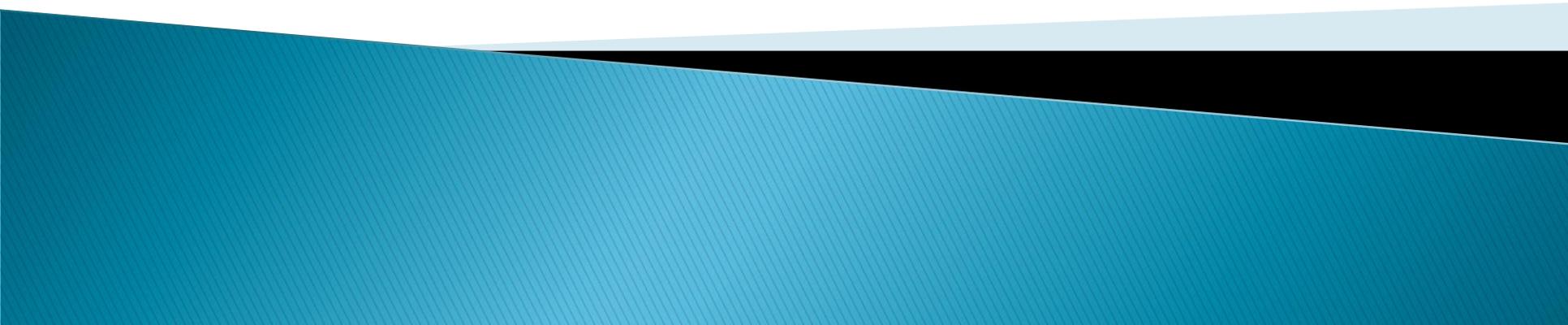


Community Responses to Sex Offenders in Northern Ireland

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*Understanding Public Disclosure of Sex Offender
Information in Northern Ireland*

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Community Attitudes to Sex

Offenders in NI (1) (McAlinden, 2007a: Public Attitudes to Sex Offenders in Northern Ireland)

- ▶ Misinformation concerning levels & types of risk, particularly re: CSA (McAlinden, 2007a)
 - ❑ that all sex offenders poses the same level of high risk
 - ❑ Over-estimation of recidivism rates
- ▶ Absorption of media stereotypes
 - ❑ Predatory adult male stranger & young victims
 - ❑ Little/no cognisance of young sexual abusers, female offenders
- ▶ Low-levels of awareness of risk management processes / preventive programmes

Community Attitudes to Sex Offenders in NI(2)

- ▶ Generally unaccepting of a sex offender living/working in the local community
- Attitudes more pronounced, eg, with women; parents of children under 18
- But, communities, as a whole, have a much more collective response to sexual offending than other social or political issues.

(see also Brown, 1999; Katz, et al, 2008; Craun & Theriot, 2009)

Community Attitudes to Sex Offenders in NI (3) (McAlinden, 2007b: *The Shaming of Sexual Offenders*)

- ▶ Complacency and lack of responsibility in relation to child protection
- ▶ Unrealistic expectations of statutory & voluntary agencies
- ▶ ‘NIMBY’ syndrome
- ▶ ‘disintegrative shaming’ (Braithwaite, 1989)
- ▶ Would such difficulties be compounded by disclosure or would disclosure promote broader community management and responsibility?

Community Responses to Sex Offenders in NI (1)

- ▶ “Pipe bomb at offenders' hostel in north Belfast” –

BBC News NI On-line: 18th October 2011

“South Belfast a dumping ground for paedophiles, claim picketers” –

The Belfast Telegraph: 23rd June 2011

Community Responses to Sex offenders in NI (2)

- ▶ Circles of Support & Accountability
- ▶ The 'SCRAP' project
- ▶ Public education and awareness programmes:
 - Stop it Now! UK and Ireland
 - Sexual Violence Prevention Strategy
 - Parents Protect!
- ▶ But significant challenges remain

Problems Unique to NI (see McA Linden, *Grooming: The Familial, Institutional and Internet Abuse of Children* (OUP, 2012: Ch 6)

(1) 'The presence of paramilitaries'

'Here in Northern Ireland ... we have a different dimension as well because we have paramilitary involvement in things like that ... I think the closest thing you might get in England is gang culture but not for the same reasons.... I've dealt with at least four [cases] where they've actually been moved out of their houses because the threat has been so high and the whole community then, and the paramilitaries, have gone and stood in a group outside ... while the person was marched out and they were all shouting, sex offender, get out....'

(NI Interview No. 11, 18th July 2011 – Voluntary sector).

(1) 'The presence of paramilitaries': The Challenges

- ▶ 'Punishment' of suspected/known sex offenders (Leggett, 2000; Knox, 2002)
 - ▶ Community mistrust and 'fear' of the authorities
 - ▶ Reluctance to engage with police or the authorities
 - ▶ Failure to report suspicions to social services
 - ▶ Failure to make disclosures
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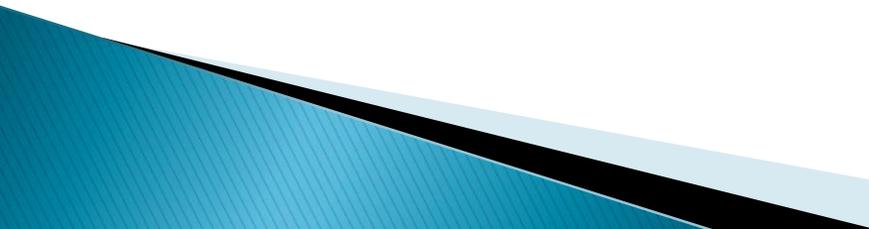
Problems Unique to NI

(2) The 'small' / 'parochial' community

'It's probably slightly more difficult because we're such a smaller community here... and we only have the three prisons. So a lot of offenders coming out know each other, so when you try to reintegrate back, there's always going to be someone there who knows you from somewhere.... Especially maybe more so out in rural areas. I live in a rural area and ...everybody in the community knows who they are, where they are, whereas say in Belfast you could slip about a bit. In rural communities, people soon get to know there's a stranger about and the word soon gets out no matter how well things are kept... word gets out somebody's living in a caravan at the back of somebody's farmyard.'

(NI Interview No. 5, 22nd June 2011 – Voluntary sector).

(2) The 'small' / 'parochial' community: The Challenges

- ▶ Many positives in terms of PPANI: one Police force, Probation services, DHSSPS, prison service etc;
 - ▶ But consequences for the release of public information about offenders
 - ▶ Harder to keep 'controls' on public disclosure?
 - ▶ Impact on offender reintegration
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Problems Unique to NI

(3) 'A multi-cultural society'

'The other thing about the challenge is ... there is no evidence to suggest that sexual abuse or exploitation is any more prevalent in minority communities or within foreign national communities, but what we find... people have very different cultural views and responses. And that is a challenge for ourselves about young people who are coming into Northern Ireland who are being exploited for that reason'

(NI Interview No. 14, 3rd August 2011 –
Statutory sector).

(3) 'a multi-cultural society': The Challenges

- ▶ What is the relevant 'community'? (Hudson, 1998; Crawford, 1999)
 - ▶ How access and target harder to reach communities?
 - ▶ Specifically tailored information/outreach programmes
 - ▶ Training for officers/ those administering disclosure schemes
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(4) The geographical border with the Republic of Ireland

‘given the fact that we’ve a shared border there, there’s a lot of guys just head south and disappear into the ether. And that makes it very difficult for us’

(NI Interview No. 8, 6th July 2011 –
Statutory Sector)

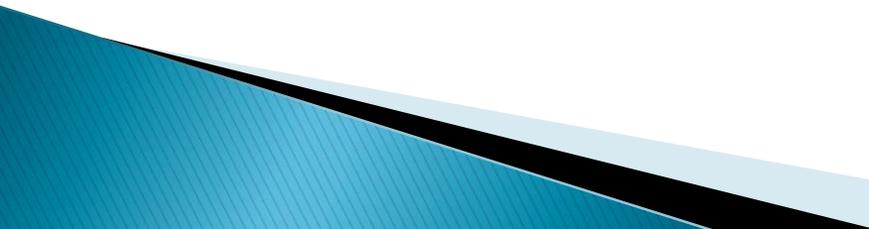
(4) The geographical border with the Republic of Ireland: The challenges

- ▶ ‘risk displacement’ rather than ‘risk management’
- ▶ Sex offenders going to ground/leaving the jurisdiction to escape notice
- ▶ Need for increased monitoring of offenders following release of information? & resources?
- ▶ Need for further/enhanced co-operation with agencies in the Republic of Ireland?

Key Challenges re: Public Disclosure (1):

- ▶ What is the purpose of disclosure: ‘penal populism’ or public protection?
 - ▶ How to promote community responsibility in relation to the provision of information?
 - ▶ How to ensure positive involvement of the local community on contentious sex offender issues?
 - ▶ How to facilitate effective co-operation between the statutory, voluntary and community sectors?
 - ▶ How to engage the local ‘community’ in the process of offender management and reintegration?
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Key Challenges re: Public Disclosure (2):

- ▶ How to strike an appropriate balance between the needs and interests of the community and those of the offender? – Art. 5 ECHR challenges (Power, 2003)
 - ▶ In introducing the public as ‘consumers of knowledge’ (Reiss, 1989) re: SO risk management, how can we protect the ‘knowledge–risk–security’ paradigm? (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997)
 - ▶ How can we balance the provision of further public information about sex offenders with current inflated levels of fear and concern?
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The Way Forward: Implementing Disclosure in NI(1)?

- ▶ Further study of public attitudes re: sex offender public disclosure
 - Eg what would they do if they were concerned about an individual who had unsupervised contact with their children? Would they use a disclosure scheme if one existed?
 - Eg what do they currently know about disclosure and how it may be used?
- ▶ Further public education and engagement around key myths surrounding sex offending
 - Eg majority of abuse is intra-familial;
 - Eg that abusers can be women, and young people etc;
 - Eg the work of the agencies but that child protection is everyone's responsibility

The Way Forward: Implementing Disclosure in NI(2)?

- ▶ A better informed public would help promote public confidence, social inclusion & reduce and manage 'panic,' fear & mistrust concerning SOs
- ▶ It may help the community make a more positive contribution, through disclosure, to sex offender reintegration/ risk management
- ▶ A 'partnership approach' (Crawford, 1999; McAlinden, 2007)
- ▶ Engagement with wider community and public disclosure through programmes like Circles of Support – with trained volunteers as mediators
- ▶ Ultimately, use the community to support sex offender reintegration and desistance and child protection through such mechanisms

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