

HISTORY STORIES (/NEWS)

How the Black Panthers' Breakfast Program Both Inspired and Threatened the Government

BY ERIN BLAKEMORE (/NEWS/AUTHOR/EBLAKEMORE) // FEBRUARY 6, 2018

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A teacher and his at a Black Panther liberation school. (Credit: Bettmann Archive/Getty Images)

In 1969, a group of children sat down to a free breakfast before school. On the menu: chocolate milk, eggs, meat, cereal and fresh oranges. The scene wouldn't be out of place in a school cafeteria these days—but the federal government wasn't

providing the food. Instead, breakfast was served thanks to the Black Panther Party.

At the time, the militant black nationalist party was vilified in the news media and feared by those intimidated by its message of black power and its commitment to ending police brutality and the subjugation of black Americans. But for students eating breakfast, the Black Panthers' politics were less interesting than the meals they were providing.

"The children, many of whom had never eaten breakfast before the Panthers started their program," the *Sun Reporter* wrote, "think the Panthers are 'groovy' and 'very nice' for doing this for them."

The program may have been groovy, but its purpose was to fuel revolution by encouraging black people's survival. From 1969 through the early 1970s, the Black Panthers' Free Breakfast for School Children Program fed tens of thousands of hungry kids. It was just one facet of a wealth of social programs created by the party—and it helped contribute to the existence of federal free breakfast programs today.



(http://cdn.history.com/sites/2/2018/02/AP_7003190373_square.jpg)

Brad Jones, member of the Philadelphia Black Panthers Organization, helping serve breakfast to youngsters.
(Credit: Bill Ingraham/AP Photo)

When Black Panther Party founders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the party in 1966, their goal was to end police brutality in Oakland. But a faction of the Civil Rights Movement led by SNCC member Stokeley Carmichael began calling for the uplift and self-determination of African-Americans, and soon black power was part of their platform.

At first, the Black Panther Party primarily organized neighborhood police patrols that took advantage of open-carry laws, but over time its mandate expanded to include social programs, too.

Free Breakfast For School Children was one of the most effective. It began in January 1969 at an Episcopal church in Oakland, and within weeks it went from feeding a handful of kids to hundreds. The program was simple: party members and volunteers went to local grocery stores to solicit donations, consulted with nutritionists on healthful breakfast options for children, and prepared and served the food free of charge.

School officials immediately reported results in kids who had free breakfast before school. “The school principal came down and told us how different the children were,” Ruth Beckford, a parishioner who helped with the program, **said later** (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00045600802683767>). “They weren’t falling asleep in class, they weren’t crying with stomach cramps.”

Soon, the program had been embraced by party outposts nationwide. At its peak, the Black Panther Party fed thousands of children per day in at least 45 programs. (Food wasn’t the only part of the BPP’s social programs; they expanded to cover **everything** (<https://web.stanford.edu/group/blackpanthers/programs.shtml>) from free medical clinics to community ambulance services and legal clinics.)



(http://cdn.history.com/sites/2/2018/02/AP_16280693345152.jpg)

Bill Whitfield, member of the Black Panther chapter in Kansas City, serving free breakfast to children before they go to school. (Credit: William P. Straeter/AP Photo)

For the party, it was an opportunity to counter its increasingly negative image in the public consciousness—an image of intimidating Afroed black men holding guns—while addressing a critical community need. “I mean, nobody can argue with free grits,” said filmmaker Roger Guenveur Smith in *A Huey P. Newton Story* (<http://www.pbs.org/hueypnewton/>), a 2001 film in which he portrays Newton.

Free food seemed relatively innocuous, but not to FBI head J. Edgar Hoover, who loathed the Black Panther Party and declared war against them in 1969. He **called** (<http://theplate.nationalgeographic.com/2015/11/04/the-black-panthers-revolutionaries-free-breakfast-pioneers/>) the program “potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for,” and gave carte blanche to law enforcement to destroy it.

The results were swift and devastating. FBI agents went door-to-door in cities like Richmond, Virginia, telling parents that BPP members would teach their children racism. In San Francisco, **writes** (https://books.google.com/books?id=_Y2sDgAAQBAJ&lpg=PA114&dq=black%20panthers%20breakfast%20%22venereal%20disease%22&pg=PA114) historian Franziska Meister, parents were told the food was infected with venereal disease; sites in Oakland and Baltimore were raided by officers who harassed BPP members in front of terrified children, and participating children were photographed by Chicago police.

“The night before [the first breakfast program in Chicago] was supposed to open,” a female Panther **told** (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00045600802683767>) historian Nik Heynan, “the Chicago police broke into the church and mashed up all the food and urinated on it.”

Ultimately, these and other efforts to destroy the Black Panthers broke up the program. In the end, though, the public visibility of the Panthers’ breakfast programs put pressure on political leaders to feed children before school. The result of thousands of American children becoming accustomed to free breakfast, former party member Norma Amour Mtume **told** (<https://www.eater.com/2016/2/16/11002842/free-breakfast-schools-black-panthers>) *Eater*, was the government expanded its own school food programs.

Though the USDA had piloted free breakfast **efforts** (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/sbp/program-history>) since the mid 1960s, the program only took off in the early 1970s—right around the time the Black Panthers’ programs were dismantled. In 1975, the School Breakfast Program was permanently authorized. Today, it helps **feed** (<https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/sbp/SBPfactsheet.pdf>) over 14.57 million children before school—and without the radical actions of the Black Panthers, it may never have happened.

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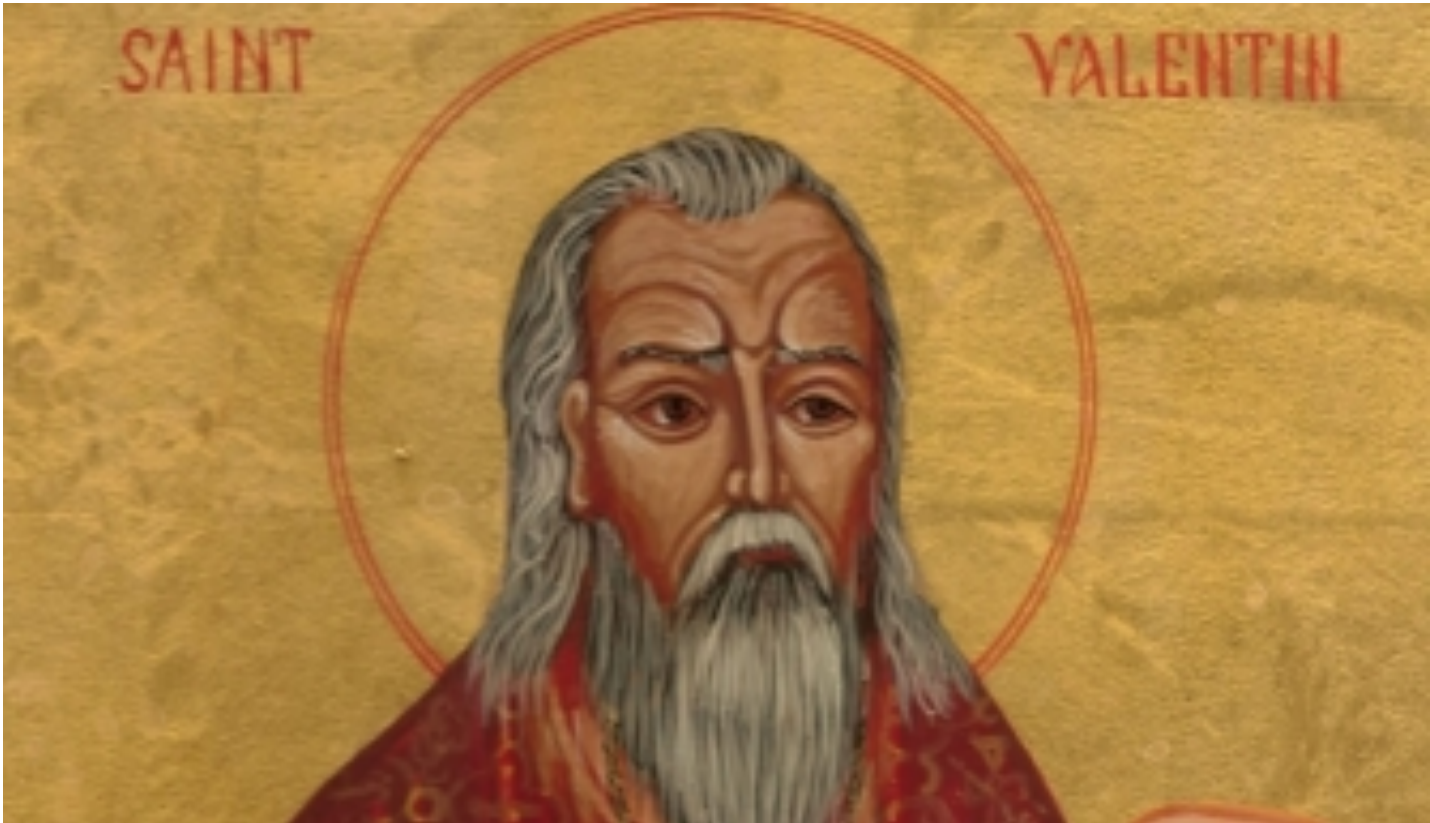
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