# **The challenges of long life imprisonment from a young age**

**In recent years, the changing composition of the life-sentenced prison population in England and Wales has been cause for significant concern among operational and managerial staff. [[1]](#footnote-1) In particular, HMPPS has been confronted with an increasing number of individuals coming into prison – particularly young people, in their late teens and early twenties –who are serving life sentences with long minimum tariffs.**

## **The rapid rise of the young ‘lifer’ in England and Wales**

As noted in the *Editor’s Introduction* to this *Special Issue*, the overall life-sentenced population of prisons in England and Wales has been increasing throughout the twenty-first century. More men and women are being sentenced to life imprisonment, with longer minimum periods, and serving more years in custody before their release, than at any other point in history.

Within these general increases, there has also been a rise in the number of young lifers serving lengthy tariffs, particularly within the last two decades. As the graph below indicates (**FIG.1**), the number of men and women in the prison population who were sentenced to life imprisonment at a young age (defined as 25 or younger) and serving *long* minimum tariffs (defined as 15 years or more) rose steadily between 2013 and 2020, from 917 to 1,394 people; an overall growth of 52% within just seven years.

However, disproportionate increases among smaller subpopulations – most notably women and Mixed-race and Black individuals - highlight important shifts within this overall trend. These figures show that among people sentenced to life aged 25 or younger with a tariff of 15 years or more:

* The number of women (all ethnicities) increased by almost 60% between 2013 and 2020 (from 22 to 35 individuals), compared with a 52% increase among men (from 895 to 1359 individuals).
* The number of individuals (all genders) from a mixed ethnic group more than doubled between 2013 and 2020 (increasing by 122% from 55 to 122 people) and those identifying as Black or Black British grew by 87% (from 219 to 410 people), compared to an increase of 31% for White individuals.

Of course, the growth in the population of young lifers serving long sentences is not only a direct consequence of increases in the number of people *entering* custody, but also of those who struggle to get *out* and – importantly – to *stay* out. This is evidenced in data from the Ministry of Justice, which indicates a fourfold increase in recalls to prison for people serving long life sentences from a young age.[[2]](#footnote-2) While this is a relatively small increase in absolute terms across seven years (from 4 to 19 individuals), the percentage increase is cause for concern.

## **Our research with people serving life from a young age**

Our research began in 2012, against this backdrop of an already rising lifer population and associated concerns among senior practitioners. There had been little recent research on the experience of serving life imprisonment in England and Wales, particularly for those serving sentence lengths that had previously been considered barely survivable.

The main aim of our research was to examine the experience of serving a long life sentence from a young age; that is, how it *felt* to be imprisoned for a significant period of one’s life course, at an age when adult life had barely begun, or, in some cases, begun at all. We therefore focused on individuals who were given tariffs of 15 years or more when they were aged 25 or younger. Our research was conducted at 25 prisons across England, covering all security and age categories in both the men’s and women’s estates. While the majority of prisoners taking part were still relatively young and early on in their sentences (a deliberate sampling decision based on our desire to understand this rapidly growing group), we also wanted to know about the experiences of older lifers, further into a long life sentence received at a young age.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The study involved surveys about the ‘problems of long-term imprisonment’ and semi-structured interviews. In total, 126 men and 21 women participated in interviews (respectively 16% and 72% of individuals from the men’s and women’s estate fitting our criteria regarding tariff length and age sentenced), while 313 completed a survey (294 men and 19 women; respectively 37% and 70% of the men’s and women’s estate fitting our criteria). Participants ranged in age from 18 years to 66 years and were serving mandatory life sentences for murder, with minimum tariffs ranging from 15 to 42 years. All participants had been sentenced aged 25 or younger, at a time of the life course which is now considered to precede full ‘adulthood’[[4]](#footnote-4), with 30 convicted as children (aged 17 or younger), including one sentenced at just 13 years old.

# **Key findings: The specific problems of long life imprisonment from a young age**

Men and women in our study explained that the most painful and challenging aspects of long-term imprisonment centred on three key *dislocations:* first, from their families and social worlds (*social dislocation*); second, from their existing sense of self (who they were), which was shattered by the significance of being involved in a murder or being labelled ‘a murderer’ (*dislocation from self*), and third, from the life they had imagined as they emerged into adulthood (*dislocation from future*). The section that follows discusses some of our key findings within this context, focusing in particular on the specific challenges faced by people serving long life sentences from a young age who were: i) in the initial years of the sentence; ii) women; and iii) approaching or beyond the tariff expiry point.[[5]](#footnote-5)

## **Surviving the early years of a long life sentence at a young age**

Young people in the initial years of a long life sentence described an absence of information about the nature or structure of a life sentence, so that some laboured under serious misapprehensions, in ways which contributed to the challenges of the initial days and weeks. This included, for example, believing that they would only have to serve half the tariff (leading to a significant shock when they were told by other prisoners that this was not accurate), or thinking that they would be kept in custody for the full life term of 99 years (‘I genuinely thought like, ‘Right, 99 years. That’s it; I’m in prison for *ever*. And I gave up’) (Arshad).

Almost all young lifers reported being completely emotionally overwhelmed at the start of their sentence, describing ‘acute reactions’ that are commonly noted among of trauma survivors. This included descriptions of numbness and shock, as well as themes of darkness, disillusion, and hopelessness.[[6]](#footnote-6) Many had been convinced, either by their own reasoning or that of their defence lawyer, that they would not be convicted (particularly those convicted as secondary parties under ‘joint enterprise’)[[7]](#footnote-7) – some had even bought bus tickets home for when the trial ended. Receiving a murder conviction and a prison sentence that was often as long as, or longer than, their life so far produced a sense of unreality.[[8]](#footnote-8) It was common to hear that, in the initial days and weeks post-conviction, young lifers felt constantly ‘numb’ (Dan), existing in a ‘sad, dream-like state’ (Karen) in which they felt entirely disconnected from the world around them and the people within it. These stress reactions appear to be distinct from the responses of male lifers sentenced at an older age (see Jarman, this issue), suggesting that the impact of receiving a long life sentence may be particularly stressful for young people.

The sense of ‘entry shock’[[9]](#footnote-9) described by the young men and women in our study was often compounded further by the psychological effects of having been involved in or having witnessed a murder (including nightmares and flashbacks to the offence) and the task of trying to negotiate life in prison (the majority of the sample had no prison experience prior to receiving a life sentence). However, when the numbness subsided, feelings of juridical and penal illegitimacy, frustration, anger, and despair came to the fore, sentiments that were heightened among individuals deemed ‘secondary’ parties in ‘joint enterprise’ murder.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In the initial years of their sentence, young lifers often sought to actively suppress, deny or deflect the reality of their situation. These were defensive psychological mechanisms, which led many to use substances, fight the system (and other prisoners), immerse themselves in the illicit economy, withdraw from others and sleep excessively to block out painful thoughts and experiences.[[11]](#footnote-11) Most reported that they were unwilling, or unable, to think about their future, and instead managed their sentence ‘day-by-day’ (Kathryn), starting each day afresh without being able to think about the future. During these early years, young lifers could find little purpose or meaning in life, feeling that they were ‘stuck in time’ (Casper), ‘treading water’ (Jill), ‘treading mud’ (Samuel) or ‘just existing’ (Paul). Most considered themselves to have very little autonomy within their daily life, while those rare individuals who *did* attempt to take control at an early point in their sentence described being unable to access services or courses because they were so far from release. One former Category A prisoner described how this experience had made him feel as though he had been ‘left to rot’ during the first decade of his sentence (‘You're not a priority at all if you're [early in] on a big sentence. […] You're on the bottom of the queue’) (Shaafi).

## **The specific challenges of life imprisonment for women**

Analysis of our survey indicated that women serving life sentences experienced the problems of long-term imprisonment significantly more severely than male lifers.[[12]](#footnote-12) That is, while some problems - such as ‘missing somebody’ and ‘worrying about people outside – were ranked by women and men in similar ways (i.e., in the same order of importance), the women often reported struggling with these challenges more frequently, and in ways that felt harder to resolve, than then men. Women were significantly more likely to identify particular problems as being more severe than men, particularly those related to *psychological well-being* (e.g., feeling suicidal’, ‘losing your self-confidence’), *intimacy* (‘wishing you had more privacy’, ‘not feeling able to completely trust anyone in prison’), and *autonomy and control* (having to follow other people’s rules and orders’, ‘feeling that you have no control over your life’).[[13]](#footnote-13) Many of these problems were linked to the extensive and cumulative histories of abuse, trauma and ‘coercive control’ reported by our female participants, which had damaged their willingness and capacity to trust authority figures in low-autonomy environments such as prisons, and had significantly impacted their attitudes towards the legitimacy of their sentence.[[14]](#footnote-14),[[15]](#footnote-15)

Women serving long-term and indeterminate sentences also ‘suffer in special ways’ that are related to childbearing.[[16]](#footnote-16) For example, women who do not have children prior to their incarceration may remain in custody throughout their fertile years, denying them the possibility of a family of their own,[[17]](#footnote-17) while for those who have children when they enter custody (and have typically been those children’s primary carers), a long life sentence creates significant challenges in the maintenance of meaningful contact.[[18]](#footnote-18),[[19]](#footnote-19) Our findings corroborate Hairston’s claim that being ‘stripped of the mother role’ represents one of the ‘most traumatic factors’ in women’s adjustment to imprisonment,[[20]](#footnote-20) particularly where this entails a long-term and indeterminate sentence.

## **The challenges of the ‘late’ stage**

Psychological studies have consistently concluded that long-term prisoners experience little in the way of enduring negative effects. However such research primarily relied on quantitative measures alone and was often missing the experiential nuance and depth offered by more qualitative studies.[[21]](#footnote-21) Most late stage lifers interviewed for our study reported they had changed profoundly as a result of having to adapt to life in the prison environment over an extended time period, often in ways which made them well suited to surviving long-term imprisonment yet ill-equipped to thrive in the community. Many talked in ways that were reminiscent of Liem and Kunst’s notion of ‘post-incarceration syndrome’, having become ‘over-adapted’ to the prison environment in ways that made it more difficult for life after release.[[22]](#footnote-22) A recent report similarly noted the ‘high psychological, financial, and vocational’ needs of people exiting prison following long term confinement, all of which had been ‘greatly exacerbated’ by so many years in prison.[[23]](#footnote-23)

We also found that rather than inspiring hope, the appearance of the tariff expiry on the horizon more commonly acted as a destabilising factor, wrenching individuals from the relative comfort of their hard-won routines and forcing them to confront the painful reality of an uncertain future.[[24]](#footnote-24) Here, anxieties old *and* new came to the fore, exacerbated by what was often described as a lack of clarity, transparency and legitimacy within a progression and parole system in which pathways to release felt ambiguous or inaccessible. For those beyond their tariff point, a sense of hopelessness and despair often set in, culminating for some in a fatalistic attitude towards the assumed likelihood of release, and sometimes a ‘retreat’ from the progression and parole and process altogether.[[25]](#footnote-25) A small number described attempting suicide as a consequence of such feelings. The root of such feelings often lay in the belief that release was now unlikely, and that after so many years inside, life in the community felt pointless, or impossible to negotiate. As Walter put it, after more than four decades in prison and facing the prospect of release in his seventies having come in as an adolescent:

I’ve reached the stage where I don't care whether they let me out or not. […] I have no future. […] I don't feel sorry about this, or unhappy. […] I'm a realist, I face reality […] There's nothing out there for me. It's like taking a monkey out of the jungle and putting him in a big city. You've got to relearn to live outside. How can you do that after forty-odd years in prison?

## **Recommendations for practice and policy**

The challenges identified above are not an exhaustive list of the ways in which individual, group and sentence characteristics intersect to produce particular difficulties for lifers serving long minimum terms from a young age. Rather, we hope that they represent the starting point for a conversation about how to more effectively support the growing number of young life sentence prisoners in England and Wales. To that end, we have compiled a number of recommendations for practice across the prison estate which may support staff in that endeavour.

First, at both a central and local level, life sentence prisoners would benefit from greater information about: the structure of an indeterminate sentence (including what the tariff means, length of time to be served, key dates for parole eligibility, release on temporary licence, and so on); what they might expect in terms of the dislocating effects of their sentence; and what support is available to mitigate these effects throughout the duration of the sentence. One source of information and support (for prisoners and staff) might be a designated ‘Lifer Officer’ or ‘Lifer Champion’ in each prison. Written information might also be productive, although alternative modes of disseminating the information could be considered given the young age of many life-sentenced prisoners entering custody, and the low rates of literacy in prisons (e.g., infographics, programmes on internal prison radio services). In this light, we intend to contribute to such information sharing, through a graphic novel-style booklet called ‘*Reflections on ‘Life’’*, which we are currently developing, in collaboration with UK artist *Ryuzza*. The illustrated booklet aims to represent to young lifers at the start of their sentence what they might expect going forward, to offer some hope – based on what others have told us – that the sentence is survivable, and to reassure them that their anxieties and concerns are shared by their peers. Once published, we hope that the booklet will be made available in every prison holding lifers at the early stage of their sentence.

Second, we recommend dedicated support for young lifers in the early years of their sentence. Although some of the young men and women in our study acknowledged that there was little that could have been offered to help them at this point, such was the emotionally overwhelming nature of their early incarceration, others said they would have benefited significantly from opportunities to talk with people, in a context that was free from judgments about risk. Here, we draw attention to formal therapeutic intervention of the sort recently piloted by the team at HMYOI Cookham Wood (Thomas & Sadie, this issue), as well as more informal channels for individuals to talk from the outset about the acute emotions that dominate the early stage experience. This would include opportunities to talk without judgement about the grief, anger, frustration and sadness that emerge from the index offence and sentence.

Third, specific work in the women’s estate might acknowledge the disproportionate impact of life imprisonment for this group and find ways to mitigate this from the outset. Opportunities for more frequent and longer family day-style visits and overnight stays with children would help women to maintain crucial family relationships, which are negatively impacted by the geographical spread of prisons in the female estate. We also wonder if the growth of online technology in prisons during the pandemic might provide a framework for women to complete specific courses required on their sentence plan without having to move away from prisons that may be local to their family network. The shift to a more ‘trauma-informed’ model in women’s prisons is also welcome (although not without its issues)[[26]](#footnote-26) and represents an important starting point for developing custodial processes and support which recognise the psychological impact of female lifers’ involvement in or witnessing of a murder. This is particularly important where the index offence was as a consequence of domestic violence and coercive control.[[27]](#footnote-27) This could also offer a model for better supporting women in response to the psychological effects of life imprisonment as a potential death sentence for their fertility and future family plans.

Finally, we would recommend more transparent and open communication around the processes and procedures relating to progression as lifers approach the tariff end point, particularly for those who have remained in custody beyond it. Among this post-tariff group, hope can easily be eroded and replaced by a sense of fatalism where the path toward release is unclear or unfathomable, as the power or agency to reach a lower security prison or to sit a successful Parole Board feels beyond them. In such instances, individuals tend to retreat from engagement. Those who were most hopeful and motivated at this point felt that they had choices, and that their choices mattered in their progression towards release, and we would suggest working mutually towards creating this with late stage lifers where possible.

# **Concluding thoughts**

The rapidly growing numbers of life sentenced prisoners coming in at a young age, before they have fully matured, and who are likely to remain in the system for many decades, represents a significant operational challenge for the prison and probation services. Often, on starting their sentence, they are overwhelmed, vulnerable and angry, with many (particularly those convicted as part of a joint enterprise) feeling that their conviction and punishment lacks legitimacy. A core challenge for the Prison Service will be to make life meaningful for such men and women from the very outset of the sentence, and to develop support mechanisms for individuals who have been convicted of murder as children or adolescents. At the other end of the sentence, more resources will be required for this population, as they grow into an ever-expanding group of older lifers who have spent many years - and sometimes decades in prison - and who may struggle to navigate the bureaucracy of parole or imagine a meaningful life on release, having come in barely on the cusp of adulthood and with little experience of living life as an adult at liberty.

1. Crewe, B., Hulley, S. & Wright, S. (2020) *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood: Adaptation, Identity and Time.* Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Freedom of Information Access request, reference: 201117009. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. To explore how the experience of imprisonment might differ over the course of the sentence, we categorised our interviewees into three broad groups, according to sentence ‘stages’: ‘early’ (served less than five years of a 15+ year tariff), ‘mid’ (reached the midpoint of the tariff, plus or minus two years) and ‘late’ (two years until the tariff expiry date or over tariff). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wright, S., Hulley, S. & Crewe, B. (2021) ‘The pains of life imprisonment during late adolescence and emerging adulthood’ in L. Abrams & A. Cox (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook on Youth Imprisonment*. London: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd, pp. 479-501 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is necessarily a brief overview of the key findings. For a full analysis and write-up of the findings of the study, please see note 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Wright, S., Crewe, B. & Hulley, S. (2017) ‘Suppression, denial, sublimation: Defending against the initial pains of very long life sentences’, *Theoretical Criminology, 21*(2), pp. 225-246, p.231. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Whereby two or more people are considered liable for a single criminal act. See Hulley, Crewe and Wright (2019). ‘Making Sense of ‘Joint Enterprise’ for murder: Legal legitimacy or instrumental acquiescence?’ *British Journal of Criminology*, *59*(6), pp.1328-1346. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Of those who completed a survey, 44% were serving tariffs that were longer than years lived (11% were serving tariffs equal to years lived, while 45% had received tariffs that were less than years lived to the point of conviction). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See n.8, p.231. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. As noted in the *Introduction* to this issue, a growing number of individuals are being convicted using joint enterprise (or secondary liability), and were significantly overrepresented in our study of people serving long life studies from a young age. For more on this, see n.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See n.8, p.231. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Crewe, B., Hulley, S., & Wright, S. (2017) ‘The gendered pains of life imprisonment, *British Journal of Criminology, 57*(6), pp.1359–1378, p.1365 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See n.13. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See n.13. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Hulley, S. (2021) ‘Defending 'co-offending' women: Recognising domestic abuse and coercive control in 'joint enterprise' cases involving women and their intimate partners’, *Howard Journal of Crime and Justice.* [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Walker, S. & Worrall, A. (2000) ‘Life as a woman: The gendered pains of indeterminate imprisonment’, *Prison Service Journal*, 132, p.28. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Fernandes, M. (2020) ‘How far can female fertility be extended?’ *BBC Future.* Accessed 22nd June 2021 from: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200828-how-fertility-changes-with-age-in-women> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See n.17. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See n.13. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Hairston, C. F. (1991) ‘Family ties during imprisonment: Important to whom and for what’, *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, *18*, pp.87-104, p.95. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For example, see: Crewe, B., Hulley, S. & Wright, S. (2017) ‘Swimming with the tide: Adapting to long-term imprisonment’, *Justice Quarterly, 34*(3), pp.517-541; Hulley, S., Crewe, B. & Wright, S. (2016) ‘Re-examining the problems of long-term imprisonment’, *British Journal of Criminology, 56*(4), pp.769-792. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Liem, M. & Kunst, M. (2013) ‘Is there a recognizable post-incarceration syndrome among released “lifers”?’ *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry, 36*, pp.333–78. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Nellis, A. (2021). *A New Lease on Life*. Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project. Available from: <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/a-new-lease-on-life/> [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See also O’Donnell, I. (2014) *Prisoners, Solitude, and Time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Wright, S., Hulley, S. & Crewe, B. (accepted, in press) ‘Trajectories of hope/lessness among men and women in the late stage of a life sentence’, *Theoretical Criminology.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Jewkes, Y., Jordan, M., Wright, S. & Bendelow, G. (2019) ‘Designing ‘healthy’ prisons for women: incorporating trauma-informed care and practice (TICP) into prison planning and design’, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 16*(20), p.3818. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See n.15. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)