

AN OP-ED FROM THE FUTURE

# Criminals Should Serve Their Sentences Psychologically

Giving people sentences that we know they will never be able to serve undermines our criminal justice system.

**By Steven James**

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*Editors' note: This is part of the Op-Eds From the Future series, in which science fiction authors, futurists, philosophers and scientists write Op-Eds that they imagine we might read five, 10, 50 or even 200 years from now. The challenges they predict are imaginary — for now — but their arguments illuminate the urgent questions of today and prepare us for tomorrow. The Opinion piece below is a work of fiction.*

Yesterday, the mass shooter responsible for the deaths of 23 people at a Manhattan nightclub two years ago was sentenced to 50 years in prison for each of the victims, along with additional weapons and felony charges, bringing his total sentence to 2045 years. He will clearly not be able to serve it, at least not in the traditional sense. And yet he's not the first to receive such a sentence: In 2003, the serial killer Gary Ridgway was sentenced to 49 life sentences plus 480 years; in 2015, James Holmes, the "Dark Knight" shooter, was sentenced to 12 consecutive life sentences plus 3,318 years without parole; and in 2017, Ronald C. Yarber, a foster parent found guilty of sexual assault of a child, was sentenced to 1,652 years.

It's time that we stop allowing our justice system to hand out sentences that we know a person cannot possibly serve. Imagine spending two thousand years in solitary confinement. That's what we're currently sentencing people to — we just don't expect the prisoner to be alive to serve it. It has been argued that we should sentence someone for each crime committed (hence the 50-year sentences for every murder) to ensure that all victims' families receive justice. I agree. The victims and their families deserve to see justice carried out. But these meaninglessly long sentences aren't justice — they're a mockery of it.

Yes, those who commit such abhorrent crimes deserve to be punished. And yes, they deserve to serve the entire sentences that they're given. Otherwise, our criminal justice system would either be giving perpetrators prison terms that no one intends them to serve or sentences that could only be completed if they lived for thousands of years — neither of which is a rational pursuit of justice. We know that a person cannot live for dozens or hundreds of lifetimes, but what if they could perceive themselves to have lived that long? What if they could have the perception that thousands of years have passed?

As a chronobiologist, I know that now, in the year 2039, we currently possess the technology and techniques to carry out the punishments that these perpetrators deserve — not to physically experience these extraordinarily long sentences, but to do so cognitively. The challenge would be making it seem like thousands of years have gone by within the scope of a typical human lifetime. What if in the person's mind, in their memory, in their own understanding of their experience, all of that time did pass? That possibility is no longer in the realm of science fiction. It lies within our grasp.

Chronobiologists study how living organisms process the passage of time. Through a variety of means, we can alter a person's perception of how much time has gone by. For instance, through sleep and sensory deprivation, social isolation, the expeditious use of certain drugs, and the latest technological advancements in the field of neural implants, we can radically alter a person's perception of how much time has passed. In some cases we can make it seem — psychologically — that much more time has passed than actually has.

The most recent studies have found that with the right combination of treatment modalities, we can make it seem to a person that a month has passed while, in reality, only four to five days have passed. As the technology develops, we will continue to see significant advances in this arena. Currently, over the course of a year of chronotech treatments, a person can psychologically serve seven years of his sentence. And with the projected improvements in neural implants, that rate is growing rapidly. Soon, over the course of 50 years of treatment a person could have the perception that 1500 to 2000 years have passed.

The use of chronotech within the justice system would have several significant advantages over the current mass incarceration approach. In the United States, there are currently 3.1 million people in prison — more than any other country on the planet. With the cost of incarceration for each inmate over \$40,000, the total cost is close to \$125 billion every year. By turning to chronotech, that money could be used instead for job growth, social programs for the poor and judicial reform.

I believe that this approach will also serve as a greater deterrent to crime and allow people to serve their complete sentences more quickly. Convicts with lesser sentences will be released earlier — something that would help ease overcrowding at prisons and eventually eliminate the need for the prison system as we know it.

If a sentence is given, we should do all we can to ensure that the convict experiences it. Using chronotech isn't cruel and unusual punishment. It's not torture. It's simply a means by which people can serve, cognitively, the sentences they receive. The question is: Do we have the stomach to allow people to actually serve the sentences we hand out to them for the crimes they have committed? If not, sentences spanning dozens or hundreds of lifetimes are fatuous and serve no legitimate purpose.

Giving people sentences that we know they will never be able to serve undermines the core principles of our criminal justice system. Now that we have the ability to make people cognitively serve sentences that stretch beyond a human's natural lifetime, we should use it.

Steven James (@readstevenjames) is the author of 18 novels, including, most recently, "Synapse."

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