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"I Don't Know You No More, and You Don't Know Me": Complicated Family Dynamics for Those Formerly Serving Life Sentences

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Abstract

This is a study of difficult familial reintegration dynamics for individuals formerly serving LWOP, de facto life, or other lengthy sentences. The Supreme Court decisions of the past decades have provided potential opportunities for freedom to individuals who were sentenced as adolescents to life without the possibility of parole. Additionally, in Louisiana, there was an 8-year period in which individuals serving de facto life sentences were also given a window of opportunity for release. One of the most difficult challenges individuals faced after serving lengthy sentences was trying to reconnect to and reintegrate into families that never expected them to return home. This study uses 92 in-depth life history interviews with individuals formerly serving LWOP or other lengthy sentences to explore the impact of carceral separation on the deterioration of familial relationships.

Keywords

life without parole, long-term reentry, family and reentry

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Introduction

Family is often the only resource that formerly incarcerated people have upon reentry. Indeed, the literature on incarceration and reentry stresses the importance of maintaining and repairing family ties in order to facilitate reentry. However, we also know that families are often a root cause of dysfunction and criminal behavior. Furthermore, incarceration does not lend itself to supporting familial relationships, especially after many years. In this article, we explore the reentry experience of people who spent up to several decades in prison, with no expectation of eventual freedom. They face a unique set of circumstances upon reentry. Many of the people in this study have been incarcerated so long that family relationships were severed entirely by the effects of distance and isolation, or by death. For others, family was never likely to be a source of support moving forward. This study explores the complicated dynamics that make family an unlikely resource for reentry after lengthy periods of incarceration. Prior to 1972, people facing serious criminal justice consequences in Louisiana, could plea bargain to a "life sentence," with an understanding that behaving appropriately would result in serving 10 years and 6 months (10–6) before being released (Cohen, 2024). After the temporary abolition of the death penalty with Furman v. Georgia (1972), and subsequent commutation of death row prisoners to life sentences, Louisiana rushed to eliminate the possibility of people being released by changing the 10–6 sentences to life without parole (LWOP). Instead of readjusting after the death penalty was reinstituted with Gregg v. Georgia (1976), Louisiana continued its punitive turn by increasing the number of crimes that could result in life without parole or de facto life sentences. Eventually, Louisiana had the largest per capita share of people serving a life without parole sentence in the entire world (The Sentencing Project, 2024). This trend continued for 44 years before Miller v. Alabama (2012) and Montgomery v. Louisiana (2016) provided for the reassessment of individuals sentenced to life without parole as adolescents. Additionally, laws from the Louisiana Reinvestment Package of 2017, provided additional release mechanisms for people serving LWOP or de facto life sentences.

This study explores a rare subset of the formerly incarcerated: those who never expected to return home. Drawing on 92 in-depth interviews with individuals reentering society after being incarcerated for lengthy sentences in Louisiana, we found that while many formerly incarcerated people returned home to their families, this was not an option for a subset of our respondents. Instead, we found that an expectation of lifetime incarceration combined with a lengthy physical separation served to damage or even sever family ties completely in many cases.

The breakdown of familial relationships resulted from three scenarios in our study. First, *death* was the primary contributor due to lengthy sentences originally given and the amount of time respondents spent in prison regardless of being resentenced. Next, many respondents experienced *drift* in which familial communication eroded over time - or even ceased altogether - as family members on the outside moved on with their lives and the incarcerated person accepted this as a natural outcome of long-extended separation. Finally, in the *disavowing* scenario, the person who was

incarcerated felt that their family did not support them, was ashamed of them, was angry at them over the situation, or otherwise viewed them with disdain.

Literature Review

Families and Reentry

The literature on families and incarceration stresses the important benefits of maintaining family connection during incarceration, while also acknowledging that incarceration itself tends to erode familial relationships (Kjellstrand et al., 2023). Family support is critical for successful rehabilitative progress while incarcerated (Comfort, 2008; Kjellstrand et al., 2023; Mowen et al., 2019). However, maintaining familial contact also presents a burden for loved ones on the outside, as phone calls and visits can be expensive, time-consuming, and stressful (Benisty et al., 2021; Boppre et al., 2022; Comfort et al., 2018; McDonald et al., 2025). Some studies have found that incarcerated people prefer *not* to have visits with their family because the conditions are uncomfortable (Aiello & McCorkel, 2018), or they are embarrassed by their incarceration (Bahr et al., 2005).

Research suggests that incarcerated people often have positive expectations of familial support upon release (Cid et al., 2021; Taylor, 2024). Positive support from families is associated with reentry success across a number of measures, including avoiding recidivism (Cullen, 1994; Mowen et al., 2019), employment (Fahmy et al., 2022), reunification with children (Charles et al., 2019; Naser & Visher, 2006), health (Fahmy, 2021; Fahmy & Wallace, 2019), and emotional support (Visher & Courtney, 2007). These findings support the argument that maintaining family ties during incarceration bodes well for after-incarceration success.

While reunification can be positive, the process of reentry can be very disruptive and stressful (Grieb et al., 2014; Pettus-Davis, 2021). Grieb et al. (2014) discuss five themes under the meta theme of stress, indicating that family members experience an acute form of stress as a result of the reentry process that adds to the chronic stress they already endured during incarceration. The reentry of a family member can be taxing financially (Harper et al., 2021; Naser & Visher, 2006; Travis et al., 2003) and emotionally (Hood & Gaston, 2022). Families and returning individuals may have unmatched expectations for financial success or behavioral requirements (Breese et al., 2000). Reunification can be challenging for romantic partners (Turney, 2015), children (Y. R. Harris et al., 2010; Travis et al., 2003), and extended families (M. S. Harris, 2025). Reentry can present a host of challenges for families. This is especially the case for long-term prisoners and those who never expected to be released due to a LWOP sentence.

Lifers and Reentry

Liem and Garcin (2014) argued that long-term prisoners go through different processes than those who serve short-term sentences. In their study, released lifers spent

an average of 20 years incarcerated, their parents were deceased, their children were adults, and the rest of their family and former intimate partners had "started new lives" (Liem & Garcin, 2014, p. 805). The social ties that remained available to their study participants were likely to be negative influences rather than pro-social forces. Liem and Garcin (2014) concluded that the lifers in their study were "off-time" for intimate relationships and parenthood, negating them as traditional "turning points" in their life trajectories. Instead, self-efficacy concerning parts of life the respondent could control and creating a new pro-social identity were the primary factors contributing to post-release success. While these findings are applicable to our study, it is important to note that the parolees in Liem and Garcin's (2014) study knew they had the opportunity for parole and were incarcerated in either Massachusetts or Pennsylvania. These psychological and contextual factors make a significant difference in the incarcerated person's perspective on the future, as long-term prisoners may become frustrated with their inability to achieve reunification and reformed identity goals, lose hope, and become apathetic, when they perceive the possibility of release as unrealistic (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016; Wright et al., 2023).

This study joins a small but growing body of research that examines the population of people sentenced to life without parole as juveniles, who, in the wake of the landmark Supreme Court decisions of Miller v. Alabama (2012) and Montgomery v. Louisiana (2016), were granted an opportunity for release (Bennett et al., 2024; Bolden et al., 2025; Huppert et al., 2025; Taylor, 2024). Additionally, this study incorporates people formerly serving de facto life sentences, which has been rarely studied and may be one of the new frontiers of legal consideration post Miller and Montgomery (Henry et al., 2018; Laugalis et al., 2025). Juvenile lifers face particular challenges upon reentry because release was not something they were prepared for. They may have failed to engage in reentry preparation because they thought it was pointless, or they may have been restricted from reentry programming due to their lifer status (Brydon, 2021; Klipsch, 2019). Adolescents likely missed significant milestones associated with early adulthood: graduating from high school, attending college, entering the workforce, and developing adult relationships (Huppert et al., 2025; Sampson, 2016). Juvenile lifers may also have difficulty adjusting to an "adult" role in the family, as they left when they were still children (Huppert et al., 2025, p. 2).

These issues can be compounded by the advanced age of many parolees, who find themselves released without the benefit of the typical rites of passage that characterize the life-course: employment, marriage, and parenthood (Liem, 2017). They often have to return to unsafe neighborhoods while contending with physical frailty and mental health challenges (Williams & Abraldes, 2007). They may face discrimination in housing and employment due to their age and felony convictions (Bedard et al., 2022). The need for geriatric medical care is also a common problem among the older people, who have to manage insurance, appointments, and oftentimes, multiple medications for the first time on the outside (Hornung et al., 2002). Lack of contact over the years means that many older people do not have friends or family that they can live with upon release (Western et al., 2015). At the same time, there are few services available

for older adults leaving prison (Maschi & Morgen, 2020). Thus, life on the outside for the older population leaving prison can be very dire.

Gender can also compound these issues. Men and women in prison often face similar barriers; however, many challenges are unique to women (Carter & Marcum, 2017). Women confront significant social and medical problems, especially related to mental health and substance abuse (Covington & Bloom, 2006; Richie, 2001). Most women lifers have extensive histories of physical and sexual victimization (Leigey & Reed, 2010), often have children, and are incarcerated for a violent offense – primarily murder – committed against a known victim who might also be a domestic abuser (Dye & Aday, 2019). The absence of gender-specific programs and resources make preparing women for successful reentry difficult (Carter & Marcum, 2017).

While these challenges are significant, the early research on juvenile lifers also suggests that successful reintegration is not only possible, but likely. In their study of the Philadelphia area, Daftary-Kapur and Zottoli (2020) found that juvenile lifers in their sample had a dramatically lower recidivism rate than the general reentry population. Bennett et al. (2024) and Bolden et al. (2025), found that peer relationships with other released juvenile lifers were significant and helpful during the reintegration process. Establishing peer relationships may be of vital importance, particularly when familial relationships are not viable avenues of support.

Data and Methods

In 2018, the PI met Andrew Hundley, the first juvenile lifer to be released in Louisiana, who would go on to be the founder and executive director of Louisiana Parole Project (LPP), a unique reentry organization focused on individuals who had been incarcerated for 20 years or more. This connection provided entrée to LPP clients for research purposes. From 2021 to 2024 the PI conducted 92 in-depth interviews with individuals reentering society after being incarcerated with lengthy sentences in Louisiana. Prior to a unique slate of legal changes which created possibilities for freedom, the majority of respondents had no possibility of being released before their natural death. This changed when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that sentencing adolescents to mandatory LWOP was unconstitutional in Miller v. Alabama (2012) and affirmed the ruling as retroactive in Montgomery v. Louisiana (2016). Additionally, reconsideration and parole opportunities for individuals serving extreme sentences for crimes committed as adults came through the Louisiana Justice Reinvestment Package (2017).

The interviews were conducted through video formats, due to initial COVID protocols, as well as the flexibility it allowed for respondents. Interviews took place with the assistance of Louisiana Parole Project, LLC (LPP), a comprehensive peer-mentorship reentry program, staffed almost entirely by formerly incarcerated persons and individuals with strong adjacent associations. LPP staff explained study participation and informed consent, provided private rooms, set up technological equipment, and were on call for any technical difficulties. On one occasion staff remained in the room to assist a hearing-impaired respondent. Ninety-two interviews were conducted with

Table 1. Respondent Demographics ($N = 92$).

Demographics	*n*	%
Sex		
Men	71	77
Women	21	23
Age at interview		
38–39	3	3.26
40–49	27	29.35
50–59	22	23.9
60–69	27	23.9
70–79	12	13.04
80–85	1	1.1
Race/ethnicity		
Black	60	65.21
White	26	28.26
Hispanic	3	3.26
Asian	2	2.17
Biracial	1	1.1

the average interview length being 1 hr and 20 min. A $25 gift card was mailed to each respondent to thank them for their time.

The interview schedule used baseline questions from The Visiting Room project (Kondkar & Duncan, 2022), a sociological multi-media project in which interviews with people serving LWOP in Louisiana could be watched on an interactive website. The interview schedule covered life-history pre-incarceration (demographics, family background, school, neighborhood, and criminal justice system involvement) and carceral experience (family support/contact, rehabilitation, challenges, reflections, obstacles, and transformative experiences). The current study adds questions regarding carceral experience (aging and social dynamics) as well as reentry questions covering experience, perceptions, obstacles, family reconnection, and successes. Interviews were transcribed through NVIVO but needed follow-up individual transcriptions due to unique slang, colloquialisms, names of geographic locations, and prominent regional dialects. The interviews were then randomly distributed among eight coders, with each interview assigned to two or three coders. Interview segments were initially coded in large themes (i.e., family, peer mentorship). We then took a grounded theory approach exploring themes that emerged from the data. For the purpose of the study at hand, emergent themes related to family communication and support were included.

There were 71 men and 21 women in this study, with ages at time of the interview ranging from 38 to 85 (see Table 1). In the sample 60 respondents identified as Black, 26 identified as White, 3 identified as Hispanic, 2 as Asian, and 1 as biracial. There were 67 who were formerly serving life without parole sentences. Three people had sentences of more than 100 years and 5 people had sentences that ranged from 60 to

Table 2. Carceral Characteristics ($N = 92$).

Carceral characteristics	*n*	%
Age at incarceration		
Adolescent (under 18)	31	33.7
Emerging adult (18–25)	32	34.8
Adult (26+)	29	31.5
Time incarcerated		
Intensive probation– 25 years	1	1.1
10–19 years	3	3.26
20–29 years	45	48.91
30–39 years	18	19.56
40–49 years	17	18.47
50+ years	8	8.69
Sentence		
Life without parole	67	72.83
100+ years	3	3.26
60–99 years	5	5.43
30–50 years	14	15.21
Under 30 years	3	3.26

99 years. There were 14 people with sentences ranging from 30 to 50 years, which potentially equaled a *de facto* life sentence if they were already of an advanced age. There were three participant anomalies with sentences under 30 years, one of which received intensive probation for 25 years. Concerning time served, there were 3 participants that were incarcerated between 10 and 19 years, 45 respondents incarcerated for 20 to 29 years, 18 participants incarcerated for 30 to 39 years, 17 respondents incarcerated for 40 to 49 years, and 8 interviewees incarcerated for more than 50 years (see Table 2).

Although most of the respondents were sentenced for a single severe offense, there were some with multiple. As such, the number of offense convictions is more than 92 ($N = 124$). Homicide related offenses comprise the bulk of convictions for sample participants ($N = 86$). Amongst the respondents, there were 86 homicide-related convictions, which included murder (prior to 1972, murder convictions were not separated by degree), first-degree murder, second-degree murder, attempted murder, attempted second-degree murder, principal to second-degree murder, manslaughter, and negligent homicide. Second-degree murder, attempted murder, and principal to second-degree murder result in mandatory LWOP sentences in Louisiana. Conviction of first-degree murder results in the death penalty or LWOP. There were 20 convictions for other violent offenses which included aggravated robbery, armed robbery, attempted armed robbery, attempted robbery, robbery, aggravated battery, and purse snatching. Between 1995 and 2002, a conviction of armed robbery in Louisiana could result in a sentence of 99 years without parole. For other felonies, being convicted for

Table 3. Offense Convictions (*N* = 124).

Conviction categories	*n*	%
Homicide-related	86	69.33
Murder	8	6.45
First degree murder	12	9.67
Second degree murder	42	33.87
Manslaughter	12	9.67
Negligent homicide	1	0.81
Attempted murder	1	0.81
Attempted second degree murder	4	3.22
Principal to second degree murder	6	4.83
Violent convictions	20	16.14
Aggravated battery	1	0.81
Armed robbery	14	11.29
Attempted armed robbery	1	0.81
Attempted robbery	1	0.81
Purse snatching	1	0.81
Robbery	2	1.61
Sex offense convictions	10	8.07
Aggravated rape	8	6.45
Crimes against nature	1	0.81
Incest	1	0.81
Property convictions	3	2.42
Burglary	2	1.61
Destruction of a hwy	1	0.81
Other convictions	5	4.04
Marijuana distribution	1	0.81
Marijuana possession	1	0.81
Escape	2	1.61
Forgery	1	0.81

a second offense could result in being billed as a habitual offender and receiving double the maximum sentence for that crime. There were three property offense convictions which included burglary and destruction of a highway. There were 10 convictions of sex crimes which included aggravated rape, incest, and crimes against nature. There were five convictions for other crimes including escape, marijuana distribution, marijuana possession, and forgery (see Table 3).

Findings

Our sample reported a range of familial relationships in terms of levels of contact and interaction. They also report various levels of support from family. Many of the respondents relied heavily on family during incarceration. Sometimes, this translated

Table 4. Thematic Category Prevalence.

Thematic categories	*n*	%
Death	42	45.7
All/most family died	18	19.6
Drift	34	37
Respondent-driven	4	4.34
Disavowal	13	14.13

into extraordinary support upon release. The majority of respondents who still had family contact received joyous celebrations from their families upon release. However, about one-third of our sample have little to no contact with their family. In this study, we explore some of the challenges and disadvantages of maintaining familial relationships that help to explain why many of our respondents sought to live independently from their families, limit contact with their family, or forgo relationships with family altogether.

In the following sections, we analyze three scenarios that inhibit or prevent familial support upon reentry: death, drift, and disavowal (see Table 4). All three are characterized by the sudden or gradual deterioration of family support. Disavowal usually occurred at the beginning, but all three scenarios transpired within the deleterious effects of long-term carceral separation.

Death

The most concrete severance of family support among our respondents was through the death of loved ones. Incarceration itself is a structural driver of health inequities for both the incarcerated individual and their loved ones, thus, incarcerated people are more likely than the general population of similar age to experience the death of a loved one (Fahmy et al., 2024; Testa & Jackson, 2021), which in turn results in poorer physical, psychological, and financial outcomes. The scope of loss among our sample is striking due to the sheer length of time that our respondents spent in prison. Loved ones inevitably passed away during their confinement, and the losses were multiple and intergenerational. Forty-two respondents (45.7%) discussed the deaths of the primary family members that supported them and 18 participants (19.6%) reported that everyone or almost everyone, save peripheral members, in their family were deceased by the time they were released. Edward, B/m, 64, who was incarcerated for 33 years, lost virtually his entire family, "I lost my mother, my little sister, my younger brother, my nephew, my middle sister. They all died while I was incarcerated."

David went to prison at the age of 16. He explained what it was like to consider his own mortality as loved ones died.

> That is your prospect, is you age in prison within Louisiana. Are you gonna end up on Point Look Out? [The graveyard at LSP-Angola] Will you have any family left? That's the other

> problem with aging in prison is family members start dying off. Brother, sisters have their own lives going on. Your world starts fairly shrinking. (David, W/m, 59, incarcerated 42 years)

Inevitably, the loss of a loved one during incarceration comes with unique difficulties. The inability to attend wakes and funerals or express grief openly in the prison context can leave feelings unresolved (Ferszt, 2002; Harner et al., 2011; Hendry, 2009). The loss of a loved one during incarceration is associated with increased depressive symptoms (Few-Demo & Arditti, 2014; Hendry, 2009). Harner et al. (2011) point out that internal and external social support can mitigate these symptoms, but for many in our sample, the people that died *were* the cornerstone of the support they relied on.

Rose lost her father early on in her incarceration, whose passing meant the loss of all financial support:

> I ended up losing my father in 2000. He was really like my financial backbone. In about three years, I remember three years after his death I wasn't receiving any money or anything like that, because all these years my daddy supported my whole family. (Rose, B/f, 47, incarcerated 26 years)

Often, our respondents did not just lose family members who loved and supported them directly, they lost their connection to the outside world and their membership in the larger family unit. This was particularly common upon the death of a parent. Our respondents talked about losing brothers, sisters, and cousins, but the significance of losing their parents came up repeatedly during our interviews. When parents died, the connection to the larger family unit tended to cease.

Dwayne went to prison at age 15. Both of his parents died early on in his incarceration. He spoke of losing his parents *and* losing his connection to the rest of his family.

> My mother and father was both deceased when I was locked up, at a young age. My dad died in 2001, I was eighteen. And three years later when I was twenty-one, my mom died. . .So all the anger and frustrations and over the years when my dad passed, and my mom passed, and I started getting frustrated. . .because I ain't been hearing from nobody. Not aunties, uncles, cousins, brother. (Dwayne, B/m, 38, incarcerated 23 years)

As a young incarcerated man, Dwayne had to endure the deaths of his parents with little to no familial support. Lawrence was incarcerated at age 19. He also spoke of losing his mother and the tenuous connection he had with his cousins and nephews. He said:

> After my mom died, I didn't have nobody but my nephews. I had some cousins. But me and my cousins, we ain't beefing or fighting with one another. We just don't see eye to eye. They speak to me, talk to me and that's about it. I ain't see them in almost 30, 40, or 50 years. I don't know if they're still living, my cousins still living, or they're dead. (Lawrence, B/m, 73, incarcerated 51 years)

Andrew's four-decade incarceration was bookended by the deaths of his family. His father died shortly before his incarceration, and his mother 9 months later. His siblings stood by him through his long incarceration. Sadly, two of them died shortly before his release, and two more passed shortly after:

> There were so many other people that came into my life that didn't get this opportunity, the people stuck with me for 40 plus years, didn't get an opportunity to see this deliverance. And it's a bit disheartening. But I understand that God has a way of doing things. But I have family members. I had three brothers and a sister passed away. Two of them got a chance to see the deliverance and two didn't. . .I'm being a little emotional when I talk about it. (Andrew, B/m, 74, incarcerated 43 years)

A striking finding regarding the death of family members was that 34 of the 42 respondents that emphasized this, and 12 of the 18 whose family were all or mostly deceased, identified as Black. This could be a result of the over representation of Black respondents in our sample ($N=60$), or it could be directly related to racial disparities regarding health and incarceration. It is consistent with the literature that Black Americans are more likely to experience the death of multiple family members as compared to other demographic groups (Umberson et al., 2017). There were no discernable differences in this theme regarding gender.

Drift

We use the term *drift* to refer to the letting go of familial relationships during incarceration. Drift, which was common among our sample, was sometimes a gradual process whereby familial communication ceased over time as those on the outside moved on with their lives. The incarcerated person accepted this as the natural outcome of an extended separation. Some forms of drift were intermittent, with years between contact points. Additionally, some respondents indicated the return of family contact upon news of their release, but it did not reconcile the damage resulting from the many years of perceived abandonment. Another form of drift was more deliberate. The incarcerated person or their family members chose to cut contact rather than endure the multiple difficulties of maintaining relationships through prison walls. Although the true prevalence of experiences with drift was harder to ascertain due to the aforementioned variations, at least 34 respondents (37%) clearly described some form of drift in their family relationships.

Some prisoners felt that they had already caused their loved ones enough grief, so continued contact would exacerbate that grief (Flanagan, 1980). King and Delgado's (2021) findings reinforced the understanding of families experiencing the incarceration of a loved one as complicated grief, which harmed hope and resilience. For respondents or their families that were overwhelmed by this stress in the present study, a decision was made to cut off all contact so as to not exacerbate those wounds. Rather than living in the state of "ambiguous loss" in which a person is not truly gone, but also not truly present (Boss, 2007; McLean et al., 2024), one or both sides chose to experience the situation as an absolute death, so that they could grieve and move on.

Joseph became incarcerated at age 17. Like many of our respondents, his mother was the person who maintained contact. She encouraged his siblings to do so as well:

> So, my mother had to tell them on several occasions, "Look, write your brother." Because I would call and she would get on me and say, "Well, did your sister call you?" "No, ma'am." "Did your brother get in touch with you?" "No, ma'am." Well, I'm going to make sure that they do." But as time was growing, I was getting more disconnected, and I was getting more disconnected because everybody felt, even myself, that I was okay, "Angola got him. He's got three meals a day." But time passes. It is like the space grew wider and wider and wider and wider. And when my mother passed, the space just didn't have no limits anymore.

Joseph tried to maintain relationships with his three remaining siblings (one sibling was deceased) after his mother died, but they were not responsive. "*A lot of times, I just get tired of trying because I hate the end results in knowing that I sent them a letter and they didn't write me back or even if they got it.*" He ultimately lost touch with them. He did not know what became of his two brothers, and his older sister, "*went on with her life.*" Joseph believed that his family thought he was okay without them because he was taken care of materially by the prison system, but over time, the lack of communication and moral support wore on him. "I was so lonely and I was so empty and I was so mad and I was so upset and I was more hurt than anything because I didn't have that moral support. I didn't have family there and I didn't know how to tell anybody."

(Joseph, W/m, 59, incarcerated 36 years)

Narratives describing drift were common in all demographic categories, but scenarios of drift in which disengagement from family was deliberate on the part of the incarcerated person, were exclusively described by Black men. The following two respondents opted to separate from their family in part to save them pain:

> I had the mindset that I'm not gonna drag you with me. I've put myself in this position, and I'm gonna handle it. I want y'all to move on with y'all life, in fact, forget about me. Because I'm dead, you know? I don't want you to worry about me, nah. I caused y'all too much pain as it is, I'm gonna go on my own. (Jeffrey, B/m, 63, incarcerated 45 years)

> I developed the concept that I got myself in this situation. I'm dragging my family down with me when they can be doing something else better. And at this time, mind you, I didn't have the foresight as for my future of freedom is concerned. So, I felt that I was wearing them down because they got a life to live. They didn't put me in this position. I put myself in there. So, I shut myself down. I stopped communicating even when they kept, continually, trying to reach out to me. (Sean, B/m, 55, incarcerated 39 years)

Jeffrey and Sean spoke of staying connected with family as "dragging" them down, when they got themselves into the situation. This alludes to secondary prisonization (Comfort, 2008), whereby loved ones are forced to endure contact with the prison in order to visit or talk to their incarcerated loved ones. However, both these respondents were sentenced to LWOP. They had no expectation of release, a factor that was

integral to their decision to separate from their loved ones. As Jeffrey said, "*I'm dead*," so the point of remaining connected to life on the outside seemed futile. In cutting ties, they felt they saved themselves a lifetime of exposure to a life of freedom that they could never have again.

"Letting go" may also be a virtuous act of love on the part of the incarcerated person. Clara did not have contact with her youngest son. Her acceptance of his distance could be read as a motherly sacrifice that allowed him to move on and create a life for himself without the burden of an incarcerated mother. Clara said:

> The youngest one [son]. I haven't heard anything from and if that young man can build himself a life and he has managed to from what I'm hearing from other people who know him, and I'm really proud of him. I don't have a right to interrupt his life. (Clara, W/f, 54, incarcerated 27 years)

Some of our respondents described robust family support early on in their incarceration, support and connection that eventually drifted away. Some of the drift is undoubtedly connected to the loss of the stalwart support of key family members, like parents, as described in the previous section. Nonetheless, our respondents describe a gradual distancing that occurred as family members lived their lives on the outside.

Edward was sentenced to LWOP, which he said was a factor in the drift of his familial relationships. He said, "Yeah, so early on, I had a lot of family support. You know, for the few years, my family was very supportive." He went on to explain that a life sentence conditions the people in one's life. "It conditions their mind, to think that they'll never really see you free again." He went on to reflect on his family members' need to protect themselves from his incarceration, and his own gradual understanding of their process:

> I think that unintentionally, people will start trying to detach from you to spare their own feelings, because they love you. And it's hard being so involved in your life every day, or every week or every month, year after year, after year, and never see the opportunity to be free. It's hard for other people, it took me a long time to realize that. I just thought, like, "Why you not?" And "why I haven't seen you?" "Why haven't I heard from you?" But really, your time is hard for you, but sometimes it's just as hard or even harder for other people. And so early on, I had a lot of family support, but as the time moved on, you know, they kind of wandered away and wandered away and wandered away, until I looked up one day and nobody was there. (Edward, B/m, 43, incarcerated 20 years)

Reginald's communication with his family was inconsistent over the years. While the drift from his family was painful, he recognized that his family was busy dealing with life on the outside, which was not easy. He said of his family's disconnection:

> They had times where I went years without hearing from them, you know, everybody was, I got mostly wind, you know? They got children, none of them have no big money or nothing, you know? And they, you know, struggling. Some of them living paycheck to paycheck and they doing what they could, you know, to survive. So, I put myself in that situation. It wasn't

> nobody fault, you know? Everybody is different. Not justifying for them, but they had times when I didn't have no family support. I felt like I pretty much was doing it on my own at the time. You know, and it hurted. (Reginald, B/m, 47, incarcerated 23 years)

Economic struggle defined life for most of our respondents and their families. Reginald came to understand that he became less important as his family members focused on raising their children under difficult circumstances. For others, contact was entirely constrained by lack of financial resources. Stephen came from what he described as a "dysfunctional" and impoverished family. "When I first got incarcerated, they were like. . . 'I ain't put you in there, so I don't owe you nothing." For his family, even phone calls were prohibitive, but allowances for phone calls during the pandemic enabled him to speak to his siblings:

> They gave us two free phone calls every Friday for like 10–15 minutes a call. You can call anybody on your list for free. And I went to really communicating with my brothers and sisters. And then I feel some type of way now because if they don't give us a call, then I won't even be talking to them. They wasn't financially supporting me, none of that. But if I talk to them, they be like, "I love you (redacted). How you doing?" And then once the phone hang up, that's the end. So I think they probably do love me but, you know, I'll tell you, I come from a dysfunctional family and they're still dysfunctional. (Stephen, B/m, 61, incarcerated 27 years)

This respondent and his family did not have a strong foundation on which to maintain contact during incarceration, but his inability to speak to them save for free phone calls granted during a global crisis is indicative of the damage that incarceration does to familial relationships in general. When contact is prohibited or too expensive to access, relationships wither and die.

Beyond the lack of interaction, incarcerated people live a different social reality than their free family members, one that can make communication and relationships difficult even when contact is available to them. Jeffrey, who previously spoke about serving his time alone in order not to "drag" his family with him, had been released for 4 months at the time of his interview. He was quite frank when he spoke about his relationship with his sister. As he had spent most of his life incarcerated, apart from her and functionally, in a different world, they really did not know each other. He said, "*We gotta learn each other. That's what I tell my sister, I said, 'I'm gone, I don't know you no more, and you don't know me.'* " (Jeffrey, B/m, 63, incarcerated 45 years)

While much has been written about the value of maintaining family ties during incarceration, the fact is that maintaining familial relationships requires concerted effort, economic investment, and a willingness to endure the emotional pain of staying connected to someone you love when you have no expectation that they will ever experience freedom again. Even for well-intentioned family members, the effects of time, physical separation, and vastly different social realities can be insurmountable obstacles to staying connected to incarcerated loved ones.

Sam was particularly straightforward when he spoke about the severing of family ties that accompanied his incarceration:

> I don't even know where my four children are at. . .No. I don't know where they at? I don't know where most my family at. And that's what happens with long time incarceration. That's the purpose of it. (Sam, B/m, 58, incarcerated 23 years)

Disavowal

Almost all of the respondents in this study were convicted of serious violent crimes. In a few cases, the crimes were deeply harmful to the family, thus rendering reunification highly unlikely if not impossible. In the *disavowal* scenario, the person who was incarcerated felt that their family did not support them, was ashamed of them, was angry at them over the situation, or otherwise viewed them with disdain. Thirteen respondents (14.13%) in this study described complete rejection or disassociation by all or the majority of their family members. All but three of the participants that described scenarios of disavowal identified as White, Asian, or Hispanic, and White women were the most likely to indicate this.

Carolyn was sentenced to LWOP for a homicide that she maintains was in self-defense. She had decided to live at the Parole Project indefinitely, largely because the person she was going to parole to turned against her. As a result, her daughter would not communicate with her. She said, "One member of my family, a key contact point of my family, began to lose her mind." The staff who visited the home prior to release, advised Carolyn not to live there because the family member, "Turned my whole family against me, she turned my children against me." (Carolyn, W/f, 74, incarcerated 24 years)

Other respondents reported similar familial strains, whereby family members distanced themselves because they were so upset with the course their lives had taken. Anthony (B/m, 50, incarcerated 23 years) said he was not in communication with his family for most of his incarceration. His was once a close-knit family; his father and three brothers were all in the military. His mother was so distressed about his crimes and incarceration, blaming herself for the way his life turned out, that she was not very functional after his sentencing. She passed away shortly before Anthony's release. As a result, he had some tense communication with his brothers, but he did not expect a reunion or familial support moving forward.

Maria explained something similar. Her grandmother was supportive of Maria until her death, but the rest of her family could not comprehend her crimes or move past them. She said:

> My grandmother was a rock, but she died, I think in 2006, and that was the end of that. I could call my sisters and my dad but the relationships were strained because coming from the environments that they all lived in, what I had done was like an aberration. "Why? What caused it? What were you thinking?" Blah blah blah. Duh duh duh. Just, it was bad. (Maria, W/f, 60, incarcerated 25 years)

Jacob was 15 when he was sentenced to LWOP + 21 years for the double homicide of his parents.

> I have a brother who did not keep in contact with me. Actually, when it came time for me to be resentenced to parole eligibility or not, he showed up in court. I haven't seen him in twenty-five years. He showed up in court with his wife. . .They all showed up in court to oppose me getting out. To tell them they didn't want me out and I didn't know any of this at the time. They were sitting right behind me. It's been 25 years. I didn't recognize them. (Jacob, W/m, 45, incarcerated 27 years)

Jacob and his brother actually resumed contact after seeing each other at the parole hearing, where neither recognized the other. They began to get to know each other and his brother came to visit Jacob in prison. After his release, they continued to spend time together, including some holidays. Jacob's reunification with his brother was a positive outcome, but living together was never an option.

Ellen (W/f, 70, incarcerated 33 years) endured abuse from her family of origin and later, abusive partners. After she lost a loving husband in a freak accident, her life unraveled in grief and dysfunction, as did the lives of her three sons, one of whom died by suicide. She felt that she would never re-establish contact with her remaining sons. She said, "My youngest son. . .he testified against me in my trial. He had accused me of killing his dad. . .as far as humans, I don't have very many in my life."

It is important to note that while Ellen's son thought she killed his father, she did not (and this was not why she served 33 years in prison). Nonetheless, the pain in her life that preceded her incarceration was not hers alone. It was shared by her children and damaged their lives as well as hers. Such pain, in conjunction with decades of separation, is often irreparable. It is yet another cruel irony that families which have suffered horrendously are somehow expected to come together to support one another under the most trying of circumstances.

Discussion

This study adds to emergent literature on reentry of juvenile lifers and expands the demographic populations to those who were sentenced to LWOP as adults, *de facto* lifers, and others who served very lengthy sentences. Consistent with the literature on the reentry of lifers with the possibility of parole, the findings of this research show that family support, which is a key factor in the successful reentry of individuals who have served shorter sentences, can be problematized, negative, or simply non-existent for people who have served lengthy sentences. Our findings elucidate the effects of time on relationships between incarcerated people and their loved ones on the outside. We delineate family breakdown through processes of disavowal, drift, and death.

Disavowal usually starts in the beginning, but drift and death are outcomes of the inevitable ravages of time. The thematic categories were not mutually exclusive. Indeed, an extended consequence of the death of key supportive family members was drift from other remaining relationships. Racial and gendered dynamics were apparent amongst the thematic categories. Respondents identifying as Black, were most likely to discuss the death of supportive family members and the most likely to report that all or most of their family members were deceased. Drift was common across

demographic categories, but the subset of incarcerated persons deliberately cutting ties with family was exclusively Black men. Disavowal was predominately described by respondents identifying as White, Asian, or Hispanic, and most common amongst White women. While not in the primary scope of the current research, these racial and gendered dynamics are of interest for future investigation.

Our research shows that even healthy relationships may not withstand lengthy periods of separation (Huppert et al., 2025). For several of our respondents, family members drifted away as their lives on the outside changed, younger generations started their own families, and the parents and caregivers of the incarcerated person passed away. Our respondents had little choice but to adjust to a life without familial interactions (Hendry, 2009), regardless of the reason these relationships ceased.

Our work demonstrates that family is simply not an option for many people going through reentry after long-term incarceration. As a result, a more robust, societal-level support system is vital to help formerly incarcerated people and the social institutions that absorb them (Cole Green & Johnson, 2024). Also, the current study supports recent findings that peer support is incredibly important and valuable for those released after lengthy sentences (Bennett et al., 2024; Bolden et al., 2025). Having spent many years away from their family and having lived a very different life than their free family members, our respondents were in particular need of the guidance, resources, and understanding provided by the Louisiana Parole Project (LPP).

At the same time, our respondents' involvement with LPP is a potential limitation of our findings. Although we were unable to disaggregate respondents that chose to go to LPP versus those whose enrollment was stipulated by the Board of Pardons and Parole, it is clear that many chose to stay with LPP or live independently rather than reintegrate with family. There were only seven participants in this study that did not go through LPP programming. As such, it is possible that we do not have a large enough comparative sample of people released after long-term incarceration that were not involved with LPP, as they may have had more robust familial support. Even so, our sample included a third of all juvenile lifers released in Louisiana and 75% of women serving LWOP or *de-facto* life that were released between 2016 and 2024, and thus may be a strong indicator of wider patterns.

The timing of our interviews is also a potential limitation: while a handful of our respondents were released years ago, the vast majority of our sample was very recently released at the time of data collection. Thus, it is possible that they would go on to establish stronger family relationships the longer they are free. Longitudinal data collection would be beneficial to understanding the full scope of our respondents' reentry process and shed light on whether or not familial relationships are reparable after long term incarceration. We were also unable to disaggregate whether different forms of criminal stigma mattered for family outcomes.

Our outcomes bring attention to how carceral systems have destructive impacts on families, even as those same systems rely on families to provide support during and after incarceration. When families falter or incarcerated people withdraw, connections to the outside world cease, which does not bode well for reentry and is especially difficult for an aged population. This in turn necessitates better support for reintegrating

families while also providing alternatives for those incarcerated people who cannot or do not want to resume familial relationships.

Our findings also reveal the shortsightedness of retributive sentencing by illuminating the experiences of people who served multiple decades for crimes they committed as adolescents or very young adults, who have the most potential for change and rehabilitation. This finding is bolstered by the early research on released juvenile lifers who have low recidivism rates and relative success with reentry (Daftary-Kapur et al., 2022).

Conclusion

This study explored the breakdown of familial relationships for people formerly serving LWOP, *de-facto* life, and other lengthy sentences through the processes of death, drift, and disavowal. Unlike the oft-championed focus on family support for general reentry, our findings indicate stark deterioration of family relationships due to lengthy incarceration resulting in damaged, strained or completely severed family support post-release. As such, successful reentry may necessitate alternate support systems such as peer-mentor reentry services. Outside the intractability of death, longitudinal research is needed to explore whether familial damage due to long-term incarceration can be healed or mitigated.

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Dr. Brittnie Aiello is a Professor of Sociology and Criminology at Merrimack College in North Andover, Massachusetts. Her research focuses on the experience of incarcerated mothers and their children, the practice of teaching and learning in jail, and prisoner reentry.

Alison Colby, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at East Carolina University in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology. Her research interests include prison visitation, the impact of incarceration on families, critical criminology (e.g., convict, feminist, queer, and rural), victimization (domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment), and qualitative methods. She is also a trained Inside-Out Prison Exchange instructor.