

**Section 1:**  
**Literature Review**

## Search Strategy

The current literature review was undertaken to ascertain the nature and extent of research interest in life sentence prisoners. Accordingly, the literature search was initially guided by a broad set of inclusion criteria: 1) influential studies conducted in both the sociological and criminological traditions were included along with those conducted by psychological researchers; 2) given that so many of the early prison studies still factor in current debates, it was important to briefly explore the historical context and not to limit the search to material published within a more recent time period; and 3) in the absence of research with life sentence prisoners, and where necessary, studies relating to long-term prisoners were drawn upon.

A number of search terms (i.e. ‘life sentence(d)’, ‘lifer’, ‘life imprisonment’, ‘long-term sentence’) were firstly entered into search engines and databases (i.e. *PsycINFO*, *PsycARTICLES*, *Sociological Abstracts*, *Google Scholar*) and, where possible, relevant articles and books were then acquired. Following this, a number of individual journals were perused using these search terms (i.e. *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, *Psychological Review*, *Psychological Bulletin*, *Annual Review of Psychology*, *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, *Annual Review of Sociology*, *Clinical Psychology Review*, *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, *Criminology*, *Prison Journal*, and *British Medical Journal*). Relevant websites were also briefly reviewed (e.g. *International Centre for Prison Studies*, *Australian Institute of Criminology*, *Correctional Service of Canada*). Finally, reference chasing and citation searches were carried out.

## **Life sentence Prisoners: A Review of the Literature**

### **Outline of the literature review**

The current literature review will consider the literature base in relation to life sentence prisoners. A synopsis of the ‘prison effects’ debate will be provided, following which research topics attracting more recent interest will be explored. The terms ‘life sentence prisoner’ and ‘lifer’ will be used interchangeably to reflect their use both within the literature and among prisoners themselves. The aims of the review are to illuminate the most dominant research trends in relation to life sentence prisoners and to identify gaps in the empirical research base.

### **Introduction: Life imprisonment and the lifer population**

The past forty years has witnessed the abolition of the death penalty in many countries throughout the Western world. Europe, in particular, harnessed this movement and the Council of Europe (1983) made the abolition of the death penalty a condition of membership for existing and prospective states. In response, some countries adopted long determinate sentences while many others replaced execution with a penalty of life imprisonment<sup>1</sup>. Accordingly, a sentence of life imprisonment is now the most severe sanction available to courts in the majority of western countries (Appleton and Grover, 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> According to the jurisdiction within which an individual is sentenced, ‘life imprisonment’ can denote a number of possibilities: 1) it can be a mandatory or discretionary penalty, and 2) in terms of length of time to be served in prison, it can be determinate (maximum period of detention specified), indeterminate (no guarantee of release) or whole life (no possibility of release) (Mauer, King and Young, 2004).

Shortly after the Council of Europe's (1983) directive, Potas (1989: 4) warned that life sentences, being at the "very pinnacle of the sentencing hierarchy", should be used to condemn only the gravest of offences. This sentiment was echoed in the United Nation's 1994 report *Life Imprisonment*. The advice went unheeded and the Western world, in particular, entered the "era of over-incarceration" (Haney, 2005: 74). According to the most recently available statistics, there are currently over 10.65 million people incarcerated in penal institutions throughout the world and the global prison population continues to rise annually (Walmsley, 2009). Directly contributing to this is an emerging trend in increasing sentence lengths: more offences are attracting a penalty of life imprisonment, more individuals are receiving long-term, indeterminate and life sentences, and fewer individuals are being granted parole (Penal Reform International, 2007). Recent statistics graphically illustrate these trends. Over a comparable ten year period, the life sentence prisoner population increased by 75 per cent in England and Wales (1994-2004), by 83 per cent in the US (1992-2003), and by over 1,000 per cent in South Africa (1995-2005) (Giffard and Muntingh, 2007: 23; Home Office, 2005: 98; Mauer et al., 2004: 3). In Ireland, the number of life sentence prisoners rose by 150 per cent between 1998 and 2008 (O'Keefe, 2008).

Due to their enforced segregation from society and their growth in number - not to mention the nature of their crimes and the emotive reactions they arouse - life sentence prisoners are a particularly interesting sub-group within the prisoner population. They attract considerable public, political and media attention. The current literature review will explore the extent to which they have attracted researchers' interest.

### **The historical context: Emergence of research interest in life sentence prisoners**

Much of the research conducted with prisoners over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century sought to determine the effects of imprisonment (Liebling and Maruna, 2005). Put simply, sociologists pointed to the psychological harms inherent in the power of institutions while psychologists argued that incarceration had little lasting impact on individuals. Long-term prisoners became an obvious focus of research attention given the presumption that detrimental effects were likely to accumulate over length of time served.

### ***The prison effects debate: Studies in the sociological tradition***

A number of ‘classic’ sociological studies continue to be of influence. Sykes’ (1958) study was recently judged to be the most influential book in prison studies of the twentieth century (Reisig, 2001). Sykes (1958: 63-78) explored the meaning of imprisonment for long-term and life sentence inmates held within a maximum security prison. While he acknowledged that each individual’s experience of imprisonment was subjective and therefore unique, he observed a consensus among prisoners’ perceptions of the social environment created by their captors. Prison life was seen as “frustrating in the extreme” and comprised of five main “pains”: the deprivation of 1) liberty (e.g. confinement, separation from loved ones); 2) goods and services (e.g. privacy, space); 3) heterosexual relationships (i.e. involuntary celibacy); 4) autonomy (e.g. lack of choice); and 5) personal security (e.g. anxiety from enforced habitation with others). In short, Sykes argued that many of the psychological effects or “pains of imprisonment” were in fact more brutal than previous practices of physical cruelty; they threatened inmates’ psychological well-being and attacked their sense of self. According to Sykes, prisoners responded to these pains through cohesive solidarity.

Clemmer (1958: 299) described a process of “prisonisation” to describe the negative psychological changes that occur as a result of adaptation to prison life. Others argued that institutions, in general, caused more harm than good (e.g. psychiatric facilities). Barton (1966: 14) introduced the concept of “institutional neurosis” (e.g. inability to plan for the future). Goffman (1968: 11) offered a theory of the “total institution” and argued that individuals undergo a dehumanising process, involving “mortification of self” (e.g. stripped of their belongings and identity at reception) and “civil death” (e.g. acceptance of the institution’s right to restrict their access to goods).

Cohen and Taylor’s (1972) book, *Psychological Survival*, documented the authors’ four year study with long-term and life sentence prisoners in a maximum security block. Voicing their dissatisfaction with traditional approaches to the measurement of psychological change, the prisoners entered into a collaborative research project which focused on their subjective experiences of long-term incarceration. The findings indicated that the men were consumed with anxiety by the challenges of how to survive prison life, namely passing time, relating to others, the fear of deterioration, and the loss of identity. Given the absence of any external time markers, the men tended to create stages themselves through “mind-building” (e.g. studying), “body-building” (e.g. weightlifting) or dividing the sentence up into manageable blocks (e.g. five year stints) (p. 95). Paradoxically, they both avoided thoughts of the future but were also sustained by thoughts about a future life outside prison. Being high-profile prisoners on indeterminate sentences, they were acutely aware of their vulnerability to the political and moral climate in relation to any possibility of release.

### *The prison effects debate: Studies in the psychological tradition*

Partly in reaction to the studies outlined above but more generally in response to the growing population of lifers, a number of empirical investigations were initiated in the UK (Sapsford and Banks, 1979). This was in the context of the recent suspension of the death penalty and concerns about the management of this newly created subgroup of prisoners (i.e. long-term). Researchers pointed to the limitations of earlier studies; for example, Cohen and Taylor's study was critiqued as a "sensitive and perceptive account" but one which held limited generality (Sapsford, 1978: 129) and the exclusion of measures of general psychological functioning was condemned (Zamble, 1992). As such, more rigorously designed methodologies were employed in an attempt to quantify the nature and extent of the psychological effects of long-term incarceration (Liebling and Maruna, 2005).

Working under a Home Office grant, a team of researchers at Durham University conducted the first large-scale attempt to explore the effects of long-term imprisonment on psychological functioning. They administered a battery of tests to a representative sample of 175 life sentence and long-term (10 years plus) prisoners and conducted follow-up testing 19 months later (154 prisoners and 30 non-prisoners). A cross-sectional analysis indicated that increasing length of sentence was associated with no deterioration in general intelligence while changes to personality (i.e. increasing levels of introversion and self-directed hostility) and attitude (i.e. significantly decreased self-evaluation) were observed (Banister, Smith, Heskin and Bolton, 1973; Heskin, Smith, Banister and Bolton, 1973; Heskin, Bolton, Smith and Banister, 1974). Longitudinal analysis indicated that the prison sample as a whole showed significantly greater improvement in full scale and verbal IQ relative to the controls while hostility declined over the test-retest period. Accordingly, the researchers concluded that there was no evidence of psychological deterioration due to

long-term imprisonment. In fact, they suggested that imprisonment itself may even be associated with positive effects (e.g. reduction in hostility) (Bolton, Smith, Heskin and Banister, 1976). However, Cohen and Taylor (1972: 201-207) were highly critical of the study; they pointed to a limited concept of “deterioration” and highlighted specific methodological weaknesses (e.g. too short a test-retest interval). They argued that the Durham team were in fact measuring *differences* between prisoners, not changes due to imprisonment, given that they failed to account for the individuals’ pre-prison presentations.

Critiquing both Cohen and Taylor (1972) and the Durham study for treating determinate and indeterminate sentences as equivalent, Sapsford (1978) argued that the lifer’s experience of incarceration is exacerbated by the uncertainty of ever being released. The researcher compared three matched groups of lifers in a maximum security prison: 26 newly sentenced, 24 in their sixth year and prior to their first review, and 10 who had passed the “average” release point of 12 years. He found that the vast majority experienced considerable emotional disturbance at the start of their sentence. Through interviews with the men, formal testing (personality), and examination of prison files, Sapsford (1978: 141-142) identified five changes which appeared to be related to the length of time detained, over and above the effects of ageing: 1) a decrease in “future time-perspective”; 2) an increase in tendency to talk and think about the past rather than the future; 3) an increase in introversion; 4) an increase in staff labelling them “institutionalised”; and 5) a decrease in contact with the outside world. Of note, a decrease in actual involvement was not matched by a decrease in the prisoners’ interest in the outside world. Sapsford (1978) concluded that the specific changes observed could be attributed to increasing length of sentence but that the changes could only be considered “deterioration” if they proved irreversible after



release; however, a longitudinal analysis was not conducted. The researcher himself critiqued his analytic method for lacking power and sensitivity. Furthermore, despite conducting a “short” battery of tests but “extended” interviews with 60 life sentence prisoners, Sapsford (1978) only referred to two quotes and failed to explore his initial observation regarding the exacerbating effects of the uncertainty of release.

Heather (1977) also observed a period of heightened vulnerability at the start of a lengthy sentence. He assessed 42 Scottish life and indeterminately sentenced prisoners and found that their incidence of mental illness fell in between the levels for psychiatric and healthy populations. There was a higher incidence of personal illness among individuals at the start of their sentence compared with those who had been in prison longer. Unlike researchers before him, Heather (1977) stated that the findings did not suggest that life imprisonment had no progressively harmful effects on prisoners’ personalities. Rather, he suggested that the reduction in personal illness over time may have been an indication of the process of prisonisation or prisoners’ adoption of psychological survival strategies (e.g. Cohen and Taylor, 1972).

Employing a different approach, Richards (1978) and Flanagan (1980) administered a problem ranking exercise to 22 British prisoners (life and fixed terms of more than 10 years) and 49 American inmates (had served at least five years of sentence). Participants were presented with 20 problems which they were asked to rate according to frequency and intensity of experience. Firstly, both samples rated “missing somebody” as their *most* severe problem and more severe than problems relating to prison life per se. What’s more, the next four most severe problems identified by both samples also related to deprivations of relationships with and in the outside world (e.g. “worrying about how you will cope

when you get out”). According to Flanagan (1980), these findings suggested that the loss of relationships with people outside represented the most challenging aspects of long-term incarceration. He found that family contact provided encouragement and support for some inmates but that others deliberately severed relationships as a means of avoiding the anxiety and despair that resulted from separation. However, Richards (1978) saw the men’s preoccupation with outside relationships as an encouraging sign of their ability to resist institutionalisation. He suggested that the maintenance of relationships with loved ones outside was central to the management of the mental health of long-term prisoners. Secondly, Flanagan (1980) noted that the problems rated *least* severe by both groups of participants were those that would indicate psychological deterioration (e.g. “being afraid of going mad”). From this, both researchers concluded that most participants did not see imprisonment as a decisive threat to their emotional well-being. However Richards (1975) queried whether the participants’ responses amounted to a social desirability effect with the men downplaying their difficulties and exaggerating their ability to handle prison. He was also quick to clarify that the findings should not be taken as a contradiction of others’ accounts of the negative psychological impact of long-term imprisonment given that his study was conducted in a prison considered an “easy nick” (Richards, 1978: 168). Further, while the list of problems were developed following a pilot study (Richards, 1975), it is important to recognise that this exercise involved ranking as opposed to self-report. Thirdly, the findings indicated that the men in both studies coped with the vast majority of problems through self-reliance and by keeping them private. Participants felt it was unfair to burden family or other inmates with their problems and were unwilling to lose respect by approaching either staff or another prisoner for help.

Departing from the quantitative approach of the day, Flanagan (1982) acknowledged a general insensitivity among researchers to the experiential differences between short-term prisoners and lifers regarding the pains of imprisonment. He critiqued earlier studies for failing to consider the adaptive strategies devised by long-term inmates and also suggested that the measures employed in quantitative studies may not have been sensitive enough to capture changes over time. Through interviews with 59 long-term prisoners, Flanagan (1981; 1982) acknowledged that the general stresses of imprisonment were all exacerbated for long-term prisoners by the length of time served. These included 1) loss of contact with people outside and fear that their relationships would be irretrievably lost; 2) managing the strained and tenuous relationships with fellow prisoners (e.g. dealing with severance of friendships); and 3) fear of deterioration (e.g. through challenges of filling time). Flanagan (1982) also acknowledged that long-term prisoners are faced with two additional sources of stress, including the indeterminacy of their sentence and prolonged exposure to the noxious features of the prison environment (e.g. instability). He observed that focusing on the here-and-now was a central element of the “long-term perspective” adopted by many (p. 123).

Coming from a different perspective, Coker and Martin (1985) explored post-release adaptation of lifers. Coker, a senior member of the Probation Service, extracted data from Home Office files (1960-1974) on 239 released lifers and arranged interviews with 33 of them and their supervising probation officers. Based on reconviction rates and general measures of social adjustment, the authors concluded that the men had not been “seriously damaged or incapacitated by their experiences” of long-term imprisonment (p. 229). Of note, the authors came to these conclusions despite the fact that participants were not asked if, and how, the life sentence had affected them either during prison or since their release;

the interview schedule concentrated on their experience of post-release supervision. When interviewed about the problems of resettlement, almost one-third of the sample claimed to have experienced no problems, 18 per cent listed practical problems (e.g. accommodation), while almost 50 per cent of the men cited anxieties or aspects of personal relationships (e.g. trusting people). None of these disclosures were explored in-depth by the researchers. The study has been criticised for ignoring more subtle, hidden kinds of psychological and emotional disability (Grounds and Jamieson, 2003).

Pointing to the limitations of previous studies (e.g. biased samples of long-term prisoners, cross-sectional designs), Zamble and Porporino (1988, 1990) assessed 133 Canadian male prisoners at reception, at four months and at sixteen months. Employing a variety of measures, the researchers explored coping and adaptation among prisoners in general. In line with previous findings, they observed that emotional disturbance was common at the start of the sentence and that participants identified their greatest concern during this time as separation from loved ones. The authors found that the prisoners adopted certain coping strategies; over time they exercised more control over their thoughts and became more self-contained. The researchers concluded that, while individual differences existed, overall the effects of imprisonment were minimal with most prisoners “surviving intact and more or less unchanged” (1988: 152). Particularly note-worthy is the authors’ use of the term “behavioural deep freeze”; this captured their assertion that imprisonment had no long-term detrimental effects because individuals’ pre-prison behavioural repertoire (e.g. coping skills) returned upon release (Zamble and Porporino, 1990: 62). The study has come under heavy criticism. According to Ellis (1988), the authors discovered little variation in coping skills across individuals or time. Further, Jamieson and Grounds (2005) critiqued the study for having too short a follow-up period and for failing to recognise that

the longer a person is incarcerated, the greater the accumulated challenges they face upon release (e.g. personal losses and altered environment).

In a five-year follow-up study, Zamble (1992) interviewed and assessed 25 of the 41 long-term inmates from the original sample (including 21 lifers). He found that after the initial psychological discomfort described above, the prisoners experienced “a slow and gradual amelioration” and there was a “total absence of any evidence for general or widespread deteriorative effects” (p. 420). Thus, he stated that his findings confirmed that imprisonment amounted to a “behavioural deep freeze” (p. 420). The general pattern was of improved emotional states, health and conduct within prison over time. In terms of adaptation to long-term imprisonment, Zamble (1992) observed participants’ tendencies to become more engaged in structured routines, more withdrawn from wider networks of prisoners and they chose to spend much of their discretionary time within their cells. “In effect, they sometimes seemed to be living within a world of their own, inside the prison but separate and apart from its ordinary discourse” (p. 421). For most participants, their activities were planned around long-term goals and their thoughts largely concerned their lives after release. In general, they became better at monitoring and controlling their behaviour over time and, unlike short-term prisoners, they maintained motivation for self-improvement. The maturational effects observed among long-term, but not short-term prisoners, was attributed to the greater consequences of misconduct for long-term prisoners (e.g. hope of release). The author concluded that long-term imprisonment appeared to promote the development of more mature ways of coping and behaving; however, he stressed that this did not justify long-term incarceration.

### **Critique of early research**

In summary, early sociological researchers highlighted the general pains of institutional living while psychological researchers concluded that long-term incarceration could not be shown to cause deterioration or lasting detrimental effects. Citing many of the studies outlined above, Walker (1987: 197) concluded that “research in British prisons – chiefly by psychologists – has done much to deflate the sweeping exaggerations – chiefly by sociologists - about the ill-effects of normal incarceration”.

According to Liebling and Maruna (2005), these studies closed the debate on the effects of imprisonment and the ‘behavioural deep freeze’ paradigm emerged the dominant consensus. While many acknowledged the challenges that individuals continued to face across their sentences (e.g. anxieties about outside relationships), it was agreed that long-term prisoners typically adapted and coped quite well over time (e.g. Coker and Martin, 1985; Zamble, 1992).

More recently, a number of researchers have returned to this debate and sought to challenge the ‘deep freeze’ concept. They point to the shortcomings of this earlier body of research (e.g. see Liebling and Maruna, 2005: 12-13). Grounds and Jamieson (2003: 357-8) identified five main limitations within the empirical studies relating to the psychological effects of long-term incarceration. They highlighted a lack of substantial longitudinal studies, a failure to explore prisoners’ post-release adaptation, the absence of a developmental perspective within studies, and the failure of researchers to ground their work in a wider context of relevant research. Finally, the authors observed the discrepancy between case studies (i.e. accounts of difficulties reported by long-term prisoners) and the findings of formal experimental psychological research (i.e. no detrimental effects).

In a similar vein, Liebling and Maruna (2005: 3) argued that the literature employed too narrow a definition of harm, thereby lacking a sufficient affective dimension:

Fear, anxiety, loneliness, trauma, depression, injustice, powerlessness, violence and uncertainty are all part of the experience of prison life. These 'hidden', but everywhere apparent, features of prison life have not been measured or taken seriously enough by those interested in the question of prison effects.

They observed that harm was typically defined as deterioration and methodologies were generally insensitive to more subtle changes in psychological well-being. They noted, "Suicide does not require a permanent drop in measurable psychological constructs such as IQ" (p. 12). As such, the participants in the long-term studies were clearly those who had survived the emotionally turbulent period of initial incarceration; those who were not represented had obviously not adapted or coped and had been lost to suicide or transfer to a psychiatric facility (e.g. Liebling, 1999).

Perhaps reflecting the mentality of the day, Walker (1983: 70) argued that an exaggeration of the harms of imprisonment can in part result from "accepting prisoners' beliefs about their own deterioration". Indeed, earlier studies looked for general patterns among samples of long-term prisoners and failed to appreciate that prison is not a homogenous experience for all (Liebing and Maruna, 2005). Flanagan (1982) had earlier warned that the group average can mask variation in individual responses to incarceration; still the individual's voice was strikingly absent in early psychological studies of long-term imprisonment.

The absence of research with long-term and life sentence prisoners during the following decade was particularly notable. One explanation for this is that psychological researchers

began to explore the concept of ‘coping’ in the 1980s (Liebling and Maruna, 2005) but suffice to say that no studies with life sentence prisoners were located.

### **Focus of recent research with life sentence prisoners**

Having consulted the empirical research outlined above, Grounds and Jamieson (2003) stated that they did not anticipate the multitude of post-release psychological and adjustment problems that emerged from their findings with long-term prisoners. Indeed, a number of commentators have observed that prison life, in general, has been neglected by researchers in recent times (e.g. Crewe, 2005a) and there have been renewed calls for the experiences of prisoners to be further examined (e.g. Liebling and Maruna, 2005). More specifically, a small number of recent studies have sought to investigate the experiences of long-term and life sentence prisoners.

### ***Coping and adjustment***

Working as a mitigation expert in capital cases in the US, Johnson interviewed 15 lifers in order to examine how they dealt with the daily problems of prison life while avoiding rule violations. Johnson and Dobrzanska (2005: 8) opined that long-term sentences could amount to “constructive” time if met with “mature coping”; that is, for prisoners to identify and make use of the legitimate resources available in order to achieve autonomy, security and relatedness to others. In terms of achieving autonomy, the authors reported that lifers chose to consciously accept and thereby consent to the aspects of imprisonment that were out of their control. The development of personal routines afforded a sense of autonomy and also helped them to achieve security; routines counteracted the uncertainty of prison life, kept them away from dangerous inmates, and minimised the chance of involvement in violence and rule violations. Accordingly, the men spent much of their time in solitary



pursuits. The authors stressed that lifers needed this routine in order to live effectively with others and to satisfy some of their needs. In terms of relatedness to others, the participants reported becoming more thoughtful, tolerant and empathic over time (e.g. mentoring younger prisoners). Johnson and Dobrzanska (2005: 37) stressed that the hope of release – even for individuals sentenced to life without parole - proved crucial for lifers’ “psychological survival”. The importance of a sense of purpose was demonstrated by participants’ engagement in mentoring activities and their desire to help others to avoid the mistakes they had made. According to the authors, the majority of life sentence prisoners adapted to the challenges of incarceration and settled into a routine. However, this generalised conclusion was based on observations of a small number of lifers who were considered “well-adjusted” (i.e. relatively clean disciplinary records) and the paper did not report any methodological or data analysis details.

In a study of post-release supervision, Wilson (2004), a member of the Probation and Welfare Service, interviewed six Irish lifers and issued questionnaires to probation and welfare officers. According to the officers, the negative impact of long-term imprisonment created additional obstacles to the lifer’s successful reintegration. The detrimental effects identified were shattered confidence, anxiety, isolation, depression, reduced ability to socialise and increased dependency on others. Unfortunately, Wilson’s (2004) methodology was not clearly specified; the number of probation and welfare officers consulted was not stated and no information was given regarding the prevalence, frequency or impact of these difficulties among lifers.

Grounds, a consultant forensic psychiatrist, and Jamieson, a criminologist, have recently conducted three separate studies with life sentence and long-term prisoners in order to

explore their psychological experiences of incarceration and post-release adaptation. Employing semi-structured interviews, the researchers reported on three groups of men: 18 Irish Republican ex-prisoners (Grounds and Jamieson, 2003), 18 wrongfully convicted men, including 15 lifers (Grounds, 2004), and six Canadian lifers on release (Jamieson and Grounds, 2005). The findings from the three studies indicated that avoidance and withdrawal were commonly adopted coping mechanisms in prison; these included self-isolation, blocking out emotions, avoiding communication, suppressing thoughts of the future, hiding feelings of depression and maintaining pride. While these coping strategies were functional during imprisonment, they proved dysfunctional following release and the prisoners' families reported difficulties as a result of the men's behaviour.

Indeed, two of the studies revealed that the men and their families hid worries from each other on visits, in the mistaken belief that this would maintain family ties (Grounds, 2004; Grounds and Jamieson, 2003). As a result, the men experienced a loss of closeness and intimacy with their families following release and reported mutual incomprehension about each other. Many of the relationships which had survived during the men's incarceration fell apart following release (Grounds, 2004). The third study revealed that the Canadian lifers tended to have less stable backgrounds than participants in the first two studies and they did not return to their communities. Regardless, they also reported similar feelings of estrangement and loss of closeness to others when released (Jamieson and Grounds, 2005).

The men faced additional interpersonal challenges upon release (Grounds, 2004; Grounds and Jamieson, 2003). They had to adapt to all the losses incurred (e.g. deaths of loved ones, family occasions, time with children) and a sense of feeling dislocated in time. A number described difficulties with social integration, exacerbated by out-of-sync

developmental trajectories with their peers. Some had lost the chance to have children or a career at the 'normal time'. Jewkes' (2005)<sup>2</sup> interviews with lifers also revealed their dislocation in time and sense of existing in the 'wrong' time compared to their peers. Grounds (2004) observed that many of the wrongly convicted prisoners struggled with planning their future and regaining a sense of purpose when released. For those that had a sense of purpose, it typically came from helping others in the same position. Similarly, following release, four of the Canadian lifers worked for ex-prisoner support groups or in the voluntary sector (Jamieson and Grounds, 2005).

Jamieson and Grounds (2005) compared the ways in which the three groups evaluated their experiences of change as a result of imprisonment. The first two groups identified their reduced emotional capacities for trust, intimacy and sociability as negative changes in themselves, while education, intellectual development and the ability to judge situations and people were considered positive changes. By contrast, the Canadian lifers talked about the same emotional losses but identified reform, greater insight and self-control as positive changes to the self.

### ***Relationships in prison***

In a study of staff-prisoner interactions, McDermott and King (1988: 357) spent three months in each of five prisons and observed the "mind games" or "head games" that both groups engaged in. Commenting on the different types of power imbalances that characterised relationships within prison, the authors observed that life sentence prisoners felt more under the power of staff than other prisoners given their dependence on staffs' reports to ever receive parole. Lifers had to pre-consider all of their responses and

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<sup>2</sup> The author drew upon an unspecified number of interviews with lifers which had taken place as part of a wider study about the use of media in prison; she did not conduct a specific study with lifers.

anticipate the potential interpretations that staff might form of their behaviour. Accordingly, lifers often distanced themselves from the games played by short-term prisoners and thereby became a stabilising influence within a prison. Cell searchers were also recognised as more difficult for long-term prisoners who generally invested more effort in their cells and considered staffs' presence as an unwarrantable invasion of privacy. In a similar vein, Walker and Worrall's (2006) interviews with female lifers identified the theme of 'living under the microscope'. The authors observed that life sentence prisoners must live with constant surveillance by more people over a longer period of time than other prisoners. The women in their study spoke about living with the fear that staff could misinterpret their actions or words and that this could have far-reaching consequences.

In terms of inmate relations, Crewe (2005a) explored the social life and culture of a medium security UK prison over ten months. He found that lifers were least likely to have strong ties to other prisoners. This behaviour was functional in that it resulted in the lifers being less emotionally vulnerable, less obligated to others and less likely to become involved in disputes which could threaten their future progress. However, the researcher also observed that the housing of long-term prisoners together on the same wing allowed them to create solidarity and be mutually supportive (e.g. discouraged conflict that jeopardised their future chance of release). A sample of elderly long-term prisoners revealed the stress and disorientation they experienced upon entry to prison (e.g. high levels of noise, lack of privacy) and pointed to the help that they received from other prisoners to settle in (Crawley and Sparks, 2006).

### ***Self-reported concerns***

Whittington (1994) asked 102 life sentence prisoners to list the concerns that they felt would most occupy lifers at various stages within the first nine years of their sentence. The participants identified fear of institutionalisation and loss of identity as most salient between the end of the first year and year six, worries about the future dominated between years six and nine, while a minority were concerned with their crime during the first three years of their sentence. The elderly long-term prisoners interviewed by Crawley and Sparks' (2006) also highlighted their significant fears of physical and mental deterioration. Their older age compounded their fears and many expressed a dread of dying in prison.

Sabbath and Cowles (1990) identified four concerns of long-term prisoners, namely inmate-staff relations (e.g. staff ignoring inmate complaints and suggestions), institutional services (e.g. quality and availability of medical care), the physical environment of the institution (e.g. noise level and crowding) and family relationships (e.g. travel distance for family and friends to visit). Of note, interviews with staff highlighted a disparity in perception regarding the severity of problems encountered by prisoners. For example, about half of the long-term prisoners (53%) saw unproductive time as a moderate or severe problem compared to the same perception held by 85% of correctional officers and 92% of treatment staff.

### ***Management of time***

Many authors have observed that time takes on a different quality in prison (e.g. Scarce, 2002). However, Jewkes (2002) argued that for the long-term prisoner, the profusion of time and the lack of standard benchmarks with which to divide it can lead to severe psychological stress. Indeed, research with these prisoners indicates that their lives run on

two opposing trajectories; they live with having too much time and a sense of their lives being foreshortened (Jewkes, 2005). Consistent with the findings of Cohen and Taylor (1972), Jewkes (2005) also observed that long-term prisoners respond to fears of deterioration and threats to identity by placing a high premium on activities that challenge the mind and body. Crawley and Sparks' (2005) study with older long-term and life sentence prisoners highlighted the importance of time-consuming activities as a coping strategy. Those that were restricted in their ability to fill their time (e.g. through poor health and mobility) found it difficult to find a sense of purpose

### ***Broadening perspectives***

Perhaps in an acknowledgement of how far-removed and difficult to appreciate the experience of life imprisonment is, a number of authors have attempted to draw comparisons with experiences more accessible to those outside prison. According to Walker and Worrall (2006: 261), the feelings of loss experienced by the female lifers in their study were so acute and all encompassing that it paralleled the experience of bereavement. Others have made similar comparisons. Jose-Kampfner (1990: 112) suggested that life imprisonment and terminal illness were experientially similar but that lifers were seen as having forfeited the right to "grieve for the loss of themselves and their outside world" (cited in Walker and Worrall, 2006: 262). Drawing on interviews with life sentence prisoners, Jewkes (2005) also drew comparisons between the experiences of a life sentence and a diagnosis of terminal illness; in both cases loss of control thwarts taken for granted assumptions about the life course. She considered the effects of the "disrupted lifecourse", whereby the prisoner must manage his identity through the loss of long held anticipations of how his life will progress:

...the sudden interruption of the lifecourse, and the realisation of what has been taken away, may be regarded as the ultimate sanction of life imprisonment ... [I]ndeterminate life sentence prisoners suffer more than a restriction of liberty: they are stripped of their fundamental sense of 'being' and may experience imprisonment as a kind of social death ... The indeterminate life sentence may thus be experienced as a kind of bereavement for oneself; the loss involving lost worlds, lost futures and lost identities (Jewkes, 2005: 370).

However, Jewkes (2005) stressed that some of the pains of imprisonment, and specifically indeterminacy, can have transformative powers. She argued that many life sentence prisoners can overcome the trauma of sentencing and incarceration and reconstruct their narratives of self. Activities (e.g. education, exercise, religion) can comprise "strategies of resistance and empowerment" that facilitate the formation of new identities (p. 375). According to Jewkes (2005: 378-9), the unifying theme of successful sociological studies of imprisonment is that "they reveal what it means to be human". She reminded that even when faced with the dramatic lifecourse transition – and potentially dis-identifying experience – of life imprisonment, individuals can still choose how to respond to their circumstances (e.g. by reconstructing or reclaiming a sense of identity).

Referring to their research with long-term prisoners, Grounds and Jamieson (2003) stated that the prison effects literature offered little help in making sense of their findings. The authors suggested that the trauma literature and research with war veterans may provide a better insight into the experiences of long-term prisoners. Indeed, Crawley and Sparks (2006: 68-9) drew upon research with survivors of trauma to develop an appreciation of the "catastrophic" impact of incarceration for the life sentence and older prisoners in their research. They pointed to Hodgkinson and Stewart's (1991) findings of five central

experiences borne by survivors, namely the death imprint, survivor guilt, psychic numbing, nurturance conflicts, and quest for meaning. They suggested that psychic numbing and quest for meaning were likely to be the most common experiences for life sentence prisoners (Crawley and Sparks, 2006).

### ***Mental health and life sentence prisoners***

Research exploring the mental health of life sentence prisoners provides a stark reminder of the distress experienced by many. Findings indicate that life sentence prisoners are more vulnerable to mental health difficulties and suicide than other prisoners. Willmott (2003) cited a number of studies which pointed to a higher risk among lifers of completing suicide compared with determinate sentenced prisoners (e.g. Crighton, 2000; Dooley, 1990; Towl and Crighton, 2000).

Duffy, Linehan and Kennedy (2006), in their study of psychiatric morbidity among Irish male sentenced prisoners, interviewed 82 per cent of the total population of life sentence prisoners incarcerated in the system at that time (n=126). The researchers reported that lifers had a higher prevalence of psychiatric morbidity compared with those serving fixed terms, including psychoses, depression, anxiety, and deliberate self-harm. They had an equally high prevalence of alcohol problems but significantly lower prevalence of drug problems. For some disorders the risk was significantly elevated; the authors suggested that the six-month psychosis prevalence of 7.1 per cent in lifers (versus 2.4 per cent in fixed term prisoners) should act as a guide to the low limit of numbers who should more appropriately be treated in hospital in any one year. The men's psychiatric difficulties had not always commenced upon incarceration; 31.7 per cent reported contact with community



adult psychiatric services and 69.4 per cent reported a history of contact with forensic psychiatric services.

Some of the problems associated with the growing numbers of elderly lifers (Crawley and Sparks, 2006) were brought into focus by a study exploring depression among this subgroup. Murdoch, Morris, and Holmes (2008) administered the Mini Mental State Examination (MMSE) and Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS) to 121 elderly indeterminate and life sentence prisoners in the UK. While depression scores were not related to length of sentence served, over half of the prisoners scored above the threshold for mild depression while 27% of the sample scored at the borderline between no depression and mild depression. The researchers concluded that depression in long-term prisoners is common and related to the burden of imported chronic ill health as opposed to specific effects of imprisonment. Regardless, the study points to the possibility of additional clinical needs among this population.

In their three studies of post-release adaptation, Jamieson and Grounds (2005) reported that all participants reported some changes to personality as a result of long-term imprisonment. Grounds' (2004) study with 18 wrongly convicted men, found that the majority of participants demonstrated personality changes which caused distress both to themselves and their families (e.g. estrangement, reduced ability for intimacy and difficulties regaining a sense of purpose); 14 of them met the criteria for an ICD-10<sup>3</sup> diagnosis of "enduring personality change after catastrophic experience". In addition, 12 of the men demonstrated severe post-traumatic stress symptoms, which typically related to particular incidents of extreme threat or violence following arrest or while in prison. 14 of

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<sup>3</sup> ICD: International Classification of Diseases – mental and behavioural disorders (World Health Organisation, 1992).

the men reported feeling terror of being assaulted or killed by other prisoners while incarcerated; three of these were subjected to serious violence. Furthermore, 16 of the men presented with additional disorders (e.g. depression). In another sample of 18 Republican ex-prisoners, the men reported problems of depression, PTSD and alcohol misuse and also described changes in their personality (typically more introverted and closed) (Grounds and Jamieson, 2003). The three studies outlined by Jamieson and Grounds (2005) could all be critiqued for using participants with very unique experiences of imprisonment; both the Canadian lifers and Republic ex-prisoners were incarcerated during notoriously difficult times in the respective prison systems while the men who were wrongly convicted lived with the knowledge of their innocence and resulting bitterness. It could be argued that these factors account for the outcomes observed. The authors acknowledge this but argue none-the-less that long-term imprisonment was responsible for at least the adjustment problems documented. Indeed, it is hard to ignore the shared set of experiences across the three very different samples and the common denominator of long-term imprisonment.

### ***Autobiographical accounts***

Autobiographical accounts offer a unique insight into the individual's subjective experience of the life sentence and incarceration. James (2003), a life sentence prisoner in the UK, maintained a weekly column in the *Guardian* newspaper for over three years. His book, *A Life Inside*, brings together a selection of these columns. Throughout, the author gives examples of issues that arise day-to-day; many of these resonate with findings of previous empirical studies (e.g. living with the threat of violence (p. 74), fear of deterioration (p. 104), the need for routine (p. 110), and filling time (p. 163)). However, his narrative captures the psychological and affective components of subjective experience which are absent in empirical studies. Describing the anxiety that accompanied uncertainty, he wrote:

Routine is everything. Soul-destroying sometimes, but simultaneously numbing and comforting. It is routine in a prison regime that creates the vacuum which ensures the most painless passage of time. Stasis can be a wonderful anaesthetic. It may feel like it's dragging sometimes, but then you wake up one morning and find a month, or a year, or more has passed in the blink of an eye (pp. 109-110).

Similarly, Frankl's (1959) account of his confinement in a concentration camp during World War 2 captured the existential challenges he faced during this period of intense uncertainty and hardship. His experiences led him to conclude that "the search for meaning" is the primary motivation in an individual's life. He argued that finding meaning in one's circumstances prevented despair and enabled individuals to survive the most challenging of circumstances. Personal narratives offer a more vivid insight into the experiences of the long-term prisoners and, as previously noted by Grounds and Jamieson (2003), they challenge the negative findings of earlier empirical studies.

### **Limitations of the current research base**

The review of the literature summarised above does not claim to be an exhaustive account of the research with long-term prisoners but certainly highlights the dearth of research with life sentence prisoners. To further illustrate, during the current literature search, eight review journals (seven psychological and one sociological) were fully reviewed and not one article was considered of direct relevance. In addition, life sentence prisoners were also neglected among the research interests of notable institutes. For example, the Institute of Criminology in Australia last published a report about lifers in 1999 and only had three documents in total relating to this population.

A further limitation concerns the fact that few studies give voice to prisoners themselves. For example, Patenaude (2004) observed that a limited number of articles exploring the subjective experiences of prisoners appear in the major anthropological journals and that the majority of research projects concerning institutional corrections are primarily quantitative in nature. The lack of psychological studies exploring these issues comprises a notable gap in the literature. Indeed, Crawley and Sparks (2006: 65) argue that:

[N]ot since the 1970s when Cohen and Taylor (1972) asked prisoners to describe their own experiences of long-term imprisonment, have the experiential, ontological and conceptual challenges of extreme and sometimes literally lifelong confinement received sustained analysis.

While Jamieson and Grounds (2005) have attempted to bring attention to this group of individuals and offer an insight into the challenges of long-term incarceration and post-release adaptation, it could be argued that some of their participants faced additional challenges to the life sentence (e.g. wrongful conviction, political motivations). Life sentence prisoners more generally have been particularly neglected by researchers.

Finally, Jewkes (2005: 378) warns against assuming that all lifers experience the life sentence – regardless of universal features of imprisonment – in the same way. While previous research may highlight shared themes regarding the experiences of life sentence prisoners, she argues that there is a danger in concluding that the responses of inmates of previous generations represent the experiences of inmates today. Indeed, Adams (1992) previously suggested that compositional changes in the long-term inmate population (e.g. sociodemographic and criminal history characteristics) can affect the institutional

experiences of the group and therefore ongoing and up-to-date research needs to be conducted.

### **Justification for further research: Exploring lived experience**

Returning to the statistics cited at the start of the review, life sentence prisoners comprise a growing segment of the prison population and society in general. The studies outlined above indicate that imprisonment is, at the very least, a challenging experience. For life sentence prisoners, a number of factors may further exacerbate this experience. Studies show that lifers are at heightened risk of mental health difficulties and suicide completion (e.g. Duffy et al., 2006), they are exposed to the noxious characteristics of the prison environment for longer periods of time (Flanagan, 1982), and they face the daily challenge of filling and managing their time (Jewkes, 2002). In addition, recent trends suggest that sentence lengths are steadily increasing (e.g. Mauer et al., 2004) which means that more individuals will spend longer periods of their lives in prison; the accumulated losses resulting from this have previously been alluded to (e.g. Grounds, 2004). Furthermore, many indeterminately sentenced prisoners live with the uncertainty of ever being released; in Ireland, all life sentences are indeterminate. In short, life sentence prisoners comprise a unique clinical population who present with a diversity of challenges.

It is important for clinicians to have some understanding and appreciation of the issues and challenges their clients' face. Put simply, the existing literature base does little to illuminate the individual's experience of serving a life sentence. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith and Osborn, 2008) provides psychologists with the opportunity to learn from the experts; IPA appreciates that:

Participants are experts on their own experiences and can offer researchers an understanding of their thoughts, commitments and feelings through telling their own stories, in their own words, and in as much detail as possible (Reid, Flowers and Larkin, 2005: 20).

According to Reid et al. (2005), IPA can therefore provide a more in-depth understanding than traditional psychological methods. IPA provides an alternative to the nomothetic approach typically employed in psychological and criminological research (Meek, 2007; Smith and Osborn, 2008). According to Meek (2007), its use in studies of restricted environments, such as prisons, is particularly relevant as it allows for participants' subjective experiences of their social and cultural contexts to be explored. The literature review conducted above suggests that life sentence prisoners have been provided with limited opportunities to communicate their subjective experiences. Johnson and McGunigall-Smith (2008: 337) point to the need to consult prisoners' in order to gain an understanding of their world:

Outsiders find it hard to put themselves in the shoes of prisoners: the prison world is alien to most citizens, so removed from our daily life that prisons might as well exist on another planet. To fully appreciate the pains of life imprisonment, one has to look at the prison as it is experienced by the inmates who must live each and every day of their lives in confinement.

IPA, with its focus on lived experience, offers an appropriate means of accessing the subjective experiences of these individuals.

## **Section 2: Research Report**

### **The Psychology of the Life Sentence: The Subjective Experiences of Life Sentence Prisoners**

## Abstract

The numbers of life sentence prisoners are on the increase both globally and, more specifically, in Ireland. Research indicates that ‘lifers’ are a particularly vulnerable subgroup within the prison population but they have not attracted the level or depth of empirical scrutiny that might be expected. To date, very few studies have been conducted with life sentence prisoners and fewer again have explored the subjective experiences of these individuals. Employing a mixed methods approach, the current study sought to gain an insight into the experiences of a population of lifers within a designated prison and training unit. To this end, a purposely-designed survey was administered to 26 lifers, eight of whom then participated in extended semi-structured interviews. The survey data was analysed with the aim of providing a descriptive profile of the population’s composition and to identify their self-reported needs. The interview transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith and Osborn, 2008). Five superordinate themes provided an overview of the men’s experiences of serving a life sentence: *reaction to conviction and sentence*; *experience of living in prison*; *managing time*; *strained relationships*; and *finding meaning: past, present and future*. The findings were considered in relation to previous research and areas requiring further exploration were identified. This study offers an insight into the subjective experiences of life sentence prisoners and considers the ways in which psychologists can address their specific clinical needs.



## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

*A long prison sentence is not, however, a short intermission in the real business of life, it is the real business of life (Cohen and Taylor, 1972: 90)*

### **1.1 Life sentence prisoners**

The numbers of life sentence prisoners are on the increase both globally and, more specifically, in Western countries (e.g. Giffard and Muntingh, 2007; Home Office, 2005; Mauer, King and Young, 2004). Research indicates that life sentence prisoners are a particularly vulnerable subgroup within the prison population. Not only are they subject to the initial period of emotional distress that typically accompanies incarceration (e.g. Zamble, 1992), they also present with heightened risk for mental health difficulties and suicide completion compared with other prisoners (e.g. Duffy, Linehan and Kennedy; 2006; Towl and Crighton, 2000). Lifers' experiences of incarceration may be further exacerbated by the extended period of time spent in confinement (e.g. Jewkes, 2002), the accumulated losses incurred (e.g. lost time with children) (e.g. Jamieson and Grounds, 2005) and, for many, the challenge of living with the uncertainty about ever being released (Sapsford, 1978).

### **1.2 Overview of the literature base**

A review of the literature indicates that life sentence prisoners have not attracted the level or depth of empirical scrutiny that might be expected given the observations outlined above. In general, two waves of research interest were highlighted by the review. The first dates back to the suspension of the death penalty in the UK (1965) and the resulting growth in the new subgroup of prisoners (i.e. long-term and life sentence) (Sapsford and Banks, 1979). Partly in response to sociologists' assertions about the detrimental impact of long-

term incarceration (e.g. Cohen and Taylor, 1972), psychological researchers were concerned with determining the nature and extent of the effects of long-term imprisonment (e.g. Bolton, Smith, Heskin and Banister, 1976; Sapsford, 1978). Primarily quantitative in nature, the studies arrived at a general consensus; long-term imprisonment amounted to little more than a “behavioural deep freeze” (Zamble and Porporino, 1988: 43) and could not be shown to cause deterioration or lasting detrimental effects (e.g. Zamble, 1992). Research demonstrated that long-term prisoners continued to face challenges across their sentence (e.g. anxiety about their relationships outside prison) (e.g. Richards, 1978; Flanagan, 1980). However, findings indicated that long-term prisoners adapted to imprisonment and coped quite well (e.g. Coker and Martin, 1985; Zamble, 1992).

More recent commentators have highlighted a number of shortcomings in this earlier body of empirical research, including the use of a narrow definition of harm, inappropriate measures of psychological change, and unrepresentative samples (e.g. Liebling and Maruna, 2005). More specifically, Grounds and Jamieson (2003) pointed to the discrepancy between case studies (i.e. accounts of difficulties reported by long-term prisoners) and the findings of formal experimental psychological research (i.e. no detrimental effects). Indeed, the authors noted that, having consulted the existing literature, they did not anticipate the multitude of psychological difficulties they observed in their study with long-term prisoners.

According to Crewe (2005b), prison life, in general, has been ignored by researchers in recent times. However, there are tentative indications of a renewed appreciation for the exploration of prisoners’ subjective experiences. More specifically, a very small number of researchers have recently employed qualitative approaches in their research with long-term

and life sentence prisoners (e.g. Jamieson and Grounds, 2005; Johnson and Dobrzanska, 2005). The findings have, for example, offered an insight into prisoners' coping strategies (e.g. Grounds, 2004; Grounds and Jamieson, 2003; Johnson and Dobrzanska, 2005), their relationships with staff and other inmates (e.g. Crewe, 2005a; McDermott and King, 1988; Walker and Worrall, 2006); the challenges of maintaining relationships with loved ones outside (Grounds, 2004; Grounds and Jamieson, 2003), and post-release difficulties encountered (e.g. Jewkes, 2005). However, this body of research comprises of little more than a handful of studies and the dearth of research with life sentence prisoners is striking. Furthermore, only a handful of the studies conducted to date give voice to prisoners themselves.

### **1.3 Justification for further research: Exploring lived experiences**

A review of the empirical literature base, summarised above, demonstrates that the experiences of life sentence prisoners, and the nature and extent of the challenges they face, have not been sufficiently explored by researchers. Recent statistics indicate that more individuals are being sentenced to life imprisonment, fewer individuals are being granted parole and the length of time that lifers spend in prison is increasing (e.g. Penal Reform International, 2007). Accordingly, greater numbers of individuals will spend considerable portions, if not all, of their lives in penal institutions. Clearly, this has profound implications for the individuals themselves, but also for prison services and those that work within them. It seems certain that psychologists' waiting lists and caseloads will increasingly include clients serving life imprisonment. The prison effects debate has given consideration to the impact of long-term incarceration but little attention has been paid to life sentence prisoners' quality of life on a daily basis. An appreciation of the subjective experiences of these individuals can only assist clinicians' in addressing their needs.

Indeed, Yardley (2000) and Patenaude (2004) argue that research needs to be pragmatic and have the potential to make a difference for it to be justifiable.

Through the detailed exploration of an individual's lived experience, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith and Osborn, 2008) facilitates researchers in gaining an 'insider's perspective' of the participant's psychological world (Conrad, 1987). IPA appreciates that "participants are experts on their own experiences and can offer researchers an understanding of their thoughts, commitments and feelings through telling their own stories, in their own words, and in as much detail as possible" (Reid, Flowers and Larkin, 2005: 20). Accordingly, IPA provides psychologists with the opportunity to learn from the "experts". The literature review conducted above suggests that life sentence prisoners have been provided with limited opportunities to communicate their expertise and identify their own needs.

#### **1.4 The current study: Ireland in focus**

Until very recently, the offence of murder was exceptionally rare in Ireland and the number of individuals sentenced to life imprisonment was miniscule. However, the population has increased by over 150 per cent in the last ten years and now represents a significant subgroup within the Irish prison population (O'Keefe, 2008). Unlike in other jurisdictions, where minimum tariffs are set and sentence management programmes are in place, life sentences are indeterminate in Ireland. While government policy dictates that most lifers will be considered for release at some stage during their sentence (Wilson, 2004), a life sentence prisoner has no guarantee of ever being released. Furthermore, statistics show that the length of time actually spent in prison has consistently increased over time (e.g. Brady, 2009; Wilson, 2004) Lifers are entitled to a review after seven years but their release

remains at the discretion of the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform. If released, lifers continue to serve their sentence in the community for the remainder of their lives but are subject to recall should they breach the terms of their parole (O'Malley, 2000).

### ***Overview and aims of the current study***

The primary objective of this study is to gain an insight into the experiences of individuals serving a sentence of life imprisonment in the Irish prison system. To this end, the study will invite a population of lifers within a designated prison and training unit to communicate their subjective experiences through a series of open questions and semi-structured interviews. A phenomenological approach (IPA) will be adopted as this is concerned with individuals' personal perceptions or accounts of their world (Smith and Osborn, 2008). This approach also allows participants to explore how experiences affect them over time and is therefore an appropriate method for asking participants to reflect on their experiences of life imprisonment. As far as can be ascertained, IPA has never been used in a study with life sentence prisoners. The current study aims to contribute to the empirical research base and to expand clinicians' knowledge and understanding of the experiences of life sentence prisoners.

## **Chapter 2: Method**

### **2.1. Research setting and population**

The primary objective of this study was to gain an insight into the experiences of individuals serving a sentence of life imprisonment. To this end, the study aimed to provide a descriptive profile of the population of male life sentence prisoners within a designated prison and training unit and to briefly survey their experiences of incarceration. Following this, the study attempted to access the subjective position of a sample of these men through detailed accounts of their personal experiences.

At the time of data collection, 49 men were serving a life sentence within an urban-based, medium security prison. Of these, 30 were in the main prison (closed) while the remaining 19 were resident in the prison's training unit (semi-open)<sup>4</sup>.

### **2.2. Procedures**

In order to meet the aims of the study and to promote the potential for full participation, a "mixed methods" design was employed (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998: 17). Here, quantitative and qualitative research approaches may be combined within the methodology of a single study.

Ethical approval was received from the Irish Prison Service and Trinity College Dublin (see Appendices A and B). Prior to recruiting participants, the researcher was afforded the

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<sup>4</sup> The training unit is a semi-open centre whose residents are life sentence prisoners either 1) coming to the end of their sentence or 2) have previously been released from prison but have since been returned on licence for breaching the conditions of their parole.

opportunity to attend the ‘lifers’ groups’<sup>5</sup> in both the main prison and the training unit. This allowed for a verbal presentation of the research proposal and gave potential participants the opportunity to ask questions or raise any issues of concern. It also allowed for feedback in relation to the research questions and proposed methodology. It was made explicit at these meetings that the offence would not be a subject of enquiry. The researcher’s autonomy in relation to the Prison Service, Probation Service and Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform was brought into question; the men were advised that the study was not commissioned and therefore the researcher would work independently, in line with the conditions of ethical approval. Full attendance was not observed at either meeting but non-attendance did not automatically result in non-participation in the study.

### *Quantitative phase*

Following the verbal presentation, the researcher wrote individually to each life sentence prisoner within the main prison and training unit. The letter comprised an invitation to participate in the study and outlined the nature of the study, handling of the data and the limits of confidentiality (see Appendix C). Consent forms were also enclosed to give participants time to review them prior to meeting with the researcher (see Appendix D).

A number of data collection days were agreed with the governors of both units and the researcher was furnished with the names of all life sentence prisoners. This list was returned to the prison authorities at the end of each data collection session and did not go off-site. Within the main jail, surveys were administered in a suitable interview room within the medical centre, which was sufficiently sound proofed. The researcher was assigned a prison officer to escort participants to and from the interview room and to sit outside the door

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<sup>5</sup> The ‘lifers’ group’ is a monthly meeting, coordinated by the Probation Service, and attended by life sentence prisoners and others, where necessary (e.g. Governors, Education, Psychologists).

during data collection. On these occasions, the officer was given the name of a life sentence prisoner, whom he then approached and invited to participate in the survey. If the individual agreed, he was either escorted to the interview room or asked to indicate a more convenient time to attend. Within the training unit, each life sentence prisoner was called to reception via the tannoy system. The staff member on duty invited them to meet with the researcher in order to participate in the survey, rearrange testing time or decline participation. Surveys were administered in a visiting room within the reception area, which was sufficiently sound proofed. A member of staff was always present in the reception area but did not sit immediately outside the door.

Prior to commencing the survey, the participant was reminded of his rights and his understanding of the limits of confidentiality was ascertained. The consent forms were then reviewed and signed. Surveys took between 25 and 80 minutes to complete, depending on what the participants wished to discuss. At the end of the survey, each participant was reminded that a referral to the Prison's Psychology Service could be made if issues of distress had arisen for them<sup>6</sup>.

### *Qualitative phase*

Those individuals who met with the researcher to complete the survey were reminded of the second phase of the study and asked if they would like to be considered for participation. Of those that agreed, a final sample was selected based on two criteria: 1) the length of sentence served, with attempts made to represent individuals at different points in the sentence (i.e. less than 7 years, 8 to 13 years, and over 13 years), and 2) the individual's ability to communicate his experiences, as evidenced in the survey.

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<sup>6</sup> One participant requested a referral be made. The researcher contacted the Psychology Department after the participant returned to his cell and the psychologist made contact with him immediately.



Each participant was notified via letter of his interview dates and times in advance. The letter detailed the nature of the study, handling of the data and the limits of confidentiality (see Appendix E). Consent forms were also enclosed to give participants time to review them prior to meeting with the researcher (see Appendix F). The procedure for meeting participants both in the main jail and training unit remained the same as that employed during the quantitative phase of the study.

Prior to commencing the interview, each participant was reminded of his rights and his understanding of the limits of confidentiality was ascertained. The consent forms were then reviewed and signed. Having been advised on how data would be stored and handled, each participant gave his consent for the interviews to be audio-recorded. Participants were interviewed on two separate occasions, each lasting approximately one hour. The second interview was conducted within seven to ten days of the first interview. At the end of the interview, each participant was reminded that a referral to the Prison's Psychology Service could be made if issues of distress had arisen for him. Participants were advised that if they had further points they wished to clarify following the interviews, they could put these in writing and the researcher would incorporate them with the data for analysis. Due to delays in the prison postal system, the participants were advised to pass on their written comments to the study's clinical advisor, a psychologist within the prison service, who would then pass it on to the researcher. No participant contacted the researcher in writing.

### **2.3. Participants**

#### ***Quantitative phase***

Out of 49 life sentence prisoners invited to participate, 26 men (53 per cent) completed the survey. 50 per cent (n = 15) of lifers within the main jail and 58 per cent (n = 11) of lifers within the training unit took part.

#### ***Qualitative phase***

The vast majority of those surveyed (96 per cent) agreed to a follow-up interview. Qualitative research guidelines advise that, in studies involving extensive interviews on a single occasion, it is acceptable to recruit between eight and 20 participants (Turpin, Barely, Beail, Scaife, Slade, Smith and Walsh, 1997). Accordingly, the present study comprised eight participants, each interviewed on two occasions. Eight men were initially contacted by letter and invited to participate. Of these, seven agreed and an eighth individual was successfully recruited shortly after. Five men were resident in the main jail and three were in the training unit.

### **2.4. Measures**

#### ***Quantitative phase***

Data was obtained from each participant using a purposely-designed survey (see Appendix G). This was deemed an appropriate method of data collection as it had a relatively short administration time, allowed for a demographic profile of the research population to be captured, and provided the opportunity for every life sentence prisoner to take part in the study and voice their opinion. The survey comprised three sections: 1) demographic and

situational data; 2) General Health Questionnaire-28 (GHQ-28) (Goldberg and Hillier, 1979); and 3) open questions regarding participants' perspectives on prison life.

The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) was designed to be a self-administered screening test which provides a measure of general psychological well-being. It assesses an individual's ability to carry out "normal healthy functions" and indicates the presence of distressing symptoms (Goldberg and Williams, 1988: 5). The GHQ-28 (Goldberg and Hillier, 1979) comprises 28 items scored on a four-point scale. It is the preferred version for research as it allows for the assessment of four dimensions related to psychological health: somatic symptoms, anxiety and insomnia, social dysfunction and severe depression (Ireland, Boustead and Ireland, 2005). It has both adequate reliability and validity and has a short administration time. It has been used and validated previously in prisoner populations (e.g. Elger, 2009; Andersen, Sestoft, Lillebaek, Gabrielsen, & Hemmingsen, 2002).

Participants were presented with a number of open questions which asked them to reflect on their current situation and experiences of imprisonment. The purpose of these questions was two-fold:

- 1) To capture as wide a range of individual experiences as possible; this would allow for commonalities to be identified concerning life sentence prisoners' challenges, coping strategies and needs. The questions were partly informed by the 'appreciative inquiry' approach which has previously been employed in prison settings and facilitates a broader reflection of an individual's reality to acknowledge the positive aspects of his circumstances (Liebling, Price and Elliott, 1999). This approach asks participants to reflect on positive experiences, including what works best in an organisation, and to

imagine how things could be better. Accordingly, participants were asked to reflect on both the “good” and “bad” things in their day-to-day lives and to consider what might improve their situation (i.e. identifying their needs).

- 2) The survey also functioned as a pilot study for the second phase by allowing the researcher to gain an initial insight into the prisoners’ experiences and to become aware of issues which might not have occurred to her.

### ***Qualitative phase***

Information was obtained from each participant using in-depth semi-structured interviews. Such qualitative methods were employed as “they are generally concerned with exploring, understanding and describing the personal and social experiences of participants and trying to capture the meanings particular phenomena hold for them” (Turpin et al., 1997: 3). Qualitative research guidelines advise that the agenda for a semi-structured interview consist of a relatively small number of open-ended questions (Willig, 2001). This allows the participant greater freedom to lead the interview into areas of particular concern to them and enables the researcher to tailor the questions to make them more appropriate to the interviewee (Willig, 2001).

The topics outlined in the interview schedule (see Appendix H) were, to some extent, a priori having emerged from issues raised in the quantitative survey, as outlined earlier. The interview schedule was also designed with reference to issues that were highlighted in the literature review such as the use of a life-history perspective to understand the complexity of the long-term prisoner’s experience of prison (Jamieson and Grounds, 2005) and employing an ‘appreciative inquiry’ approach in order to capture more positive aspects of participants’ experiences (Liebling, 2004). However, the questions listed in the schedule

were there to guide the interviewer but not to be strictly adhered to and the interviews followed a flexible and open format.

Each participant was asked to take part in two interviews, both of one hour's duration. This facilitated the development of rapport and allowed for more in-depth exploration of topics raised by the participants. It also gave participants the opportunity to reflect on the first interview in the intervening time period and to clarify or add to responses in the follow-up interview.

## **2.5. Analytic approach**

### ***Quantitative data analysis***

The demographic and situational data was analysed using descriptive statistics. As advocated by the test author, a dichotomous scoring procedure (0-0-1-1) was employed with the GHQ-28. In accordance with the findings of Andersen et al. (2002), a cut-off of 9/10, as opposed to the usual 4/5, was used. The authors reported that the higher cut-off was a good compromise in terms of achieving both sensitivity and specificity when using the GHQ-28 with a prisoner population. The open questions were analysed by extracting the most salient themes.

### ***Qualitative data analysis***

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymised. The transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith and Osborn, 2008), the aim of which is to gain an 'insider's perspective' of the participant's psychological world (Conrad, 1987). More specifically, IPA is "concerned with an individual's personal

perception or account of an object or event as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself” (Smith, Jarman and Osborn, 1999: 218). This is achieved through the detailed exploration of an individual’s lived experience (Smith and Osborn, 2008).

In this process, the researcher engages in an interpretative relationship with the transcript in an attempt to understand the meanings participants’ attribute to their mental and social worlds (Smith and Osborn, 2008). Accordingly, it is accepted that the research process is influenced by the interpretations of the researcher and is not objective. The analysis of the interview transcripts involved a number of stages (see Appendix I for a summary of the steps involved).

Every effort was made to adhere to Yardley’s (2008) proposed guidelines for conducting qualitative research. These comprise 1) sensitivity to context, 2) commitment and rigour, 3) coherence and transparency, and 4) consideration of impact and importance (see Appendix J). Disconfirming cases were also identified and reported where appropriate (Yardley, 2008). Furthermore, two independent coders, both with experience in qualitative research, reviewed substantial extracts from the interview transcripts and the themes which were developed through IPA. The themes and interview data were compared for transparency and coherence and agreement on the presence of themes was observed (Yardley, 2008).

## Chapter 3: Results

### 3.1 Survey data

Out of 49 life sentence prisoners invited to participate, 26 men (53 per cent) completed the survey. Fifty per cent (n = 15) of lifers within the main jail and 58 per cent (n = 11) of lifers within the training unit took part. Data relating to demographic and situational information was collated for analysis and will be presented as one group. The results of section 2 (GHQ-28) and section 3 (open questions) will be presented as two samples in order to facilitate comparisons of the two units.

#### 1. Demographic and situational information

##### ➤ *Age and nationality*

The age range of participants was 22 to 63 years, the mean age being 40 years (S.D. 11.6 years) (see Table 1). In terms of ethnicity, 20 men identified themselves as 'Irish', 3 as 'Irish Traveller' and 3 as 'Other White'.

##### ➤ *Educational and occupational status*

Regarding the highest level of education attained to date, four men completed primary schooling, 11 men completed lower secondary education, five men completed upper secondary education, two men completed third level qualifications (non-degree) and four men earned their primary degree. The survey did not distinguish between pre-prison and current level of education attained but the high numbers achieving lower secondary and primary level schooling highlights the disproportionate number of early school leavers in the sample. In addition, a number of the participants disclosed that they left school early but

subsequently progressed their education to a higher level while in prison. Prior to commencing their sentence, 22 men were in paid employment, three were unemployed and one was unable to work due to permanent sickness or disability.

➤ ***Family background***

At the time of data collection, 11 men were single (never married), seven had been living with a partner before coming to prison, one was married, six were separated and one was widowed. Six men who stated that they were single or separated disclosed that they were currently in a relationship. Twenty of the men were fathers and had between one and seven children each.

➤ ***Contact with family and friends***

All the participants agreed that they were in “regular” contact with at least one person outside prison. Twenty-five men maintained contact by visits, 24 by telephone calls and ten by letter. However, information obtained in the follow-up interviews suggested that a very broad interpretation of the word “regular” was employed and pointed to the probability that a number of men had very infrequent contact with family or friends outside prison. This was further highlighted by the fact that only 50 per cent of participants received visits either weekly (11) or fortnightly (2). Three participants received temporary release and visited with family on a regular basis outside prison. However, the remaining ten participants received at most one visit per month.

➤ ***Offence and sentence details***

Over two-thirds of the participants held previous convictions (n=19), the majority of whom had been sentenced to terms of imprisonment (n=17). In relation to the current sentence, the



men were aged between 16 and 49 years at the time of the offence, the mean age being 26 years (S.D. 7.9 years) (see Table 1). All but one of the men were convicted of murder; one participant was convicted of conspiracy to murder. A small number of participants were also convicted on additional charges (e.g. manslaughter). The men had served between 1.4 and 26 years of their sentences; the average number of years served in prison was 12.4 years (S.D. 6.2 years). The length of time served in the current prison/training unit ranged between two weeks and 22 years. Seventeen of the men had served part of their sentence in at least one other prison; four of these had been convicted in another country and subsequently repatriated to Ireland at some point during their sentence. Five of the participants had previously been released on license but were subsequently recalled to prison to continue their sentence in custody.

**Table 1: Summary of demographic data**

	<20	20s	30s	40s	50s	60s
Age at time of data collection	-	5	9	7	2	3
Age at time of offence	7	9	9	1	-	-
	<5	5-10	11-15	16-20	21-26	-
Years of sentence served	2	9	7	3	5	-
Years of sentence served in custody	2	9	9	2	4	-

## 2. Health and well-being

### ➤ *Subjective reports of well-being*

When asked to describe their current physical and mental health, the participants responded as follows (see Table 2):

**Table 2: Participants' subjective ratings of mental and physical health**

<b>Subjective Rating of Mental Health</b>	<b>Main unit (n=15)</b>	<b>Training Unit (n=11)</b>	<b>Subjective Rating of Physical Health</b>	<b>Main unit (n=15)</b>	<b>Training Unit (n=11)</b>
Excellent	3	2	Excellent	1	-
Very good	2	5	Very good	2	4
Good	6	3	Good	5	5
Ok	3	1	Ok	3	2
Poor	1	-	Poor	4	-

At the time of data collection 22 participants smoked cigarettes. Five participants disclosed that, at some point in their lives prior to imprisonment, they had attempted suicide and two participants reported engaging in self-harm; none of the participants had attempted suicide or self-harm in prison. Fourteen participants agreed that alcohol had been a problem for them; a number had received help for this while five stated that they would like help in relation to this. Eight participants agreed that drugs had been a problem for them; five stated that the help received to date was sufficient while three stated that they would like further help in relation to this. A small number of the participants volunteered that they first began using heroin in prison. One participant stated that gambling had previously caused him difficulties and that he would be interested in receiving information in relation to this.

All 26 participants had attended the doctor at some point during their sentence. In addition, 17 had attended the dentist, 12 a psychiatrist, 22 a psychologist, and eight an addiction counsellor. Two participants volunteered that they had attended a bereavement counsellor.

Two participants stated that they feared for their safety in prison during the past month and one participant stated that he had been bullied in prison in the last month. Seventeen participants agreed that other prisoners' drug use had caused them problems in prison; ten

of these identified it as a current concern. Participants referred to the tension, aggression and violence caused by drug abuse, as well as problems interacting with drug users (e.g. ‘hard to stay clean yourself’, ‘having to be on guard’), and the distress caused watching other prisoners abusing drugs. A number stated that drug use was rampant in prison and complained about it being “in their faces”.

➤ **Screening test: GHQ-28**

Two individuals (one each from the main prison and training unit) scored above the higher threshold of 9/10 advocated by Andersen and colleagues (2002). Mean scores and standard deviations for the total GHQ scale and the four subscales are presented in Table 3. Very low scoring was observed across the sample as a whole but participants in the main prison scored slightly higher across all domains compared with participants in the training unit.

**Table 3: GHQ-28 total and subscale scores**

	Somatic symptoms	Anxiety and insomnia	Social dysfunction	Severe depression	Total GHQ Score
Main prison	Mean = 1.6 (S.D. 2.03)	Mean = 1.07 (S.D. 1.98)	Mean = 0.73 (S.D. 1.03)	Mean = 0.53 (S.D. 1.81)	Mean = 3.93 (S.D. 5.46)
Training unit	Mean = 1.27 (S.D. 1.62)	Mean = 0.09 (S.D. 0.30)	Mean = 0.18 (S.D. 0.60)	Mean = 0.27 (S.D. 0.47)	Mean = 1.81 (S.D. 2.56)

➤ **Self-reported coping strategies**

Participants were asked what they did ‘to cope with stress or when feeling low’. As can be seen from Table 4, the majority of participants relied on exercise or solitary activities (e.g. watching TV, reading, listening to music) to get them through challenging times. Very few sought support from family, friends or professionals. A number of the participants presented as very limited in the variety of coping strategies they had and relied upon isolation from others when distressed.

**Table 4: Participants' self-reported coping strategies**

Ways of coping with stress or when feeling low	Main prison (n=15)	Training unit (n=11)
Exercise (e.g. gym, football)	8	3
Reading	6	2
Listen to music or play guitar	5	5
Watch TV	4	-
Talk to trusted other	3	6
Spend time alone	3	2
Contact with family	3	2
Writing (e.g. letters, poetry, essays, songs, music, problem)	3	3
Attend professional (e.g. psychologist, counsellor, probation officer, priest, nun, medic)	2	3
Play playstation	2	-
Think of the future – will get better/consequences of doing something stupid	3	1
Snooker	1	2
Go for a walk	-	2
Art/Paint	1	2
Just carry on	1	1
Other individual coping strategies identified (e.g. bottle things up; smoke; meditation; chess; recovery programme, look at photos)	5	9

### 3. Participants' needs

In addition to specific questions about alcohol, drug and gambling problems (see '2. *Health and well-being*' above), participants were asked on two occasions whether there was anything which they would like help with. Of interest, a number of men who had not identified anything when first asked were able to identify things that they would like help with when asked a second time. Six men (23 per cent) stated that they did not require help with anything. Five main themes emerged from the responses of the remaining 20 participants (see Table 5).

**Table 5: Participants' self-reported needs**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Composition – example quotes</b>	<b>Main prison (n=15)</b>	<b>Training unit (n=11)</b>
<b>Receiving therapeutic input</b>	<i>“Bereavement counselling” “Wait list for access to Psychology is too long”</i>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>More training and education</b>	<i>“Literacy” “Work schemes – skilling me for the future”</i>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Attention to health and well-being</b>	<i>“Better healthcare. Not regular enough checks. No follow-up to concerns”</i>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Sentence management</b>	<i>“Sentence plan laid out at start of sentence, like in the UK” “Release, a plan to work towards, sentence management”</i>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Preparing for life outside</b>	<i>“Financial advice regarding managing finances outside, for example setting up a bank account”</i>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>

Vandeveldde, Palmas, Broekaert, Rousseau and Vanderstraeten (2006) noted that, due to the negative prison counter-culture, prisoners may experience difficulties in disclosing their own support needs. In order to further educe their needs, participants were asked a number of open questions about their experiences of imprisonment.

➤ ***‘Do you make use of prison facilities?’***

Almost every participant made use of the facilities (e.g. gym, library, exercise yard) and activities (i.e. school and work) to varying degrees. What emerged from this question was the obstacles prisoners faced in availing of prison facilities and activities, namely irregular opening hours (e.g. library), workshops not open (i.e. some workshops had not been reopened following an incident six months previously), and no access to some workshops or school if housed in certain parts of the prison (e.g. medical unit).

➤ *‘What are some of the good things about life in this prison?’*

In response to this question, two participants were unable to identify anything good. Seven main themes emerged from the responses provided by the other participants (see Table 6).

**Table 6: Participants’ self-reports of ‘good things’ about life in current prison**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Composition – example quotes</b>	<b>Main prison (n=15)</b>	<b>Training unit (n=11)</b>
<b>Positive experiences with staff</b>	<i>“By comparison, not a bad jail...little bit more understanding here for lifers” “Majority of staff go out of their way to help you, they watch out for you if you’re having a bad day”</i>	8	4
<b>Contact with family</b>	<i>“Lifers’ visits ok, better than normal visits” “Normality of visits, physical contact”</i>	6	4
<b>Greater autonomy</b>	<i>“Choice to leave location and go elsewhere within the training unit, choice in the moment”</i>	-	8
<b>Greater access to education and training courses</b>	<i>“More courses compared to other prisons” “Opportunities to better yourself, education and personally”</i>	6	3
<b>Access to workshops</b>	<i>“Metal shop was good but gone now” “Welding shop, to learn a skill”</i>	3	3
<b>Hope for the future</b>	<i>“Training unit represents hope of progress and being released”</i>	-	3

➤ *‘What are some of the bad things about life in this prison?’*

In response to this question, seven main themes emerged (see Table 7).

**Table 7: Participants’ self-reports of ‘bad things’ about life in current prison**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Composition – example quotes</b>	<b>Main prison (n=15)</b>	<b>Training unit (n=11)</b>
<b>Negative experiences with staff</b>	<i>“Some officers have bad attitudes” “One or two staff will try to trip you up, for example with head games and rumours”</i>	7	1
<b>Drug use within prison</b>	<i>“Culture of drug use – surrounded by drug users and can’t get away”</i>	6	1
<b>Toilet facilities</b>	<i>“Facilities – no in-cell sanitation, dirty, too old”</i>	6	-
<b>Limited contact with family</b>	<i>“Visits too short” “New visiting regime in training unit – more restrictive”</i>	5	3
<b>Lack of work</b>	<i>“Poor work situation – no work” “Not as much training as there should be, for example the construction workshop is only welding, no other skill such as carpentry”</i>	4	3
<b>Lack of sentence management</b>	<i>“The set-up. No sentence plan for lifers” “Not kept up to speed with how people are looking at your case”</i>	3	3
<b>Problems living with other prisoners</b>	<i>“Living beside and having to share time with people that outside you wouldn’t”</i>	3	1

➤ *‘What do you think would make life easier for you?’*

Participants identified five main ways in which life could be made easier for them (see Table 8).

**Table 8: Participants’ self-reports of ways in which life could be made easier**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Composition – example quotes</b>	<b>Main prison (n=15)</b>	<b>Training unit (n=11)</b>
<b>Increased contact with family</b>	<i>“Facilitating families becoming more involved with prisoners and better quality visits”</i> <i>“More visits down home”</i>	12	2
<b>More activities in order to stay busy</b>	<i>“More things for lifers to be involved in”</i> <i>“More training courses”</i> <i>“A work programme”</i>	11	3
<b>To be granted TR<sup>7</sup> or released</b>	<i>“Go home”</i> <i>“To be released”</i>	1	6
<b>Improved toilet and wash facilities</b>	<i>“Access to washing machines”</i> <i>“In-cell sanitation”</i>	5	-
<b>Sentence management</b>	<i>“Being more informed about your sentence and what you need to do”</i> <i>“Programme should be implemented, stepping stones, you should know exactly how you’re doing”</i>	3	2

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<sup>7</sup> TR = temporary release



### **3.2 Interview data**

Eight participants, five in the main jail and three in the training unit, met with the researcher for two one-hour interviews. The age range of participants was 29 to 62 years, the mean age being 41 years (S.D. 10.9). The men had served between five and 25 years of their sentences; the average number of years served in prison was 11.4 years (S.D. 5.4). The data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); five superordinate and 17 master themes emerged from the analysis (see Table 9 in Appendix K). The following comprises a synopsis of these themes. Extracts from the interviews have been used as exemplars of the themes and to further illuminate participants' experiences.

#### **1. Reaction to conviction and sentence**

##### ***1.1 Immediate emotional response to conviction and sentence***

Participants described a range of emotional reactions to their conviction and sentencing. Having pleaded not guilty, one man recalled his shock at being convicted.

*...I lost all self-worth when that came in. I remember just standing there, feeling just like a piece of meat. I wasn't a human being... A002: 57-58*

A number of men pleaded guilty to manslaughter; for two of them the presumption of intent associated with a murder conviction was distressing.

*I went to trial saying 'Yes, this is my fault but I didn't plan it... And I just remember looking and saying 'Jesus Christ how could they have found me guilty, do you know what I mean, of murder?' Because em I just didn't feel that that's what I had done, 'How the fuck could they do that like?'...I was distraught. I was saying 'No way'...I was gutted. I was devastated because I had that heading 'murderer'. B001: 322-469*

Some of the men expected to receive a life sentence and two described preparing themselves mentally for it.

*... I'd resigned myself that I was going to be getting life so my frame of mind was get it into my head as soon as I could that way when I do end up at my trial it wouldn't be as much of a blow or anything. And which it wasn't you know, it was grand on the day and everything. A008: 41-44*

Others described the sense of relief they experienced following sentencing.

*But then when I got sentenced and the bail was gone, it was like this, the relief outweighed the burden of not knowing and I felt like so much better just after getting sentenced...than I did when I was out on bail for the few years. A003: 220-224*

### ***1.2 Not knowing and not being told***

One of the participants was convicted and sentenced in another jurisdiction where a sentence management system was in place. He had also served previous prison terms. As such, he had some sense of what lay ahead of him. The remainder, all of whom were sentenced in Ireland, recalled having no idea of what the future entailed. For many, this was their first experience of imprisonment. In addition, the length of the sentence was indeterminate and there was no formal sentence management in place for life sentence prisoners.

*No one sits down and says 'This life sentence means this'...You're brang into reception and you're told nothing really. You might see a governor the next day and your sentence might not even be brang into it...usually 'You're here now, you're here for a long time so settle in as fast as you can'. That's usually the advice you get...so that's what I'm saying like, there's complete and utter*

*confusion and frustration about what you've done as a person and what you're doing now as an individual, do you know what I mean. Because you don't get anyone that stands up and says 'This is what it is, this is what it means, this is what you need to do'. B001: 1866-1878*

### **1.3 Period of emotional turmoil**

All the participants described a period of emotional turmoil. Some discussed it in the context of the aftermath of the offence, others related it to difficulties experienced on remand or on bail. Months, even years, of heightened emotional turmoil following sentencing was commonplace.

*That was trauma, that was post distress fuckin disorder and that's how serious it was. For me, when I'm thinking back on it, do you know what I mean, from the point of realising that I was after killing someone to the point of being took away to start a life sentence. Even now, I can't even remember times from that point... A014: 1155-1158*

Similarly, another participant described the shock of facing up to the life sentence.

*I was actually sentenced and I was about a year in prison doing me life sentence when I was queuing for the shop one day and there was a clock over the wall and there was a metal cage around by the shop and it was like somebody came up and smacked me in the face. I woke up, the realisation, I'm after spending nearly a year and a half in prison, I'm into a life sentence and I'm in for murder. Wiped me out. I took eh, I had panic attacks, I had to go down to see the doctor and he gave me a few pills to try and calm me down and all that. But that was the realisation of everything that had gone on. B007:39-46*

## 2. Experience of living in prison

### 2.1 Distorted sensory environment

Recalling their first impressions of the prison environment, participants described a combination of sensory overload (e.g. noise, smell, overcrowding) and sensory deprivation (e.g. isolation).

*You have to, you have to start liking your own company quick [laughs] because ...you're in your cell locked up on your own for eighteen and a half hours a day. A003: 957-960*

*... what struck me was the absolute abnormality, the smells and the discordant noises. The rattle of keys. The shouting of prison officers, the prisoners, prisoners. The rattling, the banging of buckets. Whereas if you stood on (Name) Street you can't hear the sound... you don't hear the traffic really, you know you don't. It's natural, it's a natural sound of city life...You will hear a sound in (Prison) that you have never heard before. B006: 218-224*

Some of the participants' descriptions of temporary release (TR) further pointed to the level of sensory deprivation experienced during incarceration.

*... when I went out on TR and I came back after a day, I puked all over the place. I got very, very sick I did and it was because of me eyes. I wasn't used to focusing on anything...I was walking up (Name) Street I was, I was walking up (Name) Street and you're looking for miles and it's going further, and further and further and your eyes are straining... And there's so many different colours. You're used to the dull, dreary, kind of dowdy colours here...And you're always met with a wall somewhere here. If I look out that window and seen the wall so my vision stops... If I go anywhere else I'm looking at another wall, looking at another, looking at another wall...But when you're out there I was looking and you could*

*look and look and look for miles...And for the first maybe eight or nine TRs I went out on, I was as sick as a dog. B001: 1752-1763*

## **2.2 Atmosphere of tension and potential for violence**

Participants observed the tense atmosphere and potential for violence that permeated prison life. Although a few mentioned staff-perpetrated violence, the majority referred to the behaviour of other prisoners. A number highlighted the prevalence of drug use and the growth in gang activity as contributing factors.

*I'd say the one thing I hate about prison definite being in this environment is the fighting, the tension, the bitching, the hatred. A001: 934-935*

*...I witnessed a person being stabbed to death there about two years ago...on the landing like, maybe fifty feet from me...I seen him, I actually seen him dying...His life was ebbing away from him, he was calling for his mother. He was 22 he was. But only three days before that, he'd stabbed someone to bits as well...It's hard because it's not the first attack that we've watched. I've watched people getting cut from ear to ear... B001: 1043-1051*

Given this atmosphere, a number of the participants identified their preferable time of day as lock-up in the evening.

*Well the easiest times would be when I was in me room, locked up in me peggy from eight o'clock to eight the next morning...The hardest time was going out and there's a tension outside because you don't know who's gonna get whacked or who's gonna get cut up or worried that, why there's this atmosphere going on in the place. B007: 943-953*

One man highlighted the contradiction inherent:

*I go back to the thing about if you're an alcoholic they won't make you serve your time in a brewery...They won't let you serve your time in a pub...where you're facing this all the time, your demons. But in prisons, you go in there for violent acts and you're surrounded by violent acts all the time. B001: 1211-1215*

### **2.3 Loss of dignity**

Five of the men discussed the practice of strip searching within prison and the loss of dignity that accompanies this.

*The first time I came in here I had to strip naked and squat. That was my first experience with a prison staff. So you can imagine what that felt. So your whole dignity is gone. A001: 984-986*

*I've refused hospital appointments... I went downstairs, there was about eight men on reception and one of them decided that he'd try and strip search me again. I said 'I'm after being strip searched'. He said 'I don't care', he says 'you're being strip searched again'. I said 'Well then ask them to leave. These don't need to be here. They're coming out and they're talking to people. If you want to strip search me, strip-search me with you and him. You don't need all these fuckin, an audience, do you know what I mean'. 'Strip search or fuck off', he said. I said 'Right then, I'll fuck off'. And I didn't go to hospital. And I know that happens every day. People that are refusing to go for treatment because they don't want to be humiliated like that. That's one of the biggest things, do you know what I mean. B001: 1446-1451*

### **2.4 Lack of privacy and violation of personal space**

Participants described an ongoing violation of personal space due to a number of factors, namely limited personal space, absence of in-cell sanitation, the practice of cell searches

and experiences of having personal items destroyed, and the potential for being constantly under observation.

*Going to the toilet, you've no privacy. In fact the most privacy you can have going to the toilet is actually if you do it in your cell into a bucket. A002: 870-871*

*...when you're asleep like the officers, there's a peephole in your door which has to be there for safety reasons, but like you don't know when they're going to come and check, you know. So like you'd be asleep, you could be doing anything and next thing you know you'd hear the peephole and the light going on... A003: 1059-1062*

*And I was getting into this what do they call it, creative writing. So I sat down and I wrote about 140 pages in a matter of two days, when I was growing up, the lads and all this in (Area). And I left it on me table and when I came back from work that evening at four o'clock, it was ripped up in bits and in me bin. B007: 1057-1060*

### **3. Managing time**

According to participants, time had to be managed both on a daily basis and across the sentence.

#### **3.1 Daily: The importance of staying busy**

All the participants alluded to the importance of having a routine or purpose on a daily basis; others spelled out the necessity. For many, the key to managing time, and making progress, was returning to education.

*...there was one thing he said to me and it stuck to me now, '(Name) when you go through the system and you get sentenced, I'm gonna tell you, go to school. Do courses. And your golden rule is always make something, always make sure when*

*you wake up in the morning you have something to do'. Now I didn't appreciate what he did say at that point cause I didn't really understand it. School and all that, yes. But now, yeah, cause it's the same advice I give the young lads here. Cause it's true. If you don't have nothing to get up to in the mornings, you're whole motivation and your whole hopeful, hope that you'll get through the day will go. A001: 191-198*

*I: How do you get through a life sentence?...*

*P: Find things, find things to distract you. Find things that you are good at, that you can focus on. Find things that will keep you busy. A014: 1096-1097*

### **3.2 Across the sentence: Breaking up the sentence**

Given that a sentence management system is not in place, the men employed personal strategies to break up the sentence. A number focused on their appeal to get through the early part of the sentence. Longer term strategies ranged from setting goals (e.g. educational attainments) to using external markers to pass the year (e.g. sporting events, other people's release dates). Others spoke of the importance of maintaining a routine across the sentence. Only one participant did not employ any strategies to break up the sentence; he stated he had no desire to be released from prison.

*But there's also other little systems that you do to break it up on a daily or a monthly basis. Well, like just say in (Prison) I'm associating with certain people, you learn to know when you're getting out, you know. So let's just say your man in cell number 1 might be getting out in August of this year. Somebody else might be getting out in November, you know what I mean. So you just look at them. You look at their sentences rather than looking at your own, do you know what I mean? Your man in number 2 is getting out in August. So sure as soon as he's gone, then before I know it (Name) in number 1 will be gone in November. Ah sure, it's Christmas then. You break it up mentally in your head, you know. A002: 1000-1009*



*It's just a repetition. Everything, everything that you do today you are going to do tomorrow, you know. If you're in here or you're in (Prison), it's the same thing because it's the one thing that's keeping you free from trouble and keeping you out of everybody else's hair and you're flying under the radar...It's eh, what you say, it's a recognised eh, ingredient to your success coming through the prison... B007: 835-842*

### **3.3 Too much thinking time**

A number of the men highlighted the challenge of having too much time to think.

*It's a bad thing if you have too much time to think. It is a bad, bad thing. Because em, I know like if I sit down and just think and think and think I'd end up getting depressed because somewhere along the line my mind would end up going back to eh how it was years ago ...I'd end up pissed off and that's why like I try to get as much homework as I can from the teachers so I don't have that much time to think. I'm constantly focused on something. A008: 297-302*

## **4. Relationships under strain**

The men talked about their relationships with staff, other prisoners, professionals, and their children and loved ones. They described all their interpersonal relationships as being under continual strain.

### **4.1 Limited relationships with other prisoners**

Given the lack of induction or sentence management, the men relied on other prisoners to show them the ropes, particularly at the start of their sentence.

*Now these guys are a little bit older than me. And I learnt an awful lot within the first couple of months. How the prison works. And what is acceptable and what is not acceptable.... A001: 171-173*

A few of the men spoke about maintaining friendships in prison; these were typically relationships established prior to imprisonment. Others stated that close relationships in prison were not possible and stressed the need to be self sufficient while serving a life sentence.

*But at the end of the day you're on your own. And that's one thing I learned in here. You walked in here on your own two feet and by god you'll walk out of here on your own two feet. No one's going to do it for you. You have to do it yourself.*  
A001: 538-540

*There's no human closeness in prison as such...If you have problems and you speak to someone about those problems in prison in amongst your peer group, it's perceived as weakness...And you become vulnerable and you become targeted... Did you ever hear that saying, 'Even though there's hundreds around you, you feel so alone'? Well that's exactly what you are, you're on your own. You come in the gate on your own and you go out on your own, do you know what I mean. And through the whole sentence you're on your own.* B001: 719-726

Most of the men spoke about the need to limit their contact with other prisoners; to stick with a small number of people they knew and to avoid certain types of individuals (e.g. drug users, those affiliated with gangs and those on short-term sentences).

*... I don't have time for people that's doing a couple of months here and there.*  
A008: 586

As described by one participant, the challenge for life sentence prisoners lay in withstanding intimidation and bullying while not picking up a disciplinary report.

*So what you're doing is you're juggling the whole time between the two lines, in the middle...as a life sentenced prisoner the prisoners know that you're*

*vulnerable because any P-19s, that's a disciplinary report, could be seen as detrimental to your future progress with the parole board or people making decisions for you. So they know they can push that bit further, they know they can get away with that little bit more. So you've to try and balance that and you've to try and kinda be assertive enough in saying 'You can't do that on me' but without actually doing anything to make them not do it to you, do you know what I mean. B001: 730-737*

#### **4.2 Complex relationships with staff and other professionals**

The men described complex interactions with staff. The stark power imbalance was highlighted by the fact that the men lived in a highly controlled environment whereby they required permission from the prison officers to do almost anything. A number of the men talked about being at the “mercy” of staffs’ mood on a given day.

*I: ...Is there anything you've never gotten used to?*

*P: ... the needing permission to do everything like...if I want to go to the yard like I'll have to go through two or three different gates and each officer, you have to get permission off him to go through that gate, the next guy to go through that gate, you know what I mean like. There's that side like I suppose that points out that the fact that your life isn't your own anymore. A003: 1345-1353*

All the participants gave personal examples of negative experiences with staff members. A distinction was made between most staff, who were considered ok, and an element of staff who were perceived as antagonistic.

*No, you'll get officers testing you... not all officers like. Most of the officers are all right but there is, like in any job, there is a few, you know. A003: 377-378*

*You're dealing with some people who are there to do a good job and you're dealing with some people who believe they're the other end of the law, that*

*they're there to punish us further for what we've done on society...There's elements of staff here that will like em for instance they'll play games like with you...They'll pass comments about your visitor.... They'll try to draw you out if you say something. They might relay something that was in a letter, a private letter belonging to you...in front of people to kind of wind you up... B001: 1239-1249*

The length of their sentence meant that they were both vulnerable to staff turnover but were also in a position to build up relationships with staff over time. Indeed, despite being subjected to numerous practices which constantly threatened their relationships with staff (e.g. strip searches), the men still acknowledged positive interactions and appeared to seek positive relationships with staff.

*Cause if you're going to be in an establishment for x amount of years, you don't want the everyday battles with officers over stuff, you know what I mean...So you tend to look to try and get decent officers working with ye, whereas they give you respect and you give them respect. A002: 951-957*

*... the person doing life they're there, it's kind of vital that you kind of build some sort of relationship with them. A003: 1555-1557*

One participant spoke about his first experience of temporary release and realising the unconscious relationship that had developed between him and the officers as a result of incarceration.

*P: But I remember going in with them. And I was actually afraid of the officers leaving me side. I remember, I remember sticking so close to them when we were in the queue to get our food and that... I think it was more, I was so used to being in queues here where people are pushing in on you. Now all of a sudden you've got females beside you, other men beside you, nobody is*

*pushing through. And that was all a bit surreal to me. And I needed to get back into my comfort zone.*

*I: And the officers were your comfort zone?*

*P: Sadly, yeah [laughs]. A002: 480-495*

The majority of participants communicated a sense of feeling let down by other professionals. More specifically, many of the participants described a dissatisfactory relationship with the Probation Service.

*I think, not just Psychology. Welfare, Careers Officers, all sorts. There should be a good infrastructure there for working to set people up so that they have the education and the skills to go out there. That's what they should be looking at from the very beginning with life sentence prisoners...They do very little with lifers in these places until they've done their first seven years. A002: 1094-1100*

*But as a life prisoner there's this kinda sense of hopelessness because they [Probation] say 'Well there's nothing we can really do with him because he's here for this long anyway', do you know what I mean, 'so there's nothing we can do. We can't link in with him, we can't do anything with him'...Every agency within the jail, apart from the governors believe it or not, withdraw back. B001: 68-80*

### **4.3 Importance of personal relationships**

Regardless of frequency of contact, the importance of participants' relationships with family and loved ones was clearly communicated. These personal relationships served numerous functions; they provided the men with support, gave them hope for the future and in some cases gave them the will to live through difficult periods. One participant found the loss of contact with his family particularly hard to deal with and often resorted to drug use at emotional times of the year.

*I: ...There were three suicide attempts before you got the sentence. Then you describe your first year in prison as horrifying and*

*P: Horrifying yeah, yeah*

*I: What kept you alive through that (Name)?*

*P: Me family, me family, me whole, getting me phone calls out to the family and me visits. B007: 177-182*

*It was me young lad. I just, the urge or the need to see him getting older and...I used to dream of it, of seeing him like being 18, that was, that kept me fuckin, I'd say it would be weird not having something like that to focus on, wouldn't it? Like if you were a life sentence prisoner with no family or whatever. That's who I feel sorry for. A014: 1225-1229*

A number of participants highlighted the need for the system to support and protect prisoners' relationships with their families.

*... in other countries they realise the value of maintaining and promoting them family relationships, do you know what I mean. Because they're the things that will keep your head together and also they'll be the things that would blow your head apart, do you know what I mean. If they fall apart, you could fall apart... A014: 1202-1206*

Participants communicated the difficulties they encountered trying to maintain their relationships with loved ones. By virtue of being incarcerated (e.g. lost time with children) and at the mercy of prison regimes (e.g. restricted visiting times, security practices), participants battled to maintain relationships.

*They spend two hours driving up here to see you, they spend two hours sitting out there in a visiting room only to be told by some stupid dog that they have drugs. And that when they're searched they haven't got drugs and you're still not allowed in on a proper visit. That's very frustrating. I wouldn't put my family*

*through that. I'd never ask my family to come to jail again as long as them dogs are in place. A002: 794-798*

*But the few negatives are big negatives, you know. Like I can't, I can't stick a Christmas tree up when I get out with me daughter and tell her that like Santy's real and get her presents and get that excitement that I would have had all them Christmas's. Or I can't stick her in a Communion dress or Confirmation dress and say 'right, come on'. Like it's all gone. So all the stuff I'll have missed out on is gone, do you know what I mean? So I can't, I'll never get that back. That's probably the bit that will affect me most. A003: 1499-1504*

*...I'm trying to maintain a relationship for 26 hours a year with your loved ones. It's only a day and two hours to try and maintain a relationship. And they turn around and say it's a humane system. Nothing humane about that. B006: 792-794*

The majority spoke of missing intimacy while the men in the main prison, in particular, spoke of missing physical affection (i.e. there was a stricter visiting regime within the main prison).

*I miss the hugs. I miss me nanny's hug. And that contact... A001: 1071-1072*

*Ah it's hard. Some days it's really hard...you'd love some days just to lie down and cuddle, you know what I mean. Or wake up and see a head on the pillow beside you or something, you know. A003: 1102-1104*

## **5. Finding meaning: Past, present and future**

### **5.1 Troubled histories**

All the men described significant difficulties in their lives prior to the offence. These difficulties related to alcohol and drug misuse, mental health problems, difficulties in

childhood and previous terms of imprisonment. Reflecting on their backgrounds, three of the men observed that they were not surprised to be serving a life sentence.

*...I'm surprised that I didn't serve a life sentence before because like when I used to be taking the tablets and drinking, it was just mad, mad, mad. A008: 194-196*

*.... I suppose looking back on it now all the ingredients were there...I suppose looking back on it and saying well I suppose, I suppose there was going to be some explosion somewhere. B001: 1661-1662*

## **5.2 Finding the positive**

The majority of men – all of whom had served lengthy terms in prison – communicated an ongoing struggle to come to terms with the offence and forgive themselves.

*I can't forgive myself because it hurts to think that I actually, I couldn't hit somebody, but I could kill them. Now like as bad as that sounds, you'd want to hit somebody, the person would still be there today if I had had the guts or the balls or whatever it is to turn and around and hit them. I couldn't have that but for some strange reason I had the strength to turn around and kill a person, not the courage. It doesn't take courage to kill anybody, it's just, it gets to me and it twists me up in a ball. It actually, I go mad at the thought... B007: 575-581*

However, upon reflection, all the participants identified gains or positive changes to themselves from their time in prison. The significance they attributed to these varied among individuals; some credited the sentence with saving their lives, others pointed to educational and job opportunities that would not have been realised outside prison.

*I probably, I reckon I would have been probably dead now if this hadn't of happened. So like that's what kinda, when I feel down or pissed off like, I think how the fuck did me life get to this, like?, I do think like if I had of stayed on the*



*outside the way I was going at that stage like, I'd end out dead, you know. A003: 295-298*

A number of the men spoke about getting to know themselves by virtue of the time they had spent in prison.

*...I got to know me. I got to understand me. A002: 938*

Apart from appreciating training opportunities he received during his time in prison, one man could not identify any benefits to him serving a life sentence.

*It's a realisation, an inner knowledge that almost every hour I spent in prison was of no value to anybody good, bad or indifferent... B006: 1348-1349*

Over half the men had been in contact with the victim's family and spoke of the impact that receiving forgiveness had had on them. One man said it made him "feel human" (B006) while others recognised it as a motivating factor in progressing their lives.

*...but all she wanted, his ma, was that I get out so I had that thing... to show her that I was after changing when it finished. A014: 546-548*

### **5.3 Never knowing what's ahead**

Five of the participants spoke of the uncertainty that life sentence prisoners live with; they never know if or when their period of incarceration will end. The men spoke about the frustration caused by the lack of information provided to life sentence prisoners. A number pointed to the need for a formal sentence management programme to be set up. Throughout

the sentence, the men were acutely aware of the potential consequences of their behaviour and described an ongoing concern regarding how staff could interpret their actions.

*The unpredictability of the sentence. When I came in, when I started my life sentence I was told by a governor that 'You're going to do around eight years'...And in the space of a year the life sentence had gone up to nine years. In the space of another year it had gone up to ten years. In the space of another year it had been up to twelve...And every time I get near to a milestone, someone turns around and says it's been moved again. B001: 1577-1586*

*People doing life, from day one, don't know when it's going to end. There's no beginning, middle or end. So there's a dreadful lack of sentence management... They never know literally from week to week or month-to-month what way it's going, they'll never be told. They are never told the truth. B006: 1380-1386*

#### **5.4 Fear of power held by others**

Participants described themselves as 'state owned' and felt constantly vulnerable to the political climate of the day.

*That's another thing about doing life, you kind of start watching the politics a lot more because like whatever minister's in, whatever his view on things is, is going to affect us... A003: 919-921*

*... Like so your life really isn't your own like anymore. It's like you're, it's like that song fuckin Dido sings that like your life is for rent, you know what I mean? It's like you're just renting your body and your life now off the government because at any time they can tell you where to live, where to do anything like. Like you just realise that you lose all control over your life. A003: 1582-1586*

None of the participants explicitly verbalised a fear that they would never be released from prison; however four of the men were hugely concerned at the prospect of re-establishing

their lives and relationships outside prison and then being returned to prison. This fear centred on the control they felt that others' would have over them following release; for a number, this related to the Probation Service.

*It'd be something that I'd be afraid of, that you'd be took off licence and put back in prison. Especially after building up a relationship with me [child] and then all of a sudden I'm being took away again. That would be just heartbreaking. When you don't have a choice. Because when you're on release from prison, you're on temporary release. And that license can be revoked at any time. So that would be one of my biggest fears. To have got through me life sentence and really built up meself and been brought back out in the world again and done me dreams that I want to do and all of a sudden somebody decides along the line 'no, back to prison'. And that would be me biggest fear now, that would be heartbreaking. And that's something that I just do not want to happen. A001: 1164-1172*

*Because if they [Probation] have a disliking to you or something, they can have you taken back in as easily as that, do you know what I mean. You're taken back in and that's the end of it. B001: 60-62*

### **5.5 Hope for a better future**

All the participants, bar one, hoped for a better life some time in the future. Their dreams were modest. One man who had been recalled from license described his sense of hope for the future when last released and the difficulties he had in trying to realise those dreams; he was particularly despondent during the interviews as he struggled to cope with the uncertainty of a new release date. For the majority, time with their children was a priority.

*I just want to be happy. They say to me 'What do you want?' I just want to be normal...I have a home, I just want to go back to it...I want to interact with me children. I want to get married... B001: 849-851*

*... I still think there might be some hope at the end of the, at the end of the road, you know. There might be some light at the end of the tunnel...even though I might be whatever 40, 50 or something, I still might be able to have the last few years there with my kids, you know...I wouldn't be able to put that into words how that would make me feel. That would be unreal, that would be fantastic.*  
A008: 865-871

Five of the men expressed a desire to help others in the future.

*I want to help other people. I want to use my life experiences to turn people that may be teetering on the edge of that, certainly to give them information, if not to guide them away from, certainly to give them the information of what can go wrong.* B001: 793-795

One of the participants - who had served a lengthy sentence to date and fulfilled significant personal goals during this time – highlighted the importance of giving newly sentenced life prisoners a sense of hope.

*I suppose hope is the main thing. They should be giving people hope...everybody can be resaved, everybody can be redeemed...It doesn't necessarily mean that you have to forget what they done but you do have to acknowledge that people change and people move on... There's no hope. When you walk in there, it's like you're after being fucked into the bottom of a pit...And I don't know what's right and what's wrong with it, I don't know if it's right to turn around and say to a person that just killed someone... 'There is hope'. I don't know if that's the right thing to do but I know as a person, as an individual you need something to take you out of that hole at that time...You need someone to say 'Look it, you done something wrong and you done something really wrong but here's a hand to get you out of that hole and if you work hard, well then there is hope'...but that doesn't happen here.* B001: 1841-1886

## **Chapter 4: Discussion**

### **4.1 Overview of the study**

The primary objective of this study was to gain an insight into the experiences of individuals serving a sentence of life imprisonment. More specifically, the study sought to provide a descriptive profile of a population of life sentence prisoners, briefly survey their experiences of incarceration and gain an insight into the subjective position of a sample of these men. To this end, a population of life sentence prisoners within a designated prison and training unit were invited to participate. The findings of the study will be concentrated under three main discussion topics: 1) a demographic snapshot; 2) the psychology of the life sentence; and 3) the needs of life sentence prisoners.

### **4.2 Life sentence prisoners: A demographic snapshot**

Just over half the population of life sentence prisoners completed the survey. Participants comprised a relatively homogenous group: all were white Europeans (overwhelmingly Irish), most were early school leavers and the vast majority were in paid employment prior to incarceration. However, members of the Traveller community were disproportionately represented (11.5 per cent of sample). Over two-thirds held previous convictions, 90 per cent of whom had served time in prison.

A wide distribution of age and sentence length was observed. Lifers were aged between 22 and 63 years at the time of data collection. The men were as likely to have committed the offence in their late teens (27 per cent), as they were in their 20s (35 per cent) or 30s (35 per cent). The sample was heterogeneous in respect of the length of time already served.

This ranged between 1.4 and 26 years; over two-thirds had served between five and fifteen years in custody to date while almost a quarter had served between 16 and 26 years.

Fifteen per cent of the participants had been repatriated to Ireland following sentencing in another jurisdiction. Almost one-in-five had previously been released but were subsequently recalled from license.

A number of the findings are noteworthy in the context of previous research. O'Mahony (1993, 1997) conducted two surveys of the designated prison's population and observed a decline in the number of homicide cases (murder and manslaughter) from eight in 1986 to one in 1996 (and not all were sentenced to life). Thus, the prison in this study is housing significantly more lifers today than previously (i.e. 4,900 per cent increase). Furthermore, previous research demonstrates that lifers are now spending longer periods of time in prison. Wilson's (2004) study of 40 Irish lifers released on license demonstrated that the average time served by those released between 1976 and 1980 was 7.6 years; this had increased to 11 years between 1991 and 1995 and to 13 years between 1996 and 2001. Given that almost a quarter of the current sample has already served over 16 years in custody, this upward trend appears to be continuing.

The composition of the population may also be changing. Duffy et al. (2006) interviewed 82 per cent of all Irish lifers incarcerated in 2003 (n=126). They found that lifers tended to have fewer previous convictions than sentenced prisoners (i.e. 63 per cent, versus 37 per cent, had never been in custody prior to the index offence). In terms of ethnicity, 92.9 per cent were White and 6.1 per cent were from the Irish Traveller community. There are two possible explanations for the findings observed in this study. Firstly, the absence of any

non-White participants in the sample indicates that the sample recruited may not be wholly representative of the population of lifers either in the designated prison or in the prison system as a whole. Alternatively, the composition of the population may have changed in the intervening time period; the current findings suggest that a greater number of individuals sentenced to life imprisonment have previous convictions and that the population is comprising more individuals from the Travelling community.

In summary, the current findings demonstrate that the Irish prison system, and certainly the current prison, is housing growing numbers of lifers. Furthermore, statistics point to the likelihood that these individuals will spend longer periods of time in prison than may have previously been anticipated. Clearly this has implications for both the prison service and clinicians working there. For psychologists, increased contact with individuals serving life sentences seems inevitable. The remainder of the findings from the interviews and surveys will be synthesised below, the primary objective being to gain some insight into the subjective experiences and self-reported needs of these prospective clients.

### **4.3 The psychology of the life sentence**

Through extended one-to-one interviews, eight men shared their experiences of living through a life sentence. Five superordinate themes emerged from the analysis of the transcripts.

#### ***1. Reaction to conviction and sentence***

The men's descriptions highlighted a diversity of emotional reactions before and after sentencing. Others have previously identified the period of emotional turmoil which accompanies the beginning of a prison sentence (e.g. Zamble, 1992). According to Jewkes

(2002: 2), the combination of entry into the prison environment and the sudden and forced separation from loved ones can result in “severe trauma”. However, the current findings indicate that this period of emotional turbulence begins even before imprisonment; surprisingly, a number of participants described their sense of relief following sentencing, due to the difficulties they encountered while on bail or remand (e.g. uncertainty). It has been acknowledged that uncertainty comprises the key characteristic of a life sentence (e.g. Sapsford, 1978). The current findings indicate that some lifers begin to live with uncertainty even before sentencing. Furthermore, the experiences of Irish lifers’ are arguably exacerbated due to the absence of a sentence management system. A final point of note to have emerged from the current study was the indication that some individuals may experience an identity crisis during this time. For those that pleaded guilty to manslaughter but contested a murder charge, the conviction of murder and the presumption of intent inherent in Irish law, may challenge an individual’s sense of self.

## ***2. Experience of living in prison***

The challenges of incarceration extend beyond reception and continue throughout imprisonment. Many of the issues identified by participants provide further validation for the ongoing relevance of Sykes’ (1958) study (e.g. deprivation of personal security). Sykes’ had argued that the “pains of imprisonment” attack inmates’ sense of self. Certainly, the participants in this study, regardless of length of time served, communicated a sense of feeling “under attack” (e.g. B001: 1511) (e.g. random strip and cell searches). Indeed, Irwin and Owen (2005) argued that the prisoner’s ability to develop a cohesive concept of self is challenged by the imbalance between social interaction and privacy. The current findings replicate Walker and Worrall’s (2006) observations of the difficulties associated with living under constant surveillance. The participants’ experiences of tension



and violence further illuminate their sense of feeling under attack. Previous studies with lifers have demonstrated the potential long-term detrimental effects of witnessing violence in prison (e.g. Jamieson and Grounds, 2005). For example, Grounds (2004) reported that two-thirds of his sample demonstrated severe post-traumatic stress symptoms; these typically related to particular incidents of extreme threat or violence following arrest or in prison. The majority also reported feeling terror of being assaulted or killed by other prisoners while incarcerated (three of the men in his sample were actually subjected to serious violence).

### **3. *Managing time***

The men consciously think about and organise their time on both a daily basis and across the sentence. Staying busy and having a routine was seen as crucial; other findings have also reported this (e.g. Jewkes, 2005; Johnson and Dobrzanska, 2005; Zamble, 1992). Similar to the participants in Cohen and Taylor's (1972) study, the current participants were deprived of formal time markers and developed personal ways of breaking up the sentence.

### **4. *Relationships under strain***

The men's descriptions of their relationships with others communicated the ongoing challenge of trying to manage these interactions and maintain their relationships despite constant threats to their functioning. Similar to other studies (e.g. Crewe, 2005a; Flanagan, 1981; Johnson and Dobrzanska, 2005; Zamble, 1992), the current findings highlighted that lifers separate themselves from the majority of other prisoners primarily to avoid entanglement in activities that may threaten their progress. As expected, the findings of this study did not reflect the inmate solidarity observed by Sykes (1958). The men were

generally in agreement that close, supportive relationships with other prisoners was a rarity and that self-reliance was essential (e.g. also observed by Flanagan, 1980; Richards, 1978). The men recognised their reliance on staff and therefore their need to build relationships with them. These relationships had to be maintained despite the extreme power imbalance and practices (e.g. strip searches) which characterised prison life. The men's reliance on staff and their apprehension of staffs' power over their future progress was also observed in other studies (e.g. McDermott and King, 1988; Walker and Worrall, 2006). Finally, the majority of participants communicated a sense of being let down by the professionals who have a significant influence over their future progress; many communicated a willingness and desire to work with these professionals but felt that this was not being reciprocated. As previously observed (e.g. Flanagan, 1980; Richards, 1978), the current findings point to the significance of relationships with loved ones. The severing of relationships to avoid pain (e.g. Flanagan, 1980) was not reported among this sample. Unlike long-term prisoners in other studies, the majority of current interviewees were housed in a prison within easy travel distance of their loved ones. While travel was not a major threat to their relationships, other threats certainly existed (e.g. limited visits and telephone contact).

##### **5. *Finding meaning: Past, present and future***

All the men described significant difficulties in their lives prior to the index offence and a number saw their current circumstances as somewhat inevitable. Despite all the hardships of serving a life sentence, as outlined in previous themes, the men retained the capacity to identify positive aspects to their experiences. Again, the theme of identity emerged here with many of the participants describing a process of getting to know themselves. This finding corresponds with Jewkes' (2005) observation of the transformative powers of indeterminate sentences and the potential for lifers' to reconstruct their narratives of self.

The men's contact with their victims' families was a surprising finding and highlighted the transformative power of forgiveness. The men's ongoing lack of clarity regarding their futures – despite having spent, on average, over 11 years in prison - provided a stark reminder of the level of uncertainty they live with throughout their lives in prison. Their vulnerability to the political and moral climates of the day was acutely felt; this was also communicated by the men in Cohen and Taylor's (1972) study. Finally, the adage, 'hope springs eternal', never seemed so apt as in the case of these men. All, bar one, remained hopeful of a better life outside prison at some point in their futures. The findings of this study mirrored those of others (e.g. Cohen and Taylor, 1972; Johnson and Dobrzanska, 2005) in that the majority of men communicated a desire to help others in the future.

#### **4.4 The self-reported needs of life sentence prisoners**

The needs of life sentence prisoners were ascertained via the survey by asking participants directly what they required help with and by educing their met and unmet needs from the responses they provided to a number of other questions. Their responses were amalgamated and point to twelve needs (see Table 10 in Appendix L); the six predominant needs will be further discussed here.

##### ***1. Access to education, training and activities***

Of paramount importance to participants was access to work and educational opportunities and other activities. This reflected a number of needs, including providing ways to fill their time, progress their education and develop skills for the future. The majority of participants were early school leavers, further pointing to their need for education and training opportunities. In addition, almost 20 per cent of participants had been recalled from license. The reasons behind this were not specifically explored but this finding certainly

raises questions about the extent to which individuals are prepared for their return to community living. Indeed, a number of interviewees highlighted their concerns about feeling unprepared for the society that they were returning to (e.g. currency change). Similarly, Grounds (2004) observed the difficulties that the long-term prisoners in his study faced upon release (e.g. money management, adapting to newer technologies). Furthermore, Grounds and Jamieson's (2003) study with long-term ex-prisoners found that their greatest obstacle to successful resettlement was finding and keeping meaningful employment.

## ***2. Contact with significant others outside***

The majority of men in the main prison stated that increased contact with family would make life easier for them. This likely reflects the support that families provide, as communicated by the interviewees, and highlights the different visiting regimes in the two units (i.e. more relaxed in the training unit). At least one quarter of the men were in a relationship at the time of data collection and almost 80 per cent of them had children. However, less than half of the men had weekly contact with family. Sapsford (1978) reported that the majority of his participants had lost contact with their partners by the end of the fifth year. However, a number of men in this study were successfully maintaining relationships with their partners. This may be due, in part, to the shorter travel distances in Ireland compared with other countries. A number of organisational factors impeded on family contact (e.g. recently reduced visiting hours, introduction of the drug detection dogs, and maximum of six minute daily phone call). Previous studies have highlighted the stress of separation from loved ones (e.g. Flanagan, 1980; Richards, 1978).

### ***3. Lack of sentence management***

The lack of sentence management was identified as a problem for participants in both units and clearly indicated the uncertainty that they lived with. The sentence management system in the UK was identified by a number of men as a desirable system.

### ***4. Relationships with staff***

Relationships with staff were identified as both “good things” and “bad things” suggesting that positive interactions with staff were seen as important. The men expressed appreciation for any efforts or concessions made by staff for lifers (e.g. tolerance, understanding, running the lifers’ group). Similar to the interview findings, a minority of staff were seen as having bad attitudes.

### ***5. In-cell sanitation***

For the men in the main prison, the absence of in-cell sanitation and poor toilet facilities was a problem. In practice, this means that the use of buckets and the practice of ‘slopping out’ is a reality for many. As highlighted by the interviewees, this indignity may be further exacerbated by staffs’ ability to observe them through the peephole at any given time. A further point comes to mind: given overcrowding and the number of drug users within the prison, the sickness that often accompanies drug misuse poses obvious difficulties where in-cell sanitation is limited to a bucket.

### ***6. Therapeutic input***

Half the men within the main prison and a quarter within the training unit identified further therapeutic input as desirable. This covered a multitude of issues, including bereavement counselling, ‘dealing with the past’ and general support to deal with their circumstances.

This need was greatest for the men in the main prison and probably reflected the likelihood that the men in the training unit would have previously engaged in therapeutic work. One third of participants specifically stated that they would like further help in relation to alcohol, drug and gambling problems (both personal and family backgrounds). A further indication of the need for therapeutic input comes from the men's self-reports of their coping strategies; these were predominantly exercise and solitary activities (e.g. reading and music). Only a small number sought support from family, friends or professionals.

### ***Obstacles to meeting needs***

The information obtained through the surveys suggested that the men faced a number of obstacles in meeting their needs. Firstly, almost a quarter of the men stated that they did not need help with anything. As noted by Vandeveld et al. (2006), this may reflect their inability to identify their own needs. It may also communicate their unwillingness to share them with the researcher (e.g. Richards (1975) queried whether his findings amounted to social desirability with the participants in his study downplaying their difficulties and exaggerating their ability to handle prison). It may simply be the case that they felt that their needs were currently being met. On the other hand, it was surprising that so many requested therapeutic input.

Participants housed in certain parts of the main jail were restricted in what they have access to (e.g. if on protection). Furthermore, the study was conducted a relatively short time after a major incident occurred within the main prison which resulted in the closure of a number of the workshops. Six months later they had not reopened and this loss was communicated by participants. In addition, staff shortages impacted on prisoners meeting their needs; for example, a number pointed to the library's irregular opening hours and the

loss of the drama society (e.g. Prison Visiting Committee, 2007, 2006). In a series of focus groups with prisoners and staff, Nurse, Woodcock and Ormsby (2003: 483) found that staff shortages lead to a “circle of stress”, whereby both prisoner and staff mental health is detrimentally affected (e.g. prisoners spending longer in isolation). The authors employed a settings approach to demonstrate that a prison comprises a contained ecosystem whereby each area influences the other.

#### **4.5 Clinical implications**

The findings outlined above point to a vast array of clinical implications, a number of which will be discussed here.

##### ***1. Early intervention***

The current findings and those from other studies outlined above, point to the necessity for early intervention with newly sentenced lifers (e.g. period of emotional turmoil, heightened risk for mental health difficulties and suicide completion). Furthermore, many of the participants in this study reported feeling abandoned by professionals at the start of their sentence. Accordingly, psychologists could support lifers during the “traumatic” transition into prison (e.g. Jewkes, 2002), adjustment to the prison environment (e.g. stress caused by noise) and separation from loved ones, and coming to terms with the life sentence and uncertainty of their future (e.g. Willmot, 2003). At this stage, clients may present with a multitude of difficulties, including stress, trauma, loss and bereavement (e.g. intrafamilial homicide), remorse, anxiety about the future, worry about loved ones left outside (especially children), fear and hopelessness. As highlighted in the interviews, psychologists can certainly communicate a sense of hope to clients during this time. While not all individuals will be open to contact, support can still be provided through literature

and an induction pack (e.g. outlining stress reduction techniques). Recognising the need for information when sentenced, a number of the participants have already started to design an information booklet specifically for newly sentenced lifers.

## **2. *Individual therapeutic work***

The current findings point to a number of issues that the clinician must remain mindful of while engaging in short-term and longer-term work with lifers. Given lifers' limited autonomy within the system, Flanagan (1982) notes the importance of fostering autonomy and providing availability of choice when designing interventions for long-term prisoners. Furthermore, the prison system promotes compliance, reduces autonomy (Sykes, 1958) and can therefore give rise to 'learned helplessness' (Seligman, 1975). The clinician must therefore be aware of the danger of mirroring this relationship. Secondly, a number of authors have pointed to the importance of acknowledging lifers' abilities to develop a sense of purpose and have meaningful lives within prison (e.g. Flanagan, 1982). Accordingly, the clinician must remain aware of counter-transference in the form of hopelessness. A number of the participants in this study felt a sense of hopelessness communicated by professionals who were dealing with them. Similarly, in her discussion of her psychodynamic treatment of a young man sentenced for murder, Marriott (2007) highlighted her experiences of counter-transference as "immense sadness" and a "sense of awfulness" of what her client had to live with (i.e. remorse). However, findings have suggested that, while lifers may experience an identity crisis they can, with support, reintegrate or reconstruct a sense of self that is independent of past events (e.g. Jewkes, 2005). Self-reliance, withdrawal and engagement in solitary activities have been identified as common coping strategies. Accordingly, therapeutic work could also focus on building coping skills and rehearsing positive adaptation strategies (e.g. Willmot, 2003). However,



clinicians need to be mindful of the environmental context when implementing interventions (for example, CDs can assist relaxation and stress reduction but clients must be advised to use them when there is a limited risk of a cell search). Loss is likely to be a significant theme in therapeutic work. According to Walker and Worrall (2006), clinicians need to develop an understanding of bereavement and the grieving process, given the experiential similarities between a life sentence and bereavement. Similarly, Jamieson and Grounds (2005) demonstrated that long-term imprisonment may entail losses of life history that cannot be reconstituted. Indeed, a number of the men in this study spoke of the time and shared experiences that they have lost with their children which cannot be recaptured.

### **3. *Group work***

While the experiences of lifers' in the UK are different to Irish prisoners (i.e. sentence management system), an overview of the groups conducted there may provide some guidance. Morrissey (1995) stressed that lifers comprise a separate group of prisoners with particular groupwork needs. In a survey of UK prisons, she found that three types of groups existed for lifers: 1) information based groups (e.g. if conducted at the start of the sentence can reduce uncertainty, foster relationships between lifers and offer a degree of mutual support while skills training is more appropriate when lifers are preparing for release), 2) supportive groups (e.g. supporting lifers through the emotional turbulence at the start of the sentence, helping them through later periods of low morale and hopelessness, and addressing anxieties about returning to community living); and 3) groups addressing offending behaviour. The challenges faced by facilitators include managing the feelings and frustrations that may hinder the opportunities to address deeper feelings (e.g. bitterness, low morale). Perhaps more than shorter-term prisoners, lifers may particularly benefit from the therapeutic factors inherent in group work (Yalom, 2005: 6-27). For

example, findings indicate that lifers tend to withdraw from wider networks of prisoners over time and become more self-reliant (e.g. Crewe, 2005a). Accordingly, the experiences of universality and the development of socialising techniques are clearly relevant to this population. Further, groups provide the opportunity for a corrective emotional experience and exploration of styles of interpersonal relating. This is relevant in the context of previous studies which indicated that lifers can experience difficulties relating to loved ones and friends upon release (e.g. Coker and Martin, 1985; Jamieson and Grounds, 2005).

#### **4. *Working with families***

Psychologists can support prisoners and their families in maintaining their relationships. Previous researchers observed that relationships can break down post-release because prisoners and their families avoided disclosing their difficulties to each other on visits or failed to hold conversations about what each expected upon release (e.g. Grounds, 2004; Grounds and Jamieson, 2003). Accordingly, Grounds (2004) recommended forewarning prisoners and their families of the problems likely to be experienced upon release and supporting the family in developing mutual understanding and coping strategies.

#### **5. *Other roles***

A consideration of the other roles that psychologists could adopt in relation to lifers is beyond the scope of this discussion. Suffice to acknowledge that psychologists can bring a unique perspective to the prison system, including supporting prison staff in their work with lifers (e.g. informing them of the findings of this study and others, communicating lifers' appreciation for their efforts, exploring ways in which prison regimes (e.g. strip searches) can be made less undignified for individuals). For example, Arnold (2005) reported that prison officers also develop coping strategies over time (e.g. emotional

distance and detachment) and alluded to the dangers of officers becoming too detached and desensitised to carry out some of their tasks.

#### **4.6 Service implications**

Again, a full appreciation of the service implications to have emerged from the current study is beyond the scope of this discussion. However, a number of these will be briefly mentioned. While a sentence management programme does not exist (and would likely require the amendment of existing legislation), the prison service could address some of the uncertainties and anxiety that exist by initiating an induction programme for newly sentenced lifers.

The lifers in this study and others stressed the importance of having access to work, educational and other activities. While acknowledging the reality of staff shortages, it is, none-the-less, important to highlight that the United Nations (1994) recommended that life sentence prisoners should be provided with “opportunities for communication and social interaction,” as well as “opportunities for work with remuneration, study, and religious, cultural, sports, and other leisure activities.” In a similar vein, the Council of Europe (1977) directed that long-term prisoners should be given “opportunities of doing something useful” and “must be treated having regard to possible release and reintegration into the outside world”.

The participants in this study expressed their appreciation for the ‘lifers’ visits’ in existence (e.g. separate visiting room, more relaxed and child-friendly). Studies indicate that lifers’ mental health and well-being are directly influenced by family contact (e.g. Flanagan, 1980). Furthermore, Coyle (2001) notes that the prisoner’s family is also entitled

to maintain contact with the individual; they have not committed any crime. Accordingly, the prison service could look to increasing and improving contact between lifers and their families (e.g. increasing 'lifers' visits' from bi-monthly to weekly). Coyle (2001) points to the use of family visiting apartments in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (e.g. 72-hour visits) and conjugal visits in Scandinavian countries.

In terms of the living environment, the lack of in-cell sanitation comprises an affront to basic human dignity. The Prison Visiting Committee (e.g. 2007, 2006) has repeatedly urged the prison service to address this issue. In addition, many of the participants in this study voiced their desire for their landing to be restricted to long-term and life sentence prisoners in order to maximise the potential for stability. Furthermore, in highlighting the higher proportion of lifers with psychosis, Duffy et al. (2006) called on changes to be made in order to reduce the risk of psychosis, major depressive disorder and other mental illnesses (e.g. drug free environments).

#### **4.7 Methodological considerations**

##### ***Strengths of the study***

Every effort was made to contact all life sentence prisoners within the main prison and training unit and to facilitate the participation of each individual (i.e. verbal presentation at lifers' groups, written invitation sent to each lifer, verbal invitation issued to each lifer). The study employed a mixed methods approach which facilitated full participation and allowed for the experiences of life sentence prisoners to be explored from two viewpoints, a survey and semi-structured interview.

### *Weaknesses of the study*

The study achieved a relatively low response rate. Only 53 per cent of life sentence prisoners participated in the survey. A number of factors may have been at play here. Firstly, the researcher was reliant on prison officers to act as a gateway to potential participants. It is conceivable that an acrimonious relationship between a staff member and prisoner may have prevented some of the lifers from agreeing to participate when approached by the officer attached to the study on a given day. In addition, one of the participants informed the researcher that he did not attend the verbal presentation nor did he open the letter sent to him. He learned about the study from a fellow prisoner and only took part on his friend's recommendation. Thus, while every effort was made to notify all lifers of the study, it is possible that other prisoners responded likewise and then declined the officer's invitation to participate in the study as they had no prior knowledge of it.

While it is accepted that the use of qualitative methods provides an insight into the experiences of individuals and the findings are therefore not representative of all life sentence prisoners, it must be acknowledged that the current sample was likely to be more representative of the better functioning individuals within the population (e.g. all bar one of the interviewees had engaged in extensive therapeutic work). In addition, active drug users and individuals affiliated with gangs were particularly under-represented in the study's sample. It is arguable that the study failed to capture the experiences of life sentence prisoners who are coping less well; indeed an interview participant had to be dropped from the study as staff believed him to be under the influence of drugs on the day of interviewing. As such, valid consent could not be obtained. Further support for this comes from the findings that none of the participants had attempted suicide or self-harm in prison while the GHQ-28 scores typically fell below the cut-off point.

It was felt that two interview sessions would prove an acceptable amount of time to explore the personal experiences of individual lifers. In hindsight, a greater number of sessions with each individual may have proven more appropriate. While a number of interview participants had undertaken considerable therapeutic work and appeared comfortable engaging in a reflective process, engagement in an interview for research purposes comprises a wholly different experience. Having gained a greater appreciation for the prison culture, it is now felt that the men required more time to build rapport and access the affective dimension of their experiences (e.g. the men would not be used to automatically sharing their private emotional worlds with others). Further, while participants were reassured of the researcher's independence, they were also aware that she was expecting to complete a placement within the designated prison as part of her training as a clinical psychologist. As such, this knowledge may have contaminated the participants' perceptions of independence and confidentiality and limited the information they chose to disclose in the interviews.

Finally, the reduction of interview data to a quantity which can be communicated is an inevitable and necessary consequence of the research process. IPA facilitated this process and allowed for an overview of the men's experiences to be presented. However, individual case studies may have retained more of the diversity and richness of individual accounts. Indeed, Smith (2004) has stated that the development of IPA may be in the analysis of the single case study.

#### **4.8 Directions for future research**

The dearth of research with life sentence prisoners is disturbing given their growing numbers and the burden of care they place on the prison service over a prolonged period of

time. More importantly, the impact of a life sentence on an individual appears unparalleled. This study was ambitious in scope - to illuminate the subjective experiences of life sentence prisoners – and future research could offer a more in-depth analysis of discrete aspects of lifers’ experiences. Furthermore, given the paucity of research, it is not surprising that little attention has been devoted to the advancement of a theoretical understanding of lifers’ experiences. Other researchers have also highlighted this gap in the literature and have looked to existing theoretical frameworks in order to make sense of their findings (e.g. Walker and Worrall (2006) drew comparisons between bereavement and the feelings of loss experienced by the female lifers in their study). Specific topics for further research, including ways in which a theoretical understanding of lifers’ experiences can be advanced, are outlined below.

The findings of this study and others demonstrate that lifers’ relationships with staff are complex and often infantilising; they involve significant power imbalances whereby prisoners are not only reliant on staff to meet their basic needs (e.g. provide food) but are also dependent on staff’ reports to secure their eventual release. Accordingly, lifers must manage their interactions with staff and try to maintain these relationships despite ongoing threats to their functioning (e.g. strip searches). It would be interesting to apply an attachment perspective to the exploration of lifers’ relationships with prison officers. According to Bowlby (1969), there is a universal human need to form close affectional bonds and early interactions establish the basis for subsequent interpersonal behaviour. The participants’ descriptions of their interactions with staff resemble the ‘disorganised attachment style’ that characterises early parent-child relationships whereby the caregiver is a figure of both fear and reassurance.

According to Maslow's theory (1970), basic human needs must be satisfied before engagement in therapeutic work becomes a priority. Given that lifers are under extreme pressure to engage in personal development in order to increase their hopes of release, it would be useful to explore how they manage the tension between unmet needs (e.g. safety and security) and therapeutic engagement.

A number of participants' indicated the distress that accompanied the presumption of intent in a murder conviction. As such, it would be interesting to look at how an individual's identity is challenged and maintained in the context of a contested murder conviction.

Almost one-in-five of the study's sample had been recalled from license. Future research could take this subgroup of lifers and explore their experiences of incarceration, release on license and recall to prison. More specifically, there is clearly a need to identify the factors that led to these individuals being recalled from license and to explore whether there are commonalities in the men's experiences (both during incarceration and during release). The aim of this research would be to ascertain whether preventative measures or interventions could be developed to reduce the risk of lifers being returned to prison.

As previously highlighted, the population of lifers has grown exponentially over the last ten years. In addition, the composition of the population as a whole appears to be changing. Media reports point to the growing numbers of gang-affiliated individuals being sentenced to life imprisonment. Indeed participants in this study observed the growing gang culture in prison. Although likely to present considerable challenges in terms of recruitment, research is needed on the impact of gang affiliation both on an individual's experience of serving a life sentence and also on the population of lifers. For example, a number of participants



talked about turning their lives around when they came into prison. This potential benefit of imprisonment is unlikely to exist for lifers whose gang affiliation continues to play out in prison.

## **Conclusion**

The current study has sought to gain an 'insider's perspective' of the experiences of a group of men serving sentences of life imprisonment. Statistics highlight that lifers comprise a growing segment of both the prison population, and society in general, but that they have attracted little empirical attention to date. The findings of the current study go some way to illuminating the subjective worlds of these men and highlight that the life sentence is an experience without parallel. The self-reported needs of the men, as communicated above, indicate that lifers present with a complexity of therapeutic needs. Further research is required to gain a greater appreciation of more discrete aspects of the experiences of individuals serving a life sentence.

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