

Hopeful:  
An Examination of Incarcerated People's Experience  
Learning of Unexpected Early Release

by

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## Abstract

As a result of mandatory minimums, three-strike laws, and a host of other harsh legislation and practices in the 1980s and 1990s, the American carceral state has aggressively grown. Since then, federal court cases have challenged the constitutionality of life and lengthy sentences, especially for individuals sentenced as juveniles. In the wake of these federal decisions, Washington State enacted a variety of legal pathways towards post-conviction sentence review and early release, should a sentence meet certain criteria. This study explores how learning of the possibility of early release affected incarcerated individuals who previously did not expect to be released from prison. Qualitative interview and survey data from 12 individuals who secured early release from Washington State prisons resulted in three key findings. First, for every participant, learning of early release either created or expanded already-existing hope. Second, the hope that early release generates is tempered by institutional factors outside of the individual's control, such as correctional staff intentionally administering infractions to disqualify individuals from early release process(es). Thirdly, although tempered hope generally results in a "hope for the best, expect the worst" mentality, hope still plays a positive role, often influencing an individual's trajectory, engagement, and behavior in prison. This research illuminates the importance of creating realistic early release mechanisms as well as legislative and DOC policies that do not temper hope but instead, give it reason to flourish.

*Key Words:* Washington State, early release, prison, prisoners, incarceration, life sentences, LWOP (life without parole), LWP (life with parole), sentencing, hope.

## Introduction

*I've been given another chance at life. You know all that, all that meanness that I had, that aggression that I had... nuh uh. I started to dream again, but my dreams weren't about my life that I was living, my experiences that I was living. My dreams are about things that I will one day possibly live and experience. You know I've never been on a jet ski, never been on a quad. But one day I will. One day I will now. -Noah*

Due to punitive penal reform in the 1980s and 1990s, the American carceral state has boomed. As of 2022, this meant there were close to two million people incarcerated (Sawyer and Wagner 2023). Despite making up less than five percent of the global population, the United States is home to more than 20 percent of the world's prison population. Statistically speaking, this means that out of 11 million prisoners in the world, one out of every five are incarcerated in the United States (Wagner and Bertram 2020). Moreover, the 'one out of five' is not random; people of color are up to five times more likely to be incarcerated than their white counterparts (Nellis 2021).

Similar booms were evident at the state-level throughout the 1990s and 2000s. In the case of Washington state, the prison population has risen more than 180 percent since 1983 and another 17 percent since 2000 (Vera Institute of Justice 2018). Since 2002, the Washington incarcerated population has remained fairly consistent, oscillating between 15,743 and 18,112 (Office of Financial Management 2022). However, in 2019, the prison population began to drop, leading to an all-time low of 12,972 incarcerated in December 2022 (Department of Corrections 2022). This record low can be best understood as a consequence of COVID-related Court closures and a subsequent decrease in convictions. In addition to Court closures, Washington

state released persons from prison on an expedited basis as the pandemic tore through correctional facilities (Carson et al. 2022). The question is, as COVID recedes, whether convictions and the related prison population will rebound.

The growth of America's carceral state can partially be understood as a symptom of the "tough on crime" approach ushered in during the late 1970s. In line with the approach, the United States adopted more punitive sentencing measures, like mandatory minimums, established barriers to challenging wrongful convictions, began charging minors in adult courts, and created more stringent parole boards for those that were released (Cullen 2018). As a result, there has not only been a dramatic increase in the amount of people serving time, but an increase in how long an individual serves time. As the Sentencing Project reports, "more people are sentenced to life in prison in America than were people in prison serving any sentence in 1970" (Nellis 2021: 4). To quantify, this means that nearly 200,000 people, or one out of every seven people incarcerated are serving life sentences in the United States<sup>1</sup> and this statistic is even more staggering among marginalized and juvenile populations (Nellis 2021; see also Haney 2006: pp. 107-112). For the former, more than two-thirds of people serving life are people of color (Nellis 2021). For the latter, "nearly 12,000 are serving a life sentence for a crime they committed under the age of 18" (Nellis 2019: 1). Both statistics illuminate how life sentences are not only increasingly common, but increasingly used to incarcerate vulnerable populations for longer periods of time.

Washington State appears to mirror the national trend of increased life and lengthy sentences. As scholars Katherine Beckett and Heather Evans find, despite a 31% decrease in crime rate since 1986, "the rate at which long and life sentences were imposed was 174% higher

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<sup>1</sup> A life sentence can mean one of three things: life without parole (LWOP), life with parole (LWP), or virtual life (50 years or more).

in 2016 than in 1986” (Beckett and Evans 2020: 27). In other words, the number of individuals who received a life sentence in 2016 was “more than four times higher than the number imposed in 1986” (p. 26). Data from the Washington Department of Corrections and Sentencing Project support the trend that Beckett and Evans illuminate, reporting that as of December 2022, there are over 3,214 prisoners serving life and virtual life sentences in Washington prisons, constituting more than 20 percent of the prison population (Nellis 2021; Washington Department of Corrections 2022). And, like the disparate effects found at the national-level, Washington State’s imposition of life and lengthy sentences disproportionately impacts people of color and juveniles. For the former, “black and Native American people are notably over-represented among those receiving long or life sentences” (Beckett and Evans 2020: 28). For the latter, “about one-fourth of all long and life sentences have been imposed on people who were 25 or younger at the time of sentencing” (p. 29). Washington State implementation of life and lengthy sentences map onto the federal trend, both for lengthier sentences and disparate sentencing.

However, starting in 2010, three Supreme Court Cases have held that life and lengthy sentences are unconstitutional when imposed on juveniles (e.g., *Graham v. Florida* (2010); *Miller v. Alabama* (2012); *Montgomery v. Louisiana* (2016)). These rulings are informed by newfound neurological and developmental life science studies that have demonstrated how individuals under the age of 25, but especially under the age of 18, have diminished culpability for their decisions (Giedd 2009). In the first case, *Graham v. Florida* (2010), the Court held that sentencing a juvenile defendant to life imprisonment was unconstitutional because it was disproportionate to the crime; relatedly, the Court believed that juveniles should be able to demonstrate maturation and reform, which a life sentence is not conducive to. Similarly, in *Miller v. Alabama* (2012), the Court held that mandatory life sentences without the possibility of

parole for juvenile defendants failed to consider their youthfulness as a mitigating factor, and thus, were unconstitutional. The latest case, *Montgomery v Louisiana* (2016), provided a qualifier: life without parole sentences “may only be imposed on juveniles whose offenses are indicative of ‘irreparable corruption’” (*Montgomery v Louisiana* (2016); see also Beckett and Evans 2020: 53).

In the years following, the Washington State Supreme Court acknowledged the relevancy of considering youthfulness when sentencing a juvenile defendant, which paved the way for legal mechanisms meant to challenge prior, unconstitutional sentences. For example, RCW 9.94A.730 established a quasi-judicial board that assesses the releasability of offenders who were incarcerated before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and who have already served a minimum of 20 years. Additionally, Court opinions issued in the case of Domingo-Cornelio, Ali, and Monschke’s Personal Restraint Petitions (PRP), provided pathways for re-sentencing, based on a determination that a 2017 case, *State v. Houston-Sconiers* (2017), be applied retroactively.

These new legal avenues for release have created a population of individuals who suddenly became aware of the possibility for release while serving a life/lengthy sentence. This prompts the question of this research: How does learning of the possibility of early release affect incarcerated individuals who previously did not expect to have a chance at release? In answering this question, this research aims to make four main contributions. First, this research will fill a current gap in the literature on the social-psychological dimensions of imprisonment and the importance of hope for incarcerated individuals. Second, this research will add qualitative insights to the largely policy-related literature on criminal sentencing. Third, this research amplifies the voices and experiences of incarcerated individuals who are often omitted from research on incarceration. Fourth, this research hopes to influence the creation and acceptance of

early release policies by demonstrating their benefits - both inside and outside of the carceral state.

## Understanding Pain and Hope in the Carceral State

### I. The Pains of Imprisonment

Much of the academic literature related to prison has been influenced by sociologist Gresham Sykes's idea of the "pains of imprisonment," which were the deprivations experienced by incarcerated individuals during their sentence (Sykes 1958). In his book, *The Society of Captives*, Sykes identified five deprivations an individual experienced while incarcerated: the deprivation of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security. While Sykes spends his book discussing the "pains" of imprisonment, he does little to expand on how these pains affect and are internalized by prisoners, which is where contemporary literature has started to fill the gap.

More than 50 years after Sykes's publication, social psychologist Craig Haney contributed to the growing discussion by drawing out how increasingly punitive practices psychologically harm prisoners. His book, *Reforming Punishment: Psychological Limits to the Pains of Imprisonment*, explain how prisons do more than just incapacitate prisoners, but leave them with lasting psychological scars, which Haney calls the "deferred pains of imprisonment" (Haney 2006: 13). Haney's insight underscores that prisoners experience both present and future pain due to imprisonment; their present is saturated with overcrowding, violence, and sexual assault, and their future is inevitably harmed by the trauma incurred during their incarceration. Moreover, Haney suggests that prison's adverse conditions can cause incarcerated people to



adapt to prison life in ways that are functional in the short term but not the long term, once again harming their present *and* future.

Sociologist Ben Crewe contends that modern penal practices have created new burdens and frustrations that differ from prior pains (2011). In addition to those that Sykes described, Crewe identified three new pains of incarceration: the pains of uncertainty, psychological assessment, and self-government. For the first, Crewe explains that prisoners today experience ambiguity in correctional power, which can leave them reeling as they attempt to discern the mood of the prison that day, often resulting in discretionary consequences when they judge incorrectly (2011: pp. 513-5). The second pain, that of psychological assessment, attempts to capture the impacts of increasingly used risk assessments that not only define prisoners' futures, but have a significant impact in their present lives (pp. 515-8). Lastly, Crewe describes how changes in correctional control give rise to the emergent pain of self-government: "the prisoner is given greater autonomy — in a limited and localized way"; but "this opening up of possibility, however narrow, provokes feelings of anxiety and powerlessness" (pp. 518-20). Crewe argues that these new pains are indicative that the weight and depth of prison has changed, and neither idiom can capture the contemporary experience of prison. Instead, Crewe suggests 'tightness' as a better expression to convey the modern pains of imprisonment, which he argues have become "'deeper' and more burdensome" (p. 524).

Researchers Kevin Haggerty and Sandra Bucerius supplement Crewe's argument that the weight and depth of prison has changed, producing additional pains for those incarcerated today. Their article, "The Proliferating Pains of Imprisonment," notes how not only are there additional pains for those incarcerated contemporarily, but some pains may be unique to social, ethnic, gender, age and racial cleavages. For instance, Sykes's male-only study failed to illuminate

common pains female prisoners experience, such as the disruption of relationships with children (Foster 2012) and women's vulnerability to sexual assault (McCulloch and George 2008). Moreover, just as the pain of imprisonment can be unique to identities, it can also be shaped by sentence length.

## II. The Unique Pain of Life Sentences

In addition to the tightness and pain individuals experience while incarcerated, there is a particular painfulness associated with life sentences. One of the first studies of this unique pain explores how lifers equate prison to that of a "head game" (McDermott and King 1988). In explaining the metaphor, the authors explore how,

*Life sentence prisoners ... are continually under review as to how they are coping, their actions and reactions to the unreal world they inhabit being used as a gauge to judge their eventual fitness for release. At no time is a release date actually certain, because there is always the possibility that a particularly bad incident in the prison could cause the Parole Board to reconsider, just as there is always the possibility that post release behaviour, which yet falls short of a criminal offence, could result in a recall to prison. In a world of such uncertainty, life sentence prisoners feel themselves to be peculiarly dependent upon the staff and on getting good reports. When faced with the inevitable wind ups that constitute doing time the lifer cannot afford the luxury of ill-considered responses. Indeed he knows that whatever he does it will be open to interpretation. If he explodes, his report may say that he cannot cope with frustration. Indeed worse may happen-he may be transferred back from open to closed conditions or from a training to a local prison to cool*

*off before he is "tested out" again. If he keeps his own counsel, the reports may say that he is withdrawn and cannot come to terms with his offence (McDermott and King 1988: 364-5).*

The unique factors of a life sentence, such as heightened dependence on correctional staff, compound those that all prisoners experience. The argument that lifers experience additional, distinctive pain due to their sentence is supplemented by a series of interviews with lifers, conducted by scholars Robert Johnson and Sandra McGunnigall-Smith. Their interviews revealed how, for many, the pain associated with a life sentence was equally, if not more, painful than the death penalty (Johnson and McGunnigall-Smith 2008). For the lifers in their study, the pain is mainly attributed to the liminal state in which they exist: they are not dead, nor condemned to death by means of execution, but their freedom has come to a permanent end and “they live only in prison” (p. 329).<sup>2</sup> Navigating this state is exhaustive, often lonely, and constitutes additional pain for those sentenced to it (Leigey and Ryder 2015).

Howard Zehr and Barb Toew (2022) similarly demonstrate the unique pain of life sentences through comparative photographs and interviews with lifers. The interviews in their book mirror the previous findings (e.g., Johnson and McGunnigall-Smith 2008; Leigey and Ryder 2015) that life sentences are often equated with death sentences due to their painfulness. As the interviews illuminate, a life sentence, due to its unique characteristics, portends lasting pain to which non-lifers and even those with death sentences are not subjected.

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<sup>2</sup> The piece finds that life without parole, due to its unique pain and suffering, emerges as a viable alternative to capital punishment. I do not agree with the normative conclusion that a life without parole sentence should be considered as an alternative to capital punishment due to the comparable, if not greater, pain a life sentence fosters.

This unique pain has been recognized by courts across the United States, where it is often referred to as the denial of hope. For instance, in the 2010 Supreme Court Case, *Graham v. Florida*, the Court acknowledged that life sentences, as compared to others, deny hope: “Life in prison without the possibility of parole gives no chance for fulfillment outside prison walls, no chance for reconciliation with society, no hope” (*Graham v. Florida*, 560 U.S. 48). Years prior, in *Naovarath v State*, the Supreme Court of Nevada recognized that a life without parole sentence for juveniles “means denial of hope; it means that good behavior and character improvement are immaterial; it means that whatever the future might hold in store for the mind and spirit of [the convict], he will remain in prison for the rest of his days” (*Naovarath v. State*, 105 Nev. 525, 526, 779 P. 2d 944 (1989)). These cases, only two of the many that have challenged certain life sentences across the United States, indicate how law has begun to acknowledge and respond to the unique pains of life sentences.

Yet, while Courts synonymize life sentences with an absence of hope, criminological research consistently finds that people without foreseeable or realistic prospects for release do hope during their sentence (Johnson and Leigey 2020; Johnson and McGunnigal Smith 2008; Seeds 2022; Wright et al. 2022).

### III. Hope in the Context of Mass Incarceration

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines hope as a “feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen.” In the context of incarceration, hope can be understood as the desire to be free. When the definition appears straightforward, emerging criminological research has proved it is anything but.

It is hard to disentangle the complexity of hope: it can be generative, yet crushing, exciting, yet scary, and enduring, yet fleeting. While the literature on hope in criminological settings is robust, it is, as scholar Christopher Seeds points out, “underdeveloped” (Seeds 2022). Seeds argues that prior literature on hope presents it as a binary — an individual either has hope or does not — and in turn, leaves its nuance undissected. To rectify this, Seeds proposes that there are two modes of hope: institutional and deep (transformational) hope. The former is oriented within already-established ways of doing and thinking about things, or in other words, institutions. By contrast, while deep hope is active and grounded in reality, it is not invested in existing legal, medical, or other institutionalized paths. To explain the spectrum of these two modes, Seeds posits that when incarcerated, individuals first hold onto institutional hope: they look for ways to appeal their sentence and related legal remedies. In doing so, they cling to hope that is vested in the institution, which may delay deep (transformational) hope: “legal appeals serve as a sort of spell that keeps old visions going and postpones transformative change. Institutionally guided hopes may stall deeper adaptation” (p. 245). However, when an individual begins to accept their circumstances and find “within oneself a strength, an inner source of inspiration and belief that provides some self of control even in the direst circumstances” they may access deep hope that is more durable (p. 246). Put simply, as individuals move throughout their incarceration, they mature and may reassess who they are and who they want to be; this introspection and age-related development, as well as time served, fosters deep hope. While Seeds offer the distinction between institutional and deep hope, he notes that an individual “may hold both at different, if not simultaneously” (p. 236).

Hope is not only variable in the form it takes, but also in the experiences that generate it. Scholar Ben Crewe finds that personal characteristics and background, as well as prison

institutions and culture may change an individuals' experience with and capacity for hope (Crewe et al. 2020). For instance, those with a religious background, housed at a religious institution, or who enjoy religion, may source their hope from religion (Aday 2014). However, not every account ties hope to religion. Author of *The Extraordinary Ordinary Prisoner* and former life prisoner, Jeremiah Bourgeois, details how hope was tied to his pathways for early release. When his parole hearings returned unfavorable decisions, "he appeared to be losing hope" that was initially generated by it (Bourgeois 2020).

As Bourgeois' account indicates, hope can fluctuate during incarceration as a result of environmental and institutional factors. This finding is echoed in Johnson and McGunnigal-Smith's work, which finds that lifers' hope "is contingent on environmental conditions that could change within the next year" (2008: p. 341). In their study, the conditions that reportedly most tempered lifer's hope stemmed from procedural illegitimacy, such as repeated, unexplained delays, uncertainties, and setbacks while pursuing avenues of release. Similarly, when tracing trajectories of hope for individuals in the late stages of their life sentence, hope has often been found to be diminished by the prison environment (Crewe et al. 2020). Just as hope may vary in its modality (Seeds 2022) and how it is created (e.g., Aday 2014, Bourgeois 2020, Crewe et al. 2020), criminological research suggests that sustaining hope also varies, partly due to external factors (Crewe et al. 2020, Johnson and McGunnigal-Smith 2008).

While noting that hope is complex, non-linear, and variable, it nonetheless appears to be an integral part of surviving within the carceral state for many with long or life sentences. Zehr and Toews' interviews highlight hope as a key part of survival. Whether it is religion, legal mechanisms, or something else entirely, hope appears to be a lifeline: "To cope, you have to keep hope alive. You have to have faith (Ricardo Mercado, quoted in Zehr and Toews 2022: 63).

Thus, regardless of the ways it enters their life, there seems to be a consensus among lifers that “you can’t exist without hope ... hope is very important” (Bruce Bainbridge, quoted in Zehr and Toews 2022: 106-107).

Because hope has yet to be completely disentangled in criminological research, there has yet to be a study that examines hope for lifers whose circumstances change during incarceration. This study attempts to fill this gap by understanding the role that hope plays when individuals who previously did not expect release learn of a chance at early release. In doing so, this study uniquely explores how hope is fostered, how it changes, and how it is tempered from an individual’s life sentence to their early release.

## Data and Methods

### I. Approval and Recruitment

This research was approved by the University of Washington’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Human Subjects Division (HSD) prior to data collection. Data was collected through 12 qualitative interviews with individuals who served lengthy sentences in Washington prisons and unexpectedly learned of a chance for early release during their sentence. Initial participants were identified through the author’s prior work on early release cases with a local clemency organization. Later participants were drawn from snowball sampling, in which participants refer other participants to participate in the study (Parker and Scott 2019). In both recruiting messaging and before the interview, participants were fully informed of the nature and purpose of the research and asked to sign the IRB-approved consent form before participating.

### II. Interview Protocol

Interviews prioritized lessons imparted by Jessica McCrory Calarco and Mario Luis Small's *Guide to Qualitative Literacy*. Such lessons include cognitive empathy, which is the ability to appropriately empathize with an interview participant as they share their experiences, as well as heterogeneity, which is the prioritization of diversity. Interviews were also conducted additively, rather than re-stating general principles that failed to provide further, generative insight. Additionally, the interviews were semi-structured: relevant follow-up questions were always prioritized in interviews.

Interviews were conducted both in-person and on Zoom due to participants' restricted mobility and preferences. Regardless of the location, interview protocol remained the same. Once participants confirmed their availability, they were asked to reaffirm that they understood the contents of their signed consent form and were told recording would begin at their ready signal. Once recording began, the interview started with questions regarding a participant's sentence length and reaction to learning of their sentence. From there, participants were asked to share experiences of their incarceration and at what point they learned of the possibility of early release. Once on the topic of early release, participants were asked to describe their initial response, how they learned of the possibility, and if anything changed for them upon learning of early release. For many, hope was organically brought up in these conversations. For those where it was not, additional questions probed at their understanding of hope and the role it played (if any) during their original sentence, upon learning of early release, and after their release. Individuals were then asked to share anything else they thought relevant. The average time for an interview was one hour and thirty minutes.



After interviewing, each participant was given \$40 as compensation for their time, as awarded by the University of Washington's J. Eleanor Pearson Endowed Library Fund for Human Rights and sent a short demographic survey to fill out online.

### III. Coding

Once all interviews were completed, personal identifiers were redacted, and each interviewee was assigned a code name. Interviews were then transcribed and uploaded to a qualitative coding server, *AtlasTI*. Once uploaded, qualitative coding began, which is the practice of systematically categorizing excerpts from interviews to identify themes and patterns (Schreier 2012; Williams and Moser 2019).

Two rounds of coding were conducted. During the first round, each transcript was read and any piece of material that seemed indicative of a larger theme or pattern was assigned a "code." This led to many overlapping and broad codes that were, in the larger picture, irrelevant to this study's aims. Using first round codes to inform understanding of the material, the second round of coding began to look for more distinct and generative codes. This led to more hyper-specific codes that emerged from round two that could then be code-grouped into a larger category. For instance, the second-round of coding produced 18 more specific codes of hope that were then grouped into the code-group, "Hope." What was "Hope" in the first round of coding became:

Code-group: "Hope"

Codes within that group:

- "Hope - scared to get hopes up"
- "Hope - watching others get out"

- “Hope - facilitated by support systems”
- “Hope - growing as it gets more real”
- “Hope - religion”
- “Hope - nervousness”
- “Hope - ‘Hope for the best, expect the worst’”
- “Hope - tempered by institutional factors”
- “Hope - learning of ER law” (ER = early-release)
- “Hope - feeling dangerous”
- “Hope - having it crushed”
- “Hope - wanting to get out”
- “Hope - how they defined it”
- “Hope - difference post-release”
- “No hope - committing to new life”
- “No hope - given up”
- “No hope - hopelessness”

The second-round of coding produced 585 quotations from 88 specific codes that were grouped into 13 relevant code-groups:

- “Learning of Sentence”
- “Hope”
- “Impact of Early-Release”
- “Institutional Factors”
- “Early-Release Process”

- “Prison Environment”
- “How People Learned of Early Release”
- “Support Network - Outside & Inside”
- “Reactions Learning of Early Release”
- “Emotions Throughout Sentence”
- “Post-Release Experience”
- “Making an Inner Change”
- “Desire to Help Others/Engage in Programming”

These codes were then analyzed, which revealed three key findings that discussed in the following sections.

### Limitations

There are multiple limitations to this study. These limitations are likely due to the scope and two-quarter timeline of this research. First, the population of participants all committed their index offense and received their sentence in the state of Washington. As such, they had access to unique mechanisms of early release that other states have yet to adopt. While there are some consistent pathways for release, such as good time credit, completion of Residential Drug Awareness Programs (RDAP), the First Step Act, and Executive Clemency, state parole boards often differ in considered criteria and processes for early release. Thus, pathways like the Indeterminate Sentencing Review Board (ISRB) may constitute a unique experience for participants. To combat this limitation, this study includes individuals who received early release

through the ISRB, as well as clemency and re-sentencing structures, which are more common mechanisms to achieve early release on a national scale.

Second, while many participants were still under community supervision at the time of their interview, no interviewees were actively incarcerated. The study is comprised of individuals who were released early from Washington prisons, meaning that their accounts are retrospective. Understanding that memory is fallible, future studies may interview individuals who are actively incarcerated and recently learned of the possibility for early release.

Third, each participant interviewed in the study identified as male and was incarcerated at an institution that matched their male gender identity. The lack of gender diversity precludes generalizability, as gendered experiences may have an impact on individual's experiences while incarcerated. Future research should include a more gender-diverse participant population.

## Findings

Upon completion of coding, analyzed data revealed three key findings: First, for every participant, learning of early release either created or expanded already-existing hope. Second, the hope that the possibility of early release creates is tempered by institutional factors outside of the individual's control, such as correctional staff intentionally administering infractions to disqualify individuals from early release process(es). Thirdly, although tempered hope results in a "hope for the best, expect the worst" mentality, hope still plays a positive role, often influencing an individual's trajectory, engagement, and behavior in prison.

Additional findings outside the scope of this paper illuminate how Washington State early release mechanisms fail to provide adequate support upon release, as well as the importance of support networks - both inside and outside of prison. Additionally, most

participants expressed how learning of their lengthy sentences, especially for juveniles, sent them into a depressed state, which, for some, led to maladaptive coping mechanisms.

### I. Finding 1: Hope Blossoms

Each of the 12 participants expressed that learning of the possibility of early release generated hope, often for the first time, but some experienced an expansion of already-existing hope. While the possibility of early release was the same, the variance in whether individuals had hope for the first time or not can be attributed to personality characteristics, backgrounds, prior experiences, as well as prison institutions and regimes (Seeds 2022; Crewe et al. 2020). For example, an individual housed in a less violent institution or who was older may have already cultivated hope during their sentence, whereas an individual in a more dangerous institution or who is comparatively young may have experienced hope for the first time when learning of the chance at release. Despite differences in whether an individual already had hope, each participant expressed that the possibility of early release manufactured and/or bolstered their hope. This section explores how hope was both created and expanded when individuals learned of early release possibilities.

When incarcerated individuals came to understand that the possibility of early release was realistic, hope blossomed. For some, they expressed it was the first time they experienced hope during their incarceration. For example, Robert explained how learning of early release marked an unprecedented development of hope he had yet to experience:

*It - it created hope. Like, you know, the first spark of hope came at the decision, and then, in very short order, the county public defender contacted me and said, 'Hey, you merit a*

*re-sentencing, we're gonna represent you.' It built from there. The longer I got into the process, going into court and scheduling the dates, wow, the more real it became.*

Similarly, Adam recounted how the hope created by the prospect of early release was different than anything he had felt during his sentence:

*When you're completely hopeless, you have no control over your surroundings, you just don't. To go so many years where hope just didn't exist because it wasn't an option - I wasn't getting out - to go from that, to here, just uplifted my spirits completely.*

Both Robert and Adam had been sentenced to life as teenagers and as a result, had expected that they would die in prison. Thus, learning of the potential for early release — or in their case, release at all — offered the first realistic glimpse of a life outside prison since they were 16 or 17 years old. The potential of this alluring new reality, one where they would not die in prison, sparked hope for the first time during their incarceration. This sentiment was not unique. In a similar vein, Ryan explained how learning of early release exposed a new hope for his future, previously believing that he would die in prison.

*I think the chance of early release helped expose hope. Cause I think ... no matter what, I didn't want to die in prison, that was the worst thing ever in my mind, my big fear - dying alone in prison... Even if I was 66 - I still want a chance at life, even if I was older and stuff.*

Although a majority of participants expressed that learning of the possibility of early release created hope for the first time, this was not the case for everyone. Instead, two participants, Eli and William, explored how learning of early release was not the first time they experienced hope, as they had already cultivated it within themselves earlier in their sentence. For Eli, hope was innately tied to his perception of self, which drove him to be a better person, regardless of his life sentence.

*My hope had been built on, you know, being a better person and I was - I was pretty glued to that. So, that's where my hope was. I was okay with that. I was like, "I'm a better person whether I'm in prison or out of prison" and so, I was okay with that. Much happier. And much happier outside of prison, but you know, as far as my hopes - there were plenty of people to help in prison, you know? Plenty of projects to keep me busy - not the kind of projects that I have out here, not the happiness I have out here, but I resigned to the fact that I was going to be a better person and that was what kept me hopeful.*

William expressed a similar sentiment:

*I had already changed myself in 2004, I made a pledge to not get in trouble again. Before that, I had 44 major infractions, breaking major rules. I've been in solitary confinement or segregation over 20 times, but I - I made that pledge and I never got in trouble again... So, my approach was, you know, I'm gonna do as much good as I can and hope to make a difference, even if I'm not gonna get out.*

While Eli and William had already cultivated hope for themselves by making an inner-change (Seeds 2022) learning of early release added to their pre-existing hope, bolstering it. As William explained, “Learning of early release ... I was hopeful. Excited. It was just - excitement, I mean I - prison is an emotional drain, so just to put that behind me, I was looking forward to it.” Eli also explained how, while he had already experienced hope, the potential for release expanded it.

*I was hopeful, I mean. And then, as things began to develop, my hopes began to increase, as I'm beginning to create a release plan and go through my life story and you know, all of the things that happened, you know the opportunity and seeing other individuals who were being released by that mode, it increased hope. I just - I stayed the course. It was a long process. It was like four years before I got to a hearing.*

The fact that some respondents (i.e., Eli and William) had developed hope even before learning of the possibility of early release is not necessarily surprising. As Ben Crewe's work would predict, both Eli and William attribute their prior hope to personality attributes, such a tendency to help other people, an internal drive to be positive, and a strong inclination to be better for oneself. Additionally, Eli and William were among some of the oldest participants in the group; their maturation during their sentence may additionally explain how they had cultivated hope for themselves prior to learning of early release mechanisms.

Overall, learning of the possibility of early release triggered the blossoming of hope. None of the participants reported that learning of early release either failed to impact their hope



or negatively influenced it. This finding illustrates that presenting early release mechanisms to individuals serving life and lengthy sentences generates hope. Whether it is first-time hope or an expansion of pre-existing hope, the possibility of early release is a powerful driver of hope in correctional settings. However, while the possibility of early release creates hope, the environment of prison often tempers it.

## II. Finding 2: Tempered Hope

While the possibility of early release generated hope, interviews revealed how factors inside the prison environment tempered hope. Tempering factors are best sorted into two main categories: perceived unfairness within the legal system and DOC violence. This section explains how each of these categories, and their subcategories, served to weaken an individual's hope for early release while incarcerated.

### A. Tempered Hope and Perceived Unfairness in the Legal System

I grouped factors that tempered hope related to legal mechanisms in the category, "Perceived Unfairness in the Legal System." There were two subcategories within it: relevant legislation that did not apply retroactively and unfair rejections in early attempts to secure early release. Both factors led incarcerated individuals to believe that the legal system was unfair and as such, their hope for early release by way of legal mechanisms, such as re-sentencing or being deemed releasable by the ISRB, dwindled.

#### 1. Unfairness in the Legal System – Retroactive Legislation

For many, hope for early release was tempered when relevant legislation that would have applied to their case failed to apply retroactively. This circumstance is exemplified by the Time Credits Act, a program required by the 2018 legislation, The First Step Act of 2018 (U.S. Department of Justice 2022). The program “promised a path to an early return home for eligible incarcerated people who invest their time and energy in programs that reduce recidivism” (U.S. Department of Justice 2022: 1). However, the program applied retroactively, meaning individuals could only earn Time Credits from 2018 onward. For individuals that had been incarcerated since 1990, the Time Credits act did nothing to alleviate the three decades of time they had already served, even if they had invested those three decades “in programs that reduce recidivism” like educational courses (U.S. Department of Justice 2022: 1).

Legislation akin to the First Steps Act that did not apply retroactively led to the perception that there was inherent unfairness in the legal system that precluded individuals with lengthy sentences from ever being released. Kevin explained how he came to understand early release legislation as symbolic, not literal. As such, Kevin firmly believed that legal pathways to early release were not made to be accessible, but made to keep him, and others with life sentences, locked up:

*In 2013, I had to try clemency and then I heard this early-release bill came through and I didn't really believe that because all through my time it was always like, “Oh did you hear this happened?” or “They’re changing this now” and all that but then they would be like, “Oh but this is only for first time nonviolent offenders” like, “When are you gonna do something for the first time violent offenders?” Everytime they kept changing it, it was for somebody who was already finna get out and go home, like change something*

*for us that are stuck with a lot of time and so, the law, I believe, they would use that as a mechanism to keep those of us with a lot of time locked up.*

In addition to believing that early release was a symbolic gesture, the recognition that early release legislation would release future individuals, but not those incarcerated at the time of their passage was crushing. Noah explained how this led him to question his initial hope for early release, concluding that his hope was likely to be crushed:

*I will be honest with you. When I thought more about the early release case, I thought it would be like every other thing that - that came out, which meant that it wasn't applied retroactively. You know, 'cause there was a case that came out a while back, and we all thought it was gonna help us but what they said was that it didn't apply back after this amount of time, you know. "Oh, it only goes back 2 years." Well, what about the people that went through the same thing that it is talking about 20 years ago? What about them people? The law matters to these people now, but not to those affected that long ago. But that's the way it constantly happens. There's always something that denies you from being a part of the solution or the change. It's always something, just - it's always something, and that always something just kept on - [imitating chopping sound]! There goes another piece of that hope - it's just gone. Because you keep that sliver of hope, it still there's, and it's just - it keeps getting chopped, that tiny little piece, and it just turns you into a different person, but you know, I guess it is what it is.*

In a similar vein, Ryan explained how he struggled with the difficulty of maintaining hope for early release when the legislation that likely would have released him was not applied retroactively, and thus, could not be used in his case. Ryan, believing that future early release legislation would follow the same pattern, consciously tempered his own hope, anticipating additional institutional unfairness in future early release legislation:

*So, I remember for the juvenile parole bill, I heard it in like 2014. They started talking about it and I think that I was - it was just about to come into law. And I remember initially thinking there was a touch of hope, but a whole bunch of skepticism, because I was like, they're gonna find a way to say it doesn't apply to me. In the past, with the Blakely bill about exceptional sentences - they gave me an exceptional sentence of about 30 years and I filed under Blakely and they said 'it applies to you, but it's not retroactive because it's not a law, it's a procedural error, so your constitutional rights weren't violated, even though they have you 30 extra years' and so, the law - I just remember saying, law makes no sense. It's crazy. A million things apply to you and this one thing that doesn't - like what? Yeah, it's like, I - I consider myself a pretty smart guy and I try to read the law and I'm like, "this doesn't make any sense." Um ... I was hopeful but there was a lot of skepticism, like, you know, pessimism, it was like 'they're not gonna - this is not gonna apply to you, don't get your hopes up too high cause they're just gonna squish them again, your expectations? Keep them low.*

These accounts illuminate how perceived unfairness in the legal system, in the case of legislation that fails to apply despite relevancy to an individual's case, temper hope. Although

there is an original “spark” of hope generated by learning of early release, when the legislative pathway towards release proves unfair and unfruitful, that hope is dampened. Additionally, for those who can access legal pathways towards early release, there is an additional legal component that tempers hope: rejection.

## 2. Unfairness in the Legal System – Rejections from Release

Finding relevant early release mechanisms that apply to an individual’s case can be an arduous task by itself. For those who are eligible to have their sentence reviewed or be seen in front of the ISRB, bureaucratic arbitrariness and ambiguous rejection often impede release and subsequently, temper hope.

William, a well-known and respected figure in Washington correctional facilities, has arguably changed the landscape of programming inside prisons. During his incarceration, he designed and implemented new curriculum in classrooms, mentored countless of his peers, and was dedicated to reducing peer-on-peer violence. However, when he attempted to secure early release by way of the ISRB, he was quickly denied by the Board. When he returned to petition the Board for the second time, an extensive resume and stories of his own growth in hand, he was denied again, this time because the Board did not want him to think he “earned his way out of prison:

*Okay, so in 2015, I went to my first ISRB hearing to be released. They denied me for two years and the criteria was supposed to be - less likely than not to commit a crime. While I was in prison, according to the guys in prison, I changed the prison system. I taught over 2,000 prison, mentored over 2,000 people, created a curriculum, and so that course*

*changed the prison system to the Redemption Project and I can tell you, I can go on and on about this. And then denied me and that was a shockwave throughout the prison system. And so then my second hearing, the ISRB asked, "Do you know why we denied you?" and I said, "Why?" and they said, "We didn't want you to think you did so much good, you earned your way out" like, "Oh! What a reason to keep me!"*

In total, William had three hearings, each ending with a rejection for reasons similar to the Board not wanting him to believe he had "earned [his] way out." Ultimately, the continuous rejections, grounded in inappropriate considerations, took a toll on his hope for early release:

*I lost hope ... 'cause it's like, if you guys don't go by your own rules, your own laws, you're supposed to release juvenile according to the law if they're less likely than not to commit another crime and I hadn't been in trouble in prison for 15 years, all the stats - I had a low risk assessment. All the stats say that after so many years, you have a one and a half chance risk of recidivism so how are you possibly saying that I have over a 50% chance of becoming a criminal? You know? Yeah, so, I gave up and was like, 'I'm done.'*

William's experience is not unique; multiple participants expressed how their hope for early release seemed to be at odds with the process required to attain it. While their initial hope had been cultivated by the opportunity of early release, the process of obtaining it proved to be subjective and often, unfair. These factors tested and ultimately, tempered hope.

Frustration with the early release process extended to each early release pathway, including clemency. Jack explained how, despite his initial hope for early release, his experience

with the clemency process and hearing diminished it, as the prosecutor in his case doctored a report whose original copy may have led to Jack's release:

*So my clemency hearing was very, very interesting. During my incarceration I have always sought out mental health by counseling, someone to talk to, and the one guy who I'd seen 155 times over the course of 15 years ... he came and testified, and he said, "You know what, \_\_\_\_\_ the only dude I've ever believed in. I've worked with him all these times and I don't think he's a threat to himself or anybody else" and the prosecutor doctored his statement and said just the opposite when he submitted it to the governor.*

In these two pathways to early release - the ISRB and clemency – William and Jack were at the mercy of a legal system they perceived to be unfair. As these factors tempered their hope, individuals returned to prison environments that did nothing to build it back up. As Noah explained, his hope for release was “chopped” off by his experience with the ISRB, which was further squandered as he returned to an institutional environment antithetical to fostering hope:

*It's like ... from the moment you go to the Board - from that very first moment, that's when your hope starts getting chopped off. Bam! Every level of appeal, that's more and more hope that's being chopped off. And every denial, more and more hope chopped off, and then you have to also go back inside and deal with your surroundings, your environment like "Hey, yo, officer man! Can I go over to the chow and see if I can get a job?" "No, you cannot. Send a kite" or "Hey, officer, can I go to the chapel?" "No, you cannot. Send him a kite." or "Hey officer, can I go take a shower?" "No, you cannot*

*wait till your tiers are called later on tonight” “But I was out in the yard this morning, you know, I need to -” “I said, wait ‘til tonight when you hear your call. I just - I don’t know.”*

His voice laden with defeat, Noah’s experience illuminates how, while the possibility of early release inspires hope, taxing and unfair legal processes can temper it. Without mechanisms to facilitate hope inside prison, this tempered hope is difficult to regain, leading to “more and more hope chopped off.”

For participants, then, perceived unfairness in the legal system takes two forms: the lack of relevant and applicable legislation that will secure other’s releases (often with shorter sentences) but not their own, as well as ‘unfair’ rejections from early release pathways, such as the ISRB and Clemency Board. Despite hope for early release, these institutional factors, falling under the category of “perceived unfairness in the legal system” temper hope during incarceration. However, these are not the only factors that negatively affected the hope of participants.

## **B. Tempered Hope and DOC Violence**

Hope tempered by DOC violence was mentioned 107 times in the 12 interviews, the highest code frequency second only to “hope.” In coding DOC violence that tempered hope, three subcategories emerged: DOC intentional unfairness, DOC abuse, and DOC sexual abuse and related hypocrisy. I differentiated the last category, DOC sexual abuse and hypocrisy, from DOC abuse because sexual abuse had a particular significance for respondents. This section describes how each subcategory played a role in tempering an individual's hope for early release.



## 1. DOC Violence - Intentional Unfairness

The factor, “institutional unfairness,” refers to respondents’ belief that DOC staff in Washington State prisons would intentionally give infractions to disqualify individuals from early release pathways, most often through the ISRB.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, an infraction in the months preceding an ISRB hearing renders prisoners ineligible to petition the Board. Participants reported that DOC staff knew this and intentionally sought out individuals who had upcoming hearings. Then, several respondents reported, DOC members would administer a major infraction, nullifying their upcoming hearing and with it, their hope for release. As Kevin reported, “I seen some staff do some bullshit to get somebody in trouble before their hearing.” Similarly, Chris reported that “A lot of times, the staff members here in Washington will threaten you with a ticket or infraction before it and you know what, I see what they’re doing.” While Kevin and Chris observed the (apparently) intentional unfairness directed at their peers, Connor reported experiencing it firsthand:

*So there was a guard that was in my unit and he was very antagonistic. He knew that I had a parole hearing coming up, and I forget what the argument was over - something very, very petty, and I just walked away from it, but he wouldn't let it go, so he kept on arguing even after I was already walking away, I was trying to just like you know, de-escalate the whole situation because I was not fallin' for that. I'm not gonna argue with him over this. I wouldn't entertain him and I didn't give him the reaction he wanted. The*

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that not every participant was subjected to this, nor was every DOC official implicated, but the frequency of which it was mentioned indicates it is a common practice inside Washington prisons.

*only thing he could say to me was, "Give me your ID. You can't go to the yard unless you have your ID." So, what he was trying to do was prevent me from being able to go to the yard and I was like, "That's fine, okay, I'll go read a book, man. Here's my ID." So he took my ID, he saw that I had my key on my ID, he feels the weight of it in his hand, he feels the coldness of the metal in the palm of his hand while he's holding my ID. So, now he's barking at me, "Then go cell in" so I walk up to my cell door and I stand there and I'm waiting for him. And he's screaming at me from across the day room, "I gave you a directive to cell in. Why aren't you celling in?" and he hits the code on his walkie-talkie - the little panic button - and the goon squad comes in. The sergeant comes up to me, and is like, "Why are you refusing to cell in?" He says, "Take your key, and you - oh" And I was like, "You just took the key from me. I am physically unable to cell in" but now they've hit a code on the walkie-talkie, the sergeants here, the goon squads here, now I have to go to the hole. So they've created this whole environment where they've pretty much forced me into a corner, and I have no way of getting out of it. I've complied with everything they've asked me to do."*

Similar to Connor, Noah had witnessed a variety of tactics the DOC employed that appeared to intentionally render individuals ineligible from early release. Noah reported that in addition to giving infractions over "disobedience," DOC staff members conducted "hidden room investigations" to administer fictitious drug or paraphernalia-related infractions: "I done see them put sheets over windows when they go into people's cells, so nobody can look in there. And all of a sudden, they come out, "Oh, we found this!" Yeah. Stafford Creek. Yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah, oh, it's horrible in there. I really mean that." As Noah further explained,

tactics that appeared to be meant to destroy, or at least hinder, an individual's chance at early release, relatedly hindered their hope: "You allow yourself to have hope, and then you get shot down, it's just crushing."

Kevin, Chris, Connor, and Noah's accounts were consistent with those of Jack, who reported a time when an officer planted stolen property in his room to get him in trouble:

*I made my way into the Chow Hall ... and this cop stopped me, and he said, "Stand for search." And he was hitting me with his hands while he was patting me where I'd been stabbed in my ribs that had been broken. He knew that I was messed up, and he said to me, "Why are you shaking so bad?" And I said, "because I have a nerve disorder" and he says, "Oh, I don't believe that. And he's as a matter of fact, I feel threatened by you." And he said, "What's up with the stolen TV that's in your cell? And I was like, I don't have a TV." And he says, "No, there's a stolen TV in your cell. And you're gonna have to pay for this" and I'm thinking, what the – is he talking about. So I go into the unit, go up to my cell, and there's a TV in my cell, a black and white one, and not one that I'd put in there, and a couple of minutes later they called me out to the duty office. I go out there and they say, "Turn around and cuff up. You're going to IMU," ... and put me in there for like 30 some days, and the hole - I didn't do anything wrong. And yeah, just a horrible fricking experience."*

The reportedly intentional sabotage of early release by correctional staff became a shared fear by many inside the facilities who were either eligible for early release or currently in the release process. As William explained, even when he was able to successfully petition the Board

for release, the fear that the DOC would manipulate or interfere with his release followed him until the day he walked out the front door:

*I wasn't worried about getting out, I was worried about someone in the DOC doing something to try to sabotage it. You know? So it was like - you know, it got so bad that by the time that it got to like - I was like two weeks to being released that I could hear my heartbeat while I laid down.*

When asked how his constant fear of the DOC impacted hope, William responded:

*It made it difficult to hope ... Completely. 'Cause like they hold you accountable to the law to send you to prison but then like, you also have rules and laws you have to go by, you know? And to see them and their in a position of authority and they're not going by them ... it was - it was very demoralizing.*

William's response exemplifies how the DOC's reported practice of administering infractions intended to impede release tempers hope. Moreover, prisoners report feeling powerless to stop the DOC's apparent attempts at sabotage and with no avenue for recourse and nobody to legitimate their claims other than incarcerated peers, hopes for early release are squashed. This is further compounded by reported physical, psychological, and sexual abuse.

## 2. DOC Violence – Abuse by Staff

In addition to watching DOC staff undermine their chances at early release, incarcerated individuals reported being continually subjected to abuse at the hands of guards and their proxies. Respondents reported that the sabotage described above was aimed specifically at those in the early release pipeline. By contrast, they report more widespread DOC abuse – abuse that similarly tempered hope of release. This section explores how both physical and psychological abuse affected incarcerated individual’s experiences, as well as their hope for release.

### i Physical Abuse

Respondents described physical abuse that was carried out firsthand by guards, as well as sponsored by guards. For the former, participants reported that guards with malicious or aggressive intent would abuse them and their peers, sometimes in the line of sight of others, but more often, in isolation. Connor shared how these moments came to be expected during his incarceration and relatedly, how it tempered his hope:

*Every time a prison guard cornered me there - there were times back in the day where they take their badge off, take their walkie-talkie off where the panic button was on, put it off to the side, shut the door behind them, and now you're stuck in this fucking room - Mop, closet, your cell, the bakery. There were all kinds of little hidey-holes where these guards could get at you and be like, "All right, motherfucker. What do you want to do now?" And you're like, "Oh, shit. Okay. Things are about to get real, and there's no time out, tap out, referee stoppage, nothing. I couldn't trust anyone, and that's where my hope went.*

In addition to direct physical violence Connor experienced, interviewees reported that DOC staff would also use other inmates to perpetrate violence by proxy. This practice was well-known amongst the participants interviewed in this study. Many explained how guards would either be bribed or bribe others to abuse someone, often by releasing the lock on the outside of an individual's door in the middle of the night from their control room. Jack explained how he came to learn of this practice:

*I laid down on my bunk one night, and when I woke up this guy kicked me in my head and it knocked me unconscious, and when I was up from that my stomach was bleeding- the other guy had stabbed me, and my arm was busted. I nearly bitten off half my tongue. I was really messed up. Broken ribs. They tore most of my clothes off, and the room was just covered in my blood. I- I couldn't. Even the blood was in my eyeballs, and just filled my mouth. It was horrible. So my next door neighbor was banging on the wall, and he said, "Hey, what's going on over there?" He's like, "Man. You can't say nothing, because they'll come back, and they'll kill you" and I was, I was thinking how am I going to get out of this? What am I gonna do? And I laid there in my blood for multiple days during multiple counts. 3 counts a day. The cops never did or said anything about it. I found out later who the officer was, and he let those two dudes in my cell to work me over. Apparently they gave that cop a \$100 bill, and he popped the door for them.*

Similarly, Noah reported that

*They foster violence. I mean that, too, cause the police will pop your door open for somebody running to your house. They would do that there. You know, because we don't have keys in the penitentiary. They - we don't have keys. They have knobs they turn in this booth that slides the door open. So how do people get into them cells in order to assault you? Somebody had to open the door. It wasn't me. But somebody runs in my cell and I'm in there. So - And now I got a case because I had to defend myself and I heard somebody. But that's the type of stuff that goes on up in there. It has you always in combat mode. It doesn't have you trying to be successful, trying to change your behavior, the reason why you came in there. It doesn't have you like that - it doesn't have you thinking about, "Oh, man, I've really messed up." It doesn't have you thinking about what you did. No, it doesn't have you that it has you thinking about survival. That's it. Until you have established yourself, become rooted, the system knows you, the people know you. Then you can fall back. You know, in there as a kid, it's not good, it really isn't.*

The physical abuse individuals suffer, as Connor explained, outweigh their hope for release, tempering it in the process. This withering of hope is further exacerbated by psychological abuse.

## ii Psychological Abuse

In addition to physical abuse at the hands of guards and guard-proxies, participants report that DOC staff frequently used solitary confinement to psychologically abuse them. Currently, “there are currently no state restrictions on the use of restrictive housing in adult facilities operated by the Department of Corrections” (Baruchman 2023: 3). As such, participants

explained how they would spend anywhere from weeks to months in administrative segregation, which had detrimental effects on their psyche and relatedly, their hope for release. Connor explored how at one point during his sentence he spent a consecutive year and a half in the “hole”:

*The longest I spent in the hole was a year and a half straight. I spent months here, months there, but the longest day to day was a year and a half straight. I started hearing things like my brain was trying to stimulate itself through sensory deprivation. I started to hear music, like my brain was just trying to stimulate itself, and I would whisper to my neighbor for fear that I was going crazy: “Do you hear that song?” And he said, “What song do you hear?” ‘Cause I thought it might have been like, music echoing through the ventilation from the duty officers booth or something, and I would hum the tune or sing the lyrics he's like, “Nah bro, you alright over there” and I was like, “I don't know, man,” you know, like when you close your eyes and you rub your eyes really hard to get the little fireworks and stuff like that. So your brain is trying to stop itself trying to give its false data input, because nothing tactile, audio visual, nothing is being stimulated.*

Connor’s year-and-a-half stint in solitary confinement was devastating. An extreme case of the deprivations Grisham Sykes discussed, long-term solitary confinement as a form of psychological abuse not only impaired his cognitive functioning but pushed early release to the back of his mind, as he focused on not “going crazy.”



In addition to the psychological pains of solitary confinement, two participants reported that DOC staff forcibly medicate individuals, which disrupted their cognitive functioning and consequently, their hope for early release. As Kevin explained,

*They put us on medication 'cause they can't deal with it. I've seen people get on meds and oh my god, it was sad and mind blowing. And I told my mom this, I said, "Momma, they don't want us to have people come and visit us or any support because then they can't do what they want to do to you. And they know from the mail system and visits and all of that, they know. If you don't have that, that gives them more access to do what they wanna do to you.*

Similarly, Noah reported that

*They destroy you in prison ... They try to force feed you, Thorzine? What's that called - "coralzine"? - they give you this stuff: "Oh, you have problems sleeping here to take this." "Oh, you hear things? Here, take this" - I would see 200 pound men start taking these pills because they were having problems sleeping. They start taking a few pills and go from 200 pounds down to 140 pounds and they're shaking, doing this [imitating shaking] off those pills. So your mind doesn't grow, it just exists. But it - not only is it existing, it's cloudy now, it's foggy. So, how does your mind mature? How do your thoughts mature? How does your thought process develop? In a cloud, in that environment. No, that's why we need to change. That ,, it's so horrible. I truly mean that; it is so horrible in there.*

Noah's points are especially poignant as they relate to hope. His questions probe at how an individual is expected to be hopeful when their functioning is "foggy" at best. Thus, it follows that in a physically and mentally violent environment, hope dissipates, taking the backseat as a survival instinct takes the front.

Participants' accounts of abuse - both psychological and corporal - were endless. These experiences affected not only people's hope for early release, but led to a complete breakdown of trust between incarcerated folks, DOC staff, and the judicial system. Connor and Chris shared how their recollections of abuse not only tempered their hope for early release, but their trust in the system. As Connor explained,

*I learned real quick that I can't trust anyone, not even the cops, because even the - the guards, the prison guards, were just as shady. They would create situations just so they could be entertained. They would provoke conflicts and fights, they would allow other inmates to pay them off to create scenarios that would allow them to either go assault someone smuggle drugs in, go rape somebody, I mean, there was all kinds of shitty little situations where I couldn't trust anyone. I couldn't go to the prison guards and be like, "Hey, man! I feel afraid for myself, or fear for my safety, or whatever" - I couldn't do that.*

Similarly, Chris explained, "I didn't trust in authority because ... I watched the staff members down there - there's a lot of corrupt ones down there who are always willing to line

their pocket - if you have cash - and turn their blind eye, so, there were a lot of different things I didn't trust.”

DOC abuse, in any form, tempers hope and erodes faith in the judicial system. As incarcerated individuals watched themselves and their peers subjected to continual violence, it is understandable that their hope would oscillate between existent and nonexistent as their brain constantly dealt with threats, waves of violence, and being forcibly medicated.

Additionally, some individuals, as Connor alludes to in the quote above, dealt with another form of DOC abuse that had dire consequences for their hope: sexual abuse. The next short sections details how sexual violence emerged as different than prior forms of abuse, often because it was framed as both psychological and physical.

### iii Sexual Abuse

In addition to physical and psychological abuse, sexual violence, often in the form of rape, was brought up multiple times throughout the 12 interviews. Mentions of sexual violence were especially prevalent for individuals incarcerated as juveniles, and frequently mentioned with respect to The Prison Rape Elimination Act, which was bipartisan legislation passed in 2003 to reduce instances of prison rape (Prison Rape Elimination Act 2003).

For Jack, the prevalence of sexual violence inside Washington prisons became apparent within his first week: “It was common. The fourth day I’m in - I saw ... they were preying on and raping young kids.” Connor, another individual who recounts having “to prevent [himself] from being raped” on multiple accounts, explained that despite the legislation put into place, the reality of the prison looked nothing like PREA had promised, which led him to lose faith in the judicial system:

*The PREA policy, the Prison Rape Elimination Act policy was enacted to try and prevent us kids from getting raped all the time. They [congress] were just. They were blown away at the statistics... There were like 164 kids, I think, is what the total number before somebody in the Senate House was like ... “Look how many of these kids are either A, being victimized, B, getting raped, or C, leaving prison with so much trauma that they just end up back in prison over and over again, and it was kind of upsetting because and here's what I go back to - I kind of lost my faith in the judicial system. The reason the Senate House finally opened up their eyes is because one of the Senate House, I think it was like a nephew, it was some relative, got raped. It was like some 15-16 year old kid got raped in Clallum Bay, and the person that he was related to was in the Senate House and I'm thinking to myself at this time that I've been down for a few years at this point and I'm like, “Huh! So for us lowly, peasant folk, it was okay when this was happening to us, but to one of the royalty? Oh no!” So something happened to them so now you wanna open up your eyes? What the hell is wrong with you people?”*

Like physical violence, sexual violence was understood as an indication of the DOC's hypocrisy: while staff held those inside to the law, they frequently abused it themselves. Respondents explained how they watched DOC guards rape and sexually abuse their peers with no reprimand nor responsibility, despite the passage of PREA. This hypocrisy fueled frustration, as Noah explained:

*It's just - frustrating. I have not seen one correctional officer charged in a PREA case. I have not seen one correctional officer thrown in prison for what they're doing in there - killing people, shooting people... they kill people ... and you know, nobody knows about the officers that are bringing in drugs to the prisons. How do you think we get them? It's just not through conjugal visits. It's not through the visiting room.*

Although all participants were incarcerated at a male prison, several shared that they knew the women across Washington State were also experiencing sexual abuse at the hands of prison staff. Here is Noah:

*But when the cops is up in there doing that stuff, raping females in PERDY ... like for real? They having babies up in PERDY. How are they having babies up in PERDY if they not having sex in PERDY? Help me understand that. I know women can't get other women pregnant. So that means that there's PREA things going on. They did this whole thing. PREA this, PREA that.*

As Connor succinctly stated, these accounts of abuse — physical, psychological, and sexual — led to a “complete loss of hope in the system.” Instead of unfettered hope, it became a question of: How can I have hope for early release when I don’t have any faith in the system?

In summary, across the 12 interviews, there were 23 descriptions of “hopelessness” attributed to one of the factors categorized under “perceived legal unfairness” or “DOC abuse.” Unfairness in the legal system, by means of irrelevant legislation and unfair rejections and DOC

abuse, all three forms — physical, psychological, and sexual — not only temper hope for release, but destroy an individual’s faith in the correctional and judicial system as a whole.

### III. Finding 3: Impact of Learning of Early Release

Research shows that hope operates as more of a spectrum than a binary and can fluctuate, mimicking more of a rollercoaster than a straight line (Seeds 2022). As such, tempered hope by way of the prison environment does not mean hope is forever gone, it often means it is more suppressed than original, as Robert called it, “unfettered hope”. As the prison environment tempers hope, a majority of participants came to adopt a “hope for the best, expect the worst” mentality. This self-suppression results in qualified, rather than unbridled hope. Despite this qualification, participants explained how hope affected their prison trajectory, positively impacting their behaviors, attitude, and engagement in prison programming. This section details how tempered hope leads to a “hope for the best, expect the worst” mentality, as well as how even tempered, hope for early release has beneficial impacts.

#### A. Impact – “Hope for the Best, Expect the Worst”

Out of the 12 participants, seven expressed how their time in prison had led them to consciously adapt their hope into a “hope for the best, expect the worst” mentality to protect themselves. Instead of an unfettered hope, hope became qualified: while individuals would hope for the best, they would expect the worst, as their lived experience in prison and institutional factors had taught them to do. Ryan, Connor, and James attribute this mentality to the prison environment and a way to protect themselves from getting their hopes up to an unrealistic

amount inside the DOC. For example, Ryan reported that “I learned to hope for the best, expect for the worst, don’t get your expectations too high, so it’s kinda that type of thing.” Similarly, Conner said “I planned for the worst, I’ve planned for a witch hunt. I had to plan for that,” while James reported that “Through the prison system, you hope for the best, but you expect the worst. So when a good thing happens, it’s even better. You always expect the worst from DOC, but when it’s not the worst, and something else happens and it’s good, it’s an even better feeling.”

When juxtaposing how participants felt learning of early release compared to their levels of hope during the process for release, the modification of original hope into qualified hope becomes more obvious. When asked about his feelings upon first learning of early release, Adam reported “To go so many years where hope didn’t exist because it wasn’t an option - I wasn’t getting out - to go from that, to here, just uplifted my spirits completely.” However, Adam later modified that hope: “I guess just ... I now expect the worst and hope for the best, right?” Similarly, Eli tempered his hope over time: “I’m gonna say it like this - I’m always in a mode of ‘expect the worst, but hope for the best.’ So I was hopeful, but I wasn’t really, I wasn’t really expecting fruit to hang.”

The evolution of Adam and Eli’s feelings demonstrate how individuals come to understand and experience hope while dealing with violent institutional factors. Their journey with hope was not linear: although early release originally provoked hope, their reality tempered it. Through this iterative process, hope for early release transformed into qualified hope, where individuals had hope, but also expected what the institution had taught them: the worst.

## B. Impact – The Power of Hope and Early Release

Although hope for early release was noticeably tempered by factors of their environment, hope still had a powerful impact for each individual. This section explores the powerful impact of hope for early release on an individual's behaviors, attitudes, motivation, and engagement in prison. While this section will explore in depth how hope can impact an individual's trajectory in prison, Noah's experience below offers an impressive summary:

*Before learning of early release: I started to live my life like, "Okay, I'm gonna die in prison. I had no hope of getting out." That was my understanding, because I think that the average life expectancy of a Black man was like 60, something years old at the time. And you give me 75 years. So you do the math. And it's like, even if you give me a third off my sentence, that's 25 years, that's still 50, and I'm still 16 when you gave it to me. So, essentially, it's still a death sentence. But I didn't know this stuff until later, but I didn't understand - so I lived my life like I was going to die in prison, so I made that my life. I quit worrying about what was going on in society, I quit worrying about who was the President, I didn't care because worrying about thing that I had no control over, worrying about something that I'm not gonna be participating in, worrying about something that my opinion doesn't matter on, that my thoughts doesn't count - I can't vote about it. I can't go to war. I can't participate in nothing, so to say. And you know what, I understand. I messed up, but you know what, let me be accountable for some other things about my country that I live in. I can't do nothing that can affect change. That was the situation that you're in there with - when you get those crazy football numbers, and then you create people who have the mindset of 'I don't care 'cause I'm never gonna get out. So why should I care? I could be a jackass the whole time I'm in here and I know people*



*that were like that, you know, you say anything wrong to me, like, I'm punching your mouth, then start to fight. Say anything wrong from me punching him. It doesn't matter.*

Noah's behavior was not indicative of who he was, but a reflection of how he chose to cope with a sentence longer than he had been alive. Upon learning of early release, this changed drastically:

*Then all of a sudden the law changed overnight, bam! And now, you know, all that venom that I had within, all that fire, I tucked my tail - I didn't - I done back down from fights ... and that means tucking my chin sometimes. That means tucking my tail sometimes. That means turning the other cheek and let somebody say this or say that about me... At the point when the law changed, and they told you they couldn't give them juveniles all that time. Oh, my God, I've become the biggest - Yeah. Yeah. I became very soft. I used to be one of the hardest individuals. And now I'm one of the softest individuals. Perfectly fine. I - I changed the people I hung around because I've given another chance at life. You know all that, all that meanness that I had, that aggression that I had... nuh uh. I started to dream again, but my dreams weren't about my life that I was living, my experiences that I was living. My dreams are about things that I will one day possibly live and experience. You know I've never been on a jet ski, never been on a quad. But one day I will. One day I will now.*

For many individuals, like Noah, the hope of early release is a powerful tool in changing their ways of preparing, thinking, believing, and interacting. This is especially true for

individuals who were younger when they were sentenced and had less time to mature while incarcerated. For instance, for Adam and Robert, the possibility of early release became a motivating factor to get ready for a possible life outside of prison. As Adam explained: “The bill and the hope that came along with it was absolutely a huge motivator factor - a huge motivating factor - because then I had a goal, I had a reason to live again.” Similarly, Robert reported that “I would say yeah, hope did completely change my actions. So it changed my total outlook, perspective on my future life, my interactions in the world. So, how could that not change my actions?”

As Robert points out, hope has the possibility to change how individuals perceive their future life. Prior to learning of early release, every participant was staring down life in prison, the weight of which often impacted their functioning, attitude, and behavior - at least for the first part of their sentence. This motivation to consider a future life not behind prison walls led many individuals to seek out activities, programming, and skills they believed would prove beneficial in not only securing early release, but creating opportunities upon release. For individuals like Adam and one of William’s acquaintances inside, this meant leaving the gangs they had previously sought the protection of, not only because it would most likely hurt their chance of being released, but because they did not want the association post-release. The gang involvement behavior, as they explained, was a product of the environment, not a representation of who they were. The hope for early release gave them the motivation to make that distinction, as Adam explains:

*I had committed to the life, I was in a gang, I was a skinhead, I was a shot caller. I was in trouble all of the time, that was my life. And so I was like, if I can’t be great out there,*

*I'm gonna be great in here and in here, when you're great, you're bad... and in the prison the way it works, if you're violent enough, they'll leave you alone, so I had fully planned to go out and be violent and get left alone and do my thing, and you know, in the juvenile bill it said, if you commit another crime, if you're convicted of another felony, that you don't have action, you're burnt ... So it was then, I decided ... I dropped out of the gang, I debriefed, I went to the new prison, and I started to transform myself 'cause I had hope - I had a light at the end of the tunnel"*

William observed a similar dynamic for another prisoner:

*One guy, he was a Neo Nazi, he was a leader and he found out that not only was he gonna get out, but that two of his friends who had gotten out, and they had this business idea, they contacted him and we're like, "A third of this is yours" so I mean he covered up his swastika tattoos and was like, "I'm done" told the guys, "I'm done with this stuff" and meant it. I've seen it change a lot of people just by, you know, having that realization that they could get out.*

Similarly, for individuals who turned to maladaptive coping strategies like substance abuse during their sentence, the potential for early release gave them the incentive to get clean. As Adam and Chris explained earlier in their interviews, prior to prison, they had never touched drugs, but when sentenced to life, they found no other way to survive than being high. However, motivated by the hope of release and the recognition that drugs were not conducive to their

goals, they enrolled themselves in substance abuse treatment of their own volition and got sober.

As Adam explained:

*It was right around the time the Miller v. Alabama came out, and to get any drug infections, dirty UA, any of those kind of infractions would seriously hamper and diminish the chances of me getting out, and I would - at the end of there, I'd get high and I'd sit in my house, and I'd just be paranoid all night worried and I'd drink a bunch of water and - it was just too much. And so I quit and came to the understanding that it cannot be a part of my life because ultimately getting out of prison is only one step - staying out of prison is more difficult and so, if I didn't change my behaviors to be able to succeed in that aspect of it, of staying out of prison and not getting into trouble, then what's the point of even getting out? And so, that was a part of my thought process and changing that behavior, and many of my other behaviors.*

Similarly, Chris reported that

*I was doing a lot of drugs, I shot a lot of heroin pretty much the entire time I was down there, so I had a really bad opiate addiction and I've conquered that completely ... I got in NA and AA and that was one of those things I did on my own because I figured that was the most helpful for me.*

The hope for early release allowed individuals to both genuinely consider and prepare for a life outside of prison for the first time during their sentence. Before, thinking about the outside

world could be “dangerous” and oftentimes, crushing. As a result, some individuals felt they had no choice but to “commit to the life” or stray from the programming that reminded them of the world they would never be able to rejoin. But now, with the potential for a life outside of prison, individuals could enroll in skills-based programming, create goals, and imagine a future, because they had a possibility. This hope led Adam, Chris, and Eli to make changes that were previously too hurtful to think about making. As Adam put it,

*My goal changed. Before, I didn't have a goal... Well, my goal was to be successful in prison, but now, my overarching goal was to get out of prison... So, I was painting. I went to school like crazy, and I worked out, and I played sports, and other than that, I pretty much just stayed in my house away from everybody, and - and eventually it got to the point where I would just tell people, “Listen, I'm a law abiding citizen” - they'd be doing something, let's say, illegal activity next to me right and everybody knew that if you put me in a situation to jeopardize my future, I would absolutely tell on you. And that's what it was - I'm a law-abiding citizen and law-abiding citizens call the cops. So, but yeah, just move farther and farther away from the life, and it's a difficult thing to do, not everybody does it.*

Chris echoed this theme:

*I wanted to be ready for the release, I wanted to make sure that I put all of the things into play and do the things I needed to do in order to be effective and so ... I just grabbed*

*everything I could, everything that was available and put it to use - school, programs, people, support networks, family out here, just all of it*

Eli reported a similar experience:

*My energy was now more directed towards trying to prepare for the reality of living out in society - “could I fit in, would I fit in, what would this do to my family dynamic” and all the other things that go along with it - “how do I find a place to stay” and employment and “how do I become sustainable as a human being in society” - so, I mean, my focus became different.*

In a conversation about the impact of hope in his prison trajectory, William explained that hope is more consequential and more powerful than many consider it to be, especially in an environment that systematically tempers, rather than fosters hope. As William put it,

*It’s a lot bigger than people think- this hope piece - to have tangible hope - to where, you know, people are motivated to do the right thing, get used to a lifestyle of doing the right thing, and then they can get released from prison and continue doing the right lifestyle and we don’t have to have an overly incarcerated population.*

William, just as other participants did, link hope for release with motivation and positive change. However, it is important to note that incarcerated individuals do not experience a complete lack of motivation prior to learning of early release, as many individuals do find

productive ways to spend their time and accomplish incredible feats in prison. Rather, as William notes, hope can provide an extra push to motivate individuals to genuinely prepare for a life outside of prison that was too scary to prepare for without a chance of release. As such, while learning of early release can motivate individuals to shift their trajectories inside prison, it is not the only factor that fosters good behavior in prison.

Some scholars have argued that when learning of early release, individuals *only* change their behavior on the basis that they may secure release (Meyerson 1975). Participants in this research sample indicate this is not true. While hope for early release positively impacted trajectories, it is *not* the sole motivator in positive behavioral changes. Just as individuals have been documented to hope despite a life sentence without parole, individuals can positively change despite their life sentence, as well (Seeds 2022). These positive changes are often made years before learning of early release decisions, especially for individuals who had more time to mature during their sentence. Samuel, James, and Jack illustrate how, while hope was a motivating factor, they had already made positive changes years before learning of early release. When asked how learning of early release changed what they were doing, Samuel reported that “Well, I kept doing what I’d already been doing. You know, I’ve been involved in programming and educating myself and working and helping others. So, I just kept - I kept doing what I’d done.” Similarly, James reported that “I just kept going throughout - I’ve been educating myself since county jail, so it’s not like I started doing these things when they told me I was getting out or when the juvenile stuff started. I was already doing that, so I just kept going.” And Jack echoed that “I was still gonna do what I always do daily. It did give me a little more hope though.”

For participants like Samuel, James, and Jack, the hope for early release only expanded the incredible changes they had already made, allowing them to “keep doing what [they were] doing.” As this section has revealed, hope is a significant factor in motivating, encouraging, and maintaining self-improvement. So, while early release is not a requirement to create positive behavioral changes for everyone, in every case, it has positive effects, namely in aiding personal growth, preparation for release, and engagement in prison.

### Additional Findings

Three additional findings emerged during the interview process that were beyond the scope of this research but due to their pervasiveness, necessitated attention. This section touches on each of the topics and lays the foundation for future investigation.

#### I. Additional Finding 1: Inadequate Post-Release Resources

The first additional finding reveals the inadequate resources provided for individuals released via early release mechanisms. While participants exclaimed that their “best day outside is better than the worst day in prison” (Connor, Ryan, Robert), their release proved difficult due to inadequate post-release resources, especially with regards to housing and marketable skills. As Robert detailed, “For the guys that got out on this decision, there was no process. There was nothing, you know, waiting for us - to support, to help support our transition back.”

Moreover, for many who were incarcerated for more than a decade, the world has drastically changed. The internet, pandemic, and social media have altered the way that individuals act and engage with the world around them. As Ryan put it, “Man, there’s a lot to



learn!” Additionally, without classes meant to familiarize individuals with technology, participants find themselves lost in a technologically dependent world: “There’s been a quantum leap in technology” (Connor); “I don’t know how to do anything, like I’m learning, but I’m still getting lost with my phone” (Ryan). While Connor relayed that there has been a DOC effort to incorporate technology classes for those with upcoming early release dates, none of the participants involved in the study mentioned such programming; their lack of involvement is likely because early release individuals are often prohibited from enrolling in ERD-based programming due to their life sentence.

While only one individual in this sample returned to prison for a violation of parole, that does not mitigate the difficulty that others experience post-release. Early release laws and pathways can be unpredictable, which may result in individuals not having adequate time to put together release plans and support networks. Without adequate resources, individuals struggle to re-enter society and increase their likelihood of recidivism. Future studies may explore the importance of expanding *all* prison programming, especially those that are skills-based, to individuals with life sentences, as well as providing tailored support classes that impart how to navigate the changes that occurred during a lengthy sentence.

## II. Additional Finding 2: The Importance of Support Networks

After codes of “hope” and “DOC violence,” “support network” was the third most frequent code in interviews, with a total frequency of 70 quotations. The importance of support networks emerged with respect to both inside and outside of prison.

Support networks inside of prison consisted of peers, DOC therapists, and programming heads. The importance of support networks inside of prison is illustrated by Jack, who explained

it was lifesaving: “I had some suicidal thoughts, thinking I would never get out, and instead of ... I asked for help for the first time. I talked to my group, my friends, and my therapist.” While this is an extreme example of the help a support network can provide, it appeared that generally, support networks were integral to participant’s experiences inside prison. Even in menial circumstances, such as “walking and talking with friends,” support networks served the purpose of reassurance, creating safer (although not entirely safe) spaces, and friendly interactions that were hard to come by in the prison (James). Moreover, as Samuel explained, support networks inside of prison provided friendships of understanding, whereby individuals understood the unique experiences of a prison in a way that support networks outside could not: “I think what helped me was my support group. I had people to talk to. I had people that had been in similar situations to talk to...the understanding that they had of me wouldn't allow me to give up and gave me a reason to keep hope alive.”

Support networks outside of prison consisted of family members, loved ones, individuals who had been formerly incarcerated with them, and legal teams. While support networks inside and outside served similar purposes, participants revealed that support networks outside were integral in providing resources they often had trouble securing themselves. This was especially true for Adam and James, whose support network outside consisted of a local nonprofit organization, The Seattle Clemency Project, and their assigned lawyer, which they credit with helping them provide stability, confidence, and eventually, release.

*Adam: “She (the lawyer) spent hours on the phone with me, questioning me, doing like a pre-hearing, super supportive like it was - so amazing and I told them that the most important part for me was having a lawyer in the room, so that the Board knows that*

*they're being watched because that carries so much weight because as an inmate, we don't have any legitimacy, you know what I mean, and they have really no fear of retribution but if a lawyer is present, and they know that there's people supporting you, they're like 'okay, we can't just do this guy bad' so that was really the most important part. But, it also helped with confidence, you know the fact that people were willing to help me. The work that they put in added to my hope. It was - it was - it was amazing."*

*James: The questions and everything that the lawyer had me do was very hopeful because it helped me prepare for something that was pretty hard for me to do. I'm not a very in-front, group person. I never have been. That would have been harder for me to not be prepared for that.*

Moreover, these support networks were not only able to provide support during an individual's incarceration but provided consistency during release and re-entry. For some, like Ryan, this enduring support completely changed their ability to access resources, gain employment, and stay out of prison.

*I was supported by the SCP so much - they've helped me so much - they got me a phone, a mental health therapist, and [they] helped me go after my 6 month vouchers so I got 9 months of rent covered, so I have time to actually keep on going and doing what I'm supposed to do so, I've just been blessed. It's such a - it's very, um, it almost makes me cry [tearing up] I get emotional just talking about it and it's nice to know how many*

*people believe in me and want me to succeed and I just want to validate their belief in me. And um, really, live up to that.*

Understanding the importance of support networks, future studies may explore linkages between hope and support networks, as well as the extent to which success post-release is tied to support networks. Additionally, understanding that individuals who have previously been incarcerated are often valuable members of a support network, future research may explore why many prisons bar individuals with convictions from visitation rights and how this may impact and/or disrupt support, especially for families with a history of incarceration.

### III. Additional Finding 3: The Aftermath of Learning of Life Sentence

Each interview started with general information gathering questions, such as a participant's original sentence length and what age they had been incarcerated at. When asked how they felt upon learning of their sentence, responses to the question were similar: individuals receiving a life or lengthy sentence, especially as a juvenile, were sent into a dissociative, depressed and/or confused state. As explained by one researcher, this state can be conceptualized as a "collapse," which is the "breakdown of life as one knew it" (Seeds 2022: 243). For some, this state of collapse was so overwhelming, they frantically turned to maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as a drug or alcohol dependency to survive their new reality.

The two main emotions described when individuals learned of their lengthy sentence was confusion and depression/numbness. Connor and Noah identified confusion as failing to understand the gravity of their sentence right away, given their sentence was longer than the time they had been alive: "I didn't understand how much time that was, because I wasn't even alive for

half of that. Similarly, Noah said “I couldn’t - I couldn’t completely see it... 75 years to a 16-year-old?”

Other participants described how learning of their sentence sent them into a deep depression. As Ryan explained, the sentence he received was so overbearing, it led him to suicidal ideation:

*I was just miserable - you know, you walk around like a zombie at first not knowing how to react, not knowing how to get on, you know? And I know there were a lot of - you know, negative thoughts, negative emotionality. I remember a couple times just sitting in my prison cell, when I first got to prison, with like a razor to my wrists and just praying for the cowardice just to do it*

While Eli did not express suicidal thoughts, he explained that learning of his sentence sent him into a depression that he was unable to shake for the first months of his time in prison.

*At first, I was devastated. Crushed. I didn’t even really know how to understand all of that, I mean. I kinda walked around for days for probably around 3-4 months, maybe even longer. The depression hit and sat pretty heavy for a while. I mean that’s what - when I first got my sentence, I really- I really felt really depressed. Dazed, really not in reality. I was walking around in my head just trying to get my head around the circumstance I found myself in.*

For some, this state of “collapse” was unbearable. Faced with overwhelming emotions and a violent new reality, Chris and Adam explained how they turned to flawed coping mechanisms in the form of drug and alcohol abuse:

*Chris: I was doing a lot of drugs, I shot a lot of heroin pretty much the entire time I was down there, so I had a really bad opiate addiction ... That was the purpose of them, being numb and being away and not part of those feelings and emotions and just - just disconnected.*

*Adam: I mean, I had smoked weed and sold weed before I went to prison. I was completely against hard drugs. I never tried, I had never even seen them. And then, in those first, say 2-4 years, I was like, I used drugs to deal with what I was dealing with, because I was a kid. I was kind of codependent, so I had codependency issues. I wasn't a very independent kid when I came in, so I latched on to people who were 40 and 50 years old, and learned the ways of prison, and didn't really understand my feelings or emotions, or how to deal with them, and so I turned to drugs, and I got addicted to meth.*

While Chris and Adam were eventually able to get clean during their incarceration, partly due to their hope for early release, being sentenced to life has catastrophic consequences, particularly for juveniles. The state of “collapse” can last for months, or in William’s case, ten years: “I mean, it actually took longer than I think to get out of it, cause there’s phases of it, you know, but when I really grasped it was probably like 10 years in.” Sentencing individuals to life, seems to initially preclude them from being an active member of their new reality. Future studies

may explore how long the reality of life sentences take to sink in and relatedly, how the process of coming to terms with a life sentence interrupts an ability's capacity to engage in programming and form support networks.

## Discussion and Future Directions

This study illuminates that while incredibly complex, charting hope when learning of early release reveals a similar trajectory: hope blossoms, hope is tempered, and hope impacts. Upon learning of early release, hope blossomed. However, that initial hope was tempered by institutional factors in the form of perceived unfairness in the legal system and/or DOC abuse. Coming to terms with their violent environment, hope became qualified in a “hope for the best, expect the worst” mentality. However, even when tempered and suppressed, hope had powerful effects on individual's trajectories in prison. While hope led many to pursue different avenues of change (i.e., leaving gangs, getting sober, taking courses), it led to overall positive changes that were conducive both to achieving and sustaining release. While hope for early release is not the only element that leads to behavioral changes, it is a significant motivating force. By exploring how hope can create positive change, this study also suggests that tempered hope may therefore disrupt an individual's motivation to change.

The findings also indicate that some individuals, especially juveniles, who are given life sentences at their sentencing are sent into a dissociative state. This has implications for sentencing policies. If a life sentence can disrupt an individual's ability to participate in prison for up to 10 years, it indirectly fosters violence inside the prison. Additionally, knowing that individuals are likely to make positive changes when they have a legitimate hope for early

release indicate that life sentences are antithetical to self-improvement and positive behavioral changes. This is not to say that individuals cannot make positive changes with a life sentence, but my findings suggest that individuals with long, determinate sentences with no avenues for recourse are more likely to develop negative attitudes, maladaptive behaviors, and engage in increased violence. However, if individuals have access to post-conviction sentence review and mechanisms for release, or even a sentence with a release date, these negative developments would likely be mitigated. It is when individuals have hope for a life post-sentence that a majority are motivated to make sustainable changes that not only lead to release but sustain a prosocial life outside of prison.

My second main finding - that hope is tempered by institutional factors - has important implications for DOC policies. Those incarcerated report watching as the DOC forcibly medicate, beat, sexually assault, give infractions at whim, and take bribes from their peers. However, when an individual tries to speak of the injustice, they are either segregated in solitary confinement or ignored. Many DOC policies and practices temper hope and consequently, further negative behavioral adaptations. Knowing that hope spurs positive changes, it would be useful for the DOC to actively encourage hope and opportunities that make hope realistic. This would entail changing the DOC culture so that practices like beating and intentionally disqualifying prisoners from early release are eliminated, as well as changing DOC policies, like Policy 500.000, to disregard the low priority programming level for individuals with life and lengthy sentences. Washington Department of Corrections may look to other correctional facilities to best implement these policy and practice changes and be assured by dated studies that report positive effects of these changes on prison behavior (Elbers et al. 2022). Moreover, DOC policy and practice changes would also begin to restore trust between the DOC and those



inside, which is currently fragmented. This restoration of trust may also help to create a prison environment that allows hope to flourish.

While each participant provided valuable insight to this study, future research would most likely benefit from a larger, more gender-diverse sample of participants. This larger sample may shed insights into gendered experiences of hope, and relatedly, if gender plays a role in hope generation and fluctuation. Moreover, this research takes place with individuals who received and served a majority of their sentence in Washington state. However, penal institutions and regimes may shape hope for incarcerated individuals (Seeds 2022; Crewe et al. 2020). As such, future research across the United States may reveal interesting geographical differences and/or similarities.

Despite limitations, this research illuminates the important role that hope plays when an individual learns of early release. And knowing that hope can be a powerful motivator, this research prompts the future question: what could hope do for the incarcerated population if it was not tempered?

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