Photo: Gary Friedman - Getty Images.

Private Food, Public Harm

PRIVATIZED FOOD SERVICE IN PRISONS AND JAILS

CENTER FOR Science IN THE Public Interest
Your Food and Health Watchdog

CARCERAL NUTRITION PROJECT
change the tray

Contents

Acknowledgements

About Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI): CSPI is your food and health watchdog. Founded in 1971, CSPI advocates for evidence-based and community-informed policies on nutrition, food safety, and health, holds government agencies and corporations to account, and empowers consumers with independent, unbiased information to live healthier lives.

About Carceral Nutrition Project (CNP): CNP works to improve food and nutrition in jails and prisons across the country to effect healthier and more cost-effective outcomes for all stakeholders. We envision a transformed carceral food system that promotes dignity and opportunity, that heals instead of harms, and merges health, sustainability, agency, cultural respect, and job skills training in federal, state, local, youth, and tribal facilities across the country.

About Center for Agriculture and Food Systems (CAFS): CAFS is a research-based center at Vermont Law and Graduate School that produces original scholarly research in the field of food and agricultural law and policy to serve the broadest range of food system stakeholders. With local, regional, national, and international partners, CAFS addresses food system challenges related to food and nutrition security and affordability, farmland access, food system workers, farm viability, local economies, and public health, among others. CAFS works closely with its partners to provide law and policy support and develop resources that respond to their needs. Through CAFS's Food and Agriculture Clinic and Research Assistant program, Vermont Law and Graduate School students work directly on projects alongside partners nationwide, engaging in innovative and practical work that spans the food system.

AUTHORS

The following CSPI staff authored this report: Jessi Silverman, Amelia Keleher, Lanae Hood, and Methany Eltigani. The following former CSPI interns contributed to this report: Sarah Rudolph-Naiberg, Anna Soloniuk, and Marisa Weinstock.

The following CAFS faculty and staff contributed to the Litigation Analysis: Haley Rowlands, Legal Fellow and Laurie Beyranevand, Director. The following CAFS student clinicians and research assistants also contributed to this report: Jack Peebles '27 and Eric Grimes '26.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Daniel Rosen and Leslie Soble of the Carceral Nutrition Project served as close thought partners through the conceptualization, planning, research, and drafting of this report and facilitated the advisory committee. We thank our advisory committee members for lending their expertise and lived experience throughout the development of this report: Noah A. Barth, Pennsylvania Prison Society; Teri Castle; Anthony Cobb, freelance writer incarcerated in Florida; Sarah Hainstock; Jodi Hocking, Return Strong!; Tanaine Jenkins; Kara Lee Nelson; Janna Parker, PG Changemakers; Atif Rafay, author, *Correcting Food Policy in Washington Prisons* (2016); Nashla Rivas Salas, Correctional Association of New York; Alexis Smith; Phillip Vance Smith II, incarcerated writer; Damonte Stogner, Coffee for a Cause; Gwyn Troyer, John Howard Association; and Wayne Williams, The Food Trust.

REVIEWERS

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> "Even among the many cruelties that imprisonment inflicts, the specific violence of exploiting hunger to coerce people into consuming products that degrade their body and mental health and shorten their life, for days and years on end, stands out for its deliberate viciousness. I hope this report will call attention to the needless, immense cost of letting private profiteers corrupt what should be an opportunity to help people become the healthy, successful neighbors a decent society values. Good food policy can and should be saving the lives and dollars of the public, not providing profits to those who evade the costs of the harms they inflict."
>
> —Atif Rafay, incarcerated in Washington

POSITIONALITY

The authors of this report brought expertise in food and nutrition research, law, and policy. While we have not lived through incarceration, this report centers the perspectives of people who have and still do. We consulted with currently and formerly incarcerated individuals throughout the planning, research, drafting, and review of this report and strive to uplift their perspectives in each of the three research methods.

> "The glaring changes I've seen over the years since Aramark took over food service in prison is the lack of professional training with inmate workers, more sicknesses from dirty trays and utensils, and more people getting chronic diseases. The health and safety of the prison population is no longer a top priority."
>
> —Anthony Cobb, incarcerated in Florida

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Introduction

THE CARCERAL FOOD SYSTEM IS IN DIRE NEED OF REFORM.

Everyone deserves access to healthy and appetizing food, but this is far from reality for many of the nearly 2 million people incarcerated in the United States.[1] While conditions vary across federal, state, and local jurisdictions and individual facilities, meals served to incarcerated people are generally poorly prepared, nutrient-poor, and unappetizing.[2-8] Fresh fruits and vegetables are rare, and food safety and quality control measures are at best inconsistent.

Peer-reviewed research indicates that US prison and jail menus fall short of authoritative nutrition recommendations such as the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* (DGA).[9-12] This is hardly surprising, as there are no national nutrition standards that apply to all US carceral facilities, of which there are more than 6,000.[1, 13] For approximately 1,300 facilities accredited by the American Correctional Association in and outside of the United States, a registered dietitian must certify that the menu meets the Recommended Daily Allowances, which are adequacy goals for vitamins and minerals.[14] Nutrient adequacy goals are necessary to prevent deficiencies but are not sufficient to ensure that the menu is consistent with the DGA, which provide food-based guidelines (*e.g.*, daily servings of fruits and vegetables) that also consider health promotion and chronic disease prevention. CSPI and CNP's recommendations for all governments with authority over carceral facilities (federal, state, county, municipal, etc.) include strengthening policies for food quality, food safety, and nutrition, strengthening oversight of compliance with policies, and allocating sufficient resources to meet higher food service standards.[13]

> "As an incarcerated person, the food that prisons serve directly impacts my quality of life. Decades of research proves how processed meat can cause cancer and excessive sugar can lead to diabetes, yet we are served these foods in excess because they are cheap. Although my state (NC) doesn't contract with a food service provider, the cost cutting methods these companies use to maximize profits create a dangerous trend that other carceral systems adopt to value money over health, which is unfair to those who must survive on unhealthy food and miniscule portions."
>
> —Phillip Vance Smith II, incarcerated in North Carolina

Throughout this report, "the term 'corrections' is used when referring to agencies and professionals because that is how the profession describes itself. The word 'carceral' is used to refer to any environment in which people are confined, to emphasize the reality of incarceration."[i] For purposes of this report, carceral facilities include adult prisons and jails. Prisons are facilities under state or federal control where people who have been convicted typically go to serve sentences of more than one year. Jails are county or municipal facilities where people are typically incarcerated pre-trial or for sentences of one year or less.[1] Youth facilities and immigrant detention centers are outside the scope of this report.

We maintain that society must ultimately address mass incarceration, which refers to "extremely high rates of incarceration and the disproportionate incarceration of specific groups of the population," as a driver of health inequities.[15] In the United States, mass incarceration is most pronounced for Black individuals, and also disproportionate for Indigenous individuals.[1] At the same time, improving food conditions in carceral facilities is critical to minimize harm to people impacted by the carceral system, uphold their basic human rights,[16] and ensure they return to their communities as healthy as possible.

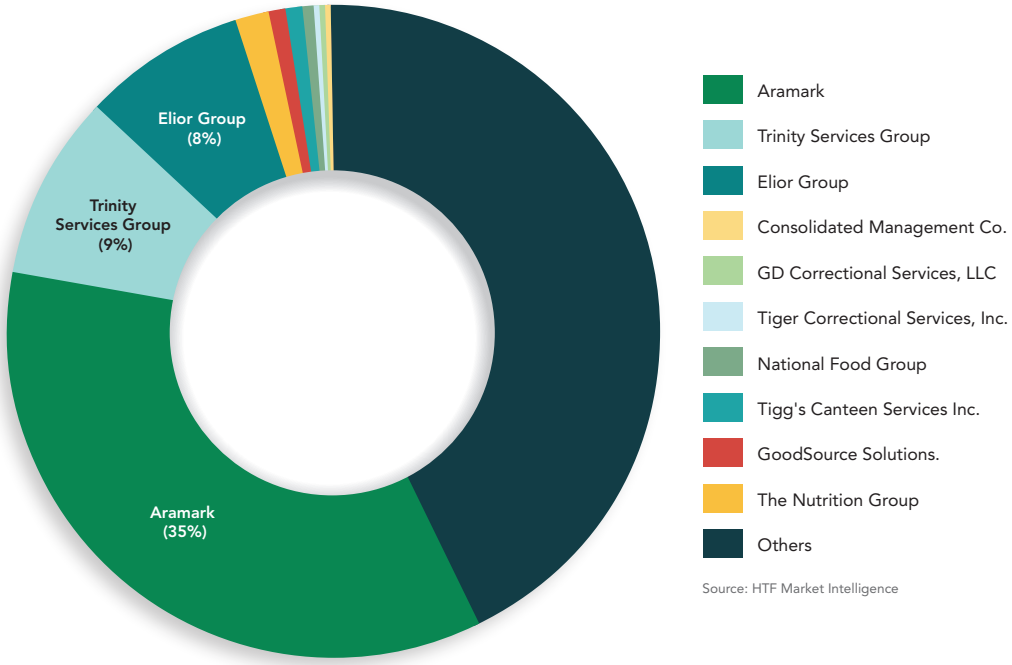
A HANDFUL OF PRIVATE COMPANIES INCREASINGLY OPERATE PRISON AND JAIL FOOD SERVICE.

Managing a food service operation in a carceral facility or other institutional setting (*e.g.*, K-12, hospital, higher education) typically involves food procurement and price negotiation, menu development, managing food service staff, kitchen facility maintenance, and ensuring regulatory compliance.[17] Most institutions either manage these tasks in-house (these are often called self-operated or "self-op" facilities) or outsource them to a food service management company. While both private and public institutions can contract out their food service, privatization refers to the outsourcing of food service at a publicly funded and operated institution.[18]

While many publicly-run US prisons and jails (which together confine 91 percent of all incarcerated people) continue to operate food service in-house, these institutions have increasingly outsourced food service management to private, for-profit companies.[1] HTF Market Intelligence estimates the correctional food service market was worth approximately $5.1 billion in 2024, an increase from $3.9 billion in 2020.[19] The industry is notably concentrated, with HTF Market Intelligence reporting that the top 3 companies account for 52 percent of the market. The largest company, Aramark, has a 35 percent market share, bringing in $1.78 billion in revenue from its correctional business in 2024. The second leading company is Trinity Services Group, which exclusively serves the correctional sector. Trinity brought in $464 million in revenue in 2024, capturing 9 percent of the market. The third largest, Elior Group, the parent company of Summit Food Services, brought in $404 million from US correctional contracts in 2024, capturing 8 percent of the market. All other companies in the US market each had less than 2 percent market share in 2024.

[i] This distinction is borrowed with gratitude from: Soble L, Busansky A, Yusuf AR. *Eating Behind Bars: Ending The Hidden Punishment of Food in Prison*. New York: The New Press; 2025.

Figure 1. US correctional food service market share by company, 2024



At the state level, 18 states' departments of corrections (more than a third of states) contract out some or all food service management functions, with Aramark holding statewide contracts for 17 states (Table 1).[20] Aramark's footprint across these 17 states includes approximately 24 percent of the country's 1,566 state prisons and approximately 37 percent of the 1.1 million people incarcerated in state prisons.[1]

Table 1. State correctional departments that contract with Aramark for food service management as of April 2026[20-22]

State	Number of state prisons	Population in custody
Alabama Department of Corrections[20, 23]	27	21,261
Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reentry[24]	9	25,222
Florida Department of Corrections	100	74,855
Georgia Department of Corrections	7	37,284
Indiana Department of Corrections	21	24,100
Kansas Department of Corrections	16	8,841
Kentucky Department of Corrections	14	11,350
Maryland Department of Corrections	22	15,201
Missouri Department of Corrections	21	24,200
Nevada Department of Corrections	14	10,824
Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections	25	44,902
Oklahoma Department of Corrections[22, 25]	22	22,000
Pennsylvania Department of Corrections	24	37,704
South Carolina Department of Corrections	21	16,918
South Dakota Department of Corrections	6	3,690
Tennessee Department of Corrections	11	21,430
West Virginia Division of Corrections and Rehabilitation	21	6,100
Total	**381 facilities**	**405,882 people**

The proportion of the country's 3,116 local jails (which are under city or county control) with privatized food service is unknown.[1] Aramark alone claims 500 correctional accounts as of December 2025,[20] of which state prisons appear to account for only 381 (Table 1) meaning the remaining 119 could be local jails. Another top food service management company in the correctional sector, Trinity Services Group, claims to serve over 900 facilities in more than 40 states, including prisons and jails.[26] Many smaller food service companies also serve local jails.[19]

Most correctional food service contracts (60 percent of the market, according to HTF Market Intelligence) use a fixed price model, in which the vendor commits to a predetermined cost per meal for the duration of the contract.[19] The value of individual contracts varies considerably based on the number and size of facilities included and the length of the contract term, among other factors. In a convenience sample of Aramark correctional food service contracts obtained by CSPI, the maximum annual payment ranges from $780,735 for the jail in Genesee County, Michigan to nearly $48 million for the Arizona state prison system. The terms of these contracts range from one to five years, typically with an option to extend for one or more years without renegotiating. See Table 2 for per meal and maximum payments in all contracts we obtained.

PRESSURE ON PUBLIC BUDGETS HAS BEEN THE PRIMARY DRIVER OF PRIVATIZATION OVER THE LAST SEVERAL DECADES.

The increasing privatization of government services is a trend that emerged in the 1970s, motivated by the belief that private contractors would create efficiencies and reduce costs for taxpayers.[18] This trend is not specific to the carceral sector, but the explosion in the incarcerated population over the last few decades has put additional pressure on prisons and jails to feed more people with fewer resources per person.[27, 28] The growing preference for outsourcing carceral food service continues to fuel the growth of the industry to this day.[19]

In recent years, carceral institutions continue to cite cost-cutting as the primary rationale for outsourcing food service management.[17, 19, 28-37] For example, one market analysis claims that food service management companies can reduce per-meal costs by 15-25 percent compared to self-operation.[19] We examine this claim later in the report, but to the extent that outsourcing actually saves money, across institutional sectors, food and labor costs appear to be the two main levers.[38] Aramark, along with similarly sized food service management companies like Compass and Sodexo (the latter two do not operate in the US carceral sector), receives volume rebates for purchasing large quantities of food from manufacturers and distributors.[17, 27, 39] Advocates, researchers, and journalists report that contractors further reduce food costs by reducing the quality and quantity of food served.[28, 29, 32, 40] Contractors allegedly reduce labor costs by replacing unionized staff with nonunionized staff who receive lower wages.[27, 28]

Another stated motivator to privatize food service is simplifying operations. For institutional leaders who feel that they do not have the expertise or staff to manage dining services, outsourcing to a specialized contractor allows them to focus on what they view to be the institution's core functions, such as security.[17, 19] This need becomes even more acute as prisons and jails everywhere experience ongoing staffing shortages.[41] Other reported motivators include the perceived utility of a contract for holding a vendor accountable for compliance,[42] the desire to improve quality while feeding a growing population,[43, 44] and the need for an infusion of funds for construction or other improvement projects (capital investments like updating kitchen equipment are often offered as incentives by large food service management companies).[17]

THE INCREASING PRIVATIZATION OF CARCERAL FOOD SERVICE HAS NOT IMPROVED OUTCOMES FOR CORRECTIONAL AGENCIES OR INCARCERATED PEOPLE.

This report examines privatized food service in prisons and jails, focusing on Aramark. Given the poor state of carceral food overall, readers might question why this report focuses on a food service management company. Over the years, numerous incarcerated people, returning citizens, researchers, and advocates have raised concerns that privatizing food service is harmful. They argue that the financial constraints of carceral institutions, combined with the need for contractors to make a profit, incentivize cost-cutting to a degree that compromises nutrition, palatability, and food safety. [19, 29, 40, 45, 46] Concerning reports from several prisons and jails after outsourcing their food service prompted us to investigate further.[30, 31, 47-50] As noted previously, Aramark holds food service contracts for nearly a third of state prison systems and controls 35 percent of the US correctional food services market in terms of revenue. This makes the company the most prominent player in privatized carceral food service and a potentially impactful changemaker.

Aramark is a publicly traded, multinational corporation headquartered in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. With approximately 278,390 employees worldwide across all lines of business, its portfolio includes food services, facilities management, refreshments, hospitality management, and supply chain services. Aramark serves the education, healthcare, business, sports and leisure, and corrections sectors. Aramark's annual report for fiscal year 2025 states total revenue was $18.5 billion ($13.2 billion from the US market and $5.3 billion from 15 other countries), with $4.2 billion from the category of "Sports, Leisure & Corrections."[51] HTF Market Intelligence estimates that Aramark Correctional Services (Aramark's subsidiary that serves the correctional sector) brought in $1.78 billion in revenue from its US business in 2024, which represents approximately 10 percent of total global revenue reported by the company for fiscal year 2024.[19, 52]

Among the concerns about privatization are situations in which the same parent company owns both the food service provider and the commissary (a store where incarcerated individuals can purchase supplemental food and other items, sometimes known as the canteen) provider in the same institution. [2, 27, 40] For example, in the West Virginia Division of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Aramark owns all food sources for people in custody: the primary meal service, the commissary (via its subsidiary Union Supply Group), and two proprietary food-for-purchase programs called iCare (supplemental food purchased by loved ones) and Fresh Favorites (supplemental food purchased by incarcerated people).[53] Inadequate meals force incarcerated people, if they have the means, to supplement their diets by purchasing food from the commissary, where healthy options are generally limited and prohibitively expensive.[2] This is a system-wide concern across privatized and self-operated facilities. However, a monopoly for a private company incentivizes serving poor quality food in insufficient portions in the primary meal service to drive profits from commissary and other food-for-purchase programs.[43, 54, 55] Both incarcerated people and their families and friends are at risk of financial exploitation in such a monopoly model. Commissary prices are marked up significantly over comparable items in retail stores, and vendors charge premium prices for care packages and prepared meals.[56, 57] Since incarcerated people rarely earn enough in prison jobs to purchase from these venues, family and friends often contribute funds to commissary accounts or use services like iCare to send care packages and prepared meals to people inside.

> "Corporations, and sometimes government agencies, profit by spending as little as possible to feed those in their care. Worse yet, failures in one service line can, in fact, drive revenue in another, creating remarkably dangerous incentives."
>
> —Bianca Tylek and Worth Rises, *The Prison Industry: How it Works and Who Profits* (2025)

In recent years, research and advocacy have increasingly shed light on poor food conditions in prisons and jails nationwide, but there has not been an in-depth examination of the impact of privatization with a national lens. Because of Aramark's outsized role in privatized carceral food service nationwide, we sought to better understand food service conditions in Aramark-managed facilities to identify opportunities for improvement that could have widespread impacts. Specifically, we conducted a literature review examining the association between the outsourcing of carceral food service to Aramark and the nutrition, palatability, and safety of food served, as well as associated costs. We conducted key informant interviews to better understand how privatized carceral food service operates in practice and affects quality of life for incarcerated individuals. We also conducted an analysis of carceral food litigation against Aramark. Based on our findings, we provide recommendations for food service management companies, policymakers and institutional leaders, researchers, and advocates to better protect the health and dignity of incarcerated people.

Literature Review Summary

This section summarizes the literature review found in Appendix A.

METHODS

We conducted a literature review to synthesize what is known about Aramark's business practices and performance in the carceral food service industry. We were guided by the following research questions:

- What is known about the nutritional adequacy and quality of Aramark's food service with respect to company and client requirements, menus, and meals served, as compared to the 2020-2025 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*?[ii]
- What is known about the palatability of Aramark's meals?
- What is known about Aramark's food safety performance with respect to company, client, and legal requirements?
- What is known about the cost to correctional departments of contracting with Aramark Correctional Services?

Using the University of Toronto Libraries' template for finding and documenting grey literature, we conducted a systematic search for both peer-reviewed and grey literature[iii] published since 2010, including journal articles, reports from government and non-governmental organizations, company literature, and news media.[58]

134 sources met our inclusion criteria for the review, including two peer-reviewed publications, four state or local government reports, seven federal government reports, 10 nongovernmental reports, 107 media sources, three sources of Aramark company literature, and one dissertation.

We analyzed the 134 included sources to identify two to four recurring themes pertaining to each research question and summarized the content pertaining to each theme.

ii An expert work group convened by CSPI in 2020 recommended aligning correctional facility food service policies with the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans. [Silverman J, Holt M. Strategies to Optimize Food and Nutrition in Correctional Facilities 2021. Available at: https://www.cspi.org/resource/strategies-optimize-food-and-nutrition-correctional-facilities-0.] Although the 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans was published in January 2026, the 2020-2025 edition was current at the time this literature review was undertaken.

iii According to the University of Toronto Libraries, grey literature is "any literature that has not been published through traditional means. It is often excluded from large databases and other mainstream sources. Grey literature can also mean literature that is hard to find or has inconsistent or missing bibliographic information." Types of grey literature include government documents, conferences, theses and dissertations, and newspapers and magazines.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: What is known about the nutritional adequacy and quality of Aramark's food service with respect to company and client requirements, menus, and meals served, as compared to the 2020-2025 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* (DGA)?

We identified three key themes based on our analysis of 57 sources that addressed this research question.

> "All we think, speak, [and] dream about is a proper food tray, nothing extra, only what we once had coming to us."
>
> – Incarcerated survey respondent, *Analysis of Food and Nutrition in Nevada Prisons* (2025)

Theme 1.1. Prisons and jails that contract with Aramark or another private vendor reportedly provide meals that fall short of key DGA recommendations.

Consistent reports indicated that prisons and jails contracting with Aramark served meals that were not aligned with key recommendations in the 2020-2025 DGA (see Appendix A), allegedly serving excessive amounts of processed meats like bologna, refined grains like white bread and white rice, and starchy vegetables (potatoes, peas, corn), as well as insufficient fruit and non-starchy vegetables (like leafy greens).[3, 6, 59] While prison menus generally fall short of the DGA regardless of privatization,[9] a doctoral candidate and former correctional dietitian's preliminary analysis found that menus created by contractors provided fewer fruits and vegetables and more sodium than those created by state employees.[60] Furthermore, correctional officers and incarcerated people who have experienced a transition from in-house food service to Aramark reported that nutritional quality declined under Aramark's oversight.[6, 61, 62]

Theme 1.2. Small and inadequate portion sizes and food and meal shortages have financial, health, and safety consequences.

We found consistent complaints that Aramark serves inadequate quantities of food across multiple states and time periods. The sources that described a transition from in-house to Aramark-managed food service indicated that portions shrank.[6, 62] Commonly reported consequences of inadequate portion sizes and meal shortages include routine feelings of hunger [3, 7, 63] and reliance on commissary for supplemental food.[3, 7, 54, 59, 62] Less commonly reported consequences include unintended weight loss [64] and disruptions to facility stability, including hunger strikes [65] and increased demand for contraband.[32] Some incarcerated people and correctional officers claimed that Aramark's culture of cost cutting exacerbated the inadequate portions; Aramark employees allegedly diluted meals with water and intentionally prepared fewer meals than needed.[61, 66]

Theme 1.3. Reports indicate that Aramark routinely makes unauthorized menu substitutions.

Generally, food service contractors are required to obtain approval from the institution for menu substitutions to ensure the substitution is nutritionally equivalent to the prescribed menu item. Our search identified reports of Aramark routinely making unauthorized menu substitutions in Michigan,[67] Kentucky,[63] Nevada,[62] and Ohio's[68] prison systems. Some examples of nutritionally questionable substitutions were brownies in place of meat,[63] and ketchup in place of spaghetti sauce.[38]

Research Question 2: What is known about the palatability of Aramark's meals?

We identified three key themes based on our analysis of 31 sources that addressed this research question.

Theme 2.1. Aramark meals allegedly lack flavor and are generally unappetizing.

Incarcerated people have described Aramark's meals as being generally "bad,"[69] "terrible,"[70] "atrocious,"[71] and "awful."[72] More specific complaints range from blandness due to Aramark eliminating seasoning [31, 61] to disgust-inducing comparisons to pet food.[70, 73] A majority of surveyed Washington, DC jail residents reported discarding most of their meals because they are so unpalatable.[7]

> "It's to the point that some of us go to sleep hungry, refusing to eat the food provided to us, and that's not by choice."
>
> —Incarcerated survey respondent, *We're Hungry in Here: D.C. Department of Corrections Food Survey Results* (2023)

Theme 2.2. Reports allege that Aramark's food is often improperly prepared and served at the wrong temperature.

Incarcerated people and independent auditors have reported that Aramark fails to keep food at the appropriate temperature by the time it is served, which interferes with both palatability and food safety.[59, 63] Other preparation issues include undercooking foods such as eggs, meat, and grains and overcooking foods like potatoes.[6, 61, 74]

> "With Aramark's takeover, the formerly recognizable turkey chunks have been replaced by a much cheaper option: an unidentifiable, ground poultry blend. This "meat" is flavorless and has the texture of generic canned dog food."
>
> —Justin Slavinksi, incarcerated writer in Florida (2023)

Theme 2.3. Aramark's meals are reported to be repetitive and lack variety.

Examples of how Aramark allegedly reduces variety include replacing hot meals with cold ones,[64,75] eliminating free options for fresh fruits and vegetables so that incarcerated people had to pay for them, or else solely eat canned or frozen versions,[6] and repeating the same meal (*e.g.*, bologna sandwiches) for multiple consecutive days.[31]

Research Question 3: What is known about Aramark's food safety performance with respect to company, client, and legal requirements?

We identified two key themes based on our analysis of 60 sources that addressed this research question.

Theme 3.1. Numerous reports have alleged or documented Aramark's food safety lapses, including serving spoiled and contaminated meals.

Incarcerated people, correctional officers, and independent auditors across many states and facilities have reported Aramark's failures to store and serve foods at the appropriate temperature, discard leftovers after the appropriate date, and maintain sanitary conditions in kitchens.[61, 63, 76-78] These stakeholders have also reported Aramark serving meals to incarcerated people that contained spoiled or undercooked food, pests such as maggots, rodent droppings, screws or metal shavings, food retrieved from the trash, and food partially eaten by rodents.[7, 33, 50, 59, 62, 78-82] Correctional officers in Michigan alleged that food safety declined when Aramark took over food service from the state.[61]

> "When Aramark won the food service contract for West Virginia prisons, we were excited about the potential for better food. That excitement was short-lived. They eliminated the fresh fruit and bowls of cereal, leaving us with no options other than what the kitchen put on the tray… The salad bar was removed. Fresh veggies were replaced with frozen ones… Aramark added for-profit food sales out of the dining room. They sold fresh veggie trays with tomatoes, green peppers, broccoli, cauliflower, and celery, along with slices of fruit pie, ice cream cups, and freshly made pizza bread with your choice of toppings. Purchasing it became the only way to get fresh food, as residents were no longer provided fresh veggies on the free trays served at meals. If you could not afford to buy them, you did not get them."
>
> —Teri Castle, *The High Costs of Cheap Food: Eating in West Virginia Prisons* (2023)

Theme 3.2. Aramark's alleged food safety lapses have been linked to multiple outbreaks of foodborne illness.

From 2010 to 2023, news media, a government auditor, and the American Civil Liberties Union have reported on foodborne illness outbreaks in Aramark-managed carceral facilities in Kentucky, Nevada, Michigan, New Jersey, and Florida.[48, 63, 75, 78, 83] In a 2023 survey, 78 of 114 incarcerated respondents in the Nevada Department of Corrections, which contracts with Aramark, self-reported having suffered from foodborne illness.[62]

Research Question 4: What is known about the cost to correctional departments of contracting with Aramark Correctional Services?

We identified four key themes based on our analysis of 68 sources that addressed this research question. Additionally, we compare per diem and annual meal costs for the sample of contracts we obtained (see Contract Analysis below).

Theme 4.1. Correctional departments have projected cost savings by outsourcing meal production to Aramark.

Multiple states have projected that outsourcing to Aramark would save them meaningful amounts of money on carceral food service, based on the meal price established in their contracts. The projected savings for a state prison system ranged from $3 million per year for Missouri to $48 million over 3 years for Michigan.[29, 84] The three sources that allowed us to calculate a percent reduction indicated a range in projected savings of 6 percent to 29 percent of annual costs.[29, 63, 84]

Theme 4.2. Aramark's cost-cutting measures allegedly include lower quality and reduced variety of ingredients, reducing the salaries of kitchen staff, and eliminating staff training requirements.

We found reports that outsourcing prison food service to Aramark was followed by replacing fresh produce with frozen or canned versions or reducing or eliminating seasonings.[6, 84] Additionally, a researcher and journalist investigating the Michigan Department of Corrections' experience with food service privatization found that Aramark lowered costs by reducing food service staffing, replacing unionized workers with non-union workers and reducing their compensation, and neglecting basic staff training on operations and safety.[28, 32, 61]

> "The food was not great [earlier], but the officers ate it along with the prisoners. Once Aramark came in, that changed. The bread was stale. I saw food in the kitchen with mold on it. The refrigerator broke down and the food was left outside in the cold or trucked in from another facility. Those who ate the food began to get sick. The officers demanded the right to bring in their own food or order out, which the jail authorities granted. But the prisoners had no choice. Diarrhea and vomiting is common among the prisoners. A few weeks ago one of the officers got a bowl of the prisoners' chili. We all told him not to eat it. He ended up with diarrhea in the bathroom."
>
> —Crystal Jordan, former officer at the Burlington County (NJ) Jail (2013)

Theme 4.3. Correctional departments have found billing discrepancies with their Aramark contracts that caused them to overpay for meals and services.

Despite projected cost savings, according to government auditors and news reports, Aramark has allegedly overbilled correctional agencies in Kentucky, Ohio, and Florida, with potential overpayments ranging from $57,193 to $5 million.[63, 78, 85]

Theme 4.4. Multiple correctional departments have allegedly fined Aramark for contract violations.

The Florida, Michigan, and Ohio correctional departments have each allegedly fined Aramark over $200,000 for contract violations including sanitation issues, employee misconduct, and food shortages.[86]

CONTRACT ANALYSIS

During our search of the literature, we encountered various documents related to currently or recently active state or local government contracts with Aramark to provide food service management in prisons or jails, including 9 contracts, 2 contract amendments, 2 requests for proposals (RFP), and 4 RFP responses submitted by Aramark. As these contracts are relevant to the research questions in this review, we have included them in our full analysis in Appendix A. Because we did not systematically obtain a representative sample of contracts, we aim to provide examples of provisions and language that exist in these types of documents rather than to generalize about all Aramark correctional contracts.

For example, Table 2 shows the price Aramark charges per person per day for all three meals for each contract we obtained. These prices cover all costs to produce meals (food, labor, etc.) and most contracts do not provide a breakdown. Within each contract, prescribed meal costs generally vary based on the population in custody: due to economies of scale, the minimum meal cost applies when the population is highest, and the maximum meal cost applies when the population is lowest. Where available, we also included the maximum compensation permitted for Aramark for the term of the contract.

Table 2. Examples of meal costs for select jurisdictions that contract with Aramark Correctional Services

Client *(Contract Term)*	Minimum meal cost per diem	Maximum meal cost per diem	Maximum contract value
STATE PRISONS			
Florida Department of Corrections *(4/7/22-4/6/27)*	$3.05	$3.23	unknown
Kentucky Department of Corrections *(1/5/15-1/4/23)*	$3.65	$3.65	unknown
Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction *(7/1/21-6/30/25)*	$4.62	$4.62	unknown
Missouri Department of Corrections *(1/6/23-1/5/28)*	$5.31	$5.56	$228,500,000
Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation, & Reentry *(9/30/24-9/29/25)*	$5.93	$7.16	$47,992,276.46
LOCAL JAILS			
Williamson County (Texas) Jail *(11/23/21-9/30/24)*	$3.20	$4.02	unknown
Office of the Genesee County (Michigan) Sheriff *(5/4/22-5/4/25)*	$3.45	$3.45	$2,342,205
City and County of Denver (Colorado) Department of Public Safety *(7/1/21-6/30/23)*	$4.07	$11.69	$7,375,506.82
District of Columbia Department of Corrections *(9/15/21-9/14/22)*	$5.76	$7.53	$5,620,162
Multnomah County (Oregon) Sheriff's Office *(3/1/23-11/30/26)*	$6.48	$92.16	$50,000,000
Lancaster County (Nebraska) *(5/1/23-4/30/27)*	$6.65	$8.25	$6,756,978
County of Westchester (New York) Department of Correction *(1/1/19-12/31/20)*	unknown	unknown	$4,589,198

LIMITATIONS

Our review included sources that employed relatively objective information-gathering methods (peer-reviewed research, independent audits, surveys of incarcerated populations, menu analyses), but the majority were more subjective sources (news stories, reports without systematic or transparent methods). In general, our search was likely subject to reporting bias, in that we were more likely to identify documentation of negative outcomes than positive ones. Furthermore, we solely gathered a convenience sample of contracts. Nevertheless, we surfaced consistent reports of nutrition, palatability, and food safety problems in at least 15 states and localities during contracts with Aramark, from as recently as 2025.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The sources included in our literature review indicate that:

1. Aramark commonly falls short of providing adequate portions of nutritious meals in carceral facilities. We found evidence of discrepancies between Aramark-provided menus and specific recommendations of the 2020-2025 DGA, which emphasize eating a variety of fruits and vegetables, increasing whole grains, and limiting refined grains and sodium.
2. Unpalatable meals are a consistent experience in prisons and jails where food service is managed by Aramark. Common issues include lack of flavor, lack of variety, under- or over-cooking, and serving meals at the wrong temperature.
3. Aramark's food safety practices are inconsistent, putting incarcerated people at risk for acute illness wherever they fall short. Even putting health risks aside, serving spoiled food or food contaminated with maggots violates the dignity of people who are already suffering the profoundly dehumanizing experience of incarceration.
4. A limited review of Aramark contracts and related documents suggests that reality is at odds with contract specifications for nutrition, food safety, and palatability (Appendix A). Assessing the impact of specific contractual requirements on outcomes was outside the scope of this review, but our findings raise the question whether insufficient contractual requirements and/or oversight contribute to poor outcomes for nutrition, palatability, and food safety.
5. Multiple states have projected that outsourcing carceral food service to Aramark would create significant cost savings. The sources we reviewed do not permit a comparison of the costs of contracting with Aramark relative to self-operation that accounts for tradeoffs in food quality and safety. However, evidence of Aramark's cost-cutting at the expense of quality, overbilling, and contract violations casts doubt on the value the company claims to provide to its taxpayer-funded correctional clients.

Key Informant Interviews

METHODS

Researchers carried out qualitative interviews to better understand how privatized carceral food service operates in practice, and how it affects daily life, health, and dignity for incarcerated individuals. They conducted interviews with people who have direct experience working in or eating in carceral institutions contracting with private food service management companies. All had at least some experience with or expertise on Aramark, with some having experienced a transition from self-operated to Aramark-managed food service.

The research team recruited participants through professional networks, advocacy organizations, and community-based contacts. They conducted interviews with ten participants who belonged to at least one of three groups:

- Formerly incarcerated individuals, who described their firsthand experiences with meals, food safety, and access to food
- Advocates, including people working in policy, prison reform, and food justice
- Carceral food service and nutrition professionals, including a registered dietitian, a correctional officer, and a food service management professional

Participants' experiences included state prisons and local jails. Some participants had experience with multiple food service management companies and/or self-operated institutions. Together, these perspectives provide insight into how carceral food systems function from multiple vantage points.

Data Collection

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Meredith College (protocol #2131) reviewed and approved this study. A trained researcher conducted interviews from September 2025 through February 2026 using semi-structured guides (see Appendix B) that allowed participants to speak openly about their experiences and observations. The research team tailored interview guides to each participant group while maintaining core themes across interviews. Interviews ranged from approximately 40 to 90 minutes in length. Topics included food quality, food safety, meal adequacy, commissary use, staffing and training, facility design, and the role of private vendors. The research team conducted interviews individually through Zoom Workspace, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. The research team removed identifying information from transcripts and attributed quotations only by the participant group to protect confidentiality. Participants received a $100 gift card for their participation.

Analysis

The research team analyzed interview transcripts using qualitative thematic analysis. They reviewed transcripts closely and identified recurring themes across interviews. They coded all transcripts using Dedoose qualitative analysis software 10.0.59 (2025). Two coders engaged in iterative coding and codebook refinement. They classified codes as shared across groups or unique to specific groups to facilitate comparative analysis. They identified themes based on their consistency and frequency across participant groups. The team examined themes across interview groups to identify areas of agreement as well as differences in perspective. Quotes included in this report are used to illustrate recurring themes in participants' own words.

RESULTS

All participants had experience with and/or knowledge of privatized food service in carceral settings, including with Aramark-managed food service (Table 3).

Table 3: Characteristics of interview participants

Group	Years of exposure to Aramark's practices (range)	Scope of experiences
Formerly Incarcerated n=3	6-22	Interviewees had lived experience eating food provided by Aramark.
Advocates n=4	3-9	Interviewees worked in prison reform, nutrition programs for incarcerated populations, and support programs for formerly incarcerated individuals and families. One advocate was also formerly incarcerated.
Food Service Professionals n=3	2-13	Interviewees included a former Aramark employee, former carceral dietitian in a DOC contracting with Aramark, and a former DOC employee with experience in an Aramark-run kitchen.

Our analysis revealed strong alignment across formerly incarcerated individuals, advocates, and carceral food service professionals regarding how privatized carceral food systems operate and the conditions they produce. However, there were differences in how participants understood accountability, consequences, and solutions. Six interrelated themes emerged.

Theme 1: Food Quality as a Daily Marker of Neglect and Devaluation

Participants across all interview groups described food quality in prisons and jails as consistently poor. Participants expressed that the low-quality food functioned as a daily indicator of how carceral institutions and private food service vendors, including large contractors such as Aramark, valued them. When asked to elaborate on the quality of food in facilities where they had been incarcerated, including an Aramark-managed facility, one participant stated:

> "We tell people what we think of them three times a day. And if you want people to leave with some sense of self intact, you can't hand them [expletive] three times a day and expect them to leave with any kind of idea of self-dignity or self-worth."
>
> —Formerly incarcerated participant

They emphasized that food quality was not merely a matter of preference or taste, but an experience that shaped physical, emotional, and social aspects of daily life. Participants described meals as consistently unappetizing, poorly prepared, and having low-quality taste, texture, temperature, and appearance in both self-operated and privatized food service, including Aramark-managed food service. According to one formerly incarcerated participant describing their experience with carceral food service in general:

> "My experience with prison and jail meals were that they tend to be lacking in any seasoning, lacking in any sort of appetizing cooking techniques. For the most part the food you're eating is just reheated, boiled, and is not cooked with an eye toward palatability."
>
> —Formerly incarcerated participant

This routinely poor food quality significantly affected formerly incarcerated participants' ability to eat. Some believed the carceral diet contributed to chronic disease risk. One participant described the experience of people they were incarcerated with at a facility where Aramark managed food service, explaining:

> "[With] all that sugar and sodium. [Incarcerated people] ended up with diabetes. They ended up with high blood pressure. They ended up with all these different things, and it derived from either the food or trying to get some seasoning to put on it to make the food edible."
>
> —Formerly incarcerated participant

Advocates and correctional food service professionals corroborated these accounts of poor quality at privatized institutions, though they framed the issue in more structural terms and emphasized the role of profit-motivated food service in lowering the cost of food at the expense of quality and dignity. For example, when asked about the potential benefits of privatized food service in carceral settings, one participant responded:

> "In theory, if we're saving money in the correctional budget by leveraging a company that has all of these suppliers that are able to provide high quality food at a lower cost and streamline things, and they have their own staff and they're well trained, I think conceptually, that sounds like it could be good, right? But in practice, we see that it's not just [STATE] that this isn't working, it's a nationwide corrections issue that it ends up…we just cut corners, and it really breaks down accountability."
>
> —Advocate

Correctional food service professionals described being responsible for preparing meals and ensuring food safety while having little control over menus, portions, preparation methods, or procurement. When describing their experience with Aramark, these participants said that decisions were dictated by the company and established contracts, leaving staff unable to respond to problems even when they recognized them. Over time, this constrained staff agency, producing moral concerns and disillusionment. As one professional explained:

> "So my concerns that I brought up, it was always a fight with Aramark. They never saw what was wrong, even with the feces in the ice machine."
>
> —Food service professional

The perspectives of all three groups emphasized that low-quality food, inadequate resources, and a lack of accountability on behalf of the private food service vendor, with many participants specifically referencing Aramark, reinforces the role of poor quality food provision in the dehumanizing impact of the carceral system.

Theme 2: Nutritional Adequacy Beyond Calories

A dietitian with extensive experience in carceral settings distinguished between calorie- and nutrient-focused standards, stating that private food service companies were required to meet set calorie minimums but no specific targets for macronutrients (carbohydrates, proteins, and fats), fiber, or micronutrients (vitamins and minerals). Interviewees consistently referenced calorie-focused nutrition standards in privatized food service in prisons and jails, with several participants describing practices under Aramark contracts. When staff attempted to raise awareness of the importance of nutrient-focused standards rather than relying on calories, they were shut down. One former employee at a department of corrections that contracted with Aramark recollected:

> "There weren't clear guidelines on what a one-size-fits-all menu looks like, as far as nutrition standards. And I even asked my boss, who was a dietitian, "how are we deciding if this is good enough?" They had calorie requirements, they wanted to be around 2800 calories, and so that kind of set the tone... But I felt like that was really ambiguous, and I still don't feel like I have a grasp on that."
>
> —Food service professional

Nearly every participant raised concerns about the nutritional value of meals served in prisons and jails contracting with Aramark. Describing Aramark-managed food service, they reported extremely limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables, inconsistent quality and quantity of protein-rich foods, and repetitive menus that relied heavily on refined carbohydrates as a low-cost, low-nutrient, high-calorie filler. Formerly incarcerated participants speculated that high refined carbohydrate intake and low fruit, vegetable, and protein intake were linked to the development and exacerbation of chronic diseases and other medical conditions among incarcerated populations. When asked to elaborate on a previous statement that the food quality was better before Aramark started managing food service for the facility where they were incarcerated, one participant explained:

> "The food, I mean, you can't have energy whenever you eat a lot of starches and noodles, you feel tired. You get more exhausted. You don't want to do things. [It] increases, you know, obesity and type two diabetes, and there's just a lot more people going to get their finger sticks [blood glucose test]."
>
> —Formerly incarcerated participant

Inadequate portion sizes and meal timing issues exacerbated hunger and necessitated incarcerated individuals' reliance on the commissary to feel satiated, further undermining nutritional adequacy. Institutional policy required meals to be served at odd hours and with long breaks in between, contributing to dysregulated hunger and fullness compared to a typical eating schedule. Across self-operated and privatized food service, participants reported extremely early meals, often around 4 am, with the justification that the carceral facility needed to feed people before morning court appearances or work assignments. In many settings, the first two meals of the day were distributed

simultaneously to each cell, forcing incarcerated individuals to either eat both meals at once or leave one unrefrigerated for hours before consuming it. As the final meal of the day could be served any time from 3:45 pm to 6 pm, incarcerated individuals often went 10 to 12 hours without a meal. Despite meeting calorie targets, these prolonged fasting periods caused by facility schedules led to hunger, forcing incarcerated individuals to turn to the commissary as the only available source of food. Normalization of this routine was described by one formerly incarcerated individual:

> "I mean, I think we would joke with each other, like, 'oh, you're going in your box again. It's like nine o'clock at night.' 'You're going to your box' meaning finding something to eat from your commissary stash. Like pretty much a regular occurrence, if not daily, near daily."
>
> —Formerly incarcerated participant

Theme 3: From Meals to Purchases: How Commissary Fills the Gaps in Food Service

Interviewees from all three groups described commissary purchases as essential to compensate for inadequate meals, functioning as an inequitable safety net within carceral facilities, with participants frequently referencing facilities contracting with Aramark. Rather than providing occasional snacks, the commissary was widely seen as necessary to mitigate hunger. Participants emphasized that institutional meals alone were often insufficient, requiring incarcerated people and their families to spend large sums of money on low-quality food from the commissary, such as instant ramen, chips, and processed meat.

Formerly incarcerated participants described access to the commissary as central to survival. Those with financial means were able to supplement inadequate meals, while those without funds experienced persistent hunger or were forced to beg for help from other incarcerated individuals. Describing their experience with both contract and self-operated food service, one participant explained:

> "I think what stands out to me is just a lot of people just didn't have [funds], right? So the food service was inadequate, and they didn't have the funds for commissary. And so wherever I was, with some regularity, there was always somebody who was like, "hey, man, can you spare a soup?" like a ramen pack."
>
> —Formerly incarcerated participant

Advocates further emphasized that this dependence on commissary can be structurally embedded in privatized food service arrangements. In many carceral facilities, the same private companies that provide meals also operate and profit from commissary service contracts. In the case of Trinity Services Group, the same private equity firm has major holdings in both Trinity and the commissary vendor Keefe Group.[iv] As one advocate explained:

> "I think there's been a lot of maneuvering around the industry... And a lot of people don't know that Trinity is owned by the same company that Keefe's is owned by, and in fact, they sit under the same holding company, but they bid on things separately, and a lot of times their connection is not very public or known."
>
> —Advocate

Interviewees, especially advocates, suggested that this dual ownership structure created a system that incentivized companies to provide inadequate and low-quality meals as they would profit from simultaneously lowering food costs and increasing commissary revenue. This pay-to-eat structure obscures accountability and undermines claims that privatized food service delivers cost-efficient nutrition.

[iv] Although not specifically mentioned by participants, this concern is applicable to facilities that contract with both Aramark Correctional Services for food service and Union Supply Group, another subsidiary of Aramark, for commissary.

Theme 4: Food Safety as a Persistent, Normalized Risk

All interviewees shared food safety concerns about prisons and jails, causing it to emerge as one of the most consistently shared problems. Formerly incarcerated participants offered vivid accounts of unsafe food, emphasizing how common these conditions were, including in food service settings managed by Aramark. Exposure to spoiled food, pest infestation, and unsanitary preparation techniques were described not as exceptions that prompted corrective action, but rather as a regular occurrence while incarcerated. For example, when asked about their experience with pests in privatized food service facilities two interviewees reported:

> "There have been times where people were working in a chow hall and rats would go diving off in the food. And instead of throwing the food away, they would still serve it. They will say, "Well, we took it out", or sometimes they found feces in the food."
>
> —Formerly incarcerated participant

> "Pests can be a struggle…if it's not something you stay on top of, it can get out of control, and we have to pour a lot of resources into it. And, yeah, it certainly happens."
>
> —Food service professional

Others described moldy bread, expired milk, and visibly contaminated meals with pieces of metal and other non-food materials, with many of these examples occurring in Aramark-managed food service operations. They noted that complaints rarely led to meaningful change. The normalization of these conditions reinforced participants' perception that food safety was not taken seriously in the carceral food service setting, particularly under privatized food service arrangements.

Carceral food service professionals corroborated these accounts, framing food safety failures as the result of structural and operational constraints within privatized food service systems. Workers emphasized chronic understaffing, limited or nonexistent food safety and operations training, and the large scale of food production as major barriers to maintaining safe conditions. As one worker explained, referring to a facility where Aramark managed food service:

> "We officers have to leave the kitchen in order to deliver the food trays to housing units. So we might start off with like three or four officers, but once the kitchen line start going, it's only one officer who stays down there. So it's impossible to see who's doing what at all times."
>
> —Food service professional

Participants described oversight as infrequent, limited in scope, and failing to capture day-to-day practices, including in food service operations managed by Aramark. In most cases, health department inspections were noted as scheduled in advance. They were also superficial, failing to assess safe storage, temperature control, and other food safety practices during meal times, reducing their effectiveness as accountability tools. These conditions left workers feeling unable to intervene or speak up even when safety concerns were apparent. A former correctional dietitian in a facility managed by Aramark described how underreporting of foodborne illness undermined food safety compliance:

> "Even when someone has diarrhea, vomiting, whatever it is, what I noticed in [STATE] was they can report that and ask for medical care, but it will take a couple of days before they'll see an actual medical provider, and at that point, the symptoms are probably gone. ...but they don't have the response time, medically to actually track what's going on and find trends of having diarrhea in so many different places. So I had a really hard time being able to encourage food safety, especially in [STATE], because there was...no data to show like, we are having problems, even though I am absolutely sure there were many foodborne illnesses."
>
> —Food service professional

Advocates discussed these failures within broader accountability gaps, particularly in privatized food service arrangements. They emphasized that even when violations were documented, consequences were often minimal, allowing unsafe practices to persist. One advocate noted:

> "These companies, like Aramark, they get fined often for their bad practices. And then they still get their contracts renewed, which blows my mind, not even like, "do they still get contracts with other like agencies?" but they get their contracts renewed with the very agency they violated and breached contract and got fined by."
>
> —Advocate

These accounts suggest that food safety risks in privatized carceral food service, including when managed by Aramark, are produced by overlapping factors, including understaffing, inadequate training, limited oversight, and weak enforcement mechanisms. This underscores that unsafe food conditions are not the result of individual negligence, but of systemic failures that place incarcerated people at risk.

Theme 5: Privatization as a Turning Point in Declining Food Quality, Control, and Accountability

Participants who experienced a privatization transition described it as a turning point in how food service operated and how meals were experienced, most often in reference to Aramark. While they described self-operated food service as less than ideal, they viewed it as more adaptable and subject to internal oversight than privatized arrangements.

Formerly incarcerated participants described a noticeable reduction in food quality following the transition to Aramark-managed food service. Several recalled that meals under self-operation generally met basic expectations for edibility. After outsourcing food service to Aramark, participants described meals as smaller, less palatable, less consistent in quality and increasingly vulnerable to contamination. They described changes as abrupt rather than gradual, reinforcing the perception that the transition to Aramark marked a distinct break in deteriorating food service practices:

> "Well, the changes that I saw, the first change that I noticed was the trays. The actual physical tray was changed. The physical tray that they replaced it with in privatization was a smaller tray, which meant that you got smaller portions. That was the first thing that I recognized. Then later, I would say, maybe a year later, we begin to notice the quality of the food begin to decline, and then maybe by the third year, we was looking at food that we really didn't even know what it was. We couldn't really even like recognize it during that point."
>
> —Formerly incarcerated advocate

> "We would have baked barbecue chicken. We would have fresh salad. We had a salad bar, actually. We had bowls, like actual bowls and spoons in the dining hall that we could just help ourselves to a bowl of cereal with a piece of fruit... One of the first things they did was they got rid of the bowls and spoons, and they got rid of the actual salad bar, you know, the actual machine that held the salad."
>
> —Formerly incarcerated participant

Others who experienced a transition from self-operated to Aramark-managed food service emphasized that quality declined alongside variety, with meals becoming more repetitive and less filling:

> "That's what people seem to miss the most, is they think that the portions have gotten significantly smaller, and they just kind of eat the same thing every day."
>
> —Advocate

Under self-operated food service models, workers described having some autonomy to adjust menus, preparation methods, or service practices at their discretion. By contrast, food service professionals and advocates described privatized food service, including when managed by Aramark, as governed by rigid contracts that left little room for adaptation on the part of the correctional officers and food service staff, but ample opportunities for the vendor to fail to meet their stated objectives:

> "...it's the contracts that we develop and the way that they're constructed. They have so many loopholes within that contract. I think that is one of another one of the major dangers."
>
> —Advocate

Workers and advocates also described privatized food service as highly centralized and driven by cost containment:

> "They really just told us, look, it's about money. It's going to be cheaper to feed them through Aramark, and if we could just up the packaging, that's easier for us."
>
> —Advocate

Meals were often prepared and pre-packaged off-site, transported long distances, and reheated before service, which food service professionals identified as key contributors to declining quality.

While private vendors advertised a low sticker price, some participants raised concerns of a "bait and switch" where misleading contract stipulations allowed private vendors to increase their fees significantly after contracts were signed by both parties. As one advocate explained from personal experience:

> "So, like, they'll say, "hey, I can provide 30 meals for a million dollars, and I can hit all these points in the 30 meals that I'm going to provide." Okay, cool, they do everything because they've underbid everybody else. Then once the contract is locked in, they come back and say, "oh, you know, actually, because of this, because of that, we actually are going to have to raise the price to 2.5 million."
>
> —Advocate

Others emphasized that contract enforcement mechanisms were often weak, allowing quality and safety problems to persist without meaningful consequences:

> "There has to be oversight and consequences. And serious consequences, because we know that there are companies who will pay a $5,000 or $20,000 a month fine to make $100,000 or $2 million a month. I'll make that trade off. I understand the business people would. That's just good math, they're not being seen as breaking any law. There's nothing they can get prosecuted for. They just have to pay a fine."
>
> —Formerly incarcerated participant

Participants described privatized arrangements as diffusing responsibility across contracts, vendors, and agencies, with many referencing Aramark when describing these dynamics, making it difficult to identify who was accountable for poor outcomes. Participant accounts suggest that privatization reshapes incentives in ways that prioritize efficiency, scale, and profit maximization over food quality and safety, including under large multi-state vendors such as Aramark. Importantly, formerly incarcerated individuals, professionals working within the system, and advocates observing it from the outside expressed dissatisfaction with privatization, underscoring broad concern about how privatized food service operates in practice.

Theme 6: Reality Falls Short of all Definitions of Success in Carceral Food Service

Interviews revealed different understandings of what it means for a carceral food service operation to be "successful." Both formerly incarcerated participants and advocates defined success in practical and experiential terms. From their perspective, a successful food service operation provides meals that are safe, filling, and health-promoting, without requiring supplemental commissary purchases to avoid hunger. They conveyed that food should meet basic nutritional requirements and be served in ways that promote health and dignity:

> "What in my view defines success? I think efficient, nutritional food that doesn't necessitate people going to commissary, and that has long term positive health impacts... I think adequate amount of food, at times when people actually eat, that [the] food is nutritional and gives them the needed things, but that it's also dignified"
>
> —Advocate

Advocates also articulated success in terms of accountability and oversight. From this perspective, a successful carceral food service operation is one that meets clear standards, is transparent about performance, and where corrective action can be taken immediately when problems arise.

Correctional food service professionals often described success in narrower operational terms shaped by limited authority and work responsibilities. Success meant preparing and distributing meals on time and avoiding disruptions, even when quality or safety concerns remained unresolved. As one professional suggested, markers of a strong food service program include comprehensive training and transparent menus:

> "One of the biggest things is training, that's top tier. Menus should be transparent. And I'm a tell you this, I've worked in that kitchen. I've worked at [REDACTED] jail for seven years. I've never seen a menu."
>
> —Food service professional

Food service professionals also shared holistic recommendations about improving food quality, increasing incarcerated population participation in menu development and feedback, and the importance of dignity for incarcerated people through food service:

> "Other things that could help develop a menu is like we'd do a survey with the inmates to ask like what they would like to see, or their opinion on current dishes, or what they like, what they don't like, also based on demographics, so if you're in a part of the country where there's like, a large Hispanic population, the dietitians might add more dishes that would suit that population."
>
> —Food service professional

These definitions of success, despite varying, reveal a system in which food service is not meeting minimal expectations for nutrition, safety, and dignity. Formerly incarcerated, food service, and advocate participants all endorsed aspirations for a carceral food system providing food that is nutritionally adequate, prepared safely, culturally appropriate and modifiable, and treats incarcerated individuals with dignity. Participants stated that this food system could be achieved through policy change, including proper education and training, independent oversight and contract enforcement, and incarcerated population collaboration in meal planning and menu design. Aligning definitions of success around shared outcomes, including nutrition, food safety, dignity, and accountability, is essential to meaningful carceral food system reform and provides a foundation for the recommendations that follow.

LIMITATIONS

This report reflects the experiences and perspectives of a limited number of participants and is not intended to represent all carceral facilities or food service arrangements, nor all Aramark-managed carceral food service. Participant accounts may also reflect variation across states, facility types, security levels, and time periods that were not fully captured in this sample. As with many qualitative studies, participants who chose to be interviewed may have had stronger opinions or more salient experiences than those who did not participate, and some accounts rely on retrospective recall. However, the consistency of themes across participant groups and the literature review, as well as the convergence of perspectives from individuals with different roles and experiences, strengthens confidence in the findings and highlights systemic issues that warrant attention.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Participants described consistent problems with food quality and safety in both self-operated and privatized prison and jail food service, including Aramark food service. Formerly incarcerated participants described these systemically poor food conditions as dehumanizing and detrimental to their health and quality of life while incarcerated.
2. Participants had heightened concerns about outsourcing food service to Aramark and similarly sized food service management companies, including the pursuit of efficiency and profit at the expense of food quality and safety, the emphasis on calories as the primary nutrition metric, and less staff agency to address problems.
3. Participants who experienced a transition from self-operated to Aramark-operated food service reported declines in portion sizes, nutritional quality (*e.g.*, fewer fruits and vegetables, more refined carbohydrates), variety, flavor, and food safety.
4. Participants described costly commissary purchases as critical to supplement inadequate meals in all types of food service, partly due to meals being served at odd times and after long gaps. Some perceived privatization as exacerbating this problem in institutions where the same company holds the food service and commissary contracts, incentivizing the vendor to serve inadequate meals to drive commissary profits.

Litigation Analysis

Prepared by the Center for Agriculture and Food Systems at Vermont Law and Graduate School

There has been extensive litigation against Aramark challenging food conditions in the carceral setting. This section provides a high-level analysis of the types of legal challenges filed against the company.

METHODS

Case law searches were performed on Westlaw and Lexis to identify cases from January 1, 2000, to March 3, 2026, in which Aramark was a party to litigation involving carceral food. The search query included all cases that included the terms "Aramark," "food" or "meal," and "prison" or "jail," and where Aramark was a named party in the litigation. Searches within these results were performed, to identify cases that included certain terms (see Table 4).

The identified cases were analyzed to evaluate the common types of legal claims raised against Aramark in the context of carceral food, the factors contributing to successful outcomes for plaintiffs, and common reasons for dismissal. The common claims were characterized by the specific facts that gave rise to the legal claims and some of the representative cases have been analyzed and included here. The results below explore major trends across a large swath of cases and includes a selection of

cases as examples only. There are many cases addressing similar claims that are relevant and could be used in their place. While Aramark's proportionally large role in the carceral food setting makes these cases representative of litigation on the topic generally, this section does not intend to capture all the nuances of carceral food litigation in federal courts. Furthermore, we have not verified the factual allegations or evaluated the merit of any individual cases. The section concludes with a discussion of the reasons these cases often fail to move forward (reasons for dismissal).

RESULTS

Overview

The search returned more than 500 cases in which Aramark was a party to litigation involving carceral food (see Table 4). Many of these cases include similar legal claims, and a set of themes emerged in the allegations made against Aramark, the hurdles individuals face when litigating these claims, and the courts' response.

Table 4. Results of search for cases in which Aramark was a party to litigation regarding carceral food

Base search query	Number of cases	
Lexis: Aramark and (food or meal) and (prison or jail) name(Aramark)	594	
Westlaw: Aramark & (prison jail) & (food meal) & TI (Aramark)	529	
Term searches within these results	**Number of cases**	
Constitutional claims	*Lexis*	*Westlaw*
Eighth Amendment	327	311
Fourteenth Amendment	201	188
First Amendment	151	141
Keywords	*Lexis*	*Westlaw*
Inadequate w/s (food or meal)	129	121
Inedible	28	28
Religion/religious/religions	100	95
Medical/medicate/medic/medication/medicine	347	332
Sick/sickness w/p (food or meal)	70	72
Undercook/undercooked/undercooks	27	27
Contaminate/contaminated/contaminates	84	77
Rotten	29	28
Mold/moldy	56	55
Maggot/maggots	17	19

The vast majority of plaintiffs in these cases are individuals who are incarcerated and representing themselves *pro se* (without legal representation). *Pro se* litigants, and especially those in the carceral system, face a variety of challenges when initiating litigation including lack of legal expertise, limited access to legal resources, financial constraints, and complex procedural hurdles in court.

In the context of conditions of confinement, it is common for litigation to focus on constitutional rights claims because state officials are often protected by legal immunity, meaning they cannot be sued for personal injury or other types of legal claims in the same way private actors and companies can. Some cases included here also employ claims under federal laws including the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA) and Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). Additionally, some of the cases encompass traditional negligence claims arguing that officials failed to use reasonable care and caused harm as a result. Individuals sue Aramark for constitutional rights

violations under 42 U.S.C. §1983, a federal civil rights law that allows individuals to sue state, county, or local officials – and private actors performing government functions – when they violate someone's rights while acting in an official government role, which is also known as acting under the "color of state law." Prison guards, workers, and administrators work for the state, so their interactions with individuals who are incarcerated naturally fall into this designation. Because Aramark is not a direct employee of the state, but rather a contractor providing food services in prisons and jails, one of the recurring analyses in these cases concerns Aramark's status as a state actor—or private actor performing government functions—that can be sued for constitutional rights violations.

REVIEW OF EIGHTH AMENDMENT CLAIMS AGAINST ARAMARK

Eighth Amendment claims against Aramark on issues relating to food in prisons and jails are by far the most common claims brought by individuals who are incarcerated. Among the cases analyzed in this review, between 311 and 327 included Eighth Amendment claims. Within these cases filed against Aramark that include Eighth Amendment claims, there are a few trends (see Table 4): medical concerns in relationship to the food, inedible food, food that is inadequate in some way, food that made the plaintiff sick, food that was contaminated, mold, rotten food, undercooked food, and maggots. The specific facts in each case differ, but these themes indicate that lawsuits filed against Aramark across the country are citing many of the same concerns.

Photo: swisshippo - stock.adobe.com.

The Eighth Amendment provides constitutional protection against cruel and unusual punishment.[87] When used to address meals in the carceral setting, the Eighth Amendment is frequently invoked against Aramark to argue that the food is nutritionally inadequate, unsanitary, or poses a risk to health and safety. Essentially, the plaintiffs bringing Eighth Amendment cases against Aramark allege that the food creates unconstitutional conditions of confinement or demonstrates deliberate indifference to basic human needs. Most lawsuits filed on the topic of carceral food against Aramark involve an Eighth Amendment claim, even those that focus on other claims.

In the federal courts, the cruel and unusual standard has been extended to include conditions of confinement that "involve the unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain" or "are grossly disproportionate to the severity of the crime." [88-90] When considered in the context of medical needs, the U.S. Supreme Court determined that only deliberate indifference to the serious medical needs of individuals who are incarcerated constitutes the unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain that is prohibited under the Eighth Amendment.[91] Courts have extended this interpretation of the cruel and unusual standard to cases involving food served in correctional facilities.[92-94]

The U.S. Supreme Court has established that an individual suing a prison or jail must prove "deliberate indifference" by the staff and officials regardless of whether the issue complained about is an isolated event or a series of repeated occurrences.[95] The Court held that multiple factors may be combined to allege a constitutional violation, which on their own might be insufficient. However, these factors must "have a mutually enforcing effect that produces the deprivation of a single, identifiable human need such as food, warmth, or exercise." These holdings have imposed a high burden of proof on individuals challenging the adequacy of food in the carceral setting under the Eighth Amendment.

Courts analyze Eighth Amendment claims under two prongs to establish cruel and unusual punishment: an objective and a subjective prong. Under the objective standard, plaintiffs must prove the food was so inadequate or unsafe that it deprived them of a basic human need such as health or nutrition.[96-99] Under the subjective standard, litigants must prove that prison officials or contractors acted with deliberate indifference to the person in custody's health or safety. This means that the plaintiff must demonstrate that the defendant was aware of a risk of serious harm to the incarcerated individual and disregarded that risk.[97, 100]

Pagan v. Westchester County provides an example of the typical form taken by and allegations made in Eighth Amendment carceral food litigation.[101] However, unlike the great majority of Eighth Amendment claims against Aramark, which are dismissed in the early stages of proceedings, *Pagan* survived a motion to dismiss. As a result, it is frequently cited by individuals who are incarcerated when filing similar lawsuits. In *Pagan,* Plaintiffs were several individuals who were formerly incarcerated in the Westchester County Jail, proceeding *pro se* against the County, Department of Corrections (DOC), and Aramark, among others. The plaintiffs alleged that they received undercooked or rotted meals on trays containing mold or bacteria. Because of the substandard food provided by the jail, they allegedly were forced to buy overpriced food from the commissary and/or to change their designated religious affiliations to obtain proper meals. Plaintiffs brought claims under 42 U.S.C. §1983 for violations of their Eighth and First Amendment rights. In addition to small portions, plaintiffs were served "salads containing rotted lettuce, vegetables with insects on them, and undercooked meat." The plaintiffs argued they suffered health issues as a result, including "severe stomach pains, nausea, vomiting, fever, headaches, diarrhea, weight loss, fatigue, dizziness, dehydration, and stretch marks." Both Aramark and the Commissioner of the DOC were aware of the complaints about the food because the plaintiffs complained and filed formal grievances about the food quality. The case was first reviewed by a magistrate judge, whose report and recommendation the district court adopted in full.[102] The magistrate judge found the allegations regarding the rotten, raw, and moldy food, alongside the alleged injuries, were sufficient to state a claim for a serious deprivation of rights, which met the objective prong of an Eighth Amendment analysis. For the subjective prong, the judge found that the number of letters and complaints to prison officials and Aramark indicated that the defendants were aware of the risk of harm posed to the plaintiffs and the fact that Aramark continued to serve contaminated and undercooked meals indicated that the defendants disregarded the risk of harm. The magistrate judge concluded that plaintiffs had alleged facts sufficient to meet both prongs

Photos: John Moore - Getty Images (top), motortion - stock.adobe.com (bottom).

of the Eighth Amendment analysis and could survive the motion to dismiss the case. However, the magistrate judge dismissed parts of the plaintiffs' claims relating to small portions and price gouging, and this case was not heard on the merits.

This decision is one example of a large body of cases filed against Aramark by individuals who are incarcerated regarding violations of their Eighth Amendment rights due to the food they were served.[100, 103-105] Because the Eighth Amendment only applies once an individual has been convicted, individuals who are detained before trial must bring their claims regarding cruel and unusual punishment under the Fourteenth Amendment, which is discussed in further detail below.

REVIEW OF FOURTEENTH AMENDMENT CLAIMS AGAINST ARAMARK

Two Fourteenth Amendment clauses, the Due Process and Equal Protection Clauses, are commonly used by plaintiffs in carceral food litigation. In the claims against Aramark, the bulk of Fourteenth Amendment due process claims are brought by individuals who are detained before trial and raise allegations identical to those discussed in the above section on the Eighth Amendment.[106]

The Equal Protection Clause, however, has routinely been used to make claims against Aramark regarding religious discrimination in meals. In order to successfully plead a valid equal protection claim, a plaintiff must allege that they have been treated differently from similarly situated inmates, and that the discrimination was based upon a constitutionally impermissible basis, such as race, religion, national origin, or some other protected right.[107] In cases against Aramark, these claims have involved religious individuals alleging that they received different treatment and meals than those of other religious affiliations.[108, 109] For example, in *Sutton v. City of Philadelphia*, a Muslim individual who was incarcerated alleged that Jewish individuals were provided meat in their meals and Muslim individuals were not.[110] The court found that Aramark was aware of the difference in religious meals and their effect on Muslim individuals and failed to take measures to address their concerns, indicating Aramark's discriminatory intent. Plaintiffs were allowed to proceed with their equal protection claims against the city.

REVIEW OF FIRST AMENDMENT AND STATUTORY CLAIMS AGAINST ARAMARK

First Amendment claims arising in the context of carceral food may allege violations of freedom of religion or focus on retaliation for the exercise of free speech. Within the cases (between 141 and 151) that have been brought against Aramark for First Amendment violations in the context of carceral food, common claims include: violation of the right to receive a diet consistent with religious beliefs, a substantial burden on the exercise of religious beliefs (policy or action that places significant pressure on an individual to modify their behavior or violate their religious beliefs), intentional denial of a religious diet, and failure to accommodate religious dietary needs. The government can defeat these claims by arguing that the burden on religious rights was in service of a legitimate penological interest.[111]

Religious Freedom Claims

The First Amendment's Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses are frequently used in carceral food litigation against Aramark. The Establishment Clause guarantees religious freedom, and the

Free Exercise Clause protects religious rights from being substantially burdened by the federal government.[112-117] Individuals who are incarcerated bring free exercise claims under the federal Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA), which prohibits the government from imposing a "substantial burden" on religious exercise unless it can prove a compelling governmental interest and that the burden imposes the "least restrictive means."[118, 119] This legislation was introduced after the federal Prison Litigation Reform Act (PLRA), which was intended to reduce the number of lawsuits in federal courts filed by individuals who were incarcerated.[120] Among other measures, it required that individuals seeking to file lawsuits in federal courts first exhaust the administrative remedies available in the correctional setting, meaning they are required to utilize all available internal grievance processes before proceeding to litigation.[121] While the PLRA has impacted the ability of individuals who are incarcerated to bring successful legal challenges, RLUIPA provides a strong basis for religious exercise claims.

Photo: Dea Brayden, UUA. This is meant to depict a typical prison or jail meal. This photo was not taken in an Aramark-managed facility.

First Amendment rights are restricted in the carceral setting: prison regulations that impinge on inmates' constitutional rights are considered valid if they are reasonably related to a legitimate penological interest.[122] Judicial review therefore involves a considerable degree of deference to prison authorities—weighing the interests of the prison as an institution (such as in security and operation) against the constitutional rights retained by the people in custody.[122, 123]

In *Torres v. Aramark Food & Commissary Services*, a Muslim incarcerated individual at the Orange County Correctional Facility allegedly received "kosher" meals during the observance of Ramadan that consistently fell below a 2000 calorie diet and were insufficient to sustain him physically or mentally during the fasting period.[124] The plaintiff alleged that he consistently made verbal complaints to prison officials and wrote to Aramark's Food Director, but the complaints went unaddressed. Ultimately, he requested removal from the Ramadan menu, alleging that the nutritional inadequacy of the meals and his inability to supplement the meals with food from the commissary forced him to do so. The plaintiff's Eighth Amendment claims were dismissed, but his First Amendment claims were not. The court found that the plaintiff had plausibly alleged that his sincerely held religious beliefs were substantially burdened, as he was forced to choose between nutritionally adequate meals and complying with his religious fasting requirements. Further, Aramark did not demonstrate that this burden on plaintiff's rights was in service of a legitimate penological interest. The plaintiff also alleged that the kosher diet menu regularly and predictably provided inadequate nutrition, which the court found was widespread enough to support a finding of a policy or custom. As a result, the court denied the motion to dismiss with respect to the First Amendment claim. This case highlights the common First Amendment violation claims from individuals with religious diet needs in facilities where Aramark provides meals.[104, 125-128]

Retaliation Claims

Another type of First Amendment claim arises when individuals who are incarcerated file grievances or make complaints, initiate litigation, refuse to eat food that violates their religious beliefs, or make requests for religious diets and experience retaliation by correctional officers as a result. Among cases against Aramark, retaliation is not alleged very frequently. For the few cases that do allege this, the courts usually dismiss these claims due to a failure to allege sufficient facts.

To succeed on a First Amendment retaliation claim, plaintiffs must show they were engaged in activity that is protected under the First Amendment, they suffered an adverse action or deprivation that would deter them from engaging in that protected First Amendment activity in the future, and the protected First Amendment activity was a substantial or motivating factor for the adverse or retaliatory activity.[123, 129] Freedom of speech is a protected First Amendment right.

When considering these types of claims, many courts are guided by Supreme Court jurisprudence that balances the individual's constitutional rights with the "legitimate penological objectives of the corrections system."[122] This means that substantial deference is given to correctional officials, and many First Amendment retaliation claims are dismissed.[130, 131]

COMMON REASONS FOR DISMISSAL

As these selected cases illustrate, courts often dismiss litigation brought by incarcerated individuals against Aramark for many of the same reasons. Frequently, lawsuits are dismissed for failure to allege sufficient facts to support a constitutional rights claim. The high bar set for these claims, coupled with the fact that many litigants represent themselves *pro se*, makes it challenging to successfully allege the facts needed to support these claims.

Another common reason for dismissal is a litigant's failure to exhaust administrative remedies.[132-135] As stated above, the Prison Litigation Reform Act mandates that individuals who are incarcerated exhaust all administrative remedies before filing a lawsuit in federal court concerning prison conditions, which requires compliance with all procedural and substantive requirements of the prison's grievance process.[136] Frequently, individuals try to access the courts before completing the internal grievance process, making their case ripe for dismissal.

Beyond the frequent dismissals for legal reasons, individuals who are incarcerated also face financial constraints, limited damage awards even in successful cases, and a variety of situational factors in the carceral setting that may have a chilling effect on litigation. Moreover, individuals might fear adverse or retaliatory actions when making legitimate complaints about the food served but face the high bar of demonstrating that their complaints were a substantial or motivating factor for the adverse action. Collectively, these factors create substantial barriers for individuals who are incarcerated to bring complaints, lawsuits, and follow through on litigation they have initiated.

LIMITATIONS

Aramark has a number of corporate subsidiaries with different entity names, and while most contain the name "Aramark," this may have impacted the exhaustiveness of the case law search. Although the search was refined several times, it continued to yield some cases that involved issues beyond the scope of carceral food (*e.g.*, health insurance arbitration disputes). Regarding the keyword searches, in many instances, cases that contained a particular term were at least in part materially about that term. However, the results do not exclude instances where a term was mentioned by the court in passing but where that term was not a material concern in the litigation. Finally, while this analysis revealed widespread allegations of poor food conditions in Aramark-managed prisons and jails and systemic barriers to relief for legitimate grievances, we did not evaluate the veracity of any claims in individual cases.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

1 Based on the research, Aramark has been a party to between 529-594 cases regarding carceral food conditions since 2000. These cases reveal widespread allegations of nutritionally inadequate, unsafe, and contaminated food.

2 Most legal claims have been brought under the Eighth Amendment, arguing that inadequate or unsafe food constitutes cruel and unusual punishment. Additional claims have been brought under the Fourteenth Amendment and the First Amendment, particularly in cases involving religious dietary needs. Across cases, common allegations include insufficient portions, spoiled or contaminated food, and failure to meet medical or religious dietary requirements.

3 Despite the prevalence of these claims, legal relief is difficult to obtain. Individuals who are incarcerated—often representing themselves—face significant procedural barriers and must meet a high legal standard to establish cruel and unusual punishment. Many cases are dismissed for failure to meet these standards or procedural requirements, including failure to exhaust the institutional grievance process before bringing a suit.

Recommendations

Our findings from the literature review, key informant interviews, and litigation analysis suggest that a combination of insufficient standards and poor compliance with existing standards drive poor outcomes for nutritional quality of meals served, palatability, and food safety in carceral food service operations managed by Aramark and to some extent other private companies. However, additional evidence is needed to assess whether a change in vendors away from Aramark or returning to self-operation would substantially improve carceral food service conditions.

Nevertheless, our findings point to meaningful opportunities for carceral institutions, their vendors, and policymakers to improve food safety, palatability, and nutrition standards and ensure compliance. We offer the following overarching principles and recommendations for corporate and institutional decision-makers to better protect the health and dignity of incarcerated people.

OVERARCHING PRINCIPLES

- Meals should be safe, appealing, nutritious, and prepared and served in a way that respects the dignity of people in custody.
    - An independent oversight entity should consult people in custody about the menu and ensure their feedback is used to guide changes. Potential methods include periodic (*e.g.*, quarterly) surveys and focus groups, perpetual mechanisms for submitting written feedback, taste tests for potential new menu items, and reviewing grievances.
    - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Model Food Safety Practices for Correctional Facilities should guide food safety policy and practice.[137] At minimum, the model's "standard" practices should be required in institutional policies and food service contracts.
- People in custody should never have to depend on commissary or other food-for-purchase venues to replace unsafe, nutritionally inadequate, or unpalatable meals.
- Menus should adhere to evidence-based food and nutrition standards that consider chronic disease prevention and health promotion in addition to nutrient adequacy and prioritize fresh

and minimally processed foods. Calorie and nutrient needs should be primarily met through nutrient-dense foods without the need for a fortified beverage.

- The American Correctional Association's current standards primarily concern nutrient adequacy.[13] Menus should meet these standards as well as evidence-based food group (*e.g.,* vegetables, protein foods) recommendations. The 2025 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee's (DGAC) "Eat Healthy Your Way" Dietary Pattern for Ages 2 and Older can be used to guide meal pattern and menu development.[138]
- New York City's Food Standards are a model of such standards that are applicable to correctional facilities.[139]

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ARAMARK AND OTHER FOOD SERVICE MANAGEMENT COMPANIES SERVING THE CARCERAL SECTOR

- Food service management companies should strengthen accountability for employees to comply with existing company policies and contractual requirements. Aramark has robust company policies and contractual commitments for food safety, menu adherence, and training for employees and incarcerated workers, and claims to have a third party conduct quality assurance audits at all locations at least annually. However, our research indicates those policies are not always implemented, particularly with respect to food safety, portion standardization, and staff training. Additional accountability measures could include:
  - Publish results of third party audits in a public accountability report annually.
  - Establish/strengthen internal whistleblower reporting mechanisms and protections.
  - Require supervisors to maintain photo repositories of sample meal trays for every meal served, to ensure menu fidelity.
  - Limit food service supervisor authorization to substitute cheaper or less nutritious alternatives to menu items, especially proteins and produce.
- Similar to the New York City Food Standards for Meals and Snacks Purchased and Served, food service management companies should adopt company-wide daily serving standards for whole fruit, total vegetables, non-starchy vegetables, whole grains, and protein foods and limits on sodium, saturated fat, and added sugar.[139]
  - Establish a timeline for phasing in implementation to the greatest extent possible within the constraints of each contract.
  - Work toward negotiating prices with suppliers that make the standards accessible within clients' typical budgets.
  - Use the Scientific Report of the 2025 DGAC to guide the development of nutrition and food group standards for a range of calorie levels appropriate for the carceral setting.[138]

> "The food isn't failing inside because … there aren't some level of requirements, they flout them and they don't give a [expletive]. And so you don't change that by instituting more rules. It is the fact that people don't care about the rules that is our big issue. And I think that that is just because of the nature of that environment, and the beast, and who's in charge, and who gets to make the decisions, which are not the people who suffer at their hands."
>
> —Advocate interview participant

> "Oversight. That's the only thing that's going to do it. Serious oversight and consequences. With oversight, sure you can identify what's wrong, but if there are no consequences for what's going wrong, then what good is oversight in itself? It's nothing. There has to be both, there has to be oversight and consequences."
>
> —Formerly incarcerated interview participant

- Companies must prohibit the practice of adding water to foods or reducing portion sizes to stretch the number of servings in a given recipe.
- Commissary vendors should ensure that healthy options are available to institutions and priced at or below other options in the same product category.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS AND CARCERAL INSTITUTIONS

> "Make sure that a good company has the resources, funding, to be able to deliver the type of and quality of food that we want them to deliver."
>
> —Advocate interview participant

- We generally recommend against self-operated institutions outsourcing food service to a large food service management company. There is more evidence of negative than positive outcomes from privatization, at least with the industry leader, and it would be challenging to reverse course down the road after forfeiting in-house procurement infrastructure and staffing.
- Policymakers and institutions should establish evidence-based food and nutrition standards for prison and jail menus based on the Scientific Report of the 2025 DGAC or a comparable authority.
- Policymakers and institutions should allocate sufficient resources for carceral food service (whether in-house or contracted) to meet optimal nutrition, palatability, and food safety standards. Institutions should track foodborne illnesses, diet-related chronic diseases, and associated costs among the incarcerated population to facilitate evaluation of the impact of investments in food services.
- Policymakers and institutions should implement a values-based food procurement approach that prioritizes nutritious, minimally processed foods and minimizes the use of harmful processed foods.[140]
- Policymakers should ensure an effective, independent oversight body has the authority to conduct unannounced inspections of institutional food service to evaluate compliance with nutrition, food safety, and palatability standards.
- Policymakers and institutions should adjust meal times so that no more than 6 hours pass between meals during the day, and no more than 12 hours pass between dinner and breakfast. For example: breakfast 6-8 am, lunch 11 am–1 pm, dinner 5-7 pm.
- Institutions should make additional servings of all meal components available to individuals who are still hungry after eating meals by ensuring meal production accounts for an estimated percentage of the population with greater calorie needs.

> "The second thing I would recommend was having an inmate population that can monitor, you know, the food and work together with Aramark to say, "Hey, this is not healthy. Can we try for this?" Like, you know, kind of negotiate."
>
> —Formerly incarcerated interview participant

- Policymakers and/or institutions should require healthy options to be available on commissary menus and priced at or below other options in the same product category.

For jurisdictions that currently outsource prison or jail food service:

- Contract Development and Vendor Selection
  - Institutions should strengthen contract requirements as needed to require alignment with evidence-based nutrition guidelines and all regulations and best practices for food safety.
  - When developing a solicitation for a food service vendor, institutions should implement a best-value procurement approach instead of a lowest-bid approach, to prevent a vendor from winning a contract simply by offering the cheapest price.[141] Consider foregoing a requirement that bidders have prior experience in the carceral sector to facilitate competition.

- Policymakers and institutions should not award food service and commissary contracts to vendors owned by the same parent company (*e.g.*, Aramark Correctional Services and Union Supply Group, Trinity Services Group and Keefe Group) to avoid creating a profit incentive to reduce food quality and quantity in the regular meal service to divert incarcerated individuals to the commissary.

- Contract Oversight
  - An institutional employee or third party (ideally a dietitian or similarly trained professional) should conduct routine (*i.e.*, daily), unannounced inspections of the food service operation that address menu and portion compliance, taste tests (ensuring food served is palatable and free from spoilage and contamination), and food safety. Publish results of these inspections on a regular basis.
  - Institutions should hire an in-house dietitian to develop and analyze menus instead of relying on the contractor's dietitian or to independently review and approve the contractor's menus.
  - Institutions should enforce existing contract requirements with financial penalties large enough to disincentivize violations. Policymakers and institutions should not renew a contract with a vendor with repeated violations.
  - Policymakers and institutions should establish feedback loops between the population and an independent oversight entity, who can then direct the institution and vendor accordingly and provide accountability while protecting people in custody from retaliation. This should be in place of or in addition to feedback loops between the population in custody and the vendor. Contracts should state that the vendor will face a penalty if they consistently fail to achieve satisfactory meal scores.

- Before rebidding a food service contract, policymakers and institutions should evaluate whether projected savings from outsourcing have been achieved without compromising portion sizes, food and nutrition quality, food safety, and other outcomes such as staff adherence to security policies. If not, consider bringing food service in house to have more control over food procurement, menu development, and staffing.[142] Another alternative could be contracting with a non-profit vendor, which may be less profit-motivated. Even smaller scale, for-profit vendors may have better quality control.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE AMERICAN CORRECTIONAL ASSOCIATION AND NATIONAL COMMISSION ON CORRECTIONAL HEALTHCARE

- Accrediting organizations should strengthen their nutrition standards beyond meeting the Recommended Daily Allowances to align with the 2025 DGAC's Eat Healthy Your Way Dietary Pattern or a comparable standard.[143]

- Accrediting organizations should conduct unannounced inspections of food service operations and audits of menus and other supporting documents as a required component of accreditation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADVOCATES

- Advocates should continue to publicize the harms of carceral food service to hold institutions and contractors accountable and generate support for reforms.
- Advocates should oppose proposals to outsource food service for carceral facilities in their jurisdiction.
- Advocates should obtain (via Freedom of Information Act request if needed) their target institution's food service contract to understand the following:
    - What the vendor's obligations are and be able to demonstrate if they are not meeting them, and
    - When the contract ends, in order to advocate for transitioning to self-operated food service or for stronger contract terms in advance of the next contract.
- Advocates should develop a *pro se* explainer or provide support to people who are incarcerated seeking to hold food service providers accountable given the high evidentiary requirements for litigation.
- Advocates should create model solicitation and contract language for carceral institutions that continue to outsource food service to hold vendors accountable for optimal nutrition, palatability, and food safety standards.
- Advocates should develop a framework for public accountability of carceral food systems, especially when corporate actors are involved.[144]

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS

- Researchers should investigate whether self-operated facilities and private food service vendors beyond Aramark receive similar reports of problems with nutrition, palatability, and food safety.
- Researchers should conduct a systematic analysis of carceral food service contracts in a sample of states and localities to shed light on the universe of contract requirements and the opportunities for improvement.
- Researchers should study the relationship between contract requirements (and/or institutional policies) and outcomes for nutrition, palatability, and food safety.
- Researchers should conduct a systematic analysis of carceral institution menus to compare the nutritional quality of those developed by food service management companies to those developed by self-operated institutions.
- Researchers should use a true cost accounting approach to conduct an economic impact analysis of outsourcing carceral food service.[145]
- Researchers should measure and analyze food waste and associated costs in a sample of states and localities' carceral institutions, both self-operated and privatized, to highlight environmental and fiscal impacts.
- Researchers should assess and compare the top shareholders in Aramark and other prison industry companies to better understand who profits from the privatization of the carceral system.

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