

Police officer attitudes to the practicalities of the sex offenders register, ViSOR and Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure Scheme in England & Wales.

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Abstract

This paper examines police officer understandings of and attitudes to the sex offenders register, Violent and Sex Offenders Register (ViSOR) and Child Sexual Offender Disclosure Scheme (CSODS) in England and Wales; an under researched area in the management of sexual offenders in the UK. This research is an adaptation of an American study (Harris, Lobanov-Rosovsky & Levenson, 2015) utilizing a mixed-methods approach, combining an online questionnaire survey (n = 227) with a series of semi-structured interviews (n = 27). The study found that police officers, irrespective of role, were generally supportive of the register, ViSOR and CSODS in principle but they thought that logistics, practicalities, infrastructure, multi-agency collaboration and public understandings had problematic impacts on the scheme in practice. The participants believed that greater investment was needed in terms of time and resource to make the register, ViSOR and CSODS easier to use and access and thus fit for purpose.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing recognition of the extent of sexual violence globally (UNICEF, 2014; Internet Watch Foundation, 2017), especially against children, reinforces that perpetrators of sexual harm pose a significant public, policy and criminal justice issue both nationally and international (Kemshall & McCartan, 2014; Nash, 2016; Harris, Walfield, Shields & Letoureau, 2015;). This has resulted in Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) shifting from being considered a criminal justice only issue to a wider multi-agency and civic issue (Smallbone, Wortley & Marshall, 2008; Dickson & Willis, 2015) especially in terms of prevention, policing, rehabilitation and management (Nash, 2016; McCartan, Kemshall & Tabachnick, 2015). This shift is important given the recent changes to the criminal justice system in England and Wales, including, cuts to police funding, the establishment of the college of policing, the privatization of parts of probation and increased multi-agency working (Kemshall, 2017). It has been suggested that the recent changes in criminal justice funding and policies will impact relevant agencies abilities to investigate criminal offences, protect the public and manage offenders in the community (Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, 2017; Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2017). The challenges to policing in the UK that such changes pose are further exacerbated when considering the management of complex and multifaceted offenders, like perpetrators of sexual harm. Currently, there are 49,322 registered perpetrators of sexual harm in England and Wales (College of Policing, personal communication, 2016 January 26). This population is set to increase further because of the recent upturn in the reporting and sentencing of sexual offences (Crown Prosecution Service, 2016), increases in historical sexual abuse linked to organizations and institutions (e.g. Football Association, BBC, Care homes) and a series of high profile inquiry's (e.g. Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse & the Office for the Children's Commissioner's report into CSA in the Family Environment). This increase will inevitably incur further structural, procedural and logistical strain on the criminal justice system (Hudson, Taylor & Henley, 2015).

Currently in the UK, the majority of management policy and practice for perpetrators of sexual harm originates from a series of policies and procedures that were introduced at the turn of the this century (Sex Offenders Act 1997; Criminal Justice Act 2003; Sexual Offences Act 2003; Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000) and focus on public protection and punitive sentencing as a basis for risk management (Nash, 2016; Williams & Nash, 2014). Current and recent management policies for perpetrators of sexual harm include establishing 'public protection sentences', the sex offenders register, multi-agency risk assessment and risk management of sexual offenders (see Kemshall and McCartan, 2014). One of the main strategies being used across England and Wales to monitor the risk from known perpetrators of sexual harm is the sex offenders register (Thomas, 2010; Kemshall & Weaver, 2012). The register contains the

details of anyone convicted, cautioned or released from prison for a sexual offence against a child or adult since its inception in September 1997 (see Prison Reform Trust, 2015). The register, which is run by the police, requires individuals to register within 72 hours of release into the community and then check in with and update the police on a regular basis notifying them of changes to their living and personal circumstances, there are penalties applied to those failing to comply (Home Office, 1997). Convicted perpetrators of sexual harm remain on the register for differing periods of time, ranging from 1 year to lifetime registration, depending upon their offence and sentence (see Kemshall et al 2010; Prison Reform Trust, 2015). However, despite the introduction of the register in 1997, the Bichard Inquiry (2004), called upon the police to investigate failings in the management of perpetrators of sexual harm in light of the murder of Holly and Jessica Wells by Ian Huntley. The outcome of this investigation discovered that even though all UK police forces had a register, this information was not very well connected nationally with different forces recording, storing and passing on information from the register in inconsistent ways. To enable the criminal justice system in the England and Wales, but especially the police, to better manage and preserve the register in England and Wales a new overarching intelligence database called ViSOR (Violent and Sex Offenders Register) was developed (Edwards, 2003; ViSOR National User Group, 2013). ViSOR helps police identify, track and share information about known perpetrators of sexual harm in their area, and assists with the disclosure of the most accurate and up to date information (ViSOR National User Group, 2013). ViSOR was rolled out to all UK police forces by mid-2005 and although the police are responsible for ViSOR it can now be accessed and used by the National Probation Service and HM Prison Service as well. Despite the centrality of ViSOR to the management of perpetrators of sexual harm as yet there has not been an independent, in-depth evaluation on its utility, effectiveness and impact.

Initially, the register was developed and only used by professionals, to assist them in their offender management and investigative roles (Thomas, 2010; Harris, Walfield, Shields & Letoureau, 2015). However, a number of high profile cases, like Megan Kanka (USA) and Sarah Payne (UK) changed this, with risk management and public protection becoming the main driving force. In the UK, following the murder of Sarah Payne by known perpetrator of sexual harm Roy Whiting, and the News of the World campaign that followed (McCartan, 2010; Williams, 2015) the government was keen to develop a model for the community notification of information about perpetrators of sexual harm. However, they did not want to replicate the American model of full, unfettered public disclosure (Kemshall et al, 2010). The American approach to community notification is highly problematic and has received widespread criticism because of public protection concerns and myriad unintended consequences (Levenson, Ackerman & Harris, 2014; Fox, 2015; Harris, Walfield, Shields & Letoureau, 2015; Pittman, 2015). Rolled out in England, Wales and Scotland in 2010 and more recently in Northern Ireland, the UK version of the public notification of information relating to known perpetrators of sexual harm, the Child Sexual Offender Disclosure Scheme

(CSODS, Kemshall et al, 2010) instead enabled members of the public to make an inquiry, to the police (or to Social Care and later Stop it Now in Scotland) about a named person who was in contact with or had access to a child or children in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The applicant will only have information disclosed to them if the subject of the inquiry meets certain criteria of risk, and has previous convictions for sexual offences against children. In essence, the scheme has three stages. At stage one an enquiry to the police is made, if this meets the criteria it is processed as a formal application, which is stage two, and if risk levels and previous conviction requirements are met then a disclosure is made which is stage three (Home Office, 2010). Initial pilot research in England and Wales (Kemshall, Kelly & Wilkinson, 2010) as well as in Scotland (Chan, Holmes, Murray, & Treanor, 2010) revealed poor take up of, and engagement with the scheme by the public; calling into question its legitimacy (Kemshall & Weaver, 2012; O'Sullivan, Hoggett, Kemshall & McCartan, 2016). In the years since the schemes introduction in England and Wales data indicates that take up has remained low and engagement poor, with recent figures from 2015/16 showing that there were 1,252 applications resulting in 192 disclosures, from across 21 police forces in England and Wales (College of Policing, 2016). This data indicates similar results from the pilot studies, suggesting that the scheme is not working in the way that it was expected to with poor utility and engagement (Kemshall & Weaver, 2012).

The CSODS, as with the register and ViSOR, has had limited research in England and Wales. The research which has taken place has either been pilot studies (Kemshall et al, 2010; Chan et al, 2010), an examination of police data (Wall, 2012; College of Policing, 2016) or research where the management of perpetrators of sexual harm is the main driver in the research with the register being a peripheral concern (Nash, 2016; Hudson et al, 2015). Research into the register, and related schemes, does not have the same academic footprint in the UK as it does in the USA with no significant research into perceptions of, attitudes to or the utility of these schemes (Harris, Levenson & Lobanov-Rostovsky 2015). For example, studies by Harris and colleagues found that participants believed that the register aided them in their jobs and was useful in terms of public protection. However, they also found that law enforcement officers had practical issues with the functionality and utility of the register and questioned the quality and nature of the material on it. They also questioned whether it effectively aided them in monitoring perpetrators of sexual harm, was helpful for the public and whether it could have negative, collateral consequences for registered perpetrators of sexual harm (Harris, Lobanov-Rostovsky & Levenson, 2016; Harris, Levenson & Lobanov-Rostovsky 2015; Cubellis et al 2016). Given this lack of UK research, the current paper seeks to address this gap by examining police officers attitudes to the register, ViSOR, CSODS and related policy.

METHODOLOGY

Design

The current paper focuses on police attitudes, and to capture a breadth and depth of these attitudes, the research combines an online questionnaire survey with a series of semi-structured interviews. The survey was an adaptation of Harris et al., (2015) American study, however their study was much broader than this adaptation given the way that the management of perpetrators of sexual harm occurs in the USA. For example, with the differences between state and federal laws as well as differences between the role of different law enforcement agencies. Comparatively, in England and Wales the register, ViSOR and CSODS schemes are managed by the police with input from prison and probation with no regional variations. This meant that the type and nature of questions asked in the original by Harris et al., (2015) needed to be adapted, where appropriate, to reflect the English and Welsh context.

Sampling and Participants

The researchers worked with the UK body the “College of Policing” to establish the credibility of the research and gain access to police participants. The online survey used a random/opportunity sample (Robson & McCartan, 2016), utilized “Qualtrics” and was distributed through the College, via email, to all officers involved in the management of perpetrators of sexual harm in England and Wales. The survey was completed by 227 members of the police who were drawn from thirty-seven of the forty-three force areas. There was a spread of respondents from these areas with some forces having a large number of participants (i.e., Northumbria, n = 25; Greater Manchester, n = 18;), others with smaller numbers (i.e., Avon & Somerset, n = 2; Merseyside, n = 1) or no participants (i.e., no data obtained from City of London, Dorset, Metropolitan, Staffordshire, Sussex and West Mercia).

The online survey was followed up with semi structured interviews with a purposive sample of officers (n = 27) from thirteen out of the thirty-seven force areas who had previously engaged in the online survey. The interview participants were sampled in a way that purposively reflected the wider demographics of the questionnaire respondents.

As per Harris et al. (2015), participant demographics captured included years of service, police rank and volume of time spent supervising perpetrators of sexual harm. The sample included a broad range of participants from various ranks in the police with differing career lengths (from new in service to 30 years) and differing roles (all of the participants had worked with perpetrators of sexual harm at some point in

their career but not all were currently working with them). In this study, we are using respondent's role in the police (see table 1) to evaluate homogeneity of attitudes as role is tied to responsibility, length of service and expertise; all of which means that the participants have a rounded view of the realities of risk management, public protection and the management of perpetrators of sexual harm.

[insert table 1 here]

Materials and Procedure

The online survey consisted of a number of different types of question (i.e., closed-ended, open-ended Likert scale questions) and addressed attitudes towards, understandings of and practical issues related to the management of perpetrators of sexual harm in the community, focusing on the register, multi-agency working, public engagement, ViSOR and CSODS. The online survey had 63 questions and took the respondents approximately 30 minutes to complete. The semi-structured interview schedule was developed out of the online survey data, meaning that they built upon and reflected the structure and content. The interviews addressed issues linked to police perceptions and attitudes to perpetrators of sexual harm, risk management tools, resourcing, multi-agency working, and public protection. Each interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes. Throughout the course of the interviews participants naturally influenced the direction and order of the interview, capturing relevant insight into their personal experience (Mason, 2002). This flexibility ensured the interviews were primarily participant focused and participant led, allowing for a body of data impossible to acquire through a sole reliance on surveys (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Ethics

The research was approved by the University ethics committee and adhered to the British Society of Criminology's code of ethical research conduct (www.britsocrim.org/codeofethics.htm). The ethical issues that the research had to consider included participant anonymity, data sharing, data storage, informed consent and confidentiality; which were highlighted in the consent form that participants completed. Having clear ethical guidelines and procedures were particularly salient given the nature of the research and participant sample.

Analysis

Initially, frequency tests were run on the quantitative data from the online survey to understand the spread of participants' attitudes to the register, ViSOR and CSODS schemes. This was followed by comparing the response frequencies from the demographic data on current police role, a key participant demographic variable, to see if there was any variation in responses. The sample and data were not particularly suitable for the use of inferential statistics therefore the quantitative data presented here acts to provide context for the qualitative data. The qualitative data was analyzed via thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with a number of themes emerging from the data, which reflected the quantitative findings, the overall research aims and objectives, and the existing body of literature. A number of themes surrounding police officers' attitudes to policies, procedures and practices linked to the management of perpetrators of sexual harm were identified which form the basis of the analysis presented here.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This paper focuses on police officers' attitudes to policies, procedures and practices linked to the management of perpetrators of sexual harm, specifically, the register, ViSOR and Child Sexual Offender Disclosure Scheme (CSODS). The findings reveal four interlocking themes, (1) Information sharing and partnership work, (2) ViSOR and offender management, (3) The Impact of CSODS on managing perpetrators of sexual harm, and (4) Public understanding, engagement and partnership working related to CSODS. Each theme will present relevant quantitative data from the online survey, which will then be triangulated and expanded upon with qualitative interview data.

Information sharing and partnership work

A. Quantitative data

The importance of information sharing was emphasized by participants when considering the utility of the Register and ViSOR. For example, of respondents (n=133) to the survey question about how useful they find the sex offenders registry as a means for sharing information and coordination efforts (useful, not very useful, not useful at all), 83.5% responded that the register was useful for sharing information within their own force while 16.6% that it wasn't very useful or not useful at all. In terms of response by rank, 82.6% of Police Constables (N=29), 88% of Sergeants (N=25), 92.9% of Inspectors (N=14) and 72.7% of Detectives (N=33) responded that the register was useful for sharing information within their own force.

Additionally, of total respondents (N=133), 87.2% responded that the register was useful for sharing information with forces outside of their own constabulary, while 12.8% that it was not very useful or not

useful at all. Examining by rank, 87.9% of Police Constables (N=29) responded it was useful, 84% of Sergeants (N=25), 100% of Inspectors (N=14) and 78.8% of Detectives (N=33).

Finally, of the total respondents (n=133), 82% responded that the register was useful for sharing information with probation workers supervising perpetrators of sexual harm in the community while 18% responded that it was not very useful or not useful at all. Response by rank identified that 93.1% of Police Constables (N=29), 84% of Sergeants (N=25), 71.4% of Inspectors (N=14) and 69.7% of Detectives (N=33) responded it was useful for sharing information with probation. This sharing of information was possible because of ViSOR. However, despite strong support for the register and ViSOR officers were clear that they were not without fault.

B. Qualitative data

The findings from the online survey were reflected in the interview data with participants believing that information sharing was vital for the management of perpetrators of sexual harm, and therefore that the register and ViSOR are vital in the daily management of perpetrators of sexual harm:

'...it's in every single serious case review isn't it, if everybody knew what everybody knew, maybe, just maybe this might not have happened' (PO23, Sergeant).

While information sharing was identified as important respondents also suggested that it is difficult as each force might capture and record information on ViSOR in different ways:

'They all do it [record information] completely differently. When you get a transfer in from another force it's like it's come from an alien planet, it's just completely different, they do everything different, which isn't great' (PO5, Constable);

The quality of information put on ViSOR as well as the way in which it was recorded was also deemed a problematic issue. For example:

'There are variants in quality of information and completeness. It is like any database, shit in shit out' (PO1, Constable).

However, it was also noted that because it is a national system that everyone within the police working with perpetrators of sexual harm has access to, that it is fundamental to their management:

'It's a national system, all forces are trained in it and have access, that is why it works so well, if you need to look at offenders for major investigations, you can use search terms, so you can pick out a number of offenders that you are interested at looking at, and yeah the fact that it is national, everyone can access it, is what makes it so good (PO21, Sergeant).

Interviewees also discussed ViSOR's centrality in terms of sharing information with partner agencies outside of the police. For example, it was noted that:

'When it [ViSOR] was first rolled out only the police were interested in having it, so for the longest time we were the only contributor to it. Some other agencies would have a limited read only access. Now the prisons are much more involved so the offender management units within prisons are adding information to there, which is a good thing and probation are now getting more and more users' (PO1, Constable);

While prison use of ViSOR was further forward, probations use was seen as a slight issue due to their limited access and knowledge:

'The prison probably use it slightly more, and I think the difficulty for probation is, it is not conducive with their system, and I think the issue is that they have to log out of their probation system and then log back in again which clearly is an absolute pain and is not effective for them to use on a daily basis' (PO9, Inspector).

The problems this created was summed up clearly:

'It's a nonsense that you have two agencies primarily responsible for offenders in the community, following their conviction, following their release from prison, into probation, and one of those agencies has limited or minimal access to er, the national database for managing offenders. It's perverse, one that I'm sure the public would scratch their heads with amazement, it's long been a national issue, one that needs to be tackled as soon as possible (PO19, Constable).

ViSOR and sex offender management

A. Quantitative data

Participants were asked to respond to a number of statements relating to their level of concern (major, moderate, minimal or no concern) to issues related to the registration and monitoring of perpetrators of sexual harm. For example, in response to the survey question about resources allocated to addressing the challenges of monitoring transient and homeless perpetrators of sexual harm (N=145), 86.2% responded that it was a major or moderate concern that there were too few resources, while 0% replied that this was of no concern. By rank, 83% of Police Constables (N=30), 86% of Sergeants (N=28), 87% of Inspectors (N=15), and 87% of Detectives (N=37) had major or moderate concerns about resources and transient populations of perpetrators of sexual harm.

Additionally, 96.6% (N=145) responded that they had major or moderate concern that there are too many registered perpetrators of sexual harm to manage and monitor given the available resources while 0% replied that this was of no concern. By rank, 100% of Police Constables (N=30), 93% of Sergeants (N=28), 100% of Inspectors (N=15), and 97% of Detectives (N=37) had major or moderate concerns that there were too many registered perpetrators of sexual harm to manage given available resources. This then raises a series of questions regarding the number of offenders that OM's can realistically and safely be expected to manage. Consequently, in relation to the growth in registered offenders, qualitative analysis raised a number of issues about problems with and the centrality of ViSOR to management of perpetrators of sexual harm.

B. Qualitative data

The qualitative data expanded upon the concerns that participants had relating to the use of ViSOR in sex offender management. Participants felt that ViSOR was old and outdated which created a range of problems for offender managers and their limited resources. In terms of the need to upgrade the system an interviewee noted that:

'I think that some of the stuff that is on there is no longer fit for purpose or needs changing. You know for instance there is a telecoms field, which was clearly set up for simple things back in the day. For your mobile number, your home number, email addresses and computers you own. That's all got very antiquated now. There is nowhere specific for storing information on social media accounts or anything like that. And obviously that is a big part of some grooming offences and very relevant to policing' (PO1, Constable).

As well as needing to be updated, interviewees frequently mentioned how slow the system was and how this negatively impacted on their work. For example, respondents stated that:

'The most frustrating thing about ViSOR is generally 90% of users work office hours, so it's so slow, it's horrendous' (PO4, Sergeant),

Another problem identified with the operational use of ViSOR is that it timed out frequently meaning that if work wasn't finished or saved then it could be lost. For example:

'The biggest pain with it, and I don't know if you know this, is when you are using it, if you don't save as you're going, it times out after 20 minutes' (PO2, Constable).

Respondents also discussed how they felt that as ViSOR was becoming such a central component to their work they were increasingly spending their time sat in front of the computer screen rather than out working with offenders. For example, it was noted how:

'It's quite a cumbersome tool, very repetitive and it's very computer driven, and essentially you are a slave to it' (PO7, Sergeant).

Despite these problems, respondents also identified the importance of ViSOR to offender management. For example it was recognized that:

'If we did not have this sole purpose database we would be up the creek' (PO1, Constable).

As another respondent noted:

'It contains everything that you need, obviously its heavily reliant on how much is populated into the relevant fields, but if you are using it properly and putting on there what needs to be put on there then yeah it's a very good tool for managing sex offenders' (PO21, Detective Sergeant).

The impact of CSODS on managing sex offenders

A. Quantitative data

Participants were also asked to identify how much impact (major, moderate, minimal or no impact) the CSODS had on a range of issues. For example, of the respondents (N=129) to the survey question about the impact CSODS has on reducing the likelihood of individual perpetrators of sexual harm re-offending, 79.1%

responded that it had a major or modest impact, compared to just 1.3% who said it had no impact. By rank, 69% of Police Constables (N=26), 86% of Sergeants (N=24), 93% of Inspectors (N=14), and 73% of Detectives (N=32) responded that CSODS had a major or modest impact on reducing re-offending.

Similarly, of respondents (N=129) to the survey question about the impact CSODS has on reducing the overall levels of sexual harm in society, 79.1% responded that it had a major or modest impact, compared to just 0.4% who said it had no impact. By rank, 73% of Police Constables (N=26), 92% of Sergeants (N=24), 93% of Inspectors (N=14), and 69% of Detectives (N=32) responded that CSODS has a major or modest impact on reducing overall levels of sexual harm in society.

B. Qualitative data

The findings from the online survey were expanded upon in the interview data with participants suggesting that the impact of CSODS in reducing re-offending or overall levels of sexual harm was linked to its ability to empower the public to better safeguard children rather than because the scheme directly assisted them in their offender management role. For example:

'It is not a tool for managing sex offenders, it is a tool whereby the appropriate members of the public, parents, guardians and what have you, can get limited enough information to safeguard their children and mitigate, and minimize the risk to those children' (PO2, Constable).

It was also discussed how the CSODS could actually cause some anxiety for both the applicant, if there is or isn't a disclosure made to them, and the offender, due to the prospect that their information may be disclosed. For example:

'Sometimes when people contact the police they've got an idea that someone's a sex offender or a pedophile as they like to call them, and then when we say there is nothing to disclose, I think it would create anxiety... there might be a bit of distrust with the police. So there is anxiety there if they don't hit the criteria we've got no power to disclose' (PO4, Sergeant),

And:

'The person on the register when you tell them that you have sent a disclosure to whoever, they get very panicky and they think there is going to be some kind of reaction against them, the windows put in etc.' (PO6, Detective Constable).

In terms of the main limitation it was identified that it won't necessarily help to prevent sexual offending against children as the most common perpetrators of such offences are those with close ties to children who will often not be suspected or have been reported. The scheme is therefore more about allaying stranger or at least acquaintance danger rather than preventing sexual harm to children:

'It is often the people you are sure about, you know, offending happens within families, within friendship groups, and also, you know the most scary and risky people are the people who have never been caught at all, so it doesn't stop that at all. It doesn't say if somebody has a sexual interest in children or what the likelihood of their offending is, all it says is whether they have been caught for it or not, so it has its place, but you know it's never going to be a failsafe system' (PO14, Police Staff).

Additionally, the impact that CSODS had on offender manager workloads was viewed as problematic. For example:

'The only thing that my staff struggle with is sometimes they are quite a long process to deal with and it causes them quite a lot of work, and basically due to lack of staffing numbers and increased workloads, my staff have got quite high workloads anyway, so when you get a child sexual offenders disclosure application on top of that, that can then take days and days out of your work, and whilst they are doing that they are obviously not seeing people that are supposed to be managed' (PO8, Sergeant).

However, it was noted that while current levels of disclosure were not too problematic for Offender Manager workloads if the numbers were to increase then this would become an issue:

'I think at the moment, as it stands we are coping with the enquiries. If it was on a billboard somewhere and it was pushed I think we would go under. We are already dealing with our own case load, managing our 80 odd offenders per person. If we were then inundated with enquiries amongst other things I think we would struggle' (PO4, Sergeant)

Public understanding, engagement and partnership working related to CSODS

A. Quantitative data

Participants were also asked to identify how concerned (major, moderate, minimal, no concern) they were about a lack of public understanding of the CSODS, and its unintended consequences. For instance, of the respondents (N=145) to the survey question about levels of concern relating to public perception and use of publically available information regarding perpetrators of sexual harm, 69% responded they had major or moderate concern that citizens may misunderstand or misinterpret information released as part of the CSODS while 3.5% had no concern. By rank, 60% of Police Constables (N=30), 69% of Sergeants (n=29), 67% of Inspectors (N=15), and 67% of Detectives (N=35) responded that they had major or moderate concern about public misunderstanding of information released as part of CSODS.

Furthermore, of the respondents (N=143) to the survey question about concerns that the CSODS may lead to citizens targeting or harassing perpetrators of sexual harm, 72.7% had major or moderate concerns, while 0% responded that they had no concern. By rank, 67% of Police Constables (N=30), 69% of Sergeants (N=29), 67% of Inspectors (N=15), and 71% of Detectives (N=35) had major or moderate concern about members of the public targeting or harassing perpetrators of sexual harm because of information released as part of the CSODS.

Finally, of the respondents (N=144) to the survey question about concerns that the disclosure of information regarding perpetrators of sexual harm against children may contribute to unnecessary fear within the community, 60.4% had major or moderate concern, while 2.6% had no concern. By rank, 53% of Police Constables (N=30), 66% of Sergeants (N=29), 67% of Inspectors (N=15), and 51% of Detectives (N=35) had major or moderate concerns that disclosure through the CSODS may contribute to unnecessary fear within the affected communities.

B. Qualitative data

The interview data supported the online survey findings about the CSODS scheme, public understandings of it and its utility in the management of perpetrators of sexual harm. The participants discussed how a balance needed to be struck between promotion of the scheme and the ability of OM's to meet the increased demands that over publicizing the scheme might have. For example:

'It's the same with any piece of crime reduction or crime prevention advice, that's essentially what it is, you know you want people to be aware of schemes, you don't want to ram it down their throats to the degree where everyone feels scared to let their kids play out the front door. So there has to be a fine balance, a reasonable balance' (PO1, Constable).

Other interviewees suggested that the public did have enough awareness but demand just wasn't as high as originally thought:

'I think the initial fear was that we would be inundated with applications and that didn't seem to happen, so whether that is a case of the public don't now, I'm not sure it does, the public do know, but for whatever reason it is too much effort to go make an application or they just decided that isn't the way to go forward, but no I think people do know' (PO7, Sergeant).

In terms of possible abuses of the scheme, respondents noted how both members of the public and other agencies could attempt to abuse it. For example:

'It needs to be used for the right reasons, there is a lot of people who use it as a potential vendetta, you know it is part of a domestic situation where they are trying to get somebody in trouble, that should be filtered out early on I think really. One of the bug bears is other agencies who fail to do their job and just say "get them to go into the front office and make a CSODS", but if it's used for what it is intended for then yes of course it should be used (PO21, Constable).

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

The findings suggest that members of the police believe that the sex offenders register is useful in the management of perpetrators of sexual harm and, although there are limits to their effectiveness, that ViSOR and CSODS are useful mechanisms in the development, maintenance and implementation of the register (O'Sullivan et al, 2016). This reflects the findings of the original USA study that although police officers believe in the use of the register they have problems with its utility, functionality, data sharing and impact upon the community/public (Harris, Lobanov-Rostovsky & Levenson, 2016; Harris, Levenson & Lobanov-Rostovsky 2016; Cubellis et al 2016). Additionally, the UK participants believe that there needs to be more investment into staff training, staff support and staff numbers relating to the registration and management of perpetrators of sexual harm, which reflects wider debates on the funding of policing in the UK (Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, 2017; Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2017). Interestingly, the current study indicates that there were some differences in attitudes and understanding relating to police rank and role, but these were relatively small differences especially given the sample size. What the differences within police rank does indicate though is that detectives, who mainly investigate cases but don't in the main manage perpetrators of sexual harm have slightly differing views on current systems for managing them. This would be interesting to follow up in more detail in future research.

Police participants agree that ViSOR is useful in terms of information sharing, collaborative working and accessibility of data (O'Sullivan et al, 2016; Edwards, 2003; ViSOR National User Group, 2013). These benefits in managing perpetrators of sexual harm reinforce the reason why ViSOR was developed (Richard Inquiry, 2004; ViSOR National User Group, 2013). However, participants also suggest a range of issues that make its operation problematic in practice, which reflects similar findings from the USA (Levenson, Ackerman & Harris, 2014; Fox, 2015; Harris, Walfield, Shields & Letoureau, 2015; Pittman, 2015; Harris, Lobanov-Rosovsky & Levenson, 2015; Harris, Lervenson, Lobanov-Rosovsky & Walfield, 2016). ViSOR may now be outdated and incomplete which is problematic, but the fact that participants believe that users are not effectively inputting, recording and sharing data is more so as it is a training and development issue that could be easily overcome. This is not a UK only issue however, with research from the USA indicating that law enforcement inconsistently and problematically input data onto central as well as localized databases (Harris, Lobanov-Rosovsky & Levenson, 2015; Harris, Lervenson, Lobanov-Rosovsky & Walfield, 2016). The participants suggest that more money and time needs to be invested into ViSOR to make it fit for purpose, which is hard given the current financial climate in the criminal justice system (Kemshall & McCartan, 2014; Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, 2017; Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2017). There was a belief by the participants that the police, as an organization, as well as force by force, did not fully recognize the time that it took for officers to implement and maintain ViSOR or the register (Nash, 2016). The officers indicated that they thought that the police should emphasize the importance of ViSOR nationally, focus more training and support for staff, as well as bulk up the resources allocated. The fact that police officers, on the frontline of management of perpetrators of sexual harm do not think that ViSOR is working to full capacity, that recorded information varies in quality and quantity between and within forces and is underutilized by other agencies presents a problem for the effective multi-agency management of perpetrators of sexual harm in the community in England and Wales. Such problems appear manifest given increased media attention on sexual offenders (McCartan et al., 2015; McLean & Maxwell, 2015; Tabachnick & Klein, 2010) and a growing (UNICEF, 2014; O'Sullivan, Hoggett, McCartan & Kemshall, 2016) as well as expensive (Brookes, Barrett, Netten & Knapp, 2013; Saied-Tessier, 2014; Fang et al., 2012) sex offender population for the criminal justice system to manage. However, despite the logistical and structural problems with ViSOR, participants identified that it still has utility for the management of perpetrators of sexual harm.

In relation to the CSODS, the participants suggest that, if used effectively and within reason, it can enable communities to protect themselves, become more aware of sexual offenders in their neighborhood and prevent re-offending. This reinforces the logic of the original community notification schemes in the USA (Thomas, 2010) and the CSODS in the UK (Home Office, 2010; Kemshall et al, 2010; Chan et al, 2010;).

However, the implementation of community notification has unintended consequences that pose community protection issues (Levenson, Ackerman & Harris, 2014; Fox, 2015; Harris, Walfield, Shields & Letoureau, 2015; Pittman, 2015; Nash, 2016;; Kemshall & weaver, 2012). The participants identified that CSODS can pose problems for communities (Williams, 2015; McCartan, 2013), perpetrators (Pittman, 2013; Home Office, 2007; Kemshall & Weaver, 2012; Levenson, Ackerman & Harris, 2014) and victims as well as their families (McCartan, 2013; McLean & Maxwell, 2014). In addition, participants have concerns about the public's understanding of the scheme (Kemshall et al, 2010). This may be evidenced by the fact that there is a poor take up of the scheme (Kemshall et al, 2012; Chan et al, 2012; Wall, 2012; NSPCC, 2015) and a belief that the public are (potentially) asking for information for the wrong reasons (Kemshall et al, 2010; Chan et al, 2010). Participants felt that the public may not fully understand the information that they are given (Kemshall et al, 2012;), that it could make them more fearful and risk sensitive (Kemshall et al, 2012) and that it may result in taking the law into their own hands (McCartan, 2012; McCartan, 2009). This would make it difficult to successfully manage these individuals in the community and protect the public, all of which reiterates national and international research, policy and practice (Thomas, 2010, 2016; Harris et al, 2016; Nash, 2016).

The current study did suffer from some limitations which affected the findings and potential impact. Using a US survey and related scales combined with smaller sample size impacted on the statistical tests which were suitable for use. If the current study was to be replicated it would adapt and standardize the Likert scales used to ensure greater capacity for a data analysis. Although the sample is respectable, especially the qualitative sample, it is still small and could be expanded given the volume of professional staff that with perpetrators of sexual harm. The study focused on police officers only, but actually a lot of the systems discussed in the research (i.e., registry, CDODS, Visor, etc) are used by prisons and probation as well; therefore the research is only getting a one dimensional view of professional attitudes and the study should be replicated with other professionals organizations. The current study therefore acts as a starting point for future research in this area.

The current research is the largest of its kind into police attitudes to and understandings of the systems for the management of perpetrators of sexual harm in the UK (the register, ViSOR and CSODS). The findings reflect previous research, policy and practice that the role of the register is to aid police in their work and increase public protection (Nash, 2016; O'Sullivan et al, 2016; Harris, Lobanov-Rosovsky & Levenson, 2015; Harris, Levenson, Lobanov-Rosovsky & Walfield, 2016; Culbeios et al, 2016). Additionally, the research identified that the structures/processes that support the register (multi-agency working, CSODS & ViSOR) are useful for the community management of perpetrators of sexual harm when used appropriately. Participants felt that the establishment of the register and the introduction of ViSOR helped with the

management and community support of sexual offenders, and CSODS while positive could create risk and management issues for perpetrators of sexual harm in the community due to public misunderstanding. The police interviewed, although sometimes critical of partner agencies, supported multi-agency working and felt that it helped them manage and monitor perpetrators of sexual harm more effectively. The participants believed that the current systems in place, despite their limits and ever evolving nature, helped them manage perpetrators of sexual harm pro-actively. However, they also felt that changes including increased partnership working, more funding and proactive working with at risk of offending populations would help in the management of perpetrators of sexual harm in the future.

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