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Negotiating challenges faced by homicide offenders upon their release from prison: A thematic analysis

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Abstract: This study explored the perceptions of the challenges faced by homicide offenders (HOs) reintegrating into the community after prison. Through interviews with six HOs and 10 Probation Officers in the United Kingdom, three themes were identified in the thematic analysis: Transitioning from life in prison to a new world; societal stigma and media representations; and the psychological aspects of homicide. Reintegrating into a fast-paced society proved difficult for all HOs, who struggled to adapt, carry their licensing conditions, find identity and purpose, and cope with the fear of being recalled to prison. Stigma and negative media portrayal hindered their acceptance by society. Managing psychological factors and self-identity while addressing the gravity of taking a life may provide a sense of individual agency and prevent reoffending. These findings can inform policymakers and practitioners working with homicide offenders in the community.

Keywords: offender rehabilitation; homicide offenders; stigma; recidivism.

1. Introduction

A considerable amount of literature has explored the challenges that criminals face upon re-entry to the community, as well as recidivism across a wide range of offending types. The rehabilitation of violent offenders has been previously explored, but fewer studies have specifically examined the population of homicide offenders (HOs) in the United Kingdom (UK). Homicide, the killing of another human being, raises public concern regarding their own safety when offenders involved in homicide are released, as the effectiveness of institutional interventions in reducing reoffending remains uncertain (Baaij, et al., 2012). The homicide rate (i.e., murder, manslaughter and infanticide) in England and Wales stood at 11.7 per million in 2022 (ONS, 2023), while the number of individuals imprisoned for homicide rose from 525 cases in 2012 to 696 cases in England and Wales by March 2022 (ONS, 2023).

According to Liem (2013), the extent to which homicide offenders' criminal trajectories differ from those of other (violent and nonviolent) offenders is unknown, and it cannot be assumed that the challenges they faced at re-entry are all the same. Dubber and Hörnle (2014) argued that the label of convicted murderer conveys the worst stigma and most severe punishment amongst any other crime in the society. It is therefore essential to develop detailed accounts of how this population, often merged in studies with other violent offenders, or lifers, faces challenges that reflect the severe nature of their crime.

Sturup and Lindqvist (2013) noted that research on recidivism among HOs is limited due to short follow-up periods and a lack of differentiation between crime types. It is crucial to understand the challenges faced by HOs upon their release to inform practice and policy for the rehabilitation of HOs, thus reducing the risk of reoffending and increasing the safety of the public. This study aims to explore the perceptions and experiences of resettling back into the community for HOs and their probation officers.

1.1 Re-entry process and its challenges for violent offenders and homicide offenders

Studies that have been written about the re-entry process of offenders in general are numerous. Empirical studies that looked at this process and challenges encountered will be presented here.

In the UK, Appleton (2010) conducted interviews with 138 released offenders who received discretionary life sentences for various crimes, including homicide (49%), sexual offenses, violence, and arson. Interviews were also conducted with 21 probation officers responsible for lifers' supervision. The study explored narratives, identity changes, desistance from crime processes, and the experience of supervision from both offenders and probation officers. Out of 67 HOs, 13 had reintegrated into the community and were interviewed. Appleton (2010) found that successful desisters faced challenges in finding employment and housing, while experiencing stigma.

Maruna (2001) explored how ex-offenders make sense of their criminal past by constructing self-stories and introduced the concept of redemption scripts, which aim to redeem oneself and create a meaningful future during the desistance process. Additionally, Maruna (2001) found that self-efficacy, the belief in personal control, is linked to resilience and successful rehabilitation among offenders.

Focusing on HOs specifically, Liem (2016) conducted narrative interviews with over 60 released HOs in the United States of America (USA) to understand their experiences of life-sentences. The study found that the re-entry process and desistance for these lifers differed from those with shorter prison sentences. Participants faced challenges in adapting to a new environment, coping with parole conditions, and dealing with limited access to programs during incarceration. They also encountered difficulties in finding employment and housing due to the stigma associated with being labelled a felon. Gender added complications for women in obtaining jobs, due to a lack of sufficient training and potential gender discrimination. Intimate and family relationships posed challenges rather than support, and some participants reported psychological difficulties and PTSD symptoms after release, such as distressing dreams and situation avoidance.

Liem (2016) also found that institutionalization greatly affected the daily lives of lifers, resulting in challenges in reestablishing social connections and feeling alienated from society. However, many participants expressed a desire to contribute to the community by sharing their transformative experiences with fellow inmates, which gave them a sense of purpose and a positive identity.

Information about the impact of murder and prison time on the offender and on the society is scarce (Heinlen, 2012), but killing someone will probably affect the offender deeply (Adshead, 2014). Ferrito et al. (2020) emphasized the importance for HOs to work on their self-identity and acknowledge the impact of their crime on their lives and others. The study focused on seven male HOs who committed an unplanned killing, using Interpretative Phenomenological analysis (IPA). The researchers identified two themes: 'The Reformed Self-Identity' and 'Factors that contribute to a Reformed Self-Identity.' These themes highlighted the role of relationships in shaping identity and how risk reduction, accountability, and social inclusion are linked to self-regulation and dealing with feelings of shame. The study shed light on the challenges HOs face in reconciling with societal perceptions after committing what was described as an ' offense against humanity,' extending beyond the impact on their victims alone. The consequences of being labelled as convicted murderer carries such stigma that has a profound impact and hinders their opportunities of finding housing, employment, and limits their earnings (Alvarez & Loureiro, 2012; Grossi, 2017).

1.2. Recall and reoffending of homicide offenders

The prevalence of convicted homicide offenders who recidivate has been broadly estimated between 1% and 82% (Liem, 2013), with most HOs reoffending within two to three years of release from prison (Liem, 2013). Furthermore, differences between types of HOs were observed: domestic homicide offenders recidivated less frequently compared to other types of HOs (e.g., juvenile HOs, mentally ill offenders, sexual HOs), whilst felony/crime related HOs were most likely to recidivate violently. Khachatryan, et al. (2016) reported that several studies focusing on juvenile homicide offenders found over 50% of those released from juvenile or

adult prisons were rearrested. In their study, approximately 90% of released JHOs were rearrested.

Studies comparing HOs to other groups of offenders have found that HOs have the lowest rearrest rates (Langan and Levin, 2002, as cited in Liem 2013). In their 22-year follow-up study looking at a sample of 1088 offenders charged for homicide in Western Australia (1984-2005), Broadhurst, et al. (2017) found that 40.3% of offenders were rearrested for another offense of any kind, whilst 21.9% were rearrested for another grave offense (e.g., assault, sexual assault, robbery). Less than 1% of cases were re-arrested for another homicide charge. They concluded that whilst the commission of another homicide offense is very rare, re-arrest for another offense (grave or not) is not uncommon. Therefore, they recommended to screen risk factors according to the type of homicide as this could help predicting re-offending.

Given the limited knowledge on the perceptions and accounts of re-entry challenges experienced by HOs and probation officers, the current study aims to provide an in-depth examination of how these offenders navigate resettlement back into the community in a UK sample. Overall, the focus of the current study on HOs' experience of living with the label of homicide offenders and how this might affect re-entry.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consists of two groups of participants: (1) six HOs (five were convicted of murder and one of manslaughter) who were within five years of their release into the community; and (2) 10 probation officers (POs) or community supervision officers with experience of supervising HOs. Five of the HOs were male and one was female, whilst six POs were female and four were male. HOs' age at the time of interview ranged from 24 to 61 years old (M = 48.6; SD = 11.94) and their age when convicted for homicide ranged from 15 to 25 years old (M = 20.5; SD = 3.26). HOs served, on average, 19.4 years in prison (SD = 9.2), with four of them having served over 15 years (five of them received a life sentence). Two HOs had been

reconvicted of other offenses after their release. Details concerning their reconvictions were not available.

The study was advertised among probation services in the West Midlands, UK, targeting probation officers with experience in resettlement of HOs after their release from prison. Purposive sampling was used to select interested probation officers who also identified potential HO participants under their supervision. Interviews were arranged by probation officers with willing participants who had been convicted of homicide offenses (murder or manslaughter) of various types, such as stranger homicide or domestic homicide. The interviews were conducted at the Probation offices in the West Midlands.

Ethical approval was granted by [redacted out] University Research Ethics Committee (P48481), and through the Integrated Research Application System (IRAS) for approval from Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS). All ethical guidelines were followed (e.g., informed consent, right to withdraw from study at any point. No incentives were offered for participating.

2.2. Procedure

Participants took part in individual, semi-structured interviews conducted in a probation services' office where privacy was guaranteed, and the interviews audio-recorded with the participants' authorization. The interviews ranged in length from 21 minutes to 1 hour and 25 minutes for HOs, and between 26 minutes and 56 minutes for POs. The interview questions were based upon the interview schedule designed by Grommon, et al. (2012), as well as questions that were found relevant in the literature around lifers and HOs' imprisonment (e.g., Liem, 2016). Open-ended questions were linked to their background (e.g., age, past education, employment, housing situation, social support, substance issues and mental health), situation and challenges experienced. For the POs, the questions addressed their roles and experiences of supervising HOs, the challenges they faced and how the experience might differ from supervising other types of offenders. The interviews with POs also focused on gender differences in HOs, support networks of HOs, and cases of re-incarceration and risk factors.

Including multiple perspectives increases the reliability of the information (Silvergleid & Mankowski, 2006), and combining the perceptions of HOs and POs on challenges brought a richer body of knowledge.

2.3. Analysis

An inductive 'bottom up' analysis was used, using the participants' testimony to construct broader themes within a qualitative paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, allowing researchers to familiarize themselves with the data, and subsequently imported into NVivo 12. As such, Thematic Analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyze the data and to develop themes and associated subthemes. Braun & Clarke's six-phase approach (2006) was adopted to make sense of the data (in-depth reading, initial coding, grouping codes, refining themes, defining themes and final analysis). This approach is appropriate for studies with an exploratory focus of participants' attitudes, experience and motivations (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Reflexive thematic analysis considers "the researcher's subjectivity as analytic resource, and their reflexive engagement with theory, data and interpretation" (Braun & Clarke, 2021 p. 330). The complete data set underwent multiple readings, during which initial ideas were recorded, and the principal investigator conducted systematic coding throughout the entire dataset. The analysis is flexible and characterized by Braun and Clarke (2021) as an interpretative and reflexive process in which coding is open and organic. The second author reviewed initial codes, discussed and agreed the generation and development of the themes. As such, this reflexive approach is not really suited to a quantitative inter-reliability coding as there is no rigid codebook with limited categories on which coders would have to agree (see Braun and Clarke, 2021).

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), TA allows to compare the experiences of different participants and to highlight similarities and differences to produce unexpected insights. To ensure trustworthiness of the data, a balanced presentation of the experiences of all participants is provided to support the themes produced and direct quotes (HO: Homicide

Offender; PO = Probation Officer) that provided the clearest support for the identified themes are presented to contribute to verifiability (Silverman, 2000).

3. Results

Although the interviews covered all challenges faced by HOs when released from prison, it was decided that the results would focus on the challenges that are more specific or unique to HOs. As such, all participants identified the 'classical' factors (i.e., those experienced by most offenders in general), such as finding accommodation and securing employment, as major challenges. As these important challenges in the life of all ex-prisoners have been covered in previous publications (e.g., Appleton, 2010; Liem, 2016), they will not be discussed in the findings, as they do not contribute new knowledge.

Three themes were generated: Transitioning from life in prison to a new world; societal stigma and media representations; and the psychological aspects of homicide. Each included two subthemes, as can be seen in figure 1 and which will be developed in this section.

[Insert Figure 1: Figure 1. Map of the three themes and sub-themes]

Many of the challenges voiced by all participants overlapped and are inextricably linked. The interviews were complementary between the first-hand account of lived experiences from the HOs and the perceptions of POs who directly accompanied HOs in their re-entry, and their reflection on the process and the 'behind the scenes' input.

3.1. Transitioning from life in prison to a new world

All participants described the pathway and transition between life in prison and life outside, in a world that has progressed rapidly. This was reflected in two sub-themes: Adapting to release and adjusting to life with heavy license conditions.

3.1.1. Adapting to release

Generally, participants (POs and HOs) discussed how the HOs adjusted to life when released into the community, with the majority of the HOs describing the transition back into the community as a 'culture shock', despite going through open conditions of prison and slowly being reintroduced. P05 described HOs being overwhelmed by the noise and the fast pace outside of prison and its regimented routine. Four HOs discussed their experiences with institutionalization, and specifically how they had become accustomed to the highly structured routines and strict rules of the prison environment during their incarceration. It's important to note that all four parolees acknowledged the phenomenon of institutionalization, recognizing its presence within their own lives as they transitioned back into society. However, intriguingly, two of the four HOs expressed uncertainty about whether institutionalization had truly affected them personally. This suggests that while the concept of institutionalization was widely acknowledged among the group, its impact on individuals varied, with some questioning its influence on their post-prison lives. HO1 perceptively reflected on the denial of prisoners on being institutionalized and the '*impossibility for it not to be. I was institutionalized and the prospect of coming back out to the big wide world was terrifying although it's very difficult to admit it'*.

HO1 also compared the routines experienced in prison to a 'comfort blanket', with known expectations, as opposed to the uncertainty in the open world. POs emphasized the need to get used to new surroundings and the lack of regimented routines, and recommend to their parolees to keep busy, by finding employment, hobbies, and getting involved in church and charities. This is also linked to the challenge of catching up with technology and society, reported by both HOs and POs, where even the 'smaller things' are difficult, like setting up new bank accounts, national insurance or council tax [HO4].

POs agreed that more support is needed to assist with those needs, as they do not have the capacity to help with these smaller problems. Participants talked about the pre and post release process and described how prisoners gradually go from Category A/closed prison (highest security) to category D/open prison (lower security) in which eligible inmates are allowed to work, study, or engage in resettlement activities outside the prison before being

released. This was seen as helping HOs acclimatize to life outside. However, several POs agreed that the provision of support given by prisons can vary widely, with sometimes private prisons being seen as skimping on these costs. The following quote by PO7 highlight their view of resettling department:

> *The resettlement department in prisons, they're not good. In fact they're useless I would say. They're supposed to be, they say they're resettlement departments but they're not. I don't think they do anything. I don't know anything that literally, none of the offenders I work with have ever benefited from resettlement* [PO7].

3.1.2. Adjusting to life with heavy license conditions

In this subtheme, participants exposed the struggles to live with probation's licensing conditions, the fear of being recalled/recommitted to prison and the challenge of trusting probation officers when one struggles to cope on the outside. Once released, HOs who are on life license (on parole) expressed that they found it difficult to accept strict conditions, despite having served a long custodial sentence, as they must still abide by their conditions when released. Having to ask for permission, being on license potentially forever and the risk of going back were highlighted.

HOs expressed their agreement with retribution and being punished for what they did, but questioned how long they need to be punished for once they have served their prison sentence. Additionally, a majority of participants (both HOs and POs) identified that the 'fear of being recalled' as another challenge of the licensing conditions. HO6 expressed how he would lose everything he had built whilst out of prison and how this would really 'crush' him.

Although recall was said to be used as last recourse by the POs in our interviews, this would have disastrous consequences on the mental health of offenders, who also mentioned in some cases their reluctance to share their struggle with their POs in fear of being recalled:

> *You don't want to admit certain things to members of staff because their reaction is, he might do something silly, right ground him, send him back to closed conditions and this is what's happened and I knew this over the years after meeting other lifers that have gone through it.* [HO1]

This was also reflected in the interviews with POs, and the interpretation of license conditions by less experienced and less confident POs was mentioned by POs, in which these officers might blindly apply license conditions even to the detriment of opportunities that would make a difference in the life of HOs. One explanation given was by PO3:

> *I mean there is a real… amongst, I don't want to be ageist, amongst newly trained workers that we've got to be hard on them, and the old social work values have just been kicked out, that's why we might get so many people up, and in this office there is a real issue with keeping people assessed as high for such a long time and you should be really looking to disengage as well.* [PO3]

To PO3, this is due to differences in the ethos between 'old school' probation workers (socially oriented) and 'the new ones' who tend to be more punitive and less likely to disengage with their clients until after a long time. Particularly when supervising lifers, POs explained that the steps undertaken pre release are slower, and offenders remain under supervision for a longer period of time. Collectively, POs said that HOs are more compliant and less risky compared to other types of offenders, assumingly because of the disastrous consequences HOs face if they commit another offense or breach their license conditions. P01 felt that professional judgement and discretion should be used to try and keep HOs in the community whilst balancing risks, and making sure that they receive enough support and stability.

The majority of POs perceived HOs as being highly unlikely to reoffend, and four of the POs had experiences with HOs they supervised who had been recalled.

> *Parole violations would be more frequent, so for violating license conditions such as going into an exclusion zone, or not residing as agreed, or maybe extensive drug use; going back to some old behaviors potentially, might be up to five percent for that sort. But it's not very common for life offenders, the threshold to recall a lifer offender is higher and it needs to be related to an increase in risk, rather than just a violation.* [PO2]

It should be noted that the absence of national statistics for this population renders it difficult to know the exact recall rate, and the proportion of those who violated licensing conditions or reoffended. Out of the six HOs who participated in this study, two had been re-incarcerated after serving their sentence for homicide, and one had struggled with leaving open prison (this participant went back to 'closed prisons' several times before their release). In terms of recall, one of the HOs explained that it was due to the breakdown of his romantic relationship that led to him becoming intoxicated and starting a fight with another member of the public in a bar.

3.2. Societal stigma and media representations

In this subtheme, participants share their experience of the label of homicide offender and its representation in the media, but also its consequences on life after prison. Two subthemes are discussed: Impact of the stigma, Media representation and public perceptions.

3.2.1. Impact of the stigma

Most participants (POs and HOs) discussed the stigma associated with being a HO and the impact it had on their life, like PO5 and HO5 below:

> *I think massively, it's the stigma of being a murderer…..Because people imagine and I've heard people who don't do my job and when they find out I work with people who have murdered someone they're like 'oh my God you work with a murderer' and I'm like: they are just a person though who have killed another person and I think that like, the sort of monster image of 'oh my God you've killed somebody' is so massive and rightfully so because it is a massive thing* [PO5].

> *Again, it's all about having then to disclose to that person the entirety of your life's experience and that one little conversation they might have their hair raised to the back of their neck or gone crazy, it's about control isn't it really, you can't control that, but it's about being honest at the end of the day* [HO5].

Stigmatization can be linked to forced disclosure (license conditions) and can have an effect on employability, housing, relationships, once HOs disclose the nature of their offense, which can be disheartening and has a further impact on the emotional wellbeing of the HOs and their sense of self-worth. As another example, HOs also need to disclose their offense to new romantic partners. Half of the HOs participants were in a relationship at the time of the interview, whilst those who did not, expressed fearing the reaction of people when knowing of their past.

Some HOs reported being estranged from their family, due to the nature of their offense (e.g., domestic-related homicide) or licensing conditions (e.g., enforcing exclusion zones), and expressed feelings of loneliness and lack of support. POs reported how family support can help reintegration, but for those who do not have these bonds, creating a social network is important, but also very difficult. When building new friendships, there can be barriers to voluntary disclosure (as their license conditions would specify the nature of forced disclosure) and is linked to the fear of being stigmatized. Participants also reflected on how to disclose: 'how do you tell someone about what you did?' and 'can you handle rejection?'. As a result, some HOs preferred to keep to themselves than risking rejection. Social activities and interactions were seen as challenging, as HOs will have to answer questions such as 'what do you do in life'?, which they felt uncomfortable answering. Several POs felt that, compared to other offenders, HOs will experience more stigmatization, with higher level if there was a sexual element to the homicide, or against a vulnerable victim (e.g., a child or someone with a disability).

3.2.2. Media representation and public perceptions

An issue raised by some participants in both groups involved the attention received from the media, including social media. More specifically, media attention heightened the fear of being recognized by someone they once knew or by the general public, as evidenced in the quote below:

> *Media, because my offense was high profile and since my offense happened it's been on TV quite a lot, so I was scared about coming outside and people recognizing me for my offense and just not getting anywhere in life* [HO3].

POs agreed on the additional pressure exerted by media attention, and one PO and gave an example of negative media depiction of an HO:

> *Suddenly this happened to her and she was deemed as this heinous person. It was a big, it was very prolific in the media, lots of stuff also on the internet. Facebook, this person was demonized on Facebook and read some of that, or people told her what was on. So, it was a real, I'd like to say a witch hunt in that sense. A lot of things were assumed.* [PO6]

This negative portrayal by the media affects public perception but also the offender self-perception and self-esteem. The challenge here for HOs is to move away from the image of a monster that was developed by the media and to reconcile the perception of their crime that was created by the media with what happened in reality.

Additionally, it also appears from the interviews with POs supervising both male and females HOs, that in their experiences, the stigma is greater for female HOs compared to the men, with the public harboring more discriminatory attitudes towards these women. PO5 theorized that this is because killing- or even violence- is not in a female's nature, and '*generally the vibe is that women shouldn't do those sort of things'* [PO5]. The perception that women should be nurturing and maternal does not fit with crimes of extreme violence.

3.3. The psychological aspects of homicide

This theme comprises two subthemes: Emotional impact of taking a life; Finding purpose and mental health well being. Both of these themes are linked to the psychological experience of homicide.

3.3.1. Emotional impact of taking a life

The emotional impact of taking another's life was raised by most of the interviewed HOs, who have to come to terms with what they have done, and living with the regret and wanting to make amends:

> *I can see the mistake that I made in my life, that I've killed someone and I can't rectify that, so when I do get out I can live a better law abiding life and make up for my mistake.* [HO2]

Several POs also spoke of seeing the regrets of HOs' actions and having to deal with the fact that they have taken a life for example, P07 compared it to those who commit assault and don't tend to feel the same guilt or shame as HOs. Furthermore, PO9 explained that the emotional impact of taking someone's life is something that a lot of HOs can struggle with for the rest of their life:

> *Often you find with homicide offenders, because of the nature of their crime, it's often harder for them… they struggle a lot more emotionally and psychologically because they've committed the ultimate crime in a sense. They've taken away somebody's life.*

3.3.2. Finding purpose and mental health well being

After serving a long sentence in prison, finding one's identity and self-efficacy when released can be difficult (Liem, 2016). Participants from both groups highlighted the importance of having found a purpose in life and a valuable lifestyle. For the majority of HOs, being resourceful, determined and proactive to get employment, accommodation, and getting support

were key to succeed. Moreover, most HOs were very open about mental illnesses and mental wellbeing with some talking about their own mental health issues such as depression, before incarceration, whilst in prison, and post-release. Furthermore, some HOs associated experiencing mental health issues whilst in prison with the numerous setbacks from the parole board, with one of the HOs having experienced an Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentence[1], which had a negative impact on their mental health and resettlement:

> *Of course that again leaves you in limbo because you haven't had to adhere to the rules and regulations of the regime and nobody takes into consideration the emotional trauma overall and you often have to remain patient really, that's the main environment I can assure you, they're hate factories really* [HO5].

Self-efficacy and inner strengths were also highlighted in participants' experiences and how HOs attempt to overcome difficulties, such as this example of resilience:

> *There's a lot of work involved. But I've got a lot of fortitude. I've got a lot of inner strength. Someone to do that amount of time and come out without being too damaged in here and in here, you know, there's a lot of strength there*…[HO6]

[1] 'Sentences of Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPPs) were created by the Criminal Justice Act 2003 and started to be used in April 2005. They were designed to protect the public from serious offenders whose crimes did not merit a life sentence. IPPs lead to inconsistent sentencing.' Ministry of Justice (n.d). IPP Factsheet. Retrieved from [06/03/2019]: https://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/legislation/bills-acts/legal-aid-sentencing/ipp-factsheet.pdf

HOs also experience trauma of long-term imprisonment and the detrimental impact of losing their freedom and being physically locked behind a door, but also through witnessing violent events in prison and not feeling safe. HO6 discussed post-prison PTSD and credited therapeutic input, external support, and a strong work ethic for aiding their readjustment. For other HOs, it is difficult to determine the presence of mental illnesses before imprisonment; conversely, HO3 admitted having been abused and experiencing flashbacks related to both the abuse and the offense itself.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to explore challenges faced by HOs during their reintegration into the community, considering the unique experiences of individuals convicted of homicide. Thematic analysis revealed findings consistent with previous research on lifers' rehabilitation in the community (Appleton, 2010; Liem, 2016). The study also took into account gender, and HOs at different stages of post-prison life, distinguishing it from previous studies. By combining the perspectives of HOs and POs, the study provided a comprehensive understanding of these lived experiences from multiple angles.

The study revealed that all interviewed HOs faced difficulties in reintegrating into a fast-paced society, struggling to adapt, find their identity, and establish a sense of purpose. Notably, the participants encountered challenges related to societal perceptions, including traditional media and social media portrayals, as well as emotional impact and guilt associated with homicide. These findings underscore the importance of establishing a supportive system for HOs, considering the significant stigma and lengthy sentences attached to their offenses.

In the first theme of ‘Transitioning from life in prison to a new world’, the participants expressed the challenges of ‘adapting to release’ and ‘adjusting to life with heavy license conditions’. Similar to Liem’s (2016) findings on adapting to life after release, the current participants all described the transition back into the community as a ‘culture shock’ and struggled coping with parole conditions. It is not surprising that after spending a long time in

prison, HOs reported feeling institutionalized and afraid of the 'outside'. To facilitate successful reintegration, it would be beneficial to implement nationwide programs that actively prepare individuals for life outside of prison, including practical responsibilities like cooking, cleaning, and managing finances.

The strict licensing conditions were found to directly influence one of the greatest fears expressed by the HOs: the fear of being recalled to prison. This fear constitutes a permanent threat that what HOs have built in the community could collapse with any violation and they face an uncertain future. Recall to prison in the UK, as accounted by the POs we interviewed, appears to differ from what has been reported in some US cases (Liem, 2016), who were recalled to prison due to missing an appointment with their PO. These 'technical violations' have been described as drivers of over-incarceration (Gray, et al., 2001), committed mainly in the first three months of probation, with devastating consequences. The current study suggests that the UK system focuses on supporting the reintegration of HOs into the community, aiming to understand the underlying factors behind their struggles instead of imposing penalties for minor offenses. Prison recall is viewed as a final option by POs, who prioritize providing support to HOs in addressing their encountered issues. However, it was noted that newer POs were seen by some of the participants as holding more punitive attitudes than those from the 'old school'. In her book published in 2011, Fitzgibbon reviewed the evolution of probation officer training and the consequences of probation privatization. Previously, probation officers were taught to address the individual holistically, developing their casework skills, and fostering strong connections with those under supervision. Fitzgibbon (2011) noted that the contemporary training approach, such as the Diploma in Probation Studies, has shifted toward a correctional mode with a greater emphasis on risk assessment, risk management, cost-efficiency, and heightened staff accountability. This new approach centralizes working methods and employs technology to monitor compliance and risks. However, this shift has been criticized for potentially reducing training to mere checklist tasks and deskilling the trainees (Fitzgibbon, 2011). Privatization also led to focusing on targets and outputs and less on people.

In a 2020 report, the HM Inspectorate of Probation found that National probation

officers were overburdened with high workloads, inadequate facilities, and insufficient staffing. These conditions heightened the pressure on them and hindered their capacity to establish effective relationships with those they supervised. Even more concerning, serious offenders in need of intensive supervision and rehabilitation were frequently placed under the care of newly qualified probation officers lacking the necessary experience and skills to deal with such complex cases (HMI, 2020). The alterations in training methods and the insufficient allocation of resources are likely to affect the quality of the connection between the officer and the person under supervision. When combined with heightened public scrutiny and the apprehension of overlooking potential warning signals, these factors may result in unfair recall. This should be monitored closely as recall threshold should be fair and well informed to avoid possibly lengthy reincarceration.

From the interviews, it appeared that POs perceived HOs as highly unlikely to reoffend, with a low proportion of prison recall; license violation was cited the most probable reason why HOs would be recalled rather than reoffending. To the best of our knowledge, there are no published records of the rate of recall among HOs in the UK. In Appleton's study (2010), of the 117 lifers who participated, 53 (45%) were recalled to prison, with 58% being recalled for 'unacceptable behavior' (e.g., poor attitude to supervision, failure to report to probation), whilst 21% were recalled for alleged offense, and 21% for both unacceptable behavior and alleged offense. While these figures are valuable for evaluating recall rates, further research on recall prevalence, factors, and motivations within this population is crucial. It would help reduce reoffending risk, enhance public safety, and lower the cost of re-incarceration.

The second theme 'societal stigma and media representations', explores how societal stigmatization and negative portrayals of HOs in the media can affect their rehabilitation and life prospects. Similar to Appleton's (2010) findings, all HOs in this study experienced societal stigma, regardless of their sentence length. This stigma impacted their relationships and social networks, hindering both rekindling old connections and establishing new ones crucial for rehabilitation. Consequently, echoing the findings of Winninck and Bodkin (2008) and Liem (2016), some HOs in this study resorted to preventive measures, such as preventative telling

(disclosing their criminal past when meeting new people) or secrecy (hiding their criminal history). This aligns with studies by Maruna (2012) and Lebel (2012) on stigma management. Furthermore, Aresti, et al. (2010) discovered that in their UK study of five reformed male offenders with a minimum three-year prison sentence, men refrained from disclosing their past to protect their sense of self, avoid social exclusion, and seek opportunities to form relationships. This risk heightens their chances of feeling isolated and undeserving of new connections.

In terms of representations, it is likely that crimes that are viewed as very serious, horrid, and cruel by the general population will carry a stigma and rejection. There is an element of moral panic and folk devil (see Cohen, 2002) in the media portrayal of HOs as evil and monstruous, and the victim as 'vulnerable and innocent' (such as the murder of a disabled person). Mathews (2018, pp. 1634) argued that 'the use of the term evil does not acknowledge the significance of context and infers a moral condemnation of behavior, which invites punishment and offers no hope of rehabilitation or change'. These implications are crucial for HOs as they must reconcile the media and societal image of themselves with the image they aim to project—a rehabilitated individual ready to move forward. A further risk is that HOs might internalize the stigma imposed on them by others with the realization of the self-fulfilling prophecy found at the heart of labelling theory (Maruna, 2012), with no hope of rehabilitation as a result.

More importantly, the community resistance towards individuals convicted for murder (Grossi, 2017), often heightened by media and social media, tends to antagonize ex-offenders, fearing for their own safety. This, in turn, has the potential of isolating these individuals which might increase the risk of reoffending (Winninck & Bodkin, 2008). It has also been shown by Lageson and Maruna (2018) argue that escaping the digital footprint associated with one's offense is challenging, with the fear of exposure through internet searches and, as a result, avoidance of new experiences and the potential support they could receive from them.

Despite limited female representation in the sample, interviews revealed that stigma attached to female HOs differs from that of males, especially when the victim was non-abusive

or when severe mental illness was absent during the offense (Kirkwood, 2003). Female violence is often perceived as unnatural and more severe than if committed by males, with cultural stigmatization of female HOs as “mad” or “bad”, breaking not only criminal laws but also social norms and gendered codes of behavior (Kirkwood, 2003).

The level of stigma experienced by HOs, as discussed earlier, appears to be high compared to other offenders (except perhaps sexual offenders), posing a significant obstacle to their reintegration. Some HOs expressed frustration that, despite serving their debt to society, they are unable to undo the harm caused and they feel that they are not allowed to move on. This sense of being ‘doomed to deviance,’ as described by Maruna (2001), may impact their capacity for change and control over their future. The experiences conveyed were quite homogeneous whilst it is recognized that HOs tend to be very heterogeneous (Liem, 2013).

The interviewed HOs were within a maximum of five years post-release, and it would be interesting to explore whether stigma recedes over time and if the public and neighborhoods become more accepting of their reintegration. However, it is possible that easily accessible online records can unexpectedly emerge and jeopardize the reintegration process. Lageson and Maruna (2018) emphasize the importance of the ‘right to be forgotten,’ a European Union policy enabling individuals to request search engines to remove links to websites containing inaccurate, inadequate, irrelevant, or excessive personal information (pp. 128).

In the third theme ‘The psychological aspects of homicide’, participants discussed the psychological repercussions of homicide and the impact of dealing emotionally with it, finding purpose and managing mental well-being. This is in essence very specific to this particular population as they can never truly redeem themselves to their victims directly. They may be forgiven by the victim’s family but never by the victims themselves. The POs had a better insight into emotional implications, dealing with guilt and shame from the work they do with the offenders in rebuilding identities after the homicide. The reconstruction of HOs’ identities discussed in Ferrito et al. (2020) was found to be particularly influenced by positive contextual influences, such as through support of family or engaging in psychotherapy to develop meaning, acceptance and reflexive connections. While three HOs openly discussed their mental illness,

others were evasive, making it challenging to assess its impact on them. Previous studies have found a higher prevalence of mental illnesses among lifers (1 in 5) compared to the general prison population (1 in 6; Mauer, et al., 2004). However, as Schnittker, et al. (2012) pointed out, it is difficult to determine whether these offenders had pre-existing mental conditions or if they developed them during their time in prison.

Furthermore, similar to findings by Liem and Kunst (2013) regarding lifer HOs with mental illness symptoms, participants faced a dilemma and were concerned about the risk of recall if they acknowledged their struggles and sought assistance, especially if they had strained relationships with their POs (e.g., lack of trust). This situation could undermine their rehabilitation by depriving them of the necessary support. Early identification and appropriate treatment of post-incarceration syndrome, as recommended by Liem and Kunst (2013), may help prevent the risk of recall. Establishing a dedicated space where HOs can find support and share experiences with others facing similar challenges could be highly beneficial.

This study offers valuable insights from offenders and practitioners that can inform rehabilitation programs and better address the needs of HOs. However, intensive post-release programs, as suggested by Liem (2016), were not found to be available to HOs in this study or provided by POs. Kazemian and Travis (2015) recommend promoting long-termers and lifers to leadership and mentorship positions within prisons, as it has shown numerous positive effects, including cognitive restructuring, improved self-esteem, enhanced mood and psychological well-being, changes in attitudes and behaviors, and a more positive prison environment. This approach can also contribute to the development of a new identity and a clearer sense of purpose.

Unlike the subtheme of making amends and giving back to others found in Ferrito et al. (2020) and Maruna (2001), none of the HOs specifically mentioned this aspect. Instead, they focused more on maintaining a low profile, discreetly moving on with their lives, and striving to be ‘normal.’ However, the potential to create a support structure in which rehabilitated offenders themselves could be involved, as mentors, peers’ supporters and users, transpired from the interviews, and which could greatly benefit this group of offenders. This aligns with

the concepts of redemption scripts described by Maruna (2001) and the theme of reformed self-identity in Ferrito et al. (2020), where mentoring can play a crucial role in offering new hope and fostering self-efficacy. Acknowledging their past to learn from it can also aid in coping with stigma, guilt, or shame feelings (Maruna, 2001). While it is evident that such support structures would be valuable, participants recognized the challenges of obtaining financial support due to budget cuts and the relatively low number of HOs, making it difficult to justify significant expenditure. However, establishing independent support structures that collaborate with HMPPS, such as through charities or existing organizations, could benefit offenders and alleviate time and economic pressures faced by POs.

Limitations

A main limitation is the sample size, although saturation was achieved, providing a rich account of the challenges faced by HOs. The interviews were conducted in the West Midlands region of England, which may have influenced participants' stories. Additionally, the accounts from HOs were generally homogeneous, but a larger sample and inclusion of different homicide types could reveal specific challenges. Future studies should also consider examining female HOs and POs with experience supervising females, as they may face different perceptions and impacts.

In conclusion, this study highlights the challenges faced by HOs, who are significantly affected by stigma and lengthy sentences. It emphasizes the need for a support system to address these challenges. A key concern is the fear of recall to prison, which threatens their progress on the outside. Stigma and community perceptions can lead to self-isolation and exclusion. Media portrayals reinforce negative identities that HOs strive to move away from with the support of their POs. Addressing the psychological impact of taking a life and finding new purpose are crucial. These findings can inform probation service policies and practices to reduce reoffending risks. Future research should explore the effectiveness of peer mentoring before and after release to facilitate smoother community reintegration.

Word count: 7549

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Figure:

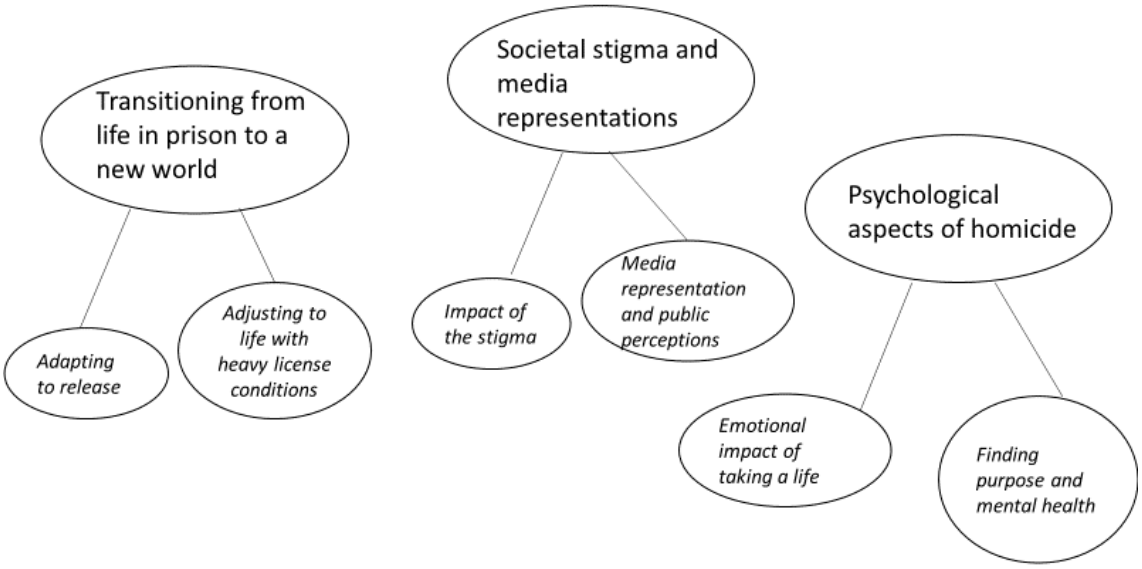

Figure 1. Map of the three themes and sub-themes