

INTRO

PART 1

PART 2

PART 3

PART 4

PART 5

PART 6



PART 4

The Prison Food Machine

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

— food services director

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

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

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

Those policies and practices encompass nutritional standards and menu planning, procurement of food (i.e., buying in bulk), preparation of meals in prison kitchens relying heavily on labor by incarcerated people, and in some states, the decision to contract with private companies to handle many aspects of food service. It's important to note that in food service, as in all other aspects of correctional practices, states operate autonomously, with no two exactly alike. Nevertheless, in our exploration we found considerable overlap in food service policies and practices, in part because states look to one another for guidance and consider standards issued by the American Correctional Association.¹

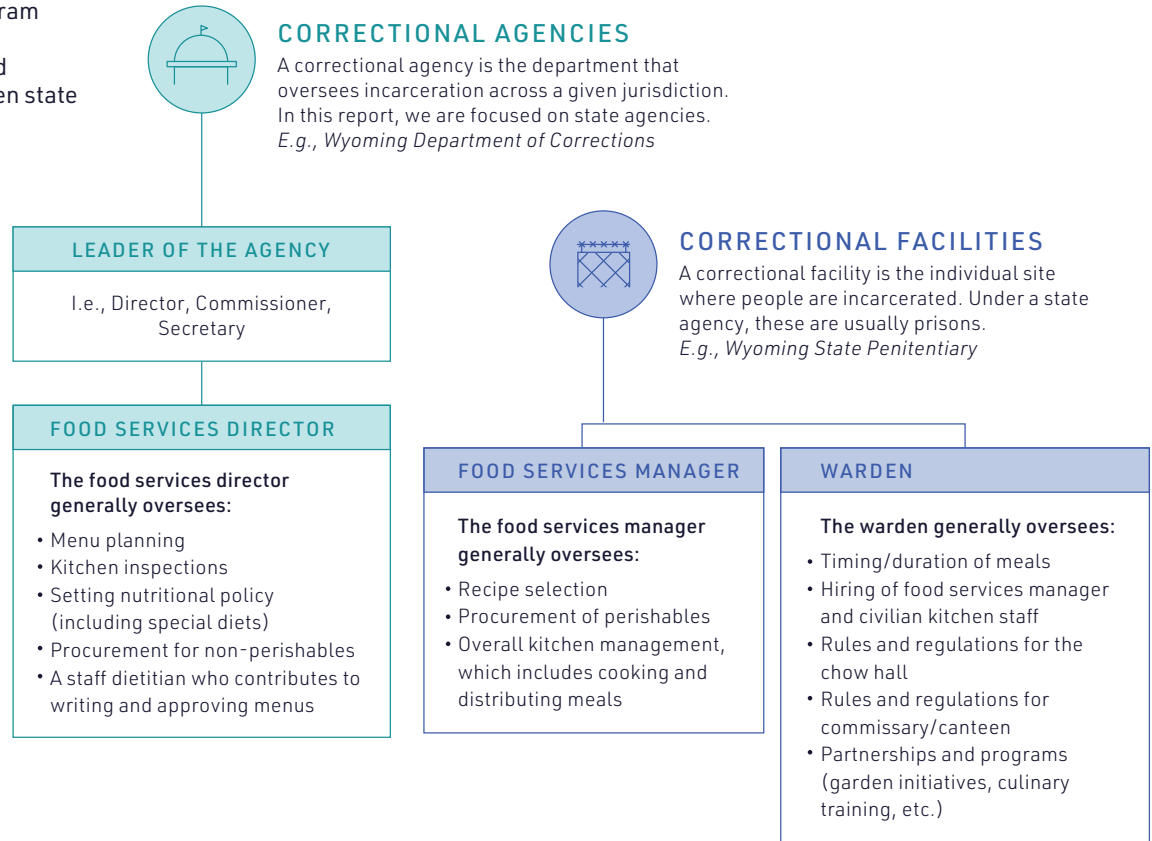
'Cooking' from the top down

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

Nowadays, state corrections officials control most of the process, from developing statewide menus (typically in consultation with a dietitian) to sourcing much of the food.² (For an example of a comprehensive food service policy, see the [Alaska Department of Corrections](#).³)

State prison food service roles

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



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

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

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

Ultra-processed: how prison policies deplete nutrition

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

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

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

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

Our own investigation suggests that nutritional policies developed by state correctional agencies range from the vague (meals will be “nutritionally adequate”) to the highly specific (e.g., two cups of fluid milk per day). While many state agencies are in compliance with their own standards, the standards themselves do not necessarily align with well-regarded dietary recommendations. This includes governmental guidelines that many correctional policies originate from, such as the USDA’s Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the Dietary Reference Intakes issued by the National Academy of Sciences. The top-level advice from each of these agencies is clear: a healthy diet focuses on consuming a variety of nutrient-dense foods including vegetables, fruits, whole grains, seafood, eggs, beans and peas, nuts and seeds, and some dairy and meat products—prepared with little or no added solid fats, sugars, refined starches, and sodium.⁴ USDA’s MyPlate recommends that half the plate be filled with vegetables and fruit, and offers personalized serving recommendations based on age, sex, weight, height, and level of physical activity.

Rather than looking at the food itself, correctional agencies generally focus on hitting minimum nutrient amounts over the course of a day or throughout the week. For example, meals provided by the Florida Department of Corrections contain 2,691 calories a day on average, using a “4-week cycle master menu that meets the Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs) established by the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Sciences.”⁵ While this approach may appear to meet professional recommendations, in practice it flouts the most basic dietary and nutrition guidance. “Comparing trays” below contrasts a tray with standard prison fare and a tray that follows the USDA’s MyPlate proportion recommendations.

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

Comparing trays

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

TYPICAL PRISON TRAY



USDA'S MYPLATE GUIDELINES



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

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

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

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

Sourcing ingredients

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

18th century

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

Early 20th century

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

1970s

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

A brief history of prison food in the United States⁷

19th century

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

Mid 20th century

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

Late 20th century to present

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



A formal meal set up at Alcatraz Prison in California

Source: National Park Service



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

MENU PLANNING & MEAL PREPARATION



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

Small gardens exist in prisons around the country, but with just a few exceptions, they don’t necessarily lead to fresher, better meals. In some states, facility food service managers can decide how to use garden produce in the kitchens they oversee—maybe preparing a fresh salad to accompany lunch or adding flavorful herbs to the evening spaghetti sauce. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice, for example, has been operating a unique program called Herbs Behind Bars since 2007. Nearly 60 facilities across the state create and maintain herb gardens that provide fresh cilantro, basil, garlic, oregano, and other herbs for their meal service. Each year there is a competition between units that engenders a sense of pride for all involved, and has reportedly led to better-tasting food.⁶ Other states don’t allow correctional facilities to serve any fruits or vegetables that haven’t gone through a formalized inspection process, however, and many gardens don’t yield a harvest large enough to prepare a dish to serve the whole facility.

A history rooted in slavery

In 2017, incarcerated people in Texas:



Harvested

123.7M POUNDS

of cotton, grains, grasses



Produced

11.7M POUNDS

of food



Produced

5M EGGS

from chickens they tended



Canned

297,143 CASES

of vegetables



Processed

22.7M POUNDS

of meat

The state “operates its own miniature food system that feeds people who are incarcerated there (the Texas Department of Criminal Justice boasts about being ‘self-sufficient’) as well as commercial sales of food to the public.”⁸ Agribusiness sites administered by the Virginia Department of Corrections and dairy farms run by the state correctional agency in Wisconsin also use what they produce in at least some prisons statewide. In Virginia, for example, prison gardens and greenhouses provide copious quantities of fresh lettuce, tomatoes, and other produce directly to facility kitchens during the growing season, and the DOC operates its own flash-freeze plant to ensure a steady supply of vegetables throughout the year. The state’s correctional facilities also feature dairy and beef cattle operations, apple orchards, and a tilapia farm.

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

War as an extension of slavery. Convict leasing allowed prisons to provide the labor predominantly of Black men to private companies, including plantations, in “one of the harshest and most exploitative labor systems known in American history.”⁹ This was a highly common—and for states profitable—form of racial oppression and violence. In 1898, almost 75% of Alabama’s entire state annual revenue came from convict leasing.¹⁰ Although Texas legally ended the practice in 1910 (it was outlawed nationally in 1941), today, according to Civil Eats, “some of those former plantations make up the 130,000 agricultural acres currently maintained and operated by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.” The 13th Amendment abolishing slavery makes a notable exception for “punishment of a crime,” which is still exploited today. When one member of the “Hoe Squad” at Cummins Unit, a prison farm in Arkansas, asked an officer why they continued to use garden tools rather than modern farming technology, the officer replied, “We don’t want your brain. We want your back.”¹¹

Jobs working the land are considered one of the more appealing assignments in many prisons because they offer time outdoors and because growing food can feel more purposeful than other available options. But it’s hard labor with only nominal wages—and in at least seven states, no pay at all. Compelling incarcerated people to work large farms without fair financial compensation is an injustice of its own, but in Arkansas, Indiana, and other states they don’t even get to eat what they grow. These prison farms are solely revenue-generating enterprises. The correctional agency sells what the farm produces, purchasing canned vegetables and food of lower quality to serve in prison. Members of the “Hoe Squad” grow cucumbers by the bushel, but may go years without tasting one. Instead, one incarcerated person who works in the prison’s kitchen described pouring cans of vegetables into a 55 gallon pot and stirring them with a “boat paddle.”¹² A former food services manager at a facility in another Southern state described something similar, telling us, “We used to have a cattle ranch for Grade A meat, and we sold that off. We purchased Grade B meat [to serve in the prison].”




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

Source: Getty Images

Prison food production across the U.S.

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

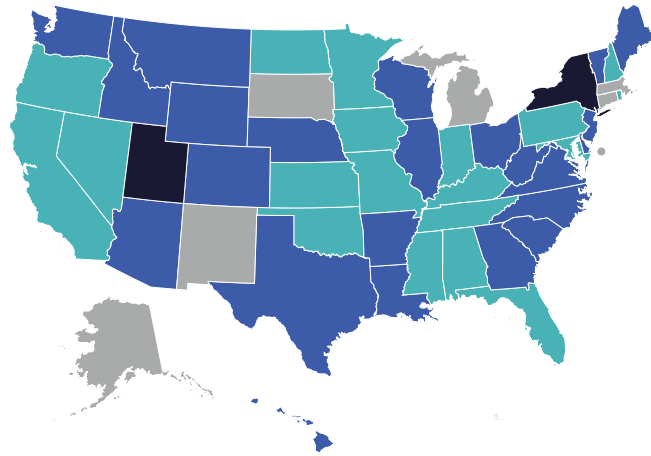
Source: Impact Justice (2020).

 Farm production, no confirmed use in meals

 States with farm production, and used in meals

 No production

 No data available



Managing the kitchen: who calls the shots?

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

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

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

BUYING LOCALLY AND COOKING FROM SCRATCH



PROCUREMENT



MENU PLANNING &
MEAL PREPARATION

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

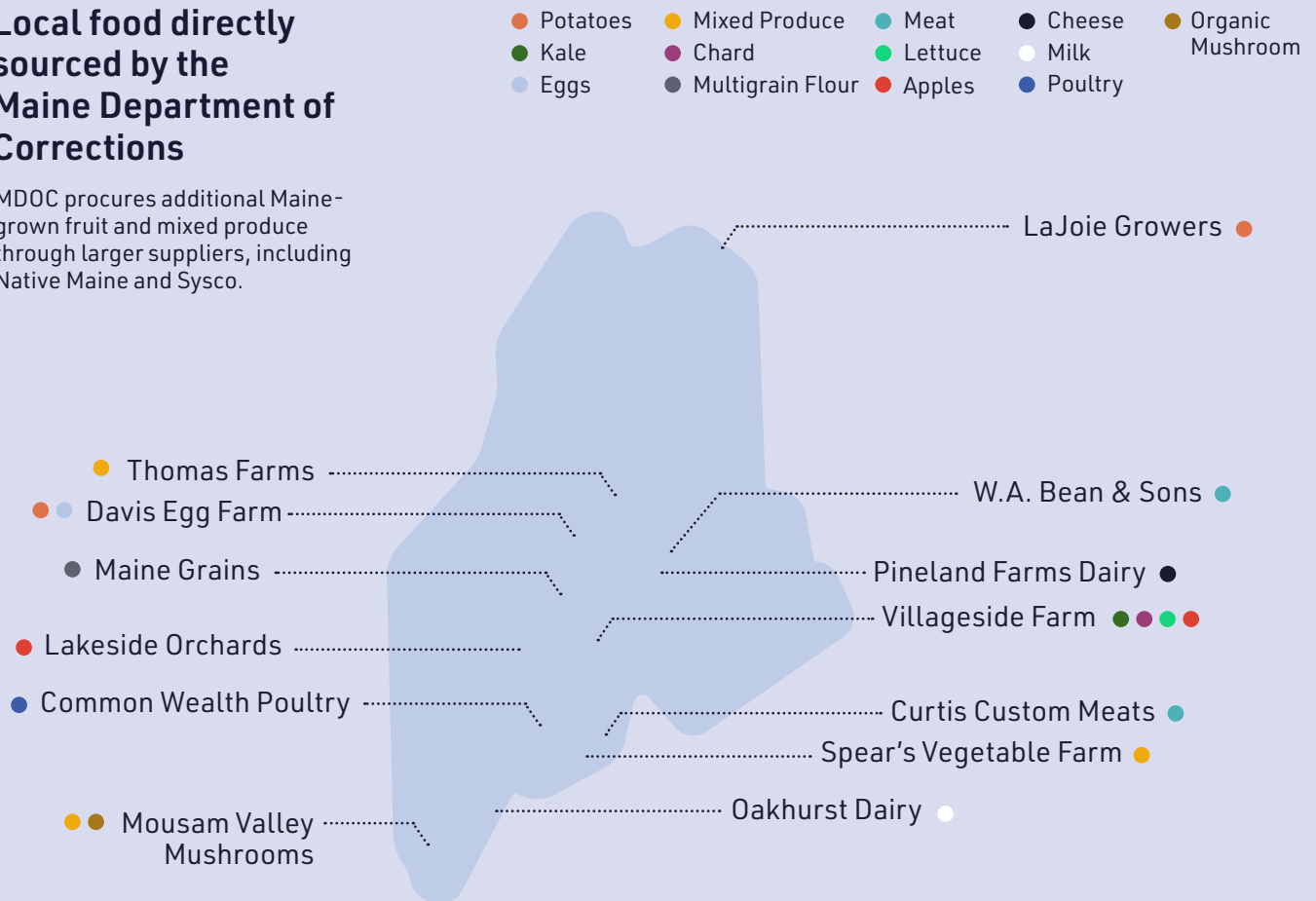
An organic farmer himself and veteran of the hospitality industry, McBrine’s work demonstrates that a willingness to innovate and advocate for better food not only benefits people in prison, boosting health and morale, but also pays off economically. For the last three years, Mountain View’s kitchen has averaged over 30% local food purchases while coming in more than \$100,000 under budget. The practices McBrine pioneered align with Commissioner Randall Liberty’s recent commitment to source 20% of all food purchased by the Maine Department of Corrections from local producers by 2025.¹³

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

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

Local food directly sourced by the Maine Department of Corrections

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



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

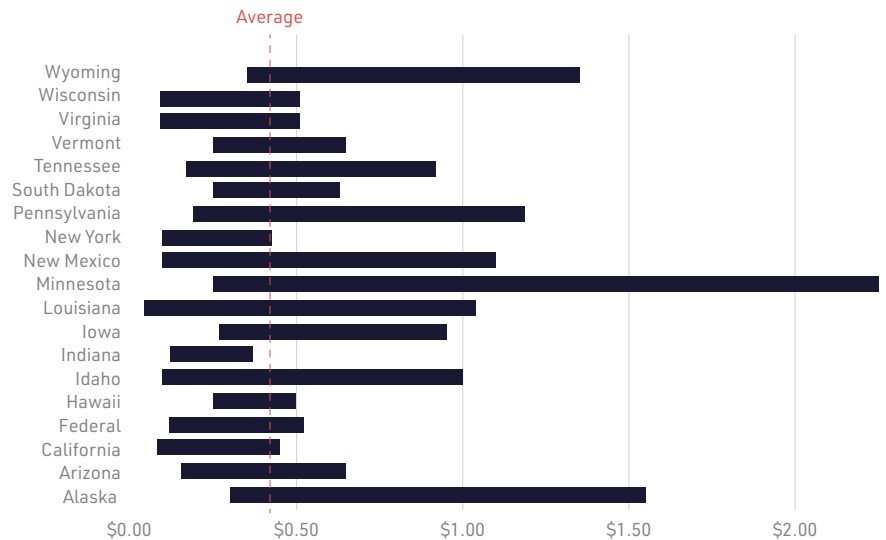
Back of house

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

Hourly wages for incarcerated people by state

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

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



Visit any prison kitchen in America and almost everyone at work is a resident of the prison. Although kitchen jobs pay incarcerated people pennies per hour—if they pay at all—for intensive labor in a fast-paced and sometimes unsafe environment, they can be some of the more desirable jobs in prisons.¹⁴ A background in kitchen work can increase a person's chances of finding employment after release. Also significant in an environment where people are hungry much of the time: kitchen work provides access to extra food, and in many facilities to raw ingredients and equipment people can use to whip up a personalized meal on the job.



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

Source: Impact Justice

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

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

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

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

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

We visited one East Coast facility with spotless countertops that could have easily passed military inspection. That kitchen also has a state-of-the-art touchscreen oven. At the other extreme, we heard stories from formerly incarcerated people about kitchens that lacked even soap and hot water; had roaches crawling out of the drains and rats scurrying across the floor; and routinely served spoiled food. As one person reported to the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, “Our containers we have our juice made and served in are often moldy. We do not have proper chemicals, like bleach, to clean them out. Our trays and cups are often dirty also. There are rats and roaches in the kitchen too.”¹⁵

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

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

Lax kitchen oversight can result in dangers beyond food safety. Walk-in coolers, large pantries, and other secluded spaces in poorly supervised kitchens are unfortunately ideal sites for predatory acts by staff or other incarcerated people. A 2009 report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that of incarcerated people who were sexually victimized by staff, about a third of reported incidents took place in the kitchen or workshop.¹⁶ In cases where the assailant was another resident, 20% of those assaults occurred in the prison kitchen. James, who “got tired” of working in the kitchen, told us, “If they want to attack somebody, they don’t do it on the yard, they do it in the kitchen.” And the facility’s response can be dangerous to bystanders. Once when a kitchen worker was stabbed on the job, according to James, the security staff responded with tear gas.

What about the money?

In 2016, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation spent just \$3.14 a day to provide breakfast, lunch, and dinner for each person confined in a state prison—roughly one dollar per meal.¹⁷ That same year, the City of San Diego, which runs the state’s second-largest school district, spent \$2.25 per child for lunch alone.¹⁸ And the California Department of Veterans Affairs allocated about \$8.25 per day to feed the residents of its long-term care facilities.¹⁹

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

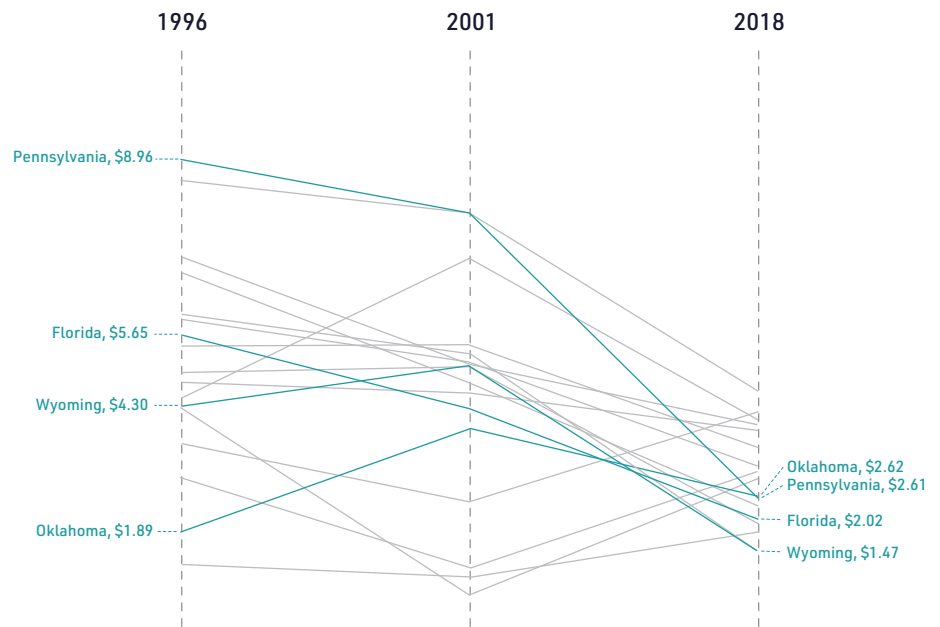
Historical daily amount spent on prison food per person

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

Source: Impact Justice(2020).

Stephan, J. J. (2004). *State Prison Expenditures, 2001*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics. [Link here](#)

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



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

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

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

incarcerated people fees for their room and board. Unlike fines and restitution, whose purpose is to punish or compensate victims, fees are intended to raise revenue.²⁰

Food cost: per day breakdown (2018)

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

Source: Impact Justice (2020).

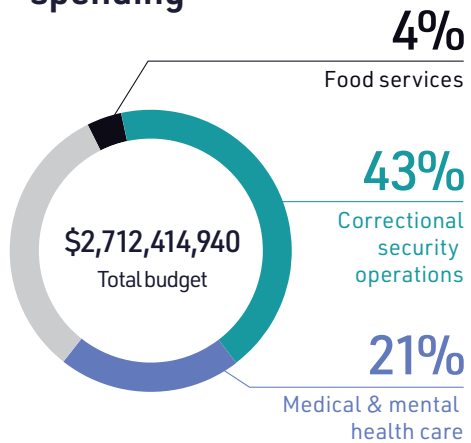
These corrections leaders aren't wrong in describing the challenges around food budgets, and yet the money spent on food services is typically just a tiny sliver of the department's total budget. For example, the \$1.1 million required for extra fruit in the example above is only .04% of the Washington Department of Corrections budget.²¹ Logically, shifting the budget to invest more in healthier food would likely decrease reliance on medical services (which are often severely underfunded to the point of gross negligence).²² Although formal research hasn't been done specifically in prisons, there is plenty of evidence that

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

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



Food budget as a proportion of DOC spending



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

consuming a healthy diet rich in fresh fruits, vegetables, and other whole foods could yield billions of dollars in savings nationwide each year on treatment for heart disease, diabetes, cancer, hip fractures, and Alzheimer's disease.²³ A new approach to diabetes treatment and prevention called the Fresh Food Pharmacy predicts that spending about \$1,000 over one year on healthy food for one low-income diabetes patient will result in \$24,000 in health care cost savings over that same period.²⁴

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

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

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

PROCUREMENT



MENU PLANNING &
MEAL PREPARATION



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

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

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

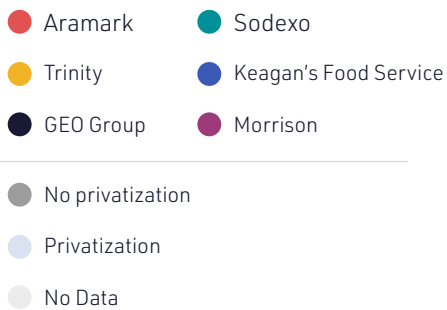
Outsourcing food service

While only about 9% of incarcerated people in the U.S. are housed in private prisons, many more are served meals planned, sourced, and provided by private companies such as Aramark, Trinity, and Sodexo.²⁵ Of the 35 state correctional agencies we surveyed, one in three currently uses privatized food service (not all states privatize for every facility). These companies often employ their own dietitians to assist with menu planning, and the on-site food service manager and any other civilian staff working in the prison kitchen are also likely to be employees of the company.

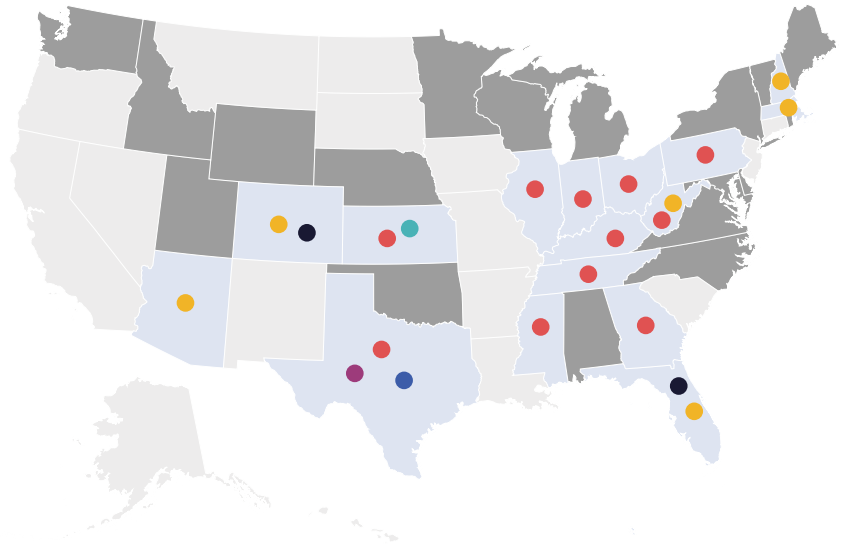
With other institutional clients ranging from public school districts and college campuses to hospitals and corporate cafeterias, these companies wield immense purchasing power and can negotiate rock-bottom prices from food suppliers around the country—savings they pass along, at least in part, to the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

States with privatized food service

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



Source: Impact Justice (2020).



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

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

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

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

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

Michigan is now notorious in this regard. The state correctional agency hired Aramark in 2013 to handle food service in all prisons, motivated by the projected \$16 million in annual savings (mostly achieved by replacing unionized state employees with contract workers).²⁶ Officials could not have imagined the disastrous problems that would ensue. Kitchens regularly ran out of ingredients, and meals were routinely served late and lacked the required calories—and these were the least egregious failures. Kitchen staff employed by Aramark were knowingly serving rotten food and even fishing food out of trash cans for the next round of trays. There were maggot infestations and outbreaks of foodborne illness. Staff showed up to work intoxicated, smuggled drugs into prisons, and assaulted some residents and had sexual relations with others.²⁷

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

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

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

NEXT UP**PART 5: WHO'S LOOKING? WHO'S LISTENING?**

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

Endnotes

- 1 American Correctional Association. (2008). ACA Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions. In B. A. Wakeen (ed.), *Nutrition and Foodservice Management in Correctional Facilities: A Guide to Menus, Nutrition, Serving, Protocol, and Security* (3rd edition, pp. 17-23). American Dietetic Association.
- 2 Out of the 35 state departments of correction that responded to our survey, 25 reported that they consult with a nutrition professional in the process of developing menus.
- 3 Alaska Department of Corrections. (2016). *Food Service Standards*. [Link here](#); Alaska Department of Corrections. (2018). *Food Service Safety and Sanitation*. [Link here](#); Alaska Department of Corrections. (2019). *Special and/or Religious Diets and Meals*. [Link here](#)
- 4 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2015). *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2015-2020*. 8th Edition. [Link here](#)
- 5 Florida Department of Corrections. (n.d.). *Inmate Menus*. [Link here](#)
- 6 Camplin, E. (2017). *Prison Food in America*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- 7 Texas Department of Criminal Justice. (2018, December). *Herb growing competition showcases gardening, culinary skills*. [Link here](#)
- 8 Reese, A., & Carr, R. (2020, June 19). *Op-ed: Overthrowing the Food System's Plantation Paradigm*. Civil Eats. [Link here](#)
- 9 Mancini, M. J. (1996). *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928*. University of South Carolina Press.
- 10 Mintz, S., & McNeil, S. (2018). Convict Lease System. *Digital History*. University of Houston. [Link here](#)
- 11 Aviv, R. (2020, June 15). Punishment by Pandemic. *The New Yorker*. [Link here](#)
- 12 Aviv, R. (2020, June 15).
- 13 This commitment is in response to Public Law 667 (2020), put forth in LD 1167AM by Rep. Craig Hickman (D-Winthrop), which became law June 16, 2020.
- 14 Sawyer, W. (2017, April 10). *How much do incarcerated people earn in each state?* Prison Policy Initiative. [Link here](#)
- 15 Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee & Research Action Cooperative. (2018).
- 16 Beck, A., Harrison, P., Berzofsky, M., Caspar, R., & Krebs, C. (2010). *Sexual Victimization in Prisons and Jails Reported by Inmates, 2008-09*. Bureau of Justice Statistics. [Link here](#). (This is the most recent BJS report that includes location of incidents as part of the survey results.)
- 17 Ben-Moshe, K., Caplan, J., Ridberg, R., Stevenson, J., & Lee, M. (2016). *California State Government Food Procurement Policies and Practices*. California Strategic Growth Council. [Link here](#)
- 18 Stickney, R., & Devine, R. (2016, May 25). *Cost of School Lunches to Increase for San Diego Unified School District*. NBC 7 San Diego. [Link here](#)
- 19 Ben-Moshe, K., Caplan, J., Ridberg, R., Stevenson, J., & Lee, M. (2016).
- 20 Brennan Center for Justice. (2019, September 9). *Is Charging Inmates to Say in Prison Smart Policy?* [Link here](#)
- 21 Washington State Office of Financial Management. (2020). Department of Corrections. [Link here](#)

- 22 For an example of gross negligence in medical services, see Schwartzapfel, B. (2018, February 26). *How Bad is Prison Health Care? Depends on Who's Watching*. The Marshall Project. [Link here](#)
- 23 Scrafford, C. G., Bi, X., Multani, J. K., Murphy, M. M., Schmier, J. K., & Barraj, L. M. (2018). Health Economic Evaluation Modeling Shows Potential Health Care Cost Savings with Increased Conformance with Healthy Dietary Patterns among Adults in the United States. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 119(4), 599-616. [Link here](#)
- 24 Lagasse, J. (2017, May 8). Geisinger's touts food-centric diabetes program The Fresh Food Pharmacy. *Healthcare Finance News*. [Link here](#)
- 25 Sawyer, W., & Wagner, P. (2020, March 24). *Mass incarceration: The Whole Pie 2020*. Prison Policy Initiative. [Link here](#)
- 26 Gerstein, M., & Oosting, J. (2018, February 7). State set to end private prison food service. *The Detroit News*. [Link here](#)
- 27 Perkins, T. (2018, August 20). *Michigan's Failed Effort to Privatize Prison Kitchens and the Future of Institutional Food*. Civil Eats. [Link here](#); Egan, P. (2019, May 23). Problem-plagued prison kitchens better after private contracts end, officials say. *Detroit Free Press*. [Link here](#); Requarth, T. (2019, April 30). How Private Equity Is Turning Public Prisons Into Big Profits. *The Nation*. [Link here](#)

IMPACT/JUSTICE

Learn more at

impactjustice.org/impact/food-in-prison/#report