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Relapses and challenges of desistance: Hearing the voices of men convicted of sexual offences on release from prison

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In this article I present the key findings from a qualitative study exploring the experiences of men who sexually reoffended.¹ These findings will also be linked with the latest evidence and research on desistance, and the wider support structures which may be helpful for men in their desistance from sexual offending. The article will conclude with some suggestions for how we can learn from this evidence and improve services for this group of people.

Introduction

Desistance is a change process², and describes the process of slowing down or ceasing to offend, and can be marked by lapses, relapses and recovery.³ There has been an increased focus on desistance from crime in the last decade. For some crimes (particularly street crime), offending rates peak in early adulthood, after which they fall off steadily and then drop sharply at around 30.⁴ It is likely that this maturation out of crime, is encouraged by social capital or the presence of particular societal roles (e.g. becoming a father/mother, getting married, or gaining employment). However, research has also indicated that desistance from crime can be facilitated by cognitive transformations; that is by the formation of a new 'non-criminal' identity and the shedding of the old 'offender' identity⁵, through the power of personal agency or the re-evaluation of a

negative experience into a growth-promoting one.⁶ Other factors also need to be in place for individuals to successfully desist, including having a belief in the possibility of change, actively contributing to their communities, having stable employment, maintaining abstinence from substance use, having positive and pro-social relationships, having positive future goals, and having the necessary skills and strategies in place to desist from offending, and to cope with their risk factors.⁷ It is a complex process, and even if people are motivated to change, the social, psychological and economic circumstances they face on release from prison, may make desistance difficult.

There are currently around 13,000 MCSOs serving custodial sentences in England and Wales⁸, the majority of whom will be released back into the community. In general, people who have committed crime and served time in prison face significant obstacles in reintegrating into society following release from prison. However those who have been convicted of sexual offences may have even greater difficulty due to the nature of their offence. Whilst the reoffending rates of MCSOs are consistently low (typically around 8-12 per cent)⁹, and most MCSOs, do not go on to commit another, the fact that this group are often viewed negatively by society, and that the harms caused by the offences are significant, together confirm the need to examine desistance from sexual offending.

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2. Maruna, S. (2001). *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*. American Psychological Association Books.
3. Farmer, M., Beech, A. R., & Ward, T. (2012). Assessing desistance in child molesters: a qualitative analysis. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 27, 1-21.
4. van Mastrigt, S. B. and Farrington, D. P. (2009) 'Co-offending, age, gender and crime type: implications for criminal justice policy', *British Journal of Criminology*, 49, 552-573.
5. Giordano, P. C., Cernkovich, S. A., & Rudolph, J. L. (2002). Gender, crime, and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation. *American Journal of Sociology*, 107, 990-1064.
6. Serin, R. C., & Lloyd, C. D. (2009). Examining the process of offender change: the transition to crime desistance. *Psychology, Crime and Law*, 15, 347-364.
7. Mann, R. E., & Thornton, D. (1998). The Evolution of a multisite sexual offender program. In W. L. Marshall, Y. M. Fernandez, S. M. Hudson, & T. Ward (Eds.), *Sourcebook of treatment programs for men convicted of a sexual offence* (pp. 47-57). New York: Plenum.
8. Office for National Statistics. (2020). *Offender management statistics quarterly: October to December 2019 and annual 2019*. ONS.
9. Barnett, G. D., Wakeling, H. C., & Howard, P. D. (2010). An examination of the predictive validity of the Risk Matrix 2000 in England and Wales. *Sexual Abuse*, 22, 443-470.

Much of the research around desistance has not focused on MCSOs, although more recently attention has been given specifically to this group.¹⁰ Recent studies which have explored desistance amongst MCSOs indicate that those who desist tend to be optimistic about their future, have an enhanced sense of personal agency, an internalized locus of control, and have found connection with the community.¹¹ Further research suggests there may be three groups of individuals in the early desistance phase: survivors, strivers and thrivers.¹² The survivors characterised by identifying as a 'sexual offender', having low hope and optimism, being socially isolated, and feeling highly stigmatised. The thrivers, on the other hand, characterised by the presence of cognitive transformation, having high levels of hope and optimism, a high internal locus of control, feeling socially connected, and having better problem-solving skills. Other research has found that the barriers to achieving goals of meaningful work, building positive relationships and being able to generate a non-offending identity seem greater for MCSOs compared to those convicted of other types of offences.¹³

Present research findings

The majority of desistance studies examine the process of successful desistance, and narrative change.¹⁴ There is little qualitative research conducted specifically and solely on those who have not successfully desisted, and the reasons for this failure. The present research aimed to address this gap. The research explored both men's experience of the intervention they attended in prison, and how men experienced their release from prison and their perceptions of their reoffending. In-depth interviews were conducted with six individuals who had been convicted of a sexual offence, had completed an intervention (the Core Sex Offender Treatment Programme, SOTP)¹⁵ on their prison sentence (between 2001 and 2010), and had then gone on to reoffend with a further sexual offence. The age of the participants ranged from 33 to 66, and original convictions ranged from rape, to downloading indecent images. The interviews were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)¹⁶, the goal of which is to explore in detail the subjective conscious experiences of the individual. The analysis produced nine higher order inter-related themes (see Table 1).

Table 1: Higher Order Themes, Descriptions and Example Sub-Themes

Higher Order Theme	Description	Example sub-themes
Treatment as a difficult but useful process	Participation in SOTP was useful in terms of skill acquisition and understanding offending, but was also a difficult process to go through.	Group setting Dealing with what I've done Skills acquisition Difficult experience Reliving experiences
Treatment: going through the motions	Participants felt they had little option but to participate in an intervention as it was a requirement of their sentence. However many felt they lacked motivation and engagement.	Importance of motivation Requirement of sentence Lack of engagement
Treatment scratched the surface	Treatment is only the start of a lifelong process to change. More aftercare needed, and focus should be on appropriate resettlement issues.	Need personal commitment Treatment is only the start Focus more on employment Focus more on release plans

10. Laws, R., & Ward, T. (2011). *Desistance from sex offending: alternatives to throwing away the keys*. New York: The Guildford Press.

11. Farmer, M., Beech, A. R., & Ward, T. (2012). Assessing desistance in child molesters: a qualitative analysis. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 27, 1-21.

12. Milner, R. (2017). *Desistance in men who have previously committed sexual offences: An exploration of the early processes*. University of York.

13. McAlinden, A., Farmer, M., & Maruna, S. (2017). Desistance from sexual offending: Do the mainstream theories apply? *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 17, 266-283.

14. King, S. (2013). Early desistance narratives: A qualitative analysis of probationers' transitions towards desistance. *Punishment & Society*, 15, 147-165.

15. Mann, R. E., & Thornton, D. (1998). The Evolution of a multisite sexual offender program. In W. L. Marshall, Y. M. Fernandez, S. M. Hudson, & T. Ward (Eds.), *Sourcebook of treatment programs for men convicted of a sexual offence* (pp. 47-57). New York: Plenum.

16. Smith, J. A. (2008). *Qualitative Psychology: A practical Guide to Research Methods. Second Edition*. SAGE Publications.

Living as a 'sexual offender'	Difficulty trying to get on with life following release from prison with a conviction for a sexual offence. Feelings of being labelled create difficulties with relationships, employment, housing and social capital.	Feeling labelled Disclosure issues Employment difficulties Being judged Living with guilt, shame and regret
Feelings of hopelessness and negative self	Intense hopelessness about oneself and the future, and having a negative view of oneself.	Low self-esteem Lack of confidence Giving up No hope for future
Isolated, alone and no support	Isolation, loneliness, and lacking of support. Feelings of loss related to losing family and friends, being abandoned, deserted or rejected by others as a result of their conviction.	Despair/unhappiness Rejected/hurt by others Loss of family and friends Isolation/loneliness Lack of support network Lack of engagement with society
Poor problem solving	Feeling unable to deal with life's problems, and using ineffective coping strategies. Feelings of despair in relation to lack of relationships, not being able to find employment and external locus of control.	Ineffective coping strategies Overwhelming life problems Relationship problems External blame Lack of maturity
Resettlement issues	Practical difficulties associated with being released from prison including issues with hostel placements, finding suitable accommodation, movement restrictions, lack of purposeful activity and financial difficulties.	Accommodation difficulties Lack of purposeful activity Negative peer influences Probation restrictions
Internet offending as less harmful	Belief that viewing indecent images of children was less harmful than committing contact offences.	Minimising harm Lack of a victim

The first three themes were related to the programme the participants had attended on their previous prison sentence. For the most part, treatment was a multifaceted experience; that is the participants described it as a difficult, intense and demanding process, particularly having to talk about their offence, but they also felt they had developed a number of skills including perspective taking, problem-solving and improved coping abilities. But whilst useful, participants also talked about the fact that participation in the programme was not optional, as it was often a requirement of their sentence. And because of this, some felt that they were not ready to participate or motivated to change, and instead just went 'through the motions':

'It was just to tick the boxes at the time. I was ticking boxes and just attending and I wasn't really open'.

The men also spoke about the fact that treatment can only be considered the start of a lifelong effort to desist from crime, and that further support following a programme and on release from prison is needed.

Being labelled as a 'sexual offender' was a prominent theme. Participants consistently described the difficulty of trying to get on with life following release from prison with a conviction for a sexual offence. Repeatedly, the interviewees reported that they felt they had been labelled, which caused major problems in other areas of their lives, including gaining employment, finding suitable accommodation, developing and forming relationships with others, and being an active member of society. In most cases, it appeared that this difficulty may, in part, have contributed towards their path to a sexual reoffence and prevented them from forging 'non-offending' identities. One participant described the time he was told he needed to be on the Sex Offender Register:

'Well if I've got no hope of getting off this register and always going to be viewed with suspicion and all the rest of it, there's no point in trying, so, a lot of times I didn't care, I really didn't care.'

A feeling of hopelessness about oneself and the future, and having a negative view of oneself also emerged. Feelings of guilt and shame in relation to their offending were common, as were feelings of despair and unhappiness. Lack of social capital was also prominent; the feeling of being alone and having no support was frequent. There was also an intense feeling of loss amongst participants, which related to the loss of family and friends, feelings of being abandoned, deserted, rejected or hurt by others, and feeling let down by others.

Some of the participants felt that they lacked the skills to deal with daily life, and the lack of problem-solving skills in some was apparent. The problems described by the participants varied and included, for example, not being able to communicate with people, having relationship breakdowns, and not being able to cope with things not going their way. The use of ineffective coping strategies in dealing with problems, a lack of consequential thinking and examples of poor problem-solving emerged regularly, as did the individuals proportioning external blame to events in their lives. Another related theme was that of participants describing the practical issues associated with being released from prison. Difficulties included issues with hostel placements and finding suitable accommodation, having restrictions placed upon them and their movements, having a lack of purposeful activity due to their conviction, financial difficulties, and problems with peer influences.

The final theme related to those who had been convicted of a non-contact offence for their subsequent prison sentence (where previously they had committed contact offences) who voiced opinion that they felt that viewing indecent images of children was less harmful than committing contact offences. This offending pattern might represent a de-escalation in offending, and it is possible that these individuals were using these minimisations as a way of starting to shift their

identities, and progressing nearer to their future 'non-offending' self as part of their desistance journey.

Assimilating the findings

This research provided a rich description of the experiences of a small sample of MCSOs who had taken part in treatment during incarceration and subsequently reoffended. Assimilating the findings with the wider literature there are six key areas which are particularly important to highlight.

Identity Change

Cognitive transformation is clearly important for desistance amongst MCSOs. There are different routes that individuals take to successfully form a new identity. Some may use denial and minimisation as a way to manage the incongruence between their preferred identity and past actions. Others tend to describe the offending as being situational, related to the particular circumstances at the time. Whether or not this is reality, it may enable people to view their offending as an aberration, driven by the situation rather than their

personality, thus enabling them to sustain a positive self-identity that is separate from their offending self.¹⁷

But it is also clear that criminal stigma and being labelled has a damaging impact on those trying to reintegrate back into the community following release from prison¹⁸, and to form new identities, and this seems to be particularly problematic for MCSOs. The ability to shift one's identity from that of 'offender' to that of 'non-offender' seems to be very difficult for a group who is so stigmatized within prison and beyond the prison gates, and for whom the label of 'sexual offender' is difficult to leave behind.

We know that the impact of labelling people can be incredibly harmful, and that we tend to internalize the stigma that others put on us.¹⁹ There are a wealth of studies which support this labelling hypothesis, including evidence within the criminal justice system. In a large study of around 96,000 men and women over a two-year period in Florida, researchers found that those who were formally labelled an 'offender' had

Feelings of guilt and shame in relation to their offending were common, as were feelings of despair and unhappiness.

17. Farmer, M., Beech, A. R., & Ward, T. (2012). Assessing desistance in child molesters: a qualitative analysis. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 27, 1-21.

18. LeBel, T. P. (2017). Housing as the tip of the iceberg in successfully navigating prisoner reentry. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 16, 891-908.

19. Maruna, S. (2012). Elements of successful desistance signalling. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 11, 73-86.

substantially higher recidivism rates within two years, compared to those who had not been labelled.²⁰ Whilst some may be able to overcome the impact of labelling, others may not, and wider society has a duty to provide support. Research indicates that the general public often believe that recidivism rates for MCSOs are higher than they actually are, that this group are particularly unlikely or unable to change, and that particularly strict controls need to be in place to manage their risk to others.²¹ Stigma-reducing strategies including education could help. But the use of labelling crime-first language, which negatively influences public perceptions of people convicted of crime, also needs addressing. Stigmatizing labels, such as 'criminal', or 'sexual offender', can create barriers to services and can hinder support for groups of people.

Hope and Future Orientation

Individuals who desist from crime are usually motivated to change their lives and feel confident that they can turn things around.²² The impact of these motivational factors has even been found in long-term studies up to ten years after release from prison.²³ Hope plays a particularly key part in the early stages of change, giving people confidence that they can exercise choice and control over their lives, and overcome the challenges they face as they try to give up crime.²⁴ People are more likely to have hope, and be motivated to work toward a different, better life, if they are regarded as a person with potential and opportunity. Having a sense of hope and a positive future orientation is commonly described by successful desisters who have previously committed sexual crime, whereas those who persist in offending often describe a feeling of hopelessness about themselves and the future.

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Together, these findings suggest that individuals should be encouraged to take responsibility for their future actions, placing less emphasis on past actions. And that generating hope is vital.

Social Capital

Social capital includes having productive things to do with one's time, such as employment or education, having appropriate support and relationships in place, and making a meaningful contribution to society. Many people who desist from crime talk about the importance of feeling like part of a group, and the powerful effect of having someone believe in them.²⁵ They are often strongly influenced to desist by interactions with others that communicate a belief that they can and will change, that they are good people, and that they have something to offer people or society more generally.²⁶ Overall, the desistance research with MCSOs, suggests that desisters describe the importance of many of the factors of social capital, including the relevance of generativity or making a positive contribution to society. Conversely, in the current research the feeling of being isolated, alone and having no support was relevant to all participants to some extent, as was a lack of social capital.

The presence of healthy relationships, community participation, a positive sense of identity, motivation and are all fundamental and important for functioning.²⁷ For MCSOs these social inclusion factors are particularly pertinent, especially when evidence indicates that serving a custodial sentence for a sexual offence is associated with elevated concerns about housing, weaker social bonds, social isolation, greater relational difficulties and greater fear of

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20. Chiricos, T., Barrick, K., Bales, W., & Bontrager, S. (2007). The labelling of convicted felons and its consequences for recidivism. *Criminology*, 45, 547-581.
 21. de Vel-Palumbo, M., Howarth, L., & Brewer, M. B. (2019). 'Once a sex offender always a sex offender'? Essentialism and attitudes towards criminal justice policy. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 25, 421-439. Harris, A. J., & Socia, K. M. (2016). What's in a name? Evaluating the effects of the 'sex offender' label on public opinions and beliefs. *Sexual Abuse*, 28, 660-678.
 22. Burnett, R. & Maruna, S. (2004). So 'Prison Works', Does It? The Criminal Careers of 130 Men Released From Prison under Home Secretary Michael Howard. *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 43, 390-404.
 23. LeBel, T.P., Burnett, R., Maruna, S., & Bushway, S. (2008). The "Chicken and Egg" of Subjective and Social Factors in Desistance From Crime. *European Journal of Criminology*, 5, 131-59.
 24. Weaver, B. (2014). Control or change? Developing dialogues between desistance research and public protection practices. *Probation Journal*, 61, 8-26.
 25. Rex, S. (1999). Desistance from Offending: Experiences of Probation. *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 36, 366-83.
 26. McNeill, F., Batchelor, S., Burnett, S., & Knox, J. (2005). *21st Century Social Work. Reducing Reoffending: Key Practice Skills*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Executive.
 27. Ward, T., & Maruna, S. (2007). *Rehabilitation*. London, England: Routledge.

victimization²⁸, and that being in prison for a sexual offence appears to act as a barrier to primary goods, which then makes re-entry even more difficult.

Problem-solving

Problem-solving emerges as a particular issue for MCSOs.²⁹ The problems described by the participants in the present research varied, but a feeling of despair in being confronted with engulfing problems in life came through strongly from the participants' experiences. The key issue was that individuals appeared to lack skills in problem-solving, which we know is a key dynamic risk factor for MCSOs³⁰, and one that rightfully continues to be addressed in interventions targeting reoffending.

Resettlement Issues

MCSOs also face significant resettlement issues on release from prison. On re-entry some of the participants in this research described how they were determined to stay out of prison and had a positive view of their future. This positivity was diminished over time due to other aspects of their life on release, such as difficulties with employment, housing and healthcare. The barriers faced by individuals on release from prison

cannot be underestimated. In 2018, only 11 per cent of adult male prison leavers were confirmed to be in employment 6 weeks after they left prison³¹, and 24 per cent of adult males leaving prison in 2018/19 were recorded as rough sleeping, either homeless, or in

unsettled accommodation, on the first night of release. Previous research indicates that social services to obtain basic needs, access to education, employment and housing social support from family and friends and the ability to adapt to the unstructured life on the outside are all key to successful transition.³²

Interventions to support desistance

The learning from this research sharpens the focus on the need to re-examine interventions designed for MCSOs. All of the participants had attended Core SOTP³³, which has now been replaced with a set of interventions which are more individualized, more future focused, and which have a greater emphasis on hope and identity. The new programmes, including the Horizon programme, targeted at men assessed as medium, high or very high risk of reconviction³⁴, are based on the most up to date theory of behaviour change, a bio-psycho-social model of offending³⁵, the Good Lives Model (GLM)³⁶, as well as the desistance literature.

Once a programme is finished further work is also needed to consolidate the learning and skills developed, throughout the sentence and on release from prison. Some participants were not able to recall in full the content or their

experience of participating in the programme, either because perhaps their participation was too far in the past, or they hadn't practiced the skills that they had learnt during the programme. This suggests the importance of appropriate timing of interventions, as

On re-entry some of the participants in this research described how they were determined to stay out of prison and had a positive view of their future.

28. Baker, T., Zgoba, K., & Gordon, J. A. (2019). Incarcerated for a sex offence: In-Prison Experiences and Concerns about Reentry. *Journal of Sexual Abuse*, 1-22.
29. Milner, R. (2017). *Desistance in men who have previously committed sexual offences: An exploration of the early processes*. University of York.
30. Mann, R. E., Hanson, R. K., & Thornton, D. (2010). Assessing risk of sexual recidivism: Some proposals on the nature of psychologically meaningful risk factors. *Sexual Abuse*, 22, 191-217.
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32. Denney, A. S., Tewksbury, R., & Jones, R. S. (2014). Beyond basic needs: Social support and structure for successful offender reentry. *Journal of Qualitative Criminal Justice and Criminology*, 2, 39-67. LeBel, T.P., Burnett, R., Maruna, S., & Bushway, S. (2008). The "Chicken and Egg" of Subjective and Social Factors in Desistance From Crime. *European Journal of Criminology*, 5, 131-59. Visher, C., Palmer, T., & Roman, C. G. (2007). *Cleveland stakeholders' perceptions of prisoner reentry*. Urban Institute.
33. Mann, R. E., & Thornton, D. (1998). The Evolution of a multisite sexual offender program. In W. L. Marshall, Y. M. Fernandez, S. M. Hudson, & T. Ward (Eds.), *Sourcebook of treatment programs for men convicted of a sexual offence* (pp. 47-57). New York: Plenum.
34. Wilkinson, K. & Powis, B. (2019). A Process Study of the Horizon Programme. *Ministry of Justice Analytical Summary*.
35. Mann, R. E., & Carter, A. J. (2012). Organising principles for the treatment of sexual offending. In B. Wischka, W. Pecher, & H. Boogaart (Eds.), *Behandlung von Straft tern: Sozialtherapie, Ma regelvollzug, Sicherungsverwahrung [Offender Treatment: Social therapy, special forensic hospitals, and indeterminate imprisonment]*. Freiburg, Germany: Centaurus. Walton, J. S., Ramsay, L., Cunningham, C., & Henfrey, S. (2017). New directions: integrating a biopsychosocial approach in the design and delivery of programs for high risk service users in Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. *Advancing Corrections: Journal of the International Corrections and Prison Association*, 3, 21-47.
36. Ward, T., Mann, R. E., & Gannon, T. A. (2007). The good lives model of offender rehabilitation: Clinical implications. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 12, 87-107.

well as the need for reinforcement of programme content and skills learnt. Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service offer support in this way via the New Me MOT³⁷, a toolkit that can be used by custodial or probation staff to provide ongoing support to programme completers.

Lack of support people receive during the transitional period from prison to community can make the desistance process particularly difficult and uncertain. Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) offers one way of supporting this reintegration, and the overall evidence for the effectiveness of CoSA is promising; for example there is some evidence that there are benefits for core members in terms of reductions in social isolation and loneliness and improvement in psychological wellbeing.³⁸ Further research has examined the importance of mentoring and peer support roles for MCSOs³⁹, which can help people take on new, positive identities, and help people to distance themselves from harmful labels and be viewed as 'human beings'.

Implications for Practice

So what does this mean for practice? One of the key implications from this research is the need to focus on better transition from prison to probation for men convicted of sexual offences, and ensure that services are available to support people with housing, employment, healthcare, social engagement and accessing essential services. To do this we need better communication and information sharing between settings, and greater follow up of care provided in the community (including use of peers, use of support structures such as CoSA, and other services which build social capital and positive identity). There

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are also implications around interventions for this group specifically, which have already in large been addressed by the development and roll out of new programmes within HMPPS in England and Wales. Programmes are likely to be most beneficial when participants are motivated to change, when they focus on identity change, when they use language and techniques that promote non-offending identities, when they are future-oriented and do not use exercises that encourage people to take responsibility for past actions which are unlikely to promote desistance⁴⁰, when they are supplemented with other resources aimed at improving social capital and opportunity to develop and practice skills learnt, and when they are focused on the individual. But we must also remember that

programmes can only be one part of the picture; on their own they are unlikely to always result in changes, but if accompanied by other support (programme follow up support as well as targeted support on release from prison), they can be the start of a positive process of change. Those of us working across prison and probation can also use every opportunity to build hope and encourage future orientation amongst the people in our care, by believing that people can change, and helping them find their strengths and talents and supporting them to believe that a better future is possible and helping them to understand how they might get there. But the

biggest implication or change all of us working with men convicted of sexual offences can do is to monitor the language we use. Using language which is humane and respectful, which doesn't label or stigmatise people, is essential if we are to support people in shedding their old identities and building future non-offending positive identities.

37. Walton, J. S., Ramsay, L., Cunningham, C., & Henfrey, S. (2017). New directions: integrating a biopsychosocial approach in the design and delivery of programs for high risk service users in Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. *Advancing Corrections: Journal of the International Corrections and Prison Association*, 3, 21-47.
38. Kitson-Boyce, R., Blagden, N., Winder, B., & Dillon, G. (2019). "This time it's different" preparing for release through a prison-model of CoSA: A phenomenological and repertory grid analysis. *Sexual Abuse*, 31, 886-907.
39. Perrin, C., Blagden, N., Winder, B., & Dillon, G. (2018). "It's sort of reaffirmed to me that I'm not a monster, I'm not a terrible person": sex offenders' movements towards desistance via peer-support roles in prison. *Journal of Sexual Abuse*, 30, 759-80.
40. Although there is some evidence that people can learn new ways of behaving by looking at past patterns of behaviour, when this is done in a positive sense, participants need to understand they are doing this work to create a better future, and the past behaviour is used to identify what strengths people need to develop, rather than to shame or encourage responsibility for past acts. This is not to suggest that *participants on programmes should not be required to take responsibility for their actions*. However the evidence suggests that people should be required to take strong responsibility for their future actions, and less emphasis needs to be placed on their past ones. In many cases, where participants exhibit denial or minimisation, it is not necessary for this to be challenged, where such neutralisations are a post-hoc, protective factor. Indeed where such denial helps a person construct a more positive self-identity it may serve as a protective function.

Conclusions

The findings presented in this article are consistent with many of the results we see from traditional desistance studies. We must focus on the transition from prison to community, often a period of stress, loneliness, fear and alienation for MCSOs. And whilst we cannot change society's perceptions of MCSOs overnight, we are able to make an impact with the language we use. We are far more likely to successfully help people to desist from committing crime and causing harm to themselves and others if we give them the opportunity to develop new pro-social identities, and adopt messages of hope and motivation. And we are less likely to reinforce the stigma associated with prison and crime, and in doing so risk worsening people's future chances, if we communicate with non-labelling language. It is also important to recognise the equal importance of the risk need and responsivity and rehabilitation approach to offending, and the

desistance approach. Historically they have been presented as polarised ways of describing offending patterns. However, in recent times there has been greater recognition that both 'schools' are important, and can be used together to further our understanding of how to help people lead offence free lives.⁴¹

Although uncomfortable for many members of the public, research suggests that accepting MCSOs into the community and helping them overcome the barriers to successful reintegration encourages prosocial behaviour and prevention of further offending.⁴² Whilst we can do our best to target and deliver effective interventions to this group in prison, we also need to ensure we give them the best chance of re-entry by supporting them to develop new identities, by helping them to develop and practice skills to lead offence-free lives, by supporting them with reintegration, by supporting them to become part of society, and by giving them hope for their future.

41. Maruna, S., & Mann, R. (2019). Reconciling 'Desistance' and 'What Works'. *HM Inspectorate of Probation Academic Insights*. February 2019/1.

42. Tewksbury, R., & Connor, D. P. (2012). Incarcerated sex offenders' perceptions of family relationships: Previous experiences and future expectations. *Criminology, Criminal Justice, Law & Society*, 13, 25.