



## Editorial

# Exploring carceral food systems: Tensions, experiences and possibilities

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In Toronto during the summer of 2023, several scholars came together to present research on food within the context of carceral systems at the annual assembly of the Canadian Association for Food Studies. While there is growing recognition and discussion of carceral food systems, it remains an underexplored topic within food studies scholarship. Particularly within the Canadian context, there were few existing avenues through which to explore these topics. The enthusiasm and critical discussion encouraged by our two panels convinced us that a themed issue was warranted, in order to continue and deepen the conversation.

The collection of related articles in this themed section points to the inextricable relationship between food and punishment, a relationship buttressed by hyper-capitalism, colonialism, racism, and other harmful approaches to social control. There is violence inherent in prison food as well, a “slow violence”

(Nixon, 2011) that delivers destruction to the body and mind through expired and undercooked food, surveilled and timed meals, and fat-laden canteen items (Stearns, 2024). There is violence in the practice of sending imprisoned people of colour to the fields to labour for little to no pay (Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Jou 2024), and there is violence in prohibiting the sharing and gifting of food amongst those in prison (De Graaf & Kilty, 2016). At the same time, it is undeniable that food is a tool of contestation and a means through which to build connection and commonality, in the face of structural violence and the ongoing harms of carceral institutions (Godderis 2006, Wilson 2023). A critical examination of prison food is uniquely positioned to lay bare the failings of the prison system, feeding into broader conversations on abolition, social justice, racism, colonialism, and capitalism. Each of the contributions to this themed section helps us to better

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understand the relationship between food and carceral systems and underscores the importance of examining, and hopefully transforming, these complex realities.

Kelsey Timler’s reflective piece on the radical act of community-building through food examines her relationship with her co-researchers—justice-involved women—at a collaborative meal. It is through making and then sharing food together, Timler argues, that relationships slowly form strong bonds, like the process of kneading dough. Through Timler’s visceral snapshot of a particular day and time, we see how an evening of pizza-making among these women is a form of protest against the prison industrial complex. She writes, “This protest, of criminalized women not having to get groceries, not having to think about what they are eating that evening and knowing that they will have leftovers to take home with them, is the slow and quiet protest that can fill in the spaces between the collective revolts and refusals.” The article is a strong call for academics to join co-researchers in the “beautiful and messy process” required to dismantle and disrupt carceral logic.

The far reach of prison food as a tool of carceral violence extends to the families and loved ones of incarcerated individuals, as described in Else Knudsen’s critical take on the Private Family Visit (PFV). Knudsen speaks with the partners and children who participate in PFVs and suggests that, while this arrangement is intended to mimic domestic life, including bringing back the normalcy of mealtimes, the cost of food during the visit is exorbitant and burdensome for families. Knudsen’s treatise points to the necessity of understanding the full power of prison food as punishment and control over not only the imprisoned, but their partners and children.

Amanda Wilson’s Field Report brings the voices of formerly incarcerated individuals to the fore as they discuss their perspectives on the food served and sold in

correctional facilities. The vignettes present a collective voice of anguish and frustration over being served food that is undercooked, unrecognizable, and unhealthy. In these dehumanizing spaces, Wilson’s featured narrators recognize the message embedded within what they are given to eat, a message that implies they are not deserving of basic rights or dignity. Yet, in these stories, food is also a tool for resistance, as told in vignettes about Thanksgiving meals and cell-made birthday cakes that lead to community building and empowerment.

As we have seen, food is a potent tool not only harnessed by the Prison Industrial Complex, but also by the individuals imprisoned inside those systems. Julie Courchesne and Amanda Wilson’s article highlights the importance of hunger strikes in gaining the public’s attention and, sometimes, in enacting change at administrative levels. The authors’ examination of 48 hunger strikes between 2016–2022 demonstrates that the most pressing reason for the strike concerns issues of health and hygiene related to the COVID pandemic, followed closely by food-related accusations regarding low protein, no fresh produce, and low-quality meals. Courchesne and Wilson point to carceral food as “sites of contestation,” where carceral power inhabits physical bodies but where, also, powerless people can embody their own power by refusing to eat. In a hunger strike, agency, collective action, community, and mobilization are realized by seemingly powerless and voiceless individuals.

Taken together, these articles offer multiple entry points through which to begin untangling the complex web of relationships between food and carceral systems. Each of these four articles highlights the role and meaning of food, not just for those currently incarcerated, but their family and loved ones, those eventually freed from incarceration, as well as groups and movements concerned with prisoner justice and abolition. They push us to reconsider and expand our

understandings of food justice and call on us to include the lives, perspectives, and experiences of incarcerated

individuals in our visions of food system transformations and imaginaries.

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