**The pains of life imprisonment during**

**late adolescence and emerging adulthood**

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**Abstract**

In recent years, the prison estate of England and Wales has received into custody a growing number of life-sentenced prisoners serving very long minimum terms, many of whom were convicted at a young age. This chapter draws on a substratum of data generated by a large mixed-methods study examining the experience of serving a long life sentence in England and Wales from the point of late adolescence and early adulthood. Focusing chiefly on qualitative data from interviews with incarcerated men and women aged 18 to 25, we conclude that the pains of long-term imprisonment among this group coalesce around losses in three key areas: *relational; temporal,* and *the deprivation of stimulation* (broadly conceived). We explore the nature, experience and impact of these losses among young life-sentenced prisoners, concluding that whilst relational pains represent an equaliser across generational gaps in the long-term prisoner population, the temporal and deprivation-centred challenges of a life sentence - particularly in the initial years - interact in a uniquely painful way with young age.

# **Introduction**

The vast body of literature on “juvenile” offending has historically focused on those whose age profile fits the state definition of a “minor”; that is, those above the age of criminal responsibility (in England and Wales, 10 years old) but below the age of 18 - the traditional and legal threshold of “adulthood” (Prior, Farrow, Hughes *et al.,* 2011). Yet Prior and colleagues (2011) highlight recent developments within the fields of developmental psychology and neurobiology which “point emphatically to the inappropriateness” of processing those in their late teens and early twenties through criminal justice systems in accordance with expectations and punishments designed for “adults” (p.35). This emerging body of work challenges long-held normative assumptions about “maturity” and offers a more “complex” model of maturational development among young adults as a means of demonstrating how individual experience and context dictate “maturity” with far greater accuracy than chronological age (see e.g. Cauffman & Steinberg, 2000). This growing recognition of the contextual nature of “maturity” as a prerequisite for a more legitimate criminal justice system has occurred in tandem with developments in global health research which acknowledge a “shift in popular perceptions of when adulthood begins” (Sawyer *et al.*, 2018). While there is no unified approach to such matters, recent developments point to the need to reconceptualise and refine our understanding of the unsatisfactory demarcation between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Such developments are of direct relevance to our study on long-term imprisonment from young adulthood (reported in full in Crewe, Hulley & Wright, 2020), which explored the experiences of men and women who had been convicted of murder and sentenced to imprisonment for life[[1]](#footnote-1) or the youth justice system equivalent[[2]](#footnote-2) for a minimum of 15 years when they were aged 25 years or younger. For clarification, while this study involved interviewing a broad cross-section of individuals of varying ages and stages of the life course, this chapter focuses only on the experiences of men and women aged between 18 and 25 years *at the time of the study*. Drawing on the literature on maturational development above, we do so with the explicit aim of offering a contemporaneous account of the experience of serving a life sentence for murder during the period of ‘late adolescence’ (defined as 18 to 19 years) or ‘emerging adulthood’ (defined as 20 to 25 years).

The chapter begins by documenting the increase in life sentences in England and Wales and setting this against the literature on the pains of long-term incarceration, before going on to outline the methodological landscape of our study. We then consider how it feels to be facing a minimum period in prison equal to, or longer than, the number of years you have lived. We ask how individuals aged between 18 and 25 years at the time of the study – some of whom were convicted prior to their 18th birthday[[3]](#footnote-3) – experienced the daily deprivations of the carceral environment, and how they negotiated the challenges of their sentence. Combining quantitative survey findings relating to the top-ranking “problems” of long-term imprisonment and qualitative interview data from young life-sentenced prisoners, three core analytical streams can be identified for discussion. Firstly, we reflect on the *relational*/*social* pains conveyed by young people; these chiefly centred on missing and worrying about loved ones outside of the prison. Secondly, we explore the *temporal*/*existential* pains they described, particularly as they pertained to the length of the sentence and implications of this in terms of “wasted” years. Lastly, we turn to the pains induced by the *deprivation* of various forms of stimuli - most notably discussed in terms of boredom and the absence of “little luxuries”, social life and sex.

Within this context, we conclude by reflecting on the long-term implications of the growing trend towards longer life sentences being handed to increasing numbers of individuals and pose critical questions about the necessity of exposing those in late adolescence and emerging adulthood to the pains of imprisonment for life.

**The Rise of Longer Life Sentences in England & Wales**

Following the abolition of capital punishment in the 1960s, sentences of imprisonment for life (and their equivalent for children and adolescents) have represented the ultimate sanction available to the courts in England and Wales. Since that time, the use of life sentences has risen inexorably – for instance, the annual number of individuals sentenced to mandatory[[4]](#footnote-4) life imprisonment increased by 75 per cent between 1998 and 2008, representing the most significant proportionate increase across the penal estate during that period (Ministry of Justice, 2009:2). The rapidity of growth can also be demonstrated through numbers of life-sentenced prisoners in the current prison population, which rose from just under 2,000 individuals in the last 1980s (Blom-Cooper, 1987) to 8,309 in 2010 (Freedom of Information request 68520).

While the most recent figures indicate a life-sentenced population of just over 7,000 in England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, 2019), a greater proportion are serving longer terms than ever before, being sentenced – even in late adolescence - to minimum custodial periods which would have hitherto been considered barely survivable. For instance, between 2000 and 2003, less than 100 life-sentences carried ‘tariffs’[[5]](#footnote-5) of 15 years or more; however, by 2008 this figure had more than doubled (Freedom of Information request 68152). By 2010, 2,309 prisoners – more than a quarter of all life-sentenced prisoners in England and Wales at that time – were serving sentences of imprisonment for life with a tariff of 15 years or more. Of these, 319 had been convicted and sentenced between the ages of 18 to 20 years (Freedom of Information request 68152).

Taken together, these trends point to an increasing number of individuals being sentenced to life imprisonment, some barely at the cusp of ‘emerging adulthood’, and being subjected to the complex and multifarious pains of long-term imprisonment within a system that was never designed to cater for those spending decades in confinement (see Flanagan, 1995).

## *The pains of long-term and life imprisonment*

The concept and terminology of the “pains of imprisonment” stems from Gresham Sykes’ (1958) seminal work, *Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*. Based on a small number of informal interviews in the US with prisoners and staff, observations, and questionnaires at New Jersey State Maximum Security, Sykes critiqued claims from contemporaries that prisons of the era were a comparatively “humane alternative” to previous carceral regimes, drawing attention to the specific pains of the deprivations of *liberty*, *goods and services,* *heterosexual relationships,* *autonomy,* and *security*. Building on this seminal study, more contemporary studies - within the specific context of England and Wales – have highlighted a diverse range of additional “pains”, including the deprivation of “certitude, legitimacy and hope” (Warr, 2016), and the pains of “uncertainty and indeterminacy, psychological assessment and self-government” (Crewe, 2011). Bearing in mind these broad range of “pains”, indicators suggest that prisons in England and Wales are now experienced as more painful and “less safe than they have been at any point since records began” (Prison Reform Trust, 2019, p. 4), signalled by significant increases in self-harm, prisoner-on-prisoner violence and serious assaults against staff.

In addition to the pains of imprisonment noted above, individuals serving very long sentences face exposure to a host of “special problems and stresses” and may experience these to a greater “degree” than their short-sentenced counterparts (Flanagan, 1982, p. 115). Specifically, the uncertainty of indeterminate sentences bears down heavily and cumulatively on long-term and life-sentenced prisoners, forcing individuals to try and manage these concerns alongside a prolonged exposure to the ubiquitous violence, despair and disempowerment of prison life.

Despite the increases in global long-term imprisonment described above and the recognition that long-term sentences generate particular pains, there has been little sociological or criminological interest in recent years in the phenomenon of long-term imprisonment. The bulk of studies in this area are squarely grounded in the latter half of the twentieth century (e.g. Cohen and Taylor, 1972; Gunn *et al*., 1973; Richards, 1978; Flanagan, 1980, 1982, 1995; MacKenzie & Goodstein, 1985; Porporino, 1990; Zamble, 1992; Sapsford, 1983) and as such unlikely to be able to account accurately for the experience of the twenty-first century “lifer”. While recent studies have strived to correct this balance (e.g. Schinkel, 2014; Toch, 2010; Johnson & McGunigall-Smith, 2008), this body of work has tended to focus on adult males, with women (whom we have considered in depth elsewhere) (see Crewe *et al.,* 2017, 2020) and young people featuring as largely peripheral concerns. The failure to consider the ways in which the particular pains of long-term imprisonment might intersect with the challenges of late adolescence and emerging adulthood is a significant gap in the literature, and one which we aim to stimulate discussion about using the empirical data generated by our study.

# **Research Design: Generating and Analysing The Data**

The aim of the overall study was to understand the experience of receiving, making sense of, and managing long custodial sentences (of 15 years or more) received at a young age (aged 25 or younger). Given the exploratory nature of the study and the desire to account for the twenty-first century experience of these phenomena, the research sought to address three broad sets of research questions:

* firstly, what are the main problems that this group of prisoners encounter and in what ways do they respond to them? How do they make sense of their predicament, find meaning, manage time, and think about the future?
* secondly, how do they adapt socially to the demands of the environment? and
* thirdly, how do such extreme sentences shape their perceptions of the prison’s legitimacy?

Fieldwork for the study took place between February 2013 and December 2014. Participants were drawn from 25 prisons across England, 16 of which held men and nine of which held women. The women were accommodated in both open and closed prisons and the men in all types of establishments, from high-security to open conditions, as well as Young Offender Institutions. The National Offender Management Service (now ‘Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service) provided data on all current prisoners who met the eligibility criteria for the original study (who were serving a life sentence with a tariff of 15 years or more, which they received when they were 25 years old or younger). At the outset of the study, 808 people were identified as meeting these criteria (789 men and 27 women). All prisoners were serving life sentences for murder and sentenced to imprisonment for life or equivalent.

## *Generating the data: Interviews and survey instrument*

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, involving surveys and semi-structured interviews. In-depth qualitative data were generated through a series of two-part interviews. Part I was a detailed life history interview, which drew heavily on the literature on narrative inquiry and life stories (e.g. Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Part II focused on participants’ post-conviction lives (the ‘life inside’ interview), particularly in relation to the experience of serving a very lengthy life sentence from a young age. Interviews were primarily conducted in recreation rooms or offices on prison wings, almost always on a one-to-one basis, and lasted on average between one and four hours. The sampling strategy for the interviews was broadly purposive. During the first phase of the study, undertaken exclusively in male prisons, individuals within the overall population were targeted by *sentence stage[[6]](#footnote-6)* and type of prison. While we conducted interviews with prisoners at the early, mid and late stages of their sentence, we deliberately oversampled men in the ‘early’ stage(within the first four years), because they represented a fast-growing group about whom little was known.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In addition to these in-depth interviews, a survey instrument was developed, which drew on and adapted (based on our early experiences in the field) the ‘problems of long-term imprisonment’ tool utilised by Richards (1978), Flanagan (1980) and Leigey and Ryder (2015). Surveys were completed in 25 prisons (16 men’s prisons and nine women’s prisons, accounting overall for 21 per cent of the 117 prisons in England and Wales) with individuals who met our overall research criteria. Survey participants were presented with 39 statements reflecting key ‘problems’ of long-term imprisonment (based on previous studies noted above and our observations and discussions during the initial month of fieldwork). Respondents were asked to report on two five-point Likert scales the *frequency* and *intensity* with which “problems” were being experienced at that point in time – where frequency represented how often the problem happened and intensity measured how hard it was to deal with (when it did happen). Problems included “Wishing that time would go faster”, “Feeling that my life is being wasted’, and “Thinking about the time you might have to serve” (see Hulley, Crewe & Wright,2016 for a complete list of all survey “problem” statements).

## *The research sample*

## In total, 309 men and 21 women participated in the broader study (N=330), either through completing a survey, an interview, or both; this sample represented 39% of men within the target population, and 72% of women. Of these, 126 men and 21 women participated in interviews (N=147; respectively 16% of the male population and 72% of the female population fitting our criteria), while 294 men and 19 women completed a survey (N=313; respectively 37.26% of men and 70.37% of the women within the population).

The specific sub-sample upon which the current chapter is based (participants who were aged 18-25 years at the time of the research) represented just over 40% (N=128) of our total survey participants and 43% (N=64) of our total interviewees. The first two tables below (**Tables I and II**) detail the key characteristics of survey participants and interviewees within this younger sub-stratum of the total sample (for more on the full sample, see Crewe, Hulley & Wright, 2020).

**Table i: Frequencies and means for key demographic variables: Survey participants and interviewees aged 18-25 at the time of the study.**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Survey participants aged 18-25 years at time of study N (%) | Interviewees aged 18-25 years at time of study N (%) |
| *N*  (Total survey sample N=313; total interview sample size N=146) |  | 128 (40.9%) | 64 (43.84%) |
| Gender a | Male Female | 121 (94.5%) 7 (5.5%) | 56 (87.5%) 8 (12.5%) |
| Sentence stage | Early Mid Late Post-tariff None | 73 (57%) 0 0 0 55 (43%) | 61 (95.31%) 3 (4.69%) 0 0 0 |
| Ethnicity | White British, Irish or Other (incl. Gypsy or Traveller)  Black/Black British (incl. African, Caribbean or Other)  Dual heritage (Black African or Black Caribbean and White)  Asian/Asian British (incl. Chinese, Indian and Pakistani)  Dual heritage (Asian and White)  Other ethnic group | 63 (49.2%)  38 (29.7%)  13 (10.2%)  6 (4.7%)  2 (1.6%)  4 (3.1%) | 33 (51.6%)  20 (31.3%)  7 (10.9%)  4 (6.3%)  0  0 |
| First custodial sentence b | Yes No | 85 (66.9%) 42 (33.1%) | - - |

**Notes:** Valid data only - percentages therefore do not necessarily add up to 100.  **a** While we acknowledge that gender is not a binary concept, none of the study participants identified outside of these two categories when asked to self-identify their gender.b This data was only collected during surveys, and not during interviews; there is therefore no comparative data for interviewees.

Taken together, the data from Tables i and ii above draw our attention to four important observations. Firstly, that this was a carcerally inexperienced group, with just over two-thirds of survey participants being first-time entrants to the prison system with no prior custodial record. Secondly, that many fell within the ‘early’ stage of their sentence - a period we have already identified elsewhere as being significantly and disproportionately painful compared to later stages of long sentences (see Wright, Crewe & Hulley, 2017; Crewe *et al.,* 2020). Thirdly, that both survey participants and interviewees aged 18 to 25 were convicted of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment at an average age of 19 (i.e. during late adolescence). Lastly, young men and women in both the survey and interview sample were facing an average minimum period of confinement just longer than the average number of years they had lived.

**Table ii: Mean averages, standard deviation and range for key demographic variables: Survey participants and interviewees aged 18-25 at the time of the study.**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | | Survey participants aged 18-25 years at time of study | Interviewees aged 18-25 years at time of study |
| Age at time of study: years | | Average (std dev) Range | 23 (1.93) 18 - 25 | 21.94 (2.14) 18 - 25 |
| Age at sentencing: years | | Average (std dev) Range | 19.37 (1.98) 13 - 24 | 19.14 (2.19) 13 - 24 |
| Tariff length: years | | Average (std dev) Range | 21.15 (4.43) 15 - 36 | 20.92 (4.38) 15 - 33 |
| This sentence - time served: years | | Average (std dev) Range | 4.02 (1.81) 1.25 – 9.08 | 3 (1.53) 0 – 9 |

It is also relevant to our analysis here that more than half of the *survey* respondents in the ‘late adolescence and emerging adulthood’ sub-stratum had served an average of just over four years (M=4.02, SD=1.81), with 57% falling in the ‘early’ stage of their sentence (within the first four years). Due to the sampling strategy adopted for the qualitative part of the study, the majority (roughly 95%) of *interviewees* aged between 18-25 years at the time of the study fell also within this ‘early’ stage. However, it is important to note that the analysis that follows did not control for ‘sentence stage’, and that owing to the high percentage of survey participants and – particularly – interviewees who were in the ‘early’ stage of their life sentence, age and stage are unavoidably conflated to some degree in the findings. The aim of the conceptual discussion that follows then is not to separate out the causal mechanics of the experiences reported, but rather to emphasise the *particular burdens* that *young prisoners at the start of a lengthy life sentence* experience.

*Analysing the data*

Interviews were digitally voice-recorded (with informed consent), then transcribed verbatim. Each interview was coded using NVivo software by at least one member of the research team. The analysis process proceeded based on an “iterative” approach, a method grounded in constant interpretation and revision, based on reading, discussion, reflection, revision and re-reading, with the goal of “deepening understanding” of the data (see Berkowitz, 1997, cit. in Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p. 77). Though this, we sought to establish thematic connections and points of conceptual convergence (as well as divergence), both according to specific characteristics (i.e. gender, age, sentence stage) and across the broad spectrum of the data.

Analysis of the survey data focused on quantifying the “severity” of the “problems” of long-term imprisonment – measured on a scale from 0-25 (where 0 denotes lowest severity/least painful and 25 indicates greatest severity/most painful), severity scores were calculated by multiplying the Likert scores for item *frequency* and *intensity* ratings (each measured on a five-point scale). A Principal Components Analysis was then conducted on these data to group the variables into nine meaningful subsets of ‘problems’, or ‘dimensions’ (for a more detailed discussion of this process and the findings from the survey, see Hulley *et al.* 2016, and Crewe *et al.,* 2020).

# **The Pains of Life Imprisonment in Late Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood**

This final substantive section draws on both the quantitative and qualitative data to identify and describe the ten “most severe” problems identified by life-sentenced prisoners (abbreviated throughout the findings to ‘LSPs’) who were aged 18-25 years at the time of the study (see **Table iii, below**). In order to determine the *particular* problems of experiencing a life sentence at this age, a series of t-tests were conducted to test for significant differences between the mean severity scores for this group and their older counterparts (aged 26 years and older) within the overall sample.

Of the 39 “problem” statements presented in the survey, those accruing the ten highest mean scores among participants aged 18-25 years are presented in **Table iii** (below) in rank-order (from 1 to 10, in descending order of “severity”). Alongside, the severity scores and ranks for adults aged ≥26 years old in the overall sample are presented for the same items. While this comparative data is useful in highlighting which problems were experienced with particularseverity by younger participants, these data should also not be interpreted as implying that age is the causal variable (for those reasons noted in the section above).

Briefly, the data in the table below indicate that young LSPs experienced six of these top-ten ‘problems’ with *significantly greater severity* than their older counterparts, specifically: “feeling that you are losing the best years of your life”; “feeling that the length of your sentence is unfair”; “missing social life”; “being bored”; “missing little ‘luxuries’”; and “feeling sexually frustrated”. The salience of these statistical observations is explored in greater detail below.

***Table iii: Ranked (top 10 of 39 ‘problems’) mean severity scores comparing survey respondents aged 18-25 years and ≥26 years at time of study.***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Respondents aged 18-25 years | | Respondents aged ≥26 years | |  |
| ‘Problem of long-term imprisonment’  survey item (N=39 items total) | Rank score | Mean severity score for survey item | Rank score | Mean severity score for survey item | *p* values for *t-*tests |
| Missing somebody | 1 | 17.90 | 1 | 16.67 | .152 |
| Feeling that you are losing the best years of your life | **2** | **16.07** | **4** | **13.85** | **<.001** |
| Worrying about people outside | 3 | 15.74 | 2 | 15.00 | .418 |
| Feeling that the length of your sentence is unfair | **4** | **14.95** | **11** | **11.42** | **.001** |
| Feeling that your life is being wasted | 5 | 14.88 | 5 | 13.77 | .221 |
| Missing social life | **6** | **14.02** | **9** | **11.80** | **.012** |
| Thinking about the amount of time you might have to serve | 7 | 13.09 | 8 | 12.28 | .409 |
| Being bored | **8** | **12.75** | **25** | **8.78** | **<.001** |
| Missing little 'luxuries' | **9** | **12.66** | **15** | **10.62** | **.012** |
| Feeling sexually frustrated | **10** | **12.50** | **16** | **10.59** | **.45** |

**Notes: Mean severity scores represent total group means. The lowest possible score is 0 (least severity) and the highest is 25 (greatest severity). These scores are presented in descending order and have been assigned a rank position to denote relative importance to each group.**

The sections that follow draw together conceptually similar items within the ten highest-ranking “problem” to explore three different areas of concern identified as particularly challenging among young LSPs. Firstly, we discuss *relational* pains (“missing somebody” and “worrying about people outside”), followed by *temporal* pains (“feeling that your life is being wasted”; “feeling that you are losing the best years of your life”; “feeling that the length of your sentence is unfair”; and “thinking about the amount of time you might have to serve”), and concluding with the pains of *deprivation* (“missing social life”; “being bored”; “missing little ‘luxuries’”; and “feeling sexually frustrated”).

These reflections are then drawn together in the final section, which concludes the chapter.

***i) Relational pains: Missing and worrying about others***

Consistent with earlier survey-based studies on the problems of long-term imprisonment (Richards, 1978; Flanagan, 1980; Leigey & Ryder, 2015) and the findings of our broader study (see Hulley et al., 2016), the relational pains of imprisonment were among the highest-scoring problems reported by young LSPs - specifically “Missing somebody” (ranked 1st of 39 survey items) and “Worrying about people outside” (ranked 3rd of 39 survey items). That relational pains were among the highest severity scores for both age groups (and that no statistically significant differences existed between the two) brings into sharp relief the omnipresent pains of relational dislocation induced by long-term imprisonment, irrespective of years lived or years served (see Crewe, Hulley and Wright, 2020 for more detail).

## Young men and women consistently talked in loving and nostalgic terms about their family, expressing deep pain at the separation induced by their imprisonment; “I miss my family more than anything” (Oscar, 21, 18-year tariff)[[8]](#footnote-8); “The thing I miss the most? It’s *always* going to be my family, and being with them” (Jeremiah, 20, 16-year tariff). Interview data demonstrated the value that these individuals placed upon the love and support received from members of their natal family, particularly their parents. As Connie explained:

[The most important people to me are] my mum and dad - I speak to them on the phone every day. […] They’re like my support. If I’ve got any problems, I’ll get on the phone and just let it all out to them. (Connie, 20s, <20-year tariff)[[9]](#footnote-9)

Interestingly, despite the challenges typically faced by families forced to live in the “shadow of the prison” following the incarceration of a relative (see Codd, 2008, p. 1), young life-sentenced prisoners (particularly male) consistently reported that their familial relationships had improved rather than diminished following conviction (albeit often from a low baseline). For instance, Thomas (21, 16-year tariff) explained how he had come to re-evaluate the value of parental love and support since being imprisoned:

When you’re a life sentenced prisoner your whole world comes crashing down. So you realise just how important family is and you learn to appreciate them, and you just feel so lucky to have a mum and dad who […] love you the same. And that feels amazing, absolutely amazing.

Similarly, Carl reflected that even though his mother was ‘not happy’ with what he had done, she and other family members had ‘really stepped up and shown that they care’, adding:

Before I might not have really considered [my family] as quite close to me, but […] my mum, my family […] they've always just supported me and said that they loved me, and they're here for me. (Carl, 20, 24-year tariff)

While the separation from family was painful, it was made bearable in some ways by the support provided by these relationships. What was less bearable, however, was the loss of peer support, as within a relatively short period of time – sometimes just months into the sentence - friends had either actively “stepped back” (Dan, 23, 15-year tariff) or simply “faded away” (Carl). Young men in particular spoke about the pain associated with the feeling of being deserted by lifelong friends; those who had “lived on the same estate, gone through the same shit, the same struggle” (James, 21, 22-year tariff), and whose abandonment consequently “hurt a lot more” (Carl) than the loss of briefer or more transitory friendships.

Contrary to these (predominantly male) experiences, it was less common for young women to reflect extensively on missing parents, partners or peers, often because such relationships had either broken down prior to imprisonment or because women had actively severed ties to such individuals (who were regularly implicated in the women’s extensive histories of pre-prison trauma and abuse). Instead, when asked about ‘missing’ and ‘worrying’ about people outside the prison, those young women with children (11 of the 21 interviewed) focused on the extreme pains of separation from their children, as Kathryn and Connie explained:

I only get to see [my daughter] three times a year, so in a sense I’ve lost the main part of her. But she’s still alive, and then that makes it really difficult because every time I see her it brings up all my feelings for her again, and then I spend the next four months grieving. And that’s really difficult because you’re constantly going through it - you’re breaking your heart a little bit more every time. (Kathryn, 20s, >20 years tariff)

I came in when my son was two and he'll be 21 [when I’m released], and that's *if* I get my first parole. So I've missed a lot of his life […] Like his first days at school and stuff like that. (Connie)

These relationships were consistently at the epicentre of fears and frustration related to the length of the sentence being served and represented a lens through which the pains of life imprisonment for young women were often brought into sharpest relief. Such concerns are discussed in more detail at the end of the following section.

## ***ii) Temporal pains: Time left to serve and losing the best years of your life***

The notion of “temporal vertigo” conveys the disorienting and distressing feelings arising from becoming overwhelmed by the length of the custodial sentence received (see Wright, Hulley & Crewe, 2017). Ranked the 7th most severe of problem of long-term imprisonment among young LSPs, “thinking about the amount of time you might have to serve” was felt to be largely incomprehensible and best avoided, as Curtis (25, 19-year tariff) explained:

I was 19 when I got sentenced. Basically, all them years I’ve just done, growing up, I’ve got to do them again in prison, and it’s, like, whoa. […] I just didn’t want to think about it, cause I knew [did] it would just mess up my head.

In the main, young men and women acknowledged that ruminating on the dizzying existential implications of time to be served was particularly detrimental to psychological well-being, and that living exclusively in the present acted to defend against this:

[The sentence] is a bit daunting at times. […] But you try not to think about it - you just try to take it day-by-day and crack on, really. (Oscar)

The “overwhelming and overpowering” realisation of having “longer to serve than I've been alive” (Maria, 20s, >20-year tariff) created a sense among some that life was being “wasted” and would be “almost pointless” (Carl) at the expiration of the tariff; this was reflected in the severity with which young people identified with “feeling that your life is being wasted”(ranked 5th of 39 problems). Interviewees expressed their sense that being incarcerated during late adolescence and early adulthood was uniquely painful because it “robbed” them of an inimitable opportunity to experience “that vital period between 18 and 21, 22 […] when you really sort of find out who you are as a person” (Carl). Being forced to confront the fact that this stage of life had been irrevocably lost was reflected in the significantly higher severity scores among young LSPs when compared to their older counterparts for the item “feeling that you are losing the best years of your life” (ranked 2nd of 39 problems; p.<.001). Contact from friends in the outside world compounded this acute sense that these “formative years” (Dan) were being lost in real time, “constantly” reinforcing their inability to follow their peers in “setting up a career” or “settling down with a family and getting married” (Dan). For many, these conventional life goals were little more than an elusive fantasy, fostering a deep sense of resentment and despair; sentiments that were often enhanced by the perceived illegitimacy of the conviction and tariff length, reflected in the significantly higher severity score among young LSPs than older prisoners for the item “feeling that the length of your sentence is unfair” (ranked 4th of 39 problems; *p*=.001).

Such temporal anxieties and despair were often brought into sharpest relief when considered through a relational lens; that is, when young LSPs reflected on the aspects of family life they would be missing while serving their sentence. For example, Kathryn explained her tariff length only “really hit” her when considered in the context of her daughter’s age (“I'm thinking ‘what the *fuck* am I going to do? My little girl’s going to be like 30 before the time I get out’”), while Blake (20, 22-year tariff) recognised that the length of his tariff meant that he might never spend time in the community again with ageing family members (“My nan’s seventy. My mum’s fifty. I don’t know if I’ll be out there with them again”).

In this sense the support of family members described in the previous section was a somewhat bittersweet experience, forcing young LSPs to constantly reflect on the ways in which familial others were ‘doing time’ with them. As Maria acknowledged, as a life-sentenced prisoner “you’re not the only one that’s being punished. Your whole family is being punished too”.

## ***iii) Deprivation pains: Being bored, missing ‘little luxuries’, social life and sex***

The mean severity scores for ‘being bored’ were significantly higher (*p<*.001) for young LSPs, for whom this was the eighth most severe problem of long-term imprisonment (compared to being ranked 25th among participants aged 26 years or older at the time of the study). Given that “repetition” and “minimal variation” is at the very core of “boredom” (Conrad, 1997, p. 473), it might be relatively unsurprising to find prison life – a routinised and monotonous experience for most – described as “boring”, particularly among an age group known for being “boredom-prone” (cf. Weybright, Schulenberg & Caldwell, 2019). However, a broad range of existential challenges were communicated by young LSPs when they dismissed something as “boring”. In some instances, it was little more than an “all-purpose term of disapproval” (Conrad, 1997, p. 468), with young people describing as “boring” any aspects of prison life which they found particularly annoying or disagreeable (e.g. prison rules, staff behaviour), or which was tedious because it was “too easy” (Blake, discussing his prison’s low-level/basic educational offer) or not “intellectually stimulating” (Dan, reflecting on conversation with “criminals”). In this sense, “being bored” reflected the absence of activities that specifically “aroused interest” (Conrad, 1997: 470); moreover, even activities that once provided a degree of relief could become “boring” when repeated *ad nauseum*. For example, Hugo (21, 18-year tariff) explained that he was so “bored” of “playing pool and table tennis [every evening] for the last five years” that he was somewhat grateful that the recent curtailment of evening association[[10]](#footnote-10) had relieved him of this obligation.

However, discussions or tasks which were conversely far too challenging, either intellectually or emotionally, were *also* described as ‘boring’. Such sentiments reminiscent of Conrad’s (1997, p. 471) notion of “boredom as alienation”, which seemingly underpinned Maria’s interpretation of letter-writing as “boring”. She explained that she struggled to connect with the task, which required reading “meaningless” descriptions of an outside life which remained inaccessible and largely irrelevant, andthe tedium of her prison life, which made her feel that she had nothing of interest or importance to offer up in return.

The disproportionate sense of “being bored” among young LSPs might also be explained by the sense of “boredom as a function of social expectations” (Conrad, 1997, p. 468). Growing up in an intensely “boredom-avoidant” society, where most young people exist in a “constant state of activity, connection and stimulation” (Madden, 2019, p. 67), no doubt meant that the monotonous and technologically-deprived nature of prison was especially painful for this group (particularly when compared to older peers, some of whom had never used the internet or seen a smartphone). To some degree, this perhaps also shaped the significantly greater severity with which young LSPs experienced “missing little luxuries” (ranked 9th of 39 problems in terms of severity; *p*=.012) compared to older prisoners. The ways in which young men and women reflected on this issue not only reflected the pains induced by the deprivation (absolute and relative) of “luxury” items (i.e. non-essential but desirable goods such as quality chocolate, 18-rated video games, take-away pizza), but also the sharp contrast between their current circumstances and their memories of a recent past in which they had been free to obtain and consume such items at will. In this sense, the absence of luxuries was all the more painful for young people – most of whom were only a matter or months or years into their sentence, and had scant carceral experience – as it represented an attack on their autonomy; an assault to which they had not yet adjusted, as Carl explained:

I went from being able to go to the shops and order whatever you wanted, to having to order [my] items once a week […] [I miss] being able to go wherever you want and do whatever you want - that *freedom*, in a sense? For someone who is *just coming into prison and who has never been in it before* […] to have that completely taken away from you? It's a wake-up call. It's a shock.

This painful disjuncture between pre-prison life and current carceral reality was also reflected in the significantly greater severity with which young men and women missed their “social life” (ranked 6th of 39 problems) compared to their older counterparts (*p*=.012). Many described how they had “loved living a bit wild” (Liz, 24, 15-year tariff) prior to their conviction, and so the stark comparison between recent lives - characterised by “drinking, going out, partying […] and doing what lads do” (Seb, 23, 21-year tariff) - and the routine monotony of prison life was a particularly painful burden to bear. The inability for heterosexual males (who made up the bulk of the sample) to “do what lads do” was also expressed in the significantly greater severity with which young LSPs reported “being sexually frustrated” (ranked 10th of 39 problems; *p*=.045). Young men – and to a lesser extent, young women - expressed anguish at the disconnect between their current circumstances and the construction of their pre-prison sexual self, and raised concerns about the long-term impact of the absence of sex:

Obviously, *of course* I miss sex! I'm a man like, so- I'm a young boy like, I'm active like, you get me? So I miss it, you know. *Obviously*! When you used to do something a lot, like, you miss it. (Zaid, aged 20, 22-year tariff)

[My vagina] will be shrivelled up by the time I get out. (Eloise, 20s, <20-year tariff)

It was not simply the absence of the physical act of intercourse which was painful, however, with young men and women also mourning the loss of everyday affection. For example, Kathryn “miss[ed] having someone to stroke your hair” while Harris described how much he missed “cuddling and kissing” women. Such experiences and feelings impacted on attitudes towards coping strategies for this, as well as shaping fears about the possibilities of a “normal” sexual relationship following release, citing the damaging and “dehumanising” effects of the deprivation of “intimacy” more broadly (Dan) (for a more in-depth discussion about sex and sexuality among women and men sentenced to life imprisonment when aged 25 or younger, see Wright, forthcoming).

# **Discussion and Concluding Thoughts**

While long-term imprisonment has long been acknowledged as an experience that is “unsettling […] disruptive and disorganizing” for most, Gibbs (1982: 100) has argued that it is a uniquely “cataclysmic” phenomenon for young people. Little work, however, has sought to explore this claim within the context of the pains of long-term imprisonment among young people, and even less in a contemporaneous (rather than retrospective) manner.

In response to this perceived lacuna, this chapter has drawn on data from our broader study of long-term imprisonment from a young age (see Crewe *et al,.* 2020) to explore the lived experience of serving a long life sentence in England and Wales during the specific life-course period of late adolescence and early adulthood (aged 18 to 25 years inclusive). In doing so, we identified the most dominant pains of life imprisonment for young people - many of whom were in the initial years of a sentence that was similar to, or exceeded, the years they had lived – as existing within three core conceptual areas: *relational* pains; *temporal* pains; and *deprivation* pains.

Notwithstanding the methodological caveats noted above, the comparative aspect of the analysis between these young prisoners and their older peers (aged between 26 and 66 years at interview) drew attention to a series of observations about the nature and challenges of long-term imprisonment during late adolescence and emerging adulthood. Firstly, the analysis supported broader findings that the most painful aspects of long-term imprisonment are often *relational*, and the absence of statistically significant differences between the groups indicates that this observation holds irrespective of age or years served. Fears that parents and grandparents would become ill or die during the course of the sentence were common, as was a general sense of despair among young parents that they would miss the entirety of their child’s developmental years, and all that this entailed (missing first steps, words, and day at school, for instance). Of specific concern to young women without children (and indeed, those across our broader sample) was that the length of their sentence would exceed their reproductive capacities, meaning that the sentence also crushed hopes of a family. This was less of a concern for young men, who did not anticipate release in their forties or fifties to impede their opportunities to have children, adding to our earlier work on the ways in which the pains of long-term imprisonment are gendered (see Crewe *et al.,* 2017).

Secondly, the analysis identified that it was aspects of the *temporal* pains of long-term imprisonment and deprivational pains that were *particularly* painful among those aged 18-25 when compared to those aged 26 or older. In terms of the temporal pains - the sense of being “robbed” of one’s late teens and twenties resulted in a sense of deep despair and irrevocable loss. Long-term imprisonment during late adolescence and emerging adulthood crushes what Shaw, Caldwell and Kleiber (1995, cit. in Caldwell *et al.,* 1999, p. 105) identify as the “normative developmental impetus towards autonomy” associated with this specific stage of the life course. And while Sykes (1958) identified “autonomy” as a separate pain from the deprivation of goods and services or of sexual intimacies, the accounts of these young LSPs revealed these concerns to be inextricably intertwined. Indeed, feeling bored and being *deprived of* “little luxuries”, social life and sex at this stage of life shattered existential expectations of what it meant to be in late adolescence and emerging adulthood. These brief years of hedonistic excess and freedom from responsibility were recognised as a rite of passage among the young, and many interviewees had severed contact with friends from the outside who represented a painful reminder of what life could, or should, have been. It may have been that these temporal pains and deprivations were felt so keenly among the youngest long-term prisoners in our sample because they had spent significantly less years in prison. As O’Donnell (2014, p. 207) notes of the initial phase of imprisonment more broadly, the deprivation of liberty is harshest when the outside world is still part of the “immediate past”, and that the “dependence on external points of reference” for what life is, or should be, act to smother adaptative potential in carceral settings. For young life-sentenced prisoners only a matter of months or years into a 15, 20 or 30-year tariff, the outside world was still painfully tangible, and far more familiar than the prison world; a new reality to which many had yet to adjust.

In a broader sense these findings raise important questions and challenges about the nature, utility and legitimacy of the trend in England and Wales towards a greater number of people serving increasingly lengthy minimum tariffs, particularly young people. It is likely that young people are cognitively and socially more vulnerable and therefore struggle more with the specific pains of long-term confinement (as demonstrated in the comparative analysis with adults) and that the system may not recognise their specific needs in a system set up primarily for adult males. These findings should force us to consider the heterogeneity of the experience of long-term imprisonment; specifically, how age and generation might shape the challenges experienced (particularly in terms of mental health and wellbeing) and hinder the ability to adapt to or cope with a lengthy period of confinement.

It is particularly important to address such concerns given that we know so little of the nature of long-term change and post-release outcomes for individuals whose maturational processes in late adolescence and emerging adulthood are played out within a carceral context. Research on adults released from lengthy custodial sentences points to poor outcomes, with mental health issues akin to post-traumatic stress disorder (see Liem & Kunst, 2013, p. 335), relationship problems (due to the complexity of managing complicated relationships over extended periods) (Jamieson & Grounds, 2005), and a general lack of preparedness for life on release (Munn & Bruckert, 2013). With this in mind, it is essential that we understand the impact of (increasingly long) life sentences on young men and women, who will be catapulted back into the community at middle age, with a significant portion of their lives still ahead of them.

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1. In England and Wales, ‘imprisonment for life’ is technically a term of 99 years but with the expectation that this term will be served partially in custody (guided by a minimum period known as the ‘tariff’; see footnote 5) and - following a successful parole hearing - partially in the community. Upon release, such individuals must adhere to a set of strict conditions known as ‘life licence’ for the rest of their natural life. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Only ‘adults’ (aged 21 or older) can be sentenced to ‘imprisonment for life’. However, equivalent sentences - also for an indeterminate period and for which a minimum tariff will be set – exist for young people: ‘Custody for Life’ (most typically for those convicted of murder) for those aged 18-20 years and ‘Detention during Her Majesty’s Pleasure’ (also known as an ‘HMP’ sentence) for children aged 10-17 years. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Of those interviewees aged 18-25 at the time of the study (N=64) who represent the focus of this chapter, 17% (N=11) were convicted prior to their 18th birthday (range = 13-17 years inclusive). For context, 8.3% (N=26) of all survey and interview participants within the broader study, who ranged from 18 to 66 years in age, were convicted as a ‘minor’ (aged under 18 years). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In England and Wales, life imprisonment is the *mandatory* sentence for murder convictions, in that no judicial discretion exists in terms of the nature of the sanction handed down. Individuals may also be sentenced to imprisonment for life for other set offences; these are known as *discretionary* life sentences. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The ‘tariff’ is the *minimum* custodial period to be served before being considered eligible for parole; unless the defendant is aged 16 years or younger at conviction, the full tariff *must* be served, with no possibility of reduction or early release. Trial judges set the tariff length, guided by the minimum ‘appropriate starting points’ legislated for in the Criminal Justice Act 2003 (Schedule 21) – these are then scaled up or down depending on aggravating and mitigating factors. Importantly, these are differentiated according to age – for example, 30 years is the minimum tariff starting point for an adult (aged 18 years or older) convicted of murder involving a firearm, or for gain, compared to 12 years for individuals aged 17 years or younger convicted of the same offence. Further, ‘whole life’ orders - where the minimum term is for the remainder of an individual’s natural life - are only available for specific offences and for individuals aged 21 years or older. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The concept of ‘sentencing stage’ was primarily a tool for sampling interviewees, whereas surveys sought to draw data from a broader spread of the population; therefore, while all interviewees fit within this framework, most survey participants fell outside of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ‘Mid’ stage was calculated as half of the overall sentence tariff, plus or minus two years, and the ‘late’ stageas two years prior to their tariff point, or beyond their tariff point. The second phase of the study, which focused exclusively on women, had a far smaller overall population, meaning that it was possible (and indeed desirable) to instead adopt a ‘total population’ sampling strategy, regardless of sentence stage. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Names, age at time of interview and tariff length are given only for the initial reference to an individual; subsequently only the pseudonym will be given, to reduce repetition. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Given that the women are a potentially identifiable group within the sample, information which could jeopardise their anonymity has been written in a manner that is deliberately vague and obfuscatory rather than giving specific age and tariff length. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Assigned opportunities within the prison regime, often in the evening, set aside for socialising with other prisoners and calling friends and family. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)