

Carceral Food Systems Summit: Bridging Food Justice and Prisoner Justice Report

March 31st- April 1st 2023



Social Innovation Workshop
Unceded and unsundered Algonquin Anishinaabe territory, Ottawa

Food sovereignty requires abolition, and abolition requires food sovereignty.

Summary

The Carceral Food System Summit brought together activists, scholars, community practitioners, and students working within food justice and prisoner justice spaces to share, connect and learn the various ways in which food systems and carceral systems interconnect, and how we can work collectively to imagine and construct abolitionist futures through food.

Over the course of two days we heard from a range of actors discussing the contemporary state of prisons in Canada, campaigns against carceral expansion and how food can be a lens and tool of liberation. The objective was not to debate perspectives or develop a common set of recommendations, but rather to deepen our understanding, foster collaboration and cross-pollination, in hopes that stronger networks of allyship and solidarity will emerge to advance struggles for both prisoner justice and food justice.

In this report-back we provide a synthesis of the presentations and discussions in order to continue the dialogue and share the insights with the wider community. Presenters were given an opportunity to review its contents before publication. You'll note some differences in language and terminology throughout, as we have tried to respect the wording used by different groups and individuals.

This event would not have been possible without the invaluable contributions of the speakers and presenters, as well as the project support team: Patricia Jean-Vezina, Julie Courchesne and Tarran Maharaj. We'd also like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) as well as Saint Paul University for their financial support of this event.

The Carceral Food Systems Project

The Carceral Food Systems Project is a multi-year research project exploring food as "contested terrain" (Brisman 2008) within the Canadian prison system. Behind bars, food holds great importance; it is a basic need for survival, a valued commodity within the informal economy, a tool of both punishment and healing and a means through which to express one's identity. In some ways it is symbolic of the overall prison environment. Food has also become a site and tool of contestation and power relations. From hunger strikes to farms and garden programs, food is a means through which to resist state violence and re-imagine post-carceral futures. Ultimately, we hope to illustrate the complex interactions between food and carcerality and how we might work collectively to imagine and construct abolitionist futures through food. The Carceral Food Systems Project is led by Amanda Wilson at Saint Paul University.

To learn more visit our website: carceralfoodsystems.ca

Logo designed by Paterson Hodgson (<https://patersonhodgson.com>)

March 31st:

Ivan Zinger - Correctional Investigator of Canada

In addition to providing a quick overview of the federal prison system and the role of the Office of the Correctional Investigator, Dr. Zinger offered some salient observations about the state of prison food and federal corrections in general. He reminded attendees that federal corrections is big business: Correctional Services Canada (CSC) has an annual budget of roughly \$2.9 billion, and employs 19 000 individuals. Of that budget, only 6% goes toward programming within prisons. With one of the highest staff ratios in the world (1.2 staff/incarcerated person), it's not hard to see where most of the money goes. Despite this high level of investment in personnel, Dr. Zinger said it's difficult to identify best practices in much of the work that CSC does.

Speaking specifically of food, he noted that it's a big issue within Canadian prisons. This wasn't always the case. Twenty-five years ago, Dr. Zinger described how incarcerated individuals prepared and cooked the food at each prison. Both staff and those incarcerated ate together in common areas, with visitors and staff all eating the food prepared by incarcerated folks working in the kitchens. Food ingredients were primarily purchased locally, and according to Zinger, there were few complaints about food. There were also vocational training programs and incarcerated folks were able to gain red seal certification.

2008 marked an important turning point, when the newly elected Harper government adopted "tough on crime" legislation. In anticipation of the increased rates of incarceration these measures would generate, the federal correctional system demanded, and received, additional funding and staff resources. At the same time, the Harper government implemented its Deficit Reduction Action Plan (DRAP) on the heels of the 2008 financial crisis. The stated goals of DRAP were to "find savings without reducing staff." For CSC, this meant a reduction in services for incarcerated folks, and a downloading of costs onto those same incarcerated people.

Among its many harmful effects, DRAP led to the Food Services Modernization Initiative within CSC, which sought to reduce food costs by buying in bulk and "modernizing" the food service through a centralized cook-chill system. It also established a National Menu institutions are required to follow and a cap of six dollars spent on food per day per incarcerated individual. At each regional site, the ingredients are boiled for one-two hours, becoming a gooey stew consistency. This "food" is then placed in a plastic bag, sealed and put in a tub of hot water that slowly reduces the temperature over the course of a couple of hours. These bags are then put in the freezer and shipped to individual institutions. This so-called 'modernization' was not only costly, it significantly changed the quantity and quality of food received by incarcerated individuals, and there are now "many many many complaints."

The food has become so bad that many incarcerated individuals now rely heavily on the canteen for their food. While the canteen used to provide mostly pop, chocolate, and chips, today most canteens are stocked like a grocery store, with a full suite of food options available. The wages of incarcerated individuals have stagnated at \$6.90/day since 1981, and even that is out of reach for most, as only 10% of incarcerated persons receive the top rate. Add to that all the various deductions imposed by CSC, and Dr. Zinger estimates the take-home pay is closer to 2\$/day. In consequence, the

pay an incarcerated person receives is almost fully dedicated to complementing and/or substituting the poor quality food served by CSC.

One of the unique features of the Correctional Investigator is that they have unfettered access to any federal penitentiary. As part of this presentation, Dr. Zinger shared photos of the various meals he and his colleagues have seen during their visits to different jails:

Photos of meal trays



(Office of the Correctional Investigator 2023)



(Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2023)

He described breakfast and lunch as “hit and miss”, but noted the calories offered in some of the vegetarian options are incredibly low, as evidenced in the above tray containing mostly cucumbers. Dinners are where they receive the most complaints. One problem is the timing; dinners are served extremely early, to coincide with the end of shift for most day-time staff. Incarcerated individuals are offered some basic snacks (bread with peanut butter and jam, fruits) but most people purchase food from the canteen to ensure they have enough to sustain themselves during the over 12 hour wait between dinner and breakfast the next morning.

While CSC claims their menus are compliant with the Canada Food Guide, a recent audit identified many shortcomings, and the newly released Food Guide has likely only widened the gap. Dr. Zinger questioned whether the FSMI even achieved its principle goal of saving money, as building these large industrial kitchens cost millions of dollars. Another consequence was the loss of training opportunities. With the closure of individual kitchens at each institution, there are few to no vocational training programs anymore, cooking skills that could be transferable upon release and lead to employment opportunities. Overall, he said the conditions inside prisons are embarrassing; the food makes prisons less safe, and responding to all the complaints drains a lot of resources.

Despite all these problems, Dr. Zinger ended on a somewhat positive note, giving the example of Port-Cartier, which, because of its remote location, is able to circumvent many of the FSMI changes and, importantly, continues to prepare their food in-house. He noted that because of this, incarcerated individuals eat quite well, to the point where some don't want to be transferred to a different institution, even one that is at a lower security level.

Kanav Kathuria – Co-founder of the Maryland Food & Prison Abolition Project

Kanav spoke of the intersections between abolition and food systems. His work in this area grew out of a desire to understand the connections between food apartheid and rates of incarceration. The starting point for the [Maryland Food and Abolition Project](#) was observing the overlap between those living in deindustrialized neighbourhoods, who lack access to fresh produce and are over-policed, and those incarcerated in Maryland prisons. They sought to use small-scale farming and urban agriculture as a tool of empowerment, and to improve access to fresh foods both inside and outside of prison. Kanav encouraged attendees to think about food sovereignty at a neighborhood level, to make visible the overlaps between food deserts, redlining¹ and incarceration. Neighborhoods facing food deserts and redlining form the backbone of the incarcerated population. According to Kanav, incarceration and hunger are both products of racial capitalism: the same system of oppression that manufactures the prison population also manufactures hunger. We need to be looking at food-based forms of resistance in order to break down the ‘prison’ created by globalized food systems.

Kanav highlighted that food serves three primary functions in prison: one, control and violence, both covert and overt; two, it is a source of profit for food service corporations and third, it is the cause of devastating health conditions

It is important to name that food on the inside is a quotidian, daily form of violence.

¹ Redlining is a practice with a long history in Baltimore and elsewhere, of denying services and divesting from racialized and impoverished neighborhoods.

for those incarcerated. People are more likely to leave prison with chronic health problems as a result of the state of food on the inside. Food in prison isn't a source of nourishment, it's a tool to keep people alive. Maryland spends \$3.83 per person per day on food. US prisons with the lowest spending on food spend around 0.77\$/person/day. Spending so little necessarily means that the quality of food will be altered: starch-heavy meals, limited portions, and refusing to allow people second servings, except for bread.

In response to a question about tensions between reform and abolition, Kanav suggested this was a false dichotomy, asserting that abolition isn't only a theoretical concept, it is a daily, practical approach. You can make daily interventions while also calling for alternatives to prison. For instance, you might work to increase access to fresh produce, as an entry point to discussing questions of power within food systems and prison systems. When we speak of abolition, we're not just talking about abolishing prisons, it also means abolition of the state. Kanav reflected that this often gets lost in the carceral abolitionist movement.

Positioning food is a great way to organize and build alliances, Kanav encouraged us to think of food as a point of connection, to re-create and rebuild some of the relationships lost through colonialism and imperialism (relationships to land, to food and to each other). Food can be a vehicle to politicize. As Kanav highlighted, one of the reasons why the Black Panthers were seen as such a big threat was because they were feeding people while simultaneously revealing the contradictions of social and economic systems. Food and land-based forms of resistance are everyday forms of resistance. Food opens up possibilities of how we can be in the world.

In response to a question about the risks of greenwashing in relation to prison food initiatives, Kanav shared that the Maryland Food and Abolition Project doesn't advocate for prison gardens precisely because of the risks of greenwashing and the many contradictions inherent in prison gardens. Instead of prison gardens, they emphasize regenerative and sustainable agriculture, food ways that are land-based and rooted in Black and Indigenous communities.

Later in the conversation, Kanav highlighted hunger strikes as an important and effective way that incarcerated people use food as a tool of resistance. He referenced a recent hunger strike by incarcerated Palestinians to mark the beginning of Ramadan, which was projected to be one of the largest hunger strikes in Israeli prisons over the last 50 years. However, there can be repercussions for these actions. Kanav shared one example where a group who engaged in a hunger strike at a minimum-security prison was transferred to a maximum security unit in retaliation, and also had time added to their sentences. There can be beautiful forms of resistance by engaging with food, but there can also be repercussions to this resistance.

Reflecting on the goal of the summit, to create connection and better support each other's work, Kanav insisted it's important to understand that we are all implicated in different systems of oppression and marginalization, and thus it

follows that we should work in solidarity with each other. Sovereign, democratic, abolitionist food systems require that we consider those in prison, and whether they have access to food that is both physically and spiritually nourishing. All of our liberation is connected. Political education can help us to better understand how these systems work and what our position is in these systems. Finally, we need to practice hope on a daily basis.

Nyki Kish - Director of Advocacy and Systems Change at the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies

Nyki spoke about the work of the [Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies](#) and how the perspective of the organization had evolved over time. She also spoke about [Emma's Acres](#), a small-scale farm in Mission BC, that uses food subversively to promote and practice transformative justice. She highlighted that food is a way to create community within prisons, but it can also be a tool of punishment and control. The very act of sharing food and creating communities through food can be criminalized in Canadian carceral institutions. Nyki reminded us of the consequences of current prison conditions, referencing a [Canadian study](#) that found long-term incarceration leads to a 20-year reduction in life expectancy, no doubt in part due to the food served. She also spoke about the importance of breaking through constructed differences and finding commonality. In this work, there will necessarily be differences when working across communities. We need to question ourselves, celebrate the things we have in common and find ways to work from there.

Saturday April 1st

Session #1 : Opposing Ontario's Prison Expansion with Escaping Tomorrow's Cages

Heidi, Bailey and Cedar shared their experiences developing the [Escaping Tomorrow's Cages](#) project, as well as their involvement in the Barton Prisoner Solidarity Project, a group that supports folks incarcerated at the Hamilton-Wentworth Detention Centre.

Escaping Tomorrow's Cages was formed in response to the Ontario government's prison expansion plan, and as a way to push back against reform-based responses to incarceration. The Ford government's strategy encompasses both Northern and Eastern Ontario. In Northern Ontario, they announced plans for a new, larger prison in Thunder Bay, which will include 345 beds (larger than the current Thunder Bay Prison and Kenora Jail it is designed to replace) as well as 50 beds in a new modular build, for a total of 70 new prison beds. This prison expansion is being justified through the rhetoric of reform, as the government claims this new facility will offer more culturally appropriate services and spaces for Indigenous incarcerated individuals. As Escaping Tomorrow's Cages notes, this is a dangerous rhetoric that normalizes the over-incarceration of Indigenous peoples.

In Eastern Ontario, there are plans to build a new expanded prison in Kemptville, under the guise of replacing ODC, the Ottawa Carleton Detention Centre. The members of ETC expressed their doubts that this would happen, and suggested it would likely be repurposed in some fashion. According to ETC, these contemporary examples follow a longer historical trend that sees prisons continually expanding, drawing on different rationales to justify their ever growing existence.

They gave the example of Millhaven, which was built in 1972 as a replacement to the Kingston Penitentiary. Initially, Millhaven was supposed to focus on training opportunities, but most of the funding actually went towards new forms of surveillance, such as CCTV and intercom systems. When incarcerated individuals got wind of this, they rioted in protest. The state then used the riot as justification for canceling the training programs and doubling down on the surveillance of these so-called dangerous prisoners.

The government's current approach is to build larger prisons in primarily rural areas, often removing incarcerated people from the communities they come from. These prisons are designed in a "pod" style, where there are many wings originating from one central area. ETC notes that the most recent wave of completed prison expansion took place in Toronto, where three smaller prisons were shut down and replaced by a large prison in Etobicoke (the Toronto South Detention Centre). With some of these newer prisons, outside yards have been replaced with rooms with ventilation, and face-to-face discussions with loved ones now take place over video chat. All of this works to create hierarchies within prisons, creating a "divide and conquer" environment that forces those incarcerated to compete for incentives. If you're labeled a "good prisoner" you have access to a better range, better access to visits etc.

Governments use the promise of new or innovative programming as a tool to legitimize expansion, but it is always the first thing that is cut, while repression, surveillance and control is consistently prioritized. New prisons are also justified drawing on the rhetoric of being culturally appropriate prisons. For example, that they will be able to provide

expanded treatment for women, to people with mental health issues etc. We have seen this legitimizing discourse especially in relation to Indigenous people. So-called reforms positioned prisons as more appropriate for Indigenous people (by offering smudging, sweat lodges, etc.) and then they were filled with them. They are Indigenizing prisons, to legitimize them as a response to what is fundamentally their marginalization and oppression. It is the same with mental health services and addictions. What we used to think of as mental health issues are now perceived as a crime. Sentences are perceived as ways to treat these 'issues', thus prisons become appropriate spaces for people with mental health issues.

ETC ended by discussing three key issues that consistently come up in Ontario's prison systems: the use of solitary confinement, overdoses, and the working conditions of correctional labour. Each of these are used by governments as justification for needing to expand prisons, however ETC argues that prison expansion doesn't need to be the way in which we respond to these problems. Instead, ETC insists we should be looking at how to reduce the number of people in prison as a solution, and recognize the inherent tension between improving prisons and expanding them. If we're not careful, we can end up putting forth recommendations that have the effect of expanding the prison industrial complex, instead of focusing on how we could incarcerate less.

ETC's approach is one of education and decentralized actions. Their goal is to share information so that individuals and groups in local communities can make use of that information and decide for themselves how best to respond and engage. They advocate direct action (which they understand as doing something without waiting for anyone else to do it) to show the government that there is popular resistance and opposition to these prison expansion projects. At the same time, we need to be mindful that many current and formerly incarcerated folks don't have the ability to engage in many forms of more public or more confrontational actions. How do we build movements that are centering these folks and their experiences? One suggestion was to challenge the sense of othering that often accompanies incarceration. Most people don't think of themselves as someone who might be incarcerated, but everyone at some point in their lives could be at risk of imprisonment. Another suggestion was to act on sites that incarcerated folks can't access, for example, sites of prison expansion, in order to complement and amplify voices from the inside.

Session #2: Food in prison - experiences and advocacy with MOMS (Mothers Offering Mutual Support) and Ghassan Zahran

The second session of the day included presentations by Marge Jestin and Anne Cattral of [MOMS](#), as well as Ghassan Zahran, who spoke about his experiences of federal incarceration.

MOMS:

MOMS is a support group for women who have incarcerated family members. Their objectives are to support members in their journey, from incarceration, to parole and to the exit of the carceral system. In addition to providing emotional support to their members, they seek to educate their members on current rules and regulations and advocate for effective justice reforms and more humane approaches to prisons. This includes lobbying government officials, raising public awareness, contacting oversight bodies as well as prison wardens when they receive complaints from their family members. They noted that food is a long-standing issue, particularly since the

introduction of the Food Modernization Initiative in 2014. Since then, they have seen many hunger strikes over food.

As part of their presentation, they summarized the three principal directives CSC has regarding food. The first is that "Meals are a critical factor in creating a healthy penitentiary environment and healthier inmates". MOMS believes that meals should be something to look forward to in order to create this healthy environment and to escape the boredom of prison. On paper the National Menu "looks wonderful", however, in talking with their members who speak with their loved ones inside, in practice, there is a wide gap between what is described on the menu and what is actually being served. The quality of the food is poor, and the portions are small. The Cook-Chill process turns everything into mush. Without much flavour or nutritional value, it becomes just plain unappealing food. Since the modernization initiative there has also been a real loss in jobs for inmates and a reduction in programs they could follow.

All of this does little to create healthy environments; inmates are either hungry and/or sustain themselves on junk food from the canteen. This creates an environment of fear, violence and intimidation. When getting canteen deliveries, the vulnerable people get intimidated and have their food stolen. Food becomes a currency for bartering and/or gambling, etc. Overall, this food environment contributes to both physical and psychological health problems.

CSC also claims that changes in portions or quality of food will not be used as a form of punishment. MOMS notes that in practice, the portions are already so small that they can't get smaller. Members of MOMS have also heard of instances of food tampering and deliberate contamination. Standardization of food in and of itself could be seen as a punitive measure against inmates, as it worsens their living conditions. One of the key problems is CSC's food budget, which is just under 6\$/ a day per person. MOMS was clear that this needs to increase to provide adequate food in prison. However, they remain doubtful that this will happen, as governments tend to follow public opinion, and many people don't think that prisoners deserve humane treatment. The 'tough on crime agenda' that we saw in the Harper era still lingers and so governments feel free to cut costs on prison food to save money.

The third key directive that guides CSC's food services is that the food served must meet the minimum nutritional standards set out in Canada's Food Guide. MOMS argues that when they say minimum, it's literally the bare minimum. The calories provided just aren't enough for many adult males, and it's difficult to determine if meals actually meet the daily nutritional needs. MOMS reminded us that the incarcerated population is very diverse, and so their nutritional needs are also diverse. Drawing on the experience of her son, Anne noted that you could always tell when the correctional manager was visiting, because the quality of the food suddenly improved. However, once the visit was over, the quality went back to what it was before.

Echoing the comments of the Correctional Investigator, the poor quality and quantity of food forces incarcerated individuals to rely on food coming from the canteen, which costs a lot. There is also a lot of starch, sugar, fat and sodium in the food. Further, prisoners aren't paid much for their work in the institution, so families must send money for them to eat at the canteen. This contributes to poverty on the outside, and the financial weight often falls to the mother or partner of those incarcerated.

There are other costs to this lack of good food. You can't focus on your correctional plan if you are hungry. How can you think of anything if you are constantly hungry? Some of the violence in institutions can be traced back to folks trying to acquire or

steal food. In addition to the financial hardship while incarcerated, once the guys get out, there are increased healthcare costs, in part because of the poor foods.

While food issues are one of the highest-ranking complaints, until public opinion about people in prison changes, it will be hard to make progress.

Ghassan:

Ghassan started by describing the three types of food service he experienced while inside: cafeteria, groceries and cafeteria, and groceries. He said the cafeteria food had a bad smell, an awful texture and tiny portions. He'd go months without a good meal and eventually got used to the constant feeling of hunger. At one point he had the chance to have a garden, in which he'd grown coriander. This was an important seasoning for ramen noodles, an essential ingredient to being less hungry on the inside.

When he was in an institution with a mixed system of cafeteria and groceries, even if your unit was stuck with the cafeteria, you could buy meals from people who lived in the pods and had access to groceries. Between that and the canteen, you didn't have to be as reliant on the cafeteria food. The grocery system helped him be motivated, and it meant he had more energy to read and train, etc. Overall, his experience with the grocery system was pretty positive.

He also had two food-related jobs while inside - working in the kitchen and as the person who ordered the groceries. He recalled that the food would smell pretty awful in the kitchen, and that it was cooked multiple times. He enjoyed acting as the grocery person, but eventually had to quit because he found it too intense, as people would always be suspicious that he was stealing food items from them.

Surprisingly, Ghassan shared that his best meal was in prison. He recalled the basa fish that they were served was really bad. But he would take the leftover fish and scavenge for flour, oil, and spices. He'd mix it all together and cook it in the oven. It wasn't so much that the fish was delicious, though it was, it was his best meal because he was just so hungry.

Ghassan shared a few of the reasons why he thinks it's important to have better food in prison. For starters, it would reduce a lot of problems and conflicts. He recalled an incident where someone got into a physical fight over a plate of food, effectively jeopardizing his parole. The poor-quality food also fuels a black market for food. If everyone had access to the grocery system, black market food wouldn't have such a massive power. Better food would also improve physical and mental health. When he had sufficient food, he was able to read a book, train, think about other things etc. People are expected to improve their life in prison; to do that, you need to eat well.

Finally, food builds solidarity. The meals he cooked with cellmates or those on the same range were very precious. Giving meals or ingredients to people while they were hungry would bring joy. They would look out for each other and share when they could. For Ghassan, it was hard to leave jail because of those relationships; those relationships were created over food.

Ghassan ended his presentation with a few concrete recommendations. First was increasing access to the grocery system and the ability to cook your own meals. There also needs to be education for people on how to cook while in prison. People from the outside need to understand that prisoners are going to get out at some point; punishing them through food inside won't change anything. Being really tough on

crime will only bring out more violence. We need to hear stories from folks inside in order to create relationships with people that will eventually get out.

In response to a question about religious and special diets, both MOMS and Ghassan shared that these meals tend to be better. However, getting approved for those meals can be a real challenge. Ghassan also spoke of cultural meals - when particular religious or ethnic groups celebrate a holiday. On these days they may have access to special ingredients or foods. While incarcerated Ghassan was able to organize a special meal for Ramadan, and he recalled that those meals were "simply amazing."

Session #3: Reflections on Food Sovereignty in Theory and Practice with Leslie Touré Kapo and Amelie Néault

Leslie Touré Kapo (Professor in the School of Social Innovation at Saint Paul University) and Amelie Néault (Administrative Coordinator of the Social Innovation Atelier) shared reflections drawn from a collaborative project on Black Food Sovereignty. The starting point was thinking about food security and food autonomy from a place of cultural sensitivity. What does it mean to think about our own food system? Specifically, the project they developed was working to create a series of intergenerational activities through the lens of food systems. They are bringing youth and elders to cook together and discuss food systems.

Much of this project was informed by [previous work](#) Leslie did with Food Secure Canada, to create an inventory of Black and racialized food system initiatives in French speaking Quebec (and more broadly throughout Canada). Through this work, he realized there were blind spots in the literature around decolonizing and anti-racist/anti-oppressive food work. Further, there isn't one shared understanding of Black food sovereignty. It differs both geographically and linguistically and depends on the history of particular communities. The challenge was to find a way to bring together afro-descendant people whose families immigrated generations ago, along with newcomers, and first generation immigrants. For example, one person who is a first generation immigrant said that it was very important for her to grow okra so that her child can eat food of her culture. But this isn't the same for Black communities that immigrated generations ago, like the ones in Nova Scotia. As Leslie articulated, racialized folks need to develop their own comprehension of what food sovereignty means to them.

While this project showed a lot of possibility, Amelie and Leslie also reflected on the challenges and complexities that arose. As one might expect, bridging the gap between the realities, expectations and desires of seniors and youth was difficult at times. Logistics, scheduling, a lack of interest all posed challenges. The youth were undergraduate students, and the vast majority were afro-descendant and international students. It proved challenging for them to speak about what Black food means to them, what a food system means to them, and what Black food sovereignty means for them. Even if those conversations didn't have clear outcomes, the discussions in and of themselves were valuable, and can be thought of as a first step in a broader process and project of building capacity and space for conceptualizations and manifestations of Black food sovereignties.

These reflections were then used as the basis for an open discussion with participants, some of which is captured below.

In response to a question about the differences between Black or racialized communities that have been in Canada for many generations compared to those newly arrived, Leslie stated that access to history, and the history of the colonial context is a challenge for newcomer communities. When you are a newcomer, you start from 'ok do you understand what it means to be on the land?' You arrive in a settler colony where you need to start understanding the complexity of food systems and relationships with the land. There are layers of complexity. To respond to these complexities, we need more spaces where Black and Indigenous communities can come together and learn about the relationship of Indigenous people to these lands.

In response to a question about connecting these specific projects to broader questions of structural and systemic transformation, Leslie shared that this specific project emerged as a means to implement some of the ideas from [the report](#) he produced with Food Secure Canada. The intent of the project was to think about food systems; how to transform the perspectives of youth into specific practices? To explore how food, and the production of food, can be a tool to change ourselves and our communities. The intent of the project was to build the confidence of the youth involved, to be a springboard for other actions and initiatives. He gave the example of a meeting that happened in a community food center that linked seniors and youth, mostly afro-descendants. Leslie believed this meeting was a catalyst that inspired the youth to subsequently organize other similar events in their communities. So, even if they did not specifically speak about afro-descendant food sovereignty, it still had a ripple effect that impacted their understanding and practice of afro-descendant food sovereignty.

A related question raised the issue of how to build solidarity, to both break down barriers and put these "big ideas" into practice. In response, Leslie emphasized the potential of interstitial spaces (small-scale or localized settings where everyday interactions can be catalysts for broader social transformation). These spaces are opportunities to bring about discussions around decolonialism, abolition, etc. We can think about those spaces as seeds that will breed other seeds, etc. to reproduce these interstitial spaces and create bigger ones where we can bring about those conversations in a more substantive manner.

Further, one participant shared an important reminder that when we're trying to imagine food sovereign and abolitionist futures, we often think we're imagining new possibilities, forgetting that communities have already existed on this same land before. There are whole other cultures, Indigenous cultures, where incarceration and capitalist systems don't exist. Learning from the past, we can learn for the future.

In response to a question about defining Black food sovereignty in the Canadian context, Leslie reflected that for him, Black food sovereignty is easy to define. It means food that is produced, prepared and consumed by the community. It means culturally appropriate food. While the focus of this project was on Black and Indigenous Food sovereignty, the intent is that we're working collaboratively across all communities. When we say Black food sovereignty, we don't mean food sovereignty only for Black people. When they cook fufu and griot at school, it's not only for Black people, it's for everyone. Food allows people to have different conversations, to break down barriers and have conversations around colonialism and relationships to land.

Session #4: Campaigning against prisons with the Criminalization and Education Project (CPEP) and the Coalition Against the Proposed Prison (CAPP)

The last session of the day featured presentations by Justin Piche and Aaron Doyle, members of [CPEP](#) (Criminalization and Education Project) and Colleen Lynas, member of CAPP (Coalition Against the Proposed Prison). Justin and Aaron spoke about the work of CPEP, as well as the broader political economy of prison expansion, while Colleen described the efforts of CAPP to stop the proposed development of a new prison on public farmlands in Kemptville.

In describing the overall context in which CPEP works, Justin explained that when a new prison is announced, we have to think about it not only as jail beds and conditions of confinement, but also as part of broader systemic processes of capitalist restructuring. As [Ruth Wilson Gilmore's work](#) highlights, capitalist restructuring creates four types of surplus that drives penal expansion: surplus people (people that are not participating in capitalist wage relations), surplus land (land that can be repurposed for capitalist development), surplus finance (which require areas of safe investment to further accumulation of profits) and surplus state capacity (when the state eliminates services, reduces taxes etc, it requires new functions to take on). The emergence of jails in colonial Ontario was also linked with the claiming of the land. To claim land, a village needed to have a court of justice as well as a prison. Thus, prisons are necessarily linked to colonialism.

CPEP started as a project with professors and students from Carleton University and the University of Ottawa, past and current prisoners, and loved-ones of prisoners, and other community members. As a penal abolitionist organization, CPEP focused on OCDC (the Ottawa Carleton Detention Centre), aiming to reduce the use and harms of imprisonment, and negotiating sometimes difficult tensions between mitigation, reform, and abolition. They wanted to find ways to address the conditions of confinement without perpetuating the current carceral system. In OCDC, about two thirds of individuals are awaiting trial, rather than serving sentences, meaning there is a transient, high turnover population with many people coming and going and even fewer amenities and supports than a prison where sentences are served. It is a very unstable environment with some of the worst conditions. The food is prepared using a similar cook/chill process to that of federal institutions, and it is one of the main sources of complaints. The guards refer to the food as "dog bowls". It's important to note that the food is only one of many problems; there is also a terrible lack of adequate health care, dental care, and mental health care. Lots of people are coming in traumatized and going out more traumatized.

After many years of calling public and media attention to the grossly inhumane conditions at OCDC, CPEP members decided to try a new approach to concretely improve the conditions at OCDC. CPEP members started a jail phone line to connect prisoners with people in the community and support organizations. In 2020, with support from jail line volunteers, there was a 14-person hunger strike at OCDC, as the dietary situation deteriorated even further during the pandemic. They had several demands related to food – including complaints about being served frozen foods, meager portions for the halal and kosher diets, and no fresh veggies. As a result of the jail phone line, they were able to organize a Facebook Live event with some of the strikers. Unfortunately, in the end only a few of their demands were partially met - peanut butter and cheese were added to halal and kosher meals and pears were added as an additional fruit option. This experience and many others led CPEP members to the following conclusions: if we want to abolish prisons and stop these conditions, we need to stop new prisons from being built.

CPEP asked themselves, how can we mobilize people to refuse a new prison? They brought together 30 community groups and said 'if you could do something to build secure communities with \$1 billion (the cost of the new prison), what would you do?' The many suggestions were then utilized as part of a public campaign to oppose the construction of a new prison and put pressure on the government. Eventually, the (at the time) newly elected Ford government dropped the idea of building a new prison in Ottawa, but unfortunately, they set their sights elsewhere in the province instead.

Colleen:

Colleen lives in Kemptville and is one of the founders of the [Coalition Against the Proposed Prison](#) (CAPP), who frequently collaborate with CPEP. They have many reasons for opposing the government's plan to build a prison in their community. Initially, many residents were most upset about the non-democratic nature of the project, and how the unwanted prison was dumped on the town in a surprise move with no consultation, while others were opposed on the grounds that it was going to pave over farmland. People had different reasons but they managed to come together under a shared objective.

Planning to pave over farm-land, refusal to disclose documents, trying to silence residents, taking power away from local government, etc. The list goes on and on. These are the practices of the Ford conservative government.

In terms of their tactics and strategies, a big focus early on was just getting the information out to residents. They did this through information sessions, rallies, opinion pieces in local newspapers etc. They produced a flyer that was sent to 6000 families in the area. They spoke to people on multiple levels so that the message was able to resonate in different ways with people.

Partnerships and collaborations were also key, building relationships with grassroots organizations, people with lived experience, experts, academics, etc. Most recently, CAPP used the judicial process to challenge the lawfulness of the government's decision, arguing the government ignored the legally required planning process. Colleen believes we should reimagine our approach to justice and incarceration. We need to invest in services and resources to transform the system that leads to inequity and marginalization.

Discussion (Colleen, Aaron and Justin):

One challenge in building opposition to this particular expansion project is that it is set in a deeply conservative county. However, this became an opportunity to help shift what could be described as NIMBY sentiments into a more abolitionist stance of "not-in-any-backyard", to generate an awareness of carceral systems as a whole. More people are now aware of the systemic issues that lead to the cycle of incarceration and the over-incarceration of marginalized groups. As a result, many local residents no longer think that prisons should be expanded, and instead recognize the need for increased social and economic supports as a means of making our communities safer and healthier.

One area they hope to improve on is creating stronger connections with environmental groups and groups focused on farmland preservation. There are significant environmental implications with building this prison. There are also two floodplains on the site, as well as Barnes Creek. In some of the proposed site maps drafted by the government, the parking garage for the jail would be built directly on top of the creek.

They're also hoping to build stronger relationships with Indigenous communities. This is particularly important as the proposed prison site is unceded Algonquin territory. This land is part of a land claim that was launched in 1983. The provincial government tries to present prison expansions as benefitting First Nations, as a tool to legitimize these projects (as we saw in the presentation from Escaping Tomorrows Cages above). At the same time, as one participant highlighted, First Nation communities may have many complex reasons for not speaking out against government projects. There are different organizations and institutions that purport to represent Indigenous peoples, some more legitimate than others. Rather than critiquing the lack of active involvement of Indigenous peoples, we should reflect on how we invite Indigenous peoples and communities into our work and projects, and whether such requests may overburden them.

Ultimately, people with lived experience are the most knowledgeable to speak about carceral experience. At the same time, we need to be careful to not overload these people, to make sure that they are not constantly representing prisoners on these issues. We have to be careful not to use them, we need to foreground them without overburdening them.

There are so many better investments that could be made with this money. For instance, investing in affordable housing and supportive housing would have a big impact because a lot of incarcerated people are unhoused. Affordable and supportive housing costs around three to four times less than the cost of maintaining a prison cell. The superintendent at OCDC has said herself that half of the people incarcerated shouldn't be there. We need to have a vision on how to achieve community safety, establishing re-entry support, and decarceration support. We need to be financing services upstream, instead of cascading people through failed system after failed system until they find themselves in jail. The recommendations are out there, but the government needs to recognize those recommendations and put them in place.