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Research Article

Contesting through food: Tracking hunger strikes in carceral food systems

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Abstract

In highly regulated environments such as prisons, food-related practices seem to be one of the only activities that can be controlled by incarcerated people, although this control is very limited. Drawing on a media review conducted as part of the research project, we explore collective hunger strikes in Canadian prisons, highlighting the demands made by incarcerated individuals between 2016 and 2022, as well as the institutions' response. Since these hunger strikes have been used to challenge various inhuman conditions of detention, we will reflect on them, and food more broadly, as a tool to resist authority, its ability to foster a sense of autonomy and identity for incarcerated folks as well as to forge a bond of solidarity through collective mobilization, both inside and outside prison walls. This paper shows how food is a space of contestation where incarcerated folks and Canadian carceral institutions fight with disproportionate means to gain power.

Keywords: Canadian prisons; carceral food systems; collective actions; hunger strikes; prison food; prisoner solidarity; punishment; resistance

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Résumé

Dans des environnements très réglementés comme les prisons, les pratiques alimentaires semblent être l'une des seules activités pouvant être contrôlées – quoique de manière très limitée – par les personnes incarcérées. Sur la base d'une revue de presse réalisée dans le cadre de notre projet de recherche, nous explorons les grèves de la faim collectives dans les prisons canadiennes, en mettant en lumière les revendications des personnes incarcérées, entre 2016 et 2022, ainsi que la réponse des institutions. Puisque ces grèves de la faim ont servi à contester diverses conditions inhumaines de détention, nous réfléchirons à ces grèves, et de manière plus générale, à la nourriture, en tant qu'outil de résistance à l'autorité, susceptible de renforcer un sentiment d'autonomie et d'identité chez les personnes incarcérées ainsi que de forger un lien de solidarité à travers une mobilisation collective, tant à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur des murs de la prison. Cet article montre comment l'alimentation peut être un espace de contestation où les personnes incarcérées se battent contre les institutions carcérales, avec des moyens inégaux, pour obtenir du pouvoir.

Introduction

> "A group of women and I got together and wrote down the things that were lacking. I said these issues would be a good reason to go on strike - we would demand a change to these conditions and hope our voices would be heard by the public. On April 1, 2021, I started a hunger strike. At one point it was only me on the hunger strike. Then five women in Unit 3 joined, and some other women joined from Unit 4. The first five days the staff called it a "refusal." Then, a woman was hospitalized for low potassium levels. It took five days for them to take us seriously. Nurses finally started checking in on us daily. More people began to join the strike during my second week, because more staff actually wanted to listen to our demands." (Deborah McKenzie, 2021).

Incarcerated individuals have long used hunger strikes as a pressure tactic to push prison management to address their grievances and garner public attention. This quote from Deborah McKenzie, incarcerated at Pine Grove Correctional Centre, exemplifies the potential power and significance of hunger strikes in prison. They often spread from unit to unit, and, despite what prison management may have the public believe, they can and do result in meaningful change. In general, it is very difficult to access clear information on what is happening inside prisons. During hunger strikes, prison management is typically loath to share details or acknowledge the full extent of these collective actions. It's often only when hunger strikers can relay details about their situation and their demands to external allies or the media that some information becomes available to the public.

In the summer of 2022, we started tracking collective hunger strikes that occurred in Canadian prisons over the past seven years. We did so by searching media and websites, generating a timeline of over forty collective hunger strikes at prisons across so-called Canada. Our objective was to generate a visual timeline (from 2016–2022), to gain a more comprehensive understanding of carceral hunger strikes in Canadian provincial and federal prisons.

This media review and timeline was a first step in trying to understand emerging patterns in contemporary carceral collective hunger strikes. As Evans and House (2024) note, prison protest is difficult to study, and it is

very likely that many collective hunger strikes, as well as carceral protests in general, are never reported outside the prison walls. This means that their occurrence is no doubt higher than what we were able to identify. More than anything, we intend to make visible the scale and scope of hunger strikes organized by incarcerated individuals, to value those actions, and to highlight one way in which food is used as an important tool of contestation within prison.

Our investigation into collective prison hunger strikes stems from a broader project exploring carceral food systems in Canada as sites of contestation, seeking to understand the complex and varied meaning and role of food within prisons in Canada (Wilson, 2022, Wilson et al. 2023, Wilson, 2023). There is a small but growing literature outlining the important connections between food systems and prison systems and how injustices within the carceral context shape and are shaped by injustices within the food system (Hazelett, 2023; Kathuria, 2022; McKeithen, 2022; Reese & Sbicca, 2022). Going beyond a simple accounting of these injustices, what Reese and Sbicca (2022) label the "critical food and carceral studies" is premised on an abolitionist politic that recognizes the impossibility of true food justice within prison systems. We share this orientation and understand hunger strikes as a tool of political action in a highly controlled and punitive environment. Despite efforts to dismiss and diminish the collective capacity of incarcerated folks,[1] they continue to find ways to push back against their poor living conditions, to challenge the systemic discrimination inhered in our prison system, and to articulate a future beyond carceral logics.

While individual hunger strikes are more common, and no doubt also significant, we chose to focus on collective hunger strikes as they more often receive mention in the media and because they are one of the few collective actions incarcerated folks have at their disposal to advocate for change. We find these acts especially meaningful, as they are an illustration of incarcerated individuals joining together in solidarity within a context designed to separate and individualize—both incarcerated individuals from one another and from the rest of society.

In the following sections, we present both quantitative and qualitative findings of the media scan, as well as observations and reflections emerging from the process. We highlight the most frequent demands, the institutions' responses, and document how incarcerated individuals still mobilize, coordinate, and act in solidarity. In combing through media articles and statements from incarcerated folks and their allies, we found a familiar dynamic: incarcerated individuals seek to bring attention to their poor living conditions and systemic discrimination while prison staff and government officials try to dismiss and diminish their efforts as much as possible, creating a push-and-pull with a highly disproportionate power imbalance.

[1] As is common in prisoner-support and abolition movements, we refer to incarcerated and non-incarcerated individuals alike as "folks". Further, to emphasize the humanity and complex identities of incarcerated people, which go far beyond their involvement in the carceral institution, we use the terms "incarcerated folks" and "incarcerated individuals."

Literature review

In general, two approaches seem to drive research on carceral food systems. The first one studies food and foodways, focussing on nutrition: dietary and caloric intake, food (in)security, nutritiousness, legal nutritional compliance of menus, as well as nutritional knowledge and educational programs about healthy food (Agyapong et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2022; Örs, 2018). This approach focusses on the potential of food to increase (or undermine) the health and wellbeing of incarcerated folks.

The second approach is largely ethnographic and revolves around the "lived experience of incarceration" (Smoyer & Blankenship, 2014, p. 563), where "perception and experiences of food, meals and eating in prison" are discussed (Woods-Brown et al., 2023, p. 2). As Woods-Brown and colleagues (2023) state, these perceptions and experiences revolve around the material aspects of carceral food systems, the quality and quantity of meals, the environment and the context in which food is served (De Graaf & Kilty, 2016; Gibson-Light, 2018; Jones, 2017; Parson, 2020; Smith, 2002; Smoyer & Lopes, 2017; Vanhouche, 2015; Watkins, 2013), and the symbolic aspect of foodways.

The symbolic aspect has been addressed in four main ways: 1) carceral foodways as forms of discipline and punishment (Einat & Davidian, 2018; Jones, 2017; Smoyer & Lopes, 2017); 2) the role of food and foodways in identity and a sense of self (Cate, 2008; Earle & Philipps, 2012; Smoyer, 2014, 2015b); 3) their role in negotiating relationships, forging bonds of solidarity and community (Cate, 2008; Earle & Philipps, 2012; Timler, 2017; Wilson, 2023) but also furthering coercive and hierarchical relationships (Earle & Philipps, 2012; Einat & Davidian, 2018; Smoyer, 2015a; Valentine & Longstaff, 1998); and finally 4) food and foodways as practices of contestation and resistance by incarcerated folks (De Graaf & Kilty, 2016; Einat & Davidian, 2018; Evans & House, 2024; Norman, 2022). This research is situated within the scholarship on the lived experience of carceral food systems and speaks to these four main symbolic aspects.

There is also a rich literature highlighting the history and significance of hunger strikes as tools of social change and collective action, as well as a particular lineage within this scholarship focussed on prison hunger strikes. As Nayan Shah (2022a) writes, "the power of the hunger strike lies in its utter simplicity" (par.6); nearly any incarcerated individual can make use of the tactic, even in highly restrictive conditions. Similarly, Vanhouche (2015) notes that in a highly controlled environment such as a prison, "food and food-related activities appear to be among the few activities people can try to control" (p.48; Gibson-Light, 2018; McGregor, 2011). Despite this, little is known about food and food-related practices of repression and resistance in prisons in Canada, as most studies are based in the United States and Europe.[2]

Incarcerated individuals use food and foodways in several ways to resist and contest the authority of the prison institution. Resistance is best conceptualized as a continuum of practices that challenge existing power relationships; these practices may be hidden or overt, individual or collective (Godderis, 2006b; Smoyer, 2016; Ugelvik, 2011; Vanhouche, 2015). Godderis (2006b) has categorized food-related resistance practices into four types—individual adjustments, individual displays of opposition, legitimate group activities, and illegitimate ones—to which Brisman (2008) adds hunger strikes as a fifth category.

[2] Godderis (2006a,b) and De Graaf & Kilty (2016) are notable exceptions.

Individual adjustments are conscious decisions to soothe the pain and trauma of imprisonment (Godderis, 2006b), such as indulging in comfort food in response to the pain and stress of imprisonment and to regain some control over one's body (De Graff & Kilty, 2016; Smith, 2002; Smoyer & Minke, 2019). An individual display of opposition includes a verbal or physical confrontation with a prison officer (Godderis, 2006b), refusing to return trays, throwing food waste at prison staff in an attempt to humiliate them (Brisman, 2008; Jones, 2017), attacking them, or other incarcerated individuals with food or food-related items, starting a rumour about contaminated food, etc. (Jones, 2017). Legitimate group displays of opposition are institutionally accepted practices, like buying groups to gain access to culturally relevant foods (Godderis, 2006b), oral and written complaints, and lawsuits to highlight the poor food conditions of imprisonment (Vanhouche, 2015) or as an attempt to rebuff the institution's authority (Brisman, 2008; Jones, 2017; Smith, 2002).

Illegitimate group practices of resistance are those that directly confront and challenge the authority of the prison (Godderis, 2006b). They include unauthorized movement of food, such as bringing leftovers from the cafeteria back to one's cell (Smoyer, 2016; Smoyer & Blankenship, 2014), stealing (Gibson-Light, 2018; Godderis, 2006b; Smoyer, 2015a; 2016), foraging (Watkins, 2013), securing additional food at the cafeteria (Smoyer, 2016), hoarding (De Graaf & Kilty, 2016), and sharing food and food-related items for preparing food (De Graaf & Kilty, 2016; Smoyer, 2014, 2015a; Watkins, 2013). Incarcerated individuals employed in food services can also engage in resistance by serving more food than is allowed (Smoyer, 2016). These practices are often done to perform another so-called illegal activity: cooking, where formally or informally collected ingredients are transformed into foods that are more meaningful and that can be eaten on incarcerated folks' terms (Cate, 2008; De Graaf & Kilty, 2016; Gibson-Light, 2018; Smoyer, 2016; Smoyer & Blankenship, 2014; Stearns, 2019; Ugelvik, 2011). Finally, illegitimate group displays of opposition also include identifying with a religion or a specific diet to gain access to food that is considered to be of a higher quality (Jones, 2017; Siporin, 2015).

Looking specifically at hunger strikes, they serve as examples of both individual and group illegitimate displays of opposition (Brisman, 2008). At a personal level, it means rejecting one's bodily needs while exhibiting autonomy and emancipation from the institution that exerts such control over the bodies of incarcerated individuals (Earle & Philips, 2012; Smith, 2002). Hunger striking can be understood as a performative act enabling incarcerated individuals to claim rights they sometimes "d[o] not (yet) have" (Desta, 2019, p. 1515), to "exercise a political voice" (Montange, 2017, p. 516), and to affirm their identity as dignity-deserving human beings (Chalit Hernandez, 2022; Desta, 2019), as well as political subjects (Montange, 2017). It is a process of reclaiming agency while shedding light on the inhumane treatment they receive (Desta, 2019). However, this process can, and has, also brought "desperation, distress and divisions" amongst strikers, as McGregor (2011, p. 608) reports. This is why Chalit Hernandez (2022) speaks of hunger strikes as a "dynamic and contradictory form of resistance", one that is, amongst other things, both "weakening and empowering" (p. 118).

At a group level, it is also a means to get attention from the outside, to transmit one's beliefs and political messages, and to protest over the conditions of detention to bring about change (Brisman, 2008; Wee, 2004). To Chalit Hernandez (2022), hunger strikes are a strategy to involve the public and make demands impossible to be ignored by the institution. Literature

highlights the catalyst effect of solidarity networks and media coverage on hunger strikes, heightening strikers' claims and political speech and granting them legitimacy (Chalit Hernandez, 2022; Desta, 2019; Evans & House, 2023; Montange, 2017). These "observers" are key to the success of hunger strikes, as they bring external pressure to the power-imbalanced and vulnerable-to-repression dynamic of resistance between incarcerated individuals and the institution (Norman, 2022; Evans & House, 2023). As a group display of opposition, hunger strikes are performed as a means to access political bodies and advocate for policy reforms (Desta, 2019) but also to challenge "the symbolic and material structures of carcerality" (Chalit Hernandez, 2022, p. 104; Montange, 2017).

For Chalit Hernandez (2022), the distinctive feature of hunger strikes compared with other forms of resistance is their ability to both "challeng[e] the legitimacy and violence of carceral institutions" and express the humanity of incarcerated individuals and their political visions in a strategic way (p. 104). While hunger strikes vary in format, Shah (2022b) suggests they all hold three primary elements: individual and collective defiance from incarcerated individuals against the state; communication to fellow incarcerated people, prison authorities, and the wider public; and third, "it makes the prisoner and his or her self-starvation matter to whoever hears of it." (p. 3).

Carceral food systems is a relatively young field of study, and some areas of scholarship have been further developed than others. Practices centred around cooking and consuming food have received greater attention than other areas, such as prison agriculture (Chennault & Sbicca, 2023; Innes, 2019; Jewkes & Moran, 2015; Struthers Montford, 2019; Timler, 2017), gardening (Sbicca, 2016; Moore et al., 2015), and hunger strikes. Discussions of carceral hunger strikes often focus on the legal, ethical, and legitimacy aspects of these struggles (Alempijevic et al., 2011; Brisman, 2008; Desta, 2019; Emmerich, 2015; Howland, 2013) and their performative acts of political resistance (Brisman, 2008; Chalit Hernandez, 2022; Montange, 2017; Norman, 2022; Wee, 2007). Building on the latter, we aim to deepen research on the resistance aspect of carceral hunger striking while also discussing their impact on relationships, community building and identity work, as well as the disciplinary responses of the institution. In other words, we focus on the push-and-pull dynamic, a framing less apparent in the existing scholarship. We situate our research within the discussions of carceral food systems and the tradition of hunger strikes and prison resistance to both contribute to the surfacing and mapping of prison resistance and deepen our understanding of the role and significance of food within the carceral context.

Definition and methods

A collective hunger strike refers to the refusal of food as an act of protest involving two or more people. In the carceral setting, the refusal of food is generally the refusal of all food, including food from the canteen, the prison's convenience store. Alternatively, it can involve only refusing the food provided by the institution, such as from the cafeteria. The latter is also called "tray refusal," a term often used by prison management to avoid labeling it a hunger strike.

To track collective hunger strikes, we conducted a media scan and document analysis of the articles identified. The primary media scan took place in the

summer of 2022 and was updated in 2023. The search included Canada's major daily newspapers via ProQuest's Canadian Major Dailies. Search words included "hunger strike," "prison," "Canada," "tray refusal," "strike," and the prison's name and a specific year. Articles discussing individual hunger strikes or hunger strikes outside of Canada were discarded. In addition, a review was conducted of several key websites: Perilous Chronicle's list of North American hunger strikes (n.d.), Mike Gouldhawke's timeline of prisoner resistance across the prairies (2021), the websites of Barton Prisoner Solidarity Project (n.d.) and Toronto Prisoners' Rights Project (2020), and a public Facebook group entitled SUPPORT for REGINA CORRECTIONAL INMATES (n.d.), as well as additional Google searches. Articles or posts that referenced a collective hunger strike between 2016 and 2022 in a Canadian prison (federal or provincial) or immigration detention centre[3] were all included. Once the articles were collected, they were categorized and coded for both emerging and a priori themes. When analyzing the data, we gave specific attention to the location and duration of the hunger strikes, how many incarcerated individuals were involved, their demands, and the outcomes of the strikes.

A total of 88 articles were included in the review; fifteen were national, forty-five were local, and twenty-eight were what we categorized as community or independent reporting (including website posts and social media posts). In some instances, multiple articles covered the same hunger strike, or a single article addressed multiple strikes (e.g., the coordinated hunger strikes across seven institutions on July 1, 2021). While the media coverage served as the data source, it was not the focus of our analysis; we did not examine the framing or nature of that coverage.

It is important to acknowledge some of the limitations posed by our choice of methods. As we noted above, one of the findings of our review is that prison management actively seeks to downplay and undermine the scope and significance of collective hunger strikes. This means that there are undoubtedly collective hunger strikes that took place that were not included in this review because they did not receive media attention. We sought to counter this, in part, through a review of additional websites, particularly those that engage in direct support and solidarity with incarcerated individuals. In addition, as we intended to make visible a range of hunger strikes across time and geography, a media review and document analysis, despite its limitations, presented as the most suitable method. Additional research drawing on a mixed-method approach to gain a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of these strikes is most certainly warranted.

Findings

We identified forty-eight collective hunger strikes between 2016 and 2022. Thirty-five of them took place in provincial prisons, with the remaining thirteen in federal-level institutions. Ten collective hunger strikes took place in immigration detention centres, seven of which were in provincial jails, and the remaining three

[3] In Canada, there are three federal immigration holding centres (here referred to as immigration detention centres), one in Laval (Québec), one in Toronto (Ontario), and one in Surrey (British Columbia). Immigrants who are detained in other regions are detained in a provincial prison (Canada Border Service Agency [CBSA], 2023).

at the Laval Immigration Holding Centre, a federal detention centre (Adams, 2021; Peterborough Examiner, 2016; The Canadian Press, 2016). Many institutions had recurring hunger strikes; Regina Correctional Centre had the most, with six identified collective hunger strikes. All of the institutions with three or more collective hunger strikes are provincial, except for the Laval Immigration Holding Centre.

Table 1: Hunger strikes in Canadian prisons 2016-2022

Institution	Location	Federal or Provincial	# Hunger Strikes
Atlantic Institution	Renous, NB	Federal	1
Bordeaux Prison	Montréal, QC	Provincial	2
Laval Immigration Holding Centre	Laval, QC	Federal	3
Central East Correctional Centre (Lindsay Jail)	Lindsay, ON	Provincial	5
Hamilton Wentworth Detention Centre (Barton Jail)	Hamilton, ON	Provincial	2
Maplehurst Correctional Complex	Milton, ON	Provincial	2
Millhaven Institution	Bath, ON	Federal	2
Niagara Detention Centre	Thorold, ON	Provincial	1
Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre	Ottawa, ON	Provincial	2
Toronto East Detention Centre	Scarborough, ON	Provincial	3
Toronto South Detention Centre	Toronto, ON	Provincial	1
Pine Grove Correctional Centre	Prince Albert, SK	Provincial	4
Saskatchewan Penitentiary	Prince Albert, SK	Federal	2
Regina Correctional Centre	Regina, SK	Provincial	6
Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre	Saskatoon, SK	Provincial	5
Drumheller Institution	Drumheller, AB	Federal	1
Edmonton Institution	Edmonton, AB	Federal	2
Edmonton Remand Centre	Edmonton, AB	Provincial	2
Fraser Valley Institution for Women	Abbotsford, BC	Federal	1

Spotlight on demands

Across the forty-eight hunger strikes, the most frequent demands were about the COVID-19 pandemic. Between the end of March 2020 and the end of April 2021, we identified twenty-two collective hunger strikes[4] protesting how prisons were handling the pandemic, in particular decrying the lack of access to personal protective equipment, inadequate health and safety protocols, and the frequent imposition of lockdowns.[5] As one group of individuals held in an immigration detention centre in Laval wrote in their public declaration in March of 2021: "This is a call for help. We want to be treated with dignity and above all

[4] Evans and House (2024) counted thirty-six of them, with data collected from media articles and prisoners' justice groups as well as interviews and government reports and communications.
[5] See Agence QMI (2020), Butler-Hassan (2020), Hasham (2020a,b) and Seawood & Fatica (2020) for examples.

we want to be protected in this time of pandemic like every Canadian citizen." (Solidarity Across Borders, 2021).

Food-related issues were another frequent concern, stated in thirteen hunger strikes, and spread out more evenly over the seven years as compared to COVID-related grievances. Common food-specific claims included insufficient portions of protein (Quan, 2019; The Canadian Press, 2020), not enough fruits and vegetables (Criminalization and Punishment Education Project [CPEP], 2020a; Radio-Canada, 2020), declining quality of food (Pacholik, 2017; Rankin, 2020), and difficulties accessing the canteen because of its high cost of food and low purchasing power of incarcerated individuals (largely related to their incredibly low wages) (CBC News, 2016a; Quan, 2019). One case, in 2016, saw over 100 incarcerated individuals launch a one-day hunger strike to protest the privatization of food services at the Regina Correctional Centre (Jackson, 2016).

Generally, the list of grievances encompasses a multitude of demands related to different aspects of life in prison. They range from specific claims to flagging poor and deteriorating conditions to making broader statements about systemic discrimination and oppression. During a hunger strike at the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre (OCDC) in June 2020, incarcerated individuals called for better quality food and an end to "food discrimination" (CPEP, 2020a) against those eating Kosher and Halal diets. A second hunger strike followed the next month. Erica Brazeau (2020), one of the hunger strikers, writes that they demanded: "an end to strip searches, increased access to hygiene products, and food that meets the Canada Food Guide requirements, which the jail is supposed to provide" (p. 127). Evans and House (2024) also reported demands from Indigenous people for culturally appropriate diets and stated that many of the grievances made during these two strikes were framed by the protesters as systemic racism. From these examples, we can see that hunger strikes are both a tool to raise grievances about specific conditions of incarceration and seek an immediate remedy and also a strategy to shine a light on the overall injustices within carceral systems and society as a whole, at a more systemic level.

Prison management response: Deflect and deny

There is a rhetorical pattern emerging from prison management's public responses to hunger strikes, as they are trying to control public opinion. In their statements, government public relations officers or prison superintendents consistently seek to minimize their scope: they will provide vague information on the strike, saying that "some" or "several" people are participating, or "a group," making it seem like only a few people care about these demands, even where it is a large number. Trying to discredit the action and the power of incarcerated folks, management or government officials will speak of "tray refusals" or "refusing meals" rather than a hunger strike (Kliem, 2022; Rankin, 2020). In response to a July 2018 hunger strike at the Edmonton Remand Centre, the Alberta Justice spokesperson was quick to note that "those individuals [on hunger strike] still have access to food from other sources like canteen purchases" (Mertz, 2018). Prison management responds to hunger strikes by deflecting the subject or denying these actions. They do this because public attention is very important for hunger strikes to succeed, and using rhetorical tactics

helps to restrain the protest and diminish its power outside the walls.

In contrast to this public discourse, inside prison walls, staff have responded in ways that appear quite punitive. For instance, there were reports of guards forcing immigration detainees to have food in their cells while they were on hunger strike at Central East Correctional Centre in Lindsay, ON, in 2016 (Cain, 2016). On the flip side, in 2021, Niagara Correctional Centre's guards raided cells, taking snacks away from individuals protesting the new phone system under the guise of ensuring nothing is consumed while on hunger strike (Green, 2021). During a hunger strike at Edmonton Remand Centre in February 2018, Timothy Crowe recounted that prison guards removed food from the canteen during their strike: "They organized a group of guards and they took every available piece of food that we had." (Wakefield, 2018).

Guards have also used threats and intimidation tactics to end the hunger strike and discourage further striking. Maya Mendes from No One Is Illegal, a grassroots migrant justice group, reported that some participants in a hunger strike at Central East Correctional Centre in October 2018 were put in segregation as punishment for striking, a claim the prison, of course, denies (Davis, 2018). Following a hunger strike at Regina Correctional, Forrest Pelletier, one of the hunger strike leaders, was moved to another prison altogether (Pacholik, 2017). Incarcerated individuals at OCDC allege strikers were put on twenty-four hour lockdown and guards threatened to withhold access to medication during a hunger strike in 2020 (CPEP, 2020b), and there were reports of an intentional two-day power outage during another at Millhaven Institution in 2020 (Butler-Hassan, 2020). These tactics are not unusual, as they also have been reported in collective hunger strikes held in other countries (McGregor, 2011; Montange, 2017; Norman, 2022). While hunger strikes are often not officially acknowledged by prison management, these actions by management send a clear message to incarcerated folks that engaging in collective action to demand change will have consequences. The prison management response is contradictory. On the one hand, the public discourse labels these actions as insignificant and unworthy of attention, while internally, their response suggests these actions are indeed important and pose threats to the established order within prisons.

Articles and posts from solidarity organizations and independent reporting were crucial in countering the lack of transparency from prison management. Groups such as the CPEP, the Barton Prisoner Solidarity Project, and the Toronto Prisoners' Rights Project provided key details, often directly from currently incarcerated individuals, on the existence of hunger strikes, their specific demands, and prison management responses. This also exemplifies what Evans and House (2024) frame as "porous prison protest" (p. 170), where the actions, culture, and politics within prisons shape and are shaped by the broader community, rather than conceptualizing prisons as isolated institutions of complete domination. Indeed, as the next section makes clear, incarcerated individuals continue to organize despite threats or reprisals from prison staff.

Mobilization, solidarity, and coordination

On the side of incarcerated folks, the media scan documented a pattern of mobilization, coordination, and solidarity that shows that they resist and contest prison management's aim to shut them down.

While the majority of hunger strikes identified were quite evenly spread out across different institutions, certain institutions had clusters of hunger strikes, such as Regina Correctional Centre (six), Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre (five), and Central East Correctional Centre (five). This could be because the conditions are particularly harsh at these institutions, there is a stronger culture of resistance amongst those incarcerated, and/or they are well supported by local allies and support groups.

In tracking the chronology of hunger strikes, we found that when one hunger strike takes place, there's a greater likelihood that another one will follow shortly thereafter. For instance, there were two hunger strikes at Regina Correctional Centre between January and March 2016 (CBC News, 2016a; Jackson, 2016) and two in March 2021 at Laval Migrant Centre (Kamgang, 2021; Marois, 2021). This is perhaps related to a pattern of prison management promising certain concessions to end a strike but failing to fully implement them, pushing incarcerated folks to mobilize another hunger strike reiterating those same demands. Indeed, we often see the same demands repeated in subsequent hunger strikes.

This is what happened at OCDC in the summer of 2020: an initial hunger strike in June achieved partial concessions from prison management (The Canadian Press, 2020), but incarcerated folks were back on strike in July after conditions once again deteriorated (Radio-Canada, 2020). Similarly, the two hunger strikes organized by incarcerated individuals at Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre one month apart in 2020 both echoed demands related to access to the jail's handling of the pandemic. In the case of incarcerated individuals at Pine Grove Correctional Centre in Saskatchewan, who organized hunger strikes (two in 2021, one in 2022, and one in 2023), all pertained to the general topic of poor living conditions, while each articulated specific grievances about that central theme. While acknowledging the inherent injustice within the carceral institution, this pattern suggests particular sustained problems with the treatment and living conditions at Pine Grove.

Another observation regarding mobilization emerging from this work is the important role Indigenous leaders play in prisoners' justice and advocacy work. Cory Charles Cardinal at the Saskatoon Correctional Centre; Forrest Pelletier at Regina Correctional Centre and Prince Albert Correctional Centre; Deborah Mckenzie, and most recently Faith Eagle, in Pine Grove Correctional Centre all led strikes, mobilized other incarcerated individuals, and coordinated with folks at other institutions to have joint collective hunger strikes. This is not a surprise since there is a long tradition of Indigenous resistance within carceral systems. Mike Gouldhawke,[6] a Metis and Cree organizer, links it to the spiritual component of fasting present in his culture. Hunger striking is a way to express and connect to Indigenous identity culturally and to fight for it politically (Adams, 2021). In addition, there has long been a devastating overrepresentation of Indigenous people within Canadian prisons, nearly nine times higher than the non-Indigenous population. At the federal level,

[6] Mike Gouldhawke is doing important work in researching the history of Indigenous hunger strikes in prison (2020) as well as tracking Indigenous prisoners' resistance across the prairies (2021).

Indigenous people account for 32 percent of the incarcerated population, a figure that increases to 50 percent in the case of women (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2023). In Saskatchewan, a province that saw 35 percent of hunger strikes included in our study, between 75 to 80 percent of the prison population is Indigenous (Clark, 2019; Ghania, 2022).

We also found several examples where incarcerated individuals coordinated hunger strikes with folks at other institutions. For instance, incarcerated folks at Toronto East Detention Centre and Central East Correctional Centre organized a joint hunger strike in 2016 to protest the indefinite detention of immigrant detainees and their incarceration in maximum security prisons (CBC News, 2016b). Others have started a hunger strike as an act in solidarity with incarcerated individuals at another prison, like in November 2022, as folks from Regina Correctional Centre struck in support of Faith Eagle and women at Pine Grove protesting over living conditions (Neil, 2022). We have also seen hunger strikes in solidarity with people affected by certain situations happening outside the carceral institutions, the most striking of which is when folks from seven prisons across the country[7] coordinated a hunger strike on July 1, 2021, to decry the confirmation of unmarked graves at former residential school sites (Stadnyk, 2021). Speaking specifically of incarcerated individuals in Saskatchewan, Sherri Maier, founder of Beyond Prison Walls Canada, said that they wanted to "stand up and do something." (James, 2021) This serves as a reminder that incarcerated individuals are not disconnected or separated from society; they remain members of communities and families and continue to engage in the world around them.

Concluding thoughts: Impacts of striking

This collection of observations and emerging thoughts shows how food is a space of contestation where incarcerated folks and Canadian carceral institutions fight with disproportionate means to gain power. While incarcerated individuals strike to shed light on and challenge their treatment and poor living conditions, the institution's public responses are meant to discredit those actions in the media while, internally, punishing them for speaking out. Despite this, we continue to see mobilization, coordination, and solidarity amongst incarcerated folks seeking to better their conditions and have their human rights met. Future research gaining a more in-depth understanding of the aspirations and lived experiences of incarcerated individuals involved in these hunger strikes would deepen the insights gained in this research and further extend our understanding of food as a tool of contestation in carceral contexts.

From a practical sense, the results of these collective hunger strikes can be disappointing: promises are made, or small changes arrive to keep the peace while the harsher problems stay, for example, accessing more sports equipment and yard time but no negotiations on dehumanizing body examinations (Toronto Prisoners' Rights Project, 2020). Sometimes, though, strikers have

[7] Saskatchewan Penitentiary, Edmonton Institution, Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre, Regina Provincial Correctional Centre, Pine Grove Correctional Centre, Fraser Valley Institution for Women, and the Toronto South Detention Centre.

their demands met, as happened in Laval in 2020, when 4 immigration detainees were released to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19 (Adams, 2021). As Desta's (2019) history of prison strikes argues, strikes rarely "br[ing] about immediate changes", but they "help initiate long-term prison reforms and have periodically been successful in drawing attention to the otherwise unnoticed plight of those behind bars" (p. 1493; Norman, 2022).

In a more symbolic sense, collective hunger strikes are important for incarcerated individuals, because it is one of a few ways folks have access to regain and exercise their power in such a highly controlled environment (Desta, 2019; McGregor, 2011). They are an attempt to regain power over their environment, showing a sense of autonomy and engaging in political acts that are meaningful to them (Earle & Philips, 2012; Smith, 2002). As for other forms of food resistance in carceral settings, this can enable incarcerated individuals to reject the institution's control over their body, the "inmate identity" that it imposes on them, and to regain a sense of their own identity (Cate, 2008; De Graaf & Kilty, 2016; Godderis, 2006b; Smoyer, 2014). Ultimately, collective hunger strikes are a way to contest authority, create alternative ways to see oneself, and engage in meaningful collective struggle with other incarcerated individuals. Our findings are a reminder that despite a highly controlled and punitive environment, incarcerated individuals still find ways to advocate for their rights and engage in solidarity actions to support others. As incarcerated people continue to organize on the front lines, we hope this timeline encourages more people on the outside to support and amplify strikes behind bars and join the fight for prison abolition.

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Hungry for Justice

A timeline of collective hunger strikes in Canadian prisons

Hunger strikes are one of the few collective actions available to incarcerated people and they've long used hunger strikes to protest prison conditions, garner public attention, and pressure prison management to address their grievances. Between 2016 and 2022, incarcerated people organized at least 48 strikes. As incarcerated people continue to organize on the front lines, we hope this timeline encourages more people on the outside to support and amplify strikes behind bars and join the fight for prison abolition.

2016

Regina Correctional Centre
Regina, Saskatchewan
Fifteen incarcerated people participate in a five-day hunger strike to demand less time spent in cells and more access to the exercise yard.

March 3

Toronto East Detention Centre
Toronto, Ontario
Sixty-eight incarcerated people join those at Central East in their protest for time limits to immigration detention, now also demanding a meeting with then Minister of Public Safety Ralph Goodale.

July 11

January 7
Regina Correctional Centre
Regina, Saskatchewan
One hundred people participate in a one day hunger strike to protest the privatization of food services.

April 21
Central East Correctional Centre
Kawartha Lakes, Ontario
A group of migrants in immigration detention initiate a hunger strike demanding a 90-day limit to immigration detentions and the end of the use of maximum security prisons to detain migrants. The group meets with officials from Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), however CBSA does not meet their demands.

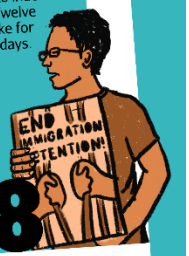
October 17
Central East Correctional Centre and Toronto East Detention Centre
Ontario
Seventeen people in immigration detention go back on hunger strike, once again demanding an end to indefinite detention of migrants. Twelve strikers remain on hunger strike for 17 days.

Central East Correctional Centre
Kawartha Lakes, Ontario
Fifteen incarcerated migrants go on a hunger strike for four days, demanding a meeting with CBSA to discuss their recently published national immigration detention framework. There were reports that the prison put some of the strikers in segregation as punishment.

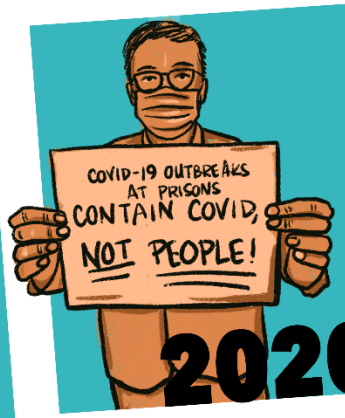
October 8

Regina Correctional Centre,
Regina, Saskatchewan
Twelve incarcerated people go on a hunger strike to protest changes to mail delivery and the lack of access to canteen, hygiene products and medical care. The Ministry of Justice refuses to negotiate with the strikers.

March 12



2018



2020

July 23
Edmonton Remand Centre
Edmonton, Alberta
Approximately 200 people go on a hunger strike for at least three days in protest of a prolonged lockdown.

Bordeaux Prison
Montréal, Québec
Approximately 150 incarcerated people go on a hunger strike for seven days to protest the prison's poor sanitary conditions. They call for their release because they are unable to practice physical distancing, putting them at risk of infection. The strikers succeed in getting access to PPE.

May 5

January 7
Edmonton Remand Centre
Edmonton, Alberta
Fifty-five people go on a hunger strike to protest the amount of time the prison forces them to stay in their cells, and the prison's transfer of an individual to a high-security unit.

March 23
Laval Immigration Detention Centre
Laval, Québec
Thirty incarcerated people go on hunger strike demanding their release and improved medical care, to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Four people continue to strike for eight days and most of the hunger strikers are released in the following months.

June 3
Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre
Ottawa, Ontario
Fourteen people in maximum security go on a hunger strike to demand better quality food and increased access to kosher and halal food, as well as to protest the prison's lack of COVID precautions. Their demands are not met, but the prison commits to providing peanut butter packets with kosher meals and increasing access to health and hygiene products.

June 15
Centre East Correctional Centre
Lindsay, Ontario
One-hundred people go on a five-day hunger strike to protest prison conditions, including increased access to books and clean clothing, higher quality food, and potable tap water.

Ottawa-Carleton
Detention Centre
Ottawa, Ontario
Over 70 people go on hunger strike to once again demand better conditions.

July 22

Maplehurst Correctional Complex
Milton, Ontario
A group of people go on a hunger strike due to arbitrary lockdowns, inadequate hygiene and food, and access to cleaning supplies and phones. The prison doesn't meet their demands and denies them access to the canteen.

July 6

Hamilton-Wentworth Detention Centre
Hamilton, Ontario
Between 20 and 50 people go on hunger strike to protest the poor-quality food the prison serves them. The prison stops serving certain "disgusting" meals.

June 20

Millhaven Institution
Bath, Ontario

A group go on a five-day hunger strike to demand four hours per day outside of their cell, two more hours than they currently have, as well as to protest prison staff's failure to practice social distancing and to wear PPE. Strikers win more time outside, but the prison refuses to improve COVID-19 safety measures.

October 8

Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Incarcerated people stage a hunger strike to call for a plan to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 including physical distancing, PPE, and the release of incarcerated people to ease overcrowding.

November 27

Saskatchewan Penitentiary
Prince Alberta, Saskatchewan

Incarcerated people go on a hunger strike to protest the prison's COVID-19 response. The prison puts incarcerated people on lockdown for seven days and fails to remove COVID-19 positive people from the units.

December 19

October 7

Toronto East Detention Centre
Toronto, Ontario

A group go on a three-day hunger strike to demand daily outdoor recreation and exercise time, affordable phone calls, rehabilitative and educational programming, better access to TV and radio, more canteen products, and an end to strip searches and the use of full body scanners. Prison management agrees to some of the strikers' demands regarding yard time, sport equipment access, and better accommodation of their religious needs, but refuses to negotiate strip searches.

December 17

Toronto South Detention Centre
Toronto, Ontario

Thirty-three people start a hunger strike to protest the prison's inadequate health and safety measures.

December 24

Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

After the prison forces incarcerated people into quarantine for 31 days to curb the spread of COVID-19, 21 people begin a hunger strike in protest.

Drumheller Institution
Drumheller, Alberta

Over 30 people go on a week-long hunger strike to protest punitive COVID-19 safety measures. For three weeks during the lockdown, incarcerated people have no access to soap, but after two days of striking, the prison provides some.

January 9

2021

Laval Immigration Detention Centre
Laval, Québec

A week long hunger strike to protest the prison's lack of COVID-19 protections and to demand their release.

March 1

January 4

Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre
Pine Grove Correctional Centre
Saskatchewan

Ninety people go on hunger strike for a third time to protest poor COVID-19 safety measures, this time joined by 14 women incarcerated at Pine Grove Correctional Centre.

March 10

Hamilton-Wentworth Detention Centre
Hamilton, Ontario

Fifty people go on a hunger strike to demand better conditions, including access to cleaning supplies, hand soap, clean bedding, regular access to yard time, and for visits and calls with lawyers to be restored.

February 15

Maplehurst Correctional Complex
Milton, Ontario

After lockdown due to a COVID-19 outbreak, incarcerated people go on hunger strike demanding access to video calls since in-person visits are no longer permitted due to COVID-19, access to personal hygiene and hair products, consistent laundry service, improved kosher food options, better TV access and more channels, increased phone card funds, and more access to books and basketball nets.

Bordeaux Prison, Montréal, Québec

Thirty people go on a one-day hunger strike after the prison goes on lockdown following a COVID-19 outbreak. For two weeks, they aren't able to leave their cells despite no positive tests.

Saskatchewan Penitentiary, Edmonton Institution, Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre, Pine Grove Correctional Centre, Fraser Valley Institution for Women and the Toronto South Detention Centre

Incarcerated people from across Canada go on a 24-hour hunger strike after the discovery of thousands of unmarked graves at former residential schools.

July 1

Pine Grove Correctional Centre
Prince Albert, Saskatchewan

Eight women go on a week-long hunger strike to protest inadequate access to health care and hygiene products, mistreatment from staff, a lack of accountability when they submit complaints to the prison, a lack of programming and support, and ongoing concerns related to the prison's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

April 8

April 30

Niagara Correctional Centre
Thorold, Ontario

After prison management install a new faulty phone system, 20 people begin a five-day hunger strike. Guards took the opportunity to raid strikers' cells and steal their snacks to make sure strikers weren't consuming anything. Strikers also protested their inability to add funds to their accounts remotely, the prison canceling visits due to the pandemic, reduced yard and TV time, and the prison's so-called "relationship tax" where they charge an additional fee when an incarcerated person calls the same number more than 60 times per month.

July 9

Regina Provincial and Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centres
Saskatchewan

After someone was stabbed, a group start a hunger strike to advocate for proper medical care for the wounded person.

Pine Grove Correctional Centre
Prince Albert, Saskatchewan

"We won't stop," Faith Eagle, an Indigenous woman from Saskatoon, went on hunger strike protesting incarcerated people's lack of access to clean water, healthy food, and time outside, inadequate medical care, racist treatment from guards, and the over-representation of Indigenous women in Canada's prison system. Five weeks into Eagle's strike, two others joined her. Weeks later, people incarcerated at the Regina Correctional Centre, Atlantic Institution, and Edmonton Institution went on a three-day hunger strike in solidarity with the trio.

September

Millhaven Institution
Bath, Ontario

When staff threatened to move certain individuals to a different ward, a group launches a hunger strike in protest and succeed in preventing the move.

January 3

2022

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