"I REFUSE TO LET THEM KILL ME":

FOOD, VIOLENCE, AND THE MARYLAND CORRECTIONAL FOOD SYSTEM

Prepared by the Maryland Food & Prison Abolition Project

"FOOD ASSUMES ENORMOUS IMPORTANCE IN PRISON: FOR MANY PRISONERS IT CONDITIONS THEIR LIFE IN CUSTODY AND, IN MANY RESPECTS, IS SYMBOLIC OF THE PRISON EXPERIENCE."

– CATRIN SMITH, 'PUNISHMENT AND PLEASURE: WOMEN, FOOD AND THE IMPRISONED BODY'[1]

"THE FOOD IN THE WORKHOUSE WAS HORRIBLE. ACTUALLY, IT WAS DISGUSTING. I WOULD SIT AND WAIT FOR LUNCH OR DINNER, HUNGRY AS HELL, AND THEY WOULD BRING ME SOME GREENISH-BROWN IRIDESCENT CHUNKS FLOATING AROUND IN A WATER LIQUID... AND THAT NASTY-LOOKING, FOUL-SMELLING STUFF TASTED MUCH WORSE THAN IT LOOKED. THE PLACE WAS INFESTED WITH FLIES AND SO WAS THE FOOD. I LIVED OFF THE NUTS AND CANDY I BOUGHT FROM THE COMMISSARY AND THE FRUIT MY FAMILY BROUGHT ON VISITS."

– ASSATA SHAKUR, DESCRIBING THE FOOD AT THE MIDDLESEX COUNTY JAIL, NEW JERSEY, IN 1973; ASSATA: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY[2]

"MEALS WHICH ARE WHOLESOME, NUTRITIONALLY ADEQUATE, WELL PREPARED, AMPLE IN PORTION, AND SERVED AT REASONABLE INTERVALS ARE ESSENTIAL TO THE HEALTH, BEHAVIOR, AND MORALE OF INMATES. MEALS MEETING THIS DESCRIPTION WILL WORK TO MINIMIZE A MAJOR SOURCE OF COMPLAINT WHICH COULD ULTIMATELY LEAD TO DISCONTENT, DISORDER, AND COSTLY LITIGATION. IT IS EQUALLY IMPERATIVE THAT SERVICES ASSOCIATED WITH MEETING THE DIETARY NEEDS OF INMATES BE SANITARY AND SAFE."

–MARYLAND COMMISSION ON CORRECTIONAL STANDARDS; ADULT CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTIONS STANDARDS MANUAL[3]

"TERRIBLE, TERRIBLE, TERRIBLE. I MEAN, IT IS HORRENDOUS. AND THAT'S ON A DAILY BASIS. IT'S NOT LIKE IT'S SOMETIMES YOU GET A PRETTY GOOD MEAL NOW AND THEN. NO, THIS IS CONSISTENT. THIS IS AN EVERYDAY SITUATION. AND THE KITCHEN—THE FOOD, THE WAY IT'S PREPARED... MICE, RATS, RODENTS. I DON'T THINK THEY'VE EVER PASSED AN INSPECTION. BECAUSE OSHA WOULD CLOSE THE PLACE DOWN. THAT'S HOW BAD IT IS. ROACHES AND MICE AND OTHER INSECTS AND STUFF CRAWLING ALL OVER THE PLACE. SO THEY PREPARE YOUR MEALS IN FILTH, BASICALLY.... THAT'S DEFINITELY INHUMANE. BUT WHO CAN YOU COMPLAIN TO? AND AS I SAY, I'M ONE OF THE FORTUNATE ONES. BECAUSE I REFUSE TO LET THEM KILL ME."

– J. G, FORMERLY INCARCERATED DURING COVID-19 AT MARYLAND CORRECTIONAL TRAINING CENTER

Acknowledgements

About

The Maryland Food & Prison Abolition Project, formerly the Farm to Prison Project, is a Baltimore-based organization that connects urban and small-scale farms to prisons to use food as a tool for resistance. We envision a world where prisons—and all forms of carcerality—do not exist. At the same time, we recognize the deep and urgent need for better food conditions in correctional facilities. Instead of advocating for "kinder, gentler" prisons, we ask how addressing the role of food in confinement can advance an abolitionist vision that builds communal power and helps tear down the prison-industrial complex in all of its manifestations. By connecting farms to prisons, we aim to pave the pathway for conditions for resistance on the inside and support community-based forms of self-determination on the outside.

Acknowledgements

Author: *Kanav Kathuria*
Report Design: *N'Deye Diakhate*
Illustrations: *Tomekah George*
Copyediting: *Bianca Biberaj*
Media & Communications: *Rianna Eckel*

Special thanks to our community reviewers and all who assisted in the development of this report, including:

Ana Puente Flores
Antoin Quarles-El
Beatriz Beckford
Benjamin Cramer
Dennis Williams
Jamesha Caldwell
Leslie Soble
William Merritt

Above all, we are forever indebted to our formerly and currently incarcerated comrades and extend immense gratitude to those who shared their experiences, their lives, their time, their energy, their memories, and their stories with us. None of us are free until all of us are free.

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Glossary

ABOLITION: From Critical Resistance: "PIC abolition is a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment."[4]

In addition to eliminating the physical buildings we call prisons, abolition also extends to all structures, spaces, and institutions that are designed to confine, exploit, oppress, harm, and kill primarily non-white people both within the United States and throughout the world. The abolition of prisons and policing means the abolition of capitalism, of imperialism, of statism, of white supremacy, of ableism and sanism, and of heteropatriarchy. Abolition, in its positive sense, is about world-building.

COMMISSARY: A store within a prison—or, if privatized, outsourced to a corporation—that sells goods, hygiene products, and food items to incarcerated individuals. Commissary services in Maryland state-run prisons are managed by Keefe Group.

DEHUMANIZATION: "Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also... those who have stolen it, is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human." — Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*[5]

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES (DPSCS): One of the largest state agencies in Maryland, responsible for operating the state's prisons, pretrial detention in Baltimore, and parole and probation.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: "The right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations." — Declaration of Nyéléni, the first global forum on food sovereignty, Mali, 2007[6]

KEEFE GROUP: A multi-billion dollar corporation, owned by H.I.G Capital, responsible for managing commissary services in all Maryland state prisons.

MARYLAND CORRECTIONAL ENTERPRISES (MCE): The prison industry arm of the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services. MCE exploits the labor of incarcerated individuals to provide a range of goods and services to state agencies such as furniture manufacturing; the production of license plates, traffic signs, and apparel; meat processing; and print services.

PRISON-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX: "The prison industrial complex (PIC) is a term we use to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems." — Critical Resistance[7]

In order to protect the identity of the formerly and currently incarcerated individuals in this report, we use a combination of pseudonyms, names, and initials to refer to tolks depending on their preference. Specific prisons are not listed at times to further protect confidentiality and prevent identification and retribution.

In early 2015, the multi-billion dollar correctional food service corporation Trinity Services Group lost its existing contract to provide meals to the 5,700 individuals incarcerated across nine prisons in Baltimore City.[8] The winning contractor—Crystal Enterprises, Inc.—underbid Trinity by $51 million, claiming to be able to supply food for just $1.43 per meal per adult.[9] However, only a few weeks later Crystal asked the state for $6.6 million in additional emergency funding.[10] Crystal alleged that the conditions in which Trinity left the prisons justified the pay increase: in the words of Crystal's CEO, "The facilities that were handed to us by Trinity were overrun with rats, roaches, mice and birds. During our walkthrough, we witnessed meals being prepared under grid ceilings which were covered with rat droppings."[11]

What happened next was a series of events that led Peter Franchot, Maryland's Comptroller at the time, to declare the disaster as "the most troubling item that I've seen brought before the [Board of Public Works]."[12] Trinity denied Crystal's allegations and fought to regain control of the very contract it lost; Crystal forced their emergency contract through the Board by threatening to stop all food service provision in prisons completely; and Governor Larry Hogan, declaring that "we can't wake up tomorrow morning and not serve food to the prisoners and have a riot on our hands," turned the matter over to the Attorney General for investigation.[13]

What was predictably lost in the dispute between these two corporations was a larger interrogation of food conditions and the role of food itself in Baltimore and Maryland prisons. As of 2018, the state of Maryland incarcerates approximately 18,000 adult individuals across 21 correctional facilities run by the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services.[14] Food services in these facilities are not managed by private corporations—Crystal's contract was terminated in 2015—but directly by the state itself. Given that the average length of confinement for adults in Maryland is about seven years, the state thus serves over 7,500 meals to a person over the length of their incarceration, and

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE:

WHILE WE REFER TO PRISONS AS CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES THROUGHOUT THIS REPORT, WE RECOGNIZE THAT THE TERM "CORRECTIONAL FACILITY" ITSELF IS OPPRESSIVE, PARADOXICAL, AND ROOTED IN STATE VIOLENCE.

over 19.5 million meals to all incarcerated adults in one year.[15]

This report, *"I Refuse to Let Them Kill Me": Food, Violence, and the Maryland Correctional Food System*, uncovers the experience of eating while incarcerated and the hidden implications of food provision in Maryland's prisons. In 2019 and 2020, the Maryland Food & Prison Abolition Project (formerly the Farm to Prison Project) conducted individual interviews and dialogue circles with over 80 currently and formerly incarcerated people across the state to determine the true impact of food in confinement. Our findings are divided into six sections, each describing a different aspect of correctional food service. The contents of each section are simultaneously expected yet devastating—bringing to light both the central role of food inside prison as well as its implications outside of bondage for those working toward food sovereignty, and, more broadly, communal self-determination. Through our conversations, individuals currently or formerly under state control systematically detailed how food in prison serves three fundamental functions: as an everyday mechanism of control, dehumanization, and punishment; as a site of exploitation and profit for private food service corporations; and as a form of violence and premature death due to long-term impacts on individuals' physical and mental health. From insects, maggots, and rat droppings in meal trays; to food that is routinely described as "unfit for animals, much less human beings"; to the manufacturing of perpetual hunger as a source of financial extraction for commissary providers; the people we spoke with characterized Maryland's correctional food system as nothing short of a public health and human rights crisis.

Currently and formerly incarcerated folks characterized correctional food as just one feature of the larger tapestry of violence that undergirds every aspect of prison. As opposed to a source of nourishment, prison food operates as a relation of power within an institution that itself is a technology of racial, economic, and political oppression. Ultimately, the characterizations of prison food uncovered in this report uproot any notion that correctional food provision can be gradually reformed to create a "kinder, gentler" institution truly able to "meet the needs" of those held in captivity. Instead, we find that the weaponization of food as a tool to dehumanize and control further evidences how prisons cannot be transformed into anything beyond what they are—a warehouse of majority Black and brown bodies, brutalized and deemed disposable by the

intersecting crises of anti-Black violence, racial capitalism, ableism and sanism, queer/transphobia, and heteropatriarchy that constitute the roots of carcerality itself.[16]

Prison Food and Correctional Food Systems: A Brief History

The histories of prison food and correctional food systems are a product of larger processes that shaped the development of carceral institutions themselves. In the United States, the origins of prison as a "penitentiary" began as a reform of corporal and capital punishment in the late 18th century. During this period, as renowned scholar and prison abolitionist Angela Davis outlines in *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, the role of prison transformed from a detention center, temporarily confining those deemed "criminals" before their true punishment was enacted, into the actual site and form of punishment as influenced by the religious, moral, and social values of the time.[17] Enlightenment-era intellectual tendencies, the rise of industrial capitalism, and movements led primarily by Protestant reformers coalesced to remodel prison as a place for labor and silent penitence. The food served to those incarcerated was thus a reflection, in part, of the emerging "corrective" ideology governing prisons. Meals were meager and designed principally to sustain the energy required for a day of hard labor: historical documents show that incarcerated individuals were served mostly bread and gruel, an unseasoned porridge mixture made from flour and boiled in milk or water.[18]

With the supposed abolition of slavery in the United States came another structural transformation of the function and racial composition of prisons. The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution infamously abolished slavery except as a punishment for crime; as a result, former slave states passed legislation known as the "Black Codes" designed to regulate, exploit, and criminalize the behavior and labor of previously enslaved Black people.[19] The racial composition of prisons in many states thus rapidly shifted from majority white to majority Black. Once incarcerated, people were legally sentenced to "penal servitude" on plantations, railroads, mines, and other industries requiring cheap and dispensable labor through a system of genocide known as convict leasing. During this time, former slave plantations such as Parchman Farm in Mississippi and Angola in Louisiana were converted directly into state-run prisons, further crystallizing the connection between slavery, prison agriculture, and correctional food

service. As Angela Davis notes in *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, individuals were sometimes incarcerated and forced to labor on "the very plantations that previously had thrived on slave labor"—only now operating under the authority of the state.[20]

The horrific food conditions under convict leasing, in part, have led some scholars to deem the system as "worse than slavery."[21] Compared to slave owners, convict lessors such as private plantation owners and corporations were even less concerned for the safety or survival of the individuals leased to them. People were so brutally punished, overworked, and abused that, as David Oshinsky writes, "not a single leased convict ever lived long enough to serve a sentence of ten years or more."[22] It was the responsibility of a lessor to provide food, housing, clothing and other basic necessities to the individuals they leased. Evoking comparisons to the prison-industrial complex today, lessors were solely incentivized to minimize costs and maximize profits by extracting as much labor as possible from leased individuals. The consequences of these incentives on food provision were abhorrent. For example, an 1887 grand jury report in Mississippi described the dehumanizing condition of individuals leased to one company as follows: "[Prisoners] are lying there dying, some of them on bare boards, so poor and emaciated that their bones almost come through the skin; many complaining for the want of food. We believe they are fed improperly.... These poor creatures get their beef in water and meal for soup, as we are informed, with coarse meat and cabbage—such diet they cannot eat. One [person] burst out crying and said he was literally starving to death."[23]

While the underlying roots of anti-Blackness remained intact, the formal end of convict leasing in the early to mid-20th century brought marginal improvements to food provision in correctional institutions. However, the rise of mass incarceration in the 1970s onwards—and the further expansion of prison as a system of racial control—again caused food service to deteriorate in many parts of the country. As we've described previously, the aggressive growth of prisons during this time "correlated to crises in racial capitalism caused in part by deindustrialization, globalization, and automation." As the United States began to shift toward a neoliberal position, "the loss of jobs in many cities, combined with the dismantling of the welfare state, led the state to turn to prisons as a means of warehousing a racialized 'surplus population'—individuals cut out of the modern economy and thus deemed disposable."[24]

Prison populations began to grow rapidly in Maryland and throughout the country. In Maryland alone, the number of people in jails skyrocketed by 258% from 1970 to 2015, and the number of people incarcerated in state prisons surged by 80% from 1983 to 2015.[25] With exploding populations and shifts in penal ideologies came a turn toward industrial food production and challenges of scale. Prison administrators began feeding growing numbers of people on austerity budgets, outdated equipment, and limited staff. The reaction to these crises was predictable: many state correctional departments privatized and outsourced food provision to transnational corporations such as Aramark and Trinity Services Group, broadened and standardized their policies and practices to meet capacity demands, and overall cut costs to feed as many people on as low of a budget as possible.

Mirroring shifts in industrial agriculture and the development of the neoliberal food regime, correctional food service became increasingly disconnected from local food systems, industrialized, and a source of profit for companies across the supply chain.[26] Food conditions predictably worsened on almost all levels of the production and distribution process. For example, the quality of meals deteriorated significantly; portion sizes decreased; fresh produce was substituted for canned or ultra-processed foods; the adoption of standardized and wide-scale preparation practices led to bland and nearly inedible meals; and any nutritional goals were replaced with empty caloric requirements and a mentality to simply keep people alive. In addition, the expansion of Maryland Correctional Enterprises—the "prison industry" arm of the state—allowed the industry to obtain a virtual monopoly on meat products, using prison labor to produce meats of such degraded quality that folks refer to them as "Rottweiler... because it looks like dog meat."[27] In short, the dehumanizing character of prison food evolved with and adapted to the rise of mass incarceration, the entrenchment of food service in the prison-industrial complex, and the ways in which food systems under racial capitalism continue to structure food conditions both inside and outside of prison today.

The Maryland Correctional Food System Today

This brief history of food in confinement helps to contextualize the contemporary state of the Maryland correctional food system. Given the evolution of modern-day prisons from historical systems of racial and economic oppression, the material conditions in correctional facilities today reproduce the same logics of dehumanization and disposability utilized by their predecessors. For many currently imprisoned individuals, their experiences with food in prison is the defining aspect of their incarceration. As Rebecca Godderis writes in 'Food for Thought: An Analysis of Power and Identity in Prison Food Narratives,' the act of eating is essential to our identity as human beings.[28] The correctional food system severs this form of identity by removing control over the process of preparing and eating food—and thus intentionally estranges a person's sense of self from their own body. Ultimately, by using food as a tool to "control, discipline, and shape [incarcerated persons'] bodies," prisons weaponize food provision to wield power and transform an individual into an "inmate"—a "subject" able to be controlled.[29]

"BECAUSE FOOD IS SUCH A CENTRAL PART OF THE DAILY PRISON ROUTINE AND BECAUSE IT ACTS AS A POWERFUL SYMBOL OF IDENTITY, THE CONSUMPTION OF FOOD IS AN EXCELLENT MEANS TO EXPRESS POWER IN PRISON."

— REBECCA GODDERIS, 'FOOD FOR THOUGHT: AN ANALYSIS OF POWER AND IDENTITY IN PRISON FOOD NARRATIVES'

In Maryland, the experience of eating while incarcerated can vary significantly based on factors such as the geographic location and security classification of a prison, a person's medical condition or dietary restrictions, access to commissary, and how long a person has spent in confinement. Our conversations with formerly and currently incarcerated individuals thus aimed to capture a wide range of food-related perspectives and experiences across all of Maryland's 21 state-run correctional institutions. This report walks through all aspects of the day-to-day reality of eating in prison—and how statewide policies and regulations, institutional practices and procedures, and a larger mentality toward the role of food and punishment in prison come together to form an experience rooted, at its core, in dehumanization.

THIS REPORT WALKS THROUGH ALL ASPECTS OF THE DAY-TO-DAY REALITY OF EATING IN PRISON—AND HOW STATEWIDE POLICIES AND REGULATIONS, INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES AND PROCEDURES, AND A LARGER MENTALITY TOWARD THE ROLE OF FOOD AND PUNISHMENT IN PRISON COALESCE TO FORM AN EXPERIENCE ROOTED, AT ITS CORE, IN DEHUMANIZATION.

Part 1 and Part 2 of this report describe the everyday experience of eating in prison. These sections cover, in part, the ways in which food is stored, prepared, and served; the hostility and abuse folks face in the prison dining hall; the poor quality and quantity of meals, leading to nearly constant feelings of hunger; the rarity of any fresh produce; the dual function of the prison commissary as a site of financial extraction and survival; and the experience of incarcerated dietary workers in preparing meals for hundreds or thousands of people three times a day. In these sections, we demonstrate the appalling ways in which prisons deny individuals of one of their basic rights, and how food-related institutional policies and practices fail to provide adequate care for those in their custody.

Part 3 of this report details the impact of prison food on individuals' physical, mental, and emotional health and well-being. Regardless of their health status, an incarcerated person will almost certainly leave prison in worse health than when they entered. We demonstrate in this section how correctional food provision not only exacerbates any underlying health issues a person may have such as diabetes, hypertension, and chronic heart conditions, but oftentimes is their root cause. For example, due to factors such as the nutritional bankruptcy of institutional meals, prisons' reliance on cheap and empty starches in order to meet caloric requirements, and forced eating times, many individuals we spoke with felt the impact of prison food on their health after just one meal. In fact—as Prison Policy Initiative explains—research indicates that "just four weeks of

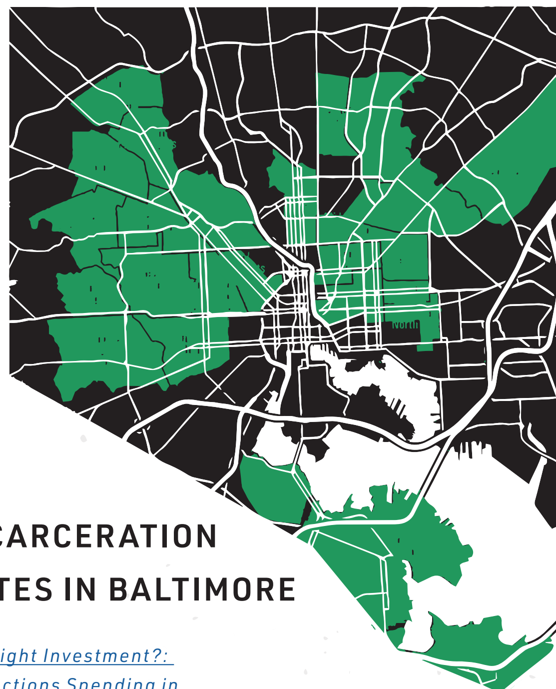
CORRECTIONAL FOOD PROVISION NOT ONLY EXACERBATES ANY UNDERLYING HEALTH ISSUES A PERSON MAY HAVE SUCH AS DIABETES, HYPERTENSION, AND CHRONIC HEART CONDITIONS, BUT OFTENTIMES IS THEIR ROOT CAUSE.

eating an unhealthy, high-calorie diet can lead to long-term increases in cholesterol and body fat."[30] Instead of serving as the physical and emotional sustenance needed for "rehabilitation"—a dehumanizing and illusory goal that the criminal justice system no longer even claims to promote—prison food constitutes a form of long-term punishment that individuals can struggle with years after their release. Furthermore, the psychological harm inflicted through the experience of eating in confinement can also change an individual's very relationship to food from one of joy to trauma. Formerly incarcerated individuals thus bear the consequences of incarceration long after they return home. Through weaponizing the act of eating, food provision in prison can damage a person's physical and mental health for the rest of their life.

This potential lifelong collateral consequence of incarceration—ultimately constituting a form of "slow and premature death"—has even greater significance when contextualized within larger struggles for food justice and food sovereignty.[31] In Baltimore, residents in neighborhoods with some of Maryland's highest rates of incarceration are at the same systematically denied access to affordable, nutritious, and fresh foods.[32] Many individuals thus find themselves trapped in a cycle between prisons—where food is a proven public health crisis—and their home communities, where access to fresh foods is again a form of structural oppression.[33] Although such spaces are often referred to as "food deserts," a term that dehumanizes

FOOD APARTHEID IN BALTIMORE

[Baltimore City Healthy Food Priority Areas (Baltimore City Department of Planning, 2018)]



INCARCERATION RATES IN BALTIMORE

['The Right Investment?: Corrections Spending in Baltimore City' (JPI and PPI, 2015)]

and pathologizes individuals caught within its parameters, the framework of "food apartheid" more accurately captures the forms of economic oppression and systemic racism that shape food systems in predominantly Black and low-income communities. As in prison, the conditions of food apartheid have significant negative impacts on health outcomes. For example, as Dara Cooper, a co-founder of the National Black Food and Justice Alliance, explains: "[Lack of healthy] food is a deep-rooted form of violence. Junk food is concentrated in Black communities, and fast food industries are concentrated there, too. We have research saying kids need nutrition to develop proper brain functions, and when they don't have access to food with nutrients, that's violence. We see high heart disease in our communities, and that's by design."[34] In this way, the lived realities of food apartheid constitute another example of scholar and abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore's framing of racism: "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."[35]

The ideologies and structures shaping material food conditions in both prisons and communities under food apartheid thus stem from the same roots of racial and economic oppression. Examining systems of food production through this lens reveals how carcerality extends beyond the walls of confinement through the use of food as a tool for control, power, and subjugation—a form of spatial organization that Ruth Wilson Gilmore frames as "carceral geographies."[36] An inequitable distribution of fresh and nutritious foods is not just an unfortunate byproduct of our food system; our food systems depend on exploitation and dispossession to survive, from prison agriculture and correctional food provision, to the oppression of Black and brown farmers and farmworkers, to communities bearing the effects of hypersegregation, over-policing, and supermarket

> **"THE MODERN PRISON IS A CENTRAL BUT BY NO MEANS SINGULARLY DEFINING INSTITUTION OF CARCERAL GEOGRAPHIES IN THE UNITED STATES AND BEYOND... THE CHALLENGE IS TO KEEP THE ENTIRETY OF CARCERAL GEOGRAPHIES—RATHER THAN ONLY THEIR PRISON OR EVEN LAW-ENFORCEMENT ASPECTS—CONNECTED, WITHOUT COLLAPSING OR REDUCING VARIOUS ASPECTS INTO EACH OTHER."**
>
> *– RUTH WILSON GILMORE, 'ABOLITION GEOGRAPHY AND THE PROBLEM OF INNOCENCE'*

redlining. By reframing prison and spaces of food apartheid as two formations on the same landscape of "premature death," it becomes clear that the fight for food sovereignty must also necessarily incorporate the abolition of the wider conditions giving rise to prisons.

Part 4 of this report discusses changes in correctional food service in Maryland across time and space. As detailed above, mass incarceration exploded Maryland's jail and prison population from 17,130 individuals in 1983 to over 30,000 individuals in 2015.[37] The nature of food provision had to adapt during this time to meet the growing numbers of people in confinement. In the 1990s, food conditions continued to decline in part due to the industrialization of food production, ever-shrinking state budgets, an increasing dependence on private contractors, and policy changes reflecting racialized "tough on crime" ideologies. State correctional departments thus developed nutritional standards for prisons to feed—not to nourish—as many people on the cheapest budget possible. Part 4 further discusses how federal and state governments simultaneously made it significantly more difficult for incarcerated people to legally protest the dehumanizing conditions of confinement through the passage of the Prison Litigation Reform Act.[38] In other words, changes in prison food service from the 1980s onward reflected the larger ideologies, laws, policies, regulations, and material conditions entrapping thousands of people in Maryland into bondage. Part 4 highlights three key time periods as lifted up in our conversations with currently and formerly incarcerated individuals: the 1980s to 2008; 2008 to 2015; and 2015 to present. We also address the lasting impact of crises such as the 2007-2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic on food service.

WE PLACE THE WORDS "GUILTY," "CRIME," AND "INNOCENT" IN QUOTATION MARKS AS THE CRIMINAL INJUSTICE SYSTEM'S CENTERING OF INNOCENCE IS ITSELF IS A HARMFUL CONSTRUCT USED TO LEGITIMIZE AND REIFY FORMS OF CARCERAL OPPRESSION. FOR FURTHER READING, WE RECOMMEND JACKIE WANG'S ESSAY "AGAINST INNOCENCE: RACE, GENDER, AND THE POLITICS OF SAFETY."

Part 4 of this report further discusses how the experience of eating in a

Maryland prison changes based on where a facility is located in the state. Maryland's 21 operational correctional institutions can be roughly divided into five regions—Baltimore, Jessup, Cumberland, Hagerstown, and the Eastern Shore.[39] In addition to differences across regions, food conditions can vary drastically between prisons in the same part of the state—and even between two institutions less than a mile apart. This section primarily highlights the singular experience of eating in a Baltimore correctional institution as compared to prisons in any other Maryland region. Due to an combination of factors such as overcrowding, chronic understaffing, paltry institutional food budgets, limited production capabilities, outdated kitchen equipment, and corruption—undergirded by the deep anti-Black racism at the core of Maryland's carceral project—correctional food service in Baltimore is significantly worse in almost every single aspect compared to facilities around the state. Furthermore, most Baltimore facilities are used for transitory purposes such as pretrial detention, where people are confined while awaiting trial without being yet proven "guilty" of a "crime." Worsened food service in such facilities contribute to an overarching sense of disregard for human life—for, even though a person may be legally classified as "innocent" in the eyes of the law, the food served to them can permanently damage their physical, emotional, and mental health regardless if they are ever formally convicted.[40]

THE U.S PRISON REGIME IS NOT ONLY RELEGATED TO FORMAL INSTITUTIONS OF CONTROL, SURVEILLANCE, AND CONFINEMENT SUCH AS PRISONS AND JAILS, BUT FUNCTIONS AS A BROADER RELATION OF POWER THAT SHAPES EVERY ASPECT OF SOCIAL LIFE.

Part 5 of this report covers how food in prison is used as a direct form of violence, punishment, and dehumanization by transforming a person's most basic need for nourishment into a mechanism of control. We explore in this section how hunger caused by inadequate institutional meals contribute to increased instances of violence; how correctional staff use food as a means to exercise power over the people in their custody; the historical use of "prison loaf" to punish individuals in disciplinary segregation; and how differences in access to commissary can

AS OF 2015, THE STATE OF MARYLAND ALONE SPENDS NEARLY ONE BILLION DOLLARS ON CORRECTIONS (PRISON POLICY INITIATIVE, 2015).

preclude opportunities for solidarity and resistance through restructuring social relations. We also discuss how prisons in Maryland, the United States, and others throughout the world respond to certain forms of resistance to correctional food—whether formal, through grievances or litigation, or informal, through hunger strikes or daily practices of refusal—with even greater forms of violence. Ultimately, Part 5 details how institutions weaponize food provision in order to meet their legal mandate to keep incarcerated individuals alive while simultaneously reproducing modes of domination and subjugation.

> **INSTEAD OF ADVOCATING FOR "KINDER, GENTLER" PRISONS, WE ASK HOW ADDRESSING THE ROLE OF FOOD IN CONFINEMENT CAN ADVANCE AN ABOLITIONIST VISION THAT BUILDS COMMUNAL POWER AND HELPS TEAR DOWN THE PRISON-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX IN ALL OF ITS MANIFESTATIONS.**

In this way, the correctional food system is another example of how prisons and carceral institutions cause more harm than they claim to resolve. In addition to tracing the racialized origins and evolution of prisons from slavery and convict leasing, abolitionists such as Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Angela Davis demonstrate the absence of any significant correlation between reduction in crime and increased rates of incarceration.[41] Instead, prisons divert billions of public dollars away from systems of support such as schools, healthcare provision, food-related infrastructure, and housing; destabilize communities and social relationships; disorganize social movements as tools of political repression; and serve as containers to manage the perpetual social, racial, and economic crises that are inherent to racial capitalism. Furthermore, an array of institutions and social services ostensibly separate from incarceration—schools, mental health facilities, the foster care system, and mandatory drug treatment centers, for example—in reality extend and reproduce the logics of prison by relying on similar technologies of control. In their book *Prison by Any Other Name*, Maya Schenwar and Victoria Law refer to these various manifestations of incarceration as the "prison nation," capturing the "system's vastness and its embeddedness within the very fabric of this country."[42] The U.S prison regime is thus not only relegated to formal institutions of control, surveillance, and confinement such as prisons and jails, but as described

by carceral studies scholar, organizer, and abolitionist Dylan Rodríguez, functions as a broader relation of power that shapes every aspect of social life.[43]

The predominant tendency of scholars, administrators, health practitioners, and researchers addressing food in confinement—even among those more critical of mass incarceration—has been to treat the dehumanizing reality of prison food, on the one hand, and the dismantling of the "prison nation," on the other, as distinct projects. As a result, solutions are generally geared towards improving policies and practices by individual institutions or states in a well-intentioned effort to better prison food in the short-term. Such an approach, however, can instead reify the very structures that created and perpetuate these mechanisms of state violence in the first place. Simply put, prisons cannot be reformed. In the same way that "prison gardens" in Maryland are used to legitimize the fictitious "rehabilitative" capabilities of prisons—all under the dehumanizing or myopic rhetoric of providing skills for employment post-release or mitigating "aggression"—improving prison food is often framed as a common-sense approach to reduce correctional healthcare costs and maintain better control of the prison environment.[44] For example, as stated by a policy director at the ACLU, "We want to make sure [incarcerated individuals] are in an environment that supports their rehabilitation, and that's not going to happen in a place where there's constantly chaos and people fighting over food. It's smart to make sure these people are treated humanely while incarcerated."[45] Framing correctional food service in this way treats the dehumanizing reality of eating in prison as separate from the innate logics of control, exploitation, and disposability giving rise to prisons themselves.

Our intent is not to say that improving material food conditions in prisons is not of crucial importance—especially as prison food can shorten the life of a person every single time they eat a meal in captivity. However, instead of advocating for "kinder, gentler" prisons—even in the short-term—we ask how addressing the role of food in confinement can ultimately advance an abolitionist vision that builds communal power and helps tear down the prison-industrial complex in all of its manifestations. Borrowing from Critical Resistance: "Abolition is both a practical organizing tool and a long-term goal... Because the [prison industrial complex] is not an isolated system, abolition is a broad strategy. An abolitionist vision means that we must build models today that can represent how we want to live in the

future."[46] It is under this framework that we present our recommendations for change in Part 6 of this report. Our recommendations are divided into two sections: first, we outline ways to mitigate the harm intrinsic to the experience of eating in a Maryland state-run correctional institution. Second, we provide a set of "non-reformist reforms"—or "measures that reduce the scale, scope, power, authority, and legitimacy of criminalizing institutions"—that address the larger intersections between carceral food systems and our food system as a whole.[47] Given the shared roots between prisons and carceral food systems, food apartheid, and all forms of food and land-based oppression that contribute to the development of an fundamentally inequitable global food system, Part 6 of this report discusses how the struggle for food sovereignty must, at its core, be an abolitionist endeavor. Instead of isolating the inherent violence of correctional food service from interconnected structures of oppression—namely capitalism and anti-Black racism—we ask in this section what prison food can reveal about such structures that deprive racialized communities of self-determination through the exploitation, expropriation, and dispossession of food, land, and labor.

In connecting carceral food systems to broader struggles for self-determination, addressing food in confinement must also center agency and the use of food as a means of resistance both inside and outside of prison. In other words, as opposed to approaching the consumption of prison food through a lens of scarcity or pathologization—where folks are merely objects, passive beings, or consumers of poor food provided by the correctional food system—we ask how food can and has been used as a tool to advance Black food sovereignty and build communal power. To do otherwise mirrors trends in food studies work, where, as critical food studies scholar and abolitionist Ashanté Reese describes, scholarly interest in low-income Black communities tends to "look for what is wrong instead of what is happening, pathologizing Black people in the process."[48] In framing prisons as sites of food apartheid, looking for "what is wrong"—and doing so devoid of an anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist analysis—leads to outcomes that relegate communities of color, as Robin D.G. Kelley writes in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, to "objects of white liberal ideology, not agents pursuing their own vision of freedom."[49] The material and ideological conditions governing correctional food systems today are deliberate: orientations that fail to recognize intent generally attempt to "raise awareness" about the harm that predominantly Black,

brown, and low-income folks in confinement face in order to convince those in power to act benevolently on their behalf. As Assata Shakur writes in her autobiography, "nobody in the world, nobody in history, has ever gotten their freedom by appealing to the moral sense of the people who were oppressing them."[50]

From the Attica prison rebellion in 1971, sparked in part due to a demand for a "healthy diet"; to the 2018 National Prison Strike protesting state abuse, political repression, and dehumanizing conditions of confinement in institutions throughout the country; to ongoing hunger strikes in prisons in the United States and across the world; to everyday forms of food-based resistance and refusal in captivity; to forms of creativity, survival, and communal care practiced in prison in the face of a carceral food system that devalues life itself; to Black urban and rural farms, cooperatives, and organizations fighting for Black land and food sovereignty in the face of food apartheid and the exploitation of land and labor; to revolutionary movements struggling against the capitalist and imperialist domination of what and how we eat in communities over the world; Black and brown communities have utilized food as a tool of resistance, liberation, and imagination against U.S empire for generations. Shifting conversations around correctional food from advocating for "softer" prisons to an interrogation of carceral food systems and the larger forms of oppression they enable/are enabled by allows us to build power—to understand the potentialities and limitations of using food as a mechanism to tear down all forms of carcerality and create new institutions that are rooted in communal self-determination.

What new terrains for struggle are opened in analyzing carceral food systems in this way? Acknowledging relationships between interconnected systems of harm, as Angela Davis argues in *Abolition Democracy*, "is a necessary first step in developing strategies to oppose and abolish the institutions and their underlying causes."[51] She continues:

> "In thinking specifically about the abolition of prisons using the approach of abolition democracy, we would propose 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 helping to render the prison obsolete. There is a direct connection with slavery: when slavery was abolished, black

> people were set free, but they lacked access to the material resources that would enable them to fashion new, free lives. Prisons have thrived over the last century precisely because of the absence of those resources and the persistence of some of the deep structures of slavery. They cannot, therefore, be eliminated unless new institutions and resources are made available to those communities that provide, in large part, the human beings that make up the prison population."[52]

Access and ownership over the food we eat is one of our most basic rights. The creation of a world where we all have power over food that physically, spiritually, and emotionally sustains us, heals us, and nourishes us cannot exist while prisons and all structures of violence and oppression still stand. It is from this understanding we invite you to read this report.

PART I

THE PRISON EATING EXPERIENCE

"MY DOG, I SWEAR TO GOD, EATS BETTER THAN THE FOOD IN THERE. I WOULDN'T EVEN SERVE THAT TO MY DOG."

– J., FORMERLY INCARCERATED IN A JESSUP PRISON

The first part of this report explores the day-to-day experience of eating while incarcerated in a Maryland state correctional facility. Incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals across all institutions and regions in Maryland consistently describe food in prison as "one of the worst parts of [their] incarceration." What are the factors that contribute to such poor food conditions in prisons? Or, more pointedly: in what ways do state correctional facilities use food as a mechanism of visible and invisible control exercised through the bodies of individuals in their custody?

Through examining an intersecting web of factors such as horrendous food quality, grossly inadequate portion sizes, limited budgets, and abusive eating environments, currently and formerly incarcerated individuals paint a picture of what it means to eat in confinement that details the myriad ways in which food acts as an often covert, constant form of violence and control inside of a prison. As Mark, who was formerly incarcerated in a Baltimore prison, put it: "I wouldn't wish this [food] on my worst enemy."

FOOD QUALITY

"YOU HAVE TO MAKE DUE. THE MAJORITY OF THE FOOD YOU'RE GIVEN IS NOT EDIBLE, BUT YOU HAVE TO MAKE DUE. YOU EAT OR YOU STARVE."

– ANDREW, FORMERLY INCARCERATED IN A BALTIMORE PRISON

In addition to a scarcity of fresh produce, low palatability, and "childlike" portion sizes, the poor quality of meals in prison is a major reason why individuals commonly describe institutional food as "unfit for human beings." Correctional food service in Maryland state facilities is self-operated, in contrast to management through private corporations such as Aramark or Trinity. Thus, state-level administrators and correctional dietary managers in each prison or region are responsible for functions such as the procurement of food items, managing contracts with vendors, and food preparation and provision. Food conditions across regions—and oftentimes across facilities in the same region—can vary based on an array of factors such as kitchen capacity, the number of individuals held at the facility, and institutional security levels. An institution's food service budget, however, is one of the most important determinants of the quality of food served to incarcerated individuals.

Correctional Dietary Budgets

"At home, if my mom cooks fish, I'll have an allergic reaction. I have bad reactions to fish. [In prison] I can be around it, I can eat it... so I don't really think the fish in here is real."

– T., currently imprisoned in a Jessup correctional facility

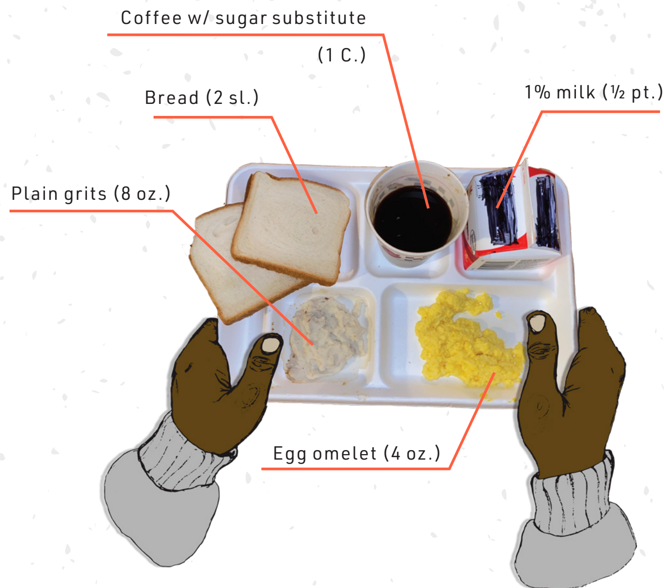
SOME MARYLAND FACILITIES SPEND AS LITTLE AS $2.40 PER PERSON PER DAY FOR ALL THREE MEALS—OR JUST 80 CENTS PER MEAL.

As of 2018, Maryland state-run correctional institutions spend on average $3.83 per day on raw food costs to feed an incarcerated person for all three meals.[53] This averages to about $1.28 for food supplies per person per meal. However,

A photograph of a meal tray taken by an incarcerated person in a Maryland state prison (2012)

some Maryland facilities spend as little as $2.40 per person per day—or just **80 cents per meal**.[54] Such budgets are not circumstantial: they serve as a direct reflection of society's larger views toward individuals in prison; a product of the neoliberal prison budget as a whole, where massive state spending on corrections goes toward staffing, custodial care, construction, and privatized healthcare as opposed to services or programming for incarcerated folks; and an intentional mechanism of control by the state. Such paltry dietary budgets are also not unique to Maryland: Connecticut's Department of Corrections spends $2.95 per person per day on food costs; New York's Department of Corrections spends $2.85; and Virginia's Department of Corrections spends $2.10.[55]

In order to procure food items on such a limited budget, Maryland correctional dietary staff substitute fresh, high quality foods for cheaper and highly processed alternatives. The images on the following page, created from a 2019 menu from a prison in Central Maryland, are representations of what incarcerated folks might encounter on a meal tray on any given day.



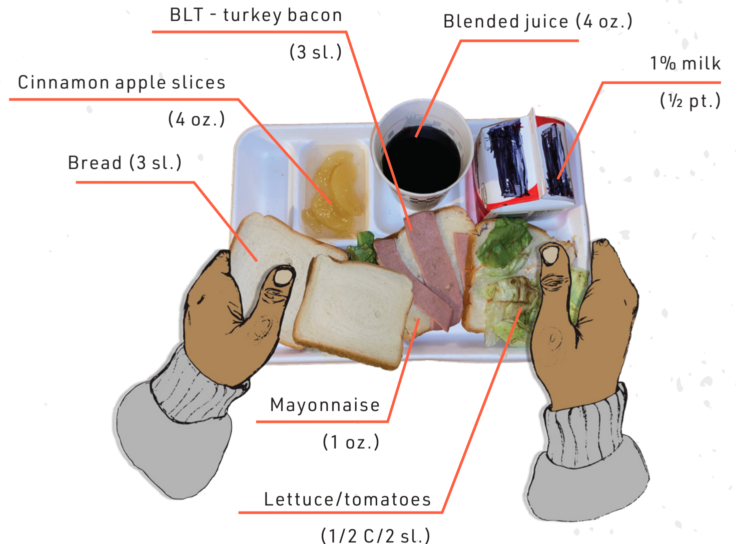
BREAKFAST

"**Breakfast you can get, you might get fake eggs, artificial beef and gravy, and artificial pancakes.** I could tell that some of the eggs wasn't real. It was horrible. I mean, breakfast could also be some oatmeal, boiled eggs, some fake bacon, or whatever they want to call it. Some rubbery stuff. It could be a bowl of dry cereal, no orange, no milk, stuff like that."

– Shirome, formerly incarcerated in six prisons across Maryland

NOT DEPICTED:

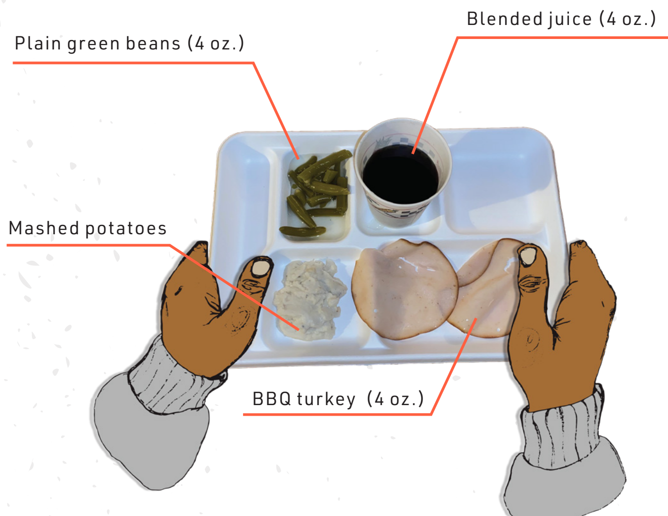
Blended juice (4 oz.) ; Margarine (2 tsp.)



LUNCH

"**For lunch, you get a bag, and everything in the bag tastes and smells the same.** You get a juice box. You get a sandwich, which is two pieces of bread, some cheese, and a slice of meat. The meat is bad. They call it sweaty meat, because lunch meat sweats, it gets the oily skin on it or stuff on it and then it turns white. You also might get a piece of fruit and a pack of cookies, but everything tastes the same. It tastes like the sandwich. And that's lunch."

– Mark, formerly incarcerated in Baltimore and at Eastern Correctional Institution



DINNER

"**... The first night I stayed there, it was some type of turkey, I want to say, that didn't look nothing like turkey, almost like some type of processed meat.** Hard, soggy. It was disgusting. And it had gravy and they had mashed potatoes. They had three little cookies when I was there. They had milk and a juice, and they had some green beans. And the green beans were so disgusting. It's like they washed them with dish soap or something. It was disgusting. I didn't eat the whole time I was in there."

– Y., formerly incarcerated in Baltimore City

NOT DEPICTED:

Bread whole/wheat (2 ea.); Margarine (1 tsp.)
1% milk (½ pt.); Cookies (2 ea.)

Scarcity of Fresh Produce

"Oh my god—I completely forgot that blueberries exist. I've been in here for so long and haven't seen or eaten a blueberry that I didn't even remember they were a fruit."

– J., currently incarcerated in a Jessup prison

The vast majority of fruits and vegetables served in Maryland state correctional facilities are canned. Although the availability of fresh produce varies by region of incarceration—with Baltimore prisons serving little to no fresh produce at all—receiving real produce in confinement is considered a "gift" or "luxury" due to its rarity. For example, in one facility, folks described how a helping of fresh vegetables—consisting of just two sticks of carrots and celery—is served barely two or three times in an entire month. In other facilities, people may receive an apple, pear, or orange a handful of times per week depending on the time of year. As Reggie, who was formerly incarcerated in a number of Maryland prisons described: "We rarely got fresh vegetables. We got everything in a can. And we had to beg for fruit...fruit was like a hot commodity or luxury that you can't get on a normal [basis]."

"YOU'VE JUST GOT TO EAT WHAT THEY GIVE YOU... WILTED LETTUCE AND ROTTEN APPLES, OR SOMETHING THAT REALLY SHOULD HAVE BEEN IN THE TRASH. SO WHY NOT FEED IT TO THE ANIMALS, SO TO SPEAK?"

– LYNN, FORMERLY INCARCERATED IN A JESSUP PRISON

In addition, whenever prisons actually do serve fresh produce, people across institutions pointed out that portion sizes tend to be tiny and the produce itself is often bruised, spoiled, or rotten. Two currently incarcerated participants in a dialogue circle explained:

K: "There are two kinds of pears. They give you the canned ones and then they give you the actual fresh fruit ones. But the fresh fruits ones have holes in the sides or they're rotted in certain areas."

M: "I had one with holes in it like a worm just came out of it or went through it."

K: "Yeah. You know how you have the little dark holes through. That... they're all over. Or they're bruised."

Some individuals also subscribe to health or religious-based diet plans, known as special diets, solely to gain greater access to fresh fruits and vegetables—although the same folks emphasized that these diets still consist mainly of canned produce. To compensate for the lack of fresh fruits and vegetables, Maryland prisons turn to fortified beverages—known informally as "base"—to provide incarcerated individuals with the nutrients needed for the institution to adhere to its dietary guidelines. Base is not only incredibly high in sugar and generally a very poor substitute for actual fresh produce, but is also a dangerous substance due to its toxicity and ability to physically stain surfaces it comes in contact with.

Outside of cost, correctional staff often cite a number of irrational reasons to explain why fresh produce is so rarely served in confinement. While we explore the contradictions behind these reasons in Part 5 of this report—including heightened "security risks" due to the creation of prison wine, and "health risks" due to supposed greater instances of food poisoning—we note here that such rationales are rooted in forms of cultural and racial pathologization that undergird the heart of mass incarceration itself. As Jackie Wang explains in *Carceral Capitalism*, during the expansion of the U.S carceral state, structural analyses of urban poverty were discarded in order to frame Black communities as "deserving of punishment."[56] As she outlines, "The conversion of poverty into a personal moral failure was intimately tied to the construction of black Americans as disposable and subject to mass incarceration."[57] Such forms of pathologization extend outside of incarceration to spaces of food apartheid—where Black and brown communities are often stereotyped and blamed for their food choices in the face of an inequitable food system that denies them access to nutritious and affordable foods. In prison, administrative staff again point to the lack of fresh produce as a matter of poor individual choice—claiming that incarcerated folks are not interested in fresh produce in the first place—thus shifting the blame of a nutritionally bankrupt correctional food system onto personal moral failures.

Inedible and Tasteless Meals

"Sometimes we used to joke about, this is the stuff that they pick up off the floor after they got everything else they got. But this is what we get. This is what the prisons get. The stuff on the floor. We're not eating for taste."

– Roderick, incarcerated in multiple Maryland state-run prisons

Most, if not all, of the food served on a tray in confinement lacks sensory appeal–specifically, taste, smell, and sight. Due to a variety of factors such as meal times, preparation practices, lack of seasoning, and insufficient training for staff, food is often described as cold, tasteless, and inedible. As Roderick explained: "You wolf [the food] down, so you don't taste it. Because the way that it looks, it would turn you off if you sat there and thought about it long enough."

To better describe the low palatability of food, currently and formerly incarcerated folks use a different set of terminology to characterize the meals served to them through correctional food service. As Kenneth, who was incarcerated in Jessup, explained, "Whatever it looked like, that's what we called it. So we came up with our own language when it comes to the food that they feed us in there." For example, folks refer to one meal as "shit on a shingle," described as "bread with gravy and little bits of supposedly beef... but definitely not actual beef." Other examples included "slop night," which are nights where prisons serve a combination of rice, stew, and beans, and "Rottweiler" to describe the terrible quality of meat.

"THE WAY [THE FOOD] LOOKS AND THE CONSISTENCIES... HAVE YOU SEEN WET DOG FOOD OUT THE CAN AND IT'S GOT WEIRD LITTLE CHUNKS IN IT? THAT'S SOME OF OUR FOOD. THE WAY THAT IT LOOKS."

– A., CURRENTLY INCARCERATED IN A JESSUP PRISON

HUNGER

"I WAS INCARCERATED FOR EIGHT YEARS. I DID WORK IN THE KITCHEN... THE BEST THING OVER THERE WAS THE CHICKEN, AND EVEN THEN IT WAS TOO DAMN LITTLE. I WAS HUNGRY OVER THERE, MAN. HUNGRY. THEY DON'T SERVE YOU TOO MUCH OF A BIG PORTION. YOU DO BE HUNGRY. IF YOU DON'T HAVE NO COMMISSARY OVER THERE, YOU UP SHIT'S CREEK... IT WAS TERRIBLE. SOME DAYS I COULDN'T SLEEP. YOU'D BE IRRITABLE. IT AFFECTED ME PRETTY BAD."

– G., FORMERLY INCARCERATED IN BALTIMORE AND JESSUP

Constant feelings of hunger are, for many imprisoned individuals, the defining aspect of their time spent incarcerated. In fact, out of all the currently incarcerated individuals we spoke with, not one single person said they were able to feel full through eating institutional food. The reasons for hunger are complex and varied—beyond being served portions "not enough to feed a baby," currently and formerly incarcerated individuals point to poor nutritional content, illogical and inconsistent meal times, and restrictions on the movement of food as to why, as one person put it, "[people] just wake up and go to bed hungry." Furthermore, as Part 5 of this report describes, insufficient food also contributes to increased instances of violence in facilities due to the mental and physical effects of constant hunger. As Anthony Hatch frames it in his essay 'Billions Served: Prison Food Regimes, Nutritional Punishment, and Gastronomical Resistance,' "raw starvation is not a major problem in U.S prisons, but well-designed hunger is."[58]

"Childlike" Portions of Food

"My grandchildren couldn't live off a portion of that. I mean a child couldn't eat that and be filled up."

– L., currently incarcerated in a Jessup prison

Menus for correctional institutions operated by the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services are constructed on a state-wide basis by the Director of Correctional Food Services, a registered dietician responsible for menu creation across all state institutions, in conjunction with Regional Dietary Managers who adapt menus to meet the needs of institutions in their respective regions. The content, nutritional value, caloric amounts, and portion sizes of meals are influenced by standards set by the American Correctional Association and the Maryland Commission on Correctional Standards—further described in Part 2 of this report.[59]

Although the official caloric quantities of meals are purportedly nutritionally adequate for adult individuals in custody, the reality is that for most folks portion sizes are not nearly sufficient enough to keep them full. As Kenneth put it, "Basically, after you eat any one of your trays, at least two hours after that you'll be hungry again. So, if you was to have all three meals at one time of the day and expect to be full the rest of the day, you wouldn't. You'll be quite hungry, unless somebody helps you out or you are able to bring something back to your cell or anything like that, but it was not filling." And, as another person clarified: "[The food] wasn't filling. It was just enough to make sure that you didn't starve."

People also expressed distrust at institutions' portion control policies. "They say they give you four or eight ounces, but it's just half of everything," L., who is currently imprisoned in Jessup, told us. "And then when you get your vegetables, they count the juice in that ounces." In addition to juice, multiple people we spoke with also stated that correctional dietary officers oftentimes added water while cooking to thin food out—both decreasing the actual quantity of food served, and contributing to overall poor palatability.

No Seconds

"You will never get seconds. Even when you sincerely say that this is not enough, I'm really hungry. No."

– T., currently incarcerated in a Jessup prison

Despite being fed portions, as one participant said, "maybe enough for children in school," Maryland state correctional institutions prohibit incarcerated persons from receiving additional servings of food aside from bread. In fact, many institutions serve four to six slices of bread per meal to compensate for a lack of adequate fruits, vegetables, or protein on a tray. This leads some people still experiencing hunger after a meal with little choice but to fill up on starch, significantly impacting their physical and mental health—further discussed in Part 3 of this report.

Furthermore, instead of serving seconds, currently and formerly incarcerated kitchen workers described how institutions routinely waste food instead of providing extra portions. "Instead of just saving the food and letting people have extra if they want, we dump everything every night," J. said. Sometimes it might be four or five pans because people didn't come to dinner." Another incarcerated dietary worker, C., added: "As much food as [staff] throws away, it's sad that they don't let you get more. For people that don't actually get commissary and have to rely on these meals, it's messed up that they give them nothing. Like they'll just say, 'Just get your state portion and keep moving.'"

Meal Times.

"The managing official shall have a written policy and procedure... Ensuring that three meals a day are served, with not more than a 14-hour interval between the evening meal and breakfast."

– Code of Maryland Regulations, Commission on Correctional Standards, Section 12.14.04.03[60]

The timing of meal services—though varied across institutions—plays a significant role in creating and fostering feelings of hunger. In some Maryland prisons, breakfast is usually served anytime between 3:30am to 5:00am; lunch is served around 11:00am; and dinner is served around 4:00pm. Between dinner and breakfast—an 11-hour gap—institutions do

not provide any additional food. As such, if incarcerated individuals do not have access to commissary, their only state-sanctioned option is to remain hungry for the remainder of the night.

In addition to long gaps between meals, institutional food service can also be frequently inconsistent, leading to even greater periods of time between breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Reasons for changes in meal timings can vary—due, for example, to staff shortages, alterations in menus, prisons being on lockdown, or other general challenges with industrial food production. In prison, many folks also use meal service as a way to mark time and get through the day; such changes can disrupt routines and similar forms of survival individuals create to cope with the realities of confinement. As R., an individual formerly incarcerated in a number of facilities across Maryland elaborated: “Early on when you first come in [to prison], that's how you make it through the day. ‘It is breakfast time. It is lunchtime.’ This is basically how you're telling time throughout the day... setting your day around meal times.”

Multiple people we spoke with also discussed the conflicts they experience or experienced with breakfast in prison. Although breakfast is known to be the most edible meal in an institution, the fact that breakfast is served, in some places, between 3:30am to 5:00am prevents people from actually going to the dining hall to eat. In addition, folks sometimes have to choose between attending breakfast or a time slot for a morning shower. As K. described: “Mainly when they call [for breakfast] I'm in the shower. I'm not going to choose between shower or breakfast. Shower comes first.” Missing breakfast inevitably exacerbates hunger, as Donté explained: “4:00am is too early, you feel me, to wake somebody up for breakfast. Then, if you don't get up, they leave you. You feel me? How you supposed to eat all day?”

The origins of prison meal timings can be traced back to the origins of prison itself—and extending meal times can also be a form of food-related punishment exercised by correctional or administrative staff. K., another participant who was formerly incarcerated in Baltimore and Jessup, described: “[Correctional staff] might serve food a little bit later. So, if you're expecting to get your lunch between 12:00 and 1:00, you might not get it until 3:00, right? Then, if they want to be a little bit more shady, an hour later, they might feed you dinner. So, for 11 to 12 hours, you got to wait until breakfast.”

Nutritional Quality.

Beyond the physical scarcity of food, the poor nutritional content and quality of meals in prison contributes significantly to incarcerated individuals' persistent feelings of hunger. The links between hunger, nutritional content, and malnutrition are well established: as described by World Hunger Education Service, "When a person has hunger for a sustained period of time, [they] can develop malnutrition"—defined as a "deficient, excess, or imbalanced intake of nutrients for proper tissue and organ function," and encompassing "both overnutrition and undernutrition."[61] Meals in Maryland correctional facilities are devoid of fresh produce; real foods are frequently substituted for highly-processed alternatives due to cost; and institutions rely heavily on starch and other empty calories to meet dietary requirements or simply to keep a person alive. Hunger is thus an inevitable consequence of eating the food served in correctional facilities. Antoin, a formerly incarcerated person and the founder of H.O.P.E. Baltimore—an organization that empowers men and women to make the transition from incarceration to community successfully—summed it up well: "A lot of that [food] is crap, so your stomach is telling you that you're still hungry, while all that shit is just sitting because it's crap. If it's quality, it's going to hold and fill and do what it's supposed to do."

WE DELVE FURTHER INTO THE IMPACTS OF CORRECTIONAL FOOD SERVICE ON A PERSON'S PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING IN PART 3 OF THIS REPORT.

IN 2013, THE FORMER SHERIFF OF MARICOPA COUNTY, ARIZONA–JOE ARPAIO–ANNOUNCED THAT HE WOULD BE SERVING "ANY INMATES WHO DEFACE OR VANDALIZE THE AMERICAN FLAG" A DIET CONSISTING ONLY OF BREAD AND WATER FOR 30 DAYS.[62] ARPAIO, KNOWN INFAMOUSLY FOR HIS INHUMANE TREATMENT OF INCARCERATED PERSONS AND HIS RUTHLESS QUEST TO LOWER CORRECTIONAL COSTS, INTRODUCED THIS DIET AS PART OF HIS "PATRIOTIC JAILS" INITIATIVE–WHERE AMERICAN FLAGS WERE PLACED IN EVERY INCARCERATED INDIVIDUAL'S CELL. WE TALK MORE ABOUT THE USE OF FOOD AS A TOOL OF PUNISHMENT IN PART 5 OF THIS REPORT.[63]

THE PRISON COMMISSARY

"AND I JUST THANK GOD THAT I'M BLESSED TO HAVE COMMISSARY. SOME PEOPLE ARE NOT."

– S., CURRENTLY INCARCERATED IN A JESSUP PRISON

Commissary in prison is akin to a store—incarcerated individuals can spend money to buy items such as snacks, noodles, hygiene products, beverages, and miscellaneous goods such as stamps and pencils. Given the failure of Maryland correctional institutions to provide meals of adequate quality, quantity, and nutrition, the majority of imprisoned individuals we spoke with rely heavily on an institution's commissary to meet their basic needs for food. In certain institutions, incarcerated individuals are also able to prepare and consume foods purchased off commissary outside the dining hall in their housing area.

Commissary services in all Maryland state facilities are managed by billion-dollar private corporation Keefe Group, which is responsible for determining goods available for purchase, setting prices, and managing deliveries for institutions without a physical commissary in the prison itself.[64] Incarcerated individuals can place an order for commissary every week or two, depending on the institution, and can collect their purchases on an institution's "commissary day." Nationally, as Prison Policy Initiative estimates, private commissary providers such as Keefe and Trinity rake in about $875 million in sales per year through the forced extraction of profit from the millions of people held in captivity.[65]

Addressing the high costs of food products, the lack of nutritious options, and the ways in which correctional institutions manufacture hunger to create dependencies on commissary, currently and formerly incarcerated folks described the core contradictions of commissary in prison—a source of survival on the one hand, and another form of control, extraction, and exploitation for private profit on the other. In this way, commissary replicates the dismantlement of the social welfare state and the privatization of public services outside of prison—a process that tracks poor communities of color into prison in the first place—by outsourcing the state's cost of feeding people in bondage onto the people themselves.

Commissary as a Primary Source of Food

"Like I said, if you don't have commissary, you'll die on them."

– Gregory, formerly incarcerated in Baltimore City

Of the formerly imprisoned folks we spoke with, individuals who could afford it consumed 70% of their daily caloric intake on average from foods purchased through commissary. For many people in prison, commissary is their key to survival. As Mayetta, who has been incarcerated in Baltimore and Jessup, explained, "I was messed up if I didn't have commissary... Commissary was necessary. Mentally, too, because, when you see hair in the [institutional] food and things like that, it turns you off." Mayetta continued: "If you didn't have any money to go to commissary, you're definitely going to lose weight... A lot of people who'll be in there without the commissary, they're going to be small, staying frail."

FOR MANY PEOPLE IN PRISON, COMMISSARY IS THEIR KEY TO SURVIVAL.

Common foods purchased through an institution's commissary include instant noodles, peanut butter, chips, candy bars, canned tuna fish, and dry cereal. Individuals use a combination of foods from the commissary and the kitchen to create "hook-ups"—a mashup of foods like noodles, tuna fish, and cheese purchased from commissary and green peppers and onions taken from the kitchen, usually cooked together in a microwave. The act of preparing and eating foods outside of what the institution provides can be a means to express agency, refusal, and resistance in an environment whose purpose is to deprive a person of any form of individual identity, autonomy, or self-expression.

Besides using commissary food items to offset hunger, individuals also pointed to the lack of taste in institutional meals, their questionable quality and hygiene, and poor preparation practices as to why they preferred to eat commissary food they could prepare themselves. For example, Andrew, a formerly incarcerated person we spoke with, described hook-ups as "the best meals you can get [in prison]." He continued: "For one, you cook it yourself. Number two, you know what you want in it, and everything you want in it is in there, and it's going to be actually done opposed to things like the hotdogs with no color they give you."

Nutritional Value

Food items available for purchase in commissary are generally not nutritious. Snacks such as cupcakes and muffins are high in sugar, and other highly-processed foods such as noodles, chips, and canned tuna fish contain excess amounts of sodium, fat, or refined carbohydrates. Given the forced dependency on commissary induced by unpalatable and insufficient institutional meals, such foods contribute directly to the creation and exacerbation of chronic health conditions for many incarcerated people—further discussed in Part 3 of this report.

Recent calls to address the overall low nutrition of food in prison either by increasing the availability of healthy foods in commissary or by "educating" incarcerated folks on eating "healthfully" tend to misconstrue the role of commissary in prison. The symbiotic relationship between institutional food service and commissary is one of control—in many cases incarcerated folks turn to commissary as means to survive, escape the prison environment, or exercise agency. Increasing the amount of nutritious options in commissary may certainly be a positive step, but this step must be contextualized in terms of the larger role of institutional food service—specifically the violence of prison enacted through food—as a whole.

Exploitation

Commissary in prison is not free—far from it. When examining the contours of the prison-industrial complex—specifically, the ways in which private corporations profit from supplying food to imprisoned individuals—private commissary management contractors are key sites of financial exploitation alongside food service providers such as Aramark and Trinity, telecommunications, healthcare, and the thousands of other corporations that profit from human bondage.

PRIVATE COMMISSARY CONTRACTORS ARE KEY SITES OF FINANCIAL EXPLOITATION ALONGSIDE FOOD SERVICE, TELECOMMUNICATIONS, AND HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS, AS WELL AS THE THOUSANDS OF OTHER CORPORATIONS THAT PROFIT FROM HUMAN BONDAGE.

Many incarcerated individuals depend heavily on commissary to combat hunger caused by meager institutional budgets for raw food costs, insufficient portion sizes, and poor quality. Thus, as state facilities turn to

private companies such as Keefe Group to outsource their failure to meet the basic needs of those in their custody, commissaries present—as outlined by the Prison Policy Initiative—"yet another opportunity for prisons to shift the costs of incarceration to incarcerated people and their families."[66]

MARYLAND DPSCS STATE WIDE GENEI

ıclude tax where applicable

DESCRIPTION	PRICE	LIMIT
BREAKFAST FOODS		
CHOCOLATE HEALTH DRINK SHAKE MIX 2 OZ	$2.00	5/ ORD
VANILLA HEALTH DRINK SHAKE MIX 2 OZ	$2.00	5/ ORD
KELLOGGS POP TARTS- SMORES 2 PK	$0.79	
KELLOGGS POP TARTS- STRAWBERRY 2 PK	$0.79	COMBINED
DOLLY MADISON POWDERED SUGAR DONUT 3 OZ K	$1.00	8 PER
DOLLY MADISON GLAZED DONUT 3.7 OZ K	$1.00	ORDER
PLAIN BAGEL 4 OZ K	$0.79	
CINNAMON BAGEL 4 OZ K	$0.79	
RAISIN BRAN (BAG) 20 OZ K	$3.52	
HONEY NUT TOASTED OATS (BAG) 20 OZ K	$3.52	COMBINED
CINNAMON SQUARES (BAG) 20 OZ K	$3.52	(2) TWO
FROSTED FLAKES (BAG) 20 OZ K	$3.52	PER
BERRIES BUNCH O KRUNCH (BAG) 20 OZ K	$3.52	ORDER
GOLDEN VALLEY BRAN FLAKES 20 OZ K	$3.52	
RALSTON OATMEAL ORIGINAL .98 OZ K	$0.32	15/ ORD
QUAKER OATMEAL MAPLE & BROWN SUGAR 1.51 OZ K	$0.32	15/ ORD
PASTRIES		
MARKET SQUARE CHOCOLATE CUP CAKE 4 OZ K	$0.65	
STRAWBERRY VANILLA CROISSANT 2.65 OZ	$1.30	
CREAM CHEESE POUND CAKE 4 OZ H	$0.85	
DUTCHESS ICED CINNAMON ROLLS 4 OZ K	$1.00	COMBINED
MARKET SQUARE ICED HONEY BUN 6 OZ K	$1.09	8/ ORD
CLOVERHILL APPLE DANISH 4.25 OZ K	$0.89	
CLOVERHILL BLUEBERRY DANISH 4.25 OZ K	$0.89	
CLOVERHILL STRAWBERRY DANISH 4.25 OZ K	$0.89	
MARKET SQUARE SWISS ROLL 12 OZ K	$1.38	COMBINED
MARKET SQUARE PEANUT BUTTER BARS 12 OZ K	$1.49	3/ORD
CHIPS & POPCORN		
BAGEL CHIPS ROASTED GARLIC 3.17 OZ	$1.50	
FRITOS CHILI CHEESE CORN CHIPS 2 OZ	$0.51	
DORITOS TORTILLA CHIPS COOL RANCH 1.75 OZ	$0.63	
THE WHOLE SHABANG CHIPS 1.5 OZ K	$0.52	
POPCORN WHITE CHEDDAR 5 OZ K/H/GF	$1.38	
REGULAR POTATO CHIPS 1.5 OZ K/H/GF	$0.52	
STUFFED JALAPENO POTATO CHIPS 1.5 OZ K/H	$0.52	
PRETZELS 1.5 OZ K/H	$0.56	COMBINED
CACTUS ANNIES CHEESE PUFFS 2 OZ K/H/GF	$0.52	8/ ORD
HOT BBQ POTATO CHIPS 1.5 OZ K/H	$0.52	
SOUR CREAM & ONION POTATO CHIPS 1.5 OZ K/H/GF	$0.52	
CARAMEL POPCORN 3.53 OZ K/H	$1.05	
CHEETOS FLAMIN HOT 1.75 OZ H	$0.51	
CHEETOS CHEESE CRUNCHY 2.0 OZ H/GF	$0.56	
BUTTER POPCORN 5 OZ	$1.38	
MICROWAVE NATURAL POPCORN 2.8 OZ K/GF	$0.57	
MICROWAVE POPCORN BUTTER 2.8 OZ K/GF	$0.57	
THE WHOLE SHABANG SNACK MIX 6 OZ K/H	$1.60	COMBINED
CACTUS ANNIE NACHO CHEESE TORTILLA CHIPS 10 OZ K/H	$2.68	3/ ORD
THE WHOLE ENCHILADA PARTY MIX 11 OZ K/H	$2.10	
MOON LODGE HOT HOT HOT ONION RINGS 6 OZ K	$1.65	2/ ORD
TERRELLS POTATO CHIP UNSALTED 7 OZ K/H	$2.75	2/ ORD

ITEM #	
4004	BABY
4005	BUTT
4031	TWIX
4032	THRE
4035	REES
4039	KIT K
4045	HERS
4046	M&M
4047	M&M
4080	SNICI
4081	HERS
4310	MILK
3085	SWEI
4121	JELLY
4160	TOOT
3004	PEAN
3030	VANI
3045	DUPL
3037	ICED
3041	ICED
3050	CHOC
3083	STRA
3020	OREC
3039	GAMI
4429	MARI
3107	SALT
3142	HONI
3143	VIST.
3184	STRE
3258	TOWI
3115	CHEE
3222	PEAN
2758	PEAN
2759	CRUI
3389	BLUE
6540	STRA
6404	CHOC
6206	KING
6208	KING
6213	KING
6214	KING
6216	KING
6217	KING
6606	MOO
6607	MOO
	K=KO

Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services Commissary Menu (DPSCS, May 2021)

The exploitation of incarcerated individuals constitutes the underlying relationship between the neoliberal carceral state, capitalism, and privately run commissaries. A fundamental aspect of this relationship is visible in the wages paid to individuals for their labor compared to the prices of commissary commodities. Through employment at the Maryland Division of Corrections, incarcerated folks are paid between 90 cents a day to $2.75 a day for their work.[67] Further eliciting blatant comparisons to slave labor, sharecropping, and the "company store," individuals are then expected to spend their earnings on overpriced necessities from commissary such as food and toiletries.[68] For example, powdered milk from one institution's commissary costs almost $4 a can—or anywhere between a day and a half to four and half days' worth of labor. As Lawrence, who has been imprisoned in Baltimore and Hagerstown, explained: "Some of the guys that were working for $1 had to save up just to get $5 to order a pack of noodles or something, because the noodle prices were so high."

In short, private companies such as the Keefe Group have found a profitable

market by commodifying state-induced feelings of hunger experienced by many incarcerated individuals on a nearly constant basis. The additional commodification of nearly every aspect of prison life forces incarcerated folks to choose between spending money on basic necessities such as food items, soap, healthcare, stamps to write letters, and phone calls to speak to their loved ones. Part 4 of this report describes the threefold increase in commissary prices when the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services contracted commissary services out to the Keefe Group in 2012.[69] As one formerly imprisoned individual put it, "[commissary] makes them money. This is nothing but big business."

Solidarity Networks, Care, and the Commissary Black Market

"WHAT A LOT OF PEOPLE DON'T REALIZE IS THAT COMMISSARY AND COOKING IN PRISON IS ACTUALLY A FORM OF SOCIALIZATION. WHAT HAPPENS IS THAT DUDES ARE LOCKED UP AT 18, 19 YEARS OLD AND THEY IN THERE FOR 10 YEARS, 15 YEARS, AND WHEN THEY COME OUT, ALL THAT THEY KNOW HOW TO COOK IS WHAT THEY LEARNED ON THE INSIDE. NOODLES, HOOK-UPS, ALL THAT... AND THEN THEY GO TO THE CORNER STORE, AND THEN THEY MAKE THE SAME THING FOR THEMSELVES, THEIR FAMILIES, THAT'S WHAT THEY FEED THEIR KIDS. HOOK-UPS. BECAUSE THEY NEVER LEARNED NOTHING ELSE."

– ANTOIN QUARLES-EL

Given the high dependency on food items and other commissary commodities, incarcerated individuals have to rely on wages from their labor and/or funds from friends or family members to help meet their basic needs. However, not all individuals have jobs in prison or loved ones who are able to send them funds. Furthermore, many of the people who lack commissary access suffer from heightened hunger due to experiences with drug addiction or struggles with houselessness prior to incarceration.

As a result, individuals in multiple institutions we spoke with pointed to the creation of "commissary black markets" and solidarity networks to navigate the lack of equal access to food. In these informal markets, incarcerated persons either sell foods "stolen" from the kitchen or purchase commissary foods for others at a fee, charging buyers "interest" to be paid back at a later time in the form of additional goods. As B. described: "[Unequal access] created a black market for people to have commissary

hustle. Like, 'Hey, I'll give you a noodle, you give me two back later. You get two, you give me three back.' They was able to create stores on the tiers. I squandered a lot of money just visiting these stores... because for me to wait until breakfast, I'm like, 'Man, my stomach is feasting on itself.' I said, 'I've got to eat something.'" More popular forms of payment accepted by folks who operate informal commissary stores include noodle packets, stamps, or goods prisons designate as "contraband."

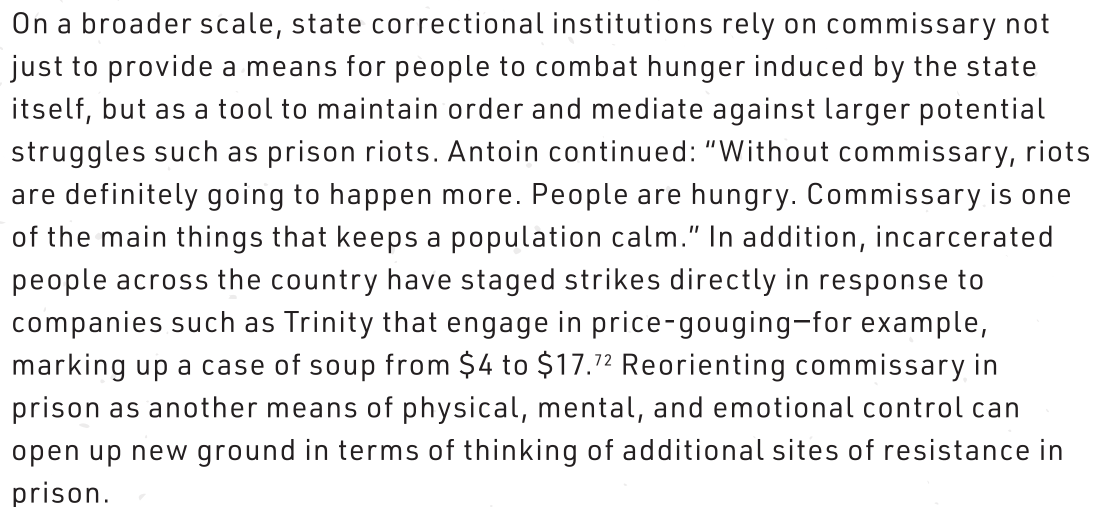
In addition to black markets, individuals experiencing hunger also rely on the care of others and informal solidarity networks within facilities for commissary food. For example, oftentimes individuals who can afford commissary give away their food to others in their housing unit who may not have access to food outside of designated mealtimes. J., who is currently imprisoned in Jessup, explained: "If you're coming in without any money then you don't have anything. It's hard to get a job. You have nothing for you. So we try to help people that doesn't have anything... we just take some of our stuff and we donate it to them to make sure they have their hygiene and food that they need." Such forms of care can also extend beyond individual relationships to the creation of informal networks—organized, for example, across housing units or religious affiliation. As M., who was formerly incarcerated in Jessup, told us: "If a new Muslim brother came in, a lot of us would join together and go ahead and set a bag up for somebody... But there were other people that come in too and if you didn't have anything, and we seen it, 'Are you okay? Are you hungry?' There are guys that are in prison that will look out for you."

Along with cooking and preparing meals from commissary items, solidarity economies and informal markets also constitute forms of resistance on the inside. As James Kilgore explains in a conversation with Ruth Wilson Gilmore on prison labor, "just like its counterpart in the community, the prison informal sector is a way to survive in a brutal economic, social, and health environment. Since they are against the rules, these economic activities are also a form of informal resistance to an oppressive system—way for people to assert their humanity and claim their right to improve living conditions inside an institution that aims to grind them into the dust."[70]

The Role of Commissary in Struggle

Food-based modes of resistance in prison—such as the 2013 California Prison Hunger Strike that protested the state's use of long-term solitary

confinement—are one of the few ways individuals can exercise agency in confinement through the use of their own bodies.[71] In Maryland, incarcerated individuals periodically refuse to consume institutional meals to protest dehumanizing food conditions, and instead rely solely on commissary for survival. Antoin, an advocate for incarcerated persons and the founder of H.O.P.E. Baltimore, described: "What we would do is that the whole housing unit would not go to eat. This would cause [the state] to potentially waste money on food, and make them open up to discussions with us." However, due to COVID-19, reliance on commissary during protest is no longer possible: "Given the conditions prisons are in right now, there's no major way we can do anything anymore."



On a broader scale, state correctional institutions rely on commissary not just to provide a means for people to combat hunger induced by the state itself, but as a tool to maintain order and mediate against larger potential struggles such as prison riots. Antoin continued: "Without commissary, riots are definitely going to happen more. People are hungry. Commissary is one of the main things that keeps a population calm." In addition, incarcerated people across the country have staged strikes directly in response to companies such as Trinity that engage in price-gouging—for example, marking up a case of soup from $4 to $17.[72] Reorienting commissary in prison as another means of physical, mental, and emotional control can open up new ground in terms of thinking of additional sites of resistance in prison.

THE PRISON EATING ENVIRONMENT

"IT'S SO HOT IN THERE, I MEAN, YOU SITTING IN HERE MAN, JUST SITTING RIGHT HERE, BOTH OF US WOULD BE SWEATING PROFUSELY. NO AIR CONDITIONING. MAN, PEOPLE JUST TRYING TO GET OUT OF THERE. EAT AND LEAVE."

– ABDUL, FORMERLY INCARCERATED AT EASTERN CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION

When prisons are not on lockdown, incarcerated individuals in the majority of Maryland's state correctional institutions are called to eat at a facility's chow hall three times a day for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. In a handful of institutions in Baltimore, however, meal trays are served to people directly in their cells through a slot in their cell door. As opposed to being a time of socialization, communal bonding, and nourishment, the experience of eating in prison serves as another form of surveillance, control, and dehumanization. This section details how institutional policy and correctional staff convert what could be a marginally positive experience—the act of sharing a meal in an environment fundamentally designed to reproduce brutality and violence—into an experience that again reinforces the underlying notion that persons who are incarcerated are, ultimately, less than human.

Verbal Abuse

"You try eating with a Correctional Officer yelling at you, 'you got three minutes left, you got five minutes left'... You could be eating and trying to chew your food, and they're screaming at you, get out! Get out!"

– A., currently imprisoned in Jessup

Institutional policy outlined by the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services dictates that incarcerated persons have 20 minutes to eat their food, starting from the minute they walk into a dining hall to the minute they are required to leave.[73]

In reality, currently and formerly incarcerated individuals explained that the actual time to eat a meal is much less. For example, A. outlined how "[correctional officers] say you have 15 or 20 minutes, but they rush you out in six." Reasons for this vary—sometimes correctional staff are running behind schedule with meal preparation; sometimes individuals at the back of the chow line only have a handful of minutes left to eat by the time they actually sit down; and other times, correctional officers simply want to exert their authority by verbally abusing folks trying to finish a meal. As such, incarcerated folks we spoke with most often describe the eating environment in prison as "rushed, tense, and unpleasant."

For many correctional officers, the dining hall is another opportunity to exercise power and control. These officers see mealtimes not as a means for people to connect with others through the act of eating, but for folks to simply to "eat and get out." As K., who is currently incarcerated, explained, "Most officers will explicitly say that the chow hall is not social meeting time. The officers will walk around and yell at you for talking because you have to utilize all your time to eat the food." As a result, it's common for incarcerated folks to have their trays actually taken and thrown away by correctional staff mid-meal. As two incarcerated participants in a dialogue circle discussed: "We eat while we're going up to the trash can. Some officers will just take your tray and throw it in the trash... I've heard them say, 'You're not even going to get to eat. It's going in the trash. I don't care. Get out.'" This led another person to add: "You have to scarf your food down. You don't even get to taste it. That's why I'm just like, forget it, it ain't even worth coming up here and going through all that."

Seating Arrangements and Food Service

In facilities that serve meals in institutional dining halls—as opposed to tossing a tray or bag through a cell door—incarcerated folks are generally not allowed to sit wherever and with whomever they want. People are called to eat based on their housing unit, and are directed to open tables in the order in which they stand in the chow line. In addition to physically preventing socialization by separating people from those they want to eat with, this system further contributes to anxiety and hostility in the already abusive dining hall. Marcia explained: "Depending on who you're sitting with, it can be very tense. It's not a pleasant atmosphere." The implications of this system on increased violence within a facility—ironically in the name of "security"—will be discussed in Part 5 of this report. In short, forced seating arrangements play a significant role in structuring social relations

within prison, sometimes hardening divisions around racial or religious lines.

The actual ways that food is served also varies from institution to institution. Some facilities utilize a "cafeteria-style" system in which incarcerated kitchen workers serve food directly to individuals as they come down the food line. Others implement a "blind feed," where kitchen workers are separated from those coming to eat by a large metal wall with a small slot in the middle. Kitchen workers then pass meal trays through the slot to individuals without ever communicating. Correctional staff claim that this system helps prevent some folks from receiving more food than others due to factors such as personal relationships, gang affiliations, and race; avoids confrontation between a kitchen worker and an individual they might be trying to harm; and overall, allows for a more "equal" experience between incarcerated persons.

However, many of the people we spoke with commented on the increased risks, uneven power dynamics, and heightened abilities for workers to manipulate food through this system. For example, as Antoin explained: "With this blind feed a [kitchen worker] could do a lot of things. You ain't going to be able to know, because he can separate your trays from the others. He could have all the trays over here and have this one sitting right here for you. When you come to the window, like, 'Here you go.' You don't know what he did with that tray. I've seen it happen. I've seen people spit in shit, I seen them put feces and stuff in it... all that shit."

Again, the irony of trying to establish a more "equal" eating environment through the active dehumanization of incarcerated individuals cannot be overstated. Instead of attempting to resolve the root causes of some of the above issues, certain institutions have mandated that all individuals should be equally subjected to the same inhumane food conditions as everyone else.

Taken as a whole—the prohibition of socialization in the dining hall, the need to scarf down food or else run the risk of not having enough to eat, and the "blind feed"—it becomes evident that the act of eating itself is used as a disciplinary method to control the bodies of incarcerated persons. In their book *Prison By Any Other Name*, Maya Schenwar and Victoria Law describe how "the prison nation... functions by breaking down connections between people and dismantling the building blocks of community."[74] By transforming

the human need to share a meal with another person into an abusive and degrading experience, the state again proves how the core logics of prison are intended to do nothing more than dehumanize the people it holds captive.

Ageism, Ableism, and the Prison Chow Hall

"Certain tables should be just for the disabled or the elderly."

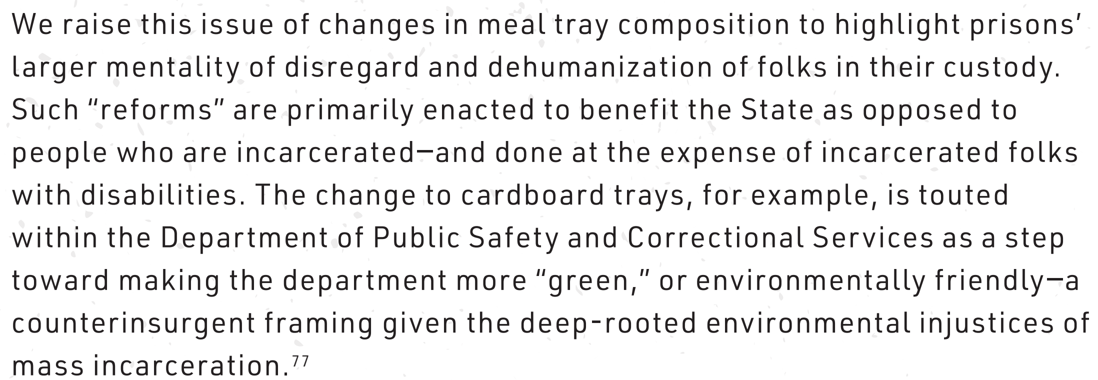
— M., currently imprisoned in Jessup

The intersections between carcerality—including state violence, policing, and imprisonment—abolition, and disability justice have been well documented by scholars, organizers, activists, and collectives such as Talila Lewis, Liat Ben-Moshe, and the Abolition Disability Justice Collective. While exploring this intersection and the roots of ableism in capitalism, eugenics, and anti-Blackness go far beyond the scope of this report, we introduce this framing in order to contextualize the violation of human rights and ongoing forms of discrimination that folks with disabilities in prison experience on a regular basis. For example, in 2017 Disability Rights Maryland (DRM) investigated the "conditions for incarcerated persons with disabilities at North Branch Correctional Institution."[75] As DRM uncovered, the Maryland prison routinely violates the "8th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution's prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment; Article 25 of the Maryland Constitution; and the Americans with Disabilities Act. The violations relate to the use of segregation, inadequate services, the failure to accommodate persons with disabilities, and discriminatory practices."[76]

In our conversations, multiple formerly incarcerated individuals described the daily forms of ableism and ageism they experienced in prison chow halls due to institutional policies and informal practices by correctional staff. In order to expedite meal times and maintain control, certain Maryland correctional institutions do not allow a person to get back up to retrieve any additional items once they sit down at a table. For example, individuals are required to carry their meal tray, a drink, utensils, and any assistive technologies such as canes or walkers all in one stretch. In addition, individuals have no choice as to where they can sit in the dining hall. As described by one participant, this policy creates clear difficulties for older individuals and individuals with disabilities: "Sometimes older people sit in tables near the front. I've seen officers yell at these people and say, no I don't care... you can walk, go sit somewhere else, you can't sit here. Then,

you have to walk with your tray and the cane. Even if you have so much stuff in your hand, you can't go back to get your drink."

The physical trays on which food is served also contributes to discrimination against older individuals and individuals with disabilities. In the past few years, Maryland correctional facilities have switched from plastic and Styrofoam to more environmentally-friendly meal trays made out of recyclable cardboard. However, this ostensibly positive change has had adverse consequences—the trays are structurally weak, hard to carry, and food tends to seep through the cardboard. As explained by L., who is currently imprisoned in a Baltimore prison: "As soon as [the tray] gets wet, it gets flimsy. You might as well carry a piece of paper." O., also incarcerated in Baltimore, further described: "Because these new trays are not that sturdy, if you have to put your soup on your tray... it's hard to juggle a full tray with a soup and your drink. You only have two hands. And if you wet it too much it'll leak. It'll start dripping."



We raise this issue of changes in meal tray composition to highlight prisons' larger mentality of disregard and dehumanization of folks in their custody. Such "reforms" are primarily enacted to benefit the State as opposed to people who are incarcerated—and done at the expense of incarcerated folks with disabilities. The change to cardboard trays, for example, is touted within the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services as a step toward making the department more "green," or environmentally friendly—a counterinsurgent framing given the deep-rooted environmental injustices of mass incarceration.[77]

RELIGIOUS AND MEDICAL DIETS

"WHILE PRISONERS HAVE A CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT TO RECEIVE A NUTRITIOUS DIET IN KEEPING WITH THEIR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS... THE RIGHT IS NOT ABSOLUTE."

– ALONZO EUGENE TURNER-BEY V. GARY D. MAYNARD, 2012

State-run prisons in Maryland are required by law to provide alternative meals to incarcerated individuals for religious or medical purposes. As opposed to a robust set of regulations, prison food is generally governed by case law pertaining to the First and Eighth Amendments of the U.S Constitution. For example, the Eighth Amendment purportedly protects incarcerated individuals from the deprivation of any "identifiable human need such as food."[78] The provision of medical diets—e.g. vegetarian and other specialized diets to meet the needs of pregnant individuals or people with cardiovascular issues or diabetes—also tends to fall under the purview of the Eighth Amendment. Under the First Amendment, which protects the right of persons in prison to practice their religion, Maryland institutions are loosely required to provide meals in compliance with religious dietary restrictions—namely halal and kosher diets. For example, Maryland correctional facilities formally introduced kosher diets in the spring of 2009 to supposedly meet these requirements.[79] However, as we detail in this section, such diets are designed not to actually honor the religious needs of incarcerated folks, but to comply with state and federal law in a way that minimizes costs and standardizes meals for all people in prison.

The Code of Maryland Regulations and medical and religious manuals developed by the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services address the specific policies and practices guiding the provision of special diets to incarcerated folks.[80] In general, most currently and formerly incarcerated people we spoke with agree that the quality of food on special diets is an improvement—however minuscule—to regular meal service. This leads some incarcerated people to enroll in religious or medical diet meal plans specifically to receive better food. However, the same individuals

also castigated the immense difficulties in actually accessing such diets as well as the ability of these diets to meet their needs.

Incarcerated folks' negative experiences with or outright denial to accessing religious diets can be traced to the religious diet manual itself. As the manual states, institutions are asked to "make reasonable accommodations" to provide persons in each correctional facility with accepted religious dietary options.[81] The language of "reasonable accommodation"—qualified by "in accordance with security needs"—is ambiguous enough to protect the State from almost all legal challenges from incarcerated folks, and thus forms the legal basis for institutions to deny persons from culturally and religiously appropriate meals.[82]

> "I BEGAN TO RAISE ISSUES ABOUT RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION BECAUSE THEY WERE GIVING KOSHER TRAYS TO PEOPLE OF THE JEWISH FAITH. BUT THEY WON'T GIVE THOSE OF ISLAMIC FAITH HALAL MEALS. THEY ARE TELLING PEOPLE, "IF YOU ARE ON A RELIGIOUS DIET, EAT A VEGETARIAN." BUT THEY WON'T TELL THE MEMBERS OF THE JEWISH FAITH THAT. THEY GIVE THEM KOSHER MEALS. THEY DON'T SERVE HALAL IN ANY PRISON IN MARYLAND THAT I'VE BEEN TO... I TOOK THEM TO COURT ABOUT THAT. I COULDN'T GET NO REPRESENTATION SO I ENDED UP LOSING IN THE FEDERAL COURTS. THE FEDERAL COURT'S RULE IS THAT THEY DON'T HAVE TO SERVE US HALAL INSTEAD JUST GIVE US A VEGETARIAN MEAL AND THAT SHOULD BE ENOUGH."
>
> – ALONZO TURNER-BEY, FORMERLY INCARCERATED IN A NUMBER OF MARYLAND PRISONS

In 2012, Mr. Alonzo Turner-Bey—who was incarcerated at Eastern Correctional Institution at the time—filed a lawsuit against the Maryland Division of Correction and then-Secretary of Public Safety & Correctional Services, Gary Maynard, on the grounds of religious discrimination.[83] Mr. Turney-Bey described in his lawsuit how prisons accommodate kosher diets but exclude Muslims from similar religious accommodations—forcing him to choose between "violating Islamic dietary law or remaining on a strict vegetarian diet."[84] He further described how "the vegetarian diet offered may contain items unacceptable to him as a practicing Muslim."[85] In response, the State claimed that "for the past two decades the DOC has

provided a vegetarian or lacto-ovo menu that meets Islamic religious requirements"—proving Mr. Turner-Bey's point that their specific religious offerings are virtually non-existent.[86] Shockingly, the State further claimed that even the kosher diets they serve are not actually kosher. They admitted that "the DOC does not provide Jewish prisoners meat slaughtered in accordance with Jewish dietary laws, and.. that the state is unable to afford a diet option for any religious group that includes ritually-slaughtered animals due to cost and practical limitations on prison storage, cooking and serving capacities."[87] In other words, the DOC argued that they do not discriminate against Muslims as they are unable to meet any religious dietary requirements at all—neither kosher nor halal.

> **"ISSUES AROUND RELIGIOUS DIET ARE THE MOST COMMON ACCOMMODATION PROBLEM THAT MUSLIM PRISONERS ALLEGED IN FEDERAL LAWSUITS, ACCORDING TO MUSLIM ADVOCATES. THESE GRIEVANCES INCLUDE EVERYTHING FROM RAMADAN MEALS TO REGULAR ONES THROUGHOUT THE YEAR THAT FAIL TO PROVIDE HALAL OPTIONS."**
>
> *– 'I DON'T THINK YOU'RE GOING TO BE EATING TONIGHT.' MUSLIMS DESCRIBE RAMADAN IN U.S. PRISONS*

The denial of religiously appropriate meals mirrors the broader discrimination faced by incarcerated practitioners of Islam in carceral institutions throughout the country. Earlier in 2021, Time Magazine published an article on the experience of participating in Ramadan in U.S prisons. "For many Muslim prisoners in Virginia and nationwide," they detailed, "Ramadan has for years entailed not getting enough food, being lucky if food even arrives during a time when you can eat... as well as fundamental misunderstandings about key components of the faith by prison staff."[88] Muslim prisoners described having food come at the wrong times; being denied food outright; being served non-halal meats; and having their food tampered with. "I've had frozen patties, like literally frozen patties," Adnan Khan, Executive Director and co-founder of Re:Store Justice, described. "And I've worked in the kitchen before and I know that doesn't happen unless there's some form of intent behind it."[89]

Accessibility.

To be formally placed on a special diet, incarcerated individuals have to receive approval from an institution's healthcare provider (for medical diets) or chaplain (for religious diets). The process of approval can be cumbersome and bureaucratic, leading to long delays and extended periods of time where people are served meals harmful to their health or against their religion. Abdul, who was formerly incarcerated in the Western and Eastern regions in Maryland, explained: "It's a letter grade [improvement] from regular meals to the diet... a D plus to a C minus. But you got to remember, it took me a while, it took me over a year to get on that diet. A lot of times you had to get on them. You just flood [administration], two and three times a day, you would flood it, flood it." L., another person we spoke with, similarly described: "God forbid if you needed a Kosher diet. If you had a Kosher diet that wasn't happening... They just didn't serve it or just sent you through so, so much to try to get it."

Medical Diets and Health Needs.

Despite an increase in fresh fruits or vegetables, a number of participants expressed that medical diet plans stopped short of being nutritionally beneficial or well-tailored to health conditions. As Mr. Dennis Williams told us: "I got high blood pressure. It's supposed to be like they're watching your salt, right? You're supposed to have food that's low in salt. But, the processed food, all of it's loaded in salt. In order for you to get proper treatment in prison, for any type of medical condition, you have to be almost dead."

On the other end of the spectrum, multiple people also described how in order to meet the requirements of a medical diet, meals tended to be bland, repetitive, unpalatable, and almost thrown together. For example, J.—a currently incarcerated person with a nut allergy—expressed: "I'm allergic to peanut butter, so whenever they served peanut butter, they just gave me cheese and some bread." And another imprisoned person described how some

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> – MR. DENNIS WILLIAMS, INCARCERATED IN EASTERN MARYLAND

institutions merely "open up a can of plain potatoes and give us cold, plain potatoes right out the can."

Some prisons in Maryland and throughout the United States offer "heart healthy" or "cardiovascular" diets tailored for imprisoned people with certain heart conditions. Such diets, however beneficial they may sound on paper, translate in practice to inedible meals with even smaller portion sizes than those served to the general population. Calling for an end to the "heart healthy diet" was a specific demand named during the James T. Vaughn prison rebellion in 2017.[90] As written in the 22-point list of requests, "While a "heart healthy diet" may sound desirable to the larger public located outside of the prison walls, individuals incarcerated in Delaware, Pennsylvania, and beyond consistently report that the proportions associated with this "diet" as administered by the Department of Corrections leaves people underfed and hungry."[91]

Conclusion and Part 2

In Part 1 of this report, we have demonstrated how the day-to-day experience of eating in a Maryland prison is rooted in dehumanization—exemplified through the inhumane quality and quantity of institutional meals, the exploitative workings of the prison commissary, the abuse incarcerated individuals face in the chow hall, and the inadequacy of prison medical and religious diets.

Part 2 takes a closer look at the prison industrial food system itself. In the next section of this report, we detail how institutional policies and procedures governing correctional food provision—including how meals are prepared, stored, and served—further compound the violence of eating in captivity.

To learn more or get in touch:

Website: foodandabolition.org
Email: info@foodandabolition.org
Instagram: @foodandabolition