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Food systems in correctional settings

A literature review and case study



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By:

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ABSTRACT

Food is a central component of life in correctional institutions and plays a critical role in the physical and mental health of incarcerated people and the construction of prisoners' identities and relationships. An understanding of the role of food in correctional settings and effective management of food systems may improve outcomes for incarcerated people and help correctional administrators to maximize the health and safety of individuals in these institutions. This report summarizes existing research about food systems in correctional settings and provides examples of food programmes in prison and remand facilities, including a case study of food-related innovation in the Danish correctional system. Specific conclusions are offered for policy-makers, administrators of correctional institutions and prison food services professionals, and ideas for future research are proposed.

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Foreword

Since 1995, the WHO Regional Office for Europe has had a programme on prison health with the aim of improving the health conditions of prisoners and integrating prison health into the overall public health agenda. Food is an important, yet often overlooked, aspect of life in correctional institutions. It not only affects physical and mental health but is also tied to the construction of prisoners' identities and to the creation and maintenance of relationships.

Examples of innovative prison food-related interventions include nutritional education, gardening, inclusion of healthy choices in the prison shop and culinary training. Aspects of such programmes, which are being implemented in some correctional settings in Europe and North America, may serve as a source of inspiration for policy-makers and administrators. It is, however, essential that individual assessments be carried out so that food systems can be developed to match the circumstances and resources of each correctional institution.

This report summarizes existing research about food systems in correctional settings and provides examples of food programmes in prisons, including a case study in Denmark.

Food systems are one way to influence health and behavioural outcomes in correctional settings. Supporting good nutritional habits among incarcerated people can enhance their quality of life and prevent a number of noncommunicable diseases.

This publication is based on a literature review and provides information on different initiatives that can be taken to focus further on food systems in prisons. It is aimed at professional staff at all levels responsible for the well-being of prisoners.

Gauden Galea

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Summary

Food is a central component of life in correctional institutions. An understanding of the ways in which food is acquired, prepared, distributed and consumed builds knowledge about the lives of incarcerated people and the impact of the prison experience on health outcomes. Correctional administrators and staff are encouraged to assess the food systems in their institutions, monitor weight change among the inmate population, and incorporate innovative food programmes that encourage positive social interactions and healthy outcomes.

Prison food systems include food-service catering programmes, self-cook facilities, prison shops or canteens, food shared with visitors, vegetable gardens and the informal preparation of food in housing units. Detailed analyses of food in Australian and English prisons demonstrate the diversity of food systems and the need to conduct individualized assessments of institutional strengths and weaknesses. Research about eating behaviour and changes in weight during incarceration is incomplete, but existing knowledge suggests that many prisoners gain excessive weight while incarcerated and that weight-related health problems are common in correctional settings. Greater documentation of prisoners' weight and how it changes over time can build a stronger understanding of these health outcomes.

Prison food also has an impact on the culture of the institution and may be used by prisoners as a tool for constructing identity and relationships. Qualitative research about prison life describes how prisoners use food to negotiate power and organize social networks. This research suggests that gender and ethnic identity shape individual food-related behaviour. Understanding the myriad roles of food in correctional settings and managing their food systems effectively may help correctional administrators to maximize the health and safety of these institutions.

Throughout Europe and North America there are examples of creative food programming and innovation in correctional settings. Examples of such interventions include nutritional education, gardening, inclusion of healthy choices in the prison shop inventory and culinary training. The food programmes implemented by the Danish prison system offer an example of system-wide innovation. In this system, most prisoners shop, cook and clean for themselves and an emphasis is placed on culinary education and self-sufficiency. While specific ideas from this innovative

programme may inform correctional policy in other countries, it is clear that food systems must be tailored to match the unique circumstances and resources of each institution. Correctional programmes are encouraged to assess their own unique food environment. Dialogue with and training for staff and inmates offer opportunities to adapt programmes from other institutions and create new ideas for maximizing the positive potential of food in prison settings.

Understanding food systems in correctional settings

Food systems in correctional settings include institutionally-run catering services, self-cook facilities, prison shops or canteens, and informal food preparation among inmates which may take place in spite of institutional rules that prohibit such activity. Food systems in correctional settings may also include opportunities for incarcerated people to cook and eat with their visitors and participate in garden or farming programmes.

- *Food service catering operated by institutions.* Food service meals may be prepared in an institution's kitchen on site or cooked in another facility and delivered to the institution to be heated and served. Meals are then served to inmates in a common dining area or delivered on trolleys to housing units where prisoners eat in their cells. The staff who cook and serve these meals include inmate workers, prison staff, civilian staff or a combination of these. Food service meals may include halal and kosher meals and other special menus catering for inmates' religious beliefs or health requirements.
- *Self-cook facilities.* Some correctional institutions offer kitchen facilities in the housing units where inmates can cook for themselves. These facilities may exist in addition to, or in place of, catering services.
- *Prison shops or canteens.* Incarcerated people usually have access to a prison shop or canteen where they can purchase foodstuffs, clothing and hygiene items. Money to make these purchases can come from employment or be wired from friends and family outside.
- *Informal food preparation.* It is not uncommon for incarcerated people to cook in their cells or housing units using food purchased from the prison shop, served by the institution and/or taken from the central kitchen. Institutional regulations about these activities vary. Some facilities may permit a certain amount of cooking and make microwaves, cooking rings and/or hot water available to inmates for this purpose. Other institutions prohibit most or all forms of cooking in the housing units. In facilities where informal cooking is prohibited, incarcerated people may use contraband items to build heating coils and/or use appliances and supplies not designed for cooking, such as hairdryers, irons, rubbish bags and pillowcases, to prepare food. Individuals who engage in these illicit activities run the risk of incurring disciplinary measures, although

enforcement varies in accordance with institutional norms and the discretion of the correctional officers charged with enforcing rules.

- *Food related to visits.* Depending on the regulations and facilities in the institution, incarcerated people may be able to share food or cook with their visitors. Some institutions provide vending machines in the visiting areas where people can purchase snacks. Friends and family from the community may also be permitted to bring food with them when they visit. Some prisons provide kitchen facilities where visitors can cook and prepare meals with their incarcerated friends or kin.
- *Prison gardens and farms.* Incarcerated people may participate in prison employment or job training projects in which they cultivate fruit, vegetables and herbs, or raise animals that are used in the institution's food preparation and sold to other correctional facilities or markets in the community.

This range of food systems in correctional institutions has been created through an array of legislation, administrative rules and legal action (1). For example, catering standards in the correctional systems of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland were modified following the 1990 prison riots that began at Strangeways Prison in Manchester. The Woolf Report about prison conditions in the United Kingdom, which was produced in response to these disturbances, recommended several changes to food policy, including the removal of dining halls which were understood as sites that fostered conflicts and violence (2).

Given this diversity of food policy in correctional institutions, a first step in understanding the impact of prison food on institutional outcomes is to assess a facility's food systems (3). Because each correctional setting is unique, administrators are encouraged to undertake a survey of their institution's food environment in order to understand both formal and informal food systems. For example, a comprehensive study of the Australian prison food service examined the menus and food practices in 25 correctional facilities (4). The final report included a brief history of prison food in Australia, a detailed description of current food systems and a summary of 16 different themes that arose in focus group discussions with inmates about prison food. Based on these findings, the authors made programmatic recommendations and suggestions for future research. While the investigators did not describe informal cooking systems or food related to visits, the report is an example of the kind of institutional assessment that can build knowledge about a correctional system's food scheme. Similarly, a study of food

services in 16 correctional facilities in the United Kingdom (England) measured food intake, observed food practices, analysed menus and conducted structured and unstructured interviews with inmates and staff to describe and evaluate these food systems (5). With a focus on nutritional analysis of the institutions' food services, the study also included a brief description of the self-cook kitchens and alluded to the power dynamics and psychosocial implications of food-related practices. Specific recommendations were made to improve the nutritional value of catering menus (such as adding fresh and seasonal fruits) and to adjust the timing and presentation of meals.

Impact of food on health outcomes of incarcerated people

There are two major ways in which prison food systems have an impact on the health of incarcerated people. First, prison food systems and eating behaviour may lead to changes in weight, including excessive weight gain or loss, which undermine prisoners' physical health. Second, nascent research about the relationship between food and behaviour suggests that food and nutrition may have an impact on mental health outcomes.

Impact of food on the weight-related outcomes of incarcerated people

Overweight and obesity present a growing health challenge across Europe. In 2014, WHO reported that 59% of European adults were overweight and approximately 23% were obese. This trend is alarming because excessive body weight is associated with cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and other weight-related outcomes that can diminish individual quality of life and increase expenditure on health care. For example, a study in the United States found that health care costs for prisoners with diabetes were 40% higher than the average cost per inmate (6). Further, in correctional settings, overweight and obesity can complicate prison management by requiring special furniture and restraint procedures for plus size inmates (7).

Inconsistency about how and when inmates' body weights are recorded makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about obesity and overweight inside correctional facilities, although existing research suggests that prisoners' weights

reflect the rates of overweight and obesity among non-incarcerated people from the same communities. Further, there is evidence to suggest that some prisoners, especially women, may experience higher rates of overweight and obesity than comparable community samples (7). For example, an analysis of prison and community medical records in the United States found that people in prison were more likely to be overweight than those living in the community (8). Similarly, a systematic review of existing literature about noncommunicable diseases in prison populations worldwide concluded that incarcerated women were more likely to be obese than women in the community, but incarcerated men's rates of obesity were lower than those in men in the community (9). Although the degree of the problem is not completely known, it is clear that a significant proportion of a prison population is overweight.

In addition to exploring the question of disease prevalence, research has sought to understand the impact of incarceration on body weight. Does weight fluctuate during incarceration? If so, to what extent and in what direction does weight change? Again, the paucity of empirical data about prisoners' weight complicates researchers' ability to answer these questions. Historically, European prisoners were provided only with bread and water and incarceration was associated with weight loss (10). Today, diets high in processed foods, carbohydrates, fat and sodium, together with limited opportunities for physical movement and exercise and the prescription of psychotropic medication, can result in weight gain among incarcerated people (2, 11). A handful of studies have found that people gain weight while incarcerated, but because these findings are drawn from small samples and were primarily conducted in the United States, further research is needed to understand fully the changes in weight during incarceration, especially in European settings (11–15). Prison administrators can gain more evidence about overweight, obesity and weight changes among confined populations by extracting this information from institutional medical records. They could also consider a more deliberate and consistent collection of weight and height information if these data are not readily available.

Impact of food on the behavioural outcomes of incarcerated people

In addition to its impact on prisoners' physical health, food may have positive and negative effects on mental health. An emerging literature about the relationship between food and behaviour suggests an association between

nutrition and criminogenic behaviours that may warrant further investigation. For example, Eves & Gesch (16) reported that young incarcerated men who received a nutritional supplement had fewer disciplinary incidents and violent behaviour than counterparts who received a placebo. Similarly, Zaalberg et al. (17) found that young adult prisoners who received nutritional supplements had better outcomes related to aggression, rule-breaking and psychopathology than those who did not. While aggressive behaviour cannot be completely explained by nutrition, these studies call for further investigation into possible links between the nutritional content of prison food and prisoners' behaviour.

From another angle, Smith's work (18) with incarcerated women in the United Kingdom (England) contests the assumption that non-nutritious eating is necessarily unhealthy by suggesting that the psychological benefits of "junk" food outweigh their physical health drawbacks. Extrapolating from interviews with 89 women in three different facilities, her findings challenge the prison health promotion agenda by suggesting that non-nutritious prison eating patterns might actually be emotionally and politically "healthy" choices for female inmates who suffer from a perceived inability to control their lives. In this context, Smith argues that unhealthy food choices offer women a healthy coping mechanism by allowing them to derive pleasure from engaging in risky behaviour. Similarly, a study of eating behaviour and anger among female prisoners in England that found eating disorders were twice as high than among samples of females in the community concluded that "although damaging to the individual in the long run, behaviours such as bingeing and purging serve the more immediate function of regulating and coping with intolerable emotional states" (19, p. 124). These studies about disordered eating among incarcerated women highlight the importance of gender in understanding the implications of prison food and illustrate the complexity of identifying and promoting "healthy" food choices in correctional environments.

Impact of food on prison culture

In addition to this body of research about prison food and health outcomes, there is a rapidly expanding debate about how prison food systems and inmates' behaviour relating to the acquisition, preparation, distribution and consumption of food can build knowledge about incarcerated people and places. This conversation about the role of food in prison life and the lives of prisoners is centred in Europe and

tends to focus on food systems created and operated by inmates that are often illicit. There are two major themes in this qualitative inquiry about the sociology and psychology of prison eating: identity and relationships.

Identity

Interviews with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals and ethnographic observations in correctional settings shed light on the ways in which prisoners use food to bolster their existing identities and construct new ones. Generally speaking, individuals experience a loss of control over their food-related behaviour when they are incarcerated: when, where and what they eat is largely controlled by the prison institution (20,21). Incarcerated people may resist this sense of powerlessness over their lives by using informal inmate-run food systems, in which they disobey prison regulations, to renegotiate their power and establish an autonomous self (22–24). For example, incarcerated women in the United States bring food to their housing units from the cafeteria, in spite of rules prohibiting them from doing so, and combine these items with food smuggled out of the kitchen and purchased at the prison shop to prepare customized dishes using hairdryers, hot water and trash bags as cooking tools (25) (Box 1).

Box 1. Prison food autobiography (1)

In her account of a year spent in prison, Piper Kerman wrote the following (26, pp. 65 & 81).

“The mess hall lunch was sometimes hot, sometimes not, the most popular meals being McDonald’s style hamburger patties or the ultimate, and rare, deep-fried chicken sandwich. People went crazy for chicken in any form. Far more often lunch was bologna and rubbery orange cheese on white bread and endless amounts of cheap and greasy starch ... Extracurricular prison cooking happened primarily in two communal microwaves that were placed in kitchenette areas between the dorms; their use was a privilege the staff constantly (and with great enjoyment) threatened to revoke. Remarkable concoctions came out of those microwaves, especially from homesick Spanish and West Indian women. This impressed me deeply, given the limited resources these cooks were working with—junk food and polybagged chicken, packets of mackerel and tuna, and whatever fresh vegetable one could steal from the kitchen ... No matter what they were cooking, it smelled like food prepared with love and care.”

Food may also be used to fortify and construct gender, religious and ethnic identities and to create new non-criminogenic identities (24,25,27–29). Below are two examples of food-related identity construction in European prisons.

Gender and power in the self-cook kitchen. In their ethnographic study of life in a medium-security male prison near London (England), Earle & Phillips (30) focused on constructions of identity in the self-cook kitchens in the housing units. The authors outlined the prisoners' management of this space and ways in which conflict around cooking schedules and protocols were negotiated. They described the kitchens as a contact zone where the diversity of ethnicities and cultures represented in the prison's population intersect, forcing a "proximity with racialized others" and destabilizing white privilege (p. 149). The gender ambiguity of this space was also explored in ways that challenge the "toxic myth" of prisoners as hyper-masculine "inherently predatory men" (p. 151). By describing "how, and who, men are in prison ... taking them beyond the dehumanized two-dimensional shadows and bogey man caricatures that prevail, respectively, in criminological theory and popular culture" (pp. 152–153), this research highlighted the multiplicity of incarcerated male identities.

Ethnicity, religion and cell-cooking. Ugelvik explored ideas of resistance and identity construction in his study of food preparation on the remand wing of a prison near Oslo, Norway (26, pp. 55,56). All of the incarcerated men who participated in this study came from ethnic minorities and most had been born outside Norway. Using spices, vegetables and homemade water heaters and stoves, the men resisted the prison system and broader Norwegian culture that confined them by modifying the official food into a more familiar cuisine that reflected their ethnicity. Ugelvik theorized that prisoners found the official food to be emasculating and used cooking practices to re-assert control over their bodies. Through this illicit cell cooking, prisoners also "positioned themselves as smart prisoners," constructing a dignified identity and sense of self that became a performance of "courage and resourcefulness ... in a very limiting and narrow environment".

Relationships

In addition to constructing identity, food systems contribute to the development and maintenance of relationships among inmates, between inmates and staff, and between inmates and non-incarcerated friends and family (31). For example, the ethnography of a British male prison included observations of the prison's kitchen, canteen and cafeterias, survey, interviews and focus groups with prisoners and prison staff and

analysis of inmates' food diaries (32). The findings offered detailed descriptions of the cafeteria service and canteen offerings with a focus on the inmates' illicit food behaviour and narratives about prison food systems. Illegal trading and hoarding of cafeteria and canteen foods and incidences of food-related bullying and violence were used by both correctional officers and inmates to negotiate power and construct social relationships among inmates. A similar study of men in a Danish prison illuminated how inmates' roles in the self-cook kitchens constructed and reflected the prisoners' social hierarchy (28). Weak prisoners, often men with drug addictions and limited financial means, cooked and waited on more powerful inmates. While these men were in subservient positions, strong cooking skills could provide them with a relatively secure and safe place within the prison hierarchy. Meanwhile, sex offenders were completely excluded from all cooking groups, a sign of their peers' rejection and their lack of any type of social network or support (28)(Box 2).

Box 2. Prison food autobiography (2)

The autobiography of Jeff Henderson (33), a celebrity chef who was introduced to this trade while incarcerated, details his time working as a cook in the prison kitchen during his 10-year sentence. The book offers detailed information about the institutional systems that determine who gets what job in the kitchen, how tasks are delegated, how food is smuggled out of the kitchen by inmate staff and distributed to other inmates in the housing units, the manner in which inmates cook and prepare food in their cells, and the racial and power dynamics that hold all these food systems together. In a television interview, Henderson asserted, "The kitchen in prison is the most important place. Food is the most important thing to a person serving time." His autobiography definitely makes this case.

Given the power of food to construct identity and relationships, correctional administrators are well-advised to stay abreast of prisoners' social organization related to food and their food practices and behaviour beyond the institution's food service. Problems may arise when food practices are used to construct group identities, delineating and reinforcing religious, cultural or regional differences, rather than building bridges between these social networks (30,34,35).

Food-related interventions in correctional institutions

What are the practical implications of research about food in prison? How might this information be used to ameliorate the health and psychosocial outcomes for incarcerated people and improve the operations of the institutions?

One result of this evidence has been the proposal and testing of interventions designed to reduce overweight and obesity among prisoners by changing the catering menus and/or canteen options to include more whole grains, lean meats, fruits and vegetables and developing cognitive-behavioural programmes that provide prisoners with nutritional education, cooking classes and strategies for making healthier choices inside prison and after release (36,37). For example, a team that included food service professionals, a registered dietician and a cooking instructor in a prison in the English city of Bristol worked together to help inmates access a healthy diet by expanding catering options to include “heart healthy” options on a regular basis and offering a healthy eating course that provided inmates with specific strategies for food budgeting and preparation (38). Gardening programmes have enjoyed increasing popularity as interventions that promise to bring fresh food to prison tables, build community and team-working skills among inmates and offer marketable job skills and training (39,40). There has also been advocacy in the public policy arena to improve the nutritional content of food sold in the prison shop (41).

Websites about prison food build public awareness about prison food practices (see Box 3), while cookbooks written by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people share recipes and allow the authors to process and record their prison experiences (Box 4). There are also manuals that offer food service professionals and correctional administrators guidance about complying with nutritional standards, accommodating medical and religious diets and managing disciplinary issues, including hunger strikes and budgetary constraints (47).

Food programmes have also taken on an important role in vocational job-training programmes. When people can learn and practise cooking in prison, these skills may lead to employment during and after their incarceration. The Clink Charity in England, for example, employs 150 incarcerated men and women who receive culinary training and life skills development in order to facilitate their rehabilitation and reintegration into the community (Box 3).

Box 3. Prison food websites

1. *Cooking in maximum security (42)*

This website, inspired by the myriad uses of a coffee-maker, grew from a partnership between an academic and a collaborative of incarcerated men in Italy. The website includes photos and illustrations (which have also been presented in various galleries in Spain and Italy) and a link to their cookbook.

2. *Eating in prison (43)*

This page of a larger website dedicated to contemporary food issues includes poignant photos and text collected during the visits of a celebrity chef to a French prison.

3. *The Clink Charity (44)*

The Clink Charity seeks to reduce recidivism by partnering with Her Majesty's Prison Service to run four restaurants, a catering service and a horticulture scheme employing approximately 150 prisoners. These individuals are trained in cooking and management skills to support their rehabilitation and future employment.

Box 4. Prison food cookbooks

1. *Cucinare in massima sicurezza [Cooking in maximum security] (45)*

Dedicated “to the possibility of choice,” this cookbook presents recipes “born in prison” that illustrate the human capacity to solve problems and be creative, and offers a glimpse of life in incarceration in Italy.

2. *Everyday cooking on the inside: a cookbook for inmates in Danish prisons (46)*

The recipes in this cookbook were developed through collaboration between incarcerated people in Denmark and professional chefs affiliated with Meyers Madhus, a food and restaurant enterprise led by world-renowned chef, Claus Meyers. After brief introductions by Mr Meyers and a former inmate, the book presents detailed directions for preparing meals and stunning photos that are sure to inspire.

3. *Nutrition and food service management in correctional facilities (47)*

The Association of Correctional Food Service Professionals in the United States publishes this manual about how to operate prison and jail cafeterias. The book includes nutritional guidelines and recipes and an overview of relevant policies and administrative rules.

4. *Stinging for their suppers: how women in prison nourish their bodies and souls (48)*

This cookbook was written by a collaborative of formerly incarcerated women in California (United States). The book serves as a memoir of their incarceration and a demonstration of the prison community’s ingenuity and survival.

Food systems in Danish correctional institutions: a case study

Innovative food programmes in the Danish correctional system offer myriad examples about how incarcerated people can interact with food including institutional catering, self-cook kitchens, prison grocery shops and cooking classes. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Danish Prison and Probation Service undertook a series of reforms that transformed the food environment in correctional facilities across the country. The system now incorporates a range of food practices that vary by the institution’s security level.

Remand prison

Most remand facilities in Denmark do not have an on-site industrial kitchen. Meals for inmates in these facilities are prepared in a regional minimum security prison and then transported to the prison where they are heated and served. Remand prisons in the larger cities have industrial kitchens where incarcerated people work in collaboration with civilians to prepare three meals a day, including a cold buffet lunch of sandwiches, a hot evening meal and a breakfast tray. These meals are delivered on a trolley to the housing units where prisoners can eat alone in their cells or in small groups. Individuals incarcerated in remand prisons may also purchase food from the prison shop and each prisoner has a small refrigerator in his or her cell to keep these supplies. These inmates do not, however, have access to cooking tools other than hot water so food preparation activities are limited. In many of the housing blocks there are kitchen facilities that prisoners can reserve to cook in small groups, provided there are sufficient staff available to monitor them. On average, interested prisoners may be able to access this facility about twice a month.

Remand inmates in Denmark are largely dissatisfied with the food that is available to them. When surveyed in 2014, only 38% of inmates in remand facilities expressed satisfaction with the food (49). These inmates distrusted the cleanliness of the kitchens that prepare the hot meals and complained about the redundancy of the cold lunch buffet. Also, because the food is prepared in advance, usually at another facility, remand inmates reported that the food may be spoiled.

Prisons

Food systems in the prisons where individuals will serve their sentences are different. There are no cafeterias or institutional kitchens in any of Denmark's minimum or maximum security prisons: prisoners shop, cook and clean for themselves in communal kitchens in the housing units that are shared by approximately 20 inmates. Each kitchen is supplied with stoves, ranges, sinks, pots, pans and cooking utensils, including knives. In addition to shared refrigerators in these kitchens, prisoners have their own mini-fridges in their cells. Using funds provided by the government, they can buy food in the prison shop or order it from the internet. This basic support can be supplemented by funds from family and friends in the community and a salary earned through employment in the prison or, if the terms of their incarceration permit, off-site jobs. The people who use the kitchen are charged with keeping it clean and tasks are allocated among the prisoners to ensure the space is maintained. The

kitchen areas include dining tables, although some prisoners elect to eat alone in their cells.

There is a small minority of prisoners who are not eligible to use the self-cook kitchen. This includes people in solitary confinement for whom meals are provided by an off-site kitchen, as described in the previous section about food systems in remand prisons.

Prisoners express strong satisfaction with the self-cook system. A 2014 survey of Danish prisoners found that about 70% were satisfied with the quality of the food (49). About half (56%) were satisfied with the variety of products in the prison shop and 31% were satisfied with the shop's prices. Prisoners appreciate the ability to choose what they eat and, to a certain extent, when they eat. There are some complaints about the variety of items offered in the shops and the pricing, which is perceived as inflated, but shops are generally able to accommodate reasonable requests, including orders for halal meats. While the negotiations among the prisoners about access to the kitchen spaces and allocation of cooking and cleaning tasks is not without problems and conflict, prisoners in Denmark still express a preference for the self-cook system as compared to institutional catering because they can have greater control of what and when they eat (28).

Cooking classes

Over the last two years, there has been an expansion in the cookery training programmes that are available in some Danish prisons. These training programmes, which allow inmates to become certified chefs, are comparable to the training programmes offered in the community and are extremely popular among incarcerated people (50). The cookery classes have been featured on Danish television and in other media outlets. Although some objections have been voiced about the programme from people who are concerned that prisoners have greater educational opportunities than non-incarcerated people, for the most part the programme has received widespread approval.

Evaluation of the culinary training programme has demonstrated several positive outcomes. First, the cookery classes have improved the social climate in the prison and relationships between staff and inmates. In one facility, the cookery students prepare meals for the staff. While it is generally uncommon for staff to consume food prepared by prisoners, the staff in this facility report enjoying the

food. Second, the students express satisfaction with the cookery classes because they believe the experience will lead to a job with a future. They also appreciate learning how to prepare healthy, inexpensive meals for themselves, a skill that will serve them well during and after their incarceration. Third, the students and staff report that the cookery students share their new food knowledge with their peers who are not in the class, enabling the information to spread throughout the facility and increase healthy eating among the entire community. Finally, that the classes are taught by enthusiastic people from outside the facility is perceived by the students as a positive feature of the programme (50). This programme demonstrates how cooking programmes for incarcerated people can contribute to both the educational and management goals of a correctional facility.

Conclusions and action areas

This report describes the menu of food and cooking options that may be available to incarcerated people and provides concrete examples of the types of research and programming that have been conducted in correctional facilities across Europe. Correctional policy-makers and administrators are encouraged to use this information as a resource in assessing and developing the food systems in their prison and remand facilities. While seemingly a routine part of prison culture, food often plays a central part in incarcerated life, and attention to food systems may ameliorate health and behavioural outcomes in correctional environments. Specific ideas for future action include the following.

1. *Assess the facility's food systems.* Each correctional setting is unique, so administrators are encouraged to undertake a survey of their institution's food environment in order to understand both formal and informal food systems. Best practices for this type of assessment include the creation of a multidisciplinary team that includes correctional administrators, custody officers, food service professionals, education staff, medical providers and incarcerated people. A comprehensive portrait of the food environment can be gained by looking beyond the cafeteria at places and systems related to food throughout the facility. One strategy for uncovering less visible food-related activities and behaviour is to ask a diverse group of incarcerated people to keep a journal for one week that includes all their food consumption. Once a detailed map of the facility's food systems has been created, staff

and administrators can begin to think about how these systems might be expanded and improved.

2. *Record weight.* Prison administrators can gain more evidence about overweight, obesity and weight changes among the confined population by extracting this information from institutional medical records. They can also consider a more deliberate and consistent collection of weight and height information if these data are not readily available.

Examination of intake procedure and medical records can reveal if, when and how inmate weights are being recorded. Other key data points for understanding nutrition outcomes in the facility include height, waist and biomedical markers related to diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Depending on the resources of the institution, prison administrators can design a feasible plan to collect as much data as is realistically possible and track these data over time to build a better understanding of the weight-related health of the prison population.

3. *Recognize gender and ethnicity.* Research about prison food highlights the central role of gender and ethnicity in shaping food choices and outcomes.

Prison food programming should be mindful of gender and ethnic differences and strive to create flexible food services that can be customized to different tastes and preferences. Promotion of “healthy food” choices in correctional environments should leave room for multiple expressions of health, food, body and personal identities.

4. *Foster positive interactions.* Given the power of food to construct identity and relationships, prison food programmes can foster positive psychosocial outcomes.

The human experience includes not only the consumption of food but its acquisition, preparation and sharing as well. Making it easier for incarcerated people to cook and interact with food in pro-social ways may boost their life skills and psychosocial outcomes during and after incarceration.

5. *Use exemplar programmes to inform the development of interventions.* The wide range of innovations in prison food across Europe invites collaboration and the sharing of ideas between institutions.

Programme development should begin with models and ideas that have succeeded in other settings. Beginning with these exemplars, institutions can

modify programmes to meet their own unique needs. Internet resources and opportunities for meetings should be developed to disseminate food-related innovations between professionals in correctional institutions.

6. *Teach culinary skills.* Cookery programmes for incarcerated people can contribute to both the educational and management goals of a correctional facility.

Collaboration with community-based restaurants and food programmes has proved to be a fruitful strategy for building culinary programmes in prisons. Education and job training are critical to a long-term reduction in recidivism, and cookery programmes have the added benefit of providing skills that may also improve an individual's nutritional outcomes.

7. *Train staff.* Provide in-service training for custody and medical staff about the diverse food systems in the institution. A dialogue with staff about their experiences with food in the prison will expand their understanding of the institutional environment and train them to recognize the multiple meanings and uses of food within the institution.

In short, prison food matters and has tremendous potential to improve both individual and institutional outcomes. The work can begin with a simple question to a group of inmates: what did you eat last night for dinner? Listening to what, when, where and with whom people eat offers a window into their lives and an understanding of the nutritional landscape that shapes eating behaviour. This report invites a conversation about food to be undertaken – between correctional staff, between staff and inmates, and across regions – that expands correctional institutions' potential to be places of health and recovery.

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