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'Will there ever be a stage in anybody's life where they're not thinking about what I did?': exploring the expectations of people convicted of sexual offences, regarding their release from medium and long-term custodial sentences

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ABSTRACT

This study, conducted in England, focused on men with a conviction(s) for a sexual offence(s) serving medium or long-term custodial sentences (≥ 5 years) and who were within two years of release. It explored how participants viewed their release from custody. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten participants; data were analysed using Visual Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (VIPA). Four superordinate themes were derived from the resulting dataset: (i) *The desire to disassociate from the 'sex offender' label*; (ii) *'I'm going to live a life to everybody else's rules': An uninspiring future*; (iii) *Obstacles and obstructions*; and (iv) *'I'll need all the support I can get': Successful reintegration is dependent on support*. In summary participants expressed feeling that their futures looked bleak as result of their convictions and the associated stigma. The implications for supporting men who have served medium or long-term custodial sentences for sexual convictions are outlined, and practical recommendations are put forward, such as the importance of licence conditions being individualised and proportionate to the risk of future harm that they pose.

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Introduction

Historically, strict licence conditions and a lack of adequate services have made re-entry into the community after release difficult for anyone with a conviction (Petersilia, 2001). Added to this, fears of social stigma are reported by individuals with specific types of convictions (Winnick & Bodkin, 2008). The task of reintegration for people convicted of sexual offences (PCOSOs) is even more challenging, in part due to the media presentation of such individuals as a homogeneous group comprised of people who will inevitably reoffend (Hanson et al., 2018). For example, a public survey in Florida found that residents

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predicted general sexual recidivism rates to be around 75% (Levenson et al., 2007). Despite media presentation and public belief, the reality is that most individuals with sexual offences are at low risk of reoffending (Bailey & Sample, 2017). While there is no denying the tremendous harm caused by sexual offending, UK recidivism data suggest that 87%–90% of men with sexual convictions will not commit another sexual offence (Mews et al., 2017), and those who do reoffend will most likely do so within the first five years of release (Hanson et al., 2018). It has been suggested that for those who do reoffend, challenges with reintegration into the community could be a contributing factor (Winder, 2022).

In response to the media's presentation of PCOSOs and the impact this has on public concerns around safety, UK Government public-protection policies have been designed to reassure the public of their safety by heavily restricting the movements, residence, and employment of people with sexual convictions (Laws, 2016). This has been partly to ensure that public confidence in the criminal justice system is not undermined. Arguably this has also meant that decision making around re-categorisation, release and subsequent management in the community is often overly stringent and above what is required to manage the actual risk of future harm for many individuals, due to fear of public backlash. Consequently, it is reported that PCOSOs anticipate difficulties in complying with their licence conditions (Allan et al., 2023).

Restrictions in the UK placed upon PCOSOs include licence conditions, monitoring by probation and the police, the award of a Sexual Harm Prevention Order (SHPO; comprises prohibitions pertinent to an individual's risk) and a requirement to be registered on the Sex Offender Register. (SOR requires individuals with a sexual conviction to present themselves to the police and provide a range of personal details within three days of a conviction when remaining in the community, or on release following a custodial sentence. There is also an annual requirement to renotify the police in person (Gov.uk, 2012)), until their term on the SOR ends. An individual serving over 30 months in custody would need to sign the SOR indefinitely or until they have successfully requested a cessation of the SOR. The police and probation have additional rights in terms of home searches and surveillance. Additionally, all people under probation supervision will be subject to individual licence conditions (HMPPS, 2021), although many are standardised.

Despite the relatively low recidivism and reconviction rates of PCOSOs in comparison with other offence types, Madden et al. (2003) reported that PCOSOs in the US were 7.5 times more likely to be re-arrested than people convicted of other offence types (Madden et al., 2003; cited in Price, 2006). It is important to note that this is a different statistic to reoffending or reconviction and it is perhaps reasonable to propose that having a sexual conviction may result in an increased likelihood of future accusations. Furthermore, difficulties abiding by multiple, isolating and sometimes unhelpful licence conditions could lead to licence breaches and subsequent re-arrest and recall due to restrictions being difficult to comply with (Teugels, 2023). Examples of potentially unhelpful licence conditions include those where individuals are prohibited from associating with another PCOSO (despite initially living in an approved premises alongside others with similar convictions), curfews and requirements to report back to an approved premises part way through the day, which can thwart attempts to find employment.

Although licence conditions and other strategies for community management of PCOSOs are intended to be preventative, not punitive, the weight of post-release supervision can be counterproductive because the level of restrictions make it difficult for

individuals to develop their motivational 'goods' or protective factors. For example, they may present challenges in securing employment (Croft & Winder, 2018; Tovey et al., 2023), finding accommodation (Lomas, 2021) and developing relationships (Brown et al., 2007). Consequently, it has been asserted that licence conditions can undermine the process of reintegration (McCarthy & Brunton-Smith, 2018). The Risk Need Responsivity principles (Andrews & Bonta, 2010), which is a guide to the assessment, treatment, and supervision of individuals with criminal convictions, advocate that treatment and supervision should be aligned to the level of risk and need that an individual has been assessed as having, via an empirically supported actuarial risk assessment tool. Penderson and Miller (2022) asserted that low risk individuals with sexual convictions who are supervised at high levels are more likely to have compliance problems.

While there remains a large focus on reducing the risk of future harm by people with a sexual conviction, there has been a corollary movement concerned with understanding and improving desistance from offending. Reoffending statistics highlight that most people who offend typically stop over time (see for example. Rocque et al., 2015). There has been an outpouring of desistance literature to explore reasons why people stop offending. Desistance literature shows that employment, relationships, and identity change over time and can all lead to desistance from crime (Donati, 2014; Weaver & McNeill, 2015). People have also been found to 'age out' of an offending lifestyle (Massoglia & Uggen, 2010). Within the desistance literature, Donati's (2014) Relational Theory advocates the importance of relationships in the desistance process, but the application of this to PCOSOs is complex, as this group is often socially isolated due to restrictions and societal stigma, and additional support may be needed to help these individuals form appropriate and supportive social bonds.

In fact, most research and theory around desistance has not been created with sexual offending in mind (McAlinden et al., 2017) and does not account for differences between the nature of how sexual offending is perpetrated in comparison to other offence types. For example, sexual offending does not appear to follow the traditional age-crime curve espoused by criminologists such as Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) and Harris (2013). In the UK, the number of older people convicted of sexual offending is growing; this is partly a result of older people perpetrating and being convicted of sexual offending, but also includes factors such as the increase in the number of people being convicted of sexual offences that they committed when they were younger (Crookes et al., 2022). Another difference is that sexual offending is typically committed by lone actors, with research suggesting that approximately one in ten sexual offences in the UK are conducted in a group setting (Kelly et al., 2005; Wright & West, 1981). These figures should be treated with caveats, however, as this field is particularly problematic to measure methodologically (Harkins & Dixon, 2013).

Misunderstandings and assumptions about desistance and sexual recidivism are also found in the field. For example, Göbbels et al.'s (2012) integrative theory of desistance considers desistance factors for PCOSOs across four stages, with the key starting point being when someone decides to stop offending. The authors postulate that 'it is important to emphasize that capitalizing on decisive momentum [the first stage] is only possible if a person is open to change' (p.454). Although Göbbels et al. (2012) affirmed that their integrative theory of desistance was a starting point and a work in progress, designed to encourage empirical research that could contribute to the evidence base on reintegration.

Arguably the first stage in the integrative theory of desistance assumes all people with sexual convictions need something in their life to change for them to stop offending and/or need to find a desire to change. This implies that there is a pattern of offending that needs breaking. This has been critiqued by others, such as Harris (2021) who describes desistance from crime as a natural process for the most people with convictions and argues that this includes people with sexual convictions. For many PCOSOs the consequences of their offending, along with their own and others' disapproval, is sufficient to prevent a reoccurrence, hence the generally low rates of reconviction (Mews et al., 2017). For example, in custody PCOSOs with one sexual conviction would generally be assessed as low risk via actuarial assessment measures and their risk of future harm would be considered manageable without the need for offending behaviour programmes. This is because the Risk Need Responsivity principle (Andrews & Bonta, 2010), advocates that the level of intervention should match the level of risk of future harm and the nature of the individual's needs. These principles have been supported through empirical studies to the extent that interventions designed for high-risk individuals, while successful with that group, have been found to increase the risk of recidivism when given to low-risk individuals (Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2004). For many PCOSOs, i.e. those considered to be low risk of future harm, the key focus should be on working to establish successful community reintegration through building strengths in relation to education, relationships, housing, and employment.

A welcome addition to the desistance literature was introduced by McNeill (2016) with the notion of 'tertiary desistance', proposing a sense of belonging within the community as a third factor of desistance. Tertiary desistance emphasises the importance of punishment having an end and the community accepting individuals back into society. McNeill and Graham (2021) point out that society needs to play their part in reintegration. Others have emphasised the relevance of social and internal identity changes in allowing someone to rejoin the community (see McAlinden et al., 2017).

These theories of desistance align well with the strength-based models that have emerged in the last 20 years. Foremost of these is the Good Lives Model (Laws & Ward, 2011; Ward, 2002) which highlights the importance of obtaining motivational goods to increase well-being and support an individual's reintegration, sense of agency, and to fuel desistance plans. The Good Lives Model (Ward, 2002) proposes that the rehabilitation of people with convictions should focus on helping PCOSOs to develop more fulfilling lives by building competencies that enable them to work towards goals that are aligned with their core values, and it highlights the importance of building wellbeing (Ward & Fortune, 2013). 'Goods' include practical goals such as having a safe home, intimate relationships and a meaningful job, which consequently can provide a sense of stability, support, independence and purpose. An absence of these is associated with an increase in risk factors for recidivism (Willis & Grace, 2009). Strengths based models are becoming more widely used in interventions and risk assessment due to the evidence supporting their utility in sexual recidivism risk management (de Vries Robbé et al., 2015; Willis et al., 2013). Failure to achieve such goods is associated with increased likelihood of recidivism (Beggs & Grace, 2010), yet achieving them whilst managing stigma and formal barriers is a particular challenge for individuals with sexual convictions.

For research on sexual desistance to be useful, it needs to be specifically focused on PCOSOs and their unique circumstances, since this type of offending brings with it

particular differences from other types of offending. Tewkesbury (2012) examined how PCOSOs in custody in the US perceived and responded to their social status. He reported that prisoners felt stigmatised by their offending, which began long before their release. It would be useful to explore this within a custodial setting to understand the impact this has on perceptions of release. As PCOSOs are also subject to forms of management that people with other types of offences are not subjected to (Corrigan, 2006), such as public notification (Megans Law in the US and Sarah's Law in the UK), it has been suggested that they may require additional support with reintegration (Tuschick et al., 2024). Suggestions of support have included resilience building, less severe formal social control, and more therapeutic services (Kras, 2022). This is because when people released from prison are supported with their well-being, they are less likely to reoffend (Maruna & Mann, 2019). Provisions currently in place aimed at supporting individuals with sexual convictions, with their reintegration and potentially their well-being, include HMPPS resources Maps for Change and the New Me MOT (HMPPS, 2024). Both provide empirically based structured supervision and support via the Community Offender Manager. However, they are not sufficient to tackle challenges that are out of the service users' control and are delivered under challenging conditions given the workload problems that probation staff are widely known to experience. Ultimately these provisions are aimed at supporting risk management in the community. Due to having a strength-based approach they aim to assist with successful reintegration, but their ultimate aim is around risk management rather than assisting individuals with challenges and barriers associated with social stigma, media scrutiny and challenging restrictions. Another provision in place to support the reintegration of PCOSOs, is Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA). Starting in the 1990s in Canada (Nigh, 1996), CoSA sought to support an isolated person with forming social bonds, they were adopted by several countries including the UK, to help support people convicted of sexual offences to reintegrate into society following a custodial sentence (Azoulay et al., 2019; Kitson-Boyce et al., 2018). Volunteers form a social circle around the individual, providing prosocial modelling, along with the social benefits of sharing a normative space and de-labelling (Fox, 2015). However, CoSA is a location and time-limited support system (Azoulay et al., 2019); support does not properly start until post release, and it does not address the wider societal problem of social stigma towards people convicted of sexual offences. Nor is it necessarily clear what 'CoSA means (Dwerryhouse et al., 2020). This is because where people released from prison are supported with their well-being, they are less likely to reoffend (Maruna & Mann, 2019).

Practical support just after release has been found to reduce the likelihood of reconviction and recall (see Gwynne et al., 2020). However there remains insufficient research directly exploring PCOSOs' experiences of rehabilitation whilst in prison, and expectations about release at that time (Blagden et al., 2016; Bullock & Bunce, 2020). Better awareness could help inform and direct pre – and post-release support structures and therefore contribute to better practice and policy; particularly for those serving medium and long-term sentences, who may have less support and stability set up in the community. This consequently could reduce demands on the prison and probation services by supporting desistance in a way that appropriately meets the assessed level of risk and need (Andrews & Bonta, 2010), promotes the acquisition of protective factors (see Seto et al., 2023) and reduces fears and misunderstandings about licence

conditions that contribute to recall. The transition between prison and the community is also important to consider, as exemplified by Hammett et al. (2001), who explored the transition into the community in terms of healthcare. They postulated that health needs were not adequately met, such as continuity of care, discharge planning, community linkage, housing and access to benefits. They called for improved understanding of patient and resource needs and better planning and coordination between healthcare and criminal justice systems (Binswanger et al., 2011). This is of note because age and a poor state of health upon release can place PCOSOs at a further disadvantage (Winder, 2022).

While there is a growing body of work around release, studies frequently omit PCOSOs and/or explore separate specific issues such as health, old age, employment, housing, restrictions, or family (e.g. Binswanger et al., 2011; Farkas & Miller, 2007; Lieb et al., 2011; Solomon et al., 2004; Wynton, 2010). Some studies relate to a range of factors but have focussed on offending without specifying offence type (e.g. Petersilia, 2001), some have focussed on females convicted of sexual offences (Tewksbury et al., 2012), many are based in the United States where resettlement processes differ to those in England and Wales (Winters et al., 2017; Tewksbury et al., 2012).

Research that does exist in this area has found PCOSOs to be concerned about ongoing stigmatisation on release (Kitson-Boyce et al., 2019) and fearful of assault (Crawley & Sparks, 2006). Existing research also found that elderly men with sexual convictions felt they had nothing in the community to go out for, with many in this situation viewing custody as preferable to the prospect of life in the community (Tovey et al., 2023).

Greater qualitative understanding of the potential difficulties that PCOSOs anticipate after release is required at the pre-release stage to improve awareness of the impact these could have on wellbeing and recognised desistance factors. This is of particular importance given that this time in their sentence could be considered a 'turning point' towards either desistance or persistence (Sampson & Laub, 2005). Previous research into release from custody has considered post-release experiences and has not accounted for the impact of pre-release anticipation. Adopting an idiographic approach to explore lived experiences of individuals in this situation could assist with development of understanding in this area. Moreover, both authors had worked with PCOSOs for many years and were mindful of the vulnerabilities individuals faced even in the conduct of research (see Waldram, 2007).

Quantitative research around release generally lacks the richness that can be achieved through qualitative methods. Therefore, applying principles of phenomenology and double hermeneutics enables us to explore how PCOSOs assign meaning to key experiences in their lives. This enables the authors to integrate participants' thoughts and feelings about their experiences with extant literature.

This research aimed to explore how men with convictions for one or more sexual offence, serving medium to long-term prison sentences viewed their release from custody, to provide insight into the thoughts and feelings of individuals faced with the prospect of release into the community in England and Wales. Understanding pre-release fears and expectations could help clarify what better support would look like for PCOSOs, prior to release and during the resettlement period, promoting wellbeing.

Method

Sample

The sample pool of participants was adult men serving a minimum of five years at an English prison for individuals with convictions for sexual offences. The determinate-sentenced prisoners included in the study were less than two years from their release date, and those serving indeterminate sentences felt that release or progression was a possibility within the next two years. Potential participants who met the criteria were selected at random from an establishment database. Fifteen prisoners were approached by internal mail and asked to respond to the invitation if they were interested in taking part or would like to find out more about the study. Of these, ten consented to take part in the research. According to Eatough and Smith (2017), ten participants constitute a more-than-adequate number for conducting interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

The participants were aged between 32 and 63 (mean = 48.2 years). When asked to describe their ethnicity, six identified as White British, one as White English, two as White Scottish, and one as White Jewish. Table 1 presents information about participants' sentences.

Visually enhanced IPA

This study used visually enhanced IPA (VIPA), which involves the use of photographs in interviews as potential stimuli for discussion, enhancing the semi-structured interview schedule (Brunsden & Goatcher, 2007). Visual methods are increasing in popularity within qualitative psychological research (Glegg, 2019; Pain, 2012). Visual prompts can yield several benefits (Banyard et al., 2015; Brunsden & Goatcher, 2007), such as assisting with participant engagement through greater consideration of learning styles and reducing desirability bias. In the interviews, the participants were asked to speak about what the images meant to them when considering their future release. Providing images in interview (employing VIPA rather than IPA) aimed to help prompt participants thinking. It was accepted that to some degree the images may direct the participants thinking (as a visual addition to questions) but whilst the meaning of them was left to the individuals interpretation. The method also provided participants with something to focus on in the room, they could move the pictures around as they wished, helping to provide a more relaxed environment with a kinaesthetic option, more thinking time and a less intensive interview environment. It was thought that this method would also be more inclusive to potential participants with learning differences and disabilities.

Stage 1: creation of materials for the research

The pool of photographs used in the VIPA study was developed from a research focus group of men serving prison sentences for sexual offences. The group of volunteers were told about the nature of the proposed study, and a brainstorm of ideas was facilitated with individuals encouraged to contribute different factors that came to mind for them when thinking about release from custody. The group agreed on 13 ideas. The lead researcher used the suggestions from the research focus group and took 13 photographs of objects, drawings, and unidentifiable places that represented the ideas

Table 1. Participant sentencing data.

Participant number	Sentence type	Approximate time in custody
P1	Life	12 years (current sentence)
P2	Life	19 + years (current sentence)
P3	Life	14 years
P4	Determinate	5 years
P5	IPP	8 years
P6	Life	20 years (released at 17.5, recalled after 2 months)
P7	IPP	8 years
P8	IPP	10 years
P9	Determinate	6 years
P10	IPP	7.5 years

identified, for use in the research interviews to help prompt the thinking of participants. No people were photographed, with the exception of one photograph of two hands holding on to each other, no other parts of the people were included. Where people were depicted in the images simple line drawings were used. The photographs were approved by the establishment's Governor before being used in the interviews. (See Appendices for a list of images in the photographs).

Stage 2: interviews

Participant access was granted following ethical approval by HM Prison and Probation Service (*ref: 13032017*). Potential participants were invited to take part in the research, and those who expressed an interest were met by the first author. During this meeting they were given further information about the research and an opportunity to ask questions. At this stage consent was obtained from those who wished to take part. All interviews were conducted by the first author in a prison interview room.

The photographs were presented early in the interviews, after initial re-introductions revisiting of consent and reminding of the purpose of the interview. Photographs were placed on the table between the interviewer and the interviewee as potential stimuli to enhance the discussion (please see Appendices for more details regarding these photographs). It was explained that the photographs aimed to prompt discussion. Participants could pick and choose what pictures they wanted to talk about and in what order. They could refer to as many or as few photographs as they wished and could discuss other thoughts that were not represented in the photographs. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing the researcher to engage in dialogue with the participant and ask questions based on their responses. Participants were encouraged to 'tell their stories' (Waldram, 2007) regarding what came to mind when they thought about their release. This included encouraging participants to talk about what they felt their futures might look like, with a focus on their thoughts and feelings about the different elements that they discussed. They were advised that the photographs aimed to prompt discussion and could be referred to as much or as little as they wished. Prompt questions included eliciting further information through questions such as 'what does this mean for you? What are your thoughts about that? How do you feel about that? Can tell me a bit more about that? In addition to asking questions to clarify information that the participant presented. At the end participants were asked 'Is there anything else that comes to mind that is not represented in the pictures? Questions were also asked to ascertain which areas of discussion they felt most strongly about.

Interviews lasted between 27 and 97 min (Mean = 57 min). They were audio-recorded using a passcode-protected device and transcribed using a primarily secretarial style. However, some features of Jefferson's (2004) style of transcription were recorded, such as pauses and voice inflections. Names and places were anonymised. Participants were advised of their right to withdraw from the study through the participant information and consent forms. They were also reminded of this on the debrief forms that they were provided with at the end of the interview. The interviewer was experienced in working with individuals with sexual convictions in custody and was sufficiently trained to respond appropriately to any concerns about the well-being of the participants in terms of adopting a generally supportive and empathic approach as well as formal processes. They were also mindful to monitor their own well-being. Participants were made aware that they could end the interview at any point and/or take breaks; they were reminded of support available after the interview. No participants left the interview visibly distressed or reported feeling distressed at the end of the interview.

Mode of analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed for the analysis in this work (Smith & Osborn, 2004). IPA assumes that the participant will reflect their underlying thoughts and feelings in their descriptions of events, and it views participants as experts in the area being explored (Reid et al., 2005). IPA allows the researcher to interpret participants' accounts to generate insights into the research area; it relies on the reflections and psychological interpretations of the researchers and acknowledges the potential influence of the researchers in creating a theoretical understanding.

The data analysis sought to obtain an understanding of how the participants viewed release, and it followed the IPA guide outlined by Smith and Osborn (2004). This involved reading and re-reading of the transcripts, note taking, and developing initial clusters of themes for each transcript individually before grouping them together across the accounts. On an individual transcript level, codes were identified by noting anything of interest linguistically, conceptually and on a descriptive level. Codes were clustered using colour coding to organise them into similar areas which were clustered into personal experiential themes. Quotes were collated from each transcript to ensure each theme was grounded in the data. After each transcript was analysed fully, theme maps were developed; the personal experiential themes from each of the transcripts were brought together and group experiential themes were developed across the dataset using physical clustering of themes on paper. This method enabled themes to be moved around and regrouped until final overarching group experiential themes and subsequent sub themes were identified with suitable labels chosen to represent the theme. This was a lengthy process that involved an iterative procedure of checking and rechecking of data, with grounding in the data via quotes, and checking for representation across the transcripts.

The second author accessed the transcripts before reviewing and discussing the analysis created by the lead researcher. Several stages of analysis and theming took place, with re-checking and re-grounding back to the transcripts before the final thematic structure was agreed. This iterative process of cross-checking (between researchers) and re-checking (between initial themes and transcript data) helps to underpin reliability in qualitative

research, echoing the techniques of inter-rater reliability and test – retest reliability in quantitative research methods (Murphy & Winder, 2016).

Results

The analysis of the data highlighted four themes. (i) *The desire to disassociate from the ‘sex offender’ label*; (ii) *‘I’m going to live a life to everybody else’s rules’: An uninspiring future*; (iii) *Obstacles and obstructions*; and (iv) *‘I’ll need all the support I can get’: Successful reintegration is dependent on support*. These themes are unpacked in this section.

Theme 1: the desire to disassociate from the ‘sex offender’ label

This theme encompasses participants’ desire to be disassociated from the ‘sex offender’ label. It was noted by the researchers that despite the research topic, there was limited direct discussion from the participants about sexual offending and the impact of being a man with a sexual conviction. When participants did refer to their sexual offending, they did so in a way that, was brief, indirect, discrete, and in reference to a desire to move forward. For example, participant 1 talks about a positive experience of interventions and reflected:

[staff] don’t call them criminals or offenders; they call them participants. (P1)

The term ‘sex offender’ is not used, but the point is clear: P1 values times when he is not labelled by his offending and wants to be viewed as an individual. His comment demonstrates an indication towards his offending without talking directly about it. The participants talked about having made changes to their identity whilst in custody and suggested that they wanted these changes to be seen and accepted by others. For example, having completed offending behaviour programmes, which for him involved acknowledging what he did and the labels associated with that. P4 felt it he should be able to move past it and put it behind him.

Extract 1

I said I’m the monster in the room. I am the evil one here. It doesn’t matter what you lot have done, [I] know I’m worse than you. Now okay, I, I still don’t like that, you know. I mean I can’t like that; I can’t like who I was, I can’t like what I did. You know. There’s no way. But it, to move beyond that. (P4)

P4 described viewing his offending self as a ‘monster’ and ‘evil’, demonstrating his acceptance of those labels which he expects society to give him as a result of his offending. Suggesting that he felt the labels were justified initially before he had addressed his offending. However, since rehabilitative work had assisted him in transitioning to a future self, an important factor in desistance literature (Göbbels et al., 2012); Participants expressed wanting society to acknowledge the work they had done and accept them for who they are now. A sense of belonging and feeling accepted within society is linked with desistance (McNeill, 2016) and therefore is a positive goal. Despite this, participants described fearing that their lives could be tainted by the ‘sex offender’ label indefinitely, leaving them permanently disadvantaged and typecast as demonstrated here by P9:

Extract 2

Will there ever be a stage in anybody's life where they're not thinking about what [I] did? ... that's always going to come first. And that I'm going to come closely behind it. But the first thing is, what you did and why you're on a register. (P9)

P9 demonstrates concern that his 'sex offender' identity will enter every room before him, with his present self following in its shadow without acknowledgment. He expects that his non-offending identity will get little attention, regardless of his attempts to demonstrate it and any personal achievements that he makes. Research asserts that there is a persistent societal attitude that men with sexual convictions are inherently deviant and cannot change (Willis et al., 2010). Therefore the 'sex offender' label is a permanent master status (Goffman, 1963, 2014), because this group of individuals is often dehumanised by society. For example, seen as demonic or like a monster (Harper & Hogue, 2015a). This indicates a lack of public belief that redemption is possible for individuals who have committed sexual offences, a concern that was echoed by other participants. For example, P2 expected to carry the 'sex offender' label forever, but he fantasised about being able to hold his 'head high' one day:

Extract 3

Had enough. Hang my boots up. I want to be able to see people as I walk down the street with my head high. Not apologising to people day and night. (P2)

P2's comments about hanging his boots up implies that he moved on from his previous offending behaviour and wants society to accept him back, without constant reminders of his past and not constantly feeling like he should be saying sorry for his past behaviour. Participants talked about the impact of the ongoing need to comply with the statutory notification requirements on release, which is colloquially known as signing the sex offenders' register:

Extract 4

It doesn't matter, how many years, mine was in 1997, it doesn't matter. Erm, you're still walking about with a pink bit of paper, see what I mean, and erm, it can be a bit hair-raising. (P7)

P7's description of the 'pink paper' being 'hair-raising' highlights how the process of signing the sex offenders' register was a frightening annual ordeal, akin to a public branding. P7 explained that he had to wait in a queue to and that only those on the sexual offenders' register would have a pink form, and everyone knew what the pink form meant. Thus, standing in a public queue, holding something that identified them as having a sexual conviction, invited further stigma from the wider population of people with criminal convictions. This echoes the findings of Harris and Levenson (2021) regarding the 'traumagenic impact of life on "the list"'; all participants asserted that they felt stuck with the label.

In the present study, to counterbalance their concerns about stigma, the participants were keen to show a positive sense of self by talking about their positive attributes and aspirations. For example, P5 talked about being open and honest when arrested, helping the police because he 'wanted to'. He felt it was unfair for others to view his offending as

something that reflected his entire personality. This was reflected across the majority of participants who sought to demonstrate their positive attributes by talking about their achievements. For example, P5 proudly talked about being an ‘enhanced prisoner’ and having ‘trusted jobs in the prison’. P9 described himself as ‘happy with who I am as a person’. Similarly, other participants demonstrated pride in their personality or work:

Extract 5

I’ve done everything; I’ve 100% chucked myself into every course available to me. (P7)

Here P7 expresses feeling that he’s worked hard to address his offending. His use of the word ‘chucked’ indicates that he had wholeheartedly thrown himself into every opportunity he had been given and was eager to work with those who were supporting him to move forward and desist from future reoffending. Other participants talked through the interventions they had done and the effort they had put into making change. These included accredited offending behaviour programmes such as thinking skills programmes, different varieties of the suite of programmes designed for individuals with sexual convictions, unaccredited courses focussing on drug and alcohol use and various educational and vocational qualifications. And while valuing and engaging in pro-social activity, and positive relationships with prosocial support are all believed to contribute to reducing sexual reoffending rates (de Vries Robbé et al., 2015), these were not suggested by participants as evidence that they had moved away from the sex offender label (instead their mention of interventions, which aim to help participants to understand and manage their criminogenic needs implies they viewed these as the best way to demonstrate change). Protective and positive factors should be recognised, encouraged, and developed in individuals with sexual convictions as part of risk reduction and community reintegration.

Many participants reported having chaotic lives prior to their offending, but this feeling of difference from others intensified once they acquired the ‘sex offender’ label in prison. P1 talked about wanting to be a ‘normal member of the public’ but reflected that he felt permanently ‘ostracised’ since receiving his conviction. The sense that it would be extremely difficult if not impossible to become free of the stigma of sexual offending was discussed by all participants in some form. This expectation is supported by research demonstrating that individuals with sexual convictions typically live in worse conditions after release than they did before custody (Göbbels et al., 2012). It is understandable for men with sexual convictions to want to reject the ‘sex offender’ label in the hope of a positive identity. Willis and Letourneau (2018) suggest that continued use of the term ‘sex offender’ can lead to misconceptions that obstruct rehabilitation and desistance, making rejecting it an understandable goal.

Theme 2: ‘I’m going to live a life to everybody else’s rules’: an uninspiring future

There was divergence in how participants talked about the future. Some said they did not want to think about it because it felt too negative. For example: ‘I just see the worst. I’d rather I stayed as I was. I’d be happy’. (P10). Others, such as P7, felt there were too many barriers preventing them from planning ahead. But either perspective suggests perceived hardship. Consequently, future plans were modest. They were also mostly realistic, demonstrating that the participants understood the restrictions and challenges that

they were likely to face. The goals identified by the participants could be considered as quite minor achievements, particularly when imagined alongside participants anticipated challenges. The participants' pessimism tended to override their hopes for a meaningful future, which is a concern when considering the value of meaningful lives in reducing reoffending (Ward, 2002). Some participants lacked motivation for release. Others tried to be positive, but those who were focused on short-term benefits, were vague or based on novelty:

Extract 6

I just want to be able to chill out, do what I've gotta do, and just relax and have a ... long and prosperous life now ... I'm dreading it but I'm, also looking forward to it ... I'm looking forward to moving to a new area and starting a new life. (P1)

P1's use of the phrase 'long and prosperous life' seems generic with little meaning, as he does not offer any specific examples of what he intends to do. His statement about 'looking forward' to 'starting a new life' also appears non-specific and misplaced alongside his use of the term 'dreading', which is an intense, visceral feeling. Similarly, other participants' statements suggested that they had limited ideas about the future:

Extract 7

Freedom for me. Because I've been away, too long ... And, doing things I like, like doing. (P8)

Extract 8

Just being free. Just being free mostly. That's the one for me. It means I can do things I couldn't, can't do in prison like er, walk around and go fishing. (P2)

Extract 9

Well I like going walking, I like walking. (P3)

'Freedom' and 'walking' may be short-term novelties given that prisoners cannot walk many steps in prison without meeting a gate or fence, yet examples like these all highlight the desire to have agency and choices in their life; this initial feeling of agency may be short lived and not enduring or substantive enough to provide sufficient sanctuary to protect against the challenges, which were identified much more clearly. Some participants had been in custody for so long, or were so concerned by challenges, that they appeared to lack imagination about future possibilities and opportunities. This led some to question if release was worthwhile for them:

Extract 10

Have a steak. (laughs slightly) have, have a proper meal. Yeah, but you know that's like joking, I mean at the end of the day, I could do without it, ... I mean I'm [age] next month ... when you're, you reach your older years, (sighs) is it worth it? ... I've missed a pint. (P10)

P10 felt that his future opportunities were limited by his age in addition to his convictions. He recognised that there are novelty factors to look forward to such as wider food choices, but he recognises that he's done without them for so long, he's got used to not having them. Therefore, being able to have these things would not counterbalance his anticipated difficulties. Other participants suggested experiences they were looking forward to, but with hesitancy due to not knowing if they would materialise or whether attempts

to start a hobby, for example, would result in rejection and further stigma. For example, P3 would have liked to take up badminton but did not know if he would be accepted into a club. He was concerned about having to disclose his offending to the organisers and consequently being told he cannot join. The requirement for men with sexual convictions to disclose their convictions on numerous occasions (for example, because of various licence conditions in relation to their interpersonal relationships and/or when asked by potential employers) creates barriers to rebuilding and reintegrating (Harper et al., 2018; Winder, 2022). This was evident when participants talked about finding future employment. For example, P9 had resigned himself to the belief that he would not be able obtain employment that he would enjoy and find fulfilling:

Extract 11

You know with masks on, and you, so that there's almost, there's barely a human form there. It's then like a machine, almost. And I thought, yeah well you never thought you would be doing that, but you could well be ... I never thought it would be me, because I'd always tried to make the best. (P9)

P9 describes monotonous work, wearing extensive protective clothing in an environment that is literally toxic. His phrases 'barely a human form' and 'like a machine' indicate his expectation that he may only be able to get a job requiring little skill, given his sexual conviction, suggesting there is no place for him as an individual in the employment industry. The only option will be for him to take the jobs that no one else wants to do. Men with sexual convictions are likely to be limited to employment that require the fewest background checks, so his concerns are realistic (Haslewood-Pocsik et al., 2008). Other participants suggested plans to start up their own businesses as a way of re-entering the employment industry without needing approval. Problems with future employment were clear issues for the participants, and any positives were small or difficult for them to predict with confidence.

P3 wanted to go into supported living upon release, but what he described was a similar lifestyle to custody, suggesting that he may have been gaining feelings of safety and comfort from the prison environment and was seeking a similar setting in the community. This suggests that P3 may have become institutionalised, meaning he had become so used to the environment that he had adapted to it, which may have reduced his tendency to act and think independently. He also described fear about release, mistrust of the police, and fear of antisocial peers, as did numerous other participants. According to Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, safety and shelter are basic needs that must be met before others can be achieved. P3 was focusing on meeting basic needs before he could consider anything else. P4 was also fearful and had difficulties being positive about the future:

Extract 12

I can't say honestly that there's anything I'm excited about. I know I should be. I should be excited about being released. (pause) but (sighs) I, I almost see it as a kind of, not a backwards step, certainly not, it, it is progress, progression. It is, it is moving on. Not necessarily moving up. Simply because everything I have, I have it here. Within the prison environment. You know, and outside I have nothing. (P4)

P4 was anxious about release and struggled to think of positives. He was comfortable in prison, and outside has 'nothing', which is a daunting prospect. His comment, 'I should be

excited', indicates that he was aware that release is typically viewed as progress and freedom, and he was therefore trying to be positive. He mentioned 'not being a number in the system' and regaining individuality as positives, but this was not sufficient to compensate for his high levels of anxiety and uncertainty. This was echoed by other participants; for example, P10 expressed similar concerns:

Extract 13

It's not release ... I've got more respect and more freedom in here than I'm ever going to get out there. (P10)

This raises questions about the meaning of freedom. Due to the obstacles and obstructions, they anticipated, participants felt they had greater freedom from stigma and hardship whilst in prison than they expected to have in the community. There was a sense of feeling safe in custody because they were surrounded by other people branded with the same stigma and staff who were trained to work in a non-judgmental way with them. It is of note that the residency of these participants meant that they were not in contact with people in prison with solely non-sexual convictions; individuals with non-sexual convictions may have shared a very different perspective.

Theme 3: obstacles and obstructions

This theme represents the challenges that participants identified and the feelings that they experienced as a result of those challenges. They described these challenges in very visual terms as obstacles and obstructions on their future path. For example, 'walking on eggshells' (P5) and 'walking on hot coals' whilst their 'hands are tied' (P10). Participants felt that they would have to be careful where they trod upon release because any foundations they built would be fragile and likely to break, and anywhere they went for support and stability could burn them, i.e. result in them being reprimanded or returned to custody. Throughout this, they felt bound by restrictions and stigma, preventing them from protecting themselves if they fall. Obstacles included proving themselves to the authorities, opportunities being limited by restrictions that are part of their Sexual Harm Prevention Order (SHPO), a lack of social support, stigma and fear, poor relationships with professionals, barriers to developing intimacy, requirements to disclose their convictions, and impacts on family. These challenges were anticipated alongside additional personal difficulties (such as mental health issues, trauma, addictions, learning difficulties, and institutionalisation), making the situation more daunting.

Participants described 'great anticipation' and 'concerns and worries' (P5), 'dreading it' (P1), feeling 'nervous' (P8), and 'a great deal of anxiety' (P4). P7 was worried because he did not have positive experiences of living in the community to draw on. Before prison, P6 did not look after himself properly and was an alcoholic. Having never lived successfully in the community is an additional challenge, as participants felt inexperienced in this respect. The lack of confidence and clear plans meant that they feared negative scenarios such as homelessness or recall to custody.

Participants talked about practical matters such as paying for identity documents (e.g. driving licences) and deposits on accommodation. P7 described getting the money required for a deposit as an 'impossibility', and P5 believed 'there's not a lot of potential' for gaining employment to pay for accommodation. These concerns demonstrate the

need for support, structure, and planning to protect the well-being of individuals through stressful times. Control and agency are an important part of a healthy personality (Declerck et al., 2006), so the lack of control felt by participants is concerning.

Participants often saw professionals as obstructive, reflecting the findings of research into men with sexual convictions who had been recalled to custody (Croft & Winder, 2018; Fitzalan Howard, 2019). This lack of trust is problematic, as engaging in meaningful relationships with providers of support is protective in reducing the risk of reoffending (de Vries Robbé et al., 2015). Distrust manifested in different ways: for example, P6 felt that professionals gave prisoners false expectations of release, and P5 expressed having 'zero faith' in his Community Offender Manager (COM). Lack of trust is a concern for the working relationship (Wilson et al., 2010). P5's experience of his COM worried him:

Extract 14

If I get one reply a year, then I'm lucky ... My last, two paroles that should have took place didn't take place because they didn't even turn up ... I've tried, communicating, I've tried, and it's just, getting nowhere. Which is frustrating to say the least. And I'm just, it doesn't put me in any better head space in terms of, confidence of what it's gonna be when I get out. I can't see them suddenly changing this when I've been released. (P5)

P9 felt that his efforts were not reciprocated, and that probation were not investing in him. COMs have limited time to provide support to clients (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2019). The misalignment of expectations builds failure into the system, reducing trust, which could prevent individuals from optimising time with professionals. P6 talked about lost job opportunities on release because COMs were too slow at completing the required security checks. While participants felt let down by COMs, they viewed police officers as a greater threat:

Extract 15

I can't do nothing; my hands are tied for anything. I can't protect myself; there's no protection against myself now, off anyone, not just the police off anyone, you know. So, they can do what they want can't they. ... If they ever see me in a van, if they ever see me, I think they're going to pull me over. ... as soon as I'm out they're gonna make it known that they know I'm out. (P10)

P10 felt he would be at the mercy of the police: his 'hands are tied' with restrictions and convictions which, given his distrust, is likely to feel like a vulnerable position to be in. P3 described the police like a gang of bullies following him, with himself as the victim:

Extract 16

When I was in [name of town] even when going by in motors the coppers on beep beep beep. And they're all winding, because I've been done for a lot of police assaults you know. And they're all going oh he's an easy target, wind him up, wind him up. (P3)

Viewing himself as an 'easy target' suggests that he felt vulnerable to harassment. Other participants were concerned by what they had heard about law-enforcement practices in other countries:

Extract 17

The phone apps and mapping and photos, and that's pretty scary ... I hope they don't do

that in this country. Because I think it will drive people underground. I've witnessed what happens when people are driven away from society. They commit crimes. (P9)

P9 was trying not to be influenced by stories, but he felt that the processes drive people to the outskirts of society, where their behaviour is less likely to be controlled by social norms (Wrong, 1963). His worry of being 'given a hard time' by police links to the bleak view that men with sexual convictions are universally disliked. Educating those about to be released and dispelling any myths is likely to help in situations where their fears are unrealistic.

The potential for the family members of the participants to suffer societal backlash was viewed as an obstacle that added to their guilt, and they were fearful that it could drive support away. These fears are not unjustified: those who reside with PCOSOs can experience negative effects if the community around them becomes aware (Levenson et al., 2007; Pryor et al., 2012). Men with sexual convictions have reported difficulties in protecting their family from societal backlash (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). Given the importance of family ties in rehabilitation, this is a significant obstacle (Farmer, 2017; May et al., 2008). Participants also expressed fears of what 'could happen', reinforced by stories that other prisoners had told them as well as their own experiences:

Extract 18

My car got trashed on my driveway, my garage got, loads of nasty graffiti written all over it, the windows got, bricks all through them ... It's a case of not wanting to be, shutting myself off in a flat somewhere, scared to go out the door ... when that all begins, stay safe. (P5)

P5 experienced hate crime whilst on licence and predicted that he may have to hide away on release. Fear of stigma (Blacker & Griffin, 2010) can lead to social isolation, consequently increasing the risk of reoffending (Miner & Munns, 2005).

The participants spoke of barriers to employment, hobbies, housing, and relationships due to restrictions and the requirement for them to disclose their offending in these situations. These are realistic concerns (Brown et al., 2007; Tovey et al., 2023). P6 talked about the impact that obstructions to employment could have on his self-esteem, because professional agencies previously withdrew support when he disclosed his convictions:

Extract 19

You just feel useless, and like, you go into job agencies. And as soon as you say, they ask you if you've got a criminal record, they don't want to know ... (P6)

This links to previous research (Lasher & McGrath, 2012) suggesting that restrictions cause harm by increasing social isolation and barriers to employment. This is problematic, as social inclusion and employment are both linked to desistance (Seleznow et al., 2002). Participants identified obstacles/obstructions to hobbies, such as curfews, finances, and exclusion zones. This is also concerning, as engaging in structured leisure activities is considered protective in reducing the risk of sexual reoffending (de Vogel et al., 2012). P8 talked about the restrictive nature of licence conditions:

Extract 20

Tied to the register effectively. I think that's the concern. It's the duty of disclosing, which, which, (slight pause) my perspective as a prisoner, is that that's gonna hamper me. (P8)

The 'duty of disclosing' and being 'tied to the register' serves as a reminder that although P8 will not be locked behind prison bars, licence conditions and the requirements of notifying the Sex Offender Register will keep him locked away from many opportunities.

P10 describes the dilemma of disclosure, alongside the idea of living a lie if he does not disclose:

Extract 21

going to feel like, I'm being false. If I, if I'm in the pub with someone if, you know having a laugh. I'm going to be thinking, ... if I told them the truth about me now, then we wouldn't be having this good time. (P10)

This represents an internal struggle. P10 feels friendships are unobtainable because anyone who knew about his offending would reject him. P10 views himself as a stigmatised person (Goffman, 1963, 2014) who cannot achieve social acceptance. A similar obstacle/obstruction was disclosing convictions to future partners. Some intended to avoid relationships due to fear of rejection:

Extract 22

It's that fine balance of (slight pause) building that trust up, with someone before you can, feel safe to tell them. It's the fear of like, telling them and then they go tell everyone else in the area ... but it's finding the right time to do it. And when is the right time to do it. (P6)

P6 is concerned about the 'fine balance' between telling someone soon enough, in line with licence conditions, and feeling safe to disclose. This is a challenging dilemma that could easily tip the scales towards rejection. P7 plans to avoid relationships for this reason:

Extract 23

I'm not gonna have any involvement with anybody, and probation says that's wrong ... the judge even told you that being a loner is bad for you ... I say okay. So, I meet somebody, well you have to tell them, about your past and your present convictions. I went all my past convictions? And they went aye. I said they'd run a mile. I said, I'm not gonna get involved. (P7)

Professionals have reminded P7 that social isolation is a risk factor for sexual recidivism, but he worries that potential partners will 'run a mile' to get away from him if he discloses, leaving him feeling alone, abandoned, and rejected. This makes relationships or friendships seem unobtainable. Participants felt torn between the obstacles that come with seeking intimate relationships or alternatively accepting that they will be excluded from romantic / sexual relationships. This highlighted that support is required with such delicate challenges as disclosure, typically a requisite in intimate relationships for people with a sexual conviction, otherwise we leave people at greater risk of isolation which in turn may impact the likelihood of recidivism and undermine desistance (Jennings & Fox, 2016; Perrin et al., 2018).

Theme 4: 'I'll need all the support I can get': successful reintegration is dependent on support

The participants expected to rely on external support and structure on release due to the fragility of their situations. This was also due in some cases to their own

institutionalisation and the number of challenges they anticipated (see Theme 3). P6 highlights that he 'needs structure'. He felt this was lacking on his previous release, and that the absence of structure led to his recall. This supports the findings of previous research (Croft & Winder, 2018) and a report by HM Inspectorate of Probation (2019), which concluded that planning for release was poor. P8 hoped to reside in supported living, stating, 'I need all the support I can get', indicating he that did not believe he would cope without it. P4 had 'no family, friends, or acquaintances' and was expecting to rely on external support from charities and professional services. This sense of needing significant support in all areas was echoed by participants. For example, P2:

Extract 24

I'm looking into all different supports for when I get out, I just want to grab the whole lot and use em, to help me. Yeah, whatever's available I'm gonna take it. (P2)

P2's intention to 'grab ... whatever's available' suggests that he was desperate for help from anyone who would be willing to help him in some way. Participants felt they needed help for many reasons, but often to help them navigate their way back into employment.

For example, P1 wanted to start out as a mechanic on release, He stated, 'but I don't know who to see ... I wouldn't know'. He was counting on getting a lot of support on release to take him through each step:

Extract 25

Thankfully I'll have someone, to be able to sort of, not coach me ... So, to assist me through that period. (P1)

Often, the quantities of support that participants expressed feeling that they were going to need were significant, if not, unfortunately unrealistic when considering that at the end of 2021 there were 240,000 being supervised by the Probation Service in England and Wales (Parliament UK, 2023). With some Community Offender Managers (COM) having as many as 80 or more individuals on their case load (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021). This means individuals are unlikely to be able to rely on their COM for the level of support that many participants are describing anticipating that they will need and realistically will have to find such support through other means. For example, P6 stated:

Extract 26

Maybe having a chat every night with someone at the hostel. See him [Names Community Offender Manager], like twice a week, more regular, get the PPU, more involved. ... Yeah. And just someone like, I can meet up with once or twice a week to have coffee with and just a general chat ... like counsellor or mentors that I can meet with during the day that I can have a coffee and chat with. (P6)

P6 wanted companionship, and in the absence of family and friends, until he is able to establish social networks, he expects to be reliant upon professionals, such as his Community Offender Manager, or other hostel staff to provide this. Based on information that they had picked up about Probation hostels, participants had expectations about what level of support would be available. P1 hoped for a relay-type system in the hostel, with staff constantly available to chat:

Extract 27

You'll have two on two off. So, you'll always have a key worker available to you. Whether it's a psychologist or probation. (P1)

Similar requirements were echoed by other participants. For example, P6 stated that he wanted daily support from his COM. This is a positive and pro-active goal, particularly considering that social isolation, poor emotional attachments, and emotional loneliness are prevalent among men with sexual convictions (Miner & Munns, 2005). Addressing this is an important part of managing risk when considering that these factors are linked to hostility and aggression (Check et al., 1985) and maintenance of sexual offending (Marshall, 2010). As a result, men with sexual convictions often require a solid support system to help counteract such risk factors. However, there are practical implications to having daily support with a Community Offender Manager, or even with hostel key workers, and expectations need to be set regarding what support will be available and when. Support also needs to be given to help individuals to establish a wider support network in preparation for and upon release.

Most participants did not expect support from family or friends. P9 was an exception as he had a relationship, but he feared that it could come 'crashing down'. This indicates that the support that he did have was fragile and weakened by his conviction, therefore offering him little security due to the potential of it being taken away at any time. The use of the term crashing down implies the end of the relationship would be catastrophic and consequently he would need significant support, landing him in a situation similar to that of the other participants. Some participants felt that if they did not get enough support on release they would not succeed and would find themselves back in prison.

Extract 28

If I've not got the network support that I need, I said it's what's going to happen [return to custody] ... I said I need the network support. I says everybody has to be there; I don't care who they are. I said clergyman, priest has to be there (laughs) ... I said to [COM] I said, when I go out, I said if there's one little gap, I said forget it, that's it. (P7)

P7 felt that successful reintegration was dependent on support, and he therefore felt reliant on it. His comment about including the 'clergyman' or 'priest', although light-hearted in tone, demonstrates desperation, as P7 did not identify as religious. Most participants' comments indicated a similar external locus of control (Phares, 1976) and a lack of autonomy. Research has shown the importance of support, and particularly the relationship between the individual and their COM, in enabling and influencing change (Burnett & McNeill, 2005). However, when high levels of support are provided initially, this may not always be sustainable and therefore consideration needs to be given regarding how it can be reduced or altered over time. This is a particular concern with rehabilitation initiatives such as Circles of Support and Accountability, which typically only last 12–18 months, in which the drop off of support post CoSA (in this case for a young person's CoSA) was highlighted in the evaluation as being worrying (Blagden et al., 2024).

Discussion

This study examined how men with sexual convictions serving medium and long-term sentences viewed their release. The participants' accounts focused on their anticipation of significant challenges, alongside a lack of incentives, due to restrictions and social stigma. The narratives highlight significant reliance on professional support due to a lack of personal support, yet also a lack of trust and faith in professionals. This creates a problematic situation. The participants indicated that they wanted to disassociate from the 'sex offender' label, but they believed that this was an unachievable goal. In part this study adds to Tewkesbury (2012)'s study in the US by providing a perspective from individuals with sexual convictions experiencing the English criminal justice system.

The themes link to existing models of rehabilitation, including the Risk – Need – Responsivity model (Bonta & Andrews, 2007; RNR). For example, the theme 'obstacles and obstructions' illustrates how overly stringent licence conditions and poor individualisation of supervision (both contrary to the responsivity principle) may actually increase risk by fostering hopelessness, isolation, and disengagement. Participants' distrust of probation services and perceptions of being over-supervised despite low risk are clear markers of poor responsivity. In the theme focusing on support, we show that although participants recognise the importance of supervision, a mismatch between their needs and what is provided creates a disconnect. Thus, many participants describe needing structure, yet they report a lack of faith in professionals and inconsistency in communication. Finally, RNR cautions against over-intervening with individuals classed as low risk, as it can inadvertently increase recidivism. Participants' accounts echo this concern (e.g. P5's description of licence conditions being 'just there to make you feel worse').

The themes also link to the Good Lives Model (GLM; Ward & Brown, 2004), with both themes 1 and 2 (disassociating from the sex offender label and uninspiring future) reflecting thwarted GLM principles. Thus, the lack of access to employment/housing, the feared rejection in relationships, and the absence of an opportunity to demonstrate change are all obstacles that directly block attainment of GLM *primary goods* such as mastery, relatedness, and inner peace. The GLM's emphasis on strengths and aspirations is clearly undermined in participants' accounts of bleak futures and fear-driven lives post-release.

The themes also link to strengths-based models that focus on protective factors against sexual recidivism (de et al., 2012). In fact, participants identified many *anticipated barriers* to protective factors such as a lack of social support (Theme 4), employment difficulties (Theme 2), and housing instability (Theme 3). Participants expressed that efforts to build strengths (like taking part in interventions, educational courses, or engaging with support services) often went unrecognised due to persistent stigma, undermining their motivation. Moreover, participants highlighted their fear of isolation and social rejection (and hence lack of protective factors relating to emotional support and connectedness).

The themes highlight anticipated difficulties in securing external motivational protective factors against sexual reoffending. The participants also expressed concerns about safety; linking to Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs where the most basic and pressing need is physical safety. Challenges around meeting basic needs can prevent men with sexual convictions from focusing on other needs, such as those related to belonging,

achievement, and self-actualisation, which underpin the principles of the Good Lives Model. These are all considered to be protective against reoffending.

The findings of the present study indicate that men with sexual convictions serving medium and long-term sentences expect to rely heavily on support from government-based management systems on release. Increased awareness of other agencies and interventions aimed at reducing social isolation, such as CoSA, would be beneficial to assist with this (McAlinden, 2007) and reduce demands on the Probation service. In particular, CoSA (or other interventions) that commence in prison and help people with the difficult and anxiety-producing transition into the community could be particularly beneficial (Kitson-Boyce et al., 2018). Similarly, exploring and dispelling myths regarding recall, information sharing, and police stop-and-search procedures is likely to increase trust and reduce the fear and uncertainty that the participants discussed. This could reap benefits for well-being and relationships with professionals. Support with offence disclosure in relationships is also likely to be helpful. Furthermore, assistance with accessing appropriate hobbies and working towards aspirations could support a healthy sense of self and counterbalance some of the challenges people are likely to face.

Regarding social stigma and restrictions, men with sexual convictions are not a homogeneous group, despite the media portrayal of the 'sex offender' label creating this assumption (Bensel & Sample, 2017). Restrictions should be individualised and pragmatic and should not unnecessarily prevent PCOSOs from acquiring primary goods linked to desistance from sexual offending, such as finding mastery (as per the Good Lives Model) in work or agency (Harper et al., 2018). The present research supports McNeill's (2016) suggestion that society needs to take responsibility for its role in desistance. Media portrayals form a large part of the current problem, preventing companies from risking their reputations by employing men with sexual convictions (Winnick & Bodkin, 2008), even when risk of future harm is unrelated to the workplace. Given that public attitudes towards men with sexual convictions are heavily influenced by media reporting (Harper & Hogue, 2015b), the media (and indeed the general public) need to be more mindful of the collateral damage to society caused by using labels of hatred towards individuals. People-centred language that condemns an act but does not write an entire individual off would be significantly better, both for society and that individual (see Winder et al., 2021). Labels that instil fear and hatred in people cause damage to everyone, including the person espousing them (Lowe & Willis, 2020). Employers should be encouraged to employ individuals regardless of them having a sexual conviction when the risk is unrelated to the working environment, and better support should be given around disclosure – both for employers and employees. The government has indicated that it plans to 'lead by example' by providing civil service roles for individuals on release from prison (Ministry of Justice, 2019); however, this initiative excludes people with a conviction for a sexual offence.

Public attitudes typically influence political decisions, which in turn further reinforce unhelpful public attitudes. When the government tighten sanctions against all individuals with sexual convictions in response to public outcry against highly publicised offences, they are reinforcing the belief that people with sexual convictions are universally dangerous and highly likely to reoffend. Media reporting adds fuel to this fire and the problem of barriers to reintegration continue. Breaking this cycle is a significant task, and it requires the public to be educated about reoffending rates and society's role in tertiary desistance

(McNeill, 2016). Studies such the current study can help educate by giving a voice to lived experience of the phenomenon, since the impact of education and providing the voices of lived experience have been found to help reduce stigma (Thorncroft et al., 2024).

HMPPS accredited interventions represent the forefront of what works in offender rehabilitation (Craig et al., 2013) and therefore the principles should be used to educate other relevant agencies, the public and the media around what works in reducing reoffending and what does not work. In the last decade, evidence-based interventions have moved towards encouraging individuals to use principles of compassion (Gilbert, 2009) and acceptance (Harris, 2006) to understand and take control of their risk of future harm. Instilling these principles within a risk management framework in the community through educating support services and the public could help support successful reintegration and reduce recall and reoffending, alongside improving the accuracy of public perceptions of both.

In terms of limitations of the research, it is not possible to generalise the findings of this study to all PCOSOs serving medium and long-term sentences in custody. It is possible that the 10 participants who chose to take part had a different outlook from those who chose not to. Further quantitative research into this area could help to support the findings of the study for example by incorporating a wider range of voices within this group. The findings of this study may not be applicable to individuals with convictions in other countries due to societal differences. In the US, individuals with sexual convictions experience some differences within their criminal justice system to England and Wales as the public are notified of their convictions. This has been found to have a serious impact on a range of important lifestyle factors (see Levinson, 2011), including significantly increasing feelings of vulnerability and stress (Tewksbury & Zgoba, 2010). The study did not specifically explore the potential additional impact of diversity and differences, such as through more specific focus on individuals with additional challenges which could include learning disability and mental health disorders. Individuals with such additional challenges were not excluded from this study and there are indications that some participants had a learning disability (as they reported completing interventions that are designed for individuals with learning disability), however this was not specifically accounted for in the analysis of the data. In fact, visual methods were used to improve inclusivity of the research. Further, this study did involve identifying whether participants had issues in relation to mental health, such as depression; such information could have added further depth to the findings. Talking to staff who work closely with individuals with sexual convictions about the topic of release and reintegration is also likely to add further insight and understanding.

Participants were included in the study if they had a release date within the next two years or for those serving indeterminate sentences, if they believed release was likely within the next two years. Two of the 10 participants were serving a determinate sentence, one of the determinate sentenced participants was due to be released within a month of the interview, the other had approximately a year left to serve. Overall, having a shorter time period to release for all participants as part of the inclusion period would have been beneficial to make sure the prospect of release felt like a very real concept to those taking part. 12 months, or even six months would have been ideal. Most of the participants on indeterminate sentences were over-tariff or on recall, meaning there was a chance of release at their next parole hearing which should take

place no less than every 24 months. Based on this, for many prisoners serving an independent sentence, thinking about when they expect to be released is a difficult and often emotive question. Additionally, once release is granted it generally happens quickly, therefore taking part in research during this period may be impractical or simply not a priority for many. Data gathered in the time shortly before release would be useful, but additionally the longer-term views of those waiting for release are valuable for future research when considering the impact that the thoughts and feelings associated with this period may have on factors such as intervention participation, mental health, hope and motivation to change. The use of VIPA is in its infancy, and in future, a more systematic approach could be taken in the use of the visual prompts. While all the participants referred to the pictures, they were used in different ways and to different extents. It is unclear whether the photographs helped to remove biases that might have otherwise arisen from the phrasing of questions in a semi-structured interview schedule. However, the interviewer felt that the pictures helped many of the participants to feel more at ease.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability

The data for this study is not available due to it being a qualitative study of a sensitive nature.

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Appendix

Descriptions of the images in the photographs.

- (1) A sports bag and some sports equipment
- (2) Some packaged cat food
- (3) A television
- (4) A games console remote
- (5) Open fields
- (6) An open road
- (7) An empty children's play park
- (8) An empty wine glass next to an empty pint glass
- (9) A drawing of 4 stick people holding hands
- (10) Two harms from the elbow down holding hands
- (11) A police car
- (12) The back of a UK drivers' licence
- (13) A generic ID lanyard
- (14) A piece paper taped to a wall with interviews this way written on it and an arrow.