

Nutrition Education Needs of Women Being Released from Prison
Maine Reentry Nutrition Initiative: 2005 Discussion Groups Summary
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Introduction

The Maine Correctional Center (MCC) located in Windham, Maine, houses the only female prison population in Maine. Women at the MCC have received at least a 9-month sentence and often begin serving their sentences at a county jail before being transferred. Once transferred to the correctional center, women are housed in "pods," a wing of the men's prison used to accommodate the expanding female prison population. The Women's Center was built in the late 1990's to house the female prison population at MCC, based on the gendered model of self-care. Residents have opportunities to practice self-healing, to take college courses via satellite, to access a gym and outdoor recreation areas, and to work -- though the number of employment opportunities are very few compared to the size of the population. There are currently 120 women at MCC, around 70 of whom reside in the Women's Center. This is the highest the female prison population has been in Maine in the last ten years.

The Maine Reentry Nutrition Initiative, funded by the USDA Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program and part of the Maine Nutrition Network (MNN), was created to provide nutrition education to FSP eligible women re-entering society after confinement. Maine is one of 15 states that currently allow those convicted of a drug related felony to be eligible for participation in the Food Stamp Program.¹ In a 2004 internal MCC survey, 78% of the female prison population indicated that they felt they would be eligible for the Food Stamp Program (FSP) upon release. As such, a series of discussion groups was conducted in partnership with Volunteers of America Northern New England (VOANNE) within the Women's Center to assess the need for education related to nutrition and physical activity among this population of future likely eligible FSP participants.

The purpose of the discussion groups was to inform the development and implementation of a post-release nutrition intervention that focuses on skill building and developing healthy lifestyles that incorporate good nutritional practices and physical activity. MNN staff developed a set of discussion group questions for women residing at the Women's Center. The questionnaire consists of 16 questions addressing nutrition knowledge and behaviors, food security, physical activity knowledge and behaviors, and related educational interests.

Four discussion groups were scheduled during August of 2005. Participation in the discussion groups was purely voluntary and relied on word-of-mouth and a sign-up sheet accessible to all residents in the Women's Center common room. In total, fifteen residents participated in the four discussion groups. Four women participated in the first group, three in each of the second and third groups, and five in the final group. One resident was asked by VOANNE to facilitate the four discussion groups in order to increase the likelihood that the participants would feel comfortable sharing their opinions. Four different people served as co-facilitators, all of whom are members of the Maine Reentry Nutrition Initiative Steering Committee. Additionally, MNN staff members attended three of the four groups as observers.

¹United States Department of Agriculture, [Food Stamp Program State Options Report](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/rules/Memo/Support/State_Options/fifth/default.htm). August 2005.
http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/rules/Memo/Support/State_Options/fifth/default.htm, viewed March 2006.

Each discussion lasted approximately 1½ hours and was tape recorded with the permission of prison officials and the participants themselves. The recordings were later transcribed and participants' identities were kept confidential. Four MNN staff members involved in this project analyzed the transcripts individually which was then discussed in the group.

The primary themes emerging from the analyses/discussions are:

- A disparity between participants' general nutrition knowledge
- Weight gain and weight control strategies
- Eating and physical activity habits linked to emotions and mental health
- Concern regarding food security upon release

General Nutrition Knowledge

When participants were asked about what food is bad or good, fruits/vegetables and whole grains were mentioned frequently as good food items. Some even mentioned 'moderation' or 'eating regularly' as healthy eating habits. Sugary foods like cookies, pastries and dessert were considered bad food, and many times women mentioned that they made conscious efforts to avoid such foods during mealtimes. In addition, starchy food (like white bread, pasta) was commonly identified as bad food. The frequency of responses showed that the participants were thinking a lot about sugar or starch items in relation to bad foods. Interestingly, it was noticed that avoiding butter, fat or oily items was not as important or vital a priority as avoiding high carbohydrate items.

The level of nutrition knowledge among participants varied. Nutrition knowledge or interest was higher in women whose family had a history of chronic diseases like diabetes or high blood pressure or a medical condition like PKU (Phenylketonuria). Women who participated previously in weight loss programs had more knowledge of the benefits of good food habits and physical activity than other participants. Some women also mentioned having smaller portion sizes as a healthy eating habit.

While discussing nutrition knowledge and good eating habits, many women also said that time constraints, limited resources or a certain lifestyle did not allow them to learn or think about nutrition. Many times women related nutrition to their habits growing up, for instance one woman said, 'Uh, growing up, nutrition for me was we had cereal for breakfast, sandwiches at lunch time and meat and potatoes and vegetables at dinner time and very rarely did we ever have dessert.' Some women mentioned that exposure to different food items in Women's Center generated some interest and they are thinking more about foods and nutrition than before.

Weight Management

A discussion of weight gain and weight control/weight loss strategies emerged during the discussion in all four groups. A number of participants indicated that they had gained a large amount of weight, some upwards of 60 pounds, while incarcerated at county jails or the MCC. Several residents attributed the weight gain to a carbohydrate heavy diet that included very large portions, especially in the county jails and "pods" where women are served the same

meals as male residents. Participants noted that portion sizes seem much more reasonable in the Women's Center, though they still identified the diet as heavy in carbohydrates.

Many of the women in all of the groups appeared to be concerned with maintaining or losing weight. As such, a number of weight control and weight loss strategies were discussed including, dieting, physical activity, reducing portion sizes, skipping meals and bingeing and purging. While dieting was mentioned as a weight loss strategy prior to incarceration, it appeared that few, if any, of the women mentioned dieting while in prison. This could be due to the idea that the women were not in control of the foods available and therefore could not diet. A few women felt that they were able to control how much they ate by asking kitchen staff for reduced portion sizes and/or refusing the desserts, but at least one person was uncomfortable asking for smaller portions and others reported that they could not go through the food line without getting everything.

In response to the inability to turn down food, some of the participants indicated that they skip meals entirely to avoid eating too much, sometimes for days at a time, drinking only water or coffee to satiate their appetites. At the other end of the spectrum, a number of women reported bingeing at meal times and returning to their rooms to purge. Though bulimia was not a topic of these discussions, it was brought up in most of the groups to varying degrees. In one group most of the women shared that they had at some point binged and purged while incarcerated, though one woman commented that she tried a number of times but was unable to. It was reported that some women would get together to take turns bingeing and purging especially while residing in the "pods" where there is little privacy.

Some of the women also felt that the lack of activity while confined to cells for most hours of the day, in the county jails and "pods," contributed to their weight gain. While most of the women seemed to share the opinion that the options for physical activity were greater in the Women's Center, it didn't always equate to a large increase in physical activity. Some of the women felt that even in the Women's Center the resources for physical activity and access to outdoor areas was inadequate. In contrast to being unable to control various aspects of eating and food availability, the many of the participants seemed to treat physical activity as an aspect of their lives in prison of which they had some control. Some of the women cited lack of motivation as the biggest obstacle to being physically active. Other women had medical concerns that prevented them from being physically active on a regular basis.

Links to emotions and mental health

In the discussion groups, participants generally reported the mental health benefits of healthy eating more often than the physical benefits. Participants mentioned benefits like reduced depression and increased mental stability when sharing their personal experiences with healthy eating. Conversely, some women reported that the guilt associated with eating "bad foods" could lead to depression, binge and purge behavior, and excessive physical activity. One woman stated that prior to being incarcerated she would go to McDonald's when she was feeling upset, then feel worse for doing it, yet repeat the behavior when she was upset again. Similarly, comfort food was mentioned a number of times as being used to relieve depression and to fill an emotional hole. In addition to healthy eating, a number of women reported the mental health benefits of staying physically active. Some women also reported feeling guilty for not being physically active on a regular basis.

Food Security

There was variability among the women reporting whether or not they and their families were able to obtain enough food prior to their incarceration. A few participants noted that obtaining food was not an issue due to the income generated by their criminal lifestyle. Additionally, some of the women who admitted having “unhealthy” lifestyles in the past were not concerned with eating healthy prior to incarceration and relied on the cheapest foods available so that their money could be spent on other items. Many of the women who had children, however, indicated that their families did not have enough food prior to their incarceration.

Some women felt that it would be easier to feed their families upon release because some, or all, of their children had grown and were able to provide for themselves or they would be returning to homes with a primary wage earner. Others were still concerned that they would not have the resources to provide adequate meals for themselves and their families. This concern was shared by most of the participants and amplified by the fear that their felony convictions would negatively effect their ability to gain employment. Participants were also concerned with the cost of purchasing “healthy” and fresh foods versus the cheaper “unhealthy” refined and pre-processed foods. (Though some of the women shared money saving tips such as sticking to a shopping list, budgeting, and making foods from scratch, as a means of providing their families with healthy meals, many of the women shared the opinion that “healthy” foods are more expensive than “unhealthy” foods.)

Though a number of the women expressed a desire to participate in the Food Stamp Program (FSP) after release, there seemed to be a stigma associated with the program. Even among some of the women who had participated in the FSP prior to their incarceration, many hoped that they wouldn't have to rely on assistance, but would consider it until they found a means of supporting themselves. One woman was concerned that she would not qualify for food assistance because of her ineligibility in the past.

When asked about interests in learning more about nutrition, some women expressed an interest in learning more about food assistance programs, such as the FSP, WIC coupons, and the location of food banks. At the conclusion of the discussion groups, some women also felt that there was not enough discussion about the economic insecurity that they will face as convicted felons upon release. Additionally, employment issues was a concern that some of the women would have liked to have talked about, but was not in the scope of the discussion. Some of the participants also shared that they felt the most important thing discussed during the session was the FSP and issues associated with buying food.