8 A Sample of the Interviews With Lifers

In order to give a more comprehensive account of the interviews I had with lifers, and not rely solely on an essential statistical analysis, this chapter provides summaries of 30 cases, demonstrating the range of responses I received. Unfortunately, it is not possible to record the confidential remarks in prison files because of the risk that individuals could discover what had been written about them. The summaries reflect the course which the interviews took and some of the expressions that were used. Naturally, they should be read in conjunction with the previous chapter, to illustrate the data that is shown there. They are intended not as definitive explanations of the interviews, but as a means of enabling the reader to appreciate the diversity of the views and opinions. Many of the responses were repeated over and over again, and I have tried to show this in the summaries, if only to demonstrate the frequency with which the comments were made.

Case No. 6

This man had served just over seven years of his sentence at the time of the interview. He spent the first month at his local prison where he was accommodated in the main wing. He spent the first week working in the mailbag shop and thereafter worked in the laundry. He said he was watched closely by prison staff although their attitude towards him was quite friendly.

He was then moved to a Main Centre prison where he stayed for the next three years or so, and he spent all of the time working in the tailors shop. During the evenings he attended classes in ‘O’ level Maths and English. After he had been there for about 12 months there were disturbances as a result of which the security tightened up quite considerably and he was kept in his cell for longer periods. He felt unjustly punished in that he was being prejudiced as a result of what other prisoners had done. At the same time he felt that the attitude of staff towards prisoners was generally quite good and all the prisoners on his wing were serving life sentences and they got on quite well together.

B. Mitchell, *Murder and Penal Policy*  
© Barry Mitchell 1990
He was then transferred to a Category B prison where he spent the next three and a half years. For the first 12 months he spent his working time assembling children's typewriters, and thereafter he worked in prison reception, in the tailors shop, and assembling electrical switches. He described the atmosphere in the prison as being very friendly both amongst staff and other prisoners. He felt that prisoners were left to organise themselves to a much greater extent which he regarded as a good thing. He attended classes in Maths and English, Poetry and Woodwork.

He was then moved to an open prison and had been there for about ten months at the time of the interview. There he had worked in the textile shop sewing 'T' shirts and had also done a four months electronics course which he felt was helpful. He was one of the first two life sentence prisoners to be accommodated at this prison and the staff were rather wary of him. Initially they watched him very closely although this had eased off gradually. Relationships with other inmates were reasonably good and he did not think that the life-sentence prisoners tended to associate only with each other. He said he was looking forward to going to prison hostel where he would have more freedom and he would have the chance to re-establish a normal life-style. He felt it was necessary for prisoners to take the initiative to learn to organise their own lives and to prepare for release and to prevent themselves from vegetating or becoming institutionalised. He still felt that he had wrongly been convicted of murder and ought to have been convicted of manslaughter instead.

Case No. 7

Here a young offender, only 17 years of age when he committed his offence, had served about eight and a half years in prison at the time of the interview. Immediately after sentence he had been taken back to the prison where he had been held on remand, but this time kept in the hospital wing for about a month. He was put in a single cell and, although there was officially no work for prisoners to do there, he got out of his cell by volunteering to clean the landing. If he had chosen to do so, he could have spent most of the time (that is 21–22 hours in the day) in his cell, either sleeping or reading. Most of the staff were pleasant to him, as were the other prisoners. In view of his youth people generally adopted a sympathetic approach to him. He was then moved to the main wing of the prison where there was little for him to do but wait to be sent to another prison. At this time he was