

*"I REFUSE TO LET THEM KILL ME":*

# FOOD, VIOLENCE, AND THE MARYLAND CORRECTIONAL FOOD SYSTEM

*Prepared by the Maryland  
Food & Prison Abolition Project*



MARYLAND  
**FOOD**  
**PRISON** &  
**ABOLITION**  
PROJECT

## PART II

### THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL FOOD SYSTEM

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**"FOOD WENT STRAIGHT FROM THE FREEZER INTO THE OVEN. MOST OF THE TIME IT WAS HALF DONE. BLOODY. HAIR ON IT. YOU STILL GOT HAIR ON THE CHICKEN. NO THOUGHT BEHIND PREPARATION... NOBODY CARES. IT'S LIKE I SAID, [CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS'] MENTALITY WAS 'JUST GET THESE GUYS FED.' MASS PRODUCTION. GET THEM FED."**

*– R.M, FORMERLY INCARCERATED IN A BALTIMORE PRISON*

Part 2 of this report explores the institutional policies and procedures that contribute to the experience of eating while incarcerated. In recent years, researchers and activists have brought attention to unpalatable and nutritionally inadequate meals in spaces outside of prison—such as schools and hospitals—due in part to challenges with industrial food production.<sup>92</sup> However, when these food systems are met with an intentional disregard of human life, patterns of neglect, abuse, and violence emerge that would cause public outrage in any other environment. People we spoke with across almost all regions and institutions recounted horror stories such as routinely finding maggots and cockroaches in their meal trays; witnessing entire groups of people fall sick after being served spoiled milk; and being made to clean cooking supplies with the same equipment used to clean floors and walls.

As described in the introduction to this report, the modern industrialized landscape of prison food is partially a product of Maryland's exploding prison population in the late 20th century.<sup>93</sup> Mass incarceration placed a

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strain on existing food service operations within pre-existing and newly constructed correctional facilities; in order to feed more people and minimize the costs of confinement, the state moved toward standardizing and industrializing prison food service operations. An example of this can be found in the centralization and expansion of Maryland Correctional Enterprises (MCE) in the 1980s to process, package, and distribute meat products to prisons in the state.<sup>94</sup> In a 1978 study on food service in Maryland's correctional facilities, published by the National Institute of Justice, the report's authors concluded that conventional food provision in individual prisons at the time was "expensive, [produces] poor food, and should be replaced by a centralized processing plant."<sup>95</sup> Thus birthed the current era of MCE: the study's final recommendation was to implement a "meat processing program facility to serve the entire correctional system" and other state-run institutions.<sup>96</sup>

Today, food provision in Maryland's prisons is governed by a set of regulations, policies, and standards determined by the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services, the Maryland General Assembly, the American Correctional Association (ACA), and a number of medical associations. State regulations—documented in the Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) and the Maryland Commission of Correctional Standards—were ostensibly created to both standardize food service across all state-run prisons and hold institutions accountable in providing "nutritional and well-balanced" meals to incarcerated individuals.<sup>97</sup> Despite their outward appearance, however, the state correctional food system is notoriously under-regulated, especially compared to food provision in public schools. As described in a 2013 article in the *Journal of Food Law and Policy*, "legislatures... generally leave prison food regulation to the sole discretion of prison administrators, resulting in a 'laissez-faire approach' in the prison food system; an anachronism in contemporary America."<sup>98</sup> In short, Maryland's prisons are solely concerned with meeting a vague set of nutritional and caloric requirements on as low of a budget as possible—while attempting

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to ensure the people in their custody do not actually die.

While delving deeper into specific regulations, standards, and food-related compliance and enforcement mechanisms is beyond the scope of this report, it must be noted that the accreditation guidelines for prison food conditions are just that—guidelines that have no legal standing. Instead, receiving ACA certification is a way for correctional staff to demonstrate false credibility. Prisons tout their accreditation as a means to justify the adequacy of their food service, while in reality institutions are not held to any real forms of accountability or transparency. In terms of enforcement, Michael—who was formerly incarcerated in Baltimore and the Eastern Shore—summed it up well: “I don't even think the guards would touch the food... you have rodents running around. The state might come through and check the kitchen out and that's probably the only time

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[guards] do a very thorough job in cleaning it.”

Furthermore, alongside lax enforcement, the state of Maryland simultaneously hinders the ability of incarcerated individuals to pursue legal recourse under the Maryland Prison Litigation Act—discussed further in Part 5 of this report.

The day-to-day operations of food provision in a Maryland prison thus fall primarily under the purview of an institution's warden. The state does hold certain high-level functions such as creating and modifying statewide and gender-specific menus; issuing bids to select and approve vendors; and, when contracts are about to expire, making modifications and additions to language in the request for proposal process. Wardens and institutional dietary staff, however, are responsible for almost all aspects of food service, including advocating for changes to their facility's

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dietary budget, managing procurement processes, and overseeing the preparation of meals. The power of an individual warden in determining what oftentimes thousands of individuals eat on a routine basis is unmatched—a power that is rooted in violence.

By walking through the complexities of the prison industrial food system, such as the operations of institutional kitchens, the ways in which food is stored, prepared, and served, and the experiences of incarcerated dietary workers, our conversations with currently and formerly incarcerated individuals laid bare the systematic failings of state-run correctional facilities to prepare hygienically safe, palatable meals appropriate for human beings. As Kenneth, who had been formerly incarcerated in Western Maryland, put it: "It's terrible. There's no care put into the food, into the cooking, no care, it's thrown together for large groups of people. No care is put into it. It's like they're feeding animals."



## THE FOOD PREPARATION PROCESS

**"I DON'T EAT ANY OF THAT CRAP THAT COMES OUT OF THERE...THEY'LL DEEP FRY THE FISH AFTER THEY DEEP FRIED THE CHICKEN TWO DAYS AGO IN THE SAME GREASE."**

*– K., CURRENTLY INCARCERATED IN A JESSUP PRISON*

The process of preparing a meal in a Maryland prison is never exactly the same between any two institutions in the state. While some facilities are equipped with extensive kitchen capabilities, allowing for a type of "scratch cooking" within the prison itself, others receive and reheat partially or fully prepared meals from a central kitchen near the facility or within another prison. Some central kitchens also utilize cook-chill processes—purportedly

**MARYLAND SPENDS ON  
AVERAGE \$3.83 PER PERSON  
PER DAY FOR THREE  
MEALS ACROSS ALL STATE  
PRISONS.**

to increase efficiency and minimize waste—where food is prepared in large quantities, frozen, and shipped to other prisons to be reheated. For example, the central kitchen in Hagerstown, Maryland distributes several thousand food items to a handful of prisons in the region, where meals are then completed in an institution's "finishing kitchen."

Alongside the paltry institutional budgets for raw food allocated per person per meal, the actual processes of preparing food contribute significantly to the poor quality of meals served in prison. Due to a variety of factors such as a lack of care from correctional dietary staff, a lack of training for both correctional staff and incarcerated dietary workers, and high turnover rates, incarcerated individuals end up being served meals that resemble—as one person described—"slop...like something you wouldn't even give your animals who love you."



## Incarcerated Dietary Workers

*"Where's the jobs in prison that could help us pay to support [our families]? Like the shit is all a setup and a game... There's no rehabilitation."*

*– Shirome, formerly incarcerated in six prisons across Maryland*

In Maryland, all state-run correctional facilities are "self-operated"—or publicly managed—meaning that incarcerated dietary workers comprise

the majority of the labor force needed for industrial food production. Incarcerated workers are overseen by correctional dietary staff, who supervise and manage food service operations such as the process of meal preparation, cleaning and organizing an institution's kitchen, storage practices, and serving food to all other individuals in the facility. The procedural requirements for incarcerated dietary workers vary across institutions; for example, some prisons require all incarcerated individuals to first work in dietary before they become eligible for other jobs, while others offer dietary positions on a selective basis.

**"WORKING IN JAIL... WE USED TO MAKE CANDY. WE USED TO MAKE SAUCE. I USED TO SELL THAT. I USED TO SELL FOR EVEN A STAMP, OR BAGGED FOOD, OR CANNED FOOD. I HAD HUNDREDS OF CANNED FOODS BECAUSE I ALWAYS NEEDED SOMETHING. I USED TO SELL PEPPERS, ONIONS, PAPRIKA, STUFF LIKE THAT."**

*– ANTOIN QUARLES-EL*

On average, non-MCE incarcerated workers in Maryland prisons are paid between 90 cents to \$2.75 a day for their labor.<sup>99</sup> Comparisons between prisons and slavery are often made linking this "super-exploitation" of incarcerated individuals to the profit motives of larger multinational corporations.<sup>100</sup> However, as James Kilgore and

**THE FRAMING OF REHABILITATION REFRAMES THE ACTIONS OF PEOPLE ENTRAPPED IN PRISON AS INDIVIDUAL MORAL FAILURES—AS OPPOSED TO A SYSTEMATIC UNDERSTANDING OF FACTORS THAT LEAD TO FORMS OF SURVIVAL IN A WORLD WHERE BASIC NEEDS ARE NOT MET FOR THE VAST MAJORITY OF PEOPLE. SHIFTING BLAME FROM STRUCTURAL OPPRESSION TO INDIVIDUAL CHOICE IS A WAY FOR THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM TO LEGITIMIZE ITSELF.**

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Ruth Wilson Gilmore notes, a more accurate comparison between the prison-industrial complex and slavery can be found in how both systems successfully reproduce themselves.<sup>101</sup> The labor of most incarcerated individuals is not oriented toward private profit—and certainly not toward “rehabilitation”—but for the maintenance and operational work necessary for the functioning of the prison itself. In notorious prison farms such as Angola and Parchman Farm, as James Kilgore writes, prisons “cruelly imitate the conditions of slavery” to grow crops for government consumption.<sup>102</sup> In Maryland, incarcerated individuals are made to cook, clean, and conduct a range of menial tasks in order for the prison machine to prosper. For example, according to the Maryland Division of Corrections FY 2019 Annual Report, a total of 11,726 individuals were assigned to work positions within Maryland’s prisons—or about 64% of the entire incarcerated population.<sup>103</sup> Of the total incarcerated workforce, 17% of individuals worked in dietary services, forming the second largest department after sanitation. Cooking and cleaning thus form the majority of the labor needs extracted from imprisoned people, with both departments comprising approximately 45% of all paid positions.<sup>104</sup>

As detailed in our conversations with currently and formerly incarcerated individuals, the experience of working in a prison kitchen is complex and nuanced. For some people, the kitchen is an abusive, stressful, and dehumanizing environment; correctional officers bark orders while workers are made to toil for long hours, virtually non-existent wages, and no actual decision-making power over the cooking process. K., a participant formerly incarcerated in Jessup, described: “When you’re working in the main dining hall, it’s very strict... Of course the work isn’t commensurate to the pay. You’re going to make like 90, 95 cents a day. They have you sweeping, mopping, bussing the tables down, pulling the pans out, dumping the contents, pre-soaking them and then washing them, and then hanging them up where they belong. So the experience... was like, ‘Work, boy, work.’ You worked like a horse in those kitchens.” Another person added: “They worked the hell out of you though. It wasn’t easy. The guard is like your boss. Anything they tell you to do, we had to do it.” As described in Part 1, the stress of working in the kitchen is further compounded by the fact that the entire prison schedule often revolves around food service.

For other individuals—while the dehumanizing and abusive nature of working in the kitchen still constitutes their primary experience—proximity to the kitchen does have advantages in the form of greater access to food.

**"YOU DON'T GET MANY CONDIMENTS, AND SO A LOT OF THAT STUFF YOU WOULD STASH. I GUESS IT'S LIKE CASH AND CIGARETTES IN JAIL, YOU TREAT IT LIKE GOLD, BECAUSE THE FOOD DEFINITELY NEEDS TO BE SEASONED. EVERYTHING WAS BLAND. IT WAS THROWN TOGETHER. JUST HORRIBLE."**

**— MARK, FORMERLY INCARCERATED IN BALTIMORE AND AT EASTERN CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION**

"Working in the kitchen... I was eating what I could, and anything that I wanted to eat, whatever I could eat, I was eating that," Greg explained. "Instead of eating the stuff that they would send through for the population, because I had that advantage... that's why a lot of us like to stay in the kitchen to where if there is extra stuff, we can eat it to where we are full." In addition, folks who worked in the Officer's Dining Room—or ODR—also had greater access to both institutional food as well as the higher-quality meals that prisons provide for

staff. As Antoin described, "I could eat out of ODR when in the kitchen... which is where the good [food] was at. Fried chicken, hot wings, things we would never get."

Proximity to the kitchen also means that incarcerated dietary workers can move food out of the chow hall or kitchen and transport it back to their tier or housing unit. The consequences for "stealing" food can be severe—ranging from a pat down, to a strip search, to losing one's job and being sent to solitary confinement. Given the poor quality and quantity of institutional meals, however, many folks choose to risk the consequences of being caught instead of staying hungry. Furthermore, transporting food from the kitchen also comprises a part of the informal prison economy described in Part 1 of this report. As Matthew, who was formerly incarcerated in Jessup, told us: "Kitchen workers used to take food out of the kitchen and sell it back in the dorms. Every day. They would go down there and make pizzas... Bring the pizzas back up. They would sell sugar, peanut butter, jelly, whatever down there they can have. They even brought back chicken fingers one time. Anything they think they can get away with, or cook and sell, or somebody might want, and they know it's down there, they're selling. A cup of sugar would go for a dollar or two. You'd get five or 10 chicken fingers for 10 bucks. A big block of butter, frozen block of butter, it'd be like \$2.00. Peanut butter, you can get almost a whole jar. They'd sell it to you for a dollar. They'd also give you commissary. If it was \$1.00, three noodles, they'd give you three

noodles for the dollar.”

While the act of moving food out of “designated” areas and eating or selling them in housing units is criminalized by correctional staff, such acts must be more appropriately viewed as legitimate forms of resistance. In “The Hidden Food: Mealtime Resistance and Identity Work in a Norwegian Prison,” Thomas Ugelvik relays incarcerated folks’ theoretical and practical intentions driving practices of “alternative food making.”<sup>105</sup> For one, bringing raw ingredients or prepared foods back to a cell or dormitory is a means of survival—for example, to address one’s hunger, to share foods with others, to counter terrible institutional preparation practices leading to inedible meals, or to sell food items for income.

Cooking in prison is also a means to express agency in an environment whose purpose is to deprive a person of any forms of individual identity, autonomy, or self-expression. Bartering or selling food items, stashing condiments, throwing out institutional meals, and preparing meals from food items purchased from commissary allows individuals to practice control and refusal through one of the very few mechanisms that folks actually have at their disposal. As Ugelvik writes: “Making your own [food] amounts to fighting for dignity and sense of self. If one... thinks of every meal served as a tiny movement of the prison machinery, each alternative meal made in a cell can be seen as a grain of sand in the cogs of the machine... By everyday rule bending or breaking, [incarcerated individuals] position themselves as autonomous subjects able to resist the powerful prison, rather than docile objects of the prison’s power.”<sup>106</sup>

## Correctional Dietary Staff

***“[Correctional staff] are feeding for a big population. So, they’re not particularly worried about taste or nutritious value, they’re just trying to get these guys fed so they can’t say that they didn’t eat.”***

*– Roderick, formerly incarcerated in multiple Maryland state-run prisons*

In Maryland prisons with kitchen capabilities, the actual process of preparing food is largely dependent on the correctional dietary officer on duty. In order to convert a written item on a menu to a prepared meal—often for thousands of individuals—correctional staff manage and direct incarcerated dietary workers on all aspects of the preparation process. As

such, most decision-making power is effectively removed from the hands of the workers themselves.

The quality of a meal in confinement varies considerably based on the personal attitudes and skill levels of dietary staff. Currently and formerly incarcerated individuals we spoke with pointed to correctional officers' general lack of care in feeding an imprisoned population; while some staff members do put care into the cooking process, others either believe that the quality of food service is genuinely adequate, or that incarcerated individuals are not deserving of "good" meals as they are, after all, in prison. From the perspective of incarcerated dietary workers, correctional staff are less concerned with palatability or nutrition and more with solely providing some type of food to meet institutional and legal mandates. "When you're home, you wash things, you take care of your food," B., who is currently imprisoned in Jessup, told us. "They could care less back there. They're all supposed to taste the food... But they don't always. So like, 'Okay, that's good. Just pack it up. Let's go. It's done.'"

In addition to a lack of regard for taste or quality, staff also directly weaponize food as a tool of punishment. Discussed in full detail in Part 5, examples of food as punishment range from withholding food from certain individuals or entire housing units as a form of retribution; letting people go hungry if they sleep through a meal; changing meal times to induce hunger; preventing folks' access to special diets; and sending people to segregation—another term for solitary confinement—for taking food out of the kitchen. "There've been times that they just called for the whole place to go on lockdown," Antoin explained. "Something happened between a dude and police and they put the whole place on lock. We were sitting there waiting to go to feed up when it happened... they didn't give us the bagged food until like 9:30pm, 10:00pm. The dinner that was supposed to come at 4:00pm came at 10. The meal before that was at 10:00am or 11:00am. And then, bagged food for dinner was nothing but four pieces of bread, some lunch meat, or a small cup of tuna or peanut butter and jelly, and an apple." Such forms of punishment—the denial of food as retribution, in this example—are exerted despite Maryland's formal prohibition of "the use of food as punishment or reward" in a correctional environment.<sup>107</sup>

## Preparation Practices

*"It looks just like slop. I don't know if you've ever seen any movie and you*

***see how they stand in line and they slop it. That's exactly what it looks like... The first time I remember when I was locked up, it was a shock. And I'm like, I'm not eating that, I'll just starve."***

*– Lorena, formerly incarcerated in a Baltimore pretrial institution*

Ice cold meals. Half-cooked chicken patties and green, rubbery hotdogs. Lack of seasoning and taste. Overcooked and nutrient-depleted vegetables. Green beans that taste like they've been "washed with dish soap." Compounding the poor quality of procured food items, institutional preparation practices ensure that foods are both unpalatable and devoid of any nutritional quality by the time they are served to the incarcerated population. From adding water to foods to stretch portion sizes; to preparing foods straight from the freezer to the oven; to serving meals hours after they have been prepared; to meats, canned vegetables, and starches mixing together in a bag or tray and turning to slop, the ways that meals are cooked and served behind bars reflect the larger mentality behind correctional food itself—as a tool to dehumanize individuals who are seen as deserving of such punishment.

Maryland state prisons are legally required to provide three meals a day to individuals in their custody. According to the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services Food Services Manual, two of those three meals must be classified as "hot"—with all meals "provided at regular meal times during each 24-hour period, with no more than 14-hours between

**"THE QUALITY AND QUANTITY [OF FOOD] DECREASED OVER THE YEARS. INSTEAD OF GETTING EIGHT OUNCES FOR THE MAIN MEAL... EIGHT OUNCE PORTIONS WAS REDUCED TO APPROXIMATELY FOUR OUNCES. THEY ACTUALLY HAD A PROTOCOL THAT THEY'RE OBLIGATED TO FOLLOW. I'VE WORKED IN VARIOUS KITCHENS THROUGHOUT THE INSTITUTIONS, AND THEY DO NOT FOLLOW THAT PROTOCOL. BECAUSE IT'S ALSO CONTINGENT ON HOW THE SERGEANT FEELS. IF THE SERGEANT REALLY DON'T FEEL LIKE IT... HE SAYS, 'LOOK, DON'T COOK SO MUCH. WE'RE NOT GOING TO HAVE A LOT OF PEOPLE COMING IN TODAY BECAUSE OF THIS TYPE OF MEAL THAT WE'RE HAVING.' IF IT IS A LOT OF PEOPLE, THEN THEY'LL JUST START GIVING THEM SMALLER PORTIONS, OR ADD WATER... A LOT OF TIMES THEY WOULD ADD WATER TO STRETCH IT."**

*– HAROLD, FORMERLY IMPRISONED IN A NUMBER OF MARYLAND PRISONS*

the evening meal and breakfast.”<sup>108</sup> The language of “hot” and “cold” describes not just the physical temperature of a meal—as in, if a meal is actually hot when ready to consume—but the type of meal itself. A cold meal, for example, could consist of a bagged lunch—a few slices of bread, “sweaty” lunch meat, cookies or an apple, and a beverage. Official policy itself dictates the subpar criteria of bagged meals as compared to standard

nutritional requirements: as stated in the DPSCS Food Services Manual, “The dietary manager is encouraged to provide a variety of bagged meals... meeting at least one-third of the daily nutritional requirements.”<sup>109</sup>

**“BREAD, BOLOGNA IN A BAGGY BY ITSELF... IT WAS WET, LIKE THEY TRIED TO THAW IT OUT—I GUESS IT WAS WET FROM IT BEING THAWED OUT. BUT THAT WAS JUST NASTY TO ME. IF I GOT A PIECE OF BOLOGNA THAT WASN'T GREEN, SOMETIMES I GOT BLESSED AND DID GET A PIECE OF BOLOGNA THAT WASN'T GREEN, I WOULD PUT A PAPER TOWEL AND GET THE WETNESS OFF OF IT.”**

*— E., FORMERLY IMPRISONED IN A JESSUP PRISON*

A hot meal could refer to a meal that requires some type of heat to prepare—even if that heat is not applied—such as a dinner of turkey hot dogs, baked beans, canned fruit, bread, and a drink. Regardless of the language of “hot” or “cold,” the majority of people we spoke with described how meals would most often be cold when served in both a prison dining hall or their cell. “The

biggest problem was the lunch and dinner trays,” Reggie told us. “They would pre-make those trays like three hours ahead of time, and then it would sit on the racks until feed up time. So of course your food would be freaking cold, and then pushed on the cart, so it's just going to be mixed all over the place.”

In addition to cold meals, foods such as canned vegetables and meats are oftentimes either severely overcooked or undercooked. Beyond a lack of palatability, these practices have a negative impact on people’s health: folks are routinely served meats that are nearly raw or canned vegetables cooked for so long that any remnant nutritional value is leached out. As J., who is currently incarcerated in Jessup, described: “You get old food, or it ain't seasoned, or they can't cook ... It's either overcooked so it takes all the nutrition out, or it's undercooked and it looks nasty. How nutritious is canned foods anyway? How nutritious is processed foods? There's not that

much nutrition in the foods that they give us because everything's either processed, or overcooked and everything's been cooked out."

Menus in Maryland prisons usually operate on a five-week cycle, where meals are repeated once the cycle is complete. While meals might look different on a menu from day to day—for example, "turkey ala king" might be listed on one day, and "turkey BBQ" the next—oftentimes the same foods are reused and recycled under a different name. "They had this stuff called turkey tetrazzini," Jackie, who was formerly incarcerated in Hagerstown, explained. "It's really just the slop they throw on noodles and rice... They'll call it turkey tetrazzini, and then they'll call it turkey ala king, and it's pretty much the same thing. They just put it on rice or noodles and different things... Like spaghetti, stuff like that. They call it different stuff. You might have that three times a week. It's hard. Nobody really eats it."

As mentioned earlier in this report, prison menus are generally developed on a state-wide level by the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services' Chief of Correctional Food Service and standardized across all institutions. Given the explosion of jail and prison populations in Maryland from the 1980s onward, correctional dietary staff turned to standardization as an attempt to homogenize meals across institutions, feed the thousands of people behind bars in a uniform manner—regardless of individual choice and dietary needs—and, overall, to cut food services costs. Meals are thus constructed to meet ambiguous nutritional requirements as cheaply and efficiently as possible—leading to bland, flavorless meals and the majority of calories coming from inexpensive fillers such as starches. While prisons do offer "special diets" for medical and religious purposes—including cardiovascular, diabetic, vegetarian, and kosher-specific meal plans—those diets do not drift far from menus developed for the general population. Special diets can also be even more bland than standard meals, are difficult to gain access to, and generally do not actually meet people's health and religious needs. In short, the hierarchical, centralized, and standardized nature of menu planning and meal production almost guarantees that correctional food service remains unpalatable everywhere in Maryland—no matter which institution a person is incarcerated in.

## THE PRISON KITCHEN

**"IT MAKES YOU NOT WANT TO EAT IT BECAUSE YOU KNOW IT'S GOING TO CAUSE YOU TO BE SICK... FINDING MAGGOTS IN THE SLICER AFTER YOU'RE DONE SLICED EVERYTHING THAT WE'RE GOING TO EAT. THEY'VE ALREADY HAD TO THROW COMPLETE MEALS AWAY BECAUSE THEY FOUND MAGGOTS IN THEIR SLICER."**

*– J., CURRENTLY IMPRISONED IN JESSUP*

Cockroaches, rats, mice, and maggots—these are some of the vermin that currently and formerly incarcerated individuals we spoke with routinely described finding in a prison's kitchen, cooking equipment, dining hall, and in their own meal trays. Such descriptions are not unique to Maryland's correctional facilities—across the United States, report after report detail the subhuman conditions to which people in prison are subjected.<sup>110</sup> For example, in 2015 a group of 16 incarcerated individuals in New York's Brooklyn House of Detention were served carrot cake laced with literal rat poison. Although one incarcerated person noticed "green pellets" in the food and alerted a jail officer, the officer brushed the concern away by claiming they were mere "clusters of nuts and fruits"—while she herself refused to sample the food.<sup>111</sup>

Rather than viewing these incidents as aberrations, the dehumanizing, violent, and oftentimes lethal physical conditions in prison are intrinsic to the everyday logics of incarceration.<sup>112</sup> As the US criminal punishment system serves to disappear, warehouse, and reproduce a racialized "surplus" population, the prison eating environment reflects the state's moral and material disregard for the humanity of those in its custody. In our conversations, individuals with direct experience eating and working in Maryland's prisons brought to light the specific institutional operations and environmental factors contributing to an overarching climate of dehumanization, including haphazard and unhygienic cleaning procedures, improper ventilation, and widespread contamination of food items. As one imprisoned person summarized, "Most of the [correctional staff] think that we're beneath them anyway, so they really don't care what we eat. And then the conditions of the kitchen... make it worse."

## Rodents, Insects and Contamination

***“Regular sanitation inspections are necessary to ensure that: food service equipment is maintained and functioning properly; proper hygiene practices are followed... refuse and waste disposal practices are appropriate; and all areas are free of vermin and pests.”***

*– Maryland Commission on Correctional Standards; Adult Correctional Institutions<sup>113</sup>*

***“I basically did not eat off of those trays because roaches, mice, feces was in them. You were actually seeing this in these trays.”***

*– A.G, formerly incarcerated in Jessup*

***“There’s roaches in the closet. There’s a drop ceiling [in the kitchen], but the drop ceiling is missing and you’ll see the roaches. Sometimes we’ll turn the light off and then watch them come out and then we’ll turn the light on and watch them [go back in]. I’ve never said that out loud, I guess it’s worse than what it is.”***

*– Christina, formerly incarcerated in Jessup*

From maggots in cooking equipment, to bugs in canned food items, to actual vermin feces in meal trays, the state of Maryland consistently serves food to incarcerated individuals that no human being should have to eat. Although some institutions are worse than others, currently and formerly incarcerated individuals detailed similar experiences with food contamination across all regions in the state. For example, as Harold, who has been incarcerated in multiple Maryland prisons described: “In the Jessup Region, you see a lot of roaches and mice running around the kitchen. When I was in BCCC [the Baltimore City Correctional Center]... you see mice all the time, because we were right there in the city.”

A number of people we spoke with also recounted instances where correctional staff served food clearly contaminated by rodents to the incarcerated population. Shirome, an individual incarcerated in various prisons throughout Maryland, stated: “It’s prison. It is a mice and a rat infestation in the prison system. They’re going to get to the kitchen, that’s where the food at. But [staff] still serves food that was damaged or nibbled

on by a rodent." Separately, another formerly incarcerated individual expressed: "I don't know if they was like cockroaches or mosquitoes or what, but [the food] had bugs in it... the greens. I mean, I couldn't understand it... They [would not] throw the whole tray away, but I think they would just... dip out the bug and still serve it."

**"COCKROACHES, PRAYING MANTIS,  
THOUSAND LEGS... THEY HAD  
FLEAS IN THE KITCHEN ONE TIME."**

**— A., FORMERLY INCARCERATED IN  
MULTIPLE MARYLAND PRISONS**

In addition to rodents in the kitchen, many currently and formerly incarcerated individuals recounted their experiences finding rats and mice in their prison cells. The majority of Maryland's prisons in operation today were constructed between 25 to 80 years ago; given

their age and generally dilapidated physical conditions, it's not uncommon for facilities to be, as asserted by Shirome, "infested" with rodents. Incarcerated individuals thus expressed how they see rats anywhere there may be food—and as they are able to store commissary food in their cells, they routinely find rodents in their already-inhumane living environment. As described in Part 1 of this report, the failures of institutional food service lead many incarcerated individuals to depend on commissary as a source of survival, escape, and agency. Although people intentionally store commissary food on shelves or closets in their cells to keep rodents away, individuals described waking up in the middle of the night to the sound of rats going through their food. Abdul, who was incarcerated in an institution in the Eastern Shore of Maryland, walked us through one particularly difficult night: "When you open the closet... I had put [commissary food] I had bought that was nonperishable up there. Mice. Sometimes you see three or four fighting. You know what I mean? Just all night long. And... I had a dream that two mice was fighting one mice. I'm going to a psychiatrist. I had a nervous breakdown."

When the state induces hunger on multiple levels—depriving people of edible food through inadequate institutional food service; charging people for food through commissary; and then creating and maintaining the conditions for rats to contaminate peoples' sources of survival—imprisoned individuals are forced to make choices that no person should have to make. As L., who was previously imprisoned in a Jessup institution described: "Some of the food that they brought in, you didn't know whether it was

pepper or mice feces or the pellets that they drop. And then they expect people to eat it, but people were actually hungry—they said they had to eat or die.”

## Outdated Equipment and Poor Ventilation

*“Being in the kitchen for as long as I have, I've picked up on a lot of things that are not good in any way, shape, or form.”*

*— J., currently imprisoned in Jessup*

A number of prisons in Maryland were first constructed close to—or even over—one hundred years ago. The Metropolitan Transition Center in Baltimore, for example, was built in 1811 and is considered one of the oldest prisons in the nation.<sup>114</sup> Another facility, the Baltimore City Detention Center—described by the Governor of Maryland himself as “one of the worst prisons in America”—was constructed in 1801 and renovated in 1858 (and was ultimately cleared for demolition in 2015).<sup>115</sup>

18 out of Maryland’s 21 currently operating correctional facilities were erected during or before the mid-1990s. Thus, at the time of writing, the vast majority of prisons where individuals we spoke with were or are currently confined were constructed at least 25 years ago. With old facilities come outdated or broken kitchen equipment not equipped for industrial food production. In addition to currently or formerly imprisoned individuals, correctional staff also pointed to old cooking equipment as a major challenge in preparing meals. As one dietary staff member expressed, “I think the equipment is a big deal... It needs to be replaced. Anything over 20 years old needs to be replaced.”

Formerly and currently incarcerated individuals also pointed to improper hygiene practices stemming from the physical layout of older correctional kitchens. For example, in some prisons bathrooms for incarcerated individuals—as opposed to those for correctional staff—are located in or near the kitchen with no ventilation. One currently incarcerated person described: “The bathroom is right there next to the kitchen too, right there. And somebody goes in there and uses the bathroom, it smells. And that smell goes right out there in the kitchen where all the food is, like it's right there.... there's no air vent or nothing in there to take it outside. And it's bad, it's all just coming right into the kitchen.”

Although not as visible as contaminated food, issues such as a lack of ventilation in the kitchen bathroom reinforce the notion that incarcerated individuals are viewed as “lesser than” correctional staff. A simple solution to addressing the smell in the kitchen could be, as a participant suggested, for correctional staff to “let [incarcerated individuals] use the officer's bathroom that's down the hallway, let the officer use the one in the [Officer' Dining Room]... and close the other bathroom down.” However, making such a change would mean restructuring the very power relations on which prisons depend to maintain subjugation—and thus interrogating the entire structure and function of prison as a whole.

## Cleaning Practices

***“They mix the jello in this big white tub, the same tub that they use to put like water and soap and to clean the floors, it's awful. They clean it but they don't sanitize it. They use the same scrubber to clean the bin as they do to clean the walls.”***

*– M., currently incarcerated in Jessup*

Some of the most glaring instances of neglect in prison kitchens can be found in institutional cleaning practices. In our conversations with currently and formerly incarcerated dietary workers, individuals detailed how cooking equipment, canned and fresh produce, and the kitchen itself are cleaned—or, more appropriately, left dirty—based on the specific correctional dietary officer on duty. As Harold explained: “With respect to cleanliness, it depended on who was responsible for cleaning up... A lot of times, and I thought this was unsanitary, the bucket that they would use to wipe the tables, may be the same water from earlier, or the buckets they used the mop before. So when you walk in, [it] stinks. It all depended on who was responsible for that job, and who was responsible for following up on their duties.” Other folks explained the inconsistencies in cleanliness

**PEOPLE WE SPOKE WITH DESCRIBED FINDING INSECTS IN BOTH COOKING EQUIPMENT AND THE FOOD ITSELF DUE TO POOR CLEANING PROCEDURES, INCLUDING MAGGOTS, BUGS, AND COCKROACHES.**

due to lack of accountability for correctional staff: “Yeah I mean, you supposed to keep the kitchen clean. You sure want them to be... everybody don't care, but it's a job somebody got to do. Nobody is calling the health

department on you. So who is to say is it clean? ... I know [correctional staff] wouldn't call them on themselves. So who is it to come round and check?"

**"THEY HAVE MAGGOTS IN THE PEACHES. IT WAS A STINKBUG IN THE GREENS. LIKE I DIDN'T EAT ANY OF THAT CANNED FRUITS AND VEGETABLES AT ALL, EVER."**

*– J.L*

**"I DON'T EAT ANY CANNED FRUIT OR VEGETABLES HERE, BECAUSE IT'S ALWAYS BUGS AND MAGGOTS IN IT. I DON'T EAT ANY OF THEIR FRUIT AND VEGETABLES."**

*– J.R*

**"THERE ARE ROACHES IN THE KITCHEN, ON THE FLOOR AND STUFF. SOMETIMES IN THE CEILINGS."**

*– J.R*

People we spoke with also described finding insects in both cooking equipment and the food itself due to poor cleaning procedures. For example, one currently incarcerated individual described: "When they do have tossed salad, I don't even get that anymore. Because they don't wash it, they don't pre-wash it. So they just put it in there, set some water on it. So then by the time you get to that bottom you see all the dirt, the little bugs." Additional descriptions included finding "maggots in the meat cutter," bugs in canned fruit, and during one especially horrifying instance, a "roach head... with little feelers" in the lettuce.

Such experiences are common throughout institutions in all parts of Maryland. As K., another participant incarcerated in a different region of the state, detailed: "I won't eat the lettuce from here. Absolutely not. It's got bugs in it. They don't wash that back there. They just peel it off,

throw it in and out it comes... I know what goes on in that kitchen. That's not going in me. And I'm not saying it can't happen on the outside... But, when you're home, you wash things, you take care of it. They could care less back there." Thus, in the rare moments where institutions do serve fresh produce, improper cleaning practices add insult to injury by further depriving incarcerated individuals of access to greens and other vegetables.

Aside from finding insects in food items, people also recounted their experiences regarding cleaning meat. One former dietary worker who wished to remain anonymous told us: “[We get] whole chickens—there are no heads and they're plucked for the most part. But the fact that there are feathers in there is really gross, and there's lots of feet and things that don't belong. So the inmates clean them, guts and they part them out because we're supposed to get a thigh and a leg connected. Right? Isn't that what it is? Supposed to be. But the inmates go through and part them, it's really gross. It's really gross. They throw a lot of stuff away because there's so many extra parts of the chickens.”

To get a sense of the general cleanliness of the kitchen, M., a currently incarcerated kitchen worker, walked us through their shift earlier that same day. They explained: “We had to clean a lot of stuff and we found out that people from early in that shift claimed they cleaned the pot. And the pot... we finally check it and I'm like, 'Oh, wait a minute. What is this?'... there's stuff caked in it. So we actually had to... to clean everything out because I'm like, 'Wait a minute.' [Correctional staff] say, 'Just prep this [food]. They cleaned [the pot] earlier'... And I said, 'How am I cooking with this?' It was old.”

Incarcerated dietary workers have little formal agency or power when it comes to food production—workers are told to follow orders from correctional dietary staff, regardless of how little sense those orders may make. While incarcerated workers do find ways to exercise agency and improve the cooking process, speaking up about improper preparation and cleaning procedures also has real consequences. For instance, people can lose their job—a vital source of income needed for individuals to meet their basic needs denied by the state—or suffer retaliation in the form of solitary confinement or physical violence. For example, three currently incarcerated dietary workers in a dialogue circle discussed their concerns about food production as follows:

**J.L.:** “[Handling the food] makes us not want to eat it.”

**J.R.:** “And it makes me want to tell everybody not to eat it.”

**J.L.:** “But when we do that we can lose our job and stuff, because we're putting it out there. So it's not good to speak up, so we just want to keep our mouth shut.”

**M.:** “Because you want to stay on the low.”

## STORAGE

**"AS FAR AS THE WAY THEY THAW THINGS OUT, OR THE WAY THAT THEY... STORE STUFF, IT'S NOT DONE RIGHT. IT MAKES YOU NOT WANT TO EAT IT BECAUSE YOU KNOW IT'S GOING TO CAUSE YOU TO BE SICK."**

*– N., CURRENTLY INCARCERATED IN BALTIMORE*

In addition to the poor quality of raw ingredients, overcooked and undercooked meals, and widespread contamination, the ways in which food is stored further contribute to the production of meals described as "nasty," "terrible," and "atrocious." As this section describes, even if certain food items arrive at the prison in decent shape, institutional practices such as continually freezing and thawing foods and serving foods beyond their expiry date ensure that meals are nearly unpalatable by the time they reach the dining hall.

The problems with prison food provision thus arise on all aspects of the food service spectrum. As opposed to a set of disparate and isolated practices, industrial food production in prison must be viewed as a totalizing system—a system predicated on negligence at best and an intentional form of control, violence, and premature death at worst.

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## Expired Foods.

*"Half the time the milk we get is spoiled before we even get it. It's nasty and disgusting, it's already bad."*

*— J., currently incarcerated in Jessup*

Given that the average per person raw food costs across all Maryland prisons are grossly insufficient—amounting to less than a dollar per meal in some institutions—the state procures products such as canned produce, milk, and breads from private food service companies that are generally of second or third-grade quality. Sometimes food items arrive at the prison already spoiled; other times, institutions hold and serve foods beyond their expiry date in order to avoid waste and save money. Currently and formerly incarcerated individuals highlighted receiving moldy, stale bread and spoiled milk in particular—frequently enough to the point where some individuals knew to check expiry dates whenever milk was served. As one imprisoned person told us, "For the most part, the only time that everybody's offered milk is when they're getting ready to expire. [I'm] not even joking. I'll come in and they'll be putting milk up and I'm like, "I bet they're getting ready to expire." Turn it around, it might be a day or two away because they got to get rid of that milk; they don't want it to go to waste."

In addition to institutions' heavy reliance on bread and other starches to compensate for "childlike" meal portions, participants also spoke to the poor quality of the bread itself. As two currently incarcerated participants, L. and E., explained: "[Correctional staff] gave the whole institution... expired bread. So instead of throwing it away, I guess they served it to us." E. added: "They use all the expired bread to make bread pudding. So they have bread pudding once or twice a week." And in a different institution in a different part of the state, C.M expressed the same sentiment: "The bread... it's old... It's always hard. Stale. Dense. Very dense, almost like it has little to no yeast in it. Hardly any soft slices."

Beyond a lack of palatability, consuming expired or nearly-expired foods can have severe negative impacts on a person's physical health. For example, a number of currently incarcerated individuals recounted a recent event where, in order to save money, the institution served a batch of spoiled milk to those purportedly in its care. As C.M portrayed: "I think it was three weeks ago they gave us chocolate milks that weren't completely

frozen. Come to find out they were bad. Everybody was getting sick off of them. But they were out of date. That's why they gave them to us frozen." Such an incident is another example of prison administration prioritizing cost over human life; furthermore, given the atrocious state of healthcare in Maryland's prisons, individuals often have no choice but to suffer the effects of state-induced harm with no recourse.<sup>116</sup>

## Storage Practices

***"It's really not a 'preparation'... Take it out of the freezer, throw it in the oven. That's it. That's how they feed."***

*– Roderick, formerly incarcerated in multiple Maryland state-run prisons*

It's one issue for prisons to procure largely substandard food items from food service contractors and serve expired or damaged foods to the imprisoned population. It's another, however, for institutional storage practices themselves to consistently cause food to spoil or significantly degrade in quality. Stemming from previously discussed challenges that come with feeding hundreds or thousands of people multiple times a day—as well as an overarching climate of institutionalized indifference—individuals currently and formerly in confinement detailed practices contributing to unpalatable meals such as continually thawing and refreezing items and storing canned goods for long periods of time.

One of the biggest issues dietary workers raised in our conversations was the practice of freezing, improperly thawing, and serving half-frozen foods such as milk. For example, as two imprisoned participants told us, "They have to freeze [milk] in order to save it so it doesn't go bad before we get it. The other participant continued: "...Once it thaws out, it curdles and it's bad. So we get frozen milk and there's no point in having it... we can't even drink it. It don't taste like milk, it's horrible." Speaking to their experience in a different institution, F., another incarcerated individual, similarly described: "[The milk] will be frozen. And one of the things, some of the milk will freeze, some of it won't. Then it defrosts and it goes bad that quick, but then they still serve it. Then we try to go back and get another one and the officer is just like, 'No, you already been up to get all your stuff. You can't get back up.' But it's bad."

Individuals also expressed similar concerns with both canned and fresh

produce. Canned produce items either arrive at the prison in already-poor condition or are held for so long that their quality deteriorates: as F. continued, "I don't think it's coming from the canning facility being the issue. I think it's coming from the fact that they sit for so long and then are served us. What's some of the other problems we've had with them? Some of them... when you open them have had a really sour smell... [and] they still get mixed with other cans."

With fresh produce, people spoke to improper practices of freezing and thawing certain foods in order to preserve their shelf life. In a dialogue circle with a group of incarcerated individuals, two participants, A. and R. detailed: "The problem is with the fruit that they try to preserve it, and they don't want the rats or whatever they have in here getting into it. So they put it in the freezer, freeze it, and then thaw it out. That's what 90% of their food is like." R. added: "And then they wondering why it's bad or it tastes like water." A. and R. further expressed how the thawing process itself caused produce to change in consistency, leading to "mushy" and "bruised" fruits and vegetables. A. described: "[They]... put it in the freezer but then say, "Oh, we got to serve that so take it out, and then we're going to serve in two hours." So it's partially frozen by the time the end people get it. Now it's all the way unfrozen but it's mushy... It's not how it comes. It's how it gets after [thawing]." Such practices thus constitute yet another means by which correctional facilities deny individuals access to fresh produce—in conjunction with nearly nonexistent cleaning procedures and the scarcity of fresh produce to begin with.

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## MARYLAND CORRECTIONAL ENTERPRISES

**"SAY THEY HAVE LIVER... [THE] LIVER IS PINK, GREEN, AND BROWN, AND FLAT. I CAN'T TELL YOU [WHICH ANIMAL IT IS]... I DON'T KNOW IF IT'S A BEAR, OR A HORSE, OR WHAT."**

*— ANDREW, FORMERLY INCARCERATED IN BALTIMORE*

**"MARYLAND CORRECTIONAL ENTERPRISES [IS] A UNIT OF THE DIVISION OF CORRECTIONS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES THAT IS AUTHORIZED BY LAW TO USE PRISON LABOR TO PRODUCE SUPPLIES OR TO PROVIDE SERVICES FOR SALE TO PUBLIC ENTITIES AND CERTAIN NOT-FOR-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS."**

*— MARYLAND CODE OF MARYLAND REGULATIONS, SECTION 21.11.05.01*

the predictably brutal conditions that come with privatizing institutions of control and confinement, these facilities represent what scholar Dennis Childs calls structures of "human commodification"—the private ownership of the racialized body extending from slavery to contemporary carceral institutions.<sup>120</sup>

Over the past two decades, much of the attention and public outcry surrounding the prison-industrial complex has been focused on the failures of private prisons.<sup>117</sup> The first contemporary for-profit prison in the United States was opened in 1983 by the Corrections Corporation of America, now known as CoreCivic.<sup>118</sup> Since then, CoreCivic and the GEO Group—two of the world's largest private prison contractors—have turned into publicly-traded, multi-billion dollar corporations, managing over 190 prisons and immigrant detention centers as of 2018.<sup>119</sup> The outcry over privately-operated prisons is just: beyond

However, private prisons ultimately represent a small fraction of the prison-industrial complex. In 2020, 9% of all imprisoned individuals were caged in private institutions; the vast majority of people were held in publicly-run and publicly-funded prisons and jails. The primary actor in the prison-industrial complex is thus the state itself. Furthermore, as noted by scholar and abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore, the reach of prisons and policing has

**MARYLAND’S GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS AND PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS—INCLUDING PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES AND THE MARYLAND GENERAL ASSEMBLY—ARE REQUIRED BY LAW TO PROCURE GOODS AND SERVICES FROM MCE AS OPPOSED TO THE “OPEN” MARKET, AND USUALLY AT A SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER MARKUP.**

expanded dramatically since the 1980s, in part to replace shrinking social welfare programs under austerity. The local and state agencies that generally receive the most public resources are police and corrections: for example, Baltimore City budgeted \$536 million dollars for the Baltimore Police Department in 2020, more than the City allocated for health, human services, and recreation and parks

combined.<sup>121</sup>

In the face of shrinking budgets, state agencies have turned to prison labor as a means to raise revenue through the development of “correctional enterprises,” or the industrial division of a state’s corrections department. In short, correctional enterprises are state-owned companies that use the labor of incarcerated individuals to produce a range of goods such as furniture, license plates, apparel, and traffic signs.<sup>122</sup> The primary customers of these enterprises are not private corporations but other state and local government agencies. Correctional enterprises exist in almost every single U.S state—in Maryland, the division was formed in the 1940s as “State Use Industries,” and rebranded as Maryland Correctional Enterprises, or MCE, in 2005.

Maryland’s government departments and public institutions—including public universities and the Maryland General Assembly—are required by law to procure goods and services from MCE as opposed to the “open” market, and usually at a significantly higher markup. For example, MCE’s website features “case studies” of universities such as Bowie State and the Community College of Baltimore County that have purchased

furniture constructed using prison labor. Although the average wage for an incarcerated MCE worker ranges from \$0.17 to \$1.16 per hour, the state touts MCE as a key program for rehabilitation and recidivism reduction.<sup>123</sup> In 2020, MCE “employed” over 2,000 imprisoned workers over 26 plants or service centers in state prisons; generated \$55.7 million dollars in revenue; and extracted over 2.4 million hours of labor across the state’s incarcerated population.<sup>124</sup> One especially disturbing function of MCE during the COVID-19 pandemic was the production of masks, face shields, and hand sanitizer for use outside of prisons, while the incarcerated population itself was facing dire shortages in personal protective equipment.<sup>125</sup>

MCE also plays a large role in food production in state correctional facilities.<sup>126</sup> The enterprise offers a number of highly processed meat and food products available for purchase—including turkey and beef meatloaf, turkey ham rolls, sliced liver, and breaded fish. If institutions are looking to buy food items that MCE also produces, dietary managers are legally mandated to procure those items from the division itself. As such, MCE has a virtual monopoly on meat products in Maryland state prisons. The quality and palatability of MCE’s products tends to be much lower than external vendors—especially since MCE knows institutions oftentimes have no choice in the procurement process. In addition, if correctional dietary staff are able to locate products from external vendors not available through MCE—known as “special buys”—MCE regularly starts producing similar food items, in order to force institutions to procure those items from them instead.

Formerly and currently incarcerated individuals’ descriptions of meats speak to the true quality of MCE’s products. As Harold portrayed: “Oh my goodness, [the turkey] was terrible. I love turkey patties, but these didn't resemble the turkey patties that I love... these weren't turkey burgers. It was a patty made out of turkey, red and green peppers, but the flavor was atrocious, in and of itself, not how they prepared it. That's just how the turkey patty tasted. No one... liked the turkey patties. Terrible. Ugh.”

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## Conclusion and Part 3

From rodents and pests in the prison kitchen, to maggots in meal trays, to dangerous and haphazard preparation practices, Part 2 of this report has uncovered the policies, practices, and procedures that undergird the inhumane experience of eating in a Maryland prison.

In Part 3, we next take a look at the deadly impact of correctional food service on an incarcerated person's physical, mental, and emotional health and well-being.



*To learn more or get in touch:*

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