Old and new problems of long-term imprisonment

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The Advisory Council on the Penal System 1968 (or the ‘Radzinowicz report’)

- ‘…any definition of a long-term prisoner involves drawing an arbitrary line. We have defined such a prisoner as one serving a term … of over four years’ (p.4)

- ten years considered ‘very long’ (p.5)

- ‘[Only a] handful of prisoners sentenced under the Official Secrets Act or in connection with the 1964 mail train robbery will have to remain continuously in custody for over fifteen years’ (p.6).

- ‘The longest period served by a “lifer” who has been released since 1950 is twenty-one years and only six have served over twelve years … only two men are now in prison who have been continuously in custody for more than fifteen years’ (p.6)

- NB currently over 2,300 prisoners serving indeterminate sentences of 15 years or more
### Average length of minimum term period imposed (excluding whole life sentences) 2003-2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average length (years)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>14.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>15.9</td>
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<td>2010</td>
<td>18.9</td>
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<td>2011</td>
<td>18.8</td>
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<td>2012</td>
<td>20.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>21.1</td>
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Background to the study

‘I believe that our high security prisons are less stable, more difficult to run and potentially more unsafe than they were nine years ago. They hold a growing proportion of men, often young men, serving very long sentences, who may feel they have little to lose.’

(OWERS, 2010)

‘In high security prisons the population is younger than it was before and serving sentences that are longer…There are similar issues in the young offender institutions where we have gangs and longer sentences and we have got to work through how best we manage those challenges…It is one of the biggest operational challenges we have at the moment. How we can best deliver to a longer sentenced population and many more younger prisoners who don’t buy into the system, with the risk that that can lead to concerted disorder?’

(Spur, interviewed by Lloyd 2011: 28)
Key questions

- What are the key problems that long-term prisoners experience, and how do they deal with them? How do they think about identity, change and the future? How are these issues shaped by sentence stage?

- How do they adapt socially, i.e. what relationships do they build with other prisoners and with prison staff?

- How do they feel about the ‘legitimacy’ of their sentence? How does this affect compliance, adaptation and resistance?
Research design

- Surveys for all appropriate prisoners in each of the prison in which we undertook fieldwork – an adapted version of Richards (1978) ‘problems of long-term imprisonment survey’

- Interviews with men at different sentence stages:
  - Early – within first four years of sentence
  - Mid – half of tariff +/- two years
  - Late – two year pre-tariff onwards/ post-tariff

- Interviews with women at all sentence stages

- Feedback sessions with prisoners in seven establishments – to disseminate and discuss findings
Research design

Population: prisoners serving life sentences of 15+ years, given to them when aged 25 or under

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Surveys</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>803</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>830</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Richards (1978): problems of long-term imprisonment

1. Wishing that time would go faster
2. Being worried about becoming a vegetable
3. Being afraid of dying before you get out
4. Wishing you had more privacy
5. Feeling that your life is being wasted
6. Feeling suicidal
7. Losing your self-confidence
8. Feeling sorry for yourself
9. Missing little" luxuries ", e.g. your favourite food, your own clothes
10. Keeping out of trouble
11. Feeling angry with yourself
12. Missing social life
13. Feeling angry with the world
14. Missing somebody
15. Getting annoyed or irritated with other inmates
16. Being afraid of going mad
17. Longing for a time in the past
18. Feeling sexually frustrated
19. Worrying about how you will cope when you get out
20. Being bored
1. Thinking about the crime that you committed
2. Feeling that you are losing contact with family and friends
3. Prison officers making life harder
4. Feeling that you have no control over your life
5. Not feeling able to completely trust anyone in prison
6. Prison psychologists making life harder
7. Feeling that the length of your sentence is unfair
8. Feeling lonely
9. Feeling worried about your personal safety
10. Feeling frustrated that you are not progressing through the system
11. Feeling that you are losing the best years of your life
12. Worrying about people outside
13. Feeling that you have no purpose or meaning in your life
14. Worrying about how you are described ‘on file’
15. Feeling anxious about the uncertainty of your release date
16. Feeling that you have no-one to talk to about things that really matter to you
17. Thinking about the amount of time you might have to serve
18. Having to follow other people’s rules and orders
19. Feeling that you need to be careful about everything you say and do
20. Being afraid that someone you love or care about will die before you are released
21. Feeling that the system is ignoring you and your
### The problems of long-term imprisonment: Findings from survey

#### Five *most* severe problems (incl. our additional ‘problems’) – Men & women

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<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Missing somebody</td>
<td>Missing somebody</td>
<td>Missing somebody</td>
<td>Having to follow other people’s rules &amp; orders</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Feeling that your life is being wasted</td>
<td>Missing social life</td>
<td>Worrying about people outside</td>
<td>Missing somebody</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Feeling sexually frustrated</td>
<td>Worrying about how you will cope when you get out</td>
<td>Feeling that you are losing the best years of your life</td>
<td>Worrying about people outside</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Missing little ‘luxuries’</td>
<td>Feeling that your life is being wasted</td>
<td>Having to follow other people’s rules &amp; orders</td>
<td>Not feeling able to completely trust anyone in prison</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Missing social life</td>
<td>Feeling sexually frustrated</td>
<td>Feeling sexually frustrated</td>
<td>Thinking about the crime you had committed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Relatively low-ranking problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Getting annoyed or irritated with other prisoners</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding it hard to keep out of trouble</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison officers making life harder</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling worried about your personal safety</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling suicidal</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being worried about your mental health</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gender, severity, & the problems of long-term imprisonment

Mean severity scores (0-25)

- Outside Relationships
- Thinking about the crime that...
- Time
- Deprivations
- Emotional & Physical Vulnerability
- Release Anxiety
- Anger/Frustration
- Autonomy/Control
- Progression
- Mental Wellbeing

Men: [Graphic with data points]
Women: [Graphic with data points]
Outside relationships

In survey:
- ‘Outside relationships’ most severe dimension
- ‘Missing someone’ most severe problem within the dimension

‘once you’re convicted, your home seems further away from you than it’s ever been in your life. And you’re suddenly not the only one that’s being punished, because your whole family is then being punished. And it doesn’t matter what anybody says or does to try and help you; it was like being sucked into a black hole and you think the pain’s never going to end, and it doesn’t. All that changes is that you suddenly become used to that pain, you get used to that tearing in your chest and accept that that’s what the next 25 years will do’

(Maria, aged 23, 24-year tariff, served 1 year 3 months)
Outside relationships

- Most research is focused on the ‘nuclear family’ i.e. partners and children (Paylor and Smith 2008).

- Relationships deteriorate, particularly for prisoners serving long sentences (Hairston 1991)

Our study:
- Pre-prison intimate relationships
  - Men: often casual, non-committed
  - Women: often abusive or linked to index offence
Outside relationships: male prisoners

- Mainly referring to ‘natal’ families i.e. parents
- These relationships often improved (from a low starting point):

  ‘[my relationship with my mum and dad is] probably stronger. [...] I probably see ‘em more now, cos [I’m] not as busy. When you’re outside, life is so busy that you don’t really get a chance to sit back and look at your relationship with that person and how you can improve it. In here you’ve got a lot more time to think about them sort of things - how can I be a better son?’ (Casper, aged 25, 25-year tariff, served 2 years 10 months)

- Parental support more solid than other relationships
- Absence generates ‘protective impotency’, but still possible to fulfil the role to some degree
Outside relationships: female prisoners

- Missing children reported
  (a) by a higher proportion of female than male interviewees
  (b) more often than than missing parents by female interviewees:

  ‘I think the hardest thing for me when I came into jail was nobody told me how to not be a mum […] I didn't know how to switch that off […] And it never goes away that missing them, and that kind of ache.’ (Gail, aged 45, 25-year tariff, served 22 years)

- Exacerbated by lack of control over contact and communication

- Absence in conflict with maternal identities:

  ‘I only get to see her three times a year […] and then that makes it really difficult because every time I see her it brings up all my feelings for her again, and then I spend the next four months grieving, and it’s like that’s really difficult because you’re constantly like going through it, so you’re breaking your heart a little bit more every time’ (Kathryn, aged 23, 22-year tariff, served 3 years)
Gender, severity, & the problems of long-term imprisonment

Mean severity scores (0-25)

- Outside Relationships
- Thinking about the crime that... (Men: 16.00, Women: 15.56)
- Time
- Deprivations (Men: 12.77, Women: 12.57)
- Emotional & Physical Vulnerability
- Release Anxiety (Men: 13.42, Women: 13.42)
- Anger/Frustration (Men: 12.15, Women: 12.15)
- Autonomy/Control (Men: 12.32, Women: 12.32)
- Progression (Men: 12.30, Women: 12.30)
- Mental Wellbeing (Men: 12.14, Women: 12.14)

- Men
- Women
Time: the overall sentence

- Bewilderment, anger, ‘vertigo’ about the length of the sentence (and the conviction in general)

  ‘In the early days following the verdict, it felt like an out-of-body experience almost. I was… I didn’t feel like the steps I was taking were my own. I felt completely numbed’.

    Dan, aged 25, 15-year tariff, served 3 years

  ‘I had no concept of 18 years of life. [Five years in] I think really I’ve only just got my head around it’.

    Hugo, aged 21, 18-year tariff, served 5 years

  ‘I just kept thinking “20 years?!?” And I kept thinking too much ahead on the same day I got sentenced – “How am I - how long I'm going to be [here]? How is it going to be like when I get out? And how is my family going to survive?’

    Aakif, aged 22, 19-year tariff, served 4 years
Time: the daily experience

- The future: impossible to contemplate, tomorrow ‘irrelevant’, ‘the same as today’

  ‘How do you think about your time in here? 
  I don’t. I just don’t think about it.
  Do you think about day-to-day, week-to-week? 
  No.
  Do you plan at all? 
  No. […] I take days as they come and I don’t want to do none of that’.

  (Tamara, aged 23, 25-year tariff, served 3 years 6 months)

- The present: ‘meaningless’

- Discourses of *stasis*: being ‘stuck in time’, ‘just existing … you’re not really living are you?’ (see Sapsford 1983; Zamble and Porporino 1988; Cope 2003) - prison as *non-life*
Gender, severity, & the problems of long-term imprisonment

Mean severity scores (0-25)

- Men
- Women
‘Thinking about the crime that you committed’

- **Denial:**
  ‘I didn’t wanna have to accept that I took a human life [...] I couldn’t believe I could be that person’ (John, aged 25, 15-year tariff, served 7 years 1 month)

  ‘It's just so painful for me. I couldn't just bear to say ‘yeah I did it’. Because, obviously, that night it wasn't just the one person that died, it was it felt like a part of me died as well’ (Kelvin, aged 29, 20-year tariff, served 10 years 1 month)

- **Shame:**
  ‘You have to contemplate day in and day out what you've done, hoping that you're forgiven by whatever or whoever: God, your victims....’ (Arkaan, aged 29, 16-year tariff, served 7 years 6 months)

  ‘Most days I do think about it. It’s a strange thing to explain, man, it really is. ... you’d have to have it happen to you in the first place to understand it. But yeah, I’m deeply ashamed of what I’ve done. I hate myself for it’ (Dan, aged 25, 15-yr tariff, served 3 years 2 months)
Gender, severity, & the problems of long-term imprisonment

Mean severity scores (0-25)

- Men
- Women

Outside Relationships
Thinking about the crime that...
Time
Deprivations
Emotional & Physical Vulnerability
Release Anxiety
Anger/Frustration
Autonomy/Control
Progression
Mental Wellbeing
Autonomy/control

- ‘No control’ – loss of liberty, power of prison officers

  ‘Do you feel like you have got control over your life in here? You ain’t got no control, unless you have got a set of keys’.
  (Martin, aged 21, 25-year tariff, served 2 years)

  ‘Do you feel you have control over certain areas of your life in here? You have no control over anything. You can think you have control but in the end the officers have control’.
  (Paul, aged 24, 23-year tariff, served 3 years 9 months)

  ‘To what extent do you feel that you’ve got control of your life in here? Limited. It’s limited because...you don’t have the keys do you’.
  (Cary, aged 25, 19-year tariff, served 4 years)
Autonomy/control: female prisoners

- Powerlessness within prison reminiscent of pre-prison trauma
- Conflict between pre-prison identity as ‘mother’ and infantilisation within prison
- Pre-prison trauma also relevant to other ‘highly severe’ problems, e.g. ‘not feeling able to completely trust anyone in prison’:

  I have real attachment issues and real trust issues [...] I'm so used to people saying they'll come back or they'll do something, and then not. (Maria, aged 23, 24-yr tariff, served 1 year 3 months)

  [My trust issues are] more with men, but it's with women as well because the way my mum's treated me [...] She chose her drink over me a lot of the time. She used to beat me with a rod. (Tamara, aged 23, 25-yr tariff, served 3 years 6 months)
Adapting to the problems of long-term imprisonment

- accepting the reality of the sentence
- finding means of managing time
- coming to terms with the offence
- shifting conceptions of control and self-control
- making the sentence constructive / finding meaning in the predicament
Adapting to the sentence

- After initial period of turmoil, resigned acceptance of the predicament

> ‘Maybe it’s just me, but there’s nothing I can do, I’ve learnt to accept the sentence. [...] You just have to get on day by day, because ... you just have to still get on with life. [If you don’t] you're looking at things like depression. [...] You get suicidal, and you don’t really want to go down that road’.

Aaron, aged 47, 25-year tariff, served 24 years

> ‘You've got two choices when you're faced with a sentence like this: sink or you swim, really, and there's a multitude of ways to sink and only one way to swim’.

Neil, aged 35, 18-year tariff, served 12 years 6 months
Adapting to the sentence

‘It doesn’t matter where you’re living, you’re still living a life. Life is just the environment you’re in … and if I was on the outside, I would probably, I’d still be doing the same things: learning academically […] forming friendships’.

Carl, aged 20, 25-year tariff, served 1 year

‘I’ve got me appeal going and everything, but in my mind I’m settled doing 30 years. The way I look at it, I’m not gonna sit here and cry. I’ve gotta carry on me life, so in my mind, … this is home now, innit. That’s the way I look at it. It’s just home. This is life now. Get used to it. Which I have’.

Zubair, aged 27, 29-year tariff, served 2 years 11 months

○ ‘persons living in prison rather than offenders doing time’ (Zamble 1992: 423-4)
Managing time - mid/late stage prisoners

- Taming of the future via segmentation and targets (‘time anchors’ – O’Donnell 2015)
- Management or manipulation of the present, via routines, and faith/spiritual practices
- Time as something to be *used* rather than filled, ‘killed’ or expended:

  ‘One of our [religious] scholars said, yeah, that, “Time’s like a sword. If you don’t grab hold of it, it’ll split you in two.” And that’s exactly what happens in prison. […] We’ve been given time, isn’t it? Prison is about time. You have a certain amount of time. That’s your punishment. […] It’s very important to use time well’.

  **Mohammed, aged 27, 19-year tariff, 8 years 10 months**

  ‘You’ve gotta get hobbies or go to the gym or whatever. Find something constructive to do with your time. [Otherwise] you’re left treading water’.

  **Jill, aged 42, 20-yr tariff, served 20 years**
Coming to terms with the offence

- Acceptance: taking moral responsibility, without being overwhelmed by the crime

  ‘He shouldn't have died, like his family shouldn't have felt the grief […] But, at the same time, there's nothing I can do, so I can't carry this burden with me for the rest of my life because there's nothing that I can do. I can't feel sorry that I'm not in my daughter's life, I can't feel sorry that I wasn't there for my mum or my gran and my family when they were grieving. […] There's nothing that I can do for [his family]. And with acceptance there is when I came to terms with it’.

  **Julius, aged 30, 15-year tariff, served 7 years 7 months**

- Management of shame & existential reflection

  ‘I've destroyed not just one life, like my action had the ripple effect on not just my family […]. There's [people] grieving every single day for the action that I had taken. And from the time I started looking at things from their point of view, my whole outlook has changed on my sentence and how I feel about my sentence’.

  **Asad, aged 33, 18-year tariff, served 11 years**
Shift in the conception of control – mid/late stage prisoners

- Sense of control: both broader in conception and greater in degree

‘Do you feel that you've got control of your life in here, or control of certain aspects of your life? I've got control of certain aspects. [...] I've got control in my reactions and how I react to people, and how I interact with people [and] my plans for the future and getting myself prepared and ready for that. I've got certain control over my education and I've got certain control over staying healthy, and staying fit, staying positive’.

Daniel, aged 31, 18-year tariff, served 9 years

- Recognising the futility of seeking to control predicament/environment

- Cultivating an ethical self through specific practices and behaviours (‘moral subjectivation – Foucault 1988)
Early-stage prisoners:

‘I wouldn’t want to be doing anything meaningful for this place. Nothing constructive will help me, I think to be honest with you. Because I am still in the same place, I am still within these walls. I am not going anywhere’.

Martin, aged 21, 25-year tariff, served 2 years

Mid/late stage prisoners: desire to ‘achieve something better than this in my life’ – both for self (personal improvement) & others (giving something back/ making amends)

‘The last thing [the victim’s mother] said to me [during an organised encounter] was she did not want two lives to be wasted, and that she wanted me to just make sure that my life turned out with something good, and not waste it, you know, partly in the memory of her son who died that night. And it was like taking a deep breath for a first time, you know, like when I breathed in it was like I felt some new life in my lungs’.

Daniel, aged 31, 18-year tariff, served 9 years
Making the sentence constructive / finding meaning (through faith/ spirituality)

○ Fortification, through belief in a higher purpose or afterlife
  ‘I believe that God never gives you more than you can bear. So [I] know that I'll be able to cope [and] that there's a reason for me going through this’

○ Attribution of meaning and godliness to the mundane present:
  ‘by trying to attribute godliness to everything and seeing the good in everything and attributing some significance to day-to-day events or the mundane, it makes it all a little less futile and a little less depressing’.

○ Answers to existential questions, re life (both taking it and losing it)

○ Hook for personal and moral transformation: ‘….how to be a normal, decent human being’
Final comments

- Adaptation – a *tidal* metaphor
  - from ‘treading water’/being carried by/swimming against the tide (*reactive* agency)
  - to ‘going with the flow’/ using tidal energy (*productive* agency)
  - ‘a determination not to struggle in a futile fashion against that which cannot be overcome, matched by an equal determination not to give internal assent to unacceptable circumstances’ (O’Donnell 2014: 252)

- The *offence-time* or *offence-time-abuse* nexus

- The impact of long-term imprisonment
  - Coping and adaptation – self-reliance, pre-occupation with time, control, identity, meaning, etc – operate as secondary handicaps