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# Sasha Borissenko: What's on the menu in prison and how much inmates get paid



Opinion by

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Green MP Golriz Ghahraman has pledged to give prisoners full voting rights. Photo / Doug Sherring

## OPINION:

Green MP Golriz Ghahraman pledged to give prisoners full voting rights under her Electoral Strengthening Democracy Amendment Bill that was pulled out of the ballot in May. Meanwhile, people mightn't know that prisoners at Rimutaka prison, for example, make 20-60 cents an hour.

If prisoners meet good behaviour requirements they can be eligible to grease the wheels of the prison machine, as it

were. The highly sought-after positions include cleaning, cooking, gardening, and maintenance of the prison facility.

The current pay rate is determined by the fact prisoners are considered volunteers under the Employment Relations Act. Prisoners could earn just \$7 at 20 cents an hour for a 35-hour week.

The money goes into a trust account, which is capped at \$200 as per the Corrections operations manual. Family and friends can contribute to the trust account and prisoners can spend up to \$70 a week. So the question remains, what do prisoners spend their money on?

## Prisoner canteen system

According to Corrections chief custodial officer Neil Beales, prisoners can purchase goods through the prisoner canteen system.

The range of goods and prices in the canteen are set nationally and are the same for every prison, he says. What's more, products are available to all prisoners and they can submit suggestions for new products to be added. The products are considered for suitability by an established Product Panel made up of four representative Prison Directors, Beales says.

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Miscellaneous items include phone cards (up to \$20), stamp books (\$14), ear plugs (.30c), blue and black pens (.60c), playing cards (\$3.50), various gift cards (\$1.20), single batteries (up to \$2), and one single magazine in the form of the TV Guide (\$2.90).

Sweet treats include: Party Mix (\$2.80), Sugarless Fruit Jellies (\$4.50), Peanut Slabs (\$1.65), Dairy Milk Chunky Bars (\$1.55), Moro Bars (\$1.65), Chocolate Fish (\$1.30), or Mints Curiously Strong (\$3.40).

Snacks include a range of nut varieties (up to \$6.50), muesli bars (up to \$2.90), and chips (up to \$4.20). Biscuits and crackers include Gingernuts (\$2.60), SNAX (\$4.25), Choc Chip (\$4.30 for a twin pack), Chewy Caramel (\$3.80), and Arrowroot (\$2.60).

For those wanting something a little more substantial, noodles (up to \$3.90), soup (\$2.55), tuna (\$2.90), jerky (\$3.95), and couscous (up to \$2.90) are on offer. Prisoners can purchase various fruits via the canteen (up to \$4.40) but canteen rules dictate that people are permitted a maximum of seven fruit or fruit-based items per week.

Various fruit-flavoured drinks and hygiene products are available but they're too depressing to mention. You can, however, buy coffee granules for \$3.10 (thank Jesus, Mary, and Joseph), and protein shakes for \$5.

Beales says Corrections does not make a profit from the canteen system. It engages a tender process when looking to source providers for services or products, using the Government Electronic Tender Service.

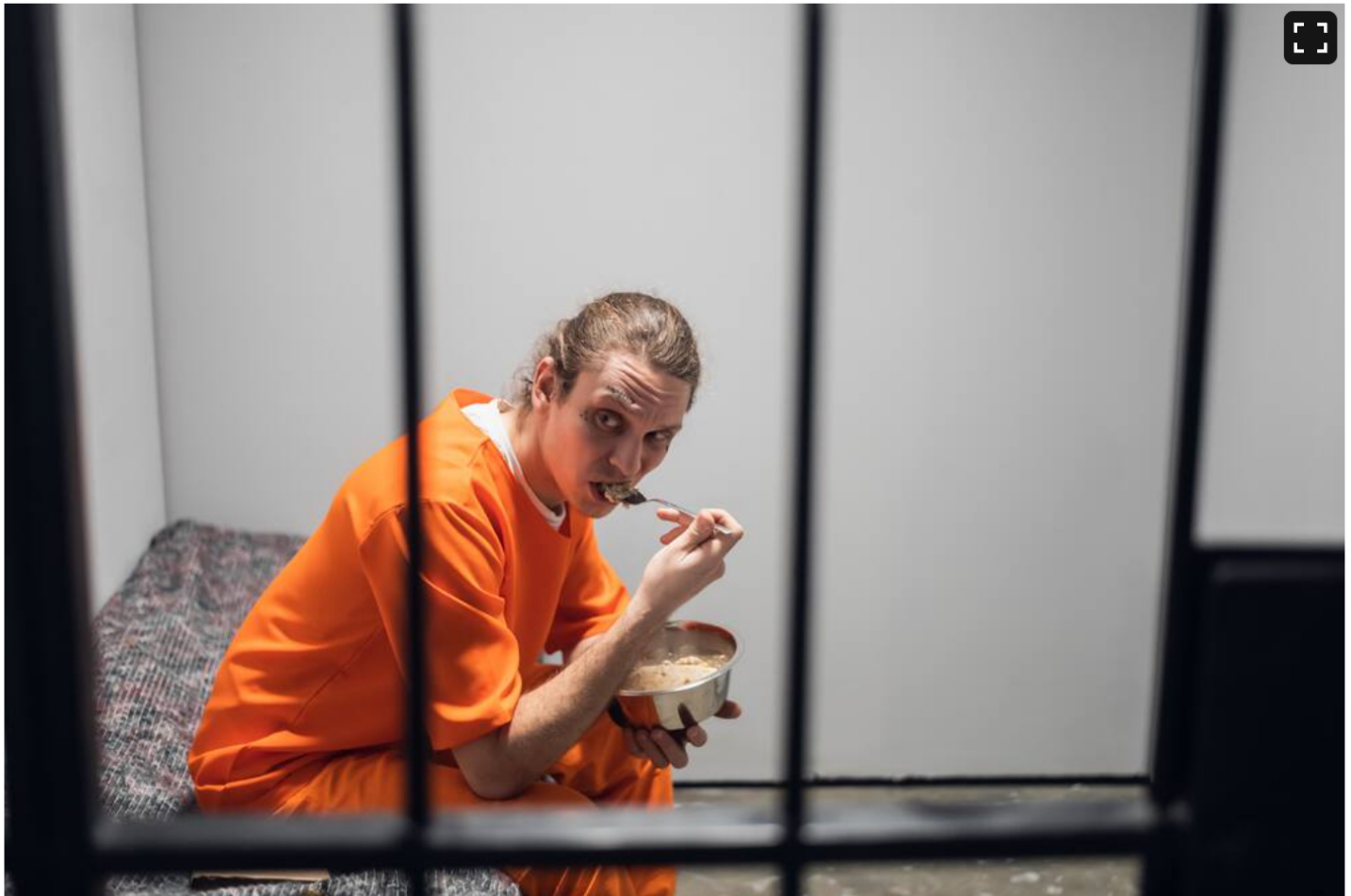
"Our small scale relative to supermarket chains, and the supermarket's complex retail pricing strategies (card discounts, specials, super savers and club prices etc), means there are always instances where Corrections' prices

are different to those offered by supermarkets.

"The pricing model for canteen items also includes item cost, picking, packing, packaging, freight, administrative costs and supervision.

"The canteen system provides a work-like training environment and offers the opportunity for prisoners to achieve NZQA-recognised training outcomes in areas across typical warehouse operations like stock management, order fulfilment, packing and distribution.

Suppose a prisoner doesn't have the funds to fuel their need for coffee, snacks, and reading the TV Guide, they're supplied with meals, medical and basic dental services, and adequate clothing. They're also provided with personal hygiene items including shampoo, soap, toothpaste and toothbrushes.



The national prison menu is rotated every four weeks. Photo / 123rf

## What's on the menu

For all the foodies out there interested in the culinary line-up - the national menu is rotated every four weeks. Week one snacks include muffins (unspecified) for supper seven days a week, or two servings of fruit.

Breakfast consists of a form of cereal and milk - Weetbix, Ricies, Cornflakes, for example - two pieces of unspecified toast that includes a rotation of spreads be it margarine, jam, or peanut butter. Interestingly no coffee is on offer - a crime against humanity in and of itself - but tea and sugar is available.

Mixed grain sandwiches are on the menu for lunch from Monday to Friday, and Sundays. For the carnivores, you'll get to choose between cheese and onion or chicken luncheon on Mondays; meatloaf or cheese and onion on



Tuesdays; roast beef et al or egg and mayonnaise on Wednesdays; shredded chicken or tuna on Thursdays; and corned beef or cheese and onion on Fridays.

Vegetarians get to choose between cheese and onion (surprise, surprise) and hummus on Mondays; lentil loaf or cheese and onion (they really love their cheese and onion) on Tuesdays; Tomato or egg on Wednesdays; falafel or egg on Thursdays; and vegemite or cheese and onion on Fridays.

Saturdays involve big-ticket items such as chicken and vegetable couscous salad or chickpea, falafel and vegetable couscous salad for the vegetarians.

For dinner, prisoners get to essentially have meat, or a meat substitute (such as lentil patties, lentil loaf, lentil everything), two servings of vegetables, a single potato, and either yoghurt or milk, six days a week. Bleak. Thursday offers a little more pizzazz, with the introduction of pasta. The sauce could either be lentil bolognese for vegetarians or beef and lentil bolognese for everyone else.

Where to from here? Essentially if you're not a fan of lentils or cheese and onion sandwiches you're hard out of luck. The situation - whether it's the minimum wage, the lack of Tim Tams, or the menu - is a little too depressing to comment on, really.