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COMMENTARY

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Recipes for resistance: Practical applications of restorative food justice in New Haven, Connecticut

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Abstract

In the United States, many people of color recently released from prison are likely to be food insecure. The intersections between race, food security, and release from prison are starting to be recognized. However, food justice should be informed by the perspectives and work being done by returning citizens and people of color. With the help of EMERGE CT, a transitional employment social enterprise for returning citizens in New Haven, Connecticut, I collected food access survey data and narratives of crewmembers at EMERGE to explore these issues. I merged restorative justice and food justice frameworks into one framework to develop an initiative that focuses on the availability of healthy, sustainable, and culturally appropriate food for returning citizens and addresses the social trauma that is perpetuated through both the food and prison systems. Further, I write about the importance of compensating food system leaders of color. I provide insight on the challenges in planning such a program. I discuss why we need to amplify the voices of returning citizens in food justice work. Lastly, I consider how these collaborative, cross-movement coalitions develop creative ways to re-envision equity.

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Author Note

This commentary is based on the author's completed graduate practicum work.

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Food Justice, Restorative Justice, Food Insecurity, Racial Inequity, Incarceration, Cultural Sustainability, Livable Wage

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with a rate of 698 people imprisoned per 100,000 residents (Wagner & Bertram, 2020). The scope of this rate has resulted in the devastation of low-income communities and communities of color. Imprisonment exploits acquired economic, cultural, and social capital, exacerbates poverty and segregation, unsettles families, and reinforces historical community marginalization. Currently incarcerated individuals and returning citizens are not often seen as deserving equitable treatment, as they must navigate systemic and structural barriers to upward mobility, such as food stamp bans, the lack of job assistance, and criminal history questions on job applications. Thus, returning citizens transitioning into the community face significant challenges, including the struggle to gain access to healthy, culturally appropriate, and affordable food. However, in critical scholarship about food studies, food, prisons, poverty, and race have rarely been linked together in relation to the food justice movement.[1] But we must not forget the women, men, youth, transgender, and gender-nonconforming individuals who have been affected by the carceral state and their unique experiences within it. In April 2020, I set out to research how restorative justice and food justice merge to form restorative food justice, and; specifically, how community members are addressing the intersections of food insecurity, race, and incarceration in New Haven, Connecticut.

The food insecurity of returning citizens of color has multiple layers, but when pulling away layers, we find that geographies, politics, and economics are the major contributing drivers. Further, when we analyze prison food, we can see that meals are not only used as a source of control, but are also devoid of cultural relevance, nutrition, flavor, sustainability, and care. Additionally, those who leave prison exit with little to no monetary and employment support from the government and return to a society where implicit bias surrounding their previous incarceration makes it difficult to receive gainful employment. To combat these inequities, food and restorative justice activists fight for policies, develop programs, and create living wage work that supports returning citizens in their community re-entry. Sbicca (2016) states that incarcerated geographies, specifically the experiences that result from living in heavily surveilled spaces before, during, and after prison, inform the development of restorative food justice. While food justice lays the foundation to fight social inequities that relate to food, restorative justice completes the structure and provides tools to heal from the trauma of incarceration. When we are fighting for systems change, we must guarantee that returning citizens of color are not only included in the fight, but that their needs are at the forefront. This leads me to ask: how can we all envision fair food futures for all?

In my hometown of New Haven, there is no question about the truth of these barriers and their subsequent effects. For instance, food insecurity rates in New Haven are 22% and 27% among Black and Latinx adults, respectively (DataHaven, 2020). Across all racial demographics, food insecurity rates in the U.S. are 10%, and in Connecticut, they are 8% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Furthermore, 69% of the 3,900 adults under Connecticut community supervision are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), as of September 2020 (Connecticut Department of Corrections, 2020). As a part of my graduate food studies practicum, I worked with EMERGE CT to implement a restorative food justice program to engage with community members and to mitigate the effects of food insecurity for returning citizens through educational and practical components. EMERGE is a social enterprise that operates a transitional employment program for adults returning to the greater New Haven community from

[1] A few scholars that address these issues include Joshua Sbicca, Ashanté M. Reese, Emily Wang, Alexander Testa, Elissa Marek, and Dylan B. Jackson.

incarceration. As both a nonprofit organization and a certified home improvement contractor, EMERGE offers part-time paid training in construction and property maintenance, while also offering mentorship and program services geared toward personal development and destigmatizing mental health issues. I had reached out to EMERGE to see if it needed a food component in its support services. When EMERGE responded, COVID was just beginning, and people globally were noticing the empty aisles in supermarkets and thinking about the need for shorter food supply chains. I spoke about this with the director of training and development, Reinaldo, and a crew lead, Maurice, and they stated that EMERGE's goals are always driven by helping their crewmembers have life, liberty, and access to economic freedom. Using food to address both these disparities and goals was a seamless fit.

To best align with this framework, the mission of EMERGE, and the needs of crewmembers (the folks who would be participating in the program), I created an exploratory survey (n=17) to assess the food access needs and program wants of the crewmembers at EMERGE. The survey results also helped to inform a food systems curriculum. I asked questions about their favorite food choices to purchase and cook, how and where they travelled to get food, what they thought about prison food, their favorite foods since returning, and what they wanted out of a food project. I ran cross tabulations to find correlations between answers, such as connecting SNAP benefits with experiencing financial stability. Although the sample size does not allow statistical analysis, I used the cross tabulations in an exploratory way.

I started the project by meeting with Maurice and Reinaldo weekly to get a feel for the organizational values, needs, and vision. I developed an iterative document outlining local food system disparities, goals, objectives, indicators, action steps, mission, initiative, contexts, inputs, outputs, monitoring, and evaluation methods. This served as my framework where I gathered data from journal articles, discussions with Reinaldo, Maurice, and community members, and survey results from crewmembers. This informal logic model helped me to stay on track, but at first was also an overwhelming volume of information for me as a first-time, remote program developer. To convey these insights in lessons for the participating crewmembers, I cultivated partnerships with BIPOC who are working on food justice causes in New Haven to facilitate these sessions in a non-didactic way. In response to different learning styles, we developed immersive classes on food systems, food safety, culinary arts, and sustainable agriculture, while integrating participatory methods such as photovoice and story share-outs. I wanted to make sure that the stories, experiences, and knowledge of the crewmembers were centered through our active share-outs on topics such as power, privileges, food memories, communities, and cultures.

Through the survey results, I also assessed protective factors unique to this population, such as self-efficacy, stress response, communal reliance, and cultural connectivity. Through city mapping tools and government data, I researched the structural causes of inadequate food access in New Haven. Being mindful that it was not within my resources to work at the policy level, the EMERGE leadership and I wanted the main goals to be the following: to increase the availability of healthy, sustainable, and culturally appropriate food for returning citizens; to heal from the damages of incarceration through a hands-on food systems curriculum; to amplify the voices of folks by confronting social trauma that is perpetuated through stages of both the food and prison systems; and to provide foundational training to be used toward economic opportunities. We hoped that the program would provide ways for returning citizens to mobilize their communities to get involved in gaining control of food spaces. When people who work with the prison population have been to prison and lead these spaces, these cross-movement ties reveal how restorative food justice can create collective liberation and resistance from our food and prison systems, offer creative solutions, and expand the field of food justice (Sbicca, 2016).

Creating this initiative was not without its challenges. Many food programs focus on personal choice or food aid instead of understanding power imbalances, the built environment, socioeconomic status,

and mental wellness. To create a holistic project that would be rooted in racial and class equality, grounded in solutions to break free from the prison pipeline, and incorporated the needs of each participant, we needed a wealth of resources: financial, technical, and stakeholder buy-in. Similarly, there were people who wanted the program to rely on unpaid labor, but how can we work toward transforming the food system if we do not pay those who contribute? These challenges led me to seek out external funding at the grassroots level. I had never fundraised before and I was questioned about the value of the work, as there were people who did not see it as a worthy project. I believe we must fight toward a livable wage; it is all too common to see unlivable wages in restaurants, farming, and general care work, especially among the Black, Asian, Indigenous, and Latinx people (mainly women, immigrants, and returning citizens) who work in these sectors.

Food justice necessitates the linkage of economic, racial, environmental, and restorative justice practices that help integrate, rehabilitate, and heal returning citizens. Therefore, I would like to see further research that includes (1) case studies of prison food policies and programs and recommendations for advocacy of sustainable, safe, and culturally appropriate food; (2) longitudinal studies on how "banning the box" on job applications that ask about conviction history can relate to food security; and (3) researching the effects of integrating the farm-to-school movement with efforts to abolish the school-to-prison pipeline. These topics can ensure critical, interdisciplinary, and cross-movement coalitions. However, most importantly, we must prioritize and divert funding to the research areas that returning citizens and BIPOC want to explore; they have the knowledge and positionality to navigate the issues that unfairly and disproportionately affect them. We must preserve the narratives of and shift power to returning citizens of color, as food justice is lacking without these perspectives. We cannot collectively abolish broken systems if those most affected are not spearheading the fight. Food, with all its layers and intricacies, can aid in the quest for *transformative* justice.

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