



"The only thing I can do is to become a better person"

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# The long road

**A reflection on the rise in extremely lengthy life sentences for young adults - what happens to the men and women serving them, and the changes which are needed**



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Imprisoning people for very long periods is the most extreme punishment imposed by the state and has been since the abolition of capital punishment in 1969. Around that time only 500 men were serving 'imprisonment for life', and of these, only two had served more than 15 years. In fact, the longest period served by any lifer at that point was 21 years.

Fast forward five decades, and today we see a very different picture of the 'lifer' population within English and Welsh prisons. Specifically, it has changed in three key ways.

First, there has been a very significant increase in the number of people serving life sentences. In 2019, just over 7,000 men and women were serving life in prison - a huge increase on earlier decades.

Second, the average minimum number of years life sentenced prisoners must serve (i.e. the 'tariff') has increased significantly. So, while in the late 1960s only two men had served more than 15 continuous years, in 2019, roughly half (3,555) of the 7,046 life-sentenced prisoners were required to serve between 10 and 20 years in custody and a quarter (1,827) had a tariff of more than 20 years. Almost 300 people have tariffs of at least 30 years.

Third, the overall amount of time life sentenced prisoners spend in custody has increased. In 1979, the average time served (including the period beyond the tariff point) was around 9 years; by 1997 it was just over 14 years; now, for mandatory lifers, it is 17 years.

## **Why have these increases happened and what impact have they had?**

Increases in the number of life-sentenced prisoners, their tariff lengths and the period of

time they spend in prison are only partially explained by a rise in the murder rate. Rather, they are mainly the result of changes in sentencing law (setting higher minimum tariffs for particular types of murder) and a growth in the use of joint enterprise (which enables multiple people to be convicted for a single murder). The result of these changes is that a growing number of prisoners are serving sentences that, a generation ago, were considered highly unusual and barely survivable.

This development has generated considerable concern amongst practitioners, who have expressed anxiety about the potential for disorder among ... 'a growing proportion of men, often young men, serving very long sentences, who may feel they have little to lose' (former Chief Inspector of Prisons, Dame Anne Owers).

Comments of this kind, along with our own experiences in the course of various research projects of meeting prisoners with unthinkably long prison terms, sparked our interest in researching what it is like to serve a very long sentence from a young age.

Between 2013-14, we interviewed almost 150 men and women, and gave out surveys to 330 lifers overall, who had been given mandatory life sentences for murder, with tariffs of 15 years or more, when they were aged 25 or under. We were keen to understand what long life sentences are like at different stages of their sentence, so we deliberately interviewed people who were either within the first four years, around the halfway point of the tariff, or near to or beyond the tariff point.

The main questions we wanted to explore were: what are the problems that such men and women encounter, and how do they cope with these problems? How do they adapt to their situation and build a life for themselves in prison during key decades of their life? And how do they feel about the fairness of their situation, with what implications for how they adapt?

## **Nothing to lose? The initial years of 'life' from a young age**

Almost all of our interviewees who were in the initial period of their sentence were struggling. Many could not get their head around receiving sentences longer than the number of years they had been alive. Most were angry - at the system, the victim, or themselves, for getting into such a devastating situation. Those sentenced under joint enterprise were bitter and bewildered, and resented being labelled a 'murderer'.

A lot of our interviewees who were still at this early stage of their sentence could barely think about the future. Very consistently, they used a language of 'drowning' or 'treading water', or of merely 'existing' rather than living. Many felt that they had almost no control over their life, no hope for the future, and no way of finding meaning or purpose in their life. Being given such a long prison sentence at a young age was particularly life-changing in three main ways: first, it meant having to come to terms with being separated from family and other loved ones for what felt like an endless period of time; second, it meant having to abandon previous plans and goals for the future; and third, it meant having to re-think who they were, particularly if they were the person who killed the victim.

These kinds of issues were also reflected in the findings from our survey. The most severe problems that men and women serving these sentences reported were: 'missing somebody', 'worrying about people outside', 'having to follow other people's rules and orders', 'feeling that you are losing the best years of your life', and 'thinking about the crime you had committed'.

## **Settling down and looking forward: beyond the early years**

Lifers who were further into their sentence were generally less distressed about their circumstances than those still in the early years. Most had found ways of managing time. They used it constructively, breaking up their sentence by setting personal targets, such as gaining qualifications or getting to Cat C and open establishments. Some reflected on small gains in feeling in 'control' of aspects of their life, such as how they reacted to situations and how they interacted with others, which could make the oppressive nature of long-term imprisonment feel more bearable.

Individuals who had served a number of years also said that they had changed as a person. Many reported that they had found 'the real me', while others felt that the sentence had, in some ways, been good for them (most commonly by giving them time and space to become 'a better person'). Often, these reflections were related to the issue of coming to terms with the offence itself, something that was much harder than coming to terms with the sentence.

Mid-tariff interviewees told us they had mostly learned to cope with the daily demands of long-term imprisonment. Typically, positive family relationships, faith, education and forms of therapy had helped them understand how they had ended up serving life imprisonment, their place in the world, and how to process suppressed emotions (often the result of experiences that occurred in childhood). For a large proportion of lifers who were some way through their sentence, addressing questions such as 'what kind of person am I?' and 'how

have I ended up in this situation?' was the main preoccupation of this stage of their time in custody. Most reflected that they wanted to 'give something back' and be defined by something other than their sentence or offence. To quote one prisoner:

*'All I can do is I can take the positives from this situation. A person of 19 years-old died, you know, and I can never ever take that back. [...] The only thing I can do is change, make myself a better person, and obviously try and affect people in beneficial ways. [...] I have to make something happen, you know? Like a shining star come out of something bleak and black.'* (Stephen)

## **Concluding thoughts and recommendations**

We want to emphasise that while the early years of a long life sentence are exceptionally distressing and difficult, most people do end up coping. However, the likelihood of this occurring might be improved through system-wide changes designed to support life-sentenced prisoners.

First, prisons could usefully offer more 'hooks' to help people in coming to terms with their situation, including enhanced psychological and therapeutic support.

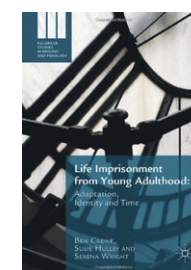
Second, they should offer avenues for honest discussion of the offence - and other traumatic experiences - without this being read as 'risk'.

Third, we would like the prison system to offer more meaningful contact with family members, through in-cell telephones (with rates equivalent to outside landlines), online video calls, and more frequent extended family visits.

Fourth, there should be more consistent access across the prison estate to the kinds of educational, cultural, spiritual and therapeutic activities that provide resources for personal change.

More ambitiously, we hope for changes in the law and legal practice, to reduce the number of people convicted of murder under joint enterprise and the use of the mandatory life sentence generally. These are political decisions and are not easy to affect. But we will continue to work towards these changes, primarily because we believe that very long sentences are highly wasteful; that is, they expend something that is of value - put simply, human life - carelessly, extravagantly, or to little purpose other than retribution.

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