of CSC to meet something as fundamental as the Canada Food Guide is reflective of the overall assessment of food by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated persons. At the federal level, much of the criticism stems from the introduction of the FSMI, described in the previous paragraph. Complaints to the Office of the Correctional Investigator increased, and articles written by incarcerated individuals highlight mounting problems with the quality and quantity of food, the availability of healthy items and the overwhelming disregard shown by CSC in responding to these critiques. For instance, Trevor Bell (2017) and an anonymous individual incarcerated at Bath Institution (Joseph, 2017) both argue that the food served is inedible, while a group of anonymous persons incarcerated at Kent Institution suggest “the food appearance is grotesque, consistent with vomit. The taste is often worse than the appearance” (Anonymous Prisoners Kent Institution, 2017, p. 266). Jean-Paul Aubee insists the food is so bad it made a number of people ill (Clancy, 2015).

Others have highlighted the impact of changes to food activities and programming, such as reduced access to the barbecue, new requirements that all food from visitors be packaged and store-bought and an end to food drives (Anonymous Prisoner #4 Fraser Valley Institution for Women, 2017; Joseph, 2017). Rachel Fayter and Sherry Payne argue that the impact of restricting the items available to incarcerated individuals goes beyond nutrition, making it

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<sup>1</sup> This does not include the Small Group Meal Preparation model, where incarcerated individuals cook their own food.

more difficult for individuals to express their culture and identity through food (Fayter & Payne, 2017).

This cultural element of food makes it all the more important to acknowledge the ways in which carceral food systems, and indeed federal prisons in general, are structured by racism and white supremacy. While the survey data presented in this paper is not disaggregated based on race or ethnicity (see the Methods section for further discussion), the fact that the percentages of both Indigenous and Black peoples in prison vastly exceed their representation within society at large is a stark reminder of the ways in which colonialism and racism permeate and animate carceral systems. Indigenous people make up 28% of the federal prison population yet represent five percent of the overall population in Canada (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2022).<sup>2</sup> Black people make-up 9.2% of the federally incarcerated population, significantly more than the 3.5% of Black people within the broader population of Canada (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2022). Despite a landmark study released by the Office of the Correctional Investigator in 2013 highlighting the overrepresentation of Black people in federal prisons, CSC has yet to address “the systemic issues related to racism and discrimination against federally sentenced Black persons” (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2022, p. 43), and federal prisons remain colonial institutions that marginalize and overincarcerate Indigenous Peoples (2022, p. 93). In this context, questions of access to culturally appropriate food and cooking environments, as well as the right to observe religious holidays in prison, become all the more pertinent. Evan Polchies, an Indigenous man incarcerated at Springhill Institution, has launched a human rights complaint against CSC for its failure to provide him with an Indigenous diet (Polchies, 2022). As he asserts: “it is unacceptable for the prison system to disrespect my way of life and culture by force feeding me a westernized diet” (Polchies, 2022, p. 2)

### **Food Justice and Abolition**

The necessity and urgency of moving beyond carceral logics has long been articulated by abolitionist scholars and activists. Abolition is both a vision and an everyday practice of prefiguration (Heynen & Ybarra, 2020). As Ruth Wilson Gilmore asserts, an abolitionist perspective commits us to “the possibility of full and rich lives for everybody” and the long-term practice of collective organizing to support ourselves and one another (Lloyd, 2012, p. 52). At its core, abolitionism seeks to de-anchor the prison as society’s response to harm and injustice (Davis, 2003, p. 21)

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<sup>2</sup> Is it important to acknowledge and affirm that many Indigenous people do not consider themselves “Canadian,” pointing to Canada as an on-going colonial project built upon the unceded and unsundered territory of various Indigenous nations. As a result, I am mindful of the language used here to describe their representation within the population that inhabits the portion of Turtle Island referred to as Canada.

Abolitionism is not just reactive in seeking an end to carceral logics, it is proactive in conceiving of and actively building alternative institutions, spaces and communities. As Angela Davis articulates, drawing on the work of Du Bois, abolition requires both tearing down and building up: destroying harmful institutions and practices, but also creating new, just and restorative institutions to replace them, along with acquiring the necessary resources to make them accessible to all. This “abolition democracy” would entail “the creation of an array of social institutions that would begin to solve the social problems that set people on the track to prison, thereby helpful to render the prison obsolete” (Davis, 2005, p. 97).

Abolition is thus much more than “the isolated dismantling of the facilities we call prisons and jails” (Davis, 2005, p. 73). Rather, abolition calls on us to fundamentally alter the economic, social and political conditions through which prisons are allowed, and indeed required, to maintain the current social order. This includes calling into question the very notion of imprisonment, policing and surveillance as well as borders, citizenship and the legitimacy of the nation-state, to recognize the ways in which carcerality is premised on White supremacy, capitalism and imperialism.

Palacios (2020) outlines three tools that have been put forth by Indigenous and racialized women advocates within White settler societies to pursue prison abolitionism: (1) the analytic capacity to connect the various institutions bound up in carceral systems and underscore the ways in which they work together to produce and assign conditions of difference that both harm and kill particular groups of people; (2) a centering of gender politics within anti-racist and anti-colonial perspectives, and a critique of mainstream feminist and anti-violence formations that support and shore-up the carceral state; and (3) “inclusive organizing strategies and tactics” (p. 534) that cultivate a practice of prison abolition capable of challenging the racialized and gendered violence of carceral systems.

Heynen and Ybarra (2020) echo these insights, noting that an abolitionist politics invites us to relearn lessons from past liberation struggles that have often been lost, or more likely erased, through what Gary Kinsman (2010) calls the social organization of forgetting. These lessons include the value in centering women’s involvement and leadership within liberatory struggles, particularly the voices and actions of Indigenous women. Abolitionist histories also remind us of the importance of coalitions and place-based solidarity in addressing structural harms, to create a shared understanding that also leaves room for the “pluralities of histories of oppressed peoples” and the “production of place” (Heynen & Ybarra, 2020, p. 25).

An analysis of carceral food systems is thus well-placed to take up the project of prison abolitionism, as it seeks to expose and make visible the various connections between different areas of society commonly thought of as separate and distinct. At the same time, carceral food systems also lend themselves to an appreciation of the particularities of place, and the solidarities and possibilities that emerge from a shared meal or the freedom to express

one's culture and identity through food. In particular, the lens of carceral food systems contributes to our understanding of prisons as a web of social relations rather than just a physical site. As Gilmore argues, conceptualizing prisons and the prison industrial complex as a "regime" shifts our thinking away from "some building 'over there' ...[to] a set of relationships that undermine rather than stabilize everyday lives everywhere" (Gilmore, 2007, p. 242). Key to an abolitionist politics in relation to carceral food systems is a focus on land relations and the relations between land and people, which are always situated in place and contextual in nature.

Two recent contributions offer examples of how we might begin to build out the possibilities for food as a tool and site of abolitionist futures. McKeithen (2022) outlines three principles to inform what they call an abolitionist politics of nourishment. The first is a rejection of top-down knowledge production to recenter the embodied experience and diverse knowledges of incarcerated peoples. Second, an abolitionist politics of nourishment does not consider prison food in isolation; it must be linked to the overall "political violence of incarceration" and questions of "carceral power, justice and liberation" (p. 77). Finally, drawing on Reese and Sbicca, McKeithen argues that there is "no such thing as food justice inside prisons" (2022, p. 77); an abolitionist approach does not take the potential for good or just food within prison as a given.

Hazelett (2023) offers a slightly different approach, seeing more possibility in the actual practices and interactions inside prisons to create moments of what he calls a carceral food justice. Hazelett (2023, p. 448) defines carceral food justice, drawing inspiration from definitions of food justice more broadly, as:

The continuous commitment to using food to defy carceral logics of control, dehumanisation and mind-body degradation by centering survival and humanisation, maximizing agency and cooperation, co-producing critical awareness of social, racial, and agrifood injustices, and forming community partnerships with outsider organisers and activities.

While McKeithen names three broad principles that together make-up an abolitionist politic of nourishment, Hazelett offers a longer series of commitments, which he suggests can be present in partial and uneven ways. Although they each offer a slightly different interpretation, I do not necessarily seem them as contradictory, as a commitment to carceral food justice can be understood as a path towards enacting an abolitionist politics of nourishment. One concern with the framing of Hazelett's carceral food justice is that it may prove too multifaceted and malleable, as some of the priorities identified (e.g., collective understanding, agency and cooperation, community partnership) can easily be taken up within reformist and rehabilitative framings without centering the critique of carceral logics themselves. I return to the question of an abolitionist politic within carceral food systems at the end of the paper to outline some possible avenues through which to enact carceral food justice and an abolitionist politics of nourishment.

## **Methods**

The purpose of the survey upon which the following analysis is based was to gain a broad understanding of the experiences of food in federal prisons, covering a range of institutions and time periods. As part of a larger study investigating the experiences of food and food systems in federal prison, but also exploring the ways in which food becomes a site and tool of contestation, it was important to begin with an understanding of some of the common experiences, challenges and tensions at play. A central principle of this research is to centre the perspectives and insights of current and former incarcerated individuals, continuing in the tradition of many critical scholars who emphasize the standpoint of incarcerated persons for both methodological and epistemological reasons (Fisher, 2021; Harlow, 1992; Phillips, 2014; Piché & Walby, 2018). The survey ran between May 17<sup>th</sup> and July 4<sup>th</sup> 2022, and was open to anyone who had been incarcerated at a federal prison in Canada. To solicit respondents, recruitment emails were sent to a variety of organisations across Canada who provide services to, and engage in advocacy with, current and formerly incarcerated individuals. The survey was also shared over social media (Facebook) and posters were also put up in federal halfway houses in the Ottawa area.<sup>3</sup> There were a total of 43 responses (33 in English, 10 in French). Respondents had been incarcerated at numerous prisons across Canada (see Table 1) between the years 1985-2021. Twelve were incarcerated at an institution for women. None of the respondents had been incarcerated at prisons located in Saskatchewan (Saskatchewan Penitentiary) or Manitoba (Stony Mountain Institution).<sup>4</sup>

The survey posed a mix of closed and open-ended questions, touching on several different components of carceral food systems, including their assessment of the food served, their participation in and assessment of social activities and programming related to food, employment in the kitchens and prison farms, and the role and meaning of food. This paper focuses primarily on data pertaining to food services and social activities; data related to food-based employment and food-based programming was not included in the analysis.

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<sup>3</sup> This additional recruitment method in Ottawa was largely opportunistic in nature, due to geographical proximity of the research team, and due to the fact that one member of the research team had previously lived at halfway houses in Ottawa.

<sup>4</sup> There are no federal prisons located in Newfoundland, PEI, Northwest Territories, Yukon or Nunavut.



Institution	Province	*	Institution	Province	*
Atlantic Institution	NB	1	Joliette Institution for Women	QC	3
Archambault Institution	QC	3	Joyceville Institution	ON	7
Bath Institution	ON	4	Kent Institution	BC	1
Beaver Creek Institution	ON	7	Matsqui Institution	BC	1
Cowansville Institution	QC	1	Millhaven Institution	ON	8
CFF 6099 et CFF 600 (Federal Training Centre)	QC	2	Mission Institution	BC	1
Collins Bay Institution	ON	5	Port-Cartier Institution	QC	1
Drummond Institution	QC	1	Springhill Institution	NS	1
Dorchester Institution	NB	1	Warkworth Institution	ON	5
Edmonton Institution for Women	AB	4	Fenbrook (merged with Beaver Creek in 2014)	ON	1
Fraser Valley Institution for Women	BC	2	Kingston Penitentiary (closed in 2013)	ON	1
Grand Valley Institution for Women	ON	3			

(\* Number of survey respondents per prison; some respondents were incarcerated at more than one institution, so the total number is higher than the total number of respondents.)

*Table 1.* List of federal prisons at which survey respondents were incarcerated.

I did not ask for demographic details from respondents as part of the survey. As experiences of incarceration are difficult and traumatic for many, it was important to create an environment where individuals felt as comfortable as possible to share their perspectives. As it is difficult to establish relationships of trust through an online survey, I instead prioritized anonymity. I wanted to ensure there was no suggestion or possibility that they could be identified based on their responses.<sup>5</sup> Two limitations result from this approach. One is that the data does not allow for a fulsome understanding of potential differences between regions and specific institutions. These particularities are significant, as they serve as a reminder that institutional systems are not as totalizing and seamless in their practical manifestations as we might assume. Second, as mentioned above, the data also does not include demographic information about respondents, which is undoubtedly an important factor in how individuals experience food in prison, and what role food plays in the overall experience of incarceration.

Additional insights were drawn from a review of CSC documents, both publicly available and obtained through Access to Information Requests. The

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<sup>5</sup> As part of the broader research project, follow-up interviews were conducted with formerly incarcerated individuals, as well as those in support and advocacy roles, where basic demographic information was recorded.

latter includes meeting minutes from the National Menu and Recipe Committee, copies of the 2021 and 2022 National Menus, correspondence from CSC Food Services Management and documents related to internal food service audits.

## **Findings**

In analysing the findings, a series of contradictions emerged as central themes, where the role and experience of food held divergent and in some ways contrasting meanings. Put together, these contradictions represent a paradox of sorts, where food is simultaneously a source of disgust and valued nourishment, a tool of oppression and a source of community, an arena of conflict and consensus.

*“The food had no nutritional value”*

Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of respondents did not have good things to say about the food during their incarceration. The words “slop” and “bland” were common descriptors, and the food was frequently referred to as unhealthy, or without nutritional value. One respondent claimed that “the food had no nutritional value - meat had pink fillers, the alleged turkey would bounce off the floor like a rubber ball... [they] fed us 6-8 pieces of bread a day.”

As described in the previous section, CSC claims that their National Menu adheres to Canada’s Food Guide, and the various meals listed within the four-week rotation appear to include a variety of grains, protein, fruits and vegetables. How then, to square this with the descriptions provided by formerly incarcerated individuals? The responses provide several explanations for the discrepancies. A few noticed differences between what was officially being served, according to the menu, and what they tasted on their plate. One individual recounted that certain dishes would be without meat, even though meat was listed on the menu, and that various sauces would be diluted. Another wrote that “the food was not seasoned, despite what was written in the CSC cookbook.” One respondent noted that changes to the menu were always for the worse, to remove or reduce particular items: “changes to the menu were always to cut more (e.g., milk, cereal in the morning, fruit, etc.)” (translated by author).

More than one respondent said the Cook-Chill system needed to go, and that individual institutions should once again run their own kitchens. Others wanted to see a return of food nights and culinary training programs, both of which had been scaled-back and in some cases eliminated all together as a result of the Conservative government’s Deficit Reduction Action Plan (Comack et al., 2015; Jeffrey, 2015), which also paved the way for the Food Services

Modernization Initiative. A lack of useful education and training was noted as an issue with the SGMP model, as respondents did not feel that all incarcerated individuals had the skills or knowledge to prepare nutritious meals.

*“We cooked it ourselves so it was great”*

There was a noticeable difference in how people described the food within different food service models. Generally, people’s description of the food was much better within the SGMP than other models of food service, such as cafeteria or tray service. As one respondent explained:

We received groceries once a week. The options were ok. And some things like condiments were expensive and we were given 48\$ a week. So it took time to build up certain things. Fruit and vegetables could be pricey in the winter months. But every house on the medium compound had gardens that we could get vegetables from in the summer.

They compared this food to what is provided through tray service, which they were subjected to during pandemic lockdowns, calling it “horrible, with the odd good day.” From this comment we can see that it was not so much that the food within the SGMP was amazing, but that it was far better than the alternative option.

Similarly, another respondent compared the food served within a maximum-security facility to the food they could purchase within the SGMP model: “in EIFW [Edmonton Institution for Women] [the food was] a bit better but that also depended who was ordering for your unit – some women just wanted desserts or sweets so then there would not be any vegetables or fruits.” One respondent spent the first two years of their incarceration at a provincial prison that also housed federally sentenced women, and their description of the food was also grounded in the comparison between food service models:

My first two years of my incarceration were at BCCW [Burnaby Corrections Centre for Women] where the food was horrible but, once at Fraser Valley it was 200% better because we had an on-site commissary where we could order groceries; it was just as good as any grocery store you shop in every day.

Beyond the comparison to other, less desirable food service models, the benefits of the SGMP were primarily about the control and autonomy it provided. By the same token, the loss of autonomy and control with cafeteria and tray service created problems specific to those models. For instance, one respondent noted that the heated tray carts were often left unplugged, meaning the food was served cold. Food in prison may pertain primarily to sustenance and enjoyment (taste), but it is also a tool to enact agency, bodily autonomy and exert some small level of control over one’s life by making one’s own purchasing decisions and deciding what is put into one’s body. One respondent

went so far as to say they appreciated the need to stretch their weekly food budget, as it helped them build useful skills they would use on the outside: “I appreciated it [the weekly per diem] being low as it made me think longer-term with my purchases and be a better shopper.” Further, the ability to purchase ingredients and cook one’s own food is one of the few instances where incarcerated individuals can more freely perform their identity while incarcerated (de Graaf & Kilty, 2016; Earle & Phillips 2012), as it allows individuals to prepare culturally meaningful dishes and express their individual preferences through food.

It is worth noting that the negative assessment of food was not unanimous, even outside of the SGMP. One respondent noted the food within Central Feeding was “surprisingly good,” however the vast majority of respondents were highly critical of the food provided to them.

*“I filed a complaint and was told no action would be taken”*

In response to the problems identified by respondents in relation to the food in prison, many individuals had filed complaints or sought to bring about change through different channels. Respondents referenced both informal and formal complaints, complaints to the Office of the Correctional Investigator, and in one case a hunger strike, to try to achieve change. Nearly one in four respondents (23%) indicated they had filed complaints or formal grievances about food during their incarceration. One person recounted an instance in a maximum-security prison where the entire range refused the food to protest its poor quality. One respondent who had worked within Food Services while incarcerated noted that they were “constantly... advocating for better quality food, cheaper prices, more options, and a higher weekly food budget.”

CSC appears to have done little in the way of changes to respond to these complaints. As one respondent clearly stated, “I filed a complaint and was told no action would be taken.” One individual described realizing a problem with the per diem system for SMGP whereby newly arrived individuals end up missing a week’s per diem due to gaps between when orders are submitted and when they arrive. They tried explaining the issue to prison staff, but they were left disappointed with their response:

I sat down and wrote out the nature of the ordering problem and explained the gap in the per diem and I was dismissed with a response vacillating between addressing the issue and the issue not existing. I chose not to submit a formal complaint because I’ve submitted other, more serious complaints over the years that have received little or no valid response other than to evoke some passive aggressive response that have created supervision barriers for me.

Regardless of whether, or how, CSC or prison staff respond to complaints, the fact that incarcerated individuals continue to advocate for better food and better food environments is notable. Indeed, the Office of the Correctional

Investigator receives a steady stream of complaints related to food every year, with a significant spike in the years following the adoption of the FSMI (Wilson, 2022).

*Food as Community: “Good meals and good conversation”*

In a recent article on food within provincial jails in Ontario, Struthers Munford refers to food as the “embodiment of contempt” (2022, p. 237). The survey respondents characterized food in federal institutions in a similar way; yet that was only a part of the narrative. While the food provided by CSC was largely panned by respondents, food also provided a valued source of community and connection. Over half of respondents (61%) indicated they had participated in food drives, cultural food nights or other food-related social activities during their incarceration. The importance of food in creating a sense of community was visible in how respondents spoke of opportunities to come together and share food with one another. This was often through special events such as movie nights, family visits or programming from particular groups (religious groups or outside organizations). Respondents described both formal and informal gatherings around food. For instance, sometimes for someone’s birthday they would organize a small party and share food with one another. While some of these social gatherings were sanctioned by prison staff, others were not, and incarcerated individuals risked retribution from guards. In most cases, the simple act of sharing food between incarcerated individuals is prohibited.<sup>6</sup>

The food available through these events was described as far superior to the food typically provided by the prison. In particular, holiday meals were a highlight, as were family visits, in part because you could purchase special foods (using your own funds) that are not usually available to incarcerated individuals. One respondent gave the example of fish sauce, which was not typically accessible to incarcerated individuals, but is an important ingredient for certain cultural diets. Another respondent noted that it was “the best food available, higher quality, better nutrition and taste. Looked forward to the events for weeks.” Speaking of the various social activities they had helped organize during their time incarcerated, one respondent explained that “the food was always good because we ran it and did the right things with it.” Formerly incarcerated individuals, particularly those in the SGMP living units, also spoke of resource pooling where you could purchase groceries together, sharing the cost of individual items across several people. One person gave an example of pooling resources and each purchasing different ingredients so they could make Nanaimo bars together.

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<sup>6</sup> Individuals within SGMP are allowed to cook together, but they are prohibited from sharing food with individuals outside of their living unit.

The value of these events and gatherings was not just about having access to better food. Respondents highlighted the social connections that came from these events, the opportunity to build friendships and a sense of community. Sixty-three percent of respondents recalled instances of community-building or solidarity amongst incarcerated individuals over food. One respondent reflected, “it was huge, we were able to enjoy friendships as well as a decent item to eat that we wouldn’t normally get on canteen or dinner/lunch menus.” Another respondent shared “they were very important to help keep us on a more sane path. Reminded us of home cooking.” As one person put it, eating food together provided a chance to relax and unwind.

As this respondent notes, food was a vehicle for connection and relationship-building, yet the threat of punishment for engaging in sharing activities was ever-present:

Sharing food with others is a great way to connect socially. I attended different cultural food nights during my time. I also joined with friends to cook Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners, birthday dinners, and good-bye dinners for prisoners being released. It was our main social practice and [a] way to have fun and connect with one another. The guards did not make it easy and often broke up these events and stole our food.

As some of the previous examples highlight, the model of food service experienced by incarcerated people shapes what opportunities are available for socializing and relationship-building through food. In minimum or some medium-security prisons, incarcerated individuals are housed in pods where they have access to kitchen equipment and purchase groceries, giving them the option to cook and eat together on a regular basis. This contrasts with those on the tray system, where trays are brought to incarcerated individuals in their cells. In these circumstances, the opportunity to socialize and share food may only come in the form of special events or through unsanctioned sharing of food items purchased at the canteen.

Unfortunately, as a result of the pandemic and related health measures, many of the opportunities for social gathering around food have been removed. In their 3rd COVID Status Update, published in February of 2021, the Office of the Correctional Investigator notes a “slow, inconsistent and uneven pace of easing restrictions, resuming programs, restoring visits, opening of gyms, yards and prison libraries” (2021, p. 11). The pandemic also impacted the ways in which food was provided, as institutions increasingly adopted individual, as opposed to communal, approaches to food service. Dean Roberts describes the early days of the pandemic at Mission Institution – Medium: “at mealtimes, staff ordered you to place a chair inside the cell door and stand at the back of your cell. A Styrofoam take-out tray from the institutional kitchen was dropped on the chair and the door slammed as fast as they could” (Roberts, 2022, p. 103).

*A Tool of both Conflict and Consensus*

Food acted as a unifying force amongst incarcerated individuals: “food was the one thing all guys would get behind. It crossed all lines within the joint. It is a[n] issue that unites all within the population.” Similarly, one respondent reflected that the shared experience of bad food in and of itself became a source of community building, as it was something upon which everyone agreed, creating a sense of camaraderie: “the poor quality of the food was a running joke. When someone made a comment about the food, pretty much everyone agreed with them” (translated from French by author).

At the same time, food was also a source of much conflict, in particular because of problems associated with the poor quality and insufficient provision of food. Nearly all respondents (87%) recalled instances of conflict over food during their incarceration. As one respondent observed, “the lack of adequate food (or the lack of adequate resources to purchase food from the canteen or weekly grocery order) fuels and exacerbates conflict amongst incarcerated people.” A common example of conflict was food being stolen, or someone’s food being eaten by someone else. As one person described, “there’s an entire underground food reselling economy.” Another respondent noted they themselves commonly bought vegetables that had been stolen. Other respondents mentioned fights and riots breaking out over food.

More than one respondent explained the ways in which power dynamics played out in relation to food. In the case of the SMGP, some individuals said that the person responsible for putting in the grocery order would sometimes abuse that power to control what was put in the order, or would keep some items from the group order for themselves or their friends. Another individual, speaking of the line to get food in the cafeteria model, explained that those with power went first and that friendships generated extra helpings: “every meal line-up was a big deal. Guys who run the range at the front. Extra helpings for server buddies. Lots of issues around who was where in [the] line.” Here we see that food was not the source of the conflict, but a means through which to exert power, thereby creating conflict. Similarly, one respondent also spoke of conflict between incarcerated people and the guards or prison staff over food: “guards frequently destroyed or stole what little food we had during searches where they destroyed our kitchen and cooked food that was left out. They also broke up special dinners and events that prisoners organized, which caused a lot of tension” Again, we see an example of food as a tool, whereby the guards assert their power by destroying people’s food.

One individual recalled an intense conflict over a change in menu: “at Millhaven they put celery in the Sunday pancakes. This was a bad plan because the boys lost it. 200,000 dollars in damages later, celery was taken off the menu.” This highlights the importance that food holds within prison, but also the potential collective power that can be generated to challenge injustice. As Hatch notes, “food is a powerful technology for direct and indirect political struggles in prison environments” (2019, p. 67). Food is sometimes the subject

of a grievance, and other times it is a tool in expressing a grievance. For instance, one respondent spoke of collective action within a rotating hunger strike – where everyone would refuse to eat, then collectively have a meal, and then alternate back and forth together.

A recent article by Erica Brazeau details a 2020 hunger strike at the Ottawa Correctional Detention Centre (OCD), a provincial jail, where she and other incarcerated persons sought a range of changes, including access to fresh fruit and vegetables and adherence to the Canadian Food Guide. Brazeau highlights the deep impact a poor diet can have on the well-being and mental health of incarcerated persons, yet the response of the prison staff was minimal at best. As she reflects, “it really hurt me having to beg for something that my body needs and getting punished for it, to be treated like my problems were a joke when they were serious” (Brazeau, 2020, p. 129). This type of response by prison management is typical in situations of hunger strikes or collective action, seeking to ignore, diminish and dismiss both the concerns and the collective agency of incarcerated persons.

## **Discussion**

Hatch (2019) uses the term “nutritional punishment” to describe the ways in which correctional staff “use the quantity or nutritional quality of consumed food as a form of punishment” (p. 67). The experiences of incarcerated individuals from the survey certainly evoke elements of this, from lack of accountability to ensure that what is on the menu is actually being served, to disregard for complaints, and retributions imposed for the simple act of sharing food. As one respondent bluntly concluded, “to make passable food is easy but the institution seem[s] to go out of their way to make the food shit.” At the same time, it is clear from the survey responses that food was much more than a tool of punishment and conflict, simultaneously providing an important source of community and camaraderie. There is both great frustration and a sense of possibility in unpacking the role of food in prison. These conflicting meanings and experiences of food highlights a paradoxical quality to food behind bars, making it impossible to reduce to one overarching understanding or conclusion.

Several scholars have noted similar tensions and contradictions within carceral food systems and spaces. In Chennault and Sbicca’s (2023) critical review of prison agriculture in the United States, they develop what they term a disciplinary matrix, to highlight the diverse and at times competing rationales that drive these activities, oscillating between forms of discipline, exploitation and rehabilitation. In Hazelett’s (2023) exploration of the possibilities for carceral food justice within prison garden programs, he concludes that prison gardens represent a duality (perhaps a paradox even) in that they are fundamentally reformist in nature, but also offer moments of resistance and possibility to work towards carceral food justice. Here we can see parallel



dynamics play out in the experiences and meanings of food shared by survey respondents, where food offers both community and solidarity as well as punishment and conflict.

This complexity is not a justification for inaction, rather it is an invitation to consider the full scope of possibilities in how to respond. There are many things that could and should be done, in the short term, to improve the quality and experience of food within federal prisons. For example, while CSC claims to adhere to the Canada Food Guide recommendations, the latest version speaks not only to servings of particular food groups, but also to the conditions under which food is consumed, under the tagline “Healthy eating is more than the food you eat.” CSC’s approach to food services appears to directly contradict two of those recommendations: “cook more often” and “eat meals with others,” as many incarcerated individuals do not have the opportunity to cook their own food or eat their meals with others (Health Canada, 2022). Creating more opportunities for incarcerated individuals to cook for themselves, and share food with others, would promote the social and community roles of food, while also increasing the freedom and autonomy incarcerated individuals experience during their incarceration. Losing opportunities to socialize around food, and build community through food, is a common complaint of federally incarcerated persons, as highlighted by several authors with lived experience cited earlier in this paper (see Anonymous Prisoner #4 Fraser Valley Institution for Women, 2017; Joseph, 2017). The newly revised Canada Food Guide may provide a strategically useful tool in advocating for policy change in this area, which may provide incarcerated individuals greater freedom in their food choices. While McKeithen (2022) argues we must be careful of mobilizing nutritional compliance as a tool of improving food in prison, because it reifies the state’s authority and narrows the terrain of contestation, these nutritional guidelines extend beyond counting calories or nutritional science. The differing assessments of food from the SGMP model versus cafeteria or tray service are a reminder that expanding the autonomy and choice of incarcerated individuals is meaningful change that might signal a small step towards a carceral food justice, as described by Hazelett (2023).

However, echoing McKeithen (2022), although such a policy change might offer meaningful improvements, I want to strongly caution against believing that “good food” in prisons is possible. Despite the public discourse of rehabilitation and reintegration, prisons in Canada are deeply punitive places (Dawe & Goodman, 2017). In addition to the deplorable food, incarcerated individuals are faced with woefully inadequate healthcare, overcrowding, prolonged isolation and inactivity, as well as structurally-induced instances of lateral violence; all contributing to a situation that is untenable (Ling, 2019; MacAlpine, 2019; Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2016; Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights, 2021). Given the impact that these conditions can have on one’s health and well-being, it should be no surprise that the life expectancy of an individual incarcerated at a federal prison is 20

years lower than the Canadian average (Iftene, 2020). These issues are not just mistakes or oversights – they are manifestations of the carceral logic at play in federal prisons. As G.S., an incarcerated individual, reflects, “the problems that exist in the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) and within our justice system cannot be fixed without fixing the problems with society first” (G.S., 2020, p. 123). Prisons are, fundamentally, harmful institutions that must be completely dismantled, not just reformed.

Despite these realities, correctional institutions, and the state as a whole, continually try to mask the fundamental truths about prisons. As Pat Carlen eloquently articulates:

Since the inception of penal incarceration, the punitive function of the prison has been multiply veiled by governmental, professional or reforming claims that prisons – especially women’s prisons – are, or could be, for something other than punishment: for psychological readjustment, training in parenting, drugs rehabilitation, general education or whatever else the ‘programmers’ of the day may deem to have been lacking in a prisoner’s life... more and more people (including this reviewer) appear to have fallen into the trap of forgetting that the *main function of prison is the delivery of pain*. (Carlen, 2002, p. 116; emphasis added)

Carlen explains this cognitive dissonance as the carceral clawback, the “power of the prison constantly to deconstruct and successfully reconstruct the ideological conditions for its own existence” (2002, p. 116). O’Malley (1999) comes to a similar conclusion, noting widespread inconsistencies and contradictions within contemporary penal policy, where competing discourses of punishment, enterprise, incapacitation, restitution and reintegration are mobilized simultaneously across various programs, approaches and initiatives.

This carceral clawback has been particularly evident in the case of carceral food systems, where everything from prison farms, to cooking classes and bee hives (even abattoirs!) are presented as tools of rehabilitation and recidivism, denying the inherent violence of the context in which these activities take place. The ability of carceral systems to hold space for seemingly opposing discourses highlights the importance of ensuring any reforms are abolitionist reforms, so as to resist co-optation into carceral logics. For instance, a reform that takes-up a framing of reintegration (such as food-based employment training or horticulture therapy) may appear to improve the conditions of incarcerated individuals in the short term, but without questioning the broader legitimacy of prisons it remains an individualizing response, bound-up in the neoliberal and neo-conservative rationalities that continue to impose punitive and inhumane conditions on incarcerated populations (O’Malley, 1999). Rather than tools of rehabilitation, opportunities to engage with food and food provisioning should be structured as moments of autonomy and agency, to expose and lay bare the contradictions of this carceral clawback and create space to challenge the inherent violence and separation of prison. Hazelett makes a similar claim in his conceptualization of a carceral food justice praxis, which includes activities around food that invite critical reflection and

collective understanding of the systemic injustices of carceral institutions and agri-food systems (2023, p. 448).

The discussion above makes that clear; there can be no “just” carceral food system because carceral systems are inherently, fundamentally, unjust systems. As Kathuria writes “creating a ‘humane’ eating environment in prison – where incarcerated folks are able to access foods that meet their physical needs and are culturally, emotionally, and mentally nourishing – is thus a paradox” (2022, n.p.). The goal cannot simply be to improve the quality of food services in prison, as this goes against the fundamental logic of prisons. One survey respondent made this point explicitly in asserting, “nutrient deprivation is supported by the inherent nature of physical, social, emotional deprivation of carceral spaces.”

The question, then, is how do we make meaningful change that has a direct impact on the lives of incarcerated individuals, while also working towards a transformative justice that seeks to fundamentally re-imagine society’s approach to harm and punishment? The stories and examples from formerly incarcerated persons described in this paper highlight that shared experiences around food have the potential to create openings of community and solidarity, despite a broader context that is highly punitive and dehumanizing. Building on these openings, I believe we can work towards enacting an abolitionist politics within carceral food systems that centers both food justice and transformative justice, whether conceptualized as a practice of carceral food justice, or a vision of an abolitionist politics of nourishment. Heynen and Ybarra, speaking of abolitionism more broadly within political ecology, note that we can:

...learn from grassroots movements and abolitionist thought to make freedom as a place. Much like the kitchen table, it is the everyday experiences of teaching each other about native plants (Carroll, 2015), making shared dinners as a community (Mei-Singh, 2020), and singing freedom songs (Ranganathan & Bratman, 2019) that make structural transformations possible. (Heynen & Ybarra, 2020, p. 24)

In the context of carceral food systems, making “freedom as a place” could involve the creation of opportunities for community-building and connection through food between incarcerated and non-incarcerated individuals. Examples include the Victory Bus Project in New York where loved ones visiting incarcerated family members are provided with free transportation to and from the prison along with fresh vegetables from local farms, or Emma’s Acres in British Columbia where incarcerated individuals volunteer at an organic vegetable farm side by side those who have been victims of crimes. Although these may appear somewhat reformist in orientation, their liberatory potential comes from breaking down barriers and creating spaces outside the direct control of prison staff where we can collectively deconstruct the structural harms found within food systems and prison systems, and collectively imagine possible alternatives. Hazelett makes a similar observation in his work on prison gardens, suggesting that gardens can be a

space where “carceral subjectivities can begin to unravel, and humanisation of oneself and the other can occur” (2023, p. 449). The survey responses emphasize the value and significance of community-building through food in settings where incarcerated folks are able to experience greater freedom and autonomy, taking small steps to defy carceral logics of control and confinement.

Work is also required to build stronger links and coalitions across food movements and prisoner justice and transformative justice movements, to continue to explore the linkages and interconnections between food systems and carceral systems. This could create a broader pool of allies and active participants in prison abolitionist movements, as well as movements to transform our food systems. For example, the recent campaign against the proposed new prison in Kemptville Ontario, led by CAPP (Coalition Against the Proposed Prison), has effectively linked the issues of prisoner justice and food security, by highlighting the social and ecological consequences of building a new prison on prime agricultural lands (see <https://www.coalitionagainstoproposedprison.ca/>).

Finally, an abolitionist politics within carceral food systems could be expressed through the co-creation of alternative institutions and processes to facilitate collective access to clean and safe environments (water, land, air), and equitable social relations of labour. In the context of a settler-colonial state such as Canada, this could manifest as active support for and in engagement in what Simpson calls Indigenous renaissance and resurgence, to rebuild Indigenous knowledge systems, cultures, forms of governance, education, care, etc., without “the sanction, permission or engagement of the state, western theory, or the opinions of Canadians” (Simpson, 2011, p. 17). Coulthard takes a similar stance, urging a “resurgent politics of recognition” to rebuild and strengthen Indigenous culture and traditions, political systems, and knowledges (2014, p. 179). In practical terms, this might mean direct support for and participation in land back struggles (such as Wet’suwet’en, and Land Back Lane), revitalizing Indigenous food systems, including harvesting traditional foods, and reclaiming Indigenous agricultural practices (such as the Anishinaabe Moose Committee, the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in (TH) farm, Black Duck Wild Rice or the White Corn Resurgence Garden Project).

Support for Indigenous governance and food sovereignty may not appear directly related to addressing the concerns over the state of food in federal prisons, however, the analysis in this paper has sought to illustrate that we cannot “fix” carceral food systems without dismantling carceral systems themselves as well as the structures that perpetuate them. As McKeithen (2022) outlines in their abolitionist politics of nourishment, food in prisons cannot be isolated from the surrounding carceral context; rather it must be understood in relation to these broader systems and structures. Just as the survey respondents highlighted ways in which conflict over food is a manifestation of unequal power relations both between incarcerated individuals and between incarcerated individuals and prison staff, so too can food in prison be used as

a tool to analyze and highlight the fundamental injustices of carceral systems. An abolitionist perspective urges us to examine the full web of relations that connect carceral institutions to the rest of society, identifying points of leverage and moments of opportunity to first make the harms of prisons visible, challenge their legitimacy, and then begin the work of imagining and co-constructing alternative institutions, practices and relationships. The complexities and contradictions that surface in analysing the experiences of food in prison are one such leverage point, opening the door to analysing the full web of food provisioning relationships within and beyond prison walls, to consider how these relationships could be re-imagined and re-structured in support of both food justice and transformative justice.

### **Conclusion**

The data presented in this paper is part of a larger research project examining food as “contested terrain” (Brisman 2008) within the Canadian federal prison system, mapping the various actors and relationships implicated in carceral food systems and bringing to light particular moments where food has been taken up as a tool to contest the treatment of incarcerated individuals and articulate alternative possibilities. While the survey did not speak directly to questions of alternatives, the paradoxical role and symbolism of food that emerged from the responses provides insight into how food can be mobilized as a tool of change within the carceral context, to not merely reform but directly challenge and de-legitimize carceral logics. Despite the poor quality and highly restrictive setting, incarcerated individuals still found ways to build community around food and contest the arbitrary rules of confinement through sharing food, filing complaints and engaging in collective action. Far beyond just a tool of punishment, food within the carceral context holds a complex and contradictory meaning for incarcerated individuals, acting as a source of conflict and consensus, nutritionally deficient but also socially nourishing, a symbol of both their imprisonment and a reminder of what is beyond prison walls. The paradoxical meaning and symbolism of food within prison parallels the paradox of trying to improve the experience of food under the current carceral realities; just as food in prison cannot be distilled down to one thing, efforts to reform carceral food systems cannot be reconciled with the harms of carceral systems.

According to Davis (2003), part of the challenge in imagining and pursuing a world without prisons is that there is an inherent distancing that takes place within society’s relationship with prison. Prisons are positioned as natural and inevitable, and yet we do not want to know any details about them and what goes on inside. Carceral food systems presents an opportunity to challenge that disconnection by highlighting the ways in which the paradoxical position of food in prison parallels the complexities many individuals within the wider community face in relation to food. Building spaces of connection and

relationship-building through food and food provisioning between incarcerated individuals and the broader community works to challenge the socially constructed barriers between incarcerated individuals and the rest of society, counteracting the distancing and disconnection that Davis notes. The act of sharing food and engaging in collective activities of food provisioning can have a unique ability to disarm people and create a sense of connection, challenging the profound “otherness” that is required for society’s continued acceptance and complacency around the realities of prisons (Davis, 2003, p. 16). To be effective, this will require pushing back against the narrow rehabilitative positioning of food – where food and food programming is seen as a tool to heal and reform incarcerated individuals – to envision a much broader set of possibilities where food becomes a site and a tool of fundamental reimaging and social transformation.

CSC’s handling of the Covid pandemic further deteriorated the conditions of incarceration within Canada’s federal prisons (see Anonymous from Saskatchewan Penitentiary, 2020; Roberts, 2022). However, the pandemic also created a space in which abolitionism gained new ground as a practical response to the harms of prison. For instance, the Abolition Coalition, a coalition of academics, organizers and formerly incarcerated persons utilized a diversity of tactics from education and advocacy to solidarity and direct support to expose the harms of incarceration that were exacerbated by the pandemic, and also to point to alternative approaches founded on community building and mutual aid (Chartrand, 2021). There is perhaps now, more than in recent decades, a strategic opening to bolster the value and necessity of an abolition politic within our understanding of carceral food systems, to position food in prison as both a site and tool of important social change.

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