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Editorial Comment

This special issue of the Prison Service Journal focuses on life imprisonment. A life sentence is a form of punishment imposed on an individual for the remainder of their natural life — it will only end when they die.¹ Life sentences are reserved for the most serious criminal offences, such as murder, manslaughter and rape. Some offences, like murder, attract a mandatory life sentence, meaning that it is the only sanction available to a sentencing judge. For other serious offences, the court has the discretion to impose a life sentence, but they are not obliged to.²

Individuals given a whole life order, for an offence that is considered exceptionally serious,³ will serve the entirety of the sentence in custody. In all other cases, a judge imposes a tariff, which is the minimum term that must be served in custody before an individual can be considered for release. Once an individual has reached the end of their minimum tariff period they are eligible for release; however, release will only be granted once the Parole Board are satisfied that the rest of the sentence can be served safely in the community. Following release from prison, life-sentenced prisoners (LSPs) remain on licence for the remainder of their lives and are subject to recall to prison should they breach the terms of that licence. This can be because they commit a new offence (of any type) or because they violate any of the specific restrictions placed on them.⁴

There have been significant changes in the population of LSPs in the prison system of England and Wales over the last 50 years. The number of people given life sentences (including whole life orders) has grown substantially and LSPs are spending considerably longer in custody, with the average tariff length imposed on this group increasing exponentially.⁵ For example, at the end of the 1960s, less than 500 men were serving life imprisonment, and only two men had been in custody for a continuous period of more than 15 years. Comparatively, by 2020, almost 7,000 people were serving life sentences across England and Wales,

half of whom were given minimum tariffs of 10-20 years, with a further third given tariffs of at least 20 years.⁶ This reflects an increase in the average minimum tariff imposed by judges for murder, which rose from 12.5 years, in 2003, to 21.1 years in 2013.⁷

These changes to the life sentenced population have considerable implications for individuals serving life sentences and their loved ones, and for HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and third sector organisations who support LSPs. For HMPPS, these implications include the need to support the growing number of young LSPs entering prison while simultaneously managing the needs of older lifers who remain in custody for longer periods, as well as responding to the needs of the increasing number of families affected by long-term imprisonment. This special issue addresses these and other pertinent issues related to LSPs, drawing on the expertise of a range of practitioners, academics and experts by lived experience.

The special issue begins with Dr Catherine Appleton and Hannah Gilman's reflections on the evolution of the most extreme form of life sentences in our legal system — whole life orders — and their increased use in England and Wales. They highlight the challenges that 'death by incarceration' raises and call for an in-depth review of this extreme form of punishment, at a time when the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill proposes to extend the use of whole life orders to young adults.

The following eight papers explore the experiences of life imprisonment among specific subgroups. The first, authored by ourselves and our colleague, Professor Ben Crewe, focuses on the problems faced by the growing numbers of young LSPs. Drawing on data from the largest ever study of men and women serving life sentences from a young age in England and Wales, we outline the difficulties of the early years of the sentence, the particular experiences of women, and the issues

1. Sentencing Council (2022). Life Sentences. Available from: <https://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/sentencing-and-the-council/types-of-sentence/life-sentences/> (accessed 23rd March 2022).

2. See n.1.

3. Crown Prosecution Service (2019), Sentencing – mandatory life sentences in murder cases. Available from <https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/sentencing-mandatory-life-sentences-murder-cases> (accessed 13th April 2022).

4. For example, see Appleton, C. A. (2010). *Life after life imprisonment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

5. Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2019). The long view – life sentences. *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile – Winter 2019*. Available from: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/portals/0/documents/bromley%20briefings/old%20editions/Winter%202019%20Factfile%20web.pdf> (accessed 23rd March 2022).

6. Prison Reform Trust (2022), *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile – Winter 2022*. Available from: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Bromley%20Briefings/Winter%202022%20Factfile.pdf> (accessed 23rd March 2022).

7. Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2020), *Life imprisonment from young adulthood: adaptation, identity and time*. London: Palgrave. P. 3.

faced by men and women who are approaching (or beyond) their tariff date, offering recommendations for policy and practice.

Dr Susie Hulley and Dr Tara Young then explore identity among young men serving life sentences for murder, convicted in trials using joint enterprise (which enables more than one person to be convicted of a single offence). They present body-maps created by two men, which illustrate the stigma and prejudice that these men felt was central to their experience of the criminal justice process, despite their young age. For them, the label of 'murderer' overshadowed — and continues to overshadow — aspects of the self that are ethical and good. The authors draw attention to the value of creative methods, in research and practice, to empower people to actively tell their own stories.

Threaded between this article and the piece that follows is the story of an individual whose expertise is rooted in his own experience of serving a life sentence.⁸ In an interview between Zahid, who is serving his life sentence in the community after 15 years in custody, and Dr Susie Hulley, we hear about the particular challenges of coming to the end of a long tariff and facing the Parole Board. Zahid draws attention to the 'tightrope' that late-stage prisoners must walk, as they seek to secure release while also managing their own anxieties in the complex environment of prison.

Dr Rachel Rose Tynan then presents the experiences of four boys serving life sentences, for whom joint enterprise is also relevant. She explores the feelings of illegitimacy associated with their convictions, the specific pains of being sentenced to life imprisonment as children and the experiences of racialised identities and stalled development. In conclusion, Tynan argues for regimes that 'meaningfully reward' engagement and for creative approaches to children serving such extraordinary sentences.

Based on his research in three English prisons, Ben Jarman's piece then shifts focus to the adaptive patterns of older male LSPs who are sentenced beyond their middle age. He explains the tendency of these men to focus heavily on the past, and to present a moral outlook that minimises and neutralises their offences. These findings have important implications for effective rehabilitative work with this population.

Stepping outside of the prison, Dr Gwen Adshead, Dr Callum Ross and Dr Katie Salucci then draw on their work as practitioners in secure psychiatric settings to examine the experiences of male LSPs who find themselves 'stuck' between the prison system and the high-secure psychiatric care. They describe the challenges of transitioning into and out of these systems using the narratives of men in their care and set

out a number of recommendations for improving this experience.

Dr Maria Adams and Professor Dan McCarthy then turn the narrative lens outwards, beyond the walls of the prison, to the families of LSPs. In the absence of specific research, they consider the broader literature on the needs of, and challenges facing, families whose loved one is serving a lengthy custodial term. They highlight the ways in which experiences may differ depending on the age, race, gender and sentence stage of the prisoner, and call for family contact in spaces that enable open but confidential communication, prioritisation of the needs of children, and greater investment in counselling and family therapy.

The final two articles in this special issue sketch out work designed to improve the experiences of individuals serving life sentences. At a local level, Helen Thomas and Dr Celia Sadie describe the piloting of a group-based therapeutic initiative with boys aged 15-17 serving life sentences at HMYOI Cookham Wood. This compelling article complements research summarised in Wright, Hulley and Crewe's earlier piece, describing the themes of loss, identity and hope that emerged in the group discussions. They also reflect on the complex ethical challenges of setting up and facilitating the group, offering advice for practitioners who may wish to embark on similar initiatives.

The issue ends with description of a broader, National Lottery-funded programme entitled Building Futures, currently being delivered by the Prison Reform Trust. Claudia Vince outlines the background and aims of this programme, which focuses on the impact of periods of imprisonment of 10 years or more and draws on the lived experience of individuals who are serving, or who have served, such sentences. The authors emphasise the importance of the programme in the context of the growing number of LSPs entering the system, highlighting this as 'the most profound challenge' facing HMPPS at this time.

In this special issue we, and the authors of the pieces, hope to provide food for thought and to provoke discussion about how the system can manage and support the burgeoning population of LSPs who, with their diverse needs, present a range of challenges to the HMPPS and staff working within the system.

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8. Our original intention had been to include two pieces reflecting expertise through lived experience, including one co-authored by Serena Wright and 'Margaret Elizabeth', a woman currently serving a life sentence in custody. However, complications arising from COVID have required us to push back the publication of this piece. We are now planning to publish this in a future edition of the *PSJ*.