

# LIFERS, LONG-TERM PRISONERS AND EDUCATION

*A discussion of the concerns expressed by life sentenced and other long term prisoners and some suggestions for the provision of relevant educational programmes.*

The numbers of prisoners serving long sentences in England and Wales has increased dramatically and continues to increase. In 1957 there were 48 prisoners sentenced to life imprisonment received into prisons in England and Wales. In 1977, 174 were received into prisons. 229 were received in 1990. The population of life sentenced prisoners in prisons in England and Wales has grown from 1,309 in 1977 to 2,795 in 1991. Eight percent of the prison population is serving a life sentence. If this population remains the same, it is estimated that the population of lifers in prison in England and Wales will have reached 3,500 by the year 2000.

The statistics for long term prisoners, those serving more than four years, also shows a marked increase. In 1981 there were 625 such prisoners, by 1991 this number had grown to 2616. With the trend towards awarding long sentences for a wider range of crimes and with attempts to make more use of non custodial sentences for minor crimes we can expect not only more long term prisoners in our prisons by the year 2000 but that they will make up a larger proportion of the prison population.

The majority of these prisoners will be released into society at some time. If the prison service is to avoid turning out increasing numbers of damaged, embittered individuals, who are unable or unwilling to contribute to society, then increasing consideration will have to be given to the type of regime most suited to prisoners serving long sentences.

The educationalists will need to know how education can contribute to that regime, and what they can do to help the individual survive the trauma of a long sentence.

This article does not seek to supply a curriculum of courses to be provided; neither does it support the view that any one discipline can work successfully in isolation. It seeks to identify the needs of long term prisoners and to suggest some practical actions that education departments might take to meet the needs of lifers and enable their return to society to be positive.

After considering research carried out among long term prisoners in various countries and from my own research with 102 life sentenced prisoners, I believe it is possible to suggest some areas of educational activity that may be beneficial to long term prisoners and lifers. The aims of introducing such activities would be that of ;

- a. helping lifers and long term prisoners to survive the ordeal of long incarceration and gain from it,
- b. helping prisons to meet the Home Office mission statement '...to look after them (the prisoners) with humanity and to help them lead law-abiding and useful lives in custody and after release.'
- c. reassuring the general public that prisons are serving the twin functions of punishment and rehabilitation.

The literature seems to show that there are broadly three main areas which cause prisoners serving long sentences the most concern. After discussing these concerns. I hope to show that education in prisons can have a positive part to play in providing strategies that allow prisoners to overcome those concerns. The long termers'

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worries can be summarised as being:

1. concerns with preservation of self identity, self esteem and personal survival. Being able to cope with the sentence, being able to 'do the bird'.
2. concerns with time, passing it, using it, accounting for it, forgetting it.
3. concerns with maintaining contacts outside the prison, with family, with friends, with organisations and with the general way in which things are done outside.

My own research with 102 life sentenced prisoners in English prisons confirmed these areas of concern.

The lifers were asked to list the concerns that they felt would most occupy other lifers at various stages in their sentence. My research was concerned only with the first nine years of the sentence. The responses were provided by lifers who had served a wide range of time inside. Twenty two had served less than three years, 36 had served between three and six years, 16 had served between six and nine years and 26 had served longer than nine years. Of this later group five had served longer than 20 years.

One or two things are worth noting from Graph 1.

The research identified a fourth area of concern not mentioned in the Literature - that of concern with the crime the lifers had committed. Although this was identified by

only a small percentage of the men it did form a core around which some concerns clustered. It is interesting to note that it was not mentioned as a concern after the three year mark.

It can be seen that the emphasis given to the concerns varied over the years quite considerably. Concerns about the self had always been strong but between the end of year one and year six they become predominant.

Worries about time, planning for the future, considering the possibilities of release in the future take over the dominant role between years six and nine. On conviction and shortly after it worries centred on maintaining outside contacts seem to be at their strongest.

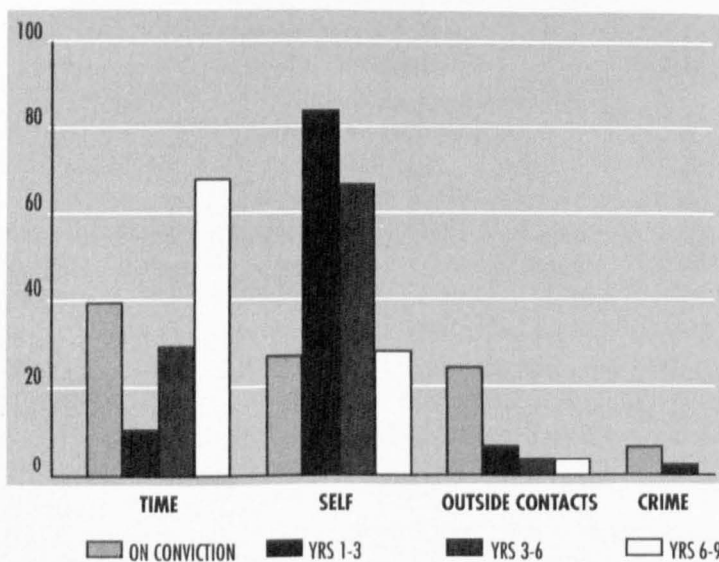
Concerns about the family and external contacts persist. Such worries seem to diminish as time goes on, but to remain at a fairly stable level throughout the period. The first year inside seems to be the time when concern about outside contacts is the strongest. This is supported by Sapsford (1978) who found that life sentenced prisoners did not lose interest in the outside world but they became more introverted and had less actual involvement. Visits became fewer and fewer and there was a tendency to talk more about the past than the future.

### **Concerns about Self Image and Mental Survival**

It has been suggested that long periods of incarceration in total institutions will automatically lead to institutionalisation of the individual. That is to say that the individual will become passive, dependant on the staff and unable to make decisions for herself or himself.

The fear of institutionalisation seems to be very real amongst the life sentenced prisoners with whom I have worked. They are all concerned about whether they can 'do the time', that is complete the sentence without losing their identity, their individuality and their own will. They are enthusiastic to employ various strategies to ensure that they do not become institutionalised. It is interesting to note that neither Richards (1978) nor Flanagan (1980) list this amongst the most severe problems described by long term prisoners. Flanagan did wonder if this was because the prisoners thought they would appear weak and uncertain if they mentioned this as a severe concern and thus might dent their macho images.

**Graph 1**  
**CHANGES IN PREDICTED CONCERNS**



Most of the lifers who completed questionnaires for my research indicated that they were coping with the sentence and in some instances that they were coping well. This despite the fact that they also registered that they were feeling lonely and life seemed aimless.

Bolton et al (1976), Sapsford (1978), Gray (1978), Flanagan (1982). Porporino and Zamble (1984), amongst others have shown that institutionalisation is not inevitable and have identified coping strategies that long term prisoners employ to avoid it.

Indeed Bolton et al and Sapsford have indicated that long term imprisonment can leave prisoners more mentally endowed, in some instances, than they were at the beginning of the sentence. Given the right regime, a battery of individually internalised coping skills and access to an appropriate prisoner culture, then deterioration over time is not inevitable.

From my own research it would appear that lifers see attendance on education and training courses as a component in their armoury of coping strategies.

The prisoners were given a list of fourteen commonly given reasons for attending education and training courses, and asked to choose the five that most closely matched, their own reasons for attending. Seventy seven men responded and produced 384 reasons between them. The question was only answered by prisoners who were currently attending classes or who had attended in the past.

As can be seen from Table 1. 85 per cent chose positive reasons for attending education that were allied to either keeping the mind active or preparing for the future. Of the remaining 15 per cent of reasons for attending education courses 7.3 per cent were to do with passing the time, 5.7 per cent as a means of 'escaping' from prison for a few hours. Only 2.4 per cent were totally negative; being 'to doss' to do nothing, to laze around and to 'escape' from the workshops, that is to get out of working in the manufacturing industries within the prison.

Much has been written on the coping strategies employed by life sentenced and long term prisoners in order to psychologically survive a long period of incarceration.

Porporino and Zamble (1984) note the importance of the inventory of coping skills that the individual brings into prison,

also the experience of previous control that the individual has accumulated in other situations. They note that the intellectual level and the self image of the individual are also important elements in their defensive armoury against institutionalisation.

Cohen and Taylor (1971) offer the inmate code as a foundation for coping. Flanagan (1981) suggested the adoption of the 'Long Termers' Perspective' as an effective coping strategy. The perspective and the code require adherence to the norms of a prison based sub-culture. Successful adoption indicates maturity and commands, if not respect, then at least an acknowledgement that the individual is coping. The strategies require a careful and thorough consideration of data before action is taken, a steadfastness of approach and a predictability of action. The perspective and the code demand that the long term man or woman rely upon themselves. An understanding that they are the only ones with a genuine and full time interest in their well-being and welfare.

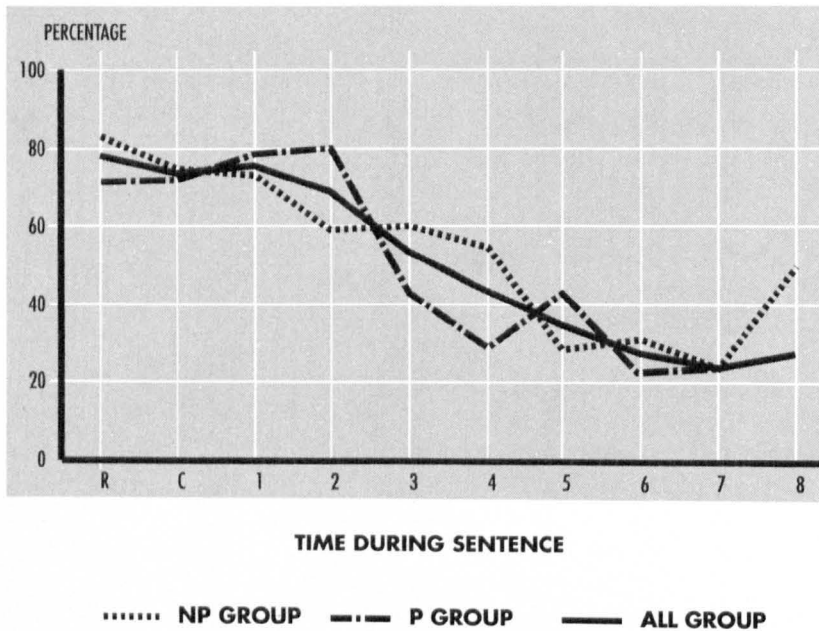
### Concerns with Time

Richards (1976) identified the knowledge that time was passing by as a major concern of long term prisoners, this was supported by Flanagan (1980, 1981, 1982). Cohen and Taylor (1971) noted that time is served, past, done, it is an almost

**Table 1**  
**REASONS GIVEN BY LIFE SENTENCED PRISONERS FOR ATTENDING EDUCATION OR TRAINING COURSES.**

REASONS FOR ATTENDING	% OF LIFERS
Keep the brain active	14.1
Mental stimulation	10.75
Keep head together	8.6
Try something new	7.5
Get head together	3.1
Meet new people	2.9
<b>KEEP MIND ALERT</b>	<b>47</b>
Prepare for the future	13.3
Gain qualifications	10.7
Make up for lost time	8.3
Learn a trade	5.4
<b>PREPARE FOR THE FUTURE</b>	<b>38</b>
Pass the time	7.3
"escape" from prison	5.7
"escape" from workshops	2.1
"doss" 0.3	
<b>PASSIVELY PASS TIME</b>	<b>15</b>

**Graph 2**  
**NEGATIVE FEELINGS BY YEAR**



tangible item to be fought and overcome.

My own research was not concerned with lifers' conceptions of time, it was concerned to discover if the lifers could identify any changes in mood or emotional state at particular times during the years they had spent in prison.

They were asked to select five words or phrases, from a battery of 24 possible choices, that best described their general outlook since they were convicted. The most often chosen response was that they were worried about the future. The next most chosen responses, as mentioned earlier, showed that the lifers felt that they were coping with the sentence, that they were lonely and that they felt that they lacked any purpose.

Later the participants were also asked to remember how positive or negative they were at various times during their sentence. The terms positive and negative were defined in the questionnaire and a scale was introduced so that the strength of the feeling could be recorded as well as its type.

Graph 2 shows the decrease in negative feelings over the first eight years of imprisonment, as reported by life sentenced prisoners.

The lifers were divided into two groups, those that had no previous experience of prison before their current sentence were placed in group NP and those who had been in prison, or similar, were

placed in group P.

The centre line shows the percentage of negative feelings recorded by the group as a whole, the other lines represent the responses from the NP and P groups. It is reassuring to note that the line falls for all the groups, indicating a fall in the number and strength of negative feelings as the years go by. It is interesting however that the lines drawn from the responses of members of the two groups are so different. The lines continually meet and diverge throughout the eight years, ending with another divergence. After seven years the feelings of the group with no previous experience of prison is becoming more negative, while those with previous prison experience continue to become more positive.

The differences may indicate that lifers from the two groups have different needs and that consideration should be given to differentiating between them in the programmes that are offered.

### **Concern About Contacts with the Outside World**

Rasch (1981) hypothesised that in long term prisoners there would be changes in social attitude, namely that they would become withdrawn and show increasingly negative attitudes to society and the legal system. His research did not confirm this hypothesis. Sapsford (1978) reported a reduction in future time perspective and that lifers who had served a number of years tended to talk more about the past than they had previously. Richards (1978) and Flanagan (1998) reported severe problems among long term prisoners in relation to deprivation of relationships inside and outside the prison. Flanagan (1992) identified special stress in long term prisoners with regard to external relationships. He states that the fear that external relationships will be irrevocably lost creates unique concerns within such prisoners. He also notes that contacts between prisoners become shallow and fragmentary due to the fact that long termers are moved between prisons, thus putting an end to relationships.

Anecdotal evidence gathered as a result of my research would seem to indicate that lifers are concerned about maintaining links with the outside. A few life sentenced prisoners have said that they have asked their friends and families not to visit out of

concern for the stress and the emotional and financial pressures such visits place on the visitors and to some extent upon the visited. The majority, however, encouraged and are encouraged by visits, although it would seem that the frequency of the visits declines as the years pass.

### **Aspects of a Positive Regime**

With regard to the type of regime most suited for lifers and long term prisoners Goeman (1997) emphasised the importance of avoiding early negative developments. Bottoms and Light (1987) pointed out the importance of maintaining the possibilities of future hope, McKay et al (1979) called for the avoidance of physical and social environments that are seen as malevolent and persecutory and the abolition of 'mundane routines'.

The European Committee on Crime Problems (1977) asserted 'It may be assumed with a high degree of probability that the negative effects of long prison terms, as described, are not inevitable and may be counteracted by purposeful action'. The report goes on to provide an ideal blueprint for the safe, humane and therapeutic incarceration of long term prisoners. It stresses that long term prisoners at the beginning of the sentence should be sympathetically and gently introduced into the prison and prison life, there should not be a rigorous initial regime.

Communications and links with the outside world should be encouraged and there should be separate accommodation for short term and long term prisoners.

The Council put forward four propositions that it believed would counteract deterioration. Amongst those recommendations there are a number that education departments could implement to the benefit of their long term students, and which meet the needs and concerns of lifers and long term prisoners mentioned earlier. For instance when the Council discusses the treatment of long term prisoners it suggests that:

- a. a sense of co-responsibility should be fostered between inmate and staff and inmate and inmate;
- b. there should be a realistic assessment of the aims of any treatment programme;
- c. there ought to be opportunities for worthwhile work;

- d. every effort should be made to maintain outside links, these should be two way.

To these recommendations might be added the suggestion that programmes be included that:

1. support and enhance a positive self image,
2. develop coping skills in individuals,
3. enable prisoners to realistically prepare for their release.

### **The Contribution Education can Make to Positive Regimes**

Education departments in prisons can play a vital part in helping the regime to meet these recommendations and suggestions. In some respects, they are uniquely placed to provide programmes, courses and opportunities that directly address those aspects of the positive regime.

Education departments, on the whole, are not seen by prisoners as part of the apparatus that is keeping them in prison. They are seen as providing a service directly to the prisoner and directly for his or her benefit. The staff are seen as non threatening civilians.

Well run departments can provide the occasion, the imagination and the resourcefulness to furnish the lifer and the long term prisoner with opportunities for personal decision making, self expression and for raising self esteem that may not be readily available elsewhere within the prison.

Prisoners, while working in the education department, can be shown that they control their own destinies; that they will achieve their goals if they make the necessary effort. The departmental staff can teach, advise, encourage, motivate, exhort, make resources available. The ultimate decision about achievement, however, lies with the individual, and the individual must be aware of this. This being true it follows that there must be trust and a partnership between the student and staff. Trust stems from mutual respect. A partnership is marked by an acknowledgement of each others responsibilities and areas of influence and control.

The education department can employ strategies that encourage prisoners to exercise responsibility, control and decision making throughout their sentences.

A number of lifers have said that the

most important role of the education department is 'to keep the dream alive'. By this they meant that the department can help the prisoner work towards a goal that the prisoner has set for himself. As a result of discussions with education staff the route to it may well be changed, the time scale altered and a more realistic view be gained by the 'dreamer'; but there is still a dream. This hope for the future will have had its value and veracity reinforced as a result of the discussions that have taken place between the 'dreamer' and the professional adviser. The dream, however, still belongs to the 'dreamer', he remains in control of it.

More formally the dream can equate to the long term prisoner's educational career plan, which will be incorporated into the prisoner's sentence plan.

Education staff can encourage all long term prisoners to develop an education career plan. It may be short and sweet, it may be long, involved and cover years ahead, it may be constructed piecemeal, one achievement leading to another goal. The plans may be achieved by formal or informal means. Target setting can help long term prisoners use time positively.

Through the establishment of prisoner led clubs, societies and even taught classes prisoners can be offered opportunities for decision making and undertaking responsibilities outside their own immediate needs. Dealing with the demands, stresses and problems that arise as a result of any group activity can provide real situations within which lifers and long term prisoners might exercise control, decision making and foster positive interpersonal relations.

It should be noted that such activities can use up a lot of education staff time. Even within the most liberal and positive of regimes there will be a limit to how much the prisoner committees can do on their own. Education staff can form an interface between the committee and the prison authorities and in some instances with the outside world. The committees will need advice and guidance, particularly in the early days and education staff may well need to attend the majority of, if not all of, the committee meetings.

Education departments can offer many links with the world outside prison. The act of taking part in an educational pursuit automatically links one with the wider world of all those others who are similarly engaged, wherever they are. Such philosophical thoughts can be encouraged so

that the prisoners may see their learning in a wider context; to see that they are not alone. Education departments can of course be concrete as well as philosophical. Many already invite speakers, debaters, performers in from the outside. All the teachers and all the staff in the prison are people from outside, although long association with the prisoners may have caused staff and prisoners to cease to appreciate this fact.

The case has been made that those who survive most readily are those who have the best range and the most relevant inventory of coping skills. The education department, together with other departments within the prison, could look at ways of teaching prisoner's how to increase the range of coping skills they have. Time might be spent teaching prisoner's how to use the skills they have more effectively.

It has been shown earlier that concern with the staff is paramount amongst life sentenced and long term prisoners. The education department can make a positive contribution by allowing the prisoner to boost his self image through the attainment of relevant national qualifications; by fostering mutual respect between individuals being taught and the individuals teaching and by acknowledging that adult prisoners are mature students and come to the learning situation with a wide range of experiences and expectations.

Life sentenced prisoners were asked specifically how education departments could become more effective for them. The suggestions put forward are shown in Table 2.

Leaving aside the perennial problem of resources, three of the suggestions seem to be related:

1. calls for a wider curriculum,
2. requests for educators generally to better understand lifers, their sentence and the problem they face and
3. for more continuity between establishments. These suggestions seem to be centred around the suggestions that there is a need to better understand the sentence and its effect on lifers.

The sentence is a long one and will be served in a number of prisons. The fear of lifers and long termers outlined above are real, as are the dangers of institutionalisation. If educationalists are aware of these and other aspects of long term incarceration then they may be in a position to work with other



disciplines to provide positive regimes.

The importance of a wide curriculum is obvious when one considers not only the range of ability and interest there will be among long term prisoners, but also the number of courses they can complete during the term of a long sentence.

Increased continuity between departments in different establishments was cited as a possible improvement by only 8% of the sample, yet it must be an important consideration for educational planners. Career plans initiated early in the sentence will need to be reviewed, renewed and encouraged in subsequent prisons. Courses begun in one prison will need to be capable of completion and supplementation in subsequent prisons.

Continuity is desirable but its achievement may be difficult. As long term prisoner's move through the prison system they are placed in prisons designed primarily to cater for the needs of a rapidly changing population of short term prisoners. There is a danger that the educational needs of a relatively small number of long term prisoners, will be lost amongst the needs of the larger, changing population. It is possible that the majority of the courses being offered will cover the basic skills and the acquisition of initial qualifications in a variety of subjects. The long termers may have already past that level and be looking for a higher level of provision.

### **Conclusion**

There are many concerns that life sentenced and long term prisoners share, these focus around the ability to avoid mental deterioration, to 'do the time' and to maintain links with the world outside the prison gates. Society generally is concerned that released prisoners do not pose a threat and that they are not a burden on its resources. Imaginative and dynamic education departments within prisons, as part of a positive regime, can be ideally and uniquely organised to help long term prisoners address their concerns and to leave prison undamaged and prepared to become self supporting ■

**Table 2**

### **WAYS IN WHICH EDUCATION DEPARTMENTS MIGHT CATER MORE FULLY TO THE NEEDS OF LIFER SENTENCED PRISONERS.**

REASONS FOR ATTENDING	% OF LIFERS
Wider curriculum	47
Better understanding of lifers, their problems and the sentence	18
More money/time/resources	14
Be more outgoing/efficient	11
Continuity between estabs.	8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>98</b>

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