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Building Futures and the long-term prison population:

Situating long-tariff 'lifers' within current prison reform work

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Throughout the 40 years since its foundation the Prison Reform Trust (PRT) has sought to reduce the unnecessary use of imprisonment. However, despite the efforts of reform organisations and extensive evidence showing how ineffective and expensive prison is, the long-term prison population has significantly increased. The PRT believes that prison sentences should not be so long that they destroy hope; and that those in prison should be supported to spend their time meaningfully and constructively. Changing who goes to prison and for how long is a core and ongoing priority for the PRT.

As part of this commitment, our National Lottery funded Building Futures programme¹ is specifically designed to focus on people who will spend 10 or more years in custody. By collaborating with long-term prisoners and developing prisoner leaders, the programme will provide a platform for self-advocacy. A network of long-term prisoners, drawn together by the programme, will directly respond to and inform the policies and debates that impact them. The aim of this is to create change from within the system by shedding light on the human cost of long-term imprisonment.

In this article, we explore the context and background to Building Futures, demonstrating the importance of focusing on long-term prisoners. For the purpose of this special issue, specific attention will be paid to the experiences of the life-sentenced population, where the inflation of minimum tariff lengths has been both rapid and significant—and who therefore find themselves serving some of the longest sentences in our penal system.²

Context

As noted in the introduction to this issue, criminal justice (and specifically sentencing) policies, have become increasingly punitive since the late 20th century. In particular, the 2003 Criminal Justice Act — with the introduction of Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) and a presumptive minimum sentencing scheme for the offence of murder — contributed to a significant increase in the long serving prison population.³ More recent legislation, as well as the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Bill currently before Parliament continues this trend. The proposed changes include: the introduction of whole life orders for young adult offenders in exceptional cases; an increase in the proportion of a sentence to be served in custody for certain groups; limiting automatic early release for people deemed high risk; and further inflationary measures on minimum terms in custody. These will inevitably see more people serving longer custodial terms in our prisons. The Criminal Justice Alliance has assessed that many of these provisions will have a disproportionate impact on people from BAME communities, worsening the racial inequality and systematic bias highlighted by the Lammy Review and which the government is supposedly committed to tackling.^{4,5}

Yet while the implications of the push towards longer sentences seem clear, the definition of what constitutes a 'long' prison term remains elusive. As lengthy periods of imprisonment have become increasingly common, what the public and policymakers deem to be a 'long' sentence has also

1. For more, see: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/WhatWeDo/Projectsresearch/BuildingFutures>.
2. Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2020). *Life imprisonment from young adulthood: Adaptation, identity and time*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
3. See Fitz-Gibbon, K. (2016). Minimum sentencing for murder in England and Wales: A critical examination 10 years after the Criminal Justice Act 2003. *Punishment & Society* 18(1), pp.47–67.
4. The Prison Reform Trust is a member of the Criminal Justice Alliance and contributed to this joint briefing, for more information see: Criminal Justice Alliance (2021). *How the PCSC Bill will entrench racial inequality in the criminal justice system: an overview*. Available at: <https://www.criminaljusticealliance.org/wp-content/uploads/Ten-ways-the-PCSC-Bill-will-entrench-racial-inequality-FINAL.pdf> (accessed 5 January 2022).
5. See n.2.

inflated.⁶ For example, at the end of the 1960s, the Home Office categorized any sentence of four or more years as 'long',⁷ yet by the mid-1990s, only a sentence of eight to ten years would qualify a prisoner as a 'long-term inmate'.⁸ Recognising the growth in this population, the Building Futures programme has defined 'long-term' as those who will serve over 10 years in custody. This will include a number of relevant sentence types, allowing the voices of prisoners serving both indeterminate and determinate sentences to be heard, including people serving life sentences, extended determinate sentences (EDS) and sentences of imprisonment for public protection (IPP). It will feature experiences ranging from the very young — typically men convicted in their late teens or early twenties often from minority ethnic communities⁹ — to the very old, typically convicted of historic offences and facing the prospect of old age and probable death in prison.¹⁰

A Challenging Start

Following a strong start to the programme in January 2020, where key prison sites, prisoners and other main stakeholders expressed the need for such a programme focusing on the long-term population, the global coronavirus pandemic brought about severe disruption in March of that year. With the national lockdown restrictions in prison estates preventing access and face-to-face engagement, the programme had to adapt its methods for platforming prisoner voice. Through PRT's established Prisoner Policy Network, we have been able to maintain contact with prisoners, primarily through Email a Prisoner and letters. Within the PPN, we have established a Building Futures

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Prisoner Network,¹¹ which allows us to identify long-serving prisoners whose expertise and contributions will form the basis of the programme's aims and priorities. This has been vital in ensuring we are able to communicate directly with prisoners, particularly during such a difficult time when many have been locked in their cells for 23 hours or more a day.

Drawing on these prisoner networks, we launched the PRT-wide initiative CAPPTIVE: Covid-19 Action Prisons Project: Tracking Innovation, Valuing Experience, which worked with approximately 300 prisoners and almost 50 families. This area of work drew on prisoners' experiences to highlight the harsh conditions and

restricted regimes introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Through a series of reports,¹² we identified key areas of concern regarding the management of the lockdown in prisons, including contact with prisoners' families, the harms of restricted regimes, and the impact of this isolation on physical and mental health. Within this, progression opportunities for lifers and other long-term prisoners notably declined¹³

*'I have served 15 years and am so close to parole, my future is looking so grim and I'm going to be released on benefits after all the hard work through my sentence'.
(Woman serving life sentence)*

Stalled avenues to progression might well mean that people serving long indeterminate sentences, such as life sentences, will end up spending more time in prison due to the pandemic, through no fault of their own. This was a concern of network members who voiced fears that the

6. Radzinowicz, L. (1968). *Report of the Advisory Committee on Penal System on the regime for long-term prisoners in conditions of maximum security* (The Radzinowicz Report). London: HMSO.
7. Flanagan, T. (1995). *Long-term incarceration: Issues of science, policy and correctional practice*. In T. Flanagan (Ed.), *Long-term imprisonment: Policy, science and correctional practice* (pp. 3–9). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
8. See n.2
9. Turner, M., Peacock, M., Payne, S., Fletcher, A. and Froggatt, K. (2018). Ageing and dying in the contemporary neoliberal prison system: Exploring the 'double burden' for older prisoners. *Social Science & Medicine* 212, pp.161–167.
10. A network of prisoners, former prisoners and supporting organisations. It is hosted by the Prison Reform Trust and aims to ensure prisoners' experiences are part of prison policy development nationally. For more on this initiative, see: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/WhatWeDo/Projectsresearch/Prisonerpolicynetwork>.
11. See: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/PressPolicy/News/Coronavirus>.
12. Prison Reform Trust (2020). *CAPPTIVE: Covid-19 Action Prisons Project: Tracking Innovation, Valuing Experience*. Available at: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/PressPolicy/News/Coronavirus> (accessed 30 March 2021)
13. House of Lords (2021). *Written Question UIN HL3923*. Available at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-11-10/HL3923/#> (accessed 5 January 2022).

suspension of most offending behaviour interventions, Release On Temporary Licence and education courses would result in them having to spend more time in custody. This is likely to have an impact on the long-term indeterminate prisoner population, particularly in relation to their ability to plan for their future and progress towards release. As lifers who are held beyond tariff spend an average of an additional 9 years and two months in prison, further delays to progression are a huge cause for concern.¹⁴ Prisoners' concerns about the impact of the pandemic on progression has helped to identify a key priority for the Building Futures programme.

Developing our approach

By harnessing and amplifying prisoner voices, supporting self-advocacy and opening routes to prisoner leadership, the Building Futures programme will make the nature of the long-term prisoner experience more visible. This work will reveal specific aspects of prison life that help or hinder long-term prisoners from living meaningful lives both in prison and post release. Drawing directly from the expertise of people serving these sentences and those closest to them, the Building Futures programme will identify changes that will improve their way of life in prison and enable them to plan meaningfully for when they are released into their communities.

Along with the Building Futures Network, a further approach in ensuring the platforming of prisoner knowledge and experiences is through the development of Building Futures Working Groups. Situated across key prison sites and comprised of long-term prisoners, these autonomous groups meet regularly to discuss the programme's progress, identify priorities, and contribute to relevant policy development. A major function of these groups is to design and manage prisoner-to-prisoner consultations that will gather the views and insights of their peers to inform debates and policies that affect them. In refining and adding to the expertise among prisoners, the

groups will have relevant training and access to PRT's wide ranging network, including sector experts, policy makers and academics. Despite the challenges imposed by the pandemic restrictions, we have formed and are developing groups across seven prison sites, including a specialist site for men convicted of sexual offences, a specialist site for young adult men, a women's site and a high security establishment.

Diversity within the long-sentenced population

We have conducted a number of scoping exercises to provide us with a clear grasp of the Building Futures cohort. A thorough literature review and a quantitative population baseline has allowed us to contextualise and understand the long-term prisoner group, capturing the rapid growth in the population and identifying potential areas of interest.

This preliminary work identified gaps in the literature relating to particular groups within the long-term prisoner population, including the experiences of women and older prisoners. To ensure that these subgroups were not overlooked within the broader Building Futures work, we have identified specific workstreams to examine their experiences. Four such workstreams are now discussed in turn: first, family contact amongst long-term prisoners; secondly, long-term

imprisonment in the women's estate; thirdly, 'progression' among long-term prisoners; and finally the experiences of long-term prisoners at different stages of the life-course. These issues are now examined in turn, drawing where possible on data from life-sentenced prisoners.

Family contact

A government commissioned review referred to families as the 'golden thread' that can help those in prison progress through their sentence and towards release.¹⁵ Yet for long-term prisoners, particularly those serving life sentences, maintaining meaningful

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14. Farmer, M. (2017). *The importance of strengthening prisoners' family ties to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime*. London: Ministry of Justice. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/642244/farmer-review-report.pdf (accessed 1 February 2021).

15. See n.2. See also Schinkel, M. (2014). *Being imprisoned: Punishment, adaptation and desistance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

relationships with their loved ones can be challenging. This is a consequence of the type of offence which most commonly gives rise to a life sentence (i.e. murder, serious sexual violence); the sheer length of separation caused by the sentence; and also because the maintenance of healthy relationships is impeded by the barriers imposed by prison environments. For example, research has shown that some lifers feel that cutting contact with family is the best way of coping, or that doing so helps to shield loved ones from the prison environment.¹⁶ Lifers also report that, over time, relationships can become increasingly difficult, superficial, and forced, with loved ones becoming distant and prisoners experiencing extreme social dislocation.¹⁷ Those who are parents serving long sentences must come to terms with being absent for a large proportion of their children's lives, facing the prospect of their children growing up and entering adulthood without ever having their parent properly present. This is a known cause of distress for prisoners and the impact on children is likely to be profound and long-lasting — they have been referred to as the 'forgotten victims of imprisonment'.¹⁸ By including families in this discussion, we will shed light on the broader and prolonged impact of long sentences, ensuring that the experiences of prisoners' loved ones are part of the conversation throughout.

In November 2020, we launched a consultation with our Building Futures Network, to explore how contact with significant others shifts or changes throughout the duration of a very long sentence. In recognition that separation from loved ones is one of the most painful aspects of life imprisonment,¹⁹ this topic felt like an appropriate starting point. Having commissioned researcher Marie Hutton, from the University of Sussex, to work with us on this consultation, we are preparing a Building Futures report that captures the multi-layered complexities of family

contact for long-term prisoners. A key theme was how being held a long distance from home limited opportunities for family contact:

*'For the majority of the last 20 years I've been located hundreds of miles from my family, often making it difficult, if not impossible to receive visits. Both my parents are in their eighties so being located this far from home, I have not seen them for many years. Something that is always on my mind is I may never see them again...'.
(Man serving life sentence)*

Lifers also report that, over time, relationships can become increasingly difficult, superficial, and forced, with loved ones becoming distant and prisoners experiencing extreme social dislocation.

And many respondents, including those serving life sentences noted the difficulties of maintaining family contact throughout the duration of such long sentences:

*'I am serving a life sentence. I do not have any living family (all passed away), I was always single so I do not have any children. I was a workaholic in my own business. Because my company...went bankrupt and many people lost their jobs, I cut all contact with friends due to shame. It is very difficult when you do not have support outside'.
(Man serving life sentence)*

(Man serving life sentence)

With these findings in mind, we are working with Partners of Prisoners²⁰, a national support charity, and others to develop a network of families of long-serving prisoners. This will be a vital piece of work for us, allowing us to communicate directly with prisoners' loved ones and consult with them on establishing key areas of work.

Invisible Women

Women serving long prison sentences have often been excluded from discussions and campaigns

16. See n.2

17. Robertson, O. (2007). *The impact of parental imprisonment on children: Women in prison and children of imprisoned mothers series*. Geneva: Quaker United Nations Office.

18. Hulley, S., Crewe, B. and Wright, S. (2016). Re-examining the problems of long-term imprisonment. *British Journal of Criminology* 56(4), pp.769-792.

19. <http://www.partnersofprisoners.co.uk/>

20. Prison Reform Trust (2021). *Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment?* Available at: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Women/Why%20women%202021%20briefing%20FINAL.pdf> (accessed 9 August 2021)

surrounding women in prison, much of which has focused on the majority—those entering prison to serve short sentences of less than 12 months for minor, non-violent offences. We have therefore entitled this workstream ‘Invisible Women’.²¹

By facilitating gender-specific engagement work and building relationships with women serving long sentences, we aim to empower them to voice their concerns and share their solutions for meeting the specific needs of this rarely considered group. Having established our work in three prisons holding women serving long sentences, we are adapting our approach to suit the needs of each specific establishment. We published our first Invisible Women briefing in November, which outlines some of the issues expressed by women serving life sentences.²² Women highlighted the impact of exposure to extensive trauma, both prior to and inside prison, leading to a desire for a more ‘trauma-informed’ system:

‘Prisons need to be more trauma-informed. Staff need to be trauma-trained. In my time in prison... I heard some horrendous stories. I’d wake up in the morning and I’d be totally happy, then I’d go into group therapy and come out suicidal because other people’s trauma would trigger my trauma and you’re just left to sit with it’. (Woman serving life sentence, in the community)

Women also described how serving life sentences created specific burdens relating to the indeterminacy of their sentence, highlighting a belief that emotional honesty was equated to risk, and because this would hinder their chances of release, it was better not to speak to staff:

‘Because you’re a lifer, you’re frightened to show that you’re weak, because it will be used against you. It will come up in your parole report ‘she wasn’t coping well, she’s self-harmed, she has suicidal thoughts’ — you know, so you tend to lean on other inmates to get you to a better place’. (Woman serving life sentence, in the community)

Little is understood about the long-term impact of either of these features of long prison sentences, and it is clear from our initial consultation that such concerns are at the forefront of women’s minds.

Progression

A third workstream explores the experiences of progression amongst men and women serving long sentences. Working in collaboration with Ben Jarman, from the Prison Research Centre at the University of Cambridge, this consultation is currently underway. This work builds on Ben Jarman’s PhD findings to explore the complex and often frustrating routes to progression for the long-term prison population, highlighting particular concerns about a disconnect between ‘prison approved’ progression and more individual, personal development.²³ Having launched the consultation in June 2021 through email and letter correspondence, to date we have received over 90 responses from long-serving men and women across the prison estate. Here, life-sentenced men offer detailed accounts of their own challenges to effectively progress through their sentences:

‘Like many lifers we often feel like we are walking amongst the ‘living dead’. Progress? Which part?

Serving a life sentence longer than I have lived — is that normal? It felt as if the prison estate did not even know what to do with us. The reality is lifers at the beginning of our sentences were just warehoused like livestock, even these days containment is the desired approach. Therefore, sadly many lifers — myself included — saw progression to be somewhat of a myth’. (Man serving life sentence)

‘The current system fails to identify genuine personal development, due to such a high staff turnover rate and poorly trained staff building good relationships built on truth trust and respect are very difficult, making

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21. Prison Reform Trust (2021). *Invisible Women: Understanding women’s experiences of long-term imprisonment*. Available at: http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Building%20Futures/invisible_women.pdf (accessed 24 November 2021)

22. See also Jarman, this issue.

progression extremely difficult. (Man serving life sentence)

With plans to publish findings on this stream in 2022, we hope that this work will provide useful and concrete areas for improvement for those involved in long-term prisoner progression.

Long-term imprisonment: being young, growing old and dying inside

Another workstream will explore and compare the experiences of people serving long sentences at different stages of the life-course. One aspect of this work will capture the experiences of young men who are disproportionately from minority ethnic backgrounds and serving sentences that are longer than they have been alive. The other end of the spectrum will explore the experiences of the ageing prison population, who may have received their sentence in later life for historic offences and face the prospect of living out the remaining years of their lives in prison.

The programme will remain grounded in the experiences of the individuals it seeks to represent through ongoing dialogue and will identify future areas of work based on their feedback.

Building Futures Working Groups

The Building Futures Network Groups will manage the project from the inside, co-producing all project materials and activities, empowering individuals to work in collaboration with the Building Futures team to ensure prisoner voice remains at the forefront of all aspects of the programme—from planning through to dissemination and influencing. In doing this we will create the space for long-term prisoners to play a leadership role in tackling the many challenges that affect them. As prisoners have highlighted how relationships with staff can come to shape their

experiences of imprisonment (in both positive and negative ways), a key priority will be to ensure both prisoners and staff are part of the conversation. In working with both prisoners and staff throughout the programme, we will share insights and knowledge to increase understanding of the distinct difficulties faced by long-term prisoners, with the view to integrate what we learn from prisoners to contribute to prison officer training.

Next Steps

Resuming our programme of visits to prisons has been a key priority as restrictions have eased. It is only by meeting with and listening to those whom we seek to represent that we are able to focus on their priorities. In the coming months we will be building on our work to identify more Building Futures Network members and facilitating working groups.

Building Futures is PRT's biggest programme, funded for five years. It reflects our view that the increase in the number of people serving very long periods in custody represents the most profound challenge for the prison service and will shape the prison landscape for the foreseeable future.

The way in which the prison service chooses to meet that challenge will be determined in part by the values it brings in how to deal with those who have committed the most serious crimes—and which attract the most public and political opprobrium. But it will also depend on the extent to which those serving these sentences are given the opportunity and skills to contribute to a meaningful way of life inside and preparing them for their life outside. So we hope to model not just our traditional virtues of careful detailed research, but also a determination to hand over more influence and agency to the people we want to support. The way the programme is delivered will matter as much as the conclusions it may reach.