

The confines of 'Invisible Walls': An exploration of life sentenced men in an open prison

Charlotte O'Brien is Head of Reducing Reoffending at HMP Millsike, with a Masters in Criminology & Penology, Cambridge University. Guy T is a serving Life-Sentenced Prisoner with a Master of Arts degree in Philosophy with the Open University.

Open prisons in the United Kingdom serve as a critical component in the decompression phase of a life-sentenced prisoner's journey towards reintegration into society. These institutions provide a transitional environment that aims to ease the shift from prison to freedom. The study that this paper is based on highlights the unique challenges encountered by men serving mandatory life sentences within the open estate. It delves into the profound implications of such sentences on cognitive functioning and psychological well-being, alongside the coping mechanisms that prisoners adopt to navigate these challenges. Furthermore, the study examines the current interventions designed to facilitate reintegration and offers recommendations to enhance these practices. The findings highlight the necessity for a comprehensive understanding of the psychological, social, and institutional dynamics that underpin the successful transition and reintegration of life-sentenced prisoners. This understanding is crucial for developing effective strategies that support these individuals in their journey back into society.

The Open Estate

The open estate is designed to aid the decompression process and promote reintegration. 'Open prisons are designed to be less restrictive, providing inmates with more freedom and opportunities to engage in work, education, and

community activities. Their role is to facilitate the reintegration process by helping prisoners develop skills and social connections that are crucial for successful re-entry into society.'¹

The Study

The prison population serving lengthy sentences in prisons within England and Wales has exhibited a consistent upward trend over the course of the twenty-first century. This trend is particularly evident among life-sentenced prisoners with an increase in the number of individuals sentenced to life imprisonment, rising from 5,146 in June 2002 to 7,406 in September 2024.²

The study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the barriers or 'Invisible Walls' individuals face in the first stages of the resettlement part of their life sentence. More specifically, the study involves evaluating whether open prisons have powerful enough reintegration (decompression) practices that can counter prolonged processes of institutionalisation (compression). The study's thematic analysis delves into the prisoners' experiences revealing the challenges and support mechanisms within the open estate.

The study involves 11 semi-structured face-to-face interviews with life-sentenced prisoners at a Category D prison in England. The participants varied in sentence length and time spent in open conditions. The table below shows the participants sentence length, time in open conditions, age and relationship status. None of the participants were recall prisoners.

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1. Leverentz, A., Chen, E., & Christian, J. (2020). *Beyond Recidivism: New Approaches to Research on Prisoner Re-entry and Reintegration*. NYU Press.
 2. Ministry of Justice (2024). <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-april-to-june-2024/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-april-to-june-2024>.

Sentence Length		Time in Open Conditions		Age	Relationship Status	
10 years or less	0	Less than 6 months	4	25-35	2 Single	8
10-15 years	4	6-12 months	0	36-45	3 Married/Partner	1
16-21 years	7	12-24 months	3	46-55	1 Divorced	1
22+ years	0	24-36 months	2	56-65	4 Separated	1
		36+ months	2	66+	1 Widowed	0

An inductive thematic method was used to identify emergent themes and codes within the data. The process of coding was far from linear and further analysis of the data was needed as new concepts were identified. This method enables participants with direct knowledge to share their personal experiences.

Themes

During the interviews, four main areas were investigated: Employment, Relationships, Environment and Progression. Analysis of the data identified four main themes: Belonging, Institutionalisation, Normalisation and Decompression.

Belonging is an important theme as life-sentenced men feel accepted in a specific environment and/or within a specific group. However, during the transition process a prisoner's sense of belonging shifts from the prison culture to society.

Institutionalisation refers to the adaptation and dependency to prison routines and culture. Institutionalisation is a complex process, with some prisoners exhibiting adaptation and others experiencing difficulties in adjusting to the less restrictive environment.

Normalisation maintains that prisoners are entitled to all their fundamental human rights, including the provision of adequate healthcare, employment opportunities, and the ability to maintain communication with their family.³ Individual normalisation refers to the fulfilment of many social responsibilities in society, such as being a father, son, or partner. Normalisation emphasises that prisoners can still complete these tasks while they are in prison.

Decompression is the gradual reduction of prison rituals and rules for a prisoner who has been in a highly volatile/pressurised environment. The process of

decompression is a critical aspect of the transition period for prisoners to have time to develop strategies to facilitate successful reintegration.

Findings Discussions

The findings show that there is a distinct separation between life sentences and determinate sentences in this open prison. There is a designated area for housing individuals serving lengthy or indeterminate sentences. The life-sentenced prisoners frequently characterised the 'determinate' prisoners as 'troublesome' and devoid of any incentives to behave. If a determinate sentenced prisoner were returned to closed conditions, they would still be released on their Conditional Release Date (CRD). However, the consequences for life sentence

prisoners would be to go through the time-consuming parole process again.

As part of the transformative process, those who wanted to change actively distanced themselves from prisoners who exhibited anti-social behaviour due to the fear of being negatively influenced or tarnished. This distance facilitated space for the development of a socially beneficial identity. What is more, 'mandatory lifers need to negotiate their identities against a series of 'push-pull' forces which either constrain or enable the development of pro-social identities (the role of the family, employment, consumer culture, and supervision all play a significant role)'.⁴

Nonetheless, an underlying sense of fear persisted among life-sentenced prisoners. Some prisoners described being subtly influenced by power dynamics with staff members. There was an implicit threat of being transferred back to the closed estate if they did not adhere to rules and regulations.

The lifer community appeared highly cohesive due to their shared experiences, which distinguished them from the rest of the prison population.

3. Engbo, H. (2017). 'Normalisation in Nordic Prisons—From a Prison Governor's Perspective.' In: Scharff Smith, P., Ugelvik, T. (eds) *Scandinavian Penal History, Culture and Prison Practice*. Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

4. Rusu, D. (2022). 'Life beyond murder: exploring the identity reconstruction of mandatory lifers after release'. Faculty of Business, Law and Social Sciences. Birmingham City University.

Belonging

The lifer community appeared highly cohesive due to their shared experiences, which distinguished them from the rest of the prison population. This sense of community appears to follow the prisoners throughout their sentence, with the prisoners describing their own 'social groups' within the prison, be this in a dispersal (Category A), Category B, C or the open estate. The transition to the open estate undeniably emphasised the feeling of belonging for life-sentenced men, although the prisoners exhibited varying responses to this transition. They still felt a part of and belonging to the lifer community although they no longer 'belong' to their previous prison culture. Initially, this recognition can be uncomfortable for some of the men, as their previous support network is removed. Furthermore, open prisons do not have the same living conditions as the closed estate such as cooking facilities or an in cell telephone. Mike states:

Yeah. And you've had, like, your comforts around you, like you've had all the people that you could go to at the end of the day and talk about your anxiety and all that kind of stuff. (Mike)

However, it was clear that the established lifer community within the open prison wanted to take new lifers under their wings, show them 'the ropes' (Shem) and offer that support which they undoubtedly felt was missing or limited when they arrived. Although similar to the closed estate with specialised wings for longer-term prisoners, the open estate seems to have a stronger sense of community. Their strong affiliation with the 'lifer community' provides them with support and assistance once they are established. Shem describes when he first arrived. He was agitated that he was not recognised as a lifer by staff:

We're different. Our mind sets are different. We've been in a long time. We have a lot more to lose. We have a lot more at stake. Therefore, that makes us different, and I feel that we should be treated appropriately. And I wasn't. I was just with the rest of the bus. Treated exactly the same, spoke to exactly the

same and I didn't like that. I thought you really don't understand. I've just done 17 and a half years behind the door and now you're talking to me and treating me like I'm doing three months. (Shem)

There is a transition from 'belonging' to the lifer community to a sense of belonging with society. The transition to the open estate and then society induces a certain level of choice as part of the process of 'responsibilisation' the prisoner is exposed to a number of vulnerabilities. The act of exploring potential options: such as education, employment location or accommodation, even if they are limited, can elicit emotions of unease and a sense of lacking control.⁵

Individuals who had resided in the open estate for a longer duration had evidently begun the process of integrating into society and were actively cultivating their familial connections, through access to ROTLs, including overnight stays with family members. They had transitioned their sense of belonging towards their family as opposed to that of the prison culture and 'lifer community'. In addition, there is a shift from the importance of material possessions in their cells to a transition to the importance of life outside of prison.

You begin to kind of detach yourself from this whole idea of being in closed conditions and you do actually start to think about going forward...obviously getting a job building relationships sort of things (George)

George explains his journey:

I just feel like its closure on a long journey...which has had so many negatives and it's been very emotional...it's time to leave all that in the past and move forward, just a new start. (George)

The comment exhibits a profound sense of relief and resolution, suggesting that George has traversed a challenging and emotionally taxing journey marked by numerous adverse experiences. The expression 'closure on a long journey' signifies that George perceives this moment as a critical juncture, enabling him to

An underlying sense of fear persisted among life-sentenced prisoners. Some prisoners described being subtly influenced by power dynamics with staff members.

5. Giddens, A. (1991). 'Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age'. Stanford.

transcend past difficulties. The focus on a 'new start' conveys a strong inclination towards renewal and an optimistic perspective on the future. This commentary encapsulates themes of transition, personal growth, and optimism, highlighting the transformative potential inherent in moving beyond past adversities.

Although allowing prisoners to go outside the prison walls does not normalise life in prison, it connects life inside the prison to life in society. George, who had recently arrived at the open prison, talked about his plans for the future and ultimately his aims whilst in the open estate:

But I think yeah, initially I just need to adapt and start thinking of the basics. I think you get the basics right and you're gonna, there's gonna be longevity in terms of me going forward, but also and also just to do this, what I've done for the last 16 years but on the outside. (George)

Those prisoners who reported having little to no contact with their families ultimately decided to remain inside the prison, despite the fact that they had access to their overnight stays and had travelled to nearby towns. During the day, they also worked within the confines of the prison. It is not quite apparent whether this was due to a potentially higher level of 'institutionalisation,' or whether these prisoners simply felt they 'belonged' to the culture of the prison and its surroundings since they lacked the support and networks of their families, similar to that as described by Irwin.⁶

The findings show that the transition to the open estate has a significant impact on individuals psychologically. Hulley, Crewe and Wright demonstrate that the coping mechanisms cultivated throughout lengthy prison sentences are, in fact, maladaptive in the real world. Certain penal scholars have proposed that life/long term sentenced prisoners construct a false identity in order to establish a sense of security. '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 ... if their bodies were

in prison, their cognitive focus was elsewhere.'⁷ Indeed, some prisoners have psychological alterations to their personalities and identities. This may cause further apprehension for prisoners especially prisoners with limited support outside of prison. Prolonged degradation effects caused by prison rituals combined with a long prison sentence may cause psychological alteration or institutionalised behaviour traits that the individual may be unaware they exhibit. Liem and Kunst's concept of 'post incarceration syndrome' whereby men become 'over adapted' to the prison environment, can clearly affect life after their release.⁸

Institutionalisation

The 'aim' of the open estate is to 'support' in 'undoing' some of the institutionalisation developed by those who have spent lengthy periods in the closed estate. When individuals are exposed to prolonged periods of imprisonment, they may acquire adaptive strategies and behavioural patterns to effectively traverse the inherent difficulties and hierarchical framework in their current setting.

George talked about how 'lifers' are naturally institutionalised due to the time spent in prison:

There's been times when I've been waiting outside a workshop, and there's a door, and I won't even try the door. I'll just wait for someone to open it — even if it's open. (George)

Indeed, institutionalisation can induce gradual psychological changes that are hidden until a prisoner is exposed to less restrictive conditions in the open estate. Indeed, Ben detailed his relocation to the 'pods' when discussing his housing situation within open conditions. The pods are a section of self-contained units made from metal, where lifers and long-term prisoners are given priority. Although, the atmosphere was relatively tranquil and consistent in comparison to the dormant areas of the estate, his inability to establish himself was a result of the structure of the building.

6. Irwin, J. (2009). *The Felon*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

7. Zamble, E. (1992). Behavior and adaptation in long-term prison inmates: Descriptive longitudinal results. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 19(4), 409-425.

8. Liem, M., & Kunst, M. (2013). Is there a recognizable post-incarceration syndrome among released "lifers"? *Internal Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 36(3-4), 333-337.

So I had to have a brick wall around me. (Ben)

Evidently, acclimated to the confined estate and his immediate surroundings, Ben found the transition to his new surroundings challenging. He was transferred from the pods to a solitary dormitory unit located in the prison's older buildings that is made of bricks. After the relocation, Ben explained:

I felt safe, and secure — more at home. (Ben)

Overall, Ben's commentary highlights the complex interplay between physical space, personal agency, and psychological well-being within the prison system. The process of institutionalisation can provide both advantageous and detrimental outcomes for prisoners.

On one side, it has the potential to facilitate individuals' adjustment to the regulated prison environment, adherence to regulations, and cultivation of discipline. Moreover, it has the potential to foster a perception of safety and comfort inside an otherwise volatile setting. Conversely, institutionalisation may also yield adverse consequences. Imprisonment can result in psychological and emotional transformations, including the erosion of individual identity, less self-governance, and heightened reliance on the institutional framework. Closed conditions introduce a set of ritualistic processes that can be difficult to undo once experienced. Maruna, explains 'The depersonalization of a person's former identity through the 'abasements, degradations, humiliations and profanations of self'....The prisoner undergoes a 'civil death', losing former citizen rights and liberties, but also a distinct set of ritualistic admission procedures-undressing, strip searching, and disinfecting the individual, assigning him or her a new institutional uniform...living quarters...meant to break the individual's personality, including enforced verbal acts of deference.'⁹

Three prisoners expressed that upon arrival, they were so profoundly surprised and disoriented that they requested to be taken back to closed conditions. However, it became clear the staff demonstrate the ability to handle these problems, as all individuals remain in the prison and successfully integrated into the system.

But nevertheless, it's still the same feeling of putting yourself back into a cage environment. I know, it's open space. And now when you look around and see less fences and stuff, mentally you're locked back in here. (Peter)

In contrast, Sid stated that it made little impact on how he dealt with his surroundings:

It's not about that there ain't no fence. They ain't none. There's cameras, there's doors. Whatever, but you just don't take notice of that. Because I didn't take notice of that when I was in C Cat or a B Cat, it's just part of the process, and it's all in your head anyway. (Sid)

I've always said I've
got to draw a line
between what
prison is and what
outside life is.

The extract reflects themes explored in research by Hulley, Crewe, and Wright, particularly regarding the psychological and emotional responses of prisoners to different environments.

The initial reaction of the prisoners, who were surprised and disoriented by the transition to open conditions, aligns with findings by Hulley, Crewe, and Wright,¹⁰ and that explored by

Shammas¹¹ which discuss the challenges prisoners face when adapting to a less restrictive environment. This surprise and disorientation can be attributed to the shift from a highly controlled setting to one with more freedom, which can be unsettling for individuals accustomed to strict routines and boundaries.

Peter's comment about feeling mentally 'locked back in' despite the open space highlights the psychological impact of incarceration, a theme consistent within the research. The presence of fewer physical barriers does not necessarily translate to a sense of freedom: the mental perception of being confined persists, illustrating the deep-seated psychological effects of imprisonment.

Sid's perspective, which downplays the significance of physical barriers and emphasises the mental aspect of confinement, resonates with the research's exploration of how prisoners internalise their environment. Sid's attitude suggests a cognitive adaptation to security measures, indicating that the mental processing of incarceration conditions varies

9. Maruna, S. (2011). Reentry as a rite of passage. *Punishment & Society*, 13(1), 3-28.

10. Crewe, B. (2011). Soft power in prison: Implications for staff-prisoner relationships, liberty and legitimacy. *European journal of criminology*, 8(6), 455-468.

11. Shammas, V. L. (2014). The pains of freedom: Assessing the ambiguity of Scandinavian penal exceptionalism on Norway's Prison Island. *Punishment & Society*, 16(1), 104-123.

among individuals. His approach reflects Shammus's findings that some prisoners adapt by focusing less on external constraints and more on internal coping mechanisms. Sid's comment about the process being 'all in your head' aligns with the notion that the mental adaptation to prison life varies among individuals, emphasising personal resilience and cognitive framing. This aligns with the idea that the experience of imprisonment is as much about the mind as it is about the physical environment.

Most of the prisoners stated that the experience of entering an open prison was overwhelming due to the lack of physical security. This freedom placed the responsibility of resisting temptation on themselves. As a result, they experienced apprehension and distress, as the coping strategies they had developed to endure the rigours of imprisonment were no longer effective. In order, to maintain compliance they need to cultivate new coping mechanisms.

Whilst open prisons implement measures to mitigate the adverse consequences of institutionalisation, such as education, vocational training and rehabilitative initiatives, more specifically Release on Temporary Licence, there remains the question if 'decompression' can ever be fully 'undone.'

Normalisation

It was observed, in identifying the theme of normalisation, that the prisoners frequently stated that their time in prison and environment was 'not normal.' A subset of the male individuals discussed how they had inadvertently or deliberately established a dichotomy between prison life and the outside world, refusing to fully accept the notion that their current living conditions constituted 'normalcy.'

I've always said I've got to draw a line between what prison is and what outside life is. Because I've seen that many people go down and go under because they are not going to draw that line. (Lee)

Some prisoners recognise that prison is not real life but a false environment that is designed for a number of purposes such as punishment, rehabilitation and reintegration. Lee's statement highlights the importance of psychological boundaries and mental separation between prison life and life outside.

There is an emphasis on the necessity of establishing a clear mental distinction between the experiences and mindset within prison and those in the

outside world. This suggests a strategic approach to maintaining psychological health and resilience by compartmentalising different life phases. Lee notes that many individuals struggle because they fail to make this distinction. This observation implies that the inability to separate prison experiences from outside life can lead to negative outcomes, such as emotional or psychological decline. In addition, the act of 'drawing a line' serves as a coping mechanism, allowing Lee to manage the challenges of imprisonment without letting them overwhelm his sense of self or future prospects. This approach underscores the importance of mental strategies in navigating the prison environment and preparing for reintegration into society. Overall, Lee's comment highlights the significance of mental boundaries as a tool for maintaining personal well-being and successfully transitioning between different life contexts.

So you've got that line between normal life and this life, and I think that guy, a speaker that came in the other week, he said something, but it really resonated. It was about like this isn't normal like this whole place is not normal, so don't ever treat it as your as your home or life. (Peter)

Whilst the open estate aims to support reintegration, another ambiguity develops when the process of normalisation is connected to other associated principles, primarily resocialisation. Normalised prison circumstances facilitate the reintegration into society by reducing the contrast with a free society and minimising the detrimental effects of imprisonment.¹²

Descriptions of the Category D used for the study varied, but when making comparisons with previous establishments it was evident the environment was not as aesthetically pleasing as previous prisons. However, an emphasis on resocialisation could shift the focus of the normalisation initiative from prison environment to behaviour, leading to attempts to normalise the individual as a means of promoting responsibility.¹³ The experience of the open estate is focused on what the prisoners can access, rather than their environment. Those prisoners who had undertaken regular day and overnight leave shared their stories:

Sure you have freedom, a sense of freedom, a sense of more of like, you know, happiness and cosiness for the future, you know. (Sid)

12. Crewe, B., Levins, A., Larmour, S., Laursen, J., Mjåland, K., & Schliehe, A. (2022). Nordic penal exceptionalism: A comparative, empirical analysis. *The British Journal of Criminology* 63(2), 424-443.

13. van de Rijt, J., van Ginneken, E., & Boone, M. (2023). Lost in translation: The principle of normalisation in prison policy in Norway and the Netherlands. *Punishment & Society*, 25(3), 766-783.

Open prisons seem to approach normalisation better than closed prisons. A degree of freedom of movement attests to normalisation, both within the prison perimeter as well as between prison and the outside world.

Normalisation can pertain to one's identity when prisoners are able to keep their pre-prison social status and occupational skills. Whilst some prisoners focus on the opportunity to work within the open estate, to assist in future resettlement, others hold onto the notion that it is more about becoming part of society.

George, discussed further plans for the future and ultimately his aims whilst in the open estate:

Initially I just need to adapt and start thinking of the basics. I think you get the basics right... there's gonna be longevity in terms of me going forward.
(George)

Decompression

The findings suggest that 'decompression' did exist within the Category D, in the form of access to education, employment and day and overnight releases. Sid explained the adaptation to the 'outside world' did not come with many barriers, adapting to employment, temporary release with ease. Results from these prisoners, highlighted that the 'decompression' period was in fact a lengthier process and required further intervention to support reintegration. Those that had served longer appeared to have struggled more with the sudden agency. They felt overwhelmed by the choices and the individual responsibility.

The emotional links to decompression were significant. The prisoners had to adapt to their new surroundings to gain entry back into society. Lee describes his journey toward reintegration as a series of transitions, each marked by a distinct emotional response:

Until I reached the open estate, there was a sense of anxiety, a kind of 'butterflies in my stomach.' But even then, there was excitement. And it happened again when I first experienced day release and overnight release. Finally, I began to experience the normalcy of birthdays, anniversaries, and sharing good news with my family. (Lee)

George also explains his journey:

I just feel like it's closure on a long journey. On this whole like journey, which has had so many negatives and it's been very emotional, I think it's gonna be confirmation that there's a part that's in the past and there's those like negative attachments to. That, and I think it's just gonna be a sign for her. Like, OK, it's time to leave all that in the past and move forward, just a new start.

Decompression encompasses multiple factors that can differ and are often subject to individual interpretation. Successful reintegration into society can be achieved by considering several elements that influence decompression, such as adequate support, resources, and a positive outlook. Although the transition process can be challenging as life-sentenced men have to contend with judgement, mistrust, or strained personal relationships.

The transition from closed to open prison conditions presents significant emotional challenges but also opportunities for personal growth and increased autonomy. Open prisons facilitate decompression and de-institutionalisation, though this process is complex and varies across individuals. Effective

communication and collaboration between closed and open estates are essential for successful reintegration. Initiating decompression programs early can assist prisoners in adjusting to societal norms and preparing for release. The open estate prison regime allows prisoners to assume responsibility and make decisions, granting them a level of autonomy that can foster optimism for the future. Social integration initiatives, such as Resettlement Day Release (RDR) and Resettlement Overnight Release (ROR), help prisoners establish connections with the community, aiding in the formation of social bonds and networks of assistance, and cultivating a sense of inclusion beyond the prison setting. Research indicates that open prisons can significantly reduce recidivism and aid reintegration by providing a normalised environment that helps prisoners maintain or regain social roles and responsibilities. However, it is crucial to recognise that institutionalisation is multifaceted, and the efficacy of open prisons in addressing it may fluctuate. Factors such as the duration of a prisoner's sentence, individual

The study underscores the intricate and perceived fragile nature of the open prison experience.

needs, and the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs undertaken can all influence the extent to which open prisons mitigate institutionalisation.

Introducing these recommendations is crucial for improving prisoner reintegration. It is essential to prioritise institutionalisation processes to ensure that all prisoners have access to comprehensive decompression programs, which are vital for helping them adjust to the natural environment and societal norms post-incarceration. Addressing institutionalisation is inherently complex and necessitates the collaboration and sustained commitment of multiple stakeholders. The period leading up to the release of life-sentenced prisoners presents an optimal opportunity to address institutionalisation traits. This can be achieved by providing access to Progressive Regimes/Resettlement

Units or similar communities, which offer less structured regimes, greater autonomy, opportunities for independent living, and reduced security restrictions. Additionally, the study underscores the intricate and perceived fragile nature of the open prison experience. It is imperative for the prison system to recognise the complexities associated with long-term imprisonment, including the dynamics between staff and prisoners, subcultural influences, perceived status among prisoners, and their impact on reintegration. Recognising these challenges is essential for addressing the unique characteristics of imprisonment for those nearing the end of life sentences. These recommendations aim to enhance the efficacy of the open prison system in promoting successful reintegration and mitigating the adverse effects of long-term institutionalisation.