

Prison Food...Bon Appetite!

Duff Bloomingdale

In today's world there is what seems like a new diet coming out every week. With everyone seemingly so focused on eating organic and healthy, yet now more than ever people have become familiar with processed and frozen food. Though sometimes convenient, it can take a toll on your health. Processed food lacks the proper vitamins and nutrients for a healthy diet and is usually high in unhealthy macro-nutrients such as sodium and saturated fats. On top of that it doesn't taste good. Having to eat this type of food is exactly what people in the U.S. prison system have to do every day. Most prison food is shipped in on a time basis and has to be rationed out as the prisons fill up with no proper adjustment to the population. Food is essential for ensuring the body and mind work properly. Without proper nutrition severe affects ranging from food borne illnesses to malnutrition may occur. Food has a lot of capabilities in curbing criminal behavior, however if not kept properly or prepared properly food can become an problematic issue rather quickly.

The prison system has been serving tainted food for a very long time. An article published by *The Atlantic* in December of 2017 brought this to light. They presented data from a CDC study published in *The American Journal of Public Health* spanning from 1998 to 2014 the showed correctional residents are "6.4 times more likely to suffer from food-related illness than the general population" (Joe Fassler). Of the food-borne illnesses, the most prevalent was that of perfringens and Salmonella, which are commonly associated with tainted and undercooked poultry products. Also mentioned in the CDC study was how 37 of the 50 states reported at least one food-borne illness breakout in their prisons per year. Lastly, they found that a large percentage of prisons didn't have adequate refrigeration as 37% of illness's arose from food remaining at room temperature. (AJPH). Interviews with prisoners who had worked in kitchens commonly mentioned rationing food supplies and serving "leftovers" far past the window of food spoiling.

When first mentioning prisons the first thing that comes to mind is adults, but this also affects the juvenile system. Kids are being fed the same processed food in the same conditions, but it is even more essential that they receive the proper diets to ensure brain development and growth. As the brain doesn't fully develop until the age of 25. A study done by the U.S. Department of Justice found a substantial body of evidence that indicates "diet, toxic metals, food additives, insufficient nutrients, food allergies, lack of physical exercise and malillumination can all contribute to criminal behavior" (A. Schauss). Later stating that in juvenile cases, diet must be examined first before coming up with a treatment and

rehabilitation plan. Much of crime is committed out of circumstance and being at a young age unable to make the money necessary to feed yourself or family, a juvenile may act out of that hunger. However, this pattern of behavior was not just exclusively for juveniles but also in adult cases. Through examination of numerous case histories, the DOJ found a direct link between diet and delinquent behaviors in adults as well.

There are some fixes to this issue that have already been shown to work. An article written by Smart City Dive titled *Six U.S. correctional facilities with farm to prison local food sourcing programs* listed six different correctional facilities, particularly in the Midwest and Pennsylvania, that have attempted to create local fresh sources of food for their prisons. This partnership with local farms created lower costs of food as well as an increased morale inside of the prisons, especially boosting morale inside of prisons that allow residents to work in their own greenhouses. Allowing carceral residents extra time outdoors, and something to take pride in doing created a better sense of culture within the prisons as opposed to putting their energy into illegal activities within the prison. These programs allow people to work outside and to gain valuable experience. Many of the farms used in these programs hire the residents after their sentences end. Even if they chose not to pursue farming or a job in food after their release, it teaches them the proper nutrition to maintain for the rest of their lives.

Many people know when going to a grocery store how expensive local meat or locally grown produce can cost. They may argue against why people in prison get to have such fresh crops. However, through the harvesting the labor costs are extremely low compared to a normal farm. The farm fresh food harvested by residents would decrease the food cost for taxpayers, which is opposite that of what most people would think. Instead of having to pay to have food shipped to the prison, they would instead have it ready at their disposal and have no shipping, labor, or cost of harvesting that usually goes into food cost. On top of the residents (and staff, who regularly eat at the prison during work) having fresh and tasty food, most of the food harvested would go to a local farmers market, providing for anyone in the local area as well.

Historically there's a unique case for good, fresh food being served within the prison system. During the height of Alcatraz, the country's most notorious high security prison, residents only ate the best food available. Given the time period, frozen, processed food wasn't available so everything was made from scratch. The high quality and large portioned meals were implemented by James A. Johnston who believed "good food bred good behavior". Though most residents at Alcatraz were serving life without parole, interviews with former inmates suggested working in the kitchen brought them an immense sense of pride and responsibility. It also defused much of the tension between the guards as the cooks were responsible for feeding 60 to 100 guards per day. It was common on Fridays for the kitchen to serve T-bone

steaks with potatoes and a normal day to day menu that is comparable to comfort food today. The cooks that worked in Alcatraz mostly had no formal training therefore allowing them to learn new skills and find a passion in something during their time incarcerated.

On average the FDA suggests a 2,000-calorie diet. However, this doesn't properly nourish juveniles or anyone who maintains an active lifestyle. This lack of nutrition can help explain the body transformations many people seem to go through when they are released. Behavior can be shaped by food. It's one of the real necessities of life. Providing higher quality food, and proper diet can help change people's lives even after they leave the correctional system. As shown, these opportunities reduce food-borne illnesses, malnutrition, and greatly decrease juvenile delinquencies.

References

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