

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

May 9, 2011

Two years ago I obtained the current data on time served for persons serving life sentences in Wisconsin (lifers) and wrote an article explaining the trend in Wisconsin which required lifers to serve an ever-increasing number of years before release on parole. That article was posted on blogspot.com but I have no idea if it is still there. I am including the three graphs that accompanied that article which I prepared based on the data.

In the 1980s, when I came to prison, lifers were serving on average 13-15 years before release on parole. Now they are serving 30 years or more. Lifers (and other prisoners with long sentences) are serving more time than ever before. There is no indication that any rational, objective criteria justify this policy change. It is an ideologically driven agenda much like the "tax cuts for the rich" issue Republicans and Tea Partyers support. Tax cuts for the rich do not lead to job growth, it just leads to wealthier rich people. The more money they are allowed to hoard, the less money there is to drive the economy. It is a lie that tax cuts for the rich create jobs just as it is a lie that keeping people in prison longer reduces crime.

The real sufferers of the decades in prison that I and others like me serve are our family members. My daughter was 5-years old when I came to prison. She grew up without her father and is now in her 30s with a family of her own. My father died a lingering death from emphysema in a rented hospital bed in his living room while I sat warehoused in a prison miles away. My mother died alone of a massive heart attack also while I was in prison. There are many people whose families have suffered more than mine. Thousands of families are held hostage by a paroling authority that refuses to release suitable prisoners.

Prisons do not allow prisoners to make much money, typically from 5¢ to 42¢ an hour. It is not enough to pay for the prisoners' needs so families end up subsidizing the incarceration of their loved ones. Not only do they pay for the collect calls prisoners make to them, they must also provide money to pay for canteen items and personal property.

May 9, 2011/page two

I have heard others speak the of the pendulum swinging back the other way, of our country no longer surging to the right. Some people believe that we've gone as far as we can go toward fascism and that we will now start to drift toward more humane policies (fascism is defined as "a totalitarian governmental system emphasizing nationalism and militarism"). I don't believe our societal values swing on a pendulum. Nor that it is only a matter of time before things swing back the other way. The breath of fresh air which we experienced in the openness, fairness and compassion of the 1960s and 70s was a unique situation fueled by a draft system which sent unwilling men to Viet Nam unprepared to fight in an unjust war. The backlash from that experience drove many people to stand up to the oppressive practices of our government and resulted in new openness and freedom. You won't see that again.

Now, every step toward justice, fairness and compassion must be gained through hard work. In a country where most people are apathetic, motivating people to step up and do the right thing is difficult. It is too easy to turn on the TV and look the other way.

As It Happens is a Canadian news show I sometimes hear on the radio. The other night a retired detective was speaking about an old case he had once investigated. He had a suspect in mind, a person he was sure was the guilty party. What really impressed me was his statement that he never arrested the guy even though he thought he was guilty because he didn't have enough evidence. He went on to say that he kept following other leads to see if someone else could have committed the crime. Detectives in the U.S. could learn from him. How many times have you seen men released from prison after being exonerated decades later by DNA evidence? I often hear the same refrain. The police thought the guy did it so they ignored evidence to the contrary and orchestrated the evidence to convict their chosen suspect. I would not be in prison today had the detectives in my case not conducted a "reinactment" with their witnesses to solidify a false version of events to present to the jury.

Have you ever stopped to think about how many other people are in prison in the U.S. who are not guilty but do not have DNA evidence to exonerate them? The Innocence Project will only represent prisoners who have DNA evidence which can clear them. They will not accept cases where there is no DNA evidence or where a person committed the underlying act but was not guilty of the crime for which he was convicted. Those are the kinds of cases which are unwinnable.

May 9, 2011/page three

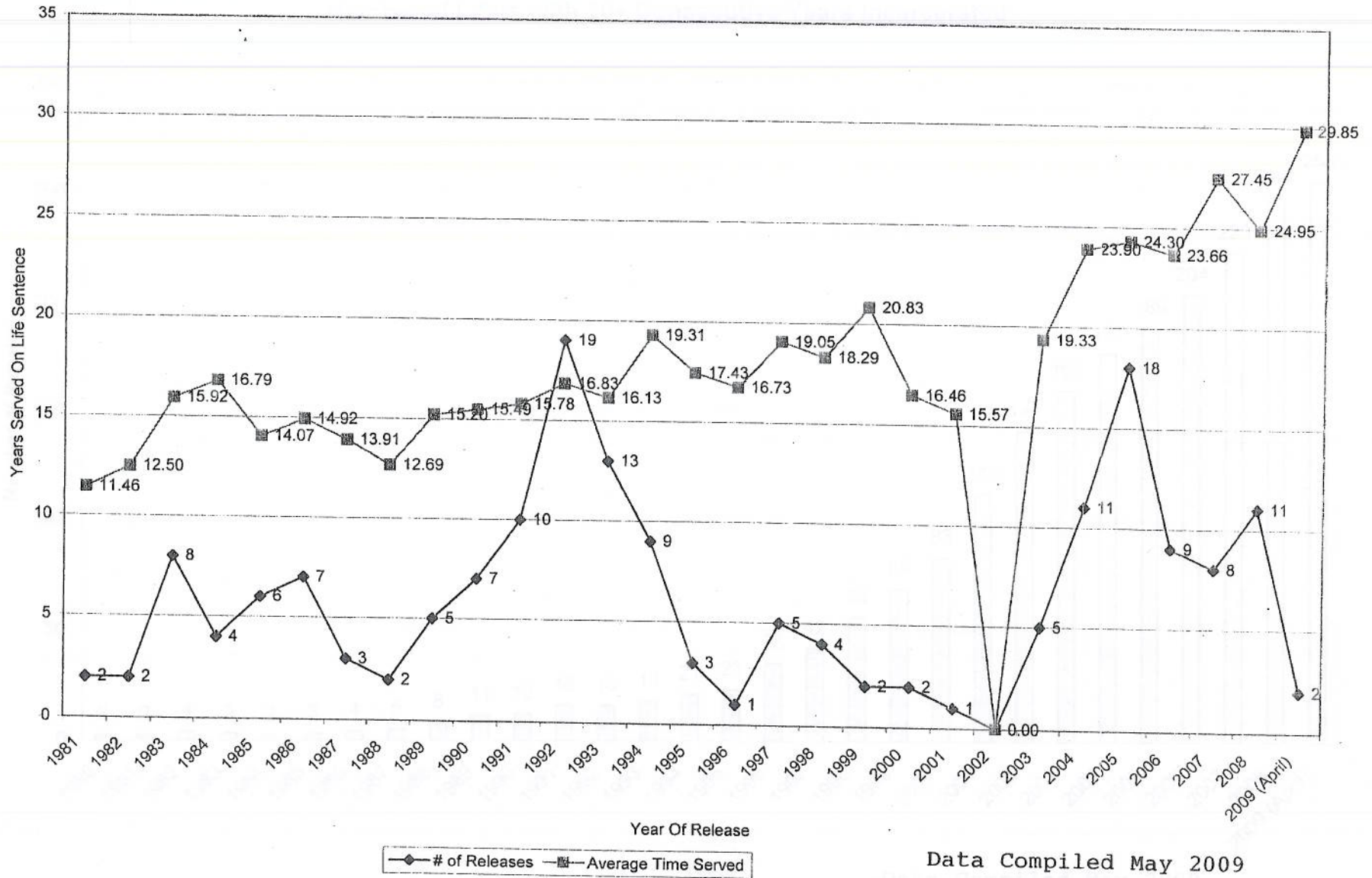
We need a new electoral system that does not depend on who can do the best job of mobilizing their core supporters or use outside groups to tell convincing lies about their opponent. We should not be looking for ways to make voting harder or reduce turnout. We should do the opposite.

Change election day to Sunday so people don't have to take off work to vote, allow online voting (if Pay Pal and banks can create secure financial transactions we ought to be able to create a secure online voting system), and make voting mandatory for all citizens 18 and over. We should also include a "none of the above" option on ballots. If NOTA gets the most votes, nobody wins and there must be a new election in 90 days. Only in this way will the wealthy no longer control our elected officials. We will be able to create an equitable, fair and just society.

No poems this week because I am posting the graphs on lifer data.

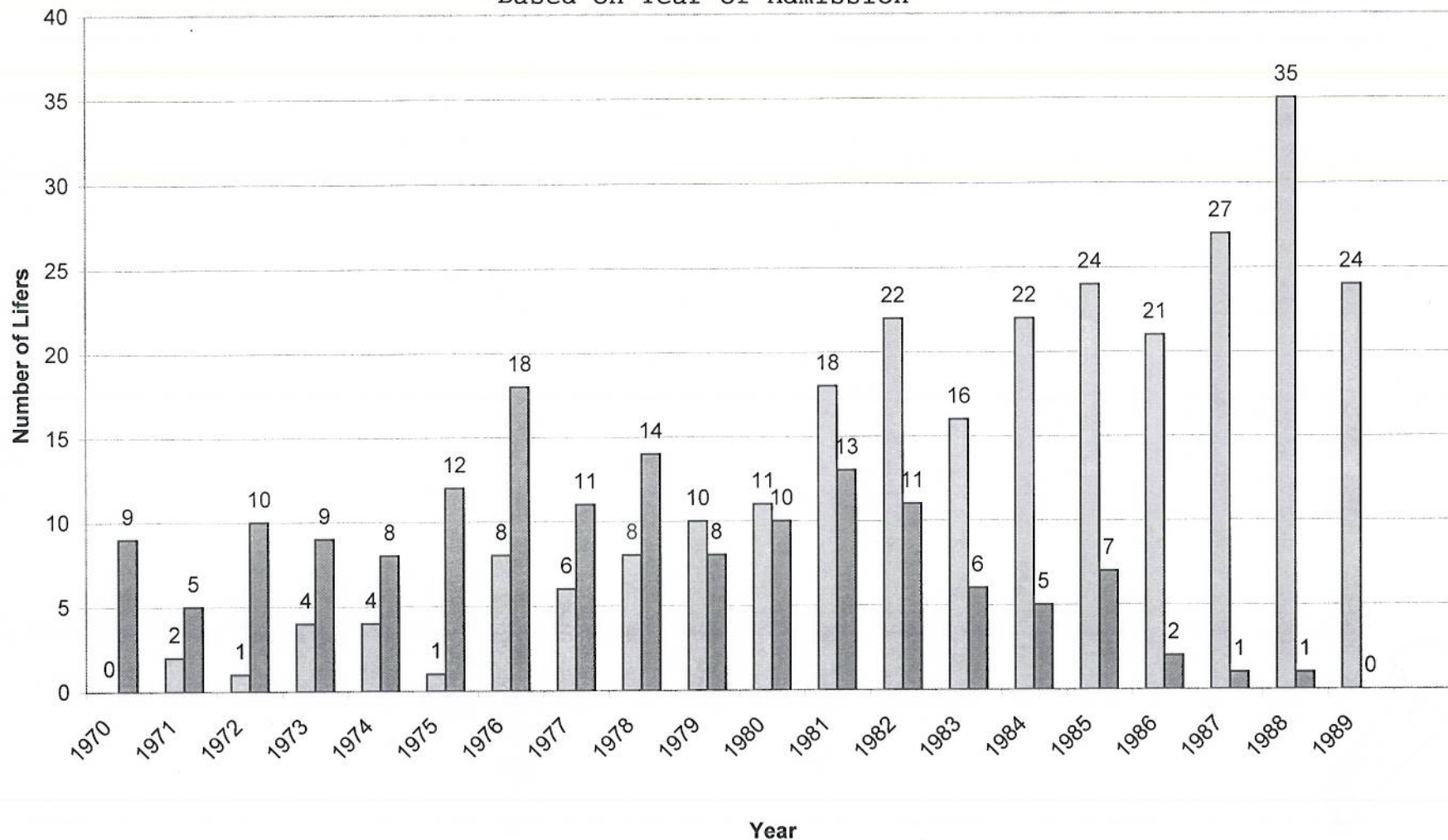
# Persons Serving Life Sentences

Time Served on Sentence Prior to Parole



Data Compiled May 2009  
 Final Draft June 23, 2009  
 Data Compiled by Harlan Richards

# **Inmate Status Comparison Per Year** Persons Serving Life Sentences Based on Year of Admission



□ Still In ■ Released

Final Draft June 23, 2009  
Data Compiled by Harlan Richards