

Bourdieu in the Women's Prison Garden: Findings from Two Clinical Sociological Garden Interventions in the Carceral Field

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Abstract

This paper presents preliminary findings from two prison horticulture intervention projects. Our project sites are located in a women's community corrections facility in the U.S. Midwest and a women's maximum-security prison in the Southeastern United States. These garden projects illustrate the importance of sociological theory and clinical sociological practice in the development of programs that will benefit incarcerated women who remain underserved and disenfranchised in U.S. society. We apply Bourdieu's theories of capital to understand incarcerated women's lived experiences. We find that clinical sociological prison gardens foster women's rehabilitation and increase food security within incarcerated settings. They also are an important site of capital and skill-building for participants.

Keywords

gardening, incarcerated women, clinical sociology, Bourdieu

With the highest prison rate globally, the United States currently incarcerates 698 per 100,000 people, equating to 1.07 percent of all working adults (Wagner and Sawyer 2020). The system of mass incarceration hereby does not affect all social strata equally; members of marginalized and racialized communities are disproportionately at risk of being detained. Females have by far been the fastest-growing demographic within prisons and jails in recent decades (Kajstura 2019; Swavola, Riley, and Subramanian 2016). With the explosion of female incarceration rates, correctional programs should focus on the needs of women, but gender-responsive programming is sorely lacking in most facilities (Covington and Bloom 2007; Swavola et al. 2016).¹ We suggest that a sociologically informed prison garden for women constitutes a form of gender-responsive programming and can be an outcome as well as a means of clinical sociology.

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Food behind bars is an issue that affects all incarcerated populations. One major issue in carceral settings is food insecurity, defined as a lack of access to healthy foods for marginalized populations (Camplin 2017; Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein 2020). Most prisoners are provided largely processed foods high in sodium, sugar, and fats; some institutions even distribute tainted or spoiled food to their inmates, which leads to and aggravates existing chronic illnesses and is detrimental to mental health and overall well-being (Soble et al. 2020). Many U.S. correctional institutions have witnessed a deterioration in food quality over the last few years (Sawyer 2017a; Soble et al. 2020), yet there is still little attention paid to the problem of food insecurity within carceral settings.

Clinical sociological interventions of prison gardens for incarcerated women may address these gaps on a practical level. Empirical evidence shows that horticultural interventions in carceral settings improve the mental and physical health of inmates and may contribute to lower recidivism (Jiler 2006; DelSesto 2022). Prison gardens are a way to address food insecurity and provide nutritious food to supplement substandard meal plans in these settings while simultaneously providing rehabilitation to incarcerated individuals (Soble et al. 2020). We understand issues around prison food mainly as a manifestation of the dehumanizing aspects of the prison experience (Fritz 2022). We aim to use clinical sociology not only to provide food but also to create space for empowerment and agency for the underserved population of incarcerated women. Our goal here is to actualize human rights, foster mental and physical health outcomes, and foster positive social interaction through horticulture.

Thus, it is essential to delineate our work from the historically problematic (ab)use of agricultural production in correctional settings. This study focuses on therapeutic prison gardens, typically organized by individual facilities, utilizing small tracts of land to grow food to be used within the facility or donated. Prison garden models (including our sites) use volunteers and outside agencies and serve rehabilitative, educational, and therapeutic purposes while also contributing to food justice. Snyder (2017) differentiated between correctional agricultural industries, prison farms, and prison gardens. She suggests that correctional industries exploit low-paid inmate labor to produce and sell foods through farming operations or contracting with private companies. State-level correctional facilities may run large-scale prison farms to alleviate incarceration costs by supplementing existing food inventories with fresh produce in prisons or selling products to other departments within the state or to local communities. Prison garden programs like ours are different than correctional industries and prison farms in our program mission and goals. Our goal is to invest in incarcerated women to empower them and to help them restore their lives, not to exploit them.

Taking insight from Bourdieu's theory of forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986, 1989), we consider how prison gardens may benefit incarcerated women and become spaces of agency for the realization of human rights in an oppressive carceral environment. Our research examines two field sites of prison gardens and how our clinical sociological garden interventions helped women build cultural, economic, social, and symbolic capital.

Literature Review

Human Rights of Women in the U.S. Carceral System

A rights-based framework in clinical sociology means that we assume that *all* people have a right to well-being and freedom (Fritz and Rheume 2014). We must thus include the voices of incarcerated women in a penal system that directly opposes the feminist ideal of gender, class, and racial equality (Davis 2011). A rights-based framework also means supporting the idea that everyone should have access to nourishing foods. The right to food is recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights as part of the right to an adequate standard of living. It

is enshrined in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. Lack of adequate food in prisons may be tantamount to inhuman and degrading treatment (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR] 2010). As clinical sociologists, we not only critically assess a phenomenon but also find creative and research-based interventions to improve human lives. The focus of the project is to provide access to nourishing food while strengthening the voice of women and assisting in removing structural barriers to gender equality and women's empowerment within and beyond the carceral system.

Women's incarceration has grown at twice the pace of men's in recent decades; the female incarcerated population is nearly eight times higher than in 1980 (The Sentencing Project 2020). There are 1.3 million women under the supervision of the criminal justice system, most of them in community corrections (like parole and probation) and local jails (Kajstura 2019). Many of these women struggle with substance abuse, mental illness, and histories of abuse.

More than two-thirds of incarcerated women in the United States reported having a history of mental health problems (Swavola et al. 2016). More women than men met the threshold for severe psychological distress in both prisons (20 percent vs. 14 percent men) and jails (32 percent vs. 26 percent men; Bronson and Berzofsky 2017). One predictor often linked to substance abuse and mental health is a history of abuse. Women in the penal system often come from long histories of trauma and abuse both as children and as adults (Covington and Bloom 2007; Swavola et al. 2016).

Another unique problem for incarcerated women is that 80 percent of those who go to jail each year are mothers—including nearly 150,000 women who are pregnant when they are admitted to prisons (Sawyer and Bertram 2018). More than 60 percent of women in state prisons have a child aged below 18 years (The Sentencing Project 2020). While many male convicts are also parents, most incarcerated mothers are the primary caretakers of their children (Sawyer and Bertram 2018; Swavola et al. 2016). This leaves children of incarcerated populations vulnerable. Compared with other children, children with an incarcerated parent are more likely to experience higher rates of poverty, food insecurity, homelessness, and physical health problems (Institute for Research on Poverty 2014). For women, the lack of gender-responsive programming and the separation from children and loved ones create additional strain in carceral settings and weigh on mental health outcomes (Bronson and Berzofsky 2017; Swavola et al. 2016). The realities of women who are incarcerated create a need for gender-responsive treatment (Covington and Bloom 2007) that supports the empowerment of women. We argue garden programming for women in correctional settings can be designed as a gender-responsive and sociologically informed program that creates a space of agency for incarcerated women, leads to better mental and physical health outcomes, and fosters positive social interaction.

Benefits of Gardens in Correctional Environments

Correctional institutions such as prisons, jails, and community corrections facilities are traditionally places of malnutrition (Camplin 2017; Soble et al. 2020). They have been conceptualized as "out-of-sight food deserts" (Soble et al. 2020:5), perpetuating patterns of ill health among marginalized populations (Fritz 2022). The U.S. prison diet impacts mental and physical health in profound and negative ways, not only for individuals who require special (yet unattainable) diets (e.g., diabetics). More recently, COVID-19 has exacerbated food scarcity and undernourishment, as fewer meals were provided at even worse quality within carceral settings (Blakinger 2020).

Soble et al. (2020) concluded that food produced through therapeutic prison gardens can be a powerful tool for restoring health and cultivating self-esteem in prisoners. Besides being a valuable source of fresh fruit and vegetables, nature-based interventions and therapy have been very effective in institutional mental health settings (Moeller et al. 2018; Howarth et al. 2020).

In correctional settings, nature therapy, such as gardening, has enhanced psychosocial functioning, reducing risk-taking and lowering substance abuse and depression (Jiler 2006; Richards and Kafami 2000). Gardening provides access to healthy physical activity, increases physical and mental health, and contributes to skill-building (Christie et al. 2016; Farrier, Baybutt, and Dooris 2019; Jiler 2006).

According to the National Institute of Corrections (2011), about a third of prisons are already integrating some form of green education and job training programs. Studies show participants enjoy the new skills they gain, develop a stronger work ethic, and hope to gain meaningful employment upon release (Christie et al. 2016; DelSesto 2022; Moore, Freer, and Samuel 2015). Employment directly correlates with recidivism rates, with offenders being less likely to reoffend if they maintain a stable job (Guy 2009). Self-published recidivism rates of graduates of green prison programs are as low as 4 percent (e.g., *Growing Gardens* 2021). Benham (2014) examined 117 Insight Garden program prisoners in California and found that of the paroled graduates between 2004 and 2010, only 10 percent returned to prison within three years. This is significantly lower than California's average recidivism rate (64 percent) over the same period. Without programming, such as gardens for incarcerated women, there is a higher chance of criminal behavior once released, resulting from being detained for a prolonged period (Guy 2011).

Gardening also offers new leisure activities (Jiler 2006; Richards and Kafami 2000) and has a history of being used in U.S. corrections for therapeutic purposes (DelSesto 2022; Lindemuth 2007). Garden programs enhance feelings of purpose, improve self-efficacy, and foster self-worth among incarcerated people. Graduates from prison garden programs have reported feeling less depressed, less aggressive, and more relaxed. James Jiler (2006), who initiated and ran the most established prison garden program on Rikers Island, had shown gardening has significant benefits for inmates of correctional facilities by assisting in: channeling aggression; learning to address anger issues; trauma; substance abuse; and depression. Ascencio (2018) showed that prison horticulture programs can provide prisoners with feelings of increased self-efficacy, success, and hope by learning new skills. These gardening attributes help teach the women prosocial attitudes rather than procriminal (Guy 2009).

Despite the evidence of the positive impacts of such programs, few studies address horticultural interventions with women. Toews, Amy, and Julie (2018) evaluated a one-time nature-based intervention (planting party) with women incarcerated in a mental health unit. Toews et al. (2020) found a visitor garden in a women's prison improved parent-child interactions during prison visits by providing a child-friendly, home-like visiting environment. Lindemuth (2007) found the same effect for a Children's Garden at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women. Prison gardens have the potential to provide women with some agency within prisons. Watkins (2017) found food in prisons is not only a source of pleasure for inmates but also a means of rebellion, resistance, and agency. Even if there is no dedicated prison garden space, Watkins (2017) observed that women forage wild greens and vegetables from green spaces in the yard, which generates a sense of agency, and incarcerated women build a community around this process that fosters positive social interaction. The ability to model positive social interactions helps develop social skills that can be practiced in these community settings (Guy 2009).

Our work provides a qualitative study to give attention to the hidden voices of incarcerated women as clinical sociologists, we use and apply sociological theory, methods, and findings to bring about social change (Bruhn and Rebach 2012) and focus on active and rights-based intervention for positive change and problem-solving (Fritz and Rheume 2014) to add to existing clinical sociological work in re-entry (Guy 2009, 2011). One hallmark of clinical sociology is using theory to guide our sociological intervention and research, and more clinical sociological work is needed to specifically empower women (Mancini Billson and Disch 1990). This study uses Bourdieu's theory on capital as the theoretical framework to interpret our data.

Bourdieu's Forms of Capital in the Prison Garden

Pierre Bourdieu (1986, 1989) radically widened the Marxist concept of capital and extended it beyond its purely economic definition. Bourdieu (1986) argued that capital can present itself in

... three fundamental guises: as *economic capital*, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as *cultural capital*, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital, and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and as *social capital* made up of social obligations ("connection"), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility. (Bourdieu 1986:243, emphasis in original)

The concept of *symbolic capital* was introduced a bit later. According to Bourdieu (1989), it is not a particular kind of capital, yet symbolic capital (re)presents every other form of capital as soon as it is recognized or misrecognized as capital. "It is the power to name, to make valid through symbolization or recognition" (Kita 2011:11). In other words, economic, cultural, and social capital exists in an objective and more measurable form and through its various symbolic applications and validations it becomes "convertible" or "fungible" (Gilleard 2020:2).

Bourdieu sees actors use these different forms of capital as they are stratified in social fields and compete for access to power within these fields, trying to accumulate and convert different forms of capital in these relational and deeply conflictual spaces. The conceptualization of the field refers to a more or less distinct social arena like education, work, leisure, or sport (Gilleard 2020). We argue carceral space is a social field in the Bourdieusian sense. We empirically examined how educational gardening within the carceral field might improve women's social location within and beyond the carceral space. Women in our programs might gain agency in the carceral social field through their program involvement, which gives them access to produce as materialized/economic capital. Prison garden programs also hold the potential to enhance cultural and social capital among incarcerated garden participants that might be actualized in re-entry and thus transgresses the carceral space.

A garden program allows them to build new social connections (with outside contacts) and gain education and skills that could help them find employment upon release and help enhance social recognition and abilities to translate the different forms of capital into symbolic capital. Bourdieu (1986) argued that if a person had one form of capital, it could lead to gains in other forms of capital. In the case of our programs, the goal is to enhance participants' economic capital (access to nourishing food and consumption, access to garden infrastructure) and cultural capital (educational certificates, nutritional knowledge, horticultural knowledge, transferable job skills, broadening of food palate) through social capital (teamwork skills, relationships with stakeholders and community partners) and symbolic capital (positive recognition by correctional staff, family members, and community) through a clinical sociological framework.

The following section presents two case studies, a prison garden inside a maximum-security prison and a garden inside a Community-Based Correctional Facility (CBCF). Both projects presented are ongoing and heavily impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Since March 2020, both of our garden sites have experienced shutdowns and supply-chain disruptions at different points in time. Next, we briefly describe each field site with their respective sociological research designs and summarize data collection and analysis for this paper.

Methods

The Field Sites

Case 1: A Southeastern U.S. garden (2018–March 2020, project reopened May 2021). The first case study is set in an 850-person maximum-security prison for women in the Southeastern (SE)

United States. The project is available to all prisoners, yet the participation has varied each season, ranging from 15 to 40 participants per class. Women who choose to participate in the project have sentences ranging from a few months to multiple life sentences. The SE Principal Investigator (PI) initiated the project in 2018 with the help of United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) funding with the future goal of wide-scale implementation. The project idea arose after media reports of food budget mismanagement by responsible sheriffs who had the autonomy to privately pocket money saved on correctional food in the state—and had indeed generously helped themselves in the past while limiting prison diets (Blinder 2018). The SE United States provides an ideal agricultural climate. The research team gained access to the site by strategically arguing that horticultural programming could supplement prison food production (and help save money).

The intervention consisted of a year-round program with weekly visits by the PI and research team, including sociology graduate and undergraduate students. Weekly, the team provided hands-on learning opportunities for women in a 2,600-sq. ft. garden, teaching them about gardening and nutrition. Between weekly sessions, the participants continued to work to maintain the garden and practice what they have learned. Participants were eligible to earn certificates after completion, which became part of their official prison record. The impact assessment of this program used a mixed-method, longitudinal design to assess residents' horticultural and nutritional knowledge. This process entailed pretest/posttest design with control and intervention groups. All participants were measured at time 1, before the intervention, and participants in the intervention group were measured again at time 2, after intervention exposure. Hypotheses measured participants' ability to access fresh fruits and vegetables, consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, and nutritional knowledge about fresh fruits and vegetables. In addition, qualitative data were collected to understand better the impact on mental health and social interaction around the prison garden and to give women the ability to explain in their own words how garden therapy may affect mental or emotional distress from living in an incarcerated setting.

From 2018 to 2020, 60 women participated in the project, with a mean age range of 30 to 34 years. In terms of race, the participants were: 81.3 percent Caucasian American/White, 12.4 percent Other races, and 6.3 percent African American/Black.² All incarcerated women could voluntarily sign up for beginners or advanced gardeners' courses. Women learned about the program through other participants as well as informational flyers. Each garden course operated for 15 weeks and is concluded with a graduation ceremony for garden participants. Two different 15-week gardening classes (beginners and advanced level) have been offered. The goal was to increase the number of fruits and vegetables a participant consumes by the end of a given garden class and portray the knowledge of garden maintenance. The research team collected qualitative data through the teaching process, and anonymous writing prompts at the beginning or end of classes. These prompts asked the participants questions about their experience with the garden project and how it benefited them in terms of their health and knowledge. In 2019, the intervention produced over 2,000 pounds of food for prison consumption only. Some of the fresh fruits and vegetables the inmates were able to consume include okra, peppers, cucumbers, squash, blueberries, strawberries, lettuce, and broccoli.

Case 2: Midwestern U.S. facility (2019–2020). In close collaboration with the PI from the SE garden, the Midwest PI initiated an organic garden in a women's CBCF. The facility resides in a city of approximately 200,000 inhabitants in the U.S. Midwest. The garden in the Midwest is in a re-entry setting with more transient participants that are referred to as "clients." This residential facility aims to divert clients from prison, reduce recidivism, and facilitate the re-entry of female clients into the wider community. While women are incarcerated full-time for a minimum of 30 days, they gradually receive access to the community through community service and treatment. The facility had an average of 215 intakes/year (2015–2018) and an 80 percent completion

rate—the length of stay averages 4.5 months. The clients had a median age of 26 to 35 years, and 40 percent did not have a high school degree. In terms of race, about 75 percent of clients in this facility identified as White, and about 12 percent identified as African American, according to facility records for the residents. The racial identity of the remaining 13 percent is undetermined.³

The Midwest PI worked as an applied sociologist in the agency and evaluated clients' exit evaluations; women consistently spoke about the perils of extensive "downtime" in the facility and the subpar food quality. An educational garden program directly responded to women's voices and addressed both issues. It could provide meaningful leisure activity to reduce idle time, supplement the food in the facility, and equip women with re-entry skills that may help them address food insecurity in their communities. The garden of approximately 400 sq. ft. was established in May 2019, and a horticultural curriculum in three seasonal phases was administered to clients weekly from May to November 2019. In contrast to the Southeast (year-round), the outdoor growing season in the Midwest is limited (May–October). We involved existing urban gardening structures through local community partners, who helped set up the garden on this site. In addition, partners donated resources and their time by sharing their expertise through guest lectures for the participants and consulting throughout the project.⁴

A research design with multiple qualitative participatory methods was adopted to understand client experiences. An ethnographic approach was used to answer the research question of how an educational horticultural program in a community correctional setting can benefit female clients and their communities. It is well suited to address institutional issues while protecting participants who cannot speak up on their behalf without jeopardizing their well-being and being vulnerable to retaliation in a carceral setting (Fine and Torre 2006). For example, women reported feeling concerned about vocalizing the (lack of) food quality, a concern we were able to bring up without fear of censure or repercussion. The design included a focus group with clients, an implementation workshop with all stakeholders, participant observation of gardening lessons, and semi-structured interviews with clients upon re-entry and conclusion of the garden program and after six months to one year as a follow-up study.

The pilot program proved to be extremely popular among the clients, with an average of 15 women participating in the garden lessons every week, totaling more than 116 women in 2019. The garden provided rich harvests and successfully involved a variety of guest speakers from the community. The women who participated took part in the planting process and the curriculum; their activities in the garden included planting, watering, weeding, and harvesting the produce grown. The garden was enlarged to 800 sq. ft. later that year; a total of 63 women participated in at least three gardening sessions in 2019.

Data

This paper draws on qualitative accounts collected from women at both field sites. The SE site collected data during the gardening lessons and transcribed 100 class exercises and weekly garden activity reports. Data from the Midwestern site consist of anonymously written reflection narratives collected from women after gardening lessons throughout the gardening program. The women in the program responded anonymously and voluntarily. A total of 120 reflection accounts are used in this analysis. In addition, a focus group of clients ($n = 4$) and an implementation workshop with all stakeholders ($n = 7$) from the Midwestern site were conducted in February 2020. In addition, the PI recorded detailed field notes before and after gardening sessions. These audiotaped field notes, participants' reflection questions, and tape from the focus group and implementation workshop have been transcribed verbatim, expanded by theoretical and methodological memos, and coded using NVivo12.

<p style="text-align: center;">Economic Capital</p> <p>Access to fresh vegetables and fruit, garden infrastructure, garden supplies, access to special approved items</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Social Capital</p> <p>Teamwork, relationships with outside partners, letters of recommendation, connections to existing food justice structures</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Cultural capital</p> <p>Educational certificates, nutritional knowledge, horticultural knowledge, transferable job skills, broadening of food palate</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Symbolic capital</p> <p>Officer and staff perceptions, family perceptions, role model for other residents</p>

Figure 1. Different forms of capital in the prison yard.

The analytic strategy for analysis was Grounded Theory (Bryant and Charmaz 2007; Glaser and Strauss 2012). NVivo 12 was also used to code image material from the gardening lessons. Throughout data analysis, codes and themes were discussed and refined among the coauthors. We present an analysis of emerging themes that will guide our further analytical approach and refine methodological tools. Writing reflections from both field sites were collected anonymously. Where observational demographic data are available (e.g., in field notes), we present it with the pertinent data. We now turn to the discussion of these analyses.

Findings

Cultural Capital

Bourdieu (1986) distinguished between embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms of cultural capital. Swartz (1997) referred to cultural capital as “a wide variety of resources including such things as verbal facility, general cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences, information about the school system, and educational credentials” (p. 75). We identify cultural capital in the prison garden program through *educational certificates, nutritional knowledge, horticultural knowledge, transferable job skills, and the broadening of the food palate* (see Figure 1). The educational garden programming on both sites institutionalized cultural capital as it granted educational certificates and integrated graduation ceremonies. For the Midwestern gardening program, for example, a participant is eligible to get a certificate and take home a grow kit containing a trowel, seeds, and garden gloves after participation in a minimum of 8 out of 12 lessons. Similarly, for the SE program, participants are eligible to earn certificates if they attend 10 out of 12 lessons. The access to certificates that can be included in the incarcerated person’s file and used in the re-entry process has become a form of institutionalized cultural capital. The graduation ceremony is a ritual that is purposely staged on both sites as a celebration of and for the women. Data show that this ritual is very meaningful to the women. One SE graduate stated, “garden graduation day was the best day

I have had in the 14 years I have been locked up. When he [the Official] handed me that certificate, it was like he was telling me that I am actually worth something.”

Bourdieu (1987) examined cultural capital as a site of the social stratification system that reveals clues to one’s social location. He focused on class distinctions as evidenced by cultural capital in formalized education and expressed in dress, language, diction, and food preferences. The *widening garden participants’ food and nutritional knowledge spectrum* is an essential aspect of cultural capital. A SE participant said, “I have never eaten collards in my life but decided to taste the ones from our garden. They were AMAZING! A hit of Banana peppers was added, as well as butter. They looked good and tasted even better.” We have observed many women on both field sites who have tasted certain vegetables for the first time and found them enjoyable, broadening their palate. The educational program on both field sites integrated lessons about nutrition and discussions of varying recipes. The garden programs enhanced cultural capital in broadening the taste spectrum and knowledge and language about how to prepare these foods. Our data thus also support Swartz’s (1997) idea of verbal facility, general cultural awareness, and aesthetic preferences, given the participant’s very tangible experiences and discussing these with others.

In the Midwest, the plan for future garden programs is to integrate food production and food education in a more structured way, as the Extension Office partner explained:

One of the things that we were working on this year was . . . a closed-loop situation where the ladies would grow the food, it would go into the meals, and they could experience the food overall . . . [. . .] maybe four crops or five crops that could fit not only into their food service but also into our education paradigm, as another colleague of my office provides nutritional education to the facility. So they could experience the chain of how you grow the food and use it in your household.

In this quote, the Extension Office partner suggests cultural capital might transfer to the communities to which the incarcerated women returned upon release. Bourdieu (1986) proposed cultural capital may be exchanged into economic capital, manifesting as educational qualifications. Another way the cultural capital of gardening skills translates into economic capital is by being transferable to green industry jobs. The Southeast and the Midwest are agricultural regions with substantial green industry and job needs in agricultural and green businesses.

Women recognize the potential to transfer their horticultural knowledge and skills and grow their food at home. “I will grow my own garden now that I have the skills and will save money!” wrote a Midwest participant in her reflection. This demonstrates participants are connected to how cultural capital might translate into economic capital if one maintained a home garden. Women gain education to address food insecurity once released, enabling them to supplement their diet and address food insecurity in their communities upon release.

Economic Capital

Economic capital is defined as money, property, and other financial resources. Incarcerated individuals disproportionately come from poverty before being incarcerated. Once in a carceral setting, their financial situation only deteriorates. With an average wage of 86 cents per hour for non-industry prison jobs, prisons pay incarcerated people less today than in 2001 (Sawyer 2017b). Regular prison jobs are mostly unpaid in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, and Texas (Sawyer 2017b). Food (including food that is smuggled from “chow hall,” that is, the dining hall) and commissary function as the most potent currency and trading good within the carceral transaction system (Camplin 2017). Thus, a large part of the economic capital of an incarcerated person is measured by how much food or commissary one can access. A garden within a correctional institution produces that currency and specifically provides access to nutritious food.

In the U.S. system of mass incarceration, economic capital is a key driver. While incarcerated individuals lack economic capital before and during incarceration, the prison food industry in the United States can gain significant profits from substandard food served in correctional facilities.

The \$4.1 billion prison food industry is dominated by a handful of players and does not only generate revenue from meals served to incarcerated people but also from the vending machines and commissary within facilities (Camplin 2017). The commissary in prison and jails is a small-scale grocery store where incarcerated individuals can obtain vastly overpriced, low-quality food and personal hygiene items. Commissary is often the only alternative residents have if they cannot, or do not, desire to eat what is on the facility menu. Incarcerated people who receive no outside financial support from family and friends often do not have the means to make commissary purchases.

The gardens directly provided *access to fresh food* and improved the substandard food situation participants experience as punitive:

But me and (*name omitted*) had just talked about the food here. It's not good enough for humans, not good enough for dogs like that's how bad it is. We wouldn't even give it to our dog and would get more expensive food for our dogs than what they give us. It's like a form of punishment in itself; it is part of the punishment or something.

This statement by Lilly, a white Midwestern participant in her mid-20s, vividly illustrates recent research on devastating and dehumanizing food conditions in U.S. correctional institutions and its health consequences for prisoners (Soble et al. 2020). Outside food in the form of healthy snacks and art supplies could be brought in occasionally as teaching material for the lessons. These were only accessible to the garden program participants, while the harvested bounty from the gardens was shared with residents that were not directly involved with the garden programs. The intervention also brought economic capital to participants through *garden infrastructure* and *garden supplies*.

At both sites, the gardens were established and built from scratch. At the SE site, the large prison garden provides an alternative to facility-regulated meals. Many garden participants have opted to find lunch in their garden, eating fresh vegetables straight from the plants. "The basil was very good. It had a bite to it on the tongue. I was very happy and somewhat proud to be able to eat something that we worked so hard to produce," wrote one SE participant in her garden journal.

The vegetables produced at the SE garden were weighed and transferred to the kitchen. In 2019, the garden produced a total of 2,000 pounds of fresh vegetables. This produce supplemented the prison diet and was used in the prison kitchen, which generally constitutes economic capital for the incarcerated individuals as well as economic outcomes for the institution. One of the main arguments used to gain entry into the SE prison was that the garden program would save the prison and administration money for food costs. Data showed that for the incarcerated women, the vegetables processed in the prison kitchen from the garden created an added value and material products in the form of food that were non-existent before. An SE participant shared,

Spaghetti sauce was a huge success. Everyone got to have some! All the inmates could not stop talking about how good it tasted, and it reminded them of the spaghetti sauce they would eat at home. The collards were wonderful as well. It was so nice to eat something from a garden that was planted by us.

Similarly, from the smaller Midwestern field site, we often integrated a communal "cooking" of simple recipes (e.g., herb butter with fresh herbs from the garden, salads) into the garden lessons.

Many women repeatedly stated that they had never tried certain herbs or vegetables before. Even fewer had an idea of what meals to cook with them; this specific nutritional knowledge also constitutes a form of cultural capital discussed above.

At the Midwestern field site, where women are sentenced to community service hours, since 2013, participants can opt to work with *Sunflower Gardens* in urban community gardens outside the facility. *Sunflower Gardens* always provides a communal meal for all volunteers. It consists of fresh vegetables and fruits from the gardens and preserves produced within the agency. It's "a table this long [spreads her arms wide] full of people and full of food, just salsas and salads, and pickles and fermented this, and dried that. Just an opportunity [for them] to sample!" said Nora, a veteran volunteer with *Sunflower Gardens*, who has accompanied dozens of community service clients over the years. The director of *Sunflower Gardens* added in an interview that the women also get to pick their own food in the grocery store on community service days ("a lot of them want to eat lunch meat sandwich, then, you know, that's on the table, too"); in addition to the vegetables and preserves they offered to the clients, the community service in the garden and gardening also provided access to store-bought food items ordinarily inaccessible to the women.

Finally, economic capital is actualized within the carceral space through *garden infrastructures and garden supplies* brought into the facilities through our projects (see Figure 1). For example, \$40,000 has been generated for the SE site through grants to fund garden supplies and sustainable garden infrastructures such as trellises, gardening containers, plant seedlings and supplies, and benches. "The new garden bench is like a new BMW compared to the V.W. milkcrate we've been sitting on," said an SE participant. Again, this also constitutes an increase in economic capital and resources for the institution, as the facility—not the women—owns the infrastructure. We frequently discussed our complicity in generating resources for the carceral complex through food and infrastructure. However, our goal is to provide meaningful programs for women and gain access to an otherwise invisible and underserved population. Women also got access to *specialty approved items such as journals, coloring supplies, new library books, craft items* used in gardening classes, and data collection. In some instances, they were given take-home grow kits as part of the graduation process that also contained resources from local community gardens. This leads us to social capital, the connections and social networks the participants built through the gardening programs.

Social Capital

Social capital refers to social relationships and networks. It can be described as the individual's accumulation of social resources and is "made up of social obligations" or "connections" (Bourdieu 1986:243). Once incarcerated, individuals are isolated from society for an extended period. They lack resources and networks. Stable relationships are fractured while incarcerated and impact a successful transition into the community. Without access to these resources from within the prison, residents find it challenging to manage the complex nature of life post-release and reconnect to the community (Koschmann and Peterson 2013). In addition to the positive experience of interaction with nature, gardening provided a source of social capital that other residents would not receive throughout their sentence. Our data identified social capital in the form of *teamwork, new relationships with outside partners, and connections to existing food justice structures* (see Figure 1). This social capital can be actualized through *letters of recommendation* and positive interaction within and outside the facility. Further data collection is needed to measure how this social capital can be used in re-entry.

Bourdieu's notion of social capital denotes the status (and subsequently economic resources) one gains through memberships in certain social groups. In the complicated dynamics of carceral spaces, social capital may be derived from membership in prison subcultures and groups.

However, prison dynamics are usually characterized by struggles for scarce resources. The garden programs allowed women to experience a *team culture* that is non-competitive and collaborative. A Midwest participant wrote, “I enjoyed most that we worked together. I liked the slides teaching us about gardening and the actual team connections we built with each other in the garden outside.” Our field notes revealed the laughter and the collaborative atmosphere created in the garden spaces during which women could apply social skills as a Midwest participant explained: “In today’s lesson, I enjoyed most that we worked together and took turns. We did something new and shared what we knew with each other.” Social bonds were formed among the women, and they established a new positive prison subculture. This is especially seen at the SE site, characterized by long-term residents with multiple life sentences. “We need to be there for anyone who wants to work in the garden,” wrote one SE resident.

Not only did women positively refer to each other and the team culture that was built on a client-client level, but both programs mobilized social capital outside the fences and brought in guest speakers and teachers from the community. This allowed the women to form *relationships with outside partners*. The program in the Midwest used guest speakers every other week from a variety of fields, exposed students to different forms of expertise, and a variety of organizers, scholars from local universities, master gardeners, and hobby gardeners. Through these connections, participants learned about existing structures like the local extension office, garden clubs, botany programs at local colleges, and free resources to start their own garden (e.g., free seed and tool libraries). This knowledge allowed the participants to express, reflect, and envision their potential and opportunity structures once released.

Social capital and outside relationships built during a prison garden program may translate into economic capital and livelihood support, as in the case of MG. She has formed long-term relations with gardeners she met during her time at the CBCF. MG is a white woman in her 50s who had spent six months in the CBCF a few years back where she volunteered with *Sunflower Gardens*. She enjoyed the horticultural community service so much that she continued to volunteer for *Sunflower Gardens* after her release and formed authentic connections and friendships. She was full of gratitude when she shared in a follow-up interview that she reconnected with volunteers during the pandemic:

For those two seasons, I volunteered, they were like family. OK, when the pandemic hit, and we couldn’t get to the grocery store, Lisa and Jane brought us food from their pantry. Yeah. We were, we were hard-pressed to get food and I knew that they had a small pantry . . . So yeah, they are family. They always will be home. (Interview in the Midwest, May 28, 2021)

Social capital comes directly from new connections with volunteers from community gardening and food justice structures. Nonetheless, these activity outlets also serve as conduits for gaining social capital in the broader community. For example, Nora, the veteran volunteer from *Sunflower Gardens*, described the experience she had over the years with women doing their community service hours in community gardens:

They [= residents] lost their inhibitions to be able to relate to the people and became so much comfortable in the garden and became friends. You know, it gave them the ability to become friends with everyone we were working with and a lot of times with each other. You know, that feeling a part of something bigger than you, you know . . . They’re in it, [it] puts them out in the community. They are tending their garden. Now, all of a sudden, they’re part of something . . . The girls really get introduced to all kinds of good people in the process.

Becoming part of the community through social interaction also involves becoming symbolically intelligible as a valuable community member.

Symbolic Capital

Symbolic capital plays out as the “accorded positive recognition, esteem, or honor by relevant actors within the field” (Emirbauer and Williams 2005:692) and is necessary for cross-converting economic, cultural, and social capital. Lebaron (2014) offered a reading of symbolic capital as a social combination of positive and negative stigmatization. He argued symbolic capital could be either positive (for instance, results in positive recognition, positive reputation, care, attraction) or negative (perceived as racism, rejection, hostility, discrimination, etc.). We documented emerging positive symbolic capital in our data analysis as we identified positive shifts in *officer and staff perceptions* as well as *family perceptions* and *shifts in self-perception* of the incarcerated individuals (see Figure 1).

Many participants at both field sites alluded to the impact of their gardening in the facilities on their *self-perception*. “I have become more positive. I want to get out and have my own garden. I know how to go out and be able to grow and take care of different variety of things,” wrote an SE participant. We argue here that a shift in self-perception is necessary for an improved self-representation that converts into recognition and thus symbolic capital. The garden also offered opportunities for positive self-representation that can be used in garnering symbolic capital.

In the data of the more transient population in the Midwest CBCF, we found numerous accounts of women who wanted to build gardens. For instance, one participant wrote, “I can do it! I will grow a garden with my children!” The Midwest garden program director shared that “a couple of [the participants] wanted a picture of them in the garden to show their kids. And then we all had like a little party and celebrated it.” Women had a keen awareness of how their garden might impact the recognition they received from their families and children. Another Midwest participant explains,

And for them [i.e., family members] to see that you have some type of fun might ease their minds but also, their family member that’s been in jail and all that stuff being in a different role where they are like proud of doing some kind of work or doing something would kinds help to change the family’s vision of that person if that makes sense.

The quote makes transparent the awareness that the “family’s vision,” the symbolic capital gained through gardening, is an essential link to gaining social (and potentially economic) support in the family and community.

An equally important aspect of symbolic capital in incarcerated settings is recognizing “positive stigma” (Lebaron 2014) participants can gain from prison officials and correctional staff. For example, one Warden from the SE field site said,

The Gardening Program has been a breath of life for our inmates. Since COVID-19, our inmates have really taken ownership of the garden and eagerly look forward to the outside staff and students coming to provide instruction. I have seen inmates pour themselves into the garden and their work. They’ve watched the results that wind, rain, and sunshine can have on the garden’s overall health and make necessary adjustments along the way to provide care to the growing plants—very similar to the personal growth adjustments they are working on in their own lives. Our inmates have a lot of pride in the garden, which is reflected in its name, “The Garden of Perseverance.”

The Warden’s quote shows that seeing incarcerated women taking charge of their garden allowed the prison official to extend positive recognition to the participants. It helps the women garner symbolic capital through the lens of prison officials who see women’s positive activity and their care for the garden and the environment. Along these lines, the gardens helped women self-actualize and develop a new narrative about themselves.

The perception of self also contributed to the idea of symbolic capital. While associated with the negative stigma of being in a carceral setting, the garden programs gave the participants a new notion of themselves. The garden gave her a new opportunity to understand that although convicted, she still had the potential to create a new label for herself and become a role model for other residents. Another aspect of self-perception was also that of their incarcerated setting:

I've done a lot of damage in the community and to myself and to my family. And so it feels good to be able to give back. It's very obvious the places that we go and where we garden, that it is contributing to the beauty of the neighborhood, to the food supply of the neighborhood. So it's obvious that you're doing something good, even if it's just, you know, making something look beautiful.

This participant from the Midwestern garden aptly connected the different forms of capital as she referenced not only the symbolic and social capital through gardening (giving back to family and community) but also how she might contribute to actual economic gain (food supply of the neighborhood) through cultural capital (newly gained skills to actualize new aesthetic preferences, see Swartz 1997).

Conclusion

This paper argues sociological theory and practice are essential for improving incarcerated women's food security and life quality. Working within the framework of rights-based clinical sociology, we consider how prison gardens might benefit incarcerated women. These gardens became spaces of agency to realize human rights in oppressive carceral environments. They constitute gender-responsive programming in corrections that simultaneously is an outcome and a means of clinical sociology. We drew on two case studies of community-level clinical sociological interventions: A prison garden in a maximum-security women's prison in the SE United States evaluated with a mixed-methods approach and an educational garden program in a residential prison diversion program in the U.S. Midwest where multiple qualitative methods were employed.

Bourdieu's (1986, 1989) theory of the different forms of capital was a productive lens through which our data were analyzed. Our findings revealed women gained cultural, symbolic, and economic capital through prison gardening. Participation in the prison garden projects allowed women to experience many interactions that represented each form of capital. Cultural capital was gained by offering educational certificates, nutritional and horticultural knowledge, transferable job skills, and the broadening of the food palate. Social capital was garnered within the facilities through teamwork, fostering relationships with outside partners, and access to local food justice structures. Social capital can be actualized through letters of recommendation and social interaction within and outside the carceral space. Access to fresh fruit and vegetables and specially approved items and garden infrastructure improved participants' economic capital within the carceral setting. Finally, their perceptions of self, their families' perceptions of them, and officers' discernments can be considered symbolic capital.

We deliberately used a rights-based clinical sociological approach (Fritz and Rheume 2014, Fritz 2022). This approach presumes that all populations have a right to a basic standard of well-being and nourishing food—incarcerated individuals at risk of undernourishment and deprivation in the United States. We strived to act as facilitators of social change in our projects. At the same time, we worked to promote a system-wide change concerning healthy food access and the ability to form relationships with all stakeholders in the institutional and community corrections system in our regions.

Our goal was to improve carceral living conditions for women, provide garden programs in correctional facilities, and afford incarcerated individuals and their communities social, cultural, symbolic, and economic capital. These garden programs we hope can serve as pilots to

be implemented more wide scale across the nation. Weinstein (2003) argued that this was sociology at its core: “the development of sociology was driven by an attempt to apply scientific knowledge to improve human conditions” (p. 21). Our work follows this clinical model to improve the lives of marginalized groups. Incarcerated settings are an essential site of community-level intervention for clinical sociologists, especially when considering the negative impact of COVID-19. The pandemic had exacerbated existing barriers for women to maintain their health and well-being in the penal system. Access to healthy foods and educational programming had deteriorated.

A longer term goal of our clinical sociological intervention is to move beyond giving a voice to women. We aim to promote collaborative knowledge, production, and leadership by graduates of the garden programs. The goal is to have them become teachers and mentors to iterations of the program (Pollack 2020). Beginning in 2022, the Southeast site intends to expand the existing programming to include a leadership course for those who graduated in the advanced gardening course. The course will be designed to prepare the future teachers of the garden program, allowing us to take a supportive role for incarcerated women who will lead their gardening program.

A limitation and further avenue for research is the body and physical health cannot be seen through Bourdieu’s lens. Yet, analysis and data show that gardening greatly benefits bodies and physical well-being. Women enjoyed access to fresh fruits and vegetables, extra time outside, and increased physical exercise. These opportunities, in turn, aid the women’s mental well-being. Finally, the working together of different forms of capital through gardening left our participants with a positive outlook on the future and newly gained resilience.

A significant limitation was the onset of COVID-19, which has severely restricted access to the field sites since Spring 2020. In this paper, we drew upon qualitative accounts we have collected from women on both field sites before the COVID-19 outbreak and in the short periods in 2020 when we could access the field sites.⁵ A point of concern and further reflection is that one might argue that we have benefited the correctional facility by bringing in grant money and donations from the outside to a space that is already making a substantial profit by exploiting incarcerated individuals and federal and state subsidies. While this is a valid critique, we wish to make clear that we intentionally bring in economic capital for the benefit of incarcerated women to establish new programs that were nonexistent before.

We conclude with words from a participant from the SE site, who brings home the paper’s argument and answers the title question of why we need more sociological practice and theory in carceral spaces as we plant gardens for the benefit of women. She said:

Now I’ve consumed a product of all my hard work as well. I was discouraged at the halfway mark, but now I am excited and hopeful. I look forward to all the things to come from this garden. I am willing to put in the work and more than happy to continue to support this product. I am very excited for the future.

We are excited for the future as well.

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Ethical Approval

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Notes

1. We have a trans- and non-binary inclusive perspective of the category “woman;” however, current data and carceral logistics only include in this category persons who have been assigned “female” at birth.
2. In April 2022, the DOC reported a total population of 2,062 women at the Southeastern site. Of the 2,062 women, 1,539 or 75 percent were classified as white and 523 or 25 percent were classified as black. It is important to note this Department of Correction (DOC) does not count Hispanics as a racial or ethnic category in its reporting.
3. For comparison, the racial demographics of the only women’s prison in the state are 75 percent white, 23 percent Black, and 2 percent other, see Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC 2021). It is evident that we find significantly more Black women in prison than in this residential community corrections setting which begs further research on racial inequality in sentencing practices and also examination on data collection practices on race by different correctional entities that are beyond the scope of this paper.
4. We refer to the participants with synonyms in this paper to protect confidentiality. The partners were the local Extension Office of the Department of Agriculture (*Extension Office*) and a local non-profit supporting about a hundred community gardens and a farmer’s market (*Sunflower Gardens*).
5. The Midwestern site went on complete lockdown in March 2020. It opened for four weeks of gardening lessons in August 2020 before going back into complete lockdown, prohibiting access to the site and prohibiting all clients from going outside. The garden program at the women’s facility is still not in operation at this time (December 2021). The Southeastern site went on lockdown in March 2020 and remained that way until May 2021. The Department of Corrections did grant the opportunity to continue gardening through drop-off visits to deliver supplies and instructions to incarcerated women in our program through a barbed wire fence, always maintaining a 12-foot distance. Data collection and garden programming have started back up in the summer of 2021.

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