

# Calories, commerce, and culture: The multiple valuations of food in prison

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## Abstract

In the last two decades, a body of critical scholarship has emerged accentuating the social and cultural importance of food in prison. This article employs a tripartite conceptual framework for contemplating and demarcating food's different valuations in prison. We draw from our interviews with over 500 incarcerated individuals to demonstrate how acquiring, trading, and preparing food is inscribed with use, exchange, and sign values. In doing so, we provide illustrative examples of how food informs processes of stratification, distinction, and violence in prison.

## Keywords

food, prison, value, culture, commerce, violence, Baudrillard, DeCerteau

Food, air, and water are the mainstays of human existence. Of these three, food is a particularly productive object of sociological analysis (see, e.g. Beardsworth and Keil, 2002; Johnston and Baumann, 2014; Poulain, 2017). Food provides sustenance but is also symbolically rich. How food is produced, exchanged, and consumed informs all these attributes. For social scientists, attending to the dynamics of food in the distinctive environment of prison serves as an entrée for understanding important material, economic and cultural aspects conditioning the lived reality of incarceration.

Traditionally, criminologists have not paid much attention to food in prison. Only in the past decade or so have a small group of scholars produced a series of critical inquiries

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into the place and politics of food among incarcerated individuals. Many of these works frame the practices surrounding food as means for incarcerated individuals to resist oppressive prison conditions and fashion distinctive identities (see, e.g. Earle and Phillips, 2012; Einat and Davidian, 2019; Gibson-Light, 2018; Smoyer, 2015, 2019; Smoyer and Lopes, 2017; Ugelvik, 2011; Valentine and Longstaff, 1998).

These studies have illustrated how, in an environment characterized by extreme material deprivation (Sykes, 1958), the acquisition, preparation, and consumption of food becomes particularly important (Valentine and Longstaff, 1998). That said, there is much we do not know about the local particularities of what food means in different prison settings and how those factors shape the lived experience of individuals detained in those institutions.

After summarizing some of the key research findings in this area, we use Baudrillard's (2019 [1976]) tripartite model of consumer commodification as a conceptual framework to demonstrate how the acquisition, consumption and improvised preparation of food is inscribed with use, exchange, and symbolic value. The body of this article provides an illustrative application of this framework by drawing upon interviews conducted with approximately 500 incarcerated individuals in Western Canada to offer insights into some of the material, social, and cultural dimensions of food in prison. In doing so we also point to some of the gendered differences in the use and creative manipulation of food. This article is in part a response to Gibson-Light's recent call for more research on how food in prison relates to '...processes of stratification, distinction...and violence' (2018: 217).

## Food in prison

Sykes' (1958) foundational study of a New Jersey prison highlighted a lack of access to goods and services as one of five fundamental deprivations experienced by incarcerated individuals. To alleviate such deprivations, incarcerated individuals often establish what Zelizer (2010) refers to as an informal 'circuit of commerce,' which are 'bounded economic spheres with shared understandings of value and money' (304). Incarcerated individuals exchange licit and illicit products to improve their material and psychological condition. Thus, items that in the outside community might be mundane or inconsequential – cigarettes, bread, coffee, canned foods – can assume a disproportionate importance in prison, where they become prized items, units of exchange, and cultural markers.

Gibson-Light's (2018) study stands out for its explicit concern with the rising material importance of standardized food products to incarcerated men. During his eighteen months of fieldwork in an Arizona prison, Gibson-Light discovered that packages of ramen noodles had replaced cigarettes as the de-facto token of exchange. On Gibson-Light's account, this development could not be explained by smoking bans, declining tobacco use, or the increased price of tobacco. Instead, it reflected an emerging 'foodways-based style of prisoner resistance' (p. 199) whereby prisoners use cheap, reliable canteen food products such as ramen noodles for dietary sustenance and symbolically, to regain control over consumption choices in the face of declining standards of institutional care. According to Gibson-Light, the preference for ramen noodles

stemmed from its 'standardized and predictable' (216) nature; a quality incarcerated men deemed desirable to counteract erratic institutional food offerings.

This focus on the material and transactional aspects of prison food has increasingly been augmented by works examining how food is incorporated into identity work and subject formation. For example, in her study of 30 formerly incarcerated women, Smoyer (2014) concentrates on how these women used their relationship with food to present themselves as both 'good' and 'healthy.' On the one hand, this involved constructing themselves as 'caring empathetic, generous people who would go out of their way to help others' (p. 530). To do so, participants would share food, something that violated prison rules they felt were unreasonable. Such actions aimed to help others and 'challenged the morality of the prison rules and constructed disobeying them as good' (530). On the other hand, participants also focused on fashioning healthy identities, where personal efforts to eat the 'right' food were seen as a part of their rehabilitation and recovery efforts.

Smoyer (2015) has also explored how the receipt, consumption, and general management of food signify the strength of an incarcerated person's social network within and outside prison. Drawing upon interviews with 20 formerly incarcerated women, she details how having prison commissary (canteen) could symbolize stable and caring relationships outside of prison. Inside the prison, foodways were used to negotiate relationships, including using food to access other desirable phenomena such as sex, artwork, styling, etc. Incarcerated women could also gain respect via their skills in preparing meals, with participants passing down their knowledge and skills in crafting makeshift meals to less experienced individuals.

The varied sub rosa activities in prison relating to the acquisition, consumption, and sharing of food have, in recent years, increasingly been characterized as a form of 'resistance.' In this framing, resistance is understood as an extremely broad set of activities that incarcerated individuals undertake in opposition to the official expectations of the prison regime (Bosworth and Carrabine, 2001: 511). Ugelviks' (2011) study of foodways in a Norwegian prison stands out in this regard. He describes how incarcerated individuals hide food in their cells, drawing cooking heat from lamps and water heaters to creatively make meals using prison condiments as spices. Ugelvik's central point is that resistance may not always be overt or violent. Instead, through the reconstruction of prison food, resistance can be subtle, nonviolent, and help constitute an incarcerated person as 'smart.' Following Ugelvik, '...the smart prisoner beats the prison at its own game, smiling' (p. 54). The research conducted by de Graaf and Kilty (2016) with 12 formerly incarcerated women in Canada makes roughly the same point, focusing on food as a gendered locus of power and resistance.

Such works have provided intriguing and persuasive insights into the dynamics of food in various prisons settings. In relation to our own research setting it was useful to conceptually demarcate some of the central dynamics relating to food in prison. In particular, food in prison (as in other spheres of life) has different values, and foregrounding how those values operate in prison provides insights into significant dynamics relating to health, commerce, and identities. This analytical strategy is informed by the work of the philosopher Baudrillard (2019 [1976]) who identified a tripartite model by which

commodities are valued in contemporary consumer society and which can also help us appreciate food-related dynamics in prison. The first is 'use value,' which is the most intuitive. The use value of food is the sustenance it provides for the reproduction of human organisms.

'Exchange value,' in contrast, refers to the value products acquire within a system of commercial relations. Here, value exists in reference to and comparison with the values of other products. In the Marxist tradition, such values are ultimately traceable to the amount of labor entailed in their production (Marx, 1987). In prison, the valuation of assorted products and services, including food, is embedded in a complex system of informal exchanges and facilitated through clandestine commercial structures.

However, Baudrillard's (2019 [1976]) distinctive contribution was to propose a third form of valuation that is increasingly central to consumer capitalism. He identified how, starting in approximately the 1920s, Western economies came to focus on managing consumption and creating needs for new prestigious goods. Such commodities are, in part, bought and displayed for their sign value and are desirable for what they signify about the owner as markers of prestige, power, and standing (Goldman and Papson, 1996). This is a distinctly cultural approach to the value of 'things,' which Baudrillard explicitly connected with Veblen's (1934) *Theory of the Leisure Class*. It also prefigured Bourdieu's (1984) work in *Distinction* by attending to how commodities acquire cultural meanings that speak to a person's class-based identity. In prison, food also has a sign value. It is embedded in systems of cultural meaning-making that help signify the nature of prison-based relations and the identity and subjectivity of different individuals.

To varying degrees, the existing literature sheds light on aspects of all of these different forms of valuation without explicitly recognizing the distinctive character of each form of value or their connections and interrelations. In what follows, we draw upon our findings to provide examples of these valuations, focusing first on the material conditions of food in prison, then outlining aspects of its exchange value as exemplified by the operation of informal 'stores.' Our final substantive section briefly discusses making 'brew,' presented as an example of a cultural practice and prison-based identity associated with manipulating food.

## Methodology

We draw our data from the University of Alberta Prison Project, a multiyear study of lived experiences of incarcerated men and women in Western Canada.<sup>1</sup> This article is informed by interviews with 495 men and 92 women in four provincial prisons.<sup>2</sup> Two of those institutions were remand facilities, which detain legally innocent people awaiting trial in custody rather than in the community. Such individuals are referred to as 'remand prisoners.' They comprise a diverse group of people accused of committing minor offenses, such as failing to pay outstanding fines, all the way to those accused of committing serious crimes, such as murder. The third facility we studied held convicted individuals sentenced to a term of incarceration of up to two years. The fourth was a mixed prison, detaining approximately an equal number of sentenced individuals and those held on remand.

To recruit participants, we made announcements on the individual living units, indicating that we were interested in learning about the daily experiences of prison.<sup>3</sup> Our team comprised ten researchers of varied racial, class, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural backgrounds. Nearly every incarcerated person on each unit signed up. We conducted participant-guided interviews in private rooms on or near the living units.

Interviews were semi-structured, which allowed participants to steer the discussion towards unanticipated but important aspects of their experiences of incarceration (Presser, 2005; Presser and Sandberg, 2015). We assigned randomly-generated pseudonyms to each participant and transcribed the interviews verbatim. After transcription, the authors and three additional research assistants revisited and reread each interview, identifying shared themes and narratives emerging from the data. We initially used broad themes related to prison life to create a coding scheme, which we then tested against randomly-selected transcripts until we had 85–90% overlap between coders. Food was not an explicit focus of our research, but in analyzing and coding the data, it became apparent that this topic repeatedly emerged spontaneously in our discussions, often concerning reflections about the day-to-day routine and the prison's informal economy. Subsequently, we re-coded the data using Baudrillard's tripartite model and incorporated several categories related to food, such as food as exchange value and food as a cultural value. Using these strategies, we identified three unique and consistent narrative themes relating to the values of food, which we codified using NVivo 11 software.

## **Context: Food in prison**

Our participants typically received three meals a day (breakfast, lunch, and dinner) but only two meals on Sundays (brunch and dinner). Meals were flash-frozen and delivered to the unit on trays after reheating. Incarcerated individuals ate their meals on the unit, usually in their cells. If they were not on the unit at mealtimes, such as when they attended court, they received a bag lunch comprised of a sandwich and some fruit. They also had access to a canteen once a week (see below).

## **The values of food in prison**

In what follows, we detail the tripartite division of different forms of value associated with food, briefly identifying various aspects of the use-value, exchange value, and sign value of food in the prisons we studied.

### *The use value of food in prison*

Food is sustenance. This essential fact sets the parameters of the use value of food in prison – or anywhere else. Consequently, it is perhaps predictable that food was a recurrent concern and topic of discussion amongst incarcerated individuals. Our participants voiced various opinions about the use value of food prison.

Echoing previous studies, most of our participants lamented the prison's substandard food offerings (de Graaf and Kilty, 2016; Einat and Davidian, 2019; Gibson-Light, 2018;

Godderis, 2006; Smoyer and Lopes, 2017). These complaints focused on inadequate portion sizes, an unbalanced diet (i.e. overconsumption of carbohydrates, a monotonous menu, limited offerings of vegetables and fruits, and poorly cooked meals). Participants with extensive incarceration histories indicated that the current state of institutional food had plunged to new depths and attributed this situation to callous institutional indifference or to efforts by prison authorities to cut costs. Wyatt encapsulated these views in his concern about inadequate portion sizes and offerings:

They say we're on Canada food guide, I believe the Director said at one point we get 2200 calories a day. I find it incorrect [...] They're trying to say we're on the Canada Food Guide, but that's a laugh [...] I've had a pasta dish and I've had eleven noodles in my pasta dish, eleven little noodles, I count them they don't even cover the bottom of the little serving tray. I never seen so many people at one time say, 'God, I would like some green vegetables right now.' You get like a dozen peas. It's so weird. [...] The food's bad, like that's terrible. And we understand it has to be cheap but don't like the way they do it.

Several participants complained of being constantly hungry and pointed out that they had lost weight while incarcerated. Some were pleased with their weight loss, which they attributed to relatively small portion sizes and a healthier diet than that to which they were accustomed. Another subset of incarcerated individuals suggested that they had gained weight in prison due to their increased consumption of carbohydrates and 'junk food' (see below). Several said they gained weight because they 'got [their] appetite back' in prison after they suspended their pattern in the community of heavily using methamphetamine (Bucerius et al., 2021). Incarcerated women were particularly concerned about gaining weight, which they often expressed as a fear that their clothes would not fit when they were released. In a culture that valorizes slender 'fit' women's bodies (Bordo, 1993), they saw this as a particularly distressing development (see also de Graaf and Kilty, 2016).

Individuals who had a repeated pattern of arrest were also more prone to taking a relative orientation to food quality, focusing on how the food was better or worse in the past or in different prisons. A small subset of incarcerated people was simply resigned to their situation and irritated by the recurrent complaints about the food. For example, a visibly annoyed Dylan noted: 'It's prison. What the fuck do they expect?'

Finally, about 30% of our participants presented a markedly different perspective on the use value of food. These individuals accentuated how prison provided them with regular access to meals. Due to their often precarious life circumstances, they lacked consistent access to meals in the community as their lives were overdetermined by poverty, unstable housing situations, and extensive illicit drug use (Bucerius et al., 2021a; Schneider, 2021). Hannah, for example, noted:

I for one am homeless otherwise right now, so it's kinda a safe place for me to be [...] well I don't talk to too many people in here but the few people I have, which is like a handful at least, they're pretty much all homeless right now. So, I find it good place for us that way, even though maybe we don't like the fact that we're in here and like that there are so

many rules in some ways [...] But yeah, we're otherwise homeless. Here we have a clean bed, shower. We have networking with other ladies. Three square meals a day. Programs, like getting our education. If we have lost our ID. We have ways of getting medical attention. Those are things that otherwise isolated or homeless person wouldn't have.

Olivia presented much of the same picture:

In here, just having a roof over my head and three meals a day is a bonus right now because I'm pregnant. Because I have no idea where and how it would've panned out, out there [on the street] since I sometimes don't eat [...]. I have no place that I feel safe at or can trust anybody to keep my stuff, because I lost many things over the last year. I basically have nothing out there. I'm alone so, nothing to go back to either. So, that would be my only benefit at the moment, I guess is that I have meals but, and a roof over my head and somewhat secure.

Such individuals regularly presented the 'three meals a day' in prison as a (highly contextual) benefit to being incarcerated. Having access to food in prison allowed them to concentrate on other personal concerns instead of being preoccupied with finding their next meal. Not having to worry about this primal facet of survival was a particular relief for our pregnant participants.

### *Exchange value: Stores and commerce*

In prison, informal illicit economies typically arise to help meet incarcerated individuals' diverse needs. The literature on such economies has focused on cigarettes, which have historically been a key form of currency and unit of exchange (Lankenau, 2001). More recent work has accentuated the sale and trade of illicit drugs (Crewe, 2005; Mjåland, 2014; Skarbek, 2014). With the notable exception of Gibson-Light's (2018) study of food exchanges in an Arizona prison, the magnitude and details of the exchange systems surrounding food in prison remain poorly understood and insufficiently documented. Einat and Davidian recently suggested that the literature on the illicit prison economy 'has shown a total disregard of the status, roles, and significance of food within this trade' (2019: 128).

The quantitative and qualitative deficits of the meal offering made the prisons' canteen an essential resource. Once a week, incarcerated individuals could use their prison account to purchase canteen items. These accounts could contain a maximum of \$100 (CAD) acquired from working at (poorly paid) prison jobs or from deposits by friends and loved ones. Canteens mostly stock 'junk food' (candy bars, cola, and chips) but also sell other things, such as tins of tuna, kimchi bowls, and oatmeal packages. Participants regularly portrayed these as necessary supplements to the bland and meager prison diet. As Carson noted, 'To actually feel full around here, you actually have to get canteen.'

As cigarettes had been banned in prison several years previously, food had emerged as prominent items in the prisons informal system of commercial exchange, as Carson also observed:

You just treat canteen as currency now, I guess. It used to be - from what I understand from my friends and family that used to frequent these places – cigarettes used to be the currency. Now it's kimchi bowls [...], chocolate bars, and chips. That's the only currency they have in here for trade.

Incarcerated individuals were not necessarily pleased with how canteen items had supplanted cigarettes in the prison's informal economy. Beyond lamenting their inability to smoke, several were disheartened by seeing grown men with extremely 'hard' street personas squabbling over junk food:

It's pathetic that it's [canteen items as] the currency. I know somebody who years ago went to prison, and the currency was cigarettes. Now the currency is freaking Kimchi and Doritos... Everybody has lowered themselves to that level where a dollar thirty-five bag of Doritos somebody will fight over if they're not paid back. It's embarrassing. I find it embarrassing when I see this happening. (Ryan)

Ryan's complaint about the transition to food as the de-facto currency can be understood in light of the cultural meanings of cigarettes to incarcerated people. Research has shown that cigarette smoking in prison allows individuals to cultivate a sense of independence and a temporary reprieve from the rigors of incarceration (Gibson-Light, 2018; Karpova, 2013; Kauffman, 2009; Lankenau, 2001) while also being tied to dominant conceptions of masculinity (Starr, 1984). Trading and fighting over candy bars did not have comparably weighty cultural resonances.

Incarcerated individuals used informal but prohibited methods to exchange food to improve often quotidian aspects of their living situation. Some of our participants had a semiofficial role in this process. They operated illicit 'stores' out of their cells, selling and bartering food and snacks to meet the persistent demand for such items. Stan, for example, ran such an operation and was proud to showcase his entrepreneurial acumen: 'When I come to jail, I usually start a store. I'll buy a whole bunch of canteen. A couple days before canteen [day], no one has canteen... You provide a service.' In doing so, Stan and other store operators could profit in an environment with few legitimate opportunities for financial gain. Harvey, who also operated a store, put it this way: 'Like, I built a store from eight dollars, I've built it into five hundred dollars.' Any profit derived from operating a store comes from selling items at a higher price than that in the canteen.

Incarcerated individuals turned to these stores instead of the official canteen for several reasons; they could spend more than their maximum \$100 weekly allotment; the store was more frequently 'open;' newly admitted individuals could purchase items before their official account had been established; and they could negotiate the form, terms, and timeline of repayment, with debts sometimes repaid in services or other food



items. Incarcerated individuals could also turn to the informal stores if they were denied access to the canteen as a disciplinary measure. Most importantly, individuals who had no funds could purchase items at a store on credit, with promises to repay later.

Store items were priced according to a series of well-known but still occasionally negotiable rates, typically twice the canteen cost, colloquially known as the ‘double bubble’ rate (Crewe, 2005; Phillips, 2012). At the same time, a fluid set of constant comparisons of the value of different items and services was in operation. Food played a particularly significant role in this economy, but other things (drugs, crafts, letter writing, haircuts, etc.) were also incorporated into ongoing comparisons of the value of different items and services. Kaleb and Carson provide a sense of the contextual and malleable nature of these calculations:

I have a store right now, so... I just cuff out—so, cuz you wanna get canteen each week, right? So, what I do is I just order canteen, and I have a bunch of canteen myself, right? So, I just cuff it out. Either three for five, so that would be three items, and you owe me five items back, right? I cuff you two for one, so I give you one item, you owe me two back, right? So, I do that every week. (Kaleb)

Depending on what they offer, sometimes you get two bags of chips, and you’ve got to pay back three, or three for five, or two for one. It [the cost] depends on what time of the week it is. If it’s later in the week, if it’s two or three days before canteen, you’re going two for one on everything.... Some things are premium items, like chocolate bars and juice crystals. Those are always two for one. They have their own little monetary system here. (Carson)

Elevated prices were justified by the labor and risks involved in running a store. If discovered, store operators could receive disciplinary charges and have their inventory confiscated, although, in practice, officers often used their discretion to turn a blind eye to a store’s existence (Haggerty and Bucarius, 2020). As customers could be lax about repayment, store operators also required a system for collecting debts. Stan, who had previously operated a store, resented the hassles of this process: ‘I would constantly have people not paying me. I would have to chase them just to get a couple noodles back that they came to me and asked to borrow.’

Incarcerated individuals occasionally tried to skip out on these debts by not settling their account before being released or surreptitiously asking to be transferred to another unit. Such strategies were widely condemned as ‘bad actions’ and could result in reprisals. However, as such trading was illicit, agreements could only be enforced informally. If standard forms of persuasion were unsuccessful, it could be necessary to assault a recalcitrant debtor, which also sent a message to other individuals about the consequences of shirking. Consequently, the store system could contribute to violence amongst incarcerated individuals, which is the official rationale for why stores were prohibited. As Stan noted about people failing to repay these debts, ‘people get jumped for shit like that.’ Devin highlighted how gangs operated some stores, who would ‘send their collectors over to collect if you don’t pay. You’ll get a shot [punch] to the head or something like that.’

Hence, as Carson noted, store operators must have the physical and psychological makeup to allow them to violently enforce their agreements, if necessary: 'It's usually the guys that... are big enough to defend their claim [to a] store here.' Alternatively, store operators could use their inventory of food and snacks to recruit and reimburse other individuals to collect debts on their behalf. Serving as this type of 'hired muscle' was particularly tempting to incarcerated individuals who were younger and relatively experienced and those who were poorer and therefore could not purchase items legitimately through the canteen system.

Then you get guys paying other people to do things, to do their dirt. You know? If there's a little tiff going on between two guys, *a hungry person will fucking do anything for a cup of soup...* There are a few guys that'll do it. Really, anyone that likes to fight, you just go to them, 'Hey listen, this guy's got a problem with me. I'll give you \$40 or \$50 to go and deal with them.' 'No problem.' Canteen day comes [...] *There are a ton of kids in here that are starving, that have no money in their account.* They can't buy canteen. So, they'll say, 'I'll do it; what do you want me to do.' And there are some tough kids in here. They'll go in, two or three of them [...] They walked into this guy's room because somebody didn't like them. So, these two guys got paid some canteen to go beat him up and get him to check in [behave appropriately]. (emphasis added) (James)

We spoke with Rodney, who described his history of proving his services in such arrangements:

[...] Like I've been paid to beat people up before. Well, if he's my ex-bro [who made the request], I'd do it for fuckin' free. But usually, if it's like some nobody and some fuckin' guy I don't even like asked me to do it, like I'm probably gonna' do it for like 100 bucks or 50 bucks [worth of canteen], you know. That goes a long way in here.

However, several factors mitigated the frequency or extent of such violence, such that assaults were a 'last resort.' Assaults could result in the unit being locked down, and such confinement was directly counter to the commercial interests of store operators who relied upon in-person interactions with incarcerated customers to sell or trade their products.

The dynamics of informally exchanging food also provided opportunities for generosity and solidarity. Our female participants suggested that the violence characteristic of the commercial exchange of food amongst incarcerated men was less pronounced on women's units. For the women, there was a greater emphasis on sharing and building relationships through the exchange and consumption of food. An excerpt from our conversation with Naomi, is illustrative:

A: So if you don't have money for canteen is there, how do you make money if, like if you need to eat what do you, what can you do in here?

I: Well you just got to make friends right and sometimes girls will take their sandwiches and food that they don't want and just set them on the table out in, in like there's a table in that area there like four tables one at each, on each tier, like there's four tiers right and if you don't want something to eat you just put it on the tier you just put it on the table in your tier and anyone can go and get it and have it, so yeah

Bella noted that such generosity was often conspicuously extend to pregnant women: 'extra food, extra milk, um if you get a pregnant girl who's in here a long time, the girls just start to take care of them, right.' Such findings reinforce insights from the existing prison food scholarship about how incarcerated women can demonstrate an ethics of care in sharing food (de Graaf and Kilty, 2016).<sup>4</sup>

In summary, the material deprivations characteristic of prison provided food items with an elevated exchange value. Such exchanges could be explicit and generous. However, they could also be covert, as was most apparent in the illicit but often tacitly tolerated operation of prison stores by incarcerated individuals. This trade was occasionally enforced by forms of violence that could themselves be funded through the exchange of food items.

### *Sign value: Brew, culture, and identity*

Incarcerated individuals would often alter the prison's food offerings to make more interesting or appealing meals or snacks (see Smoyer, 2016; Ugelvik, 2011). For instance, during our research, one incarcerated individual made and sold his version of toffee:

He gets a bunch of peanut butter, a bunch of honey, and a bunch of sugar, and he makes his own toffee, right. He did it all up, melted it, and put it in the fridge. He went around and sold chunks for uh fifty cents to three dollars, depending on how big of a piece you want. (Brayden)

One of the most frequently mentioned examples of creatively manipulating and transforming food involved making 'brew' (also known as 'pruno'), an alcoholic beverage crafted from ingredients found in meals or canteen items.<sup>5</sup> Despite being prohibited, dangerous to consume (Centers for Disease Control Prevention, 2012), and not particularly palatable, a subset of individuals commonly made brew.

A series of factors contributed to the prevalence of brew. Alcohol had a distinctive 'use value' in the prisons we studied. An exceptionally high percentage of individuals had histories of misusing or abusing alcohol and other substances (Bucerius et al., 2021). Several of our participants noted that the level of brew found on a unit fluctuated with the availability of illicit drugs; when drugs were in short supply, more people made and consumed brew.

Our participants described several different brew recipes, but as Arthur notes, the essential ingredients are fruit and bread acquired from food trays and canteen: 'brew is made from juice, water, crackers, lots of sugar, fruit, pineapples, oranges, sometimes apples, maybe a couple of potatoes.' Ingredients are mixed and allowed to ferment

over a period of days. The pulp is strained off, and the resulting product can be highly intoxicating.

Brew making is a prominent aspect of prison culture, often learned over time from more experienced individuals. While the basics of making brew are straightforward, creating it in prison required considerable skill and institutional savvy given that it is prohibited, and access to ingredients could be restricted. Beyond having a recipe, people who made brew also had to develop techniques for heating the mixture, concealing its pungent odor, and hiding the concoction in physical spaces that guards regularly searched. Some individuals described keeping cola bottles filled with brew next to their body under their prison-issued coveralls to heat and hide the concoction. Francois revealed his preferred hiding spot: 'I sleep with it, right. So, I keep a garbage bag [containing fermenting brew] underneath my mattress and then lay on top of it. So, they come into the cell, and if they can't smell it, it's not there.' Depending on the technique used, the bottle containing the mixture had to sometimes be discretely 'burped' to release gas: 'I have actually held onto a brew for a chick once, and I had to burp it (laughing). Opened the lid, and it sprayed a little bit of stickiness all over my hands. And I'm like 'Ew' (laughing)' (Vivian). As Garcia has noted about making brew: 'Inmate creativity has no boundaries when acquiring basic materials, ingredients, and concealing the process from institutional personnel' (2019: 465).

Several incarcerated individuals indicated that they had parlayed their brewing skills into a lucrative income: 'I've actually put probably 4000 or 5000 dollars in savings just as well [from selling brew]' (Francois). Making allowances for some exaggeration in these dollar figures, brew was obviously a profitable staple of the informal prison economy. Carson reiterated the point, noting, 'You can make some money for canteen that way [selling brew]. It's pretty much the only way you can really make money in here unless you're willing to knock somebody out for cash.'

These transactions, however, were not entirely instrumental. Making and drinking brew could also be a simple diversion. As Hayden notes, it was a way to find enjoyment in an otherwise hostile or dreary situation: '...since everything gets taken away from you, you gotta have like some kind of like... pleasure, right? Like... something, right? And I guess since you can't smoke cigarettes and stuff like that, so people make brew. Try to make their time a little more easier, right?' People would make brew in anticipation of special occasions, such as holidays, birthdays, and prominent sporting events (Smith 2002). At such times it was often shared: 'The person that makes the brew usually... usually shares with his friends, right?... So, yeah, that's usually how it works. They don't... I don't think... people don't usually drink it all to themselves' (Hayden). In the process, the informal rituals surrounding making, sharing, and drinking brew could help to foster forms of solidarity.

The individuals who made brew could also develop a particular identity related to this practice. Several individuals we spoke with proudly identified themselves as 'brewmasters,' with Francois, for example, bragging at great length about how he made the 'best' (and most potent) brew in prison. This brewmaster status was something of a contested identity. Some incarcerated individuals saw the presence of brew as an annoyance, given that drunk individuals could disrupt the unit and lead to correctional officers locking

everyone in their cells. Others, however, valued the craft skill and ingenuity of brewmasters and applauded their ability to provide others with a welcome intoxicant.

Consequently, brew demonstrates the tripartite valuations relating to food operating simultaneously. Brew had a distinctive use-value for incarcerated individuals but was also a commodity with an exchange value. By making, selling, and gifting brew, incarcerated 'brewmasters' could also develop an identity valorized by a subset of the population, giving such activities a form of sign value.

## Discussion

In this article, we have introduced a tripartite model to examine the use, exchange, and sign values of food in the prisons we studied. This approach usefully encompasses many of the themes highlighted in works that have been done to date while serving as a possible productive framework for future research. The substantive component of our article provides brief empirical insights into some of the material, economic, and cultural aspects of food in prison.

In contemplating the use value of food, we have affirmed how the physical need for sustenance makes food quality and quantity a constant focus of discussion, concern, and grievance amongst incarcerated individuals. We also foreground the unsettling fact that a subset of marginalized incarcerated individuals focused their comments on the beneficial aspects of the basic subsistence-level food offerings in prison. For these individuals, obtaining adequate food in the outside community can be difficult and at times impossible, which contributed to their portraying the ability to acquire a basic 'three meals a day' as a (highly contextual) benefit of their incarceration. Such a situation is an implicit condemnation of the level of services available in the community and the gaps in Canada's social welfare system.

The yearning for more or better food provides food with both an exchange value and sign value. These informal exchanges can be understood in terms of Michel De Certeau's (1984) distinction between strategies and tactics of power. For him, strategies of power involve efforts to objectify the social environment and are derived from an individual's access to key spatial or institutional locations. Prison would be an extreme example of a situation where authorities can deploy diverse strategies of power, or what Foucault would call 'disciplinary mechanisms' (1977). Criminologists have produced an enormous body of work interrogating such mechanisms. Tactics of power, on the other hand, are resources of the subjugated. They are forms of 'making do' that are necessarily defensive and opportunistic, used in more limited ways, and seized momentarily within spaces governed by highly structured strategic relations (Rowe, 2016). Much of what incarcerated individuals do daily to improve their situations in opposition to or in defiance of the explicit institutional rules and expectations can be understood as tactics of power. Surreptitiously selling food and crafting makeshift meals and snacks are pragmatic forms of 'making do' undertaken in an environment overwritten by larger power structures that severely restrict an incarcerated person's scope for agency.

The routine exchange of food amongst incarcerated individuals occurs through occasional sharing, informal bartering or, as we document above, via the illicit 'stores'

operated by incarcerated individuals. In contrast to Gibson-Light's popular account, we did not find a single item (Ramen noodles in his study) that had become the standard marker of value in the prison's informal economy. Instead, there was a more fluid, contextual, and negotiated set of valuations, a type of barter system. Food plays a key role in this system, along with considerations of and comparisons with the value of other items such as services (making crafts, cutting hair, writing letters) and illicit drugs (Bucerus and Haggerty, 2019). Consequently, collecting food-related debts can entail recourse to violence in a system of threats and reprisals that can itself be funded through canteen items.

Finally, at the cultural level, as it is acquired, exchanged, prepared, and consumed, food becomes invested with a 'sign value' that speaks to a person's standing within their distinctive community. In prison, these food-related identities are forms of distinction and are amongst the many ways incarcerated individuals categorize and stratify the prison population (Phillips, 2012; Smoyer, 2016; Ugelvik, 2011). Like the informal exchange practices detailed above, making makeshift meals and snacks are also pragmatic forms of 'making do.' They involve a surreptitious set of tactics undertaken to directly improve the life situation of incarcerated individuals in the face of larger structures of power that severely constrain their scope for agency (Rowe, 2016). Our brief discussion of making 'brew' draws attention to the contextual sign value associated with this underground tactic, which, in turn, allows the brewer to foster informal prison-based social networks while fashioning for him or herself a social identity as 'brewmaster.' For some, this 'brewmaster' status was perceived as a positive identity in an environment where the prospect of fashioning other forms of valorized status was severely circumscribed.

## Conclusion

Approximately 38,000 adults are detained in Canada's federal, provincial, and territorial correctional institutions (Malakieh, 2020). Few things are more central to these individuals' lives in prison than food. Everyone is fed multiple times a day, which requires a complex formal and informal logistical infrastructure and diverse roles performed by a wide range of individuals. However, the literature on prison and food comprise a tiny proportion of the now enormous body of works published on assorted aspects of incarceration. The social, economic, and cultural dynamics of the consumption, exchange, and manipulation of food in prison are consequently little examined or understood beyond a set of specialist researchers. Smoyer's (2019) recent scoping review, for example, found only 38 articles of varying quality and diverse foci written on the topic over 20 years. Only three of those articles related to Canada.

The lack of sustained attention to this topic may derive from a perception that food is a mundane or banal object of analysis. Writing in 1997, Germov (1997: 35) drew attention to what was then a lack of sociological research on food, suggesting that this situation was likely due to how 'the everyday 'nature' of food and eating made it a taken-for-granted and self-evident subject beyond the interest of sociological analysis.' Since that time, the sociological interest in food has blossomed (see, e.g. Beardsworth and Keil, 2002;

Johnston and Baumann, 2014; Poulain, 2017), but criminologists have not kept pace. Part of the reason for this neglect might stem from the fact that food preparation is generally associated with devaluated forms of gendered work performed predominantly by women. As such, it does not appear to have the academic caché of the more common and often sensational foci in the prison literature. Perhaps tellingly, most of the scholarship on food and prison has also been produced by women.

Such disinterest beyond a small group of punishment scholars is curious given how sharply it contrasts with the preoccupations and occasional obsessions of incarcerated individuals, who can spend an enormous amount of time contemplating, commenting on, and scheming about food. Even cursory reflection on this topic suggests that the social organization of food in prison involves processes that profoundly shape incarcerated individuals' health and well-being and that meeting those needs requires complex organizational routines while giving rise to distinctive food-based identities. As such, far from a niche gendered topic removed from the usual preoccupations of analysts, attending to the consumption, exchange, and manipulation of food in prison offers multiple avenues for developing a critical understanding of the lived reality of incarceration. This article demonstrates the value of Baudrillard's theorizing about 'value' as part of our emerging understanding of the rituals and realities of food in prison.

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### **Notes**

1. <https://www.canadiancriminology.com/projects/uapp>.
2. As part of our research agreement, we do not identify the province where we conducted our research.
3. Research ethics approval was provided by the University of Alberta.
4. It is important to stress that such sharing could be found on *both* male and female units, but appeared to be more commonplace for incarcerated women.

5. While not technically a 'food,' brew is crafted from food ingredients, and becomes invested with forms of cultural meanings related to other items that are consumed in prison.

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