

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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Introduction

The past 50 years witnessed rapid growth in criminological literature on the impact of prison. The effects of long-term imprisonment have been well documented (Sykes, 1958; Cohen and Taylor, 1972; Sapsford, 1978; Richards, 1978; Zamble and Porporino, 1990; Flanagan, 1995; Roscher, 2005; Liebling and Maruna, 2005). However, much of the research has focused on psychological changes that occur during imprisonment and the detrimental effects of long-term imprisonment. All of this research has taken place in other jurisdictions. In the Republic of Ireland, since 1998, there has been a sharp rise in the number of life sentences being imposed by our criminal courts (O'Keefe, 2008; O'Donnell, 2011). According to the Irish Prison Service, the number of life sentences increased by 10% in 2009. In that year 22 life sentences were imposed by the criminal courts, and by the end of it 276 prisoners (male and female) were serving life sentences, which represents 6.8% of the total prison population (Irish Prison Service, 2009, p. 3). There has also been a notable increase in the average time spent in custody for life sentences. In recent times a life sentence prisoner can expect to serve, on average, a minimum of 17 years in prison before being considered for a structured release programme. This compares to an average of just over 7.5 years served for life sentence prisoners who were released between 1975 and 1984, and just under 12 years for life prisoners released between 1985 and 1994 (Irish Prison Service Report, 2009, p. 4). It is clear from these statistics that not only is the number of life sentence prisoners increasing, but the length of time served is also rising.

Research rationale

In light of the increasing number of life sentences, it is timely that some attention be paid to the needs of life sentence prisoners. Currently there are no specific programmes designed to meet the needs of life sentence prisoners within the Irish Prison Service (IPS). Once sentenced, a life sentence prisoner is treated similarly to other prisoners in that he/she must adapt to the prison regime and find ways to come to terms with his/her sentence. (The term 'lifer' is used in much of the literature, and will be used interchangeably with the term 'life sentence prisoner' throughout this paper.) Lifers are eligible for review by the Parole Board approximately seven years into their sentence and, until then, they must

adjust and cope. Thus, as this study highlights, few programmes are implemented with lifers until the first Parole Board review is imminent.

Research in the Republic of Ireland on coping with life imprisonment is limited to just two studies: Jamieson and Grounds (2002) and Geaney's (2008) unpublished master's dissertation in criminology. Jamieson and Grounds (2002) examined the effects of imprisonment among Republican prisoners and their families. Republican prisoners had a support structure among prisoners, and their families had additional political support, which may have aided coping (Jamieson and Grounds 2002). Geaney's research identified common themes such as loss of identity and loss of contact with family. She found that prisoners responded differently to life sentences, and their resettlement experience also varied. Geaney recommended that further research on life sentence prisoners' coping strategies should be carried out in Ireland. There is limited research in Ireland on coping with life imprisonment from prisoners' perspectives, and very little is understood or known about the coping strategies employed by prisoners to come to terms with the indeterminate nature of their sentences and their futures. Further, there is a dearth of literature with an Irish context on how best to respond to the needs of this group of prisoners, though Probation Officers and psychologists are deployed to prisons where there are large numbers of life sentence prisoners. While the Irish Probation Service has guidelines for supervising life sentence prisoners released 'on licence' and protocols for the management of life sentence prisoners, guidelines outlining effective work in prisons with this group of prisoners do not exist in Ireland. Consequently, probation practice within prisons with lifers is varied and is limited to writing parole board reports and preparing life sentence prisoners for release.

The author works with prisoners and has developed an interest in how they come to terms with life imprisonment. Of particular interest is how life sentence prisoners cope and motivate themselves. This group of prisoners have to accept that they have no release date. The release date, for other prisoners, signals an end to imprisonment and a target to work towards. Managing a sentence with no specified end date can be challenging for prisoners and for staff who are charged with engaging them.

Aims of study

The study aimed to explore coping among male life sentence prisoners, and to identify from prisoners' perspectives the kind of supports that

would be useful in helping them cope with a life sentence. The study also aimed to make to make recommendations for professional practice with life sentence prisoners.

Research questions

The study focused on two main questions.

1. How do male life sentence prisoners cope with life imprisonment?
2. What factors contribute to coping among life sentence prisoners?

Research design

The research design was qualitative, which allowed the researcher to exact richness and meaning from the data (Maxfield and Babbie, 2001). Qualitative designs permit more in-depth analysis of the data and are flexible enough to respond to whatever data is made available from the research participants (Patenaude, 2004). The prisoners in this research told their personal stories of coping with life imprisonment, and attempting to quantify these deeply sensitive and personal experiences would have been inappropriate. As the sample was selected by the Governor of a different prison to the one in which the researcher currently works, the risk of familiarisation was minimal. The prisoners were given written information on the research design, informed consent and the parameters of confidentiality. The first three prisoners who agreed to participate were interviewed and they formed the sample. The sample size was small and therefore, the data gleaned from the participants was not intended to be representative of larger lifer populations. Given the small size of the sample, the findings cannot be generalised to wider life sentence prisoner populations. Rather, the study was designed to capture personal experiences of coping among a small number of lifers, which would be suggestive and subjective as opposed to definitive.

All male prisoners currently serving a life sentence in the prison in question were included in the sample. Non-life-sentenced prisoners and sex offenders were excluded as the study aimed to look exclusively at coping among men who had committed murder. The researcher gained access to a prison in which no sex offenders were housed. Thus, access limitation was also one of the reasons for excluding lifers with a sexual element to their offence. Female life sentence prisoners were not included

in the sample as the researcher was permitted access to a male-only prison. Thus, the coping responses of female life sentence prisoners are beyond the scope of this study. However, it is worth noting that research on coping among female lifers indicates that they require different programmes to male lifers to assist coping (Roscher, 2005).

The research was completed within a limited time frame as it was undertaken as part of an academic study. The time constraints reduced the sample size considerably. Each participant had served over 20 years in prison. Participants were between 59 years and 65 years of age.

As mentioned above, the data collection method chosen was semi-structured interviews, which facilitated the researcher to build rapport and trust with the participants. Moreover, interviews seemed to be the most unobtrusive way of extracting rich data. As the researcher aimed to elicit the participants' experiences, interviewing offered the best potential to understand these experiences. An interview schedule was designed to capture data and to guide the researcher during the interviews to the areas that are the focus of this study.

The men in this study were asked how they came to terms with the life sentence and how they coped with long-term imprisonment. Throughout the process of the data collection, the researcher analysed the interviews to look for core concepts and themes that were relevant to the study. When common themes occurred, they were extracted and presented in the findings. A number of other themes arose during the course of the interviews, including issues such as the lack of special training for prison officers working exclusively with life sentence prisoners, coping with boredom and frustration within the prison regime, and the arguments for abolition of the mandatory life sentences in Ireland in favour of a system where a fixed tariff or punitive period is handed down at the start of the sentence. Given that the specific focus of the study was to explore coping, these themes were not developed or explored in detail in the study.

Participant profile

All participants had been sentenced to life imprisonment in their mid-thirties, and two of the three had never served a custodial sentence prior to the life sentence. All participants pleaded guilty to murder from the outset, and this appeared to have assisted them in coming to terms with what lay ahead.

Research limitations

The participants spoke about their subjective experiences and, therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to the wider population of life sentence prisoners. Due to delays in gaining access to the target sample, and the time constraints this generated, the final sample size was smaller than previously envisaged. The sample is not intended to be representative of the general prison population. It is possible that the findings would be different if the researcher had interviewed participants who had recently commenced their life sentences. The limited sample and delay in gaining access to the sample meant it was not possible to compare coping among life sentence prisoners who were at the beginning of their sentence and prisoners who had already served a significant term.

Impact of life imprisonment

Historically, descriptions of prison life have highlighted the destructive nature of long-term imprisonment on the psychological, physical and social wellbeing of inmates (Sykes, 1958; Goffman, 1961; Cohen and Taylor, 1972; Snacken, 1997). Sykes (1958) coined the term 'the pains of imprisonment', which refers to the various forms of deprivation prisoners experience when incarcerated for long periods. The deprivation of liberty, goods and services, autonomy, sexual relations and security is so painful that it requires prisoners to form a defence in order to be able to cope and adapt (Mathiesen, 2006). According to Snacken (1997), life sentence prisoners experience uncertainty and a lack of security more than other prisoners due to the indeterminacy of life sentences. Toch (1992) also identified the lack of autonomy and uncertainty about safety as pains of imprisonment. Sykes (1958) describes the impact of isolation experienced by long-term prisoners; being involuntarily cut off from family and friends and the boredom and loneliness this entails. He suggests that perhaps the most difficult of the pains of imprisonment is the fact that 'the confinement of the criminal represents a deliberate, moral rejection of the criminal by the free community' (Sykes, 1958, cited in Jewkes and Johnston, 2006, p. 164).

Cohen and Taylor's (1972) study of inmates in a maximum security prison, coupled with Mitford's (1973) scathing review of prison as a place where reforms are nothing more than empty rhetoric and where civil

liberties do not exist, contributed to the perception of prisons as cruel and brutal institutions (Bonta and Gendreau, 1990). According to Goffman (1961), when a prisoner enters a prison he undergoes rites of passage; rituals that reinforce that notion that the prisoner is the property of the institution. The main purpose of these rites of passage is to dehumanise the prisoner; that is, to strip him of his personhood (Mays and Winfree 2009). Goffman used the term 'total institution' to describe institutions where every aspect of inmates' lives is in the hands of those who have the power and authority. The total institution is identified by the presence of hierarchical routines, segregation of populations and rituals of degradation. According to Mays and Winfree (2009, p. 149), the term 'total institution' captures the essence of contemporary prisons.

In order to retain a sense of personhood, the degradation by the free community must be warded off and the prisoner must find ways to protect himself from the psychological impact of long-term confinement. While contemporary prisons are institutions designed to deprive prisoners of liberty and to control large numbers, it must be noted that the standards and conditions in European prisons have improved in recent years. Moreover, the introduction of the United Nations Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman Treatment for detainees, prison visiting committees and the inspections of prisons combine to provide more robust accountability and oversight mechanisms compared to the 1970s, when Cohen and Taylor's research was conducted.

Cohen and Taylor (1972) argue that life sentence prisoners need particular attention as they cannot draw on other coping mechanisms or supports to aid adjustment to life imprisonment. They argue that when we experience a loss or a negative life event, in order to come to terms with it we refocus our attention on other aspects of our lives, such as work or family. Our lives still have meaning following a shattering event; the pieces can be picked up, which allows us to rebuild meaning. Major events tend to happen in one domain of our lives, leaving other domains for us to draw upon for support and reassurance. Cohen and Taylor (1972) suggest that long-term prisoners cannot play one domain against another. A life sentence prisoner must face the fact that 'a life cannot be reassembled twenty years after its destruction. He has been given life, a prison life – and somehow he must learn to live it' (Cohen and Taylor, 1972, p. 43).

Long-term imprisonment is also associated with low self-esteem and a loss of interest in external relationships and the future (Heskin *et al.*,

1977). Lifers resist thinking about the future, lose interest in external relationships and 'grow more insensitive to the problems of their relatives, feeling powerless to influence them' (Heskin *et al.*, 1977, cited in Snacken, 1997, p. 53). However, Cohen and Taylor (1972) found that prisoners are not passive recipients of the pains of imprisonment. Rather, they are active 'social agents who reflect upon their situation and respond to it not automatically, but strategically' (Cohen and Taylor, cited in Snacken, 1997, p. 49). The findings of this study suggest that the men were able to effectively utilise strategies to reduce the impact of life imprisonment. This indicates that prisoners who find meaning in their daily lives cope better with the pains of imprisonment.

More recent research has challenged the perception that lifers deteriorate over time. Johnson and Dobrzanska (2005, p. 36) suggest that most lifers 'can and do adapt to incarceration in active and reasonably effective ways, although adjustment typically remains an ongoing and arduous affair'. Bonta and Gendreau (1990) argue that while long-term prisoners tend to lose their relations with the outside world, this results in a more intensive use of internal prison programmes and better adjustment to discipline. This allows them to adapt to life in prison, resulting in increased compliance with prison regimes. Hence, the widely held assumption that long-term imprisonment is destructive to the emotional wellbeing of prisoners (Sykes, 1958; Goffman, 1961; Snacken, 1997) is challenged when critically examined (Bonta and Gendreau, 1990; Holahan and Moos, 1990; Johnson, 2002).

In terms of adjustment and coping, the importance of prison programmes and regimes in attempting to reduce the negative effects of long-term imprisonment was not highlighted in earlier research findings (Bonta and Gendreau, 1990; Johnson and Dobrzanska, 2005). It seems that at different stages of the sentence, lifers may require different programmes and strategies to support coping. The men in this study had served over 20 years in prison, thus their programme needs might be different from prisoners early in a life sentence. Johnson (2002) suggests that hard time can become constructive time if the pains of imprisonment are met with mature coping. He argues that lifers cope maturely with long-term imprisonment by establishing routines that give their lives meaning and purpose. Thus, life sentence prisoners come to grudgingly accept the prison as their home from home, and see other lifers as akin to an adopted family (Toch and Adams, 2002; Paluch, 2004).

Coping and life imprisonment

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) found that in order for the prisoner to endure a life sentence, he must adapt in different ways. Firstly, he must adapt practically to his new environment; secondly he must adapt socially to be able to interact with staff and inmates; and finally, he must adapt psychologically, which involves both problem- and emotion-based coping. Thomas and Zaitow (2006) found that religion and spirituality were an effective coping mechanism employed by life sentence prisoners.

Research with prison populations indicates that effective coping strategies have been found to ease distress (Zamble and Porporino, 1988) while an inability to employ them is associated with self-harming behaviour (Liebling, 1992, 1994, 1999, cited in Harvey, 2007). Bonta and Gendreau's (1990) research on prisoners' adaptation to particular aspects of confinement such as isolation, crowding and long-term imprisonment supports the various studies on general coping (Visotsky *et al.*, 1961; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Rotter, 1966; Carver *et al.*, 1989; Carver and Scheier, 1994; Holahan and Moos, 1990). They found the evidence inconclusive regarding the effects of long-term imprisonment and the impact of the pains of imprisonment on psychological wellbeing. Rather, their research points to the importance of individual differences in coping and adapting to long-term imprisonment. This finding is corroborated by other research in the area of coping and imprisonment (Zamble and Porporino, 1990; Liebling, 1992; Johnson and Dobrzanska, 2005), which indicates that it is not the situation but the individual appraisal of it that matters. It seems that it is the combination of structure and the individual's sense of agency that is important when considering factors that influence coping outcomes.

Research findings: Factors that support coping

Participants in this study were asked what they believed contributed to their adaption and coping. In response, the participants identified coping as an individual matter which depended on the person's personality, temperament, social resources such as contact with friends and family, their ability to protect their mental health from the impact of long term imprisonment and the availability of work programmes within the prison. Each factor that the men identified is outlined below with citations from the men's interviews.

Having a focus: Getting involved in work/education

I knew I had to keep busy to be able to cope and keep the head, you know, keep sane! You could go mad in places like this over the years. But work kept me focused and gave my life meaning. You are left to your own survival. There is no special regime for lifers. (Participant No. 1)

Coping is a very individual thing. You must accept the realities because you can't do anything about them. Philosophically, you have to accept the reality. It's a matter of temperament really. You must be realistic, be patient and endure it. If you can, look on the bright side, if there is one. Also my education and my intellectual interests which I can pursue just as effectively here as I could on the outside have helped me cope. I have maintained my interest in things and this has protected me from deteriorating over the years. (Participant No. 2)

The quotes above suggest that having a focus and becoming involved in training and education while in prison significantly improve coping. Prisoners who can retain a sense of optimism, self-esteem and personhood to protect themselves from the impact of long-term imprisonment tend to fare better. The prisoners in this study found ways to draw on alternative coping mechanisms in the absence of family and friends.

These findings support previous research findings (Sykes, 1958; Cohen and Taylor, 1972; Carver and Scheier, 1994; Johnson and Dobrzanska, 2005; Roscher, 2005; Geaney, 2008) that prisoners' dispositional optimism and pessimism affect how they adjust and deal with stressful events. Participants in this study described how they warded off mental and psychological deterioration by keeping busy, undertaking educational programmes and maintaining intellectual interests. This finding also supports Bonta and Gendreau (1990) and Johnson's (2002) argument that prison programmes and regimes are important when one is attempting to reduce the negative effects of long-term imprisonment.

Maintaining family contact

Two out of three participants were in contact with their family and have maintained contact for over 20 years of imprisonment. One participant had no contact with his family since the day of his arrest for the offence. Overall, contact with family appeared to be a major issue for life sentence prisoners. Having ongoing access to family members via regular visits

appears to encourage coping and generates future-oriented thinking (Geaney, 2008).

You could have some good conversations with your visitors but it depended on where you were sitting and sometimes, officers would sit closer than they needed to and it would be clear that they are listening to your conversation. However, despite all of this, all of my relationships have survived and prospered. Some of my friends have died over the years, one or two have emigrated. But my partner, my son and my core group of friends have visited me every week for 30 years. I'm lucky because my relationships have remained intact. That is a key issue for lifers. For a number of lifers, they are not allowed keep in touch with their children. That is a source of distress for a large number of lifers. (Participant No. 2)

Participants in this study spoke about the difficulties of having relationships with their children and their partners from behind prison walls with no definite period of release. Participants also described the changes that occurred in their relationships with their family.

I noticed that my child would refer to my wife if she wanted anything. I did not resent this. It's only natural that the child would do this. Your partner's life moves on. You are still married, but you're not able to fulfil the normal things that you would do when married ... there is not enough qualified people in the prison who can sit down with you and talk to you about family life. The Probation Officer does this, but there is not enough of them to do this job. A lot of relationships break down. You create a false relationship. You have to accept the fact that your wife may want to end the relationship. (Participant No. 3)

Participants in this study suggested that it was easier to cope with a life sentence when contact with family members is maintained. This finding is contrary to research by Crawley and Sparks (2006) which found that lifers without access to partners or wives tended to cope better in custody. Crawley and Sparks found that some prisoners actually cut themselves off from family during the sentence, believing that it would help them cope better with prison life. This may be due to prisoners feeling that they have little influence over the lives of their loved ones, or the belief that having nobody to care about on the outside world assists coping with life on the inside.

Someone to talk to: Access to therapeutic and support services

Access to therapeutic services such as the Irish Prison Service Psychology Service and the Probation Service was another theme that was common to all participants. The men spoke about long waiting periods before seeing a psychologist and all agreed that in some prisons, there was a complete lack of therapeutic support services for life sentence prisoners. Participants highlighted the need for life sentence prisoners to begin to talk about their life, the offence and feelings of grief and loss early in the life sentence. The participants identified the prison-based Probation Officer as the first person they would go to when they wanted to talk about something, and they were in agreement that the prison-based Probation Officer is in a position to offer supportive counselling.

There are not enough services to help people with their emotions. Even Probation, they are too busy; they have to prioritise prisoners and lifers are not a priority until they are being prepared for release. Usually, a lifer is up to his gills in guilt, so you need to talk to someone about that. (Participant No. 3)

We need more Probation staff in prisons so that they can help a lifer deal with his problems. Probation can help a lifer build a new life for himself. But they don't have the staff ... Lifers need to build a new life and they need help with their problems. It could be years and years before you get to see a Probation Officer to do this work. (Participant No. 1)

It has been recognised in other jurisdictions that work with life sentence prisoners requires staff that are specially trained to respond to their particular needs (Sykes, 1958; Cohen and Taylor, 1972; Heskin *et al.*, 1977; Snacken, 1997; HM Inspectorates of Prisons and Probation, 1999; Johnson, 2002; Roscher, 2005). Geaney's (2008) unpublished Irish study of the direct consequences of life imprisonment also found that there is a need for more specialised training for all practitioners working in prisons where there are significant numbers of life sentence prisoners.

In recent years, the Probation Service has restructured its service provision in Irish prisons. It has prioritised work in prisons to focus on the following: post-release supervision orders, pre-release work and preparation of Parole Board reports (Probation Service, *Our Work in Prisons*, accessed via www.probation.ie, January 2012). This refocus of the

service in prisons has resulted in the Probation Service having a reduced input with life sentence prisoners who are not due for review by the Parole Board or being prepared for release. As life sentence prisoners' lives are not static in prison, lifers experience the various stages of the life cycle in prison. They are likely to require different programmes to meet their needs during the various stages. Consequently, opportunities for prison-based Probation Officers to support lifers with life events that occur during the term of the life sentence are missed given the reduced input with lifers who are not due for review.

The parole process: Uncertainty and frustration

A key theme that emerged in all three interviews with the men in this study was concern about the Parole Board review process; in particular, the limited power of the Parole Board to make decisions about life sentences.

In the Republic of Ireland, the Parole Board has an advisory function to the Minister of Justice and Equality. It has no statutory basis and is limited in its jurisdiction and powers. The primary function of the Parole Board is to advise the Minister in the administration of sentences of eight years or more. Prisoners serving sentences for murder or attempted murder of members of An Garda Síochána and/or the Prison Service are not eligible for review by the Parole Board. The Parole Board advises the Minister on a prisoner's progress, and 'the degree to which the prisoner has engaged with the various therapeutic services and how best to proceed with the future administration of the sentence' (Irish Parole Board, 2009). The final decision about a sentence rests with the Minister, who can accept the Parole Board's recommendations in full or in part or reject them. Given that the Parole Board's reviews are on a 'case-by-case' basis, there is no set time frame within which a prisoner can expect to complete the process. Indeed, the length of time spent in custody by offenders serving life sentences can vary substantially (Irish Parole Board, 2009).

Participants in this study experienced feelings of frustration with a perceived lack of progression with their sentence management and a sense of stagnation when involved in the process of review. All participants suggested that the Parole Board's advisory capacity is powerless because it has no statutory basis and all decisions about life sentences rest with the Minister for Justice and Equality. The men in this study believed that all decisions regarding the management of a life sentence are political and therefore vulnerable to political calculations. They suggested that the

current system is flawed, as lifers are only asked to engage in offence-focused work prior to a review by the Parole Board, which occurs seven to eight years into the life sentence. Participants indicated that life sentence prisoners should be engaged by therapeutic services from day one of the sentence. They suggested that following an initial 'settling-in' period, life sentence prisoners' needs should be assessed so that a sentence management programme can be developed for each lifer and reviewed at agreed intervals.

In the first seven years, you have to wait. You don't do any work on your issues. You're just left to get on with it. There should be something in place in the first seven years to deal with their crime. Not just before a review year. (Participant No. 1)

The general public don't know just how defective the system is ... Politicians are afraid that they might be damaged by anything that might be perceived as risky and in particular may be seen as being in favour of releasing a murderer. (Participant No. 2)

No regime, no individual work done for over seven years, and then the first review is just a process. Even when decisions are made, lifers are not told. There is an appalling lack of communication. You have to get used to dealing with this. (Participant No. 3)

As outlined above, all participants highlighted that problems such as the uncertainty of time frames regarding the Parole Board review process, coupled with a perceived lack of transparency in communicating decisions about the transfer or temporary release of life sentence prisoners, contributed to a sense of stagnation and frustration. The apparent delays in receiving feedback and decisions from the Parole Board have resulted in a prevailing sense of uncertainty. This uncertainty appears to increase the perceived degree of suffering amongst lifers. Cases that attract media interest present specific challenges. Those charged with making decisions about the release or transfer of high-profile lifers risk being influenced by political calculations and the political climate at the time. In Britain, the Parole Board has the independent authority to decide to release a prisoner when the minimum tariff has been served and 'once concerns relating to public safety and risk of re-offending have been adequately addressed' (Ministry of Justice, 2012).

A pervasive theme from the interviews was the notion of making the most of a grim situation, and all participants agreed that coping and adaptation to life imprisonment is contingent on a number of factors: the individual's personality and the extent of supports available to him such as family contact, access to therapeutic services and the availability of meaningful work within the prison.

Policy implications

Life sentence prisoners present both a challenge and an opportunity to the prison system. They will be released back into the community at some point, and when that time comes, the prisoner must prove that he does not pose a risk to the community. In recent years, the number of life sentence prisoners has increased, increasing pressure on the penal system to manage these sentences effectively. Rising numbers of prisoners in a time of decreasing resources within the public service has prompted debate about the cost of our penal system as value-for-money considerations become prominent aspects of the crime control discourse (Garland, 2001; O'Donnell, 2011).

The absence of critical debate on our policy of penal expansionism, coupled with the lack of vision and insight into how best to respond to and manage those who commit serious offences, has ramifications not just for those living behind bars and those who work with this prisoner group but for victims and the public in general. When thinking about the topic of coping among life sentence prisoners, it is easy to assume that prisoners are more capable of dealing with imprisonment than non-offending populations. If we are honest, perhaps some of us hold the view that they deserve their lot as they have committed grave offences that warrant long-term imprisonment. The literature on coping with long-term imprisonment is contradictory and somewhat inconclusive regarding the detrimental effects on psychological wellbeing. However, there appears to be agreement that there is a need for support programmes within prisons that are tailored to the specific needs of life sentence prisoners.

There needs to be a change in policy in relation to the system for managing life sentence prisoners. The current arrangement does not encourage progression through the prison system for lifers once they have addressed their offending behaviour and satisfied the Parole Board that they are suitable for release. The Parole Board in conjunction with the Prison Service should develop a policy that stipulates time frames within which recommendations by the Parole Board must be made.

The Probation Service is an agency in a pivotal position to support lifers to adjust and cope with life imprisonment. However, as suggested in the findings of this study, the Probation Service has refocused its policy on probation work in prisons. The newly prioritised areas of work in prisons include offenders who are subject to post-release supervision orders, preparation of Parole Board reports and preparing life sentence prisoners for release. Life sentence prisoners early in their sentence, and not due for review by the Parole Board, are not considered a priority by the Probation Service. The men interviewed in this study highlighted the need for support at different times during their sentence; someone to talk to when they experience a loss or when they are going through a transitional period. A consequence of the current Probation Service policy is the missed opportunities to engage lifers during critical periods throughout the life cycle of a life sentence. The implications of these missed opportunities are, arguably, far reaching.

Whatever the reason for the lack of attention to the topic in Ireland, as social scientists we have an obligation to shine a light on all sections of society who experience deprivation of any kind and to be sensitive to the plight people experience whether they deserve what they get or not. Regarding the question of why researchers should focus on lifers who have committed violent and brutal offences, it seems clear that the answer lies in our personal philosophy about the purpose of prison: deterrence, rehabilitation or retribution (Roscher, 2005). Garnering interest and investment in support programmes for life sentence prisoners will always be challenging given the nature of the crimes committed and the fact that spending money on lifers may show few visible results. Nonetheless, it seems the current penal response achieves little but confinement for an indefinite period (Roscher, 2005, Geaney, 2008).

The cost to the public finances that is incurred in keeping lifers in prison for indeterminate periods in these times of austerity and economic crisis is significant. There is a lack of leadership and vision in relation to the most effective ways to manage life sentences. While some might argue that the very essence of a life sentence is its indeterminacy, the reality in Ireland is that life sentence prisoners will not spend the rest of their natural lives in prison and they will be released at some future point. Supporting life sentence prisoners to cope and adjust early in their sentences by providing therapeutic support services may prevent prisoners from resorting to maladaptive coping such as drug use, which we know impacts the entire prison system and is resource-intensive

(Liebling, 1992, 1999; Smith et al., 1996; Linehan et al., 2005). Further, if therapeutic support services are provided early in their sentence, lifers are more likely to have already taken steps to address the offending-related needs by the time they are called for review by the Parole Board. The sense of frustration and uncertainty that appears to permeate the parole process is likely to decrease.

Summary and conclusions

The findings of this study are not definitive and they cannot be generalised to wider lifer populations due to the limited sample size. Nonetheless, they provide an insight into the factors that supported mature coping among a small number of men serving a life sentence in an Irish prison. It is clear that the participants in this study adjusted and coped with life imprisonment differently depending on the following: their personality, in particular, their dispositional position regarding hope and optimism; their ability to fashion a routine that gives their lives meaning and purpose; their ability to submit to the prison regime yet retain a sense of autonomy and control over their lives; the quality of their family contact; and the opportunities to avail of work and education. What is apparent from this study is that lifers learn to live within the limitations of confinement. They settle in; they develop a routine for themselves and learn to live with the pains of imprisonment.

However, the current system for managing life sentence prisoners in the Republic of Ireland needs to be overhauled. The Parole Board process has become protracted, with significant delays in lifers receiving decisions about their review and the absence of firm time frames within which reviews must be completed. Moreover, a life sentence prisoner will not be told when the Parole Board review will be completed. The current system appears to be punctuated with uncertainty.

It is widely acknowledged that a prisoner sentenced to life will not remain in prison for the rest of his/her natural life, and the Minister has the discretion to order the temporary release of a lifer. The Minister is not obliged to follow the Parole Board's advice. Keeping lifers in suspense about the length of sentence for years when the details of the offence are known from the outset seems unfair and, in some cases, increases the sense of suffering on the part of those sentenced to life (Von Hirsch, 1976). Moreover, keeping life sentence prisoners in prison for any longer than is deemed necessary is morally questionable in a progressive society.

The Irish Human Rights Commission has argued that the current regime governing life sentences in Ireland is incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights on the grounds that the decision to release is entrusted to the Minister rather than a court-like body. It has called for legislation to be introduced to bring Ireland into line with European human rights requirements (Irish Human Rights Commission, 2006).

Consideration should be given to introducing new legislation that transfers the function of release from the Minister for Justice and Equality to an independent body with executive powers. By introducing an independent review body on a statutory basis with the power to make decisions about the management of life sentences, political consideration would be removed from the Parole Board process.

The Irish Prison Service should develop a national analysis of the lifer population to determine the provision for offending behaviour work that needs to be in place. A single department should also be created within the Irish Prison Service that has responsibility for ensuring that sentence management for lifers is centrally directed and would provide an overview of how life sentences are managed. The current policy of reviewing prisoners seven years into a life sentence needs to be revised. Life sentence prisoners should be engaged earlier by the therapeutic services, with a view to developing an individual life sentence management plan.

Given that the Probation Service has experience of working with life sentence prisoners in both prison and community settings, it should consider developing a psycho-educational pre-release group programme for life sentence prisoners who are preparing for release or being transferred to lower security prisons. Specialised training for staff working in prisons with life sentence prisoners should be offered by the Irish Prison Service in conjunction with the Probation Service. This training should take account of the often sophisticated approach that lifers may have. Further research into what supports coping among this prisoner group is required in order to gain a broader understanding of the issues faced by life sentence prisoners.

The importance of work with lifers has not been acknowledged in Ireland. The lack of criminological research in Ireland on the impact of life sentences and the absence of specific programmes for life sentence prisoners are telling. Garnering interest and investment in support programmes for life sentence prisoners will always be challenging given the emotive responses generated by the crimes they have committed.

Moreover, investing in lifer programmes may show few immediate, visible results. The topic is likely to remain a political 'hot potato'. Nonetheless, providing therapeutic intervention early in the life sentence is warranted due to the gravity of the offences and the life-long consequences for victims and their families and for society in general. Providing support services to lifers earlier in the sentence to assist them to cope effectively with life imprisonment is likely to have advantages not just for the prisoner, but for the authorities responsible for managing life sentences. In the long term, the benefits for society may become more visible as the adaptive coping responses lifers develop in prison can be utilised by them on their eventual release.

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