A Critical Analysis of What Works for the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Sexual and Violent Offenders: A Review of Practitioners' Approaches.[1]

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Abstract

This article sets out the professional opinions of criminal justice practitioners on what works for the rehabilitation and reintegration of sexual and violent offenders. This primary study utilises a qualitative method informed by ten semi-structured interviews with practitioners in the field of rehabilitation and reintegration. The findings foreground barriers that hinder and aid the rehabilitation and reintegration of sexual and violent offenders, such as doxxing, social media vigilantism, and their impact. As a result, the findings build on current understandings of the barriers facing individuals who have committed such offences and what practitioners would deem to be a positive social change in the development of rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives.

Key Words: *Desistance, Recidivism, Rehabilitation, Reintegration, Stigmatisation, Technology Facilitated Violence.*

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The concept of rehabilitation has utilitarian underpinnings and principles, adopting a forward-looking consequentialist perspective (Brooks, 2021). It encompasses efforts to reform individuals who have committed offences, intending to reduce harm and enhance the well-being of both society and the offender (Bentham, 1973; Burke et al., 2018; Crow, 2001; Forsberg & Douglas, 2020; Marshall et al., 2011; McNeill, 2004; 2006; 2012; Raynor & Robinson, 2009; Ward 2002). The rehabilitation of offenders heavily relies on theoretical frameworks that explain the origins of offending behaviour, offering insights into potential interventions to alleviate individual suffering and reduce recidivism (Casey et al., 2013; Marshall et al., 2011). Similarly, rehabilitation provides practitioners with conceptual frameworks to navigate the complexities of the rehabilitation process, what constitutes risk, and how to effectively balance the offender's needs with those of the wider community (Ward & Maruna, 2007).

Theorists have questioned whether current interventions and practices encompass the totality of the individual's needs (McNeill, 2006; 2012). Hence, this article draws on the narrative of criminal justice practitioners on what works for the rehabilitation and reintegration of sexual and violent offenders (SAVO). The primary study is informed through ten semi-structured interviews with practitioners in rehabilitation and reintegration. The key to this study is that it foregrounds barriers that hinder and aid the rehabilitation and reintegration of SAVO through doxxing, social media vigilantism, and the impact this has on the rehabilitation of offenders. As a result, the findings add to current debates on the barriers facing individuals who have committed such offences and what practitioners deem would be a positive social change in the development of rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives and the recognition of digitally facilitated violence.

Theories of Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation historically has been used synonymously with concepts of desistance and reformation, these concepts are aligned with stages in a journey to recidivism (Casey et al., 2013; Maruna, 2017; McNeill, 2004; 2012; Ward 2002; Weaver 2016; Weaver & McNeill, 2015). Rehabilitation is concerned with identifying and assessing the needs of the individual and providing treatment, reformation relates to internal and external changes in identity, and desistance is the journey leading to the cessation of offending behaviour (Mair, 2004; Maruna & Roy, 2007). Rehabilitation, reformation, and desistance work are interconnected with the same purpose of recidivism (McNeil, 2006; Ward & Maruna, 2007). Treatment interventions aim to bridge the gap between an individual's present state and their envisioned future. Such interventions help individuals shift their criminal tendencies by building values and strengths, focusing on acquiring skills for a fulfilling life free from offending behaviours (Laws & Ward, 2011; Shapland & Bottoms, 2011). To achieve meaningful, pro-social identities, individuals must pursue valuable goals and adopt lifestyles that reflect desired outcomes (Ward & Laws, 2010).

McNeill (2012) postulates that the psychological model provides a necessary base for rehabilitation but is insufficient as a lone intervention. McNeill (2012) contends that practitioners need to acknowledge the legal, moral, and social rehabilitation of offenders. 'A solely psychological conception of rehabilitation is inadequate to the moral and social offence that crime represents' (McNeill, 2012, p.2). This further acknowledges the complexity of rehabilitation and hypothesises that failure to engage with the other aspects of rehabilitation may hinder desistance (McNeill, 2004; 2006; 2012).

Theoretically Informed Interventions of Offender Rehabilitation

In response to Martinsons' (1974) '*nothing works*' notion concerning the relationality of rehabilitation, correctional treatment intervention Risk Needs Responsivity (hereafter

RNR) was developed, supported by theoretical and empirical evidence (Andrews & Bonta, 2017). The RNR framework assesses an individual's risk level to guide treatment intensity, focusing on the factors that contribute to offending behaviour, such as substance misuse, familial problems, and anti-social associates, also known as criminogenic needs (hereafter CN) (Andrews & Bonta, 2017; Ward & Stewart, 2003a). Interventions target specific areas of offending behaviour, particularly pertinent in cases involving individuals who have committed SAVO, wherein interventions are targeted to mitigate RNR by addressing the underlying factors contributing to their sexual and violent behaviour (Ward et al., 2007b). Whilst RNR has effectuated positive results such as lowering recidivism (Hollin, 1999), RNR is critiqued for the inability to encompass the totality of the individual's needs, particularly the lack of specific focus on lifestyle (Marshall et al., 2011; Ward & Gannon, 2006). Ward and Maruna (2007) argue that CN may hinder treatment engagement and instead advocate for the enhancement of well-being and strengths to better address them. Ward and Stewart (2003b) contend that addressing non-CN may be a prerequisite to productively targeting needs.

Alternatively, Ward (2002) proposes a positive psychological approach employing a strength-based practice framework through the Good Lives Model (GLM). GLM intends to enhance the RNR framework through a theoretical approach to sustainable harm reduction and emphasizing personal agency (Craig et al., 2013; Ward, 2002; Ward & Maruna, 2007). Ward (2002; 2010) argues that individuals engage in criminal behaviours because of unachieved aspirations and unmet needs due to a lack of internal or external resources. GLM proposes an infrastructure to aid the individual in achieving a fulfilling, socially responsible, and meaningful life (McNeill et al., 2012). This can be accomplished through identifying and developing a pro-social outlook accompanied by the skills, resources, values, and goals to motivate change (Marshall et al., 2011). The therapeutic interventions' core objective is to aid

individuals in creating a meaningful life plan containing varying valued outcome, termed 'primary human goods,' which can be achieved through both pro-social and anti-social means (Blake, 2012; Ward, 2002; 2010). GLM emphasises focusing on individual CN through the facilitation of internal and external interventions, rather than placing all emphasis on the management of risk as 'problems with internal and external resources are considered to be causes of or contributors to sexual offending' (Keenan et al., 2022, p. 10). Strength-based interventions aid SAVO in developing adaptable coping mechanisms and self-regulation skills, cultivating pro-social attitudes, behaviours, and connections, and encouraging successful reintegration (Ward & Gannon, 2006). For individuals who have perpetrated SAVO, GLM focuses on enhancing pro-social interests while addressing the absence of skills (See Ward, 2002; Ward & Laws, 2010; Whitehead et al., 2007).

However, a possible limitation of the reliance on support networks is the risk that individuals may transfer responsibility rather than assume accountability themselves (Fitzsimons & Finkle, 2011). Therefore, individuals must recognise their agential responsibility for achieving goals. Ward et al. (2007a) contend that the involvement of pro-social connections allows for the development of personal qualities. Without support, individuals may struggle to approach goals and strive toward the attainment of desired outcomes (Ward et al., 2007b). Additionally, both RNR and GLM frameworks inform current interventions within the HM Prison and Probation Service, and the risk framework continues to dominate interventions for SAVO (Ministry of Justice & HM Prison and Probation Service UK, 2018, November 23). A collaborative approach to SAVO rehabilitation, including a coalescence of RNR, GLM, and the social, moral, and legal aspects of rehabilitation, would enhance individual strengths, allowing them to create and sustain pro-social behaviour which encompasses positive behavioural aspects that benefit both society and the individual (Casey et al., 2013; McNeill et al., 2012; Ward, 2002).

The Stigmatisation of Sexual Offenders

Understanding stigma and the consequences that precede it stems from labelling theory (Becker, 1963). The assignment of the label and the subsequent stigma accompanying the label are socially constructed and dependent on society's normative values, beliefs, and definitions regarding acceptable moral behaviour and deviance (Goffman, 1963). Becker (1963) proposes that individuals may internalise and conform to these labels, making it challenging to discard them once acquired. Social stigma, also termed 'public stigma,' accompanies the label, socially discrediting the individual's character within society (Goffman, 1963). Stigma has exclusionary and discriminatory effects if the individual is perceived to be a threat to social stability (Goffman, 1963). Link and Phelan (2001) postulate that stigma and subsequent labelling devalue the individual's social standing within society; this loss of status results in individuals separating from society through self-isolation or societal marginalisation. Social stigma for SAVO is elevated as they have been devalued for their deviant and immoral actions (Furst & Evans, 2014; Moore et al., 2016). The societally constructed label of sexual offender will precede all other identifiers for the individual, taking on a master status (Goffman, 1963). Socially constructed narratives will accompany the label, such as 'predatory paedophile' (Brayford & Deering 2012; Goffman, 1963). Link et al. (1989) hypothesise that individuals form internal conceptions regarding their stigmatised status. The labelled individual perceives the potential of discriminatory treatment and, in turn, actively avoids opportunities due to perceived constraints both internally and externally (Link et al., 1989). The stigma associated with SAVO extends beyond the individual to encompass courtesy stigma (Goffman, 1963; Furst & Evans, 2014). Families and associates may be subject to societal hostility, leading to the breakdown of social connections and support (Furst & Evans, 2014). Additionally, households associated with individuals involved in SAVO may

encounter adverse social consequences due to their perceived association with the stigmatised behaviour (Furst & Evans, 2014).

Tyler's (2020) concept of the 'stigma machine' suggests that stigma is generated through institutionalised power mechanisms. Tyler (2020) argues that stigma constitutes a form of violence and induces shame, thereby adversely affecting individuals' well-being and internalised self-perceptions. Braithwaite (1989) suggests that society possesses the ability to significantly change the stigma associated with sexual offending. In contrast to the labelling process characterised by disintegrative shaming, the notion of reintegrative shaming serves to redirect the focus of shame from the individual who committed SAVO toward the specific offence itself (Braithwaite, 1989). This approach enables individuals to discern the distinction between the committed crime and the individual perpetrating it, allowing for the recognition of two separate entities, thereby avoiding the internalisation of shame (Goffman, 1963; Tyler, 2020).

Barriers to Successful Rehabilitation and Reintegration

The term SO encompasses many different crimes of a sexual nature from contact offences including rape, sexual assault, and assault by penetration, and non-contact offences including voyeurism, exhibitionism, downloading, and/or sharing indecent images (Home Office, 2012, March 2). The terminology used colloquially and derogatorily for sexual offenders, such as 'perv' and 'paedophile' perpetuates stigma and dehumanises the individual (Jahnke et al., 2022; Viki et al., 2012). This use of terminology is prevalent on social media, where online vigilante groups expose sexual offenders by publishing non-consensual private information, past offences, and images of the individual. The term 'vigilante' refers to individuals who investigate, prevent, or punish perceived offences without the appropriate legal authority (Kohm, 2009). These acts of online naming and shaming are termed 'doxxing,' which refers to the practice of publicly revealing information to expose,

intimidate, or harass (Kohm, 2009; Tippett, 2022). Groups operate due to the public's perceived inadequacy of the CJS, under the premise of public safety and interest, to deliver a form of moral justice to cleanse society, whilst acting as a form of deterrence by denouncing the sexual offender through humiliation and shame (Guardians of the North, 2024; Newcastle Hunters, 2024). Doxxing is a concerning consequence of the societal stigma associated with SAVO leading to digital harassment and technology-facilitated hate behaviour (Cubellis et al., 2018; Dunsby & Howes, 2019; Tippett, 2022). Although Braithwaite (1989) highlights reintegrative shaming as positive for reintegration, doxxing and the subsequent shame that accompany it demonstrate the use of shame as a destructive force (Kohm, 2009). Despite the non-violent claims of groups (Kohm, 2009), many posts incite hatred towards individuals, for example, 'D*ad paedophiles don't reoffend' (Improved Maximum Exposure, 2024, p.1). This statement suggests death is a solution to SO re-offending, using the term paedophile influences the emotional weight and societal reaction to the statement. Social media users demonstrate support and participate in the shaming through liking and sharing information, thus fuelling online vigilantism (Skoric, 2010). This retributive stance, through in-person confrontation and online vigilantism, has led to self-harm and suicide. 'At least eight men killed themselves in the UK (in 2019) after being labelled child sex offenders on social media by so-called paedophile hunters' (Tippett, 2022, p.1). This exposure around the prevalence of SO recidivism leads to moral panic through intensifying fear and public belief in the unreformable sexual offender (Brooks, 2021; Levenson et al., 2007). Burchfield et al. (2014) posit that contemporary society is characterised by an enduring state of perpetual concern. This continuous anxiety is deeply entrenched within societal structures, giving rise to a pervasive culture of fear (Thomas, 2000). McDonald (2014) argues that vigilance against the fear of crime translates into vigilante violence and hatred for SO.

Proven reoffending statistics from January to March 2022 indicate that 13.1% of all recorded reoffences were classified as sexual offences, representing the lowest reoffending rate among all offense categories within this cohort (Ministry of Justice, 2024). Yardley et al. (2016) argue that the online realm and offline are intertwined, leading to technology-facilitated violence; thus, SO doxxing leads to both harm and harassment both in person and online (Cubellis et al., 2018; Tippett, 2022). The Guide to Human Rights for Internet Users (Council of Europe, 2014) safeguards internet users' fundamental rights, including freedom of information and expression on social media, permitting even controversial content unless it incites violence or discrimination. In England and Wales, online vigilantism, such as by paedophile hunter groups, operates legally due to the absence of laws against doxxing. However, perpetrators face legal consequences if proven to harass individuals with malicious intent or incite violence under the Communications Act (2003), *Malicious Communications Act* (1988), and *Online Safety Act* (2023). While the *Online Safety Act* (2023) holds social media platforms accountable for hosting harmful or illegal content, it fails to address the wider societal implications of digital stigma and vigilantism. Consequently, it fails to acknowledge the practice of doxxing and the subsequent harm it produces (Cubellis et al., 2018; Tippett, 2022). To mitigate the effects of digital stigma, policymakers should consider expanding existing legal protections to include a broader range of online harms. Such reforms could compel social media platforms to revise and enforce comprehensive user guidelines. These measures would ensure that harmful posts are removed and that offending users face stricter consequences, such as account suspension, permanent bans, or restrictions on posting privileges (Facebook, 2024). This approach could provide a framework for addressing the pervasive challenges of online harm and creating a safer digital environment.

However, digital stigma is not confined to the UK. In the United States, individuals convicted of sexual offences are legally required to be listed on publicly accessible online sex

offender registries. These registries disclose personal information, including names, addresses, and photographs, thereby subjecting offenders to heightened levels of public exposure and scrutiny (Agan, 2011; Teichman, 2005).

This practice, which can be likened to a legalised form of doxxing, can subject offenders to public inquiry and societal stigma (Tippett, 2022). While the primary purpose of these registries is to enhance public safety, like exposure sites on social media in the UK, they often exacerbate social exclusion by creating significant barriers to reintegration, particularly in essential areas such as access to housing and employment (Tewksbury, 2012).

Alternatively, Norwegian penal policy prioritises reintegration by safeguarding individuals' anonymity and shielding them from public stigmatisation (Sandbukt, 2023). The US and the UK allow for the public labeling of individuals in the digital sphere through mechanisms such as sexual offender registries and social media platforms, which hinder their ability to reintegrate anonymously into society (Levenson et al., 2007; Willis et al., 2010). Norwegian law ensures that criminal records remain confidential and inaccessible to the public (Sandbukt, 2023). This approach to legal rehabilitation promotes social reintegration and allows individuals who have previously been convicted of sexual offences to reintegrate back into society while mitigating the pervasive effects of societal stigma (McNeill, 2006; 2012; Tyler, 2020). Furthermore, it may reduce the prevalence of digital vigilantism, although such risks persist if the offence becomes known to others who may initiate targeted actions.

The current literature identifies areas within the rehabilitation and reintegration of SAVO that require attention. While public perceptions and narratives of SAVO have been evidenced within research (Jahnke et al., 2022; Viki et al., 2012), it has not been explored as to how these perceptions hinder rehabilitation and reintegration through public processes such as doxxing or social media vigilantism, nor their impact. Subsequently, there is a need to understand the impact of digital advancement on such practices. Therefore, this article

critically examines current theoretical explanations and their influence on practitioners, investigates barriers to reintegration, and identifies potential improvements in interventions based on practitioners' perspectives and experiences.

Methodological Framework

This primary research follows the British Society of Criminology's Statement of Ethics for Researchers in the Field of Criminology and was granted ethical approval by the Ethics Committee. The data presented determines practitioners' views and understanding of the rehabilitation of SAVO and the potential barriers presented upon reintegration (See Appendix A: Participant Demographics). The aims were accomplished by adopting an inductive approach to qualitative primary data analysis, allowing for the recognition of themes (Bryman et al., 2021). The research adopted the epistemological position of interpretivism, guiding the research through interpreting the lived professional experience of practitioners from an insider perspective (Bryman et al., 2021). This research adopts an ontological constructionist perspective, whereby individuals perceive and interpret the world around them through socially constructed categories and interactions, thus emphasising the socially contingent nature of reality (Bryman et al., 2021). This allowed the researcher to consider practitioners' individual experiences when interpreting theoretical explanations concerning the labelling and stigmatisation of offenders.

Positionality must reflexively acknowledge any bias throughout the research process, necessitating critical self-reflection (Bryman et al., 2021). The researchers' reflexivity ensures internal validity, as the researcher critically analyses their subjectivity and objectivity (Bryman et al., 2021). To combat any bias, neutrality within the data analysis process was employed by the researcher to maintain academic objectivity by looking through the lens of other practitioners (Wisker, 2009). The validity of the data collected from practitioners is true

and based on professional experience, knowledge, and understanding of their social background.

Sampling

This research utilised non-probability sampling through the purposive sampling of practitioners based on their job roles and experience, then relying on chain referral sampling, allowing participants to link with other potential participants (Davies & Francis, 2018. The sample includes ten practitioners from various roles within the criminal justice system (CJS), including His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, Police, employees from approved premises, bail hostels, and employees from third-sector organisations supporting offenders' rehabilitation and reintegration.

This research study has limitations due to the time constraints and available resources, which have hindered the ability to be able to have a larger research participant sample, which would allow greater rigour to the findings. Bryman et al. (2021) recognise limitations within qualitative research as a small sample size is not representative of all individuals and is biased due to the analysis being interpreted by the researcher. However, due to the scope of the study, a sample size of ten was deemed appropriate.

Data Collation

The collection of primary qualitative data through one-to-one semi-structured interviews (SSI) was chosen for this research to allow the interviewee to shape the focus and direction of the interview depending on their own opinions, allowing for a true representation of practitioners' authentic lived experience (Davies & Francis, 2015). The SSI ensured data was comparable from each participant whilst allowing flexibility to prompt further information. Before agreeing to take part in the research, participants were provided with all relevant information about its purpose; how the information they provided would be recorded, stored, and used; and their right to withdraw from the research at any time.

Pseudonyms have been used in this article to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The interview schedule was based upon three key themes; barriers to the re-integration of sexual and violent offenders, the stigma associated with the label of offender, and the views on rehabilitation as a philosophy of punishment, and was comprised of open questions to ensure reliability, whilst also allowing the interviewee to shape how they answer the question and how much information they divulge. This is essential when discussing sensitive topics.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen for data analysis as this research is concerned with capturing the complexity and significance of practitioners' experiences and allowing this to be accurately put into context (Bryman et al., 2021). The qualitative data produced from the SSI was recorded and transcribed. Then, an initial cleaning and screening of transcripts was conducted to ensure they were reflective of the interviews. The screening and cleaning of each transcription were carried out on Microsoft Word by matching the recording of the interview with the transcription, and anonymisation ready for thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process.

Findings

The Public Stigma and Labelling Encountered by Sexual and Violent Offenders

A key theme from the data analysis was the public stigma faced by SAVO. When asked if they had witnessed stereotypical labelling of offenders, 100 per cent of participants responded yes. All acknowledged that social stigma is particularly prevalent for SAVO. Six participants noted the prevalent public misconception associating the term 'sexual offender' with stigmatising labels like 'Predatory Paedophile', 'Nonce', 'Tri Sexuals', and 'Rapist'. Each term carries negative connotations and further stigmatises individuals. Others likened 'sex offender' to a spectrum of offending (See Appendix A: Participant Demographics).

A participant detailed social stigma as heightened for SOs and cited the public's predetermined misconceptions as a barrier to desistance.

> *I think the social stigma is more prevalent with sex offenders as the public already has preconceived notions about the individual being, you know, a child sex offender, rapist, nonce, and stuff labelling them before they know them, which can hinder their desistance process* (Participant D).

Further acknowledging the public's reaction to the term SO, detailing the prevalence of the stereotypical labels by providing a situation that highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of sexual offences.

> *As soon as you say the term sex offender, people's minds automatically go they raped a child, that's where everyone's mind first goes, what they don't think about is it could be a 16-year-old male who had sex with his girlfriend who was two weeks away from her 16th and now that lad has got a sex offender conviction* (Participant G).

The lack of public understanding of what crimes are committed by SOs challenges the public assumption that all individuals who commit sexual offences are 'paedophiles.' The participant

pointed out, '*even if somebody commits a sexual offence, they are not necessarily a paedophile, because that's not necessarily their sexual preference*' (Participant A). Also cited was media coverage of SOs as the main cause of stigmatisation through labelling and exacerbating the stigma '*the News of the World [newspaper] was diabolical for stigmatising paedophiles and then labelling any sex offender a paedophile*' (Participant A). This perpetuates the widespread fear that threatens societies values through the demonisation of offenders through '*pure ignorance and whipping up the hype train against these people*' (Participant A).

Other participants articulated social media as an issue associated with the stigma surrounding SOs through doxxing.

There is social stigma generally because nowadays with social media and, you know, formal journalism and the press a lot of these cases are publicised and then people find out where they live (Participant C).

These hunters, you know, the groups on social media that spread the narrative of the predatory paedophile, they name and shame people too, that spreads hatred through communities (Participant J).

Other participants acknowledged the weight of the label attached to SOs with one stating the label has negative perceptions held by the public, linking with the theoretical notion of the unreformable offender (Brooks, 2021).

When you talk about the label sex offender instantly that is weighted, the perception of the public is negative, and quite a lot of the time they wouldn't think someone like that could be rehabilitated (Participant C).

Another highlighted the permanence of labels within society and their internalisation, suggesting labels have a lasting imprint on the individual's identity, represented

metaphorically through Harry Potter's scar. '*Labels are a massive issue… Once you have got it on your head, it's like Harry Potter… the scar doesn't really go away*' (Participant E). With one participant offering an alternative perspective and concept of stigma by association.

> *Families are having to be moved and rehomed because of the community, putting through windows and their families are being bullied and harassed, and even physically and verbally assaulted in the street* (Participant H).

Barriers to Reintegration

The barriers to SAVO re-integration arose from the findings, with participants citing the emotion of 'fear' stemming from either disclosure of past convictions or fear of exclusion, reprisal, or vigilantism from the community because of the conviction. For example, it was narrated, '*Fear is a barrier, the fear comes from disclosure*' (Participant A). One participant detailed the fear of repercussions from public exposure through both local word of mouth and social media.

> *Fear, fear of disclosing what they have been convicted of or you know fear of the community finding out what they've done through social media or through the community gossiping if they are recognised* (Participant J).

Participants also acknowledged that isolation and loneliness stem from fear. A deficiency in support or assistance may lead to struggles to reintegrate.

> *They don't have the support, and they can struggle to reintegrate, they fear people finding out what they have done or disclosing what they have done leading to isolation, loneliness, and, you know, kinda sometimes have that, that feeling of what's the point, you know what they've got? nobody to give them that. You know the help and the feeling of isolation is a big barrier* (Participant D).

Another participant emphasised the potential challenges faced due to a prolonged absence from society, suggesting a lack of support in the transition from custody to society.

> *In terms of reintegration, you're throwing someone who has been in prison for like ten years and throwing them out into the real world, here you go, go and live a normal life, it's too much of a shock to the system, they are scared to get back out there, and scared people will find out what they have done* (Participant B).

Participant C detailed recognition by community members through journalism and social media as a barrier leading to the desire to mitigate the risk of being identified, suggesting individuals may actively seek strategies to reduce their presence in society as a means of self-protection.

> *Social media and you know formal journalism the press a lot of these cases are publicised and then people find out where people live, so sometimes we have to move them and that it might experience, that's one of the biggest concerns of people with these convictions, with sexual convictions and that is, you know, people are going to recognise me. What can I do to make myself less noticeable and that sort of thing, so society itself is a barrier* (Participant C).

Additionally, another also acknowledged a combination of journalism and social media as a barrier. *'People share the articles all over social media, there's these groups that repost stuff for years after'* (Participant H). This ultimately impacts long-term desistance.

Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation represents a shift from punitive paradigms towards addressing the underlying causes of crime through targeted intervention. All participants were asked to discuss the primary goals and objectives of rehabilitation.

One participant reflects with a nuanced perspective on the purposes of incarceration, deterrence, and rehabilitation while also reflecting on the philosophical and ethical discourse surrounding punishment.

> *Imprisonment is about three things the most important one from my perspective is public safety and there's the deterrent aspect and then there is a sense of punishment, which again, is that there's a philosophy bite to be had around that. But rehabilitation has to be about making people safer and more productive citizens* (Participant A).

Another suggests the multifaceted nature of rehabilitation while acknowledging the broader societal impact of rehabilitation.

> *Rehabilitation in general, you're trying to get the best possible outcome for everyone, you're rehabilitating the actual offender to ensure that not only are they not going to re-offend in the future, you're trying to make everyone a functional member of society. As that old quote goes not only for the individual, not only for the victim, not only for everyone around them, but society as a whole, is a better place if you've got less bad actors* (Participant B).

Multiple participants aligned with a strength-based approach, which illustrates the importance of providing individuals with the necessary support to facilitate positive behavioural change leading to successful reintegration. Participant C references the building of strengths and social capital, which relate to both the primary and secondary stages of the Good Lives Model (Ward, 2002).

> *The primary goal is to build people's own strengths and social capital so that they've got the internal controls and beliefs and structures to change their behaviours and work towards desistance and rehabilitation* (Participant C).

Participant D refers directly to the core tenets of GLM, through laying a foundation for change with the goal of successful reintegration encompassing the three sequential stages of the GLM.

> *The main objective is to aid people in building themselves back up focusing on their*
>
> *abilities and strengths to allow them the foundations to change to stop them from*
>
> *reoffending and giving them that place in the community* (Participant D).

One participant cites three components of criminal justice interventions: RNR, which is the need for risk stratification methods to ensure both public and individual protection; rehabilitation as a method for treatment; and the long-term journey of desistance. Each of the three components serves to facilitate progress and positive change.

> *Overall is the risk management, the rehabilitation and the desistance from crime,*
>
> *helping people really move forward* (Participant G).

The Need for Further Supportive Intervention and Policy Changes to Reduce Recidivism and Aid Reintegration

Participants were asked what could improve re-integration. Each cited alternative responses, linking with further supportive interventions and funding through policy change. One participant expressed a strong negative sentiment towards the privatisation of the probation service, critiquing the shift in the probation officer's role. This demonstrates the importance of evaluating policy and practice with theoretical perspectives.

> *What would make things better is if there had never been that abominable and*
>
> *disastrous experiment in privatising the probation service. If there had never been*
>
> *what I consider to be the dreadful decision to recast the probation officer's role as*
>
> *being an enforcement role rather than a support role to the offender* (Participant A).

Another highlighted insufficient support for individuals upon release, citing an impersonal transition to society combined with limited resources, both materially and through support, while suggesting the cyclical nature of the CJS through the revolving door concept.

> *The amount of people that I saw that had literally just left prison without necessities*
>
> *and had to beg, borrow, and steal because they weren't given enough to get out of*

> *prison. They weren't given the skills or the actual physical amenities to reintegrate. It was just open the door, see you later hope it doesn't hit you on the way out and they find the wrong way* (Participant B).

One participant emphasised the importance of community, support and connection, and education, and the significance of interpersonal relationships and social connections, stating, *'We need community, we need services, we need education, we need people around us, we all need the same things'* (Participant E). Another participant cited funding and emphasised targeted intervention programmes to promote healthy relationships, positive behavioural change, and emotional awareness and management.

> *There's a lot that needs to be done and I think first of all and it it's never going to happen, we need massive, more funding, massive amounts of more funding. We need more rehabilitation pathways, more programs, we used to have a program around victim awareness. We do the victim awareness work now like I suggested before, rolling out programs or shorter versions of building better relationships. That is all around. It's not just relationships. It's around communication and emotional management* (Participant G).

As this article is written, a new UK government has come into power, so change might be on the horizon.

Davidson, K.M., & Wilcock, A. (2025). A critical analysis of what works for the rehabilitation and reintegration of sexual and violent offenders: A review of practitioners' approaches. *Deconstructing Criminology 1*(2), 37-75. DOI.

Discussion

The Public Stigma and Labelling Encountered by Sexual and Violent Offenders

The current literature recognises the public stigmatisation of SAVO as pervasive and carries exclusionary effects for the stigmatised individual (Goffman, 1963; Tyler, 2020). Additionally, current literature elucidates the various types of crimes linked to sexual offences (Home Office, 2012). However, a misconception highlighted within the findings of this study pertains to the limited public knowledge and understanding of the range of crimes encompassed by the term 'sexual offence', as evidenced by six participants acknowledging both the scope of misconceptions and terminology used by the public. Individuals labelled as SO are subjected to heightened public stigma, both digitally and physically, as opposed to individuals with other criminal convictions (Snape & Fido, 2021). Participants used terminology such as 'Tri Sexuals' to describe someone convicted of a sexual offence that will try anything sexual; this terminology is used both colloquially and derogatively as a slur, dehumanising the individual while carrying exclusionary effects (Jahnke et al., 2022; Viki et al., 2012).

The media holds a prominent role in shaping public perceptions through narratives surrounding offences, including the depiction of the prevalence of sexual offending and the fear-inducing concept of the predatory paedophile (Brayford & Deering, 2012). Moral panic refers to the amplification of widespread fear that emerges when a perceived threat challenges societal values, often fuelled by escalating anxieties and the proliferation of online morality campaigns that use doxxing and dehumanising terminology (Cohen, 1972; Cubellis et al., 2018; Tippett, 2022). Burchfield et al. (2014) postulate that society is in a state of continuous perpetual panic, which is embedded within society, producing a culture of fear (Thomas, 2005).

McDonald (2014) argues that community vigilance against the fear of crime gives rise to retributive or vigilante violence and creates a unique hatred for SOs because of moral panic. Labelling and stigmatization by media and society increase risk by blocking individuals from opportunities essential for desistance and reintegration (Mingus & Burchfield, 2012).

Levenson et al. (2007) examination of societal perceptions revealed the public commonly views the stereotypical SO as inherently unreformable with a prevailing belief that recidivism rates for sexual offending are rising, despite empirical evidence suggesting otherwise. Transitioning from a disintegrative to a reintegrative shaming model within society may lessen the stigma attached to offenders (Braithwaite, 1989). This shift involves directing shame at the specific offense rather than the offender, helping individuals view their crime as separate from their identity (Braithwaite, 1989).

The psychological impact of technology-facilitated violence is an essential consideration when addressing the barriers faced by SAVO. Digital stigma, perpetuated through mechanisms such as doxxing and public shaming, profoundly influences individuals' self-identity and emotional well-being (Skoric, 2010). Fear, shame, and stigma, as identified by practitioners, act as significant barriers to seeking help. From a psychological perspective, digital stigma can erode an individual's sense of self-worth and security, leading to heightened levels of anxiety and depression. Maslow's hierarchy of needs highlights the importance of safety as a foundational requirement for psychological well-being (Lester et al., 1983). When this sense of safety is undermined by digital stigma, individuals may struggle to progress toward higher-order needs, such as social connection and self-actualisation (Cubellis et al., 2018; Lester et al., 1983).

Barriers to Reintegration

The findings highlight 'fear' as a barrier to reintegration, which was articulated by all participants. This fear can stem from the disclosure of past criminal convictions, fearing repercussions such as exclusion, outing, and reprisals. McNeill (2014) postulates the repercussions are consequences of the conviction (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016), with Farrall (2019) stating disclosure may be counterproductive as it may prevent individuals from seeking opportunities. In line with Tippett (2022), public exposure through doxxing, formal journalism, and community recognition is problematic for individuals attempting to reintegrate, while the literature recognises vigilantism, it is not evidenced how this affects individuals attempting to reintegrate (Kohm, 2009; Skoric, 2010; Yardley et al., 2016). This study foregrounds that doxxing and disclosure can exacerbate challenges upon reintegration, such as fear and the desire to mitigate the risk of harm, leading to byproducts including isolation and loneliness.

The UK does follow discretionary disclosure, which is based upon individual and public safety through Multi-agency Public Protection Arrangement (Ministry of Justice, National Offender Management Service, & HM Prison Service, 2014), which allows information to be controlled and only disclosed when necessary for public protection while also mitigating risks of reprisal or vigilantism (Tippett, 2022). Full public disclosure of SO was rejected on the premise of PP on the fear of both vigilantism and avoidance of registration (Kemshall et al., 2011). However, this approach does not account for the rise of digital technology where individuals are outed through doxxing on social media and vilified within the community, nor does it prevent subsequent vigilantism (McDonald, 2014; Tippett, 2022).

Rehabilitation

The literature recognises how practitioners view rehabilitation as either a risk-based practice or a strength-based practice, not as a coalescence. Strength-based approaches assist individuals with previous offending behaviour to desist from criminal activity by enhancing their skills and networks to enhance their social identity and improve their social standing within society (Casey et al., 2013). One participant acknowledged the shift from the offending identity and transition to a new self-narrative.

Maruna (2001) postulates that individuals internalise self-identity changes, attitudes, and beliefs through 'redemption scripts' and 'condemnation scripts' which occur through adopting a proactive mindset guiding conscious decision-making. These narratives are embraced internally, facilitating the transformation of the individual's self-identity (Maruna, 2001). Alternatively, risk-based practice was recognised by two participants. The RNR model of treatment views treatment as being proportional to risk while targeting criminogenic needs and tailoring to the individual. SO treatment focuses on relapse prevention strategies, victim empathy, and healthy relationships, however, this approach may emphasise deficits which may be challenging for individuals who have committed sexual offences due to their susceptibility to shame surrounding the offence (Braithwaite, 1989; Casey et al., 2013; Dewhurst & Neilsen, 1999). Findings from the participants show the pivotal role of social capital, including prosocial relationships and strong opportunities in rehabilitation and reintegration (Laws & Ward, 2011).

McNeill (2012; 2016) emphasises the importance of social support, particularly through family and positive relationships, in the rehabilitation and reintegration process. However, McNeill (2012;2016) also argues that access to opportunities is equally essential. Without such opportunities, the absence of social support is magnified, reinforcing

criminogenic societal inequalities, which refer to the societal factors and conditions that are attributed to offending behaviour.

As raised by participants, a strength-based practice approach is utilised within SO treatment programmes within HMPPS including 'Becoming New Me+' 'New Me New Strengths' and 'Living as New Me' following an approach to transitioning to a new non-offending identity and challenging the negative self-internalisations associated with the past offending identity (Ministry of Justice & HM Prison and Probation Service UK, 2018).

However, the needs of SO are diverse and dependent on criminogenic needs and typologies; the findings have highlighted the importance of implementing strength-based practice through all interventions.

The Need for Further Supportive Intervention and Policy Changes to Reduce Recidivism and Aid Reintegration

The findings from this study highlight the crucial need for further supportive interventions and policy changes to reduce recidivism rates and facilitate the reintegration of individuals into society. Participants highlighted various factors that could enhance rehabilitation and reintegration, all of which align with the implementation of supportive interventions and policy reforms. One participant criticised the privatisation of the National Probation Service in 2013, during which the Transforming Rehabilitation Initiative shifted the role of the NPS from a welfare-supportive role to a managerial role. This also encompassed a shift to the new rehabilitative ideal, which is concerned with risk management (Ministry of Justice, 2013, May; Pycroft & Clift, 2013; HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2014). However, in 2021, the privatised probation services and community rehabilitation companies were absorbed and reverted to public control. This was integrated into the HM Prison and Probation Service (GOV.UK, 2025). Conversely, the risk-based managerial approach still stands however, an individual's risk could escalate upon release due to the risk of doxxing and

other technologically facilitated targeting. King (2013) suggests that while probation can aid rehabilitation and desistance transitions, it provides limited support for socio-structural processes.

Other participants cited the improvement of rehabilitative and re-integration interventions. Moreover, insufficient support for individuals upon release was identified as a significant issue within the findings of this research, leading to a lack of material resources and support networks necessary for successful reintegration, aligning with current empirical research (Ward, 2002). Similarly, there was a consensus that more comprehensive efforts are needed within custody to prepare individuals for reintegration.

These findings underscore the necessity of targeted interventions and additional funding to promote healthy relationships, positive behavioural changes, and emotional management among offenders. It also demonstrates the need for greater awareness of doxxing and other forms of technology-facilitated violence and the impact this has on long-term desistance. Overall, the findings suggest a multifaceted approach combining supportive interventions and policy changes is essential to address the more nuanced challenges associated with recidivism and reintegration.

Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This study conducted primary qualitative research to address what works for the rehabilitation and reintegration of SAVO through a review of practitioner perspectives. While public perceptions and narratives of SAVO (Jahnke et al., 2022; Viki et al., 2012) and technology-facilitated violence through doxxing and social media vigilantism have been evidenced within research (Cubellis et al., 2018; Kohm, 2009; Tippett, 2022; Trottier, 2017; Yardley et al., 2016), the impact these processes have on SAVO rehabilitation and reintegration journey and the barriers they create has not yet been explored in the literature. Subsequently, there is a need for further research to understand the impact.

This study has contributed to existing knowledge of rehabilitation and reintegration of SAVO, offering a nuanced focus, including highlighting the need for further strength-based interventions for sexual offenders when creating interventions to aid individuals in desisting from offending behaviours and the barriers hindering reintegration, including stigma, fear, and shame. Suggestions for future research extend the findings of this article through further exploration of the barriers and challenges SAVO encounter during reintegration through the lived experience of individuals with past offences.

Initiating research within the prison environment before the reintegration process, utilising qualitative semi-structured interviews with individuals convicted of sexual offences, would facilitate a more nuanced understanding of their cognitive and psychological perspectives on reintegration.

A longitudinal qualitative study, incorporating subsequent follow-up interviews conducted in either Approved Premises or Community Accommodation Service Tier 2 or Tier 3 facilities, would enable the researcher to comprehensively examine the trajectory of reintegration and the progression toward desistance over time.

This approach provides a nuanced understanding of their perspectives, challenges, and needs. By incorporating their emotions and thoughts, researchers can better elucidate the reintegration process.

Research into public perceptions and education about SAVO can enhance community understanding, reduce reliance on media stereotypes, and improve social attitudes. Current initiatives, such as Circles of Support and Accountability, address similar challenges. This practice provides individuals with a network of informal support comprised of community members. This approach serves as a reintegrative mechanism, offering support to the individual while simultaneously functioning as a form of community education. By facilitating relationships between community members and individuals with previous

convictions for sexual offences, the programme contributes to the humanisation of these

individuals, challenging stigmatising perceptions and promoting their reintegration into

society (McAlinden, 2005).

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Appendix A

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age (Years)	Education	Practice (Years)	Sector
Participant A	66	Undergraduate and Master's degrees.	32	Public
Participant B	22	Undergraduate and Master's degrees.	1	Public & Third Sector
Participant C	41	Undergraduate and Master's degrees.	2	Public
Participant D	45	Undergraduate degree.	4	Third Sector
Participant E	28	Undergraduate and Master's degrees.	7	Third Sector
Participant F	49	Undergraduate and Master's degrees.	10	Public
Participant G	47	Undergraduate and Master's degrees.	4	Public
Participant H	48	Undergraduate degree	8	Third Sector
Participant I	31	Undergraduate and Master's degrees currently pursuing PhD.	7	Third Sector
Participant J	28	Undergraduate degree.	3	Third Sector