'Why Would You Choose to Study Sex Offenders?': Assisted Desistance and Reintegration of Perpetrators of Sexual Harm

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Summary: This paper presents an overview of a study which evaluated how well three community-based programmes run by PACE (Prisoners Aid through Community Effort) in the Republic of Ireland (henceforth called Ireland) are assisting convicted perpetrators of sexual harm with desistance and reintegration following custody. The study breaks new ground in highlighting the successes and challenges of assisted desistance across the programmes, as perceived by this offender group and a broad range of stakeholders, including probation officers, gardaí, programme facilitators, policymakers and community volunteers. The results presented in this paper focus on the social aspect of assisting desistance and show that the programmes are working effectively in this area, despite particular external barriers and challenges experienced by this offender group.

Keywords: Perpetrators of sexual harm, assisted desistance, reintegration, community-based programmes, community volunteers.

Introduction

'Why would you choose to study sex offenders?' was a question I was asked early on in this research. There are good reasons to do so. Firstly, to prevent further victims of sexual crime we need to understand better how perpetrators of sexual harm can be helped to desist, that is, to avoid reoffending. As yet, there is no agreement on how exactly desistance should be defined and measured (Bersani and Eggleston Doherty, 2018). While the concept itself is generally understood as a process of ceasing or slowing down criminal behaviour (cf. Bottoms *et al.*, 2004; Farrington *et al.*, 2006), how this process should be measured remains contested. Secondly, although there is a growing body of research into desistance from crime generally,

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how perpetrators of sexual harm desist is underresearched, especially in Ireland. Thirdly, there is even less research relating to the 'assisted desistance' of this offender group, that is, the ways in which they can be helped to avoid reoffending.

This lack of empirical research represents an important gap in knowledge, since this offender group faces particular legal, political and social barriers to reintegration, e.g. notification schemes, post-release supervision and public alienation. Additionally, in common with other offender types, they may experience issues relating to addiction, mental illness and social disadvantage. This study helps to fill the gap by evaluating the effectiveness of three different, if coordinated, types of community-based programme which aim to help this group to desist and reintegrate into communities.

The paper starts by providing a background to the research, then defines the concept of 'assisted desistance' and explains the chosen overarching framework which was used to explore the findings. The chosen methodology, comprising three research strands and use of mixed methods, is then discussed. Finally, the themes found relating to social rehabilitation are presented. The article ends with a discussion and overall conclusions drawn from this aspect of the research.

Background

Research in Ireland matches international research in finding that the rate of reoffending for sex offenders is low in comparison to other types of criminal offences. However, on any given day, there are 450 people in custody convicted of sexual offences (Irish Prison Service, 2019), and at time of writing, 170 sex offenders were under probation supervision in the community following release from custody (Probation Service, 2020). The field of sexual offence prevention and rehabilitation is challenging, and there is a paucity of empirical research into desistance from sexual offending, with even less in the area of 'assisted desistance', i.e. how interventions help individuals to avoid reoffending. Difficulty in accessing this offender group, as well as managing highly sensitive data from a vulnerable population (Farmer *et al.*, 2015), can present particular difficulties for researchers. Furthermore, issues of confidentiality arise in small jurisdictions such as Ireland, where more people know each other and there is a crossover of programme stakeholders involved with different rehabilitation interventions. Broader challenges in this field include strong public emotion towards sexual crime, pressure on

politicians and policymakers to respond, and often inadequate or conflicting evidence for effective interventions (Schmidt and Mann, 2018).

General desistance principles propose that rehabilitative approaches to offending must consider not only thought processes and risk, but also the broader issue of reintegration, which needs to involve the community (McAlinden, 2011, 2016). At government policy level in Ireland, criminal justice agencies recognise that public abhorrence drives perpetrators of sexual harm underground (Gallagher, 2020) and that rehabilitative approaches to sexual offending which consider only thought processes and risk, and not wider issues relating to reintegration, do not adequately help offenders or communities and are less likely to prevent further victims (cf. Mews *et al.*, 2017). On the contrary, alienating this population may well increase the risk of reoffending when perpetrators of sexual harm leave prison and return to communities who despise and reject them (Willis *et al.*, 2010; Brown *et al.*, 2007). Responding to the need to assist desistance and protect communities, the Irish Probation Service funds a coordinated community-based response, comprising three different types of rehabilitative programme. Initiated, run and managed by PACE in Ireland, these programmes, Foothold (floating support service), Safer Lives (treatment programme) and CoSA (Circles of Support and Accountability), aim to prevent further victims of sexual harm by managing risk in the community and assisting adult perpetrators to desist from reoffending.

What is meant by 'assisted desistance'?

Although others have explored practice applications of desistance research (e.g. Farrall, 2002; McCulloch, 2005), the term 'assisted desistance' was first coined by King (2013) in an article concerning the impact of probation interventions on individuals in the primary[1] stage of desistance (Dufour, *et al.*, 2018). King (2013) found that while such interventions had a positive impact, they offered little support to address the socio-structural elements of desistance, because if an individual starts to envision a new self, this can be disrupted by adverse circumstances or difficulties which seem too difficult to manage, with the result that reversion to the familiarity of old habits may seem easier. The concept of assisted desistance is complex in incorporating three

[1] Maruna and Farrall (2004) propose that primary desistance can be defined as any gap in an offending career, whereas secondary desistance involves not just ceasing to reoffend, but also the taking on of a new identity of a non-criminal person. While these two phases of desistance are distinct, Healy and O'Donnell (2006) suggest that they are closely connected.

distinct but interconnected concepts within it of desistance, rehabilitation and reintegration. Each of these concepts will now be considered briefly, particularly in relation to sexual offending.

Desistance

General desistance theories focus on themes of natural desistance emerging through ageing (e.g. Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990), the influence of informal social controls such as relationships or employment (e.g. Sampson and Laub, 1993), cognitive transformations involving psychological or individual change (e.g. Maruna, 2001; Giordano *et al.,* 2002) or some combination of these (Bersani and Eggleston Doherty, 2018). These general desistance theories are variously, if uncertainly, supported by empirical evidence in relation to desistance from sexual offending. However, there are discrepancies that general desistance theories find difficult to explain. Examples include the unique features of sexual reoffending, such as the wide variations in specialised crime among different types of sexual offenders, or the longer timeframe for sexual reoffending than for general crime, which makes it more difficult to establish whether a person has truly desisted or is still in the process of reoffending. Furthermore, general desistance theories tend to neglect the challenging impact on desistance of an increasingly punitive contemporary criminal justice context (Mustaine *et al.,* 2015). For example, stringent social controls for perpetrators of sexual harm in many jurisdictions, including Ireland, result in restriction of movement, employment and social interaction, although research has shown the impact of social controls to be complex for this offender group who have also reported positive criminal justice experiences (Kruttschnitt *et al.*, 2000; Farmer *et al.,* 2015). Empirical research is thus providing evidence that the combination of different components involved in desistance for perpetrators of sexual harm are complex and can be different from those involved in desistance from general crime (e.g. Farmer *et al.*, 2015). The composite balance between social structures, cognitive factors and personal agency continues to be explored, and research is now highlighting the unique challenges faced by this offender group (McAlinden, 2011; Lussier, 2016; Farmer *et al.,* 2015; McAlinden *et al.,* 2017). Nonetheless, with relatively few studies on desistance from sexual offending, the picture remains unclear as to why and how perpetrators of sexual harm desist.

Rehabilitation

Desistance theorists understand desistance as a process of change which involves social and structural aspects as well as individual behavioural change (cf. McNeill, 2006). An assisted desistance approach therefore focuses more on *how* programmes bring about change, rather than on the evaluative evidence for 'what works'. Desistance itself is often described as a process of self-change. However, offenders have nonetheless acknowledged the role played by rehabilitation and professionals in helping them change, which suggests that rehabilitative programmes to prevent reoffending should be focused less on producing change, and more on assisting and advancing the individual and social processes that bring about this change (Maruna and LeBel, 2010; McNeill *et al.*, 2012). An assisted desistance approach puts the focus on risks secondary to the broader aims of developing strengths and exploring how each individual can best be supported to achieve desistance through rehabilitation. This requires practitioners to build on an individual's strengths to develop human capital (changes in individuals that enable them to act in new ways) as well as to help build social capital (changes in relations between people who assist that action) by acting as a link to resources and opportunities (McNeill, 2006).

Reintegration

The concept of reintegration goes further, involving the removal of practical and legal barriers, full reinstatement and acceptance as a citizen, an important aspect of the desistance approach (McNeill, 2012). However, research has noted legal and structural barriers with reintegration and, although current Irish penal policy acknowledges the limitations of imprisonment and emphasises the importance of the community role (Kilcommins *et al.*, 2004; Hamilton, 2014), systems are moving towards greater punitiveness in terms of sex offender legislation and community risk management. For example, the General Scheme of the Sex Offenders (Amendment) Bill, 2018[2] (Department of Justice and Equality, 2018) proposed a number of amendments to the (Ireland) Sex Offenders Act 2001. These included restricted travel outside the state, more stringent post-release supervision, including electronic monitoring and a

[2] This Bill was published in 2018. A report on pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill was made by the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality in January 2019 (https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_justice_and_equality/reports/2019/2019-01-24_report-on-pre-legislative-scrutiny-of-the-general-scheme-of-the-sex-offenders-amendment-bill-2018_en.pdf). The Bill has since lapsed following dissolution of the government in January 2020 (https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/bills/bill/2018/28/).

requirement to notify the Garda Síochána within three working days of release, as opposed to seven under current laws (which would bring Ireland into line with Part 2 of the (UK) Sexual Offences Act, 2003). Socially, communities appear to be increasingly less welcoming (Bazemore and Stinchcomb, 2004), an issue that is particularly problematic for perpetrators of sexual harm (cf. Ackerman *et al.*, 2013).

Thus, assisted desistance is a field still finding its feet, with much theory but less evidence to support its key tenets empirically. While empirical studies of desistance from sexual offending remain few in number (cf. Kruttschnitt *et al.*, 2000; Lussier *et al.*, 2010; Farmer *et al.*, 2012; Lussier and Gress, 2014; Harris, 2014; Farmer *et al.*, 2015; Hulley, 2016), there is a dearth of evidence-based programmes and empirical research on the effectiveness of strengths-oriented rehabilitation programmes in the area of sexual offending. This study drew on a general assisted-desistance framework proposed by McNeill (2012), which argues that successful rehabilitation needs to involve psychological, social, legal and moral aspects. This four-part framework enabled a broader understanding of the ways in which avoiding reoffending can be assisted by three different types of rehabilitative programme. In addition, it was tested to see if it can be readily applied to perpetrators of sexual harm. McNeill's (2012) framework is discussed briefly below.

Psychological rehabilitation is recognised as a very important element of rehabilitation. However, critics suggest that it has shortcomings. The principal focus is on individual-level change, which seeks to address only psychological causes of criminal behaviour, rather than also addressing other aspects, e.g. social and structural factors, recognised by desistance theorists as important catalysts to bring about change (cf. Weaver, 2014). McNeill (2014) expanded this more restrictive aspect of psychological rehabilitation to a broader understanding of 'personal' rehabilitation.

Legal rehabilitation is concerned with the requalifying of offenders as citizens and the expunging of criminal records by the state (i.e. spent convictions).

Moral rehabilitation concerns the settling of debts and requires a relational focus on the offence, the victim and the community through reparation. This is consistent with Zedner's (1994) argument for a broader conception of reparative justice, whereby an offender is seen to have offended not only against an individual, but also against society.

Social rehabilitation concerns the viewpoint that rehabilitation needs to extend beyond personal change to the building of social relationships and to helping individuals to reintegrate more positively into communities.

Desistance theorists suggest that this requires a shift in focus from rehabilitation models focused only on risk to more strengths-based models. These encompass broader aims of providing positive social environments to encourage desistance, developing hope for the future, and encouraging a more positive process of 'reintegrative shaming', where the harm caused is fully acknowledged but there is also a belief that the person is capable of change (cf. McAlinden, 2011). This form of rehabilitation also espouses and encourages community involvement in rehabilitation, which tends to be ignored in risk-based models.

The four-part framework was useful to evaluate all three programmes simultaneously, the advantage being that it enabled a better understanding of them as moving parts, which operate together as a whole in providing a coordinated holistic response to the rehabilitation of this offender group. Furthermore, analysing results through different aspects of rehabilitation allowed the programmes' similarities and differences, as experienced by programme participants and stakeholders, to be encompassed in a comprehensive understanding of how the programmes assisted the process of change. The three PACE programmes are now described below.

Three community-based programmes for perpetrators of sexual harm

Foothold floating support service provides an intensive one-to-one practical and emotional support for high-need individuals with limited supports in the community. The programme focus is on helping the client to find accommodation, sort out finances, seek employment and deal with any basic material or practical needs that may arise.

Safer Lives programme is a multi-modal, group treatment programme for perpetrators of sexual harm with a range of sexual offence types. Co-facilitated by PACE and the Probation Service, the programme addresses issues relating to the offence to prevent further harmful sexual behaviour. Adopting a strengths-based approach and a desistance focus, Safer Lives aims to help individuals to build internal capacity and coping skills to live safely in the community.

Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) is a community-based initiative which operates on restorative principles. CoSA increases community capacity to help break down barriers to reintegration through the direct involvement of community volunteers, by bringing a group of them together

with a perpetrator of sexual harm to reduce social isolation and to hold the perpetrator accountable for the way they now live their lives. The Irish CoSA model assists with the monitoring of perpetrators of sexual harm in the community, as well as providing social support in a way criminal justice agencies cannot, 'addressing the social support needs of offenders which are linked to offending but beyond the capacity of professionals to manage' (Armstrong *et al.*, 2008: p. 5, para 1.3).

Research methodology

Recidivism is the tendency to relapse and reoffend, and a recidivism rate is generally measured as an objective behavioural indicator. However, recidivism measured at any point tells us simply whether someone has been reconvicted, re-arrested or re-imprisoned and does not indicate if or how an individual's behaviour may have changed. Furthermore, such objective measurements in assisted desistance practice do not reveal how programme mechanisms help the desistance process, and a more subjective human element needs to be considered to assess this process. Therefore, the study proposed a way in which programme success might be measured through the process of an individual's perceptions of having changed for the better. Measures of programme success were used which included intermediate successes such as the development of social skills, participants' perceptions of increased motivation to avoid reoffending and the achievement of subjectively defined and official outcomes.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, and the different ways of gathering data enabled the diverse types of results from the three programmes to be analysed and synthesised into a complex but cohesive whole. This was a methodology that more accurately reflects the reality of rehabilitation programmes, which do not occur in a vacuum but rather are embedded within complex social contexts. The need to gather information specific to each programme had to be balanced with the requirement for research consistency, that is to use tools similar enough to allow for comparisons but sensitive enough to capture the uniqueness of each programme. An example was the use of the same scales to assess programme effectiveness in the stakeholder survey questionnaires, although the individual programme aims, aspects of participant experiences and levels of satisfaction were specific to each programme. The study design consisted of three distinct but overlapping phases, involving in-depth interviews, survey questionnaires

and programme document analysis. The three phases were carried out concurrently across the three programmes over a two-year period. These are now described below.

Phase 1: Interviews with programme participants

Phase 1 of the research explored with each programme participant the process of change over time, through initial semi-structured interviews, followed by telephone interviews six to nine months later. The sampling criteria for research participants required: conviction(s) for sexual offence(s); aged over 18; involvement with a PACE programme (Foothold/Safer Lives/CoSA) for a minimum of three months to ensure sufficient experience of programmes; and voluntary participation. Fifteen participants had contact offences and three were non-contact offences (one had a contact and non-contact offence). Fourteen offences were against children and three were against adults.

As five participants were involved with more than one programme, the different programme effects could be difficult to isolate from all other desistance and criminogenic influences. The methodology reflected this reality of rehabilitation and maximised different programme effects by interviewing these participants on separate occasions for each programme, making a total of twenty-two initial interviews. An interview schedule was designed to ask participants about their experiences of: involvement with a PACE programme; the criminal justice system; leaving custody; social bonds and relatedness; desistance; reintegration; and feelings about the future. Three psychometric tools were administered after each interview: My Life questionnaire (Mann and Hollin, 2010); Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS) (Tennant *et al.*, 2007); and Life Satisfaction Scale (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2011). These tools identified cognitive schema (a framework or structure that organises and interprets cognitive constituents, e.g. attitudes, beliefs) and explored wellbeing and life satisfaction.

The second research contact, six to nine months later, was with thirteen available participants from the initial interviews. Again, five participants were involved with more than one programme, and eighteen follow-up telephone interviews and a repeat of the psychometric tool on wellbeing were carried out. All interview data were analysed using thematic analysis and the software package MAXQDA (Kuckartz, 1989).

Phase 2: Survey questionnaires (programme stakeholders)

Fifty-nine key programme stakeholders completed survey questionnaires (thirty-six face to face, eighteen online, five in hard copy). These research participants were key programme individuals who were working directly with a PACE programme on a daily or weekly basis, at policy level, and/or working directly with PACE clients. They were asked about their experiences of being involved with the programmes and the participants. Information was sought on the same research topics explored in the participants' interviews, with adjustments made for the different focuses of programme stakeholders and the different types of stakeholders. Thus, specific aspects within each topic were tailored for each programme as well as for the different groups of stakeholders (e.g. probation officers, gardaí, programme facilitators, community volunteers). Overarching survey questionnaire themes for all stakeholders related to successful outcome factors, programme effectiveness, critical client needs, work motivation, attitudes and reoffending. Standardised section headings were used, and individual questions were adapted for different programmes and stakeholder roles. An example of this was a question tailored to the effectiveness of the specific elements, procedures and aims of each programme. Stakeholders also provided information relating to other areas, for example, interagency working, reintegration, and attitudes towards offenders. Thematic analysis and basic descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data.

Phase 3: Client files and programme documentation

Phase 3 involved the gathering of documentation regarding programme processes as well as the collection of programme aggregated data from client files to provide background information on the research participants. The information provided further context as well as a more rounded picture of the participants, for example, their involvement with the criminal justice process, sanctions incurred, the move from prison to the community, risk-factor and treatment needs, and changes that occurred during involvement with a programme. These data were synthesised with the interview and survey questionnaire data to evaluate each programme, as well as to provide an overview across the three programmes.

Research themes

Results were analysed through the lens of McNeill's (2012) four forms of rehabilitation. Firstly, key external contexts to the programmes, experienced

collectively by all three programme participant groups, were analysed through a legal/structural rehabilitation framework. Secondly, the impact of the programmes on cognitive and broader personal change were considered within a psychological/personal as well as a moral rehabilitation framework. Thirdly, key findings relating to programme mechanisms which help to develop human and social capital and build relationships were explored within a social rehabilitation framework. For the purpose of this paper, the focus is on themes found within the context of social rehabilitation. The three programmes, Foothold, Safer Lives and CoSA, will be referred to where relevant within the themes.

Social rehabilitation

Social rehabilitation concerns the viewpoint that rehabilitation needs to extend beyond individual change to the building of social relationships, and research has found that building social bonds and developing social capital is particularly problematic for perpetrators of sexual harm (cf. Robbers, 2009, McAlinden, 2007, 2011; Schultz, 2014).

Within the social rehabilitation framework aspect, analysis was carried out of how effectively PACE programme mechanisms and processes build social and human capital through the provision of practical support, enhancing social skills and developing social relationships. Two key themes were found: social and practical needs, and social inclusion and relationships. Within these themes, key programme mechanisms identified were: help with basic needs and social skills; building relationships with facilitators, peers and volunteers; building relationships beyond the programme with family and community; and building relationships between stakeholders.

Social and practical needs

Help with basic day-to-day needs and social skills

The findings in this theme were focused mainly on Foothold, whose participants have the highest needs, as it is part of the programme's role to assist participants as soon as they leave custody, often with no capacity or basic skills to cope with daily requirements. In terms of assisting clients with basic day-to-day living needs (e.g. accommodation, acquiring financial welfare benefits, courses or employment/meaningful occupation) and providing one-to one support, Foothold was found to do its utmost to assist clients. Programme participants gratefully acknowledged the help, support

and perceived friendship provided by the support workers within recognised boundaries. Many Foothold clients had very unstable lifestyles and, in addition to their convictions, were sometimes dealing with a combination of emergency one-night accommodations, addictions or an undiagnosed intellectual disability.

Participants gave accounts of the harsh reality of trying to find somewhere to live and how, if they were fortunate enough to have somewhere, they were in constant fear of being evicted. The majority expressed palpable fear of the media's potential negative impact on their lives. Recognition by the media or the public often led to harassment and having to leave their accommodation for fear of being attacked. Many had moved multiple times and, on different occasions, had been helped by another source, by the Probation Service or by Foothold.

> When I came out of prison at first, I was homeless, so I was moving about a lot. Without Foothold's help, I would have been on the streets otherwise. (Foothold participant)

All Foothold stakeholders (support workers, probation officers, liaison gardaí) highlighted as Foothold's key challenge the lack of structure around accessing accommodation. In their view, external structural issues relating to a general housing shortage and inadequate housing policy for this offender group constrained the impact of this aspect of Foothold's role. Liaison gardaí commented that support workers were doing their best working in a very difficult area. Probation officers also commented on Foothold managing with what was at its workers' disposal and with insufficient resources in an extremely challenging area. Support workers spoke of the reduced time available for other important aspects of their work because of the frequent need to deal with accommodation emergencies. The accommodation issue illustrates how the external environment shapes programme operations and participants' experiences of programmes. As one stakeholder said,

> … guys sleeping in tents, sleeping in the back of cars, couch surfing, or if they're lucky, [place name] one-night-only shelter…. When someone comes out of prison and they have no accommodation, they don't want to hear anything else from us. Like you can't say, 'Ok we're going to do some shops or get your CV'; they're like 'Look, I don't even know where I'm staying tonight.' So, you can't do any work with them until you get some sort of stability in that regard, so it makes it really difficult. (Foothold Support Worker)

The majority of participants said that they were employed prior to conviction in a variety of occupations, for example, warehouse work, retail, the leisure industry. Most had lost their jobs following conviction and, at the time of first interview, only a few said they were currently working in paid, voluntary or community work. Various explanations for this included being too afraid to apply for a job because of fears around making a disclosure of their crime, being recognised if they had a high media profile, or being asked questions about gaps in their employment histories. The Sex Offenders Act, 2001 restricts employment for this offender group in certain circumstances only, but employers are perceived to be influenced by the stigma attached to sexual harm and to want to avoid the risk for their business. Some participants said they were too fearful of recognition and its consequences even to seek work. A few were doing training courses in the hope of getting work. Others were not seeking work for various reasons, including older age or disability, and found it challenging trying to occupy their days meaningfully.

Notwithstanding these challenges, there was agreement across the board, between participants and stakeholders, of the wraparound support offered to clients, the need for flexibility, the acceptance of clients as people, and the efforts to reduce isolation. Probation officers commented on the suitability of the support workers for their roles and their experience of the system regarding social welfare, housing and resources. Liaison gardaí also pointed to the practical and emotional strengths of the Foothold support network, which meant: getting people back on their feet; pointing them in the right direction; establishing a day-to-day routine; providing emotional help, and generally assisting them to lead more stable lives.

Although Safer Lives and CoSA do not offer specific support with accommodation and employment, and the lives of participants on these two programmes are somewhat more stable, most were struggling with employment challenges because of their conviction. Just under half of Safer Lives and CoSA participants had given up on finding employment for various reasons, including previous experiences of stigma and the fear of being recognised (even when disclosure was not required). Little had changed regarding employment in the six to nine months since first interview. Of the thirteen follow-up participants, two said that they had got some work, and one was doing a hospitality course.

In terms of social skills, results also showed the impact of the programmes' work in developing these in different ways, through building confidence and advising on interactions with others, as well as improving social contacts.

CoSA volunteers, for example, felt they helped to strengthen a core member's social skills through pro-social modelling, which in turn helped them to become more involved in the community,

> They learn how to express themselves within a group setting and talk with peers rather than those in power positions, e.g. gardaí or parole officers, and through their time in CoSA, they gain confidence in being given the tools to look further afield and try new things in the community. (CoSA Volunteer)

Although not a main Safer Lives focus, social skills were also very relevant:

> It's important because if they're socially isolated they're at higher risk if that was significant in their offending, so ... social skills would be a significant one for some.… They get a lot of positive feedback for managing social situations better and for taking that risk and putting themselves out there and for engaging and signing up for things that are appropriate. So, it is a focus, an ongoing focus. (Safer Lives Facilitator)

Social inclusion and relationships

Building relationships within the programmes

Other structural influences that shaped programme experiences and revealed the challenges faced in the community included the difficulty of forming relationships and community bonds. A first analysis considered the different levels and types of supportive relationships that existed between participants and stakeholders in each programme. For example, participants in Foothold had one-to-one supportive relationships with individual support workers. Participants in Safer Lives interacted with both facilitators and peers, while those in CoSA interacted with a coordinator and community volunteers. Results showed how effectively the work of support workers in Foothold, facilitators in Safer Lives and volunteers in CoSA helped all programme participants to rebuild personal connections through their commitment, provision of emotional support, and recognition of the humanity of the individual. For instance, Safer Lives staff encouraged participants to engage with others and improve communication skills. Safer Lives interviews also revealed the powerful dynamic of a peer group which encouraged

participants to relate to like-minded others, disclose information about their past and move towards self-acceptance and change (cf. Weaver, 2012). The empathy and commitment of the CoSA volunteers also came through strongly in both participant and stakeholder accounts, with participants expressing more confidence socially and feeling better able to handle social situations as a result of these interactions.

Building relationships with others beyond the programmes

A second analysis was carried out on building/repairing relationships with others beyond the programmes. A sexual offence conviction had severe repercussions for the majority of participants' important relationships with family and/or friends. Participants expressed varying attitudes towards how they felt about trying to rebuild relationships. A positive finding was that at follow-up, the majority of participants had experienced improvement in their relationships in the six to nine months since first interview. However, there was a more mixed response from participants at follow-up regarding reintegration and the wider community. The particular challenges of the 'sex offender' label when back in the community were evident, e.g. difficulties with finding or keeping accommodation and employment and experiences of social rejection and stigma. Some participants spoke of choosing to avoid reintegrating and to stay below the radar to avoid detection and what they feared would be the inevitable resultant retribution. This can be seen less as a choice, but rather as being driven by the fear of being outed as a 'sex offender'. Over time, these external issues may well affect the benefits of the programmes and increase risk factors for reoffending (cf. Farmer *et al.*, 2012). An additional problem in terms of reintegration and community support in Ireland is its relatively small communities, particularly in rural areas (cf. Healy and O'Donnell, 2005). Because of the damage and hurt caused by these crimes, many are living in an unfamiliar community after custody, and to reintegrate requires making new connections, which is challenging for anyone, but particularly for those with an intellectual disability who find it hard to form relationships.

Desistance research has found that social supports (e.g. relationships and employment) help to prevent offending with general crime. However, similar to other sexual offender research findings (see Farmer *et al.*, 2015), many of the participants in this study said that they were in relationships and/or employment prior to conviction. It was obvious that many were shocked at the extent of the social losses they experienced after conviction. This raises

the question as to whether such social supports are less important to perpetrators of sexual harm or whether those perpetrators were unaware of what they stood to lose by committing such offences. Notwithstanding, most participants said that they were desisting from further criminal activity. Taken together, these findings, similar to other research, highlight the complex role played by informal social controls such as employment and relationships for this offender group (cf. Farmer *et al.*, 2015). It is possible that the less straightforward link between employment and desistance for this offender group suggests that the importance placed by participants on employment has less to do with desisting, and more to do with seeing work as a means of civic reengagement and seeking greater self-positivity through work which provides a positive social identity (cf. Maruna, 2001; Giordano *et al.*, 2002; LeBel *et al.*, 2008; Healy 2010).

Relationships between stakeholders

Analysis of relationships between programme stakeholders revealed the critical importance of interagency working and the value of a successful collaborative approach in managing perpetrators of sexual harm in the community. The PACE programmes rely on effective interagency collaboration and good working relationships between stakeholders such as the Probation Service and the Garda Síochána. The involvement of other criminal justice agencies is important in assisting their work, and building relationships at every level takes time to achieve and can be challenging. For example, building stakeholder relationships was a crucial aspect of the pilot CoSA programme (2015 to 2018) and key challenges involved dealing with issues arising from multi-agency participation, coordinating various stakeholders and information sharing:

> The overall support, from everything from the Coordinator to the Outer Circle and Probation, is important. Everybody seems to be on board, so I think that's a positive, to keep things moving, keep things changing. (Probation Officer)

Many issues highlighted by stakeholders, for example the challenges of information sharing, undoubtedly reflected the coming together of agencies with different priorities. The results also showed how this type of collaboration helps to build appreciation and knowledge of others' roles, to expand mind-sets and to encourage appreciation of everyone working toward the common

good of reduced reoffending as well as individual reintegration. This important area of interagency cooperation is often a forgotten part of relational desistance.

Discussion

This research explored the assisted desistance of adult perpetrators of sexual harm living in the community following conviction. The study is the first of its kind in Ireland to evaluate three coordinated community-based programmes for this offender group, which, as far as is known, offers a unique combination of coordinated interventions. With regard to the field of assisted desistance, the study provides new evidence for strengths-based rehabilitative interventions for perpetrators of sexual harm. Whereas most existing rehabilitation studies are of psychological/cognitive programmes, this study compared and contrasted, in so far as is possible, three very different types of programme with broader strengths-based approaches. Caveats to the findings are voluntary research participation and some restricted access to Foothold clients deemed extremely chaotic or unstable. However, the integrity and independence of the research was upheld throughout, with the field research carried out entirely independently and the confidentiality of all research data maintained. A novel methodology and mixed methods approach, which also included PACE programme and client file documentation, was used to give a voice to programme participants as well as stakeholders. Additionally, the study proposed a subjective way of evaluating programme success, and explored the experiences and viewpoints of participants and stakeholders to capture how well the different programme mechanisms were successfully assisting desistance.

Within the aspect of social rehabilitation discussed here, the research found that, external barriers notwithstanding, all three PACE programmes were assisting to a point. Importantly, information supplied by PACE at the end of the field research period showed that 88.2% of research participants had no further convictions, for either sexual or non-sexual offences, during their time with a programme, while the remainder comprised two breaches of supervision orders for non-sexual offences and one undetermined offence.

Results revealed that the programmes were effectively helping participants to move towards social rehabilitation through programme mechanisms of: helping with basic needs; building relationships within the programmes; building relationships with others beyond the programmes;

crucial collaboration between stakeholders. The positive impact of the programmes' work in improving participants' social contacts was achieved from the developing of social skills through building confidence and providing pro-social modelling of interactions with others. Such activities are recognised in the literature as necessary steps along the journey towards social inclusion (cf. McNeill *et al.*, 2005).

All participants said at follow-up that their lives had changed positively. The majority attributed the changes to their involvement with a programme and, importantly, they said that these changes had influenced their avoiding reoffending. Furthermore, all stakeholders believed the three programmes to be operating successfully based on the criteria they identified and felt that they were achieving their stated official aims. They also felt confident that the programmes performed well in assisting reintegration/living safely in the community.

However, programmes do not work in a vacuum, and findings clearly reveal that these rehabilitation programmes do not operate in isolation but are set within complex criminal justice and societal contexts. For example, the results revealed the need for stakeholders and participants to work within an institutional and political context and highlighted the risk of external barriers to desistance (such as rejection and alienation) undermining the positive work being done by the programmes. Therefore, the notable achievements of the programmes need to be extended beyond their capacity into the wider community. Programme supports and assistance notwithstanding, there were very real difficulties in achieving social inclusion at the most basic level of needs for programme participants. They experienced extremely challenging problems relating to accommodation and employment, which impacted severely on their prospects of achieving full social rehabilitation (cf. Göbbels *et al.*, 2012; McNeill 2012; Ward and Willis, 2016). While all ex-prisoners experience difficulty in finding employment after custody (Visher and Travis, 2003), these participants experienced more pronounced challenges because of the additional restrictions and the stigma attached to this offence type. Participants spoke of high levels of fear, rejection and isolation as a result of these challenges. Certainly, desistance may be frustrated even for a highly motivated individual (Hunter and Farrall, 2018) if they have little hope of being accepted at some level by society.

Nevertheless, despite the variety of challenges in the community, it seemed that a range of informal and formal supports were available to participants. A majority mentioned various support structures that helped

them with behaviours, addictions and reintegration, which included counsellors, addiction services, community schemes, family, friends, accommodation services, and sometimes a combination of such supports. Additionally, it is of interest that, within a criminal justice context external to the programmes, participants' experiences of dealing with probation officers were very positive, and most felt very well supported. Although this has been found previously to be the experience of probationers convicted of non-sexual crimes (see Farrall, 2002; Healy, 2012), it is interesting that a heavily stigmatised group also had a positive experience of supervision. Furthermore, it supports other findings of positive criminal justice experiences (Kruttschnitt *et al.*, 2000; Farmer *et al.*, 2015), which highlight that social controls are complex for this offender group. It may also reflect the welfare approach of the Probation Service, enhanced further by the integration of desistance theory into practice. The probation officer may be particularly important for this group given the stigma and social isolation attached to their offender status. Very few participants expressed criticism of probation supervision and, even then, respect was evident in the way participants spoke of their probation officers who not only advised and helped them but also held them accountable when needed.

The research results support McNeill's (2012) argument about the need for rehabilitation to extend beyond the psychological, and also speak to Barry's (2006) concept of social recognition, which suggests that desistance is the task not just of the individual but also of society. The findings further resonate with the notion of transformative rehabilitation that attends to the need to transform the structural and social barriers which encourage social exclusion rather than reintegration (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2018). Bearing in mind that participation was voluntary and there was some restricted access to extremely chaotic clients, the following conclusions were drawn from the research results presented here. Firstly, transferring the concept of assisted desistance into practice (with three connected concepts of desistance, rehabilitation and reintegration), and combining this with risk management, is extremely complex. Secondly, all three rehabilitative programmes were found to be valuably assisting with social rehabilitation despite external barriers. Thirdly, although it seems that reintegration as proposed by McNeill (2012) may never be fully achieved for perpetrators of sexual harm, given the particular structural challenges they face, the importance of social rehabilitation was revealed through the positive changes over time experienced by the majority of research participants.

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