



## Research Article

## Punishment and waste: Family meals in Correctional Services of Canada's private family visits

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## Abstract

While families of prisoners in Canada are often allowed to visit their loved one inside, they can face significant challenges in accessing and navigating the conditions of these visits. One such challenge is the food available to them as they seek to take part in a key aspect of family life and relationship, the family meal. Families' experiences of the limited options, poor quality, and high costs of food echo those of the prisoners living in the institution. The prized Private Family Visit (PFV), during which family members spend a weekend with a prisoner in a small house on the grounds of a CSC

institutions, do present a rare opportunity for a true family meal. However, institutional policies render the costs and waste of the food so high that partners in this study (primarily women living in poverty) experience this as yet another 'painful' penal power. While these policies are minor in scope, impact, and importance to all but a few hundred Canadian families a year, I argue that families' experiences of carceral food systems contribute insights into the way food is used as a tool of penal power and as one of the mechanism through which families of prisoners become carceral subjects.

**Keywords:** Carceral food systems; children of incarcerated parents; families of prisoners; prison food; punishment and society

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## Résumé

Alors que la plupart des familles de détenus au Canada sont autorisées, en principe, à maintenir une relation avec leur proche détenu et à lui rendre visite à l'intérieur des murs de la prison, elles peuvent se heurter à une myriade de défis pour accéder aux visites et s'y retrouver dans les conditions exigées. L'alimentation est l'un des défis auxquels les partenaires et les enfants sont confrontés lorsqu'ils cherchent à prendre part à un aspect essentiel de la vie et des relations familiales, à savoir le repas en famille. Cet article explore les expériences des visiteurs familiaux en ce qui a trait aux politiques alimentaires liées aux visites, en s'appuyant sur des entretiens avec des partenaires et des enfants de détenus, ainsi que sur les politiques du Service correctionnel du Canada relatives aux visites et à l'approvisionnement en nourriture. Les opinions négatives des familles sur les choix limités, la mauvaise qualité et les coûts élevés de la nourriture font écho à celles des prisonniers vivant dans l'institution, tout comme leurs expériences des systèmes alimentaires

carcéraux comme étant punitifs, imprévisibles et injustes. La très prisée visite familiale privée, pendant laquelle les membres de la famille passent une fin de semaine avec leur proche détenu, constitue un rare sursis, et la possibilité d'un véritable repas familial est au cœur de cet avantage. Cependant, les politiques institutionnelles rendent les coûts et le gaspillage de la nourriture si élevés que les partenaires (avant tout des femmes vivant dans la pauvreté) vivent cette visite comme une autre manifestation « douloureuse » du pouvoir pénal. Bien que ces politiques aient une portée, une importance et des effets dans la vie de seulement quelques centaines de familles canadiennes chaque année, je soutiens que les expériences des familles en matière de systèmes alimentaires carcéraux permettent de mieux comprendre la manière dont l'alimentation est utilisée comme un outil du pouvoir pénal et comme l'un des mécanismes par lesquels les familles de prisonniers deviennent des sujets carcéraux.

## Introduction

A key standard of international human rights related to incarceration, and the Supreme Court's interpretation of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, is that prisoners "retain all rights other than those necessarily limited by lawfully imposed restrictions or sanctions" (Sapers, 2017, p.1). An adage from the prisoners' rights movement puts this another way: prisoners are sent to prison "as punishment, not for punishment." However, this is difficult to reconcile with the experience of eating a meal in prison, which prisoners and researchers (including in this special edition) often describe as a tool

or mechanism of punishment and penal power (de Graaf & Kilty, 2016; Earl & Phillips, 2012; Hatch, 2019; Ugelvik, 2011; Wilson, 2023).

This literature naturally focuses on the interests of and data from prisoners; however, there are others who eat prison meals and experience institutional policies and practices regarding food. This article seeks to contribute to the discussion of carceral food systems by exploring the food experiences of visitors to prisons, in particular children and partners of prisoners. These family visitors spend time in day visiting rooms and private family

visiting (PFV) “trailers” and bring valuable perspectives on these food systems. Their experiences provide further insights into the costs, quality, accessibility, and control over food inside prisons and how prison service policies are enacted.

Examining family visitors’ experiences can also add insight into the meanings of food “inside.” As they try to have a family meal, which sociologists see as a constitutive and sustaining practice of families (Ochs & Shohet, 2006; Punch & McIntosh, 2014), they are faced with barriers in the form of rigid institutional policies and rules, as well as frustrations at practices felt to be inconsistent, arbitrary, and unfair. I argue that this constitutes experience of a “tight” penal power (Crewe, 2011; Crewe & Ievins, 2021) and aligns with critical scholarship into the nature, use, and implications of penal power.

The experiences of food by visitors also provide insights into the processes by which families become subjects of penal regulation and harms. While there is no legal justification to punish children and families of prisoners, scholars in the emerging area of familial incarceration argue that they are nonetheless subjected to a sort of adjunct sentence and live “in the shadow” of the prison (Codd, 2013; Comfort, 2009; Condry & Minson, 2021). This concept has been variously theorized, but

Comfort’s (2009, 2019) notion of families experiencing a “secondary prisonization” provides a particularly useful lens through which to understand the experiences of Canadian children and partners who visit their relative inside, with its focus on the disciplining power of the institution on families. I argue below that engagement with carceral food systems during visits is one of the mechanisms through which families become *subjects* of the prison.

This article briefly reviews the literature on prison food in Canada, including the “modernized” food system used in many institutions and the limited research into prisoners’ experiences of food inside. Evidence from a broader qualitative study of Canadian families of prisoners is then presented, focusing on evidence regarding their experiences of food and family meals in day visiting rooms and PFVs. While real family meals are possible and a prized element of the PFV for children and partners, their experiences nonetheless support the argument that carceral food policy is both subjectifying and punitive.

## Prison food quality and neoliberal “central feeding”

The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the *Mandela Rules*) state that “every prisoner shall be provided by the prison administration at the usual hours with food of nutritional value adequate for health and strength, of wholesome quality and well prepared and served” (*United Nations General Assembly*, 2015, Rule 22.1). Despite this, there is extensive research literature about poor quality, spoilage, inadequacy, and other faults

with much prison food (McKeithen, 2022; Smoyer & Minke, 2015; Ugelvik, 2011). Examples of this inadequacy abound, including requiring some prisoners to eat meals beside or seated on the open toilets in their cells if they are incarcerated in some remand settings, institutions on lock-down due to illness, violence, or staffing shortages, or in solitary confinement, (Evans et al., 2022; Pratt & Hosoi, 2024). One study of elderly prisoners found that the second most common

aspiration for post-release life was “eating what they wanted” (Pratt & Hosoi, 2024, p.148).

The quality and quantity of food in Canadian prisons has been specifically decried as inadequate in terms of quality and quantity, particularly since the shift to centralized, industrial food preparation after 2014 (OCI, 2019; Senate Committee, 2021; Wilson, 2013b). Under the narrative of “modernization,” industrial cook-chill systems replaced “from scratch” cooking in many federal and some provincial prisons. These systems involve large vats of food being cooked and flash chilled at centralized sites and then shipped to individual prisons for “finishing” in the form of reheating large bags of stews and soups (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2019; Wilson, 2023). Costs per meal have been further reduced through a lower diversity of food, fewer grains and whole foods, and the use of powdered milk. This system is deeply tied to a neoliberal ideology, in its austerity and “reductionary nutrition” as well as its focus on technical and financial efficiency and standardization (McKeithen, 2022). Within these logics, the idea of prisoners eating freshly cooked food, made with ingredients that have a relationship with season, climate, or culture and that respond to the eater’s choices and desires, is irrational. Indeed, the food is experienced as disgusting and inedible by prisoners (Wilson, 2023).

Further, the appearance of efficiency in this centralized system does not appear to be reflected in institutional practice. An internal audit by CSC

identified significant concerns and inconsistencies with food spoilage and waste in visited institutions (CSC, 2019). Findings included that all institutions prepared far more meals than required for each sitting (though simultaneously not allowing prisoners to store or retain food), that some institutions simply did not record food waste, that a third of institutions had spoiled or expired food in their freezers, and that one institution simply threw away all excess food after a meal and kept none for “leftover” meals (a full third of what was prepared) (CSC, 2019). Further, the repurposing of prison kitchens from sites of cooking meals to reheating bags of food meant the closure of programs that trained prisoners for work in the food service industry (Wilson, 2023).

The inadequacy and lack of palatability of the prison food provided leads prisoners to purchase more palatable food through the canteen or underground economies. Prisoners rely on snack foods purchased from the prison canteen using the limited funds they have earned or had sent in by family, such as instant noodles, to supplement the meagre and poor quality food they receive through the official food service, and “with no way to shop for better prices, federally-sentenced persons are forced to pay exorbitant prices for these items” (Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, 2021, p.86). Nearly all respondents to Wilson’s (2023b) survey described conflicts between prisoners over traded, stolen, purchased, or extra food.

## Food as a tool of penal power

The provision of nutritious food to prisoners is the responsibility of the state that incarcerates them, and prisoners have this right enshrined within international human rights instruments, including the Mandela Rules which outline a clear prohibition on using prison

diets as a sanction (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). However, prisoners and researchers have long argued that food choice, quality, quantity, and access are used as a less formal form of power by institutions

and their staff to discipline and punish prisoners (Ugelvik, 2011; Wilson, 2023).

Certainly, prisons across Canada use prized foods such as snacks or higher quality items as incentives for prisoner compliance. Evidence for this can be found in such mundane texts as a Public Works and Government Services Canada (2013) request for private bids to supply food and food services at a CSC institution, which notes that “tea, coffee, milk, juice, pop, dessert items, canned fruit etc. provided for behavior modification shall be provided in bulk separate from any other food on a weekly basis” (p. 25). Combined with the inadequacy and poor quality of prison-issued meals, it is unsurprising that using food as a tool of penal power is replicated within the informal economies of the “society of captives” for currency and status (Gooch, 2022; Wilson, 2023). An ex-prisoner I interviewed for the study described below explained to me his method for procuring a nightly phone call with his children while he was on remand: he collected the sugar packets that arrived with meal trays and sold these to the range cleaner, a prisoner who had earned this position of relative power which included the power to tell the officers which cells should be “cracked” first when prisoners were let out onto the range. The sugar packets bought him the service of being let onto the range first and thereby being first in line for the range telephone, another contested resource (Knudsen, 2016).

Like food, family visits are used by prisons as a tool of behaviour modification, despite the right to family life for prisoners being guaranteed in the Mandela Rules (United Nations General Assembly, 2015), upheld as a Charter right in *Hunter v Canada* ([1997] 3 F.C. 936), and, for children, outlined in the UN Convention on the Right of the Child (Lagoutte, 2011; Parkes & Donson, 2018). The Mandela Rules state explicitly that “disciplinary sanctions or restrictive measures shall not include the prohibition of family

contact. The means of family contact may only be restricted for a limited time period and as strictly required for the maintenance of security and order” (Rule 43, United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Nonetheless, access to visits and other key elements of prisoner life are routinely used as incentives to discipline prisoners by modifying behaviour and gaining compliance, as shown in this description of open or “contact” visiting rooms for prisoners to meet with their children or other family members at an Ontario remand centre: “Open visits at the institution are primarily used as a good behaviour incentive, and are available to men and women who are on a direct supervision unit who staff have judged as consistently demonstrating good behaviour” (Sapers, 2017, p. 57). Gooch (2022) points to the neoliberal austerity approach to prison management, which values compliance and order over any rehabilitative aims, as the cause of this prioritization.

In parallel to prisoners’ experiences of institutional food, limited research into the experiences of family visitors to prisons indicates that food in prison visiting rooms is experienced as poor quality and limited in choice (Christian, 2005; Evans et al., 2022; Knudsen, 2023). The only food options in day visit rooms are provided by vending machines run by private for-profit companies that CSC contracts to install and stock them. CSC does not pay the vendor, rather the vendor sets the price of the items (on which CSC sets no upper limit in the Tender process) and receives the profit of the items sold after paying a share to the prison’s “Inmate Welfare Fund” ((CSC, 2017) These costs are paid by visitors who, like prisoners, are disproportionately likely to be living in poverty (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). I have argued elsewhere that Canadian prisons systemically neglect any responsibility to identify, understand, or meet the needs and rights of prisoners’ families (Knudsen, 2016).

## Private family visits in Canadian prisons

Most visits between prisoners and their family members in Canada are short sessions during which people speak through glass or a video camera with little privacy, as most prisoners in Canada are incarcerated on remand and are therefore held in maximum security settings by default (Knudsen, 2016; Sapers, 2017). Visits are issues of primary concern and frustration to prisoners and their visitors. Indeed, the category of “visits” is regularly in the top ten categories of complaint to the Office of the Correctional Investigator (OCI), which hears complaints only related to the federal prison system (Public Safety Canada, 2024).

One opportunity does exist for some prisoners to have visits with their family members that resemble or constitute a home-like environment: the Private Family Visit (PFVs or “trailer visits”). These visits are highly prized and are used by the institution as a powerful incentive, like higher quality food. Yet PFVs are scarce: they are only open to prisoners incarcerated in federal CSC institutions, who constitute around one third of Canadian prisoners, while 44% are people being held on remand in provincial institutions and 18% are provincially sentenced (Public Safety Canada, 2024).

PFVs involve three days spent in a small bungalow located inside the grounds of the institution and are private aside from daily visits by correctional officers. Visits may occur every two months once approved. CSC (2024) describes the goal of PFVs as follows:

Private family visits (PFVs) allow inmates and their families to spend time together. These visits help inmates keep and strengthen family and community ties. As well as:

- enhance daily living skills

- maintain positive community and family relationships and responsibilities, such as parenting skills
- decrease the negative impact of incarceration on family relationships

Families often spend trailer visits engaging in normal home-life activities like watching television, playing games, talking, having sex, cooking, eating family meals, and washing dishes. Vacheret (2005) notes the intimacy that can be cultivated through mundane activities in the PFV, allowing prisoners to recover, recreate, or reinforce their parenting roles, even if only superficially or temporarily. In analyzing women’s experiences of similar visits in a California penitentiary, Comfort (2002) described them as “domestic satellites” created by women visitors within the prison. In a global context, the availability of this type of “conjugal” or overnight visit is uncommon, and Canada’s PFVs are commended internationally (Moran, 2013; Raikes & Lockwood, 2019).

However, even within the population of federal prisoners, only selected prisoners and families are eligible. Prisoners are formally eligible if they are not in a Special Handling Unit and can pass risk assessments related to family violence and other threats (CSC, 2016). The potential visitor must similarly have their “suitability” reviewed through an application, photographs, a criminal record check, written responses to questions about their relationship with the prisoner and desire for the visit, an interview with a correctional officer, and a search for contraband upon entry (CSC, 2022, 2023). Finally, prisoners must buy the food for the PFV using their inmate account, choosing from a list of items provided by the institution (CSC, 2024).

Prisoners and potential visitors can also be informally ineligible for PFVs for a range of reasons,

many associated with living in poverty. These include lacking funds to travel to CSC institutions (often situated in rural areas away from public transit) or to stay in hotels the night before a visit, inability to take three days away from work or caregiving, not having identification cards, being homeless, having a criminal record, substance use (as trace amounts will be detected by the ion scanners at the institution), lacking funds to send to the prisoners' accounts to contribute to the cost of PFV food, inability to complete the application process due to lower literacy, or sexual abuse histories that make the risk of being frisk-searched untenable (Knudsen, 2016). While services for visiting families, such as advice, lower-cost transportation, or Welcome Houses to receive long-distance visitors, are sporadically

and sparsely offered to families by local charities, neither prisons nor the governments that run them offer any support to reduce these barriers to maintaining family life.

Given these many limitations, it is unsurprising that, of the 33,000 prisoners in Canadian prisons, the number receiving PFVs on any given weekend across the country is at most around 150 (Vacheret, 2005). For this small, privileged percentage of prisoners and visitors, the experience appears to be widely valued. This paper seeks to examine how families' experiences of being able to choose, cook, and share family meals during the PFVs may contribute to scholarly and policy discussions of the nature of both penal power and familial incarceration.

## Methodology

This paper draws on qualitative interviews collected during a broader study of the self-reported experiences of Canadian children of incarcerated parents, for which I interviewed twenty-two children and youth, aged six to seventeen years, who currently had a parent in prison (Knudsen, 2016). Participant recruitment was extremely challenging for this study and took almost two years. Initial recruitment efforts were extensive yet yielded an extremely low response rate. These efforts included passive recruitment strategies through various routes: information across social media; hundreds of “pull tab” flyers posted on agency bulletin boards and phone poles throughout several cities; a website; packages of flyers sent for posting and distribution to every parole office and CSC institution, every Ontario halfway house, and hundreds of social service organizations and community health centres; emails to every Ontario child protection office; a recruitment letter sent to 200 families who matched my eligibility

from the Angel Tree funding program; and inclusion of my flyer in every CFCN Family Orientation package (n = seventy-five to 100) sent to families of all new CSC prisoners who provided the institution their family's address over six months in 2012. I initially approached the CSC, but efforts to recruit participants at or through the institutions themselves, or even to post recruitment flyers, were denied.

I was eventually able to successfully recruit participants by volunteering for two charitable prison transportation services, both of which offered low-cost travel from the Greater Toronto area to CSC men's institutions on weekends and are primarily used by partners and children. I drove the van for one service, and for the other service I rode on a larger bus and sought to assist by keeping kids busy and chatting with parents. I distributed my recruitment flyers and answered questions about my research near the end of each ride.



Rigorous attention was paid to maintaining a non-coercive and otherwise ethical research protocol, given the heightened vulnerability of these children, the importance of confidentiality in relation to criminal legal systems, and the risks of distress associated with the topic.<sup>1</sup> Measures taken included using a strict “opt-in” approach to recruitment such that caregivers’ failure to proactively contact me would prevent their child’s inclusion in the research, an approach that may reduce coercive effects but also leads to much lower participation rates and risks “non-participation” for reasons other than refusal to participate (such as inertia, confusion, or lack of contemplation) (Berry et al., 2012). This opt-in recruitment method is a natural element of passive recruitment strategies like posting a flyer; however, I used this within active recruitment efforts as well. When I met or built relationships with potential participants or their caregivers on transportation services, I ended our interactions by giving (or re-giving) them my flyer and asking them to call, email, or text me if they were interested in participating, or to spontaneously offer to book a time for me to visit their home. I note concerns that this opt-in protocol raises other ethical risks, such as encouraging higher participation by people with university education and higher socioeconomic status (Berry et al., 2012).

I conducted a single, semi-structured interview with each child, lasting around forty-five minutes in length. These interviews were conducted privately, aside from a few children who indicated that they preferred their caregiver to be present. They were conducted in the spaces in which I was invited by the caregiver to meet the children, which was primarily their homes but also included a restaurant booth, a backyard, and a park.

Interviews occurred in different locations across southern Ontario between 2011 and 2013. Children were eligible if they were aged between six and seventeen years and had a parent currently in prison. I defined “parent” as anyone whom the child and their caregiver regarded or identified as the child’s parent (regardless of biological or legal ties). “Prison” was defined as a carceral institution, including provincial jails and facilities for remand and sentenced prisoners and federal penitentiaries, but not including community corrections (e.g., halfway houses), immigration detention, or secure psychiatric settings.

I attended to rapport and trust building with care and other resources, in part because of the extreme wariness I perceived from caregivers. These efforts included spending time with the family upon arriving at the visit rather than rushing to begin the interview, taking up any offers of food or drink, meeting family pets and admiring favourite toys, touring the home, going for a walk, and, in one case, visiting a school fun fair together. I offered to purchase lunch or dinner for the family during the visit; this was usually accepted, and I would bring, arrange delivery of, or purchase pizza or other fast food based on the family’s preference. Sharing a meal thus became a backdrop to building relationship and constructing the data.

One interesting exclusion criterion emerged in the course of the research related to a child’s knowledge of their parent’s incarceration. Caregivers who kept the parent’s incarceration a secret from the child (e.g., telling them that their parent is away at work or school) were unlikely to respond to my recruitment efforts for interviews about this topic. However I did actually have several caregivers on the bus service who let me know that they would be willing to have their child

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<sup>1</sup> Research ethics board approval was obtained. My social work education, as well as training and experience as a child protection worker, afford me particular skills in interviewing children and families around potentially distressing topics. Further discussion of this process can be found in Knudsen (2016).



participate on the condition that I not ask their child anything about prisons or their parent's incarceration; despite bringing their children to visits at the prison, they told the child (and felt confident that their child believed) that they were visiting their father at "work." I declined to interview these children as this would not have been useful, aside from one child. In this case, the mother asked me to call the prison "daddy's work," and I agreed to go ahead because I had met the child several times on the visiting bus and heard him mention that his father was in prison. However, this was the one child who did not assent to be interviewed (described above), and so they were not included. There is some evidence to suggest that this strategy of not telling children about the parent's incarceration may be widespread (Boswell, 2002; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008).

The demographics and experiences of my sample of child participants was likely reasonably representative of what can be inferred (but which we do not have research to show) are representative of Canadian children of prisoners on some demographic indicators. They were disproportionately living in poverty, with eight of the families' (eighteen of the children) primary incomes being derived from various government income support programs, and another three families whose income came primarily from employment. All reported or showed indicators of low income, including living in subsidized housing or temporarily with a family member. While there are no Canadian data on the previous incomes of Canadian prisoners, there is substantial research literature showing that criminal legal systems disproportionately capture people living in poverty (Wacquant, 2009). Fourteen of the twenty-two children were white (similar to 62% of the Canadian prison population), three were Black (versus 9% of prisoners), one was Indigenous (versus 19% of prisoners), one was Latino (versus 1% of prisoners), one

identified as half Indigenous and half Black, and three identified as half white and half black (Public Safety, 2024). In certain other ways, these children do not represent the population of Canadian or even Ontario children of prisoners as they all lived in southern Ontario and most had parents in the federal correctional system. This bias was due to recruitment through transportation programs from the Toronto area to CSC institutions, and it may lead to underreporting of additional costs faced by families of prisoners who travel from rural areas to these institutions.

The twenty-two children lived in twelve unrelated households; I conducted interviews with these children's primary caregivers on the "outside," with interviews occurring privately and during the same visit. These twelve caregivers were all the child's mother and their sole caregiver, aside from one child who was cared for by his mother's sister and brother (I interviewed the maternal aunt) and two children were cared for by both their mother and maternal grandmother. These interviews were also semi-structured and lasted sixty to ninety minutes in length, and I found that most caregivers had a great deal to say and communicated an interest in keeping the interview going. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was used to develop a coding scheme, and the data were coded using NVivo software.

Finally, the broader study included visits to a variety of services for families of prisoners in southern Ontario and maritime province Welcome Houses, interviews with twenty key informants, and a review of grey literature on this topic, including prison service documentation and service provider materials. The key informants had a range of professional expertise with the prison system or prisoners' families, mainly as the executive directors or program managers of social services or policy analysts, but none had any specific

focus or expertise in food systems. Finally, the methodology from design through to analysis was informed by key concepts from critical childhood studies, particularly the framing of children as competent, political social actors and authors of

knowledge. As such, the broader study centers the voices and views of children about their own lives, connects discussions of childhood to sociopolitical systems, and resists the tendency to focus on children's outcomes or their utility (Burman, 2023).

## Findings

While this broader study was not designed with any goals around exploring food or family meals, these topics arose spontaneously, immediately, and consistently in the interviews. As I asked about their experiences of having a loved one in prison, families, and children in particular, so frequently brought up the topic of food, and particularly the quality, options, cost, accessibility, and value of their meals in the prison, that the importance of food to the experience of familial incarceration emerged as a key finding.

### Food as a defining element of familial incarceration

When asked about various aspects of having a parent in prison, children consistently and spontaneously identified their experiences of food during visits, and used food to evaluate, illustrate, and organize their experiences. For example, seven-year-old Grace answered my questions this way:

*Anything you like about the day visits?*

Uhm that we get to have food and we get to play and I get to talk to my daddy and get to talk to my mommy.

[...]

*Okay is there anything good about having dad in jail?*

Uhm that he gives me candies.

Similarly, Rob, also seven, reported on the salience of food in his visits with his father:

*What do you like about your visits [to the prison]?*

I gets lots of treats from my daddy.

*You get lots of what from your daddy?*

I get lots of treats from my daddy.

*You get lots of treats from your daddy! What kind of treats?*

Um I got, I get pop, [//you get pop] chips, and popcorns.

*Okay. And what do you like best about visits with daddy?*

The stuff he gives me.

Ten-year-old Darcy used the visiting room food options to assess the difference between the two different prisons she had visited her father in:

*And is there one [of the prisons] you liked better or were they about the same?*

Uhm...the one that he's in now, there's like TV and stuff. [Okay] And the vending machines, they have better stuff.

*Oh. What was it like in the first place?*

They had like chips and sandwiches and drinks that I don't really like...

*Okay gotcha. But how is the food in this one he is in now?*

They taste good.

So consistent was the spontaneous mention of food experiences that I concluded that food was a defining

element of children's experiences of having a loved one in prison. The significance of food to visits with a parent for these children exemplifies the way that meals are "central to defining and sustaining the family as a social unit" (Ochs & Shohet, 2006, p. 37) and a medium for socializing and constituting family identity (Punch & McIntosh, 2014).

However, poor quality and meagre options of food to share during visits appear to be just as defining. For example, when discussing her frustrations with the institution, partner Bree described the way that poor food in the day visiting rooms negatively impacted visits

There should have [been] somewhere you can get actual food, not these, just vending machines....[The food in the prison visiting areas is] chips and chocolate and pop. People are going to be in there with kids from 9:30 to 3:30, no food? No kind of food? Just rubbish? Garbage?

Caregiver Casey similarly raised the issue of food when discussing how families could be better supported, suggesting:

If [families] could even bring a picnic lunch or something. Okay, no utensils or whatever [which might raise a safety concern]. Sandwiches or whatever, and even if it means we get the pop from [the prison staff] so it's not glasses coming out, you know. Whatever the issues. So you're there for that length of time, the person can enjoy eating a cooked meal just for that one time that they see you. So they know what they're looking forward to. Instead of same old, same old; the only difference, I'm seeing my family.

Casey argued that the processed snack foods on offer in vending machines affected the quality and nature of visits with her son-in-law, but suggested moreover that such food could not constitute a family meal, which she framed as key to making the visit special.

## Food as defining: Food quality and family meals in the PFV

Nowhere was this defining nature of family meals for the prison visit more evocative than with six-year-old Will, whose experience of visiting his stepfather for a PFV visit (which he calls his stepfather's "house") centered on the food:

*Can you tell me, how do you feel about having visits with [stepdad in the PFV]?*

Happy

*Yeah? What makes you happy about it?*

'Cause I get to see him 'cause I don't really see him a lot. And uhm 'cause his house is very fun *His house is very fun?* [Mm hm] *What do you do in his house?*

Play toys and the lunch is better than our lunch *Yeah? What do you get to have for lunch, when you go to [his] house?*

Usually for breakfast we have pancakes. Not the pancakes that you buy it and you make it and you put it in the toaster. The pancakes you just make by yourself

*Oh wow.*

And we sometimes we have fries and uhm fries and chicken for dessert

*Oh wow you get all good foods, huh?*

Mm-hm and for dinner we had rice and shrimps

*Oh rice and shrimps, fancy!*

And then the other thing, we had dumplings and chicken.

*Okay. can you tell me some other feelings you have about going to [stepdad's] house?*

Happy...excited.

Unlike visitors' experiences with vending machine food in the day visit room, the PFV offers the possibility for families to eat freshly cooked food from primary ingredients, and to cook for each other together as a family activity. For Will, the meals and therefore the

visit itself was special, exciting, and enjoyable due to the food being freshly prepared and high quality.

### Food costs and waste

The enjoyment and quality of family meals available in PFVs, and the visits themselves, were tempered by concerns over the high cost of PFV food for visitors. Prisoners order the food for their PFV visit through CSC staff, and normally a correctional officer takes their list to a local grocery store to purchase the items. The cost is taken from the prisoner's inmate account, although in practice this is heavily subsidized by contributions from the prisoner's families, who often send significant amounts of money into the prisoner's account (Knudsen, 2016). The correctional officer purchasing the food will choose the grocery store to buy from, which at times means that prices are higher than using lower-cost stores, bulk options, coupons, and other mechanisms that people living in poverty use to keep food costs manageable.

Further, the PFV trailers contain kitchens with items for cooking and eating but are emptied of all food from previous visitors, including basics like salt, spices, and condiments. Therefore, when ordering and paying for the food they will need for the weekend, through the limited options provided, families must also purchase these basics. Many of these items are available only in quantities much larger than are needed for a seventy-two-hour visit. In the context of the disproportionate poverty faced by prisoners' families and the other high costs of attending visits described above, the requirement that families purchase full containers of spices is not insignificant. Sue provided an example of this, noting that she spent \$300 on food for a PFV visit while her income from benefits that month was under \$2,000:

Sometimes you can spend \$40 on condiments going in on the [PFV] trailer. So sometimes we're guessing it's gonna be like a \$300 bill because you need to make sure you get enough milk, to make the food. 'Cause you can't go out again once they have cereal or whatever, you're done. So, that's cause, we're spending almost \$200 when me and [daughter] and [prisoner husband] were there. And just me and him last time and we did \$124 and we made it just by the skin of our teeth.

Another partner, Katie, explained:

So, it's just, some days it's really, really hard for financials, but when it comes closer to a trailer, trailer visits [PFVs], you at least have to have the minimum of \$100 for groceries.

*So if you have trailers, you're sending in money to supplement for his canteen? So he can buy food for—*

Yes. The guys will go and they have a list of food for the groceries and they will go through it. Our groceries for the week—for a seventy-two-hour visit, will be an amount that I would pay for a week or two. It's like, the last one we had, I think we paid \$150, close to \$160 for three days. For a family of four....But you know, a CO, a CSC officer will go and they will do the grocery shopping for them. So it's like a hit and miss if they have a good sale, then fine. If they don't have a good sale, everything is like, it could be a little bit more. And it all depends on where they go grocery shopping too.

In the context of these high costs faced by PFV visitors, families were particularly frustrated by the pervasive waste of food during these visits. The CSC policy and practice is that visitors may not take any food items out with them after the PFV visit, nor can the prisoner take the food back to their cell, as these are considered security risks. Therefore, all of the food items remaining at the end of the visit are disposed of by

correctional officers. Prisoners are similarly not allowed to bring food from their cells, purchased from the prison canteen, out to the day visiting room.

This was widely decried as unfair, arbitrary, and even punitive by the caregivers in this study. Sue noted:

There is nothing no more, now they don't even provide you with the condiments like before you used at least get the Wing Wong soy [sauce] pockets or whatever, or the peanut butter//  
*//for the PFVs, we're talking about?*

Yep for the PFVs and stuff. Now they don't even supply that. Or, and they throw it everything, like when you buy it, it doesn't stay in the fridge. Before you used to be able to go in and there'd be extra jars of ketchup from other people and then he would just get the cleaners to come in once and they'd recycle it out so you weren't always missing stuff, like. And now the cupboards are completely empty. You won't have, and then when you buy it, you're throwing it all. There's so much food going to waste and they do not donate it and we're not allowed to take it out.

*You're not allowed to take it out?*

Because it's that's a security risk. Which I think is insane because if you wanted to smuggle it, you would've smuggled it out.

Partner Cathy described her frustration with seemingly arbitrary food waste:

[Husband] tried to bring down an open thing of cookies [from his cell, to a day visit], all there was, was like three cookies out of the package, but because it was opened, they threw the whole container in the garbage. He was just bringing them down for the kids, this was his treat to give for the kids and they threw it in the trash.

These concerns echoed the views of women interviewed in another of the few studies on Canadian prison visits, who mentioned the high cost of food for

PFV visits, which some participants saw as inflated, and expressed anger at this high-cost food being wasted due to a seemingly arbitrary policy.

### Visit food as a mechanism of penal power

Like concerns about arbitrariness and unfairness of PFV food rules, families complained more broadly about the precarity of the visits themselves. Families noted the unpredictability of visits, which can be unexpectedly cancelled or denied due to lockdowns, administrative errors, inconsistently applied policies, behaviour that is deemed disruptive, or positive findings from unreliable security scanning technology (Knudsen, 2016; Ontario Ministry of the Solicitor General, 2021; Toepell & Greaves, 2001). Although visits with family are one of the rights that prisoners are ostensibly guaranteed by international human rights instruments to which Canada is a signatory, neither families, prisoners, nor prisons perceived them as rights; indeed, visits are described as “privileges” in public information provided to prisoners and their families (CSC, 2024; Ontario Ministry of the Solicitor General, 2021).

The unpredictability and constant threat of denial of visits left families in this study deeply insecure, focused on the minutiae of every explicit rule, and dependent on the inclinations of the individual correctional officers on shift, including around visit food. Even when family members spoke positively of prison staff, it was often in the context of individual officers *choosing* to be helpful or kind, with the awareness that they could also be unhelpful or unkind. For example, partner Sue deemed correctional staff helpful in shopping for her PFV food, given the context that staff have the option of choosing a more expensive, less accommodating, or less helpful approach to meeting her needs:

*Will they go to somewhere cost-efficient, like do they go to the No Frills [less expensive], or do they like go to the Sobeys [more expensive]?*

They will go, um, I've known people to go to Food Basics, I've known officers to go to Freshco [both less expensive]. But some days they will accommodate for you, if you want something extra, you'll have to write it down on the list, soya milk, or like if you have a family occasion, like a birthday or something, they will add it to your grocery list so that they can celebrate together. We've done that.

Sue shows that access to affordable, higher-quality, or special food is a precarious type of benevolence or privilege, as is the potential to turn this food into a real family meal such as a birthday celebration.

## Discussions and conclusions

The stories, opinions, and advice shared by children and caregivers in this study provide evocative insights into the nature and mechanisms of penal power as well as the experiences of familial incarceration. For families, and for children in particular, food and shared meals were defining and structuring elements of their visits to the prison. They used their food experiences to tell the stories of their relationships with their incarcerated relatives, identify key events and issues of their visits, and construct complaints about the institution.

Although I had not set out with any view to asking about food, the topic emerged inductively and became an issue or mechanism through which families could communicate their experiences to me, and we could construct the research data together. This aligns with the rich literature showing the importance of the family meal as a central site of caregiving, learning, and regulation (Ochs & Shohet, 2006).

Ten-year-old Phoebe illustrates all the above elements here, framing food and its accessibility, cost, and rules as one of the ways that prison “works” and as central to “everything I know” about the prison. Asked what advice she would give a hypothetical peer whose parent was about to be incarcerated, like her dad, Phoebe says:

If I were to give advice to another child of a prisoner, I'd tell them] Everything I know. How much the bus costs to go there, how much dadadadada. How things work, and the dog might sit on you if you have drugs.... That there is, that you have to pay for your food and drinks, but the toppings are free.... Like ketchup, relish, mustard, mayonnaise. They're just little packages.

Given complaints about food quality, access, cost, and regulation raised by families, can food in prisons be accurately defined as a “family meal?” Helpfully, a meta-analysis of research into benefits of the family meal by Dallacker and colleagues (2019) identifies six essential elements: parent modelling of healthy eating behaviour, high food quality, a positive atmosphere, involvement of children in meal preparation, not having the TV on, and longer meal duration. Similarly, food provided during prison day visits cannot meet most recommendations for healthy eating from the federal government's own food guide, including advice to plan and prepare meals together, make healthier food choices, eat less processed food, reduce food waste, create a positive eating environment, and enjoy food that reflects one's culture (Health Canada, 2019).

On this basis, food shared during day visits is neither healthy nor a “family meal.” In fact, these guidelines



indicate that Canadian prisons, through their food policies, act to *prohibit* families from engaging in this essential function of family life. This is an example, I would argue, of the broader neglect by prisons (all of which are public institutions in Canada) of their responsibilities to children and other family members who come through their doors. Although the specific legal and moral responsibilities that states and their institutions have to prisoners' families are not well studied, the notion that prisons have some basic level of accountability to these individuals is clear. Moral philosopher Bülow (2014) argues that, when they harm children and families by incarcerating a relative, states become obligated to these families, and they are specifically obligated to communicate with them, respect them, and mitigate the financial costs they bear as a result. An international human rights perspective is more forceful: the UN Convention on the Right of the Child, to which Canada is a signatory, protects the rights of children of prisoners, amongst others, to be heard in decisions that affect them, to have their best interests prioritized, to not suffer discrimination, and to maintain contact with parents (Codd, 2019; Parkes & Donson, 2018). In this context, the decision of Canadian prisons to structure visits in such a way that children are unable to share a family meal during day visits, and that the cost of PFV food is set unnecessarily high, are obvious failures of responsibility.

Indeed, the stories shared by families of prisoners suggest not only that their interests and rights are neglected, but that they are subjected to some of the same penal powers as prisoners when they interact with the institution. In particular, the unpredictability and precarity that families reported, such as never being sure whether prison staff could bring the birthday treats they would need for a family celebration in the PFV or whether the milk in the vending machine would be fresh, align with the prisoner experience of *uncertainty*.

This concept has been well-studied in prison scholarship, including in theorizing around the “pains of imprisonment,” where uncertainty and indeterminacy are framed by Crewe (2011) as one form of “tight” penal power (Crewe & Ievins, 2021). Another form of this “tight” pain resonates with the findings above: the *self-governance* that families engage in by monitoring and regulating themselves to meet the (often capricious) needs of the institution. The feelings of frustration, tension, and insecurity that are said to follow from these forms of penal power in prisoners (Crewe, 2011) are also well illustrated by the present data, and these experiences are a common finding in qualitative research with prisoners' families.

The apparent consistency between the impacts, experiences, and responses to penal power between prisoners and their families supports Comfort's (2009, 2019) concept of “secondary prisonization.” She argues that the carceral regulation of prisoners' wives and girlfriends is the same as that faced by prisoners themselves, albeit in a diluted form, and that women learn, adapt to, and are transformed by this socialization and discipline when they engage with the institution (Comfort, 2009, 2019). Aiello & McCorkel (2018) argue that children experience secondary prisonization as well, including transformation through the discipline of their bodies and regulation of their emotions. This use of disciplining power by the institution can be seen in the present study, particularly in the exhaustive demands, high costs, and narrow eligibility of the PFVs, including the provision of food, and the authority the institution communicates in its policies. This is consistent with Moran's (2013) argument that prison visiting areas, such as the day visit rooms and the PFVs, are “liminal” carceral spaces where visitors from the outside become temporarily imprisoned and subject to carceral control and surveillance.



Taken all together, the present study supports the framing of prisoners' families as becoming *subjects* of the prison, temporarily and secondarily, when they visit and seek to engage in the process of family. I propose that carceral food systems are a key mechanism through which this subjectification occurs: the unpredictability of food quality, availability, and cost during visits transmit "tight" penal power, and the process of families learning and adapting to rules and policies around food (such as waste) is a mode of secondary prisonization.

If prisoners' families are subjects of the Canadian prison system, this raises concerns about the compliance of Canadian prisons with international human rights instruments and Charter protections in relation to their obligations to the children and family members of prisoners. The use of food as a mechanism of control and discipline, given the vital and defining nature of the family meal to family life, suggests institutional neglect of the needs, rights, and relationships of prisoners' families.

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