

Prisons for Profit – Food Service

Private, for-profit companies secure contracts to provide food services in prisons by promising quality meals for inmates and savings for taxpayers. Once hired however, these companies often cut corners to pad profits, serving inmates contaminated food and slashing employees' pay, benefits and training to the bone, often resulting in the employment of unqualified workers, who undermine prison security and endanger the health of inmates and staff.

In 2013, Michigan and Ohio turned food services, in state prisons, over to the private, for-profit company Aramark. The results were nothing short of a disaster.

Michigan

In December 2013, 370 state employees were displaced when Aramark began providing food service at 32 Michigan prisons under a three-year, \$145-million contract.¹

From the start, Aramark's service was plagued with problems. During the first 18 months of the contract, an incredible 166 Aramark employees were fired and barred from Michigan prison properties — a rate of one Aramark employee every three days.² For comparison, the state worker with the least seniority at one Michigan prison had been there for 15 years before Aramark took over.³

“Thirty prisoners at Parnall Correctional Facility in Jackson are being treated for symptoms consistent with food poisoning after maggots and fly larvae were discovered in one of the meal serving lines.”

—Detroit Free Press

Aramark employees were fired for smuggling drugs into prisons and having inappropriate sexual contact with inmates.^{4/5} One Aramark employee was even charged with a felony for attempting to hire an inmate to arrange an assault on another inmate.⁶

- 1 <http://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/2015/05/21/aramark-seeks-cost-increase-michigan-prison-food-contract/27749305/>
- 2 <http://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/2015/05/21/aramark-seeks-cost-increase-michigan-prison-food-contract/27749305/>
- 3 <http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2014/12/14/aramark-prison-food-inmate-sex/20364467/1>
- 4 <http://archive.freep.com/article/20140716/NEWS06/307160148/aramark-inmate-sex-michigan-prison>
- 5 <http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2014/10/23/third-aramark-prison-food-worker-fired-suspected-drug-smuggling/17784655/>
- 6 <http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/05/20/>

“I am at my wits end...”

—Kevin Weissenborn, Michigan Department of Corrections manager in charge of policing the Aramark contract

In addition to extensive problems with staff, Aramark has also been unable to fulfill its basic food service responsibilities. Thirty inmates at one facility were treated for food poisoning after maggots and fly larvae were found in one of the serving lines.⁷ Food shortages and the poor quality of the food served by Aramark sparked a protest by 200 prisoners at another facility.^{8/9} One Aramark employee filed a whistle-blower complaint after she was fired, alleging that the company falsified records to inflate payments from the state and conceal that inmates were served expired and contaminated food.¹⁰

Although Aramark's contract was intended to save the state \$14 million per year, it was revealed in May 2015 that Aramark is seeking a possible increase in its contract.¹¹ Additionally, while Aramark was fined \$98,000 for contract violations in March 2014, the state waived the fine shortly after, and Aramark never paid it.¹²

[aramark-worker-charged-prison-hit-case/27634893/](http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/05/20/aramark-worker-charged-prison-hit-case/27634893/)

- 7 <http://www.freep.com/article/20140630/NEWS06/306300136/prison-food-maggots-Aramark>
- 8 <http://www.freep.com/article/20140218/NEWS06/107120002/Michigan-prisoners-leave-cells-protest-over-meals-menu-options>
- 9 <http://archive.freep.com/article/20140713/NEWS06/307130099/aramark-prison-food-privatization-michigan>
- 10 <http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2014/10/23/former-aramark-prison-workers-allege-unsafe-kitchen-practices/17753335/>
- 11 <http://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/2015/05/21/aramark-seeks-cost-increase-michigan-prison-food-contract/27749305/>
- 12 <http://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/2015/05/21/aramark-seeks-cost-increase-michigan-prison-food-contract/27749305/>

Ohio

In September 2013, Aramark took over food service at Ohio prisons under a two-year, \$110 million contract, displacing more than 400 state employees.¹³

“The report of maggots was the second in the Marysville prison and the eighth confirmed case in a state prison this year.”

—Norwalk Reflector

During the first 18 months of the contract, 135 Aramark employees were recommended for termination.¹⁴ The rate at which Aramark employees were recommended for termination is an incredible 1,200 percent higher than the rate for state employees in 2011 and 2012.¹⁵ Aramark staff were caught smuggling drugs and cellphones into prisons and having inappropriate sexual contact with inmates.¹⁶

While the state employees who previously staffed the kitchens were required to complete six weeks of training, Aramark employees receive just a few hours of training.¹⁷ In one instance, an Aramark employee became locked in a kitchen cooler with six inmates.¹⁸

In addition to the security concerns associated with drug smuggling, inappropriate sexual relationships and insufficient training, the inability of Aramark to fulfill its basic food service responsibilities endangers inmates and staff.

In August 2014, 1,000 inmates at the Ohio Reformatory for Women threw out their lunches after maggots were found in the serving line.¹⁹ In other instances, maggots were found in a hotbox and crawling in a turkey roll.²⁰ With more than 100 documented food shortages and maggot infestations at seven prisons across the state, the number of inmate grievances about food service spiked 53 percent under Aramark.²¹

“The transition [to Aramark] was plagued with problems, the most notable being reports of maggots in the food, high staff turnover, inappropriate relationships with inmates, and operational problems due to food shortages.”

*—Ohio Correctional Institution
Inspection Committee Report*

Corrections officers report that Aramark’s problems increased tensions among inmates, and they aren’t alone in expressing concern.²² Gary Mohr, the Director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections, testified at a legislative hearing that Aramark’s problems were making Ohio prisons less secure.²³ The executive director of the independent Correctional Institution Inspection Committee reported in a memo to legislators that “the likelihood that inmates will engage in a demonstration or disturbance over food services seems relatively high.”²⁴ At times, corrections officers must even fill in for Aramark employees who don’t show up or get fired.^{25/26}

13 <https://news.vice.com/article/despite-allegations-of-starvation-sex-and-maggots-ohio-wants-to-renew-private-prison-food-contract>

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17 <http://www.daytondailynews.com/news/news/more-than-100-food-workers-banned-from-state-prison/nhXTx/>

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24 <http://www.mansfieldnewsjournal.com/story/news/local/2014/07/30/state-fines-prison-food-contractor/13383277/>

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26 <http://www.mansfieldnewsjournal.com/story/news/local/2014/07/30/state-fines-prison-food-contractor/13383277/>