Better Planning for Rehabilitation for Long-term Prisoners Needed

Further to your headline news of 28th July *Can Hong Kong break its prison shackles to cut crime?* I believe Long-Term Prison Sentences Review Board (LTB) members may be inadvertently thwarting the CSD’s efforts to rehabilitate prisoners. That’s because the Board’s function includes offering offenders the equivalent of parole i.e. *early release under supervision orders* for prisoners serving long determinate sentences, and *conditional release orders* for prisoners serving mandatory life imprisonments. Why doesn’t your chart include figures for these groups?

Your article *System failure? Calls for transparency in Hong Kong’s ‘cruel’ prison sentence reviews* of 23rd October 2016 gives this reader a clue: indeterminate sentences are ‘to ensure offenders are released when they are no longer deemed a serious risk to the public’. But how can lifers prove they are no danger and can be fully rehabilitated without having an opportunity to live in a relatively ‘open’ environment? Moreover, evaluation of whether a prisoner meets these key factors surely demands that LTB members work very closely with the CSD, the police, prison psychologists and the Social Welfare Department. How can this be happening under the present system? LTB members work voluntarily and usually meet four times a year to review over 500 cases. Furthermore, according to your article, even the CSD is ‘only responsible for inmates behind bars.’ Meanwhile, around 280 mandatory lifers are languishing in limbo here with little hope of release.

In the UK the average time spent in custody for people serving mandatory life sentences is around seventeen years. Parole for remorseful and reformed prisoners is considered after they have served two-thirds of their minimum tariff. Meanwhile, here it is unofficially acknowledged that LTB members won’t consider a recommendation for a lifer’s sentence to be converted to a determinate one until prisoners have served at least twenty.

Numerous psychological reports cite dependence, depression, feelings of acute loneliness and despair as inevitable consequences of long-term incarceration. It was Mahatma Gandhi who wrote, ‘A nation’s greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members.’ The LTB has not issued a report since 2004 and is not regulated by a third party. Maybe the recent spate of articles about Hong Kong’s prison system will alert stakeholders to the fact that our city’s policy on the rehabilitation of prisoners, especially with regard to parole for long-term prisoners, needs much closer scrutiny.