

A qualitative content analysis of an online support forum for family members of individuals with reported histories of sexual offences

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Few studies have examined the impact of sexual offences on non-offending family members. Using thematic content analysis of posts on a relevant, anonymous online support community website, the current study identified the experiences and needs of family members following a sexual offence. Findings indicate that collateral consequences of legal restrictions, coupled with stigma, result in enduring emotional, social, and practical difficulties for non-offending family members. In addition, family members highlighted an important role in providing practical and emotional support for alleged perpetrators managing offence-related challenges. Uncertainty surrounding registration requirements serves as a barrier to maintaining and accessing housing, planning key life events, and helping family members comply with parole requirements. Overall, findings serve to identify key challenges confronting non-offending family members and inform the design of services to support positive relationships associated with reduced re-offending.

KEYWORDS: collateral consequences, criminal justice, non-offending family members, online supports, qualitative methods, sex offenders, social support

Sexual offences have numerous collateral consequences, extending beyond identified victims to the innocent family members of alleged perpetrators. Although few studies have examined the needs and experiences of family members of perpetrators of sexual offences (Bailey & Sample, 2017), some research suggests that bystander family members suffer practical, emotional, and social difficulties following sexual offence(s) coming to light (Farkas & Miller, 2007; Kilmer & Leon, 2017; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009). Because family members often provide emotional and practical support to the perpetrator (Comartin et al., 2010; Iffland et al., 2016), which can be instrumental for relapse prevention (Duwe, 2013; Fox, 2015; Wilson et al., 2009), it is important to better understand the needs and challenges faced by family members.

Aside from studies on identified victims, studies on the consequences of sexual offences have focused on perpetrators (Grossi, 2017; Levenson, 2016). This research has emphasized that perpetrators face many practical and social stressors due to the especially stigmatized nature of sexual offences (Rade et al., 2016) and the pervasiveness of the “sex offender” label resulting from notification laws and public registries present in every US state (Evans & Porter, 2015; Rydberg, 2017; Tewksbury et al., 2016). Although Canada currently has a non-public national sex offender registry, law enforcement organizations in

some provinces (e.g., Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan) are permitted to disclose information to the public about high-risk offenders (Lussier & Mathesius, 2019). Many perpetrators report experiencing employment discrimination and difficulties finding and maintaining stable housing following their offence and after serving their sentence (Levenson, 2016; Nally et al., 2014; Rydberg, 2017; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). Practical difficulties are often compounded by a loss of social support, with many perpetrators reporting losing emotionally close relationships, being unable to access social services, and even experiencing direct backlash in the form of harassment and vigilante justice (Cubellis et al., 2019; Levenson et al., 2007; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). Taken together, these consequences contribute indirectly to strain and challenges confronting family members.

Legal Consequences of Sexual Offences in the United States

In the United States, most sexual offences fall under the jurisdiction of state laws, but some offences, including engaging in interstate travel to engage in sexual acts with a minor and specific activities relating to child pornography, are included under federal laws (Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation Act of 1977, 2008). Furthermore, states differ from each other in how various

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sexual offences are considered. For example, some states (e.g., California, Idaho; [Idaho Code, 2018](#); [Penal Code of California, 2007](#)) distinguish sexual assault of a spousal victim from assault of non-spousal victims, often with the former being considered a less serious crime, whereas other states do not. Penalties for sexual offences vary widely by state. In California, for example, rape of an adult victim results in mandatory sentences of 3, 6, or 8 years ([Penal Code of California, 2010](#)), whereas rape in Georgia is punishable by death, a life sentence with or without parole, or a sentence not less than 25 years followed by lifetime probation ([Sexual Offences Act, 2014](#)). In general, violent sexual assaults and offences involving children generally result in harsher penalties.

Individuals convicted of sexual offences in all fifty states are required to abide by registration requirements, as mandated by the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA) ([Department of Justice, 2020](#)). Convicted offenders in all states must minimally provide their name, address, phone number, internet address and identifiers, travel documents, employment information, school information, professional licenses, vehicle information, physical description, full criminal history, driver's license, and DNA sample and fingerprints ([Department of Justice, 2007](#)). In many states, tier definitions of sexual offenders are applied depending on the types of offences or victims (e.g., minors vs. adults), and such tiers are often differentially linked with registration requirements, including duration, frequency of in-person verifications, and level of public disclosure required. In all states, at minimum, registrants' names, physical description, residential address, employment address, school address, license plate number, photograph, and list of offences must be accessible online to the public.

Consequences Among Family Members

Stigma and legal restrictions aimed at perpetrators serve as barriers to activities of daily living among non-offending family members. Perpetrators often lose or are unable to obtain employment ([Farkas & Miller, 2007](#); [Kilmer & Leon, 2017](#); [Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009](#); [Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009](#)), and many family members report additional loss of income due to unforeseen costs of dealing with legal restrictions resulting from the sexual offence (e.g., having to finance a second residence; [Kilmer & Leon, 2017](#); [Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009](#); [Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009](#)). Family members also report difficulties finding and maintaining housing due to registry requirements or social pressure from landlords or neighbours ([Kilmer & Leon, 2017](#); [Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009](#); [Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009](#)).

Studies indicate that, as a result of the offence, family members experience significant loss of social support ([Bailey, 2018](#); [Bailey & Klein, 2018](#); [Bailey & Sample, 2017](#); [Farkas & Miller, 2007](#); [Kilmer & Leon, 2017](#); [Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009](#); [Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009](#)) and report feeling socially isolated ([Bailey & Klein, 2018](#)). In particular, family members report experiencing the loss of close family and friends, an inability to participate in community activities, and direct harassment, which can even be directed towards the children of perpetrators ([Farkas & Miller, 2007](#); [Kilmer & Leon, 2017](#); [Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009](#); [Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009](#)).

Practical and social difficulties resulting from the offence have a profound influence on family members' psychological adjustment. Indeed, even learning about an offence is perceived as unexpected and traumatic ([Bailey, 2018](#); [Cahalane et al., 2013](#); [Iffland et al., 2016](#)). Furthermore, family members often report feelings of fear, shame, and anger resulting from stigma and practical difficulties ([Bailey & Klein, 2018](#); [Farkas & Miller, 2007](#); [Kilmer & Leon, 2017](#); [Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009](#); [Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009](#)), and subsequent loneliness and social isolation experienced by family members often lead to chronic and persistent stress ([Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009](#)).

Sexual offences can positively and negatively impact relationships between perpetrators and their family members ([Bailey, 2018](#); [Bailey & Sample, 2017](#); [Cahalane et al., 2013](#); [Cahalane & Duff, 2017](#); [Iffland et al. 2016](#); [Kilmer & Leon, 2017](#); [Lang et al., 1990](#)). For instance, non-offending family members and perpetrators may adapt to difficulties resulting from a sexual offence by increasing the amount of emotional support provided to the other person and alternating between providing and receiving emotional support to each other through a process known as dyadic coping ([Bailey & Sample, 2017](#)). In contrast, other families may be left to manage a loss of trust among family members ([Cahalane et al., 2013](#); [Cahalane & Duff, 2017](#)). Situations involving intra-familial sexual abuse often lead to multiple unique challenges and disruption to family dynamics, including emotional trauma experienced by victims, stress in testifying against a family member in court, ongoing efforts to promote safety and prevent further abuse, and loss of contact between parents and children ([Kilmer & Leon, 2017](#)). However, there remains a need for better understanding of the needs of individuals managing interpersonal challenges and threats to family stability resulting from a sexual offence.

Non-Offending Family Members as Caregivers

Research suggests that family members play prominent roles in supporting perpetrators following a sexual offence ([Bailey & Sample, 2017](#); [Cahalane & Duff, 2017](#); [Cahalane et al., 2013](#); [Comartin et al., 2010](#); [Iffland et al., 2016](#); [Tewksbury & Connor, 2012](#)). In particular, non-offending family members provide emotional support by communicating acceptance of the perpetrator despite the offence or by monitoring mental stability. Furthermore, they often provide financial support, assist with housing accommodations and employment, and help manage legal affairs ([Bailey & Sample, 2017](#); [Comartin et al., 2010](#); [Iffland et al., 2016](#); [Tewksbury & Connor, 2012](#)). Romantic partners, in particular, often support male perpetrators of sexual offences to prevent relapse by monitoring the partner's risky behaviour or environmental triggers ([Cahalane & Duff, 2017](#); [Cahalane et al., 2013](#); [Iffland et al., 2016](#)).

Studies on caregivers of individuals with mental health or addictions issues suggest that caregiving among non-offending partners may result in ongoing experiences of stress, accompanied by feeling that they are left alone to take on the burden of caregiving ([Radfar et al., 2014](#); [Slaunwhite et al., 2017](#)). In addition, for non-offending family members, feelings of stress related to caregiving responsibilities may be further compounded by

stigma and grief (Perlick et al., 2008; Von Kardorff et al., 2015) and may limit non-offending family members' ability to provide support because of emotional exhaustion and limited capacity to seek help from others (Angermeyer et al., 2006; Von Kardorff et al., 2015). Given the importance of familial social attachments in support of the reintegration of perpetrators into society following an offence (Duwe, 2013; Fox, 2015; Wilson et al., 2009), a greater understanding of the complexities involved in family members' support of perpetrators is needed.

Online Support Communities

Online communities are a common resource for individuals experiencing stigma or isolation, including those whose family member has been accused or convicted of a sexual crime (Bailey, 2018; Bailey & Sample, 2017; Parkinson et al., 2017), and they can have both positive and negative impacts. For example, disenfranchised individuals may find the anonymity offered through online communication an appealing avenue of support and may feel less inhibited to express their emotions relative to in-person meetings or interventions (Christopherson, 2007; High & Crowley, 2018; Setoyama et al., 2011). Indeed, research indicates that disclosure of painful emotions online can have a positive influence on mental health (Breuer & Barker, 2015; Shim et al., 2011). In addition, information received on online forums can be considered in making decisions or resolving personal challenges (Sadovykh et al., 2015). Nevertheless, online communities present several potential limitations, such as possibly spreading misinformation (Cohen et al., 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2012), promoting negative information leading to psychological distress (Feigelman et al., 2008; Kramer et al., 2015), generating miscommunication and conflict due to the lack of visual cues typically found in in-person interactions (Waldron et al., 2000), and providing opportunity for avoiding interactions with individuals who are not part of the stigmatized group (Lawlor & Kirakowski, 2014). Although studies suggest that online forums remain one of the few sources of available support for family members of alleged offenders, there is limited research investigating the role of online communities in managing offence-related challenges.

The Current Study

Collateral consequences resulting from sexual offences are reported frequently among perpetrators' family members, but there is limited contextual information about the difficulties family members have following a sexual offence or the role of online support groups in assisting family members. The goal of this exploratory study was to describe the experiences and needs of non-offending family members in dealing with challenges and in supporting the reintegration of perpetrators following a sexual offence.

METHOD

Dataset

The DailyStrength domain, created in 2006 as a division of the Sharecare platform that hosts a variety of support groups (e.g.,

depression, parenting, cancer), was used in the current study to investigate individuals' experiences and needs. On this domain, individual members can create unmoderated Community Groups and can publish posts without prior review. Members remain anonymous, and efforts are made by administrators to delete identifying information. The DailyStrength domain was an appropriate data source for the present study given its popularity among marginalized groups, including family members of alleged sex offenders.

Data for the current study were gathered in January 2020 from the community group entitled "Families of SOs Support Group". All posts created in 2018 and 2019 were selected and imported in NVivo 12 with the "NCapture" feature. A total of 256 original posts and 234 responding sets of comments were extracted. It should be noted that since original data extraction, the support group has been relocated to a new site (<http://support-for-families.boards.net>). It is difficult to determine where participants were located at the time data were gathered due to the anonymous nature of this support group. However, because many of the posts referred to American states and laws, it is likely that a substantial proportion of the sample reside in the United States. Institutional ethics review was not obtained for this project because the information was available publicly in an online forum.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a process of identifying patterns of responses and organizing content into themes. Given the exploratory nature of the current study, thematic analysis provides a richer understanding of individuals' experiences relative to what could be obtained through quantitative survey research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Because the dataset was created from an online forum, we employed an inductive, data-driven approach to identify emerging themes.

Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis, data were analyzed in six steps: (1) familiarizing and initial coding, (2) searching for themes, (3) reviewing themes, (4) defining themes, (5) naming themes, and (6) producing the report. After reviewing a subsample of the data ($N = 40$ posts), a preliminary coding structure was created and refined through an iterative process involving two independent coders. This process resulted in the creation of codes and subcodes that were applied to the remaining posts. To ensure reliability, a subsection of posts and comments (78 posts and 72 comments) were coded by both coders, and minor discrepancies that emerged were resolved by discussion and consensus.

RESULTS

Individuals recounted experiences following a family member's alleged sexual offence and provided support to other group members by describing personal experiences, giving advice, and sharing information. Individuals' experiences were classified under the following themes: individual and interpersonal adjustment, logistical and practical concerns, and family involvement in the legal system (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. Thematic Structure

| Theme | Codes and Subcodes Included |
|---|---|
| Individual and Interpersonal Adjustment | Dealing with difficult emotions; Relationship concerns |
| Logistical and Practical Concerns | Housing and living advice; Concerns about job and health; Legal concerns; Issues with the registry; Steps of the legal system; Sharing outside information and recommendations; Questions and concerns about prison |
| Family Involvement in the Legal System | Mistrust of police; Sharing of personal experience; Advice for how to deal with police |

Individual and Interpersonal Adjustment

Welfare for Self and Family Members

Individuals described learning of their family members' alleged offence as unexpected and reported experiencing an initial period of shock. One individual explained:

37 hours ago, my life changed drastically. I went from being in a happy, loving relationship to having my boyfriend arrested while we were at dinner and subsequently seeing his name [in] all of the local papers with horrendous charges. I am still in shock and I'm grieving because it feels like he's died. I can't bear being in my home with his stuff or sleeping in the bed we shared together. I don't know how the kind, gentle, loving human that I fell in love with could commit the monstrous acts he's been charged with.

Following an initial period of shock, some individuals described refusing to accept the accusations made against their family members, whereas others stated they were shocked by the allegations but accepted that they were true. Coming to terms with the accusations was often accompanied by feelings of anger:

Although I'm sympathetic and know he got screwed and bullied into taking a plea, I'm angry because my life that I've worked hard for is now being turned upside down . . . I don't want to walk away from a good man because of false allegations she made.

Finally, individuals described coming to terms with the offence as a mourning process for both the accused family member and their previous way of life: "I've tried to be strategic and strong, but I have those moments when I just have to grieve. I feel like I've lost my best friend, my happiness, the future that I wanted."

Co-occurrence of stigma and legal restrictions was regarded as a barrier to planning key life events. For example, the spouse of a man reportedly convicted of a sexual offence explained how challenges related to the offence resulted in difficulties with family planning:

I'm scared of the stigma and harsh reality of being married to a sex offender. It's hard losing friends. My dad told me I made a big mistake marrying him. If it was [a] temporary state, I wouldn't worry as much. It's forever and I don't think it will ever get better. I want to have children, but it seems cruel to put a child in this situation.

I don't know what to do. Do I divorce him purely because I can't cope with him being a RSO (Registered Sex Offender)?

Despite not having committed an offence themselves, family members of alleged offenders often expressed frustration due to believing their life was on hold.

Although many individuals reported losing social support (from friends, coworkers, or extended family members) as a result of stigma related to their family members' offence, others' accounts suggest their awareness of possible stigma related to the offence caused them to withdraw pre-emptively from social relationships to avoid perceived negative attention from others. For instance, one individual described how perceived stigma influenced her decision to avoid disclosing details of her partner's offence to others:

I haven't told any of my friends or family because I'm afraid of what they'll think and the questions they'll ask. His parents did get a call and I told them a bit, but not everything the FBI told me was in the warrant. It's hard to wrap my mind around everything or figure out what to do.

Findings suggest that feelings of internalized shame and perceived public stigma can result in self-imposed social isolation. In addition, many individuals considered their involvement with an alleged perpetrator to negatively impact their self-concept. For example, one mother reflected on her role as a parent after discovering her son's alleged offence:

How do you continue to be his mom when you can't bear to look at him? Because you know what he did. That he knew what he was doing was wrong. That he is not your little boy but a monster. A monster doesn't live in my house . . . right? I'm not raising one . . . right?

Individuals expressed a need to provide emotional supports for their family members managing offence-related challenges. Helping family members manage fears of the future, providing understanding and acceptance, and listening were among the types of emotional support provided. For example, one participant said:

I just feel so lost right now. I don't know how to console him, so [I] am just trying to remain as supportive as possible. I don't really have anyone I can talk to about all this because while some friends and our families are aware of our situation, being aware and understanding what we're actually going through are two totally different beasts.

This suggests that not only do participants feel responsible for providing emotional comfort to their family member accused of a sexual offence but also perceive a lack of support from others in fulfilling this responsibility.

Logistical and Practical Concerns

Housing

A common theme that emerged in one quarter of individuals' accounts pertained to legal restrictions and perceived stigma as barriers to finding suitable housing. One individual described:

Hope someone can provide some positive insight. I'm so nervous about our future together with him having to register. Will we be able to buy a home? Will anyone want to sell to us? I know there are limitations on where you can live. And I already know some rental companies refuse to rent to sex offenders.

Individuals believed that landlords' biases or other property restrictions further limited their options for housing.

Practical concerns appeared to intersect with emotional welfare, as some individuals described experiencing feelings of anxiety regarding tenuous housing. Some individuals felt nervous about others finding out about the offence due to fear of being forced from their home:

I really feel like I'm losing my mind. I keep thinking about what's going to happen to me once the neighbors find out. I live in a neighborhood with many families with young children. I do not want to be forced to sell my house and move because he will be on [a] registered SO (Sex Offender) list.

Persistent worrying and advice-seeking seemed to result from individuals' perceived lack of control over their housing. In response to concerns about housing, many participants provided opinions about legal restrictions in specific geographic areas, while a minority of group members' responses included facts about registry requirements. For example, one participant commented: "You want to avoid any of the Bible Belt states, especially those in the Deep South. Florida is toxic to sex offenders, so don't even think of moving there. Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas are terrible places for sex offenders."

Supporting Welfare

Many participants reported a sense of responsibility for providing practical supports to family members accused of a sexual offence. Support in finding employment was one of the most commonly cited forms of support provided. For instance, one member noted:

He's been offered jobs until his background check comes back, or they pass him up right away when he tells them about his RSO (Registered Sex Offender) status. Those posts on FB (Facebook) about hiring people that are RSOs or felons are outdated or full of errors. Does anyone have any ideas on where to find employment, particularly [in] Texas? I'm sure once he starts working again, he'll start to feel more like himself.

Other individuals described the challenge of providing ongoing financial support to their family member because they were unable to obtain employment due to being registered as a sexual offender.

Several individuals mentioned that it was their responsibility to support incarcerated family members and sought advice from other group members about communicating and providing financial support to family members in prison, as well as having concerns about visitation. For example, one woman explained her desire to check in on her partner in prison:

It's been a week since he is in reception and I hung up by accident [on] our only call. I have been writing every other day but still

haven't [received] anything from him yet. My heart is broken and I'm so worried about him. So far this is the hardest, and I don't know how to cope. How long does it take to get a letter?

Individuals reported the belief that the conditions faced by their family members in prison were worse than those faced by individuals convicted of non-sexual offences. As one concerned individual noted, "I would hate for him to be doing well where he is at now and transfer to Sheridan medium and get beaten up because of his sex offender status."

Questions and Concerns About Prison

Many individuals described feeling overwhelmed with uncertainties about their family member's future experiences in prison. More specifically, fear for safety was the most commonly cited concern. One woman reported:

My son has recently been sent to prison on two counts of child pornography. My son is 30 and has always been a quiet mama's boy. I am very worried about his wellbeing while being in prison. Is there anyone out there that has been to prison on similar charges that can offer advice on how to help keep him safe? I have always heard the most awful things that happen to sex offenders in prison. Is there anything he can say or do to keep other inmates from bullying or manipulating, or even worse, physically hurting him? Any advice would be greatly helpful.

This quote demonstrates a mother's desire to reduce her feelings of anxiety by ensuring the safety of her son when he goes to prison.

Family Involvement in the Legal System

A desire to prevent family members from violating the conditions of their parole was one of the primary concerns among participants, as illustrated by one individual's post:

The thing that gets me, about all the laws changing. If it weren't for me, my son would have no idea about new laws regarding him as a SO. He's not allowed to use the internet. He might get a letter explaining practically nothing. The new law in PA about registry . . . Why don't they include a copy of the bill that passed so he could understand it? But if he doesn't know and does something that he's [not] supposed to do it's on him.

This quote demonstrates participants' impression that the tendency for registry laws to change over time makes it difficult to understand the rules and regulations that govern their family members' lives. In addition, several individuals spoke of the impact of legal restrictions resulting from their family member's offence on family travel. As one individual asked: "Once my loved one is off the registry in my state, can he travel? Can we go to FLA, without fear of him being forced to register?" Individuals in this study emphasized a sense of confusion about legal restrictions and believed that accessing valid information is essential in preventing their family member from being re-arrested.

In response to questions and concerns about the legal system, advice tended to focus on participants' opinions and personal

experiences. For example, one individual provided informal legal advice regarding a rehabilitation program:

He may have to play the game just to get through the program. He does not have to come right out and say he was guilty as hell. He can use a variation and say he thought the young lady consented and at no time did he forcibly sexually assault her. He can make it appear as if he had no idea he was breaking the law.

In contrast, a few group members advised other individuals to seek the advice of a professional (e.g., lawyer, parole officer). Professional credentials were not stated by any of the individuals who provided advice (e.g., lawyer, paralegal, law enforcement officer, parole officer).

Mistrust of Police

Many group members, according to their own experience, perceived police as untrustworthy and unsympathetic to false convictions and related concerns. Lying to accused individuals to illicit a confession, raiding family homes to arrest individuals for accessing child pornography, and arresting non-contact offenders were all behaviours described and deemed problematic. Several individuals asserted the belief that their family member was innocent and described a heightened sensitivity to evidence that the police are untrustworthy:

None of you should talk to the police. I didn't know that I could say no to talking to the detective in my boyfriend's case. When he interviewed me and interrogated my boyfriend, he lied through his teeth and tried to pretend he was there to help me because he wanted me to say something to help his case against my boyfriend. They will try and twist even the most innocent statements into something they can use. Be very careful.

As illustrated in the above quote, many individuals cited past experiences as having influenced their recommendation to avoid talking to the police. Another individual described a similar belief that the police are untrustworthy:

The cops will take advantage of a naïve young man who knows nothing about the criminal justice system and get him to start talking. They know that he does not know his rights or anything—and they also know he is probably scared to death. So they basically abuse him in a way, take advantage of his lack of understanding of his constitutional rights, and pull what they will call a 'confession' out of him.

DISCUSSION

The goal of the current study was to evaluate the discourse, generally in the forms of information seeking, advice giving, or sharing of personal information, that occurs on an online forum to identify key issues confronting family members following an alleged sexual offence. Alleged offences do not occur in a vacuum but instead have a widespread impact on offenders and their families. Specifically, they influence an individual's interpersonal adjustment, initiate a cascade of legal and practical concerns, and shape beliefs and attitudes about the judicial system.

Interpersonal Adjustment

Change in Identity and Family Roles

Many individuals reported experiencing shock and surprise when learning about their family member's offence. The unexpected nature of this news seemed to force them to simultaneously re-evaluate how they view their family members and how they see themselves. Many forum members consequently struggled to reconcile their perception of their accused family members with the reality of their offence. As a result, they used various strategies to alleviate the cognitive dissonance stemming from the conflict between their previous perceptions of their family member and how they view them now (Winder et al., 2020). For example, some members denied the offence had occurred (e.g., adamantly stating their innocence) or blamed the victim (e.g., "She told him she was 18 years old").

Family members of offenders must also face the reality that a shift in identity is permanent (e.g., being a family member of a sex-offender). The offence often results in a reconfiguration of family structure that leads to differing roles and responsibilities (Farkas & Miller, 2007). As such, family members are left with worries about both the present and future for the family and the alleged offenders. For example, many romantic partners or parents of offenders are worried about the financial burden of simultaneously supporting an offender in prison and a family on the outside. They must also cope with a loss of secondary income from the offending partner (during and following incarceration), the loss of close relationships with old friends, and direct harassment from community members (Farkas & Miller, 2007; Kilmer & Leon, 2017; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009).

Providing Emotional Support

Family members play an integral role in providing emotional support to relatives who have been accused of a sexual offence, and this support has been linked to lower rates of recidivism upon release (Farkas & Miller, 2007; Yoder et al., 2015). Members of the forum explained that it was difficult to provide such support to others because they felt unsupported and judged by individuals outside their immediate family. Although some forum members described overt acts of discrimination, such as being refused from landlords or being shunned by friends and family, others described instances when they withdrew prematurely from social situations out of fear of rejection. These experiences of external and internalized stigma further exacerbate the degree of stress and isolation these family members experience. This finding is consistent with research by Farkas and Miller (2007) suggesting that individuals turn inward to avoid the stigma they face from others. Social withdrawal leading to isolation may make it even more difficult for family members to manage offence-related challenges and support the reintegration of alleged perpetrators.

Strong opposing emotions (e.g., anger and sadness) are likely to arise and persist as a result of alleged offences, impacting how non-offending family members cope with their changing lives and their ability to provide support to alleged perpetrators

of sexual offences. Expressed emotions such as guilt, shame, anger, sadness, and anxiety were present in many forum posts. Individuals reported experiencing multiple losses following the offence, including loss of their old way of life and outdated conceptualizations of the accused family member. Individuals' accounts of mourning such losses over time (e.g., immediately following learning of the offence, when their family member is incarcerated, post-incarceration) fit with identified trajectories of grief, including denial, anger, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969). In addition, many women described feeling completely alone, as if nobody else had shared their emotional experiences, and conveyed a desire to have their experiences and emotions validated by other group members. Disenfranchised grief, understood as grief that is not socially sanctioned (Doka, 2008), was noted by many individuals in our sample as feelings of shock and betrayal upon learning about their family member's offence, followed by a sense of grieving over the loss of who they believed their family member was, with little to no social support. The online support forum appeared to serve as a source of comfort for non-offending family members by bringing together individuals managing similar experiences. Members frequently expressed gratitude to other members in the forum, vocalizing the joy and comfort they experienced as a result of finding this community.

Logistical and Practical Concerns

Perceived Stigma as a Barrier to Housing and Employment

Perceived stigma is a barrier to accessing and maintaining housing and employment among non-offending family members. Individuals reported believing they were at the mercy of biases held by various gatekeepers (e.g., landlords, employers), as these people had the final say about whether they would be willing to house or employ a sex offender and their family. Consistent with this finding, the presence of discrimination beyond what is required by law against perpetrators of sexual offences and their non-offending family members during their attempts to find housing and employment has been found in the literature (see Kilmer & Leon, 2017; Rydberg, 2017). In addition, many individuals feared stigmatization from neighbours and linked perceived stigma held by neighbours with the possibility of retaliation and forced relocation from their home, consistent with reports of harassment from neighbours and other community members directed at non-offending family members (Kilmer & Leon, 2017; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009) and instances of forced relocations resulting from community social pressure (Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009).

Confusion About Restrictions

The findings highlighted confusion about changes in residence restrictions across geographic locations as a barrier to accessing housing for family members. In the United States, sex offender registration laws vary from state to state, and accompanying residence restrictions also vary greatly across jurisdictions (Lytle, 2015; Savage & Windsor, 2018). In addition, lack of clarity about

changes in legal restrictions across jurisdictions coupled with anticipated stigma from family, friends, and community members limit family members' ability to make plans for the future (e.g., family planning, travelling). The finding that confusion surrounding changes in restrictions serves as an additional obstacle for activities of daily living among non-offending family members highlights both the complexity of the laws governing registration requirements as well as a lack of available information for impacted family members.

Preventing Parole Violations

A more comprehensive understanding of the judicial system is considered essential to supporting the reintegration of registrant family members. Consistent with previous studies demonstrating a tendency for non-offending family members to provide assistance with the management of legal affairs and relapse prevention (Cahalane & Duff, 2017; Cahalane et al., 2013; Comartin et al., 2010; Iffland et al., 2016), one participant in the current study, for example, explained that it was up to her to ensure that her son did not violate the conditions of his release from prison. However, although many individuals in our sample expressed a willingness to help their convicted family members comply with legal requirements, difficulty accessing credible legal information was widely apparent. Non-offending family members' search for credible legal information may be further complicated by the tendency for legal restrictions and requirements to be modified or repealed over time (Bouffard & Askew, 2019; Lytle, 2015; Prescott & Rockoff, 2011). The dearth of easily available information may result in offenders breaching parole without intent (Grattet & Lin, 2014).

Responses to Logistical and Practical Concerns

Participants' responses to other group members' concerns about housing reflected the belief that some places are more favourable for non-offending family members to live than others. For example, Florida was widely considered a less suitable place to live among family members, an assertion that may be explained by harsher penalties for sexual crimes in the state, including required lifetime registration upon conviction for certain sexual offences (Florida Department of Law Enforcement, 2018; Levenson & Zgoba, 2016). In addition, other individuals provided anecdotal descriptions of their experiences to warn others against moving to specific states.

Overall, the tendency for individuals in the current study to rely primarily upon personal opinions and experiences when responding to others' concerns about housing and parole violations may reveal a lack of factual knowledge among family members regarding cross-jurisdictional differences in registry laws. Furthermore, depending on the internet as a source of legal information is risky due to the pervasiveness of misinformation, which can influence people's beliefs, even in the face of corrective evidence (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Lack of expert input found in our sample combined with vast jurisdictional differences and constantly changing policies/regulations further call into question the accuracy of advice given.

Supporting Family Members in Prison

Inequities in the prison system may impact non-offending family members' ability to support alleged perpetrators of sexual offences in prison (Boudin et al., 2013). Due to the stigmatized nature of sexual crimes (Rade et al., 2016), individuals who have been convicted of sex offences are often placed in protective custody in prison (e.g., in isolation, solitary confinement) for their own safety (Blagden & Pemberton, 2010). Different protocols applied to higher-security inmates result in fewer visiting opportunities (Boudin et al., 2013), which may directly impact family members' ability to support alleged perpetrators of sexual offences in prison.

Mistrust in the Judicial System

Many participants described having a lack of trust in the judicial system and identified the police as particularly problematic. For some participants, the belief that the police tricked their family member into confessing may have contributed to denial of guilt or a sense of mistrust of the police. This may be accounted for partially by a public belief in the prevalence of false confessions elicited by police interrogation (Costanzo et al., 2010). Given that denial may be an effective coping strategy for reducing cognitive dissonance, family members may be quick to attend to an external source of blame. Furthermore, in many instances, mistrust of the police may be protective, as speaking to police when not required by law runs the risk of revealing information that can be used against an individual in court. On the other hand, these findings suggest the formation of a reciprocal structure where family members' reluctance to disclose information to the police leads to the use of more intensive investigational techniques.

Implications

Although endorsed by the public (Anderson & Sample, 2008), sexual offender registration and notification (SORN) laws are not effective in preventing further sexual crimes committed by known offenders (Adkins et al., 2000; Prescott & Rockoff, 2011; Vásquez et al., 2008; Zevitz, 2006). Given that unintended consequences of SORN laws reach beyond perpetrators of sexual crimes to create practical, psychological, and social difficulties among family members, both legislators and clinicians should consider the numerous personal accounts described in this study. In addition, by considering the difficulty in understanding legal restrictions reported by non-offending family members, law enforcement officials should publicize new legal information resources or strengthen existing resources to support family members and perpetrators of sexual offences in their attempts to comply with legal restrictions. In addition, mechanisms to improve non-offending family members' understanding of restrictions and residency requirements may include increasing awareness of existing online resources (e.g., <https://ccresourcecenter.org/state-restoration-profiles/50-state-comparison-relief-from-sex-offender-registration-obligations/>; <https://floridaactioncommittee.org/residency-restrictions-by-state-for-persons-required-to-register-as-sex-offenders/>). Moreover, it is important to consider the lack of trust in law enforcement

felt by many non-offending family members to help strengthen police-community relationships and improve public safety as it relates to sexual abuse.

Given that the predominant focus in the current study was on the experiences of non-offending family members residing in the United States, there are implications for future research in Canada. Consistency of prohibited actions and residency requirements across Canada (Criminal Code, 1985) suggest that some of the experiences of non-offending family members in navigating these policies are different from those residing in the United States. However, although Canada does not have federally mandated community notification or public disclosure of perpetrators' private information by law enforcement, research points to the increasing emergence of initiatives by individuals and activist communities aiming to expose those convicted of a sexual offence (Lussier & Mathesius, 2019). Future research is needed to understand non-offending family members' experiences specifically in the Canadian context.

Limitations

Results of the present study should be considered in light of several limitations. First, because the posts and comments selected for analysis were sampled from a limited time frame, results only represent a "snapshot" of interactions among community members. Second, given that the posts and comments on the forum were reviewed post-hoc in a manner similar to naturalistic observation, useful follow-up information could not be obtained. In addition, although only individuals still involved with their accused family members participated in this study, alleged perpetrators of sexual offences commonly report losing family relationships following an offence (Evans & Cubellis, 2015; Robbers, 2009). Thus, the perspective of individuals who may have disowned or walked away from their accused family member was not captured in this study. Furthermore, because we were unable to interact directly with participants, it was occasionally challenging to ascertain members' specific relationships to offenders (e.g., child, parent, significant other). However, most of the quotes presented appear to have been provided by female romantic partners or from mothers of alleged perpetrators, which suggests that current findings may not be generalizable to the wider population of non-offending family members. Finally, some forum members posted pervasively, perhaps limiting researchers' exposure to a wider breadth of responses and opinions. Future research would benefit from facilitating semi-structured interviews with family members of alleged sexual perpetrators or such individuals particularly seeking support from online forums to better understand their perceived needs or barriers.

CONCLUSION

Despite the above-noted limitations, the current study is the first to examine online accounts of non-offending family members' experiences dealing with a family member's sexual offence. By analyzing anonymous posts, the current study provides information about family members' needs in managing offence-related

consequences, which can contribute to the development and implementation of services to improve the welfare of non-offending family members. In addition, improved understanding of challenges faced by family members in support of alleged perpetrators of sexual offences would likely contribute to reduced recidivism and increased integration of perpetrators in society.

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