

The pains and problems of imprisonment

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Sykes and 'the pains of imprisonment'

.....in examining the pains of imprisonment as they exist today, it is imperative that we go beyond the fact that **severe bodily suffering has long since disappeared as a significant aspect of the custodians' regime, leaving behind a residue of apparently less acute hurts such as the loss of liberty, the deprivation of goods and services, the frustration of sexual desire, and so on.** These deprivations or frustrations of the modern prison may indeed be the acceptable or unavoidable implications of imprisonment, but we must recognise the fact that they can be just as painful as the physical maltreatment which they have replaced. [...] Such attacks on the psychological level are less easily seen than a sadistic beating, a pair of shackles on the floor, or the caged man on a treadmill, but the destruction of the psyche is no less fearful than bodily affliction.

(Sykes 1958: 64)

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The depth' & 'weight' of imprisonment

Downes (1988) *Contrasts in Tolerance*:

- The degree to which imprisonment was 'damaging and repressive' depended on a range of factors: 'relations with staff; relations with prisoners; rights and privileges; material standards and conditions; and a sense of the overall quality of life which the prison regime made possible or withheld' (Downes 1988: 166).
- The depth of imprisonment redefined by King and McDermott in terms of security & control measures (i.e. 'deep end custody')
 - Distance from release
 - Level of situational control (e.g. bars, walls, etc)
 - Isolation from outside world (visits, family contact, external agencies etc)
- Psychological oppressiveness, the feeling of the sentence 'bearing down'/ a 'weight on the shoulders' re-labelled the weight of imprisonment

McDermott and King (1988) *Mind Games: Where the Action is in Prison*

'...the nature of physical confrontations between staff and prisoners may be changing. Increasingly staff are trained in control and restraint techniques. Both staff and prisoners seemed to agree that things were not what they used to be. Often prisoners told us: "They don't beat us any more – they don't have to. They can win by using bits of paper. It's all a mind game now"' (McDermott and King 1988: 373).

'... life sentence prisoners feel themselves to be peculiarly dependent upon the staff and on getting good reports. When faced with the inevitable wind ups that constitute doing time, the lifer cannot afford the luxury of ill-considered responses. Indeed he knows that whatever he does it will be open to interpretation. If he explodes, his report may say that he cannot cope with frustration. ... If he keeps his own counsel, the reports may say that he is withdrawn and cannot come to terms with his offence' (McDermott and King 1988: 364-5)

The new pains of imprisonment? (see Crewe 2005, 2009, 2011)

- Uncertainty and indeterminacy
- Power-at-a-distance
- Psychological assessment
- Self-government

(1) The pains of uncertainty and indeterminacy

(a) rules and behaviour

‘[In the past] The rules was tight but at the same time it was relaxed because you knew exactly how far you could go. It’s like getting a piece of elastic band, pulling it, and you know if you pull it a bit further it’s going to snap. [Now] you have the same elastic band and pull it and pull it and pull it and not know when it’s going to snap’

‘You knew where you stood, [even though] it was a harder time than it is now. [...] You could ask for something, and you knew the answer. The answer was always no. There were no dangling carrots, no moving goalposts. [...] Today’s prison, one day, you go and ask for something and you’ll be given a reasonable answer. The next day, you’ll go and ask and be told a pack of lies to confuse you. They let one man do one thing, but the next man they say ‘no’

(1) The pains of uncertainty and indeterminacy

(b) sentence progression

'I've done everything I need to do for my sentence. Now I'm being asked to do more.'

'You're knocked back for reasons you don't understand.'

'I went for the R and R course and they asked me all these questions and they said, 'well, you haven't got enough defects to do the course, we don't feel that you'll benefit from it'. They said to me, 'that's as good as a pass'. [But] my parole papers come back and it says 'you haven't done enough courses'.

(2) The frustrations of power 'at-a-distance'

- Power and decision-making: inflexible, impersonal,
- 'The system': faceless, slow, difficult to negotiate with or challenge:

'You get to a certain level within a prison that you never meet, the people that actually run the prison. If I'm dealing with an officer I'm dealing with another person, I can talk to them, I can manipulate them, or I can negotiate with them. Once you get beyond that, it's a faceless contact: security, the administration, even the governors. You can't actually get anything but superficial contact.'

(3) The pains of psychological assessment

'You have one minor incident and they'll go write it in the file. That's gonna catch up with you in two or three years time: a silly little incident, every few months, a minor indiscretion. [...] You're in prison! You've just got the hump, or you've slept badly. But you add em all together and they show a pattern of something that's not really there.'

'They twist everything, they ignore the constructive stuff you do. I made a joke about sedating my girlfriend to take her on holiday [as part of a course scenario] – in the report they gave no context, said that my idea of getting someone on a plane was sedating them! I got knocked back based on the psychologist's report'

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(4) The pains of self-government

The requirement to govern all aspects of self, & actively engage in the sentence:

‘You used to be just left to your own devices. It was less comfortable but you had more freedom. You didn't have all these fucking [courses]. As long as you didn't give them no bother, they didn't care. They'd just move you through the system, for an easy life’.

‘Before you just did your time and you got out. There was nothing required of you, except to go to work. Whereas now it's down to the slightest little thing, it's all tied in. [...]. So right down to the sort of tiniest sort of forms of behaviour, it's all monitored, it's all tied in to your future’.

‘I even think about who I walk round on exercise with, and what I have on the walls of my cell, things like that.’

- *Being a prisoner becomes a more complex and demanding task*

'Soft power' (Crewe 2005, 2009, 2011) / 'Tightness'

- It is 'sticky', long-lasting and deferred in its effects
- It is intrusive and subjectifying (in that it seeks to create a new kind of individual), but also objectifying (in that it treats you like an object rather than an individual)
- It is demanding (it requires active, visible engagement, with new sentence requirements)
- It is all-encompassing (affecting all aspects of conduct)
- It is perpetual (because you don't know when you are being observed)
- --- neither depth nor weight, but '*tightness*'

Implications:

(1) staff power and behaviour

‘All we’ve got is the power of the pen. If they’re rude, you put comments in their wing file, but what’s a comment in a wing file? It’s only like a bad report in school’. (Prison officer)

‘It’s better to write stuff in their files than to nick them – they get their IEP dropped, it lasts longer, it’s on their wing file forever’. (Prison officer)

‘This is *my life* we’re talking about, that little entry could stop me getting my C-Cat, stop me progressing, stop me from getting my parole, but they don’t realise that. [...] Sometimes I just sit there and say, ‘do you not really know what you’re doing with our lives?’ (prisoner, fieldwork notes)

- How aware are staff of these new forms of power/frustration?
- Does ‘the power of the pen’ enable new forms forms of mistreatment?

Implications

(2) 'Playing the game'

'Basically, it's how everything looks on paper. It might not be a true reflection of who you are, but if you play the game then they've got no reason on you'.

'Like cards, you've got to have bluff. [...] You've got to get them to believe you're not high risk, not going to re-offend, that you realise your mistake, you're fully rehabilitated, you're never coming back to jail, and they think, 'he's a good lad' – [so] you're going home in two weeks. [...] I ain't content in the slightest but what choice have I got? [...] It's their place, at the end of the day'.

Implications

(3) 'everyday life' and 'getting out'

'[In terms of] The day-to-day concerns, most prisoners know what to expect, they know the rules that they're living within, so they accept that. They accept the day-to-day authority that they're under. When it comes to probation and psychology, because it's not to do with the day-to-day things, it's to do with the effects on your *life*, the effects of you getting out, it's a deeper type of power [from] the everyday situation: I think it's felt more profoundly'.

Average length of minimum term period imposed (excluding whole life sentences) 2003-2013, England and Wales

Year	Average length (years)
2003	12.5
2004	14.5
2005	15.9
2006	17.1
2007	15.6
2008	17.8
2009	17.5
2010	18.9
2011	18.8
2012	20.4
2013	21.1

Key questions

- What are the key problems that long-term prisoners experience, and how do they deal with them? How do they think about identity, change and the future? How are these issues shaped by sentence stage?
- How do they adapt socially, i.e. what relationships do they build with other prisoners and with prison staff?
- How do they feel about the 'legitimacy' of their sentence? How does this affect compliance, adaptation and resistance?

Research design

- Surveys for all appropriate prisoners in each of the prison in which we undertook fieldwork – an adapted version of Richards (1978) ‘problems of long-term imprisonment survey’
- Interviews with men at different sentence stages:
 - *Early* – within first four years of sentence
 - *Mid* – half of tariff +/- two years
 - *Late* – two year pre-tariff onwards/ post-tariff
- Interviews with women at all sentence stages
- Feedback sessions with prisoners in seven establishments – to disseminate and discuss findings

Research design

Population: prisoners serving life sentences of 15+ years, given to them when aged 25 or under

	Population	Surveys	Interviews
Men	803	294	125
Women	27	19	21
Total	830	313	146

Richards (1978): problems of long-term imprisonment

1. Wishing that time would go faster
2. Being worried about becoming a vegetable
3. Being afraid of dying before you get out
4. Wishing you had more privacy
5. Feeling that your life is being wasted
6. Feeling suicidal
7. Losing your self-confidence
8. Feeling sorry for yourself
9. Missing little luxuries ", e.g. your favourite food, your own clothes
10. Keeping out of trouble
11. Feeling angry with yourself
12. Missing social life
13. Feeling angry with the world
14. Missing somebody
15. Getting annoyed or irritated with other inmates
16. Being afraid of going mad
17. Longing for a time in the past
18. Feeling sexually frustrated
19. Worrying about how you will cope when you get out
20. Being bored

Crewe, Hulley & Wright: supplementary problems

1. Thinking about the crime that you committed
2. Feeling that you are losing contact with family and friends
3. Prison officers making life harder
4. Feeling that you have no control over your life
5. Not feeling able to completely trust anyone in prison
6. Prison psychologists making life harder
7. Feeling that the length of your sentence is unfair
8. Feeling lonely
9. Feeling worried about your personal safety
10. Feeling frustrated that you are not progressing through the system
11. Feeling that you are losing the best years of your life

12. Worrying about people outside
13. Feeling that you have no purpose or meaning in your life
14. Worrying about how you are described 'on file'
15. Feeling anxious about the uncertainty of your release date
16. Feeling that you have no-one to talk to about things that really matter to you
17. Thinking about the amount of time you might have to serve
18. Having to follow other people's rules and orders
19. Feeling that you need to be careful about everything you say and do
20. Being afraid that someone you love or care about will die before you are released
21. Feeling that the system is ignoring you and your

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20. Being afraid that someone you love or care about will die before you are released
21. **Feeling that the system is ignoring you and your individual needs**

The problems of long-term imprisonment: Findings from survey

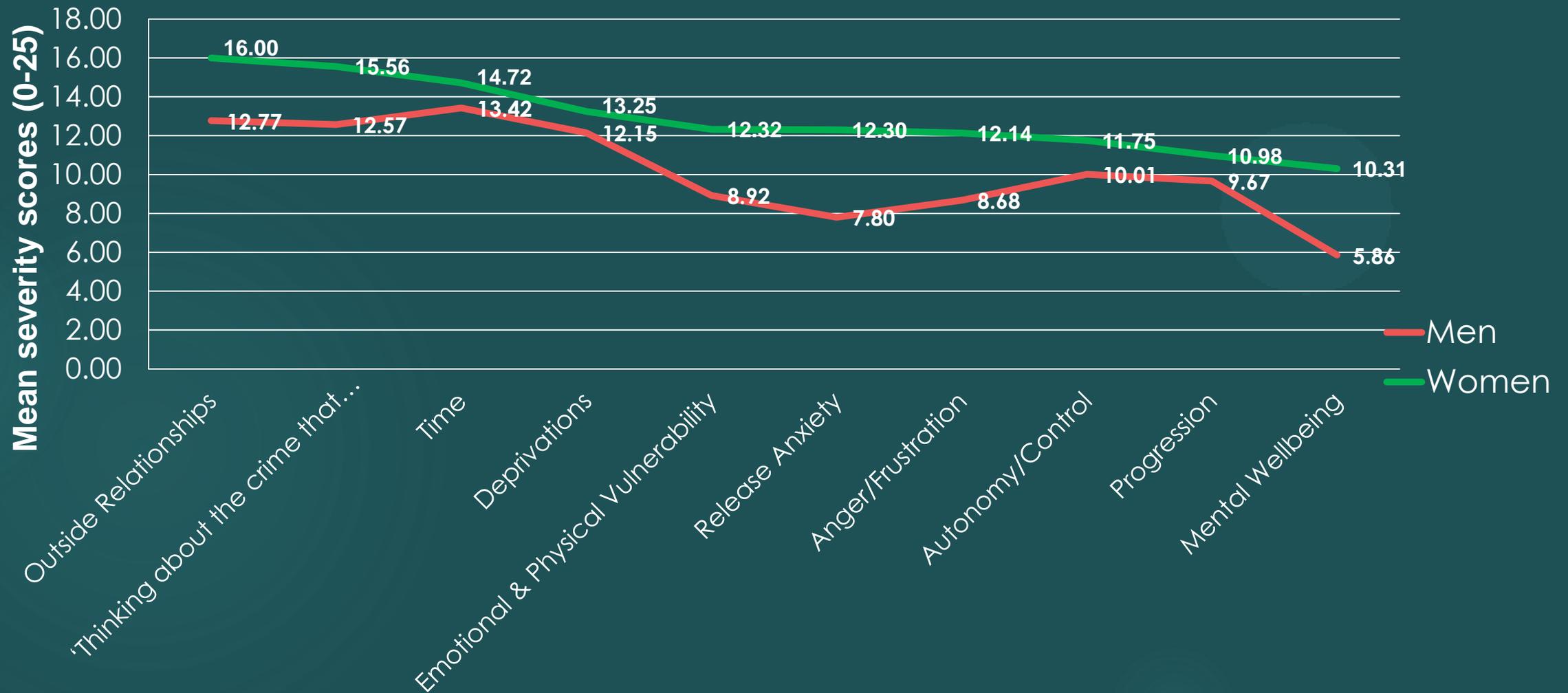
Rank	Five <i>most</i> severe problems (incl. our additional 'problems') – Men & women			
	<u>Richards [1978]</u>	<u>Flanagan [1980]</u>	<u>Current study [2013] - Men</u>	<u>Current study [2014] - Women</u>
1	Missing somebody	Missing somebody	Missing somebody	Having to follow other people's rules & orders
2	Feeling that your life is being wasted	Missing social life	Worrying about people outside	Missing somebody
3	Feeling sexually frustrated	Worrying about how you will cope when you get out	Feeling that you are losing the best years of your life	Worrying about people outside
4	Missing little 'luxuries'	Feeling that your life is being wasted	Having to follow other people's rules & orders	Not feeling able to completely trust anyone in prison
5	Missing social life	Feeling sexually frustrated	Feeling sexually frustrated	Thinking about the crime you had committed

Relatively low-ranking problems (ranked out of 39)

Statement	Severity ranking (out of 39) - Men	Severity ranking (out of 39) - Women
Getting annoyed or irritated with other prisoners	24	27
Finding it hard to keep out of trouble	33	39
Prison officers making life harder	22	30
Feeling worried about your personal safety	36	37
Feeling suicidal	39	38
Being worried about your mental health	37	31

Gender, severity, & the problems of long-term imprisonment

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Outside relationships

In survey:

- 'Outside relationships' most severe dimension
- 'Missing someone' most severe problem within the dimension

The research literature

- Most research is focused on the 'nuclear family' i.e. partners and children (Paylor and Smith 2008). Relationships deteriorate, particularly for prisoners serving long sentences (Hairston 1991)

Our study:

- Pre-prison intimate relationships
 - Men: often casual, non-committed
 - Women: often abusive or linked to index offence

Outside relationships: male prisoners

- Mainly referring to parents
- These relationships often improved (from a low starting point):

‘[my relationship with my mum and dad is] probably stronger. [...] I probably see ‘em more now, cos [I’m] not as busy. When you’re outside, life is so busy that you don’t really get a chance to sit back and look at your relationship with that person and how you can improve it. In here you’ve got a lot more time to think about them sort of things - how can I be a better son?’ **(Casper, aged 25, 25-year tariff, served 2 years 10 months)**

- Parental support more solid than other relationships
- Absence generates ‘protective impotence’, but still possible to fulfil the role to some degree

Outside relationships: female prisoners

- Missing children reported
 - (a) by a higher proportion of female than male interviewees
 - (b) more often than missing parents by female interviewees:

‘I think the hardest thing for me when I came into jail was nobody told me how to *not* be a mum [...] I didn't know how to switch that off [...] And it never goes away that missing them, and that kind of ache.’ **(Gail, aged 45, 25-year tariff, served 22 years)**

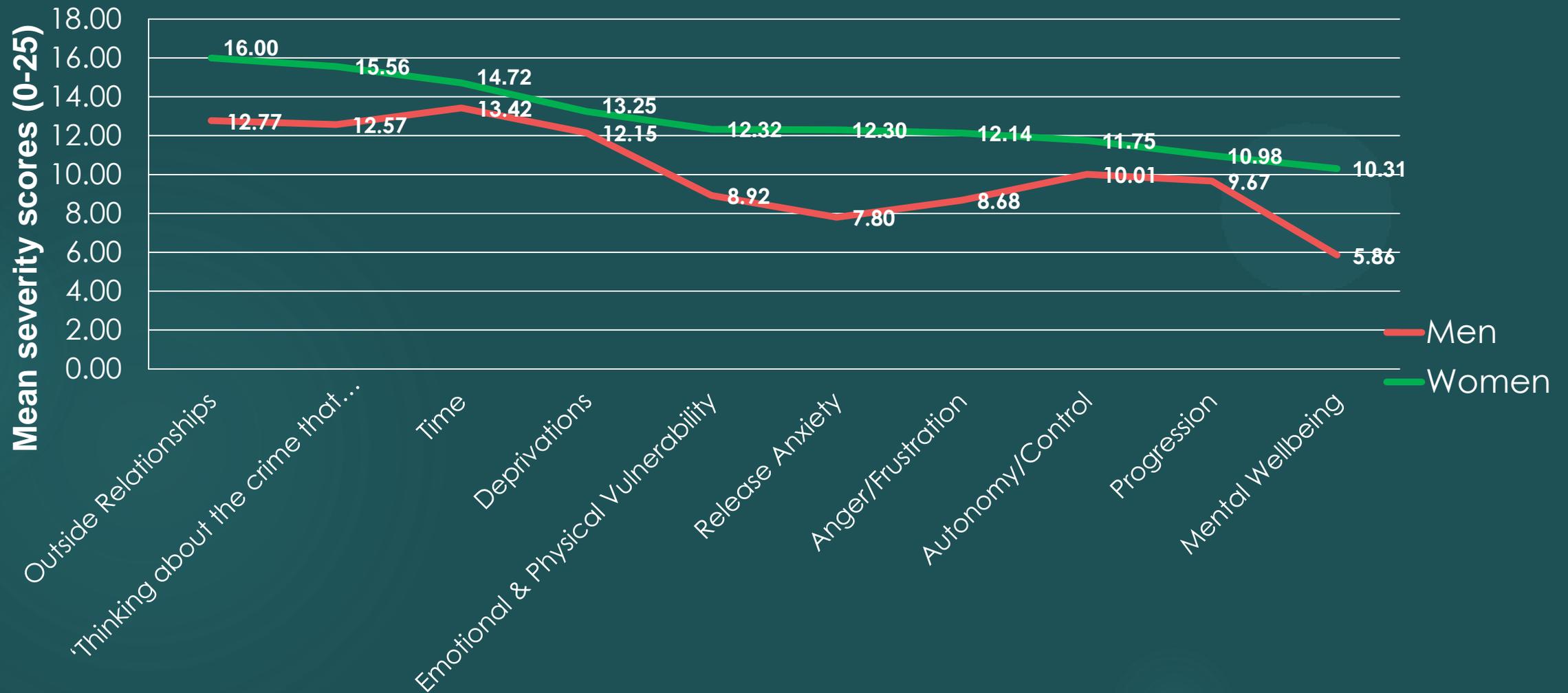
- Exacerbated by lack of control over contact and communication
- Absence in conflict with maternal identities:

‘I only get to see her three times a year [...] and then that makes it really difficult because every time I see her it brings up all my feelings for her again, and then I spend the next four months grieving, and it's like that's really difficult because you're constantly like going through it, so you're breaking your heart a little bit more every time’

(Kathryn, aged 23, 22-year tariff, served 3 years)

Gender, severity, & the problems of long-term imprisonment

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Time: the overall sentence

- Bewilderment, anger, 'vertigo' about the length of the sentence (and the conviction in general)

'In the early days following the verdict, it felt like an out-of-body experience almost. I was... I didn't feel like the steps I was taking were my own. I felt completely numbed'.

Dan, aged 25, 15-year tariff, served 3 years

'I had no concept of 18 years of life. [Five years in] I think really I've only just got my head around it'.

Hugo, aged 21, 18-year tariff, served 5 years

'I just kept thinking "20 years?!" And I kept thinking too much ahead on the same day I got sentenced – "How am I - how long I'm going to be [here]? How is it going to be like when I get out? And how is my family going to survive?'

Aakif, aged 22, 19-year tariff, served 4 years

Time: the daily experience

- The future: impossible to contemplate, tomorrow 'irrelevant', 'the same as today'

'How do you think about your time in here?'

I don't. I just don't think about it.

Do you think about day-to-day, week-to-week?'

No.

Do you plan at all?'

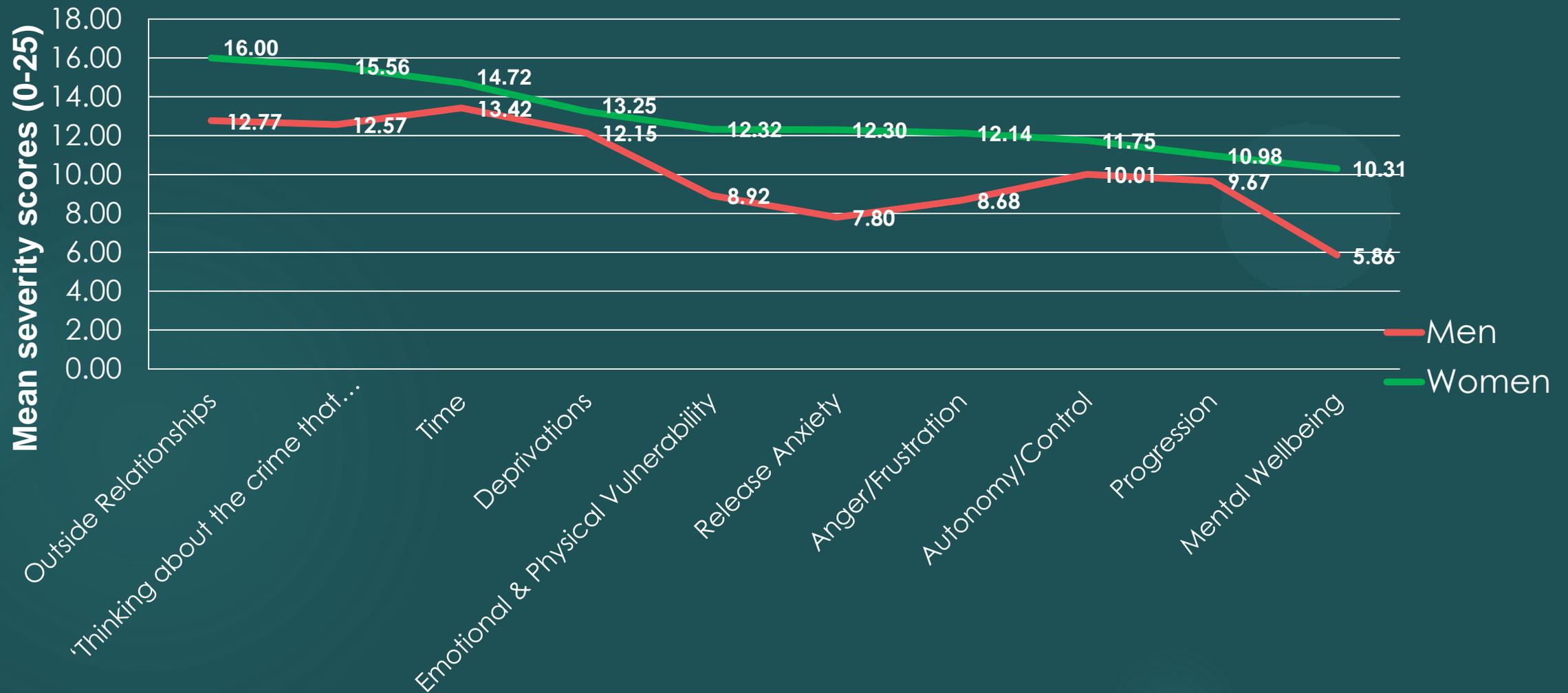
No. [...] I take days as they come and I don't want to do none of that'.

(Tamara, aged 23, 25-year tariff, served 3 years 6 months)

- The present: 'meaningless'
- Discourses of *stasis*: being 'stuck in time', 'just existing ... you're not really living are you?' (see Sapsford 1983; Zamble and Porporino 1988; Cope 2003) - prison as *non-life*

Gender, severity, & the problems of long-term imprisonment

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'Thinking about the crime that you committed'

- Denial:

'I didn't wanna have to accept that I took a human life [...] I couldn't believe I could be that person' (**John, aged 25, 15-year tariff, served 7 years 1 month**)

'It's just so painful for me. I couldn't just bear to say 'yeah I did it'. Because, obviously, that night it wasn't just the one person that died, it was it felt like a part of me died as well' (**Kelvin, aged 29, 20-year tariff, served 10 years 1 month**)

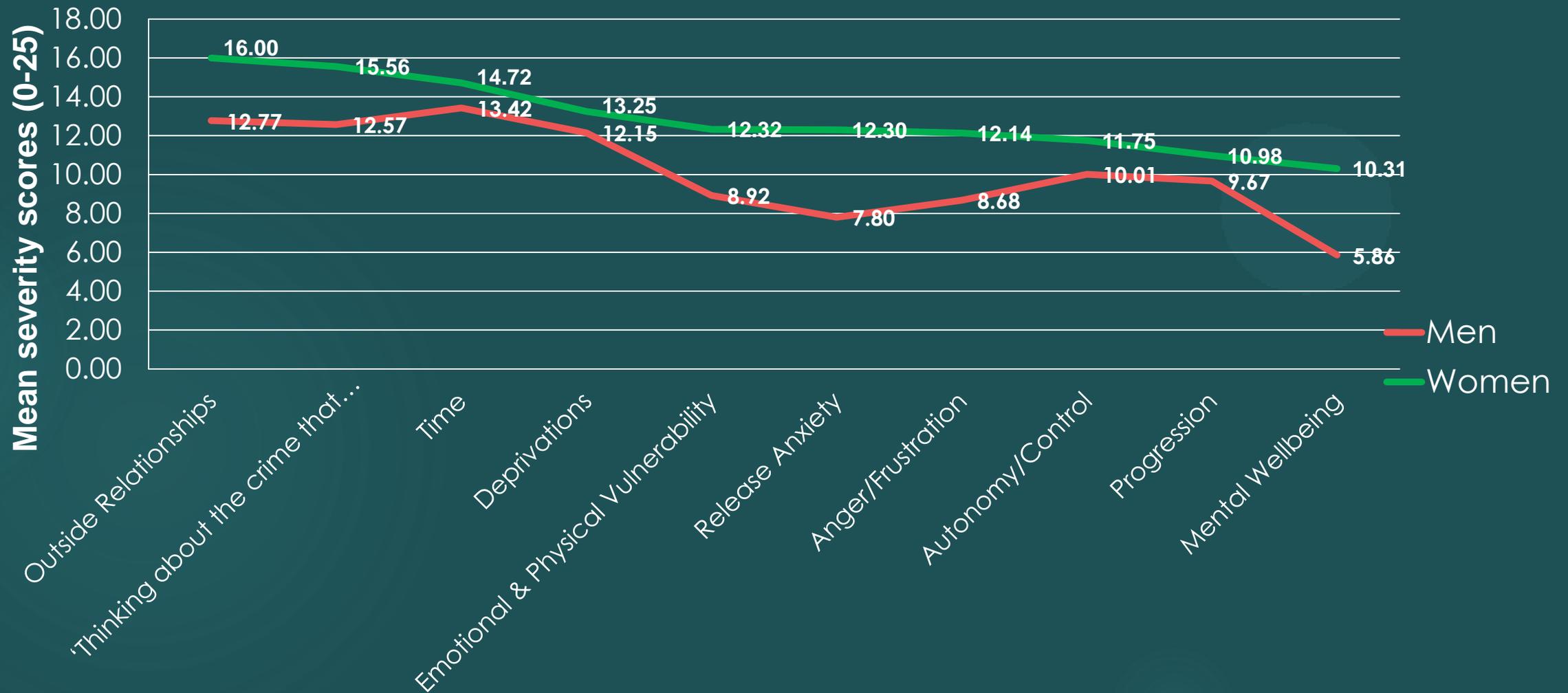
- Shame:

'You have to contemplate day in and day out what you've done, hoping that you're forgiven by whatever or whoever: God, your victims....' (**Arkaan, aged 29, 16-year tariff, served 7 years 6 months**)

'Most days I do think about it. It's a strange thing to explain, man, it really is. ... you'd have to have it happen to you in the first place to understand it. But yeah, I'm deeply ashamed of what I've done. I hate myself for it' (**Dan, aged 25, 15-yr tariff, served 3 years 2 months**)

Gender, severity, & the problems of long-term imprisonment

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Autonomy/control

- 'No control' – loss of liberty, power of prison officers

'Do you feel like you have got control over your life in here?'

You ain't got no control, unless you have got a set of keys'.

(Martin, aged 21, 25-year tariff, served 2 years)

'Do you feel you have control over certain areas of your life in here?'

You have no control over anything. You can think you have control but in the end the officers have control'.

(Paul, aged 24, 23-year tariff, served 3 years 9 months)

'To what extent do you feel that you've got control of your life in here?'

Limited. It's limited because...you don't have the keys do you'.

(Cary, aged 25, 19-year tariff, served 4 years)

Adapting to the problems of long-term imprisonment

- accepting the reality of the sentence
- finding means of managing time
- coming to terms with the offence
- shifting conceptions of control and self-control
- making the sentence constructive / finding meaning in the predicament

Adapting to the sentence

- After initial period of turmoil, resigned acceptance of the predicament

‘Maybe it’s just me, but there’s nothing I can do, I’ve learnt to accept the sentence. [...] You just have to get on day by day, because ... you just have to still get on with life. [If you don’t] you’re looking at things like depression. [...] You get suicidal, and you don’t really want to go down that road’.

Aaron, aged 47, 25-year tariff, served 24 years

‘You’ve got two choices when you’re faced with a sentence like this: sink or you swim, really, and there’s a multitude of ways to sink and only one way to swim’.

Neil, aged 35, 18-year tariff, served 12 years 6 months

Adapting to the sentence

‘It doesn’t matter where you’re living, you’re still living a life. Life is just the environment you’re in ... and if I was on the outside, I would probably, I’d still be doing the same things: learning academically [...] forming friendships’.

Carl, aged 20, 25-year tariff, served 1 year

‘I’ve got me appeal going and everything, but in my mind I’m settled doing 30 years. The way I look at it, I’m not gonna sit here and cry. I’ve gotta carry on me life, so in my mind, ... this is home now, innit. That’s the way I look at it. It’s just home. This is life now. Get used to it. Which I have’.

Zubair, aged 27, 29-year tariff, served 2 years 11 months

- ‘persons living in prison rather than offenders doing time’ (Zamble 1992: 423-4)

Managing time - mid/late stage prisoners

- Taming of the future via segmentation and targets ('time anchors' – O'Donnell 2015)
- Management or manipulation of the present, via routines, and faith/ spiritual practices
- Time as something to be *used* rather than filled, 'killed' or expended:

'One of our [religious] scholars said, yeah, that, "Time's like a sword. If you don't grab hold of it, it'll split you in two." And that's exactly what happens in prison. [...] We've been given time, isn't it? Prison is about time. You have a certain amount of time. That's your punishment. [...] It's very important to use time well'.

Mohammed, aged 27, 19-year tariff, 8 years 10 months

'You've gotta get hobbies or go to the gym or whatever. Find something constructive to do with your time. [Otherwise] you're left treading water'.

Jill, aged 42, 20-yr tariff, served 20 years

Coming to terms with the offence

- Acceptance: taking moral responsibility, without being overwhelmed by the crime

‘He shouldn't have died, like his family shouldn't have felt the grief [...] But, at the same time, there's nothing I can do, so I can't carry this burden with me for the rest of my life because there's nothing that I can do. I can't feel sorry that I'm not in my daughter's life, I can't feel sorry that I wasn't there for my mum or my gran and my family when they were grieving. [...] There's nothing that I can do for [his family]. And with acceptance there is when I came to terms with it’.

Julius, aged 30, 15-year tariff, served 7 years 7 months

- Management of shame & existential reflection

‘I've destroyed not just one life, like my action had the ripple effect on not just my family [...]. There's [people] grieving every single day for the action that I had taken. And from the time I started looking at things from their point of view, my whole outlook has changed on my sentence and how I feel about my sentence’.

Asad, aged 33, 18-year tariff, served 11 years

Shift in the conception of control – mid/late stage prisoners

- Sense of control: both broader in conception and greater in degree

‘Do you feel that you've got control of your life in here, or control of certain aspects of your life?’

I've got control of certain aspects. [...] I've got control in my reactions and how I react to people, and how I interact with people [and] my plans for the future and getting myself prepared and ready for that. I've got certain control over my education and I've got certain control over staying healthy, and staying fit, staying positive’.

Daniel, aged 31, 18-year tariff, served 9 years

- Recognising the futility of seeking to control predicament/environment
- Cultivating an ethical self through specific practices and behaviours

Making the sentence constructive / finding meaning

- Early-stage prisoners:

‘I wouldn’t want to be doing anything meaningful for this place. Nothing constructive will help me, I think to be honest with you. Because I am still in the same place, I am still within these walls. I am not going anywhere’.

Martin, aged 21, 25-year tariff, served 2 years

- Mid/late stage prisoners: desire to ‘achieve something better than this in my life’ – both for self (personal improvement) & others (giving something back/ making amends)

‘The last thing [the victim’s mother] said to me [during an organised encounter] was she did not want two lives to be wasted, and that she wanted me to just make sure that my life turned out with something good, and not waste it, you know, partly in the memory of her son who died that night. And it was like taking a deep breath for a first time, you know, like when I breathed in it was like I felt some new life in my lungs’.

Daniel, aged 31, 18-year tariff, served 9 years

Making the sentence constructive / finding meaning (through faith/ spirituality)

- Fortification, through belief in a higher purpose or afterlife
 - ‘I believe that God never gives you more than you can bear. So [I] know that I'll be able to cope [and] that there's a reason for me going through this’
- Attribution of meaning and godliness to the mundane present:
 - ‘by trying to attribute godliness to everything and seeing the good in everything and attributing some significance to day-to-day events or the mundane, it makes it all a little less futile and a little less depressing’.
- Answers to existential questions, re life (both taking it and losing it)
- Hook for personal and moral transformation: ‘....how to be a normal, decent human being’

Final comments

- Adaptation – a tidal metaphor
 - from ‘treading water’/being carried by/swimming against the tide (*reactive agency*)
 - to ‘going with the flow’/ using tidal energy (*productive agency*)
- The *offence-time* or *offence-time-abuse* nexus
- The impact of long-term imprisonment
 - Coping and adaptation – self-reliance, pre-occupation with time, control, identity, meaning, etc – operate as secondary handicaps