

FEDERAL PRISONS

# America's Prison Food Is Still Criminally Awful

And COVID-19 has made it worse

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A prisoner grabs lunch from a cafeteria inside the Darrington Unit of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice men's prison in Rosharon, Texas August 12, 2014. (AP/WIDE WORLD/REUTERS/Newscom)

The food served to inmates in America's prisons continues to be a national embarrassment. Thankfully, more and more people are trying to do something about it.

This week, Impact Justice, a nonprofit that advocates for criminal justice reform, released a report on the state of foods served to prison inmates across the United States. The first-ever national report on prison food, *Eating Behind Bars: Ending the Hidden Punishment of Food in Prison*, shines a critical light on "the quality and consequences" of food served in America's prisons.

The report, which clocks in at more than 130 pages, is based on surveys, interviews with prisoners and experts, and a review of state policies. It reveals some sobering figures. Three out of every four prison survey respondents said they'd been served spoiled or rotting food in prison, while more than nine out of 10 prisoners surveyed said they weren't provided with sufficient food while incarcerated.

It concludes that food served to incarcerated people "and the conditions under which it is served are harmful to physical and mental health and can erode self-esteem, with immediate and long-term impacts."

The report also notes the COVID-19 pandemic has made lousy prison food even worse.

Indeed, prisons quickly became hotspots for COVID-19 outbreaks. More than 1,500 prisoners across the country died from COVID-19 in just the first two months of the pandemic, The Marshall Project, a nonprofit that focuses on criminal justice issues, reported in May. Prison staff have also contracted the virus at work.

In some cases, these COVID-19 outbreaks in prisons have hammered the facilities' ability to prepare and serve food—because of staff illnesses and because inmates at some prisons also serve as prep cooks and foodservice workers.

"Their food now arrives at odd hours in paper bags, cold, mushy and without a hint of green (except perhaps for some iffy-looking hot dogs)." The Marshall Project reported of food served during the pandemic in Texas prisons. "Mostly it's stale white bread and mystery meat, with the occasional helping of raisins or prunes."

Some prisoners who complained found their food got worse, not better.

A recent investigation by the food website *Eater* found that prison food in Massachusetts had also worsened since the pandemic began.

"The quality of food served to people inside prisons operated by the Massachusetts [Dept. of Corrections] has deteriorated since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, according to multiple sources with knowledge of the situation," *Eater* reported this week.

*Eater* spoke with people who reported a host of issues, ranging from smaller portions to fewer vegetables, a lack of hot meals, and meals that don't comply with court mandates.

These problems aren't limited to Texas and Massachusetts. A quick search reveals prisoners around the country have complained in recent weeks and months about everything from a lack of vegan or gluten-free options to food that's moldy or cold.

The federal government knows these and other problems plague its prison food and foodservice. In March, before the pandemic hit, the Justice Department's Office of Inspector General (OIG) [released](#) a report on the state of food served to the 180,000 or so inmates housed in federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) facilities. The OIG report, [reissued](#) in June, highlighted the problem of spoiled and moldy food and concluded BOP has no way to "ensure that food products procured by the BOP meet the specifications outlined in BOP contracts, the standards set forth in BOP's national menu, industry standards, and legal requirements." BOP spends more than \$400 million each year to feed federal inmates the agency houses.

Changes aren't just possible. They're happening right now.

The Impact Justice report discusses ways to implement lasting improvements, highlighting ongoing efforts to provide prisoners with opportunities to garden, linking local farmers and prison foodservice providers, implementing architectural design changes to foodservice areas, and holding cookouts for inmates and visiting family members.

In Texas, a prison aquaponics farm is helping inmates at the Michael Unit, one of the state's largest maximum-security prisons, learn a new trade while feeding themselves, as the *Houston Chronicle* [reported](#) last month.

"America's prisons and jails do a terrible job feeding people behind bars," I wrote in a 2018 [column](#). In that column, I proposed introducing more choice and instituting better oversight as ways to improve prison food.

There's no good reason to wait to implement these and other necessary changes—which can help reduce waste and [fraud](#), [lower recidivism rates](#), and improve human rights, health, and dignity.

"Even as we work to dismantle the structures that drive mass incarceration, this is a change that can be made now," says Leslie Soble, a research fellow at Impact Justice who is the primary author of the new report, in an email to me this week. "People's lives are at risk."