



Research *at a glance*

Community Outcomes for Offenders Serving a Life Sentence

KEY WORDS: *Lifers, community success, reintegration, readmission, indeterminate sentences*

Why we did this study

In Canada, offenders sentenced to life ('Lifers') are subject to lengthy periods of incarceration and indefinite supervision upon release. Little is known about the characteristics of Lifers who are successful or unsuccessful upon release to the community. This study aimed to address this gap in knowledge and to identify which factors were associated with a return to federal custody.

What we did

Offenders who were serving life sentences and had been released to the community on day or full parole between April 1995 and March 2005 were included in the study (1,129 Lifers).

Lifers were grouped into three categories based on relative 'success' in the community following initial release from federal custody: no readmissions within the first five years after release, readmitted with an offence, and readmitted without an offence. Analyses were conducted on data including demographics, risk, need, and institutional outcomes (e.g. segregation, involvement in incidents) to identify the variables associated with a return to custody with or without an offence.

What we found

Approximately one-quarter of Lifers released to the community were readmitted within five years, a rate similar to that found for full parole releases. Only 3.5% of all Lifers released were readmitted with an offence. Male and female Lifers were equally likely to succeed in the community. Aboriginal Lifers were more likely than non-Aboriginal Lifers to be readmitted; however, Aboriginal ancestry did not increase the odds of return when other demographic and institutional variables were considered.

Offenders serving a life sentence for a homicide offence were more likely to be successful in the community than those serving a life sentence for any other type of offence (e.g., armed robbery, assault a peace officer, attempted murder, or sexual assault).

Lifers who were readmitted for any reason had higher levels of overall need assessed at intake than those who remained in the community for at least five years. Further, readmitted offenders had higher levels of need in the Substance Abuse, Associates and Attitudes needs domains.

In general, Lifers readmitted without an offence spent less time in the community after initial release, were generally higher need and demonstrated more problems with institutional adjustment than offenders readmitted with an offence.

What it means

Results demonstrate that Lifers are overwhelmingly successful on community supervision, and that most who return do so without a new offence. Lifers who are returned to custody appear to have challenges with attitudes, associates, and substance abuse. These areas represent good targets for interventions prior to release and for monitoring after release to prevent a return to custody.

In addition, differences identified between the groups who were returned with and without an offence highlight the need for focused management and supervision strategies for Lifers that may experience difficulty in adjusting to the institutional environment and/or to subsequent community release.

For more information

Axford, M. & Young, M. (2012). *Community Outcomes for Offenders Serving a Life Sentence*. Research Report R-264. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

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