

Crime and nourishment – the link between food and offending behaviour

September 28 2018, by Hazel Flight, John Marsden And Sean Creaney



Credit: Mikhail Nilov from Pexels

It is well known that eating a balanced diet is of vital importance for maintaining good health and well-being. It is also one of the great [social pleasures of life](#). Yet, far too many young people in prisons are

[consuming a poor diet](#), lacking in nutrition.

Alarmingly, research suggests over half of [food](#) items available for purchase in some prisons in the UK and [the US](#) are "high in fat or sugar". It has also been suggested that in the US, prison food has been described as "[scant, joyless, and unsavoury](#)". But it doesn't have to be like this. Sant'angelo dei lombardi in Italy is said to have [one of the best fed prisons in the world](#), where prisoners work to produce organic fruit and vegetables and leave healthier than when admitted.

Poor nutrition can impact on concentration and learning and may result in episodes of [violent or aggressive behaviour](#). In prison, a bad [diet](#) can also contribute to increased rates of poor [mental and physical health](#) compared with the general population.

To tackle this problem, a new UK government strategy aims to provide young people with healthy eating advice on arrival in prison. Inmates up to the age of 21 will be provided with nutritional guidance so they can make "[informed choices](#)" about their diets.

Poor diet, aggression and impulsivity

The amount and nutritional value of food available in prisons and the dietary choices prisoners make has a significant [influence on the quality of a prisoner's life](#). Consuming highly processed and sugary foods can lead to sudden peaks and troughs in the amount of glucose in a person's blood. This can cause fatigue, irritability, dizziness, insomnia and is even a [risk factor for depression](#) – particularly in men. It has been shown that a diet of whole foods can offer [protection against depression](#).

Deficiencies in vitamins and minerals can lead to a number of issues. For example, low levels of iron, magnesium and zinc can lead to increased anxiety, low mood and poor concentration, leading to attention

deficits and sleep disturbance. [Omega 3 is required](#) to improve cognitive functioning.

Recent government policies have recognised the problem of additives and the [high sugar content](#) of food, with the introduction of the sugar tax and moves to address the use of colourings, which have been found to have a negative effect on [behaviour and hyperactivity](#). A recent example of the UK government's willingness to intervene in the purchasing decisions of young people is the [outlawing of energy drink sales](#) to under-16s.

The types of problems associated with a [poor diet](#), such as aggression, [attention deficits](#) and hyperactivity can make impulsive behaviour more likely. [Studies have shown](#) that "high levels of impulsivity are connected with high and stable levels of offending".

Addressing the problem

[Lucy Vincent](#) – a freelance journalist with a background in both food and fashion – has started a campaign to address the need for better food in UK prisons. She believes that decent nutrition has the power to positively impact self-esteem, health, learning and development. Young people in prison are likely to have struggled with these issues and providing a better diet is an important step in improving their emotional health and well-being.

But there are obvious difficulties in improving the diets of young offenders. For example, Public Health England suggests that providing a balanced diet [costs £5.99 per person](#), per day. Yet some prisons have food budgets as low as [£1.87 per person, per day](#). There are obvious economies of scale to take into account, but providing a [balanced diet](#) for young offenders would still be a costly exercise – at a time when other parts of the prison service are starved of funds.

With experienced prison officers leaving the service and their remaining colleagues protesting over [unacceptable levels of violence](#), improving the diet of young people in prison will be difficult to achieve.

But if the UK is to come close to breaking the cycle of reoffending, it needs to meet the basic needs of [young people](#) in prison and respect the basic human right of adequate nutrition. [Government advice for young inmates](#) is one thing, but those in [prison](#) need to have healthy food to choose from if they are to have any hope of staying healthy in jail.

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