



University of Southern Denmark

## Couscous in Tilburg

### Food Narratives and the Quality of Prison Life in a Belgian-Dutch Prison

Vanhouche, An-Sofie; Smoyer, Amy; Kjær Minke, Linda

*Published in:*  
Prison Service Journal

*Publication date:*  
2018

*Document version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Vanhouche, A-S., Smoyer, A., & Kjær Minke, L. (2018). Couscous in Tilburg: Food Narratives and the Quality of Prison Life in a Belgian-Dutch Prison. *Prison Service Journal*, (238), 3-9.

#### **Terms of use**

This work is brought to you by the University of Southern Denmark through the SDU Research Portal. Unless otherwise specified it has been shared according to the terms for self-archiving. If no other license is stated, these terms apply:

- You may download this work for personal use only.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying this open access version

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details and we will investigate your claim. Please direct all enquiries to [puresupport@bib.sdu.dk](mailto:puresupport@bib.sdu.dk)

# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

July 2018 No 238



# Couscous in Tilburg Prison

## Food Narratives and the Quality of Prison Life in a Belgian-Dutch Prison

**Dr An-Sofie Vanhouche** works as a postdoctoral researcher at Vrije Universiteit Brussel, **Dr Amy B. Smoyer** is an Assistant Professor at Southern Connecticut State University, and **Dr Linda Kjaer Minke** is an Associate Professor at the University of Southern Denmark.

**In February 2010, 500 men incarcerated in Belgium were transferred to the Dutch prison of Tilburg, in order to alleviate Belgian prison overcrowding. Upon their arrival, among the myriad stressors and adjustments that they encountered, they were confronted with a different food system. In Belgium, meals are cooked in an institutional kitchen inside each correctional facility. In Tilburg prison, incarcerated people were served ready-made frozen meals that were prepared off-site. At meal times, prisoners heated these meals in microwaves located in their cells. For several years following the transfer, prisoners in Tilburg complained about these frozen meals. For example, after visiting Tilburg prison in 2011, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment reported that: ‘the delegation received a large number of complaints about the quality and method of preparation of the food served in the establishment.’<sup>1</sup>**

Eventually, in 2013, Dutch prison authorities changed the food system, introducing a self-catering project that was positively received by prisoners. This project allowed men to cook and prepare their own meals in kitchens located in the housing units, with financial support from the institution. By altering the food systems in this way, the Tilburg prison managed to change its biggest weakness and source of inmate complaints, the prison food system, into one of the

facility's most popular programs. The self-catering system was perceived by the prisoners as a positive and meaningful initiative.

Analysis of the prisoners' perceptions of the frozen meals and the self-catering project, offers an in-depth understanding about the impact of food on the prison environment. While government officials initially dismissed the prisoners' complaints about the frozen meals by describing the nutritional value of the food, this analysis highlights that the prisoners' complaints were not related to nutritional concerns: Their grievances reflected a larger struggle with the detention experience. This article demonstrates the ways in which food-related complaints can reflect a broader perception of the prison system and its overall treatment of prisoners. Using Liebling and Arnold's<sup>2</sup> framework about the moral performance of prisons, this analysis expands understandings about the role of food in penitentiaries.

Prison researchers have historically ignored the centrality of food, leaving the subject in the arena of health care analysis. This is not to say that prison food was totally neglected in previous work, but it has been less than central. More recently however, a growing body of prison researchers have engaged with this topic. These studies provide important insights into the symbolic role prison food can play across a variety of correctional settings. Important themes have emerged, such as how food can reflect ideas of normalisation<sup>3</sup> or less-eligibility.<sup>4</sup> Food is important in the way that prisoners shape aspects of their identity(s):<sup>5</sup> it reflects power relationships

1. Council of Europe (2012). Rapport au gouvernement de la Belgique et des Pays-Bas relative à la visite effectuée à la prison de Tilburg par le Comité Européen pour la prévention de la torture et des peines ou traitement inhumains ou dégradants (CPT) du 17 au 19 octobre 2011. Strasbourg: Council of Europe (CPT/Inf (2012) 19).
2. Liebling, A., & Arnold, H. (2004). *Prisons and their Moral Performance. A Study of Values, Quality and Prison Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
3. Minke, L. K. (2014). Cooking in prison-from crook to cook. *International Journal of Prisoner Health*, 10(4), 228–238; Minke, L.K., & Smoyer, A.B. (2017). Prison food in Denmark: Normal responsibility or ethnocentric imaginations? In P. S. Smith & T. Ugelvik (Eds.), *Embraced by the Welfare State? Scandinavian Penal History, Culture, and Prison Practice*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.
4. Tomlinson, M.H. (1978). 'Not an instrument of punishment': Prison diet in the mid-nineteenth century. *Journal of Consumer Studies and Home Economics*, 2, 15-26.
5. Valentine, G., & Longstaff, B. (1998). Doing porridge. Food and social relations in a male prison. *Journal of Material Culture*, 3(2), 131-152; Earle, R., & Phillips, C. (2012). Digesting men? Ethnicity, gender and food. Perspectives from a 'prison ethnography'. *Theoretical Criminology*, 16(2), 141–156; Smoyer, A.B. (2014). Good and healthy. Foodways and construction of identity in a women's prison. *The Howard Journal*, 53(5), 525–541; Vanhouche, A. (2017). *Prison Cuisines in Europe. A comparative study of prison food systems in Belgium, Tilburg and Denmark*. Unpublished doctoral thesis defended at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and the University of Southern Denmark.

between prisoners,<sup>6</sup> and between prisoners and officers or prison authorities.<sup>7</sup> Some studies also show how prisoners use food to fight and resist power.<sup>8</sup> Finally, food can be used as a tool to create or breakdown order in penitentiaries.<sup>9</sup>

## Methods

This multi-method qualitative study collected interview data from 27 male prisoners in three phases.<sup>10</sup> Twenty-four (24) interviews were recorded and a verbatim transcription was made. During the other three interviews, participants declined to be recorded. Therefore, notes were made during the conversations. During the first phase of the project, it was noticed that culture strongly influenced food habits and experiences with the prison food system. Therefore, in the next two phases of the study, immigration/residence status, a proxy for culture, was used to ensure a diverse sample. Of the 21 male prisoners who were interviewed during the second and third research phase (when immigration/residence status was used as a selection criteria), 13 prisoners were undocumented and would probably be expelled from Belgium after their imprisonment, one person had an unclear immigration status, seven prisoners had legal residence in Belgium, including four who were Belgian nationals. In terms of their prison food experiences, 24 of the 27 respondents were housed in a group unit where the self-catering project had been introduced. The other three participants had previously stayed on these group units but were removed to a unit with individual cells, including two people who were housed in a unit for vulnerable prisoners.

In addition to these 27 interviews with incarcerated men, eight staff members were interviewed: a prison governor, a nurse, an imam, three prison officers, a Sodexo employee and an accountant. Three months of participant observations were also conducted. These participant observations

took place on the housing units, the prison kitchens, and in prisoners' cells. Finally, an analysis of the prison's internal documents related to the organization of food services was carried out. The study used the grounded theory method, as described by Thornberg and Sharmaz,<sup>11</sup> to analyse the data.

A unique feature to this data includes the ability to link changes in the food system to participants' perceptions about prison life. As the prison system modified the food system—transitioning from the frozen meals to the self-catering system—participants' lived experience of incarceration and perceptions of the institution improved. This natural experiment indicates that the theories articulated in previous research about prison food are true: Food matters and is a powerful tool in building the prison experience.

## Findings

Using Liebling's and Arnold's<sup>12</sup> conceptualization of quality of life, this analysis evaluates the performance of this prison experiment by examining the prison's food systems over time. Some of the key aspects of prison life that Liebling and Arnold identified can be linked to our participant's food narratives. These aspects include safety and trust, staff support, humanity, well-being, and personal development.

### Food Service in Tilburg Prison

Prisoners who were transferred to Tilburg from Belgian prisons in 2010 experienced a change in food systems and, from the very beginning, the food served at Tilburg created problems. In 2013, in response to these complaints, prison administrators invited one of the group units to participate in a self-catering project: Distribution of frozen meals would be suspended and prisoners would receive a small allowance to buy and prepare their own meals. Since most of these men

- 
6. Minke, L. K. (2014). Cooking in prison—from crook to cook. *International Journal of Prisoner Health*, 10(4), 228–238.
  7. Godderis, R. (2006). Food for thought. An analysis of power and identity in prison food narratives. *Berkley Journal of Sociology*, 50, 61–75.
  8. Valentine, G., & Longstaff, B. (1998). Doing porridge. Food and social relations in a male prison. *Journal of Material Culture*, 3(2), 131–152; Smith, C. (2002). Punishment and pleasure. Women, food and the imprisoned body. *Sociological Review*, 50(2), 197–214; Godderis, R. (2006). Dining in. The symbolic power of food in prison. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 45(3), 255–267; Brisman, A. (2008). Fair Fare?: Food as Contested Terrain in US Prisons and Jails. *Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law and Policy*, 15(1), 68–145; Ugelvik, T. (2011). The hidden food. Mealtime resistance and identity work in a Norwegian prison. *Punishment and Society*, 13(1), 47–63; Smoyer, A.B. (2014). Good and healthy. Foodways and construction of identity in a women's prison. *The Howard Journal*, 53(5), 525–541.
  9. Sparks, R., Bottoms, A., & Hay, W. (1996). *Prisons and the Problem of Order*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; Earle, R., & Phillips, C. (2012). Digesting men? Ethnicity, gender and food. Perspectives from a 'prison ethnography'. *Theoretical Criminology*, 16(2), 141–156.
  10. The data in this article are gathered and analysed in light of the PhD study of An-Sofie Vanhouche on prison food. The project was funded by the Research Foundation Flanders and was supervised by Prof. Dr. Kristel Beyens (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), Dr. Linda Kjaer Minke (University of Southern Denmark) and Prof. Dr. Peter Scholliers (Vrije Universiteit Brussel).
  11. Thornberg, R. & Charmaz, K. (2013). Grounded Theory and Theoretical Coding. In U. Flick (ed.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Data Analyses*. London: Sage.
  12. Liebling, A., & Arnold, H. (2004). *Prisons and their Moral Performance. A Study of Values, Quality and Prison Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

already cooked for themselves at their own expense, they were willing to join. In total, about 300 incarcerated men joined the project. Only the intake cell, where men were first housed upon arrival to the prison, continued to use frozen microwaveable meals to ensure newcomers had something to eat. After a week, these newly arrived prisoners could elect to join the self-catering project.

Prisoners who joined the self-catering project received 12.50 EURO a week to buy food for seven meals. Some basic staples (e.g. bread, spread, fruit, and desserts) were provided by the institution. Prisoners could spend this 12.50 EURO on a Sodexo canteen list that was specifically established for the project. The self-catering commissary list was limited to ingredients for cooking, snack foods, like chips and cookies, were not included. Prisoners had access to an industrial kitchen on the wing for about one hour per day. A small work space in the cells facilitated the use of the larger kitchen by allowing prisoners to prepare and cut all of their ingredients beforehand. Usually the men formed food groups that included from two to eight other men in order to cut costs.

### Humanity

One major theme that arose in prisoners' narratives was the link between food and their humanity, a relationship that improved over time. In the Belgian prisons, prior to their transfer to Tilburg, all meals were prepared in an on-site, institutional kitchen. Being able to eat only what the system put in front them—'They choose what you'll eat.' (PT#1)—felt unacceptable. When they moved to Tilburg, prisoners experienced their food conditions worsened. The frozen meals were described by participants as unpalatable meals and inhumane. Participants maintained that the frozen meals denigrated them, treating them worse than animals. From the very start of the study, this perception was clear:

*I explain the topic of my research to prisoners on the courtyard. One of them immediately reacts by stating that the food [deep frozen ready-made meals] is inedible. Others shout 'dog food'. One of them jokes that even his dog would not eat it. (Observations, June 25, 2013)*

When self-catering was introduced and participants had the opportunity to cook their own meals, their prison experience changed. The autonomy and choice they experienced from preparing their own meal made the prison seem more humane. As a participant puts it:

*You can make your own choice in what you eat and what you don't want to eat. Listen, in Belgian prisons, they choose what you'll eat. And of course, you have to eat what you get on your plate. This is not the case here. You can make your own choices. That's nice. (PT#1)*

This participant's narrative suggests that self-catering supports their humanity by allowing them to

control the food that they choose to consume. The link with Sykes<sup>13</sup> deprivation of autonomy is stark: 'Most prisoners, in fact, express an intense hostility against their far reaching dependence on the decisions of their captors. The restricted ability to make choices must be included among the pains of imprisonment.'

When prisoners are suddenly given the ability to make choices about their own personal food intake, it comes as no surprise that they experienced this choice as one of the greatest

advantages of the self-catering system. Participants reported that they felt treated as a person again, not as a prisoner.

### Identity

Participants also described how the self-catering system enhanced their capacity to create a non-prisoner identity in the penitentiary. For example, one prisoner described his dissatisfaction with the deep frozen ready-made meals because they were inconsistent with his cultural/ethnic identity, different from the cuisine he would eat at home: 'First, they gave us the food in a plastic box. Nobody could eat it...One time I ate it but I didn't like it. I prefer my cuisine' (PT# 3). For this study participant, the frozen meals were very different from what he would normally eat and being forced to eat tasteless food was a central pain of imprisonment. It was not uncommon for participants to report that they did not feel the frozen meals reflected the culture to which they were accustomed, their 'normal' baseline.

One major theme that arose in prisoners' narratives was the link between food and their humanity, a relationship that improved over time.

13. Sykes, G. (1940). *The Society of Captives. A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press: 73.

These perceptions of the frozen meals contrasted with prisoners' comments about the self-catering system. Self-catering allowed prisoners to control and shape their personal identities through food.<sup>14</sup> A participant explained:

*I was eating the food from the prison in Belgium [the food prepared in the industrial kitchens] and suddenly when someone gives you your dish ... like I am Indian...I will prefer my Indian dish. I want, I don't know what is in the box [ready-made meals in Tilburg], rice or whatever they make, I don't know. So they [other 'Indian' prisoners who participate in the self-catering project] just came to me and they said 'Okay we make this food' .... I said: 'Waaaw this is not like a prison!' (PT #4)*

After eating cafeteria food in Belgium and frozen meals at Tilburg, being able to eat a meal that had been prepared in the self-catering kitchen made this participant's food experience seem 'not like a prison,' but like what he would eat at home. The food cooked in the self-catering space connected to his non-incarcerated community and identity. The self-catering system allowed men to use distinct preparation methods, including specific ways of seasoning and habits of consumption. For example, one prisoner explained how he was very particular about his spices and preferred to eat on his own instead of adapting his meals to the group:

*Pistachio and baklava, you maybe know it. They grow in my city. If you buy them in a Turkish shop, it mentions [name of city anonymized], that's my city... Our cuisine is very spicy. We eat very spicy but not all people like that here. I tried to add the spices after the cooking but that doesn't taste the same. (PT#9)*

### Staff Interaction and Support

A third theme in the participants' narratives relates to the quality of support and interaction between staff and inmates. Study data illustrates how food systems can allow for staff interaction with

prisoners that demonstrates staff is listening to prisoners' complaints and trying to resolve them. The self-catering system was a response to the men's complaints about the food. This experience of being heard had a tremendous impact on the study participants who were overwhelmingly positive about their interaction with the Dutch staff. A prisoner described these positive relationships:

*The social contact between staff and prisoners is much better [...] you often notice it when people arrive...so they [officers] say their first name: 'I'm this person, who are you?' You are not used to it. In Belgium everything is behind glass, behind bars, no contact, you always must say 'chief, chief, chief', here we can use their first name. And that makes it quieter. It's more relaxed. You can ask everything. (PT#8)*

## Self-catering allowed prisoners to control and shape their personal identities through food.

Since prisoners felt staff was listening to their requests, the food system was regularly discussed with officers. In recognizing the disadvantages of the frozen meals, the staff demonstrated empathy and support for inmates. One participant explained (emphasis added): 'Before, we received black boxes [ready-made meals]. But we complained, complained, complained and, in the end, *they listened.*' (PT# 2). That complaints were actually reviewed and used to reform prison policies instilled confidence among the participants about the staff and their own ability to contribute to prison decision-making. These positive relationships did not only reflect prisoners positive approach towards staff but also staff's approach towards prisoners. In line with the study of Earle and Phillips,<sup>15</sup> these findings indicate that self-catering systems allow staff to afford some level of trust towards the prisoners, in particular prisoners' ability to organize the cooking activity. One officer stated:

*We also told them: 'Listen guys, we offer you this opportunity but expect you to stay calm and to clean the place. If you don't do that, the kitchen remains closed.' So it's for their own good and they encourage each other: 'You need to behave, if not, we can't cook for a week.' (OT#1)*

- 
14. See also: Earle, R., & Phillips, C. (2012). Digesting men? Ethnicity, gender and food. Perspectives from a 'prison ethnography'. *Theoretical Criminology*, 16(2), 141–156; Minke, L. K. (2014). Cooking in prison—from crook to cook. *International Journal of Prisoner Health*, 10(4), 228–238.
15. Earle, R., & Phillips, C. (2012). Digesting men? Ethnicity, gender and food. Perspectives from a 'prison ethnography'. *Theoretical Criminology*, 16(2), 141–156.

The attitudes and activities of officers can have a major impact on prisoners' experiences and are central to prison life. This example of how both groups, prisoners and officers strived to improve the food systems, serves as a clear example of how positive relationships between staff and prisoners can be developed within an institution.

### Trust and Safety

A fourth theme relates to trust and safety. Participants described poor quality pre-prepared meals as being a source of deep dissatisfaction and potential disruption. When the facility converted to a self-catering system, participants reported that prison safety improved because prisoners were no longer angry about the food. The increased freedoms afforded to prisoners through the self-catering system created a better atmosphere in prison and decreased hostility because they were able to prepare and eat decent meals.

The self-catering system, however, was not without safety issues. Specifically, there were concerns about making knives available to prisoners for cooking purposes. However, participants described these concerns as unfounded:

*I saw people in Belgium who were very aggressive. They come here and are not aggressive anymore...nobody does something with these knives. I'm here for a year now, I don't see anyone being killed or something else... (PT#5)*

As this participant explains, the dynamic prison environment in Tilburg, which included a variety of activities, reduced stressed and aggressive incidents. This impression was shared by the social and psychological staff from Belgium who temporary worked in the Tilburg penitentiary. Participants suggested that the trust they received from officers by being allowed to handle sharp utensils afforded a mutual sense of respect that encouraged them to follow prison rules. In short, participants experienced the self-catering regime, in which potentially dangerous objects were given to them, as safer than the traditional prisons where they had no access to knives but spend lots of time in their cell. The self-catering system allowed for more positive relationships with staff and experienced lower levels of stress. One of the prisoners explained this feeling:

*Why I say that it is better here? Because I already have my problems [...] I go to the recreation [where the kitchens are], I cook. You forget your problems a little bit because you do something. It's different from when you're constantly locked up. (PT#10)*

This respondent related time out of the cell to the relaxed environment that was created thanks to the presence of activities.

Other trust issues that arose from the self-catering system related to food sharing. The participants descriptions of this type of interaction made visible the trust, or lack thereof, that existed between incarcerated people and correctional officers. It was not uncommon for prisoners, who were very proud of the meals they prepared, to offer officers a plate. While prison rules prohibit officers from accepting any goods or services from prisoners, some officers accepted these invitations to eat together with the prisoners and most prisoners experienced this interaction as a positive element in their relationship. Other officers refused to share meals with prisoners. This rejection was interpreted as a clear lack of trust from officers towards prisoners. During the participant observations the following incident took place:

## The attitudes and activities of officers can have a major impact on prisoners' experiences and are central to prison life.

*I walk with the prisoners back to their cells. They ask if I want to taste their home-made lasagna. I sit with them in their cell and eat. A bit later X [name of one of the officer anonymized] enters the place. The prisoners offer her some lasagna. She gets irritated and tells she is not allowed to taste their food. She explains prisoners might abuse it later to ask a favor in return. Moreover, she adds that prisoners can offer her contaminated food... then, she leaves the cell and the prisoners are clearly annoyed by the incident. They ensure me that I should not believe her and claim she always exaggerates. They add everyone hates this officer due to this kind of behavior. (Fieldnotes, January 29, 2015)*

This example about the sharing of meals illustrates a central operational dilemma for correctional staff: the tension between balancing trust and relationships with security. In monitoring the self-catering system and other prison activities and supervision officers reported

struggling to balance seeming conflicting roles and responsibilities. On the one hand, staff seek to maintain order and security by controlling activities and keeping a distance. On the other hand, the prison aims to support and motivate prisoners to live a life without crime after their release. Staff reported conflicting views about how to best balance their role as a prisoner-officer, along the continuum between too soft and too strict. According to some, sharing food enabled to show appreciation for the work of prisoners and even learn from them through the sharing of recipes. Other officers believed certain barriers had to be maintained and were afraid prisoners would contaminate the food or ask a favor in return. Each officer decided which approach suited him/her best.

Finally, participants reported that the self-catering system bolstered relationships of trust between prisoners. In line with the results of Minke's<sup>16</sup> study on prisoners' food groups in Denmark, the cooking groups that were formed at Tilburg allowed people developed alliances through these cooking partnerships. The financial support from the institution during the self-catering project also decreased the pressure on prisoners with more resources to share money with others. Although income inequality did not disappear completely with institutional support, 12.50 EURO is a modest allowance, prisoners witnessed how this institutional support created more material equality between them and built trust by reducing stealing and subordination. A prisoner explains:

*Before we received this 12.50 EURO, there were some prisoners with whom I shared a cell, they just arrived and didn't have money on their account. And I was there for a longer time, so I had to financially support them... So these first months, I had to buy my own food and that of others... I did it voluntary because I cannot sit there and eat my meal in front of them.... [Now] when someone is new, they receive 12.50 EURO on their account... [Before the allowance was introduced] I spend between 400 and 450 Euros every month. (PT #2)*

For this individual, providing financial support for newly incarcerated people was an expensive endeavor. The introduction of a basic food allowance for all

prisoners, lifted the responsibility of providing for other from him.

## Well-being and Personal Development

Participants' narratives clearly linked food to well-being and personal development. While it is possible that the frozen meals, designed and approved by prison nutrition guidelines and dietary staff, were more nutritious than the meals they prepared on their own, participants overwhelmingly perceived their own cooking to be more healthy. A participant who was interviewed before the introduction of the self-catering project claimed that:

*They say even outside prison, it's not healthy to eat microwave food. In here, you don't get anything else. Sometimes I wonder if you eat it every day, two years in a row, would you get problems with your health? So I don't eat it every day. I throw it away. (PT #7)*

Self-catering allowed prisoners to enact eating habits and methods of meal preparation that they understood as healthy and fit for daily human consumption.

Self-catering allowed prisoners to enact eating habits and methods of meal preparation that they understood as healthy and fit for daily human consumption.

Similarly, allowing prisoners to be involved in health enhancing behavior (i.e. the preparation of fresh meals) promoted personal development. The tedium of incarceration is often discussed by prisoners as they search for ways to pass their time in a meaningful way. One participant noted: '[With self-catering] Time goes faster, yes. I think it goes faster. You can do more, you can exercise, you can prepare your food. You can keep yourself busy, not as in Belgium' (PT #8).

For some participants it was just nice to spend their time cooking, while others felt it improved their cooking skills and it enabled them to learn from their peers.

*And now it's getting better [compared to when they served pre-prepared meals]. Because you know, every country, they have their own food, as you know. And then it depends how you deal with it. I'm a*

16. Minke, L. K. (2014). Cooking in prison-from crook to cook. *International Journal of Prisoner Health*, 10(4), 228–238.

*gourmand, I cook with everyone. I don't have any problems, I talk to everyone, I want to learn things. For example now I can prepare couscous as the Arabs do. (PT #9)*

While explaining how one can learn from other prisoners, this participant touched upon another important advantage of self-catering: Cooking together can encourage prisoners to expand their horizons by talking to each other and showing interest in each other's culture. Moreover, several prisoners experienced cooking as a pleasurable experiment. Inventing new recipes and obtaining positive ratings from fellow prisoners for these new dishes could become a meaningful form of self-entertainment.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

This analysis showed that prisoners' detention experiences changed after the institution shifted from pre-made frozen meals to a system of self-catering. Study participants reported that the self-catering system was more humane. Participants described feeling more supported and understood by prison officers. Moreover, they felt recognized as individuals with their own personal identities. Positive relationships with peers were built while cooking together and sharing meals in the self-catering system. Improved relationships with staff were also noted, although the sharing of meals between staff and prisoners was a precarious moment in the development of trust between the two groups. Finally, cooking offered a meaningful way to pass time that promoted prisoners' sense of personal development.

Issues of safety are critical for this analysis, given that the security of staff and incarcerated people is a

central goal for prison administrators. The idea of giving incarcerated people the tools to cook their own food, including knives and other potentially dangerous instruments, can give policy makers and administrators pause. Indeed, after data collection for this study was completed, an inmate-on-inmate assault in the self-catering kitchen was reported by the Tilburg administration. In response to this incident, additional correctional staff were assigned to monitor the kitchen space. While this additional staffing may help to prevent future violence, clearly it is impossible for staff and administrators to completely prevent fights in any part of the prison, including these kitchens. In both incarcerated and non-incarcerated settings, human beings argue and fight. In many prisons without self-catering systems there are assaults involving sharp instruments. While concerns about safety in the self-catering kitchens are legitimate and protocols should be developed to provide adequate supervision and support within these spaces, this data offers strong evidence to suggest that the positive features of these programs—including trust, relationships, and program satisfaction—outweigh the potential risks.<sup>17</sup>

To conclude, while prison administrators and regulatory bodies often focus on the content of meals and logistical issues about timing and serving, these narratives from incarcerated men challenge this narrow construction of food as simply a source of nutrition and fuel. In their responses, participants focused not only on nutrition, but on how the food made them feel and shaped their broader prison experience. Seen in this light, food is transformed into a tool that can provide not only physical sustenance, but emotional and psychosocial fuel that can improve the quality of life for incarcerated people.

---

17. See also Earle, R., & Phillips, C. (2012). Digesting men? Ethnicity, gender and food. Perspectives from a 'prison ethnography'. *Theoretical Criminology*, 16(2), 141–156.