

Carceral Hunger

Struggling to be free, to stay sane. If not this, then what? . . . Must I turn my cheek and be happy to plainly exist? Miserable, but existing. Eating, drinking, consuming crap—but existing. Fuck that! I will do what i can.

—HERIBERTO SHARKY GARCIA, “IF THE FUTURE IS NOW: REVOLUTIONARY ABOLITIONIST ART AND PRAXIS FROM THE UNDERSIDE OF WHITE-AMERICAN CIVIL SOCIETY,” 2018

Some two million people in the United States are made hungry, on purpose, every day. They are incarcerated in American detention centers, jails, and prisons (Sawyer and Wagner 2023). Some are made hungry by the withholding of food; many, many more are served food that is disgusting, spoiled, tasteless, and ultraprocessed. Prison officials use hunger as an instrument to control inmates’ behavior. In addition, the nature of prison food itself causes hunger. Prisons fulfill regulatory requirements for calories and nutrients (when state requirements exist) in the cheapest, least nourishing forms possible: processed meats, “mechanically separated chicken,” soy filler, piles of white bread, yellow cake, vitamin powders. “With the exception of a few good meals, the chow was lethal,” rap artist Albert “Prodigy” Johnson wrote of his time in a New York penitentiary, “you get hungry between meals. . . . Plus when they feed you, you only get served in portions. You’re lucky if you know people, you can get an extra piece of chicken or something. But you be hungry” (Johnson and Iandoli 2016, 3, 7).

Carceral hunger brings together many themes explored in this book: behavior modification, punishment, and reward; starvation wages and labor control; consumer choice, processed foods, and craving; and the liberatory politics of refusing hunger. Private food service providers like Aramark furnish worthless and disgusting meals, incentivizing extra purchases at privately run commissaries. Incarcerated people work for pennies an hour (if they are paid at all) to afford cheap food and other basic goods at inflated prices from these commissaries. Prison authorities use food service and commissary access as technologies of behavior control and punishment. But inside prisons food can be a tool for sociability, creativity, and resistance for incarcerated people. Prison hunger strikers mobilize collectively to refuse carceral hunger.

Anthony Ryan Hatch (2019, 76) has suggested that “raw starvation is not a major problem in U.S. prisons, but well-designed hunger is.” What kinds of hunger are *well-designed*? How is hunger produced in the absence of raw starvation? Carceral hunger stems from a total lack of control and predictability, when someone cannot know whether their needs will be met from day to day and can do nothing about it. Carceral hunger results from working for starvation wages, which never provide close to enough money to buy healthy food. Carceral hunger is caused by industrial, cheaply made ultraprocessed foods (described below as *nutritus*), and food vendors who inflate prices for junk food because they know that their clients have no other choice but to buy from them. Carceral hunger removes people’s control over their time, wages, access, sociability, and bodily autonomy. Carceral hunger is racist and racially targeted. It devalues and depresses. In sum, carceral hunger describes a combination of food insecurity, food oppression, and food apartheid, which impacts whole communities both within and far beyond prison walls.

“I was hungry,” one formerly incarcerated person told the Maryland Food and Prison Abolition Project. “Some days I couldn’t sleep. You’d be irritable. You’re hungry, you know. It affected me pretty bad . . . I had to get a [prison] job so I could eat” (MFPAP 2021, 207). According to one survey, 94 percent of incarcerated people in the United States (in a survey size of 250) “did not have enough food to feel full” (Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein 2020, 9). A prisoner in Ohio told the Incarcerated Workers’ Organizing Committee: “I’m hungry every day” (IWOC/ Action Cooperative 2018, 13). A whopping 80 percent of people surveyed by the IWOC complained that they had been denied meals or given too little food in the past year (4). A respondent from a Kansas prison wrote: “The portions on the trays are very small and I’m always hungry even after I eat” (14). An incarcerated person in Missouri described how strict time limits at the canteen prevented them from eating a full meal. A person in California described prison officers “taking my food from me” (14).

A 2023 meta-analysis of prison ethnographies in Canada and the United States found that “those in custody complained about being constantly hungry” (Woods-Brown, Hunt, and Sweeting 2023, 11). “Constant feelings of hunger are, for many imprisoned individuals, the defining aspect of their time spent incarcerated” (MFPAP 2021, 30). “Carceral logics,” write Ashanté Reese and Joshua Sbicca (2022, 8), “permeate the experience of eating in general for poor, Black, and Brown people. . . . The state regularly polices poverty instead of addressing how racial capitalism perpetuates the lack of access to basic needs like healthy food.” Brian Williams and Carrie Freshour (2022, 38) name “the production of hunger” as one of the defining features of carcerality. Circuits of hunger and carcerality extend prison logics beyond prison walls—sometimes directly, as when prisons (still) use convict labor on agricultural plantations (Reese and Carr 2020). Welfare rules and regulations create another circuit of carcerality. Workfare requirements criminalize those who do not have a regular job. Welfare benefits exclude most of

those who are not employed, making it impossible to survive (Dickinson 2019, 9). The most marginalized welfare recipients—Black women, formerly incarcerated people, and single mothers—are not free to live fully. Welfare rules create hunger by design (Tani 2016, 273, 280). Carceral hunger is produced, programmatically, every day, across the United States.

Plantation prisons starved their captives. Prison laborers worked fields where enslaved people had labored, under conditions of extreme violence (Reese and Carr 2020). State-owned plantation prisons kept their captives under conditions of forced labor, terror, and deprivation through most of the twentieth century and arguably still today (Oshinsky 1997, 223–248). As Williams and Freshour (2022, 43) point out, plantation prisons were filled with Black people caught up in the criminalization of their own survival. Common sources of food were cut off by strict trespassing and vagrancy laws. These prison farms made use of a well-established instrument for labor control on the plantation—namely, starvation. Cummins Farm, a plantation prison in Arkansas, became the site of a judicial reckoning over carceral starvation. The State of Arkansas purchased farmland in 1902 on a site that once belonged to the Cummins slave plantation and has been running a penal farm there ever since. In 2022, Cummins Farm received an Arkansas “Century Farm” prize in recognition of its long existence. State Corrections secretary Solomon Graves celebrated this “opportunity to spotlight the Department of Corrections’ Agriculture operations. Many people aren’t aware that the Division of Correction manages over 20,000 acres of farmland, saving taxpayers between \$5 and \$6 million a year through inmate consumption and providing inmates with farm-fresh food and valuable agriculture job skills” (Bass 2022). Today, prison laborers at Cummins Farm and other plantation prisons are still not paid any wages for their work (McDowell and Mason 2024). In 2001 six Cummins Farm correctional officers were found guilty of torturing inmates (Nelson 2002).

Beginning in 1965, Cummins Farm prisoners filed multiple legal cases against the Arkansas Department of Corrections for cruel and unusual punishment. The findings were (are) devastating. District Judge J. Smith Henley described Cummins Farm as “banishment from civilized society to a dark and evil world completely alien to the free world” (*Holt v. Sarver* 1970). Prisoners worked the fields all year, ten hours a day, six days a week, under surveillance of “trusty” convicts who had been armed with guns and charged by the prison wardens with maintaining discipline. No wages were paid; the only way to earn money was to sell blood to the prison-run blood bank (*Holt v. Sarver* 1969). If a prison laborer fell behind in the field and failed to meet his quota, the assistant warden whipped him on the buttocks with a five-foot-long leather strap (*Talley v. Stephens* 1965). Some prisoners were forced to stand for hours on an unstable “teeter board.” Some prisoners were tortured with electric shocks from the wires of a battery-operated crank telephone (*Jackson v. Bishop* 1967).



FIGURE 11. “Superintendent M. L. Royster set the pace of the workday at the prison farm which could often stretch 12 hours or more,” Virginia State Prison Farm, June 24, 1961. Source: “From the Archives” 2023.

When Judge Henley barred Arkansas from employing these forms of corporal punishment, prison authorities shifted to the use of isolation cells. As many as eleven men were kept in an eight-by-ten-foot cell with a drinking fountain and an uncovered toilet that flushed from the outside. Prisoners kept in twenty-four-hour isolation received squares of “grue,” pushed under the grating of the cell door (*Holt v. Sarver* 1969). Grue consisted of “meat, potatoes, vegetables, eggs, oleo, syrup, and seasoning baked all together in a pan and served [twice a day] in four inch squares” (*Holt v. Sarver* 1969). At first Judge Henley did not object to grue, even as he ordered the prison to cease torturing prisoners and to improve intolerable living conditions (*Holt v. Sarver* 1969). Higher courts overruled Henley and determined that the grue diet was a form of forced starvation—a cruel and unusual punishment. An Appeals Court decided that the Eighth Amendment guarantees a right to “the basic necessities of human existence . . . including light, heat, ventilation, sanitation, clothing and a proper diet” (*Finney v. Arkansas Board of Corrections* 1974). Cummins Farm could no longer legally starve prisoners as punishment.

Arkansas was not an exceptional case in this regard. The Virginia Penal System, for most of the twentieth century, similarly held most of the state's incarcerated men on prison farms, alongside several field camps for road gangs and other work-sites. Prisoners at State Farm Penitentiary in the 1960s worked corn fields with mules for twelve or more hours each day ("From the Archives" 2023). Those who fell behind or refused work at the penal farms were punished with rations of bread and water. One cold day in 1968, several men incarcerated at Virginia Bland Correctional Farm refused to work. All those who refused, and some who were believed to have incited the stoppage, were punished. Charles Lee Melton, whom the guards accused of agitation, was sent to solitary confinement and fed a diet of only bread and water "because the administration disapproved of his 'attitude'" (*Landman v. Royster* 1971). Melton was confined to solitary at two different work camps from December to March 1968 and from July to September 1970. He received four slices of bread and water two times a day, two days out of three. While in solitary confinement in 1970, Melton's weight fell from 160 to 140 pounds (*Landman v. Royster* 1971).

Also in 1968, inmates at the Virginia State Penitentiary struck from prison industry jobs (paying fifteen cents an hour), and in response prison officials imposed months of solitary confinement and a diet of bread and water (Hillyer 2019, 1–2). A District judge found in 1971 that Virginia practiced "disregard of constitutional guaranties of so grave a nature as to violate the most common notions of due process and humane treatment." Judge Robert Merhige enjoined the State of Virginia to end bread and water punishment. Merhige condemned bread and water on three grounds—scientific, psychological, and penological. In the decision he wrote:

Bread and water provides a daily intake of only 700 calories, whereas sedentary men on the average need 2000 calories or more to maintain continued health. . . . The purpose and intended effect of such a diet is to discipline a recalcitrant [*sic*] by debilitating him physically. Without food, his strength and mental alertness begin to decline immediately. It is a telling reminder too that prison authorities enjoy complete control over all sources of pleasure, comfort, and basic needs. Moreover, the pains of hunger constitute a dull, prolonged sort of corporal punishment. That marked physical effects ensue is evident from the numerous instances of substantial weight loss during solitary confinement. (*Landman v. Royster* 1971)

Bread and water meals weakened both body and mind, and arbitrarily wielded control over the life and death of incarcerated people. "As a technique designed to break a man's spirit not just by denial of physical comforts but of necessities, to the end that his powers of resistance diminish," wrote Judge Merhige, "the bread and water diet is inconsistent with current minimum standards of respect for human dignity" (*Landman v. Royster* 1971). Virginia, like Arkansas, was enjoined to stop forcing people in prisons to work by starving them.

In 1978 the Supreme Court took up the Arkansas case—now named *Hutto v. Finney*, after T. Don Hutto, supervisor of the Arkansas Department of Corrections, and incarcerated petitioner Robert Finney. Justice John Paul Stevens upheld the Appeals Court decision on the grue diet. What constituted a “basic necessity” and a “proper diet”? Stevens, like Merhige, turned to the science of nutrition: the National Academy of Sciences had set a daily caloric minimum for active adult men at 2,700 calories and sedentary men at 2,000. Stevens determined that Cummins Farm grue provided fewer than 1,000 calories per day. In addition, Stevens noted that “practically all inmates [in punitive isolation] are losing weight” on the grue diet. “Grue” might be tolerable for a few days and intolerably cruel for weeks or months” (*Hutto et al. v. Finney et al.* 1978). The cruel and unusual impact of a starvation diet, for Stevens, depended on its measure. Still today, *Hutto v. Finney* remains the Supreme Court standard for judging the constitutionality of prison diets: by duration of punishment and measures of weight loss, daily calories, and nutrients (Cuellar 2022, 500; McKeithen 2022).

Hutto, the Arkansas Department of Corrections director who gave his name to the definitive court case on programmatic starvation in prisons, began his penal career on a state prison farm in Texas. He was appointed superintendent in Arkansas in 1971 and became deputy director of the Virginia Department of Corrections in 1976. He went on to cofound one of the first and largest private prison companies in the United States. The Corrections Corporation of America (CCA)—later rebranded CoreCivic after a journalist exposed terrible conditions in CCA prisons—gained contracts with state correctional agencies and with federal immigration authorities. Today some 8 percent of state and federal prisoners are incarcerated by private prison companies including CoreCivic (Bauer 2018a). The company named a facility in Texas in Hutto’s honor. First built as a prison, it was converted to an immigrant family detention center that, as of 2018, held mothers who had been separated from their children (Baur 2018b). The Hutto Detention Center was the site of a 2015 mass hunger strike by detained immigrant women.

In Arkansas, Virginia, and elsewhere through the 1960s and 1970s, “litigation became a form of resistance to the deprivations of prison life” (Hillyer 2019, 2). This avenue of protest and redress did not remain open long. In the 1980s prison authorities, legislators, and courts imposed increasingly difficult restrictions on prisoners’ access to court review (Hillyer 2019, 5). Grue did not disappear into the past. Rebranded as Nutraloaf, grue continues to circulate as punishment in prisons and jails across at least eighteen states (Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein 2020, 12). Nutraloaf describes a paste of food ingredients—leftovers, mechanically separated chicken, beans, oil, powdered milk, vegetables, chunks of bread, sometimes apples or raisins—blended together and baked into a loaf, cut into squares, and generally served cold in a paper bag. The loaf is used as a punitive measure

and seems to be employed mostly for behavior control. A Vermont corrections commissioner described Nutraloaf as “a way of providing nutrition in a mechanism that dissuades inmates from throwing feces, urine, trays and silverware. . . . It tends to have the desired outcome. Once the offender relents, we stop with the nutraloaf” (Ring 2008).¹ The loaf is usually dense and highly caloric, and contains essential nutrients. Nutraloaf is designed to taste “blank, as though someone physically removed all hints of flavor” (Ruby 2010). George Eng, who was subjected to Nutraloaf while in solitary confinement in New York, recalled it as grainy and hard. “The reality is that you’re starving,” he told the *New York Times*, but I would taste it and just throw it away” (McKinley 2018).

Nutraloaf exploits the limitations of *Hutto v. Finney* (Cuellar 2022, 526). If a punitive diet contains sufficient calories and nutrients, if there is no measurable weight loss, it does not count under *Hutto* as cruel and unusual punishment. Samuel LeMaire filed a complaint against the Oregon State Prison in the early 1990s, after he was confined to the prison’s Disciplinary Special Unit and fed Nutraloaf as punishment for aggression and misbehavior. Circuit Judge Stephen S. Trott denied LeMaire’s complaint. Trott’s decision repeatedly notes that LeMaire was a heavy man, who “unlike the Hutto inmates who lost weight, has actually gained some sixty pounds in confinement. . . . Nutraloaf provides an excess of nutritional requirements. . . . LeMaire is not being starved. He is being fed, and he is being fed adequately” (*LeMaire v. Maass* 1993).² Since LeMaire received essential nutrients and did not lose weight, the court reasoned, he was not made hungry.

The shift from gruel to Nutraloaf indexes a shift in carceral modes from forced labor to behavior control, from starvation to *nutritus*. Prisons are required to maintain inmates’ weight and provide a minimum number of calories and nutrients. But the courts do not care much how they do it. A judge in Wisconsin allowed Nutraloaf on the grounds that “food served in prison must be nutritious, but it does not have to be delicious or even particularly appetizing” (*Prude v. Clarke* 2011). Although raw starvation is widely condemned today as a form of torture, feeding people painfully impoverished foods has become normal and normative.

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Prison food makes people hungry. Prison food is edible detritus, *nutritus*. “I feel . . . bloated,” an incarcerated person told the Maryland Food and Prison Abolition Project. “I feel like I’m full and after a while I just felt like I haven’t ate anything” (MFPAP 2021, 95). Zachary Starnes, who spent four years in the Oklahoma State Reformatory, told journalist Brianna Baily (2020) that while in prison he was wracked by hunger: “Those meals, when you eat them a couple hours later, you’re starving . . . a few hours later, those carbs are going to turn into sugar and you’re not going to be full anymore.” Baily notes that Oklahoma spends an average of 75 cents to 85 cents per meal for people in its prisons. Kenneth, formerly incarcerated in West Maryland, echoed Starnes’s experience:

“Basically, after you eat any one of your trays, at least two hours after that you’ll be hungry again” (MFPAP 2021, 31).

Prison food, as reported by incarcerated people, is “spoiled” and “undercooked,” “all processed, not enough protein/whole grains, fresh fruits/veggies, most calories from white sugar/white pasta/white bread. Bad shit!” (IWOC/Action Cooperative 2018, 13–15). About 80 percent of people surveyed by the Impact Justice organization labeled the food as “unappetizing in taste and smell.” Respondents described prison food as a “nasty, mushy, goulash-type mixture” or “rubbery, chewy, slop on a plate.” Most commonly, they described prison food as “unhealthy,” “processed,” “junk food,” “non-nutritious,” and “malnourishing” (Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein 2020, 23, 29).

Prison food is cheap. The California Department of Corrections spends about one dollar for every meal served—half of what it costs to serve one school lunch and about a third of the cost of a meal from Veterans Affairs (Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein 2020, 76). Most states spend fewer than three dollars per day for each inmate’s food, and the state of Wisconsin reports that it spends a single dollar per day (Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein 2020, 87). Food expenses constitute 4 percent of Texas’s overall prison budget (Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein 2020, 7). There is constant pressure to cut costs by substituting ultraprocessed foods that can be quickly reheated and that require no preparation. Nancy Porter, food service director of corrections for the State of North Carolina and president of the American Correctional Food Service Association, described the challenge of building a meal containing sufficient calories and nutrients. “We are using public money to fund correctional food service, and the public wants us to feed inmates for the least amount of money possible. . . . We have to watch the markets and see what happens. When turkey was cheap, we started blending turkey with beef products, making a cost-effective mix. We are always looking for something else we can use to develop menus that can increase protein, which costs the most” (Stein 2000, 208). This is why prisons serve mechanically separated chicken (puréed carcasses with bone fragments removed) and soy filler, alongside mounds of bread, pasta, cookies, and cake (*Smego v. Aramark Food Servs. Corp* 2013).

Cake, it seems, is ubiquitous in prison. Darlene, formerly imprisoned in the Northeast, told Amy Smoyer: “They’d give you cake, cake. . . . You get it almost every morning for breakfast, a piece of cake with your oatmeal, a piece of cake with your freno, a piece of cake with your eggs, a piece of cake with everything. . . . I just can’t understand the logic behind the menu” (Smoyer and Lopes 2017, 247). Miguel, who served time on the West Coast, told Impact Justice that “sometimes they serve a giant slab of coffee cake as the breakfast entree. It must be like a thousand calories” (Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein 2020, 30). At first I was taken aback when I learned about all the cake. I didn’t know how to understand the omnipresence of a sweet dessert, which I associate with pleasure and indulgence. “Let them eat cake,” said Marie Antoinette. Is cake not a symbol of wealth and luxury? How

can incarcerated people suffer so deeply and so widely from hunger when they are eating cake all the time?

Serving cake with every meal seems coherent only from the perspective of what Will McKeithen (2022, 59) has called “carceral nutrition.” It goes back to *Hutto v. Finney*. Prisons must supply sufficient calories and nutrients. Some states mandate that corrections departments supply precise levels of calories, protein, and vitamins; others require that meals be approved by a registered dietitian. The American Correctional Association (ACA) publishes nutritional guidelines for ACA-accredited prisons. Cake, like bread, pasta, biscuits, and so on, fills a specific function: to pack the most calories into the cheapest possible form. (Cheap, because US agricultural subsidies sink the cost of processed food ingredients like wheat, soy, and corn syrup.) Cake is a filler food. Theo told Impact Justice: “It’s as if someone handed you two Snickers bars and called it dinner” (Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein 2020, 50). Conversely, fresh fruits are excluded from prison meals to prevent home brewing of fermented alcohol (Hardy 2016). Alongside caloric foods like cake, prisons serve sugar-sweetened vitamin powders to convey required nutrients. These powders have so much food coloring that they stain everything they touch, which, along with their strong chemical taste, does not encourage consumption (Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein 2020, 24; MFPAP 2021, 53).

Theo’s callout to Snickers brings us back to sugar, craving, and control (see chapter 5). Cake is making imprisoned people in prison hungry and malnourished. Sugar, the food that promised to relieve hunger and maintain life, is doing the opposite. (Same for its cheaper substitute, high-fructose corn syrup.) In the carceral context sugar recalls plantation convict leasing, when starving men performed forced labor cutting cane (Reese 2021). Sugar and its isomorphs continue to cause harm to people in prison. One incarcerated person told the Maryland Project: “[Correctional staff] will allow you to have all this bread, and they give us a lot of noodles, which is starch. That just turns into sugar. So, I can see why the [people] here are increasing diabetics” (MFPAP 2021, 97).

Cake might also be understood as a tool for behavior control. Corrections officials told Impact Justice that they considered heavy foods with sugar and fat useful to “encourage lethargic and docile behavior” (Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein 2020, 105). The Maryland Project calls cake and other heavy processed foods a “‘tranquilizing’ biotechnology deployed to deplete energy and thus hinder the potential for resistance” (MFPAP 2021, 103). The timing of access to food in prison is also tightly controlled and often unpredictable. Many prisons limit meal time to fifteen or twenty minutes, including time spent waiting in line to be served. Out of fear or disgust, imprisoned people often eat so quickly that they do not taste their food (Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein 2020, 52; MFPAP 2021, 42–43). Officials can shift meal times to odd and unpredictable hours, serving lunch at 3 p.m., dinner at 4 p.m., and breakfast twelve hours later (as in an example in Maryland

[MFPAP 2021, 31]). One Michigan Department of Corrections officer put it starkly: “Food is a control mechanism” (Perkins 2018).

In 2020, Raymond B. Skelton filed a class action suit against the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) for serving food so devoid of nutrition that it violated the Eighth Amendment rule against cruel and unusual punishment. Skelton’s complaint put forth the obvious: high-calorie starches and sugary vitamin powders do not meet any standard of healthy nutrition. “NJDOC serves a diet to prisoners, including diabetics, of grits, overcooked carrots, white bread, greasy processed meats, cookies, cakes, white rice, sugary drinks, margarine, and constant potatoes—all foods to be avoided by diabetics. . . . Even if the menu as designed is what is actually served, it does not stand the most basic nutritional scrutiny.” NJDOC, Skelton charged, had “removed virtually every fruit and vegetable critical to human health and replaced it with pasta, white flour, and starches” (*Skelton v. NJDOC* 2020). This case was dismissed on a technicality, but others challenging the *Hutto v. Finney* nutrition standards will certainly follow.

Corrections departments employ a common legal defense against such lawsuits: in thirty-eight states, corrections offices contract with registered dietitians to certify their menus’ nutritional content. Dietitians have become arbiters of what meets the courts’ standards at the lowest possible cost. Their conflict of interest is evident—they are employed by the agencies whose standards they are asked to review—which might explain why dietitians regularly approve meal plans so far askew from known nutritional standards. Prison dietitians are asked to certify whether the menus meet state and federal standards, not whether they provide adequate nutrition (Hardy 2016). A detainee at the Kane County Detention Center in Illinois, for instance, complained about insufficient and unsanitary food (served by the Aramark Corporation), which caused him gastritis and severe vomiting. His legal case failed because the Detention Center’s menus were reviewed periodically by a certified dietitian (*Becerra v. Kramer* 2017). Arguably, at least some prison dietitians are legitimizing nutritional torture.

Even in a tightly controlled prison environment, some dietitians and corrections officials place responsibility on incarcerated individuals for their own health and weight. Women at the South Dakota Women’s Penitentiary complained about unhealthy meals and weight gain. In response, the prison developed a “wellness program” offering a lower-fat meal option and classes to “educate inmates on the importance of proper weight, nutrition and daily exercise” (Stein 2000, 509). Similarly, an Oregon women’s prison instituted a Healthy Food Access Project, which reduced the daily calories served to all women in the prison who had diabetes (Firth et al. 2015). Dietitians at the California Correctional Health Care Services provide individual nutrition counseling, where they “emphasize education to empower the patient to make good decisions regarding their diet and take control of their health issues” (Hardy 2016).

Prison commissaries also create an illusion of consumer choice and responsibility. Prison jobs pay starvation wages, often a few cents per hour (on average, \$3.45 per day). Most of this labor goes toward keeping the prison itself going, especially the food service. People who refuse to work are often disciplined. Prison wages are necessary to purchase basic hygiene items and supplemental food from the commissary, which is often operated by a private company (Sawyer and Wagner 2023, 801). Food items for sale do offer materials for control and creativity in one's own eating, but they do not offer much nutrition and they are extremely expensive. Impact Justice found that three in five respondents could not afford commissary purchases; many went to great and dangerous lengths to get access to money for food consumption (Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein 2020, 11). Without these supplements, "[people] just wake up and go to bed hungry" (MFPAP 2021, 30).

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What kind of hunger is produced in prisons by cake and vitamin powders? This hunger does not generally come with weight loss or starvation.³ It is a different kind of hunger, caused by impoverished products and insecurity. As described, carceral hunger removes people's control over their time, wages, sociability, and bodily autonomy. Not knowing, day to day, whether your needs will be met or when. Not having enough money to be sure that you will not be hungry that night. Carceral hunger helps to understand a kind of hunger that is produced by having irregular, unpredictable access to cheap filler foods. In other words, carceral hunger is a form of food insecurity.

The concept of household food insecurity emerged out of a period around the 1980s when poverty became increasingly criminalized. Instead of seeking structural solutions to racism, poverty, lack of housing, and hunger, policy makers focused on controlling individual pathologies and behaviors—from welfare fraud to petty crime (Hinton 2016, 105). Stories depicting fraudulent "welfare queens" spread through the media and political speeches (Kohler-Hausmann 2017, 187). States cracked down on a perceived wave of welfare fraud, even as they withdrew benefits for people not receiving regular wages. Poor people on welfare were arrested for crimes of survival, trying to make some extra money to top off insufficient welfare payments (Kohler-Hausmann 2017, 203). Punitive policies, carried out by welfare officials and the police, targeted urban Black and Brown mothers and youth.

The Reagan White House declared that hunger did not identifiably exist in the United States and that representations of hunger were fraudulent. "We've had considerable information that people go to soup kitchens because the food is free," Reagan counselor Edwin Meese commented in 1983, "and that that's easier than paying for it." Meese denied that there was any evidence of real hunger in the country (Hoffman 1983). Meanwhile the number of food banks and demand for charity food exploded in this period (Fisher 2017). Welfare was reconfigured as

support for low-wage earners and denied to the unemployed; support was withdrawn from single parents. In the process, more and more people came to rely on food pantries (Dickinson 2019, 3; Kohler-Hausmann 2017, 123). Activists and scholars sought to measure real hunger in the United States, to debunk the narrative that welfare and food bank recipients were all cheaters.

Nutrition researcher Kathy Radimer profiled a kind of hunger that she named “household food insecurity.” Radimer spoke with women who sought help from food banks in upstate New York in the late 1980s. Her interviewees were not starving like people pictured in UNICEF and Food for Africa campaigns in the media at that time. But they were suffering. A woman she named Gay told her, “I’m not *hungry* hungry.” Gay said, “going *hungry* hungry is when there is absolutely nothing in the house. But also going hungry is when you have to eat the same thing all week long and you have no variation from it and you know sooner or later you’re going to run out of that, too” (Radimer 1990, 206). Gay, and other women Radimer spoke with, described something other than starvation. “The gist was that the food eaten was enough that the women knew neither they nor their children were going to die of starvation, but also they knew it wasn’t as much as they should eat, as they needed to be healthy, as they wanted to eat, as they were used to eating, etc.” (Radimer 1990, 192).

Radimer drew from Gay’s and others’ experiences to coin a new definition of hunger as food insecurity. Food insecurity, she proposed, is “the inability to acquire or consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so” (Radimer, Olson, and Campbell 1990, 1546). Food insecurity included some elements of deprivation, such as skipping meals and cutting portion sizes. But it also meant eating in ways that made women feel degraded and unhealthy. It meant eating *nutritus*. And it meant constant worry about having enough. Food anxiety—worrying that the food you have will run out before you are able to buy more—is a defining characteristic of food insecurity (Radimer 1990, 211). So much more could and should be said about Radimer’s extraordinary work on food insecurity and its impact on national and global food policies. For my purposes here, Radimer’s concept of food insecurity names the distinction that I describe above, between raw starvation and *nutritus*. Never feeling truly full. Not knowing if your needs will be met, or when. Being surrounded by what Imani Perry has called “deprived productions”: “The stuff that goes to the confined, and that is produced for the confined, is stamped with the imprimatur of ‘less than’” (Perry 2018, 160).

Food insecurity points to historical connections between carceral hunger, anti-welfare, and tough-on-crime politics—from the War on Poverty to the War on Crime (Hinton 2016; Kohler-Hausmann 2015, 87). Erika Camplin (2016, 10) has remarked that the Prison Industrial Complex took off at the same time, around the 1970s through the 1980s, as production of impoverished, ultraprocessed food, and withdrawal of the welfare state. Poor people and people of color were captured in

overlapping regimes of enclosure and insecurity. At the same time, people arrested for crimes of survival were demonized as not deserving: as one judge wrote about prison food, “to the extent that conditions are restrictive, indeed, even harsh, they are part of the penalty criminal defendants must pay for their offenses against society” (*Johnson v. Williams* 1991).

Food insecurity is a defining experience for people impacted by incarceration. Welfare reforms in the 1990s instituted a double punishment for crimes of poverty: people convicted of dealing drugs could be barred from receiving food stamps for life. West Virginia, in 2016, blocked more than twenty-one hundred people with drug felony convictions from receiving SNAP benefits (Born 2018). Formerly incarcerated people in the United States are food insecure at almost twice the national average rate (Testa and Jackson 2019). A 2013 survey found that 91 percent of people recently released from prison were food-insecure, and nearly four in ten had not eaten all day because they could not buy food (London and Jones 2021). When we note that 113 million people in the United States have an immediate family member who spent at least one night in prison or jail, the community effects of punitive food insecurity come to light (Sawyer and Wagner 2023). Criminalizing poverty and impoverishing criminals means that whole communities are made food-insecure.

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“We have decided to put our fate in our own hands. . . . Power concedes nothing without demand” (Crawford and DuGuya 2011). Tens of thousands of imprisoned people have staged hunger strikes over the past few decades. Hunger strikes are perhaps the most powerful form of collective resistance to incarceration. If hunger is the defining experience of imprisonment, the hunger strike is “ultimate practice of freedom involving food in a prison” (Ugelvik 2011, 56). Hunger in prison is a tool for psychological and physical control, which the hunger strike turns back upon itself. Prison hunger strikers reverse and “interiorize the power of the state” (Feldman 1991, 237). Incarcerated people oppose carceral hunger with forms of collective counter-conduct that “utilize the tools of government against government” (Banu 2014, 65). Hunger strikers “turned their hunger on its head” (Camacho 2023, 181). They publicly reproduce—and thereby refuse—a relation that they already experience every day. Prison hunger strikers are always already hungry.

Over the past fifteen years, hunger strikes have taken place in prisons across the United States: California, Kentucky, Michigan, and Washington. Incarcerated people in Alabama staged at least twenty-seven hunger strike actions between 2013 and 2017 (Sheets 2017). The largest prison strike in 2013, at its peak, included more than thirty thousand people in California prisons, some of whom struck for a life-endangering sixty days (Reiter 2014, 581). In that same year, 106 of 164 prisoners at the Guantanamo Bay military prison camp went on hunger strike; many were forcibly fed (Associated Press 2013).

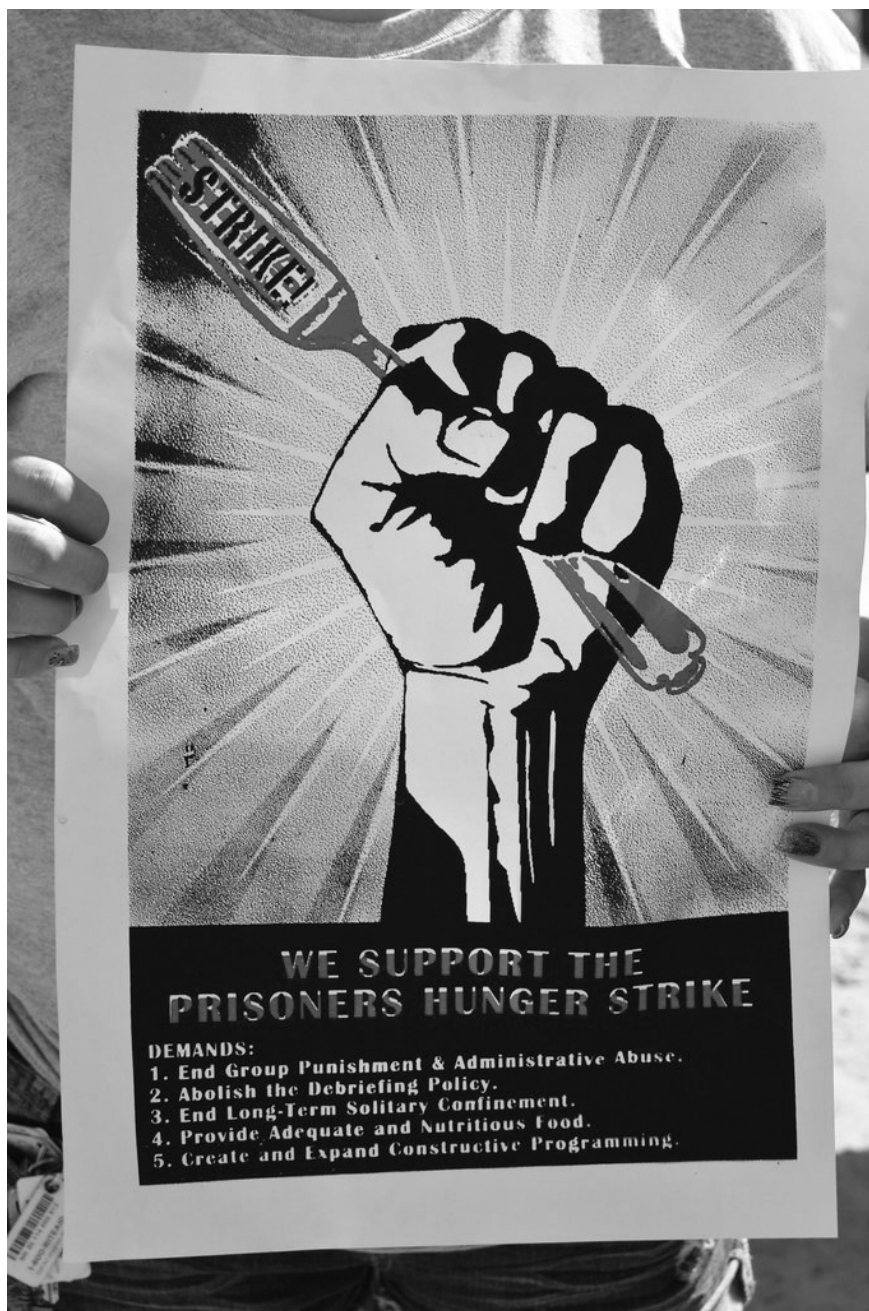


FIGURE 12. "We Support the Prisoners' Hunger Strike," poster at hunger strike solidarity protest at Corcoran State Prison, July 13, 2013. Source: Photo by Steve Rhodes (CC-BY-NC-ND 2.0).

When prisoners hold a hunger strike, they publicly name their own hunger. Hunger becomes a collective identity and a basis for collective action. Prison hunger strikes echo past and present coalitions of the hungry—from the 1930s Hunger Marches to the Poor People’s Campaigns. Like these campaigns, prison hunger strikes are often led by self-consciously interracial coalitions who come together around shared experiences of hunger (Crawford and DuGuya 2011; Reiter 2014, 590). Hunger strikes fit in a long and enduring collective movement of the hungry. Hunger strikers refuse to ingest refuse, nutritus. They claim an existence beyond living like trash. Kentucky prisoners in 2010 struck against high commissary prices and prison food contaminated with worms, rocks, cardboard, and insects (the state prison system had contracted with Aramark to provide meals for \$2.63 per day) (Reuter 2010). In 2014 twelve hundred immigrant detainees at the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, Washington, staged a hunger strike to demand “Better food—Better treatment—Better pay—Lower commissary—Fairness” (Montagne 2017, 509; Hernandez 2017, 103–33). A thousand prisoners at Michigan’s Kinross Facility refused to eat meals one day in 2016 to protest poor food service by private contractors Aramark and Trinity, ranging from maggot infestation to employee drug running and corruption (Egan 2016). Heriberto Sharky Garcia, incarcerated at California’s Folsom State Prison, smuggled a video of himself refusing food during a 2018 hunger strike (Pilkington 2018). Garcia (2018) stated his refusal to take in nutritus: “Must I turn my cheek and be happy to plainly exist? Miserable, but existing. Eating, drinking, consuming crap—but existing. Fuck that! I will do what i can.”

Hunger striking is one strategy that people in prison use to deal with being fed crap. Mutual aid is a less visible form of resistance to carceral hunger. People in prisons practice forms of community food security, sharing resources and cooking together. J., incarcerated in Maryland, explained that “we try to help people that doesn’t have anything . . . we just take some of our stuff and we donate it to them to make sure they have their hygiene and food that they need” (MFPAP 2021, 40). Another person at the same prison told the Maryland Project how he and others make welcome bags for new arrivals: “Are you okay? Are you hungry?” There are guys that are in prison that will look out for you” (MFPAP 2021, 40). If a group accumulates enough supplies from the commissary, they can make a “hook up,” a collective meal composed of ingredients like ramen noodles, pouches of tuna, hot sauce, peanut butter, perhaps an onion or pepper from the kitchen. Anthony Ryan Hatch (2019, 79) pays respect to the “maker culture” displayed in such collective experiments in pleasure and survival, “in which their ability to produce palatable food out of refuse should amaze and astound.”

Like hunger strikes demanding better food, mutual aid posits hunger as a collective affliction requiring collective action. Mutual aid points toward collective possibilities for sustaining life in prison. Hunger strikes, when carried out over a long time, challenge the very structure of carceral hunger and incarceration. Long

hunger strikes reclaim control over the state's ability to generate slow death. James Crawford and Mutop DuGuya, imprisoned in solitary confinement in California's Pelican Bay Prison, announced the first in a long series of hunger strikes in 2011. Pelican Bay hunger strikers recognized that the function of solitary confinement was to kill them slowly: "Some of us have already suffered a slow, agonizing death in which the state has shown no compassion toward these dying prisoners. Rather than compassion they turn up their ruthlessness. No one wants to die. Yet under this current system of what amounts to intense torture, what choice do we have? If one is to die, it will be on our own terms" (Crawford and DuGuya 2011).

Hunger strikers make visible and reverse the state's power to kill them slowly. Long hunger strikes publicly reveal the ultimate goal of imprisonment, which is to eliminate people. Kelly Lyle Hernandez (2017, 1) has named this fact and its historical origins: "Mass incarceration is mass elimination. . . . Incarceration operates as a means of purging, removing, caging, containing, erasing, disappearing, and eliminating targeted populations from land, life, and society in the United States." Men incarcerated in Pelican Bay recognized that all those in solitary were targets for elimination. "This hunger strike will be carried on by all races, New Afrikans (Blacks), Mexicans (i.e. of all walks), whites and others who realize [that] we are silently being murdered by CDCR/CCPOAA Union as well as the US judicial system" (Crawford and DuGuya 2011). Crawford and DuGuya refused to exist in a "state of organized debility," whose end point is slow death (Kalina 2019, 60, 69). In this they poignantly echoed hunger marchers and strikers from an earlier era, like the Missouri cotton field strikers of 1941 who said that "it is better we die than live as we have been living" (UCAPAWA, CIO, and James 1942, 5).

Hunger strikers visibly make their own bodies, their biologies, political. As anthropologist Alan Feldman (1991, 230) wrote, hunger strikers engage with "the political manipulation of their bodies [as] a managed project." Feldman described how Irish Republican hunger strikers in the 1980s projected their own lives and bodies onto a broader historical trajectory. They imagined that their own biological time would align with historical, political time, and that their own physical decline would shift the course of Irish history (Feldman 1991, 233). The decline of one biological existence, the death of one hunger striker, could put into motion a new historical epoch. The hunger strike opens a field of historical possibility and transformation. Heriberto Sharky Garcia (2018) envisioned the creation of "the New Human, a new 'species' of being modeled on the needs and immediacies of the colonized masses." In the meantime, Garcia wrote, he was "struggling to be free, to stay sane. If not this, then what?"