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‘We are the walking dead’: Piloting group therapy for adolescent boys serving life sentences

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Introduction

Across the secure youth estate in England and Wales, a growing population of young people, predominantly boys, are serving mandatory life sentences for murder.[1] For those convicted as children, the minimum starting point for sentencing is a ‘tariff’ of 12 years. This increases or decreases depending on aggravating and mitigating circumstances and must be served in its entirety before an individual is eligible for parole.[2] If successful at their Parole Board hearing, individuals will return to the community under strict licence conditions, where they remain liable to recall to prison for the remainder of their life.

Over the past few years, the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) at HMYOI Cookham Wood has noted a rising proportion of child lifers in the YOI. Frequently distressed, these boys needed intensive support before, during and in the aftermath of the shock of trial and sentencing. Their imminent transition to the adult estate (given stark differences in regime and provision)[3] required care and attention. In this context, the team developed a therapeutic group intervention, as part of a wider pathway for young lifers. Here we describe the existing literature, our intervention, the themes that emerged in the group and the experiences of those who attended, along with recommendations for future practice.

The value of lifer groups in forensic settings

Existing analyses of therapy groups for adult life-sentenced prisoners convicted of murder have consistently identified positive outcomes for participants. These include a greater capacity to reflect on and learn about themselves, and shifts in narratives of agency (particularly towards taking responsibility for their offences)[4], which in turn are linked to improved mental health.[5] The despair that is common among this group means that they require consistent therapeutic support6 in which they experience being listened to compassionately.[7] Such therapeutic space, whether provided individually or in a group context, allows lifers to work through the conscious experiences of distress, and the unconscious enactments of such feelings.[8]

To date, such initiatives have been confined to the adult estate. This means that young people sentenced to life, whose imprisonment may trigger a distinct ‘biographical rupture’ characterised by acute feelings of shock, dislocation, and adjustment,[9] do not currently benefit from this knowledge. While recent research with lifers describing ‘entry shock’ suggested that individuals

1. Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2020). *Life imprisonment from young adulthood: Adaptation, identity and time*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
2. UK Parliament (2021). *Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill: Part 7 – Sentencing and release*. London: HMSO.
3. Price, J. and Turner, J. (2021). (Custodial) spaces to grow? Adolescent development during custodial transitions. *Journal of Youth Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2020.1865525.
4. Adshead, G. (2011). The life sentence: using a narrative approach in group psychotherapy with offenders. *Group Analysis* 44(2), pp.175-195.
5. Adshead, G., Ferrito, M. and Bose, S. (2015). Recovery after homicide: Narrative shifts in therapy with homicide perpetrators. *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 42(1), pp.70–81.
6. Hillbrand, M. and Young, J. L. (2004). Group psychotherapy for parricides: the Genesis group. *Forensische Psychiatrie und Psychotherapie Werkstattschriften* 11, pp.89 –97.
7. Hillbrand, M. and Young, J. L. (2008). Instilling hope into forensic treatment: The antidote to despair and desperation. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law* 36, pp.90-94.
8. Adshead, G. (2015). Safety in numbers: group therapy-based index offence work in secure psychiatric care. *Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy* 29(3), pp.295-310.
9. See n.1.

in late adolescence or emerging adulthood might not be ready for a therapeutic intervention in the initial years of the sentence,[10] our clinical observations suggested that young lifers' distress was intensified by the loneliness of having no sanctioned space in which to share it with others in similar circumstances. This accords with literature in the trauma field supporting the value of group interventions.[11] Moreover, evidence suggests that adolescents in the criminal justice system are more responsive to interventions that involve peers.[12]

Taken together, these observations provided a powerful rationale for piloting a group-based therapeutic initiative with life-sentenced boys at HMYOI Cookham Wood.

Context, rationale and conceptualisation of the group

HMYOI Cookham Wood is one of four Young Offenders' Institutions (YOI) in England providing custodial placements for boys aged 15-18. The YOIs are expected to provide a rehabilitative experience, preparing a predominantly short-sentenced population to re-settle in the community following release. Accordingly, educational and therapeutic programmes are chiefly short-term in nature and outlook, and have historically overlooked the needs of those with long sentences.

Research has shown that facing a life sentence in adolescence provokes overwhelming feelings of anger and deep psychological distress and gives rise to a range of defensive actions to cope with these emotional states.[13] In practice, services employ processes intended to manage the anxiety this generates. Newly convicted children at Cookham Wood are supported via the ACCT process (Assessment, Care in Custody, and Teamwork; a multi-agency meeting, coordinating support for individuals perceived at increased risk of suicide and self-harm). It is common practice for an ACCT to be closed within a few days, based on an assumption that the boy is no longer at increased and immediate risk of suicide. Without such provision in place, and surrounded by young lifers, custodial staff may lose sight of the traumatic impact of the sentence, becoming desensitised to each child's need for support.[14]

We often observed the ways in which young lifers at HMYOI Cookham Wood appeared animated by the sway they commanded through their murder conviction, which publicly elevated their status, yet privately left them feeling overwhelmed. This oscillation played out in difficult dynamics, where their power was at times harnessed or enhanced by officers (through conferring additional responsibilities or being utilised as crucial allies) and suppressed or crushed by others (through removing privileges or relocation to other units, away from peers). These ups and downs consumed much of the conversation in individual therapy, acting as a smokescreen which often obfuscated attempts to reach deeper into their life stories and experiences. Therapists felt the power of what remained unspeakable: the offences themselves and much of the trauma that preceded them. In the hypermasculine and often violent custodial environment of a male YOI, it is rare for boys to express vulnerability openly, even in private therapeutic spaces.[15] An external and internal prohibition around discussing the specifics of a murder — the details, the emotional impact, or the meaning of what has happened — was ubiquitous, and yet it was clear that the boys we spoke with were curious about how others were handling and making sense of this very issue. Bearing in mind some of the key principles of group therapy, such as the instillation of hope and the recognition of 'universality' (that is, a sense of shared experience or mutuality)[16], we began to formulate how we could bring these boys together.

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Dynamic administration: creating the conditions for the group

While aware of the potential benefits of a lifer therapy group, both staff and potential group members

10. See n.1.
11. See n.8.
12. Zimpfer, D. G. (1992). Group work with juvenile delinquents. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work* 17(2), pp.116-126.
13. See n.1.
14. See n.1.
15. Gooch, K. (2019). 'Kidulthood': Ethnography, juvenile prison violence and the transition from boys to men. *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 19(1), pp.80-97.
16. Yalom, I. D. and Leszcz, M. C. (2005). *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (5th ed). New York: Hachette.

were cautious about bringing together a number of boys convicted of fatal violence. The waiting list of referrals was examined for known gang rivalries and grievances, influencing who was prioritised. Developing trusting relationships with members around and in advance of the group was essential, given what the therapists knew of the boys' difficult early attachment experiences and the fear and mistrust that pervaded their expectations of others. This involved openly attending to their anxieties and thinking with them about how they could develop healthy attachments to and within the group. Two boys, whose rivalries outside prison had necessitated separation, were keen to discuss and resolve their historical enmity to allow them to come together safely.

Following consultation with these boys around the group's name, membership and potential activities, the Long Sentences Group or 'LSG' was born. Pre-group one-to-ones involved discussion and negotiation around the culture and purpose of the group, alongside qualitative and quantitative data collection, including developing goal-based outcomes for each boy. The model for the group's structure and facilitation was drawn from the facilitators' training backgrounds and experience in analytic, systemic, and 'mentalization'-based[17] work in the YOIs and beyond. It involved an explicit commitment to create a space for free discussion and thought, unhindered by a specific programme, requirement or goal (i.e., the reduction of risk, of any sort). The boundaries of NHS confidentiality were discussed, with an agreed understanding about what would be recorded or shared via intelligence reporting if necessary.

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The overarching approach sought to help the boys identify and understand their emotions and relationships, and their impacts on each other and others beyond the group, with the principles of trauma-informed work in mind.[18] Transparency and informality were privileged to facilitate the development of 'epistemic trust' (a willingness to consider new knowledge as trustworthy and relevant)[19] and to nurture and respond to the differing developmental needs of each boy. Clear and consistent boundaries around timing, location and expectations were iterated.

Group members

Over the life of the group, 14 boys participated. At any time, there were never more than nine boys present (though six seemed to work best for group cohesion). All were aged between 15 and 18 and in the initial years of tariffs ranging from 11 to 21 years for offences committed in the context of serious street-based violence (rather than domestic, relational, or stranger murders). Members were predominantly from Black British, Caribbean and Asian backgrounds, with only two White British boys, reflecting the growing disproportionality endemic in youth custody.[20] This offered a stark contrast with the White, female, middle-class facilitators of the LSG; an issue later brought into the discourse of the group.

The boys' histories included multiple early losses and trauma, including early parental death, domestic violence, physical abuse, neglect, and criminal exploitation often involving county lines, reflecting the high levels of childhood adversity identified in similar populations.[21] Several boys had been in the care of their

17. *Mentalization*-based therapy centres on developing the capacity for social relatedness, via the awareness of one's own and others' mental states. See, e.g., Bateman, A. and Fonagy, P. (2011). *Handbook of Mentalizing in Mental Health Practice*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Pub.
18. Taylor, J., Shostak, L., Rogers, A. and Mitchell, P. (2018). Rethinking mental health provision in the secure estate for children and young people: a framework for integrated care (SECURE STAIRS). *Safer Communities* 17(4), pp.193-201.
19. Fonagy, P. and Allison, E. (2014). The role of mentalizing and epistemic trust in the therapeutic relationship. *Psychotherapy* 51(3), pp.372-380.
20. Recent estimates indicate that 51.9% of males in YOIs identified as being from a minority ethnic group in 2020; a figure that has almost doubled since 2009 (27%). Comparison of these figures to broader estimates in the national non-custodial population (where 18% of individuals are from minority ethnic groups) also serve to highlight the disproportionate representation of people from minority ethnic groups in youth custody settings. See: Ministry of Justice. (2020). *Youth Justice Statistics*. London: Ministry of Justice. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2019-to-2020 (accessed 15th February 2021).
21. Ford, K., Bellis, M., Hughes, K., Barton, E. and Newbury, A (2020). Adverse childhood experiences: a retrospective study to understand their associations with lifetime mental health diagnosis, self-harm or suicide attempt, and current low mental wellbeing in a male Welsh prison population', *Health Justice* 8(13), p.6666. See also Fox, B. H., Perez, N., Cass, E., Baglivio, M. T. and Epps, N. (2015). Trauma changes everything: Examining the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and serious, violent and chronic juvenile offenders. *Child Abuse & Neglect* 46, pp.163-173.

local authority. Most had experienced multiple school exclusions. They shared a similar frame of reference in terms of exposure to criminal activity, drugs, street violence and exploitation, and they talked about this in casual, matter-of-fact terms, alongside a fatalistic acceptance of the risk of being stabbed.

Emerging Themes

Loss

The boys in the group described struggling with feelings of shock around the conviction and length of the tariff, as they contemplated the loss of their imagined future lives. The sense that life was foreshortened or wasted was acutely felt; there was a palpable sense of despair as they described themselves as 'the walking dead' (Akeem)[22]; of 'existing' rather than 'living' (Derik). A sense of emptiness and sameness (in terms of the everyday mundanity of prison life), the loss of normal teenage activities, the inability to form or maintain existing relationships, and potential loss of the opportunity to have children were core topics of discussion. They spoke of the pains of being mixed with others serving short sentences, contributing to their sense of what they were missing, exposing them to immaturity and provocation, and highlighting the difficulty of conceptualising their futures. They mourned their lost lives, describing a limited systemic recognition of their particular challenges, and a poverty of opportunities within prison.

Beyond the prison walls, too, mentalizing (imagining) the loss experienced by their families was hard to tolerate. Jay recounted the early loss of his mother and his fear of other family members dying while he was in prison, while others talked about how inconceivable the potential (and real) loss of their mothers felt. Silences after these admissions spoke of the pain in the room and were sometimes interrupted by conscious and unconscious defensive digressions, jokes, or distractions. Shame and guilt were less easily articulated than anger, but present in evasions, silences, and bravado. The boys described the need to maintain a façade, in an effort not to worry or upset loved ones.

Day-to-day experiences felt more bearable to articulate, including the loss of their individuality, power and autonomy. Locked up with limited access to meaningful or purposeful opportunities, a loss of the subtle, ordinary activities of daily living, and the requirement to wear prison-issued clothing, all contributed to feelings of frustration and the shock of the stark contrast with their recent past. The reiteration of the hopeless statement, 'It is what it is' (Derik), reflected this feeling of dejection, at their reliance on others at a time when their independence would have been developing.

Sudden and uncontrollable endings in the group (when a member was transferred to the adult estate, or when a group session was prematurely curtailed) reflected the unpalatable losses and breakages in connections that were a central and often avoided focus of the boys' lives. The unpredictable change in group membership mirrored their experience of navigating time in custody with little control, as well as the sense of impending doom and loss that felt so familiar from years of living in the shadows of community violence.

Consistent with the literature, feelings of anger and injustice were common, while the shock of being identified or labelled 'a murderer' was experienced as incongruent with the boys' self-perceptions.

Identity

Several boys had been convicted using the legal doctrine of joint enterprise, which enables more than one person to be convicted of a single offence of murder. Consistent with the literature[23], feelings of anger and injustice were common, while the shock of being identified or labelled 'a murderer' was experienced as incongruent with the boys' self-perceptions. The group provided a place where they could express confusion and anger and process their circumstances together.

While using the group to acknowledge their positions as perpetrators of violence, the boys also reflected on their experiences as victims. Several group members had been stabbed previously, and in custody the rivalries and dangers around community affiliations

22. All names used to identify boys are pseudonyms, to protect their anonymity. When assigning pseudonyms however, we made an effort to choose names that reflected the culture and ethno-national background of the boys' names or were the boys' own choices.
23. Hulley, S., Crewe, B. and Wright, S. (2019). Making sense of 'joint enterprise' for murder: Legal legitimacy or instrumental acquiescence? *British Journal of Criminology* 59(6), pp.1328-1346. Also see Hulley and Young, this issue.

remained alive. The boys' narratives slid between these positions as they discussed the dangerousness of their worlds, and the notion that their incarceration had interrupted an existence in which they were constantly at risk. This drew a parallel with the danger of being assaulted while in prison, but also evoked the notion that as lifers, they existed only in the sense of surviving, always facing the prospect of imminent psychological death. Yet, the sense of solidarity was strong; the boys united in difficult conversation, felt accepted, with some commenting on the safety of sharing their burdens, the group representing their 'Cookham family' (Jay).

Following initial anxieties about bringing this group of boys together, staff from across the establishment soon commented on its power. Staff in multi-agency reviews recognised the growth in maturity, compliance, and capacity to think about future plans and transitions among boys in the LSG. The boys increasingly sought opportunities that reflected their desire for redemption, via roles as peer mentors and mental health champions, and in their commitment to education. The group's role in supporting young lifers at Cookham Wood to learn to swim with (rather than against) the tide of a life sentence in this way provides an important counter-narrative to existing analyses which have identified such identity work as predominantly the preserve of individuals in the mid- to later stages of a life sentence.[24]

Symbolically, it seemed that the group could represent an opportunity to begin to repair some of the damage they had done. Group therapy created a place for these boys and their offences to be met with mutual compassion rather than judgement.

Hope, repair and the power of dialogue

The importance of the space provided by the group was recognised by the boys; often the relief and excitement that the group had managed to meet at all was the dominant feeling. It felt enlivening. Beyond this, they felt it was innovative — that by coming together as a novel group in the youth estate, they were establishing something that could be of value to future young lifers. Symbolically, it seemed that the group could represent an opportunity to begin to repair some of the damage they had done. Group therapy created a place for these boys and their offences to be met with mutual compassion rather than judgement; an experience they felt was not available elsewhere.

Attempts were made by some of the boys to contemplate the future, imagining marriage, children and job prospects. While others struggled, the importance of more immediate decision-making was acknowledged in the context of significant time points in their custodial journey, such as the mid-sentence review and their parole hearing. Akeem commented, 'The choices we make today should reflect our hopes, not our fears'.

Several boys described anxieties around speaking freely to facilitators in the early stages of the group (as Derik remarked, for example, 'When I speak to you, I speak with a constant filter'). Their fear of repercussions from sharing their thoughts openly in the context of the all-powerful prison system was articulated in the recurrent idea that 'the keys always win' (Derik). However, they also implied a moving sense of hope that the group could help, offering genuine containment (in the psychoanalytic sense, as a context of safe and trusted relationships in which real feelings could be expressed). Language switched between formal English, when addressing the facilitators, and a familiar, animated dialect amongst themselves, until gradually a more decipherable mixed language emerged, creating a shared sphere of understanding.

Exploring their shared circumstances encouraged the boys to move from positions of alienation, rejection and incoherence, towards curiosity and open dialogue. Through this, the group fostered a move from fearful isolation to a more pro-social, mentalizing space within and between the boys, where there was a greater tolerance of uncertainty, and the potential for hope.

Evaluating the group, and concluding thoughts

This is a descriptive study of a new, specialised psychotherapy group for a specific cohort of young

24. E.g., see Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2017). Swimming with the tide: Adapting to long-term imprisonment. *Justice Quarterly* 34(3), pp.517-541.

male prisoners who are at high risk of extreme emotional distress and its behavioural manifestations. Material from the group suggests that it was a unique and valued intervention, enabling members to face the reality of their offence and its consequences in a way that was supportive, non-judgemental and avoided further shaming. Attendance was enthusiastic and consistent, with attrition almost non-existent; only one boy chose to leave the group over the 18 months it ran. Anecdotal feedback from prison staff indicated that group members' involvement in conflict and non-compliance declined following attendance. Information sought after the boys had moved to the adult estate suggested that their stability had continued across the transition. The shifting behavioural and attitudinal presentations of group members also contributed to changing perceptions of these young lifers amongst staff in the establishment. In response to hearing alternative stories of their sensitivity and vulnerability in the group, and witnessing positive behavioural changes, a new set of more curious and thoughtful responses from officers were expressed in informal interactions with both the boys and group facilitators.

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Feedback from the boys themselves attested to their positive experiences of the group, and reflected a hitherto untapped capacity to think about, confront and discuss feelings and emotions. Dylan described how he had previously been 'bottled up' but that the group had helped him to begin to speak about his feelings. Jay similarly described feeling 'more confident' to open up, while Kamil explained that it had offered him a safe place to 'think about things that I wouldn't usually think or talk about which was helpful: it got things off my chest'.

This evidence suggests that the Long Sentences Group offers a powerful and positive therapeutic model with real potential for expansion and formal investigation. We believe it represents a valuable and exciting practice-based contribution to the field of group therapy approaches for children in custody, and as a psychological intervention for those serving life sentences.

Reflexive insights and challenges for practitioners embarking on similar initiatives within the estate

First, and most importantly, this was a psychodynamically-conceptualised and managed initiative. Clinical facilitation, underpinned by principles of unconditional positive regard,[25] was crucial to its unique success. Furthermore, group members attended voluntarily — the initiative was not designed to manage or mitigate risk, and sat outside of the realms of interventions intended to influence an individual's sentence length. The open and therapeutic nature of the group enabled these boys to demonstrate that they are capable of reflexivity and post-traumatic growth when the right kind of support and ethos is offered. We suspect that an offender management group facilitated by non-clinicians would struggle to achieve the same outcomes.

Lifers have elsewhere described wariness around the motives of psychologists representing the Prison Service,[26] and the boys in the LSG were no different (despite the group's facilitation by clinical psychologists operating within the NHS, separately from the prison psychology staff team). The sense that interactions might be misconstrued — particularly that they risked implicating themselves regarding gang affiliation or the 'murderer' label (something they were seeking to relinquish) — was often present and influenced how candidly the boys felt they could speak. Despite this group's attempt to offer safety and openness, members would only reveal what felt safe in that context. The lack of wider safety in the prison environment and the difficulty establishing trust (given early disorganised attachment relationships that generate fearful, rigid over-interpretation of others' motives)[27] will likely limit how effective such interventions can be in this setting.

25. Rogers, C. R. (1957). The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 21(2), pp.95–103.
26. Crewe, B. (2011). Depth, weight, tightness: Revisiting the pains of imprisonment. *Punishment & Society* 13(5), pp.509-529.
27. Fonagy, P., Luyten, P. and Allison, E. (2015). Epistemic petrification and the restoration of epistemic trust: A new conceptualization of Borderline Personality Disorder and its psychosocial treatment. *Journal of Personality Disorders* 29(5), pp.575–609.

The facilitation of a therapy group in custody also brings numerous challenges which can impact effectiveness. Prominent among these were institutional barriers (e.g., long delays in escorting boys, room unavailability/inconsistency, poor communication between staff, and low prison staffing levels) which often led to the sudden cancellation of group sessions. Inter-system and inter-professional conflict were common, driven by the anxieties this work evoked.[28] Limited resources also meant that this group was available only to a small proportion of lifers. The boys felt that one session a week was inadequate, describing feelings of frustration at slow group formation and a sense of hopelessness that there would be sufficient time to delve into the issues that mattered. This reflects similar findings regarding groups offered to life-sentenced adult men, where activities were slow to develop despite strong group cohesiveness.[29]

While such a group can make a positive contribution to the adjustment and care of boys convicted of fatal violence, it must be integrated with other opportunities that support their development and onward transition. Planning and decisions around transition are often chaotic and unclear, with a high number of transfer refusals leaving many young lifers in a state of uncertainty and shame. Improvements in systems, enhancing perceived autonomy and creating clarity around progression, would help to create conditions under which young lifers' capacity to reflect and develop could be fostered and potentially flourish.

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28. See n.18.
29. Brunning, J. (1982). The group psychotherapy of murderers. *Prison Medical Journal* 23, pp.6-10. See also n.8.