



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CORRECTIONS

Thanksgiving behind bars

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment November 24, 2010 11:30 AM

Thanksgiving is by far my favorite holiday. What could be better than a day that combines football, food, and family? And in thinking about the range of things and people for which and whom I am thankful, I include the opportunity to express my point of view in this space and those readers whose feedback, concurring or contrary, makes writing this blog especially rewarding.

Given my left-leaning perspective, I frequently get responses (posted here and heard elsewhere) that complain about the "criminal-coddling" justice system. Yet one particularly absurd conjecture served up years ago by a local columnist has long stuck in my craw: that the amenities of life behind bars -- including the lavish Thanksgiving dinners and cable TV -- contribute to the high rate of recidivism.

Is life behind bars really so wonderful? Is it true that ex-cons yearn to return to the slammer just to feast on Thanksgiving dinner and watch the Patriots play the Lions on television?

A couple of years ago I decided to experience first-hand what those coddled criminals were doing for their Turkey Day. Is it really special from the usual turnkey days of the rest of the year?

I decided to make a field trip -- a pilgrimage of sorts -- to check out the jailhouse festivities. Fortunately, the Norfolk County House of Correction (the "median security" lockup situated on the strip between the north and south lanes of Route 128) had room for one more for dinner.

The menu was fairly traditional, including carved jail bird (white meat only) with seasoned stuffing (made with bread and water, of course) and cranberry sauce. The inmates were not given any choices over turkey parts, I guess to avoid any fights over the drumsticks.

Rob O. ate in the jail's drug and alcohol treatment unit. The 43-year-old convict, who was serving time for assault and battery, compared his experiences in Norfolk County with the time he spent in jail back in his native Mississippi. In Mississippi, Thanksgiving was basically a lock-down day -- no turkey, no television.

While admitting that the "get tough" approach might scare some men from future offending, Rob minimized its impact. "Criminals are used to abusive situations," he insisted. "They respond better when approached with dignity and a bit of compassion."

It was Mahatma Gandhi who observed that a society's moral progress could be judged by how its weakest members were treated. In the spirit of the holiday, I suggest that we might judge our moral progress by how we feed our inmates. The "let them have bread and water" crowd would have life behind bars be as miserable and oppressive as possible. However, the punishment of incarceration is deprivation of liberty, not deprivation of humanity.

For some perspective on my own jailhouse experience, I called around to ask about Thanksgiving activities elsewhere. Inmates in the culinary arts program at Riker's Island in New York cooked 100 stuffed turkeys, which they then delivered (under armed escort) to church organizations for feeding the homeless. The inmates, I was told, felt good about doing something for those less fortunate.

For a sharply contrasting perspective, I called Sheriff Joe Arpaio of Maricopa County, Ariz., who is renowned for his hard-line practices. How would this maverick lawman, legendary for forcing convicts to wear pink underwear and sleep in tents, accommodate inmates on Thanksgiving?

Not surprisingly, Arpaio made only a slight concession for the holiday -- allowing the inmates to have pepper with their meal. While describing his no-frills menu, Jailor Joe actually boasted about spending half as much per day on inmate meals as he does for the dogs and cats housed in county-run shelters.

My own Thanksgiving meal at the Norfolk County House of Corrections was surprisingly tasty -- compliments to the chef. Still it was hardly lavish to the point where I would expect throngs of ex-cons to be banging on the bars trying to return in time for Christmas dinner.