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## Grumbling behind bars: Prisons cut back meals to save, critics say hungry inmates turn violent

SHANNON McCaffrey  
Associated Press Writer

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ATLANTA (AP) — The recession is hitting home for inmates, too: Some cash-strapped states are taking aim at prison menus.

Georgia prisoners already didn't get lunch on the weekends, and the Department of Corrections recently eliminated the midday meal on Fridays, too. Ohio may drop weekend breakfasts and offer brunch instead. Other states are cutting back on milk and fresh fruit.

Officials say prisoners are still getting enough calories, but family members and critics say the changes could make prisoners irritable and food a valuable commodity, increasing the possibility of violence.

In Georgia, inmates are still getting the same number of daily calories: 2,800 for men and 2,300 for women. The portions at breakfast and dinner are bigger on days only two meals are served.

Almost 5 percent of the state's 58,295 prisoners still get three meals every day because they are diabetic, pregnant or have other special health needs.

Barbara Helie, whose 25-year-old son Nicholas is serving time for armed robbery in Valdosta State Prison, said he would go hungry without the roughly \$60 a week she puts into his account to buy instant soups, cheese, beef sticks and other snacks at the prison commissary.

"I don't know how the guys who don't have someone on the outside helping out handle it," Helie said. "Food has been an ongoing issue for him ... He's hungry a lot."

Georgia's fast-growing prison system — the fifth-largest in the nation — has been hit hard by the same budget woes plaguing other states. For the current fiscal year, the state has slashed almost 10 percent from the state Department of Corrections' \$1.1 billion budget.

Friday lunches were a casualty of the department's decision to save money on gas and other costs by scaling back the prisoner work week from five eight-hour days to four 10-hour days, said Calvin Brown, Georgia Department of Corrections Deputy Director of Facility Operations. He couldn't say how much the state is saving.

For years now, Georgia prisoners have received only two meals a day on weekends because they

don't work, so now the same holds true on Fridays. They get three meals on work days because they are exerting themselves on road crews and litter pick up.

There are no federal minimum caloric standards for state prison systems, though they are encouraged to adhere to guidelines established by the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies Food and Nutrition Board. Georgia officials say they follow those guidelines, and Brown said there have been some complaints from inmates and family members but no lawsuits.

In Ohio, prisons director Terry Collins said eliminating breakfast on the weekends and replacing it with brunch "could save us some real dollars when it comes to staffing and food costs."

He said the move would not upset prisoners because it would not sacrifice quality.

"I don't expect them to be as good as mom's home cooking, but the food should be cooked and presented properly," Collins said.

Other states have kept three meals but are scaling back menus. Earlier this month, Alabama reduced the milk and fresh fruit it serves to save \$700,000. Alabama inmates now receive an apple or an orange once a week, down from twice a week. Milk has been reduced from seven servings per week to three. Tennessee has also cut back on milk portions for men — from two servings a day to one — to save \$600,000.

Gordon Crews, a professor at Marshall University in West Virginia, wrote a book looking at correctional violence and said historically there have been links between food and problems behind bars. He pointed to a February riot at the Reeves County Detention Center in Texas caused in part by poor food quality.

"A lot of prisoners will see something like that as some kind of retribution against them or some kind of mistreatment," Crews said. "It'll be something that the correctional staff will pay the price for ... another reason (for inmates) to argue and fight back."

In Georgia, reports of inmate assaults — on both staff and other inmates — are up substantially for fiscal year 2009 over the year before, according to data obtained by The Associated Press through an open records request.

Prison officials deny the increase has anything to do with the shrinking menu but didn't provide an explanation.

Sara Totonchi, of the Southern Center for Human Rights, called the elimination of Friday lunch part of a troubling trend of budget cuts in Georgia's correctional system.

"We don't think this is a good idea," she said. "It destabilizes things inside the prison and that is not good for any of the inmates or staff."

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Associated Press writers Phillip Rawls in Montgomery, Ala., and Erik Schelzig in Nashville, Tenn., contributed to this report.

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