



# Research Review

## Offenders with Very Distant Parole Eligibility Dates: Themes from the Literature

*Offenders serving very long sentences may present different case management challenges than other offenders.*

### What we looked at

Recently, the Criminal Code of Canada was amended to allow for the imposition of multiple consecutive life sentences. In the coming years, the management of offenders serving such sentences may present new challenges for the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), as these offenders' parole eligibility dates will be very distant. Given that other jurisdictions already manage such offenders, the existing literature was reviewed to attempt to anticipate areas of possible importance with respect to offenders with very distant parole eligibility dates.

### What we found

Relevant themes emerged from existing literature on long-term and life-sentenced offenders, most notably with respect to offenders' resilience, institutional adjustment, aging, and institutionalization.

**Resilience.** In the early stages of their incarceration, offenders serving very long sentences may experience feelings of loss that mimic the stages of grief (e.g., denial, anger; Silva, 2014). As a result, many seek ways to exercise personal choice, and forge meaning in their new situation.

**Institutional Adjustment.** Typically, offenders serving very long sentences show better institutional adjustment than those with shorter sentences, both with respect to institutional misconducts (Morris et al., 2010) and to their mental wellbeing (Leigey, 2010). In fact, those serving long sentences are often considered stabilizing influences within correctional institutions. In cases where institutional adjustment problems are present, these are typically concentrated in the early part of the sentence, perhaps given the initial reactions to incarceration described above.

**Aging.** As a result of long periods in custody, these offenders may experience the normal health-related implications of aging, such as physical health deterioration and palliative care needs, in an institutional context.

**Institutionalization.** In many cases, those serving long sentences struggle more with weakening relationships outside of institutional life (e.g., family, friends) than with problems inside the institution (Leigey, 2015). When released into the community, many lack community supports and experience difficulties with adjusting to societal changes and new community norms or expectations.

### What it means

Anticipating possible challenges for those with very distant parole eligibility dates may allow for the implementation of appropriate approaches and strategies for this group. For instance, given findings relating to resilience, it may be important to support these offenders in finding empowering pursuits during incarceration, such as meaningful institutional employment. For those offenders who are ultimately considered for release, release planning may also be complicated by possible effects of institutionalization.

### References

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- Silva, S. M. (2014). On the meaning of life: A qualitative interpretative meta synthesis of the lived experience of life without parole. *Journal of Social Work. Advance online publication.* doi: 10.1177/1468017314550748

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