

# The indirect harm of online child sexual abuse: the impact on families of people who offend

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"It's not our fault. It's not the partners, the children of that family. It's not their fault, and yet they almost go through more than what the actual offender does. That's how it feels, because you haven't done anything wrong, but you're still in the process of it's all out of your control."

Partner

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## Who we are

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation is the only UK-wide charity dedicated solely to preventing child sexual abuse.

Around 1 in 6 children will be sexually abused. Around one third of this is carried out by under-18s. And around 9 in 10 children who are sexually abused know their abuser.

We work to stop this.

## How we help keep children safe

**We work to reach** adults and young people to prevent abuse from happening in the first place – and, if it already has, to prevent it from happening again.

Where abuse has already taken place, we work with all those affected, including adult male and female abusers; young people with harmful sexual behaviour; children with concerning sexual behaviours; and victims of abuse and other family members. But we also work in families and with adults and young people where there has been no abuse, to help them keep themselves and others as safe as possible.

We run the Stop It Now! UK and Ireland helpline. A confidential service available to anyone with concerns about child sexual abuse, including adults worried about their own or someone else's sexual thoughts, feelings or behaviour towards children.

## The Faithfull Papers

**We research** and evaluate our work to make sure what we do protects children, and we share the evidence with professionals and the public. We want to make best use of our expertise, our data and our insights, independently and in partnerships, to develop new strategies and interventions that help keep children safe.

**We advocate** for a greater focus on preventing abuse before it happens and for a public health approach to the prevention of child sexual abuse. The Faithfull Papers are a series of reports showcasing our understanding of what works to protect children to the widest possible audience – to policymakers, journalists, researchers and partner organisations in the UK and overseas.

## Executive summary

Online child sexual abuse (CSA) is a growing problem in the UK and around the world. Estimates of the number of people offending in the UK stand in the tens, if not hundreds, of thousands. This Faithfull Paper describes the experiences of family members of people who have viewed, shared or made sexual images of children online and/or people who engaged in online solicitation and grooming. These are serious crimes and cause huge harm to children, which can last many years.

Relatives of people who have committed an online sexual offence can also experience considerable harm during the criminal justice system response to the offence; as such they are often described as secondary victims of crime (1). Usually the first they know of a loved one's offending is when police officers arrive to search the house. There is currently little research around the impact of offences relating to online CSA on families of people who have committed these offences. This is an important area to explore. For the family of people identified as committing online CSA offences, the trauma is unlikely to be a one-off incident. Rather, the stressors and strains will be ongoing and change over time. This can begin with the initial search of the home, and families will be thrust into often unfamiliar worlds of the criminal justice and child protection systems (2, 3). Our own experience suggests that the route to prosecution is long and can take up to two years before conviction or acquittal. Non-offending partners of people who committed sexual offences are typically expected to monitor and manage their partner's behaviour (4) and safeguard their child(ren) (5), with minimal support available for their own wellbeing (4).

Many of the laws and policies relating to sexual offending that are imposed on people after sentencing also impact upon the non-offending partner and their children, bringing disruptions in family dynamics and social networks (6, 7). For example, children with a parent whose sex offender registration status becomes known (through community notification policies) have reported experiencing bullying and harassment (6) and being treated differently by classmates by teachers and other adults (8). For children, these experiences often precede feelings of anxiety, anger, fear, depression and suicidal thoughts or attempts (8).

In 2018, The Lucy Faithfull Foundation (LFF) launched the [Family and Friends Forum](#) where people whose loved ones have committed an online CSA offence can give and receive support from others in similar situations. The forum was made and is maintained thanks to charitable support, and it aims to:

- improve users' mental health, including reducing feelings of isolation, dislocation, stigma and shame
- enhance users' capacity to protect any children in their care, including by increasing their confidence in talking to children and supervising their contact, and having a greater awareness of risk
- increase users' knowledge, including of risks associated with the viewing of sexual images of children online and online solicitation and grooming; the criminal justice system and child protection processes

We commissioned an evaluation led by Professor Rachel Armitage (University of Huddersfield) to better understand the experience of forum users and explore the impact of online CSA on family and friends of people who have offended.



## Key points

### Impact on the family in the immediate aftermath of the police investigation

- When online CSA occurs the initial focus is rightly on the person who has offended and on protecting victims and children at risk. However, this criminal behaviour has a ripple effect beyond the child harmed. People who have offended have their own families and approximately 42% of our service users who had offended online were parents. Becoming aware of online CSA offences committed by a family member has a significant negative impact on partners, their children and other family members, even if they have not been directly harmed. We can think of these people as secondary victims.
- In the vast majority of cases family members only find out about their loved one's offending when police arrive at the family home. This is often referred to by families as '**the knock**' - a term now commonly used to describe the moment police attend an address to execute a warrant or search a home in relation to online CSA offences. It is becoming common practice for families of those who have offended to describe their lives as 'pre-knock' or 'post-knock'.
- Children are often present at this time and will see searches, devices being taken, arrests and distraught parents.

### Impact on the family in the longer-term

- A long process can follow the initial contact with police. This can include the investigation, trial, disclosure to others, media attention and the repercussions that can come in terms of living arrangements, childcare and supervision. Each of these stages involves more stress and often relentless pressure for non-offending partners as the remaining safeguarding parent.
- A striking finding of our evaluation is the identification of post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) and potential post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in families of people who offended. This trauma is unlikely to be a one-off incident for families when they discover what has been happening and stressors and strains will continue and change over time.
- Family members also report feelings of guilt, shame, perceived discrimination and stigmatisation. For some, this is made worse by loneliness and isolation, with little or no access to support.
- The non-offending partner can also face financial hardships, including loss of income or costs associated with recovery or building a new life.

## Agency responses

- Experiences of engagement with services including police and children's services can vary. Where there is empathy this is often expressed by individual officers or staff, rather than being how the system itself is designed to respond.
- Remembering that we are talking about family members, not people who have offended, police actions can sometimes leave them feeling scared and distraught. Family members perceived this as stemming from a lack of compassion. Such feelings are exacerbated in the long term by poor communication which leaves people feeling ashamed, judged and ill-informed about what is happening.
- Navigating the criminal justice process is difficult for families, as they often have little knowledge of the legal process and there is a lack of clear information regarding what to expect as things progress.
- One of the key issues in terms of the response of children's services is a lack of communication and care. Some partners reported that their child's school or nursery were informed about the offending without prior warning. This fosters feelings of fear, shame and embarrassment, particularly in small communities.
- The impact of media reporting, or the fear of this possibility, has a significant impact on wellbeing of partners and children.

## Recommendations

- The psychological impacts upon family, partners and children are extensive, long-term and affected by agency responses to the offence. The agencies involved in the process of conducting 'the knock' know when the initial investigation of the home will happen and who will be impacted. Where there is predictable exposure to potential trauma, agencies have a duty to adjust their responses to minimise harm for those caught in the 'cross-fire'.
- Where children are known to be present, a specialist team, such as trained POLIT or other appropriately trained officers, should conduct 'the knock' and all efforts should be made to prioritise family welfare, including identifying a dedicated social worker or police officer who will help the family navigate the next few days, weeks and months.
- Police officers undertaking the initial investigation of the home should hand out a [Family Pack](#) that explains the investigation process and contains information on available support services for offending and non-offending members of the family.
- Access to such support services needs to be improved for all partners and children of people who have committed online CSA offences throughout the lengthy prosecution stage. Provision should not be a postcode lottery.
- Reporting standards relating to media coverage of people who have committed online CSA offences need to be reviewed and adjusted to protect family members from emotional and physical harm.

## Introduction

Online CSA is increasing. In England and Wales for the year ending March 2019, across 39 of the 43 police forces, 17,521 image-related offences were recorded (9). It has become increasingly challenging for the criminal justice system to process the number of people committing these offences (10, 11).

The arrest of a person for an online CSA offence has a ripple effect that includes their family, and these family members can be considered secondary victims because they suffer harm in the aftermath of criminality. Data from our service users suggests that there are secondary victims for almost half of online CSA referrals; among 800 people who had offended online, 45% reported being in a relationship, while 42% reported being a parent when they first contacted Stop It Now! Scotland.

There may be a particular type of shock, stress and stigma associated with online CSA offences. Families often first become aware of offending behaviour when the police arrive at the family home. This moment is sometimes called 'the knock' and is the beginning of an often long and painful process for family members. When there are children in the family, safeguarding practices require the police to conduct 'the knock' at a time when children will be present in the property to try to ensure their safety. The search of the home is often frightening for family members, including children.

In 2018 we launched an online forum so that family and friends of people who have offended can get peer support. Since then 2,188 people have posted on the forum. Many people visit the forum and choose not to post and during the 2021/22 financial year the forum had 39,137 users, who completed 188,167 sessions. This is an average 39% monthly increase in sessions compared to 2020/21 (15,681 vs 11,293).



## Methodology

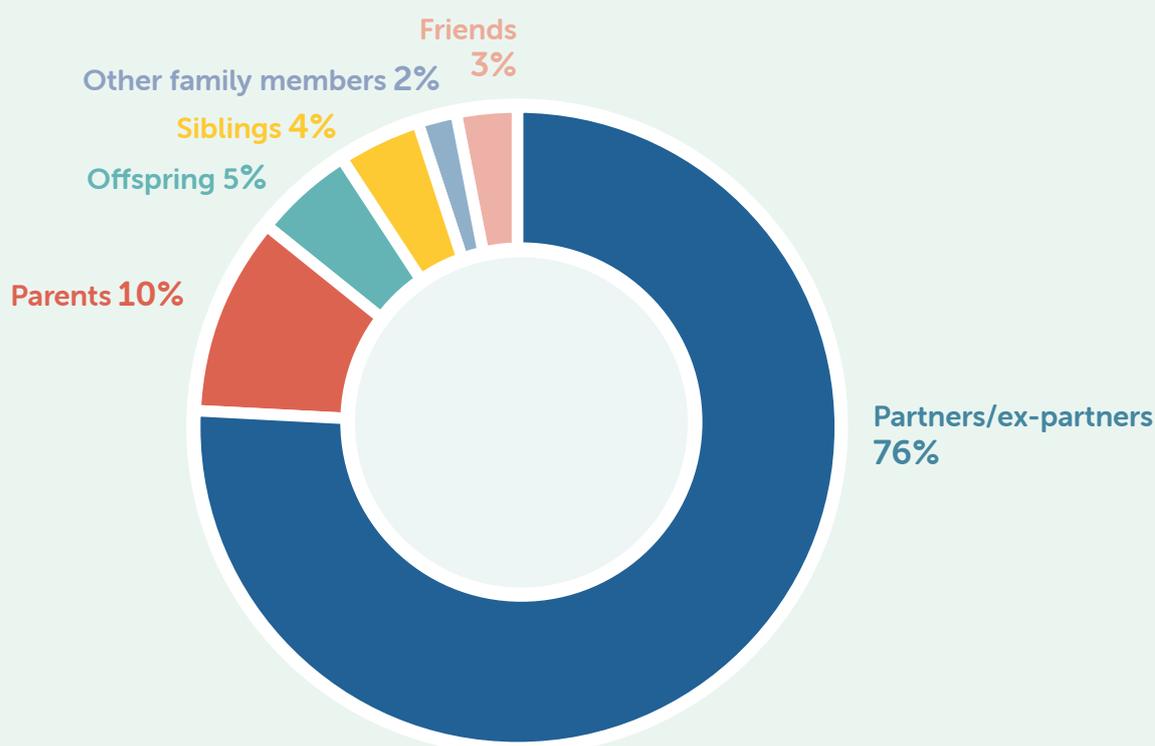
We commissioned an evaluation led by Professor Rachel Armitage (University of Huddersfield) to better understand the experience of forum users<sup>1</sup>. An exploration of the impact of online CSA offences on family and friends of people who have committed these offences, based on surveys and interviews with forum users, was included as part of the evaluation. An evaluation reference group was set up consisting of LFF staff, academic partners, and non-offending partners of people who committed online CSA offences.

Data were analysed from 123 participants who were family or friends of people who had committed online CSA offences. They consisted of partners/ex-partners (n = 93), parents (n = 12), offspring (n = 6), siblings (n = 5), other family members (n = 3) and friends (n = 4) (see figure 1). Their ages ranged from 22 to 73 years. Participants responded to questions that helped us understand the impact of an online CSA offence on the wellbeing of non-offending family members and friends and their experiences of engaging with formal agencies.

We used the Impact of Events Scale - Revised (IES-R; 12, 13) to screen for the potential occurrence of post-traumatic stress that might impact on partners, family members and friends. Although self-report measures cannot be used independently to diagnose PTSD and diagnostic cut-off scores vary across studies depending on the population investigated, the IES-R measure is a well-validated screening tool that can be used to indicate the presence of probable PTSD (14).

**Figure 1**

### Relationship to the person who committed online CSA offences (N = 123)



<sup>1</sup> All research methods and data collection tools were assessed and agreed in line with the University of Huddersfield Human and Health Sciences Ethics and Integrity Panel and with ethical permission from The Lucy Faithfull Foundation Ethics Panel.

Survey respondents who self-selected to attend an in-depth interview were screened for inclusion in the sample, to ensure a mix of participants in terms of relationship to the person who has offended and the time since the offence or disclosure. The final interview sample consisted of 20 participants, 18 of whom were female, and whose age ranged from 28 to 73. Within this sample 15 participants were partners or ex-partners of people who have offended. Among them, 10 had children with the partner who offended and two reported the partner who offended to have children from another relationship. Two were a parent to a person who has offended. One participant was a sibling and one participant was an adult offspring of a person who has offended. Only one participant who attended an in-depth interview was a friend of a person arrested in connection to online CSA, the current paper will, therefore, focus on the experiences of family members only (n = 119). The survey and interviews together give us real insight into the experiences of family of those arrested in connection with online CSA offences.



## Key findings

### For family members, the shock of the discovery starts with 'the knock'

From our survey 81% (n = 96) of family members found out about their loved one's offending behaviour at the time of 'the knock' and had no knowledge of the offending prior to a search warrant being served. Many described the "bombshell" that was dropped on them, while feeling that little consideration was given for their, or their children's, wellbeing. This extract from one interview describes this moment and subsequent trauma.

Nobody actually sat with me to give me any sort of... nothing. I was just left with this... My partner was just a mess, broken down, crying, remorseful, said he's sick. Personally, I feel they just dumped this bombshell on me, and then that was it. For all they know, I could have gone and completed suicide, and I genuinely think nobody would have given a shit about me until that had happened. Even my partner's mental health was basically just shoved on to me.

Partner

### Engagement with the police

Survey respondents' and interviewees' experiences of interacting with the police was varied.

Remembering that we are talking about family members, not people who have offended, we were told that police sometimes left families feeling scared and distraught. Participants perceived this as stemming from a lack of empathy for those affected. Such feelings were exacerbated in the long term by poor communication which left people feeling ashamed, judged and ill-informed about what was happening.

I know they're very busy, I don't want to criticise the police but my view of [police force] is they were just horrendous to me, awful. They came round that night they got the devices, they didn't talk to me. They went through the house like a fine-toothed comb. I was just sat in shock. They were just huffing and puffing around. It was horrendous. They couldn't tell me why they were there, which I understand, but I think if you're a police woman or man, surely you show a little bit of compassion? Maybe they're just completely fed up with their jobs and dealing with scum of the earth people, but they were just horrible.

Partner

Some family members reported that police could be empathic and understanding of the shock experienced after 'the knock' and in the longer term. But these expressions of compassion seem to be individual, and not the expected response on behalf of the system.

Then I went in the kitchen with them and I asked my eldest to watch the other two, and I think I cried then and just said: 'What has he done? What's happened?' They were just so apologetic and they were like, we're so sorry that we can't tell you anything.

Partner

It was only when they went out, because there were four of them, there was one woman and three men, the last man as he went out just mouthed to me: 'I'm really sorry.' They never said it out loud, like they weren't allowed to say anything like that.

Partner

In practical terms the removal of digital devices that belonged to all members of the family, including children, was upsetting. But this was not always done and some police officers did show empathy and good practice in terms of mitigating impacts on children.

My daughter was allowed to keep her phone. They went through the phone and said she was allowed to keep it, and she got the boys ready, and took them to school. The boys were told that their dad was helping the police with some of their enquiries, and made to feel like, well, it wasn't him that was being investigated.

Parent

## Family members experience stress that accumulates over time

A major stressor for partners of people who have offended is the immediate consideration for the children who were harmed by the acts committed, and, for those with children, a concern that they may have been abused by their partner.

Family members have described to us the lengthy process that follows initial contact with police, from investigation to trial, and the many pressures and decision making points they encounter along the way. This may involve telling other people about the offending or having to cope with media coverage. Each stage or event brings more stress and pressure.

You are generally quite lost in the first couple of weeks and months, because your whole world has just been, to the core, ripped apart. The one person that actually is - weirdly, the one person that is actually trying to help you, or trying to give you that support bubble and make everything okay, is the very person who has destroyed it, because they are looking for the same thing.

Partner

## Engagement with the criminal justice system

Whether or not they continue to support the person who has offended, partners and children can also find themselves in direct engagement with other parts of the criminal justice system. This might be while they stand as a witness, attend court or read the crime report, which can involve hearing or reading graphic details of the offences committed, which they did not expect.

Interviewees primarily experienced their journey through the criminal justice system as difficult, and attributed this to their lack of knowledge in navigating the legal process. The majority of participants indicated that they experienced uncertainty throughout this time and they would very much value the provision of clear information regarding what to expect as things progress.

One of the most difficult things was the fact that it kept on being postponed, postponed, postponed. They kept on needing more evidence. That was very unsettling.

Partner

The police were called, he was arrested and then released under investigation and that's where we are now. Still don't know what's happening... we've had nothing... but we don't know anything. There's just nothing from the police... It's just released under investigation... it's nearly three years.

Partner

## Engagement with children's services

Our survey respondents and interviewees reported largely negative experiences regarding the way in which children's services had dealt with their case. Issues focused predominately on a lack of communication, a lack of empathy, and a lack of support or provision of resources. Some families described being left with the responsibility to manage risk (for example, to supervise the contact that offending partners had with children) without sufficient information regarding the offence.

You do not leave any of them with him for one second, sort of thing. I was like, okay. He said: 'You need to really think about whether you can manage that risk before you go ahead and do it.' It did feel almost a bit like, you're putting all this on me, like this responsibility, and then telling me this is how it needs to be, and then just leaving me. I was just a bit...

Partner

Partners of people who have offended were left with a feeling that the role of children's services was purely to ascertain risk and not to care about their wellbeing as the parent who had done no wrong. Many spoke of children's services as the agency having the most negative of impacts on their psychological and physical wellbeing. Partners told us that the impact of the offence and subsequent process could have been reduced with some degree of empathy and understanding from children's services staff.

One of the key issues that emerged was the lack of communication and care, particularly surrounding informing schools or nurseries when a person who has offended is known to have children, without warning the non-offending partners. This brought feelings of fear, shame and embarrassment, particularly in small communities. One interviewee spoke about children's services informing the school before the family had a chance to speak to them. After being told this, she ran to try to talk to the school before they did.

Yes, so actually, that was horrendous because my sister phoned for an update and they said: 'Oh, we're just about to tell your schools.' They hadn't informed us of that, so I literally ran across to the school, I broke down.

Sibling

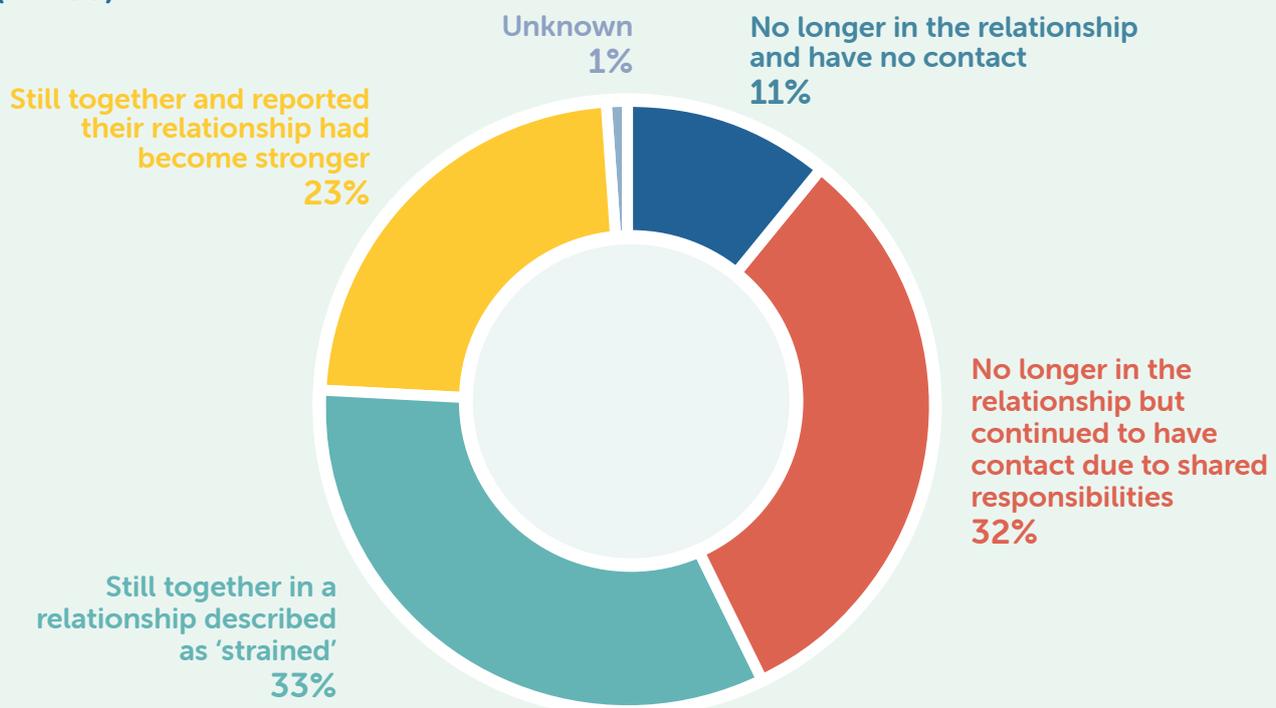
## The impact on adult family members' relationship with the person who has offended

'The knock' and subsequent actions have a significant impact on the relationship between family members and the person who has offended.

At the time of completing the survey, respondents who were partners when 'the knock' occurred reported now being in varying relationships with the person who had offended. Out of 93 respondents, 56% (n = 52) were still in a relationship with the person who had committed offences; 10 reported they were no longer in the relationship and had no contact; 30 partners were no longer with the person who had offended but had to continue contact due to shared responsibilities; 31 were still together in a relationship described as 'strained'; 21 were still together and reported their relationship had become stronger (see figure 2).

Figure 2

### Partners' relationship status to the individual who committed online CSA offences (N = 93)



Among the 26 survey respondents who were family members other than partners, 58% (n = 15) reported a range of negative impacts, while 19% (n = 5) described their family relationships as becoming stronger since the discovery of the offence.

As well as an immediate impact on relationships there are ongoing issues. Our interviewees reported the need to build a false narrative with people who would have been trusted confidants to explain changes in circumstances, isolation and loss of relationships. Over half of the people we interviewed reported that their friendships had been affected.

After nearly 6 years I still feel isolated in my community. I used to have lots of friends but now I just have lots of acquaintances. I am lonely for adult friendships.

Survey respondent

Participants who were trying to build new relationships also spoke of the struggle of disclosing to their new partner, with a continuing dilemma as to when they should share this information, and worries about how this will impact the future of that relationship.

## The impact on children of people who have offended

A story of shock and loss begins when children are present at the first interaction with police, particularly if this comes early in the morning as an investigation of the home. Children can see searches, devices being taken, arrests and distraught parents.

My daughter was here, at the time, and the knock, when the police came to take the devices and that, was absolutely horrendous. It really, really did affect her. She was crying, she was making noises like a wounded animal, she was being sick. Absolutely horrendous.

Partner

Future careers of children, if they ever end up in public roles. This may come out etc. It's like a stone being thrown in a lake and the ripples never stop.

Survey respondent

Some families described trying to shield their children from knowledge of the offences committed. However, this requires them to build a false narrative around the absence of a family member and then having to maintain their own emotional and physical wellbeing whilst maintaining the story.

## The impact of media coverage

The impact of media reporting, or the fear of this possibility, had a significant impact on survey respondents and interviewees. Some families had their home addresses or identifiable personal information reported. Media can report the address of a person who committed online CSA offences if it is shared in open court (and often do to prevent a case of mistaken identity), but this may also be the home address of their family. Our interviewees spoke of negative community responses, and being unable to shield their children from information, judgement or exclusion.

You don't need personal details and addresses. The address thing, that just blows my mind that they can give an address out that has got a woman and children are left in that house. To be left vulnerable, when they have done nothing wrong.

Partner

## Financial impacts

Another impact on us was the expense of having to move out of the family home and having another set of bills.

Partner

Survey respondents specified a range of negative financial impacts they experienced as a result of the arrest, with others stating impacts in every part of their lives. These centred around:

- the loss of the offending partner's job
- having less to spend on children due to the offending partner losing their job
- the new cost of childcare
- the costs associated with relocating and/or financing two homes if it was a couple who had separated
- legal fees
- covering the costs for damage to the home during the police investigation<sup>2</sup>
- loss of the family member's job due to the psychological impact of the discovery of the offence
- the costs incurred in paying for therapy

Many non-offending partners reported a reduction in their own working hours due to changes in childcare arrangements and interruptions to employment, including losing their jobs.

Some families had a new reliance on welfare benefits or became bankrupt. Others reported worries about managing in the near future, with concerns over mortgage payments or growing reliance on loans or credit. Several participants faced the expense of relocating when there was a fear of negative community responses. Almost all participants faced significant legal costs.

<sup>2</sup> Police often need to dismantle household items, furniture or fixtures and fittings to ensure a thorough investigation is conducted and, whilst these items need to be returned to a habitable state, police cannot replace items that have been damaged as part of this process.

## Post-traumatic stress

A striking finding of our evaluation is the identification of PTSS and potential PTSD in families of people who offended.

It's a bit of a weird one to say, I can never quite put it, but I have suffered, or do suffer with PTSD. One of the few things that I can always remember, and I don't think I'll ever forget, is the day.

Partner

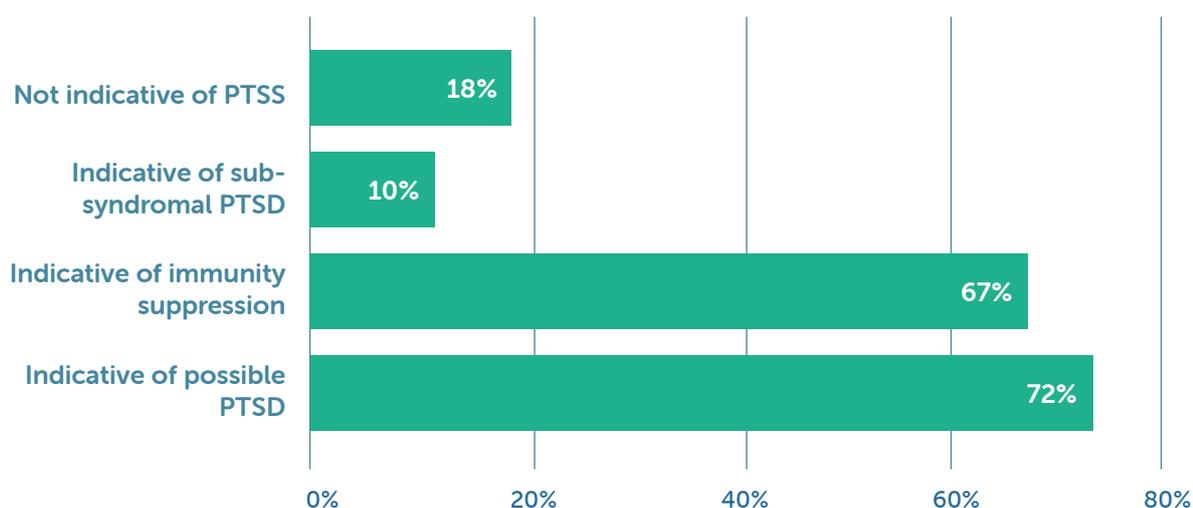
The way I see it is I'm just collateral damage to a very complex trauma.

Partner

While few of the survey respondents told us that they have been clinically diagnosed as suffering from PTSD, the respondents' scores on the IES-R scale revealed a very different picture in terms of PTSS (see figure 3). Among survey respondents who were family members, 101 completed the IES-R. While 18 respondents had scores indicating that they did not have problematic levels of PTSS, almost three quarters ( $n = 73$ ) reported symptom levels ( $\geq 33$ ) indicative that a diagnosis of PTSD was likely warranted (15). Over two thirds of respondents ( $n = 68$ ) reported symptom levels ( $\geq 37$ ) that were sufficient to suppress their immune system's functioning (16). Ten respondents reported symptom levels ( $\geq 24$  and  $< 33$ ) indicative of at least sub-syndromal PTSD, which suggests that any additional trauma or stressor could move them into the diagnosable category (17).

Figure 3

### Respondents' levels of PTSS



All non-offending partners in the survey demonstrated PTSS that exceeded the threshold indicating a possible diagnosis of PTSD.

I think it has changed my own sense of identity forever.

Survey respondent

Building on the survey findings, it is clear from the interview responses that the psychological impact upon the family is extensive, lengthy and, in many cases affected by agency responses to the offence. Participants acknowledged that the damage is caused by the offending behaviour but perceived that their wellbeing was negatively impacted by the way in which 'the knock' and subsequent investigation is dealt with, and how they have been treated within that investigation.

Partners of offenders. People in my situation because we are isolated, we are... There is no proper support for us. As far as trauma goes, I think we're the only one where our trauma isn't appreciated. It's like we're not allowed to have experienced trauma. We're not allowed to go through the grieving process, it's not okay because of what they did. Yet, actually through it, our strength is not recognised.

Partner

## Other psychological and social impacts

Family members also reported feelings of guilt, shame, perceived discrimination and stigmatisation. For some, these impacts are likely made worse by loneliness and isolation, with little or no access to support. Ninety-seven family members completed the survey question asking about these potential impacts. Two thirds (66%, n = 64) told us that other people judge them because of their connection to the person who has offended, leaving them feeling ashamed of themselves. Over half (58%, n = 56) also felt discriminated against by those providing services to their family. Some respondents (14%, n = 14) also reported they had been threatened or attacked because of their association with the person who has offended.

It impacted every part of my life... There is not a part of your life it does not contaminate.

Survey respondent

No one wants to be seen to support us, the families. Husband has lots of support, all concerned about him taking his life. What about me? I did nothing wrong, yet I feel like I have been punished by society straight from sting/arrest whilst he lives many miles away anonymously.

Survey respondent

I was a risk via association. This is not my crime, and I did the very hard thing of reporting my own husband but feel I'm treated in a similar manner to the offender.

Survey respondent

Non-offending partners also described how they experienced the very real loss of the one person they would normally go to for support. Two interview participants talked of attempting suicide. One of them, described to us the "nightmare" of finding themselves in this situation.

That's essentially what it does really. You are literally living your worst nightmare. In fact, it's so far off your worst nightmare that you hadn't even considered it as your worst nightmare. My worst nightmare before this was like, my husband leaving me. Now my worst nightmare is like, my husband is not the person I thought he was, and I'm married to him. Then you go on to a forum only to realise that everyone else is experiencing your worst nightmare, and they're pointing out all the ways in which your worst nightmare is going to get worse.

Partner

## Discussion

This research highlights the psychological impacts on families of people arrested for committing online CSA offences, following the arrest and subsequent engagement with the criminal justice system. These include often severe mental health difficulties, feelings of shame and guilt, and suicidal thoughts and behaviour. These impacts can be exacerbated by the responses of formal agencies involved in the investigation of such offences, which are often perceived as judgmental and lacking in empathy. They can be further intensified by feelings of isolation that follow from not being able to access agency support or discuss their experience and seek support among their wider network of family and friends. Adverse impacts can continue into the future, as engagement with agencies can be lengthy, starting from the initial investigation of the family home and continuing in all subsequent stages of the family's journey through the criminal justice system. During this time, poor communication and lack of care in disseminating information about the offence (by children's services and the media) will leave families feeling exposed and fearful for their safety. There can be significant financial repercussions for the family as well, following an investigation of online CSA offences, bringing further disruptions to family life and impacting upon parental stress.

When referring to the lack of empathy demonstrated by the police and children's services, family members reported a variety of behaviours that showed little interest for the wellbeing of the family. They reported feeling distraught when law enforcement and children's services would not promptly or sufficiently communicate agency proceedings. There are different reasons for delays in communication. These may include long waiting times for digital devices to be examined before updates are issued, and professional policies limit how often and why the police should contact a person who has offended. At the same time, data protection laws often prevent the police from sharing meaningful updates with the family. There might be value to assigning a dedicated member of staff within each agency as a point of contact for a nominated family member at agreed-upon time intervals. This could help ease some of the anxiety associated with investigation and safeguarding procedures. It could also give due notice of any imminent proceedings, leaving sufficient time for the family to discuss and respond.

Non-offending family members also perceived agencies as discriminating against them, because of their association with the person who has offended. Non-offending partners specifically addressed the lack of care and support by children's services, who at the same time required them to undertake the full responsibility of managing their partner's risk. The importance of appropriate agency responses in this population cannot be understated. The inherent power imbalance in the interaction between criminal justice and children's services with families, as well as the judgment elicited against those who commit sexual offences and those who love and support them offers the ground for agency responses that are confrontational, disempowering, and retraumatising (18). Approximately three quarters of survey respondents (72%) reported elevated post-traumatic stress in response to their family member's online CSA offence. This leaves them vulnerable to confrontational agency responses that can increase mental health distress, shame, sense of stigmatisation, and suicidal thoughts and behaviour that family members talked about.

Participants occasionally described instances where individual agency staff behaved with empathy, but such instances were considered an exception and perceived in stark contrast to the general response of the agency. It may be that lack of compassion is a systemic issue and characteristic of systems rather than the actions of specific agency staff. As the rate of online CSA offences rise rapidly, occupying agency time across an increasing amount of investigations, agency responses may be restricted to the bare minimum of activities necessary to perform assigned duties. For example, at the time of the investigation of the family's property, police are trained to focus on securing and preserving evidence. Likewise, the priority for children's services staff is to identify whether the non-offending partner can safeguard the children in the family. This may leave little time and mental space to consider the impact an online CSA offence has on the family of the person who has offended and to provide support accordingly.

Any discussion of agency responses should, however, factor in compassion fatigue or vicarious traumatisation. These refer to disruptions in psychological wellbeing and occupational functioning in professionals supporting people who have experienced trauma. Vicarious traumatisation also occurs among professionals who are exposed to CSA imagery, including police officers, law enforcement, and social workers, and can have a negative impact on their ability to practice care for themselves and the families they are working with (19, 20, 21, 22). Initiatives to introduce trauma-informed policing and social work across the UK should be enhanced. This approach will help minimise the risk of (re)traumatising service users who have offended and their families, as well as staff who respond to online CSA offences (23).

# Recommendations

## 1. Police should aim to minimise the harm to families

When police first engage with a suspect the focus is rightly on arrest and on gathering evidence. But safeguarding and ensuring the wellbeing of everyone involved should also be a priority. Police will have gathered intelligence before the initial investigation of the family property on who else might be present when contact is made, and that 'the knock' often comes early morning to ensure the person who has offended is at home and that evidence in terms of devices will be found. It is also customary for the police to conduct 'the knock' at a time when children in the family will be present, to ensure that they are safe.

In practice, it seems that little is done in terms of safeguarding at the time of 'the knock'; safeguarding will typically be conducted during the follow up by children's services. The exponential rise in online CSA offences is likely to play a part in this, limiting the time that police can invest in safeguarding. 'The knock' is an integral part of the police investigation that cannot be avoided, yet is shown to carry significant potential for family trauma. Some rethinking of this initial contact might help mitigate the stress and minimise harm for children.

We suggest:

- data should be collected and reported on a regular basis so that we can better understand how many children are present when arrests are being made, and help assess the need for support for families
- when children are known to be present a specialist team, such as trained POLIT or other appropriately trained officers, should conduct 'the knock'
- when children are present at the address, all efforts should be made to prioritise family welfare. This should include considering ahead of time who the dedicated social worker or officer will be to help the family navigate the next few days, weeks and months. This identified professional would also act to improve communication between police, criminal justice and families as well as support families in liaising with educational services
- police should consider whether a potentially traumatic impact on children can be avoided, by engaging the person who has offended when children are likely to be out
- adopting a trauma-informed approach to conducting such police investigations would recognise that all family members are likely to be significantly affected by the discovery of the offending and that all involved should be directed to sources of support.

## 2. Non-offending family members of people who have committed online CSA should be treated as secondary victims

To change potential perceptions of non-offending family members from complicit to victims, police, criminal justice, children's and social services should be supported and challenged in training and professional development. Our findings can be shared with colleagues across services to begin to inform them of impacts and to build a sense of professional and personal empathy towards family of people who have offended. We are working with the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse to develop a resource for social workers engaged with families when a parent has accessed sexual images of children online, to make practical, informed decisions to minimise risk of reoffending, safeguard children and support the family.

## 3. Services responding to online CSA need to be trauma-informed

A key requirement of all services that engage with victims of crime, including the family of people who commit online CSA offences, should be to understand the potentially traumatic impact of the offence on the family. Our report provides strong evidence as to this area of concern (with 72% of survey respondents reporting symptom levels indicative that a diagnosis of PTSD was likely warranted). It is important to consider additional training needs on trauma-informed practice and policies for social workers and police officers who respond to online CSA offences.

## 4. Non-offending partners and children should be signposted to support services

All families should be given a [Family Pack](#) at the time of 'the knock'. The pack should provide a brief overview of what the investigation process entails and signpost to available support services for offending and non-offending members of the family alike. A follow-up in the two-week period after 'the knock' should also be arranged and conducted by the dedicated social worker or officer assigned to the family. We also recommend a follow-up after three months when there may be many benefits to children's services checking-in and advising or referring on, as and when needed.

In addition, all families should be given information on charities and services that offer support to families of people who have offended online. These are limited, and often limited to specific geographical areas. Professionals in this field should be working together to expand such provision. Accessing information and support should not be a postcode lottery.

## 5. More research should be done

Much of the existing literature on non-offending partners and their children has focused on either contact sexual offending or non-offending partners as parents of the children directly abused by their partner. Consequently, there is a gap in knowledge regarding the short-term and long-term impacts and outcomes for non-offending partners, children, and other family members of people who have committed online CSA offences. The high volume of arrests each month for this crime, and the resultant numbers of preemptively identifiable secondary victims make this an important area for exploration.

## 6. Family members should be protected from exposure in the media

Efforts should be made to work with the Independent Press Standards Organisation regarding the reporting of online CSA offenders' family details. Guidance for police on when to consider releasing charged individuals' details should also be in place. Family members have done no wrong and their status as secondary victims who experience significant adverse effects as a result of their family member's offending needs to be acknowledged. We need to work towards providing a greater level of protection in terms of reporting.

# Conclusion

This paper clearly describes the trauma families go through when a loved one is arrested for online CSA offences. While the makeup and the specific experience of each family might differ, what does not differ is the huge impact on their lives and the lives of those around them, including their children.

Hundreds of arrests are being made each month and the response, support and services for all those affected are currently inadequate. We have made some recommendations, but these are far from exhaustive.

There are steps being taken by charities, academics and families who have been through the experience with a view to driving change. For example, both England and Wales, and Scotland, have working groups looking into these issues. We are also working with the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse to develop a resource for social workers engaged with families when a parent has viewed sexual images of children online, which we hope goes some way to helping social workers make practical, informed decisions to minimise risk of reoffending, safeguard children and support the family.

There is much more that needs to be done - we must do better for these families.

*Anyone affected by the issues raised in this paper can contact our Stop It Now! helpline on 0808 1000 900 for anonymous advice and support.*

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