



Sex Offender Public Disclosure: Learning from the UK pilots & international research

Seminar Four: Public Perceptions, Media Framing and Policy Responses to Risk

Hosted by Staffordshire West Midlands Probation Trust.

November 23rd 2012

The seminar focused on:

- An update on the public disclosure scheme as operating in England and Wales, but also focused on broader strategies for engaging the public and discussing the community reintegration and safe management of sexual offenders. (Speaker Louise Wall, West Mercia Constabulary, presentation is available on website).
- A review of the USA position was presented, including key issues and difficulties with the operation of disclosure and community notification in the USA. (Speaker Roxanne Lieb, Associate Director, Washington Institute of Public Policy, presentation available on website).
- An in depth ethnographic review of the Paulsgrove event was provided, with a review of media coverage and public reactions. (Speaker: Andy Williams, Institute of Criminal Justice, Portsmouth University).

Through workshops the seminar also looked at different models for achieving public awareness and public education, and for engaging local communities in dialogue about sex offender reintegration; desistance approaches to managing sex offenders and achieving change; and the use of public health approaches to the reduction of child sexual abuse.

The workshop discussion outlines and outcomes:

1. Towards Understanding Desistance from Sexual Offending

Mark Farmer, SWM Probation Trust.

There is a growing literature on why people stop being criminal, that is, why they stop committing crime and begin to lead non-offending lives. Nearly all of this research has focused on the persistent, antisocial offender, and to date there has been very little research looking at why adult sexual offenders desist. In contrast, the research on sexual offenders has tended to concentrate on how they came to be sexual offenders in the first place, or on how likely they are to re-offend. Yet an understanding of why they desist seems

to be crucially important in our understanding of sexual crime, particularly for those with the job of preventing re-offending, because the reasons for desistance might be unrelated to the aforementioned causative and risk factors. An understanding of desistance may lead to new responses to sexual offenders that might move forward the point at which they desist from sexual crime.

The workshop will discuss the literature on desistance from non-sexual crime, and consider its applicability for sexual offenders. It will outline the limited research that has taken place so far into desistance from sex crime, and discuss some implications for practice that arise from this. Mark will outline a new research project 'Understanding Desistance from Sexual Crime', that sets out to give us a better understanding of this field.

Outcome of the workshop:

The two groups looked at the desistance literature in relation to sexual offending.

The complexities surrounding sexual violence, highlighted some of the contradictions between the more traditional approaches used to manage risk and our understanding of desistance. For examples, the risks associated with convicted sex offenders securing employment, starting a relationship etc. The discussion explored how sex offender notification in England and Wales (less so in America) fits well with desistance theory.

2. Keeping Children Safe through Community Engagement

Willie Manson, Stop It Now, Scotland.

The workshop will look at the development of the child sex offender community disclosure scheme in Scotland (Keeping Children Safe).

It will also explain the public engagement strategy which is being undertaken as a result of the Keeping Children Safe scheme. The public engagement work aims to better inform parents and carers about their responsibilities through education and to dispel some of the myths surrounding sex offenders.

Outcome of the workshop:

The group discussions explored the need to move away from the “myth of the monster” and put sexual violence back into the realms of families.

The groups discussed the advantages of a Public Health Approach to sexual violence, particularly in times of austerity. The group pointed to the danger of the scheme becoming to ‘routine’. The group felt quite strongly that sexual violence and the treatment and management of sexual offenders should not be treated as a routine matter. On the contrary it was noted that this area of work requires specialist insight, training and practices, not only in how we work with those convicted of these crimes, and their victims, but also those requesting support and advice (such as applicants through the disclosure scheme) including wider family members.

The difficulty in measuring the impact of publicity with regard to the child sex offender disclosure scheme was discussed. The group commented on the fact that the scheme and accurate information about sex offenders was still not filtering out to those considered 'easy to reach'.

3. Dealing with perpetrators in communities

Jeff Maxwell, NIACRO

The workshop will focus the work of NIACRO's Base 2 project and its engagement with local communities in dealing with incidents of child sexual abuse. Base 2 project has been in operation over 20 years providing a crisis intervention, clarification and support service for individuals and families who may be at risk of violence / under threat from paramilitary groups in the community. This experience has led NIACRO into dialogue with community representatives dealing with difficult situations following the disclosure of information concerning alleged abusers.

This workshop will explore this in the context of Northern Ireland during the last 20 years of political transition. We will reference specific approaches:

- Mediation with community representatives
- Meeting organised vigilante protest groups
- Co-facilitating dialogue alongside the "Stop-It-now" project
- Developing a programme to explore community responses to sex offenders.

The workshop will look at the potential for developing community strategies to:

- Raise awareness of child sexual abuse
- Contribute positively to prevention and early intervention
- Addressing the issue of hosting sex offenders in the community

One of the key findings of the evaluation of the English Pilot Disclosure scheme was the lack of engagement from minority ethnic groups and those groups defined as "socially-disadvantaged". The evaluation found that there was no correlation between the level of resources invested in marketing the disclosure scheme and the ability of communities to engage with it. The workshop will examine whether investment in community awareness and early-intervention programmes might prove a more effective way of reducing the incidence of sexual offending whilst also improving community confidence in statutory arrangements for public protection. Base 2 has developed training on Community Awareness of Child sexual abuse with an emphasis on developing Community strategies to support the Statutory Agencies further reduce the incidence of sexual offending.

Outcome of the workshop:

The two workshop groups focused on the work of NIACRO's Base 2 project and its engagement with communities in dealing with incidents of child sexual abuse.

A number of key points were highlighted as good practice in working with '**hard to reach groups**'.

1. What are hard to reach groups?

The issue of hard to reach groups was questioned with regard to the issue of child sexual abuse. In fact it was argued that when it comes to this highly sensitive topic all communities/ groups/ individuals are in fact 'hard to reach'.

The group therefore recognised the need for measures designed to engage with the public to adapt and modify their approach depending on the needs of the different communities, and in doing so work out what is going to bring the issue 'closer to home' to these different groups.

2. The importance of knowing the 'community' you are working with.

Following on from above, how we define communities was also questioned. It was recognised that there was a need for communities to define themselves, be it in terms of geographical boundaries, inclusionary and exclusionary factors and/or their different infrastructures.

3. Public education needs to take advantage of a receptive audience.

As above, it was felt that the public would be more receptive to public education approaches if the issue was 'live', and/or directly impacted on their lives (in whatever way – for example, house prices was given as an example). The public disclosure scheme was therefore seen to offer a unique opportunity to engage with members of the public at a time when they have expressed anxiety about the possible risk of sexual abuse. They were therefore considered to be more receptive to hearing about the realities of sexual offending and sex offenders and thus offered a channel to dispel some of the myths around sexual abuse.

4. Agencies working with 'communities' need to be responsive to the communities needs.

This includes practical issues including the hours that support agencies are available to respond to the anxieties of different community groups and individuals. The examples offered by NIACRO, where clarification and support was sought and given, fell outside the conventional working day.

5. The need to provide ownership to the communities by integrating the management of those with a conviction of a sexual offence into the communities' infrastructure.

The use of hostels was presented as an example of how to achieve this. Having local community members working within the hostels was seen to help dispel the myths of sexual offending, and avoid exclusionary tactics being used. For example, communities would be less likely to campaign for the hostels closer if it meant that local jobs would be lost.

6. *There is a need to recognise what communities want to know.*

Communities generally want to know what current management procedures are and that they work, and that they have a mechanism for inputting their thoughts and concerns. There is a fear that having any more *responsibility* will leave them exposed if things go wrong.

4. *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse*

Donald Findlater, Lucy Faithfull

The workshop will review basic models developed over the past 25 years help professionals analyse the behaviour of convicted sex offenders, assess their risk and construct risk management plans. These models give us important clues about the array of preventative activities that might better serve to keep children safe. These activities include work with parents and, indeed, with children and young people before abuse has happened - essentially to make it less likely. This workshop will use Finkelhor's pre-conditions model and a public health framework to explore the realities and possibilities of prevention. It will describe the work of the Stop it Now! Helpline; some educative work that results from calls with Internet offenders and family members; public education work that resulted from the Home Office's Child Sex Offender Review.

Outcome of the workshop:

The two groups addressed the Public Health Approach to child sexual abuse. It looked at different examples of practices highlighting where the gaps were.

The group discussed the need to invest in early prevention rather than the focus on treatment of those convicted of sexual crime. In doing so the groups raised new questions that would need to be addressed:

- Who is at risk of becoming a sex offender?
- Who is at risk of becoming a victim of sexual abuse?
- What areas are most at risk?

The challenge of approaching sexual violence through education was discussed. In particular how, despite being seen as a good idea, there was a general reluctance to engage with the issue of sexual violence. The question then becomes: How do you engage with everyone? In answer to this question, some suggestions were put forward. This included the need for a disciplined educational approach that runs alongside current measures designed to manage

and treat those convicted of sexual offences. The language used in any discussion about sexual violence was raised as an area that needs to be addressed: Is our dialogue supportive of a preventative agenda? Do we have a unified language?