

— conversations on —

FOOD JUSTICE

A series hosted by
Share Our Strength and Food & Society at the Aspen Institute

SUMMARY TO ACTION REPORT SESSION #8

SESSION DESCRIPTION

On November 3rd, Share Our Strength, in collaboration with Food & Society at the Aspen Institute, hosted the latest edition of the **Conversations on Food Justice** Series "The Significant and Far-Reaching Impact of the Criminal Justice System in America" featuring speakers, Kanav Kathuria, Sam Lewis, Vonya Quarles and moderator Dr. Douglas Wood. The panel discussed a prison system that traces its roots back to slavery, and the ways in which the conditions facing people in prison — and when they return home — have significant costs when it comes to health, public safety, and human dignity. The panel also highlighted people and organizations that are working to reframe the national dialogue around criminal justice and build food systems based on health, equity, and justice for all people.

FEATURED PANELISTS

Kanav Kathuria

Founder, The Maryland Food & Prison Abolition Project



Kanav Kathuria's work lies in the intersection of prison abolition, public health, and food sovereignty. He is a 2019 Open Society Institute Baltimore Community Fellow and the founding member of the Maryland Food & Prison Abolition Project, a Baltimore-based collective that changes food conditions in prisons to use food as a tool for resistance. By connecting urban and small-scale farms to state correctional institutions, the Maryland Food & Prison Abolition Project asks how addressing the role of food in confinement can advance an abolitionist vision that builds communal power and helps tear down the prison-industrial complex in all of its forms. Kanav

completed his undergraduate education from Johns Hopkins University, and is currently pursuing a graduate degree in the sociomedical sciences from Columbia University. Follow The Maryland Food & Prison Abolition Project on Twitter @foodandabolition

Sam Lewis

Executive Director, Anti-Recidivism Coalition



Sam Lewis is the Executive Director of the Anti Recidivism Coalition (ARC). Previously, Sam served as the Director of Inside Programs. A former life prisoner himself, Sam understands the various obstacles, challenges, and difficulties the prison and reentry populations face. In 2017, Sam created the Hope And Redemption Team (HART), a first-of-its-kind initiative he built from scratch. HART is a group of nine former California life prisoners who go back into California state prisons to provide hope, demonstrate that redemption is achievable, and prepare participants for successful reentry into our communities. His work directing the Hope and Redemption Team exemplifies what's best

about ARC: our desire to reach and walk with those who have been most marginalized by society. Most Saturday nights, Sam leads the Hope and Redemption mentors who support youth currently housed at Barry J. Nidorf Juvenile Hall. These youth are facing potentially long prison sentences. The unique mentors are trained in Transformative Mentoring and use a peer-to-peer Credible Messenger model to encourage incarcerated youth to believe in themselves and pursue their education while incarcerated. Sam previously worked with Friends Outside Los Angeles County (FOLA) as a Job Specialist, Case Manager, Employment Programs Supervisor, and Project Director, roles that reinforced his

— conversations on —

FOOD JUSTICE

A series hosted by
Share Our Strength and Food & Society at the Aspen Institute

SUMMARY TO ACTION REPORT SESSION #8

commitment to creating opportunities for formerly incarcerated men and women as they transition back into society. In 2018, Sam was the recipient of a Bank of America Neighborhood Builders Award, Uncommon Law's Uncommon Heroes award, and 2019 Danger Man Award. Follow ARC on Twitter @AntiRecidivism

Vonya Quarles

Co-founder, Starting Over, Inc.



Vonya Quarles Esq., native Californian and the co-founder of Starting Over, Inc., a transitional living and reentry service providing community-based organization. Starting Over, Inc. has operated for 12 years and has helped over 1600 men, women, and children address immediate housing needs while working to address long-term solutions that include systems change. Vonya blends experience, education, logic, and love, into an organic concoction that has helped to organize and center the voices of people who have been historically marginalized. Vonya holds a Bachelor of Science in Business Management and a Juris Doctorate. Vonya is a founding member of All of Us or NONE Riverside that works to end hyper incarceration the discrimination faced by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. She is system-impacted herself works to address the complexities and collateral consequences of criminal convictions as they relate to family reunification, housing, and employment. Follow Starting Over on Twitter @startingoverca

Dr. Douglas Wood

Director, Aspen Institute's Criminal Justice Reform Initiative



Dr. Douglas E. Wood is Director of the Aspen Institute's Criminal Justice Reform Initiative. From 2011-2018, he was a program officer at the Ford Foundation on the Youth Opportunity and Learning team and for nearly two years served as Acting Lead of the foundation's global Higher Education for Social Justice initiative, managing grants in the U.S., Colombia, Peru, Chile, Southern Africa, Egypt, and China. He also funded a myriad of programmatic grants focused on criminal justice reform at the national, state, and local levels including investigative journalism, theater, and documentary film. Prior to joining Ford, he was Executive Director and Chief Education Officer of the Tennessee State Board of Education, chair of the Basic Education Program Review Committee that oversees Tennessee's \$3.2 billion K-12 budget, a member of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, a gubernatorial appointee to the Education Commission of the States, a Fellow at the Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University, executive director and principal investigator of the National Academy for Excellent Teaching, Teachers College, Columbia University, and Associate Dean at Eugene Lang College of Liberal Arts, The New School. Dr. Wood began his career as a public school teacher and while a graduate student at Harvard, worked as a consultant with the Urban Superintendent's Program, the World Bank's Office of East Asian Affairs, and taught at the John F. Kennedy School of Government. Dr. Wood received the 2018 Alumni Council Award for Outstanding Contributions to Education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and is a board member of the Partnership for College Completion. Dr. Wood holds a B.A. degree in History from Wofford College, a master's degree in English from Middlebury College, and a master's and a doctoral degree from Harvard University. He is a member of Phi

— conversations on —
FOOD JUSTICE

A series hosted by
Share Our Strength and Food & Society at the Aspen Institute

SUMMARY TO ACTION REPORT
SESSION #8

Beta Kappa and holds the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from Middlebury College. Follow Dr. Douglas Wood on Twitter @dwood371

SUMMARY AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

Our nation's criminal justice system is deeply entrenched in food injustice that impacts the more than 2 million men and women in prison across the United States and has a devastating impact on our nation's children and families. Unhealthy, unsafe, and oftentimes inedible food is endemic in prisons, with the CDC reporting that inmates are 6.4 times more likely to suffer from food-related illness and experience higher than average rates of chronic illness like diabetes and heart disease. Food deprivation is often wielded as a further form of punishment, with little accountability due to a lack of food safety or nutritional protocols in prisons. Prisoners themselves make up a crucial cog in our nation's food production systems: To reduce costs and make up for labor shortages, companies across the U.S. are increasingly turning to prison industries for food production, with 650 correctional institutions across the U.S. operating some sort of food processing, landscaping, or farming facility and more than 30,000 incarcerated people working in prison food operations—many of whom are earning less than a dollar per day.

Using prison labor dates back to the Civil War where states would lease prisoners to work on railways, mines, and plantations, for no pay, while the states profited, known as a convict leasing system¹. The thirteenth amendment was later ratified and prohibited slavery but exempted those who have been convicted of a crime. Essentially stating that those who are incarcerated have no constitutional rights. As panelist Vonya Quarles stated, “The exploitation of labor is codified in the US constitution. Until we address that, we will continue to fight against the exploitation of incarcerated people”. The use of prison labor still exists in our food system today and heavily relies on cheap labor. Panelist Sam Lewis recollected, “you get paid from twelve to twenty cents per hour. In California, every dollar you make, they take 55%”. Private companies, manufacturers, and state agencies rely on prison labor to produce, items such as furniture, textiles, and road signs but also for agriculture, and harvesting onions, watermelons, potatoes, apples, etc. As panelist Kanav Kathuria described, this exploitation of labor makes it possible to keep prison operations running.

Sam Lewis shared his experience of working in the prison kitchen, noting lack of supervision, transferable skills, and poor food quality. Foods would come to the prisons molded or rotten, bugs and maggots would be found in the food or cooking equipment, spaghetti was made with a soy filler, eggs came dehydrated, and cheese would not melt. The food would contain preservatives, and be high in sodium and starch. He continued to share that they would find food that fits the budget, it was not about health, it's about saving money. You were forced to eat what is provided or go to the canteen but as panelist Vonya Quarles noted, the prices at the canteen were often 150% greater than what the offices were paying for costs. A report titled, *Eating Behind Bars: Ending the Hidden Punishment of Food in Prison*, by Impact Justice, found that

¹ Equal Justice Initiative . (2019, November 11). *Convict leasing*. Equal Justice Initiative. Retrieved November 5, 2021, from <https://eji.org/news/history-racial-injustice-convict-leasing/>.

— conversations on —

FOOD JUSTICE

A series hosted by
Share Our Strength and Food & Society at the Aspen Institute

SUMMARY TO ACTION REPORT SESSION #8

seventy-five percent of respondents, from a national survey conducted among formally incarcerated people, said they were served spoiled or rotten food while in prison².

Food insecurity is apparent for those that are incarcerated and even continues for those that were formally incarcerated. According to the National Institute of Health, 91 percent of people transitioning from incarceration report experiencing food insecurity. Having parents who have been incarcerated also affects the food security of families. Young children who live with their father before incarceration are three times as likely to experience food insecurity and having an incarcerated parent increased the likelihood of food insecurity by fifteen percent³.

The collateral consequences of incarceration—particularly when it comes to hunger and poverty—are high, even as individuals return home. Many folks are locked out of lifesaving benefits like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) due to lifetime or modified bans for people with criminal histories. Currently 24 states have a lifetime or modified SNAP ban, and 27 states with a lifetime or modified ban for TANF³. One Study by Harvard Law School found that “...access to SNAP and TANF, significantly reduced an individual’s risk of being reincarcerated by up to 10 percent within one year”⁴. With fewer resources to support returning citizens and their struggling families, children suffer—currently, 1.4 million children in the United States have a parent in prison. We need to realize there is an inherited racial inequity to our current systems and that prisons and prison food are a public health crisis. As panelist Sam Lewis said, “if we lift up the least of us, we can all rise”.

RESOURCES

Article: [As COVID-19 Ups the Stakes, Advocates Say prison Food Needs and Overhaul](#)



A new report shines a light on the low-quality food served to 2.3 million people behind bars in the U.S. Healthier food is possible—and on the agenda in some prisons.

Report: [Food, Violence, and the Maryland Correctional Food System](#)



Introducing the groundbreaking report on the Maryland correctional food system- the first-of-its-kind investigation into prison food from an abolitionist perspective

² Impact Justice. (2020, December 2). *New report provides first-ever national examination of food in U.S. prisons*. Impact Justice. Retrieved November 8, 2021, from <https://impactjustice.org/new-report-provides-first-ever-national-examination-of-food-in-u-s-prisons/>.

³ Sullivan, J. (2021, April 27). *Second chance month: Repeal snap and tanf bans for people with a past felony drug conviction*. Center for Law and Social Policy. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from <https://www.clasp.org/blog/second-chance-month-repeal-snap-and-tanf-bans-people-past-felony-drug-conviction>.

⁴ Thompson, D., & Burnside, A. (2021, August 31). *No more double punishments: Lifting the ban on snap and tanf for people with prior felony drug convictions*. Center for Law and Social Policy. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/no-more-double-punishments>.

— conversations on —

FOOD JUSTICE

A series hosted by
Share Our Strength and Food & Society at the Aspen Institute

SUMMARY TO ACTION REPORT SESSION #8

Report: [Eating Behind Bars: Ending the Hidden Punishment of Food in Prison](#)



Good food nourishes and sustains the body and does more than that. What we cook and eat affirms who we are as individuals and connects us to people, places and cultures. Yet a positive relationship with food- an essential part of being human- is denied every day to incarcerated people when the food made available to them functions as another form of punishment.

Paper: [Mass Incarceration: A Major Cause of Hunger](#)



This paper explains how mass incarceration increases hunger. In a study by the National Institutes of Health, 91 percent of returning citizens reported being food insecure. Many face difficulty securing a place to work and live after being released. In addition, 75 percent of returning citizens report that it is “extremely difficult” or “impossible” to find a job post-incarceration. Even once formerly incarcerated people manage to find jobs, they suffer a permanent reduction in their lifetime earning potential, by nearly \$180,000.1 This explains why 1 in 4 households headed by a returning citizen lives in deep poverty. In addition, incarceration frequently leads to hardships for their families. According to one study, almost 70 percent of households reported having difficulty meeting basic needs,2 such as food and housing, when a family member was incarcerated.

Book: [The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together](#)



Author Heather McGhee marshals economic and sociological research to paint a story of racism's costs, but at the heart of the book are the humble stories of people yearning to be part of a better America, including white supremacy's collateral victims: white people themselves. With startling empathy, this heartfelt message from a Black woman to a multiracial America leaves us with a new vision for a future in which we finally realize that life can be more than a zero-sum game.

CALL TO ACTION LIST

People often ask, what is the next step? If there is a right way to take the step, or if there is a formula. There is not, but we can all do something. Individual actions suggested by the panelists include the following:

- Invest in underserved communities! Provide education, training, and a livable wage. If you invest in the communities and give a hand up, you can change an entire generation.
- Decarceration is vital for public health. This is a health conversation, not a public safety conversation.
- Healthy food is a human right. Access to nutritious food in prison can be a form of rehabilitation and ensure successful reentry into society.

We hope you will continue the conversations in your organizations and your community! Please do not hesitate to let us know how you are keeping the conversations going or if you have thoughts or topics you would like to hear in the future. Reach out to us at foodjustice@strength.org Learn more about the initiative at <https://www.shareourstrength.org/conversations-on-food-justice>



Share Our Strength is ending hunger and poverty – in the United States and abroad. Through proven, effective campaigns like No Kid Hungry and Cooking Matters, we connect people who care to ideas that work.

<https://www.shareourstrength.org>

— conversations on —

FOOD JUSTICE

*A series hosted by
Share Our Strength and Food & Society at the Aspen Institute*

SUMMARY TO ACTION REPORT SESSION #8



Food & Society at the Aspen Institute brings together public health leaders, policymakers, researchers, farmers, chefs, food makers, and entrepreneurs to find practical solutions to food system challenges and inequities. The common goal is to help people of all income levels eat better and more healthful diets—and to enjoy them bite by bite.

<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/food-and-society-program/>