Methods description

This archive derives from a longitudinal study of men and women serving very long life sentences (a minimum custodial term, or ’tariff’, of 15 years or more),[[1]](#footnote-1) sentenced when aged 25 years or younger, and interviewed on two occasions: first in 2013-14 and again in 2020-23. The archived material relates only to the more recent interviews.

Our first wave of fieldwork involved two main methods. The main method was in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 125 men and 21 women held within 24 establishments overall (16 holding male prisoners; 9 holding female prisoners). To capture the experience of serving a life sentence at different sentence stages, and at prisons with different security levels and cultures, we sampled purposively, according to whether prisoners in our population were within the first four years of their custodial period (‘early’), around the mid-point of their tariff period (‘mid’) or close to / beyond their tariff point (‘late’) (for further details on sampling and the research process, see Crewe et al 2020). Due to the relatively low number of women serving very long life sentences we sought to interview all those who met our research criteria, regardless of sentence stage. Our main interests were the particular problems that participants encountered and their strategies for managing them; their social adaptations and attempts to ‘build a life’ within prison; and their beliefs about the legitimacy of their situation. The second method involved the distribution of a survey, primarily designed to assess the problems of long-term imprisonment, to all prisoners who met our criteria in the establishments where we conducted interviews. In total, during the first phase of our research programme, 310 men and 23 women participated in the study (39% of the male population and 79% of the female population who matched the research criteria at the time) either by conducting an in-depth interview, completing a survey, or both. All of our participants had been convicted of murder, and were serving mandatory life sentences.

In our second wave of fieldwork (i.e. the archived material) we sought to re-interview everyone who had participated in our earlier study, and to administer to these participants (but not a wider sample) a revised version of our initial survey. Official data was provided to help us locate our sample, who had been asked as part of the original consent process whether they were happy for us to re-contact them in the future. Overall, we were able to interview 120 of our original 146 participants, 100 in prison (out of 110 who were still in custody when fieldwork began), and 20 (out of 29) who, by then, were living in the community, having been released on life licence.[[2]](#footnote-2) Eight of our prison interviews were with people who had been released but subsequently recalled to custody. Since the initial interview (or during the fieldwork period), four participants had died, two had been deported to their country of origin, and one had been transferred to a secure psychiatric hospital. One interview was abandoned because it was clear that the participant was too mentally unwell to give meaningful consent. Eight people (three who were in prison and five who were in the community) could not be located. Ten people declined: of those within custody who declined to participate, the primary reason – though we did not ask for people to justify their decision – seemed to be not feeling in the right mental ‘headspace’.

Of the sub-sample of participants who had been released into the community, some proved impossible to approach because the probation practitioners who acted as gatekeepers did not respond to our attempts to contact them; others did not respond once we were able to contact them, or expressed interest in being re-interviewed but did not, in the end, commit, mainly, we think, because they were keen to put their prison life behind them or were simply too busy to accommodate a long interview. Our interviews were organised around the same themes as in their first version, though we asked more focussed questions about some issues, including the ‘depth’ of imprisonment (Crewe 2021), and were particularly interested in matters of change and prisoners’ personal, social and institutional trajectories since the first interview almost a decade earlier. For the community interviews, we produced a new interview schedule, covering a range of matters relating to post-release life, as well as the final years of custody, and asking prisoners to reflect on the emotional impact of their sentence and the challenges of life in the community. We also administered a short survey to community-based participants.

All interviews were transcribed and coded in full, using an adaptive analytic approach, which organized the material using a pre-defined thematic framework while leaving room for the addition of themes where appropriate.

Out of our second wave of interviewees, 64 consented to their anonymised and redacted (i.e. de-identified) interview being archived; a further 17 did not consent to this, but did consent to an anonymised and redacted summary of their interview being archived. The remaining interviews consented to neither option.

1. Prisoners serving ‘whole-life tariffs’ with no possibility of release, of whom there are around 60 in England and Wales, were excluded from our sample. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Many prisoners changed location during the long period of fieldwork, which was interrupted and disrupted due to the measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)