Lifers: An Exploration of Coping among Male Life Sentence Prisoners

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Summary: The impact of long term imprisonment has been well documented. However, much of this research has taken place in jurisdictions other than the Republic of Ireland and focused on the psychological changes that occur during long term incarceration. This study focuses on coping amongst a small number of prisoners serving life sentences in a prison in the Republic of Ireland. In the Republic of Ireland, there are no specific programmes designed to meet the needs of life sentence prisoners in custody. Once sentenced, prisoners must simply adapt and come to terms with the indeterminate sentence. In recent years, there has been a sharp rise in the number of people being sentenced to life imprisonment. It is therefore timely that attention is paid to the issue of coping amongst this group of prisoners. The study identifies the factors that support coping among life sentence prisoners currently serving sentences in Ireland. The study also highlights a number of flaws inherent within the current system for managing life sentence prisoners in Ireland. It argues that the importance of providing support services to life sentence prisoners should not be underestimated given the gravity of the offending behaviour, the impact on victims and the consequences for society in general.

Keywords: Life sentence, prisoners, imprisonment, courts, sentencing, Ireland, coping, long-term imprisonment.

Prison is not a life that life sentence prisoners would want, and prison does not provide a life that they would desire. But prison is all lifers have. To survive, they must adapt. For lifers, it’s as good or as bad as it gets.

(Johnson and Dobrzanska, 2005, p. 8)

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