

## How Does Long-Term Imprisonment Affect People?

In a sample of long-term offenders traced across an average of seven years of imprisonment, a recent study found that, contrary to popular opinion, the inmates did not become more depressed, behave worse or lose contact with the outside world over time. In fact, inmates' emotional and behavioural states generally improved over time.

This study was an extension of an earlier project<sup>(1)</sup> which examined how offenders cope with problems they encounter in and out of prison and their psychological changes over a period of 18 months in prison. This study extends the follow-up period of the previous study to an average of seven years.

### Methodology

Five years after completion of the earlier study, the 41 men in the original long-term group were traced. All were serving sentences of at least 10 years. Of the original group, 15 were not available for this study for various reasons (e.g., released or deceased). Of the remaining 26 subjects, 25 agreed to participate.

All but four of these 25 men were serving life sentences for homicide. On average, they had served 7.1 years of their prison term. At the beginning of their sentences, 11 were married and six were involved in ongoing relationships. On average, the men in this sample had completed just over nine years of education.

Most of the measures used to gather information on the inmates' behaviour, cognitions and emotional states were the same as those used in the earlier study. Information on current behaviour was collected principally through a structured interview with each subject. The interview included questions dealing with use of time and pattern of activities, problems and ways of coping with those problems (not covered in this article), contact with the outside and expectations of release.

A number of written questionnaires were also administered to assess the emotional state of the longtermers, criminal attitudes and belief systems and general perceptions of emotional stress.

Additionally, the inmates' institutional files were reviewed to gather information on disciplinary and medical events during the prison term. Unfortunately, space does not allow us to report the study findings on disciplinary and medical events.

### Results

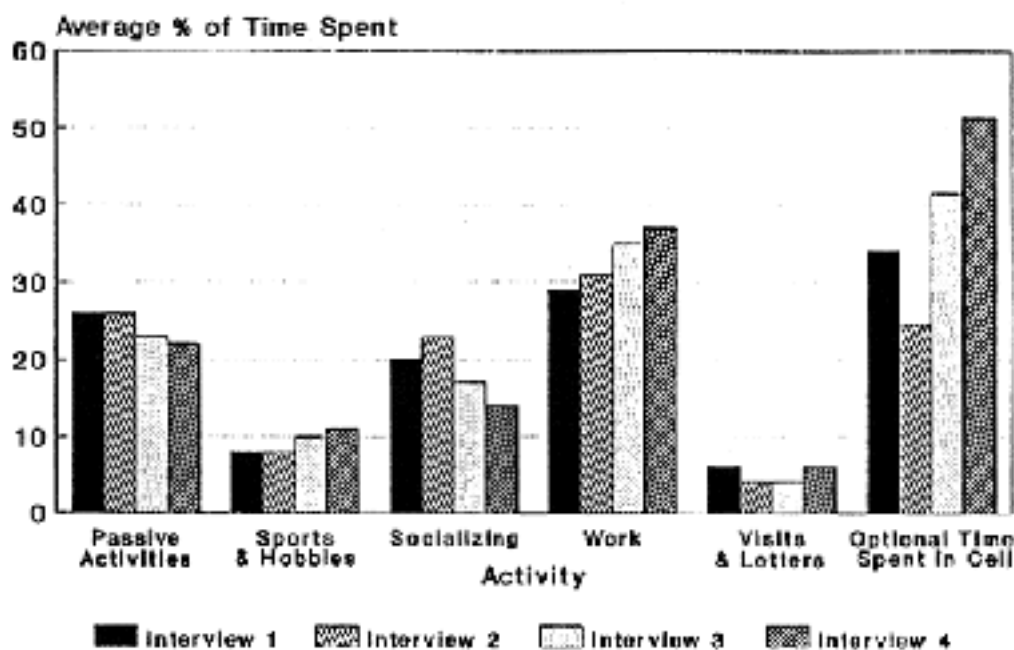
When the interviews for this study were conducted, the average time that the long-termers expected to serve before full parole was about two years. In fact, the date of eligibility for full parole ranged from immediately to 17 years in the future. Despite this variety in the length of time to be served before release, most of the long-termers had begun to think about release and life on the outside, and most had made visible progress toward release. However, most of them had not yet obtained any degree of freedom from institutional regimes in spite of their progress, and this contrast was stressful. While some

long-termers thought that things were getting easier in terms of serving their sentence, most felt that things would get difficult again as the possibility of release approached. As one long-termer said, "The very beginning and the very end are the hardest."

Figure 1 presents some of the observed changes in the behaviour of the long-termers over time, particularly their use of time. Over time, these inmates spent significantly more time in work activities, accounting for 29% of their time at the beginning of their sentence (first interview) and 37% at the time of the fourth interview (present study). Conversely, the proportion of time spent in casual socialization and passive activities decreased. This was especially significant when we looked at the decrease in time spent in casual socialization since the time of the second interview, that is, after about the first year of the sentence.

**Figure 1**

**Figure 1**  
**Changes in Use of Time**



Despite this decrease in socialization activities, the average number of friends each long-termer had did not change significantly over time; almost all subjects had a few close friends, usually other long-termers. Furthermore, there was no evidence that the long-termers became more socially isolated over time.

Long-termers in this study appeared to have chosen to spend their time in routines of their own. For example, when given the choice of going onto the range or staying in their cells, the long-termers increasingly chose the latter. In fact, the amount of optional time these long-termers spent in their cells was significantly greater than at the beginning of their sentences. The most common reason given for this change was the choice of activities that could be done better in their cells, such as studying or watching

television.

In sum, although they were not isolated, most long-termers had deliberately and consciously chosen to withdraw from the flow of institutional socialization. Two thirds said they did this to avoid the emotional and practical problems created by entanglements in casual prison relationships. They avoided the risks of getting institutional charges by limiting their involvement in the uncertainties of commonplace patterns of inmate socialization.

As for outside contacts, the earlier study did not include telephone calls because they had been so infrequent. Since then, however, telephones have become more accessible, and most long-termers in this study had at least weekly calls with family. Several mentioned this as a reason for the reduction in the number of letters they received and sent. Similarly, there was an increase over time in the number of visits received.

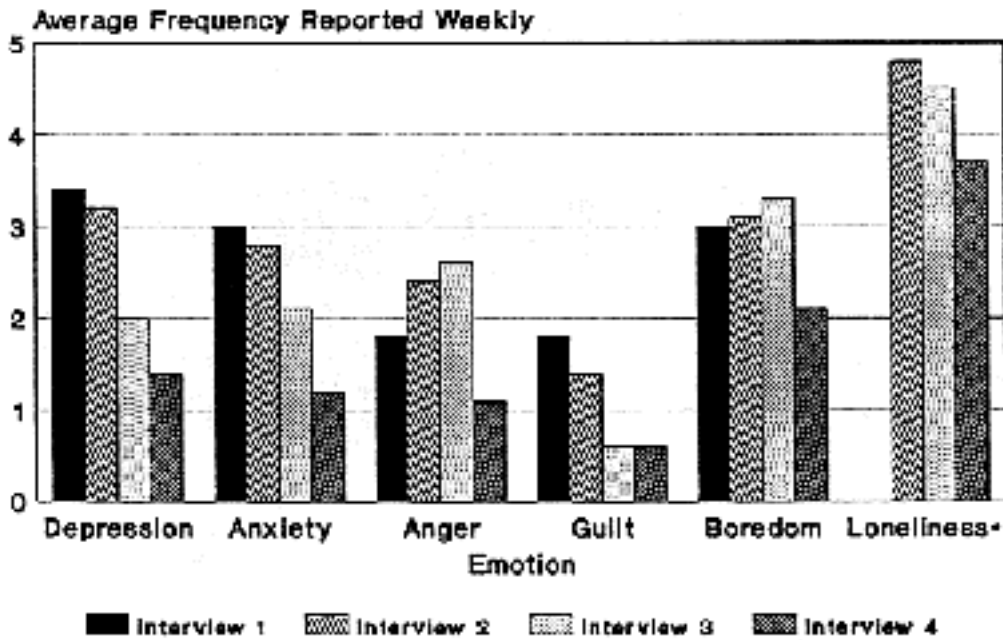
The findings suggest that emotional ties with people on the outside had been maintained. These longtermers missed people from the outside as much as they had at the beginning of their prison term. Although some inmates did lose contact and end relationships with those on the outside, others developed new relationships and increased contact with the outside while in prison.

As to changes in the mood and emotional states of the long-termers (see Figure 2), there were substantial decreases in feelings of emotional ill-being (dysphoria). Scores on tests and reported feelings of depression, anxiety, hopelessness, guilt and boredom decreased significantly from those reported at the beginning of the prison term. Furthermore, scores on tests of self-esteem increased significantly over time. As for feelings of anger and loneliness, these did not change much over time.

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**Figure 2**

Figure 2  
Emotions Across Time



\* Loneliness was not measured at the first interview.

Thus, it appears that while longtermers' overall emotional states improved over time, the prevalence and seriousness of moods that are reactions to specific environmental circumstances (i.e., loneliness and anger) did not follow the same pattern. In fact, the highest frequency of anger was during the middle of the prison term.

In contrast to these generally positive changes in their emotional states over time, the long-termers did not see their lives in prison as significantly more desirable or rewarding after several years, nor did they see fewer problems.

Despite this, a higher proportion of long-termers were able to list some positive aspects of their lives in prison. These aspects most commonly corresponded to the actual situation of the offender - such as improvements resulting from a transfer to lower security or greater access to people from the outside - rather than changes in how they perceived conditions in the system.

Unexpectedly, scores on the Criminal Sentiments Scale indicated that attitudes toward the criminal justice system had actually become more prosocial over time, going from a score of 73.6 at the time of the first interview at the beginning of the sentence, to 85.3 at the time of the fourth (last) interview.

Regarding personal objectives and framing their sentence and the future in terms of specific stages, although most long-termers said they lived day by day, about two thirds had specific goals to accomplish during their prison term. Most often these were educational objectives. It is of interest that scores on these questions did not change much over time. This is in contrast to the findings of the original study, which included a large proportion of short-term offenders, the majority of whom lost their motivation for self-improvement within about a year.

On the other hand, long-termers said they now thought of the future more often than before. For example, long-termers' daydreams largely involved pleasant images and rehearsals of their lives after release. Again, this is in contrast to the findings of the original study where most subjects (primarily short-termers) seemed to focus on the immediate present. In fact, few of these short-termers, some of whom would have been released soon, had done any sort of realistic planning for the future.

## **Conclusion**

It appears, from the results of this study, that the beginning of the prison term induces considerable psychological discomfort, but that the constancy of the prison environment leads to gradual amelioration of this discomfort. Moreover, the prison environment does not induce widespread behaviour change.

Long-termers in this study did not become socially isolated, and they did not lose contact with those on the outside. Most did not sink into despair and rebellion. In fact, their emotional states, health and conduct in the institutions all improved over time.

Most of the activities of these long-termers were planned around long-term goals, and their thoughts were connected with their lives after release. As a result, they became more adaptive within the prison environment, avoided entanglements that result from heavy involvement with other inmates and monitored and analyzed their own behaviour better.

However, it should be noted that only three inmates with extremely long sentences (i.e., life sentences of 25 years) were included in this study. It is possible that people subjected to such long terms, where release is too far off to be either a goal or an incentive, will suffer damage. In sum, this study found evidence that imprisonment does not have widespread deleterious effects for periods up to about a decade.

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E. Zamble, "Coping, Behavior and Adaptation in Long-term Prison Inmates: Descriptive Longitudinal Results." Unpublished paper, Queen's University, 1992.

<sup>(1)</sup>*E. Zamble and F.J. Porporino, Coping, Behavior and Adaptation in Prison Inmates. (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1988).*