Role of Food and the challenges it poses for correctional management

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Introduction

Food is a vital part of life, a basic raw material of the body. Within a correctional facility food can pose a variety of problems for correctional management. There is a growing body of research that discusses the consumption and possession of food within prisons. This research highlights the diverse range of management problems which food creates for correctional staff and prisoners. Valentine and Longstaff (1998) found that food is a useful commodity within prison that has exchange value between inmates and groups of inmates. They concluded that food plays an important role in the complex social network of prison and is therefore a possible source of conflict between individuals. Similarly Geahart refers to food as “nuisance contraband” (2006:2). Food items such as fruit and bread can be utilized to make alcohol. This poses a serious threat to the good order, safety and security of a correctional facility and therefore is an ongoing management problem for staff. Mate (2009) identifies food as a crucial component to the black market economy of prison. Thus food becomes the currency in this legal economy.

Smith (2002) researched the experiences of food amongst female prisoners. She found that it is not only experienced as part of the disciplinary machinery of a gaol but it is also a powerful source of pleasure, resistance and rebellion. Where her results especially relate to pleasure and comfort of food, Smith suggests a redefinition of what it means to be healthy in a prison context. Similarly Godderis (2006) examined the symbolic power of food and how it is used by inmates to resist institutionalisation and challenge the power inequalities of a rule bound environment. Similar to the symbolic role of food is its religious significance providing emotional comfort to inmates. Abney (1985) discusses failure of correctional administrators to provide religious friendly food that allows prisoners to fulfil the religious obligations.

Additionally, Love and Pease (1987) and Bitsas (2004) have found in their literature reviews research that has identified the role of nutrients in food and their effect on reducing aggression, violence and criminal behaviour. Bitsas using these studies proposes a plan for correctional management that involves the implementation of nutrient based interventions that will reduce violent behaviour amongst prisoners. Additionally, Laurance (2008) reports of recent research by scientists from Oxford University. This research details the intention to use food supplements to reduce the violent behaviour of some of Britain’s most difficult young prisoners. These scientists have suggested the increase in consumption of junk food has contributed to the rise of violence. Laurance notes that a pilot study published by these same researchers in 2002 revealed that violent offences in custody were reduced by a quarter to a third among those given the supplements.

In the Australian context Williams, Ainsworth, Walton and Wirtz (2008) examined food service experiences in three prisons. They interviewed thirty-five inmates. Issues raised by them included complaints about food quality, lack of choice and considerable use of additional purchased food referred to as “buy ups”. It was reported that cultural buy-ups for Asian and Muslim inmates were a source of tension for other
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There are many problems and issues posed by food in a correctional facility. This paper will focus on the management problem that food can create when it strengthens an inmate’s religious, cultural or gang identity. With this strengthened identity an inmate is emboldened to perhaps behave in ways that threaten the good order and security of a correctional facility. Faced with this management problem a number of suggestions will be made to address this matter.

Religion and Food

Religion plays an important role in enabling an inmate to adjust to prison life (Clear et al., 1992; Drammer, 2000). Hamm (2007) suggests a number of reasons why an inmate may turn to religion. One, there is the emotional trauma of incarceration caused by the loss of liberty. Inmates may turn to religion to cope with this loss. Two, religious membership may improve the social identity of an inmate which in turn can provide protection and acceptance. Three, those with no religious background may seek religious membership because they are looking for conversion and new life while for others they may be seeking religious membership to break the boredom of incarceration. Four, some may turn to religion as a way of manipulating the prison system to gain access to special religious food and diets, religious items, musical instruments and the privilege of wearing items of clothing that denotes one’s religious beliefs culture, political and ideological position.

Based on Hamm’s observations it seems that religion can provide many benefits to inmates. For some inmates their religious and cultural beliefs entitle them to have access to special diets. Corrective Services New South Wales Operations and Procedures Manual (2007), supports this by making provision for the special dietary needs of inmates from diverse cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds.

Inmates who felt that it was unfair they should be excluded from these additional opportunities to purchase special foods. In short this research revealed a level of frustration and discontent amongst inmates regarding food. Finally, food can be used as a weapon of retributions within the prison system particularly when inmates are employed to prepare food. Kellett (2009) reported that inmates in the Woodford Correctional Centre in Queensland Australia went on a hunger strike complaining it was laced with human faeces. Kellet’s article implies that inmates employed in the food services division of the correctional centre were sabotaging food being prepared for protection inmates.

Because religious friendly diets are important to those inmates who are entitled to them, these diets take on an important role in the life of inmates who this food. As noted by Godderis (2006) the symbolic power of food plays an important role in the life of inmates. Religious diets are able to reinforce the social, political and cultural identities of particular groups of inmates. These diets are able to affirm their minority status and also their right to exist as an identifiable group within the correctional system. However this right to exist does not necessarily mean acceptance by other inmates or individual staff. When a minority group does not eat the commonly consumed prison food it marks them out as different in which difference “is constructed as negative and inferior” (Said, 1978:136). Therefore religious diets and religious buy ups can become a vehicle for prison officers and inmates to articulate disparaging, often racist comments and criticism of beliefs of another religion. This seems to be supported by the Australian research of Williams, Ainsworth, Walton and Wirtz (2008) who noted that Muslim and Asian cultural and religious buy ups created tension with other inmates from non-Islamic or Asian backgrounds. Valentine and Longstaff (1998) found that blatant racism was evident in the accounts of prison officers who used racial and religious stereotypes to suggest particular minority groups were
aggressive. It would be reasonable to assume these officers would have considered particular minority groups posing a risk to the security and good order of the prison. In the author’s personal experience as a Chaplain in the correctional system there is anecdotal evidence that such views exist amongst a number of prison officers.

Special religious diets pose significant challenges for correctional management. While there are positive outcomes of providing such food in terms of psychological well being, conversely these benefits can become a symbol of power, a flag of protest. This emboldening can advance the influence of religious minorities and the individuals in them in ways that can destabilise a prison in terms of its good order. This emboldening and destabilisation is often exacerbated when minority groups and individuals in them feel vilified, threatened or mistreated by the correctional staff or other inmates. This destabilisation can take the form of resentfulness, uncooperativeness and resistance to correctional staff and the correctional system.

While religious food has enormous symbolic power it also has great value simply as food source. Some religious food is rich in carbohydrates and protein and is therefore highly prized amongst inmates. This is particularly the case with those who are into the body building sub culture of prison. This food provides them with enough calories to satisfy their training needs. Religious diets therefore provide correctional staff with an important opportunity to monitor and observe the inner dynamics of prison life and the networks of power that exist between different prisoners and groups. Observing these networks where special religious food is traded can provide important clues to the recruitment practices of religious groups, identification of its leaders and how the underground prison economy works that uses at times religious food as a form of currency.

In sum, the social relations and networks that revolve around religious food is an ongoing potential source of conflict and instability within a prison. It needs to be appreciated by correctional management that religious food can often become a symbol that is part of the struggle of minority groups to establish identity, exert power and offer resistance to a system that suppresses individuality. When food is used and thought of this way by inmates it is evidence of “us against them mentality” which is an effort by inmates to reverse the imbalance of power the correctional system has over their lives.

Culture and Food

Linked to religious dietary needs are the cultural needs of inmates. Therefore what may be a religious need is equally a cultural need. This is the case for example with inmates who identify themselves as coming from a Muslim, Asian or Jewish cultural background. Like religious observances, cultural observances have strong links to food. It is not uncommon for ethic-based food groups to be formed. This occurs around those times when cultural buy ups are allowed. As noted by Williams, Ainsworth, Walton and Wirtz (2008) this can cause resentment among other inmates who are not entitled to purchase this specialised food. This resentment is compounded when inmates who believe they are entitled to such food are denied because they cannot prove their cultural or religious identity. This resentment is usually directed towards the correctional system and its front-line staff. It is not uncommon that at such times some inmates may try to change their religion to be entitled to purchase such buy-ups. This also poses problems for prison chaplains who as part of the front-line staff, are called upon to determine whether such a conversion is genuine or mischievous.

Gangs and Food

Wood says, “there is no precise definition of a prison gang” (2006: 605) but
suggests it is a group of three or more whose negative behaviour can have an impact on the good order and security of a prison. Therefore the potential of a religious or cultural group evolving into a gang poses management challenges for correctional staff. This is understandable. The prison environment is comprised of many social networks; close-knit groups will be formed amongst inmates. How many may turn into gangs engaging in negative behaviour is a problem that correctional management needs to monitor as gangs are about asserting power and control over the prison and other prisoners.

It was found that “prison gangs account for over 50 per cent of all problems and violence in American prisons” (Camp and Camp, 1991: 1). Where there was significant gang related activity “73 per cent of non-gang prisoners wanted a transfer and 87 per cent wanted protective custody” (Stevens, 1997: 606).

Just as food can be used as a symbol of loyalty to the religious beliefs of a minority group food can also be used as a badge of loyalty in a gang. It is a statement that members share the same values and goals, culture and religion. Food in this setting, like gang colours or symbols, has the effect of cementing and linking an inmate’s identity to the group. This can have an emboldening effect on the inmate. Therefore gangs can use food as an organising principle from which social networks are created to engage in illegal behaviour. Indeed, the special food that such cultural or religious groups are entitled to may become the “currency” that “funds” illegal activities within the prison, for example; trafficking of drugs, standing over other inmates, or purchasing prized contraband items.

Tracking the use of special food within a prison and identifying who eats what and who shares food with whom can help correctional management to predict and locate possible gang related activity and leaders. Therefore one hypothesis worth testing is as follows. There is an increase in problematic prison behaviour, such as the movement of drugs around the prison at those times when cultural or religious buy ups or days are allowed or when highly prized food is consumed by a minority group of inmates on special cultural days. This problematic behaviour in most cases is in linked to gang related activities.

Managing issues created by food

While correctional policy in New South Wales is committed to providing “high quality meals” (Corrective Services New South Wales, Standard for the Operation of Correctional Centres, 2005:180) and “making provision for the special dietary needs of offenders from diverse cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds” (Corrective Services New South Wales, Operations and Procedures Manual, 2007:2) correctional staff need to appreciate that food is not a neutral item within the prison system. Front-line staff in particular need to view its consumption in the wider social, political, cultural and religious context of inmates’ lives. Therefore the first step in helping staff to appreciate the role of food in inmates’ lives particularly from those inmates who come from different cultural, religious, political, social and ethnic backgrounds entails the following:

• Educating staff to view consumption and purchase of food as an activity that takes place within highly organised social networks. For minority groups these networks play an important role in linking them to other members of their group within the prison system emotionally, politically and religiously. Such networks are most likely to have an organisational structure that allows for criminal activities to be managed within the prison system and outside.

• Front-line staff need to develop knowledge-based competencies. For example, they need to familiarise themselves with the cultural, religious and political beliefs of various religious and cultural groups. Therefore observing and understanding how food is used within such groups can provide staff with
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Important information about how they maintain their identity separate from the institutional label of ‘inmate’ or societal label ‘criminal’. Such knowledge-based competencies may enable staff to avoid errors around food that could be offensive leading to tensions between staff and inmates.

- While most inmates obey the rules, prison staff need to appreciate that legitimate issues raised by minority groups over food may be a strategy to increase a group’s visibility and influence in the gaol. This may be a way to seek more privileges, relax rules and therefore become a way to recruit new members and possibly become a security threat group.

- Monitoring and understanding how food is used in prison wings needs to be seen by management as part of the wider intelligence gathering system and therefore part of enterprise risk management.

- Chaplains need to develop ways of indentifying sincere changes of religion by inmates as distinct from mischievous ones that may be motivated by food privileges or other factors such as threat.

- Chaplains need to be involved in educating staff about the religious significance of food and what it means in terms of inmates’ cultural and religious identity and overall well being.

Conclusion

This paper has endeavoured to highlight the management problems associated with food in prison. These problems demonstrate that food is not a neutral, valueless item. It plays an important role in the life of all inmates. It has great symbolic power as it enables them to cope with the loss of home and identity, of liberty and autonomy, along with material, social and emotional strain of deprivation. Food provides a meaning to one’s existence.

Food contributes and provides information regarding the social structure and social networks of prison. It can be used to produce and negotiate relationships and unify groups of inmates. A common diet consumed by one group of inmates can have an emboldening effect. This emboldening can allow them to assert power and influence over other inmates and the prison system. Food is therefore able to provide information regarding the social structure of prison and where power is located and asserted. This enables staff to socially engineer inmates in a prison wing. This militates against the destabilising efforts of groups and individuals to assert power and control that may jeopardise the good order and security of a

References
