

Article

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# On the Importance of 'Hope-in-Practice' behind Bars

Marion Vannier

Studies show that prison staff and prisoners believe that hope, when it is vested in a possibility of release, is essential for ensuring safe management of the prison environment. However, the way in which this significance of hope manifests within prison walls has not been thoroughly explored through research. This paper, based on unique data gathered in a prison in England and Wales, empirically examines how prison staff interpret and understand hope, particularly from the perspective of those working closely with older prisoners serving life sentences—individuals with the slimmest chances of release within their lifetime. This article argues that hope in prison is viewed as a means to ensure the safety of both prisoners and staff, maintain order, propel rehabilitation, and, in some cases, as something that life-sentenced prisoners should not be entitled to. These findings begin to shed light on *hope-in-practice*, raising important questions about the ethical dimensions of promoting, protecting, and nurturing hope in the context of the harshest forms of imprisonment.

**Keywords:** hope, life imprisonment, old prisoners, prison

## 1. Introduction. The Appeal of Hope

Hope is an open-ended psychological and philosophical concept often defined as a combination of desire for a specific outcome and belief in its possibility, even if improbable (Day 1969; Downie 1963). Unlike mere optimism, which involves an expectation that the desired outcome is likely, hope does not necessarily depend on such high probability (Martin 2013). Philosophers argue that hope requires an affective engagement with the possibility of the desired outcome, making it distinct from wishful thinking (Chignell 2013). Aristotle, for instance, linked hope to courage, suggesting it motivates confidence in the face of challenges, while others, like Thomas Aquinas, described hope as future-oriented and involving difficult yet achievable goods (Bobier 2020; Gravlee 2000). Others underscore the motivational and emotional depth of hope (Meirav 2009; Pettit 2004). Modern psychological theories, like Cindy Snyder's, emphasize goal-directed agency and pathways as key components of hope (Snyder et al. 1991). Whether viewed as an instrumental virtue or an intrinsic good, hope is recognized as essential for human resilience, motivation, and agency in uncertain situations (Blöser 2019; Calhoun and Calhoun 2018). Overall, works in anthropology, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and politics (Havel 2018; Marcel 2010; Miyazaki and Swedberg 2016; Snyder et al. 1991) emphasize the vital role of hope as a driving force, enabling individuals to

persevere through severe hardships and to find a way forward in even the most challenging situations. Hope inspires and motivates to overcome adversity.

Hope has recently become a key topic in discussions about one of the most severe forms of punishment in Europe, life imprisonment. Under European human rights law, judges from the European Court of Human Rights found that hope derived from a realistic possibility of review and release was essential to determine the acceptability of the most extreme forms of punishment (*Vinter and Others v. the United Kingdom* (2013)<sup>1</sup> and then *Matiošaitis and Others v. Lithuania* (2017)<sup>2</sup>). Judges held that whole life orders and then life sentences more broadly should preserve a 'right to hope' for release during imprisonment. Hope under European human rights law is cast as something experiential, that is, 'lived through' (Trotter 2024). It recognizes prisoners' capacities to atone and to change as features of their humanity (Trotter 2022). Alongside these jurisprudential developments, the concept of hope has become a topic of larger political debate in the UK, challenging the role of penal institutions (Gove 2016; UK Parliament 2020) and propelling new academic interest in both law and prison sociology (Ashworth and Zedner 2019; Liebling et al. 2019; Trotter 2022; Wright et al. 2023).

Criminological studies have begun investigating the importance of hope behind bars. They stress the struggles to find meaning and purpose when there is no hope (Crewe et al. 2020; O'Donnell 2016; Styles 2019). An important source of hope is retaining the sense that there is a significant portion of life worth living upon release; it then becomes a source of motivation to engage with the prison regime and can mitigate the pains of long-term imprisonment (Crewe et al. 2020; Wright et al. 2023). While hope can emerge from deep, individual experiences in moments of profound despair (Crewe 2011a; Crewe et al. 2020; Seeds 2021), hope vested in procedural possibilities of release is appealing because it can ensure security and stability. Prison staff and prisoners indeed believe that 'hope derived from a realistic possibility of release is essential to maintain order and safety in the prison' (Seeds 2021:1).

Yet, where does the value of hope lie for those who work closest to prisoners with very slim chances of parole due to their advanced age and sentence length? In examining the significance of hope for prison staff in the specific context of older life-sentenced prisoners, we can also begin to articulate an understanding of '*hope-in-practice*'.

Drawing on unique data collected during group discussions with prison staff from all ranks in one high-security facility in England and Wales in 2024 and building the analysis within international criminological studies on older prisoners, this paper examines their understanding of hope behind bars. The main question addressed is as follows: what are the justifications for fostering hope among older life-sentenced prisoners who are either unlikely to be released within their lifetime or face a particularly arduous journey toward release as they continue to age?

The initial findings are as follows: for prison staff, hope sets the severity threshold of 'true' life sentences; it is perceived as an efficient tool to ensure their own safety and that of older prisoners; it can motivate

rehabilitation and desistance from crime and appears as a useful managerial means to maintain the prison regime. Hope as practice does not emerge as an individual or agential sentiment but materializes as a functional and pragmatic *techne*, strategically cultivated to act as a stabilizing force, and ultimately becoming integral to the concept of life imprisonment itself.

## 2. Old Age, Life Imprisonment, and Prospects of Release

The overlap between old age and life imprisonment provides a critical framework for understanding the importance of hope when it is invested in the possibility of release. The prison population is aging worldwide (Aday and Krabill 2012; Baidawi et al. 2016; Ridley 2021; Vannier and Nellis 2023). England and Wales illustrate this trend particularly well. There are almost four times the number of people in prison aged 60 and over than there were in 2002 (Ministry of Justice 2023a: Table A1.7). Almost one in five (18%) of the prison population is aged 50 or over (15,525 people). Of these, 4,178 are in their 60s, and 1,965 people are 70 or older (Ministry of Justice 2024: Table 1.3). Alongside the greying of the prison population, the number of life sentences is also increasing (Ministry of Justice 2023b: Table A.1.15) and represents a significant portion of the total prison population (10% of the sentenced prison population in the UK) (Ministry of Justice 2023c: Table 1.9a). In part, this is due to penal policies expanding their scope, prison minimum tariffs having been lengthened and are often exceeded (House of Lord 2022), and to the fact that life sentences continue to be routinely handed down despite a decline in crime and homicide trends (Office for National Statistics 2024).

The aging of the prison population and the increase in life sentences coincide; the older life-sentenced prisoners are the fastest growing sub-group in the country. Over a third (33%) of those serving a life sentence are aged 50 and over (Ministry of Justice 2023d: Table A1.16). The correlation between aging prisoners and life sentences can be understood through several interconnected factors. Some individuals are sentenced to life imprisonment later in life, often due to delayed justice, such as cold cases being solved, improved forensic techniques, or individuals being held accountable for historical crimes committed decades earlier (Levins 2023; Ridley 2023). Older individuals are also more likely to be convicted of serious offenses like murder or sexual crimes, which typically carry life sentences (Prison Reform Trust 2024b).

Release becomes increasingly distant for individuals who enter prison in midlife to serve a life sentence, particularly when they exceed the tariff. In December 2023, one in seven (14%) life-sentenced prisoners had a tariff of 10 years or less, almost half (48%) a tariff of between 10 and 20 years, and over a third (36%) over 20 years (Prison Reform Trust 2024a: 18). Over a fifth of people currently serving a life sentence have already served their minimum term. In 2021, post-tariff lifers had spent an average of nine years and two months extra in prison (Prison Reform Trust 2024a:18). During the

tariff period, prisoners are not eligible for parole or release. Although they *may* become eligible for parole after the tariff period and could potentially be released, the extension of the tariff means they are effectively held in custody for longer, serving extended periods without the possibility of parole or release. Additionally, the process of aging itself may limit their ability to fulfil parole requirements, such as securing housing, work, or meeting stringent health criteria (Dagan and Vannier 2024; Vannier and Dagan 2024). Even when release is thus theoretically possible post tariff, the conditions for parole remain restrictive, resulting in extended incarceration and aging behind bars (Amalfi Wronski and Kokkalera 2023; Codd and Bramhall 2002).

The number of deaths among older prisoners serves as a stark illustration of the illusory nature of the prospect of release (Ministry of Justice 2023e). English courts have repeatedly asserted that the severity of life imprisonment includes the risk that prisoners, regardless of their advanced age, may not be released during their lifetime (Van Zyl Smit and Appleton 2016; Van Zyl Smit and Appleton 2019). Even for those who do not die in prison, the combination of advanced age and a life sentence creates a uniquely challenging journey toward release. Prisons were designed and built for young able-bodied men, but the demographic has evolved and will shift even more over time toward older, sicker residents (Ridley 2021). The literature on the pains of imprisonment—defined as the loss of liberty, desirable goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security by Gresham Sykes (1958)—emphasize how they vary depending on ethnicity, gender, disability, and young age (Chamberlen 2016; Crewe et al. 2017; Dodd et al. 2022).

Prisoners who grow old in prison will experience the traditional pains of imprisonment, but these will be exacerbated under the effect of aging. Studies across the world highlight the *cumulative* nature of the pains that older prisoners endure. Diete Humblet (2021) writes that older prisoners face a range of pains 'that both consolidate and exacerbate those experienced by the (general) prisoner population' (p. 60). Charlene Lane et al. (2020), for instance, point out that 'the 10 most common physical problems reported included osteoarthritis, asthma, hypertension, diabetes, hearing loss, high cholesterol, ischemic heart disease' (p. 339). In addition, not only do they deteriorate physically and mentally, but they experience stress and trauma and may become more dependent on peers and prison authorities (Kerbs and Jolley 2009; Maschi et al. 2012). They also lose the ability to participate in daily supportive activities like visiting the chapel or library, taking classes or working (Crawley 2005; Humblet 2021; Wahidin 2004). As they grow weaker, older prisoners also become exposed to enhanced abuse and bullying (Pratt and Hosoi 2022).

When old age is combined with a life sentence, other sources of harm accumulate (Vannier and Nellis 2023). The indeterminacy tied to life sentences is particularly harmful for those who grow old in prison, as it removes key markers of aging such as retirement, loss of a partner, or adjusting to chronic conditions (Crewe 2011: 512–513). Older life-sentenced prisoners become aware they have very little hope of ever being released and

that they will die in prison (Crewe et al. 2020; Nellis 2013; Vannier 2016). The conflation between the time left to live and the time left to serve makes the experiences of older prisoners serving life sentences distinctively distressful (Aday and Wahidin 2016; Deaton et al. 2009; Wahidin 2004: 109). Older life-sentenced men do 'harder time' and experience imprisonment as a more severe form of punishment than their younger counterparts (Mann 2012). In sum, an examination of 'hope-in-practice' that is grounded on the prospect of release must recognize that older prisoners serving life sentences either have minimal chances of being released or endure arduous paths toward a hypothetical release.

### **3. Methodology: How to Research the Importance of Hope in Prison**

The study 'In Search of Hope: The Case of Older Life Sentenced Prisoners in England and Wales' was funded by a UK Research and Innovation grant and started in 2022. Its aim was to uncover the meaning and value of hope across the criminal justice system. Fieldwork was conducted across three prison sites in England and Wales to explore how experiences and practices of hope evolve in different security-level environments and at various stages of the sentence. To give hope 'meaning-in-practice' (Liebling and Ludlow 2016; Martin 2014), the methodology employed was multi-layered and included group discussions with prison staff and prisoners, prison observations, and individual interviews with prison staff; prisoner participants were also invited to write diaries on instances of hope.

This article draws on the researchers<sup>3</sup> notes taken during two group discussions held in one prison, at the start of the fieldwork with staff of all ranks and working in both operational (in wings) and managerial positions. A total of 26 prison staff took part in the group discussions that lasted around 1.5 hours. The sessions were designed to present the study and to initiate a conversation around views on the importance of hope. Given the complexity of hope, the group discussions included a set of questions to engage the participants and help them reflect on the meaning and value of hope in the carceral environment. Participants were asked to think about the questions in pairs first and then to share their thoughts with the rest of the group as part of a broader informal conversation. Questions included 'Can you think of an example to illustrate feeling hopeful?', 'How important is hope in your daily prison activities?'; 'What can older prisoners serving life sentences hope for?'; 'How do you preserve and give hope to older prisoners?'; 'What comes in the way of preserving and giving their hope?'. Both researchers took handwritten notes during the discussions; these were then discussed and compared, later typed and analyzed inductively (Birks and Mills 2011; Pefintseva 2022), and constitute the basis for the early findings discussed below.

The notes produced rich and varied data to provide some initial findings and thoughts on the importance of hope 'as a prison practice.' There was little variation in views on the importance of hope, but the richness

of these narratives lies as much in the diversity and dissimilarities of their individual representations, as it does in the commonalities and shared understandings of their reality. These subjective and varied views are still valuable, as they highlight aspects of the institutional perspective on hope and provide unique insights into how hope is understood and applied within prison operations, though they naturally leave some aspects unexplored. Different perspectives were thus not treated as contradictions (where some views would be prioritized over others), but rather the differences helped develop the reflection and pushed the analysis further. In this article, these views are situated within and contrasted with existing criminological studies. At a later stage of the research, the group discussion data will be enriched with staff one-to-one interviews, data from prisoners, and material collected in other prisons. The four main themes that emerged across the group discussions are discussed below.

#### 4. Findings: The Importance of Hope for Prison Staff

##### a. *The denial of hope to ensure the severity of life imprisonment*

Some participants asked whether prisoners serving a life sentence even deserved hope for release. They asked: 'Is it not part of their sentence that they have no longer hope to be released?' One member of prison staff confided that 'when I heard about the project, I'm going to be honest, I thought it was bullshit because they don't deserve to hope.' The reactions depicted fear and concern over the ethical justification for giving hope to prisoners who had committed extremely grave and violent offences. There was a sense amongst the staff that the prisoners who had been sentenced to life imprisonment and sent to this prison deserved a punishment that did not provide hope for release. In the discussion, someone asked: 'Why would they deserve hope anyway? They committed horrific crimes...' Prison staff, however, did not go as far as to say that if hope were to emerge, they would seek to smother it. Rather, they questioned the deservedness of hope, suggesting that some prisoners were deserving of feeling hope for release whilst others, due to their levels of blame, did not have a legitimate right to experience the positive effects of hoping for a way out of prison walls.

This finding could suggest that for some prison staff, hope does not need to be exclusively tied to the prospect of release but could instead be linked to other meaningful objectives or aspirations within the prison setting. For example, hope might center on personal growth or contributing to the prison community without depending solely on the promise of release.

But most importantly, the discussion around deserving hope for release is evocative of how some staff perceive the threshold of 'true' life sentences. A feature of serving a life sentence, the comments suggest, is to have no or little hope for release. If life-sentenced prisoners were to have such hope, they would somehow not be serving a real or full life sentence.

The contention is also revelatory of the punitive attitudes that persist amongst those who work in prison, where positive emotions in prison environments (Laws 2022) are treated with suspicion and resistance (Liebling and Arnold 2004). The absence of hope serves to expose the true essence of life imprisonment, making hope important, as it becomes an integral part of the life imprisonment experience.

*b. Hope to ensure safety*

During the time we conducted the fieldwork, a number of violent incidents occurred, where prisoners assaulted officers, causing entire wings to be shut down, alarms going off, and reinforcement staff were called in. We were told that the levels of violence had significantly increased over the last five years, and this was largely tied to a change in demographics and offender profiles. Organized crime offenders were younger and tended to be more violent than the older, less aggressive offenders, we were told. When reflecting on hope, staff members repeatedly said that without hope, prisoners were likely to 'lash out' and become dangerous as they would have 'nothing to lose,' suggesting that violence was not solely due to demographics. This echoes a long-standing belief that prisoners sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of release present an enhanced risk for staff and are likely to become 'uncontrollable' (Cunningham and Sorensen 2006; Sorensen and Reidy 2019).

These perceptions are interesting to contrast with research on misconduct amongst life-sentenced prisoners. Studies evidence how inmates facing lengthy prison terms have lower rates of disciplinary violations than inmates serving shorter sentences (Herbert 2019; Toman et al. 2015). As prisoners spend time in prison and adapt to their environment, the levels of violence decline (Jarman 2020). They prefer solitude and stand away from 'impulsive, disruptive, and even dangerous' behaviors (Johnson and Dobrzanska 2005: 10). Lower levels of risks are further mediated by age. Violent conducts decline as prisoners grow older (Cunningham and Sorensen 2006).

It is interesting to note that discussions on the importance of hope often shifted towards the fear of its absence. The value of hope was framed in a negative light, as something whose removal could lead to serious and potentially dangerous consequences. Equally notable is the observation that features typically associated with older prisoners—such as frailty, dependence, and low risk—seem to disappear when considering the potential implications of individuals losing hope. The absence of hope was perceived as a universally destabilizing force, regardless of age or perceived vulnerability. Even older prisoners can be potentially dangerous if they were to lose hope.

In addition to the belief that hope increases safety for staff, participants stressed that hope helped reduce self-harm amongst prisoners. From this perspective, hope is viewed as having the power to keep prisoners safe too; it gives 'the drive or will to carry on,' as one participant stressed. The staff made the point that if prisoners no longer had hope, they would give



up and take their lives. Preserving prisoners' hope was characterized as a way to protect prisoners from themselves. The participants described hope as a resource to keep prisoners alive, even though some prisoners in this facility would most probably die in prison, given their age and prison sentence. Once again, the prison staff approached the importance of hope through its absence: its essential nature, according to them, somehow became most evident only when it was taken away. A positive approach to the importance of hope nonetheless emerges in discussions around rehabilitation and desistance.

*c. Hope to propel rehabilitation and desistance*

From the conversations with staff, there was a sense that hope could serve as a fuel to take part in the prison environment. 'It keeps them moving forward,' one participant said. They spoke about how those who took part in activities dedicated to older prisoners, such as gym sessions for those over 65 years old, and described well-adjusted workshops such as the barbers' course or the braille workshop. Prison staff also believed that with hope, older prisoners were more likely to stay away from criminal activity in prison, which was on the rise in this particular prison during the time of the fieldwork. This resonates with work on rehabilitation (Arbour et al. 2021) and desistance (Liem and Richardson 2014; Maruna 2001) that has established that prisoners' engagement with the prison regime is key to move away from criminal activities and reintegrate into the community. Taking part in education activities, jobs, treatment programs is also a requirement to progress through the prison system. To be transferred from a high-security prison to a lower-security facility (Burt 2024) or to become eligible for parole, prisoners indeed need to demonstrate that they have engaged with the prison regime. The motivation to change thus stems from the individual and is induced and shaped by official policies.

But when prisoners become older, engagement in prison life encounters a range of practical barriers that have to do with ill-adapted architectural design for older prisoners (Mann 2012; Crawley 2005). Reduced mobility and cognitive decline also require special access and adaptation, which prisons, including the one we visited, rarely provided (Ridley 2023). The lift between the first floor, where food, health care, and educational activities were located, had been broken for months, we were told, which implied that older prisoners whose cells were on the higher floors either did not attend some of the activities or had to rely on others to bring their food up or help them down the stairs to access the classrooms. The lack of resources, staff, and space are all practical hurdles to engaging in prison life regardless of there being hope or not. Despite wanting to stay away from criminal activities, participants described how some of the older prisoners were bullied, harassed, and sometimes forced to take part in drug-related activities by the younger offenders.

d. *Hope to manage and maintain the prison regime*

In the group discussion, participants pointed out that hope helped the staff manage prisoners and ensure a secure environment. Hope was described as a helpful tool to trust and develop relationships with those working on the landings. It helped keep the communication channels open, as those with hope were keen to ask about opportunities in prison life (such as workshops or educational training) and would become knowledgeable about administrative and procedural requirements to work towards release. Hope helped obtain 'compliance,' they said.

While hope was described as an essential tool to manage prisoners and maintain the prison regime, the staff were concerned about giving 'false hopes' and described the importance of managing expectations. To do this, they gave examples of never making empty promises and orienting prisoners to activities or administrative tasks that they felt confident could be completed or achievable. Hope was thus portrayed as a managerial tool that required a bit of fine-tuning to channel prisoners' expectations.

The expectations of older prisoners were described as focusing primarily on leading a quiet and uneventful life, with some participants emphasizing that their single-occupancy cell frequently 'became their home.' Participants highlighted that, although the traditional view assumes that prisoners aim to progress through the prison system and work towards lower security categorization, many older prisoners expressed a preference for maintaining the status quo. They seemed reluctant to disrupt their established environment or routines. Some were described as even refusing to complete the requirements to progress through the prison system.

Compliance through hope is also evocative of a form of coping, whereby prisoners adapt and become resilient to the prison regime. Life-sentenced prisoners, and older prisoners too, are known to adjust to their predicament over time (Johnson and Dobrzanska 2005; Toman et al. 2015). Coping with prison life, however, is also indicative of profound emotional damage and distress (Haney 2003; Liem and Sampson 2016); it is not 'pain-free.' Adaptation further illustrates how prisoners become 'institutionalised', defined as 'prison-based habits and ways of being, an overdependency on external structures and routines to organize and regulate one's behaviour, a tough veneer that precludes expressing weakness or vulnerability, the generalized mistrust that comes from the fear of exploitation, and a tendency to strike out in response to minimal provocations' (Haney 2012: 7).

The association of hope with compliance thus raises the question whether the outcomes mentioned (i.e., engagement with the prison regime, desire to lead a peaceful life, and others) are akin to a form of maladaptation or even 'sedation' to the prison environment (Crewe 2024). As Crewe (2024) claims, 'highly painful circumstances [can] generate psychological adjustments that enable their survival, and can engender a sense of personal growth' (p. 4). This idea of *compliance-through-hope* finally echoes works on how the exercise of the punitive power breeds obedience discipline (Foucault

1977), which has become increasingly less visible, more pervasive, and all-encompassing (Crewe 2011).

## 5. Discussion: Pervasive Hope?

This paper situates the notion of hope in the carceral context, in the specific case of older life-sentenced prisoners. It relies on data collected from two group discussions with prison staff to shed original light on the importance of hope from the perspective of those who work closest to these prisoners. While some doubts were formulated on the place that hope holds for people who are least likely to be released due to the combination of their advanced age and the nature of their sentences, there was an overall agreement that hope had some value.

From the stance of prison staff, hope is perceived as an essential tool to ensure the safety of both prisoners and prison staff; it has the propensity to propel efforts to rehabilitate and change; and it is characterized as a resource to maintain the smooth running of the prison regime. *Hope-in-practice* operates as a carefully cultivated mechanism that fosters compliance and order among prisoners while simultaneously motivating rehabilitative efforts and desistance from crime. Hope is also deemed important through its denial. Some prison staff argue that prisoners sentenced to life should not be afforded the comfort of hope, as it undermines the severity of the sentence and the punitive purpose of their incarceration.

Prison staff's deliberate nurturing of hope in prisoners, vested in the possibility of their release, creates a dynamic where hope is wielded as both an individual incentive and a source of collective discipline. Firstly, beyond its traditional framing as an individual sentiment and agential force, hope is leveraged to align prisoners' behavior with the broader goals of imprisonment. The promise of release is employed to motivate all prisoners to engage in rehabilitative programs, adhere to rules, and demonstrate 'progress.' But the cultivation of such behaviors and beliefs towards an outcome that may remain perpetually out of reach due to the realities of aging in prison carries significant ethical and moral ambiguities. When confronted with the fact of aging in prison, the practice of hope appears as potentially deeply manipulative. Secondly, hope further seems to target potential unrests within the prison environment. It is not just a way to shape prisoners' behaviors to adhere to institutional goals; hope is employed for the *collective* management of the prison environment. For prison staff, the cultivation of hope—however tenuous—turns into a pragmatic response to reduce violence, prevent mental health crises, and create an environment that appears to prioritize rehabilitation, even if the structural realities of release mechanisms in the context of older prisoners limit its operationalization.

The instrumentalization of hope behind bars raises fundamental questions about the contours of punishment. Hope is deemed important either by its absence or presence. Its absence is justified to determine and

reveal the true nature of life imprisonment, and its presence serves to reinforce the very structures of control and deprivation that define imprisonment. The practices of hope ultimately become a *part of* the punishment. And in becoming embedded into the very fabric of penal governance, hope becomes an inextricable part of the punishment's capacity to sustain and justify itself. Put differently, the pervasive role of *hope-in-practice* compels us to rethink its function as an integral feature of the state's power to punish.

In grappling with these questions, we see that hope in carceral settings often becomes a source of moral discomfort. It becomes essential to acknowledge the moral cost of using hope to serve institutional priorities at the expense of recognizing the fact of aging in prison, which is a matter of dignity and humanity. At its core, the conversation about hope as a prison practice forces us to confront not only the contradictions of imprisonment when it comes to older prisoners but also our own collective responsibilities toward those it incarcerates for the longest time.

A further step in the research would be to uncover whether and how hope is equally important for different prisoners and across different prison security levels. We would be able to better understand the meaning of hope in the carceral setting and evaluate the extent to which hope as a prisoner's 'lived experience' differs from 'hope as a prison practice' and 'hope as law.'

A word of caution to conclude. We should bear in mind that this study only tells one story about one prison in one country in the context of older life-sentenced prisoners and from the perspective of a small group of prison staff. I further acknowledge that different narratives may exist for other prison staff across the prison estate in England and Wales—and these views may be contingent on factors such as age, gender, ethnic origins, and prison experience. In addition, the analysis is based on transcribed notes of group discussions; whilst situated in criminological studies and official data, the discussion results were not triangulated with the official data on older prisoners serving life sentences. Although caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings, this study sheds new light on an under-researched area and reveals the complex role of positive experiences such as hope in prisons. It is our hope to inspire future research on hope in prison.

1. The case of *Vinter and Others v. the United Kingdom* concerned whole life orders and found that life imprisonment without a prospect of release may violate Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (thereafter ECHR or the Convention) which prohibits inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment. The case involved three applicants who were serving whole life orders in the UK. They argued that their sentences were incompatible with Article 3 as they had no realistic prospect of release, regardless of rehabilitation. The European Court of Human Rights (thereafter ECtHR or the Court) ruled that while life sentences are not inherently inhuman or degrading, there must be a mechanism to review such sentences after a certain period.

Without this possibility of review, whole life sentences could become disproportionate and violate Article 3. The Court emphasized that a review mechanism must assess whether continued detention is justified based on legitimate penological grounds, such as public safety or rehabilitation. The judgment effectively challenged the UK's practice of imposing irreducible life sentences, stressing the importance of hope and the possibility of rehabilitation in the penal system.

2. The ECtHR found a violation of Article 3 of the Convention in the case of six applicants serving life sentences in Lithuania, as their sentences were deemed neither *de jure* nor *de facto* reducible. Measures such as parole, amnesty, and reclassification offered no genuine prospect of release, and the presidential pardon lacked transparency, judicial review, and procedural safeguards, rendering it arbitrary. Prison conditions also hindered rehabilitation, as inmates were confined for extended hours with limited social interaction. The Court concluded that whole-life sentences without proper mechanisms for review and rehabilitation progress violated Article 3.
3. The notes of the principal investigator and the research associate.

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