



MARYLAND
FOOD &
PRISON
ABOLITION
PROJECT

Violence, Hunger, and Premature Death:

How Prison Food in Maryland
Became Even Worse During COVID-19



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Introduction

The experience of eating in confinement—whether in a federal or state prison, county jail, or youth or immigrant detention center—serves as a violation of a person’s human rights. Instead of acting as a source of nourishment, prison food is weaponized as a form of punishment, control, and dehumanization. As atrocious as correctional food systems were prior to 2020, however, the Covid-19 pandemic drastically exacerbated the crisis of prison food provision.

In 2021, The Maryland Food & Prison Abolition Project (formerly the Farm to Prison Project) conducted a critical participatory action research study to understand the true impact of the pandemic on carceral food systems in prisons and jails throughout Maryland. Our in-depth conversations with over 30 folks—who were incarcerated in 15 carceral institutions across the state in total—uncovered the ways in which, as Mr. Brown put it, “food [during Covid-19] got ten times worse.”

Covid-19 in Maryland Prisons



Prisons are known to be “petri dishes” for the spread of Covid-19. In Maryland, at least 1 out of every 4 incarcerated people tested positive for the virus as of March 2021. Folks we spoke with who contracted Covid-19 or exhibited Covid-like symptoms while incarcerated either (a) experienced gross medical negligence in terms of treatment; or (b) kept their symptoms hidden after witnessing prisons’ heinous response to others who developed Covid on the inside. For example, folks described how:

Access to testing was infrequent and severely limited. A number of Maryland prisons provided no access to testing at all until months after Covid-19 spread within the institution.

Prisons did not provide adequate access to personal protective equipment for incarcerated folks. Individuals also spoke to how some correctional staff consistently did not wear masks or gloves when preparing and delivering food.

People had zero ability to socially distance in the event that they exhibited Covid symptoms or were exposed to people who tested positive for the virus. One participant, John, described how his housing unit was so cramped that he “got himself into trouble” in order to be thrown into solitary confinement—known to be a form of torture—instead of risking death from contracting Covid.

Incarcerated individuals often did not report Covid-19 symptoms to staff in order to avoid prisons’ incredibly dehumanizing “medical treatment.” In certain institutions, folks who tested positive for Covid were shackled to a bed in a makeshift tent in the cold for weeks at a time. In other institutions, folks were thrown into solitary confinement without any medical care and left to suffer.

The only medical treatment some prisons made available to folks exhibiting Covid-19 symptoms was Tylenol—and even that was oftentimes withheld.



"I think I caught Covid right before Ramadan... I stayed sick for about 24 days, something like that. And it was rough. So I believe I had Covid because I know one time I sneezed, and man, it had me crying. It was like my head... I knew I had caught Covid. But because I had asthma, I was afraid, and one of my friends kept telling me, 'Man, you need to go to the hospital.'





Guys was starting to die because of no treatment. You catch Covid in [Jessup Correctional Institution], what they would do, they got tents outside, right there in this cold weather... they would put the guys in the tents, and they might shackle your left leg and handcuff your right arm. And so you're stuck in the bed like this on your back. Shackled on your arm, and they handcuff you so you can't move. You're stuck. You're like that for 14, 15 days. And when it was time to use the bathroom, they try to scoot the bedpan up under you. And so that's where you at. It was like they didn't care. Especially around when we caught it, it was like in the beginning, they wasn't even testing people."

— Alonzo, formerly incarcerated at JCI

The Prison Eating Environment



As a response to Covid-19, prisons throughout Maryland went on indefinite lockdown—confining incarcerated individuals in their cells or housing units for at least 23 hours a day for months on end. Under lockdown, correctional officers in many prisons initially took over all components of food service—including meal preparation, delivery, and cleanup—that incarcerated dietary staff would normally be paid cents per hour to perform. Lockdown had drastic impacts on all aspects of the carceral food system. Folks we spoke with described:

-  Eating every meal alone in their cell or in a crowded dormitory instead of the prison chow hall—oftentimes eating while sitting on a toilet due to a lack of actual space.
-  Experiencing long periods of hunger due to meals being served at early and inconsistent hours—for example, receiving breakfast at 4:00am; lunch at 10:00am; and dinner at 4:30pm.
-  Eating meals while surrounded by trash due to irregular waste management procedures.
-  Only being able to access drinking water from a sink in their cell—water that folks describe as “nasty tasting, murky, and yellow,” and the same water that circulates from the sink to the toilet.

“The food wasn't really nothing to start off with. Then when the Covid hit... the [incarcerated folks] are the ones who cook the food for the population. So, when the Covid hit, and they locked the jails down, there's nobody going to work. So now, it's like the staff is cooking the food, and you know they're not putting no heart into the food or whatever, so now it's terrible. It's even worse than what it was at first... They've got a rule, after three days, you're supposed to get a hot meal. They disregarded all that and just giving you bologna and cheese, cold bologna, cold cheese. I mean, it takes hours to melt, to defrost out, so you can eat it. And God knows how long they had it stored before this came up, so it just got, I mean, to the point where you had to go to commissary and spend money in order to maintain your weight because you couldn't eat it.”

— Brian, formerly incarcerated in multiple federal and Maryland state-run prisons during Covid-19

Food Quality



The quality of food in every institution where folks we spoke with were incarcerated decreased significantly since the beginning of the pandemic. Folks described how:

The vast majority of meals were “ice cold” when served due to long gaps between when meals were prepared and delivered to their cell.

Food items in bags or trays sloshed together during delivery, resulting in soggy and unpalatable meals. As Jackie put it: “They were just locking people in a cage, feeding them slop.”

Meal trays were often covered with old food residue or peeling paint.

Meals consisted primarily of cheap and nutritionally empty starches designed to fill people up—even more so than prior to the pandemic.

Prisons further reduced the amount of fresh produce served, with most institutions relying nearly exclusively on low quality canned food items. In rare cases where fresh fruit was served, produce was almost always rotten or spoiled.

“Being locked up for as many years as I had, you begin to not expect much out of DOC. Especially when it comes to food. [During Covid] we didn't get no hot meals, none of the meals was hot, every meal you got was cold. Even though they were supposed to be hot. You got a lot of starch—even outside of Covid you got a lot of starch—but during Covid you got more and more starch.”

— Alonzo, formerly incarcerated at JCI



Food Quantity



The portions of food on a meal tray were diminished even further during Covid-19. Nearly every person we spoke with described how meals were “not enough to feed a child”—leaving folks in a constant state of hunger. Eating insufficient and nutritionally bankrupt meals for months or years during the pandemic also gravely impacted people’s mental health. Some individuals developed depression and anxiety, while others used food to mentally disassociate from the inhumane conditions of confinement.

“It’s really bad. People were faking heart attacks just to leave their cell and go sit in the medical department. It’s bad. It was really bad. Everybody was fighting... Everybody was on edge.” — N., formerly incarcerated at MCI-W

“They don’t treat you right in there. The guards, they don’t care about you. So far, I seen during the Covid, five people died... One person that died in there, they got him out of his cell in two days. He was dead in his cell for two days. Then an older person, he died on a chair. He just fell out because of COVID. It was crazy.” — Wayne, formerly incarcerated at RCI

“Oh my God. I was getting depressed. My sleep was messed up because I was sleeping so much because there was nothing else to do... And then it got to the point where you could only do so much sleeping and so you’re up. It’s very hard. I got very depressed and my anxiety was up. It’s just very hard for me.” — Chris, formerly incarcerated at MCI-J



Covid-19 & Impacts on Health



Eating in Maryland's prisons already served as a form of premature death prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Correctional food service both creates and exacerbates short- and long-term health conditions such as acid reflux, hypertension, heart disease, and diabetes. As a result of worsened food conditions during the pandemic, carceral food provision had even worse and more frequent negative impacts on a person's physical and mental health. This occurred, in part, as some prisons stopped serving special diets altogether—meals constructed to meet certain health or religious requirements.

Folks described:



Experiencing frequent indigestion, acid reflux, diarrhea, and constipation.



Developing cysts, peptic ulcers, and ulcerative colitis—potentially life-threatening conditions that were left untreated by the prison.



Losing significant amounts of weight due to a lack of sufficient portion sizes.



Gaining significant amounts of weight gain due to increased consumption of starches and sugars alongside physical inactivity due to lockdown procedures.



Developing diabetes and high blood pressure.



Contracting Hepatitis B after being served a meal contaminated with fecal matter.



"Right now, I'm in bad shape. I got osteoarthritis, and they're telling me now that I might have to have a hip replacement. And on top of that, I've got ulcerative colitis, which is also a major illness. And I also have asthma and high blood pressure. And then, I got anxiety and depression... I wouldn't wish this on nobody. Can you imagine, when you have to use the bathroom, when that feeling hits your stomach that tells you you have to go to use the bathroom, you actually got like 10 seconds to get to a toilet and get your pants down. You can't control your bowels, you can't hold your bowels. And you go to the bathroom at least 15 to 20 times a day, if not more.

So imagine how I make it to the bathroom in 10 seconds in this jail. It doesn't happen. Oh my god, my mental health is just gone. For two weeks, [Wicomico County Corrections Center] took my cane and didn't give me nothing to assist me for walking. And I, literally, had to hang on to stuff around the walls, and to lean on the tables for support myself to even go get my trays and my medication. The last four days of those two weeks, I literally crawled on the floor. I had to drag myself, my bottom half, with my arms because I couldn't put no weight on my hips and my legs. And they did nothing."

— Mr. Dennis Williams, currently incarcerated at the Wicomico County Corrections Center



Commissary, Survival, & Exploitation



Commissary services in Maryland state-run prisons are managed by Keefe Group, a multibillion dollar corporation owned by private equity firm H.I.G Capital. 87% of all currently and formerly incarcerated folks we spoke with relied heavily on buying foods from the prison commissary in order to survive during the pandemic. In fact, folks consumed 73% of their daily calories on average from commissary foods as opposed to institutional meals.

At the beginning of the pandemic, some Maryland prisons shut down commissary services entirely for one to three months. In prisons where commissary remained open, incarcerated folks were unable to work—and thus unable to receive the minimal wages paid to them for their labor—reducing folks' ability to purchase food items. Many people went hungry as a result—especially given folks' dependency on commissary to compensate for inadequate and unpalatable institutional meals. Other changes to commissary included:



Price gouging. Keefe increased prices by 10-40% for certain popular foods items, allowing the corporation to further extract profit from a system of induced hunger.



Worsened health. As commissary foods are generally unhealthy, people described how eating more from commissary led to high blood pressure, weight gain, and mental fog.



Limited stock. People described not being able to purchase traditionally cheap and filling food items like noodles during Covid due to stock shortages.



New methods of extraction. As people increasingly relied on commissary to survive during the pandemic, Keefe Group rolled out online services for folks' loved ones to purchase commissary items and care packages—in part to compensate for incarcerated individuals' reduced purchasing power due to work stoppages.



"There was a huge shortage. For a while, there was a shortage of a lot of the noodles, and that's the main staple. That's in every prison all through the country... 70% of [my food] came from commissary. I couldn't eat the [institution food]. After maybe two or three months of trying, I gave up and I just stuck with commissary. It got really pricey too. It got really hard. But I couldn't eat the institution's food. It was that bad."

— Doug, formerly incarcerated at MCI-H

"I lost so much weight. Until you start getting commissary, you're not living. You're a ghost, basically... commissary prices went up [during the pandemic]. So now the people that's sending you money, or money that you got on the outside, now you've got to pay more while you're locked up. Because they know that the food is shitty, and you need us, so we're going to raise them prices up so we get extra money."

— Mr. Chambers, formerly incarcerated at Jennifer Road Detention Center

Resistance, Care, & Retribution



Food in prison can be used both as a means to express care, solidarity, and resistance as well as a tool of punishment by correctional staff. For example, people we spoke with described:



Embarking on hunger strikes to protest prisons' handling of Covid-19; holding shut meal delivery slots in their cell door; lighting trash cans on fire as a form of protest; and organizing entire housing units to throw away unpalatable and unhealthy meals.

Filing formal grievances against correctional staff using food to punish, following administrative remedy procedures, and filing lawsuits against the prison to protest inhumane food conditions.



Expressing care and solidarity by sharing meals with friends, people in the same housing unit, and individuals experiencing hunger; trading commissary foods; celebrating special days by cooking together; and "illegally" selling higher quality food items.



Prison staff also weaponize food service and punish certain individuals or the entire incarcerated population in the face of resistance. Forms of retribution include:



Sending folks on hunger strikes or resisting the conditions of confinement to maximum security prisons.



Adding more time onto folks' sentences as a form of punishment and deterrence.



Withholding food from people entirely or serving them altered, lower quality and quantity meal trays.

"There's four units in Dorsey Run. My building was the first that had an outbreak [of Covid-19], so the prison was trying to spread people out, and send people that was exposed to a different housing unit. All them guys bucked. They would not let you come in that jail, so [the prison] ended up sending a lot of them guys outside the jail as retaliation... The people that didn't have any outbreaks would not let you come in there. The ones that protested, they sent them out the jail. Like you're going from a pre-release camp to a maximum security prison.

They send you far away... Like Dorsey Run's in Jessup. They'll send you to Cumberland, or they'd send you to [Eastern Correctional Institution], across the bridge... They moved [incarcerated people] for protesting. There was eight to 12 of them. And Dorsey Run is pre-release. They send you... until your time is up. Then when you'd get a ticket, it's going to add more time to your date. They added more time, and made you finish the rest of the sentence at supermax."

— Reggie, describing prisons' response to Covid-19 protests at Dorsey Run Correctional Facility



About

The Maryland Food & Prison Abolition Project connects urban and small-scale farms to prisons to use food as a tool for resistance.

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