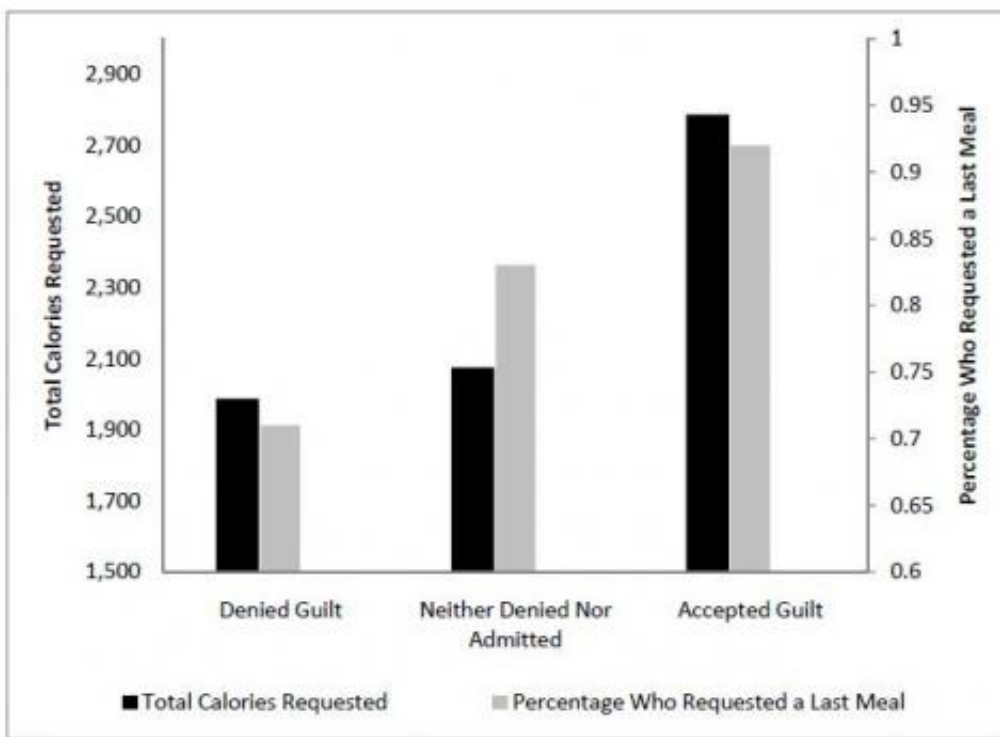


Death row confessions and the last meal test of innocence

January 23 2014, by Katherine Baildon

Figure 1. How self-reported guilt relates to last meal requests.



Can last meals reveal more about individuals on death row than their taste preference? Some have argued there is significance embedded in death row last meal decisions. Famously, Ricky Ray Rector asked to save his untouched pecan pie for after his execution. This request

sparked significant discussion about Rector's competency – on the basis of his food request.

Similarly, in a documentary film about last suppers, artists Bigert and Bergstrom have claimed a connection between whether or not an individual chooses to have a last meal and his or her guilt. In each case, there is an assertion that last meals are relevant to the legitimacy of an execution. It is these signals that Cornell University researchers Kevin Kniffin and Brian Wansink examined in this self-funded study. In particular, they studied whether an individual who has accepted guilt—by apologizing or confessing—is more likely to indulge in a last meal. They also looked at how their meals differ from those who maintain that they are innocent.

The researchers hypothesized that those who perceived themselves as innocent would request fewer calories or decline to receive a last meal altogether. After analyzing the last meals of 247 people who were executed in the United States between 2002 and 2006, they found the hypothesis to be accurate. Those who denied guilt were 2.7 times more likely to decline a last meal than those who admitted guilt. Furthermore those who were admittedly guilty requested 34% more calories of food and were more likely to request brand name, comfort-food items.

Social circumstance often gives meals meaning, so it is logical that the last [meals](#) of those on death row may signify something beyond taste preference. While there are many factors that could contribute to last meal selection, this study is the first to provide evidence of a link between food selection and self-perceived [guilt](#) or innocence. These findings may be useful to the legal community in further assessing the innocence and perceived innocence of those who have received the death penalty in the past.

More information: Kniffin, K., & Wansink, B. (2014). Death row

confessions and the last meal test of innocence. Laws, 1–11. DOI: [10.3390/laws3010001](https://doi.org/10.3390/laws3010001)

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