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Cadong Rice and Kitchen Privilege in Indonesian Prisons

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Abstract

Tamping dapur, kitchen assistant inmates in Indonesian carceral settings, occupy a distinctive position within Indonesian prisons because their labor gives them access to food distribution, institutional space, and informal authority. This study examines how *tamping dapur* participate in managing *cadong* rice, how their role contributes to prison security and stability, and what privileges they receive from prison authorities. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the study draws upon observation and in-depth interviews with inmates to analyze the everyday power relations surrounding prison food management. The findings show that the *tamping*'s management of *cadong* rice functions as an informal mechanism of social control that helps maintain institutional order and creates unequal access to resources. The study argues that kitchen work should not be understood merely as prison labor but as a privileged institutional position that can reproduce hierarchy inside detention settings. These findings underline the need for policy reform to ensure that prison food management is consistent with equality, accountability, and human rights principles.

Keywords: Prison food; *tamping*; *cadong* rice; prison labor; inmate privilege.

Introduction

Prison kitchens constitute a critical yet underexamined site for understanding power relations, welfare distribution, and institutional stability within carceral settings. Prison food, for instance, is an essential resource, and its provision is one of the clearest ways in which incarcerated people experience the practical meaning of state custody. The provision of food here is therefore not only a nutritional concern but also a core element of prison governance, shaping security, social order, and inmates' psychological well-being (Hannan-Jones & Capra, 2016; Johnson et al., 2024; Woods-Brown et al., 2023). Globally, prisons continue to face chronic pressures, including limited budgets and dependence on inmate labor (Cloyes et al., 2017; Hewson et al., 2024; Mantouvalou, 2024). Within such constrained environments, unequal or poorly regulated food management may intensify social tensions, produce discriminatory practices, and even contribute to unrest that undermines rehabilitation and social reintegration (Runturambi, 2013).

Within this context, access to food can become an instrument of informal power. In Indonesian prisons, this dynamic is closely associated with *nasi cadong*, a term referring to the daily food ration distributed to prisoners. The term is historically associated

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with colonial-era practices in which rice was mixed with corn or cassava to reduce costs. In contemporary Indonesian prisons, the *cadong* has become a standard daily food ration, with menus generally consisting of white rice accompanied by simple side dishes such as fried tempeh, tofu, spinach, or salted fish. Food provision is formally regulated by the minimum nutritional standards, approximately 2,345 kcal per day for adult men, 1,995 kcal for adult women, and 2,240 kcal for children, established under the Regulation of the Minister of Law and Human Rights (Permenkumham) Number 40 of 2017 (Indon.) on Food provision (Primawardani, 2017). However, despite this regulatory framework, the daily allocation for *cadong* rice remains limited, at approximately Rp20,000–25,000 (around US$1.12–1.41) per inmate per day. These restricted allocations have often been criticised as nutritionally "seadanya [inadequate]," (Runturambi, 2013, p.102) particularly in overcrowded prisons (Firmansyah et al., 2019; Nugroho & Haerah, 2024), which correlate with inmates' stress, aggression, and interpersonal conflict (Johnson et al., 2024).

The political significance of prison food becomes clearer when attention is directed to the people who manage it. In the institutions examined in this study, kitchen operations depend partly on *tahanan pendamping dapur*, or kitchen assistant inmates. These inmates occupy a dual position: they remain prisoners serving their sentences, yet they also assist officers in managing logistics and distributing food, primarily *cadong* rice (Larasati et al., 2022; Perkasa, 2020). These prisoners remain subject to the correctional system, but they are also entrusted with practical responsibilities in food preparation, storage, portioning, and distribution. Their position is therefore intermediary: they operate between correctional officers and the broader inmate population (Simarmata, 2016; Zarkasi et al., 2022). This position typically requires inmates to have served a minimum period of imprisonment, maintained a record of discipline, and possess basic cooking or logistical skills. Moreover, their existence reflects the limited number of prison employees, especially in overcrowded facilities where the ratio between officers and prisoners is structurally imbalanced (Arifani & Syafiq, 2019).

Tamping dapur are officially appointed under Permenkumham Number 7 of 2013 (Indon.) concerning *pemuka* (inmate leaders) and *tamping* (inmate assistants). In many Western correctional contexts, comparable roles are discussed through the language of peer workers (Nixon, 2023), inmate caregivers (Cloyes et al., 2017), inmate workers (Mantouvalou, 2024), peer supporters (Bagnall et al., 2015), or prisoner representatives (Buck & Tomczak, 2024). These terms do not refer to exactly the same institutional arrangement as the Indonesian *tamping* system, but they show that prisons in different jurisdictions often delegate selected labor and governance functions to prisoners themselves.

Although previous studies have examined prison food primarily in relation to nutrition (Runturambi, 2013), health (Firmansyah et al., 2019), and the adequacy of food provision (Primawardani, 2017), less attention has been paid to the informal power relations produced through food distribution. Moreover, the role of *tamping dapur* as prison labor remains underexplored. Prison labor research, meanwhile, asks whether work contributes to rehabilitation and reintegration or reproduces exclusion and exploitation (Mantouvalou, 2024; Villman & Saarikkomäki, 2025). Research on prison order, which explains that stability is frequently negotiated through formal authority combined with informal arrangements, is also helpful to explain the *tamping* dynamics (Crewe, 2009; Skarbek, 2020; Sykes, 1958).

This article, therefore, approaches prison food through the combined lenses of prison food studies, prison labor, and informal prison governance. The purpose is not to portray kitchen assistants as either privileged wrongdoers or exemplary rehabilitated prisoners, but to ask what their intermediary position reveals about how prison order is produced. Specifically, this study addresses three research questions. First, what are the implications of *tamping*'s labor to manage *cadong* rice for inmate welfare and social relations? Second, to what extent does *tamping* contribute to maintaining prison security and stability? Third, what forms of privilege are granted to kitchen assistant inmates?

Prison Food: Between Care and Inequality

Prison food studies show that food work can serve different institutional purposes across correctional systems. In Denmark, self-catering, as part of the correctional principle of normalization, is linked to inmates' autonomy, everyday responsibility, and continuity between prison and community life (Minke, 2014). However, studies of food practices in Danish prisons caution against treating self-catering as automatically humane, since the experience of autonomy remains shaped by imprisonment, gender, ethnicity, and institutional restriction (Weir, 2021). In England and Wales, prison catering is more explicitly connected to food safety, institutional accountability, and employability, with official guidance emphasizing nutritional provision, menu planning, supervision, and prisoner training in food hygiene and catering work (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2025). Australian prison foodservice studies similarly show that food provision involves complex relationships between menu planning, nutrition, foodservice systems, and inmate perceptions, while some facilities provide certified vocational training in foodservices (Hannan-Jones & Capra, 2016; Williams et al., 2009). By contrast, studies of prison food in the United States and

broader international reviews show that food can also become a site of punishment, deprivation, control, resistance, and labor exploitation (Van Hout et al., 2025; Woods-Brown et al., 2023).

Studies also complicate a simple distinction between food as care and food as punishment. Minke (2014) shows how cooking can become part of rehabilitation and responsibility, while Weir (2021) demonstrates that apparently humane food practices remain shaped by institutional restrictions and social differences. Van Hout et al. (2025) place the issue within a rights framework, documenting concerns about inadequate food, food preparation, access, punishment, exploitation, and interpersonal power. These studies suggest that food should be analyzed not only by asking whether it is nutritionally sufficient, but also by asking who controls it, under what rules, and with what consequences for everyday relations. In Indonesia, this care dimension is embedded in a correctional system that formally combines custody with rehabilitation, health, guidance, and social reintegration (Lo & Rahmi, 2015; Nelson, 2017; Sulhin, 2022), although formal care does not eliminate coercion. Goffman's (1961) concept of the total institution remains useful here because basic needs are organized through institutional routines and surveillance. In overcrowded facilities, the distance between formal entitlement and everyday access may become particularly important (Angkasa, 2020). The Indonesian case examined in this study contributes to these debates by showing how prison food work may simultaneously support order and reproduce inequality. *Tamping* are entrusted with responsibility over *cadong* rice, but this responsibility also gives them discretionary control over food distribution.

Prison *Tamping*: Labor, Inmate Helper, or Institutional Intermediary?

Prison work can provide routine, skills, recognition, and opportunities for social integration, but it can also reproduce unequal power relations. Villman and Saarikkomäki (2025) show that work may acquire positive meaning for desistance and social integration when it provides meaningful employment pathways. Prison peer work can similarly create roles of responsibility and care (Bagnall et al., 2015; Cloyes et al., 2017; Nixon, 2023). These findings caution against treating all prison labor as merely punitive. At the same time, labor in prison is structurally different from ordinary employment. Mantouvalou (2024) argues that prison work may become a site of exclusion and exploitation when prisoners lack protections associated with ordinary labor. This tension between meaningful participation and structural dependency provides an important point of departure for understanding the Indonesian *tamping* system.

Theoretically, the Indonesian *tamping* system is closer to what prison sociology describes as an intermediary position between staff authority and inmate society (Crewe, 2009). A *tamping* remains an incarcerated person subject to prison rules and restrictions yet is simultaneously entrusted with selected responsibilities that support the everyday operation of the institution. Different *tamping* roles provide different forms of access and responsibility, including *tamping keamanan* (security), *tamping kebersihan* (cleanliness), and *tamping dapur* (kitchen). The latter is distinctive because kitchen assistants work directly with food preparation, portioning, and distribution. Their proximity to *cadong* gives them access to an essential resource on which all incarcerated people depend. Consequently, benefits associated with kitchen work may function simultaneously as labor recognition and as institutional privilege. This distinction is important because legitimate work incentives should not compromise equal access to basic needs. The *tamping dapur* therefore provides a useful case for examining how delegated labor responsibility can also produce internal hierarchy.

Informal Governance Over a Scarce Resource

Prison sociology has long demonstrated that formal authority alone cannot explain everyday prison order. Sykes (1958), Crewe (2009), and Skarbek (2020) demonstrate that everyday prison order also emerges through informal relationships, dependencies, and negotiated practices. In Indonesia, Runturambi (2013) describes prison culture as a semi-autonomous social arena in which formal rules coexist with inmate-generated practices, while Arifani and Syafiq (2019) and Perkasa (2020) show how *tamping* can become part of institutional operations. The present study extends this perspective by focusing on food. Unlike many prison resources, food is an essential resource that must be distributed repeatedly and predictably to every incarcerated person. Consequently, the delegated management of *cadong* gives kitchen assistants a particularly consequential intermediary position. Because food is both essential and scarce, the kitchen creates a particularly consequential form of intermediary authority. The distribution of *cadong* rice is therefore more than a routine administrative task; it might function as an instrument of social control since food influences morale, security stability, and perceptions of institutional fairness (Nurdin & Kartini, 2017). When *tamping dapur* control access to portions, menu variation, or leftover food, they may acquire informal authority over other inmates. In addition, failures in food distribution may also provoke tension, protest, or conflict, as reflected in the Salemba Prison case (Simarmata, 2016). For this reason, reform of the *cadong* rice system is necessary not only to improve nutrition but also to support rehabilitation, social reintegration, and compliance with Law Number 22 of 2022 (Indon.) (Kisworo & Puspytasari, 2025; Larasati et al., 2022). Unequal or inconsistent food provision may affect how inmates perceive the legitimacy

and fairness of institutional arrangements, while dependence on selected inmates for distribution can create opportunities for informal authority.

Data and Methods

This study was conducted in two correctional institutions in West Java, Indonesia, referred to as Prison A and Prison B to preserve institutional anonymity. At the time of research, Prison A housed 967 inmates (900 regular inmates, 15 security assistants, 32 cleanliness assistants, and 20 kitchen assistants), while Prison B housed 1,200 inmates (1,116 regular inmates, 20 security assistants, 40 cleanliness assistants, and 24 kitchen assistants). Formal institutional permission was obtained from the Ministry of Law and Human Rights, West Java Regional Office (No. W.11-HH.05.04-6692), and a data release agreement was documented under legal stamp with inmate representatives, including key informants, and witnessed by custodial authorities (No. W.08-LPBI1.22.05-4523). Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and all participants and institutions were anonymized. Identifiable facial features and distinctive tattoos in figures were blurred to protect privacy.

A descriptive qualitative approach, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis framework, was used to examine the experiences and roles of *tamping dapur* in managing *cadong* rice. Data was collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews over 7 months in Prison A and 6 months in Prison B, focusing on kitchen activities; food distribution; interactions with inmates and officers; and informal practices concerning portions, leftovers, and food allocation. Five *tamping dapur* were selected through homogeneous purposive sampling based on at least 6 months of kitchen service, direct involvement in *cadong* distribution, and willingness to participate. The interviews generated approximately 10 hours of audio recordings, which were transcribed and translated into English by the authors. Interview questions addressed kitchen routines, food distribution, interactions with officers and inmates, perceived privileges, and the role of kitchen work in maintaining prison order.

Throughout the research, a clear methodological distinction was maintained between key informants and supporting informants. The five *tamping dapur* served as the primary key informants whose lived experiences formed the core dataset for analysis. To ensure their accounts accurately reflected the broader realities of the institutions and to establish robust analytical consensus, the study applied methodological triangulation by cross-referencing observational data, interview transcripts, and internal prison documents. Trustworthiness was further solidified through rigorous member checking with supporting participants, specifically a correctional officer and a regular inmate, who were engaged solely for triangulation rather than as primary sources of analysis. This collaborative verification ensured mutual agreement on the operational realities of the prison kitchen before finalizing the results. Key and supporting informants' profiles are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Profiles of Key and Supporting Informants*

Informant initial	Term of assignment/service	Age	Prison initial	Type of offence	Role
Z*	18 months	38	A	Violence	*Tamping dapur* (coordinator)
M*	24 months	42	B	Narcotics	*Tamping dapur* (cook, distributor)
H*	12 months	31	A	Violence	*Tamping dapur* (cook, distributor)
A*	15 months	35	B	Narcotics	*Tamping dapur* (cook, distributor)
B*	15 months	29	A	Harassment	*Tamping dapur* (cook, storage)
J	26 months	38	A	Property	Regular inmate (kamar paring)
Officer R	22 years	49	A	-	Correctional officer

Findings

The Cost of Tamping Privilege: Labor, Discipline, and Daily Routine

Ministry regulations establish formal criteria for appointing *tamping*, including good conduct, absence of disciplinary violations, and assessment through the correctional system. Permenkumham Number 7 of 2013 (Indon.) specifically regulates the appointment and dismissal of *pemuka* and *tamping*, while subsequent research confirms that the regulation provides the formal framework for *tamping* appointment (Firmansyah et al., 2019; Primawardani, 2017; Runturambi, 2013). Field observations, however, indicate that access to kitchen assignments in both facilities also involved informal gatekeeping. Z, the *tamping* coordinator, explained that competition for kitchen positions was high and applicants were expected to provide an informal payment, locally referred to as *uang buis*, paid through family members outside the prison or during visits, after which the administrative process could proceed. “Hundreds of men in the blocks want these slots. To get your name on the decree, there is an informal fee, what we call the ‘uang buis.’ The standard rate right now is two million rupiah [approx. US$130]” (Z, personal interview).

This dynamic creates an immediate class barrier. Poor prisoners whose families cannot afford two million rupiah or those who have broken ties with the outside world are shut out. They remain trapped in the “kamar paring,” the prison term for overcrowded, damp residential cells where non-working inmates sit for 20 hours a day on thin floor mats, entirely dependent on standard *cadong*.

For those who secure placement, however, kitchen work involved substantial physical and temporal demands. The work began around 3:00 a.m. with “buka keong,” the prison term for the predawn opening of cell gates, followed by “kawal kanan-kiri” as kitchen workers were escorted to the kitchen. B, the cook, described preparing food for nearly 1,000 inmates: “You are standing over massive boiling cauldrons, inhaling diesel fumes and thick steam that burns your face. You stir 50 kilograms of rice with wooden paddles as thick as oars. By 6:00 a.m., your clothes are soaked in sweat” (M, personal interview). Daily tasks included carrying 50-kilogram rice sacks, washing rice in large containers, chopping vegetables, and moving heavy cooking equipment. Despite these demands, kitchen workers described the physical exhaustion positively in comparison with spending the day confined in “kamar paring.” This finding complicates the meaning of kitchen privilege: it provides material and spatial

advantages, but these are accompanied by intensive labor, strict routines, and responsibilities that distinguish kitchen workers from the wider inmate population.

Informal Authority Over Cadong *Rice Distribution*

The most immediate power exercised by kitchen assistant inmates lies in their practical control over the portioning and distribution of *cadong* rice. Although correctional officers are formally responsible for supervising food distribution, the large imbalance between staff and inmates, as suggested by Figure 1, limits their ability to inspect every meal container. This arrangement creates considerable micro-discretion for kitchen workers, who can adjust portions and side dishes according to inmates' behaviour, block relationships, or personal preferences. As H, who led food distribution at Prison A, explained:

> The officer walks behind us, but he only watches the hallway. We hold the ladles. We decide who gets the thick side dishes and who gets plain rice. If a block is respectful to the kitchen crew, we give them extra. But if a block protested or caused trouble yesterday, they only get the "nasi kucing" [meager portion] treatment. The prisoners grumble, but they know better than to push us too far. In here, your stomach depends on who controls the kitchen. (personal interview)

This account illustrates how formal supervision can coexist with informal authority. Kitchen assistants may use their control over portions to reward compliance and discourage resistance. Other informants confirmed that distribution could be adjusted according to perceived obedience or loyalty. Z, a *tamping* responsible for menu coordination, stated, "As the menu coordinator, I can give extra boiled eggs to the obedient block, but those who protest only get rice" (personal interview). A similarly reported, "Sometimes we eat shredded chicken, but regular prisoners only get boiled eggs. Sometimes they protest, but we are the ones who manage the kitchen" (personal interview). These accounts indicate that food distribution was not experienced solely as the implementation of a formal nutritional standard but was embedded in everyday relations of compliance, loyalty, and authority.

The unequal distribution of food was accompanied by broader material privileges. Kitchen assistants occupied less congested sleeping quarters and had access to amenities that were less available to ordinary inmates. They received monthly "premi" Rp400,000 [approx. US$23] and opportunities associated with sentence remission. This finding reveals an important ambiguity: benefits connected to kitchen work may function as incentives for labor, but preferential access to food also creates a distinction between *tamping* and other inmates in relation to a basic necessity.

For ordinary prisoners, however, *cadong* represents a much more immediate condition of survival. J, a regular inmate in "kamar paring," described this dependence in particularly direct terms:

> If you don't have money to buy snacks from the informal canteen, *cadong* is your lifeline. … Even if the rice smells sour, you smile, say thank you, and swallow your pride. If you anger them, tomorrow your tray will be half empty. (personal interview)

Figure 1

An Officer in Boots is Supervising the Cadong Distribution (Photo from authors, used with permission)



These accounts provide evidence that the consequences of unequal distribution were experienced by regular inmates rather than existing only as a theoretical possibility. This finding, however, should be understood as evidence of reported experiences within the study sites rather than as proof that all kitchen assistants routinely or universally manipulated food distribution.

At the same time, kitchen life was not exclusively defined by hierarchy and control. Kitchen assistants also developed their own communal practice, *ngalas*, in which they shared leftover rice, chicken, vegetables, and other food from a common tray (see Figure 2). A described the experience as follows:

> When we sit down for *ngalas*, the prison walls disappear for an hour. There are no senior inmates, no junior kids, no murderers, no thieves. We are just brothers eating from one tray. We pass around *lumpia* [a hand-rolled cigarette], laugh loudly, talk about our families, and curse the guards. … *Cadong* eaten together like this tastes better than a restaurant outside. It's the only time we feel human. (personal interview)

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that *cadong* rice was not merely a form of nutritional provision. Because *tamping dapur* controlled its practical distribution under conditions of limited staff supervision, food became embedded in the prison's informal social order. The same arrangement generated both institutional functionality and inequality: kitchen labor supported the daily operation of the prison and provided workers with recognition and benefits, while delegated control over an essential resource created opportunities for favouritism and unequal treatment. The kitchen therefore became a microsocial political arena in which food, labor, loyalty, compliance, privilege, and dignity were continuously negotiated.

Figure 2

Tamping During Ngalas (Photo from authors, used with permission)



Contributing to Prison Security and Stability Through Food Distribution

Rather than operating merely as a domestic service unit, the prison kitchen functions as a frontline apparatus of carceral peacekeeping. Under conditions of severe overcrowding—where four or five guards must secure wings housing upwards of 500 men—the punctual delivery of edible calories is the single most decisive factor preventing collective violence. Correctional staff and incarcerated workers universally recognize that while walls and iron bars establish physical boundaries, daily institutional stability is negotiated through the timing, predictability, and micro-allocation of *nasi cadong*. The temporal precision of the distribution schedule—breakfast at 06:30 a.m., lunch at 11:30 a.m., and early dinner at 04:00 p.m.—governs the psychological rhythm of the blocks. Delays of even 30 minutes generate visible anxiety along the corridors, rapidly

escalating from impatient murmurs into acoustic bar-banging protests. B, the cauldron cook, articulated this custodial burden plainly:

> People outside think our only job is peeling vegetables. They don't understand that the kitchen is the buffer holding this whole prison together. If breakfast is late by half an hour, a thousand locked-up men start shouting and rattling zinc plates against the bars. The noise shakes the rafters, and the guards panic. We are the first line of defense before a riot breaks out. (personal interview)

Beyond maintaining strict temporal routines, kitchen *tamping* exercise proactive conflict management during hallway distribution. When tensions spike between rival gangs, ethnic factions, or overcrowded rooms, *tamping* deliberately deploy the material properties of food to defuse hostility. Rather than relying on armed intervention or formal disciplinary reports, which often inflame collective resentment, the *tamping* practice strategic nutritional pacification. When rolling the metal food carts through agitated wings, they quietly distribute denser portions of rice, richer broth, or choice pieces of fried chicken to volatile "kepala kamar [cell leaders]." H, a cart coordinator, explained how food functions as an informal sedative:

> If Block C is brewing because of an unpaid debt or an argument in the yard, we know it before anyone else. … We make sure their containers are steaming hot, packed with thick soup and double pieces of tempeh or chicken. (personal interview)

Crucially, this pacification operates alongside an informal system of internal punishment. The very ladle used to soothe restless blocks is mobilized to sanction uncooperative or disruptive individuals. Inmates who violate informal codes, instigate fights, or insult kitchen workers are subjected to targeted nutritional deprivation. *Tamping dapur* quietly dilute their soup, serve cold burnt crusts scraped from the cauldron floor, or withhold protein rations altogether. Because correctional officers observe distribution only from hallway perimeters, this everyday rationing operates beneath formal disciplinary review. It functions as an extra-legal disciplinary mechanism that enforces peer compliance far more swiftly than the "strap sel," formal administrative isolation.

This delicate balancing act is anchored in an intimate operational partnership between kitchen *tamping* and frontline custodial officers. Because kitchen *tamping* traverse the institutional boundary three times daily, they operate as the informal intelligence network of the facility. Outnumbered 30 to one, officers rely on the kitchen crew not just for cooking, but to gauge the internal temperature of every block. Officer R, a veteran officer, described this reliance:

> With 20 guards on duty for over 1,000 inmates, our physical control is largely an illusion. If the population decides to riot together, they can overwhelm us in 10 minutes. That is why the kitchen *tamping* are our most valuable asset. They are our eyes and ears in every corridor. Every morning, H or Z will whisper, 'Komandan, watch cell 14, two guys from Jakarta are arguing,' or 'Block B is planning to refuse the noon muster.' We can move quietly and settle the problem before blood is spilled. (personal interview)

In return, guards practice the "86" protocol, an informal contract of selective non-enforcement. The guards trade food access and blind eyes for logistical labor and micro-intelligence. As long as meals arrive on time and no weapons leave the kitchen, guards do not micromanage the *tamping*'s private quarters or police their extra rations.

During 13 months of sustained fieldwork, not a single collective food strike or major riot occurred. While this absence of unrest demonstrates the operational effectiveness of informal pacification, it exposes the regressive nature of carceral order in Indonesia. Peace is not achieved through robust institutional governance, adequate state budgets, or progressive rehabilitation. Instead, institutional stability is purchased through an informal oligarchy: the state outsources frontline security to an inmate elite, who maintain custodial order by weaponizing food rations and pacifying their peers with carbohydrates. The kitchen orderly is not a powerless captive; he is a functional partner in the daily policing of his peers.

Spatial and Administrative Privileges

The compensation gained by kitchen assistant inmates extends far beyond illicit snacking or informal hallway authority; it is physically inscribed into the carceral architecture and formal administrative records of the institution. By systematically stripping inmates of goods, autonomy, and security—what Sykes (1958, p. 64) terms the "pains of imprisonment"—the institution directly attacks a prisoner's self-worth; the prison administration deliberately weaponizes the mitigation of these deprivations. By selectively distributing tangible material and spatial privileges, the state engineers a loyal, disciplined proxy workforce. This unequal distribution of relief is not a byproduct of administrative generosity, but a calculated technology of governance. In an environment defined by chronic scarcity, the institution manufactures a carceral elite whose vested interests in maintaining their elevated status align perfectly with the state's imperative for institutional order.

The most visceral manifestation of this structural stratification is spatial and corporeal. For the regular inmate population, residential life constitutes an ongoing bodily ordeal governed by extreme density and infrastructural collapse. In both Prison A and Prison B, ordinary prisoners are confined in severe, hyper-congested conditions, with 30 to 35 men packed into cramped residential cells measuring roughly 3 by 3 meters. These inmates sleep head-to-toe on bare concrete floors covered only by thin, worn woven plastic mats, colloquially termed "kasur palembang." This environment institutionalizes physical degradation: zero personal privacy; the rapid transmission of chronic skin infections; and severely rationed running water, which is often restricted to mere 30-minute intervals of communal pump flow per day. The general block functions as a space of sheer biological containment, where the friction of overcrowded survival systematically grinds down collective resistance.

In stark contrast, *tamping dapur* inhabit an entirely discrete spatial reality that shields them from the penal misery of the general population. *Tamping* are housed in dedicated, low-density quarters strategically located near the kitchen compound. These rooms, measuring approximately 4 by 4 meters, accommodate only four to six workers, mathematically granting them exponentially more cubic space than a regular inmate. Rather than enduring concrete floors, *tamping* rest on elevated wooden bunk frames fitted with thick commercial foam mattresses, individual pillows, and clean cotton blankets. Wall-mounted electric fans mitigate the stifling tropical heat, while secure wooden lockers provide private storage for personal clothing and hygienic commodities—liquid soaps, clean towels, and bottled water—that remain completely inaccessible to the general population. A, a key informant responsible for managing the heavy kitchen steamers, articulated how this spatial segregation profoundly reshapes daily psychological and physical survival:

> When I was in the general block, life was hell. You sleep packed like dried anchovies on the cold floor; if you wake up to use the toilet at night, you lose your sleeping spot. Your body is covered in rashes, and everyone is fighting over water. But once you move into the *tamping* room, you can breathe. We have foam mattresses, a fan running all night, and our own semi-private bathroom with clean water on tap. We even have a small television in the corner. (personal interview)

This testimony reveals how spatial relief functions as a disciplinary tether. The administration leverages the stark contrast between the squalor of the blocks and the sanctuary of the orderly quarters to ensure absolute compliance and gruelling physical exertion.

Beyond mere physical comfort, this spatial autonomy provides a critical shield for clandestine practices, representing an intentional concession of state sovereignty. Because custodial guards rarely conduct "bongkaran," or intrusive structural searches inside the *tamping* quarters, these rooms function as semi-private sanctuaries immune to routine penal surveillance. Field observations confirmed that senior *tamping* maintained discreet access to contraband mobile communication devices, utilized late at night to maintain vital familial ties. Z, a senior *tamping*, explained that custodial staff consciously tolerate these infractions as an informal performance incentive:

> The officers know we have phones tucked away. … If they confiscate our phones or take our foam mattresses, the crew's morale collapses, and who is going to stoke the diesel burners tomorrow at dawn? The administration gives us these facilities because our labor keeps the facility peaceful. It's an unspoken bargain: we give them institutional stability, and they give us an island of dignity. (personal interview)

This dynamic illustrates a sophisticated form of extra-legal clientelism: the state turns a blind eye to micro-infractions to secure macro-institutional peace, effectively trading localized control for systemic operational stability.

Complementing these spatial and material advantages are decisive administrative privileges, most notably financial stipends and prioritized sentence remissions. While official correctional policy mandates nominal monthly productivity "premi" under Permenkumham Number 7 of 2013 (Indon.), the rates granted to *tamping dapur* systematically outstrip all other inmate assignments. Administrative records from 2023 to 2025 demonstrate that while cleanliness and security *tamping* received modest monthly stipends, senior *tamping dapur* commanded premium rates. In a closed carceral economy where cash is formally banned and informal commissary goods carry exorbitant risk-adjusted markups, this reliable monthly capital injection grants *tamping dapur* substantial purchasing power. This monetarization of compliance further embeds the *tamping* into the prison's internal economic hierarchy, transforming them from mere "inmate helpers" into consumers with vested economic interests in the status quo.

Yet, as informants unanimously testified, the most coveted and fiercely protected institutional asset is not capital or comfort, but calendar time. In the Indonesian penal system, statutory remissions granted on Independence Day and major religious holidays represent the primary legal mechanism for early release. Because kitchen labor is heavily relied upon and directly evaluated by core custodial officers, *tamping* benefit from heavily greased administrative processing. Supervisory staff

systematically fast-track positive character evaluations to the Inmate Observation Board (Tim Pengamat Pemasyarakatan [TPP]). This ensures that kitchen *tamping* routinely receive the maximum allowable sentence cuts, typically 25 to 30 days per holiday cycle, devoid of the bureaucratic friction that plagues the general population.

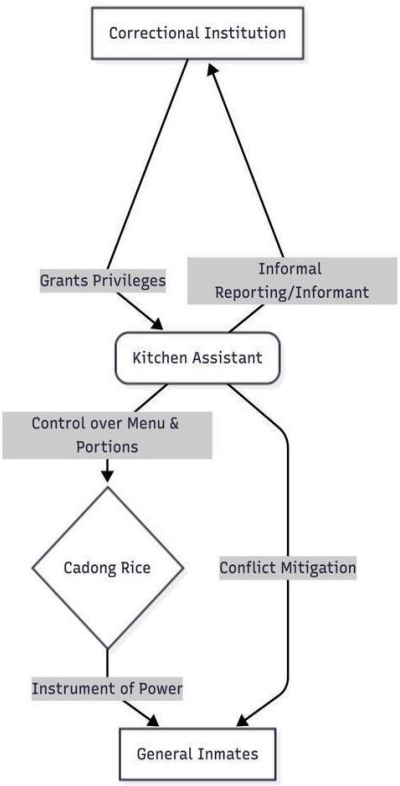
When analyzed holistically, these intersecting spatial, material, and administrative advantages elucidate the profound structural distance engineered between the kitchen orderly and the general captive population. The Indonesian carceral state does not govern its chronically overcrowded facilities through absolute surveillance or the continuous threat of brute force, as such methods are mathematically impossible given the severe staff shortages resulting in low staff-to-inmate ratios. Rather, it governs through the strategic cultivation of an internal aristocracy of labor. By offering a highly selective reprieve from the most acute pains of imprisonment, the administration co-opts a vital segment of the population. *Tamping dapur* are elevated into a privileged carceral elite whose personal interests in physical comfort, economic purchasing power, and accelerated liberty are seamlessly aligned with the state's imperative for total institutional preservation. Through this reciprocal exchange, the prison outsources its operational survival to the very individuals it incarcerates.

Discussion

The empirical findings of this study complicate conventional penological models of carceral order, inmate social systems, and penal labor (Crewe, 2009; Sykes, 1958). By examining the micro-politics of *nasi cadong* (*cadong* rice) and the *tamping dapur* (kitchen assistant inmates) system, the analysis offers that carceral food governance demonstrates that institutional order in overcrowded and underfunded Indonesian prisons does not operate through direct sovereign surveillance. Instead, carceral equilibrium is sustained through a circuit of exchange and discipline mediated by food (see Figure 3). On one side of this circuit is a state–orderly exchange. Facing severe custodial staff shortages and a statutory food budget of under US$0.40 per meal, the administration delegates food logistics to an orderly elite. In return for grueling labor and acting as intelligence gatherers, *tamping* receive spatial autonomy, monthly stipends, and fast-tracked sentence remissions. Officers formalize this dependence through the "86" protocol, tolerating minor infractions to ensure overall facility stability. On the other side is an orderly–inmate hegemony.

Figure 3

Tamping Dapur as Intermediaries in Informal Prison Food Governance



Holding discretionary control over food allocation, *tamping dapur* function as frontline disciplinarians. They strategically distribute generous, protein-rich portions to calm volatile blocks, while punishing uncooperative prisoners with diluted soup and burnt crusts. The regular population, reliant entirely on these rations for biological survival, is compelled to maintain calculated deference toward the kitchen crew.

Traditional frameworks assume custodial administrations negotiate accommodations with captive populations against a baseline of adequate state provision. Such models, however, are not adequate to capture the structural realities of chronically austere environments where the state deploys minimal guards and negligible budgets. In response to these resource deficits, the carceral apparatus outsources sovereign logistics to an inmate labor elite. By endowing *tamping dapur* with structural discretion over food allocation, the administration delegates the frontline management of mass survival to the prisoners themselves. This challenges the conventional governance–labor dichotomy, proving that in overcrowded carceral facilities, prison labor might become the actual mechanism of carceral governance. The state purchases institutional peace by co-opting a captive cadre whose personal stakes in spatial comfort and accelerated remissions align directly with preserving order.

Furthermore, the existence of an informal placement fee, or "uang buis," for kitchen roles challenges Goffman's (1961) classic theory that total institutions function as social levelers. In contemporary Indonesian prisons, the carceral boundary violently reproduces external socioeconomic stratification through the commodification of institutional labor. Kitchen placement constitutes a multi-tiered trajectory of capital conversion. As Bourdieu (1984) argues, "the different types of capital can be derived from economic capital," although this conversion requires "a more or less great effort of transformation" (p. 24). The process begins when an incarcerated candidate mobilizes economic capital from outside family networks to clear the informal bureaucratic threshold. Once the payment has secured the position, this economic expenditure is converted into immediate material and bodily advantages, granting access to running water, foam mattresses, and a protein-dense diet, as well as exemption from infectious residential blocks. Daily physical exertion and reliability then earn *tamping* the trust of custodial supervisors, translating into social and symbolic capital. Finally, this supervisory trust is converted into temporal capital through fast-tracked sentence remission recommendations, effectively purchasing "calendar freedom." Conversely, indigent inmates lacking outside wealth are structurally barred from this economy, relegated to spatial suffocation and delayed administrative processing.

Latour's actor-network theory (2005) is useful to explain the material and socio-political agency of *nasi cadong*. In this environment, food operates not as an inert backdrop, but as an active non-human actant exerting tangible force over human behavior and security outcomes. The temporal chemistry of large-scale grain hydration dictates the predawn 03:00 a.m. unlock schedule, forcing bodies into motion hours before administrative staff arrive. Furthermore, the sensory condition of the ration acts as an instantaneous political barometer. Steaming, well-seasoned rice soothes collective anxiety and lowers the emotional temperature of the wings, whereas cold, delayed, or spoiled rice provokes visceral revulsion and acoustic protests that threaten custodial control. When substandard produce is delivered, the physical limitations of the ingredients compel the *tamping* to engage in creative infrapolitics, deploying heavy spices and deep-frying to mask spoilage and avert revolt. Ultimately, food is a material agent that compels guards to grant discretionary immunities and dictates institutional stability.

Finally, these findings deconstruct the fallacy of pure rehabilitation surrounding contemporary penal labor (Angkasa, 2020; Nelson, 2017; Sulhin, 2022). The state often presents inmate labor as an investment in human development under Law Number 22 of 2022 (Indon.) (Kisworo & Puspytasari, 2025; Perkasa, 2020), a narrative occasionally echoed in studies citing facilities like prison libraries as evidence of care (Lo & Rahmi, 2015). However, the ethnographic evidence exposes this as an ideological mystification. The realities of kitchen work are designed strictly for institutional survival, not human flourishing. *Tamping dapur* receive no accredited vocational certifications, and the physical skills acquired offer minimal competitive advantage upon release. Instead, the language of rehabilitation legitimizes unfree, uncompensated penal labor (Mantouvalou, 2024), providing a socially acceptable vocabulary that masks the state's structural reliance on captive bodies to perform underfunded domestic chores. The coexistence of care through food provision alongside coercion via disciplinary gatekeeping forms the fundamental governing logic of the post-colonial penal state under austerity. Care is thus weaponized, with biological survival administered as a discretionary privilege to keep the captive population dependent and docile.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the Indonesian *tamping dapur* in the prison system operates as an informal governance mechanism born from chronic underfunding, effectively reproducing socioeconomic class divides behind bars. Rather than serving as a site of genuine rehabilitation, the kitchen is a commodified space where inmates with outside wealth pay illicit placement fees to secure privileged living conditions, better nutrition, and accelerated sentence remissions. Meanwhile, indigent inmates are confined to overcrowded blocks where the *tamping* weaponize food distribution, rewarding compliance with dense protein and

punishing dissent with inadequate rations, to maintain institutional order through extra-legal discipline. Thus, the Indonesian case could demonstrate that prison kitchen labor is not inherently rehabilitative or humane; its effects depend on how food resources are governed, supervised, and distributed.

To align correctional practices with international human rights standards and Indonesia's Law Number 22 of 2022 on Corrections, the systemic weaponization of food and labor must be dismantled through five structural reforms. First, corrupt gatekeeping must be eradicated via transparent, externally audited recruitment. Second, facilities must implement standardized, staff-supervised meal packaging to prevent the manipulation of rations. Third, mandatory term rotations should be introduced to break up entrenched inmate oligarchies. Finally, the state must transform uncompensated penal labor into accredited, fairly compensated vocational training and significantly increase the statutory per diem food budget to reflect realistic market costs. Ultimately, establishing equitable and dignified food distribution is the indispensable first step toward transforming these facilities into institutions of genuine justice.

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Data Availability

The raw qualitative and audiovisual data generated and analyzed during this study, including original audio recordings, unanonymized interview transcripts, and field visual footage are not publicly available in an open repository. This restriction is strictly necessary to protect the safety, anonymity, and institutional well-being of the incarcerated participants and correctional personnel, thereby preventing potential disciplinary sanctions or institutional reprisals within custodial facilities. The data governance protocol adheres strictly to formal research clearances issued by the Ministry of Law and Human Rights, Regional Office of West Java (No. W.11-HH.05.04-6692) and legally stamped participant consent agreements (No. W.08-LPBI1.22.05-4523). De-identified transcript excerpts and the thematic analytical codebook may be made available to qualified academic researchers upon reasonable request directed to the corresponding author, subject to formal institutional ethics verification.

AI Disclosure Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors utilized generative artificial intelligence (AI) and AI-assisted language tools solely to assist with English language translation, grammatical refinement, and stylistic readability. These tools were not employed to generate empirical data, conduct qualitative coding, synthesize field observations, or formulate theoretical arguments. Following the use of these tools, the authors thoroughly reviewed, verified, and edited the resulting text, and assume full intellectual and ethical responsibility for the study's design, empirical integrity, and theoretical interpretations, and the final content of the publication.

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