

# Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology

## **Series Editors**

Ben Crewe  
Institute of Criminology  
University of Cambridge  
Cambridge, UK

Yvonne Jewkes  
Social & Policy Sciences  
University of Bath  
Bath, UK

Thomas Ugelvik  
Faculty of Law  
University of Oslo  
Oslo, Norway

This is a unique and innovative series, the first of its kind dedicated entirely to prison scholarship. At a historical point in which the prison population has reached an all-time high, the series seeks to analyse the form, nature and consequences of incarceration and related forms of punishment. Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology provides an important forum for burgeoning prison research across the world.

### **Series Advisory Board**

Anna Eriksson (Monash University)

Andrew M. Jefferson (DIGNITY - Danish Institute Against Torture)

Shadd Maruna (Rutgers University)

Jonathon Simon (Berkeley Law, University of California)

Michael Welch (Rutgers University)

More information about this series at

<http://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/14596>

Ben Crewe · Susie Hulley ·  
Serena Wright

# Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood

Adaptation, Identity and Time

palgrave  
macmillan

Ben Crewe  
Institute of Criminology  
University of Cambridge  
Cambridge, UK

Susie Hulley  
Institute of Criminology  
University of Cambridge  
Cambridge, UK

Serena Wright  
Department of Law and Criminology  
Royal Holloway, University of London  
Egham, Surrey, UK

Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology

ISBN 978-1-137-56600-3

ISBN 978-1-137-56601-0 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56601-0>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Limited 2020

The author(s) has/have asserted their right(s) to be identified as the author(s) of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover credit: madvikimg/Alamy

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Limited  
The registered company address is: The Campus, 4 Crinan Street, London, N1 9XW, United Kingdom

# Foreword

The impact of long-term imprisonment is hard to imagine for those who have never experienced it first-hand. Most who haven't don't particularly care what it's like. Unless connected in some way to someone serving a long sentence why should anyone care? When we think about prisoners, generally all we see in our mind's eye are faceless, nameless, voiceless criminals safely locked away from the rest of us. How they feel, about their crimes, their victims and their incarceration—what they think as they serve their time inside, their hopes and their fears—is of little concern to the rest of us.

A popular misconception on the outside is that prisoners are having an easy life with their three-square meals a day and a warm bed at night—with no regrets for their criminal actions. Taxpayers are regularly regaled by the press with tales of prisoners lording it up with televisions, phones and pool tables. The public's ignorance of prison life has allowed the popular press a free reign to report prison stories however it pleases. Prisoners are 'lugs', jails are 'cushy'—every Christmas at least one tabloid newspaper will publish a prison's Christmas day menu and contrast it with the deprivations of pensioners. Media portrayals of prison life usually contain at least a kernel of truth. But even then it is mostly served up as entertainment or titillation. We may be fascinated, intrigued and horrified by what we see on TV or films, or by what we read in the tabloid press—but mostly we're just glad it's them doing time and not us.

It might not always seem apparent to the observer, given the amount of violence in our jails today—but the fact is our prisons are brimming with self-loathing, remorse and contrition. Vulnerability, psychological dysfunction, poor mental health and intellectual impairment abounds. As a long-term prisoner, I remember the mental and emotional exhaustion of living day after day, year after year trying to adjust to living in chaotic captivity. It's hard to imagine an environment more inappropriate than our prisons to address problematic human behaviour. In his most recent annual report, Chief Inspector of Prisons Peter Clarke described the levels of suicide and self-harm in our prisons as 'a scandal' and suggested an independent public inquiry into the issue. People in the so-called care of the state, he said, 'are dying unnecessarily.' One reason is surely that we imprison more people in the UK than anywhere else in Europe. We have more life-sentenced prisoners than Russia or Turkey—more in fact than France, Germany and Italy combined. But the chasm between the public's perception of prison and the reality has never been greater.

'Murderers, rapists and paedophiles deserve all they get, and more,' say the politicians, and the proverbial man in the street, outraged by such crimes, is hardly going to disagree. Violence against the person of any kind causes so much pain and distress, and victims of crime quite rightly want their perpetrators to be punished; in many cases, the more severe the punishment the better. So many times after a high-profile conviction, we hear cries that the sentence was 'not long enough.' But how long is long enough for any crime, and what is it we expect years of incarceration to achieve?

Sensational reporting of violent or sexual crime in particular has no doubt helped prison sentences to creep ever longer over the past forty years. In 1979, the average time a life-sentence prisoner spent in custody before release was around nine years. In 2001, it was thirteen years; today it is seventeen years. The average minimum term judges imposed for murder rose from twelve and a half years in 2003 to twenty one years in 2016. In the 1980s, there were two globally reported UK serial killer trials, at the end of which each perpetrator was convicted of having killed over a dozen people. Each was given a minimum tariff to be served in custody of 25 years. Such terms then were considered unusually lengthy.

Today, however, we think nothing of it when young men in their early twenties, or late teens even, caught up in youth gang culture who end up with murder convictions receive tariffs of 25, 30 or 35 years. Our society has become inured to the idea of sentencing people we consider to be violent and dangerous to longer and longer periods of imprisonment. In 2006,

Lord Phillips, the former Lord Chief Justice said, ‘Some murderers are being sentenced to a minimum of 30 years, or even full-life terms. But I sometimes wonder whether, in 100 years’ time, people will be as shocked by the length of sentences we are imposing as we are by some of the punishments of the 18th century.’

Always missing from the debate on prisoners and prisons however are the voices of those serving the longest sentences. They are voices that need to be heard, and finally, this book allows them to speak. Poignant and powerful, it should be the required reading for ministers, judges and especially the Sentencing Council. A common theme among the subjects is their endeavours to survive—I’ve often described my own twenty years of imprisonment as a long-term exercise in survival—some will make it, but the sad truth is that many of them will never get the chance to breathe free air again. Too often a long prison sentence turns into a death sentence. I hope this book brings the much-needed reasoning and rationality back to our thinking about prison sentence length.

North Wales, UK  
July 2019

Erwin James

# Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge a number of people collectively. Funding for the project was provided by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant ES/J007935/1) and subsequently by the University of Cambridge's Newton Trust. We are extremely grateful for their support.

We are also thankful to all those people who enabled and championed the research from its early days onwards, including a range of practitioners without whose assistance the study would not have been possible. Those deserving of special mention include Steve Wagstaffe, Richard Vince, Phil Wheatley, Michael Spurr, Gordon Davison and all of the governors who granted us permission to undertake fieldwork in their establishments as well as the staff who facilitated us during our time administering interviews and organising interviews. Many front-line practitioners made us feel welcome and assisted us enormously, and we particularly want to thank Dave, Scott and Simon at HMP Gartree, who helped us on our way during our prolonged fieldwork period there. We are also grateful to Adam Spriggs and Sam Cuthbertson who provided us with the information that enabled us to sample and locate our participants.

We received a huge amount of support from colleagues at the Institute of Criminology, many of whom we thank individually below. The Prisons Research Centre deserves special mention for providing such an exceptionally nurturing environment: a true intellectual home. Beyond the Institute of Criminology, we have been inspired and stimulated by a range of academics

and practitioners and wish to express our gratitude to members of our advisory board, whose expertise we should have used much more: Jamie Bennett, Peter Bennett, Phil Boardman, Gwyneth Boswell, Rod Earle, Adrian Grounds, Yvonne Jewkes, Ruth Mann, Shadd Maruna and Tara Young. Thank you to Josie Taylor and Liam Inscoc-Jones at Palgrave, who remained very patient.

Throughout the study, we were always aware of the people whose murders were at the heart of our study, and the families and other loved ones left bereft at their deaths. As we try to highlight throughout the book, these victims were an absent-presence in the narratives of our participants, the majority of whom—particularly once they had been in prison for a few years—reflected with deep remorse about the people whose deaths they had been involved in. At times, we asked ourselves how the tone and content of our writing might feel to those people on the other side of the criminal act. In the end, we do not feel that there is any contradiction between providing a humanistic portrayal of long-term prisoners and their circumstances, and feeling deep sympathy for the direct and indirect victims of murder. We do, however, want to make explicit acknowledgement of the latter. The tragedy of murder is deep and enduring.

We are most grateful to the men and women who participated in our study, especially those whom we interviewed. Thank you sincerely. We hope we have done the job that we pledged to you we would try to do.

## **Ben Crewe Acknowledgements**

This was a very challenging study, and it would have been far less successful without my co-researchers, their incredible commitment to the study and our shared orientation to our participants. Susie, I'm enduringly grateful for your good sense and wisdom, and for all of the conversations over the years, which have been more significant than you might realise. Serena, thank you for the endless enthusiasm and for pushing me into places of discomfort. Working with both of you, and seeing you develop, was an absolute pleasure, and I'm sorry for the bad decisions along the way. I make no apologies, though, for overruling those various PowerPoint designs.

Within the Institute, I am particularly grateful to Alison Liebling, for the ongoing intellectual and personal friendship. It makes a huge difference. Sincere thanks too to very many staff and Ph.D. students, in the PRC and beyond, but especially Ruth Armstrong, Tony Bottoms, Loraine Gelsthorpe, Adrian Grounds, Ben Jarman, Borah Kant, Caroline Lanskey, Ben Laws, Amy Ludlow,

Nicky Padfield, Bethany Schmidt and Jason Warr. Members of the COMPEN research team—Claire Bonner, Alice Ievins, Julie Laursen, Kristian Mjåland and Anna Schliehe—also merit a special mention, for the number of conversations they've endured that have begun 'When we did the long-term prisoners' study', and for their friendship, understanding and collegiality in recent years. I also want to thank a number of people beyond the Institute of Criminology who have shaped and sustained me and this study, even if it might not be apparent to them: Catherine Appleton, Jamie Bennett, Peter Dawson, Tomer Einat, Kate Gooch, Yvonne Jewkes, Shadd Maruna, Fergus McNeill, Ian O'Donnell, Thomas Ugelvik and Dirk van Zyl Smit. I feel very fortunate to have so many sources of support, challenge and good company.

My parents, plus Deborah, John and Daniel continue to form a bedrock that underlies so much of what I do. Most of all, thank you to Nicole, for everything, and to Eva and Joseph, who give my life so much meaning.

## Susie Hulley Acknowledgements

Thank you to all my colleagues at the Institute of Criminology for ongoing support and inspiration, particularly: Alison Liebling for her loyalty to me, in finding me projects in the early years and for being an inspiring scholar; Caroline Lanksey for listening when things got tough and for the moral support; Julie Laursen and Alice Ievins for being all-round lovely people and supportive colleagues; to Eliza Preece for the short-term but high impact camaraderie (and long-term friendship) and to Ruth Armstrong and Amy Ludlow for their ongoing advice and support. To my current co-investigator Tara Young, at the University of Kent, for always providing a confidence boost and some light relief on the tricky days!

Thank you to Ben, for being a great mentor, an inspiring colleague and a good friend. You made my first ride out as co-investigator on this study straightforward and enjoyable. I have learnt so much over the last decade from you, not only from our discussions but also from observing and reading your work.

I am grateful to you, Serena, for throwing yourself into this study with full force. Your infectious cheerfulness brightened our stays in grim hotels during fieldwork and charmed prisoners and prison staff within minutes of arrival. You were my support when interviews were emotionally gruelling, and with your warmth and kind nature, you are a valued friend.

Finally, thank you to my amazing family. To Ruth and Steve Howell, for being unbelievably kind people, for taking me in and being stuck with me 23 years later. To Lynn and Ian McHugh, and Annie and Ollie Browning, for sharing your families with me—the wonderful Anneliese, Sophia, Florence, Matilda and Kitty. To June and Ken Rutherford, without whom it would literally be impossible for me to work, for being so supportive and generous. To Graeme, Sarah, Frankie and Millie, for your support (often in times of need!). To Matthew Hulley and Eve Rowland for being so supportive and Matt for being a brilliant brother—our daily chats make me happy and politically more informed! To my husband Paolo, for being brilliant, funny, kind and (inconspicuously) unbelievably supportive. I couldn't have done this without you. To my favourites—Isla Mae and Rory Matthew. A prisoner in this study asked me what I wanted my legacy to be, and at that moment, it was clear: you are all that matters. As long as you are happy, kind and brave, my life project is complete.

To my Mum and Dad—in the short time, you were both here with me and Matt, whatever you did, you did an amazing job. We are happy and strong and surrounded by love. I am Dr. Hulley because of you. We are so lucky to have ever had you.

*For Isla and Rory and for Mum and Dad.*

## Serena Wright Acknowledgements

My first and biggest thanks go to my co-authors, Ben and Susie. You both nurtured, supported and guided me through my first research post, and helped me to grow from a nervous doctoral student to an assertive early career scholar, with a raft of publications and a wealth of empirical experience and knowledge that I will continue to draw upon for the rest of my academic life. More than just co-authors though, I think of you both now as life-long friends and look forward with enthusiasm to our wild nights out (i.e. discussing books over beer—and *most* of a burger—or tea, cake, and those awful weak, half-shot decaf lattes). Susie, you have always been the most amazingly wonderful and compassionate person and never too busy to lend an ear to me when I was struggling. I could not have wished for a better fieldwork comrade; thank you. And Ben—thank you for your wisdom, kindness and awful sense of humour (FYI, your taste in PowerPoints, however, remains your least endearing attribute).

A massive thanks also to my friends and colleagues, past and present, at the Institute of Criminology, Cambridge, who made my four years there such an inspiring, challenging and fondly remembered venture. Thanks to Alison Liebling, who provided academic guidance and cultivated my desire to excel in the field of prisons sociology and to Loraine Gelsthorpe, who gave me much-welcome opportunities to co-author with someone whose work on women and justice I had long respected. Thanks also to Caroline Lanskey, Ruth Armstrong and Amy Ludlow for their warmth and tea-fuelled chats, and to Giulia Conto, Zetta Kougiali, Jules Laursen, Tomer Einat, Matt Skipper, Ben Laws and Alice Ievins for all their support over the years.

A host of other long-term academic friends were also instrumental in supporting me during both the duration of the long-term prisoner project and the write-up period, particularly Isla Masson, Fi Wadie and Yvonne Jewkes, all of whom provided wise words, tea and cake. I have also begun to collect new friends at Royal Holloway, whose support has also been incredibly important in trying to balance book writing with full-time lecturing. A huge thank you to my friend and Learning Together partner in crime Morwenna Bennallick and particularly to my long-suffering office-mate Michelle 'Stealth' Webster; DW, the academic sparring, Thorpe dates and laughter you bring to my life saw me over the final hurdle, so thank you.

Thank you also to my lifelong friends back in Portsmouth, particularly Jo, Laura, Lau, Hannah and Faye, for always being so proud of me and keeping me grounded. For those I have parted ways with, thanks to Nina and Jess, and particularly to Jasmin, for the years of support. To Jacko, no longer with us, thank you for your care and compassion, for teaching me how to be a better person and for always believing in me, even when I didn't believe in myself. I miss you every day.

And lastly, thank you to my wonderful parents, Rita and Graham Wright—I am so incredibly proud to be your daughter—and to the world's best siblings, Mark and Zoe Wright, whose unique humour always provides welcome light relief from the constant academic hellfire that is term-time.

*For Mum and Dad, Mark and Zoe, and—as always—for Jacko.*

## Praise for *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood*

“In all the attention to mass imprisonment in recent years, criminologists have only turned recently to what is clearly one of the most significant and problematic features of it: life sentences with no possibility of release for decades, especially when imposed on the very young. In *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood*, Crewe, Hulley, and Wright go beyond the legal transformations that have accompanied this revolution in punishment in England and Wales, to give us the deepest empirical look at adaptation and survival in long-term imprisonment for over forty years; a generation that has seen the life imprisonment sanction explode across the common law world.”

—Professor Jonathan Simon,  
*University of California, Berkeley, USA*

“Changing trends in sentencing and the use of imprisonment have resulted in the imposition of prison tariffs so lengthy that they were only recently regarded as highly unusual and barely survivable. In *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood*, Crewe, Hulley and Wright explore this peculiar manifestation of our deep cultural attachment to incarceration and describe the ways in which very long sentences are experienced by the men and women serving them. At the core of this book is violence—the violence of the offences that result in lengthy sentences, the violence that has saturated the lives of those serving them, and the violence of a system that fractures lives and consigns the people

it punishes to squander decades behind bars. It is meticulously researched, imaginatively constructed, elegantly written and quietly passionate about the injustices and cruelties surrounding its subject matter. *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood* will undoubtedly quickly become a classic in the canon of sociological studies of the prison.”

—Professor Yvonne Jewkes, *University of Bath, UK*

“*Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood* is a masterwork of social science. The book is original, comprehensive, balanced, and insightful. The authors draw on a rich body of scholarship spanning a wide range of disciplines to bring moral, existential, and psychological insights to bear on a complex subject that is assessed with a thorough set of mixed research methods, the rich findings of which are all reported with clear, concise, and often compelling prose.

This study of life-sentence prisoners embodies social science at its best. The authors provide a ground-breaking analysis of life sentence prisoners—their crimes and their punishments; their trials and tribulations in relation to their crimes and their imprisonment as they grapple with what they have done, what they are now, and what they might yet become; and ultimately their remarkable human resilience in the face of profound and life-changing adversity that is analyzed with great empathy and insight. For life sentence prisoners there is persisting damage and loss, but also enduring growth and hope for lives worth living. Reformers can take a cautious hope from this seminal study, which offers fruitful guidance to students of correctional policy and practice.

Everything one would want to know about the nature of the crimes and punishments of life-sentence prisoners as full-blooded human beings working out their lives in harsh and often unforgiving circumstances is concisely and often eloquently presented inside the covers of this marvellous text. I am confident this book will mark a turning point in the study of prison life and adjustment that will move the field to greater and more nuanced understandings of crime and punishment in general as well as in the context of life-sentence prisoners. By probing the outer edges of crime (homicide) and punishment (life terms), Crewe, Hulley and Wright shed a bright light on timeless questions about human nature that are at the heart of our understanding of crime and punishment.”

—Professor Robert Johnson, *American University, USA*

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Life Histories</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>The Early Years</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Coping and Adaptation</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Social Relations</b>	<b>209</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Identity and Selfhood</b>	<b>251</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>Time and Place</b>	<b>289</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>321</b>
	<b>Index</b>	<b>335</b>

## About the Authors

**Ben Crewe** is Deputy Director of the Prisons Research Centre and Professor of Penology and Criminal Justice at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge. He is interested in all aspects of prison life, including prison management, staff-prisoner relationships, public and private sector imprisonment, penal power, and prisoner social life. He is the author of *The Prisoner Society: Power, Adaptation and Social Life in an English Prison*, as well as a number of edited collections.

**Susie Hulley** is a Senior Research Associate at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge. She is interested in how young people are affected by the criminal justice system, particularly their experiences of criminalisation and imprisonment. Her recent work focuses on the application of ‘joint enterprise’ by criminal justice practitioners (police and lawyers) and the impact of this legal doctrine on young people.

**Serena Wright** is a Lecturer in Criminology and Researcher in the Department of Law and Criminology at Royal Holloway, University of London. Prior to this, she worked for four years as a Research Associate at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge. Her research on prisons

and penology has focused chiefly on long-term, life imprisonment, but also extends to short-term sentences and 'frustrated desistance', particularly among women. She is particularly interested in the intersection between trauma, addiction and criminalisation, and between health, gender and criminal justice.

# List of Tables

Table 1.1	Average tariff length for murder in England and Wales (2003–2013)	3
Table 1.2	Number of individuals receiving life sentences, 2000–2010	5
Table 2.1	Interview sample breakdown by sentence stage and prison type	38
Table 2.2	Demographics of male and female interview sample	40
Table 2.3	Comparison of current study with previous studies using problem statements	42
Table 2.4	Richards' (1978) original problem statements (as revised) and additional problem statements included in the current study	44
Table 2.5	Part 3 of the survey: the extent to which prisoners felt they had changed since the start of their sentence	46
Table 2.6	Part 4 of the survey: prisoners' attitudes about other aspects of their sentence	47
Table 2.7	Demographics of male and female survey sample	48
Table 2.8	Dimensions generated from survey items	59
Table 4.1	Mean dimension severity scores according to sentence stage—male prisoners	85
Table 4.2	Mean dimension 'severity' scores according to sentence stage—female prisoners	86

Table 4.3	Mean ‘severity’ scores according to sentence stage for the dimension ‘Time’—female prisoners	88
Table 4.4	Mean ‘severity’ scores according to sentence stage for the dimension ‘Time’—male prisoners	88
Table 4.5	Mean ‘severity’ scores according to sentence stage for survey items ‘Worrying about people outside’ and ‘Missing social life’—male prisoners	89
Table 4.6	Mean ‘severity’ scores according to sentence stage for survey items ‘Worrying about people outside’ and ‘Missing social life’—female prisoners	89
Table 4.7	Mean ‘severity’ scores according to sentence stage for survey item ‘Missing somebody’ (‘Deprivations’ dimension)—male prisoners	89
Table 6.1	Mean scores and ranks of problem statements related to social relations—female and male survey respondents	210
Table 7.1	Mean scores showing perceptions of change among male survey respondents by sentence stage	279
Table 7.2	Mean scores showing perceptions of change among female survey respondents by sentence stage	281