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# **Reconciling selves after sexual offending: Exploring processes of desistance and impact on family members**

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THE UNIVERSITY  
*of* EDINBURGH

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## Reconciliation

today I will rebuild  
this time no quick fixes no steel cables  
or wooden planks  
no rust no rot  
no nails necessary  
but rather the slow growth of twisted roots  
from ancient trees  
the way across a path  
made of grandfather  
grandmother stones  
I will become a self-sustaining structure  
gain strength over time  
a living root bridge that lasts five hundred years

*Jónína Kirton (2017)*

## Abstract

**Aims:** This thesis aimed to better understand the lived experiences of family members of individuals charged with cyber-enabled sexual offences (CESO). This explored the impact of the crime and its consequences on their subjective wellbeing. In addition, it investigated how family members made sense of this experience and how this translated to attempts to reconcile their view of themselves and repair their relationships with the other. This analysis was informed by an understanding of ‘desistance’ processes by which individuals move away from sexual offending.

**Methods:** A systematic mixed-studies review was conducted on the topic of desistance from sexual offending. This included  $n = 16$  qualitative studies and  $n = 10$  quantitative studies. The evidence was analysed using a ‘best-fit’ framework synthesis, drawing from the ‘Integrated Theory of Desistance from Sexual Offending (ITDSO)’. A qualitative study was also conducted, interviewing  $n = 13$  family members of individuals charged with CESO. This included romantic partners, parents and adult siblings. The narratives were analysed using a Multiperspectival Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

**Results:** The review provided support for the ITDSO, whilst proposing amendments to further capture the complexity and unique considerations for those charged with sexual offences. These adaptations included hypothesised pathways of desistance and an understanding of the means by which desistance is promoted. The importance of social connection, forgiveness and belonging was emphasised, as well as barriers to re-entry and re-integration. Family member narratives provided main themes of ‘*loss*’, ‘*cast out*’, ‘*silenced*’ and ‘*reconciliation*’. Related themes of stigma, shame and trauma were pervasive throughout these.

**Conclusions:** Societal perceptions and stigma of sexual offending shames individuals, preventing acquisition of goods that help to promote desistance or aid reintegration. This is true both for those convicted of crimes and individuals associated with them. Understanding reasons for the behaviour facilitates shifts towards prosocial identities and encourages forgiveness and reconciliation from those in their wider systems.

## Lay Summary

This thesis described two related studies exploring how people make sense of, and move forward from, sexual offending.

The first study is a systematic review on the phenomenon of desistance, the process of ‘moving away and stopping crime’ in individuals charged with sexual offences. This identified twenty-six relevant studies. Those who showed signs of desistance spoke of realising the harm caused to others and their responsibility in causing that harm, with the recognition that they ‘didn’t want to be that kind of person anymore’. This helped them seek a new, non-offending identity. However, this process could be challenging as restrictions placed upon individuals and reactions from others enforced their identities as ‘sex offenders’. Individuals were better able to desist when they found meaning and purpose to their lives as well as being forgiven, promoting connection with others. Many were not able to achieve desistance through these means, but despite this managed to stop offending due to a fear of the punitive consequences of these behaviours, for example returning to prison.

The second study recognises the importance of family and social connection in the rehabilitation of those charged with sexual offences, whilst questioning how able family and partners are to forgive and to stay connected to the person in the wake of this type of event. Furthermore, it considers this for sexual offences committed online, where individuals are charged for possession of indecent images of children. This is a non-contact form of offending, but given it involves a sexual offence against a child, still has devastating consequences and high levels of stigma and shame. Family members described high levels of emotional distress, feeling a loss of their loved one, their lives and their sense of selves following the discovery of the crime. They experienced ostracism and rejection from wider society and felt unable to reach out to others for support. They described how they made sense of the behaviour and whether they had been able to forgive and move forward from what happened. Overall, the studies both emphasised the importance of reflection, understanding and a continual commitment to rebuilding, in order to achieve substantive change and reconcile a valued sense of connection to self and others.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank the participants who kindly agreed to take part in this study. I was consistently moved by your bravery, honesty and compassion. Hearing your stories has been one of the most illuminating and heart-rending experiences in my career and I feel you have taught me so much about love and endurance. I hope that I have managed to capture and portray your narratives in a way that honours that here.

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# Sexual offending and desistance: A systematic mixed studies review

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# Abstract

There is a growing body of literature on the process of desistance from sexual offending. To better understand this phenomenon, and how desistance is operationalised within the literature, a systematic review was conducted. This synthesised qualitative and quantitative empirical studies on the topic. Twenty-six studies were included in the review and the evidence was considered in relation to the 'Integrated Theory of Desistance in Sexual Offending' (ITDSO) using a 'best fit' framework synthesis. Findings suggested the model was well supported by the evidence; however, it failed to capture complexity in pathways to desistance, the ways in which individuals consolidate or generate meaningful change; and the nature of barriers faced during re-entry. In particular, this related to the importance of connection with others and finding a sense of meaning and purpose, efforts which are often hindered by legal restrictions and stigmatisation. Aspects of this are discussed further, considering implications for theory, policy and practice.

## Highlights

- Quantitative designs are limited in exploration of desistance processes
- The ITDSO is well supported, but oversimplifies aspects of the process
- Relational desistance is promoted via connection and belonging
- Desistance can occur in the absence of cognitive transformation

Key words: Desistance; sexual offending; systematic mixed studies review

## 1.1 Introduction

Desistance is defined as the underlying causal process that encourages individuals to cease and refrain from offending behaviour (Laub & Sampson, 2001). This process is recognised as changes occurring in criminality and the propensity to offend, placing the individual at the centre of the change process (Bushway, Piquero, Broidy, Cauffman, & Mazerolle, 2001). It is often defined as a termination point, but is more widely accepted as a dynamic, ongoing process which involves a marked decrease in frequency, intensity, and seriousness of criminal behaviour including (but not limited to) a lack of reoffending (Cooley & Sample, 2018). Desistance research aims to identify factors and support the individual in their efforts to maintain desistance, guiding post-onset intervention strategies (De Vries Robbé, Mann, Maruna, & Thornton, 2015; Kazemian, 2007).

Conceptualising and understanding the phenomenon of desistance is complex due to competing theoretical models and variation in how desistance is quantified across studies. Empirically, desistance has been investigated both with the qualitative exploration of lived experience, and quantitative approaches, aided by development of large-scale longitudinal datasets of criminal data (Bersani & Doherty, 2018). Weaver (2019) reviews theories of desistance from crime, outlining four main categories of theory. This includes individual and agentic; social and structural; interactionist; and situational. Individual and agentic captures theories stressing the importance of the ageing process and maturational reform, as well the role of agency and of rational choice in behaviour. Social and structural theories highlight the influence of social bonds and formal (e.g., prison, probation) and informal social controls on conformity, including family, employment and education. Interactionist theories explore the interaction between agency and social structures, including subjective change in identity. Situational theories promote the role of environments and routine activities in the desistance process.

Recently, greater emphasis has been placed on interactionist theories, exploring how internal factors interact with external influences. Within these, there is an acknowledgment of the importance of ‘cognitive transformation’ and the seeking of pro-social identities. In Maruna (2001)’s phenomenological study of psychological

and social elements of desistance, he identifies 'redemption scripts' for individuals perceived to be desisting from crime. These scripts harness a process of 'making good', whereby the self is reconstructed and a person's 'true', good selves are realised as they move away from crime. Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002) propose that cognitive shifts or 'transformations' act as precursors to desistance. Their theory outlines that an increased openness to change; is followed by exposure to prosocial elements or 'hooks for change', leading to an envisaged new identity and a negative re-evaluation of their previous criminal lifestyle. This cognitive transformation and adoption of a non-offending identity has been associated with what has been termed 'secondary desistance'. This is opposed to 'primary desistance', which indicates simply a period of non-offending (Maruna, 2003). Building on this, McNeill (2015) proposed the related concept of 'tertiary desistance'. This suggests recognition of the identity change by others, and an acquired sense of belonging.

The literature on desistance from crime is extensive. Reviews have focused on a number of different sub-topics such as desistance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Bersani & Doherty, 2018), desistance in juvenile crime (Basto-Pereira, Começanha, Ribeiro, & Maia, 2015) and desistance in females who offend (Rodermond, Kruttschnitt, Slotboom, & Bijleveld, 2016). However, there appears to be fewer reviews which delineate by type of offending (Walker, Bowen, & Brown, 2013). As the underlying causal mechanisms vary for different types of crime (van der Put, Assink, & Gubbels, 2020), mechanisms of desistance are likely to be influenced by this. The topic of desistance in sexual forms of crime has received less research attention (Farmer, McAlinden, & Maruna, 2015; Weaver, 2019). Reasons for this are unclear. It may reflect a societal assumption that sexual offenders are more persistent in their offending trajectories and that they are less capable of change or reform (Harris, 2014). In reality, rates of known recidivism for sexual offences are low (Hanson, Harris, Helmus, & Thornton, 2014). This suggests that desistance from sexual offending is actually the norm (Laws & Ward, 2011). However, given these societal assumptions, high levels of restrictions placed upon these individuals and observed differences in criminal profiles, it is important to consider whether the wider theories of desistance also apply for sexual offending.

Laws and Ward (2011) addressed this, encouraging deliberation and understanding of desistance in sexual offenders with their seminal book on the topic. Since the publication of this work the evidence base continues to develop, informing advances in related theories of desistance from sexual offending. The most notable and comprehensive theory is the 'Integrated Theory of Desistance from Sexual Offending' (ITDSO) proposed by Göbbels, Ward, and Willis (2012). The ITDSO hypothesises the process of desistance from sexual offending, from the initial decision to cease criminal behaviour to successful re-entry and reintegration in society. The model encapsulates internal and external processes, whilst acknowledging the role of personal agency, 'natural desistance' (desistance occurring without intervention) and luck. Recognising the temporal aspect of desistance as a process, they outline the interplay between factors within four stages: '*decisive momentum*'; '*rehabilitation*'; '*re-entry*' and '*normalcy*'. The model incorporates wider desistance theory (Giordano et al., 2002; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), as well as utilising key features of the 'Good Lives Model' (GLM; Ward and Maruna (2007)). The GLM is a strength-orientated rehabilitation theory which aims to provide internal and external resources to promote desistance (Laws & Ward, 2011). It has been most widely used to help rehabilitate sexual offenders (Ward & Stewart, 2003). Given its relevance within this review, the stages of the model are summarised here.

'Decisive momentum' describes the initial process, whereby provision of opportunities combined with an openness to change prompts the start of the desistance process. This can be facilitated by life events (e.g., arrest) which leads to evaluation of their identity as an offender, and its alignment with personal goals and values. This encourages the creation of an 'emergent possible positive self', guiding subsequent behavioural change. Self-evaluation elicits feelings of guilt, shame and remorse, leading to a 'crystallisation of discontent' and readiness to change. The 'rehabilitation phase' emphasises the importance of a changed practical identity via the process of 'cognitive transformation'. Practical identities are closely aligned to 'primary goods'. These are derived from the GLM, referring 'to states of mind, experiences, personal characteristics which are sought for an individual's wellbeing', for example relatedness and spirituality (Laws & Ward, 2011). Rehabilitation provides adaptive strategies, or 'instrumental goods', to help obtain these primary goods. The third stage,

‘re-entry’, refers to the process of reintegrating from prison into the community. This can be extremely stressful, with additional challenges for those charged with sexual offences due to notification, stigma and restrictions (Connor, 2020). This requires a maintained commitment to change and endorsement of their practical, non-offending identity. Inevitably, there are barriers and facilitators to this process, material and immaterial, which can affect the maintenance of the commitment to change. ‘Normalcy’ is considered an extension of ‘re-entry’, where they are felt to have successfully achieved identities as ‘non-offending’ members of society.

De Vries Robbé et al. (2015) build upon this by highlighting protective factors that encourage desistance from sexual offending. They draw these from their structured assessment tool of protective factors in adult violent and sexual offending (de Vogel, de Ruiter, Bouman, & de Vries Robbé, 2009). Factors include: healthy sexual interests, capacity for emotional intimacy, social and professional support networks, goal directed living, problem solving, engagement in leisure activities, sobriety and a hopeful attitude in relation to desistance. The empirical evidence base for desistance in sexual offending is also growing, with a number of related reviews in this area providing insight into whether these theories are substantiated by evidence (Cooley & Sample, 2018; Farmer et al., 2015; Harris, 2021). However, to our knowledge, there has not been a systematic review and synthesis of the literature in this area. Systematic reviews are recommended when considering the available evidence in a given field and aim to give a comprehensive, representative synthesis of the current literature, reducing likelihood of potential bias in reporting. A systematic approach may gauge how researchers in the field are attempting to understand and operationalise this process, highlighting key areas for further research and guiding practice and policy recommendations.

### **1.1.1 Review aims**

Addressing the need for a systematic approach, a mixed studies review on the topic of desistance in sexual offending was conducted. This aimed to provide an overview of empirical studies examining factors contributing to desistance, in individuals convicted with sexual crimes.

Given the exploratory nature of the review, and to maximise inclusivity, it included both qualitative and quantitative studies, published and grey literature sources and appraised the study quality for included studies. The protocol for this review was pre-registered on the Open Science Framework in August 2020 (<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/WMQP3> see **Appendix 2**).

## 1.2 Methodology

### 1.2.1 Literature search

This review was conducted in accordance with PRISMA guidelines (<http://prisma-statement.org>). In the planning stages of this review, PROSPERO & Cochrane databases suggested no pre-existing or reviews in progress on the topic of desistance in sexual offending.

Following consultation with a subject librarian, the primary author (MC) conducted a search of pre-selected electronic databases for relevant literature. Given the interdisciplinary nature of this review topic, a number of databases spanning different disciplines were selected. This included: ‘PsycINFO’, ‘EMBASE’ and ‘MEDLINE (PubMed)’ for psychology of behaviour and other aspects within the clinical literature. ‘Criminal Justice Database’ and ‘Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts (ASSIA)’ were included to capture publications on the population of interest, not included within clinical databases. ‘Web of Science’ was included to capture additional sources not included within the subject specific databases. To help reduce effects of publication bias, the review included both peer reviewed journal articles and unpublished data. To achieve this, the author searched ‘PsycINFO’ and ‘ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global’ for dissertations and theses which may detail unpublished studies (grey literature). The indices of relevant journals were also searched, including: ‘*Sexual Abuse*’ and ‘*Aggression and Violent Behaviour*’, using the term ‘desistance’. Once the screening process from the initial database searches was completed, bibliographies were extracted from all identified relevant reviews and

articles using Scopus. These results were de-duplicated and screened at title and abstract level to identify any additional studies requiring full text review.

All available years were included (up to August 2020). Only studies published in English were included, due to a lack of necessary resources to translate studies published in other languages. Study authors were contacted for further clarification or data if study reports were unclear. Database search results were initially extracted, stored and managed using reference management software, EndNote X8.

### 1.2.1.1 Search terms

In line with the recommendations of Cooke, Smith, and Booth (2012), the SPIDER search strategy tool was used for qualitative and mixed methods research. This includes the components: Sample; Phenomenon of Interest; Design; Evaluation; Research type. Given the exploratory nature of this review and to maximise inclusivity, Population (or Sample) terms, and Phenomenon of Interest were included only. Population and phenomenon terms were combined using the Boolean operator ‘AND’. See **Table 1.1** for included search terms. Variations of this search strategy were used for the additional databases, encompassing the search terms listed (or with controlled vocabulary database equivalents) and additional key text words.

Search term string		
<i>Population/sample</i>	1	• criminal* OR prisoner* OR offender* OR delinquent* OR perpetrator*
	2	• AND sex* OR rape or “child* abus*” OR “sex* abus*”
<i>Phenomenon of interest</i>	1	• desist* OR “re entry” OR reintegrat* OR “re integrat*”

**Table 1.1**

Search terms strings used in database searches

Additional searches including the phenomenon terms “re offend\*”, reoffend\* and rehabilit\* were also piloted. These yielded a much greater number of irrelevant studies. In the interest of specificity, these were omitted from the final search strategies, focusing on the term ‘desistance’, over reoffending terminology. An example search strategy can be found on the last page of the protocol in **Appendix 2**.

### 1.2.2 Eligibility criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria are detailed in **Table 1.2**. Given the variation in operationalisation of desistance within the literature, we aimed to include studies that specifically made reference to investigating desistance within their study aims. This attempted to identify studies that directly addressed this phenomenon, to create a more conceptually cohesive review. This is opposed to studies that focused primarily on re-integration, re-entry and reoffending. These concepts were felt to overlap, but their inclusion introduced more heterogeneity in the study results and obscured the clarity of the synthesis.

### 1.2.3 Study selection

Searches were conducted on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August 2020. **Figure 1.1** outlines the search process using a PRISMA flow diagram (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, 2009). Within database searches,  $n = 1988$  potential studies were identified. Following removal of duplicates,  $n = 856$  records were imported into Covidence, a software programme for managing screening in systematic reviews, <https://www.covidence.org/>. Bibliographies of relevant studies yielded  $n = 960$  records (search run 5<sup>th</sup> February 2021),  $n = 5$  of which were imported into full text screening.

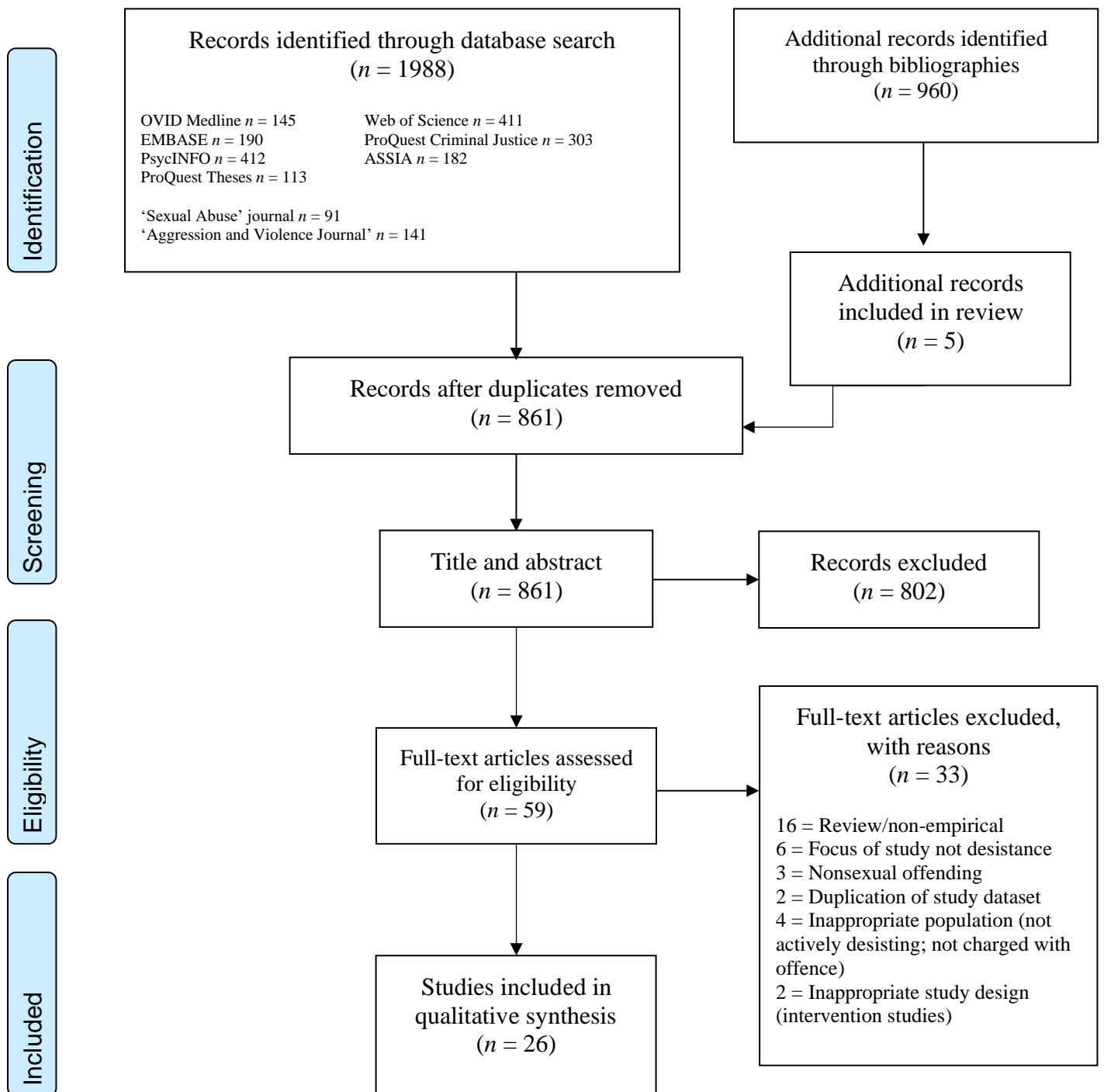
In the first stage of screening, studies were screened by title and abstract. For studies that appeared to meet inclusion criteria, or where there was a possibility that they may do so, the full texts of the reports were screened ( $n = 59$ ). Reasons for exclusion were recorded at this stage (see **Figure 1.1**). This gave a total of  $n = 26$  included studies. The first author (MC) completed a 100% eligibility assessment for both title and

abstract screening and full text screening. The second author (ROD) completed a 20% screen of titles and abstracts ( $n = 188$ ) and full text ( $n = 12$ ).

<b><i>Inclusion Criteria</i></b>	
	Language: English, or with English translation available
	Study setting: Any
	Participant age: Any
	Participant gender: Any
	Studies of individuals charged with a sexual offence (including child molesters, rapists, female sexual offenders and internet-based sexual offenders)
	Studies investigating the process or phenomenon of desistance from sexual offending
	Studies with a qualitative, quantitative or mixed-methods design
	If studies explore desistance for more than one kind of offending, they will only be included if those with sexual offences can be separated from those with nonsexual crimes
	Peer reviewed studies and grey literature (including unpublished manuscripts, theses)
	Any date up to and including the date of the database searches (August 2020)
<b><i>Exclusion criteria</i></b>	
	Review articles and commentaries
	Book chapters
	Studies of non-sexual offending (e.g., non-sexual violence, drug related crime)
	Studies that focus solely on reintegration, re-entry into society or reoffending behaviour, as opposed to those explicitly specifying the process of desistance from crime

**Table 1.2**

Inclusion and exclusion criteria to inform selection of studies



**Figure 1.1**  
Prisma Flow diagram

Discrepancies were resolved by reaching consensus amongst reviewers, with consult from a third study author (EQ) to resolve any outstanding ambiguity. One study author was contacted for clarification regarding a larger ongoing study, but no response was provided. We also checked for reported retractions and errors in the eligible studies, none were found.

#### **1.2.4 Data extraction**

Data extraction was conducted by the first author (MC) for 100% of included studies, with a 10% extraction check completed by the second author (ROD). This included: characteristics of studies; participant characteristics; how desistance was operationalised, and a summary of key results and outcomes. This consisted of verbatim quotes, summaries substantiated by the data, or summaries of quantitative results (Booth & Carroll, 2015).

#### **1.2.5 ‘Best fit’ framework synthesis**

When considering synthesis methods to use within this review, a framework synthesis approach was selected as an appropriate and effective option. This enabled the extraction of data within the included studies, primarily qualitative, but with scope to incorporate quantitative, in a form that was relevant to the research question and informed by the pre-existing theoretical literature (Noyes & Lewin, 2011). Given the breadth and complexity of the process of ‘desistance’ and the exploratory nature of the review, this helped inform the synthesis of findings and presented the data in an accessible manner. It also helped to establish whether the pre-existing theory was underpinned by good quality empirical evidence (Booth et al., 2016).

“Best fit” framework synthesis involves the identification of a pre-existing theory or conceptual model to use as a framework against which to compare and contrast new evidence. The pre-existing conceptual model is reduced to key elements which inform the themes within an *a priori* framework. Evidence is compared against this framework, either corroborating and strengthening the framework or generating new themes if the evidence is not captured within it (Carroll, Booth, & Cooper, 2011).

Consideration of data in relation to the framework, and formation of new themes and adaptations when data cannot be readily synthesised, harnesses inductive, thematic analytical techniques, a ‘secondary thematic analysis’ (Carroll, Booth, Leaviss, & Rick, 2013). This enables in-depth consideration of content of results and flexibility in the formation of new theory and concepts, whilst being systematic and anchored in current theory. This flexibility also enables synthesis of qualitative and quantitative results, including data from published or unpublished study reports (Booth & Carroll, 2015).

The ITDSO proposed by Göbbels et al. (2012) was identified as a suitable theoretical framework from which to anchor the results of the primary research studies (Carroll et al., 2013). The concepts within the model were condensed into sub-themes within the four stages of ‘decisive momentum’, ‘rehabilitation’, ‘re-entry’ and ‘normalcy’. To simplify the framework and aid interpretation of results, ‘rehabilitation’ and ‘re-entry’ were combined here into one stage due to overlap within some of the proposed concepts. A summary of condensed themes and their definitions are provided in **Table 1.3**.

## **1.2.6 Quality assessment**

### **1.2.6.1 Mixed methods quality appraisal**

The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT; Hong et al. (2018)) was used to critically appraise the methodological quality of the included studies. This tool has been designed for the appraisal of complex systematic literature reviews that include qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods studies. This current version was developed on the findings from a literature review of critical appraisal tools, interviews with MMAT users, and an e-Delphi study. It is suggested to have good content validity, however additional research is required to establish its validation and inter-rater reliability (Hong et al., 2019). Quality assessment was completed by the first author (MC) for 100% of included studies, with a 20% assessment check ( $n = 5$ ) completed by the second author (ROD).

<b><i>Decisive momentum</i></b>	
<i>Focal life events</i>	Specific events facilitating change, prompting critical evaluation of practical identity as offender
<i>Self-reflection and evaluation</i>	Four distinct motives: self-assessment, self-enhancement, self-verification- and self-improvement.
<i>Possible positive self</i>	The individual starts to imagine a more adaptive and conventional self-concept. Creates a 'cognitive filter' for decision-making
<i>Social capital and opportunities</i>	Social environments and network of relationships that support new self-views and narrative identity shifts
<i>Crystallisation of discontent</i>	Self-evaluation is accompanied with shame, guilt and life dissatisfaction. Discontent with current practical identity - desire for more adaptive practical identity results in readiness to change
<b><i>Rehabilitation and Re-entry</i></b>	
<i>Practical identity</i>	Successful reconstruction of the self as adaptive, or re-establishment of previous adaptive identity; description under which you value yourself and find your life worth living and actions to be worth undertaking
<i>Seeking and acquisition of primary goods</i>	States of affairs, states of mind, personal characteristics, experiences which are sought for an individual's own sake and likely to increase psychological well-being if achieved. Rehabilitation helps to guide towards valued primary goods, seeking to acquire upon re-entry (e.g. relationships, education, work)
<i>Adaptive instrumental goods</i>	New adaptive internal conditions and external means of obtaining primary goods. Includes examples such as therapy, learning new skills, mentoring, interventions
<i>Maintained commitment to change</i>	Endorsing practical identity as a non-offender, even in presence of significant challenges of re-entry
<i>Facilitators</i>	Material or immaterial factors that ease the process of re-entry
<i>Barriers</i>	Material or immaterial factors that obstruct or impede re-entry
<i>Social networks</i>	Change in identity narratives is recognised by others and reflected back in a de-labelling process
<b><i>Normalcy</i></b>	
<i>Criminal identity in the past</i>	Individuals define selves as non-offending members of society. Criminal selves belong in the past
<i>Time passed since last convicted</i>	Maintained effort over years or decades
<i>Hope for future</i>	A sense of hope and planning for future. Self-belief in ability to lead a good life.

**Table 1.3**

Concepts derived for coding from the ITDSO

### 1.2.6.2 Inter-rater reliability

The inter-rater reliability was calculated for each stage of screening and quality appraisal, using Cohen's  $\kappa$  (Belur, Tompson, Thornton, & Simon, 2018), with 0.21 to 0.4 indicating fair; 0.41 to 0.6 indicating moderate; 0.61 to 0.8 as substantial; and 0.81 to 1.00 as almost perfect agreement. When planning this review, it was agreed that if  $\kappa < 0.50$  for any of these stages, the eligibility criteria would be reviewed and screening repeated. For the title and abstract screen  $\kappa = 0.48$ , leading to review and refinement of the eligibility criteria via discussion between the first (MC) and second (ROD) authors. A 20% screen was repeated and subsequently  $\kappa = 0.89$ . For the full text screen  $\kappa = 0.81$  and for the MMAT quality appraisal  $\kappa = 1.0$ . The 10% extraction check indicated a high degree of consensus in the extraction of study characteristics, qualitative and main findings.

## 1.3 Results

### 1.3.1 Summary of included studies

Twenty-six studies met the eligibility criteria. Of these,  $n = 16$  utilised a qualitative design, and  $n = 10$  utilised a quantitative study design. A summary of study characteristics and main findings can be found in **Table 1.4** for qualitative studies, and **Table 1.5** for quantitative studies. Studies were predominately conducted in the USA ( $n = 10$ ), the UK ( $n = 8$ ) and Canada ( $n = 6$ ). One study was conducted in the Netherlands, and one in Australia. The majority of the included studies recruited samples of adults with sexual offences (over 18 years;  $n = 17$ ); with additional studies prioritising slightly older samples ( $> 35$  years,  $n = 3$ ). Older samples were specified to provide longer time in the community since release (Harris, 2014). Four studies recruited adolescent samples (between 12 and 19 years); or they included both adolescents and adults ( $n = 2$ ).

#	Study, Year, Country	Study aim	Setting, Recruitment Sample size	Age (SD/range) Ethnicity Education	Nature of Offending	Operationalisation of desistance	Data collection Analysis	Key findings	Themes Main themes in <b>bold</b> Threats to desistance <i>italicised</i>
1	Cooley et al. 2017 <b>USA</b>	To determine how the threat of punishment for violating sex offender policies may act as a deterrent to reoffending	Community Registered sex offenders <b>77</b>	Av age: 39.5 (25 – 82) 75% caucasian, 2% black, 22% unknown	Sexual assault adult, child, other. 73% contact offence. 65% against children Average 8.2 years in community	Self-reported no offending whilst in the community. Triangulated with arrest data and family interviews, data collection over 3 – 5 years	Informal conversational interviewing <b>Thematic narrative analysis</b>	The threat of formal legal sanctions for rule violations works to ensure registration compliance and discourage reoffending, however the influence of this on desistance was conditioned by individual factors	5 main themes regarding inferences to formal control: 1) <b>prison</b> ; 2) <b>probation/parole</b> ; 3) <b>registration</b> ; 4) <b>notification</b> , and 5) <b>threat of civil commitment</b>
2	Cooley et al. 2018 <b>USA</b>	To highlight how desistance and lack of reoffending differentiate within sexual offending	Community Registered sex offenders <b>2</b>	Ages 40 & 70.	Both 'Level 3' (serious risk) sex offenders. Contact offences against children	Not reoffending, but also determined by analysis of stage of rehabilitation, follow up of 4 & 8 years	Informal conversational interviewing Comparative case study, using <b>Qualitative Comparative Analysis</b>	Difference between desistance from crime and not reoffending in terms of identity shifts, behavioural changes, affective states and coping strategies	J: Evidence for cognitive and affective shift, evaluation of behaviour as harmful, seeking new identity, forming social networks; K: <i>Lack of identification with label of 'sex offender', lack of responsibility for actions</i>
3	Farmer et al. 2012 <b>UK</b>	To determine whether desisting offenders are different to those still engaging in risky behaviours, and to investigate processes contributing to desistance	Community Treatment programme 'Active' (n = 5) and 'Desisters' (n = 5) <b>10</b>	Desisting group: Av age: 35.4 (5.6) 4/5 caucasian	Sexual offences against children (indecent assault, indecent exposure)	Rated as 'absence' of risk using Risk Matrix 2000 and Beech's deviancy system	Semi-structured interview <b>Phenomenological analysis</b>	Desistance related to personal agency, optimism and availability of 'turning points'. Need access to social and psychological resources to construct adaptive self-narratives	<b>Positive</b> themes (redemption, generativity, agency, communion); <b>negative</b> themes (contamination, <i>external locus of control</i> , hard early life); <b>belonging</b> ; <i>pessimism</i> ; <i>alienation</i>
4	Farmer et al. 2015 <b>UK</b>	To explore the structural and cognitive changes associated with desistance from sexual offending against children	Community Probation 'Desisters' (n = 25), 'Active' (n = 7) <b>32</b>		Sexual offences against children (indecent assault, indecent exposure)	Individuals previously convicted of sexual offences, 'at risk' in the community at least 5 (relaxed to 3) years, no new charges or investigations for sexual offences	Semi-structured interview <b>Phenomenological, using Grounded Theory</b>	Participants portrayed motivation for offending as situational and temporary. Desistance was portrayed as a rational choice about pros and cons of behaviour. Influenced by shock of arrest and shame regarding offending	<b>Situational offending</b> ; <b>early stages of desistance</b> , including reappraisal of pros and cons of offending; rehabilitation; future planning; <b>importance of work</b> ; <b>role of relationships</b>
5	Farmer et al. 2016 <b>UK</b>	To understand why men who have committed sexual offences against children desist, investigating situationist themes	See Farmer et al. 2015		See Farmer et al. 2015	See Farmer et al. 2015	See Farmer et al. 2015	Men who were desisting from crime tended to explain past offences as situational, circumstances not of their making. Helped to manage shame and form pro-social identity	<b>Situational factors</b> outside of control, including breakdown of relationships or social activities; changes in routine activities; offending small part of identity

6	Harris 2014 USA	Investigating to what extent theories of desistance from nonsexual offending explain desistance from sexual offending	Community Treatment programme 21	Av age: 52.6 (31 – 78) under 30's excluded. 76% caucasian	Served custodial sentence (range 1.5 – 30 years), Sexual offences predominately against children	Self-reported non-offending whilst in community. Follow up duration varied, (mean 4 years 6 months – 15 years)	Semi-structured interview <b>Qualitative Narrative Analysis</b>	Identified natural desistance for a small group, highlighted importance of cognitive transformation within the context of treatment.	<b>Natural desistance; cognitive transformation; informal social control</b>
7	Harris 2016 USA	Exploring nature and extent of desistance from sexual offending, building on earlier work in Harris 2014	Community Treatment programme 60	Av age: 53 (24 – 78) 88% caucasian	Served custodial sentence (4 months to 38 years). 86% child victims	Denied offending sexually since recent release In community for av 4.1 years (range 4 months to 21 years)	Semi-structured interview <b>Content and Thematic Analysis</b>	All articulated desistance to varying degrees and was most often viewed as an aversion to returning to custody or a product of extensive treatment	4 'styles' of desistance: 'age'; 3 related to cognitive transformation: 'resignation' (deterrence), 'rote' and 'resilience'.
8	Harris 2017 USA	To describe and explain desistance from sexual offending in men convicted of serious sexual offences	Community Treatment programme 45	Av age: 48.9 (24 – 79) 89% caucasian	Served custodial sentence, serious contact sexual offence, majority committed against children	Self-reported no subsequent offending since release. Average time in community > 2 years (4 months – 15 years)	Semi-structured interview <b>Not stated</b>	Long-term desistance observed for majority in absence of any desire for intervention, identity transformation or social controls	<b>Readiness to change (+/-); behavioural change in absence of cognitive preparation</b>
9	Harris et al. 2019 USA	Exploring the pursuit and attainment of primary human goods in men convicted of sexual offences	Community Treatment programme 42	Av age: 49.5 (24 – 79) 89% caucasian	Served custodial sentence. Contact sexual offence, predominantly against children	See Harris 2017	Semi-structured interview <b>Content and Thematic Analysis</b>	Primary human goods valued, but often restricted by correctional status	PHGs 'life and survival'; 'relationships and friendships'; and 'knowledge'; also 'independence and personal choice'; 'peace of mind'; 'mastery'
10	Hulley* 2016 UK	To explore desistance process in adult male child sex offenders	Community Probation 15	Av age: 50.6 years (28 – 79) 100% caucasian	Served custodial sentence (30 month minimum). Sexual offences against children	Self-reported no subsequent offending since release. Average 6.5 years in community (1 – 15)	Semi-structured interview <b>Thematic Analysis</b>	Use of stigma management techniques was employed to enable positive self and identity reconstruction. Difference between formal and substantive desistance	<b>Formal social control; informal social control; and internal (re)sources of control;</b>
11	Kewley* 2015 UK	To explore the experiences of sex offenders, engaged with religious community attempting to desist	Community Probation 4	Av age: 58 (50 – 68, SD 7.6)	Sexual offences against children, assault, possession of indecent images	4 – 25 years in community	Semi-structured interview <b>Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis</b>	Through religious conversion individuals were able to transform identities and present reformed narratives, and form social connections through church	<b>Risk factors persist; changeable nature of faith, loss of networks; difficulty accessing new networks;</b> religious affiliation provides humanity; <b>comfort, hope and protection;</b> seeking forgiveness; group affiliation

12	Kras et al. 2016 <b>USA</b>	Considers how post-hoc accounts of offending behaviour in sex offenders relates to desistance processes	Community General persisters (7), sexual persisters (16), <b>desisters (5) 28</b>	Av age 47 (21 – 70, <i>SD</i> = 15). 74% caucasian; 26% black	<i>n</i> = 18 solely child victims; <i>n</i> = 9 solely adult victims	No new sexual offences at 3 years post-release, verified with data from department of corrections	Semi-structured interview <b>Inductive Thematic Analysis</b>	Participants presented a holistic explanation of offending, reflecting on agency. Relates to underlying schema for offending as well as desistance.	Desisters: <b>externalisation of responsibility</b> , not 'real sex offenders'; persisters <i>situate behaviours 'beyond their control'</i> ; <i>assertion of conventional identity</i>
13	McAlinden et al. 2017 <b>UK</b>	Examination of self-narratives of men convicted of sexual offences against children	See Farmer et al 2015	Ages 20 - 29 to 70 - 80	See Farmer et al 2015	See Farmer et al 2015; average 11 years in community 'desisters'; 1.5 years 'active'	See Farmer et al 2015	Support for integrated theory of desistance from sexual offending involving structural and social processes, as well as internal subjective changes	<b>Work identities</b> ; having a purpose, keeping busy, something to lose; <b>relationships and reintegrative shaming</b> ; <b>formation of future selves</b>
14	Milner* 2016 <b>UK</b>	Explore the early stage of desistance in men who have previously committed sexual offences	Community Probation In treatment (39) and not (18) <b>57</b>	Ages 18 – 25 to 61+ 89.5% caucasian	Sexual offences against either adult, children, both or internet offences	14 – 16 months in community (early desistance)	Narrative interview (x2 12 months apart), prospective longitudinal <b>Thematic Analysis</b>	Proposed a continuum model of early desistance, previously described obstacles to desistance, may act as protective factors	<b>Hope/Optimism</b> ; <b>purposeful activity</b> ; social capital; new me; generativity; and problem solver; <b>obstacles</b> : shame, stigma, focus on loss, <i>hopeless stance</i>
15	Richards et al. 2020 <b>Australia</b>	Exploring desistance narratives of nonwhite offenders, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander sexual offenders	Community Cultural Mentoring Programme <b>11</b>	Av age 42 (34 – 53)	Served custodial sentence, mean time 10 years. 'Dangerous' sexual offenders, involving violence or against a child	Not reoffended following release from prison and having narratives incompatible with offending, 2 – 9 years in community under close surveillance	Semi structured interview <b>Phenomenological Thematic Analysis</b>	Largely reflected 'redemption scripts', whilst also constructing cultural 'true selves' and generative goals. Took ownership of their offending and desistance	<b>Reconnecting to true warrior self</b> ; <b>Trauma, loss and the bad 'it'</b> ; <b>Personal efficacy and projectivity</b>
16	Vieira et al. 2020 <b>UK</b>	Explore desistance in a sample of high-risk sexual offenders with pervasive psychological difficulties	Community Treatment programme <b>6</b>	Av age 47 (13.2)	Not stated	Living in community (duration not stated) offence free, following release	Semi-structured interview <b>Thematic Analysis</b>	Importance of high-quality relationships with professionals, redemptive narratives, social capital and a sense of belonging in achieving desistance	<b>Desistance as a process</b> , context, <b>understanding and managing risk</b> ; <b>factors limiting impact on desistance</b> ; challenge not helpful, outside factors, sacrifice; <b>cog transformation</b> ; professional support

\*Denotes unpublished grey literature (Post-graduate/doctoral theses). Where comparison groups are included, characteristics relating to the 'desisting' sample are reported.

**Table 1.4**  
Included qualitative studies for systematic review

#	Study, Year, Country	Study aim	Setting, Recruitment Sample size	Age (SD/range) Ethnicity Education	Nature of Offending	Operationalisation of desistance	Data collection Analysis	Key findings
17	Blokland et al. <sup>^</sup> 2015 <b>Netherlands</b>	Examining the effect of stable dynamic factors, how marriage, divorce and parenthood are associated with recidivism over 25 years in sexual offenders	All convicted of sexual offence in Netherlands in 1977 <b>500</b>	Av age 27.3 (13 to 62)	Indecent exposure, sexual assault, rape, child molestation, other sexual offences including IIOC and forcing prostitution	Absence of reoffence in criminal records	Documentation of Criminal Record Office <b>Event History Analysis</b>	During 25-year follow-up, 71% of sexual offenders were reconvicted, 30.2% for sexual offences (much higher than for nonsexual offenders). Being married, divorced or parenthood did not alter risk of reoffending
18	Boyd* 1994 <b>USA</b>	Investigating differences between desisting male adolescent sexual offenders and adolescent sexual recidivists	Community Probation or correctional facility <b>31</b>	Av age 15.6 years, under 18 62% black; 31% caucasian; 8% hispanic Grade level 3	Serious sexual offences, 49% rapists, 51% child molester	Not reoffending between data collection timeframes, 6 to 54 months	Official records <b>ANOVA, regression</b>	Those categorised as desisters had less previous arrests on average than recidivists. Very few observable differences on a large number of measures, reduced percentage of behavioural problems and less experience of family violence
19	Carpentier et al. 2011 <b>Canada</b>	To identify the factors associated with variety and desistance of criminal activity, among adolescent sexual offenders	Official hospital records, assessed between 1992 – 2002 <b>Desisters (193) 351 total</b>	Av age 15.8 (1.8)	Hands-on sexual offences against children, peers or adults, 48% single victim, mean no. of victims 2.25, range 1 - 16	No new criminal charges during follow-up period	Retrospective archive data, secure Psychiatric institution <b>Chi squared, hierarchical logistic regression</b>	Adolescent sexual aggressors who desisted from delinquency exhibited fewer cognitive, familial, social and academic deficits than those in 'persisting' groups
20	Kruttchnitt et al. 2000 <b>USA</b>	Investigation of how informal and formal social controls affect recidivism amongst sexual offenders	Probation Official records 1992 – 1997 <b>556</b>	Av age 33 (17 – 82)	Convicted of sexual offending in 1 <sup>st</sup> through 4 <sup>th</sup> degree 2/3 victimised a child aged < 15years, 36% victimised a family member	Absence of any new crime or; absence of new personal offending (sexual and nonsexual), av length of probation 12.5 years (SD 8.3)	Data derived from Minnesota Community-Based Sex Offender Evaluation Project <b>Event History Analysis Cox Proportional Hazard</b>	Those with stable job histories demonstrated reduced recidivism, particularly those in court-ordered sex offender treatment. Marital status exerted virtually no effect.
21	Lussier et al. 2010 <b>Canada</b>	Examination of offending trajectories of adult sex offenders from adolescence to adulthood	Prison and community Admissions in federal penitentiary between 1994 and 2000 <b>250</b>	Av age 45.4 (9.9, 29 – 78) at admission 92.4% caucasian 37% achieved high school	58% sexual assault, 31% sexual contact with a minor	Defined by offending trajectories (very low rate; late-bloomers; low-rate desisters; high-rate chronics)	Semi-structured interviews and access to official records <b>Semi-Parametric Group-Based Modelling</b>	'Very low-rate' (desisting; 56%) group significantly older, higher levels of employment, highest degree of specialisation in sexual crimes, highest proportion of child molesters. 'High-rate chronic' (8%) highest proportion of adult victims
22	Lussier et al. 2015 <b>Canada</b>	Examination of desistance during adolescent-adult period using four different conceptual frameworks	Open and secure custody Incarcerated serious and violent young offenders Sexual offenders (56) <b>Total 349</b>	12 – 19 years	Sexual – type not specified	Defined as 1) as an event; 2) as a process; 3) probabilistic terms; 4) part of offending trajectory	Semi-structured interviews and access to official records <b>Semi-Parametric Group-Based Modelling</b>	Inconsistencies in classifying offenders as desisters/persisters across the modelling strategies used. Of importance, following the transition into adulthood, evidence suggests that most of these individuals were not on a life-course pattern of serious, violent, and sexual offending but rather at different stages of desistance.

23	Lussier et al. 2016 <b>Canada</b>	Investigation of desistance factors in the context of sexual offending criminal justice policies	Community Under supervision <b>500</b>	Av age 40.4 (10.2) 57% caucasian, 39% aboriginal	Various	Entire criminal history from age 18 up examined, desistance as absence from any conviction during the follow-up period	Anonymised records including community risk/needs assessment <b>Cox Regression Analyses</b>	Employment and marital status were not found to be significant predictors associated with desistance. Ageing and the absence of recent substance abuse were associated with desistance. Desistance may occur in the absence of community re-integration
24	Riordan* 2019 <b>USA</b>	To establish the utility of the Measure of Criminal and Antisocial Desistance in sexual offenders	Civilly committed sexual offenders <b>96</b>	Av age 47 (13.2) 60.5% black; 35% caucasian; 3.5% hispanic	36% aggravated sexual assault; sexual abuse, assault of a child – all contained some degree of violence	Not defined – not in community	Self-report surveys <b>T-tests and regression</b>	Committed sexual offenders differ in terms of desistance strategies from general offenders on probation. Integration into social structures and valued social place were rated most highly by sexual offenders
25	Walker et al. 2020 <b>Canada</b>	Explores criminal career trajectories of sexual offenders within the community	Community Official records for those on 810.1 or 810.2 order <b>318</b>	Av age 44.8 (11.8, 20 – 79) 65% caucasian	Sexual offence against a child (810.1) 42%; sexual assault against an adult (810.2)	Reduction in activity, not desistance as event	Anonymised records including community risk/needs assessment <b>Semi-Parametric Group-Based Modelling</b>	Two distinct groups of offenders: one very low-rate, continued to decline; one higher rate with steady declines. Marriage not significantly associated, stable family support supported desistance
26	Worling et al. 2015 <b>Canada</b>	Identification of protective factors that are predictive of desistance in adolescent sexual offenders	Community Clinics <b>81</b>	Av age 15.1 (1.5, 12 – 19)	Sexual offences – not specified	Recidivism data from national database, no new sexual offences, follow-up 0.1 to 7.9 (av 3.5) years in community	Clinician assessment, creation of ERASOR ratings & BERS measures** <b>Area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (AUC)</b>	Sum of risk factors on ERASOR predicted sexual recidivism. BERS affective strength predicted sexual desistance, BERS School functioning predicted desistance from nonsexual offending.

\*Denotes unpublished grey literature (Post-graduate/doctoral theses). ^ Book chapter, but as inclusion of original data study extracted for analysis. \*\*Estimate of Risk of Adolescent Sexual Offence Recidivism (ERASOR), Behavioural and Emotional Rating Scale (BERS)

**Table 1.5**  
Included quantitative studies for systematic review

# Lead Author	Clear research questions	Collected data address research questions	Qualitative approach appropriate	Data collection adequate	Findings derived from the data	Interpretation substantiated by data	Coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation	Sampling strategy relevant	Sample representative of target population	Measurement appropriate	Risk of non-response bias low	Statistical analysis appropriate
<b>Qualitative</b>												
1 Cooley	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes					
2 Cooley	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes					
3 Farmer	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Can't tell	Yes					
4 Farmer	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes					
5 Farmer	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes					
6 Harris	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes					
7 Harris	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes					
8 Harris	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes					
9 Harris	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes					
10 Hulley	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes					
11 Kewley	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Can't tell					
12 Kras	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Can't tell	No	Can't tell					
13 McAlinden	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes					
14 Milner	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes					
15 Richards	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes					
16 Vieira	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes					
<b>Quantitative</b>												
17 Blokland	Yes	Can't tell						Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Can't tell
18 Boyd	Yes	No						No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell
19 Carpentier	Yes	Yes						Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
20 Kruttschmitt	Yes	Can't tell						Yes	Can't tell	Can't tell	Yes	Yes
21 Lussier	Yes	Yes						Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
22 Lussier	Yes	Yes						Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
23 Lussier	Yes	Can't tell						Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes
24 Riordan	No	Can't tell						Can't tell	Can't tell	Yes	Can't tell	No
25 Walker	Yes	Yes						Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes
26 Worling	Yes	Can't tell						Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Can't tell

Column headings in grey represent quality approval items for qualitative studies, columns to the right of these represent quality approval items for quantitative descriptive studies. Items are rated 'yes', 'no' or 'can't tell'.

**Table 1.6**  
Summary of quality appraisal using Mixed Method Appraisal Tool

Fourteen of the studies included individuals who had committed sexual offences against adults and/or children, whereas the remaining recruited individuals who had been charged with a sexual offence specifically against a child or children ( $n = 10$ ), or the age of victims wasn't specified ( $n = 2$ ).

A number of included studies replicated a previously reported sample within their dataset, or reported the same sample within a subsequent, larger study (for example see Farmer et al. (2015) & Farmer, McAlinden, and Maruna (2016) and McAlinden, Farmer, and Maruna (2017)). However, given the focus of the qualitative analysis varies between studies, the outcome data is arguably different and as such they are retained here as separate studies.

### **1.3.2 Quantitative appraisal**

Quality ratings for both quantitative and qualitative studies are summarised in **Table 1.6**.

Many of the included quantitative studies focused on predictors of recidivism, indicated by official records of new charges for sexual offences or nonsexual offences, as opposed to identifying predictors of desistance. As stated, in the eligibility criteria efforts were made to identify studies focused on the process of desistance, as opposed to those primarily investigating risk of reoffending. However, as detailed, the operationalisation of desistance is still not well defined across the literature, and factors associated with desistance are often presented as the absence or the inverse of risk factors for reoffending. Therefore, whilst studies may claim to investigate desistance, the analysis actually relates to risk of reoffending. This was observed to be the case for Blokland and van der Geest (2015) and Worling and Langton (2015). This reduced clarity in the assessment of whether their analytic methods were appropriate. Their analytic approach may have been appropriate for assessing recidivism risk. However, the utility cannot be as clearly determined when investigating the process of desistance which encapsulates greater complexity than the presence or absence of an offending event.

Furthermore, a number of the quantitative studies included measures of informal social controls, including marriage, parenthood, divorce, social bonds and job

stability (Blokland & van der Geest, 2015; Kruttschnitt et al., 2000; Lussier & McCuish, 2016; Walker et al., 2020). It is important to consider these factors within the process of desistance. However, by reducing these events to binary or simplified outcomes, their meaning for the individual and the understanding of how these may promote desistance from sexual offending, is obscured. On this justification, the queries of whether collected data and included measures are appropriate have been categorised as ‘unclear’.

For some included quantitative studies, attempts are made to categorise individuals into those that are active or ‘persisting’ in crime, with comparisons against those that are ‘desisting’. Whilst this can yield interesting insights into factors relating to desistance, it arguably introduces a degree of error and uncertainty into the data. If desistance is considered as a process, it is likely that both groups contain individuals at varying stages of desistance or engagement in criminal or antisocial behaviour. Furthermore, certain studies use questionable criteria to categorise individuals by these terms. Boyd (1994) defined ‘desisters’ as those in the community for at least six months who had not reoffended. Given the suggestion that desistance is a process that can occur over years or even decades, six months in a sample of adolescent offenders does not seem an appropriate length of time to be categorising on this basis.

Riordan (2019) compared individuals convicted of general offences in the community, against a sample of civilly committed individuals charged with sexual offences. It is not clear how what sampling strategies were used, there is a lack of coherence between the overall question, analysis and findings, and perhaps most importantly, it is very unclear why the individuals who are committed are assumed to be ‘desisting’ without time in the community. This obscures any interpretation of findings. In comparison, Carpentier et al. (2011) also categorised a sample of adolescents into groups based on reoffences, but they included a longer follow-up period of time in the community (at least two years), and their categorisations of desistance included those that had no new charges (desisters) and those whose offending had reduced in intensity or severity (presence of nonsexual, nonviolent offences; de-escalators). This was felt to be a more rigorous and informative approach than the methods included in studies by Boyd (1994) and Riordan (2019).

In addition, Boyd (1994) compares groups on a multitude of measures, yielding very little in the way of difference and not comparing for multiple comparisons, further inflating the likelihood of Type 1 error (false positive). Kruttschnitt et al. (2000) whilst including a large and representative sample, did not include individuals with sexual offences at either extreme of the risk continuum (most serious or mild), and Worling and Langton (2015) provide limited detail on recruitment procedures, which makes it difficult to ascertain whether any respondent biases were present, therefore they were rated ‘can’t tell’ on the corresponding appraisal items.

### **1.3.3 Qualitative appraisal**

Within the qualitative studies, omission of direct extracts from interviewees obscured appraisal for whether results and interpretations were adequately supported by the data (Farmer et al., 2015). As discussed for quantitative methods, the inclusion of individuals who had not been living in the community for extended durations were questioned as to whether they could be considered to be ‘desisting’. Within the timeframes of the studies conducted by Harris (Harris, 2014, 2016, 2017; Harris, Pedneault, & Willis, 2019), they made reference to an individual(s) who had been in the community for a duration of four or six months. However, given the average was two to four years in the community between studies (up to 15 or 21 years), it was suspected that the reference to these shorter durations may have been anomalies within the dataset. Furthermore, this did not appear to adversely impact quality of data and analysis. In Harris et al. (2019) the chosen qualitative approach was not specified.

The quality and coherence between the research question and data was questioned for the study by Kras and Blasko (2016). This study is interesting in that it captures some of the noise and inconsistency within the desistance process for sexual offenders, with 66% of their sample returning to prison for parole violations, but none being reconvicted of new sexual offences. Helpfully, they delineate based on the type of persistence in criminal behaviour. However, whilst the study pertains to the desistance process, primarily it focuses more on the post-hoc explanations of the reasons for offending. Some of these explanations and ‘sense making’ of the offending behaviour are helpful in understanding differing potential mechanisms for the desistance process, however this is inferred, as the interviews ask less directly about

the decisions to cease and move away from crime post-offence. Due to this, the conceptual links were not always clearly substantiated by the data. Furthermore, the study by Kewley (2015), whilst holding relevance for desistance processes, was in many aspects more focused on experiences of engagement with religious communities during the offence or whilst in prison. In addition, the study of desistance was a smaller study within a wider doctoral thesis. Whilst providing some interesting insights, it was a limited sample and some of the questions and corresponding data were discordant, suggesting perhaps it was retrospectively fitted to the topic of desistance, rather than designed to investigate desistance specifically.

### 1.3.4 Refining themes

All of the original themes (see **Table 1.3**) derived from the ITDSO were substantiated by evidence from included studies, to varying degrees. The only theme that wasn't evident was that of *'time passed since last conviction'*. Whilst this was not specifically referred to, it was inferred from inclusion of those who had seemingly lived crime-free for extended durations. Furthermore, some of the quantitative longitudinal studies utilised survival curves to estimate proportions of individuals without new convictions over extended durations (Kruttschnitt et al., 2000; Lussier & McCuish, 2016). Therefore, this theme was retained.

Some initial themes were modified or gained greater depth and complexity from the inclusion of this evidence. *'Self-evaluation'* felt better captured by *'cognitive transformation'*, which replaced the original theme. Furthermore, references to feelings of *'grief, loss and regret'*, were subsumed under *'crystallisation of discontent'*, but appear pervasive across the process of desistance. *'Risk management'* was added as a sub-theme within *'maintained commitment to change'*

We exploded the theme *'Primary goods'* to give more detailed examples of these as described in the narratives. This included *'knowledge'*, *'mastery in work'*, *'relatedness'*, *'community'*, *'spirituality'* and *'inner peace'*. The original theme of *'social networks'* was subsumed within the new themes of *'relatedness'* and *'community'*. Within *'relatedness'*, *'forgiveness and trust'* was included as a sub-theme, and within *'community'*, *'belonging and acceptance'* was included. The theme

*'instrumental goods'*, expanded to include sub-themes of *'re-building'*, *'self-forgiveness'*, *'generativity'*, and *'education'*.

The evidence base provided a new theme, that of desistance occurring via *'cognitive neutralisation'*, as a variant of *'cognitive transformation'*. This included post-hoc interpretations of behaviours as having *'situational motivations'*, seeing offending behaviours as temporary and out-of-character with an inability to identify selves as sexual offenders, whilst still often acknowledging the crime and harm caused. They attributed offending to, for example, deterioration in life circumstances or mental health difficulties. Due to this the desire to return to their *'true self'* was expressed, as opposed to a *'new possible selves'*. This distinction between a true and new self was added within *'practical identities'*. This indicated a subsequent process of identity-driven desistance, but without the hypothesised preceding evaluation and crystallisation of discontent.

Others who did not appear to engage with cognitive transformations appeared to utilise alternative strategies of *'denial'* as a coping strategy, refusing to associate with the label of sexual offender and often, failing to take responsibility for their actions, or perhaps proportioning blame with the victim. There was a suggestion that these individuals appeared to resent the restrictions put upon them and felt angry with their sentencing. Some, conversely, identified their selves and/or sexual desires as *'deviant'*, and that they felt a lack of agency over their ability to desist. The desistance processes for these individuals appeared mainly driven by *'deterrents'*, for example threat of return to prison (added to *'re-entry'*), or natural desistance due to *'aging out'*. A number of authors noted this discrepancy between desistance driven by internal change versus those driven by external forces (Harris, 2016; Hulley, 2016) and suggested different ways of differentiating between those that had undergone true identity change, versus those that hadn't. Here, the terms *'formal'* and *'substantive'*, suggested by Hulley (2016), were adopted to describe this. These were felt to capture these differences more comprehensively than within the *'primary'* and *'secondary'* forms of desistance, as outlined previously. *'Decisive momentum'* was renamed accordingly as the *'primary'* stage in the model, to capture individuals who did not appear to undergo a period of evaluation and cognitive appraisal. See **Table 1.7** for final themes following the literature review. See **Table 1.8** for representation of main

<i>Primary</i>	
<i>Substantive*</i>	<i>Formal*</i>
<b>Focal events</b>	<b>Absence of cognitive transformation*</b>
<b>Cognitive transformation</b>	^Denial*
^Cognitive neutralisation*	^Deviance*
<b>Crystallisation of discontent</b>	^Ageing out*
^Grief, loss, regret*	
<i>Rehabilitation and re-entry</i>	
<b>Practical identity</b>	
^Possible positive self	
^Return to true self* (situational)	
<b>Primary goods</b>	
^Knowledge*	
^Work & Mastery*	
^Relatedness*	
^Forgiveness and trust*	
^Community*	
^Belonging and accepted*	
^Spiritual*	
<b>Instrumental goods</b>	
^Re-building*	
^Self-forgiveness*	
^Generative*	
^Education and treatment*	
<b>Maintained commitment to change</b>	
^Risk management*	
<b>Deterrents to recidivism*</b>	
<b>Barriers to re-entry</b>	
<b>Facilitators to re-entry</b>	
<i>Normalcy</i>	
<b>Criminal identity in the past</b>	
<b>Time passed since last convicted</b>	
<b>Hope for future</b>	

^ Denotes sub-theme; \*Denotes change from *a priori* framework

**Table 1.7**  
Final themes following literature review

<i>Themes</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>#</i>
<i>Focal events</i>		X	X	X				X		X	X		X	X													<b>8</b>
<i>Cognitive transformation</i>		X	X	X		X	X	X		X			X	X	X												<b>10</b>
<i>Crystallisation of discontent</i>		X		X	X	X		X			X			X	X												<b>8</b>
<i>Absence of cognitive transformation*</i>		X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	X															<b>9</b>
<i>Practical selves</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X		X	X	X	X	X											<b>13</b>
<i>Primary goods</i>	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X		X	X	X		X	X				X						<b>14</b>
<i>Instrumental goods</i>	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X				X		X	X				X						<b>12</b>
<i>Maintained commitment to change</i>	X						X	X		X	X			X		X											<b>7</b>
<i>Barriers to re-entry</i>	X	X		X		X			X	X	X		X	X		X				X				X			<b>12</b>
<i>Facilitators to re-entry</i>	X									X	X		X														<b>4</b>
<i>Deterrents to recidivism*</i>	X						X	X		X	X			X													<b>6</b>
<i>Criminal identity in the past</i>	X	X			X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X											<b>12</b>
<i>Time since last conviction</i>																					X			X			<b>2</b>
<i>Hope for future</i>				X			X		X	X			X	X	X												<b>7</b>

*Studies in chronological order, qualitative studies initially (1 – 16), followed by quantitative studies (17 – 26).*

**Table 1.8**  
Representation of themes across studies

themes across included studies. A comprehensive version, including sub-themes is available in **Appendix 3**.

For some included quantitative studies, the results described the observed characteristics of individuals thought to be desisting, as compared to those still actively engaged in crime, or ‘persisting’. These results mapped more closely onto risk or protective factors for reoffending, instead of delineating the process or mechanisms of desistance. Due to this, they could not be readily integrated into the existing theoretical framework and are summarised separately (see **Section 1.3.6.13**).

### **1.3.5 Model derived through framework synthesis**

This section summarises the evidence for the proposed themes.

#### **1.3.5.1 Focal events**

Göbbels et al. (2012) recognises focal events as events which call attention to problems in one’s life, prompting self-reflection. These were suggested to be retrospective constructions of perceived ‘turning points’ in offending trajectories.

“[Referring to conviction]: “In a sense its one big sort of negative but I could not, never have thought that anything positive could’ve come out of it, erm, it’s made me stop and look at me life in a completely different light . . .” (Farmer et al., 2012, p. 939)

Multiple studies referred to the shock of detection and conviction, with subsequent incarceration being a turning point, facilitating subsequent desistance. “The shock of the police turning up at the door- gave me enough of a shock not to want to do it again” (Milner, 2016, p. 81)

Some identified incarceration as being positive, or a ‘relief’ due to this, saying they ‘didn’t need to lie anymore’ and ‘didn’t need to hide’. They could accept their identity as a paedophile and sex offender, which provided opportunities to seek treatment and support (Harris, 2017). Others acknowledged that once they came to terms with their incarceration they were able to see it as an opportunity, deciding to ‘make the best’ of the situation and engage with treatment (Hulley, 2016). The loss of

employment and valued relationships were also identified as ‘low points’ which encouraged subsequent desistance (McAlinden et al., 2017).

### **1.3.5.2 Cognitive transformation**

This theme was evident throughout the included studies. It was captured within narratives of self-evaluation and reflection, prompting feelings of shame, disgust, self-loathing and victim empathy in the individuals who had committed the offences. It involved a process of taking ownership of actions and recognising behaviours and current identity as incompatible with morals and desired identity.

“Looking into himself” he came to “realize that I’m not one of those guys that do that stuff”, and that he was in the process of “becom[ing] a changed person” (Richards et al., 2020, p. 820).

Some described the ‘harrowing’ experience of victim empathy components within the sex offender treatment, which they stated forced them to look at themselves as a whole person, rather than just considering the offending behaviours (Hulley, 2016). This helped them to understand in depth, the nature of their offence (Harris, 2014). Cooley and Sample (2018) detailed how their participant captured this process in their journal entries, describing the cognitive and affective changes as the thoughts moved from criminal, to harmful to himself and others.

Within this theme, some studies described ‘cognitive neutralisations’. These helped individuals to maintain a positive sense of self as essentially good, whilst weakening their attachment and distancing themselves from the crime (Farmer et al., 2015). For these individuals, they saw their offending behaviours as arising via a specific set of social circumstances, emphasising that they didn’t seek out victims (e.g., children were known to them through work or daily routine). They didn’t perceive themselves as being sexual offenders and often appeared genuinely shocked by their behaviour, suggesting that it was not representative of who they were as a person. However, they still appeared to comprehend the gravity of the offence and impact on victims and demonstrated remorse for actions. Farmer et al. (2016) suggest that these

post-hoc interpretations may serve a protective function by shielding the individual from feelings of guilt and shame.

### **1.3.5.3 Crystallisation of discontent**

Cognitive reappraisal and transformation is suggested to generate a ‘crystallisation of discontent’ with the current offending identity, prompting subsequent behaviour change and seeking of a practical identity. Some individuals used highly emotive expressions to describe the degree of this discontent, as akin to being torn, or tortured by the shame of that realisation.

“I couldn’t sit in a [religious] meeting without my heart being ripped in two, you know the hypocrisy from me, you know, I mean I could be choked you know sat in a meeting, I couldn’t just switch from one to another and just sit in a meeting and feel free, and you know, my heart was in a knot, my mind was in a knot, you know the freedom, you know, I just felt awful, you know, I felt awful about it” (Kewley, 2015, p. 119).

Some spoke of the grief and regret for all they had lost and that couldn’t be retrieved. They described the process of ‘cursing themselves, over and over’ and the pain they experience as a consequence of knowing what they have lost (Milner, 2016). For others, this was labelled in less evocative terms. Rather, it was portrayed as a ‘weighing up of pros and cons of offending’, before making a rational choice to desist (Farmer et al., 2015). This may suggest a continuum of individual variation within the process of cognitive transformation and the extent of discontent, which may in turn affect the subsequent process of desistance, particularly the maintained commitment to change within the rehabilitation and re-entry stages.

### **1.3.5.4 Absence of cognitive transformation**

This theme was portrayed effectively in the studies by Harris (2017) and Cooley and Sample (2018). Cooley and Sample (2018) presented a comparative case study between an individual identified as ‘truly desisting’, compared with another who had simply ‘ceased offending’. The latter differed in that he did not demonstrate an

understanding of the impact of his offences on others, saw himself essentially as a good person with ‘bad behaviours’ and did not appear to fully achieve any real remorse or shifts in identity as a result of his detection and conviction. He described his anger towards sex offender laws and restrictions placed upon him, feeling them to be unjust. Harris (2017) expands on this, identifying that within their samples individuals rarely began treatment with a mind-set open to change; rather they engaged in treatment to avoid further sanction. She describes how the individuals were adamant that they would not reoffend but struggled to articulate their desistance process, tending to minimise responsibility and acknowledgement of harm.

“I was just angry with the whole situation, frustrated. She [his niece] was there so you know, I didn’t hit her or anything like that, I just abused her”. (Harris, 2017, p. 3061)

They were more likely to attribute desistance to self-preservation and avoidance of custody, rather than a desire to avoid creating new victims. This was often accompanied with an increased hypervigilance for, and management of risk, which some attributed to sex offender treatment and community restrictions. Some accompanied these with a degree of resentment. Harris (2017) offers the interpretation that behavioural changes can, and often do occur in the absence of internal motivation and despite external obstacles.

Other studies build on this, highlighting how some individuals who appeared to be desisting and who also minimised responsibility and acknowledgement of harm may have used this denial as a coping mechanism (Kewley, 2015). Kras and Blasko (2016) hypothesised that desistance from offending may be achieved via this dissociation of their identity with the stigmatised sexual offender. Some described that they were not like ‘other sex offenders’ and rejected any subsequent offending behaviours that may further affiliate themselves with this group. Others, however, situated explanations to *internal* factors outside of their control. This included sexual deviancy, mental health including addiction, or family history of trauma. The external locus of control and lack of agency was associated with a reduced capacity to take responsibility for actions. This was felt to correspond with a higher risk of sexual recidivism and increased struggle when it came to managing risk in the community.

For some, desistance was attributed to an ‘ageing out’ of crime, in keeping with theories of ‘natural desistance’. These are predicted to occur independently of formal or informal social control, emphasising biological maturation and ageing. These individuals again tended not to identify as sexual offenders, seeing their sexual offences as another category on a larger ‘rap-sheet’ of offending, including violent and nonviolent crimes (Harris, 2014).

This evidence suggests a variation of ways in which individuals justify or make sense of their offending behaviour, and subsequently different pathways for desistance that are not necessarily dependent on the initial shift in cognition, affect, agency or identity, as proposed by Göbbels et al. (2012). This supports the distinctions made between suggested ‘types’ of desistance, including ‘primary’ (Maruna, 2003), ‘formal’ (Hulley, 2016), or ‘resignation’ and ‘rote’ (Harris, 2016), as opposed to ‘secondary’, ‘substantive’ and ‘resilience’ desistance. However, it is worth noting, that processes within proposed ‘types’ of desistance appear dynamic, complex and as occurring along a continuum of change. Those who do not appear to engage with cognitive transformation as an initial stage of desistance, for example by taking responsibility and recognising themselves as active agents in the offending, may achieve identity transformation or substantive desistance by other means, for example by re-engaging with their practical identities.

#### **1.3.5.5 Practical identities**

Moving from preliminary stages to rehabilitation and re-entry, re-establishing or seeking a practical identity suggests acquiring a sense of self that is adaptive and holds value, anchoring cognitive transformation. This theme was present across many of the included studies but was particularly striking within the narratives in Richards et al. (2020). Drawing closely on Maruna (2001)’s ‘redemption scripts’, they characterise narratives where individuals identify themselves as essentially good, deep down and that they need to locate and re-establish the valued ‘old me’. They identified how the role of culture and ethnicity can influence this by investigating the narratives of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander men, a population overrepresented in the Australian Criminal Justice System. Via a cultural mentoring programme these

individuals developed their non-offending identities, grounded in their indigenous culture. They channelled the archetype of ‘the Warrior’, a traditional masculine role of men as protectors, providers and leaders. They spoke of wanting to return to this status and become father figures in the community. The wish to return to a ‘true self’, seeing crime as an aberration, was also identified by those identifying situational motivations for offending in Farmer et al. (2016).

Others made reference to creation of a new, positive self-identity, facilitating the moving away from their past, criminal selves.

“Now I wanted to change. Now I wanted to see and prove to myself that I did have a worth and purpose in life. This gave way to my attitudes changing and having a different outlook on my past as well as my future”  
(Milner, 2016, p. 93)

Hulley (2016) described this for one of her participants following disclosure and recognition of their sexuality. This was described as a ‘cathartic’ experience, assisting the construction of a new non-offending identity as they could move forward and engage in more meaningful relationships. Others identified the utility of probation services, in helping individuals move from offending identities to more positive ones of being parents or citizens (Cooley et al., 2017). As outlined in Göbbels et al. (2012) the seeking and acquisition of practical identities was often via the seeking of primary goods, including acquiring close relationships and meaningful and productive work roles (Farmer et al., 2012; Hulley, 2016; McAlinden et al., 2017).

#### **1.3.5.6 Primary goods**

The seeking and acquisition of primary goods, or ‘primary goods packages’, was a clear and consistent theme across studies. This was particularly true for the goods ‘relatedness’ and ‘community’. This theme is deconstructed to identify evidence for specific primary goods, and the meaning they provided to these individuals.

Harris (2014; 2016; 2019) described how participants sought knowledge and understanding in relation to their offending. This included understanding of their offending cycle, their triggers and increased self-awareness. In Harris et al. (2019)

participants described seeking almost an academic level of understanding of desire and sexual offending behaviour, utilising psychological evidence and theory. The acquisition of this knowledge was suggested to help individuals make sense of their behaviour, described as ‘essential’ in enabling them to move forward (Hulley, 2016).

Farmer et al. (2015) stated that individuals related their employment to happiness and life satisfaction. Employment provided meaning in their lives and gave them ‘something to lose’ as well as new routines and informal social controls. It was identified as important for reconstructing practical identities but was not essential for desistance. Conversely, for a participant in Hulley (2016), he felt his job was ‘crucial to his desistance’. It provided him with a sense of purpose, structured routine, fulfilment and sense of mastery, as well as a wider social network. This helped to rebuild his self-esteem and altered his self-perception. Kruttschnitt et al. (2000) found that those with stable employment at the time of sentencing were 37% percent less likely to reoffend than those with less stable employment histories. It is worth considering, however, the likelihood that those individuals convicted of sexual offences are able to acquire employment and academic understanding of psychological processes. These results may refer to a select minority within this wider population.

Hulley (2016) acknowledges difficulties faced by these individuals in seeking employment, but relays that some found alternative forms of unpaid employment or activities which also provided a sense of purpose and mastery. She provides an example of someone finding this through participation in chess tournaments. The seeking of mastery through alternate means is also evident in Vieira et al. (2020).

“More than what you can do it’s more about more you could do. It’s more, what do you do with your life? Find something you are passionate about. Interests, hobbies . . . that’s what life is about.” (Vieira et al., 2020, p. 847)

Relatedness is the natural desire of human beings to establish warm, affectionate bonds with others. This may be romantic, family or close platonic friendships. The desire for closeness with others was a strong sub-theme within primary goods, via seeking of romantic relationships, maintaining relationships or building new

connections (Cooley & Sample, 2018; Farmer et al., 2015). However, individuals often expressed feeling unsure how to obtain these or feared rejection due to their sexual offending status (Harris et al., 2019). Whilst marriage and close family support were associated with lower sexual recidivism in some studies (Blokland & van der Geest, 2015; A. Walker et al., 2020), these effects were not replicated in others (Kruttschnitt et al., 2000; Lussier & McCuish, 2016). Lussier and McCuish (2016) suggest that it is the context of these relationships and the quality of the intimate bonds that is important, rather than being married per se. Both Cooley et al. (2017) and McAlinden et al. (2017) identified that the acquisition of relatedness within primary goods packages gave the individual reason to desist, for fear of losing that valued connection. Integral within the theme of relatedness was the importance of being forgiven by others and earning their trust (Farmer et al., 2015; Harris et al., 2019; Hulley, 2016; Kewley, 2015). Forgiveness and trust from valued others helped strengthen and feedback successful acquisition of a practical, non-offending identity.

Community, and within this, the need to belong within social groups, were also clear sub-themes within primary goods. Repeatedly, there was mention of the church and religious communities in relation to this, where people found that they were able to integrate and feel accepted by their community (Cooley & Sample, 2018; Kewley, 2015; Milner, 2016). This process was also described in relation to integration with peer support groups, with studies highlighting this integration (Riordan, 2019; Vieira et al., 2020) and the need to belong as key factors in desistance (Farmer et al., 2012). Milner (2016) re-interviewed individuals after a year of apparent desistance and suggested increased levels of social connectedness, providing additional support for the importance of connectivity in aiding desistance. The primary good of ‘spirituality’ was also described in relation to finding meaning and purpose in life. This was evident in narratives of religious affiliation, but also was present in relation to work and generative projects.

#### **1.3.5.7 Instrumental goods**

Instrumental goods are adaptive means of acquiring primary goods. Within the evidence summarised here, those most apparent included ‘rebuilding’ (primary good

of relatedness), 'self-forgiveness' (inner peace), 'generative' (community, spirituality, mastery), and 'education and treatment' (knowledge).

Rebuilding referred to the rebuilding of valued relationships, slowly regaining trust with time and commitment.

"I spend time trying to make things up for my daughter who is a collateral victim of all this, it broke up her family, it ruined her mother and it shamed her, you know?" (Harris, 2016, p. 1731)

Some studies made reference to the importance of being able to be compassionate and forgiving towards the self first, in order to enable others to also extend forgiveness towards them. They spoke of the courage this entails and the strength required to 'put it behind them' (Kewley, 2015). Engagement with generative projects, harnessing a desire to help others via mentoring and voluntary roles, was present within a number of included studies (Harris, 2014, 2016; Hulley, 2016; Richards et al., 2020). For many, this was within the context of mentoring in sex offender treatment and support groups, empowering individuals and enabling them to impart knowledge that they had learned through the programmes. Richards et al. (2020) spoke of community projects designed to benefit future generations, allowing individuals to be role models and leaders for others, again reinforcing reformed practical identities and building a sense of internal control and agency. The importance of education and treatment resonated throughout these narratives, in prison, in community, and via probation services. The engagement in treatment, particularly those increasing victim empathy, helped to assist with cognitive transformations. Individuals expressed pride in their knowledge gained and their engagement with programmes (Harris et al., 2019). This boosted self-esteem and created optimism for a brighter future (Milner, 2016). Many demonstrated retention of knowledge for extended durations following treatment, with some being 'able to recite the sexual assault cycle and identify their triggers to behaviour, after being out of treatment and prison for eight and ten years' (Cooley et al., 2017). The effects of these interventions often appeared to be transformative within the narratives.

“I did not gain just knowledge, nor understanding, I gained wisdom. I did not know empathy before, or, at least, I did not know how to tap into it, to my feelings, and to walk in your shoes to see what you would go through” (Harris, 2014, p. 1567)

#### **1.3.5.8 Maintained commitment to change**

The importance of maintained conscious effort and management of risk in the community was highlighted to promote desistance. Some spoke of the utility of contact with probation services and the necessity of registration as encouraging this. This helped provide reminders of their past and encouraged their commitment to avoid reoffending, enforcing that they wanted to maintain a changed identity and they ‘wanted their lives back’ (Cooley et al., 2017). The role of agency in the individual’s ability to achieve this and to keep themselves and others safe, was an important component of this commitment (Harris, 2014; Hulley, 2016; Kewley, 2015). There was a recognition that they could easily relapse without maintained conscious effort, reflecting that ‘it only takes a thought, and I could end up back in prison’ (Harris, 2016, 2017). For some, the self-awareness of risk and the need for external barriers provided a greater sense of control over their ability to desist.

“There is a monster inside my head, I am never going to lose him but I can control him... you have gotta have control. It’s conscious and I manage it every day” (Milner, 2016, p. 85)

Importantly, there appeared to be variation within this theme. Some appeared to lack any trust in their ability to restrain themselves in the presence of triggers, or fear that they may inadvertently break their restriction orders. This resulted in their avoiding any situation where they may be in the proximity of children to keep themselves and others safe.

“It’s a way of protecting me, I understand about them [children], but I’m saying it’s a way of protecting me. You know? Like, I’ll give you a good example, okay? I’m waiting for an elevator, there’s a bunch of kids,

teenage girls and boys and all that in there. I won't jump on that elevator; I'll walk down the stairs before I jump on that elevator" (Harris, 2017, p. 3064).

This lack of perceived control was suggested to correspond with an absence of cognitive transformation (Harris, 2017; Kras & Blasko, 2016). It seemed important that individuals have confidence in their commitment to change and ability to stay safe, whilst acknowledging the continual cognitive effort and protective strategies required to do so. Too much or too little awareness of risk management appeared problematic in relation to desistance.

#### **1.3.5.9 Deterrents to reoffending**

Many included studies made reference to threats of violating registration and notification laws, and the associated fear of return to prison as an effective deterrent. As outlined in 'absence of cognitive transformation', this for some indicated a 'resigned' or 'formal' form of desistance, where individuals abstained from repeated offending to avoid further sanction. However, it appeared that the influence of deterrents was also important for those who had achieved a more 'substantive' form of desistance, even if it was not the primary factor promoting desistance. Many made reference to the fear of prison, and a sense of 'never being able to go back there' (Harris, 2016; Kewley, 2015).

"The majority of them will hear that [prison] door slam behind them and never want to hear that door slam behind them again, ever" (Hulley, 2016, p. 86)

#### **1.3.5.10 Facilitators and barriers to re-entry**

As outlined in commitment to change, support received via probation services was identified as a valuable facilitator to re-entry. In Cooley et al. (2017), 40% of the sample referenced probation as beneficial, partly for providing reminders of the need to maintain desistance efforts, but also to help obtain access to targeted treatment programmes. In some cases, narratives referred to probation officers going 'above and

beyond' their roles, providing food parcels and helping to secure benefits, accommodation and seek employment (Hulley, 2016). Others spoke of how they'd been helped by members of their church with resettlement arrangements (Kewley, 2015).

However, many other studies highlighted how probation and parole, and related registration processes, could be a hindrance to re-entry and acquisition of primary goods (Cooley et al., 2017). Individuals described how they often were met with a lack of empathy and understanding from probation officers, and some described being treated very badly (Hulley, 2016). Indeed, Kruttschnitt et al. (2000) identifies how the quality of this relationship with probation officers can be predictive of reoffending rates.

Registration and notification laws repeatedly were mentioned as being barriers to seeking employment, to forming new relationships or to accessing communities and social networks (Harris, 2016; Harris et al., 2019; Kewley, 2015; McAlinden et al., 2017; Vieira et al., 2020). This also extended to the acquisition of basic goods, including food, shelter and medication (Harris et al., 2019). They described how the stigma associated with the label left them socially outcast, akin to being 'lepers' in society, and at heightened risk of vigilante attacks (Milner, 2016). Substance abuse and negative peer influence were also identified as barriers to re-entry and desistance efforts (Richards et al., 2020).

#### **1.3.5.11 Past selves**

Many references were made to the offending behaviour or the identity of sexual offender as being one belonging in the past. This was true for those with situational motivations, seeing the behaviour as a small part of their lives, now historical (Farmer et al., 2012), and for those who identified as having 'aged out of crime' (Harris, 2014). Those who had 'aged out' described themselves as having had 'two lives', offending and non-offending (Harris, 2016). Some said that their offending identities were aspects of their pasts, but that 'their history is not their destiny', stating that part of the past 'is gone now' (Hulley, 2016). Some, however, embraced their identity as being an 'ex-offender', expressing their pride in their new reformed identity (Cooley & Sample, 2018). They called for the importance of retaining that aspect of self, in order to promote their new identity as being reformed from their 'old selves'.

It made me more aware not to forget where I've been and where I am now and in the future . . . You cannot get rid of the 'old you' . . . You can just improve on yourself . . . You get rid of the 'old you', you get rid of the bad experiences. You need the 'old you'" (Vieira et al., 2020, p. 845)

#### **1.3.5.12 Optimism and hope**

For those who had seemingly achieved substantive desistance, there were strong narratives of hope and planning for the future (Farmer et al., 2015; McAlinden et al., 2017). They had a clear sense of their future lives, including where they wanted to be and what they wanted to do. This included putting their skills learnt in therapy into practice in the hope of achieving a better life and 'coming out stronger' (Harris, 2016). There was mention of seeking happiness through contentment with what they have, and expression of their gratitude. There was a sense that even in the face of challenges, in time things will work themselves out and that new opportunities will arise (Hulley, 2016; Milner, 2016).

#### **1.3.5.13 Additional quantitative findings**

Some of the main findings from the quantitative studies could not be readily incorporated into this framework synthesis. These mostly included characteristics of individuals considered to be 'desisting', in comparison to those actively 'persisting'. Carpentier et al. (2011) & Boyd (1994) identified that those in the desisting group exhibited: lower prevalence's of antisocial traits; lower rates of Attention Deficit Disorder; less exposure to pornography at a young age; lower rates of learning disability, behavioural problems, school failure and drug and alcohol problems. Higher scores on an index of affective bonding were predictive of desistance from sexual offending (Worling & Langton, 2015). Desisters also reported the fewest consensual sexual experiences (Carpentier et al., 2011).

Lussier et al. (2010)'s desisting group (low-rate crime) showed the greatest degree of specialisation in sexual crimes, with the highest proportion of child molesters, in comparison with those still engaged in crime, or desisting on a slower trajectory. A. Walker et al. (2020)'s results suggested those at higher risk of offending were more likely to include individuals convicted of sexual violence against adult women.

## **1.4 Discussion**

This study reports the first systematic review and synthesis of qualitative and quantitative evidence of the process of desistance from sexual offending. The search yielded twenty-six included studies, sixteen of which used qualitative analyses and ten which employed quantitative approaches. Evidence is synthesised and discussed in relation to a ‘best-fit’ theoretical framework, drawing from the ITDSO (Göbbels et al., 2012). Main findings included a substantial degree of support for aspects within the ITDSO framework. This includes: the process of cognitive transformation; the desire to adopt practical non-offending identities; a maintained commitment to change; challenges faced upon re-entry to society; and the importance of acquiring practical and instrumental goods. Divergence from the model was apparent for individuals who appeared to be desisting from sexual offending in the absence of cognitive transformation or identity shifts. Furthermore, greater insight into specific types of primary and instrumental goods and how these consolidate acquisition of practical identities was provided. In addition, this review provides further insight into the strengths and limitations of different methodological approaches for operationalising and measuring desistance.

The implications of these key findings will be explored here, discussing their contribution to theoretical, as well as applied practical and clinical considerations.

### **1.4.1 Operationalisation of desistance**

Desistance is evidently substantially more than cessation from crime. Laws and Ward (2011) describe the wide variation in how desistance is operationalised within the literature on nonsexual crime and importantly, how it is measured within studies. They observe that quantitative approaches tend to consist of those using static approaches that measure desistance from the last recorded crime, and those employing dynamic semi-parametric trajectory modelling to explore patterns in desistance. Similar distinctions were observed here for the included quantitative studies. The majority operationalised desistance as the absence of any new official charges since their last offence, release from prison or within a particular follow-up period. The three

exceptions utilised semi-parametric group-based modelling to investigate trends in the desistance process.

The use of these approaches is problematic in that it conceptualises desistance as an absence of recidivism, which, as eloquently argued in Cooley and Sample (2018), fails to capture cognitive, affective and identity shifts that characterise desistance as a process. Cooley and Sample (2018) identify that quantitative studies make it easier to utilise large samples and as such, are more externally valid. However, if they are predicting a concept which is not actually being measured, this falls within the realms of ‘intellectual irresponsibility’. These sentiments are echoed here, there appears to be limited utility in conceptualising and categorising individuals on the presence or absence of subsequent reconvictions. Furthermore, cross-sectional group comparison provides little insight into mechanisms driving desistance. Whilst encouraging that some studies have included factors associated with desistance to investigate their influence on offending trajectories, rudimentary (often binary) measures of complex interpersonal or defining life events (e.g., marriage, divorce) provides limited insight. As acknowledged, it is the meaning attached to these events for the individual which is important and the gradual, rather than abrupt influence of these events over time (Walker et al., 2020).

Either more detailed quantitative longitudinal studies are required, incorporating comprehensive measures over multiple time-points or the ongoing focus of desistance research should employ richer qualitative designs. Efforts should be made to acquire samples who arguably appear to be actively desisting, avoiding inclusion of those who are still in the early process of self-evaluation and re-entry, unless this is substantiated with longer follow-up. The evidence suggests a high degree of heterogeneity in relation to desistance timeframes. Therefore, it is difficult to suggest a specific duration and sampling will inevitably be imperfect. However, attempting to recruit those who have lived seemingly offence-free in the community for at least a number of years is recommended, as is the option of re-interviewing individuals at repeated longitudinal time-points in order to capture dynamic aspects of this process (as employed by Milner (2016)).

## 1.4.2 Contribution to theoretical models

The synthesis of this evidence helps to provide greater insight into some of these desistance mechanisms and how they correspond with the current theoretical framework. The ITDSO is a widely accepted and comprehensive theory of desistance from sexual offending. However, limitations have been highlighted including: an overreliance on features of the GLM; a lack of grounding in current evidence; and a neglect of the influence of identity shifts throughout the stages (Cooley & Sample, 2018). These results lend support to the hypothesised concepts and processes of desistance from sexual offending within this model. However, it is agreed that there are aspects of the model that are overly simplistic.

### 1.4.2.1 Pathways to desistance

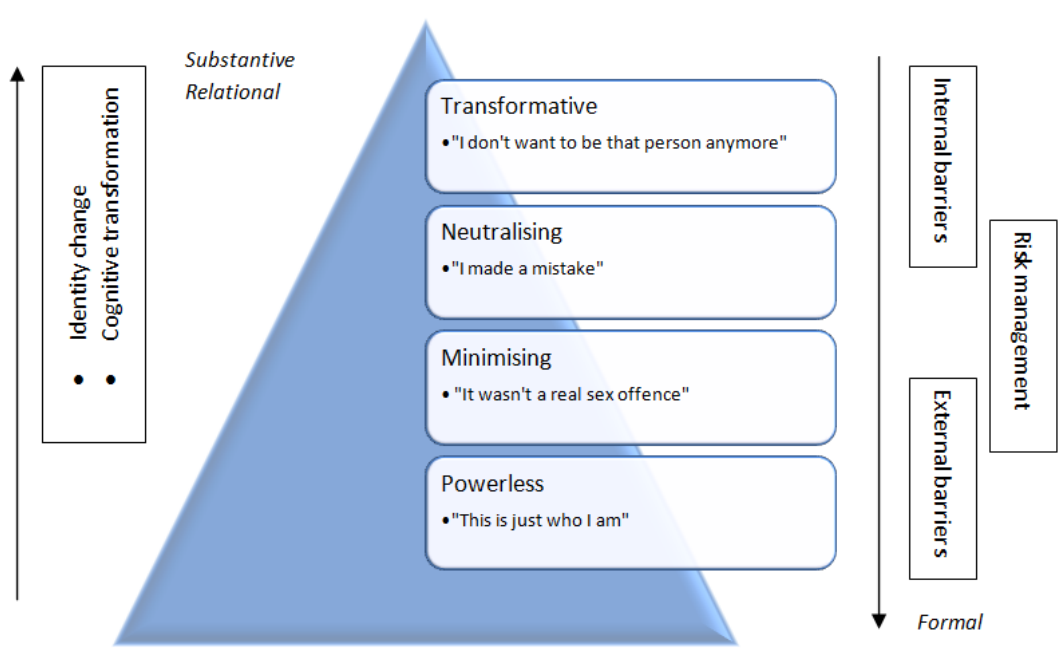
The ITDSO stresses the importance of self-reflection and evaluation within the early stages of desistance, leading to crystallisation of discontent. This draws parallels with the process of ‘cognitive transformation’. However, the cognitive mechanisms underpinning this and their necessity for achieving subsequent desistance are questioned here. The findings from this review suggest that there may be different desistance pathways or ‘types’ of desistance. This has been suggested by others, including categorisations of what is considered a more basic form of desistance, or a period of non-offending (e.g., primary, formal, resigned desistance). This is compared with those who achieve a more complex form of desistance, consistent with the conceptualisation in the ITDSO, including accompanying cognitive transformation and identity shifts (e.g., secondary, substantive, resilient desistance). Here, we propose that processes of desistance and accompanying cognitive transformation and identity shifts are likely to occur along a continuum.

Not intended to be exhaustive, prescriptive, or mutually exclusive, four general categorisations of desistance deriving from the literature are suggested here. This included those who achieved a ‘transformative’ level of desistance, taking responsibility for actions and expressing remorse for harm caused, with a desire to move away from their previous offending identities, echoing sentiments of “*I don’t want to be that person anymore*”. The second are those who ‘neutralised’ the shame of offending, not minimising the harm caused, but viewing the crime as an anomaly

or as being unrepresentative of their ‘true selves’. Here expressed as “*that’s not who I am, I made a mistake*”. Third, are individuals who use more apparent denial, minimising harm and their sense of responsibility for actions and distancing themselves from the identity of sexual offender, “*it wasn’t a ‘proper’ sexual offence, I’m not like the other sex offenders*”. Fourth, are individuals who express a lack of self-control and agency in their behaviour, identifying as sexual offenders but feeling powerless to change. Expressed here as “*This is just who I am, I can’t help it*”.

All four appear capable of desisting from further sexual crime, however they seem to have different mechanisms for achieving this and as such, differing considerations for practice. An illustration of these processes is provided in **Figure 1.2**. It appears that having too much, or too little awareness of risk and responsibility for actions may be detrimental to desistance efforts. It may be helpful to encourage those who minimise harm caused and their responsibility to engage in treatment programmes, particularly victim empathy, to promote awareness and encourage movement towards ‘transformative’ desistance. However, it should also be acknowledged that failure to do so may not indicate increased risk of reoffending and that the process of denial may be protective for these individuals.

For those who feel powerless over their actions, for example due to sexual deviance, there may need to be a greater reliance on external barriers of risk management in the community. However, additional efforts could be made to help these individuals build a sense of control and agency over their ability to keep themselves and others safe, by teaching them how to recognise and manage triggers as well as indicators of relapse. Finding ways to help these individuals re-integrate and seek primary goods, in a way which keeps themselves and others safe, can still promote desistance and help to build more meaningful lives. We suggest here also that those who achieve a higher degree of cognitive transformation and acquisition of practical identities, may be more likely to have that change recognised and reinforced by others. This encourages the ‘tertiary’, or more appropriately named, ‘relational’ form of desistance (McNeill, 2015; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016).



**Figure 1.2**  
Schematic of categories of desistance across continuum of individual variation and cognitive transformation

It would be helpful to focus future research efforts on the samples of individuals who fall towards the end of the spectrum without cognitive transformation. According to the evidence, this appears to be a substantial proportion of those seemingly desisting from sexual crime (Cooley & Sample, 2018; Harris, 2016). However, there is a greater focus in the literature on narratives that indicate an affective and cognitive identity transition. This may be partly due to selection and reporting biases. Individuals who have achieved this change may be proud of doing so and seek to impart wisdom to others through research participation.

#### 1.4.2.2 Anchoring desistance efforts

Furthermore, as highlighted by Hulley (2016), there are discrepancies in relation to the temporal ordering of achieving substantive desistance. This reflects a key limitation with the ITDSO that suggests a linear progression through desistance stages. Conversely, the evidence suggests that some aspects of the process may take place over extended durations, spanning preliminary stages, rehabilitation and re-entry. Cognitive appraisals and identity shifts may ebb and flow with the provision or loss of primary goods and supportive environments.

Whilst the ITDSO outlines the need for maintained commitment to change and some of the barriers faced in re-entry, it does not fully portray quite how difficult many individuals convicted of sexual offences may find it to re-integrate, to combat the pervasive stigma and to obtain primary goods in a way that helps promote meaningful identity change. In addition, the original model does not capture the complexity and inherent value of the acquisition and meaning of primary goods. Here, it was striking how apparent the importance of relatedness, forgiveness by others, rebuilding of trust and the experience acceptance and belonging can be in aiding the desistance process. This again emphasises the significance of ‘relational desistance’. This was evident even for individuals with very impoverished social networks, via the acquisition of some small, valued connection. This feels vital, particularly in the context of sexual offending, where individuals are often extremely isolated and rejected by wider society, leading to a severing of social connection and pervasive disconnect from others. Furthermore, as outlined by Richards et al. (2020), it seems the acquisition of these primary goods can elicit subsequent cognitive and identity change, as opposed to merely consolidating them.

This has important implications for policy and practice. The intervention outlined in Richards et al. (2020) appeared effective for individuals who did not demonstrate cognitive transformation, who were extremely marginalised and stigmatised and who were considered to be high risk for reoffending. Promotion of a collective practical identity and engagement in generative projects may help individuals to acquire meaning, purpose, a sense of belonging and acceptance by others. The reliance on specific cultural identities may be harder to recreate elsewhere, however it is encouraging that collective positive identity can be generated when re-imagined individual ones seem unattainable and that individuals experienced positive change through other generative efforts. Finding avenues, even if on a small scale, for connection with others appears vital. Working with families to help rebuild and maintain relationships may be one avenue for this, or engagement with spiritual communities promoting forgiveness or targeted programmes to increase social support can also be useful avenues (for an example see ‘Circles of Support and Accountability’, (Wilson, Cortoni, & McWhinnie, 2009)).

This evidence draws attention to the adverse effects of stigmatisation and legal restrictions hindering efforts to desist via these means. The stigma and risk management practice within wider society perpetuates the belief that those convicted of sexual offences are deviant, dangerous and will always remain high-risk, both for those convicted and those around them. These individuals are prevented from seeking employment, accessing accommodation and in some cases basic goods. Furthermore, they are ostracised and are excluded from their community and social networks. Efforts to redeem and reconcile their selves appear to be continually thwarted. This appears to damage their sense of agency and their hope for redemption. Focusing solely on risk management often appears to hinder desistance efforts, as opposed to promoting them (as also identified by Cooley et al. (2017); Harris et al. (2019); Hulley (2016)). The need for education and increased public awareness of the variation within sex offending is paramount, as is the promotion of rehabilitative efforts and compassion over vigilantism and condemnation. Training for professionals is essential, as experiences with probation services, healthcare professional and the wider criminal justice system can seemingly be pivotal in encouraging or obscuring desistance efforts.

### **1.4.3 Research recommendations**

Within the current theory of desistance from sexual offending, there is limited distinction by different types of sexual offending. This review included studies recruiting a range of samples including individuals who offend sexually against adults (predominately women), those who offend sexually against children, those who offend against both, non-contact sexual offences and those whose sexual offences are one type of offence within an extensive and varied criminal history, including non-sexual crimes. There appear to be divergent trajectories of risk relating to different forms of offending, with higher degree of specialisation and lower levels of subsequent recidivism in child molesters as compared with adult rapists (Lussier et al., 2010). Desistance mechanisms may also be different, with for example, child molesters being more likely to identify as sexual offenders and undergo cognitive transformation, as opposed to those with more varied criminal histories who do not associate with the identity of being a ‘sexual offender’ or who may desist via different pathways. It is beyond the scope of this review to delineate between types of sexual offending with

the aim of comparing or contrasting these differences, but it would be helpful for future research to address these considerations. It would also be helpful to study how types of desistance in sexual offending are influenced by other factors, such as level of cognitive ability, presence of mental illness and socioeconomic status.

Furthermore, studies appear to either focus on the reasons why people engaged in crime, or the processes by which they desist. As outlined, some focus on post-hoc explanations of reasons for offending but there seems to be little evidence explicitly looking at the whole ‘journey’ of offending, including reasons why they initially engaged in crime and processes of subsequently moving away from crime. This combined approach may help to better elucidate pathways of desistance.

#### **1.4.4 Limitations**

As with any review there are a number of methodological limitations to acknowledge here. First, this being an initial attempt to systematically synthesise evidence relating to this topic, there may be differences in opinion with regard to how widely we ‘cast the net’ for inclusion criteria within the review. As outlined, the operationalisation of desistance is not well defined within the wider literature, with one of the aims of this review being to investigate this variation. As such, despite our efforts, there may have been studies with relevance to desistance in sexual offending, which did not meet inclusion criteria (for example, focused on rehabilitation and re-entry as opposed to specifying desistance), and indeed, studies which met inclusion criteria that were not, in essence, investigating desistance mechanisms (instead focusing on recidivism risk). This also generally led to omission of studies of treatment programmes designed to promote future desistance, which did not specifically investigate the process of desistance. A separate review of these areas may be helpful in further elucidating processes of desistance from sexual offending and inform practice recommendations for different aspects within the process.

In addition, we included studies where the individuals had been charged with a sexual offence. This excluded studies of unconvicted sexual violence, for which the desistance processes are arguably still relevant (for example, see Abbey, Wegner, Pierce, and Jacques-Tiura (2012) and Berggren, Gottzén, and Bornäs (2020)). Here there is an overreliance on official charges for offending, which fails to capture lower-

level or undetected sexual violence. However, as sexual abuse and violence is pervasive and widely unacknowledged by those who perpetrate it within our society, developing understanding of desistance mechanisms in non-criminal samples is arguably of equal value in helping to inform policy.

Also, by using a ‘best-fit’ framework synthesis, we shaped interpretation of the evidence through the lens of this *a priori* theoretical framework. This allowed for a more accessible way of synthesising and interpreting the findings, but in doing so may have obscured some of the nuance and depth in analysis that might have been achieved with an inductive, as opposed to deductive, analytical approach. For example, an aspect that has not been explored in detail here is the influence of informal and formal social controls on desistance. These appeared of importance within the evidence and wider literature but did not significantly converge or diverge from the current framework to require separation and elaboration. As formal controls and legal restrictions varied across the different geographical structuring the results on this basis may have yielded different insights regarding desistance processes.

## 1.5 Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this review provides the first systematic attempt to synthesise a broad range of evidence to encourage understanding of desistance from sexual offending. This captured a range of populations, in terms of types of offending behaviour, ages of participants, country of origin, operationalisation of desistance, and methodological approaches. Inclusion of both qualitative and quantitative designs helped to inform discussion of types of approaches used to understand desistance and broader aspects of this process. Furthermore, inclusion of unpublished grey literature yielded a number of doctoral theses, which provided valuable evidence and insights into this process.

These findings suggest that whilst the majority of individuals charged with sexual offences do appear to desist from further offending, there are variations in how this desistance is achieved. Some appear to reconcile their valued selves, reconnect with others and effectively re-integrate into society. Others however remain outcast and disconnected, feeling resentful of sanctions or fearful of the risk they pose to themselves and others. Here we offer suggestions for how these individuals may be

understood by the criminal justice system, professionals and wider society, calling for individualised approaches to help aid desistance and promote identity transformation and agency. In particular, instead of casting out these members of society, we call for a need to promote their connection with others, finding a sense of meaning and purpose, consolidation of change and in doing so, instilling hope for their futures.

## 1.6 References

*\*Denotes included studies within systematic review*

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## 2                    “Please tell me it’s not children”: A study of the impact of cyber-enabled sexual offending on family members

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## Abstract

This qualitative study investigated the lived experience of family members for individuals charged with non-contact, cyber-enabled sexual offending (CESO). Twelve family members were recruited, including romantic partners, mothers and adult siblings. Data was collected in the form of semi-structured interviews and analysed using a Multiperspectival Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. This generated four main themes across the narratives, including ‘*Loss*’; ‘*Cast out*’; ‘*Silenced*’; and ‘*Reconciliation*’. These captured a loss of anonymity, betrayal, grieving for relationships and imagined futures, as well as a loss of foundation and sense of self. Participants described experiences of ostracism and harassment arising from their association with those charged with the crime, as well as related experiences of stigma, shame and fear of exposure. Themes of silence and secrecy were pervasive, with many feeling unable to confide in others, withdrawing and isolating themselves from the wider world. ‘*Reconciliation*’ explored how family members made sense of the behaviour, with themes relating to reconciliation of the self and with their loved one. Parallels are explored for other forms of offending, focusing on experiences of societal response and how individuals seek to understand the behaviour. Implications and recommendations for policy and clinical practice are discussed.

**Key words:** Sexual offending, indecent images of children, family members, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

## 2.1 Introduction

Over the past decade the UK has recorded a 700% increase in crimes involving indecent images of children (IIOC) (The Home Office, 2018). In Scotland, ‘cyber enabled’ (internet) sexual offences (CESO<sup>1</sup>) contributed to half of the growth of all recorded sexual crimes between 2013 and 2017, with ‘possession or distribution of IIOC’ and ‘communicating indecently’ accounting for one fifth of recorded sexual crime (Scottish Government, 2018). This is a growing problem, both in the UK and worldwide. The COVID-19 crisis has revealed a surge in online distribution of IIOC, as well as increased live streaming of child sexual abuse (Europol, 2020). This increase is suggested to be due to greater amounts of time spent online, boredom and isolation, with more opportunities for self-produced indecent material, online solicitation and exploitation (ECPAT, 2020). The report produced by Europol in 2020 suggested that the growth of child sexual abuse material shows ‘no signs of stabilising, let alone decreasing’ (Europol, 2020).

The vast majority of perpetrators for CESO are male (95%), with younger victims than for non-cyber enabled crimes (average age of 14 years, compared to 23 years). Perpetrators are also younger, with an average of 18 years (compared to 36 years for non-cyber enabled crimes) (Scottish Government, 2018). The increase in CESO, including possession of IIOC, is likely due in part to advances in communication technologies and higher levels of police monitoring. Improvements in technology have influenced the production of higher quality images and videos. This enables perpetrators to offend at their convenience within their homes (ECPAT, 2020). Social media has been found to play a significant role, where high proportions of sexual harm to children is committed via apps on smart phones and devices, using popular social media platforms, as well as illegal sites (Quayle & Koukopoulos, 2019). These enable increasing opportunities to perpetrate abuse, platforms to share content and greater anonymity with use of ‘onion’ (hidden service) sites and the ‘darkweb’ (Parks et al., 2020). This has led content creation and distribution to be at ‘breaking

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<sup>1</sup> CESO denotes ‘cyber-enabled sexual offending’ or ‘cyber-enabled sexual offence(s)’ accordingly

point' with criminal justice organisations being incapable of responding accordingly (Quayle, 2020).

The internet provides a perceived anonymity that gives individuals a sense of detachment from the material and allows them to experiment with their sexuality (Ogas & Gaddam, 2011). It also makes access to IIOC much more readily available, enabling rapid acquisition for those seeking it (Quayle & Taylor, 2002). Rimer (2017) explores 'boundaries' created within online spaces, suggesting the online environment does not feel 'real' and does not require the same adherence to social rules. This leads to an erosion of moral values. Individuals reportedly engage in behaviour that they feel is unrepresentative of their 'true selves'. Furthermore, there appears to be a prevailing societal perception that internet offences are non-contact and as such, constitute a victimless crime (Winder & Gough, 2010). This is echoed in the accounts of individuals with charges for possession of IIOC, who may differentiate themselves from those with contact offences or online grooming with the justification that they did not 'create' a victim (Winder, Gough, & Seymour-Smith, 2015). However, by accessing IIOC a greater demand is created for the production of these images, perpetuating child abuse. This has devastating consequences for the children involved (ICMEC, 2018; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2013).

The criminal justice system (CJS) has responded to this problem with harsher punitive measures and greater restrictions to deter offending and to manage risk of reoffending. This is despite findings that suggest most individuals convicted of non-contact CESO, without prior contact offences, are unlikely to engage in subsequent contact offending (Eke, Helmus, & Seto, 2019), or repeat non-contact offences (Faust, Bickart, Renaud, & Camp, 2014). There are disparities across countries in the sentencing of these crimes (see ICMEC (2018) for detailed report). Sentences for possession of IIOC can include incarceration of between two and four years in the US (Berlin, 2019). In the UK a minimum sentence for possession of a Category B image (non-penetrative sexual activity) is 26 weeks in custody and for a Category A image (images containing penetrative sexual activity) is one year. Under the Sexual Offences Act (1997, UK) anyone convicted of a sexual offence (both contact and non-contact) are subject to registration and notification requirements. Further consequences are

varied and can involve needing to leave the family home; having supervised access to their children; disclosure to employers often with subsequent loss of employment; financial hardship and relationship breakdown (Berlin, 2019; Tewksbury & Zgoba, 2009).

For sexual offending in general these factors are associated with high rates of mental health problems, suicide and difficulty re-integrating into society (Ackerman, Sacks, & Osier, 2013; Connor, 2020). Utilisation of mental health services for those convicted of non-contact CESO is estimated to be more than three times higher than that found in the general population, similar to those with contact offences (Henshaw, Ogloff, & Clough, 2018). This likely underestimates the true prevalence of mental health difficulties within these populations as many may fail to seek support due to shame and fear of how services will respond. For those with contact offences, the disclosure of the act and the trial are often times of significant emotional upheaval, with fear of incarceration, irreparable damage to reputations, and remorse and shame for the crimes committed (Pritchard & King, 2005). Compared with individuals with contact sexual offences, those with CESO were more likely to be better educated, employed and higher earning (Ly, Murphy, & Fedoroff, 2016). They were also less likely to have a criminal history or antisocial traits, showing more victim empathy following the arrest (Babchishin, Merdian, Bartels, & Perkins, 2018; Ly, Dwyer, & Fedoroff, 2018). There is a lack of evidence comparing the impact of an arrest for different types of sexual offending on the individual. It remains unclear whether the emotional impact is reduced, proportionate to the severity of the crime, or whether these individuals experience similar levels of upheaval, perhaps due to a greater 'fall' from relatively stable, non-criminal lives. Berlin and Sawyer (2012) present five case examples of individuals charged with possession of IIOC, highlighting the devastating impact of arrest on both themselves and their wider family. They call into question why consequences are so harsh for this type of crime, and why there appears to be a lack of differentiation with other forms of sexual offending.

Furthermore, mental health difficulties and impoverished social networks may be precipitants to, as well as consequences of, sexual offending. Risk factors for CESO include stress, progression from legal material, loneliness and isolation (Morgan &

Lambie, 2019). Those charged with CESO report a more negative self-view and less secure attachments than non-offenders and those with contact offences (Armstrong & Mellor, 2016). Webb, Craissati, and Keen (2007) suggested that individuals charged with CESO were more likely to have mental health difficulties, and whilst some were in relationships at the time of offending, they tended to have greater difficulty establishing intimate relationships, compared with those with contact child sexual offences. Middleton, Beech, and Mandeville-Norden (2005) found similar results, suggesting those with CESO in relationships were likely to be lacking in intimacy, often suffering affective difficulties and depression. The adverse outcomes of discovery, such as isolation and relationship breakdown, may perpetuate risk factors associated with this type of offending.

Relating to this, the wider sexual offending literature suggests that social support and close intimate relationships may be protective against future reoffending and mental health issues for those charged with sexual offences (Walker, Kazemian, Lussier, & Na, 2017). However, it is acknowledged that it is the quality of these relationships and the meaning attributed to them that determines their importance, rather than simply their presence (Sampson, Laub, & Wimer, 2006). For those who are supported by a wider social network at the time of discovery, the arrest and the consequences that follow can be highly damaging to these relationships. Discovery often results in relationship breakdown, with the family member withdrawing or ceasing future contact, whether by their own volition or due to pressure from others. Sexual offences, particularly those committed against children, evoke guttural disgust and anger. This resounds within wider societal attitudes with ‘stigmatic shaming’ of those convicted of sexual offences (Cubellis, Evans, & Fera, 2019). This form of stigma permanently shames individuals from societal life, categorising them by an undesirable social norm violation and creating a shamed ‘out-group’ from mainstream society. Evidence has observed how this stigmatisation and shaming is so pervasive, that it extends not only to those charged with sexual crimes, but also to those suspected of crimes and to individuals within their wider network. This is termed ‘courtesy’ or ‘secondary stigma’ (Condry, 2007; Furst & Evans, 2015; Goffman, 1963). This stigmatisation encourages harassment and even violent acts of vigilantism against those who commit sexual offences and their loved ones (Cubellis et al., 2019). Family

members and friends who continue to provide support can experience a high degree of stress and trauma due to their association with the accused. Tewksbury and Levenson (2009) surveyed 584 family members of registered sex offenders. Results indicated that these individuals experienced high levels of fear, shame, social isolation and forced residential relocation. Levenson and Tewksbury (2009) investigated the impact of sex offender notification and registration laws in the US and concluded that the collateral consequences impel loved ones to distance themselves in order to cope.

This has adverse implications for the process of desistance (moving away from crime) in individuals charged with sexual offences. Support networks can aid desistance by encouraging the individual to seek a more adaptive, non-offending identity and recognising the achievement of this change. Furthermore, acquisition of valued relationships helps to promote desistance by giving individuals ‘something to lose’ (McAlinden et al., 2017). Key aspects of this include acceptance, forgiveness and providing the individual with a sense of belonging (Cohen, O’Dowd, Davis, & Quayle, in prep). However, the response of family, friends and the wider social network can also hinder rehabilitation efforts. Adverse reactions and estrangement from family may serve to exaggerate feelings of shame and hopelessness, which can encourage negative outcomes, including suicidality (Hoffer, Shelton, Behnke, & Erdberg, 2010). Farkas and Miller (2007) call for a greater focus on the needs and concerns of families of those charged with sexual offences, to help them facilitate the re-entry process by recognising their role as ‘protectors’. Indeed, based on the suggested importance of social connection it might be argued that loved ones should be encouraged to stay and to provide ongoing support for those who have offended. However, as outlined, the impact and shock of the crime for family members is severe. Condry (2007) interviewed the relatives of individuals convicted of ‘serious crimes’ (including contact sexual offences) in England, describing the impact of the discovery as traumatic and ‘akin to a bereavement’. She discusses how those closest to us act as an extension of ourselves with the stigmatizing shame of the experience disrupting the entire narrative of family members lives and sense of self. She identifies that many experienced symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder after the event. This highlights the importance of acknowledging the emotional upheaval for family members when considering their capacity to provide ongoing support.

This evidence suggests that family members may be subject to competing pressures. From wider society there appears to be an expectation that individuals will condemn and distance themselves from those who offend. Rehabilitation efforts, conversely, may encourage forgiveness and continuity of support. However, the perspectives and needs of family members appear rarely taken into account. The impact of the crime on their subjective wellbeing and mental health is not widely acknowledged or understood. This is despite the sheer scale of this problem and the corresponding number of people affected by it. Furthermore, continued contact may be detrimental to both the family member and those charged if the emotional upheaval is extensive, and the resulting reactions are that of condemnation and blame. The literature on this topic is scarce, and the majority of the evidence outlined here relates to contact forms of sexual offending. As detailed, there are significant differences between characteristics, risk factors and reoffending rates for those charged with non-contact CESO compared with other forms of sexual offending. This makes it difficult to extrapolate these wider findings to this specific form of crime. This calls for a more detailed understanding of how family members are affected and how they process and make sense of CESO.

### **2.1.1 Research Objectives**

This study sought to address this by providing a more detailed understanding of the lived experiences of family members of those charged of possession of IIOC, and the sense they make of these experiences. This aimed to:

- Provide an insight into the experiences of family members, including their emotional responses, forms of coping and challenges faced, to inform support for these individuals
- Investigate the impact of the crime on their relationship and how they made sense of the behaviour, considering implications for wider theory and treatment recommendations

The protocol for this study was pre-registered on the Open Science Framework in February 2020 (DOI:10.17605/OSF.IO/7NUHJ see **Appendix 5**).

## **2.2 Methodology**

### **2.2.1 Study design**

This research utilised an exploratory qualitative study design. Data was collected in the form of semi-structured interviews. These interviews investigated the lived experiences of parents, partners and adult siblings of individuals charged with a CESO, considering how family members made sense of these experiences.

### **2.2.2 Analysis**

Phenomenological approaches describe the essence of a phenomenon. They do so by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it, to gain an understanding of the meaning generated by this experience (Teherani, Martimianakis, Stenfors-Hayes, Wadhwa, & Varpio, 2015). This aligned closely with the study objectives. A Multiperspectival Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as the analytical approach, to capture perspectives from a number of different relational roles and to provide greater understanding of the complexity of lived experience as distinguished by these roles.

IPA illuminates lived experience and is primarily concerned with how an individual makes sense of their world (Eatough & Smith, 2008). It has been used previously to explore the narratives of individuals charged with sexual offences (Blagden, Winder, Thorne, & Gregson, 2011) as well as to explore values and the process of reintegration following a criminal conviction (Aresti, Eatough, & Brooks-Gordon, 2010; Stuart, Tansey, & Quayle, 2017). IPA is idiographic in that it endeavours to analyse each case in detail, prior to searching for patterns across cases, assessing aspects of convergence and divergence within the narratives (Smith, 2011). This approach recognises that the researcher is a 'being in the world', with their own experiences and perceptions shaping the interpretation of the data. This introduces a 'double-hermeneutic'. The participants make sense of their world; and the researchers make sense of the participants making sense of their world (Smith & Osborn, 2003). It is common for descriptions of criminal acts to evoke emotive responses and to encourage assumptions about those who commit them. Sexual offences, particularly those which involve children, are particularly sensitive areas of psychological enquiry.

Conducting research in this area may evoke reactions and assumptions from the analyst and it is important to consider this in the interpretation of the data.

Multiperspectival IPA retains a commitment to idiography in analysis but does so by combining two or more focal perspectives. This can be particularly effective when there is a strong relational or systemic dimension to the analysis (Larkin, Shaw, & Flowers, 2019). Given the focus on family systems in the current study, a multiperspectival approach was utilised, incorporating the viewpoints of directly related, but distinct groups. This aimed to recruit a sample generally immersed within the same phenomenological experience, but that may have variation in interpretation. Anticipating divergence according to the nature of the relational role, this enabled comparison and contrast not only within the overall sample but between romantic partners, parents and adult siblings. The decision to use a multiperspectival approach was made in advance of recruitment, informing the recruitment strategy of recruiting balanced groups according to relational role (as opposed to ‘widening the net’ in response to recruitment challenges).

### **2.2.3 Participants and recruitment**

We worked in collaboration with the ‘Stop it Now! Scotland’ (SN-S) organisation. SN-S is a national child protection charity, run by the Lucy Faithfull Foundation. SN-S provides information about online sexual offending; increases public awareness; offers training for people working with children and families; runs an anonymous and confidential helpline; and facilitates online and face-to-face intervention programmes. This study was conducted in collaboration with SN-S staff who specialise in working with the families of those charged with a CESO. We recruited romantic partners, parents and adult siblings of individuals charged with possession of IIOC. Possession of IIOC was identified as the most common CESO managed by SN-S. Due to this, we focused the study on this type of offending.

Participants were recruited by SN-S from their family members groups. The lead author (MC) was invited to attend a group to provide information about the study and contact details for those interested in participating. Following this, interviews were either scheduled in person, via SN-S staff, or an online interview was arranged.

### **2.2.3.1 Eligibility criteria**

SN-S staff identified and approached family members using the following inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria included:

- The participants must either be a parent, an adult sibling or a romantic partner of an individual who is charged with a CESO (possession of IIOC), affiliated with the SN-S charity.
- The participant must reside in Scotland.

Exclusion criteria included:

- Participants affiliated with individual's charged with a contact offence, or creation and distribution of IIOC (rather than possession only).
- Family members of individual's charged with possession of IIOC who were not affiliated with the SN-S charity.
- Individuals in the acute or 'crisis stage' of the arrest.
- Children, other family members or friends of those accused
- Individuals who did not speak English
- Individuals under 18 years of age

### **2.2.4 Study site**

Initially, interviews were arranged at the SN-S base in Edinburgh. We recruited participants from across Scotland. The initial interviews all took place at the base in Edinburgh, however following the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions, adaptations to the protocol were made to enable remote online interviewing. For online participants, we highlighted the need for a stable internet connection, an internet-enabled device with microphone and camera, and an area within the person's home or office where they could speak freely without being overheard, interrupted or distracted. Given the sensitivity of the subject area, privacy for participation was paramount. This prevented the inclusion of some eligible individuals. However, online interviewing did enable wider recruitment for those residing in more remote areas.

### 2.2.5 Sample size

We recruited  $n = 13$  participants. For IPA studies, each subjective account is analysed in detail and the intensity of this activity requires relatively small sample sizes (Smith, 2011). Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) recommend a sample size of approximately seven participants for an initial study to allow adequate depth in analysis, although this is not prescriptive. Through discussion with skilled IPA analysts, it was agreed that  $n = 5$  per relative group would be an appropriate sample size. It proved challenging to recruit adult siblings as they were not as common within this population ( $n = 2$  in final sample).

### 2.2.6 Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a dyad between researcher and participant. The interviews lasted approximately one hour on average. Informed consent and demographic information were collected beforehand. Demographic information (including age; sex; occupation; relationship with the accused; nature of the charge) was stored separately in the interest of protecting anonymity, by separating identifiable information from the main interview data. An open, informal style of questioning was used, with varied prompts allowing for richer content in data collection and to reduce researcher bias (Smith et al., 2009). Questions and prompts were informed by discussion with the research team, meetings with SN-S staff and attendance of a SN-S family member support group. Topics were varied and designed to be flexible depending on what was generated during the interview. However, some example topics included: barriers to reintegration (“*did you find anything particularly challenging during this time?*”), practical adjustments, coping mechanisms, impact on the relationships (“*where are you now?*”). Prompts were included to elicit additional detail (such as “*What was going through your mind at the time? What do you mean by X?*”). The interview schedule was piloted with a SN-S member of staff prior to data collection. A copy of the interview schedule can be found in **Appendix 6**.

Following the interview participants were debriefed. The researcher’s contact details were provided to allow participants to make future enquiries, withdraw their study data or to raise concerns. SN-S staff made email contact following the interview to check participant wellbeing and to offer additional support if needed. A member of

SN-S staff was either on site (during the face-to-face interviews) or were available by phone contact during the scheduled interviews, to liaise with if there was a wellbeing concern or risk disclosure. Given the sensitivity of the collected data, precautions were taken to ensure safe collection and storage and protect anonymity. Interviews were recorded using an encrypted and password-protected digital recording device. For those who participated online, interviews were also recorded using the Skype record function. Dual recordings were made to minimise risk of data loss through network disruption. A Skype account was created solely for the purpose of data collection and deleted following its completion, erasing identifiable contact details. Video and audio files were securely stored using shared online data storage (SharePoint). The recordings were transcribed, taking measures to ensure they were fully anonymised at this stage. Quality checks were completed, with consultation sought for interviews with strong regional accents to promote accuracy. Transcribed documents were also stored using the online data storage (SharePoint), separate to the original recordings.

The analysis procedure involved identifying preliminary themes by first reading and re-reading the first transcript, attending to similarities, differences, amplifications and contradictions in narrative (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This involved making preliminary notes on hardcopy versions of the transcripts. These were then digitalised, clarifying the analyses on descriptive, linguistic and conceptual levels (Smith et al., 2009) (see **Appendix 7** for an example of this process). These initial transcripts were reviewed by additional members of the research team (EQ; AD) with further discussion of preliminary themes. Clusters of related themes informed development of main themes. These were then applied and developed further with subsequent transcripts using 'NVivo' (qualitative data analysis software; QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 20, 2020) to facilitate this process. This was repeated for the following transcripts first on an individual level, taking note of patterns of convergence and divergence between individuals, before considering patterns between different relational roles. Reviews of data were conducted throughout the process by the wider research team to check understanding and consolidation of themes. During the writing of results, the themes were again revised to promote a more interpretative conceptual analysis, over descriptive analyses. A summary of the results was shared

with participants and SN-S staff to check accuracy of interpretation prior to publication of the findings.

### **2.2.7 Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval was granted by The University of Edinburgh, School of Health and Social Science ethics committee (27/11/2019) and the Lucy Faithful Foundation research ethics committee (13/08/2019). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic an amendment was sought, enabling remote interviews to be conducted in an online format (granted University of Edinburgh, 01/05/2020; LFF, 07/05/2020) (see **Appendix 8**). As confirmed with the local NHS ethics team, NHS ethical approval was not required.

The main ethical considerations related to participant confidentiality and anonymity. Given the sensitive topic of this study, taking measures to minimise risk of confidentiality breach was vital. This was managed with data protection precautions outlined in **Section 2.2.6**. In the event of a breach, University of Edinburgh and SN-S recommended documenting and management procedures would have been adhered to. Protocols were created in advance for managing a confidentiality breach in the event of a disclosure of past or current abusive behaviour or other criminal activity (see **Appendix 9**). Given the potentially triggering content of interviews, we checked the emotional state of study participants prior to, during and following completion of the interviews. If distress was identified during the interview, breaks or termination of the interview was offered as an option. A member of SN-S staff contacted the participant during the week following the interview in case additional support was required.

Participants were informed prior to consent that their participation was voluntary and their decision as whether to participate would have no bearing on the future support received from SN-S. If participants decided that they no longer wished to take part, they could withdraw from the study prior to, during or after the interview process without having to provide a reason. They were notified that following anonymisation and synthesis of data during analysis, extraction of individual data would no longer be viable.

## 2.2.8 Quality assurance

Qualitative researchers argue for the necessity of a parsimonious fundamental framework of quality in qualitative research studies (Poortman & Schildkamp, 2012). Their proposed core criteria include controllability, objectivity, reliability, construct, internal & external validity. The relevant procedures for qualitative research are provided in **Table 2.1**, with examples of efforts made to meet these criteria.

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Procedures</b>	<b>Actions</b>
<i>Controllability</i>	Report the results of the study publicly and the procedures used to achieve them	Publication in appropriate scientific journal and pre-registration of study protocol (registered Open Science Framework, <a href="https://osf.io/utqz7">osf.io/utqz7</a> )
	Write the report in precise language	
	Testable results	Replication of this study methodology can be undertaken to assess whether results are robust
<i>Objectivity</i>	Make use of ‘objective’ data	
	Interpretation of data in logical and unprejudiced manner	Describe the research steps and interpretation in as clear and comprehensive manner as possible
		Retain transcription data for reanalysis by others
<i>Reliability</i>	Study design congruent with clear research questions	Study protocol assessed formally, informing congruency with proposed design
	Use software for qualitative data analysis	Use of ‘NVivo’
	Use multiple researchers	Sections of the transcriptions were interpreted by second researchers, compared and discussed
	Use peer review	Findings to be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal

<i>Construct validity</i>	Explication of theoretical models underlying constructs	Interpretation and discussion of the study findings
	Supply 'chain of evidence'	Original audio files and transcriptions are retained until the study is accepted for publication, or for a duration of three years following completion of the study
	Review of transcripts and parts of data analysis, discussion if anything unclear	The academic and field supervisors for this project were involved in checking sections of the transcripts and analysis. If any part of audio recording or meanings were unclear, this was discussed until agreement reached. For one transcript, quality checks from a researcher with shared regional dialect were conducted to promote accuracy
	Pilot instruments	Semi-structured interview schedules and prompts were piloted prior to data collection
<i>Internal validity</i>	Establish phenomena in a credible way	Highlighting convergence and divergence in experiences and beliefs, what components are significant and what mechanisms underlie them
	Eliminate alternative causal arguments	By presenting comprehensive and evidenced arguments in the discussion, comparisons with other populations and peer review of method and results
<i>External validity</i>	Analytical generalisation	Compare generated theory with empirical results and previous theories in this literature
		Provide detailed account of context, culture and setting to identify how specific the findings are to this sample of people

**Table 2.1**  
Quality standards for qualitative research and relevant actions

### 2.2.8.1 Quality in interpretative phenomenological analysis

Smith (2011) has outlined a series of recommendations for ensuring and assessing the quality of IPA studies, adhered to within this analysis. The criteria for 'good' IPA studies include having a clear focus; strong data arising from competent interviewing techniques; a rigorous approach (including consistent representation of the corpus in the analysis and indication of representativeness and variability); sufficient elaboration of each included theme; interpretative rather than descriptive accounts; and convergence and divergence between accounts. Overall, analysis needs to subscribe to the core principles of IPA, being phenomenological, hermeneutic and idiographic, as well as being written clearly and transparently with a plausible and interesting analysis.

## 2.3 Results

### 2.3.1 Sample demographics

In total thirteen family members were interviewed; one (mother) was subsequently excluded as the charge pertained to grooming behaviour in the context of a neurodevelopmental disorder and was felt to be significantly different in circumstance from the other narratives. The final sample of participants included twelve individuals, including six partners, four mothers and two adult siblings. In relation to nature of crimes, ten were family members of those charged with possession of IIOC, one charge was for grooming (detection via a vigilante group) and one was for indecent communication<sup>2</sup>. The sample comprised of eleven females and one male. Family members were either living with ( $n = 5$ ) or in frequent contact with those charged. Ages of participants ranged from 31 to 62 years ( $M = 49$ ,  $SD = 9$  years). A basic summary of demographics are provided for each participant in **Table 2.2**.

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<sup>2</sup> Inclusion criteria were expanded to accommodate family members who expressed an interest in participating. It was felt that given these were non-contact internet sexual offences it would be a reasonable adjustment without compromising sample homogeneity. Moreover, excluding these individuals would have felt to have further 'silenced' those who wished to tell their story.

### 2.3.2 Interpretative themes

The Multiperspectival IPA identified four main themes. These included: ‘Loss’; ‘Cast out’; ‘Silenced’; and ‘Reconciliation’, with related subthemes within these. All four main themes were represented in some degree by all included family members. There was variation in the nature and expression of related subthemes, however these were also represented in some form across the majority of included narratives.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age band</b>	<b>Charge</b>	<b>Contact with perpetrator</b>	<b>Additional</b>
<i>Partner, 1</i>	Female	60 - 65	Possession IIOC	Co-habiting	Adult children
<i>Partner, 2</i>	Female	30 - 35	Possession IIOC	Co-habiting	Young children
<i>Partner, 3</i>	Female	60 - 65	Possession IIOC	Co-habiting	Adult children
<i>Partner, 4</i>	Male	55 - 60	Possession IIOC	Co-habiting	
<i>Partner, 5</i>	Female	45 - 50	Indecent communication w/ minor	Co-habiting	Young children
<i>Partner, 6</i>	Female	45 - 50	Possession IIOC	Contact via text	Young children
<i>Sibling, 1</i>	Female	40 – 45	Possession IIOC	Regular contact	
<i>Sibling, 2</i>	Female	40 - 45	Possession IIOC	Regular contact	Young children
<i>Mother, 1</i>	Female	40 - 45	Possession IIOC	Visits in custody	Multiple offences
<i>Mother, 2</i>	Female	55 - 60	Possession IIOC	Visits in custody	Multiple offences
<i>Mother, 3</i>	Female	*Not provided	Grooming	Co-habiting	
<i>Mother, 4</i>	Female	50 - 55	Possession IIOC	Weekly contact	

**Table 2.2**  
Participant demographics.

### 2.3.2.1 Loss

“He done it during the day at 11 o'clock in the morning, when most people are having a coffee. It breaks my heart, ey. Because I feel like he made a mockery of what we had”. [*Partner*, 5]

One of the overarching themes within the narratives was the experience of loss. This operated on multiple dimensions, including on a direct level in terms of a loss of privacy and anonymity within their communities, but also on a more personal and emotional level – a loss of their foundation and sense of selves. They described an inability to retrieve their past and current lives, damaged relationships, some being akin to bereavement, and mourning for the loss of their imagined futures.

#### 2.3.2.1.1 Shattered

This theme presented initially, and perhaps most dramatically, in the discovery of the offence, most commonly experienced during the process of the arrest. Family members described a very direct invasion of privacy, where police officers arrived in the early hours of the morning and intruded upon families as they awoke and were preparing for the days ahead. Many individuals spoke of the shock and disbelief they felt during this process, often experiencing a sense of surreal detachment from the proceedings. The degree of this invasion of privacy was portrayed in the descriptions of the home and morning routines, with family members being monitored as they dressed, being prohibited from contacting schools and places of work or being unable to speak to distressed family members separated within rooms in their homes. They spoke of how they witnessed police officers, often in numbers of five or more, searching through their laundry baskets and private cupboards for internet-enabled devices. The references to underwear drawers, being in a state of undress and unwashed laundry within the narratives suggests an impression of having their privacy invaded at a very fundamental and visceral level, evoking feelings of being violated. There is a sense that this violation draws parallels with the realisation and discovery of the crime, in that a trusted member of their family committed the offence and

betrayed them from within the safety of their own home. This suggested the safety and comfort of their home had been compromised, leaving them vulnerable.

Many spoke of a feeling of disbelief, not being able to comprehend that the crime may have been committed by someone within their household, instead assuming mistakes had been made or that their devices had been hacked. Some spoke of the slow dawning of realisation, and the feelings of shock and horror that accompanied it.

“And he said, 'someone at this address has been looking at illegal images'. And I can remember turning to him and just saying 'please tell me it's not children, please tell me it's not kids'. and he just said, 'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry’”. [*Partner, 3*]

During the arrest and the aftermath of the event, family members described the significant emotional upheaval, feeling overwhelmed by what had been revealed and unable to function. Many metaphors and physical descriptors were used to convey the magnitude of this distress in a manner that conjured up imagery of a person's world shattering. They spoke of 'going to pieces' and of 'breaking down', implying a loss of foundation. Some described suicidal ideation in response to the discovery, with feelings of nausea, panic and trauma.

“Traumatising. I literally could not believe what they said when they said what they were there looking for. And I can remember the exact time, the day, the date, what I was doing - it's - I don't know. (...) it was like somebody had ripped my insides out. And that horrible gut feeling that your world's about to come crashing in’”. [*Mother, 4*]

#### 2.3.2.1.2 Severed

Following the discovery, those charged were taken into custody. Multiple family members described the sudden nature of this removal and subsequent feelings of being left, alone in the comparative stillness following the search. This conjures imagery of being severed from their loved one, before being abandoned and 'cut adrift' to make sense of the event. This physically deprived them from the presence of their

family members. Moreover, the experience of discovery left them questioning the identity of who their family members were as people, of their morality and of the integrity of their lives in the face of the betrayal. They described that in some way the family member was no longer the person that they had been. This loss of identity robbed interviewees of their foundation and their way of making sense of the world. It seemed to convey that it deprived them of their imagined futures and undermined their sense of selves. They described losing capacity to trust, fearing what was to come and mourning the lives that they had lost. Some expressed this as being akin to bereavement, with the subsequent process being that of grieving or mourning.

“I think that I have been through quite a lot, like through my life and this by far was the hardest thing for me to deal with” ... “I literally cried all the time. I just could not stop crying. And my husband was like - it's like you're grieving. And it is like you're grieving, it's like you've lost the person that you thought you knew and ultimately you never get that person back, because you know them in a completely different light”.

[*Sibling, 2*]

#### 2.3.2.1.3 *Deprived*

Another key aspect of loss was the deprivation of self-identity, the sacrifice of own wants and needs, and the loss of ability to live without the burden of responsibility for the other. Family members often described a sense of responsibility and a shift of relational role to being one of a carer or ‘protector’. For some, this was intensified by a belief that they were the only person the individual had left. For some this evoked feelings of resentment and anger towards those charged with the offence.

“I almost need to see him through work eyes in that I'm supporting him. But it's a very one-way relationship. There's no reciprocal feeling about - like I say there's a bit of resentment that I feel he's affecting my life and I've had no say in it. And I'm having to pick up the pieces. So I do feel (...) quite upset about that. But I have to be his support person, and now

I have to see it - that relationship in a different light, where I'm the supporter and he's the one who will receive the support" [*Sibling, 1*]

The implications of association led to a cascade of effects, causing dissolution of their own romantic relationships (for mothers and siblings), and their relationships with more distant family. Family members expressed fears regarding the safety of their own careers, their own opportunities and sacrificed desires, such as being able to spend time with new grandchildren.

Those for whom crimes had been exposed to the wider community, via media reporting and gossip, suffered a further loss of anonymity, resulting from their association with the accused individual. They found themselves open to wider societal judgement, leaving them exposed to the harsh scrutiny of others.

#### **2.3.2.2 'Cast out'**

The second main theme was that of being 'cast out' by wider society. Again, there was variation in the experience of this, pertaining to whether individuals did directly experience rejection, ostracism and harassment as a result of their affiliation with those charged, or whether they were impacted by the fear and expectation of condemnation by others. There was an impression that those charged were sectioned off from wider society, seen as a feared 'other', and that by being associated with that person, the family members also experienced vicarious shame.

##### **2.3.2.2.1 Tainted**

One of the pervading aspects of this theme was the stigma associated with the nature of the offence, with the categorisation and labelling of those accused as deviant and abhorrent. Family members perceived a societal expectation that others would attribute the offending behaviour either to something having gone 'awry' within the family system that spawned it, or that by continuing to support the behaviour they as individuals in some way condoned it. This suggested that the family members were 'tainted by association'.

“Why? Do you think that it's weird that I'm staying with him, or that it means that I'm also a child abuser? That what people, that's the link people make. That I condone, I condone paedophilia”. [*Partner 4*]

This was expressed both as a fear, and expectation of others reactions, but it was also substantiated by the experiences of judgement, harassment and ostracism experienced by family members. This included having friends and family members withdraw or cut contact from the participants following discovery of the crime. It also pertained to more covert ostracism and microaggressions within the wider community and workplaces. The discourse around these narratives expressed the emotional pain of these experiences as well as the public shame and humiliation.

“There were about eight girls we were a big group at work and we all go about together. And I know they know. Nobody's ever said they know. And, I just immediately got dropped” ... “Then it's your birthday, and even though you've put money in for everybody else, you don't even get a card. It's been hard, ey? It's been hard. And it's been cruel. A lot of it's been cruel” ... “They all still meet up for lunch and everything. And everybody notices I'm not there” [*Partner 5*]

Some relayed experiences of direct harassment from neighbours and colleagues. This was sometimes directed at the individual charged, but in doing so it affected the family member. Sometimes it was directed at the family member themselves.

“I was hanging out the washing the following week, and one of the neighbours came at me with a copy of the newspaper article. Very, very angry, "what's this, what's this? We will not live like this"” ... “He had also gone around all the houses nearby with children, with a copy of the newspaper article to make sure they all knew who he [husband] was” ... “he said, 'we won't live like this' and she said to him, 'oh, are you moving like?' and he said 'no, but they will"” [*Partner, 3*]

This extract generates imagery of a witch-hunt, of people taking it upon themselves to ‘hunt down’ and banish individuals from their communities, conveying the level of fear and anger expressed by members of society in relation to this form of offending. To give additional context, this extract describes threatening behaviour between a middle-aged man towards his elderly female neighbour, taking place whilst she attended to chores within the confines of her residence. This again highlights exaggerated vulnerability and what is perceived to be a justified violation of social norms, in a manner that is frankly unimaginable within any other circumstance<sup>3</sup>.

#### *2.3.2.2.2 Exposed*

A clear sub-theme contributing to this wider theme of societal judgement was media portrayal, and the impact of being exposed in media, either in local newspapers or online. It is noteworthy that not all families experienced this. For those that did, the devastating nature of this exposure was conveyed. Once the information was ‘released’, all control over disclosure was lost, and that their anonymity and privacy were irretrievable. Other family members said how their addresses, or parts of addresses were printed in the articles, even when those accused were no longer residing there. They described this as feeling unnecessary and unjust, and directly contributing to their distress. This aspect could be argued is in defence of public safety from those accused. However, in reality, it appears more to serve the purpose of ‘outing’ the individuals and publicly shaming them.

As outlined by some of the interviewees, the manner in which the media report the crime influences the way in which wider society digests it and subsequently forms opinions about it. They report that by speaking of those accused in a derogatory way, this impacts not only that person, but the lives of those connected to them. They described how the offences can be twisted and exaggerated to make them appear more serious than they were.

“The way it's reported in the press is it sounds like [partner] was taking pictures of young people” ... “So that's what they had imagined. That in

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<sup>3</sup> Following this event, police were contacted. There were no further experiences of harassment from this individual towards the family member.

my house, that I shared with him, that he was bringing in young boys and taking pictures of them”. [*Partner, 4*]

The various aspects of this societal judgement combine to make the prospect of exposure feel terrifying, reinforcing a felt loss of control over the impact of the crime and the wider consequences. One participant spoke of attempting to ‘shield’ her husband from journalists using an umbrella when leaving the court, trying to protect him from this uncontained threat. She details how she was unsuccessful, and that once his picture was in the paper, it was ‘out there’. This gives the imagery of the release of something monstrous and uncontrollable.

#### 2.3.2.2.3 *Hiding*

The prospect of this exposure elicited fear in numerous family members, and many described experiencing what appeared to be a debilitating degree of fear, anxiety and hypervigilance in relation to the perceived threat of others. This would result in their hiding and isolating themselves from the outside world. For some, this was apparent in the initial crisis stages and eased over time, but for others, this fear remained, years following the arrest.

“The whole world was a very dangerous place. And I knew in my head that it wasn't true. But I couldn't do anything about the way I was behaving” ... “I was expecting was policeman coming back to knock on my door. Or journalists. I think that's where it came from. But it just became everybody. I don't want to speak to people, it was as if I had it plastered on my forehead. That you know, this had happened again”.  
[*Mother, 2*]

This extract refers to a repeat offence (present within two of the narratives), however there was no indication that the degree of fear changed between these narratives compared with those whose loved ones had been convicted once only.

Family members spoke of being confined to their homes, of counting the number of minutes it would take to walk to local amenities and of staying in their

accommodation due to its 'high hedges'. This portrays the extent to which individuals were hiding from their wider communities, for fear of condemnation and judgement. When asked directly, family members found it difficult to articulate what it was they were afraid of. Instead, they attributed it to a wider sense of threat, a fear of others and a fear of the unknown. Interestingly, for family members that had been exposed within the media, some spoke of the perceived benefits of this exposure. This arose, in part from the alleviation of anticipation and fear, or via the elicited support this generated from others towards them. One particularly striking example was for a mother where her son's crime was exposed via a 'wolfpack' vigilante group. She reflected that due to this, other mothers reached out to her and helped her, saying that 'in a way, they did her that one favour', as otherwise she would have been inclined not to tell anyone [Mother, 3]. This appeared to help the individual accept the consequences of exposure and find ways to manage the responses of others. However, this impression was not present within all the narratives of those exposed by media reporting.

### **2.3.2.3 Silenced**

This leads us to the next main theme, that of secrecy and silence in relation to the crime; the experience of being unable to disclose to others due to fear, shame and the aforementioned stigma of the crime. This contributes to the sense of isolation and disconnect from the wider world. Within this theme, we also explore how breaking down the silence and finding trusted and non-judgemental avenues of support can help individuals navigate through the process. Ten of the family members referred to experiences of being 'silenced' with all twelve reporting in some form the isolation felt, and the felt incongruity of their experience compared to those around them.

#### **2.3.2.3.1 Censored**

A key aspect of this theme was that family members felt unable to speak or turn to others for support following the arrest. Multiple participants described being actively discouraged from telling others (by police and staff from SN-S), unless it was deemed to be absolutely necessary, or they were sure the individual they confided in could be trusted. Family members often referred to the importance of this advice and promoted the same recommendation to others in a similar position. This was in part

due to the unpredictability of the reactions of others, and again the feared loss of control over the nature of their reactions. Many recalled how they had lost friends and family members as a result of disclosure, or that they were often surprised by the reactions of those they felt they could trust and confide in. There was a suggestion that this unpredictability was provoked by the guttural, instinctive level at which the crime affected people. This appeared to obscure any wider capacity to understand the bigger picture or see past the behaviour, or to even attempt to. A selection of family members said that their lives would have been easier if their relative was convicted of a non-sexual violent crime, or had died, in comparison to having been convicted of a sexual offence.

“And people are very, very closed-minded. And I fully understand why there's something with children is (...) it genuinely broke my heart when I found out” ... “they're innocent little things, and it would have been a lot easier if it was a drinking addiction or gambling or something like that, or something that was not quite a taboo subject as (...) I don't know, I don't know how I view it so differently to everybody else, but I find a lot of people are very, just close-minded about it and it's - it is wrong and that's the end of it”. [*Partner, 2*]

“It would be easier to say if my brother was a murderer, than it would be for me to say 'my brother is a sex offender’” [*Sibling, 2*]

This impeded the use of their usual coping strategies. Various family members spoke of how they felt unable to reach out or utilise social supports in ways that they would typically. For some this had the consequence of making them become more withdrawn and isolated, and this impacted on their sense of identity.

“I think I was impacted (...) because I've always been a bit of a talker. And to be quite secretive, doesn't come well to me. I think it has made me (...) isolate myself more. I think just because you can't (...) tell people,

(...) how you're feeling - say or, anxious and I think it's really hard to - put a mask on all the time. So, I have withdrawn" [*Sibling, 1*]

#### 2.3.2.3.2 *Shame*

The extract above is interesting in the use of the word 'mask', evoking a perception of hiding your true self, and creating a false, acceptable identity. The pervasive nature of this silence derives from the shame and guilt felt by family members. Repeatedly, family members made reference to a feeling of blaming themselves and in some way being responsible for the occurrence of the crime. They expressed feelings of guilt, regret and remorse. They also experienced shame – a devaluing of selves, a sense of worthlessness and a desire to hide from the wider world. This guilt and shame arose for mothers, from a belief that they had in some way failed as parents. They felt that their family member and, hence by association they themselves, had inflicted pain on another. For partners this evoked a very personal sense of shame, because, in some way, they believed they had failed to respond to the intimate and sexual needs of their partners.

"Maybe it was something that I did? That I wasn't responding to his needs?" ... "People say it was their decision to go down that route, which is fine, I can understand that. But I'm still (...) not sure, If I would be completely blameless (...) you know?" [*Partner, 1*]

There was repeated mention across narratives of a belief that in some way the crime could have been prevented; that it might have been averted by different courses of action of other family members. This appeared to haunt these individuals.

"...Did I miss the signs?" [*Partner, 4*]

This shame and guilt appeared to further prevent family members from speaking to, or seeking help from others. There was a sense that they were undeserving of help due to their association with the perpetrators. This overlaps with the earlier theme of being 'cast out', but as opposed to external condemnation, this suggested an internal

chastisement. Multiple family members spoke of an all-consuming feeling of being alone in their experience.

#### *2.3.2.3.3 Unfathomable*

Those who did manage to reach out and find sources of non-judgmental, compassionate support, described it as a ‘lifeline’. This support was sought through various means, including close, trusted friends, SN-S, professional therapy or religious communities. Family members also frequently mentioned the family group, run by SN-S. This was predominately recognised as an invaluable source of comfort and support. This was partly due to a sharing of practical information in relation to legal proceedings, which helped to manage expectations for subsequent processes. In addition, it was due to the importance of meeting and speaking to other family members who had shared a similar experience. This was felt to be vital as many described that, whilst friends could be compassionate and supportive, they could never fully comprehend the magnitude and emotional complexity of their situation, which often left family members feeling further isolated.

Other family members, however, reported difficulties with their experience of the group, due to incongruity of experiences within those attending. These differences included factors surrounding the arrest, the family’s progress within the legal process, whether children were present in the wider system, or their different relational roles within the group (parents, partners, siblings). This suggests that within the family members of individuals charged with non-contact CESO, there is still wide variation of experience. Indeed, there was a sense that no one could fully grasp how it really felt for that individual. Perhaps because society is incapable of fully comprehending the true nature of sexual offending, it renders the related experience of family members unfathomable to both themselves and to those around them.

Despite this, it was felt overall that the approachable and proximal nature of support provided by SN-S and the members of the group was an essential comfort during the process. Others spoke of the invaluable support provided by colleagues, including their bosses, or contact from social workers, police officers or healthcare workers. It appeared that the quality and the consistency of even a very enclosed circle

of support could provide an essential way of reconnecting with selves and others. In the initial stages, for many this may need to be sought via professionals. This speaks to the importance of education and promoting a compassionate non-judgemental stance for those working in professional roles with these individuals, whose support could be pivotal. Where the professional fails to adopt a neutral, non-judgemental stance, this interaction poses the risk of being highly detrimental to the family member.

“You constantly feel that your decisions are being judged. And as I said, social services were quite shocking when they found out that I was pregnant with my youngest they asked me why I hadn't aborted. Um, which is quite a (...) not something that I would ever expect a professional to say that to me, they should be very unbiased. If I wanted my child or if I didn't want my child would not be their decision. Equally, if I wanted to go back to my husband, it isn't their decision to make” [*Partner, 2*]

#### **2.3.2.4 Reconciliation**

The final main theme relates to the difficulty in coming to terms with the offence, the process of making sense of what happened, finding ways to cope and for some, rebuilding lives lost and reconnecting with their loved one. Overall, the term ‘reconciliation’ here relates to that of reconciling the sense of self.

##### *2.3.2.4.1 Suspended*

Some of the divergence within this theme related to the decision of whether to stay and support the individual, or to ‘cut ties’ and leave. Upon discovery, most family members described an instinctive feeling of wanting to leave, a desire to walk away from the situation or to distance themselves from those charged with the offence. Indeed, it seemed this was often expected of them from those in their wider network (friends, acquaintances, professionals). This led to family members feeling pressured or adversely judged when they continued to provide ongoing support. This seemed more apparent for partners, in comparison with mothers or siblings.

“This was less than a week after it happened. And I said, but oh - but I might want to you know, keep in touch with him. And she basically said 'he's a paedophile. Why would you want to keep in touch with him?'”.  
[*Partner, 6*]

For some, predominately partners, their indecision regarding whether to stay or leave remained with them for an extended duration or remained with them still. Their desire to leave appeared to be challenged by a number of factors. First fear, over the wellbeing and safety of the individual accused. Many described fears of suicidal risk, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the arrest.

“And I said that I would stay for six months because um, he was really broken like, and I think if I'd have walked away, he'd be dead. And I really believe that, like. I believe that 100% and more”. [*Partner, 5*]

They also described a sense of guilt, being unable to abandon their loved ones during their time of need, and the sadness and grief at the imagined loss of this relationship. For those who did decide to leave, they in turn described guilt and emotional upheaval for having done so. This led to imagery of being stuck, suspended between the experience of anger and revulsion at the crime, and the grief of the loss for the loved one, rendering it impossible to make a decision or move forward.

“But now, being in back in limbo you just don't know what to do, because (sighs), in a way I still like being with him. But then it hits you again what he's done and then you think, all the upheaval he's given to the family” ... “it's just awful”. [*Partner, 1*]

Partners often described being advised to delay any decision-making regarding leaving until some time had passed and they were better able to process the events without the emotional intensity and shock that followed the discovery of the crime. For some, the influence of wider factors aided their decision-making. This included having children together and a family system to manage. In addition, the logistical and

practical considerations of leaving were important, as was a perception of being unable or unwilling to start over, a sense of “having nowhere to go” [*Partner, 1*]. This tied in with the aforementioned loss of foundation and compromised home.

Mothers and siblings did not appear to be faced with these decision-making processes to the same degree. They described feeling they had no option to leave, despite perhaps some having the desire to do so. Mothers in particular described their relationships as having ‘cords that could not be cut’, that the person could never be ‘removed from their heart’, which prevented them from withdrawing support. Some reflected that this made the decision to stay easier, acknowledging this might be harder for partners. However, others, including siblings, described a feeling of being ‘burdened with responsibility’, feeling unable to escape or distance themselves from the person and the situation. This was amplified by a sense that the family member often considered them to be the main, if not the only, source of remaining support for them, a sentiment which was also echoed by narratives of partners.

Whether due to a difficulty of deciding whether to stay or go, an inability to withdraw support, or the guilt experienced in wanting to do so, the sense of internal conflict was a clear narrative for many of the family members within this study. This increased their experience of emotional upheaval and affected their ability to make decisions regarding the future. A selection of women described how this contrasted with the coping styles of their partners, who felt they wanted to ‘put it behind them’. They said they felt personally they were unable to do so and described it as a source of tension within their relationships, hindering their ability to move forward. Some described this as a feeling of being stuck, or ‘in limbo’.

#### *2.3.2.4.2 Understanding*

To help alleviate this sense of conflict and the emotional pain caused by the discovery, the betrayal, and the inability to move forward, family members described their process of attempting to make sense of the offending behaviour.

“I would try and move on and then I was just so devastated I couldn't. So for me, understanding was key” [*Sibling, 2*]

Frequently individuals made reference to understanding the behaviour in the context of mental health difficulties and psychological distress. This helped explain the offending as a consequence or symptom of depression, anxiety, social isolation, childhood issues (including sexual abuse) and relational trauma. They did not seem to use this understanding to condone or minimise the behaviour, but it helped individuals to rationalise it within the larger context of lived experience, seeing it as a 'cry for help' or a form of self-injurious behaviour. Others understood the behaviour as a form of addiction. This was often seen in the wider context of addiction to internet pornography, rather than indicative of a primary sexual interest in children. This gave the impression of the behaviour as being something beyond the control of the individual, which helped to alleviate some of the blame.

"I think that's the way I've got the understanding in my head now. He had an addiction that got out of control and luckily, you know I'm quite glad that the police came now. Because you know, I can't even imagine, can't even think about if it hadn't, if it hadn't stopped there"  
[*Mother, 4*]

Understanding the behaviour within the context of an illness narrative seemed to help to resolve some of the responsibility and elicited care and compassion, externalising or re-framing the behaviour. Others spoke of understanding the behaviour as being a mistake. They compartmentalised the behaviour as one aspect of the person, rather than believing that the behaviour defined the person who had offended.

"And that is the person, and the wee dot in the middle is what he's done, but there's still all this other stuff and that's exactly what it is. Um, he's a kind, loving, hardworking, would do anything for anybody man, he's just done something very, very wrong. Made a big mistake, big error of judgement". [*Partner, 3*]

These narratives of compassion and understanding seemed to help the family members accept the behaviour, and to promote the possibility of forgiveness and redemption.

“And even if he were you know, that sometimes good people do bad things or have bad parts to them. You can still love people” [*Partner, 4*]

There was an impression that the capacity to make sense of the behaviour in this way, and to accept and forgive what had happened was determined at least in part, by the degree of betrayal. This included the number of downloaded images, other legal forms of betrayal (for example frequenting online dating chatrooms), number of times the individual had been charged and personal circumstances. Personal circumstance alludes here to those who had been married for a long time, or for those who themselves were survivors of sexual abuse. For these individuals the ability to accept and forgive appeared harder to reach.

Furthermore, the presence of long-standing moral values appeared influential. Some came from religious or occupational backgrounds, where morality and values of redemption were central to their sense of identity. These individuals explained that their values helped to provide them with a compass to guide subsequent decision-making and aid their forgiveness of their loved one who had wronged them.

“I did believe in rehabilitation and I did believe in giving people second, third and fourth chances. I do believe that there's a variety of different factors that lead people to choose, to make the decisions that they make” ... “That has really influenced how I've gone forward and how I've viewed everything, kind of the decisions that I've made. So quite early on, I knew that I would stick by my brother” [*Sibling, 2*]

#### 2.3.2.4.3 *Optimism*

Many family members described themes of re-building, reconciliation of selves and optimism for change. People spoke of their hopes for the future, which often included their seeking to return to some form of normality. This included the possibility that their loved one would be able to source some form of paid employment and a degree of independence, and that they would be able to rebuild relationships or

reconnect as a family. Some spoke of the process of rebuilding, with the sense that they had become closer with their loved one or that their relationship had been strengthened as a consequence of the process.

“The lady at Stop it Now said to me at the start you know you can end up having a better relationship with your son at the end of this and I was like 'are you kidding? Seriously?' I just thought - how can you even say that? I don't want a better relationship with him I don't even want to be around him. I don't want to live with him I don't want to have him as a son. But I know what she means now”. [*Mother, 4*]

Other partners spoke of changes, or shifts in the relationship, becoming more platonic and akin to friendship.

“We're not really man and wife, we're not - we're friends, we're good friends. Really good friends. But to say that we're man and wife is - I don't wear a wedding ring, I haven't since the day” [*Partner, 5*]

A more consistent narrative across the interviews was the reference to 'reconciliation of self'. This involved a re-building of their identity, finding ways to cope, ways of feeling stronger in themselves and finding clarity in who they are and what they want from life. As outlined, frequently references were made to the importance of finding trusted others to speak to, whether this be through friends or professional wellbeing support. A number of individuals also spoke about how this had been helped by practices of mindfulness, meditation, relaxation and yoga, as well as other self-care practices. Again, there was acknowledgement that this could be a very slow and fluctuating progress, that required rebuilding a day, or even an hour at a time to begin with. Within these narratives of optimism for change, there was also an acknowledgement that the experience will always be carried with you. Family members spoke of the acceptance that it will 'never fully go away', 'learning to live with it', and managing the fear that someday it could happen again.

“You will get through it eventually, but it takes a long time, a long, long time. I don't think it will ever go away. It might get easier to live with but I don't think it will ever go away” [*Partner, I*]

## **2.4 Discussion**

This study explored the lived experience of family members (partners, parents and adult siblings) of individuals charged with a CESO, predominately possession of IIOC. Utilising a Multiperspectival IPA, four main themes were identified within these narratives: *Loss*, *Cast-out*, *Silenced* and *Reconciliation*. Within these themes there were clear references to stigma, shame, being ‘tainted by association’, fear of exposure and of societal responses. In addition, it considered ways people made sense of the behaviour, and how they reconciled relationships with others and the self. Parallels with the wider literature, as well as implications for policy and practice are discussed.

### **2.4.1 Stigma and shame**

Within these accounts and particularly within the main theme of ‘cast out’, the impact of stigma and shame were pervasive. Drawing parallels with the wider literature, this included clear effects of ‘courtesy’ stigma, where stigmatisation is extended to those associated with the stigmatised individual (Goffman, 1963). Many described experiencing threats, ostracism and harassment as a result of their affiliation with those charged, analogous to individuals convicted of more severe sexual offences in the USA (Mercado, Alvarez, & Levenson, 2008). Mercado et al. (2008) reflect on how stigma is comparable for both moderate and high-risk sexual offences, rather than being proportional to the severity of the crime. There appear to be similar judgements and stigmatisation observed here for those convicted of non-contact CESO, for both those charged and their wider family.

This highlights that as a society we appear unable to make distinctions between types and severity of sexual offending, instead viewing these crimes and the associated shaming as one discrete entity. This may be partly attributable to the labelling of all forms of sexual offending under the term ‘sexual offender’ and the media representation of people convicted of sexual offences as posing a stable and unremitting danger to members of society upon release. This is despite comparatively

low rates of sexual recidivism compared to non-sexual or contact forms of crime (Gottfried, Shier, & Mulay, 2020). Furthermore, this likely reflects a perception that non-contact CESO operates as a pre-cursor to contact sexual offences, which again appears unsubstantiated by the evidence (Babchishin et al., 2018). There is also an impression from these accounts that the term ‘sexual offender’ is synonymous in mind with ‘paedophile’, whereas, as outlined in the wider literature, there appears to be variations in sexual interest, which does not necessarily imply an exclusive sexual preference for children (Kettleborough & Merdian, 2017). Furthermore, as evidenced in these narratives, these exaggerated perceptions of risk and stigmatisation translates to very real impact in terms of adverse treatment and response from others, including harassment and vigilantism.

Drawing from principles of Cognitive Analytic Therapy (CAT; Corbridge, Brummer, & Coid, 2017) there appears to be a shift in reciprocal roles, in that those who have perpetrated abuse become abused themselves by wider society. Furthermore, individuals (including the media, neighbours and professionals) feel justified in perpetrating this abuse. Via this courtesy stigma, the sphere widens, and this abuse is extended to family members. This feared response for the reactions and condemnation from others, elicits descriptions from family members that echo with narratives of complex post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This includes altered perceptions of the world, themselves and others around them. This stigmatisation serves to heighten feelings of shame and remorse in those who have committed the crime and conversely those who support them. This is intended as a punishment and a deterrent from future offending. However, it also leads individuals to punish and abuse themselves, increasing the risk of serious mental health difficulties, suicide and social withdrawal.

Clear themes of internal shame and condemnation were present for those in this study. Family members felt they were partly to blame for the behaviour and due to this; they were undeserving of support from others. This was particularly apparent within the theme of ‘silenced’. This prevented them from being able to integrate and process the events, using the ‘natural processes’ or coping strategies that they would have usually. This included social contact, speaking to others about the event and not having to hide their emotional state. This suppresses efforts to heal and reconcile, with adverse outcomes both for the family member’s wellbeing, but also for aiding

rehabilitation and desistance efforts in those charged with these crimes. The shame and inability to confide in others resonated with accounts of sexual abuse survivors. This shame silenced their seeking of help and perpetuated the psychological effects of the trauma.

There also appeared to be variation in how this shame expressed itself, depending on the relational role of the family member. In this study, mothers more frequently expressed self-blame and guilt for inadequate parenting, feeling this encouraged the expression of offending behaviour. They felt they had not protected children from external threats (including child abuse and dangers of the internet) or provided them with a sense of adequate responsibility for their actions. Siblings described feeling that the association with the crime indicated something ‘unspeakable’ or deviant operating within the family system. Conversely, partners described guilt that they had not detected the behaviour, or that by failing to respond to their partner’s sexual needs effectively, they had encouraged the behaviour. This again parallels with stigma processes in the wider literature. For mental health stigma, parents are more likely to be blamed for causation, whereas partners are blamed for mismanagement of symptoms (Östman & Kjellin, 2002). Condry (2007) identifies that for the family members in her study the shame is in part vicarious, due to proximity of those that have offended, but also based on their own perceived culpability and sense of failure, reaching them at “the very core of their and their family’s identity” (p.64). This highlights the magnitude and deeply personal level at which the crime affects family members.

### **2.4.2 Moving forward**

In order to process what had happened, family members spoke of ways they attempted to make sense of the behaviour. Their explanations corresponded with the wider evidence base for causal factors of why people engage in CESO in the first instance (see Seto (2013) for a review). This included seeing the behaviour as an addiction or as being an extreme of problematic internet pornography use. This positioned those offending as being powerless to the draw of the behaviour, that they had wanted to stop, but felt compelled to keep accessing the material. Many understood the behaviour within the wider context of early life trauma and mental

health difficulties, as is also suggested by wider literature (Babchishin, Hanson, & VanZuylen, 2015). Within this realm, others identified the behaviour as a coping mechanism. This suggested that masturbation and fantasy are used to escape or alleviate negative affect including anger, sadness, stress and feelings of loneliness (Cortoni & Marshall, 2001; Dervley et al., 2017). Family members also interpreted the behaviour as a 'cry for help', with a recognition that their loved ones were becoming unable to cope with the demands of their lives. Here the discovery of the offence was seen as a turning point in preventing against more extreme outcomes, such as a contact offence or suicide. Many identified it as a mistake, an extremity or anomaly within the realm of their behavioural repertoire and as being 'out-of-character' with their loved one's identity. The framing and understanding of the behaviour in these externalising frameworks permits compassion and care for those that have committed the crime and facilitates the process of forgiveness and rebuilding.

This has important implications for encouraging desistance in those convicted with sexual offences. Substantive, or 'secondary desistance' has been associated with cognitive transformation and identity change (Maruna, Lebel, Mitchell, & Naples, 2004). Through this, individuals seek to find a way to recognise that the behaviour was an aspect of a maladaptive, or a now redundant criminal identity and adopt new practical, non-offending identities that present themselves as fundamentally good, and their selves as having inherent value. Key aspects of this capacity for desistance are the acceptance and belonging to a social group or within relationships with significant others, where these redemptive identities are integrated and reinforced, termed 'relational desistance' (McNeill, 2015). This provides the individual who has offended with resources needed for meaningful change and encourages wellbeing and better reintegration with society. Understanding the behaviour in the context of psychological distress, as due to external influences, or as part of a previous and now redundant self makes it easier to accept and promote this reformed identity. Those that spoke of positive outcomes, made reference to observing their loved one rebuilding, their engagement in sex offender treatment programmes, and observing indicators of genuine remorse. Working towards substantive desistance, may in turn help encourage forgiveness from the family member, with movement towards relational desistance and effective reintegration. This could involve working towards a shared

understanding of the causes and triggers for the behaviour, promoting a changed identity and helping their loved one maintain that commitment to change.

However, there are examples here where individuals were unable to integrate this new identity and move forward, or forgive those charged with the offence. There are a number of hypothesised reasons for this. First, some of the narratives suggested that those charged with the offence had not achieved this substantive desistance, and instead demonstrated desistance of a more primary or 'resigned' form (Harris, 2016). This suggests cessation from offending and adherence to legal restrictions, but without taking responsibility for actions, demonstrating genuine remorse or encouraging a shift to a new non-offending identity. Family members may have been unable to externalise or compartmentalise the offending behaviour. Instead, they may see the behaviour as a pervasive trait indicating deviancy and impoverished moral values, with an associated risk that it may occur again. They may tolerate this uncertainty and attempt to 'put the crime behind them', but leaving an ongoing tension, discontent and unresolved fear that the offence will be repeated. Second, it may be that the degree of betrayal and pain makes it harder to conceptualise the behaviour in these terms, especially when faced daily with the consequences of that betrayal and associated loss. If there are no indicators of confirmatory evidence for understandable explanations of the crime (e.g., no observable indicators of psychological distress at the time of the offence; large collections of child-specific content), it may make it difficult to accept or consider these more 'digestible' explanations for the crime or see it as an anomaly in behaviour.

In essence, individuals are trying to make sense of the unimaginable, an act that is opposed to their very core moral values and which generates a revulsion that makes it near impossible for them to locate it within the continuum of acceptable human behaviour. This disquiet may perpetuate, and when there is still the possibility of leaving and distancing yourself from that individual, it may be very difficult to fully accept and forgive what has happened. This may lead to maintenance of intimacy deficits, with individuals remaining disconnected, suffering separately and being unable to find ways back to each other. Furthermore, for those that have committed the offence, seeing shame and resentment reflected back at you through the eyes of

your loved one may perpetuate feelings of hopelessness and obstruct rehabilitation efforts.

### **2.4.3 Policy and clinical practice**

The considerations raised here in relation to the stigma, guilt and shame experienced by family members are concerning. There are clear debilitating effects where individuals live in fear, of real and imagined threat and condemnation from others. They feel unable to reach out and utilise support, leading them to withdraw and hide from the world. This appears to prolong effects of trauma and prevents attempts to rehabilitate, rebuild and reintegrate.

There is a need for greater education and public awareness to increase understanding of the nature of sexual offending and variation with regard to type, cause and risk within this. This extends to police officers, social workers and healthcare professionals, as well as government and policy makers. The current legislation regarding registration and notification laws, as well as the publishing of personal information in the media, appears to primarily publicly shame the individual charged with the offence and those in their wider system, as opposed to effectively managing risk (Willis, Levenson, & Ward, 2010). It is concerning that the significant impact on family members rarely appears to be considered, as if their experiences are irrelevant. The courtesy stigma and vicarious shame serve the purpose of dehumanising these individuals and encourage the risk of threat and vigilantism. This study calls for the need to consider the impact of these laws on a person's wider system and to make more proactive efforts to manage instances of ostracism, harassment and vigilantism towards individuals (Cubellis et al., 2019).

Furthermore, given the sheer scale of the problem of crimes involving CESO, there is a need for increased public awareness and preventative measures to help people refrain from criminal behaviour online. This is the aim of 'Stop it Now', however very few individuals utilise these services proactively, instead contacting the organisation reactively following detection of the crime. If there was greater acknowledgement of the prevalence and risk factors that encourage this offending,

individuals may feel more able to seek help at an earlier timepoint. There is a sense that due to the 'taboo' nature of sexual desires and the 'guttural and instinctive' response that sexual abuse against children evokes, as a society we are unable to tolerate or even consider any discussion in relation to this. However, whether we care to acknowledge it or not, this is a part of our society. Furthermore, statistics for sexual crimes and sexual interest in children suggest it may be more common and in so, more normal than we are willing to admit (Dombert et al., 2016). How helpful is it to condemn and vilify, teaching others to abuse those who have done wrong? Instead, should we not be asking what has happened to the person to encourage this behaviour and what can we do to support and encourage rehabilitation? Avoidance and detachment from the issue serves to perpetuate the shifting of roles between abuser and abused, without changing the wider dynamic. This serves to maintain the abuse and its devastating effects.

This study has important implications for clinical practice. With the growing scale of this problem, we are seeing increasing numbers of individuals being referred to psychology services, whether perpetrators, victims, or family members. There appears to be a lack of confidence in working with cyber enabled sexual offending. This might be due to poor awareness or understanding of the legal processes. This can lead individuals support to be delayed or not provided, if there is not a clinician with relevant forensic expertise within the service. If we can increase awareness of this issue via clinical training and training of mental health professionals in related health services, we can increase the amount of expertise and support available for individuals who are affected by this form of crime. This might include greater understanding of the risk factors or reasons why people engage in this form of offending, or the impact of stigma and shame following an arrest. It could also be used as a learning opportunity to consider the attitudes and beliefs of the clinicians, and to challenge stigmatised attitudes within healthcare and allied sources of professional support. Also, the provision of hope, that people can rebuild after an arrest and reconcile their relationships with themselves, and others, may be helpful in aiding recovery.

#### **2.4.4 Clinical implications**

This research also highlights additional clinical implications and potential avenues for support, to assist those affected by this type of crime. First, as highlighted by individuals in this study, the provision of information regarding the offending behaviour and the subsequent legal proceedings is invaluable in this process. Here, this was predominately sought via direct support from SN-S staff; however, there are also online resources available that can help to provide guidance that individuals could be signposted to (see <https://www.stopitnow.org.uk/>). Furthermore, many described how useful the family group was for meeting others and hearing shared experiences, helping them to feel they weren't as alone in the process. Of course, these sources of support will not be appropriate for everyone, but the seeking of non-judgemental support from trusted others (including professional and religious sources) can be a vital lifeline in helping to cope with the event. This is suggested with the caveat that family members carefully consider who and when to disclose to.

In terms of working therapeutically, clinicians should hold in mind the impact of stigma, and the shame, guilt and self-blame evident in family members of those charged with a CESO. Clark (2012) provides guidelines for working therapeutically with guilt and shame, stressing the importance of building a strong, non-judgemental therapeutic alliance. It is important to differentiate between guilt and shame, understanding that the client may have difficulty locating and expressing the source of shame. In relation to guilt, efforts should be made to explore the degree of perceived responsibility and attempting to construct a more balanced appraisal.

In addition to this, the individual may require direct treatment for associated mental health conditions, for example anxiety disorders (including agoraphobia, generalised anxiety and panic disorder), depression, including suicidal ideation and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), amongst others. During the process of arrest and discovery of the crime, many described experiences of overwhelming shock and horror, often using physical descriptors of somatic symptoms such as 'gut-wrenching' or feeling faint. Condry (2007) again described similar experiences in her sample, identifying many of her participants as having symptoms consistent with the diagnostic criteria of PTSD, likening the experience to a 'living death', as they experienced the

process of bereavement and ‘the abrupt disintegration of one’s inner world’. The presence of ongoing mental health symptoms and their chronicity should be examined when working therapeutically with these individuals.

These findings also inform relational approaches to help individuals make sense of the offence and to process whether or how to navigate their relationship with their family member in the aftermath. Here we advocate the use of approaches such as acceptance (e.g., Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, ACT), forgiveness and compassion (e.g., Compassion Focused Therapy, CFT), but advocate the application of these towards both the other, and the self. It is important to utilise a personalised approach, taking into consideration the nature of the situation and factors surrounding the offence. If the relationship cannot be salvaged, it is important to promote self-acceptance, self-forgiveness and self-compassion in enabling the family member to preserve their selves and end the relationship. However, if their loved one shows genuine remorse, and seeks redemption and rehabilitation, these approaches may be helpful in alleviating some of the anger, hurt, and enabling the relationship to regenerate and lives to move forward. It is also important to instil a sense of hope that it is possible to rebuild and strengthen the relationship, but it takes time and dedication from both individuals.

#### **2.4.5 Limitations and future directions**

A key limitation to highlight is that family members were recruited through SN-S, and as such, this may represent an unrepresentative sample in terms of the proportion of individuals who have decided to continue to provide ongoing support to those charged with the offences. Whilst not all the partners in this study stayed in a romantic relationship with those that had offended, they did continue to support them, even if this was up to a certain point. As such, many of the themes relate to making sense of the behaviour and where possible, reconciling. However, the narratives of individuals who cease contact with those charged are likely to be different to those heard here and it would be interesting to explore these further. Furthermore, this was an entirely Scottish sample and variations in relation to restriction laws, sentencing

and levels of support were observed across different geographical regions. This highlights the possible variation in experiences for those living elsewhere and this should be considered for future research.

Additionally, the sample comprised of parents, partners and adult siblings, but did not involve other family members, including children. All the included parents were mothers, so the voices of fathers were not captured here. Inclusion of additional relational roles may serve to elucidate some of these mechanisms further, as would an investigation of relational dyads between the family member and those charged with the offence.

A further consideration, as opposed to a limitation, is that the primary author (MC) works clinically within a forensic setting. Due to this, the interpretation of these experiences is through the lens of someone who promotes rehabilitation, reintegration and redemption in people charged with sexual offences. The double-hermeneutic present within this analysis may have been significantly different if analysed by someone operating primarily from a risk management, or victim-focused perspective.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study has provided a valuable insight into the lived experience of family members of individuals charged with a CESO. It has highlighted several key considerations around the processes of stigma and shame for these family members. In addition, this study has explored the life-altering impact of the crime on the family system around those charged with CESO, taking into account the influence of different relational roles. This highlights avenues for support, for both family members and those attempting to desist. Primarily, it gives a voice to these individuals who have for the most part, been excluded and silenced, due to events for which they cannot, and should not, be held accountable.

## 2.6 Reflections

Whilst conducting this research, I reflected on my assumptions and stance in relation to sexual offending and my understanding of its impact on others. Despite having previous experience in forensic research, the area of sexual offending and cyber-enabled sexual offending was new to me. I was surprised that I had not given it more consideration previously. I wondered whether my doing so reflected a wider societal pattern of not wanting to consider sexual offending as within the spectrum of possible behaviour, due to its aversive and shameful nature and the visceral reaction it evokes. It seems there is an ‘out of sight out of mind’ mentality that enables us to distance ourselves from this discomfort, whilst in doing so perpetuates the problem of making it something we are unable to consider or discuss openly. When embarking on the research I was surprised by the sheer scale of the issue and the way this type of offending seemingly did not appear to differentiate based on family background, criminogenic risk factors or socioeconomic status. The participants referred to never having had any dealings with the law previously and finding it completely unimaginable that something like this could have happened to their family. It felt like in some ways, this made the discovery of the crime even more overwhelming and devastating.

It highlighted to me how common this type of offending can be and how it can fall as a deviation from the continuum of what we perceive as ‘normal’ or acceptable behaviour. It felt to me that this really could happen to anyone, and perhaps to some degree (maybe without our awareness) it might have already done so. It struck me the extent to which we condemn perpetrators and their family, and I was concerned at how people’s experiences mirrored that of more serious types of sexual and non-sexual offending. As previously mentioned, I wondered whether my interpretation would have been different if I had been working with victims or had approached this project from a risk management perspective. Sometimes I considered whether I was minimising the seriousness of the behaviour, or in some way condoning it. By understanding the crime as a mistake or an addiction, it helped to remove some of the culpability and encouraged forgiveness and compassion. I wondered whether I was influenced by the narratives and the strategies of the family members. Perhaps I adopted similar coping strategies and distancing to help me to process the narratives

and to approach the issue with optimism, promoting the possibility of rehabilitation and reintegration as this better aligns with my values as a clinician.

I did find that time and time again I tried to imagine how I would feel if this had happened to my partner, or family member. Whether I would be able to consider and understand the behaviour in a compassionate or forgiving way, or whether I would be too hurt and betrayed by the actions to be able to work past it. Whilst I would hope that I would show some of the same strength and compassion conveyed by the participants within this study, I also really can't say for certain how I would respond. I think it is such a deeply personal hurt that we can never fully know how readily people can move on from this kind of pain. This makes it difficult to give an opinion or advise on an appropriate course of action. It emphasised to me as a clinician the importance of considering the wider social network and the complexity of experience that this form (or indeed any form) of offending might have on a loved one.

I also thought about how I would feel if it were me that through the course of my actions had ruptured relationships with those closest to me. I considered having done so in the context of something as private as sex and relationships. I imagine I would feel hopeless, ashamed and lost, not knowing where or how to seek support. I think we frequently acknowledge that people often make mistakes and can do so in a multitude of different ways. However here, when the behaviour is conceptualised within a criminogenic framework, and we lose our capacity to make sense of it or to understand what may have led someone to act in this way. We seem to lose the impetus to try. It felt to me that we instead shame people at the very core of who they are as a person and do so without seemingly giving the opportunity for redemption. I think instead we need to acknowledge these responses in ourselves and our society and reconsider how we can approach this problem in a more balanced and informed way.

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# Appendices

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## Appendix 1

### Aggression and Violent Behaviour Guideline for Authors

#### *References*

There are no strict requirements on reference formatting at submission. References can be in any style or format as long as the style is consistent. Where applicable, author(s) name(s), journal title/book title, chapter title/article title, year of publication, volume number/book chapter and the article number or pagination must be present. Use of DOI is highly encouraged. The reference style used by the journal will be applied to the accepted article by Elsevier at the proof stage. Note that missing data will be highlighted at proof stage for the author to correct.

#### *Formatting requirements*

There are no strict formatting requirements but all manuscripts must contain the essential elements needed to convey your manuscript, for example Abstract, Keywords, Introduction, Materials and Methods, Results, Conclusions, Artwork and Tables with Captions.

If your article includes any Videos and/or other Supplementary material, this should be included in your initial submission for peer review purposes.

Divide the article into clearly defined sections.

Please ensure the text of your paper is double-spaced—this is an essential peer review requirement.

#### Figures and tables embedded in text

Please ensure the figures and the tables included in the single file are placed next to the relevant text in the manuscript, rather than at the bottom or the top of the file. The corresponding caption should be placed directly below the figure or table.

#### *Article structure*

##### Subdivision - numbered sections

Divide your article into clearly defined and numbered sections. Subsections should be numbered 1.1 (then 1.1.1, 1.1.2, ...), 1.2, etc. (the abstract is not included in section numbering). Use this numbering also for internal cross-referencing: do not just refer to 'the text'. Any subsection may be given a brief heading. Each heading should appear on its own separate line.

##### Introduction

State the objectives of the work and provide an adequate background, avoiding a detailed literature survey or a summary of the results.

##### Material and methods

Provide sufficient details to allow the work to be reproduced by an independent researcher. Methods that are already published should be summarized, and indicated by a reference. If quoting directly from a previously published method, use quotation marks and also cite the source. Any modifications to existing methods should also be described.

##### Theory/calculation

A Theory section should extend, not repeat, the background to the article already dealt with in the Introduction and lay the foundation for further work. In contrast, a Calculation section represents a practical development from a theoretical basis.

##### Results

Results should be clear and concise.

#### Discussion

This should explore the significance of the results of the work, not repeat them. A combined Results and Discussion section is often appropriate. Avoid extensive citations and discussion of published literature.

#### Conclusions

The main conclusions of the study may be presented in a short Conclusions section, which may stand alone or form a subsection of a Discussion or Results and Discussion section.

#### Appendices

If there is more than one appendix, they should be identified as A, B, etc. Formulae and equations in appendices should be given separate numbering: Eq. (A.1), Eq. (A.2), etc.; in a subsequent appendix, Eq. (B.1) and so on. Similarly for tables and figures: Table A.1; Fig. A.1, etc.

#### Essential title page information

- Title. Concise and informative. Titles are often used in information-retrieval systems. Avoid abbreviations and formulae where possible.
- Author names and affiliations. Where the family name may be ambiguous (e.g., a double name), please indicate this clearly. Present the authors' affiliation addresses (where the actual work was done) below the names. Indicate all affiliations with a lower-case superscript letter immediately after the author's name and in front of the appropriate address. Provide the full postal address of each affiliation, including the country name, and, if available, the e-mail address of each author. The title page is to be the first page of the manuscript; the second page is the abstract with key words.
- Corresponding author. Clearly indicate who will handle correspondence at all stages of refereeing and publication, also post-publication. Ensure that telephone and fax numbers (with country and area code) are provided in addition to the e-mail address and the complete postal address.
- Present/permanent address. If an author has moved since the work described in the article was done, or was visiting at the time, a "Present address" (or "Permanent address") may be indicated as a footnote to that author's name. The address at which the author actually did the work must be retained as the main, affiliation address. Superscript Arabic numerals are used for such footnotes.

#### *Abstract*

A concise (no more than 200 words) and factual abstract is required. This should be on a separate page following the title page and should not contain reference citations.

#### *Highlights*

Highlights are mandatory for this journal as they help increase the discoverability of your article via search engines. They consist of a short collection of bullet points that capture the novel results of your research as well as new methods that were used during the study (if any). Please have a look at the examples here: [example Highlights](#).

Highlights should be submitted in a separate editable file in the online submission system. Please use 'Highlights' in the file name and include 3 to 5 bullet points (maximum 85 characters, including spaces, per bullet point).

### *Keywords*

Immediately after the abstract, provide a maximum of 6 keywords, using American spelling and avoiding general and plural terms and multiple concepts (avoid, for example, 'and', 'of'). Be sparing with abbreviations: only abbreviations firmly established in the field may be eligible. These keywords will be used for indexing purposes.

### *Acknowledgements*

Collate acknowledgements in a separate section at the end of the article before the references and do not, therefore, include them on the title page, as a footnote to the title or otherwise. List here those individuals who provided help during the research (e.g., providing language help, writing assistance or proof reading the article, etc.).

### *Formatting of funding sources*

If no funding has been provided for the research, please include the following sentence: This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### *Footnotes*

Footnotes should be used sparingly. Number them consecutively throughout the article. Many word processors build footnotes into the text, and this feature may be used. Should this not be the case, indicate the position of footnotes in the text and present the footnotes themselves separately at the end of the article.

### *Tables*

Please submit tables as editable text and not as images. Tables can be placed either next to the relevant text in the article, or on separate page(s) at the end. Number tables consecutively in accordance with their appearance in the text and place any table notes below the table body. Be sparing in the use of tables and ensure that the data presented in them do not duplicate results described elsewhere in the article. Please avoid using vertical rules and shading in table cells.

### *References*

#### Citation in text

Please ensure that every reference cited in the text is also present in the reference list (and vice versa). Any references cited in the abstract must be given in full. Unpublished results and personal communications are not recommended in the reference list, but may be mentioned in the text. If these references are included in the reference list they should follow the standard reference style of the journal and should include a substitution of the publication date with either 'Unpublished results' or 'Personal communication'. Citation of a reference as 'in press' implies that the item has been accepted for publication.

#### Web references

As a minimum, the full URL should be given and the date when the reference was last accessed. Any further information, if known (DOI, author names, dates, reference to a source publication, etc.), should also be given. Web references can be listed separately (e.g., after the reference list) under a different heading if desired, or can be included in the reference list.

#### Data references

This journal encourages you to cite underlying or relevant datasets in your manuscript by citing them in your text and including a data reference in your Reference List. Data references should include the following elements: author name(s), dataset title, data repository, version (where available), year, and global persistent identifier. Add [dataset] immediately before the reference so we can properly identify it as a data reference. The [dataset] identifier will not appear in your published article.

#### References in a special issue

Please ensure that the words 'this issue' are added to any references in the list (and any citations in the text) to other articles in the same Special Issue.

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Most Elsevier journals have their reference template available in many of the most popular reference management software products. These include all products that support Citation Style Language styles, such as Mendeley. Using citation plug-ins from these products, authors only need to select the appropriate journal template when preparing their article, after which citations and bibliographies will be automatically formatted in the journal's style. If no template is yet available for this journal, please follow the format of the sample references and citations as shown in this Guide. If you use reference management software, please ensure that you remove all field codes before submitting the electronic manuscript. More information on how to remove field codes from different reference management software.

#### *Reference style*

**Text:** Citations in the text should follow the referencing style used by the American Psychological Association. You are referred to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, Seventh Edition, ISBN 978-1-4338-3215-4, copies of which may be ordered online.

## Appendix 2



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### **STUDY PROTOCOL**

#### **Sexual offending and desistance: A systematic review**

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#### **Background**

Desistance is defined as the underlying causal process that encourages individuals to cease offending behaviour completely (Laub & Sampson, 2001). This process is recognised as changes occurring in the propensity to offend, rather than observed changes in crime (Bushway, Piquero, Broidy, Cauffman, & Mazerolle, 2001). Recently, more interest has been taken in understanding the causal processes underlying the process of desistance. Desistance studies place the individual at the centre of the change process. They ask how change works, aiming to identify factors and support the individual in their efforts to maintain desistance (De Vries Robbé, Mann, Maruna, & Thornton, 2015). Better understanding of the predictors of desistance is important as it helps to guide post-onset intervention strategies (Kazemian, 2007).

There has been growth in research interest on the topic of desistance, which (Bersani & Doherty, 2018) attribute to greater availability of longitudinal data, advancing methodology for mapping of longitudinal trends, more dynamic theories of offending and an expansion of prison populations. Longitudinal studies have been beneficial in helping to identify trends in desistance (such as increased desistance with older age), but can be limited in their capacity to describe change mechanisms by which desistance occurs. (Veysey, Martinez, & Christian, 2013) address this with a review of qualitative studies on the topic of desistance. Twenty-nine qualitative studies suggested similar themes of social structural issues, cognitions, identity transformation, relationships and spirituality (Veysey et al., 2013). Reviews have focused on a number of different aspects of desistance such as desistance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, criminal careers and desistance, correlates of desistance and desistance in females (Bersani & Doherty, 2018) although there appears to be little in the way of delineation by type of offence. This is important to address as the underlying causal mechanisms encouraging criminal behaviour are divergent for different types of crime, and mechanisms of desistance are likely to correspond with this (Ward & Beech, 2006).

There has been little published research on desistance in sexual crime (Farmer, McAlinden, & Maruna, 2015). The reasons for this are unclear, but may reflect a societal assumption that sexual offenders

1

tend to be more persistent in their offending trajectories with a perception that they are less capable of change or reform (Harris, 2014). In reality rates of known reoffending in sexual offenders are low suggesting that the majority of those accused appear to desist from further sexual offending (Kruttschnitt, Uggen, & Shelton, 2000). Harris (2014) conducted a qualitative study which attributed desistance to 'growing out of crime' in some cases, but more often attributed desistance to cognitive transformations or embodiment of a non-offending identity. It is encouraging that more research is focusing on processes of desistance in sexual offending. Reviews in this area (see Farmer et al. (2015)) are helpful for providing insight into these processes and in guiding treatment strategies or modifying societal assumptions and stigma. However, as far as we are aware currently there has not been a systematic review and synthesis of the literature in this area. Systematic reviews are recommended when considering the available evidence in a given field and aim to give a comprehensive, representative and unbiased synthesis of the current literature, highlighting key areas for further research and guiding practice and policy recommendations.

This study aims to address this need and will systematically review the current literature, including both qualitative and quantitative studies, published and grey literature sources, assessing study quality and risk of bias.

### **Study Objectives**

To provide an overview of qualitative and quantitative empirical studies examining factors contributing to desistance in those convicted of sexual crimes.

### **Eligibility Criteria**

#### **Inclusion Criteria**

- Language: English
- Study setting: Any
- Participant age: Any
- Participant gender: Any
- Studies of sexual offenders (including child sexual abusers, rapists, female sexual offenders and internet-based sexual offenders)

#### **Exclusion Criteria**

- Animal (non-human) studies
- Review articles and commentaries
- Studies of non-sexual offending

### **Search Strategy**

We have searched PROSPERO & Cochrane databases and to our knowledge, there are no existing systematic reviews on this topic. We will repeat these searches prior to running the searches. We will search the electronic databases: PsycINFO, Web of Science, EMBASE, MEDLINE (PubMed), Criminal Justice Database and Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts (ASSIA) for relevant studies. We will include peer reviewed journal articles, and for both these and for unpublished studies, we shall use quality assessment frameworks to determine the quality of included studies. We will search PsycINFO and MEDLINE (PubMed) to retrieve published systematic reviews related to this review title, so that we can scan their reference lists to identify additional relevant studies. We will check the bibliographies of included studies and any relevant systematic reviews identified for further references to relevant studies. We will also search the indices of relevant journals, including: '*Sexual Abuse*' and '*Aggression and Violent Behaviour*', using the term 'desistance'. We will search PsycINFO and 'ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global' for dissertations and theses which may detail unpublished studies.

All years will be included and only studies published in English will be included, as we do not have the necessary resources to translate studies published in other languages. We may contact original authors for clarification and further data if trial reports are unclear.

### **Search Terms**

Examples of included search terms:

- Population/sample-related terms: criminal\* OR prisoner\* OR offender\* OR delinquent\* OR perpetrator\*
- AND sex\* OR rape or "child\* abus\*" OR "sex\* abus\*\*"
- Phenomenon of interest: desist\* OR "re entry" OR reintegrat\* OR "re integrat\*\*"

In line with the recommendations of Cooke, Smith, and Booth (2012) we referred to the SPIDER search strategy tool for qualitative and mixed methods research. This includes the components: **S**ample; **P**henomenon of Interest; **D**esign; **E**valuation; **R**esearch type. Given the exploratory nature of this review and in the interest of inclusivity, we plan to include population or sample terms, and phenomenon of interest terms only. Population and phenomenon terms will be combined using the Boolean operator 'AND'. Variations of this search strategy will be used for the additional databases, encompassing the search terms listed (or with controlled vocabulary database equivalents) and additional key text words. An example search strategy can be found in the appendix.

### **Selection of Studies**

Following de-duplication, studies yielded by the database searches will be screened for eligibility. Following exclusions by title and abstract, remaining studies' full-texts will be screened. Eligibility assessment and a 100% screen of titles, abstracts and full texts will be conducted by the first author (MC) and a 20% screen of titles, abstracts and full texts will be conducted by the second author (ROD).

Discrepancies will be resolved by reaching consensus amongst reviewers. If insufficient information is available to determine a paper's eligibility, the authors will be contacted to request the required information (on at least two occasions). We will also check for any reported retractions or errors in the eligible studies.

Search results, following removal of duplicates, will be uploaded to Covidence, which will be used to screen abstracts and full texts and to resolve disagreements.

Reasons for exclusion will be listed for each excluded paper that is excluded at the full-text level of screening.

### **Data Extraction**

Data extraction will be conducted by the first author (MC) and a 10% extraction check of study data will be performed by the second author (ROD).

Specific data will be extracted from each study and recorded in a data collection form. Examples of extracted data for each domain are given below, however this stage will be informed by the results of the literature search and may be subject to change. Information will be collected on study characteristics (design, recruitment method), participant characteristics (age of participants, sample size, gender ratio, inclusion and exclusion criteria, ethnicity, education, co-morbidities), information relating to how desistance was operationalised and measured, and key outcomes.

### **Risk of bias and study quality**

We will use the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT; Hong et al. (2018)) to critically appraise the methodological quality of the included studies. This tool has been designed for the appraisal of complex systematic literature reviews that include qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods studies. This current version was developed on the findings from a literature review of critical appraisal tools, interviews with MMAT users, and an e- Delphi study. It is suggested to have good content validity, however additional research is required to establish its validation and inter-rater reliability (Hong et al., 2019).

### **Analysis and Reporting**

Once the studies have been collated, we will provide a narrative synthesis of the findings from the included studies, differentiating those using qualitative from quantitative designs. A discussion of how desistance was conceptualised and operationalised, with discussion of key findings in relation to this will be provided.

### **Discussion**

A discussion of the key findings and implications for policy and practice will be discussed in relation to this topic. It will be interesting to consider whether there is consistency in accounts and mechanisms underlying desistance across studies and how this compares with desistance in non-sexual offending. If possible, we will consider differences between different forms of sexual offending, however this will be guided by the results of the literature searches.

### **Quality control and Quality Assurance**

The authors will be responsible for data quality. The study screening and quality assessment will be completed for 100% of the yielded records, with an additional 20% check by an independent researcher (ROD). A 10% check for extraction of study details will also be conducted and data extraction sheets will be piloted by both researchers prior to initiation of this stage.

In line with recommendations, we will calculate the inter-rater reliability for each stage of screening, extraction and quality appraisal, using Cohen's  $\kappa$  (Belur, Tompson, Thornton, & Simon, 2018). If  $\kappa$  is less than 0.50 at any stage, the agreed coding criteria will be discussed and the stage will be repeated if required. Any discrepancies will be flagged for further discussion and resolution. If MC & ROD cannot reach agreement regarding a study's inclusion or quality, a third study author (EQ) will be consulted.

### **Publication and Dissemination**

The findings from this research study may be published in an appropriate scientific journal (and made available open access), and/or presented at an appropriate meeting or scientific conference. Study data will be collected and held by the study investigators.

### **Ethical Approval**

Ethical approval is not required for this study

### **Study Personnel**

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#### **Conflicts of Interest**

None to report.

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### Appendix

Example search strategy including MEDLINE (PubMed), EMBASE, PsycINFO.

Search conducted 17/07/2020, 10:00

Criteria		Search Term	Records retrieved
Phenomenon	1	(desist* or "re entry" or reintegrat* or "re integrat*").mp. [mp=ti, ab, hw, tc, id, ot, tm, mh, tn, dm, mf, dv, kw, fx, dq, nm, kf, ox, px, rx, ui, sy]	28511
Population	2	(criminal* or prisoner* or offender* or delinquent* or perpetrator*).mp. [mp=ti, ab, hw, tc, id, ot, tm, mh, tn, dm, mf, dv, kw, fx, dq, nm, kf, ox, px, rx, ui, sy]	252025
Population	3	(sex* or rape* or "child* abus*" or "sex abus*").mp. [mp=ti, ab, hw, tc, id, ot, tm, mh, tn, dm, mf, dv, kw, fx, dq, nm, kf, ox, px, rx, ui, sy]	3090809
Combined	4	1 and 2 and 3	740
	5	Remove duplicates from 4	498

\*Additional searches including the phenomenon terms "re offend\*", reoffend\* and rehabilit\* were also piloted. These yielded a greater number of hits ( $n = 3205$ ) that were of less relevance to the process of desistance. In the interest of specificity, these were omitted.

### Appendix 3

Themes	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	#	
Focal events		X	X	X				X		X	X		X	X													8	
Cognitive transformation		X	X	X		X	X	X		X			X	X	X													10
Cognitive neutralisation				X	X					X																	3	
Crystallisation of discontent		X		X	X	X		X			X			X	X													8
Grief, loss, regret*					X	X	X				X	X	X	X													7	
Absence of cognitive transformation*		X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	X															9	
Denial*		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X															10	
Deviance*					X						X	X		X													4	
Ageing out*						X	X			X				X						X							5	
Practical selves	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X		X	X	X	X	X											13	
Possible positive self		X	X	X	X	X								X	X	X											8	
Return to true self*		X		X	X		X			X					X												6	
Primary goods	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X		X	X	X		X	X			X							14	
Knowledge*				X		X	X	X	X	X				X		X											8	
Work and mastery*		X	X	X					X	X			X	X		X				X							9	
Relatedness*	X	X		X		X	X		X	X		X	X	X		X	X			X			X	X	X		16	
Forgiveness and trust*				X			X		X	X	X		X	X													7	
Community*	X	X	X	X			X				X		X	X	X	X				X			X	X			13	
Belonging and accepted*		X	X						X	X	X			X		X								X	X	X	9	
Spiritual*											X			X													2	
Instrumental goods	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X				X		X	X			X							12	
Rebuilding*	X			X		X	X		X				X														6	
Self-forgiveness*							X		X	X	X																4	
Generative*						X	X		X	X			X	X	X												7	
Education and treatment*	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X				X		X	X				X						13	
Maintained commitment to change	X						X	X		X	X			X		X											7	
Risk management*	X	X				X	X	X			X			X		X											8	
Barriers to re-entry	X	X		X		X			X	X	X		X	X		X				X			X				12	
Facilitators to re-entry	X									X	X		X														4	



## Appendix 4

### Sexual Abuse: Journal Formatting Guidelines

See: <https://journals.sagepub.com/author-instructions/SAX>

Manuscripts should be prepared according to the guidelines set forth in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (7th ed.). This includes stipulations regarding page layout, manuscript sections and headings, and formatting of references, tables, and figures. DOI numbers when available for listed references are to be included. Effect sizes and confidence intervals are reported, where appropriate.

Each submission should also include an abstract between 150 and 200 words and 4-5 keywords.

Authors should also ensure appropriate statements have been included in the submission and the Submission Checklist completed.

#### Statement 1: Statistical Significance Statement

Qualitative study designs are another submission that do not easily fit these elements and where the 21 Word Solution might not be appropriate. For qualitative studies, Element a (reporting how sample size was determined), Element b (reporting any included cases), and Element f (citing prior publications that use some or all of the data) are usually applicable.

#### Statement 2: Role of Funding Sources

Authors must identify any financial support received to conduct the research and/or preparation of the manuscript. Authors should specify if the funding source had any involvement in the research and/or preparation of the manuscript. The absence or presence of funding does not preclude eligibility for publication in the journal.

#### Statement 3: Disclosure of Financial Interests

All authors must disclose any financial interests, such as a financial stake in a measure or service described in the manuscript, or a close, current personal relationship with someone (e.g., partner/spouse, family member) who has a financial stake in a measure or service that is described. A financial interest does not preclude eligibility for publication in the journal.

#### Statement 4: Research ethics approval

Authors must include a statement in the Methods section regarding institutional research ethics review and approval, if applicable. If not applicable, a short rationale should be provided (e.g., not applicable or not required).

Authors are encouraged to be thoughtful about the connotations of language used in their manuscripts to describe persons or groups. Person-first language (e.g., “persons with sexual offense histories”, “individual who has been adjudicated for...”, “child/adolescent with sexual behavior problems”) is generally preferred because it is often more accurate and less pejorative than terms like “sex offender”. Terms like “sex offender” imply an ongoing tendency to commit sex offenses, which is inaccurate

for many persons who have been convicted for sex offenses given current sexual recidivism base rates.

Similarly, the term suggests a homogeneous group defined and stigmatized on the basis of criminal behaviors that may have taken place infrequently or many years in the past. Person-first language is also consistent with APA style guidelines for reducing bias in written language (see American Psychological Association). Authors will sometimes need to refer to current legal terms such as “Sexually Violent Predator” laws in the US; in such cases the legal term can be placed in italics or in quotation marks. Additional guidance on this recommendation can be found in the 7th edition of the APA Publication Manual, Willis (2018), and Willis and Letourneau (2018).

## Appendix 5



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### STUDY PROTOCOL

#### **Experiences of family members of those charged with a cyber-enabled sexual offence: an interpretative phenomenological analysis in collaboration with Stop it Now! Scotland.**

Miriam H. Cohen, Alana Davies, Carol Robinson, Ethel Quayle

#### **Background**

Whilst other forms of crime in Scotland appear to be decreasing, the number of reported sex offences has risen dramatically over the previous decade, observing a consistent increase each year since 2008. The 'Recorded crime in Scotland, 2016-2017 report' observed over 10,000 recorded sexual crimes in 2016, the highest reported number within the past 40 years. Forty four percent of sexual crimes recorded involved individuals under the age of 18 years. 'Other sexual crimes' encompassed 40% of all recorded sexual crimes in Scotland, including: communicating indecently; taking, possessing and distributing indecent images of children (IIOC); sexual exposure; and public indecency. This accounted for a greater proportion of recorded crimes than sexual assault (< 40%); rape and attempted rape (17%) and prostitution (3%). 'Cyber enabled' crimes (crimes using the internet) contributed to half of the growth of all recorded sexual crimes between 2013 and 2017. The majority of these online offences involve possession or distribution of IIOC. Over the past five years the UK has recorded a 700% increase in IIOC crimes referred to the National Crime Agency (The Home Office, 2018). In Scotland, the vast majority of perpetrators for online sex offences were male (95%), with younger victims than for non-cyber enabled crimes (average age of 14 years, compared to 23 years). Perpetrators were also younger, with an average of 18 years (compared to 36 years for non-cyber enabled crimes) (see 'Recorded crime in Scotland: 'Other sexual crimes', 2013-2014 and 2016-2017'). This highlights the excessive scale of this problem and the associated strain for the Criminal Justice System (CJS).

The increase in cyber enabled sexual crimes is due in part to advances in communication technologies. These enable new forms of sexual abuse, platforms to perpetrate the abuse and a greater degree of perceived anonymity (Faust, Bickart, Renaud, & Camp, 2014; Wager et al., 2018). Targeting this, Police Scotland launched a campaign in 2018 warning online users of the personal risk they are taking through their offending behaviour and signposting to third sector

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support services (#NotMyFriend, see link in references for details). Consequences of these crimes for perpetrators are numerous and include: leaving the family home; having supervised access to their children; disclosure to employers; financial hardships; lengthy legal processes which can result in a prison sentence; and being placed on the Sex Offender's Register. The increase in IIOC crimes may also have arisen in part due to a prevailing societal perception that internet offences are non-contact and as such, constitute a victimless crime (Winder & Gough, 2010). This sentiment is echoed in the accounts of IIOC sex offenders who may differentiate themselves from contact offenders or online groomers with the justification that they did not 'create' a victim (Winder, Gough, & Seymour-Smith, 2015). However, by accessing IIOC a greater demand is created for the production of these images, which can have devastating consequences for the children and young people involved (Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2013). The CJS has responded to this concern with harsher punitive measures. In the UK a minimum sentence for possession of a Category B image (non-penetrative sexual activity) is 26 weeks in custody and for a Category A image (images containing penetrative sexual activity) is one year.

Outcomes for people convicted of a sexual offence, including cyber-enabled sexual offences, are bleak. Despite low rates of recidivism within this group (2% for contact sexual offences, 3% for IIOC offences (Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, 2011)), there are poor prospects in terms of future employment, relationship breakdown and separation from families. These factors can result in high rates of mental health problems and suicide, with utilisation of mental health services estimated to be around three times higher than that found in the general population (Henshaw, Ogloff, & Clough, 2018). This likely underestimates the true prevalence of mental health difficulties within these populations as many may fail to seek support due to shame and fear of how services will respond. Brophy (2003) investigated suicide in males outside of prison settings in Ireland and suggested that those convicted of sex offences against children were 230 times more likely to complete suicide than the general Irish population. Completing suicide was more likely to occur during the disclosure of the act around the time of the trial (Pritchard & King, 2005). These events are attributed to the irreparable damage the sentence can cause to reputations, the threat and pressure of a court appearance and incarceration and the remorse and shame felt in response to the crimes committed (Hoffer, Shelton, Behnke, & Erdberg, 2010; Pritchard & King, 2005).

It is important to consider the wider social network and systems surrounding the offender. Hoffer et al. (2010) investigated the impact of child sex-offender suicide on friends and family. They identified that the reaction of the offender's family, friends and wider social network can be a help or hindrance during the time of arrest. Adverse reactions and estrangement from family may serve to exaggerate feelings of shame and hopelessness. Conversely, support from family and friends during this time may be a protective factor against adverse outcomes. Intimacy deficits and emotion dysregulation have been associated with higher risk of sexual recidivism for both internet-only and contact child sex offenders (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004) and cyber-enabled sex

offenders reported less secure attachment and a more negative self-view (Armstrong & Mellor, 2016). Marriage and employment can act as protective factors against future offending (Clevenger, Navarro, & Jasinski, 2016). However, a study by Middleton, Beech, and Mandeville-Norden (2005) suggested that whilst individuals with emotional dysregulation were often in relationships, these tended to be lacking in intimacy, with individuals often suffering affective difficulties and depression. Precipitants to offending include stress, progression from legal material, loneliness and isolation (Morgan & Lambie, 2019).

Whilst logical that support from family and friends would be protective and valuable during the time of arrest and following sentencing, it is not always possible for individuals to access this. The event of an arrest for a sexual crime against children can be devastating, both for the offender and for those close to them. Understandably, this can result in relationship breakdown, with the family member withdrawing or ceasing future contact with the offender, whether by their own volition or due to pressure from others. For those who stand by those accused, they can experience a high degree of stress and vicarious trauma. Tewksbury and Levenson (2009) surveyed 584 family members of registered sex offenders. Results indicated that family members experience high levels of fear, shame, social isolation and forced residential relocation. Levenson and Tewksbury (2009) investigated the impact of sex offender notification and registration laws in the US and concluded that the collateral consequences impel loved ones to distance themselves in order to cope. This further restricts economic and social support, removing barriers that reduce the risk of recidivism and aid reintegration. Farkas and Miller (2007) call for a greater focus on the needs and concerns of families of sex offenders in prisoner re-entry programmes, in helping them facilitate the re-entry process by recognising their role as 'protectors'. They interviewed 72 family members in the US and identified the key challenges of: emotional and psychological distress; housing; employment; economic hardship; invasion of privacy, social stigma and isolation. Condry (2007) interviews the relatives of serious offenders in England, describing the impact of the discovery as traumatic and 'akin to a bereavement'. She discusses how those closest to us act as an extension of ourselves with the stigmatizing shame of the experience disrupting the entire narrative of their lives and sense of self, with many experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder after the event.

There is a dearth of research into the impact of an arrest for family members of offenders in general and this reduces further for sexual offences and cyber-enabled sexual offences in particular. Berlin and Sawyer (2012) consider the disruption caused for the lives of five men convicted of IIOC possession and their families. However, the provided descriptions are brief without personal accounts of lived experience, which fails to capture the richer detail and complexity of these situations. Those convicted of possession of IIOC tend to have divergent criminogenic and psychological profiles with general and sexual offenders (Faust et al., 2014). Many are in relationships or married at the time of arrest, without history of previous offending. This makes the discovery of an offence all the more bewildering and devastating for those closest

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to them. Often through no fault of their own, these individuals find themselves in a unique set of adverse, life-changing circumstances without much guidance or specialised support to navigate this process. In this study we address the need for this research.

### **Research Questions & Aims**

This study aims to provide a better understanding of the lived experiences of family members of those accused of possession of IIOC, and the sense they make of these experiences. This will inform how best to provide support and improve outcomes for the accused and their families.

### **Study Design**

This research will use a qualitative study design, which will be exploratory in nature and utilise semi-structured interviews to collect data from the study participants. This will investigate the lived experience of parents, partners and siblings of individuals charged with a cyber-enabled sexual offence (possession of IIOC), considering how the participants make sense of these experiences. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) will be used to analysis the data, drawing comparisons between the experiences of those in a romantic partnership with the offender and those in a parent or sibling role.

### **Study Site**

The interviews will take place at the Stop it Now! Scotland (SIN-S) organisation base, in Edinburgh. As participants will be recruited from across Scotland, they will also be given the option of a home or local area visit, if they are unable to travel to Edinburgh for the interview.

### **Participants and Recruitment**

We will work in collaboration with the SIN-S organisation, which is a national child protection charity, run by the Lucy Faithful Foundation as a campaign for child sexual abuse prevention. The charity provides information, increases public awareness, offers training for people working with children and families, runs an anonymous and confidential helpline and facilitates online and face-to-face intervention programmes. It targets people who are worried about their own or another's behaviour, friends and relatives of people arrested for sexual offending and survivors or professional working with child abuse. This study is conducted in collaboration with SIN-S staff who specialise in working with the families of those accused.

We will recruit romantic partners, parents or siblings of people charged with a possession of IIOC and we will aim to sample approximately five people in each group, with a total group size of 15. The SIN-S collaborator will identify current and previous clients suitable for participation in the study. SIN-S staff will make initial contact with study details. If individuals are interested in participating, further information will be provided in the form of an information sheet including the

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researcher's contact details for further discussion over phone, email, or in person. If they decide to take part in the study or wish to meet in person to discuss the study in more detail, an appointment will be booked through SIN-S to meet at the base in Edinburgh. This is the most effective logistical plan as room availability at the SIN-S base is limited and the interviews will need to be scheduled in accordance with this. If it is not possible for the participant to arrange travel to Edinburgh, then the option of a home visit will be discussed in accordance with the lone working protocol.

Inclusion criteria include:

- The participants must either be a parent, sibling or romantic partner of, an individual who is currently being charged with an internet-based sexual offence (possession of IIOC), affiliated with the SIN-S charity.
- They need to reside in Scotland. This will aid recruitment feasibility and homogeneity of the recruited sample.

Exclusion criteria include:

- Participants affiliated with individuals with a current charge of a grooming internet-based sexual offence, a contact offence or creation and distribution of IIOC (rather than possession only). This is based on the rationale that the experiences of partners and families charged with these offences may have a different experience and different interpretation of these events and it is important in IPA to aim to keep the sample as homogenous as possible. I specify 'current charge' here as it is difficult to determine whether there are any undisclosed previous offences that the researcher and the family members may be unaware of. Possession of IIOC is the most common charge referred to SIN-S which aids recruitment feasibility for this population.
- Parents or partners of individuals charged with possession of IIOC, not affiliated with the charity SIN-S. Affiliation with the organisation helps the research team ensure that the individuals meet the inclusion and exclusion criteria and help ensure there are no additional risks in terms of safety and emotional distress that may arise during the interview process.
- Children or friends of those accused.
- Those in the acute or 'crisis stage' of the punitive process. Involvement in the study after the 'safety and stabilisation' phase of their work with SIN-S will be more appropriate and likely less distressing for the participants. There is no specified time period for this, it will be determined on a case-by-case process by SIN-S staff.
- Individuals who do not speak English fluently
- Individuals who are under 18 years of age

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#### Sample size determination

We will aim to recruit 15 participants. For IPA each subjective account is analysed in detail and the intensity of this activity requires relatively small sample sizes (Smith, 2011). Through discussion with skilled IPA analysts, it was agreed that  $n = 5$  per group would be an appropriate sample size. If there are difficulties recruiting that number for a particular group due to lower representation of those family members in the service (i.e. siblings), we will aim to supplement these numbers with additional parent or partner participants.

Confidence in being able to recruit a sample of this size derives from the large number of people contacting SIN-S who meet the eligibility criteria for this study (with 86 referrals of family members in the previous year). These individuals have been receptive previously when asked to provide written statements or narratives of their experiences, therefore it seems logical that they or others would be interested in participating in qualitative interviews (although we acknowledge that for some providing written accounts may be less distressing). There is a given impression from feasibility meetings with SIN-S that this is a marginalised population that are not often heard. Inclusion in a study such as this, with the intention of informing others, would likely be beneficial and meaningful for those involved. In addition to this, SIN-S have collaborated previously with the University of Edinburgh on other projects where the sample size has exceeded the initial estimations, due to interest in the study and the efforts of the SIN collaborators in facilitating the recruitment process.

#### Withdrawal of participants

Participants will be informed that they are able to withdraw from the study at any time without needing to provide a reason. We will make it clear that deciding to withdraw, or choosing not to participate will have no bearing on their support received from SIN-S. Within the participant information sheet, it states that anonymised data will be combined with other participant data during analysis. It may be difficult to identify and withdraw individual data at this stage, especially following the completion of the study and after the identifiable key for participant codes have been destroyed. Based on this we will emphasise to participants that if they want to withdraw their data, we recommend they inform us at the earliest stage possible.

#### Procedure

Data collection will take the form of semi-structured interviews in a dyad between the researcher and participant, lasting approximately one hour on average. Following consenting procedures, demographic information will be collected at the start of the interview (taking precautions to protect anonymity), followed by a semi-structured interview format. Participants will be thanked and debriefed following the interview. Contact information will be provided to enable future enquiries about the research project, withdrawal of data at a later stage or communicate concerns regarding

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the research study process. There is a possibility that further interviews may take place with the same participants if there are themes within the data that require additional attention. We will make this possibility clear to the participants and gain consent during the initial interview to be contacted in future prior to further involvement.

We will record Interviews using an encrypted and password-protected digital voice recorder. We will transcribe the audio files, ensuring they are anonymised at this stage (changing names, removing identifiable information) They will be pseudo-anonymised at this point, and will become fully anonymised upon completion of the study, once the key-code is destroyed. We will analyse the transcripts using the software programme 'Dedoose'. Dedoose is an encrypted programme and has cross-platform capabilities. The analysis procedure will involve looking for themes in the first case, by reading and re-reading the transcript, paying attention to similarities, differences, amplifications and contradictions in the narrative (Smith & Osbourne, 2017). Following this, we will attempt to make connections between the interpreted themes and identify clusters of themes. Then we will repeat the process for the following transcripts, taking note of convergence and divergence between individuals. We will consult recommendations for utilising multiperspective designs using IPA. A second researcher will interpret sections of data. We will share a summary of the analysis with participants and research staff to check accuracy of interpretation prior to completion of the final report.

#### Analysis Plan

As this study seeks to understand a social phenomenon rooted in interpersonal interaction, we selected a qualitative research design. Qualitative approaches depart from the positivist beliefs that there is a singular reality that can be discovered with the appropriate experimental methods and incorporates investigation of environmental and individual differences with the idea that reality is shaped by participant experience and perceptions (Teherani, Martimianakis, Stenfors-Hayes, Wadhwa, & Varpio, 2015). Phenomenology describes the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it to gain an understanding of the meaning generated by this experience (Teherani et al., 2015). Phenomenological approaches aligned best with the overarching research objectives of this study, therefore a phenomenological approach was chosen to guide the data analysis.

IPA investigates and illuminates lived experience and is primarily concerned with how an individual makes sense of their world (Eatough & Smith, 2008). It has been used previously to explore the experiences of sexual offenders (Blagden, Winder, Thorne, & Gregson, 2011) as well as to explore values and the process of reintegration following a criminal conviction (Aresti, Eatough, & Brooks-Gordon, 2010; Stuart, Tansey, & Quayle, 2017). IPA is idiographic in that it endeavours to analyse each case in detail, prior to searching for patterns across cases, assessing aspects of convergence

and divergence (Smith, 2011). This approach also recognises that the researcher is a 'being in the world', with their own experiences and perceptions shaping the interpretation of the data. This introduces a 'double-hermeneutic' – the 'participants make sense of their world; and the researchers make sense of the participants making sense of their world' (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This is of particular importance in research in this subject area. It is common to have emotive responses to descriptions of criminal acts and to form assumptions about those who commit them. Sexual offences, particularly those which relate to children, are among the most abhorrent and vilified forms of human behaviour. It is logical to expect that conducting research in this area will evoke reactions from those interviewing and interpreting the data and it is important to take these factors into account when considering the interpreted outcomes.

### **Ethical Considerations and Informed Consent**

Ethical approval will be sought from The University of Edinburgh, School of Health and Social Science, ethics committee. In addition to this, ethical approval will also be sought from the Lucy Faithful Foundation Research Ethics Committee. NHS ethical approval is not required as the participants are not being recruited as NHS patients.

A key ethical consideration within this study is that of participant confidentiality. Following procedures used with offenders in an additional collaborative project with SIN-S, the interview will be recorded using an encrypted and password-protected digital voice recorder, before being stored on a password protected laptop and the researchers DataStore account. All identifiable information will be removed at the point of transcription and the only individuals with access to the audio files will be the researcher, the project supervisor and the SIN-S project coordinator. Information will be shared with the project supervisor and SIN-S project management for any clarification required regarding content or meaning. Anonymised transcripts will be uploaded to the online platform dedoose.com for the data analysis. This platform is both encrypted and password protected. All confidentiality procedures will be communicated with the participants through the study information sheets and consent forms. If there is any disclosure of risk or criminal behaviour, confidentiality will need to be breached and this will also be discussed with participants prior to enrolment in the study.

### **Management of Risks to Project**

The main potential risks for this study include:

- *Disclosure of alleged criminal activity.* It is rare for offenders to disclose information regarding new offences and this is likely rarer still for a family member to disclose as they may have less awareness of previous behaviours. However, due to the design of the study and the nature of the questions being asked it is still important to acknowledge the risk of participants making such a disclosure. Drawing from previous similar research conducted

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in collaboration with SIN-S, we are confident that these risks can be managed and contained for this new study. Management of this risk utilises the researchers clinical experience and research skills to identify risk initially, the supervisors experience in running similar previous projects with analogous risk elements, the structured policies of SIN-S for managing disclosures of this kind and a protocol for managing a disclosure of an alleged planned or committed criminal activity has been created and will be used in the event of a disclosure (with permissions of the protocol author (Noukopoulos, 2018)). This information will be reiterated at the start of the interview process.

- *Confidentiality breach.* There is a risk, as with any research study, that there may be a loss of data or a breach of confidentiality. The risks associated with this are higher for this particular study due to the nature of the research topic and the sensitive and criminal components of the data. As detailed in the previous sections, measures are being taken to reduce this risk, including the use of encrypted digital voice recorders, password protected digital storage devices and encrypted software packages for the storage and analysis of data, even following pseudo-anonymisation. Should such an event occur, the researcher will follow appropriate procedures as recommended by the University of Edinburgh and SIN-S to document and manage this breach.
- *Psychological distress and suicide ideation.* Based on the nature of this research topic there is an elevated probability that people are experiencing psychological distress, mental health problems or suicide ideation at the time of the interview. As a precaution, the researcher will work closely with SIN-S staff to identify clients who have been through the 'safety and stabilisation' programme and are feeling at a more stable place emotionally to enable them to take part in the research study. However, the questions being asked are sensitive in nature and may be upsetting for the client. If psychological distress is encountered, this will be addressed and the interviewee will be reminded that they are free to withdraw at any time, take breaks or refrain from answering any questions that they are not comfortable with. If there is concern of an untreated mental health problem or suicide ideation, this will also be discussed with the client with signposting to additional treatment services if required. The research team are well placed to manage these risks, with the supervisors being qualified clinical psychologists, the researcher a clinical psychology trainee and the SIN-S staff receiving extensive training on the topic of managing suicidal thoughts, feelings and identifying risk. There will always be a member of SIN-S staff in the building at the time of the interviews, in case additional support is required. A similar procedure for managing disclosure of suicide risk will also be followed in accordance with the SIN-S policies and BPS Guidelines (2017; Section 7.3).

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- *Lone working.* If the researcher undertakes home visits to conduct the interviews, they will follow a 'lone working' protocol. This will include only visiting individuals who are known to the SIN-S service and who are deemed appropriate for home visits. In addition, the supervisor will be notified of the time and duration of the visit, checking in before and after it has taken place, utilising safe and well procedures. There is minimal perceived risk associated with this activity.
- *Vicarious trauma.* The topics discussed within the interviews are likely to be traumatic and distressing in nature. This may lead to vicarious trauma for the researcher, with mild to moderate risk. To help manage this, the researcher will be well supported, with the opportunity of discussing this in supervision with either the academic or field supervisor, or a member of SIN-S staff who are experienced and well trained in managing this.
- *Unforeseen problems in recruitment or supervision.* There is a risk that data collection will be slow, or we will be unable to recruit the numbers specified in this proposal in the time provided. This risk is low, given that only small numbers are required and an IPA approach can utilise a single case study if required. Furthermore, feasibility discussions with SIN-S have taken place and it seems apparent that there are many eligible choices from the previous or current clients affiliated with the charity, which minimises the chance of this risk. We will monitor the recruitment progress throughout the process and if it seems unfeasible to recruit the 10 – 15 specified, we will employ a contingency plan (e.g. recruiting partners or parents only instead of both groups). If supervision arrangements change (e.g. due to supervisors changing roles), this will be discussed and managed within the wider research team, however there is minimal perceived risk of the study being unsuccessful due to this.

### **Quality Assurance**

There are numerous criteria which have been suggested to assess quality in qualitative studies. Poortman and Schildkamp (2012) argue for the necessity of a parsimonious fundamental framework of quality for qualitative studies. This is in order to assess usefulness of findings for guiding practice and future research. They proposed a set of core criteria which apply both qualitative and quantitative approaches and then differentiated between procedures required to meet these criteria. These include: controllability; objectivity; reliability; validity; construct, internal & external validity. The relevant procedures for qualitative research are provided in **Table 1**, with examples of how I will strive to address these criteria.

Smith (2011) has outlined a series of recommendations for ensuring and assessing the quality of IPA studies, which we will endeavor to adhere to within this study analysis. The criteria for 'good'

IPA studies include: having a clear focus; strong data arising from competent interviewing techniques; a rigorous approach (including consistent representation of the corpus in the analysis and indication of representativeness and variability); sufficient elaboration of each included theme; interpretative rather than descriptive accounts; and convergence and divergence between accounts. Overall, it needs to subscribe to the core principles of IPA, being phenomenological, hermeneutic and idiographic, as well as being written clearly and transparently with a plausible and interesting analysis. Furthermore, a second researcher, experienced in the approach of IPA, will independently interpret sections of transcribed data for comparison and discussion during the analysis process.

**Table 1.** Quality standards for qualitative research and planned actions

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Procedures</b>	<b>Planned actions</b>
<i>Controllability</i>	Report the results of the study publicly and the procedures used to achieve them	Publication in appropriate scientific journal and pre-registration of study protocol
	Write the report in precise language	
	Testable results	Replication of this study methodology can be undertaken to assess whether results are robust
<i>Objectivity</i>	Make use of 'objective' data	
	Interpretation of data in logical and unprejudiced manner	Describe the research steps and interpretation in as clear and comprehensive manner as possible Retain data for reanalysis by others
<i>Reliability</i>	Study design congruent with clear research questions	Study protocol to be assessed by academic supervisor and formal assessment procedures, inform the congruency with proposed design
	Use software for qualitative data analysis	Use of 'Dedoose' will help create a platform for shared analysis and checking
	Use multiple researchers	Sections of the transcriptions will be interpreted by a second researchers and compared and discussed
	Use peer review	The findings will be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal
<i>Construct validity</i>	Explication of theoretical models underlying constructs	This will be addressed in the interpretation and discussion of the study findings

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<i>Internal validity</i>	Supply 'chain of evidence'	Original audio files and transcriptions will be retained
	Review of transcripts and parts of data analysis, discussion if anything unclear	The academic and field supervisors for this project will be involved in checking sections of the transcripts and analysis. If any part of audio recording or meaning unclear, this will be discussed until reaching agreement
	Pilot instruments	The semi-structured interviews and prompts will be piloted prior to data collection
	Establish phenomena in a credible way	Highlighting convergence and divergence in experiences and beliefs, what components are significant and what mechanisms underlie them
	Eliminate alternative causal arguments	By presenting comprehensive and evidenced arguments in the discussion, comparisons with other populations and peer review of method and results
<i>External validity</i>	Analytical generalisation	Compare generated theory with empirical results and previous theories in this literature
		Provide detailed account of context, culture and setting to identify how specific the findings are to this sample of people

#### Involvement of service users

We will aim to involve service users in the study design, the data analysis and the dissemination of the findings. Initially, we attended group support meetings for family members. Here the concept of the study was introduced and information was gathered informing topics for inclusion in the interview schedule. We will share a summary of results during the preliminary stages of analysis with participants and SIN-S staff. If this highlights themes or key concepts not previously considered this will inform subsequent analysis of the data. The findings will be disseminated at relevant conferences. This includes academic conferences, as well as conferences involving policy-makers, the wider SIN organisation and public engagement events. Internet-based sexual offending is not a topic which is widely discussed within society, which further increases the stigma and shame for those who experience these events. Therefore, it is important to disseminate findings of this study to the wider general public to improve awareness of internet-based sex offending, of the organisation SIN and the difficulties faced by members of these populations.

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### **Knowledge Exchange**

The results of this study will be prepared in a manuscript format for submission to a relevant scientific journal (for example: 'Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment' or 'Aggression and Violent Behaviour'. In addition to this, an article will also be prepared for inclusion on the SIN Website, relevant news letters or available educational resources. The results will be presented at the SIN national conference and the results will be submitted for presentation at additional relevant conferences, such as the annual National Organisation for the Treatment of Abusers (NOTA) meeting.

### **Study Personnel**

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### **Conflicts of Interest**

None to report.

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#NotMyFriend, launched 2018: <https://www.sbrcentre.co.uk/news/2018/april/police-scotland-s-notmyfriend-campaign/>

<https://www.sbrcentre.co.uk/news/2018/april/p-scotland-s-notmyfriend-campaign/>

## Appendix 6

### SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW TOPICS

This schedule was devised following input from the service user focus groups, through discussion with SN-S, academic and field supervisors and through review of the wider literature.

Possible topics included:

- *Tell us about the experience of the arrest. What was going through your mind at the time? What happened afterwards? How did you make sense of it?*
- Coping mechanisms (*what helped you during this time?*)
- Shame, stigma, personal identity
- Practical adjustments (i.e. living arrangements, employment and lifestyle)
- Barriers to reintegration (*did you find anything particularly difficult during this time?*)
- Considerations for supporting a loved one during the process
- Messages – what to convey to people in a similar position, or people in wider society? (*what advice would you give to others in this position?*)
- Impact on relationship (*where are you now?*)

Demographic information included:

- Nature of the crime
- The relation to the accused
- Time since charge, where they are in the punitive process
- Current contact with the accused
- Living arrangements (do children reside within the home?)
- Age, sex, current or previous employment

## Appendix 7

<p>I: And these three month meet-ups that you have is that organised by...?</p>	<p><b>COHEN Miriam</b> Means of release, sharing, even on very basic level</p>
<p>That's by ourselves. Yeah, we have a whatsapp group going and if you really have a bad day you can put something up. It's really more to organise the meal now, whereas before there used to be a lot more messages back and forth, um, because there was, we were all very much in the same time where the trials came up and how we got through all that.</p>	<p><b>COHEN Miriam</b> Frequency of contact, even low level Ebb and flow of emotional response Continuation of support across different time-points of the process</p> <p>Organised resource – transition from provision to formation of own support network, independent of organisational input, natural, authentic support. Valued.</p>
<p>I: I was going to say, was it quite a similar timing and process?</p>	<p><b>COHEN Miriam</b> Shared trajectories, going through process – suggestion of it as a 'journey'</p>
<p>Some of it yeah. I think one, one had actually gone through the trial already. And then, the others were 2-3 months in succession. So you were there if someone had to go into court. Just as a head-up, can't be as bad as that, you know that sort of thing. And that was actually very useful because you talk to friends but (...) and they're very supportive but (...) you know they don't know the emotional parts your going through [tearful] yeah, so, that's been really, really good.</p>	<p><b>COHEN Miriam</b> Trial as a key event</p> <p><b>COHEN Miriam</b> Normalising, reassuring</p> <p><b>COHEN Miriam</b> Inability for others to fully comprehend the emotional experience, can sympathise, not empathise. Can only really appreciate it if lived it yourself.</p>
<p>I: Good</p>	<p><i>Language – pauses, tearful, indication of raw pain, others not comprehending, feeling isolated in this experience</i></p>
<p>Um, obviously it was devastating when they turned up. Um (...) because you never, ever expect that of someone you've been living with for 35 years. Um (pause)</p>	<p><b>COHEN Miriam</b> Shock of the arrest – emotive language</p>
<p>I: Tell me a little bit about the arrest</p>	<p><b>COHEN Miriam</b> Completely unexpected – disbelief, longstanding intimate relationship</p>
<p>(exhales). They came in the morning, police knocked on the door. You know. They told me what he was accused of and I didn't believe them. Um, they were there, maybe 2-3 hours. Halfway through they took him away, because it was a Friday he was in a police cell until Monday. (...) The police was OK, the girl wanted to talk, I said I didn't want to talk, they wanted me to give a statement, I didn't want to give a statement. Um, And then they left. And there you are, left on your own. She said 'Oh, is there not a neighbour you can go to?' (laughs, exasperated) anyway, I was trying to get in touch with my sons and my daughter and they were all busy over the weekend. I thought there's no point in spoiling it for them, they might as well just enjoy the nice weekend because after that it will be horrendous. So, um. I phoned my youngest son on the Monday, after we came out of court and he came home straight away. My other son was still down south so we phoned him and he came up the following day and we contacted my son-in-law to say that we had really bad news. Because my um, (tearful, sighs), my daughter was 8 months pregnant. So I was quite worried to tell her. And um, but she took it actually OK I must admit. I think she had an inkling because I had spoken to her on</p>	<p><b>COHEN Miriam</b> Disbelief/denial</p> <p><b>COHEN Miriam</b> Practical aspect – duration of time, days of the week that it occurred</p> <p><b>COHEN Miriam</b> Alone, isolated – abandoned</p> <p><b>COHEN Miriam</b> Inappropriate suggestions, not fully grasped by those working in the system</p> <p><b>COHEN Miriam</b> Left completely alone</p> <p><b>COHEN Miriam</b> Protective, managing needs of the wider family system – their own emotional responses, whilst processing her own</p> <p><b>COHEN Miriam</b> Fear of what's to come</p> <p><b>COHEN Miriam</b> Emotion in account – added complexity of impact, due to young children being involved</p>

**Figure A1:** Example initial coding for interview transcripts

## Appendix 8

Ethical approval confirmation, University of Edinburgh. Initially granted 27/11/2019; amendment approved 01/05/20.

### *Second Approval*

#### Comments

**Dear Miriam Thank you for your revised application. Based on your responses the application meets the standards for University Ethical approval. Good luck with your project. Best wishes, Karri Dr Karri Gillespie-Smith Lecturer in Applied Psychology Ethics & Integrity Lead Thank you for your application. The review process has generated two minor issues that require clarification (see below). I would be grateful if you could discuss these with your supervisor, make the required changes and resubmit your application to ethics for further consideration. With thanks and best wishes, Ingrid Dr Ingrid Obsuth Lecturer in Clinical Psychology Ethics & Integrity Lead This is a well-thought through project with all ethical issues appropriately addressed, with two small points requiring clarification prior to approval: 1. The application states that "There will always be a member of SIN-S staff in the building at the time of the interviews in case additional support is needed". However, it is also stated that home visits may be an option. It would be helpful to clarify how additional support would be provided if the interviews took place in a participant's home. 2. When discussing the protection of data, the procedures are described as anonymising the data. However, they should more accurately be described as pseudonymisation i.e. pseudonymisation involves "the processing of personal data in such a way that the data can no longer be attributed to a specific data subject without the use of additional information." To pseudonymise a data set, the "additional information" must be "kept separately and subject to technical and organisational measures to ensure non-attribution to an identified or identifiable person." Which is what is described here. So the data is pseudonymised until the point that the code-key is destroyed following completion of the study, at which point it becomes anonymised. I recommend that this is revised in the application.**

### Amending an approval

This form should be used to notify the School's Research Ethics Committee of changes to your research project made after ethical approval. You should not make any changes to your research project until your proposed amendment has received approval.

If your project requires University Sponsorship please inform the CAHSS Research Governance Office of your proposed amendments before completing this form.

If you are updating participant information to comply with GDPR requirements you may not need to make an amendment. Please contact your Ethics Lead for advice.

This form should only be used when ethical approval has been given by the School of Health in Social Science.

1. Complete the table below.
2. Submit this form to your Subject Area Ethics Lead.
3. If your project requires University Sponsorship please include a copy of the feedback you received from the CAHSS Research Governance Office.

This is a simple Microsoft Word form and the sections will expand automatically.

**Applicant name**

Miriam Cohen

<b>Project title</b>	Experiences of family members of those charged with an internet-based sexual offence: an interpretative phenomenological analysis in collaboration with Stop it Now! Scotland
<b>Subject Area</b>	Internet-based sexual offending
<b>Student supervisor</b>	Ethel Quayle, DClinPsy
<b>Course/programme</b>	
<b>Date project received ethical approval</b>	27 <sup>th</sup> November 2019
<b>Does your project require University Sponsorship?</b>	No
<b>Have you notified the CAHSS Research Governance Office of your requested amendments and included a copy of their feedback?</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Notified the CAHSS Research Governance Office <input type="checkbox"/> Included a copy of CAHSS Research Governance feedback

#### **Amendment/s and request for approval**

*Subsequent to receipt of ethical approval I the applicant would like to request the following amendment/s to my original proposal.*

In the context of COVID-19 restrictions I would like to amend my methodology and conduct interviews via Skype. Here are the proposed changes:

- Advising participants that they have the option to continue interviews, via Skype, if they are comfortable using online platforms and familiar with the programme
- Advising participants that the interviews will be recorded, both using the Skype record function and recording the audio in addition to this with an encrypted voice recorder
- Advising the participants that they can request we cease recording at anytime, and they can withdraw their data if they wish to do so (deletion of audio and video files). Skype will also provide them with a copy of the interview which they can use to review and inform their decision to withdraw at a later time-point. I will recommend they delete these files and associated email correspondence following completion of the interview.
- I will create a separate Skype account for the purpose of the study, and following completion of the study, I will delete this - erasing all communication history and their contact details.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advising the participants that they will require stable internet connection, access to technology with a microphone and camera, and a quiet space where they will not be overheard, interrupted or distracted.</li> <li>• The videos and audiofiles will be stored using a secure sharepoint data storage location, which can only be accessed by study researchers (myself and Ethel)</li> <li>• Demographics, consent and debrief will be collected via email and the phone, to ensure identifiable data is stored separately to the interview files. Email chains for obtaining scanned consent forms will be deleted and the digital documents stored in a separate, password protected folder on Sharepoint.</li> <li>• I will liaise with Carol Robinson (Stop it Now representative) so that she is aware when the interviews are happening and can be reached during or following the interviews by phone if there are any concerns regarding well-being or disclosures.</li> <li>• Participants will be reminded about the disclosure policy, and I will also advise that they refrain from using the name of the accused in the interviews</li> <li>• If participants are not comfortable participating over Skype, we will monitor the COVID-19 recommendations and discuss the possibility of face-to-face interviews at a later time point, should this become available within the given time-scales for the project</li> </ul>
Signature:
Date: 21-04-20

#### Conclusion to ethical review of amendment

<p><i>I can confirm that the above amendment has been reviewed by two independent reviewers. It is their opinion that:</i></p> <p><i>a) Ethical issues have been satisfactorily addressed and no further response from the applicant is necessary</i>  <i>Or</i>  <i>b) The ethical issues listed below arise and the following steps are being taken to address them</i></p>
Signature:
Date: 01/05/20
Position: Lecturer in Applied Psychology, Ethics and Integrity Lead

**Lucy Faithful Foundation Ethical Approval. In accordance with recommendations, only one family group session was attended**

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation



**The Lucy Faithfull Foundation Ethics Committee  
Response to Application for Ethical Approval**

<b>Name of Researcher:</b>
Miriam Cohen

<b>Date the Ethics Committee met:</b>
26 <sup>th</sup> July 2019

<b>Committee Decision:</b>	
Approved	
Accepted subject to amendments	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Rejected	

<b>Additional Comments:</b>
Most comments attached are advisory only. However could you respond to the second point made under project plan ('Ethical concerns are raised in relation to attending multiple meetings. In my view attendance to one session to introduce the research would be sufficient. Having a researcher attend more than one session would affect the dynamic of the group and potentially stifle disclosure and engagement. Furthermore, I would also be concerned attendance may lead service users to feel obliged to attend.').

If you would like to discuss the outcome of your proposal or any of the comments further, please get in touch with Dr Alexandra Bailey via [research@lucyfaithfull.org.uk](mailto:research@lucyfaithfull.org.uk)

## Appendix 9

### Protocol for reporting alleged criminal activity

*Created by Nikolaos Koukopoulos, modified for use in this study by Miriam Cohen*

During the interviews with the study participants, the interviewer will be asking them about their family members online activity related to their sexual interest in children. This increases the risk of the participant referring to a criminal activity unknown to the police. Therefore, a certain procedure will be followed by the interviewer in this case:

#### **A) Before the interview:**

Participants will be clearly and thoroughly informed about the fact that should they make any disclosures about a criminal activity – online or offline –, Stop It Now staff will be informed and the case will be officially reported to the police, if unknown to them.

#### **B) After the interview:**

If there has been a disclosure of possible criminal activities during the interview, a verbal and written alert to the charity's CEO will be made immediately after the interview, so that they can implement the mandatory reporting procedure.

In all instances where the student is unsure how to proceed during or after an interview, the safest option will be followed, which is to communicate his concerns to Stop It Now staff, who will then decide on any further actions to be followed.

#### **Stop It Now Scotland's procedure for reporting alleged criminal activity**

The Lucy Faithful Foundation, which is Stop It Now's parent organisation, has a policy in place in relation to the handling of allegations or child protection concerns. This policy also applies to Stop It Now (see paragraphs 4.1, 4.2.1, 4.2.2, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6 of the document "Procedures and Protocols for Promoting and Safeguarding the Welfare of Children and Vulnerable People"). In the report, it is stated that:

- Staff should inform the clients for the limits of confidentiality
- Staff has the obligation to record all the information that might raise child protection concerns
- Staff are expected to share information with the relevant child protection authorities.
- Any child protection concerns should be reported to the referrer or to the social services team involved as soon as possible (and certainly within 24 hours). Details should be recorded to the file and the line manager should be informed. Concerns should initially be made by telephone to the referrer and confirmed in writing within two working days.

In addition, researchers have contacted Stop It Now Scotland enquiring their reporting procedures during their work with their clients and the charity provided the following information:

The first time an individual makes a contact with Stop It Now Scotland through the helpline, they are being given the following information:

'The Helpline is confidential and you don't have to give me your full name or any other details that will identify you, but if you do and then you give me information that identifies a child who has been, or is at risk of being abused, or any information which may suggest that any other person is at risk of harm, then we will pass that information on to the appropriate agencies. We will also pass on details of any criminal offence committed.'

In case anyone provides any of this information, staff informs them that they have a duty to report this. Following this, Stop It Now would report it to the police or relevant offender manager involved in the case. Through the course of Stop It Now's work with clients, details of their offending behaviour might be discussed. These remain confidential, as largely clients have already been charged and are pleading guilty and they often consent for Stop It Now to share this information (e.g. in a court report which Stop It Now will share once they have pled guilty at court).