

The Embodiment of Contempt: Ontario Provincial Prison Food

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sls**Kelly Struthers Montford** *Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University), Toronto, Canada*

Abstract

Prison food is central to the prison experience and is a physically invasive manifestation of carceral power. This article draws on 61 interviews with individuals with lived experience of provincial prisons in Ontario, Canada. Participants reported that the food was unhealthy, small-portioned, bland, and steamed to the point that they could not discern what they were eating. Others reported living in fear of the food, whether because it was molding, spoiled, or had been tampered with. For many participants, their experience of incarceration was that of hunger and unwanted bodily changes. Poor quality prison food bolstered an underground food economy in which trading, gambling, or intimidation were used by prisoners to access more and/or better foods. Overall, prison food was a means through which social, political, and institutional contempt for prisoners was communicated to and embodied by prisoners.

Keywords

Prison food, prison diets, provincial prisons, Canada, Ontario, food as punishment, embodiment, cook-chill, hunger

Introduction

Food is political and inherently intimate; physically ingested, transformed by and transformative to our bodies, with our available food options shaped by geopolitical, environmental, geographical, cultural, and institutional forces. The power of food and the

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constraints upon it are heightened in the prison setting. On the one hand, the need to continuously feed large numbers represents a significant operational issue for prison administrations, one that is remedied by assigning prisoners to the labor of food preparation and serving (Godderis, 2006a). On the other hand, incarcerated individuals routinely report constant hunger and malnourishment despite standards laid out by the United Nations in its *Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners* requiring that meals of wholesome quality and adequate nutritional value for health and strength be provided (OCI, 2019; UN General Assembly, 2015).

Food is central to the prison experience (Godderis, 2006a). Some have argued that “prison food assumes enormous importance, symbolically representing, in many respects, *the prison experience*” (Smith, 2002: 197). Pratt (2002) has suggested that the symbolic function of the prison diet is to encourage uniformity and to reify the overwhelming power of the prison (and hence the state). It is also meant to provide prisoners with *just enough* nutrients to maintain biological life. Poor quality food is often the catalyst for various exercises of resistance, misconducts, and prisoner organizing such that cafeterias have not been included in the blueprints for some new institutions, as administrations seek to curtail the potential for resistance and violence that often occurs in these locations (Earle and Phillips, 2012). With this shift, prisoners often eat in the common area of their pods or in their cells, resulting in increased restrictions on movement and socializing, as well as more time-in-cell. The outcome, as Pratt argues, is much like the taste of the food itself: a bland, boring, and mundane institutionalized life.

Despite its centrality to prison conditions and experience, prison food has received relatively little academic attention. Existing scholarship has investigated important relationships between food, health, and identity; ways in which poor-quality food causes feelings of unworthiness and neglect; food as pleasure, punishment, and resistance; the role of food in articulations of masculinity and ethnicity; as well as the role of food in prisoner organizing (de Graaf and Kilty, 2016; Einat and Davidian, 2019; Godderis, 2006a, 2006b; Sexton, 2015; Smith, 2002; Smoyer, 2016; Ugelvik, 2011). As well, we have seen how non-white prisoners in Norway are normalized through national diets, and how the British government’s self-proclaimed cultural sensitivity is undermined in Immigration Removal Centers by its serving of a ‘British’ diet (DeAngelis, 2020; Ugelvik, 2011). These examples come from the UK, USA, Norway and Israel and turning to the Canadian context the research is more scant still, though with notable exceptions in the federal context (see for example, Godderis, 2006b, 2006a).

A focus on the federal context is common in Canadian prison studies, yet because Canada’s prison system is bifurcated, with provinces administering sentences of two years less a day and remanding accused persons, provincial prisons warrant sustained attention. Based on admissions figures, the province of Ontario is Canada’s largest jailer. In the 2018/2019 fiscal year, there were 14,548 admissions to federal penitentiaries, and 64,818 admissions to Ontario provincial custody. Of the admissions to Ontario provincial custody, 41,131 individuals were remanded prior to trial, making them legally innocent (Statistics Canada, 2020). De Graaf and Kilty (2016) have examined how women who have served both provincial and federal time in Canada use cooking and the sharing of food to take care of themselves and others, thereby subverting the desubjectifying and alienating nature of prison power. Yet, there has not been a thorough

investigation into the mundane, recurrent, and enduring experience of provincial prison food and how this shapes everyday institutional life. This article responds to this absence by centering interview data from 61 individuals who experienced incarceration in Ontario provincial prisons. As such, it is the first in-depth examination on the matter of prison food in a Canadian provincial context.

The article extends recent criminological scholarship on the embodiment of incarceration (Chamberlen, 2018). Chamberlen's study of women's experience of imprisonment and life post-release argues for an "embodied criminology and sociology of prison life" (2018: 8) on the grounds that bodies are "pertinent in understanding the living and feeling of prison's uniquely constituted time and space" (p. 7). Embodiment takes the body as perception itself, and constitutive of subjectivity because we experience the world through our bodies. However, those who are able-bodied and for whom the social environment is designed, rarely become aware of their bodies. It is when confronted with injuries, the experience of physical or mental disability, or being in an unaccommodating context that we are made more aware of our bodies and how we perceive our environments through our senses. For Chamberlen, the prison's repressive environment is one such scenario, in which restricted and controlled movements, regimented schedules, and prison food, for example, confront and are felt by the body. Incarceration enhances the bodily awareness of those subjected to the penal regime compared to life on the outside where individuals exercise more autonomy over their lives. Many women prisoners in Chamberlen's study also reported that their bodies changed in prison, further confirming that incarceration is an embodied phenomenon that marks one's body during and after release. Sensory perception in the sense of emotional meanings attached to smells, sounds, and specific prison areas point to the fact that imprisonment is felt through one's body (Chamberlen, 2018). When participants in this study talk about their experience of prison food in Ontario institutions, they are then talking about their embodied experience of provincial punishment experienced *through* eating: the quality, texture, and taste of prison meals, how prison food organizes time, space, and relations shaping their incarceration, as well as how prison food changed their bodies. Prison food, analyzed through embodiment, is at once "a theory of the (prisoner's) body [and] is a theory of how the (prison) world is perceived" (Chamberlen, 2018: 5).

Methodology

The data analyzed herein is from the Ontario region of the Prison Transparency Project (PTP)¹, a national study on prison conditions, which also included sites in Quebec and British Columbia. The study received research ethics approval from each institutional ethics board in which researchers were affiliated and conducted fieldwork. This included the University of Toronto, Carleton University, and Trent University in the Ontario Region, Université Laval in the Québec Region, and the University of British Columbia for research undertaken in that province.

The PTP engaged a participatory action research (PAR) methodology in which the research team included scholars of carceral sociology as well as community experts with lived experience (Balfour et al., 2018; Balfour and Martel, 2018). Consistent with

PAR and feminist criminology, participants were respected as experts of their own experience and incarceration more broadly (see Comack, 2006). Community research assistants (RAs) were integral members of the research team who collaborated with investigators to recruit, interview, transcribe, and analyze the participant interviews. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit participants who had been incarcerated at any time in the five years preceding their date of interview. Participant interviews were conducted by investigators, post-doctoral fellows, graduate research assistants and community RAs. Interviews followed a standardized interview guide to ensure consistency across research sites, with probing questions asked at the discretion of the interviewer. The interview guide included multiple human rights grounds, spanning conditions of confinement, health services, programming and volunteer services, access to justice, complaint mechanisms, frequency of lockdowns, solitary confinement, food, religious and cultural accommodation, and reintegration. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically coded.

Overall, the PTP interviewed 152 persons between 2016 and 2018. 95 participants were from the Ontario region and had a range of incarceration experiences including federal penitentiaries, provincial prisons, immigration detention, and police and court holding cells. This article focuses on those who were incarcerated or detained in Ontario provincial prisons, resulting in a sample size of 61 persons who ranged in age from 28 to 62, with a mean age of 45.2 years. Of these 61 individuals, 49% (n = 30) identified as First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, 33% as white (n = 20), 11% (n = 7) did not disclose their racial identity, and 7% (n = 4) of participants identified as Black, mixed race, Chinese, or Southeast Asian. Further, 74% (n = 45) identified as cis-gender men, 25% (n = 15) identified as cis-gender women, and 1% (n = 1) identified as gender non-conforming. Participants chose their own pseudonyms, which are used throughout this article. As the aim of the PTP was to provide a systematic account of conditions of incarceration as reported by those with lived experience, throughout the analysis and to the fullest extent possible while preserving anonymity, I center participants' narratives. In this sense, a prisoner-centered empirical snapshot of prison food as a condition of confinement, and as shaping the experience of prison in Ontario facilities, is provided.

It's "just garbage": Prisoners' Experience of Food Quality

"Steamed to death"

When asked about prison food, participants often responded by referencing cook-chill. Over the past decade or so, there has been an ongoing shift to "cook-chill" feeding methods at both the provincial and federal levels of prisons in Canada, meaning "food is cooked in large vats, packaged, cooled and stored before being shipped out to 'finishing' kitchens at local sites for reheating and serving" (OCI, 2019: 55). Steve described prison meals as, "it's all heated right, just comes in pre-made." Participants directly linked the method of food preparation to the negative nutritional value of prison meals. The Ministry of the Solicitor General (2020a) has a 16-page policy, "7.1: Nutrition and Quality Standards" that outlines procedures for the Cook Chill Production Center around the Ministry's menu design, nutritional composition of meals, menu changes for holidays, medical, religious, and lifestyle meals, taste testing

processes, and the like. Despite outlining that “high quality food items will be produced” (Ministry of the Solicitor General 2020a: 7.1.1), participants’ experience did not reflect this policy stipulation. Doug for example, when asked about whether he believed the food served was nutritious replied “No. The way in which the food is prepared[is] that everything is steamed to death, it’s over steamed by the time you get it.”

Dave also drew a connection between the reheating through steaming aspect of cook-chill and its role in health. In discussing his time inside, Dave said “the food sucks though...the food is brutal. It’s all steamed, all the nutrients are taken out of the food.” Mao also pointed to practices of reheating food multiple times to the point where food items no longer contain nutrients: “I don’t even think there is any more nutrient in the vegetable by the time you eat it because it’s so steamed...multiple times!” Whether or not prison food has nutrients after cook-chill methods of preparation, prisoners believe and experience their diets, which they have little control over, as unhealthy and harmful. Health is contingent and subjective and is not solely reducible to a specific nutrient composition. The prisoners’ widely held belief that the food was unhealthy because of how it is prepared could then cause this to be experienced as such, regardless of official nutrient breakdowns. Women prisoners in the UK, for example, have noted that for them, health meant “feeling well,” even if this meant they experienced their bodies as “fat,” which in the western world is falsely associated with ill-health (Kirkland, 2011). Previous research has discussed prisoners’ loss of decision-making pertaining to food in the sense of not being able to make health-promoting decisions. This was experienced as a further loss of sense of control over oneself knowing that they had little option but to eat foods they believed would be detrimental (Godderis, 2006b). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened these conditions.

Prisoners incarcerated in the Ontario provincial Ottawa Carleton Detention Center during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic noted a sharp decrease in the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables, and eventually more than 70 prisoners participated in a hunger strike to ameliorate their conditions of confinement, including getting raw produce and meals consistent with Canada’s Food Guide (Brazeau, 2020). Brazeau (2020), for example, reported that she and other prisoners went ten weeks without a single fresh vegetable. The only vegetables they had included “the odd serving of carrots, potatoes and peas...[which] had been frozen, cooked, and/or steamed using the ‘cook chill’ preparation method...leav[ing] the vegetables depleted of their nutrients” (p. 128). Brazeau recounted “begging for vegetables” and attempting to make trades with guards to access fresh fruits and/or vegetables but was told shortages were related to the pandemic more broadly and limitations in who could touch food trays. Within the first week without fresh produce, Brazeau (2020) reported that the women’s dorm became a “toxic environment” characterized by “many more arguments and girls had issues using the washroom—people felt sick, including me” (p. 128). Women experienced anxiety surrounding a lack of raw produce in addition to a tense environment and digestive issues. Namely, this is due to broader cultural scripts around nutrition in which “the importance of eating our fruits and vegetables has been engrained in us since childhood” (Brazeau, 2020: 128). The above section on prisoners’ experience of cook-chill meals demonstrates their direct and negative experience of political and fiscal decisions to

shift food production from individual institutions (on-site and in-house) to a centralized and out-sourced system.

Cook-chill marks the increased privatization and subcontracting of prison food to corporations, with the aim of reducing costs for the government. The food in Ontario provincial facilities, apart from the Ontario Correctional Institute, is prepared under contract by Eurest Corrections, a division of Compass Food Services. Eurest operates out of the Maplehurst Correctional Complex, in Milton, Ontario, from where cook-chill foods are distributed to the province's largest prisons (Mintz, 2016). Ontario feeds approximately 8000 prisoners a day and in 2016 spent \$41.3 million dollars on food services in its prisons at a cost of \$9.17 per prisoner per day with transportation and labor costs totalling \$14.54 per day. Although budgetary figures are not available for the province of Ontario, numbers from the Ministry of Corrections, Policing, and Public Safety which administers the Saskatchewan provincial prison system, are illustrative. When Saskatchewan subcontracted the prison food at *one* of its institutions, the Regina Correctional Center to Compass in 2015, the government's costs decreased by \$2.4 million dollars.

As evident in the above passages, the move to cook-chill has not gone unnoticed by prisoners and can contribute to an environment of escalated tension and conflict. Prisoner resistance often revolves around food, and low-quality prison food can play a role in catalyzing prison riots (Earle and Phillips, 2012; OCI, 2017). Poor quality and dangerous prison food as well as unsafe drinking water are amongst reasons prisoners in various Ontario provincial institutions have organized multiple hunger strikes since the summer of 2020 (Chidley-Hill, 2020). In the federal context, the Correctional Investigator of Canada found that the Correctional Service Canada's (CSC) "Food Modernization Initiative" which led to CSC instituting cook-chill at over half of its penitentiaries, substituting fresh foods for processed versions, and smaller overall portions, drove the 2016 riot at the Saskatchewan Federal Penitentiary in Canada where one prisoner was killed, two prisoners seriously assaulted, and six hit with pellets fired by the response team (OCI, 2019, 2018). As such, poor quality prison food can influence and structure prisoners' experience of space, conflict, and security.

"That's what you get"

Participants relayed multiple experiences of undercooked, unsafe, and rotting food, a fact that they had little control over nor access to alternatives. For some, this was a direct expression of the prison's control, as well as marked disdain and lack of care toward prisoners. Jake for example recalled that "some of the egg was even green." Joseph described that "meat was always red, raw inside." This occurred despite policy stipulations for the Cook Chill Production Center to follow "Retherm Testing Procedures and Parameters" outlining quality assurance testing, taste testing at production and meal assembly production points, visual inspections of meals, and that all meals are warmed "to a minimum desired internal temperature of + 74 degrees Celsius or 165.2 degrees Fahrenheit for at least 15 seconds...using a Ministry approved calibrated thermometer...to test meals randomly throughout the cooking oven" (Ministry of the Solicitor General 2020b: 7.3.5).

Jude described that while he could always count on getting his meals, the timing and/or the state of the meals was another issue:

Got them frozen one day, didn't even bother to cook it. I don't know if it was the whole range, but our unit, everyone's unit was frozen solid. And I don't know if some guard thought it would be funny. Could have been a mistake but I doubt it. How do you not remember to nuke a bunch of meals or whatever...They did rectify it, but it was about 11:00 at night they brought sandwiches, a cheese sandwich. Would have been better off eating the frozen meal. And that was basically the attitude, should have shut up and eaten the frozen meal. We figured they would take them and nuke them or steam them and bring them back. But no, we got a great cheese sandwich.

The sentiment that guards were unsympathetic and that it was futile to approach them about food issues was shared by Crystal. She described that "they would not listen, they would just be like, oh 'that's what you get'" (Crystal). Here low-quality food is not only experienced as punitive, but also a way that 'extra' punishment can be meted out by not cooking the meals, or leaving prisoners little option but to eat raw, rotting, or otherwise unsafe foods. Guards' refusal to care about the food has been previously reported as an extension of their overall lack of regard for the wellbeing and subjectivity of prisoners (see Sexton, 2015). In this way, the embodied experience of incarceration through food is that of threat: to one's bodily integrity, health, and sense of food security if one was to refuse or resist 'what they got.' One has no choice but to turn against one's body (see Chamberlen, 2018), either through the consumption of unsafe foods, or through the refusal to eat.

"It wasn't really food"

Not only did prisoners experience the food as unsafe, they also felt that prison food does not qualify as "real". Several interviewees commented that the prison diet lacked in texture, taste, nutrients, and was indistinguishable in terms of what it was meant to be—a 'mystery.' Collette, for example, described prison meals as "the...vegetables were grey and turned to liquid in my mouth. I couldn't eat it. I mostly ate peanut butter sandwiches because it wasn't really food." For Sandra, "it was gross, mostly processed food and fake, fake meatloaf...processed, not real meat." Joseph recounted that "potatoes weren't potatoes...potatoes weren't real." Prisoners also pointed to the unknowability of what they were eating. Mike described a visit he had with his father:

I'd been in jail and he came to see me and he said, 'so how's the food?' and I said 'it's terrible,' and I described something, and he said 'oh yeah in the navy we called that shit on a shingle,' I said 'yeah great, it's a piece of bread with a mystery meat on it.'

Mike's inability to identify prison fare speaks to the fact that such food might not be identified as 'real.' This example also highlights the consistency of food quality over time across different state institutions, in this case, the Navy and the prison. It is worth noting that hospitals in Ontario have also been shifting to cook-chill production measures (Mintz, 2016). The repetitive and bland nature of prison food is not unique to cook-chill (Carlen and Worrall, 2004; Pratt, 2002), but is likely to exacerbate this experience. The body's senses then point to the artificiality of prison food, it did not taste or feel like 'real' food to the point where some participants could literally not stomach prison fare. The taste of prison food is then as artificial and denigrating as the environment writ large.

“Food filler”

Participants often referred to the province’s obligation² to meet specific nutrient and caloric requirements as set out by the national food guide to describe their experience: “you get the basic government nutritional diet. The basic” (Max). Some did so to highlight that they believed the prison met its obligations based on technicalities alone. Joe for example, described: “and it can’t be healthy and all I could think was the only thing they’re doing is just shoving MSG [Monosodium glutamate] or whatever, food filler or whatever you want to call it just so we could meet our, their calorie intake requirements you know.” Ministry policy does speak directly to these issues. For example, the Cook Chill Operations Manual (Ministry of the Solicitor General 2020a: 7.1) sets out that “meals from approved menus...meet all meal requirements including adequate nutritional content, energy requirements, good quality and minimum portion sizes...[and] are free of peanuts, nuts, monosodium glutamate (MSG) other than what occurs naturally in products.” It is also well documented that the Province of Ontario is often non-compliant with their own policies (Dubé, 2017; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2020, 2016). The above quotations from Max and Joe reflect prisoners’ beliefs that the Ministry feeds them the bare minimum necessary to keep them alive, and does not care about their well-being. For participants, this is a manner in which contempt is embodied. Namely, they believe their bodies to be directly harmed by the province’s interest in meeting its obligations at the lowest possible financial cost. Such a practice reflects the lesser eligibility principle which sets out that ‘criminals’³ ought not be ‘given’ better quality items than the poorest free citizens could obtain on the outside (de Graaf and Kilty, 2016). This occurs within a broader context in which prisoners often understand the prison’s role as that of managing social waste and/or ‘garbage,’ in the sense that it performs a ‘hygienic’ function in containing, managing, and disposing of those who threaten the ‘purity’ or ‘cleanliness’ of society (see Zurn, 2019). Poor quality prison food is then a way the prison reinforces this “social status of waste” (Zurn, 2019, p. 674).

“That’s a lot of carbs”

Another participant, Mike, also distrusted the prison system as manifest in the institutional diet. He pointed to the difference between technically meeting the requirements of the food guide versus doing so in a manner that promotes health, “I mean their, their daily food guide says that there’s enough to eat, but it’s, it is like a high carb diet there...so you’re getting enough calories but not enough protein...so it evens out in their eyes ‘cause the calorie count” (Mike). The amount of carbohydrates in prison diets was something commented on by many participants. Doug explained that meals were “...very high [in]carbs, lots of bread, lots of pastas, lots and lots and lots.” Alexandra commented:

They fill you with so much carbohydrates and nasty food that just makes women blow up like balloons...They give you so much potatoes, so much bread, so much sweets and it’s just.. and you so crave for anything ‘cause you are just bored.

Here Alexandra also draws attention to the fact that the prison, in her use of “they,” are exerting power over women’s bodies in a way that affects health and body image. Here, like in Chamberlen’s (2018) work, incarcerated women point to their bodily transformations caused by doing time. Unlike Chamberlen’s work, however, in which some

participants understood their weight gain as returning to health after struggling with addictions, participants in this study saw this in a consistently more negative and damaging manner. The prison was not positioned as a location where one could return to themselves and health through consumption, but as an environment that caused harm and negatively shaped how prisoners felt about themselves. Alexandra also attributes weight gain to coping with the boredom and idleness engendered by the prison. This was not unique, Susie also pointed to the relationship between boredom and hunger and other deprivations endured in prison: “cause no cigarettes, no nothing, all you want to do is eat.” Chamberlen notes that coping can entail “acting for or against one’s body” (2018: 142). As these participants indicate, the body is responding to the prison environment, in which the pain of incarceration is managed and survived through food consumption, even if this is in a negative manner.

Like Alexandra, Crystal also focused on the *type* of carbohydrates being provided, with the least expensive, such as bread and potatoes being common:

Yeah, it was bready, like every mealtime, every suppertime we’d have potatoes and vegetables and every other day it was chicken, chicken, chicken or lunchtime it was just cold lunch and like just one sandwich that they made and potato salad or Cesar salad.

Jude relayed a similar experience, “dinner would be your mashed potatoes, bread, there is always bread. Lots of bread.” Collette, a vegetarian prisoner who had difficulty accessing proper meals explained that eating bread and potatoes in prison was so frequent she would avoid these foods upon release, “I just stick to bread and potatoes. The girls who don’t eat tofu share their meals with me. Every time I don’t get my meals and I am back home I don’t touch bread or potatoes for months.” Here a focus on embodiment demonstrates how prison, through food, transforms one’s tastes, preferences, and senses. Collette does not leave prison behind and resume her life as it was prior to incarceration; instead these sensorial transformations continue to shape her life post release (see also Chamberlen 2018: 79). Despite participants discussing the ubiquity of carbohydrates and food consumption as a means of emotionally surviving the prison, feelings of hunger were not always satiated. Steve recounted that the prison diet still left him hungry, and, specific to bread, he recalled: “six slices a day usually and it’s still not enough.” For many participants, feelings of hunger shaped their time inside.

Food as Corporeal Power: Hunger, Degradation, and Discipline

“We were always hungry”

Constant hunger was a common description of the prison experience, which prisoners attributed to small portions, the inedibility of the food, and the boredom of incarceration. Mem recalled, “you’re always hungry...you always feel hungry.” Jason gestured to the perceived universality of this experience, “everybody’s hungry inside.” Bruno described having “starved the whole time I was there” and Sandra stated that the food was simply inedible: “I was hungry but I, I couldn’t eat because [it was] gross food.” These findings are unique as literature to date has focused on how women experience constant hunger or how this is experienced in the context of hunger strikes (see Miller, 2016; Smoyer and

Lopes, 2017). Instead, this study shows that hunger is experienced despite the provision and consumption of prison meals, which theoretically meet the caloric requirements as set out by Health Canada. The pain of imprisonment is embodied and described through descriptions of enduring hunger that highlights one's lack of bodily autonomy, the inability to satiate one's appetite, and that this feels neglectful and humiliating (Godderis, 2006a; Smoyer and Lopes, 2017).

Those experiencing addictions described its relationship to incarceration, malnourishment, and hunger. Bob continued, "I'd say 80 percent of us that go to jail either have mental health issues or addictions issues or both...so with that being said we're all undernourished when we get there." Susie explained that even if the prison follows its food policy, it is inadequate in meeting the needs of prisoners struggling with mental health and/or addictions issues:

It says it is and it says it's supposed to be, but I don't think so...either way you're fucking hungry...there's nothing worse than coming off dope, you're sick, you're hungry, you know nothing, you know you haven't looked after yourself for the last nine months or six months.

This diverges from Chamberlen's (2018) findings in which prison food, a steady meal schedule, and consequent bodily transformations, such as weight gain, were described by some participants as beneficial in the context of 'getting clean' in prison. Participants in the PTP study, instead had a more negative understanding and did not position the prison as providing a space in which they could come back to health.

Many participants also attributed hunger to portion size. Dave likened prison meals to, "kid's portions...Like a 12-year-old kid would eat that meal and still be hungry." Bob explained, "I think there could have been a little more food portion, I mean we're all big guys and other than eating in there there's not a lot to do." Comparing Ontario prison food to that in a Montreal Quebec prison, Susie explained "and good food in Montreal, very, homemade food down there, here it's just...like disgusting, I mean it wasn't so good and its very small...Do you know those TV dinners? Small ones...like that." In Susie's case, she points to better foods being those that more closely resemble meals one could access on the outside, or in one's home. Crystal explained that talking to the guards provided little recourse, "it wasn't enough...and we would ask for extras, there's no extras."

The prison meal schedule also contributed to prisoners' hunger and created a demand for canteen access and an underground food economy. Hunger pangs can therefore be understood as the embodied experience of *prison time*. Dave explained that "your last meal is at 4:30 in the day and you don't get no food until 7:30 in the morning, so its like 18 hours or 16 hours until you eat again, makes it pretty long." Gord used money put in his prison account to buy non-food items on the prison market which he then traded to ensure more food in the evenings:

Like my wife, she used to send me money, and like, over four grand, I was there for four months, just for food. Just to go buy weed off somebody to get a gram of weed to get actual meals every night for like a week, you know.

The institutional rules shaping the prison environment are enacted upon prisoners' bodies in that these shape decisions about whether and when to eat. Some prisoners would try to keep some food from their trays "if you got your meals and a fruit and a dessert or something, you had to save a portion of your food at suppertime or throughout the day" (Dave). Stashing food, as prisoners know, is a violation of prison rules. As Mao described: "Some of the women are hungry, right? So...but when they do searches and they find that you have food, it's a charge. Or they'll confiscate and throw it out. You can't have food unless it's canteen." Others such as Jude felt it was "not worth it" to hide leftover food in their cells. If a prisoner did attempt to mitigate their hunger by exerting agency over one's body by way of a snack, this occurred within a context marred by constant surveillance, whether explicit or internalized, and the threat of additional punishment. Even though prisoners often understand these rules as arbitrary exercises of carceral power with little contribution to institutional safety (Godderis, 2006a), they do have very real effects on whether prisoners will risk the added punishment of a charge, or endure the punishment of hunger.

Food is currency inside, and the scarcity produced by the prison heightens its value. Ray explained, "If you don't want to eat your butter you can save your butter. It can be used to sell or trade or anything like that." Another strategy to combat hunger is gambling, pointing to the role of food in the prison economy, a demand driven by low quality prison food. Doug recounted:

I count cards, so I have a bit of an advantage, I play Bridge, so my gambling skills are quite up there, being a card counter, I've won a lot of extra food that way...but if you...go in with no money or anything like that, you'll be hungry all the time.

The catalyzing function of poor-quality prison fare and inadequate portions to prison violence and clandestine markets is also found in the Canadian federal and international contexts (Einat and Davidian, 2019; OCI, 2017).

"If you have no money, you don't get nothing"

Those with financial means relied on the canteen. Charlie described canteen as affording a modicum of choice, "so you don't always have to eat what's on the wagon." Participants explained that prisoners were able to "get canteen once a week, a \$60 canteen order,⁴ that's if you have money...if you have no money, you don't get nothing" (Dave). Technical access is then not material access. As Jason explained, "but being where I'm from and nobody to come and see me, you know I don't have money." Those who did have funds for canteen noted that their food often did not last the week between orders. Crystal explained, "I had my canteen last week and it didn't last very long 'cause I shared it with everyone." Others noted high prices, "like bags of chips, chocolate bars, outrageous prices. They're makin' money. I don't know who's got that contract, but..." (John Smith).

Participants also observed that canteen options varied across the province and that some prisons only offered "junk" foods. Steve described:

And the canteen is for the birds, like at least before you could buy nutritional things, I could buy oatmeal or you know, just add hot water to it, or soup, you know, [provincial prison] has

soup, why can't [another provincial prison]? What's the discrepancy, why, why does it change?

Others specifically described which junk foods were available through the more limited canteens, "it's only chocolate bars and chips...not very healthy" (Stephen). Echoing Stephen, Mao described the prison's control over what foods could be purchased with personal funds, "so you have to buy with your own money, which is like bad food: chips, chocolates, pop..." While access to canteen allows for a modicum of autonomy to be exercised (Godderis, 2006a), overall, prisoners felt canteen offerings were unhealthy, overpriced, and available only to those with access to funds. The characterization of canteen foods as unhealthy and that this was negative, differs from previous research, in which "junk" food provided pleasure and a means of expressing food choice in a severe setting. While participants in Chamberlen's (2018) research noted canteen foods as unhealthy, they did not associate these with weight gain and other bodily transformations as they did with institutional meals. Institutional food represented compliance and brought up feelings of anxiety and depression, whereas canteen foods brought about feelings of euphoria, autonomy, and satiation (Chamberlen, 2018). For participants in the PTP, they expressed inconsistent access across institutions and increasingly unhealthy foods that did little to satiate their hunger, however defined.

Deepan Budlakoti, who is currently on bail after more than four years in Ontario provincial prisons stated that in terms of health, the canteen offers "nothing fresh" while the ubiquity of junk foods provides a way of "killing yourself faster."⁵ Canteen access in Ontario provincial prisons differs from federal penitentiaries that provide automatic, albeit small, deposits into prisoners' accounts and prisoners can earn wages (also exploitatively low) from training programs (Brownell, 2017; CSC, 2014). This is not the case in Ontario provincial prisons where prisoners cannot work and must rely on their support networks to make deposits into their accounts. As canteen foods are permitted in cell, these provided some choice over what and when food was consumed, yet participants still felt that limitations on canteen items was unwarranted and unsatisfying.

"I ate all day long"

Not all participants reported experiencing hunger. For some prisoners, working in the kitchen gave them more control over their food intake, whereas others took a relativist approach or described how they improved their prison fare through 'hacks.' Curtis was incarcerated and worked in the last remaining prison in Ontario that cooked food from scratch, "Well in [name of Ontario provincial prison] you got a lot. Plus, I worked in the kitchen so I ate all day long." He was adamant however, that this was not the case in other prisons, "But, in say [name of Ontario provincial prison], you get a tray of food, it's a little bit of this a little bit of that. Piss-portions. Not enough for a growing man." John Smith also had increased access to food as he worked in the kitchen preparing food for institutions, "...we had more than enough food. We had lots of food." When probed by the interviewer as to why he had more than others, he replied "Because I worked in the kitchen." This is consistent with the status and power that working in a kitchen brings, especially in prisons where the standard prison fare is of low quality and small portionsize. Here, participants expressed eating as much as they wanted. As well, kitchen work can provide opportunities to exercise autonomy over consumption,

if one does not like the standard meal that day, they can make something else for themselves (Chamberlen, 2018).

Kyle Taylor took the approach that things could be worse, “There was three meals a day. Right? I mean, I never starved. I’m quite sure there’s people out there in the street that actually are worse off, as far as eating, than in the jail.” Yeasua for [her] part listed a variety of foods she had access to, and described ways to make it appealing, “...break the muffin into the cereal and the bread into the cereal and it doubles the cereal. And you pour the milk over and eat it that way, it’s good that way.” These examples, while the minority of participant experiences, nevertheless show that certain participants took a positive approach to the provided prison diets, and that work assignments provided access to food and autonomy over the quantity consumed. The ingenuity of ‘hacking’ prison food items into meals that are edible has been cited in the literature as a method of resisting the prison’s assault on individuality and its attempt of total corporeal control (Smoyer, 2016).

“I ate on the floor, on the flush”

It is through the body that prisoners adapt to the uniqueness of prison time and space. Where, with whom, and the conditions shaping mealtime structure the experience of prison food and incarceration, more broadly. Eating and sharing meals with others serves to form bonds and a sense of belonging to the point that this has been termed “table fellowship” and has been written about in both academic and popular literatures (see Taylor, 2013). Participants pointed to the heavily hierarchical administration and guard structure in addition to the prisoner social structure, or “convict code,” that structured who ate what, and where. These power structures and relationships surrounding eating must be understood in a broader context of prison overcrowding, food scarcity, and the increased use of lockdowns as common operational practice as described by participants. Samuel recalled fights often occurring in general eating areas: “once you eat there, there will be a fight and somebody will get hot and some people around trying to make trouble and food is the easiest weapon to get what you want.” To mitigate conflict and resistance, prison jurisdictions have been increasingly limiting access to cafeterias and common eating areas (Earle and Phillips, 2012). This has also occurred in Ontario, which is known to inadequately staff their institutions and commonly rely on lockdowns for institutional management. In fact, the Province of Ontario’s widespread use of lockdown is the subject of a class action lawsuit that includes those incarcerated between 2009 and 2017 (Koskie Minsky LLP, 2021). Lockdowns often include prisoners remaining in cell apart from time out for showers and phone calls for days, weeks, or months at a time, meaning that prisoners eat in cell.

Jono noted this shift from eating in common areas to eating at his bed:

It’s changed a lot since the last, like when I first started going or hadn’t been incarcerated. Everybody would have their meals at the tables...and there would be ample room for everybody to do so, now, well the last meal that I had in, in dorms or whatnot I was standing up, I had the top bunk, so I ate off my bunk basically.

Dave also pointed to guards’ unwillingness to allow prisoners to eat in the common area:

And there's tables, what annoys me the most is there's tables out on the range... You could be eating out in the common room, but they lock you down... I guess I don't know labor or whatever, it's just easier for them to lock us up and then let the servers on the range serve us the food through our hatch.

If prisoners were not locked in their cell to eat, access to common area seating was shaped by status. Skyler explained, "I ate at my tables 'cause I was there for a while, but sometimes the newcomers who come in don't have a place to sit or they get bullied you know, so." Jono also referenced the convict code in a context of triple-bunking (three prisoners in a cell designed for two), "the third persons got to sit on the floor and eat... because that's his bunk right, I'm not going to let him sit on my bunk." Joseph described in his experience "At [provincial prison] I had to eat on the step, 'cause there were only the two seats here and here [gesturing]. I had to stand up and eat where the steps were to go up to the bunk bed, I had to put my trays on there." Bruno also shared his experience as the triple bunkee, saying "I ate on the floor, on the flush [all-in-one toilet/sink/mirror], I put the thing, the tray on the flush." Given that meals are important to shaping sociality, and that the body is the basis "for the expression and actualization of emotions" (Chamberlen, 2018: 143), preventing prisoners from eating together in communal dining areas and confining them instead to small areas inside units and/or their cells, can increase feelings of loneliness and is yet another expression of social contempt. This is especially the case when prisoners have little choice but to place their food on or beside the toilet, a device literally designed to manage waste (Zurn, 2019).

"I was degraded to nothing"

The convict code, guards looking the other way, and the built environment of Ontario's newer prisons, in which prisoners are housed in pods that staff supervise from outside rather than working within it like on ranges, also shapes access to food and exacerbates food's status as capital inside prisons. When an item is capital inside, it can drive competition for access and have violent outcomes (see Chamberlen, 2018). Kyle recounted that "a lot of inmates would fight for food." Bob explained that he "didn't really want to stir anything" which meant other prisoners decided what he ate from his meal tray:

And when you're in a pod the inmates run the pod... So when the food comes in, the guards push the cart in and they give you the food, the other inmates. There's two inmates that will divvy out the food. And if they, you know, either you eat good or you don't. So I mean, I would eat their little microwave meal, and all the fruit and all the other stuff they would keep or have to themselves, so then at night around 7/8 o'clock maybe, say eight, those people would be eating apples, oranges, other people's sandwiches, they had all this food. The whole time I was in there it was like that, you'd never have everything at night and they've have tons.

These prison power dynamics around food also played out in older prisons which housed prisoners in ranges. In Ray's experience, those in control of the range confiscated and hoarded foods that were the most valuable on the prison market, "there are some

people that run the range and keep all the peanut butter and that's not right." Being deprived of food at the hands of other prisoners had harmful physical and psychological effects.

Bob described feelings of low self-worth, both attributed to the prison environment and the convict code, "So we didn't see any sunlight and you know, I didn't, I, I think I was entitled to a bit more food than I had, and it was just, I, I just felt like I was, I was degraded to nothing you know." In this sense, vulnerable prisoners are doubly denied autonomy over their bodies through the control of food, both by the prison and by prisoners with higher statuses. Food can then be central to the trauma of incarceration as it was a means through which prisoners' bodies were deprived of nutrients, and this lack of control generated feelings of degradation. Contempt is thus experienced through in multiple registers, from the institution which engenders food scarcity and competition, its guards who do not intervene in situations of food muscling, and by fellow prisoners who would rather eat well through the deprivation of others.

Not only did prisoners experience being 'muscle'd' for their food, but they also lived in fear of their food being contaminated or otherwise not what the prison claimed. Curtis for example, spoke to the power held by those whose who work in the kitchen or handle the food carts, "cause the prisoners know what ranges, where the food is going, the carts have numbers so if they want to do something to the food they can." Bruno's concern of his food being tampered with prevented him from eating, "a lot of times it looked like people spat in it...I'd throw it away, I wouldn't eat it." In this way, prisoners understood food tampering as an expression of power between prisoners that had negative physiological and psychological implications. Prisoners were either revolted by the food they consumed, or they eschewed consumption altogether. These experiences point to how concerns surrounding food are both psychologically insidious, and have physical effects. Even if food had not been tampered with, the social structure of the prison combined with food scarcity and distrust provides the conditions where prisoners are afraid of and avoid prison food for myriad reasons. Consumption of food one *believes* to be contaminated with the bodily fluids of others, with little option other than starvation, is degrading in and of itself. The physiological and psychological effects of prison food then gesture to a very specific corporeal application of punishment through food.

Guard-prisoner dynamics through food: "It just punished me"

Whereas certain prisoners exerted control over others through the confiscation and contamination of food, food also featured as a medium of struggle between prisoners and guards. Ray explained:

It's just constant like guys pumping their chest between COs [correctional officers] and inmates, it's little things too like when they conduct the searches, they are taking everything. Like if you have an extra thing of butter that you're saving for if you get hungry in the night, they will take that from you.

In this example food is the conduit of guards' power. For prisoners, keeping some food to ward off hunger during the night is at once resistance to the prison's control over one's body and fills a physiological need. In other instances, food was weaponized by the administration and staff to garner compliance in matters unrelated to the food itself.

Brittany explained that her mental health issues were met with segregation and that her consumption of prison food was coerced. “I have an eating disorder,” she said, “so because of that I, because of stress and depression and all that stuff, I, I didn’t feel like eating, but because I didn’t eat, they put me in seg[regation].” Brittany recalled that this lasted two days: “when I started eating my three meals a day, then yeah I was allowed to leave [segregation].” When asked how segregation affected her, she replied “it just punished me.” While Brittany was coerced to eat as a way of getting out of the most restrictive and potentially torturous conditions of confinement, Bruno conversely had his meals taken away to ensure compliance. As Bruno suffers from night terrors, he had to be placed in a single cell. Upon placement, his meals were withheld by guards:

So they put me in there and the cell that I was in, whoever was in there before me, they, they drew pictures and, an stuff all over the walls, and the white shirt⁶, it was [name redacted], the head guy there at the time...came in there and told the guards to take away my meals until the walls were cleaned...It took me like almost a week to do it, I never had no meals for almost a week and it wasn’t even me that fuckin did it.

In these instances, food is forced or withheld to engender compliance. Through searches, the institution’s ability to control prisoners is reaffirmed. Prior prison food research shows that standard prison fare symbolizes institutional compliance in that its quality and blandness makes prisoners lethargic and deindividualizes prisoners in order to transform them into ‘inmates’ (Chamberlen, 2018; Pratt, 2002). Participants in this study, however, showed that prison food represented compliance in the sense that staff would force or withhold meals to ‘manage’ those experiencing mental health and/or medical issues into behaving in normative manners. In addition to staff using food to control prisoners’ bodies, prison food conditions also had direct effects upon prisoners’ bodies.

Unwanted weight changes

Prisoners attributed changes to their bodies, such as *unwanted* weight loss, to the available food. Knoxette described that despite eating most meals provided to her, “like I ended up losing a lot of weight inside...I didn’t eat a lot.” Tinkerbelle explained that her weight loss was the result of the quality of the food: “I didn’t gain any weight there, that’s for sure...I gave a lot of my stuff away, yeah...It was just stuff that didn’t appeal to me, and it just didn’t look right.” Gord, who explained that he ate the food provided and had access to the canteen, still experienced significant weight loss. “I still come out weigh[ing] 209 pounds and right now I weigh 285 pounds. Yeah, I got out, everybody thought I had cancer, I was dying, like my family was all crying thinking I was lying and trying to downplay it.” For Jake, the experience of incarceration caused depression, leading him to refuse food often. “I just kept to myself,” he explained, “and had my head down a lot of the time. And I pretended I was asleep on the range and, it was just terrible. I didn’t even eat half the time. I still haven’t put on a lot of the weight.” Jake’s experience shows the enduring effect of incarceration can have on one’s physicality. Whereas previous research has shown that the bodily transformation of weight gain was experienced positively by incarcerated women overcoming addictions, this was not the case for men and women in this study. Instead, their descriptions of unwanted

weight loss, that some continue to try and regain post-release, can be understood as the “body’s reaction to doing time” and how this follows the prisoner when they leave prison (Chamberlen, 2018: 78–79). This study shows that poor quality prison food then not only plays a symbolic role (Smoyer and Lopes, 2017) but materially represents the power of the prison to control the body through effecting one’s size and overall well-being.

Conclusion

Prison food is a foundational aspect of the prison experience yet is relatively understudied. Extant research focuses on the Canadian federal context or jurisdictions outside of the country, leaving the experiences of Canadian provincial prisoners underrepresented. As a first step to addressing this absence, this article has drawn on interview data from 61 individuals who were incarcerated in Ontario provincial prisons. Important differences exist between federal and provincial prisons in terms of access to work programs, canteen, population stability in provincial populations given that most prisoners are remanded, and the ability to order and prepare one’s own food—a limited exercise of autonomy which exists in some federal penitentiaries and is the default in women’s federal institutions in Canada. For this reason, provincial prison food and its regimes of distribution are likely experienced as more punitive than in federal penitentiaries. The overall participants’ discussion herein found Ontario prison food to be lacking in quality and quantity, non-nutritious, bland, largely having the texture of mush, and as being dangerous since it presented multiple food-safety issues.

For many, their experience of incarceration was marred by constant feelings of hunger, and many lived in fear of what they had little choice to consume. An embodied criminological approach allows us to understand the multiple registers in which contempt, social, institutional, and interpersonal is expressed through food, often leaving prisoners’ little choice but to turn against their bodies, whether that was through food refusal, not being able to eat enough as prisoners with higher statuses ate off their trays, eating foods they believed to be unhealthy, spoiled, tampered with, or disgusting, and/or eating to cope with the boredom of incarceration, leading to unwanted weight gain, whereas others experienced unwanted weight loss. Overall, prisoners understood the bodily transformations caused by prison diets to be negative. Prison meals shape prison rhythms, and the prison diet marks the prisoner’s body—markings that follow them upon release. A minority did positively experience prison food. Some prisoners were able to mitigate their hunger by accessing the canteen or working in the kitchen, whereas others gambled, traded, or hid leftover food in the cells, speaking to food’s role in the prison economy—an economy bolstered by poor food quality and scarcity. Whereas this subversion can be understood as micro-resistances to the prison’s power, these findings show that food did not always bring prisoners into relationships of mutual support. Rather, it provided the conditions in which higher status prisoners exploited those with lesser status.

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Notes

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2. The province does not make public the details of its obligations specific to food. Based on documents I have received through legal disclosure, Solicitor General Policy 7.2 (Ministry of the Solicitor General, 2020c) effective as of 30 January 2020 “Food Purchasing Standards and Specifications,” and Policy 7.3 (Ministry of the Solicitor General, 2020b) on “Food Quality and Quantity” effective 21 August 2020, indicates that meals must be consistent with “Canada’s Food Guide to Health Eating” (2019) and Health Canada’s “Recommended Nutrient Intakes” (2010).
3. It should be noted that the majority of persons incarcerated in Ontario are remanded prisoners (Ministry of the Solicitor General, 2020d), or have been convicted to sentences of one day, for example, to secure the province’s responsibility to transport Indigenous persons back to remote communities that Indigenous prisoners would otherwise not be able to afford.
4. This limit remains in effect, with weekly canteen orders exceeding \$60 requiring approval by the superintendent (Sol Gen, 2021).
5. Personal correspondence with Deepan Budlakoti, April 19, 2022 on file with the author.
6. In the Ontario provincial context, ‘white shirt’ refers to staff in management roles, whereas ‘blue shirts’ refer to the colour of the uniforms front-line guards wear.

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