



## An exploratory study of the experiences of a small sample of men convicted of sexual offences who have reoffended after participating in prison-based treatment

Helen Wakeling and Firoza Saloo

The aim of the present study was to explore the experiences of individuals who have committed sexual offences and subsequently reoffended after participation on a Sex Offender Treatment Programme (SOTP). In-depth interviews were conducted between March and July 2015 with six men who had been convicted of a sexual offence, had completed an SOTP on their prison sentence (between 2001 and 2010), and who had then gone on to reoffend with a further sexual offence. The interviews were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 2008). Nine higher order themes emerged. The use of a small sample size means that the findings may not be generalizable to a wider population, and as such, the findings should be treated with some caution. The emergent themes are discussed in relation to the wider desistance literature, and preliminary suggestions are made which may enhance the outcomes that can be made from attendance on a prison based treatment programme. Consideration of the wider support structures, which would be of benefit to this group, are also highlighted, along with the issues associated with labelling and signalling (Maruna, 2012).

### Key findings

- Interviewees described participation on SOTP as being useful for skill acquisition and understanding their offending, but also a difficult process. Motivation to change and engagement were identified as important for perceived success.
- Being labelled as a 'sexual offender' can create difficulties in individuals forging new identities that separate their offending behaviour from their real self, and can enhance everyday problems faced by individuals released from prison (such as forming relationships and finding suitable employment).
- Living as a 'sexual offender', intense feelings of hopelessness about themselves and their future, having a negative view of themselves, feeling isolated and without support, feeling powerless to deal with life's problems and specific difficulties associated with being released from prison were all factors which individuals described as contributing in part to their pathways to reoffending.
- The findings provide support to the notion that desistance is not a linear process.
- The findings confirm that a holistic approach to dealing with those convicted of sexual offences is required; a treatment programme will be just one part of a life-long effort to desist from crime. The findings reinforce the critical role of wraparound support from other services, particularly on release, which will help with isolation, and reintegration, and provide practical assistance.
- The findings emphasise the potential importance of tailoring services to an individual's needs, and improving individuals' motivation to change.
- Work with individuals who have been convicted of a sexual crime may be improved by incorporating a focus on developing self-narratives, and improving future orientation (thinking about and planning for the future).

**The views expressed in this Analytical Summary are those of the author, not necessarily those of the Ministry of Justice (nor do they reflect government policy).**

## Introduction

There are three main perspectives which help explain desistance. The first of these, natural desistance, is defined as a decline or abstinence in offending which occurs independently of the actions or influence of others (Laws and Ward, 2011). This theory emphasises the process of maturation and effect of age on offending behaviour. Cognitive transformation is the second perspective, which describes the process whereby the power of personal agency (the sense of oneself as the agent of one's own actions) and cognitive transformation (a turning point or re-evaluation of a negative experience into one that is growth-promoting) in one's life enables individuals to change (Giordino, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002). Triggers for change can result from a desire to stay out of prison, or an awareness of the damage caused by offending, for example. More recently, this has been defined as the transition from 'active offender' to 'desisted offender' (Serin and Lloyd, 2009). Within this model desistance is conceptualised as a change process involving multiple internal factors (Maruna, 2001), with a change in identity from that of 'offender' to 'non-offender' (Maruna, 2001). The third perspective is the presence of informal social controls. The development of prosocial relationships (positive relationships with non-criminal peers or family), meaningful employment, and community investment (i.e. positive involvement in community activity) provide examples of how integration into society can lead individuals away from offending paths.

There have been a number of studies examining the process of desistance and narrative change (e.g. Burnett, 2004; Gadd and Farrell, 2004; King, 2013; Maruna, 2001), and more recently studies have also been conducted on individuals who have been convicted of sexual crime (e.g. Farmer, Beech and Ward, 2012; Göbbels et al., 2012; Harris, 2014; Willis, Levenson and Ward, 2010). Harris (2014) explored the factors that contributed to desistance from sexual crime in a sample of 21 men. Their qualitative analyses found support for cognitive transformation, with many reporting a desire to live an offence-free life. A small group of the participants reported having stopped offending naturally, largely because of the aging process. Farmer et al. (2012) compared a group of men deemed to be desisting from sexual crime, with a group who were deemed potentially active in their sexual crime. Desisters were more optimistic about their future, had an enhanced sense of personal agency, and had found a meaningful place within a social group or network, whereas the active group were more likely to blame external events for their problems and were more pessimistic about their future.

Much of this work has been conducted on those who have successfully desisted. There is little research on those who have not successfully desisted and the reasons for this failure, especially with those convicted of sexual offences who have attended prison based treatment. Webster (2005) interviewed 25 men convicted of a sexual offence who had attended an SOTP but had gone on to reoffend. This research indicated that a large proportion of the sample had a desire to reoffend and used careful planning to do so. Such individuals may not be amenable to treatment intervention.

The present research aimed to examine the experiences of individuals who have attended an SOTP and reoffended sexually on release from prison. The study aimed to explore how these men experienced the SOTP they attended, as well as how they experienced their release from prison and their perceptions of why they went on to reoffend. With its use of interpretative phenomenological analysis, the present study allowed for a more in-depth examination of men's experiences than Webster (2005) did.

## Method

In-depth interviews were conducted with six men who had taken part in an SOTP (the old version of prison-based treatment provision for this cohort) between 2001 and 2010 in prison, and had then gone on to sexually reoffend. The sample was recruited using an opportunity strategy. Four sites from the 25 that offer SOTP were randomly selected and approached to identify individuals who fit the entry criteria. Nineteen individuals were identified as suitable for inclusion, and of these, six gave their consent to be interviewed and were in custody at the time of the research, serving time on a subsequent sentence for a sexual offence. The interviews took place between March and July 2015. All identifiers were changed to ensure confidentiality of the participants. The age of the participants ranged from 33 to 66, and the original offences they had committed included rape, attempt to kidnap with an intent to commit an offence of a sexual nature, downloading indecent images, and indecent assault. In four of the cases, the reoffence was of the same nature as the index sexual offence; in the remaining two cases, the reoffences were both downloading indecent images, whereas for both of these men the original offences were indecent assault and possession of indecent images.

A topic guide was used to structure the qualitative interviews, which outlined the main areas the researcher wanted to cover, directed from the literature. All interview participants were given an information sheet and signed

a consent form prior to taking part. The interviews lasted approximately 1 hour, but ranged from 45 minutes to an hour and a half. All interviews were recorded and transcribed prior to analyses.

The data derived from the interviews were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 2008). Qualitative methods are best when attempting to explore, describe and interpret the personal and social experiences of participants (Smith, 2008). The goal of IPA is to explore in detail the subjective conscious experiences of the individual and to allow participants to share their experiences.

Initially the transcripts were read and re-read for familiarity, before specific themes were generated, which were then clustered into higher-order themes, which aim to give a descriptive label to convey the conceptual nature of the clustered themes.

### Limitations

It is important to note that this is an exploratory qualitative study with a small sample. Although the focus of IPA is to examine the in-depth experiences of a small group of individuals, caution is warranted in generalising from these findings to a wider group of individuals. It is also acknowledged that the present research would have been strengthened by conducting interviews with a group of individuals who had not reoffended as well. This would have enabled some element of comparison between those who have desisted and those who have persisted in offending. This would be a useful avenue for future research.

### Results

Nine higher order themes were derived from the analysis. Many of these themes were interrelated in various ways, but still emerged as separate and distinct categories. The themes are shown in table 1, along with a selection of the sub-themes contained therein. The nine higher order themes were:

#### 1. Diverging experiences of treatment

Almost all of the participants described the process of taking part in SOTP as difficult or intense. Particularly the process of having to face up to their offence and what they have done was described as a demanding experience. Whilst finding participation difficult, particularly at the outset, interviewees felt that the programme helped them in a number of ways, particularly in terms of skill acquisition (e.g. problem solving, perspective taking, development of positive coping strategies), and in understanding their offending

and the impact of their behaviour on others. Participants also felt that the programme had helped with their perspective taking, their ability to look to the future, identifying their behaviour patterns and developing victim empathy.

The group setting was highlighted as both being a challenging aspect of embarking on a programme, and as an enabler in terms of the provision of support. For some, the expectation of taking part was worse than the reality: *'I was scared of opening up; I was scared of being judged you know. I just didn't really know what to expect... I went in there and it was so different from what I thought it would be... It was on the one hand very supportive and helpful, on the other hand it was quite horrifying really... you're listening to the stories of other people and you think, you know, well, I'm not the only one that's sort of going through all this.'* (Participant D)

#### 2. Going through the motions

Whilst SOTP was considered to be helpful, interviewees also described how taking part in treatment was often a requirement of their sentence, and as such they felt they had little option but to participate in the programme. Participant F stated: *'There's also a feeling that you've got to do the course because it's part of your sentence plan.'*

Interviewees highlighted the importance of being motivated to change and the need to be fully engaged with the treatment process in order to facilitate change. A couple of those interviewed described how they were not motivated to engage or wanting to change when they took part in SOTP.

**Table 1: Higher order themes**

Higher order theme	Example sub-themes
Treatment as a difficult but useful process	Group setting Dealing with what I've done Skill acquisition Difficult experience Reliving experiences
Treatment: going through the motions	Importance of motivation Requirement of sentence Lack of engagement
Treatment 'scratched the surface'	Need personal commitment Treatment is only the start Focus more on employment Focus more on release plans
Living as a sexual offender	Feeling labelled Disclosure issues Employment difficulties Being judged Living with guilt, shame and regret

Higher order theme	Example sub-themes
Personal feelings of hopelessness and negative self	Low self esteem
	Lack of confidence
	Giving up
	No hope for future
	Despair/unhappiness
Feeling isolated, alone and without support	Rejected/hurt by others
	Loss of family and friends
	Isolation/loneliness
	Lack of support network
	Lack of engagement with society
Feeling unable to deal with life's problems	Ineffective coping strategies
	Overwhelming life problems
	Relationship problems
	External blame
	Lack of maturity
Difficulties associated with being released from prison	Accommodation difficulties
	Lack of purposeful activity
	Negative peer influences
	Probation restrictions
Internet offending as less harmful	Minimising harm
	Lack of a victim

*'I didn't really learn anything, because I didn't take it in. I didn't – I didn't – it weren't registering with me. I weren't using the tools... didn't care about authority of anything like that... It was just to tick the boxes at the time. I was ticking boxes and just attending and I wasn't really open...'* (Participant C).

Participant C clearly stated that he was not engaged, and did not want to change when he took part in SOTP. He later goes on to say that this was down to him and not related to the services that were on offer to him.

### 3. Treatment 'scratched the surface'

This theme contained both suggestions for how SOTP could be made more relevant to participants' lives and their future, and how treatment is just the start of a life-long effort to desist from crime. The crux of the theme is an understanding that participation in a standalone programme may not be sufficient for change alone.

Some of the suggestions for enhancing SOTP included making more use of those who have previously taken part in treatment, and focusing more on release plans and real life issues like employment. The need for more aftercare and appropriate referral to other services in particular was pertinent for participant D:

*'I suppose the SOTP kind of scratched the surface, but I needed more, because you know... I think more support, sort of, after getting out of*

*prison really... What I wanted was to be seen by the mental health people, you know... It's (treatment) just the beginning really.'*

### 4. Living as a 'sexual offender'

A prominent theme to emerge from the transcripts was a sense of the difficulty in 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, such as for example gaining employment, developing 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.

Participant B, for example, described his lack of hope for the future and despair when told he needed to be on the Sex Offender Register. He felt that this would mean that he would always be viewed with suspicion, and labelled as a 'sex offender', and as such there was no point in trying to change: *'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, like I said to you just now, a lot of times I didn't care, I really didn't care.'*

All interviewees described the process and consequences of labelling. Labelling someone as a 'sexual offender' may have a negative influence on an individual's ability to move forward. Labelling like this makes it harder for individuals to forge new 'non-offending' identities, which was perceived by interviewees as critical for desistance. Participant D felt it was important to separate the person from the act, suggesting that he understood the importance of building a self-identity around not reoffending in the future: *'I am not what I did... I know what I did was evil, I know what I did was wrong, but I'm not evil.'* Other participants appeared to be at a different stage in this process of forging a new identity.

The interviewees described in detail the difficulties resulting from being labelled. These included forming new relationships, losing support of family and friends, being abused, feeling isolated, and finding suitable employment and accommodation. The participants' experiences and descriptions of living as a 'sexual offender' highlight how society's views of those who have been convicted of sexual offences can have a significant impact on the lives of these individuals. This labelling may influence how they view themselves, the support they have from others, the lives they are able to build for themselves, and ultimately may have an impact on someone's desistance path. This theme is intrinsically linked to the remaining themes.

### 5. Personal feelings of hopelessness and negative self

A feeling of intense hopelessness about oneself and the future, and having a negative view of oneself also emerged as a separate higher order theme. For a few of the interviewees, having low self-esteem, low self-confidence and a lack of belief in themselves was reported as a key contributory factor in their reoffending. Participant D described how his identity and sense of self were extrinsically linked to his relationship status, so that when his relationships broke down his confidence suffered, which in turn he believed has contributed to his offending:

*'I've gone from being down, like being low, before I offended... I've gone from being low, then had me ups and downs after release from prison, real lows and now when after I've talked with her I've gone right up and I've thought this has got to be something fantastic, it's probably the best that I've felt for years and then I think the higher the lift when the crash comes unfortunately you fall lower than what I fell before...'*

Four interviewees similarly described that prior to their reoffence they had given up on their life: *'Having been attacked and all the rest of it, I didn't really care... didn't feel like I had a future. Thinking I've been sort of slung on the scrap heap.'* (Participant B)

The notion of a negative self consistently appeared throughout the transcripts during which individuals were describing their experiences on release from prison and prior to their offending. Feelings of guilt and shame in relation to their offending were common, as were feelings of despair and unhappiness. These intense feelings were often experienced in isolation.

### 6. Feeling isolated, alone and without support

The feeling of being alone and having no support was relevant to all participants to some extent. A cluster of themes relating to the feelings of loss associated with offending emerged. These included descriptions relating to the loss of family and friends, feelings of being abandoned, deserted, rejected or hurt by others, and feeling let down by others. Descriptions of how the interviewees had lost family and/or friends because of their offending and incarceration were frequent and powerful. Participant D described these feelings in the following way:

*'Well my support group just sort of disintegrated, really, you know, and my biggest err, support, she, sort of, stuck by me all the way through, you know, and, err, then she got taken away from me by cancer, you know, so... the abandonment and other things, you know, because off out there it was difficult because, you know, most of them just turn their backs on me... every time you, sort of, reach out, someone stamps on your fingers, you know. I think the worse thing is that I've kind of felt alone, that I'm struggling alone. In have nothing left, none of my possessions, you know, my friends have gone, my family's gone, nothing.'*

Participant D's experience of isolation and the notion of being rejected by others is clear. Use of words such as 'abandonment', 'disintegrated', and 'alone' emphasise the intensity of these feelings. The loss of support and isolation also seems to be directly attributed to the sexual nature of the offending, again reinforcing the difficulties of life after being convicted of a sexual offence. There also appeared to be a lack of further, more general, support, and a lack of engagement with society.

### 7. Feeling unable to deal with life's problems

This theme portrayed the collection of experiences described by the participants as feeling powerless to deal with life's problems. The problems described by the participants varied and included, for example, not being able to communicate with people, having relationship breakdowns, and being unable to find suitable employment. In all transcripts, a feeling of despair in being confronted with engulfing problems in life came through strongly from the participants' experiences. As an example, participant A described the following: *'It's when life gets on top of me, it seems like everything comes at once, you know what I mean?... It's just overwhelming.'*

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. For two men in particular there appeared to be a lack of maturity, which seemed to have had a direct impact on their ability to deal with problems. In particular, the description of their experiences highlighted impulsive behaviour and a lack of perspective taking. A lack of future orientation (thinking about and planning for the future) also came through as a significant topic within this higher order theme.

### 8. Difficulties associated with being released from prison

Another related theme was that of participants describing the practical issues associated with being released from prison. Whilst the previous theme related to everyday problems, these problems were specific to prison release. Difficulties included issues with hostel placements and finding suitable accommodation, having restriction placed upon them and their movements, having a lack of purposeful activity due to their conviction, financial difficulties, and problems with peer influences. Again, interviewees reported that these issues were often exacerbated by having a conviction for a sexual offence.

### 9. Internet offending perceived as less harmful

The final higher order theme was a small but distinct collection of experiences, which were seen in those

interviewees who had committed a non-contact offence when they reoffended. Amongst these individuals, there was a belief that viewing indecent images of children was less harmful than committing contact offences:

*'I've never been able to get into the same mind set to view images as seriously, and I don't know why that is. Maybe it's because I'm detached from them... It's just I don't view the victim in an image the same way as I do a visible victim.'* (Participant B)

## Conclusions and implications

Although the sample size was small, the findings allow us to draw some tentative conclusions regarding how individuals experienced SOTP and the experiences that led to their reoffending. Interviewees generally found the experience of participating in SOTP difficult, most also found it a useful experience in terms of positive skill acquisition and support. Some were not able to recall in full the content or their experience of participating in the programme. This suggests the importance of appropriate timing of interventions, and the need for reinforcement of programme content and skills learnt.

Motivation to change emerged as a key factor and may contribute, in part, to the success of a programme. A couple of interviewees said that they were not motivated to engage on the programme and learnt very little. Other interviewees said that they learnt a great deal, but that other problems on release got in the way of them using the skills they had gained from the programme. The complexity of factors associated with offending was apparent. Situational, practical, social and psychological factors were all identified as important, and these factors can be seen in the higher order themes generated from the transcripts. For each individual interviewed the predominant contributory factors differed.

The present findings provide some support for all three perspectives of desistance and for the notion that desistance is not a linear process; rather it is a gradual process of moving away from crime, which takes time (Bottoms and Shapland, 2011). Each of the individuals interviewed were at different stages along their desistance path.

The process of signalling may be key to the development of individual desistance (Maruna, 2012). Being labelled as a 'sexual offender' is a prime example of unhelpful signalling, with which the interviewees had all struggled. Building a self-identity, which separates their offending from their real self, is critical. It was apparent that some interviewees were trying to do this, but that the process of being labelled as a 'sexual offender' by society made this difficult.

The importance of tailoring services to an individual's needs is supported by this research. Whereas some of the interviewees felt that they needed additional practical support on release, in terms of help with finance, employment and housing, other interviewees expressed a need for different types of support, such as help with building up social support networks and developing pro-social relationships, or to minimise feelings of isolation. It is critical that the required help is given to the individuals at the right time. This latter point also highlights how the present study provides support for the Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) approach (see Harvey, Philpott and Wilson, 2011; McCartan et al., 2014).

Whilst the majority of the desistance theory and literature has been developed on individuals convicted of general crime, and not those convicted of sexual crime, the present research has found little reason to indicate that the evidence would not also apply to this subset. Three of the top six obstacles to desistance from Bottoms and Shapland's (2011) model were also found in the present study: lack of money, lack of work, and having a record. In fact, the latter obstacle, having a record, is directly linked to the issue of labelling already discussed, and it may be that this issue is even more pertinent with this group. In addition to these factors, issues to do with isolation, loneliness, low self-esteem and self-efficacy and problem solving skills were also particularly relevant with desistance in individuals convicted of sexual offences. Results also support findings from studies specifically focusing on individuals who have desisted from sexual crime (e.g. Farmer et al., 2012; Harris, 2014).

The results confirm that a more holistic approach in dealing with those who have committed sexual offences is important. A treatment programme on its own, with no ongoing support or practical assistance, will not be sufficient to enable change.

## Practical suggestions

The use of a small sample size means that the findings may not be generalizable to a wider population and, as such, the findings should be treated with some caution. However, the results do suggest some practical approaches which may help to improve outcomes for this group of individuals:

1. Treatment in isolation may not result in long-term changes, unless accompanied by other services, particularly on release, which help with isolation, reintegration and building a positive identity.
2. Further tailored support, following participation on a treatment programme, may be beneficial and should cater to the needs of the individual.

3. Consideration should be given to supporting individuals with developing a new identity and positive future orientation (thinking about and planning for the future).
4. Consideration should be given to develop guidance on how to engage unmotivated individuals.
5. A treatment programme will play just one part in a holistic approach to the rehabilitation of individuals who have committed sexual crimes.

## References

- Bottoms, A. E., and Shapland, J. (2011). Steps towards desistance among male young adult recidivists. In S. Farrell, R. Sparks, S. Maruna and M. Hough (Eds.), *Escape routes: Contemporary perspectives on life after punishment*. London: Routledge, pp. 43-80.
- Burnett, R. (2004) *One-to-one ways of promoting desistance: In search of an evidence base*. In: Burnett R and Roberts C (eds), *What Works in Probation and Youth Justice: Developing Evidence-Based Practice*. Cullompton: Willan.
- Farmer, M., Beech, A. R., and Ward, T. (2012). Assessing Desistance in Child Molesters: A Qualitative Analysis. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 27, 930-950.
- Gadd, D., and Farrall, S. (2004). Criminal careers, desistance and subjectivity: Interpreting men's narratives of change. *Theoretical Criminology*, 8, 123–156.
- Giordano, P. C., Cernkovich, S. A., and Rudolph, J. L. (2002). Gender, Crime and Desistance: Toward a Theory of Cognitive Transformation, *American Journal of Sociology*, 107, 990-1064.
- Göbbels, S., Ward, T., and Willis, G. M. (2012). An integrative theory of desistance from sex offending. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 17, 453-462.
- Hanvey, S., Philpot, T. and Wilson, C. (2011). *A Community-Based Approach to the Reduction of Sexual Reoffending: Circles of Support and Accountability*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Harris, D. A. (2014). Desistance from Sexual Offending: Findings from 21 Life History Narratives. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 29, 1554-1578.
- King, S. (2013). Early desistance narratives: A qualitative analysis of probationers' transitions towards desistance. *Punishment and Society*, 15, 147-165.
- Laws, D. R., and Ward, T. (2011). *Desistance from Sex Offending. Alternatives to Throwing Away the Keys*. The Guildford Press, New York, London.
- McCartan, K., Kemshall, H., Westwood, S., Solle, J., MacKenize, G., Cattell, J. and Pollard, A. (2014). *Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA): A case file review of two pilots*. Project Report. London: Ministry of Justice.
- Maruna, S. (2001). Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Maruna, S. (2012). Elements of successful desistance signalling. *Criminology and Public Policy*, 11, 73-86.
- Serin, R. C., and Lloyd, C. D. (2009). Examining the process of offender change: the transition to crime desistance. *Psychology, Crime and Law*, 15, 347-364.
- Smith, J. A. (2008). *Qualitative Psychology: A practical Guide to Research Methods. Second Edition*. SAGE Publications.
- Webster, S. D. (2005). Pathways to sexual offence recidivism following treatment: An examination of the Ward and Hudson Self-regulation Model of Relapse. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 20, 1-22.
- Willis, G., Levenson, J., and Ward, T. (2010). Desistance and attitudes towards sex offenders: Facilitation or hindrance? *Journal of Family Violence*, 25, 545-556.

*Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service is committed to evidence-based practice informed by high-quality social research and statistical analysis. We aim to contribute to the informed debate on effective practice with the people in our care in prisons, probation and youth custody.*



© Crown copyright 2018

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit [nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3](http://nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3)

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

First published September 2018

ISBN 978-1-84099-800-9

Contact info: [National.Research@noms.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:National.Research@noms.gsi.gov.uk)