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An Exploration Of The Challenges Families Experience When A Family Member Is Convicted Of A Sex Offence

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Introduction

Recent figures from the Ministry of Justice (March, 2017) show that there are 85,513 offenders in the prison population, 13,246 of whom have been sentenced for sexual offences.¹ This is the highest number in custody since 2002 and it now represents 15 per cent of the prison population. This trend of increasing numbers of sex-offenders in the prison population can be put alongside a spike in historical sex abuse cases, and more punitive sanctions implemented by the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 which has resulted in longer average sentences for sex-offenders and more people placed on the (ViSOR) Sex-Offenders' Register.² ViSORs are confidential and can only be accessed by personnel from the police, and the probation and prison services. Nonetheless, a long campaign by the media (especially the now defunct *News of the World*) to publish the identities of child sex-offenders, where they publicly 'named and shamed' them has created a type of 'moral panic' (as described by Cohen 1972). This coupled with a difficulty, in some cases, of retaining anonymity, often due to information gained

from court reports, local newspapers, and social media which has resulted in more families being drawn into a socially constructed ethical and psychological universe, where public distaste is prominent for these types of crimes.³

At the same time, research has shown that family members, community members, and also some organisations can be crucial in supporting prisoners through a prison sentence and after their release.⁴ One implicit consequence of sexual offences is that the people who can often help the offender most (such as an offender's family), are those who have often been hurt the most, and losing these relationships further increase the chances of recidivism.⁵ Although it cannot be assumed that all family members maintain contact with their incarcerated relative a substantial amount do, as the fieldwork in this study indicates. This is a significant observation, as the link between family and offender has a distinct consequence for society and potential future victims.⁶ Although interest in the connection between family support and their role in reducing recidivism has been increasingly recognised,⁷ relatively little is currently understood about the challenges faced by family members who maintain social links with convicted sex-offenders.⁸

1. In order to be concise, individuals who have been convicted of a sex offence have been referred to as 'sex offenders' throughout this paper. This is not intended to describe the person, just the offence.
2. Ministry of Justice (2017). Offender Management Statistics Bulletin, England and Wales: Quarterly January to March 2017 with Prison Population as at 31 March 2017. Available online at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/541499/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-bulletin-jan2-mar-2016.pdf [accessed 5 May 2017].
3. Farmer, M., McAlinden, A.M. and Maruna, S., 2015. Understanding desistance from sexual offending: A thematic review of research findings. *Probation Journal*, 62(4), pp.320–335.
4. Tewksbury, R. and Connor, D.P., 2012. Inmates who receive visits in prison: Exploring factors that predict. *Fed. Probation*, 76, p.43. Daley, M.V., 2008. A Flawed Solution to the Sex Offenders Situation in the United States: The Legality of Chemical Castration for Sex Offenders. *Ind. Health L. Rev.*, 5, p.87.
5. Tewksbury, R., and Lees, M.B. (2006) Perceptions of sex offender registration: collateral consequences and community experiences. *Sociological Spectrum*, 26(3), 309–334.
6. Craun, S.W., and Theriot, M.T. (2009). Misperceptions of sex offender perpetration: Considering the impact of sex offender registration. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 24(12), 2057–2072.
7. Tewksbury, R. and Connor, D.P., 2012. Incarcerated Sex Offenders' Perceptions of Family Relationships: Previous Experiences and Future Expectations. *W. Criminology Rev.*, 13, p.25.
8. Action for Prisoners Families (2013). Action for Prisoners' Families: Supporting the Families of Sex Offenders – findings from a symposium [online]. Available at http://app.pelorous.com/public/cms/115/237/245/10095/Supporting_the_families_of_sex_offenders_symposium.pdf. [accessed 24 April 2016]. Codd, H. (2011). *In the Shadow of Prison. Families, imprisonment and criminal justice*. (2nd edn). Oxford: Routledge.

Research methods

There is a dearth of formal organised support in the UK aimed specifically at the relatives of sex-offenders.⁹ This study aims to fill a gap in research, firstly by focusing on the challenges experienced by family members related to individuals who have committed sex crimes, and secondly by looking at the coping strategies and support mechanisms family members employ, from the initial discovery and conviction, through imprisonment to the eventual release of their family member back into society. It is hoped that the findings will be of benefit to third-sector organisations working with families and a valuable source of reference for those seeking to 'tailor' their support and to those looking for help.

Research Questions

This research has three primary aims; firstly to explore and identify the challenges that families of sex-offenders describe; secondly, to determine what their coping mechanisms and strategies are, and thirdly to identify and review existing formal support systems (locally and nationally) available to prisoners' families. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected from a sample group of 60¹⁰ family members of convicted sex-offenders. The following research questions guided the research:

- What challenges do family members of convicted sex-offenders describe?
- Have they received any support? (formal and/or informal)
- How useful was that support?
- How easy was it to access support?
- What other support do they feel would help the most?

Type of sample and why it was chosen

The research was undertaken with family members in the visitors' centre at a category C prison, with a population of 1,200 adult males, 90 per cent of whom have been convicted of a sexual offence. The site was selected as it houses a large number of

prisoners convicted of sex offences, providing an exceptional opportunity to reach the target sample population of family members through the visitors' centre. Access was sought through National Offender Management Service NOMS, the Governor of the prison, and an operational manager within the Ormiston Trust (with whom I had previously worked as a volunteer) and NOMS approved the study.

The intended and achieved sample size and method of selection

Sixty family members of incarcerated sex-offenders took part in the research. The sample population was recruited following advertising through posters and leaflets that were placed around the visitors centre, and by staff members making potential participants aware of the impending research within the centre.

Consequently, this relied heavily on the willingness and availability of individuals to take part, so the strategy was one of convenience (non probability) sampling of individuals who met the eligibility criteria.¹¹ The need to minimise disruption and interference upon families' visiting times was a constant preoccupation. Given these relatively few hindrances, the sample was broadly representative of the population of visitors. The sample included both female and male visitors having family connections with

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the offender, the age ranged from 20 to 80 (the mean age was 50) and the ethnicity of the sample was largely white/british. The three tables below show the full breakdown of the demographics of the research sample. Consistent with previous research on prison visitation, most of the supportive relatives were female in this study.¹² Furthermore, the sentence lengths of the convicted family members of the participants in the study ranged from two years to 18 years with four of the offenders on indeterminate sentences (IPPs). An indeterminate sentence is one where the prisoner has no set release date. This may mean that the challenges for the relatives involved are even more extensive than for others in terms of maintaining contact and planning for the future, as there is no definitive release time for families to focus on.

9. Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods*. (4th edn.) New York: Oxford University Press.

10. Of this sample group, 35 responded to a questionnaire, while 25 participated in a one-to-one interview and also completed the questionnaire.

11. See 10 Bryman (2012).

12. See 9 Codd, (2011:64).

The following tables 1, 2 and 3 portray the demographics of the research sample.

Table 1: Relationships with the offender

Family Member	Number in study	% of total sample
Wives	12	20
Mothers	10	16.6
Sons	7	11.3
Fathers	5	8.3
Daughters	5	8.3
Partners	4	6.6
Sisters	3	5
Cousin	2	3.3
Godson	1	1.6
Girlfriend	1	1.6
Uncle	1	1.6
Unknown	4	1.6

Table 2: The age of family members

Age	Number in study	% of total sample
20/30	7	11.6
30/40	6	10
40/50	7	11.6
50/60	13	21.6
60/70	18	30
70/80	5	8.3
Unknown	4	6.6

Table 3: The ethnicity of family members

Ethnicity	Number in study	% of total sample
White/British	40	66.6
Black/British	5	8.3
English	2	3.3
Caribbean/Black	3	3
African/Black	1	1
Filipino	1	1
Unknown	8	13.3

Data Collection

The research used a mixed methods strategy. The processes of data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously and interactively, congruent with a grounded theory approach.¹³ The data collection phase was undertaken over eight afternoons (40 hours) and consisted of collecting quantitative data from 35 questionnaires with qualitative data gathered from 25 semi-structured interviews. Consistent with grounded theory research approaches, the formulation of both the questionnaire and interview schedule were influenced by the literature review.¹⁴ Before beginning the fieldwork, pilot interviews took place with other researchers to check that the questions would work well.¹⁵

Initially, I embarked on recruitment by approaching family members in the visits waiting area, the purpose of the research was explained and interested participants were handed an information sheet (see appendix C), consent form (See appendix D) and questionnaire. Every effort was made to speak to a diverse range of family members, in terms of gender, age and ethnicity. Most family members who were approached were willing to take part and the number who declined was only *four*. It was not uncommon to hear statements such as ‘thank god there is somebody I can speak to’ or ‘yes, I am more than happy to take part, somebody needs to do something to help us’. For those who wanted to speak further there was the option of an interview, which was designed to fit around their waiting time. Some family members were a little concerned that their identity might be compromised; once reassured, however the conversation flowed and the majority expressed their gratitude for having the opportunity to speak to somebody independent.

Twenty-three of the interviews were conducted face to face in a private room within the visit centre, this was not possible for two of the participants—so a telephone interview was arranged for one relative and the other family member posted their questionnaire response back to the visits centre. All apart from the postal response were digitally recorded (with consent). The participants were encouraged to speak freely and use their own terminology, whilst discussing their thoughts and feelings in detail. Due to the dearth of literature on exploring the emotions of this group there was no prior insight into navigating this research, although I did have some understanding and experience of discussing problems faced with this sector as I had previously worked as volunteer in a visits centre, and this proved an advantage

13. Glock, C., Y. (1988). Reflections on doing survey research, in H. J. O’Gorman (ed.), *Surveying Social Life*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
14. Bachman, R. and Schutt, R, K. (2014). *The Practice of Research in Criminology and Criminal Justice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
15. See 14 Glock (1988).

Research findings

when facilitating the interviews. The interview process did present different emotions (for some this was the first time they had been able to talk freely). I was able to support individuals by listening and being empathic as they expounded their stories. For the most part participants were extremely keen to contribute to this study and convey their thoughts in a confidential and non-judgmental environment and were grateful to have this opportunity. The duration of the interviews ranged from six to thirty-nine minutes. At the end of the interviews participants were offered an information sheet on how to access self-help for any distress the interviews may have caused, however none of them felt this was necessary.

Strengths, Limitations and Potential Problems

A limitation in this study is that due to the relatively small numbers involved, and a lack of homogeneity within the sample group, a certain degree of ambiguity resulted in the quantitative analysis. Therefore a larger sample group would have been preferable (although this could only have been achieved if the study period had been longer). A further limitation was the design of the questionnaire; it was not until fieldwork was underway that there was a realisation that a yes or no response would work better for some answers than a Likert scale (this is a scale that can represent people's attitudes to a topic). Whereas qualitative research is far more time consuming and subject to researcher interpretation,¹⁶ in this case it gave a more defined, in-depth representation of how each of these family members demonstrated their resilience, agency, and the complexity of emotions each endured whilst fulfilling often multiple and competing moral obligations. The mixed-method research approach gave the families the opportunity to 'voice' their experiences and to convey their hopes, fears and expectations for the future, and an opportunity to discuss which (if any) systems of support best suit their needs, or what might prevent them from seeking it. Furthermore, this study concentrated solely on those who wish to remain in contact with their relatives therefore it is not possible to generalise the findings to a broader population.

The findings from this study show that the degree of the impact on family members was contingent upon the nature of the pre-conviction familial relationship (i.e. whether the family member questioned was wife, brother, mother, etc. of the convicted sex-offender), financial dependence, and personal economic status (i.e. whether the family member was in employment, retired, independently wealthy, etc).

Twenty-eight per cent (7/25) of family members interviewed found that the distance to the prison represented a major difficulty due to the long distances travelled, coupled with short visiting times. Nonetheless, this study found the longer the period of imprisonment the greater the strain and stress in relation to visiting. For example one participant summed up the general consensus by stating 'the people doing the biggest sentence are the families'.

The findings also show that some participants saw maintaining contact as positive experiences, both for themselves and the offender, and an effective method of mutual support.

Participants were asked if their financial situation had been negatively impacted since their relative's imprisonment, 50 per cent (12/25) stated that maintaining contact had had a negative impact on them financially and in some cases it was a barrier to them visiting more frequently.

Although financial hardship is often reported to be a very real collateral consequence of incarceration¹⁷ the same may not apply to the families of sex-offenders. This difference in reported economic impacts on the families of sex-offenders by comparison to families of other offenders may be because the families of sex-offenders are arguably drawn from a broader social demographic group and tend to be older, with the consequence that there may be higher percentages of those who are more financially stable.

Participants in this study were asked if there have been any differences in their housing and employment situation since their relative's incarceration (see table 4).

Twenty-eight per cent of family members interviewed found that the distance to the prison represented a major difficulty ...

16. Creswell, J.W. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd edn). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
17. Arditti, J. (2012). *Parental Incarceration and the Family*. New York University Press: New York.
Lösel, F., Pugh, G., Markson, L., Souza, K., & Lanskey, C. (2012). Risk and protective factors in the resettlement of imprisoned fathers with their families. Ipswich: Ormiston Children and Families Trust. See 9 Codd (2011).

Table 4: Housing and Employment

Since my family member went to prison ...	Disagree and Strongly Disagree	Agree and Strongly Agree
Work colleagues have behaved differently towards me	67.7% (21/31)	32.2% (10/31)
My work situation has changed negatively	82.9% (34/41)	17.0% (7/41)
Neighbours have behaved differently towards me	77.7% (28/36)	22.2% (8/36)
I have had to change my housing situation	81.1% (43/53)	18.8% (10/53)

Most of the sample either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the questions. This suggests that each different family relationship is effected with varying degrees of gravity. For those family members who live in another area of the country, or not in the same abode, the impact is perhaps far less likely to significantly disrupt their lives.

This study shows that the identity as a spouse or partner to a sex-offender can also negatively affect their career, especially those who work with children. For partners who had careers in education, the link to a sex-offender ultimately resulted in the loss of their employment. For this reason those who had supportive colleagues, or remained silent about their predicament, seemed better able to cope. It is clear that when the identity of a sex-offender enters the public sphere, often after media attention, or informal networking within communities, their families' identities are often also revealed. This can mean that the processes of segregation, classification and exclusion that society imparts upon those surrounding sex-crimes can begin.

Family members were asked if their health had been affected negatively since their family member went to prison (see table 5).

Table 5: Psychology and Physical Health

Since my family member went to prison ...	Disagree and Strongly Disagree	Undecided	Agree and Strongly Agree
My health has been affected negatively (psychological or physical health)	28.3% (17/60)	13.3% (8/60)	58.3% (35/60)

Seventy-two per cent (18/25) of participants described how they have struggled with stress, anxiety, depression, worry and sleepless nights as a result of the impacts of the sentence and coming to the prison.

The impact of conviction is a particularly traumatic period for the families of sex-offenders. 84 per cent (21/25) of the participants stated that they had experienced shock at the point their relative had received a custodial sentence. A 'realisation' that their relative has been found guilty begins, and the manner in which family members accept this is often a pivotal point in processing the events.

The interviews suggested that conviction is a difficult period and practical problems are evident. The lack of information and support available to family members at this time is a key issue for many families and increases the intensity of their trauma substantially. This study has identified that nothing has really changed in the ensuing years.

Participants were also asked if they felt they had been treated differently in their communities since conviction (see table 6).

Table 6: Impacts felt in local communities

Since my family member went to prison ...	Disagree and Strongly Disagree	Undecided	Agree and Strongly Agree
I feel stigmatised and labelled because of the crimes	45% (27/60)	16.6% (10/60)	38.3% (23/60)
I tell people why my family member is in prison	65.4% (36/55)	N/A	34.5% (19/55)

Family members describe how they have experienced stigma in their local communities. It is not uncommon for the media to report on convictions associated with sex offences. However, not all participants in this study felt stigmatised by their connection to a convicted sex-offender. This seemed to depend whether or not they live in the same community.

After establishing the challenges families were facing, they were then asked a series of questions associated with accessing (formal and informal) support mechanisms and if they felt this was needed for them (see table 7).

Table 7: Accessing Support (Formal/Informal)

Since my family member went to prison ...	Disagree and Strongly Disagree	Agree and Strongly Agree
Some family members have been supportive	12.5% (7/56)	87.5% (49/56)
Some friends have been supportive	11.5% (6/52)	88.4% (49/56)
Support from family or friends has helped me	7.2% (4/55)	92.7% (51/55)
My relationships with close or extended family have been affected negatively	64.1% (34/53)	35.8% (19/53)
Support from agencies is easy to access	65.9% (31/43)	27.9% (12/43)
Support from agencies has helped me	75.7% (25/33)	24.2% (8/33)

The quantitative data strongly suggest that the majority of participants 87 per cent (49/56) seek support more informally through family and friends; however, this was not felt to be the same for formal support, where participants were less sure how easy agencies were to access and what help they could offer to them. Interestingly, the findings show that, although 36 per cent (19/53) of close family relationships are affected negatively, two-thirds 64 per cent (34/53) of relatives disagree or strongly disagree that their relationship had been affected negatively.

Most support for offenders' families is provided by the voluntary/non profit sector and is typically delivered by trained individuals attached to charitable organisations whose intent is to provide help or be of service to the family, this includes helplines, prison based initiatives, and self-help groups.¹⁸ Nonetheless, as the findings below depict there appears to be a lack of help available both locally and nationally for family members who have a relative in prison convicted for a sexual offence.

Forty-three participants responded to the question 'Has formal support been easy to access?' The data from the quantitative analysis show that almost 72 per cent (31/43) of the sample disagreed or strongly disagreed that support was accessible to them.

Almost half the sample 45 per cent (27/60) were unaware that any support was available. Many families do not join a support group as they do not know what is available to them both locally and nationally. Another common theme was that they were reluctant to source formal help.

Moreover, 72 per cent (31/43) of participants were frustrated with the difficulties of accessing formal support; with 76 per cent (25/33) stating that they disagreed or strongly disagreed that it had helped them.

Seventy-two per cent (18/25) of the participants commented on their frustrations with prison security. Visits are supposed to start at 2.00 pm and it is not uncommon for the first group to be called up at 2.15 pm or later, this gives less time for families to interact and visit their relative and after travelling often long distances, some family members felt understandably annoyed. Participants recognised that sometimes this cannot be helped, but felt it would be more deferential if the allocated times were adhered to.

A support group with other family members was a notable recommendation: 32 per cent (8/25) of the relatives in this study mentioned this as something they would benefit from.

Participants interviewed report that the point of conviction is a particularly difficult, stressful and traumatic time for family members. A 'realisation' that their relative has been found guilty appears to begin, and the manner in which family members accept this (or not) is often a pivotal point in processing the events that have befallen them. The majority 92 per cent (23/25) of participants expressed that lack of information, support and knowing where to turn were all challenges they had to face.

Participants felt that support is needed for families in the courtroom, especially when the crime is a first offence and there have been no previous

18. See 9, Codd (2011).

dealings with the criminal justice system. Sexual crimes are often complex, intra-familial, and may have been concealed for many years; as a result the outcomes for families can be even more traumatic.¹⁹

Thirty-six per cent (9/25) participants stated that support for the family members effected is also central to helping families process the circumstances that they are now forced to endure.

For example, one participant commented:

Often in historical sex cases it is family members that are effected, but there's nothing available to help families build bridges, and you do need the support of your family, and this is where we've had so many problems. And there's nobody that we can go to, you know, to help us. So some sort of formal support would be really good for that, often the people like me—the wife—isn't aware of what's gone on; it's a total shock, and you're in the middle, trying to support your husband until he's convicted, you've got family members that are vulnerable.

When asked what type of support would be useful at this time, this participant replied:

There isn't any support for, because it's relatively new [becoming more a phenomenon in society], and there isn't any support groups out there because I've already looked into it, and I've asked my doctor to look and he couldn't find any. It's just there's nothing there. I feel strongly that support groups and counselling services are made available; it is impossible for family members to deal with the complexity of these issues on their own, we need help!

The majority of the participants 92 per cent (23/25) reported that the point of release was an exceptionally anxious time. Issues around strict licence conditions, concerns about accommodation (most sex-offenders

go to controlled housing before returning home), employment prospects and stigma are found to be particularly distressing worries for relatives.

The need for targeted, specific support around release was a sentiment overwhelmingly expressed by most 92 per cent (23/25) of the relatives. The 'realisation' that the sentence has 'not ended', but rather, another one is beginning, can be extremely demanding emotionally.

Implications for policy, practice and research

There is a need for effective formal support as the family progresses through each phase of the offender's 'journey'. Therefore one recommendation would be the placement of a family support worker, or counsellor, with a family, firstly at the arrest, then at the courtroom stage, at the prison visits centre, and on to release.

At the courtroom stage, basic information about what might happen, and where the offender might go, was a concern for many of the participants; access to more information at this stage would be beneficial to families of offenders and courtroom workers alike.

Additionally, specialist training for possible support networks such as teachers, GPs, employers, and charities would

be beneficial for many family members, especially given the increase in historical sex-abuse cases, the sheer complexity of many sexual crimes, and the traumatic impacts of intra-familial abuse over many years.

'Aftermath' was the last assigned national self-help group for families of serious offenders, and this closed in 2005 due to lack of funding. At the time of its demise 1,285 families were members. Given that the rise in convictions for sex-offences is now running at unprecedented levels, an organisation managing and operating bespoke assistance for the families of sex offenders, along similar lines to Aftermath would be both forward-thinking, and of even greater benefit to people who are arguably suffering from considerable social injustice.

19. See 5, Condry (2007).

This study has described the challenges facing families of convicted sex-offenders; however, future research examining how families of sex offenders access support would be valuable.

Firstly, identifying what it is that support services should deliver, and how they would work, is essential. One recommendation for future research would be to pilot a focus group with family members, with the intention of developing an effective support network. The family members would shape a model of best practice, and create the format and content for this possible venture, with a researcher as a facilitator. This would provide valuable further knowledge, and therefore greater understanding for practitioners relating to the type and nature of the support that best suits these families.

Secondly, given that the research findings suggest that the point of release and resettlement is a period of

great anxiety, future research might usefully examine licencing conditions and how they affect family life. Increasing numbers of offenders are being placed on the sex-offenders' register (ViSOR), and the negative outcomes for their family members require additional assessment, as they have no culpability and are 'innocent victims'.²⁰

Thirdly, further research into the impact on the relatives of sex-offenders might be useful, with a larger sample population, across more sites, and inclusive of *all* family members, to determine whether any common patterns develop within the different familial relationships. For example, do mothers share common experiences? Are siblings less effected? Are extended family members prone to similar levels of stigma? This would give an even more reliable insight into their challenges.



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20. Tewksbury, R., and Levenson, J. (2009). Stress experiences of family members of registered sex offenders. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 27(4), 611–626.