Problematizing Perpetual Punishment: Tensions and Impacts Across News Reports and Lived Realities of the Canadian Life Sentence

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Abstract

Life sentences are poorly understood across public and policy spheres; however, the sentence's application continues to rise. Presently, 27.8% of the federal prison population are sentenced to life imprisonment. To generate insight into the sentence and address the dearth of research surrounding it, this paper presents findings from a qualitative content analysis of 46 news articles about life-sentenced people gaining parole. Media analysis is a fertile ground for this investigation, as media is a powerful, socially-organizing force with the potential to sway public opinions and influence policy. Results demonstrate that news media does not focus on the actual context of the sentence, nor the composition of who receives it. Instead, life-sentenced people are portrayed as archetypal killers who commit egregious violence and who are purported to present indefinite risk. Ultimately, this study finds that the news reports analyzed here seek to communicate a systemic failure in the application of justice, which functions to legitimatize calls for increased state power and punitiveness.

Keywords: life-sentence; carceral; Canada; sentencing; frame analysis

Introduction

Although 27.8% of Canada's federally-sentenced population have life sentences (Public Safety Canada, 2022), there is a dearth of data about them. The last dedicated Public Safety study into the impacts of life sentences dates back to 1991 (Porporino, 1991). Their absence as a research priority is striking, as the sentence constitutes the harshest punishment allowed within the law; it is imposed until a person's death and excludes the potential of reintegration, upon which the

prison system is premised (Canada, 2023). While every life-sentenced person is given a "possibility of parole" eligibility date, this does not guarantee they will gain parole. Those who do gain parole remain under strict surveillance until their death or return to prison for breaching their conditions (Parole Board of Canada, 2023). Despite the severity of life sentences, they are poorly represented in public and political narratives, with myths abounding that life sentences are not imposed for the duration of a person's life (Parole Board of Canada, 2023) and, more broadly, that Canada is "soft on crime" (Varma & Marinos, 2013).

To begin advancing insight into life sentences and addressing the paucity of research on life sentences in Canada, this study seeks to answer how life sentences are framed in Canadian news media. Our research considers how 46 news reports frame life sentenced people being granted parole in Canada. We begin by providing insight into what is known about life sentences in Canada and offer context into the broader culture of incarceration that the sentence is situated within. Next, we introduce the influential relationship between news headlines about incarceration and penal outcomes to highlight the value of media analysis in socio-legal inquiry. We then present the findings of our qualitative frame analysis, followed by a consideration of the implications of this framing.

Understanding Life Sentences in Canada

In 2019, Van Zyl Smit and Appleton published a global comparative analysis of life sentences and their varied specificities and parameters, from which Canada was excluded as result of a lack of coherent data about its application of the sentence. Despite the dearth of data, the nearly 27% of Canada's federal prison population who have life sentences (Public Safety Canada, 2022) represents a figure that has increased starkly since the sentence formally replaced the death penalty in 1979 (Parkes, Sprott & Grant, 2022). In addition to becoming more prevalent, life sentences have become increasingly restrictive over time, with longer periods of ineligibility being imposed at sentencing and people spending more years incarcerated past their eligibility dates before being granted parole (Parkes, Sprott & Grant, 2022).

Life-sentenced people must spend a period of between 10 to 25 years in prison before they become legally eligible to apply for parole. The possibility of parole constitutes the most liberty they can ever attain (Parole Board of Canada, 2023). As of April 2021, 61.9% of all life-sentenced people in Canada were in custody, while 38.1% were on parole in the community (Public Safety Canada, 2023). Limited ethnographic research has focused on reintegration outcomes. Murphy, Johnsen and Murphy's (2002) text, *Paroled for Life,* presents interviews with nine individuals who were sentenced to life and on parole; Munn and Bruckert's (2013) study, which considers parole after lengthy incarceration and interviews 20 individuals, 16 of whom have life sentences, closely relates to this research . Munn and Bruckert find individuals living in "fragile freedom," where individuals face ''a profound sense of being abnormal, of being outside, of not belonging, despite their efforts to manage identity and accumulate assets'' (p. 169). Both studies noted experiences characterized by economic instability, ongoing stigma, and fear of reincarceration (Munn & Bruckert, 2013; Murphy, Johnsen & Murphy, 2002). Additionally, life-parole has been described through one public account by Indigenous woman and author, Yvonne Johnson, as "existing in a state of survival" (Johnson & Scout, 2011). Johnson correlates conditions of life sentence parole as a direct extension of colonial harm (Johnson & Scout, 2011).

Canada's Carceral Space

The populations who experience incarceration represent the most disadvantaged communities in Canada (Cote-Clussier, 2016; Kish, 2021; Pollack, 2014). Fifty percent of all people in prisons designated for women are Indigenous, as are over 30% of federally incarcerated people overall, despite Indigenous people comprising only approximately five percent of the general population in Canada (Public Safety Canada, 2022; Zinger, 2023). The average education level at sentencing is less than grade eight (Lea, 2023) and the majority of people who become incarcerated have histories of addiction, mental illness, and are survivors of physical and/or sexual violence (Sapers, 2016; Zinger, 2020).

Canada's carceral system is often characterized by a contradiction between its listed purpose, which prioritizes reintegration and rehabili-

tation (Canada, 2022), and practices which are driven by objectives of punishment (Gray & Salole, 2005; Kish, 2021; O'Malley, 2014; Pollack, 2014). This conflict has led to what O'Malley (2004) describes as a system of incoherence. Interestingly, the practical difference between rehabilitation and punishment has been challenged (Brown, 2009; Duguid, 2000). As far back as 2000, Stephen Duguid grappled with how the rehabilitative and punishment models seemingly pose as competitors in a Canadian context, but both function similarly to make incarcerated people passive in processes of criminalization. Since the mid-2000s, however, the objectives of punishment in policy have been more starkly pronounced, aptly summarized by Webster and Doob (2015):

> From the mid-19th century until 2006, Canadian official policy statements (from both Liberal and Conservative governments) made it clear that offending was seen as largely socially determined and that it was the state's responsibility to try to reintegrate those who offend back into mainstream society. In this context, imprisonment was seen as a necessary evil, to be avoided wherever possible … since 2006 … the policy elite in Canada has taken the position that those who commit offences are inherently 'bad' people and qualitatively different from 'ordinary law abiding' Canadians (p. 299).

The move toward greater punitiveness culminated in 2011, when the Omnibus crime Bill C-10 instituted sweeping restrictive changes into Canada's salient legislation regulating incarceration, the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act* (see Dawn & Goodman, 2017; Piché, 2015), and was accompanied by a host of program and budget cuts to services provided to federally incarcerated people (Lemonde, 2016; Piché, 2015).

Across these changes, the system's overarching requirement to be rehabilitative in nature by facilitating the gradual release and community reintegration of people has not been similarly augmented. People in prison – including those with life sentences – cannot sit idly in prison and receive punishment. They must work from the commencement of their sentence toward the reintegrative goal of achieving parole. Yet, this task presents as nearly Sisyphean, as penitentiary conditions are harsh, chaotic, and unstable (Iftene, 2021; Kish, 2021),

and largely deny determinants of wellness such as physical safety, privacy, access to family and community, meaningful self-development, vocational development, economic security, etc. (Hansen, 2018; Iftene, 2021; Kish, 2021). People experience immense violence, isolation, and limited amounts of nutritious foods (Hansen, 2018; Zinger, 2020), and as a result, they undergo pronounced stress, mental and physical illness, and accelerated aging processes overall (Iftene, 2021).

Those who overcome the penitentiary environment and gain parole enter what Allspach (2010) describes as a "transcarceral landscape"; a precarious, limited version of liberty within the community, where people remain under the authority of carceral agents who monitor and limit their movement, actions, and community ties, and who always hold discretionary power to reincarcerate them. The Parole Board of Canada (2023) confirm parole's restrictive nature, "people on parole as well as on statutory release must remain within a specific area determined by their CSC parole supervisor. In other words, they are usually restricted to the area of residence and of work and they must remain in Canada" (paragraph 20, lines 1-3).

Beyond the conflict between rehabilitation and punishment in the policy sphere, the nature of incarceration in Canada is often confused and misrepresented in public and political narratives. Many news headlines can be found suggesting that Canada is "soft on crime" (Higgins, 2023; see also Goldstein, 2023). In 2015, the conservative government even introduced a "life means life" act, calling for life sentences without the possibility of parole to apply to many convictions. However, because life sentences are imposed until a person dies, life does mean life, and always has.

Media Narratives and Justice Outcomes in Canada

Media is a powerful socially-organizing force. News analysis has the potential to unpack socio-political issues and tensions beneath the headlines (Xiao, 2020), and to "answer questions about how controversies surrounding issues of public concern are played out, who are identified as key stakeholders, and how their positions within the controversy are constructed. News analysis can also establish what

issues and stakeholders are ignored" (Hodgett & Chamberlain, 2017, p.2).

In Canada, numerous examples point toward the influence that media attention has on justice policy outcomes, demonstrating the importance that inquiry into the role media plays in influencing carceral policy. For example, in 1994, the airing of conditions in Kingston's Prison for Women on primetime television led to a massive public outcry for changes to conditions of incarceration for women in Canada, toward a more rehabilitative approach (Arbour, 1996; Moffatt, 2002). Subsequently, news media attention about a strong rehabilitative approach in prisons designated for women led to restrictions in how incarcerated women could spend leisure time (Pedlar, Arai & Yuen, 2007). In 2023, public reaction following extensive news media coverage of the transfer of a high-profile prisoner from maximum to medium security led to a federal cabinet shuffle, and pending amendments to the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act*, (Fullerton, 2023). Also in 2023, national media attention about a small number of crimes committed by people on bail led to the passing of Bill C-48, which imposed restrictive "reverse-onus" changes to the Criminal Code, which many scholars and advocates publicly called against (see, for example, Cross, Kish & Owens, 2023; Rahim, Aviv, Coyle, Kish & Latimer, 2023).

Understanding that the media does not simply share factual accounts with the public, but that they construct intentional narratives is key to understanding the media's influence on justice outcomes (Xian, 2020). As Hodgett and Chamberlain (2017) note, "news does not simply 'select' and 'report' … News 'constructs' events and relationships between groups of people," (p.2) and Goffman's (1976) concept of framing provides an apt foundation to both understand and analyze the ways in which media constructs phenomenon.

Methods

Frame Analysis

Goffman's (1976) text *Frame Analysis* posed the sociological question "what's really going on here?" to introduce framing as a key persuasive process in communication. Framing is the act of presenting an experience or phenomenon within a conceptual parameter, which

assigns specific meanings and priorities to it (Perrson, 2019). A frame imposes specific assumptions, priorities, and conclusions within messages: "[w]ithin the frame exists or is created a certain meaning. One might think of the frame of a painting that frames and thus emphasises one thing and excludes other things" (Perrson, 2019, p.55). How something is framed dictates the boundaries through which it will become seen and known (Goffman, 1976).

This work has led to a body of literature that takes up the analysis of frames, especially in professionalized and influential communications such as news reports (Xiao, 2020; see also Perrson, 2019). By considering what frames news media impose on the reports they produce, scholars can uncover what biases and political and ideological agendas are going on behind the frames (Xiao, 2020; see also Entman, 2007; Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011). Entman's (2007) work on understanding frames offers that "fully developed frames" follow a functional pattern; frames provide "problem definition, causal analysis, moral judgment, and remedy promotion" (p.165). Entman advocates that there is a need for scholars to "assess the larger theoretical implication … of consistent one-sided framing" (p.165).

Sample Criteria and Characteristics

The data set for this study is comprised of 46 Canadian news articles focused on instances of life-sentenced individuals gaining parole. Sample criteria was restricted to selecting unique cases (i.e. no duplications of the same person being granted parole reported on by multiple news sources) within the 12-month period between February 2022 and February 2023. Only reports published about instances in Canada were selected, so that we could delve into the relationship between public framings and the judicial and penal culture in a dedicated Canadian context. This sample was drawn from two sources, Nexus UNI and Google. Within Nexus UNI, a search was conducted using the criteria "news; newspapers" and the keywords "life sentence parole granted". After exclusions, 46 articles were selected for analysis. A Google search using the same keywords was subsequently conducted to ensure that Nexus UNI results represent material found in popular search results, and this was confirmed.

While the articles appear, at first glance, to represent various municipal and national news media sources (for example, *The Toronto Sun*, *The Toronto Star*, the *Victoria Times Columnist*, the *Lethbridge Herald*, etc.), analysis revealed that 31 out of 46 (67.39%) of all articles captured in the dataset are produced by one parent company, Postmedia Network. The remaining articles are produced by 10 additional parent companies, totaling only 11 voices representing the sample (see also Appendix 1 for the distribution table of companies). The sample is comprised of short length news reports; there are no editorial or investigative reports in our analysis. This is not the product of exclusionary criteria, but rather an absence of such reports in our search results.

Qualitative Content Analysis

To apply a systematic approach to our frame analysis, we apply the tenets of qualitative content analysis (Schrier, 2019). Qualitative content analysis (QCA) is a method that uses systematic, reductive processes for understanding and organizing meaning within data (Assarroudi, Nabavi, Armat, Ebadi & Vaismoradi 2018; Prasad, 2019; Schrier, 2019; Zaidman-Zait, 2014). QCA is a relevant method for the study of news media, having been developed directly out of quantitative content analysis, both of which originally formed as methods to understand the phenomena and influence of news media as it emerged in post-industrial form (Schrier, 2019, p.3). QCA is also flexible (Schrier, 2014 & 2019), making it popular across fields that draw upon qualitative research, as it is "not reliant upon a specific epistemological orientation; it's procedure-focused nature well positions it to be applied within a diversity of research programmes" (Schrier, 2019, p.3). After inductively open-coding 20 articles, codes were iteratively evaluated and augmented during analysis of the remaining 26 articles. This iterative meaning-making process continually deepened, and literature and insight was layered within, through to the completion of this text's production.

Ethical Considerations

This study relies on the analysis of existing, publicly available information. As such, anonymity and confidentiality of individuals and communities represented in the articles are not guaranteed. However,

because this study relies on analysis of highly-publicized accounts of actual occurrences, efforts have been made to present information in a manner consistent with the ethical objectives outlined within the Tri Council Policy Statement (2019). The Tri-Council Policy Statement is a joint policy developed by Canada's three federal research agencies, which outlines standards of ethical research involving human beings. This is an important mechanism to avoid the reproduction of harm in the detailing of our data and results. To this end, all names of individuals are excluded from the findings.

Results

An Emotive, Repetitive, Homogeneous Frame

Analysis demonstrated a strong homogeneity across the structure and content presented within the 46 articles examined. While the articles each deal with a different conviction, the reports predominantly focus on men who have been convicted of egregious acts of premeditated violence. They begin with summaries of the events for which the life-sentenced people were convicted:

> *A man who stabbed his wife to death on a busy Winnipeg street in 1994 has been granted day parole.*

> *Family members of a woman brutally murdered in Saskatoon more than 20 years ago say they are devastated the man convicted in her death has received day parole against their wishes and the advice of Correctional Service Canada.*

In many instances, the summaries are written emotively, with typifying terms such as "killer" and "murderer" heavily relied upon. Opening summaries rely on sensational words and phrases such as the terms "terrified" and "unsuspecting": "*For more than 37 years,* [name of individual] *has been terrified of the day his sister's killer would be released back into an unsuspecting community."*

Each summary also includes how many years ago the events occurred: *"After numerous bids, a man convicted of brutally killing a mother in her home in Terrace in 1998 has been granted day parole."* However, though the opening lines of each article include the length of time since conviction, time is mentioned only passively. The significance of time becomes lost within the horrific details that

are prefaced, and the articles do not continue to substantively discuss the length of time since conviction, nor the impacts of time. Instead, they focus almost solely on historic details. Consider these four segments:

> *Working alone overnight, with only six hours training, was* [name of individual] *a new criminology graduate.* [name of individual]*, on booze and drugs, sexually assaulted and killed the lone supervisor, leaving her body in a basement storage room, then escaping to his girlfriend's home.*

> [Name of individual] *was 17 when, armed with a knife, he broke into the home of neighbour* [name of individual] *in December 1998 with the intent of stealing from her. When* [name of individual] *woke up to find him in her house,* [name of individual] *stabbed her about 83 times.* [name of individual's] *seven-year-old daughter found her dead the next day.*

> *"If I can't have you," he vowed, "then no one else can." With the help of his cousin,* [name of individual] *made good on his death threat more than 27 years ago, slaughtering his ex-girlfriend* [name of individual] *and her younger sister* [name of individual] *in a bloody massacre of gratuitous, rage-fuelled violence.*

> *As* [name of individual]*, 23, set off across Canada, he kept a chilling diary along the way: "Killing* [name of individual] *didn't seem so wrong," he wrote. "It didn't hurt as much as I thought." And in another entry, "I wonder how long it will be until I get caught," he mused. "I'm feeling the urge to kill again." So he did. Three days later, he took* [name of individual] *a pregnant 17-year-old sex worker, back to his Halifax hotel room, where he struck her on the head with a telephone receiver and smothered her with a pillow.*

Following introductory summaries, the articles focus on segments detailing extremely violent content. The scope of each segment involves a particularly egregious act of prolific and premeditated violence, and segments of text such as the excerpts above represent the majority of content in the articles. The tone of the writing in these segments is intensely sensational, as evidenced through phrasing such as "*a bloody*

massacre of gratuitous, rage-fuelled violence," and they are present-
ed with a strong level of description and detail.

Following substantial descriptions of historic crimes, the articles pro-
vide a few sentences about the individual's trial, include a few seg-
ments about the parole board hearing, and, in many cases, briefly de-
scribe select parole conditions. A few outlying examples mention
positive attributes that are related to a person, but always in relation-
ship to the historic conviction, within a discourse of risk, as demon-
strated in these segments:

> *His risk was considered lower if housed in a long-term care facil-
> ity rather than a domestic situation. That's because a psycholo-
> gist recently described him as 'an untreated perpetrator of do-
> mestic violence who continues to struggle with emotional regula-
> tion'.*

> *Psychological risk assessments through the years have rated his
> risk of reoffending as extremely high in 2003, high in 2004, and
> moderate in 2014 and 2019. While in prison there have been in-
> cidents of violence, drinking hand sanitizer, leaving minimum se-
> curity institutions without authorization, questionable associa-
> tions, and allegations of moving contraband around the institu-
> tion.*

Despite some reference to certain conditions associated with an indi-
vidual's parole, the articles do not provide any context or insight into
the nature or characteristics of parole itself. Overall, parole is posi-
tioned as a type of freedom: *"In asking jurors to deny her application*
[seeking earlier parole eligibility]*, [the crown] *said* [name of individ-
ual] *may deserve a gold star on her prison report card for her at-
tempts to better herself, but she hadn't earned a golden ticket to free-
dom."* While some articles position parole as freedom, many more
convey in their latter sections an outright hostility toward it.

A *Proving* Frame: Positioning Parole as a Failure of Justice

The articles convey an overall hostility toward the granting of parole,
even in instances where some positive context is mentioned in rela-
tion to the reduction of the "risk for reoffending." Life-sentence pa-

role is messaged consistently as an occurrence contrary to the benefit of society:

> *It seems like yesterday that* [he] *had finally exhausted all his appeals and was serving his life sentence, safely locked away, out of sight if not out of mind, as the teens' parents and friends struggled to move on from the horrific murders of two promising young women.*

> *But time moves too quickly for a double killer now poised to seek release back into the community he devastated. Because life never means life at all.*

> *In 10 days time, the Sun has learned* [that the individual]*, now 46, is scheduled to appear before the Parole Board of Canada at his minimum security prison to argue that he's ready for freedom – even if he still places most of the blame on someone else and denies even being at the scene of the bloody crime.*

None of the articles impart to audiences the context regarding parole – that it is a central goal of Canada's prison system – nor do they impart a context encouraging audiences to conclude that parole is the appropriate decision. The message in this frame is that paroled individuals are not welcome back into society. Instead, the presence of parole becomes an indication of a failure of justice. This message is achieved in multiple ways throughout in the sample. It is achieved in part through segments of text that call for longer, harsher sentences: "*There needs to be more measures to ensure our voices are heard by the parole system and longer sentences for those who perpetrate violence against Indigenous women and girls. Sentences don't seem to be a deterrent,"* and it is also achieved through the presentation of victims of crime as being categorically opposed to parole:

> *He said there will be a large RCMP presence front and centre to make sure the parole board never grants him the light of day.*

> [Name of organization] *strongly opposes* [name of individual's] *early release.* [Name of individual] *said "lack of compassion and rehabilitation in this crime shows the perpetrator deserves the maximum time behind bars".*

> *"I was, again, having to go through writing the victim impact statements and attending his parole hearing,"* she said. *"It doesn't get easier for victims. We serve a life sentence fighting to get justice for our loved ones who were violently taken away from us."*
>
> *"I saw it coming,"* he said with a sigh. *"It's a helpless feeling; he's had 37 years to figure out how to convince them to let him out."*
>
> *"Despite the years of suffering he has put his family and so many in our community through over the past quarter-century, he continues to insist on his innocence and push for parole terms that cater to his personal preferences with no regard for anyone else."*
>
> "*The feeling is that he's absolved of his crime, and that is repugnant to us," said* [name of individual].

These segments establish a rationale that parole is a failure as the release of individuals on parole is a source of ongoing harm. In addition, parole is subtly entrenched as failure through the discourse of ongoing risk. Erasing the concept of rehabilitation and/or "having served one's time," risk is presented as permanent and ongoing. Levels of risk are repeatedly noted in the articles, emphasizing that risk continues when someone is released from prison: *"A 2020 psychological assessment found* [name of individual] *to be at "a moderate to high risk for violence."* This sentiment reinforces the idea that people convicted of crimes did not just do something illegal, but that they are inherently deviant. When life-sentenced people are granted parole, this framing inspires the conclusion of a failure – or at least questioning – of the state's ability to keep the public safe. Of course, the public assumed here is the "law-abiding public," who life-sentenced people on parole are constructed to be forever differentiated and separated from.

Discussion

The articles analyzed here contribute to a distinct structure that constitutes a homogeneous news frame about life-sentenced individuals gaining parole. Notably, there were no different frames available for

comparative analysis in our sample. Instead, the chorus of reports put forward one specific, oversimplified, and typifying message suggesting people who receive life sentences in Canada deserve them because of the egregious violence they are convicted of, that their eventual release on parole causes further suffering, and that they present an ongoing risk to the public. This is a powerful frame, as it implies a failure of the state to protect the public, which is a failure of a foundational obligation of the state. In order to arrive at this persuasive conclusion, the frame excludes and erases a host of salient and complex considerations relating to life sentences.

Erasure of Complexity About Who Receives Life Sentences and Why

The framing of these articles distorts the public image of *who* receives life sentences in Canada. The individuals represented in the frames constitute the architype of folk devil; the murderer-Other who has been uncovered in previous literature (Fyfe, 2014). Almost all of the articles analyzed in this sample report on men who are convicted of first-degree murder in extreme acts of sexual and physical violence, primarily against women. Though premeditated murder convictions represent only outlying cases in the Canadian courts overall (Public Safety Canada, 2022), they overwhelm news media coverage and reinforce the public image of who is associated with life sentences.

As of March 31, 2022, there were 5,068 life-sentenced individuals in Canada (Public Safety Canada, 2022). 3,592, or 70.9% of them, were not convicted of first-degree murder, but of the lesser second-degree murder, where a conviction resulted from a death that occurred without prior intent. An additional 191 individuals (or 3.9%) held life sentences for "other offences" which can involve a number of additional lesser charges (Public Safety Canada, 2022). Only one quarter (or 1,285 people) who held life sentences did so for first-degree murder convictions (Public Safety Canada, 2022) and of that population, a much smaller figure likely represents the types of acts focused on in this sample.

By focusing only on egregious and outlying cases, the news media frame creates a dangerous oversimplification. It paints a picture ab-

sent of a background – a subject who sits dislocated from social context, within the frame *only* by the extreme deviance of their actions. A growing body of literature suggests a number of life sentences result from "shaky convictions" (Roach, 2023) and that widespread systemic discrimination is contributing to an abundance of wrongful convictions at the murder level (Roach, 2023; see also Pate, 2022). Also unrecognized in the public framing is that a number of life sentences result from events that occurred when someone was significantly intoxicated, from instances of unrecognized self-defence (Pate, 2022; Roach, 2023).

The picture painted – the calculated male who has committed terrible violence – conceivably contributes to the dearth of research priorities surrounding life sentences. Perhaps there would be greater public concern about punishment for life if more people were aware of the actual characteristics of the life-sentenced population, who are also overwhelmingly characterized by those same demographic characteristics broadly plaguing the prison population: people who are cumulatively disadvantaged across class, race, and other social locations. According to the Corrections and Conditional Release Overview (2022), between 2010 and 2022, 61% of life-sentenced women were Indigenous.

The frame also focuses heavily on the presentation of victims and perpetrators of crime as being dichotomous. It depicts victims as being in staunch opposition to the release of life-sentenced people. However, this framing dangerously diguises the fact that over half of individuals who receive prison sentences nationally are survivors of physical and/or sexual victimization themselves (Sapers, 2016). The frame further ignores the many instances of restorative and transformative justice processes in Canada that involve life-sentenced people, where victims of crime mediate, receive supportive services from, and sometimes even come to be supports for life-sentenced people (Flett, 2015; see also CBC, 2017).

The Erasure of Systemic Context

Beyond erasing who receives life sentences from public thought, the frame fails to inform the Canadian public of what parole is and how difficult it is for individuals to gain. Parole is the overarching goal

and desired outcome of the prison system, as gradual release from prison creates the most beneficial impacts to public safety and is presented as being essential for rehabilitation (Canada, 2022). Yet, throughout the articles examined, the processes of parole are never explained. Even a brief description of the Correctional Service of Canada's risk rating would help the Canadian public understand there is not a possibility of any federally-incarcerated person to be determined as "no risk". The scale ranges from high to low, and every person must be measured by a level of risk within this range (Kish, 2021). Further, parole is only granted if a host of objectives have been met, objectives that are tremendously difficult to achieve amid the chaotic conditions of incarceration (Kish, 2021). Finally, life-parole itself is a restrictive experience and ongoing form of punishment (Parole Board of Canada, 2023), as articulated by the Board itself:

> A life sentence means life. Lifers will never again enjoy total freedom … Lifers can only be released from prison if granted parole by the Board … If granted parole they will remain subject to the conditions of parole and the supervision of a CSC parole officer for the rest of their lives. Parole may be revoked and offenders returned to prison at any time if they violate the conditions of parole or commit a new offence. Not all lifers will be granted parole. Some may never be released on parole because they continue to represent too great a risk to re-offend (paragraphs 37-39).

By failing to include relevant systemic context about the nature of incarceration or parole, the intensity of parole's restrictiveness, or the hurdles individuals must overcome to gain parole (Kish, 2021) after having spent one's vocational and family-building years in a small cell (Munn & Bruckert, 2013), parole is erroneously presented as a type of freedom. Indeed, it has been described in one news report within our sample as a "golden ticket to freedom." Substantively, as the Parole Board of Canada excerpt above emphatically advises, parole is far from freedom.

Erasure of Time

The articles begin with summaries of historic, horrific crimes that led to the convictions where life sentences were imposed. The focus on a historic action – in many articles dating three to four decades earlier – combined with an absence of additional information and context about their lives, subsequently serves to erase the importance of temporal considerations. It erases the very real ways that human beings change over time, presenting the violent events described from decades past as if they could have happened yesterday.

The absence of considering time becomes even more curious in this frame because time is the currency that has legitimized incarceration as the fair and impartial sanction for law-breaking (Foucault, 1976). The passing of time is supposed to be synonymous with the payment of social debt. For a system premised on the notion of time, it is striking that none of the articles meaningfully grapple with the impacts of aging processes that still occur inside prisons (Iftene, 2021), the many ways human beings change over time, or the notion of the forfeiture of time as an appropriate payment for harm caused. Two outlying instances reference that individuals were terminally or chronically ill, but in the same way that time is only referenced passively, so too are their health conditions.

The individuals portrayed in these articles are constructed statically; their releases from prison are directly juxtaposed against their historic convictions, with no consideration for the many ways people's characters and circumstances change over time. Price (2015) notes that there are not entrenched positive symbolic processes attached to social reintegration; the act of incarceration is an act of social death, and social death persists upon release. Yet, the frame constructs parole as if individuals have "beat the system" by eventually being granted a restrictive release into a form of community incarceration, after being imprisoned for decades.

The character of the sample, through its focus only on instances where particularly egregious historic violence have occurred, moves beyond descriptive reporting and establishes a persuasive rationale that the release of life-sentenced individuals on parole is a source of ongoing harm, and more broadly, a failure on the justice system to

protect the public. The goal of the media reports in the sample appears not to inform audiences of all of the relevant information concerning the release of a person on parole, but – consistent with Entman's (2007) findings on the functions of frames – to demonstrate a problem with the justice system and to persuade audiences how to orient their conclusions about the issue. Life-sentence parole is a qualifying example of broader systemic failure; the individuals who committed egregious violence are not the subjects being problematized, rather it is the justice system itself that is problematic. The conclusion readers are persuaded to accept is the need for a more systemic punishment apparatus, a harsher system to resolve the injustice of the dangerous murderers going "free".

What Conditions Produce the Homogenous Structure?

Typifying, sensational framings are not limited to issues of crime and punishment. Block (2013) finds that media portrayals have a broad tendency to reduce people and phenomenon to archetypal simplifications divorced from nuance and complexity. Moreover, the homogenous structure across the reports has evidence in institutional theory, which offers that homogenous tendencies are prevalent across professionalized institutions and their practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Specific to news media, Bennett (1997) developed a framework that maps the predictably homogenous formats that news reporting follow, dubbed "contemporary news rules," which include "basing stories on official sources; indexing views according to the magnitude and content of conflicts between these sources; following the trail of power; [and sic] narrating stories according to the prevailing customs of the political culture" (Ryfe, 2006, p.205). However, explanations rooted in the broader institutional logics of the field of news media do not disqualify the impacts of these tendencies. Interestingly, the homogenous structure the articles follow reveals their pattern of not following an *objective* writing format, but a *persuasive* one. The homogeneity of the sample made the rhetorical devices, premises, and conclusions easily identifiable in ways that may have been harder to unpack if there were diversity to the tone or format of the articles analyzed.

The Proving Frame: Implications

Instead of meaningfully informing the public about the context and nature of life sentences – which could in turn provide a venue for much-needed public dialogue about the implications of perpetual punishment – the news reports analyzed in our research support Entman's (2007) findings of the functional utility in news media framing: the construction of social problems. The problem defined in this frame is a flawed justice system, evidenced through the release of dangerous threats into the community. These actions are morally denounced through a significant focus on details of egregious violence and the ongoing suffering of victims. The conclusion of the frame is a resulting call for a more restrictive system and an expansion of state power.

The presentation of life-sentenced people who gain parole as a source of risk and suffering creates doubt in the appearance of the state's ability to meet its fundamental obligation to provide safety. News media portrayals of life-sentenced people are reductive and archetypal; they are framed to represent "the worst of the worst", which has the potential to increase social appetite for retribution and provides the state with the opportunity to become more punitive. As illustrated in the introduction of our paper, there are numerous examples of legislative and policy changes following significant news media attention about the justice system, and there is evidence of similar relationships between media and policy outcomes in the United States (US) and beyond (see Xiao, 2020, pp.110-112). In a sense, policy reaction is a logical response; the legal system is the salient institution through which the state demonstrates its ability to maintain domestic order. The state has every interest in defensively championing its efficacy in relation to this goal (Foucault, 1976).

This insight is supported by Foucault's work, introduced through his famous lecture *Society Must be Defended* (1976), where he locates the racialized and disadvantaged composition of prison populations as a structurally racist process in the function of order. Racialized bodies become used to constructing a "problem" to which the state must respond, a constructed deviance that has been dubbed a productive power for the state (Tiethof, 2016).

Limitations

While it was anticipated that there would be some substantive differences in framing and the nature of information included – especially differences between tabloid sources such as the Toronto Sun, and more historically-balanced and objective sources such as the Toronto Star – there were not. Common messaging and conclusions about life-sentenced people gaining parole underpin each news story and are delivered through a common format, producing one homogenous frame. Additionally, data collection procedures did not exclude alternative media, although this did not return any results. Accordingly, comparative analysis was not possible.

Conclusion

Scholars of frame analysis argue that media frames should be more carefully considered in terms of the influence they wield in social, cultural, and political systems (Xiao, 2020; see also Entman, 2007). We call for more dedicated research into news framings in a Canadian context to increase consideration of potential links between news reporting, punitive justice, and public safety policy directions. By casting life-sentenced people as the dangerous murderer-threat who is extremely deserving of punishment, and by arguing judicial and prison systems are too lenient, the news media frame hides the intensely restrictive life-long conditions placed on many of Canada's most disadvantaged people. While challenging the efficacy of the state in a way that invites the deepening of restrictive structures, it creates opportunity for the system to codify reactions to exaggerated threats.

Through our examination of 46 news media articles about life-sentenced individuals who gain parole in Canada, our emergent insights show that news reports about this population do not paint an accurate picture, nor a picture that would support informed public opinion. Regardless of the fact that life sentences are inflicted as a perpetual punishment upon disadvantaged and largely racialized communities, and despite a dearth in research regarding their use and efficacy, the prevalence and pervasiveness of life sentences continues to increase (Parkes, Sprott & Grant, 2022). This trend cannot be understood in isolation from the public about framings of life sentences.

Beyond examinations of media framings, further research is needed to address a host of issues related to these findings. Dedicated research into the impacts of how Canadian media reports on life sentences for Indigenous Peoples is needed given the alarming rise in incarceration and life sentence rates of Indigenous Peoples. More broadly, we call for research into all domains of the life sentence. If Canada is to place increasing numbers of people under perpetual punishment, we must understand the implications and outcomes of doing so. Future research into life sentences is ripe with opportunity to consider salient questions such as: Are life sentences just? Is parole-for-life fair or reasonable to impose? Do life sentences reproduce colonial logics against Indigenous Peoples? And finally, what does the practice of perpetual punishment reveal about Canadian society?

Appendix 1

Table 1. Distribution of companies represented in sample

Parent	Name	Geographic Distribution	Instances
Postmedia Network	Postmedia Breaking News	National	11
	The Star Phoenix	Saskatchewan	2
	Edmonton Sun	Alberta	1
	Vancouver Sun	British Columbia	3
	The Vancouver Province	British Columbia	6
	Montreal Gazette	Quebec	1
	Toronto Sun	Ontario	5
	The Sarnia Observer	Ontario	1
	Sudbury Star	Ontario	1
Brunswick News Inc.	The Telegraph Journal	New Brunswick	2
American Media Inc.	Chatham Daily News	Ontario	1
Metroland Media Group	The Allison Herald	Ontario	1
Nordstar Capital Ltd.	Toronto Star	Ontario	1
Glacier Media	The Victoria Times Columnist	British Columbia	1
Alta Newspaper Group	The Lethbridge Herald	Alberta	1
Black Press	Abbotsford News	British Columbia	2
	Maple Ridge News	British Columbia	1
Canadian Broadcasting Corporation	CBC News	National	1
Torstar, Globe and Mail, and La Press	The Canadian Press	National	2
Hollinger Inc.	The National Post AKA The Financial Post	National	2

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