Pregnant Women's Opinions of the Food Provided in Prison

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**Background:** The UK has the highest incarceration rate in Western Europe, with pregnant women comprising 6% of the female prison population. There are limited qualitative studies documenting the experiences of pregnancy whilst serving a prison sentence. Prison food provision is their main dietary source. Women often receive the same diet as their non-pregnant counterparts, relying on food packs to meet additional nutritional requirements. This research aimed to analyse incarcerated pregnant women’s and staff members opinions of the diet provided within three English prisons.

**Ethical approval:** Favourable ethical opinion for the primary study was granted by the National Offender Management Services (NOMS) through the Health Research Authority Integrated Research Application System (IRAS) and permission to proceed was granted by the University of Hertfordshire.

**Methods:** This research analysed incarcerated pregnant women’s perceptions of the food provided within English prisons. To support the early manual colour coding, NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) was selected to help to organise the data. Secondary qualitative analysis of transcripts from 28 audio-recorded semi-structured interviews of incarcerated pregnant women and 10 members of staff built upon original doctorate research undertaken by Abbott (2018). This used a peer-reviewed framework methodology, following previous, initial coding for food themes to allow a secondary analysis using peer-reviewed framework methodology (Pope & Mays, 2006). In addition, further secondary analyses were undertaken on the opinion of ten members of prison staff to carry out a comparative analysis.

**Results:** Prison food is mainly supported by staff and critiqued by incarcerated women. Food is often described as inadequate by women and many report feeling hungry, especially at night-time: “you are starving”. Food also had an emotional context where women felt deprived leading to frustration: “you have to eat because you are pregnant and or you would die”. The diet provided was mainly viewed positively by staff and negatively by women who consume the food provided. Key themes included: 1) opinions of food provided: “not getting enough nutrition and stuff like that…the diet is poor”; 2) the dining experience: “in prison you just turn up for your meals…they just sort of slop it on your plate”; 3) the prison environment: “you can buy noodles on the canteen and fruit and cereals and stuff like that”;

**Discussion:** The inadequacy of the prison diet has been described by pregnant women and has a detrimental effect on women’s experience of nutrition. At night-time, hunger is often exacerbated, with the prison environment limiting a woman’s personal freedom over when she can satiate her hunger. For the pregnant women, not being able to take control of their nutritional wellbeing was especially difficult. All women interviewed for Abbott’s (2018) original research discussed prison food when asked about their experiences of being pregnant in prison. Most women used negative descriptors to articulate their feelings of food and nutritional deprivation, emotional frustration and hunger. Food would dominate their urges for some women as their hunger trumped all other needs. Overwhelmingly women expressed concern about the quality and quantity of food, highlighting the lack of uniformity and stability across the system.

**Conclusion:** Women often voiced an expectation that their pregnancy deserved a ‘special status’ which would guarantee access to high-quality and timely food (for example), yet this was not in their experience. The experiences of pregnant prisoners are negative due to poor food quality, inconsistencies between and within prisons, and lack of support. This demonstrates the need for re-evaluation within the criminal justice system to meet the nutritional needs of these women.

**References:**