Food Protection in Jails and Prisons

BAILUS WALKER, Jr. and THEODORE GORDON

Environmental Health Administration
Government of the District of Columbia
Washington, D.C. 20002
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ABSTRACT

In recent years substantial attention has been given to environmental health and food protection in jails and prisons in the United States. As a result several commissions and task forces, as well as the courts, have studied conditions in the correctional setting which are hazardous to the health and well-being of inmates. This report, based on an investigation of 100 selected jails and prisons, summarizes findings on foodservice operations and their role in penal and correctional institutions.

During the past decade substandard environmental conditions and inadequate health care in penal and correctional systems have been found by the courts to constitute a cruel and unusual punishment in violation of the Constitution of the United States. In its 1971-72 term, the U.S. Supreme Court decided eight cases directly affecting offenders' rights and in each case the contentions of the offenders prevailed. More recently, in its 1976-77 term the highest court ruled that deliberate indifference by prison officials to serious medical needs of an inmate violates the Eighth Amendment's ban against cruel and unusual punishment and gives the inmate grounds to sue the officials in Federal court.

In addition to the judicial system, several governmental and quasi-governmental organizations have been concerned about environmental health services in jails and prisons. Notably, the United States Department of Justice and the National Prison Project separately requested the assistance of the authors in the identification and evaluation of environmental health issues existing within the penal and correctional system. This identification and evaluation required visits to 100 preselected institutions throughout the United States, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands in which the Department of Justice and the National Prison Project had reasons to believe that environmental conditions were less than adequate. These visits were made between 1974 and 1976.

It is the purpose of this report to describe only one of the several environmental health issues which were investigated — foodservice and its ramifications.

The Correctional System

To summarize intelligently the findings of the investigation, certain dimensions of the correctional system of the United States must be reviewed. Institutionalization as a primary means of enforcing customs, mores, or laws of a people is a relatively modern practice. In earlier times restitution, exile, and a variety of methods of corporal and capital punishment, many of them unspeakably barbarous, were used. Confinement was used only for detention.

Today the backbone of the nation's correctional system is composed of 36 federal prisons, 11 federal community treatment centers, 600 administratively separate correctional facilities operated by state governments, and 3,921 jails operated by local units of government.

State-operated institutions probably embody most of the ideals and characteristics of the early attempts to reform offenders. It is in these facilities that most intensive correctional or rehabilitative efforts are conducted. Here inmates are exposed to a variety of programs intended to help them become productive members of society. But the predominant consideration is still that of security. About half of all state correctional facilities in the United States are located in the South, with the remaining institutions about equally distributed among the other three regions of the country. North Carolina has the largest number (76), followed by Florida (46), Virginia (38), and California (35).

Operating expenses of jails and prisons for the latest fiscal year (1975) range from less than $50,000 to more than $3 million. Expenditures made by each institution are a function not only of its type and size, but also of such factors as the proportion of inmates in each confinement status, the amount of labor contributed by inmates toward operating expenses and maintaining the facility, existence of a prison industry, scope of rehabilitative programs, and the extent to which volunteers perform certain functions.

For the most part jails are not places of final deposition. Approximately 2.5 to 5.5 million jail
commitments occur in this country annually. The obvious result is a highly transient jail population. However, pretrial detention can stretch into years through legal maneuvering by law enforcement officials. Local control, multiple functions, and a transient heterogeneous population have shaped the major organizational characteristics of jails. Typically, they are under the jurisdiction of the county government and they retain the dual purposes of custodial confinement and misdemeanant punishment. The most conspicuous addition to the jails' functions have been services to the homeless and to alcoholics. Thus jails are, in a sense, one of the catchalls for social and law enforcement problems in a community.

In summary, both jails and prisons are communities within themselves. Their "metabolic" requirements include complex mechanical services, heating and ventilation systems, domestic water supply, sewage disposal facilities, industry and labor programs, recreational services, and foodservice operations. All of these must be managed in such a way as to effectively meet at least four basic human needs: (a) fundamental physiological needs, (b) fundamental psychological needs; (c) protection against contagion, and (d) protection against accidents. These needs are common to all human populations and they cut across boundaries and definitions of social behavior, socioeconomic status, criminals and non-criminals. Accordingly, persons confined in penal and correctional institutions are just as susceptible to environmentally-induced diseases and disabilities, including the hazards of food infection and food intoxication, as are law abiding citizens in other institutional settings.

The pattern of foodservice varies among the nation's correctional institutions. In all state operated prisons food is prepared and served within the institution. However, in 70% (2,753) of all jails, meals served to inmates are prepared in the jail, whereas in 1,135 other jails the meals are prepared elsewhere and brought into the institution. In small jails (less than 10 inmates) it is fairly common practice for the sheriff or chief jailer to arrange for meals to be brought in. In at least two small county jails foodservice is provided by a nearby fast-food outlet.

More than two-thirds of the jails and all state prisons serve meals at least three times a day, while the remaining jails serve meals once or twice a day. In 12% of the nation's jails meals are served exclusively in dining halls or in a central foodservice area. However, in 65% of the jails food is served solely in the cells. About 17% of the jails use both dining halls and cells, and 23% have other foodservice arrangements.

For state prisons foodservice follows four general patterns: (a) mass feeding and mass cooking in one dining room, (b) mass cooking with feeding in several dining rooms or day rooms, (c) cottage-type feeding with small kitchens and small dining rooms for each cottage inmate group, or (d) one kitchen with feeding in individual cells or rooms. Patterns (a) and (d) are being followed by an increasing number of institutions because of overcrowded conditions.

**FINDINGS**

**Food supplies**

All institutions visited, except two, prepared and served food which either originated from approved sources or which was considered satisfactory by the state and local health authorities. However, two state-operated institutions, each housing more than 2,500 inmates, carried out their own meat processing operation which was not under supervision of appropriate meat control authorities; no ante-mortem or post-mortem inspections were done to eliminate slaughtering of sick or fatigued animals or to detect gross pathology of the carcasses.

**Food protection**

In all 100 institutions investigated there was substantial evidence of inadequate food protection. This evidence included the following.

1. Food was transported from central kitchen to cell block in unheated and/or uncovered containers, followed by the lapse of an inordinate amount of time (3-4 h) between preparation, delivery to cell blocks, and service to inmates.

2. Raw food ingredients and prepared foods contained animal and insect filth including live insects and insect parts.

3. Raw and cooked products were managed in such a way that the opportunity for cross-contamination was enhanced.

4. Steam tables and similar devices for keeping food hot were defective and in need of major repair.

5. Prepared foods such as salads, hash, and left-overs, were placed in large deep containers which required an extended time interval for the entire mass to chill sufficiently to inhibit bacterial growth, especially in the center portions of the food.

6. Refrigeration space was inadequate to store and maintain perishable food at a proper temperature without packing and crowding and impeding air circulation.

7. Clean food contact surfaces of equipment were not protected from recontamination between uses.

**Cleanliness of equipment and utensils**

Substandard dishwashing procedures and equipment were prevalent in 85 of the 100 institutions. While mechanical dishwashing was common, problems of inadequate hot water for final rinse cycle, clogged spray jets and inoperable detergent dispensers hampered effective cleaning and sanitizing of eating and drinking utensils; greasy and food-stained tableware was the rule rather than the exception.

In 10 of the institutions dining utensils were not returned from the cells to the central kitchen for washing but were "cleansed" in a utility sink located in the cell block area. The procedure was simply "rinse and dry."

Single-service knives and forks were used and reused.
in the maximum security section of four large prisons. Here cleaning of the utensils was the responsibility of each inmate. This was usually done in individual cells, none of which were provided with warm water or detergent for cleaning purposes.

Vermin control

Regular pest control services were provided in 97 institutions by commercial pest extermination services. Three institutions carried out their own insect and rat control program on an "as needed basis."

However, substantial cockroach infestations were evident in all 100 institutional foodservice operations. Thirty institutions, visited during warm weather, had a significant fly problem.

The missing element in the insect and rodent control service was a comprehensive housekeeping and maintenance program designed to eliminate those conditions which encourage growth and development of flies, cockroaches, and rats.

Personnel

Inmates, under the supervision of civilian personnel, were "employed" as foodservice workers in all of the institutions. None of the institutions provided food sanitation training and orientation for foodservice personnel.

The warden and foodservice supervisor in all but five institutions gave high priority to "pre-employment" and periodic physical examinations of all inmates who performed duties in the foodservice program.

As is well known among health service personnel, periodic physical examinations are not effective in preventing development and progression of foodborne epidemics because most of the conditions detected in physical examinations are transient and develop and pass away in the interval between such examinations.

On the other hand training of food service workers is one of the most effective approaches in minimizing problems of food hygiene and sanitation at the preparation and service levels of the food distribution system.

However, in the four state-operated institutions where culinary vocational training was established, foodservice sanitation and hygiene were not emphasized in the "curriculum."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Food and other environmental health issues occupy such an important place in every inmate's life that their effect on morale, and physical and mental health cannot be overestimated. To be sure most incarcerated offenders are of the lower socioeconomic classes which generally have worse nutritional problems than more affluent groups. Thus there is a need for greater attention to the quality and quantity of food served to the confined inmates than on the population at large.

In fact, in many instances food can determine the success or failure of the most carefully designed rehabilitation and correctional programs. This was clearly indicated in the most recent civil disturbance in the Tennessee State Prison in Nashville in September 1975. As described in the Nashville Tennessean: "It all began for the lack of pork chops (which ran out during an evening meal and cold bologna was served as a substitute) and when it was over, 39 people had been injured and one inmate was dead"

Jail and prison foodservice systems operate under budgetary constraints and under physical limitations which make it difficult to provide the variety of foods which are found in facilities in the "free" community. As such, meals often become monotonous to the inmates who have no choice but to consume food provided by the institution or experience one of the many manifestations of primary malnutrition.

Even the cold gray metal of the food trays detracts from the appetizing appearance of the food. Unless precautions are taken, speedy service often produces an unattractive tray with gravy spilled over the edges and vegetables scattered outside the vegetable compartment.

Unfortunately management of foodservice in jails and prisons is under the supervision of non-professional food service personnel. The workers are inmates, and in such work force there are new and untrained personnel; others who have had limited experience, and very few who have acquired experience which is valuable to the management of mass feeding systems. Among this group of foodservice workers, every attitude from active interest to open antagonism is manifested.

The incarcerated foodservice worker often feels alienated, angry, and isolated in an environment which he does not understand; a situation which frustrates his performance as a member of the foodservice staff.

Compounding this problem is the fact that the correctional officer — who is usually in charge of the "foodservice detail" — sees his primary role as guardian of custody, discipline, and security in the immediate environment and not as that of supervisor of food hygiene and sanitation practices.

This complexity of attitudes of the worker and of the officer in charge is often reflected in the level of sanitation in the food preparation area and quality of food offered to inmates.

In this setting it must be recognized that methods of operating foodservice programs like other subsystems of the correctional institution should never be static. They must be reconciled with changing patterns produced by social and economic characteristics. Changes in the penal and correctional process and the newer aspects of institutional food management demand a continuous evaluation of methodology and the application of resources to promote maximum food protection and reduce the potential of foodborne illness.

Cost must be considered in relation to goals and results; duplication and waste of efforts must be avoided. Economy demands maximum results compatible with the concerns about increased productivity and better acceptability of food service in the institutions.
It would therefore seem appropriate, from a food protection standpoint, to abolish the participation of inmates in the foodservice program and replace them with professional foodservice personnel who could, using modern techniques of foodservice management, plan, prepare and serve all meals required of the institution.

This view is supported by several groups, including the National Sheriff’s Association which recently suggested that, “It is time now to think of eliminating inmates entirely from the food service” (2). The Federal District Courts have taken a similar position and in one case the judge ordered that “the food served to inmates shall be nutritionally adequate and properly under the supervision of a foodservice supervisor for each institution; each supervisor shall have at least bachelor’s level training in dietetics or its equivalent” (3). The court also required the institution to employ a qualified nutritionist to assist in menu planning, in food purchasing and preparation, and to monitor foodservice hygiene and sanitation.

Hospitals, academic institutions, and industrial feeding operations have for several years recognized the benefits of putting foodservice management on a sound professional foundation. Such an approach has increased productivity, reduced cost, and improved consumer satisfaction with the quality and quantity of foods which are served (5).

The problem of foodservice in jails and prisons is also complicated by the physical environment — the preparation and serving area. Outmoded and archaic food equipment, inadequate ventilation systems, insufficient refrigeration, and totally inadequate working and storage space perpetuate a substandard rather than effective and efficient food management system.

Of the 100 institutions studied in this project, 56 were constructed between 1830 and 1900. They were built to be internally and externally secure and reflected concern for complete surveillance of inmates. Evidently in the process of achieving the goals of security, the foodservice plant was given less than a high priority.

Thus some correctional institutions are saddled with the physical remains of last century’s concept of foodservice for jails and prisons and with an ideological legacy that poor food and substandard foodservice are part of the penalties which an offender must pay during confinement.

The result has been an inefficient foodservice program, “economical” perhaps in its daily operation, but tragically expensive in its ultimate effect on the overall goal of foodservice hygiene and sanitation.

Contemporary facility planning must recognize the requirement of safe food preparation and storage areas while recognizing the needs for the most efficient expenditure of limited public funds.

Hopefully, reforms in foodservice in jails and prisons will run parallel with current reforms in the entire criminal justice system. Fortunately the Federal government, followed by the states, is beginning to provide important leadership here. In addition, budgetary recognition is being given to the significance of correctional institutions as treatment facilities and correctional administrators are no longer isolating corrections from the general public. For example, statutory provisions now require that at least 20% of Federal funds disbursed by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration to states to aid crime control be allocated to corrections. The low priority traditionally assigned to budgetary support for the penal system and to prisoners in general is being changed. It is being supplanted by the realization that the quality of life depends in part on creation of a humane, just and efficient correctional system. Coupled with this realization is the knowledge that achievement of such a correctional system must entail substantial reform of each of the subsystems, including the institutional foodservice program.

Unfortunately, we do not know the full extent of malnutrition or the incidence of foodborne illnesses in the correctional system, but problems of adequate nutrition and foodservice sanitation in penal and correctional institutions have ramifications which are different from other community health problems and therefore require a slightly different approach by the community health specialists. The scope of food management is extensive involving as it does problems of crop production (in which many prison systems engage), farm equipment and manpower, food processing, food preservation, transportation and storage, proper food preparation, as well as both nutrition and food sanitation education, and the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of specific dietary deficiency diseases. In fact the scope is so broad that it cannot be planned, implemented, and evaluated by any one discipline of the health and medical sciences. Close cooperation and intimate working relations among several disciplines are essential (4).

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REFERENCES