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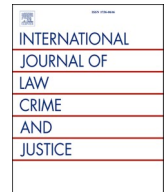
A desistance practice framework to support police professionals working with people with sexual convictions

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A B S T R A C T

Under Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) in England and Wales, statutory agencies (police, probation, and prison services) are responsible for assessing and managing the risk of over 70,000 people subject to sexual notification requirements. With the majority (approximately three-quarters) of this population being managed in the community by specialist police professionals, control and containment approaches dominate policy and practice. This is of concern because risk management tactics that adopt restrictive measures in isolation can only achieve short-term goals. However, when combined with desistance-focused strategies, longer-term change is facilitated.

Desistance refers to the cessation of criminal behaviour, requiring both cognitive and behavioural change, alongside pro-social and structural support. Positive informal (e.g. family and friends) and formal (e.g. police) relationships are crucial in fostering successful desistance outcomes. But, because desistance is a meta-theory, integrating various psychological, social, and situational theories, its operationalisation is complex. To effectively address sexual reoffending, police professionals must maximise every opportunity to support the desistance process among people with sexual convictions. To this end, we introduce our **Desistance Practice Framework,** co-developed with police stakeholders and people with sexual convictions. We outline here our consultation process and present the theoretical foundations underpinning our model.

1. Introduction

All sexual abuse is deplorable. The devastating impact on the health and well-being of victims and survivors (Violence against women, 2024) as well as the significant socio-economic costs involved (Radakin et al., 2021) mean that once detected, convicted or cautioned for a sexual offence, courts and criminal justice agencies must enforce rigorous sanctions and implement effective measures to both prevent sexual reoffending and safeguard potential victims. Across England and Wales, court-imposed sanctions available to

sentencers are regarded as among the "toughest" penalties designed to tackle and deter sexual (re)offending (Thomas and Marshall, 2021).

In addition to prison or community sentences, those convicted, cautioned, reprimanded, or warned for a relevant sexual offence (as listed under Schedule 3 of the Sexual Offences Act, 2003) are automatically required to comply with notification requirements (Sexual Offences Act, 2003). Notification periods range from fixed to indefinite terms (depending on the seriousness of the initial offence or risk posed) and run concurrently, often beyond community or custodial sentences. The notification requirement was initially designed to provide police with a local register of where people with sexual convictions lived in the community, but it also assisted investigations of potential suspects following a crime (Thomas and Marshall, 2021). Recent rhetoric around notification requirements suggest they help protect the public by deterring both the individual, and others, from (re)offending; although, this has yet to be empirically tested across England and Wales (Kewley and Brereton, 2022) however, copious studies in the United States demonstrates notification and registration requirements have no impact on recidivism or the deterrence of sexual offending (Zgoba and Mitchell, 2023)

Some people are given civil orders (Sexual Harm Prevention Orders and Sexual Risk Orders). These mandate people to engage in certain behaviours to protect others (general public, known children, or vulnerable adults) (Beard, 2023). Conditions within civil orders can restrict movement, internet access, activities/employment or preclude attendance at places where a child(ren) may be (*Sexual Harm Prevention Orders (SHPO)*, 2024). They can also instruct positive behaviours such as engaging in treatment programmes for drug or alcohol problems, offender behaviour work or taking a polygraph test (*Guidance on Part 2 of the* Sexual Offences Act, 2003, 2023).

Under Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA, 2024) in England and Wales, police, probation, and prison agencies have statutory responsibility for the risk assessment and management of 70,052 people (as of March 2024) subject to sexual offender notification requirements (*Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) Annual Report 2023/24*, 2024). With a 54 % population increase over the last decade (Kewley and Karsna, 2025), most of this group (approx. 73 %) are managed in the community by specialist police offender managers.[1] Between April 2023 and March 2024, 93 people were charged and/or convicted of a serious further offence (SFO[2]) equating to approximately 0.1 % of the MAPPA Category 1 population (people convicted of a sexual offence) (Lancashire MAPPA, 2024) and over 2 % of the people on probation caseload with sexual convictions (n = 4356 as of end March 2024) (Ministry of Justice, 2024). Additionally, the National Crime Agency detected that one in 10 people committing child sexual abuse (during proactive online investigations between April 2020 and September 2022) had previous sexual convictions while being actively managed by either probation or police services (National Crime Agency, 2024).

As most sexual offences and reoffences never reach criminal justice agencies, official reoffending data is an underrepresentation of the true scale and nature of sexual abuse (Elkin, 2023). And so, despite 'tough' legislation to tackle sexual violence, some people continue to sexually reoffend. Given that most people with a sexual offence, in England and Wales, are managed by the police (Pemberton and Kewley, 2025), we must look to this group of professionals to explore how we can best support them to help prevent people mandated to notification and other civil orders from reoffending.

Across England and Wales, police-led management of people with sexual offences in the community is undertaken by specialist public protection police offender managers (commonly known as MOSOVOs under *the management of sexual offenders and violent offenders* – hereon in, and to avoid the use of pejorative terms, we refer to this group of specialist police officers as 'police professionals'). Each constabulary organise their public protection units differently, but all use approaches to control (i.e. detect crime, protect others, and administer civil orders of the court) and rehabilitate (i.e. support the desistance process through providing suitable diversion activities such as employment or other constructive activities) people mandated to notification orders (Kemshall, 2021). While containment strategies dominate police policy and practice, approaches that facilitate rehabilitation are encouraged, as they are deemed likely to achieve more desirable and long-term results.

As part of the UK government strategy '*Tackling violence against women and girls*' (2021), an independent review into police-led management of *registered sex offenders* in the community (Creedon, 2023) called for greater desistance-focused approaches to policing people with sexual convictions in the community. We recognise public protection policies can appear incompatible with desistance-focused approaches. As highlighted in recent work (Mydlowski et al., 2024; Pemberton et al., 2023), police professionals managing people with sexual convictions operate within a highly politicised risk-based culture. They are tasked with enforcing restrictive and often stigmatising sanctions (Kewley and Brereton, 2022), including limitations on housing, employment, and movement, conditions that can reinforce the "offender" identity and hinder reintegration. While containment sanctions are necessary where risk is present, public protection requires more than restriction alone. Supporting people to reduce risk and desist from offending is a fundamental part of public protection. Despite these challenges, police professionals are well-positioned to serve as formal agents of change and promote desistance with perpetrators of sexual violence.

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[1] Calculated using March 2024 Ministry of Justice data: 4332 people with sexual convictions managed by probation services (Ministry of Justice, 2024) and 14,271 people in prison for a sexual offence (Ministry of Justice, 2024).

[2] Offences for people on probation orders that automatically trigger a SFO Review include murder, manslaughter, other specified offences causing death, rape or assault by penetration, a sexual offence against a child under 13 years of age, or qualifying offences under terrorism legislation. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/probation-service-serious-further-offence-procedures-policy-framework.

2. Assisting desistance

Creedon (2023) recommends a far greater focus on desistance and prevention when working with people subject to notifications and managed by the police. This is because, following a period of punishment, either imprisonment or time on probation, nearly all people convicted of a crime, in England and Wales, will at some point be returned 'back' to the community. Thus, efforts to help improve police professionals' skills and knowledge of desistance-led approaches with this population are critical. Yet, operationalising desistance is complex, not least of all because it is an amalgamation of many criminological and psychological theories.

Desistance research, from a criminological perspective, has since the 1970s/80s begun to help our understanding of not only 'who' desists and 'when', but, perhaps more importantly, 'how' people desist (Weaver, 2015). We know a journey of desistance takes time, and where barriers exist, people can be derailed, inhibited, and return to a life of crime (Maruna, 2001). Promoting desistance is, therefore, critical for everyone involved. Not only does it help serve justice and protect people from future harm/victimisation, but it also helps the person desisting to repair and rebuild relationships, develop personal strengths that help them contribute to society and their community in a safe and crime-free manner (Kewley and Burke, 2023).

There are many pathways into desistance, but essentially the process is characterised by three key stages: the first, 'primary' stage sees an initial lull or gap in offending, followed by a 'secondary' stage in which the person maintains behavioural change and adopts/ re-gains a new non-offending identity (Maruna and Farrall, 2004). A 'tertiary' stage sees this identity shift not only in the individual, but in the community around them; here we see others accepting and embracing the person back into the community as a reformed and valued citizen (McNeill, 2016). In addition to this non-linear process of desistance, several theories provide varying explanations of the process, including individual and agentic, social and structural, interactionist, and situational theories.

Individual and agentic accounts include maturation and agentic explanations as to why people desist. They describe how people age out of crime (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983), mature, become less motivated to offend (Rutherford, 2002) or choose not to offend (Cornish and Clarke, 1987), perhaps because they view the consequences of crime as being risky and no longer beneficial (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Other theorists draw on social and structural aspects in which desistance is shaped by differential association and social learning theories. Here, the bonds and informal ties people have with social institutions across the life course, such as family, education, and employment (Laub and Sampson, 2001), as well as the strength of these bonds and attachments (Hirschi, 1969), are important factors to help foster desistance. Interactionist theorists describe desistance as the interplay and dependency of both agency and structure, as internal and external factors alone are an oversimplification of a complex process. Interactionists explain how people make internal shifts and changes through a process of identity transformation (they move away from the label "offender" to one of "ex-offender") (Maruna, 2001). However, change cannot be achieved in isolation; others (both informal and formal relationships) must provide external validation of a changed identity (Weaver and McNeill, 2015). Theorists debate whether internal transformation is first triggered by the individual, or if it coincides with external opportunities, or indeed, if access to external opportunity is required before internal change can occur (Giordano et al., 2002). Either way, an interaction between agency and structural factors exists. Finally, situational theorists explain how the desistance process can be influenced by the spaces and places people inhabit (Bottoms, 2014). The environments in which people live impact their lives (negatively and positively) because of the routines, interactions with others and cultural meaning and experiences within these spaces (Farrall et al., 2014).

By applying greater desistance-focused practice when working with people convicted of sexual offences, police professionals can not only help prevent future harm to victims but also reduce the social and economic costs to society, while also increasing the safe reintegration of people back into the community. To do this, they require far greater practice guidance around desistance. This is because, despite Creedons' (2023) call for desistance-focused practice, training and support in this space is scant.

3. Practice framework

Practice frameworks can help with the operationalisation of criminological explanatory theories in challenging criminal justice contexts (Ward and Durrant, 2021), but such frameworks are rare. Ward and Durrant (2021) outline how a practice framework "creates a bridge between treatment theories, normative assumptions, and etiological theories" (p.2). Practice frameworks are made up of three linked levels or ideas.

- Level One: Core ethical and prudential values and normative principles and assumptions - Ethical values relate to the "concern of rightness and wrongness of certain types of actions and situations and the goodness or badness of characteristics of individuals", and prudential values relate to "the goods affecting individuals' level of well-being or quality of life" (p.3)
- Level Two: Knowledge-related assumptions – These relate to the general hypothesis of the factors and causes related to crime. Factors relating to agents, actions, and contexts help examine underlying motivations and explanations.
- Level Three: Intervention and practice guidelines – Outline how professionals should work with people, given what is known in Levels One and Two. This includes details regarding the moral standing of the individual, the target of the intervention, a specific intervention, and aspects of practitioner style.

Without an operationalised understanding of the mechanisms and factors needed to help people move away from crime, the somewhat abstract and theoretical concept of desistance remains a challenge for police practitioners to implement. Desistance theory is not one unified theory, but a meta-theory incorporating several psycho-social and situational theories. Thus, we are, therefore, grateful for Fox's (2022) foundational work outlining the complexity of desistance and conditions needed to develop a practice framework.

We aimed to develop a Desistance Practice Framework for police professionals to engage in more desistance-focused practice

during their routine and everyday management and interactions with people with sexual convictions. Adopting a collaborative approach with key police stakeholders and people with sexual convictions enabled us to gain real-world insights around how to support desistance effectively (Brierley, 2023; Telep et al., 2020). We provide here a brief outline of the process. Following this, we summarise our Desistance Practice Framework along with a description of the underpinning theory to support the model.

4. Method

Lancashire Constabulary, in the Northwest of England, operates three specialist offender management teams in which approximately 50 police professionals manage 2453 people subject to sexual offender notification requirements (as of March 31, 2024) (*Lancashire MAPPA Annual Report, 2023–2024*, 2024). We facilitated three points of consultation to gain feedback on the development of the framework. Summarised in Table 1 are details of the method, frequency and number of people who engaged in the process.

4.1. Procedure

Initial consultation: The collaboration was initiated by Lancashire Constabulary following a conference presentation and publication by authors that explored the role of police in supporting desistance among people with sexual convictions (REDACTED, 2023). A Detective Chief Inspector from the Change and Continuous Improvement team approached the first author to explore the co-development of resources and training aimed at enhancing desistance-focused practice among police practitioners across the force. This request was partly driven by a desire to respond to the Creedon Report's recommendations and its call for more rehabilitative, person-centred approaches in managing people with sexual offences. Thus, the project was co-designed with police stakeholders to ensure relevance, feasibility, and impact in frontline practice. A small internal 'seedcorn' grant was awarded to the lead author by Liverpool John Moores University Forensic Research Institute, and ethical approval was granted by the University Research Ethics Committee (ref no: 24/PSY/049) before the commencement of the project.

Theory of Change: With access, funding, and ethical permissions secured, the research team collaboratively developed a Theory of Change (ToC), drawing on existing desistance theory and practice knowledge. It was then tested and refined through engagement with key stakeholders (police professionals and people with sexual convictions) who provided feedback and practical insights. This iterative process ensured the final ToC (see Fig. 1) was both theoretically grounded and operationally relevant, reflecting the realities of frontline practice and lived experience and defined realistic goals for this initial phase within available resources (Doherty et al., 2022).

Given that our aim was to co-develop a Desistance Practice Framework for police professionals, we needed to adopt a methodological approach that actively engaged stakeholders. A collaborative, real-world design was essential to ensure relevance and applicability. Focus groups were used to bring police professionals together, making efficient use of their limited time and enabling open discussion. For people with sexual convictions, one-to-one interviews were chosen to ensure privacy and confidentiality; we recognise that group settings would have been inappropriate. This approach allowed us to gather meaningful insights while respecting the distinct needs of each participant group.

Police professional consultation – focus group one: We invited (via our police gatekeeper, the fifth author on this paper) police professionals from each of the three Lancashire Constabulary units to attend a hybrid consultation session. The criteria for inclusion were that participants were current offender managers within the public protection units in Lancashire. We did not collect demographic data of participants as this was not an aim of the research. However, a mix of senior and more recently recruited offender managers attended, which was evident from the experiences they shared. Sessions were held during working hours, in a meeting room at police headquarters, allowing for both face-to-face and virtual attendance for staff who could not attend in person. In total, 13 police professionals attended a 2-h session. Five of these were face-to-face, the remainder online. During the session, we introduced the project, concept of desistance, ToC and facilitated initial feedback from the group.

The first and fifth authors facilitated the discussion, using pre-prepared semi-structured prompt questions, modelling collaborative working. Questions included what challenges police professionals face when working with people with sexual convictions; in addition to assessing and managing risk, how do they facilitate opportunities for people with sexual convictions to desist; what would help them to better support people they manage to desist from sexual offending; in what ways might a Desistance Management Plan assist their work. To ensure all participants contributed, or at least had an opportunity to share thoughts, facilitators directed questions when needed. Group members, however, were fully engaged and responses were positive toward desistance and the project, showing openness to this work. Notes were taken by the second author throughout the session; these were used to support the analysis process. Discussions highlighted three key needs: (1) more training and knowledge development on desistance-focused practices, (2) resources for community services to refer individuals with sexual convictions, and (3) a tool to focus on desistance factors and track individuals' progress.

Table 1
Method, frequency, and type of stakeholders throughout consultation process.

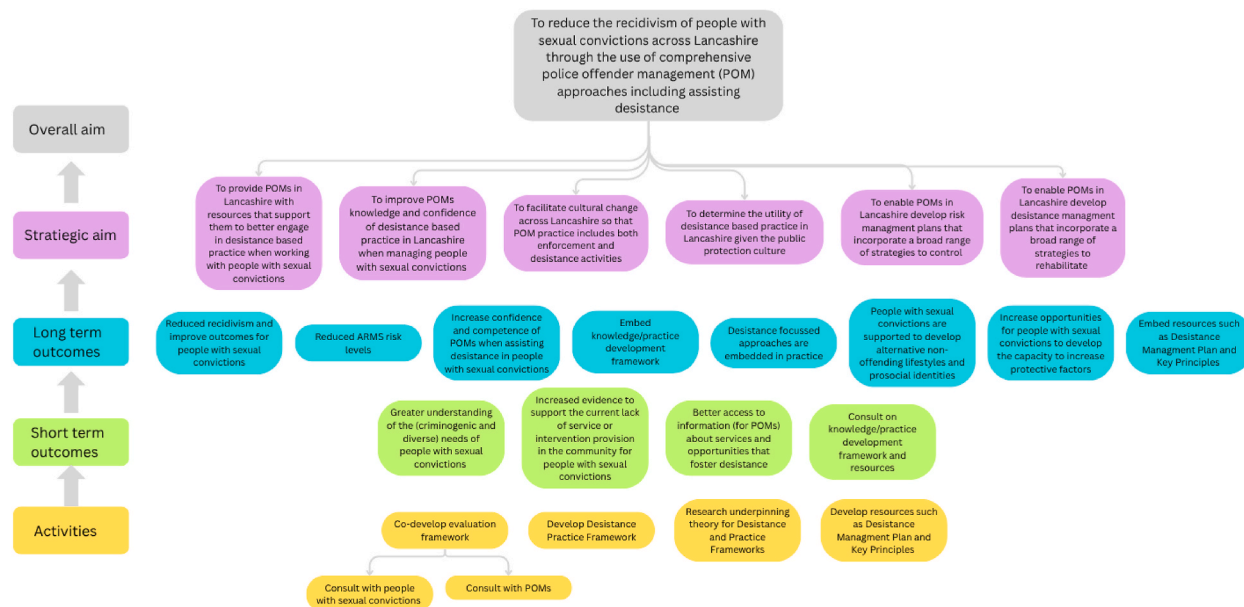| Stakeholders	Consultation Method	Total Number
Police professionals	Focus group one	13
Police professionals	Focus group two	6
People with sexual convictions	One to one interview	7

Fig. 1. Theory of Change to support formal agents to assisting desistance in people convicted of sexual offending.

Principles and values development: The research team held three separate face-to-face development days and online sessions to draft a response ahead of the second consultation. By drawing on the desistance literature and our previous work and experiences in this space see (Kewley et al., 2020; Kewley and Brereton, 2022; Kewley and Burke, 2023; Pemberton et al., 2023; Mydlowski & Turner Moore 2023; Mydlowski et al., 2024; Pemberton and Kewley, 2025) we developed a draft document comprising of values and principles and intervention guidance.

Police professional consultation – focus group two: We invited police professionals from the three units to attend a second consultation session, though scheduling challenges meant it was not the same group as the first session. A total of six participants attended, with only one being a return attendee. This second session aimed to provide feedback on the principles and intervention guidance developed by the research team following focus group one. However, since most people were new to the discussion, we introduced the research project and ToC again before presenting the draft framework for group discussion. Using prepared prompts, we adopted the same approach as in focus group one and facilitated a productive conversation. This was an online session as no participants were able to travel to Headquarters. This time questions centred on the framework and their views on the utility of this in their work. Feedback was positive, with no new ideas emerging or changes requested, though further work was identified to operationalise the principles and values.

One-to-one discussion with people with sexual convictions: We undertook seven one-to-one discussions with adults convicted of a sexual offence and living in Lancashire. Six were male and one female, the average age was 44 ($SD = 17.96$) they had been managed by Lancashire police on average for 9 years ($SD = 5.4$) and had convictions for rape (of an adult female); making, possession and distribution of indecent images of a child; Causing/inciting a male child under 13 to engage in sexual activity; Causing/inciting/prostitution of/pornography involving a child under 13; and voyeurism. In terms of their risk levels as determined by their Active and Risk Management System (ARMS),[3] three were assessed as Low Risk, two Medium Risk, and two High Risk.

People were invited via a police gatekeeper and provided project details and consent forms ahead of the discussion. Private discussions were held at a police station, with travel costs covered by Lancashire Constabulary. We were mindful of the potential impact the interview location may have on people and so reiterated our support and interest in their experiences through a detailed information and debrief sheet before and after the discussion. We introduced the notion of desistance to participants and asked them if police professionals they were working with used desistance focused approaches how would this impact them and their commitment to desist, we asked if they felt police professionals were best placed to do this work, we asked them how our framework could be improved or if anything was missing and what they thought police professionals could do to help people like them in their situation live an offence free life. We intentionally avoided seeking personal experiences of police management, although some participants shared such experiences. Two individuals disclosed childhood sexual abuse and were referred to support services. All sessions were audio recorded, with no incentives provided.

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[3] ARMS is a dynamic, structured assessment tool, commonly used by the police. It guides assessors to consider both risk and protective factors and supports the risk management planning of people with sexual convictions (Kewley and Blandford, 2017).

5. Analysis

We employed a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2021), drawing on both inductive and deductive reasoning. This method allowed us to identify themes emerging from stakeholder data (notes from focus groups and interview transcripts from discussions with people with convictions) while also engaging with existing theoretical frameworks on desistance and offender management. The process was iterative, involving multiple rounds of refinement, shaped by stakeholder feedback and guided by our ToC. This work was undertaken manually (given the small number of transcripts and field notes, software was not required). A deductive approach was used to draft the desistance framework; this was developed *a priori*, using the extant literature and presented to police participants during focus groups. Following focus groups 1 and 2, the research team met to discuss and refine the framework ahead of consultation with people with sexual convictions. After conducting one-to-one interviews, transcripts were analysed inductively (again manually). No new themes or significant changes to the framework were developed, although operational suggestions were incorporated. Reflexive thematic analysis was particularly suited to our aim of co-developing a practical framework, as it enabled us to balance empirical insights, conceptual rigour and real-world insight.

5.1. The Desistance Practice Framework

Rooted in a welfarist rehabilitation paradigm (McNeill, 2004) our Desistance Practice Framework embraces core values that support police professionals to empower the person to move towards desistance. This requires attention to structural and individual factors. It also points to helping the development of goals that strengthen internal protective factors, while tackling external factors (and the barriers associated with access to opportunities). Potential risks posed by those subject to notification requirements are attended to (Ward and Maruna, 2007; Ward and Stewart, 2003), and people are allowed to thrive whilst contributing to society (Ward and Connolly, 2008). We discuss each level of the Desistance Practice Framework here, but provide a summary in Table 2.

5.2. Level One: core values and principles of the desistance practice framework for police professionals working with people with sexual convictions

Core values and principles within a practice framework outline *how* practitioners ought to go about their practice and *what*

Table 2
A Desistance Practice Framework for police professionals working with people with sexual convictions.

Level 1		Level 2	Level 3
Core Ethical Values	Prudential Values	Knowledge related assumptions	Intervention guidelines
●Identity transformation and cognitive shifts are needed to support effective desistance ●Desistance requires development of both human and social capital ●Development and promotion of individuals' personal strengths and resources	●Facilitate meaningful relationships and access to purposeful activity ●Help reconstruct positive social identities – de-labelling ●Promote hope, respect and self-determination	Agents: ●Early bio-psycho-social development impairs capacity and authentic "agency" ●Complex blend of internal and external factors ●Healthy pro-social relationships and positive attachments Actions: ●Strengths based and restorative activities support desistance ●Welfarist approach recognising structural challenges and stigmatising nature of criminal justice systems Context: ●Supportive contexts can help decrease vulnerability ●Understanding motivation, state and trait factors should inform situational prevention	●Consider disability, physical and mental wellbeing o Promote the use of self-help, relaxation techniques, mindfulness, exercise, and signpost to specialist and universal health services ●Work in collaboration and with transparency to develop goals and plans around the individuals' needs. o Build capacity and capability o Work 'with' not 'on' o Draw up a Desistance Management Plan ●Help increase social capital o Help access to activities that foster informal relationships o Help to repair broken social bonds o Focus on developing capacity and capability of interpersonal skills o Promote formal social relationships ●Promote hope and agency while also recognising legal and social barriers ●Use and reinforce person centred de-stigmatising language ●All interventions should work to promote agency ●Use strengths-based approaches to goals that address internal and external deficits and promote and reinforce change o Good Lives Model, challenge anti-social beliefs, motivational interviewing, old me new me o Help them achieve goods via legitimate means

outcomes are desired by the process to meet individual needs (Ward and Durrant, 2021). Ethical values refer to the principles that guide people toward morally responsible behaviour, such as respect for others and fairness. These values underpin a person's sense of right and wrong and are essential for developing a prosocial identity that supports desistance from offending. Prudential values, on the other hand, relate to personal well-being and flourishing. They encompass goals and aspirations that contribute to a meaningful life, such as autonomy, competence, emotional health, and fulfilling relationships. These values help people pursue a life that is not only offence-free but also personally satisfying and sustainable. In our proposed Desistance Practice Framework, *ethical values* include increased identity and cognitive shifts, improved human and social capital, and the development of personal strengths. Our *prudential values* include hope, respect and self-determination, meaningful relationships and access to purposeful activity, and the reconstruction of positive social identities/de-labelling.

5.2.1. Identity transformation and cognitive shifts

Identity transformation and cognitive shifts are needed to support effective desistance. Identity transformation through cognitive shifts involves the person distancing their identity away from the "old self" to a new (non-offending) identity. This transformation is reinforced when it is accepted by others (e.g. family members, persons in authority, community). Maruna (2001) describes the reconstruction of 'offender' to 'non-offender'. He notes how people desisting use 'redemption scripts' that are peppered with hope, future aspirations, and a clear distance from past criminality; they narrate an openness to change and redefine themselves as an 'ex-offender'. This is contrasted with 'condemnation scripts' used by people persisting with crime. They blame external factors and perceive change as unattainable. How internal change occurs is debated, but Giordano et al. (2002, 2008) emphasise the need for an external 'trigger for change' to initiate desistance. In essence, there must be an openness to change, exposure to opportunity, and some 'hook for change'. When people are supported and facilitated to engage with external 'hooks' and make authentic identity trans-formation, particularly by formal agents, such as police professionals, their sense of self-efficacy and agency increases (de Vel-Palumbo et al., 2023).

While these (primary/secondary) cognitive shifts are essential to the process, transformation can only be deemed authentic when reinforced and externally validated (tertiary desistance) (McNeill, 2016). The reinforcing process is somewhat cyclical: external validation—whether from authority figures like police or probation officers, or informal recognition from family and community members—strengthens the individual's internal change. This, in turn, boosts their resolve and motivation to pursue pro-social op-portunities and build social capital. As others observe these positive changes, the cycle of reinforcement continues. Quaternary desistance is experienced when the person desisting is 'assumed ordinary' by others, that is, they do not consider a change has occurred, as there is no awareness of previous offending (Gray and Farrall, 2024). External validation is, therefore, hugely powerful and reinforcing. But it is dynamic, it requires time and is only negotiated through trusted social interactions and the development of meaningful social relationships. Many people subject to notification requirements are without family or friends and often only have social relationships with professionals (Farmer et al., 2016). The role of police professionals to help validate and reinforce the change made is, therefore, vital for successful cognitive identity transformation.

5.2.2. Human and social capital and access to meaningful relationships

All humans have a natural desire to engage in safe, warm, and meaningful relationships with others (be that platonic friendships, close family relationships, or intimate romantic partnerships) (Laws and Ward, 2011). People do not exist in the world in a vacuum; thus, meaningful and positive social relationships are essential. But, for people mandated to notification requirements, often their capacity and/or opportunity to develop new or repair old relationships have been hampered by their offending. Desistance theorists outline the critical role social relations play in the process of desistance (Weaver, 2015). This is because meaningful social relationships enable people to feel connected, it provides them a sense of belonging, and an opportunity to be bonded to others. This sense of connection (which requires reciprocity) helps people create new social roles and strengthen new identities (Healy, 2012) and increase social capital potential.

5.2.3. Positive social identities

Social capital provides access to other communities and networks, practical and emotional support, economic and cultural re-sources, and new opportunities (Portes, 2024). Indeed, a benefit of promoting meaningful social (formal and informal) bonds is that new identities are formed through the creation of new social roles shaped through these interactions. However, helping to reconstruct positive social identities includes the need to recognise the power and harm problematic labels have in this process. Using labels such as 'offender', 'sex offender' or 'nominal' when interacting with, or talking about a person with a sexual conviction, contradicts the principles of desistance and rehabilitation (Willis, 2018). Such labels identify and badge people with the behaviours we want them to stop and are, therefore, counterproductive to a strengths-based process (Maruna et al., 2004). Thus, our framework encourages person-centred language to help reduce the stigma associated with having a sexual criminal conviction and assist others to be more accepting of the person and the changes they have made (Cox, 2020).

5.2.4. Development and promotion of individuals' personal strengths and resources

The Desistance Practice Framework also prescribes a focus on the development and promotion of individuals' personal strengths. More traditional rehabilitation approaches, such as the Risk Need and Responsivity (RNR) model (Andrews and Bonta, 2016), dominate criminal justice approaches. While these are effective, the "primary goal of such interventions is always the reduction and management of risk for sexual recidivism rather than the enhancement of the offenders' lives" (Chu and Ward, 2015, p.140); by focusing attention wholly on criminogenic risk factors, although a vital part of responding to crime, this approach alone, is unlikely to

motivate and encourage the person to desist. Instead, while branded under public protection policy, such interventions risk unintended consequences such as pathologising, othering, labelling the person (Kewley and Brereton, 2022) and increasing dynamic risks related to sexual offending (Harris and Levenson, 2021).

Strength-based approaches adopt a more balanced strategy; blending "risk reduction and life enhancement" (Chu and Ward, 2015, p.141). Strength-based approaches view the person as an asset and one who requires help and support to not only repair harms caused, but to embrace a process of personal growth and change (Maruna and LeBel, 2015). This is important because people with sexual convictions suffer disadvantage as a result of structural constraints (Healy, 2012), meaning agency is obstructed. Thus, even with a strong motivation not to re-offend, many people must lower their expectations, life goals, and identities. In search of a meaningful life, people might revert to crime as the ability to realise a meaningful future self is unachievable with such social constraints (Healy, 2012). It is, therefore, critical that people's strengths and resources are developed and promoted.

5.2.5. Hope, respect and self-determination

Hope is a central prudential value in this Desistance Practice Framework. A person committed to desist must have the belief (sense of agency) that life goals are attainable for a positive future life and that a pathway to begin to achieve these goals can be realised (Snyder et al., 2000). However, access to core life domains (family, employment, housing, etc.) is likely to have been hampered, either by people's own offending or because of criminal justice sanctions (Levins and Mjåland, 2021); thus, feelings of hopelessness and being blocked from achieving personal goals are a reality for this population. Feelings of powerlessness to achieve positive personal goals will reinforce a belief of being *doomed to deviance* (Maruna, 2001) and impede the desistance process. Fostering an authentic sense of hope and a belief in the person being able to make changes is critical to this Desistance Practice Framework. Having hope alone, however, is insufficient; access to opportunities must also be supported. People with sexual convictions are subjected to stringent community conditions restricting movements and activities, thus hampering access to purposeful activity (Allan et al., 2023). These unique restrictions can impede change and obstruct the development of hope, self-respect, and self-determination. People must be provided genuine and sustained opportunities to access markers of citizenship (Villeneuve et al., 2021) so that the desistance process is facilitated and the desire to return to a life of crime is an undesirable option.

5.3. Level Two: knowledge-related assumptions

Knowledge-related assumptions refer to the general causes of crime and the problems associated with criminality. People commit crimes for several psycho-social reasons that are often contextualised within specific circumstances or situations (Ward and Durrant, 2021). As prescribed by Ward and Durrant's practice framework, we present some assumptions organised under three linked factors: agents, actions, and contexts.

5.3.1. Agents

Agents or *agency* is categorised according to Ward and Durrant (2021) as risk factors, cognitive variables, goals/needs or personality features. Importantly, Ward and Durrant conceptualise agency not as a fixed trait or label, but as a dynamic and context-dependent capacity for intentional action. While the term "agents" may refer to individuals, agency itself reflects the evolving potential for self-directed change, shaped by the interaction of psychological, social, and environmental factors. Thus, we briefly summarise here key aspects of agency when framed within a desistance model.

Pathways to sexual offending are complex. They are unique to the individual, and not one theory or explanation alone can be used to explain *all* sexual offending. The Integrated Theory of Sexual Offending (Ward and Beech, 2016) provides a useful and unified explanation of sexual abuse. Ward and Beech (2016) describe how:

> "Sexual abuse occurs as a consequence of a number of interacting causal factors, operating at different levels and occurring in distinct domains of human functioning: biological (evolution, genetic variations, and neurobiology), ecological (social and cultural environment, personal circumstances, physical environment), core neuropsychological systems, and personal agency" (n.p)

However, without help, primary, secondary and indeed tertiary desistance is unlikely if people have pre-existing (untreated) vulnerabilities due to genetic/biological, social learning, and/or neuropsychological systems (Ward and Beech, 2016). As such, they will likely lack the capacity or agency to access opportunities to effectively desist. Compounding these vulnerabilities are the collateral consequences resulting from criminal justice sanctions (Hamilton et al., 2022). These include the loss of intimate relationships and access to social capital (Blagden et al., 2023); lack of meaningful employment or being perceived as 'unemployable' (Wooldridge and Bailey, 2023); not having stable accommodation or having restricted residency requirements (Roberts et al., 2024); experiencing stigma, discrimination and harassment as a result of having a sexual conviction (Sandbukt, 2023) as well as family members carrying the secondary stigma because of their offences (Evans et al., 2023). When responding to these varying vulnerabilities, not only should a bio-psycho-social response be considered (Carter and Mann, 2016), but given the context, potential developmental impairment, and reduced capacity of the person, an individualised approach must be adopted to meet their needs and support authentic agency and desistance.

In addition to these aetiological causes of sexual offending, healthy pro-social relationships and positive attachments are at the core of desistance. People require positive social support to move away from sexual offending (Seto et al., 2023); without this, they remain exposed to a more challenging journey of desistance. Even with primary and secondary desistance achieved (i.e. a commitment to desist and an internal identity shift) without diverse meaningful and flourishing relationships, desistance is painful (Nugent and

Schinkel, 2016) and arguably harmful. If people are socially isolated and unable to achieve personal relationship goals, then feelings of hopelessness are reinforced. This can then interfere with any shifts in cognitive identity transformation. Furthermore, if people have limited capacity and/or opportunity to access psychological resources, social capital and pro-social environments (Laws and Ward, 2011), the desistance process will be severely impeded, and sexual offending is more easily maintained and/or escalated (Ward and Beech, 2016). As found by Maruna (2001), when people continuing to offend felt a sense of hopelessness, existing in a vicious offending cycle, they felt not only '*doomed to deviance*' but were unable to develop pro-social non-offending identities.

5.3.2. Actions

Actions are described as the channels between the person and their environment (Ward and Durrant, 2021). The means by which internal and external factors are bridged is inevitably complex, and like the causes of sexual offending, not one theory explains desistance. However, using strengths-based approaches can support this bridging process. Maruna and LeBel (2015) describe strengths-based activities as those that are a) active, in that they require engagement of both the person desisting and those around them to facilitate opportunities to repair harm, and demonstrate a new way of living; b) they are creative and generative, that is, people desisting look to go beyond punishment and use their own experiences to give back or help others; c) they are self-determined, but guided, while, strength-based activities require volunteerism, the person cannot be coerced or mandated to engage, they must be intrinsically motivated to act in this way, while accepting guidance and support from experts in this space, and finally d) strengths-based approaches should embrace a sense of collectivism, so that they foster a sense of 'we' through mutual collaboration and commitment.

Equally, welfarist approaches recognise the causes of crime as structural (economic and social) rather than individual; they place responsibility for crime in the hands of the state, and as such, professionals should work with the person to support change/help/ advocate on their behalf (Villeneuve et al., 2021). Through a collaborative relationship that works 'with' the person rather than 'does to' them (Ward and Maruna, 2007), using person-first language (Cox, 2020) will greatly strengthen relationships and assist desistance. By centring and promoting the needs of the person, at the heart of the work, not only protects others (Garland, 2002) but it fosters a hope that change is possible by prioritising people's needs and life goals. While this approach should not avoid holding people accountable for their actions, nor administering punishment as mandated by the courts, an over-reliance on surveillance and control approaches risks undermining any efforts to develop safe spaces that foster a climate in which people can ask for help and seek support ahead of any lapsing behaviours (Villeneuve et al., 2021).

People attempting to desist often struggle with the stigma from their offending and the labels associated with this. This impacts their confidence, self-worth, and social interactions (Suzuki et al., 2024). Gaining trust and acceptance from others will help people move beyond these challenges, rebuild connections, and develop a stronger sense of belonging. However, current criminal justice systems, particularly for those convicted of sexual offending, face several barriers in the community to adequately support people with complex needs (Pemberton et al., 2023). This is in part due to a criminal justice system that reacts to crime (tertiary prevention) rather than intervening before crime occurs (primary and secondary prevention) (Harris et al., 2024). It is well documented that a heightened focus on *risk,* a politically driven narrative around *dangerousness* (Kewley and Brereton, 2022), results in individualistic approaches that pathologize and deliver excessive interventions. Unsurprisingly, this climate causes people to feel "doomed to be labelled" (Kras, 2022, p. 1302) and draw on maladaptive strategies such as hypervigilance to cope (Harris and Levenson, 2021). Existing in a fear state will inevitably obstruct the desistance process, cause further (albeit unintended) harms (Harris et al., 2024) and prevent people from engaging in adaptive strategies to develop pro-social narratives of identity transformation.

5.3.3. Context

Ward and Durrant (2021) describe contexts that draw people closer to offending, such as social, cultural, physical, or psychological. Like Ward and Beech's (2016) Integrated Theory of Sexual Offending, Seto (2019) provides an account of the importance of trait and state factors, along with situational factors, to facilitate the onset of sexual offending. In his motivation-facilitation model,[4] motivation is defined as a "psychological process that energises and directs behaviour" (p.5). Seto (2019) describes how sexual motivation alone, however, is insufficient for the onset of sexual offending. This is because even with sexual motivations such as paraphilias, high sex drive and/or an intense mating effort, individuals can have high levels of self-control and resilience. However, this self-control can be inhibited when exposed to one or more state (e.g., negative affect and alcohol) and/or trait stressors (e.g., poor self-regulation and hostile masculinity). While the presence of both a motivation to sexually offend plus state and trait factors increases the vulnerability to offend, situational factors are still required to facilitate the opportunity to sexually offend. Situational factors include the presence of a vulnerable victim, the absence of a suitable guardian, along with temporal and locational factors.

Situational prevention factors (Smallbone et al., 2013) and routine activity theory (Cohen and Felson, 1979) outline how critical 'situations' are in shaping the opportunity and motivation for people to sexually offend. As humans, we are nested within socio-ecological systems, including families, friends, neighbourhoods, work environments, and wider communities (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). However, at the micro level, family and peers likely serve as the most proximal influence that informs behaviour and motivation to sexual offend (McKillop et al., 2018). Likewise, specific contexts and situations can create opportunities for sexual offending, which in turn can facilitate motivations to offend when they might otherwise not be developed. Thus, having an oversight on the social, cultural, physical, or psychological context of people at risk of sexual offending is critical (Ward and Durrant, 2021).

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[4] influenced by the preconditions model (Finkelhor, 1984) and the general theory of crime (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990).

Compounding these contexts is the lived experience of people subject to notification requirements. This experience has been conceptualised as post-conviction traumatic stress (Harris and Levenson, 2021), and the "fragile balance between legalistic and therapeutic roles is one of the greatest challenges faced by practitioners" (Villeneuve et al., 2021, p. 77). Assisting desistance in a 'vulnerable' population is not without its challenges. In particular, the need to help build/develop psychological, social, human, and community capital with individuals in a context of sparse resources (Durkin, 2025) places pressure on both the person attempting to desist and the professional supporting them. For example, without the opportunity to access diverse, meaningful employment or activities, one may trigger feelings of low self-worth, loneliness, and boredom. Thus, even without a motivation to offend, desistance becomes a challenge (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). People are thwarted from being able to redeem themself or gain a sense of purpose, risking feelings of being "doomed to deviance" (Maruna, 2001) and never feeling free (Mann et al., 2019).

5.4. Level Three: intervention and practice guidelines

Considering the assumptions detailed in Level One and Level Two, here we outline Level Three, which describes *how* professionals should work with people subject to notification requirements (Ward and Durrant, 2021).

5.4.1. Consider disability, physical and mental well-being

Police professionals working with this population are well-positioned to assist desistance. They will, however, face many tensions and challenges (Pemberton et al., 2023) and, as Durkin (2025) notes, the "desistance process is inherently complex and often involves lapses and relapses, particularly for individuals with long-term offending histories" (n.p). Thus, the good mental and physical well-being of a person is key to supporting the desistance process and helping them thrive. Many people with sexual convictions will have mental health problems (perhaps related to their offending or a result of their conviction) which could include depression and anxiety, addictions, emotional problems such as anger management (Lussier et al., 2024) personality disorders (Arbanas et al., 2022) adverse childhood experiences, impacting health (Kahn et al., 2021); these conditions could remain undiagnosed and untreated. In addition, this is an ageing population, who have a greater degree of physical, mental health and care concerns (Bows and Westmarland, 2018). Thus, police professionals should adopt more of a welfare-approach (Mann et al., 2019) and support pathways to mental health assessment, treatment, and support, where needed. They could encourage and signpost to strategies of self-help, relaxation techniques, mindfulness, and physical exercise.

5.4.2. Collaboration and transparency

A further approach to help foster a climate of desistance is by working with greater transparency and collaboration with the person. The formal supervisory relationship, while undoubtedly coming with risk management tasks, can still be managed in a way that includes respect, compassion, and fairness. Developing a trusting and hopeful relationship with shared goals and targets will help police professionals work 'with' the person and foster greater autonomy (Ward and Maruna, 2007). When developing goals and targets, police professionals ought to keep in mind the persons' unique needs, capacity, and capability to achieve agreed goals. This means a one-size-fits-all approach should not be deployed. Instead, police professionals must work with the person to develop a desistance management plan to address these goals. To do this, a mutual understanding of their needs is required (e.g. criminogenic/bio-psycho-social and cultural). It is insufficient to simply identify 'needs'; professionals must assess the capacity and capability of the person to achieve these goals. For example, if the agreed goal is for the person to meet new people and develop safe friendships with others, they must together generate an understanding of interpersonal skills, emotional resilience, confidence levels, and the ability to access (safe) social opportunities. In the absence of any of these, a plan to support the person increase capacity and capability is needed first. This might include modelling pro-social skills, role play, discussion, advocacy, etc. By supporting people in this way, they can begin to develop internal capacity and start (with support) to access resources provided through increased social capital.

5.4.3. Increase social capital

Social capital is defined as the "network of social relationships and connections that can either promote desistance or perpetuate offending behaviours" (Durkin, 2025, n.p). With limited access to social networks (Blagden et al., 2023), people subject to notification requirements experience barriers to engaging in meaningful relationships and maintaining family ties (Mann et al., 2019). The role of informal relationships cannot be underestimated in the process of desistance. First, police professionals must help people access opportunities that are safe, suitable, and local (e.g. employment, volunteering, hobbies/sports, faith and/or community events, etc.). Participating in regular activities will provide exposure to new informal social relationships, which, if pro-social, can reinforce desistance (Weaver and McNeill, 2015). If safe, professionals could consider helping people repair broken social bonds with existing family and friends.

In addition, police professionals should strive to help people develop the social skills needed to engage in pro-social adult relationships. This is because relationships are dynamic and reciprocal in nature; for many people, poor attachments and intimacy deficits (Beech and Mitchell, 2016) are the pathway to offending, and so police professionals may need to monitor the progress of relationships and provide ongoing help and support. This could include preparation during home visits, in which a range of scenarios are discussed and prepared for, or a discussion about anxieties and concerns with meeting new people, followed by a practical strategy to cope with this. Given that few people with sexual convictions feel safe enough to reach out for help (Swaby and Lievesley, 2023), proactive action may be needed by police professionals.

5.4.4. Promote hope while recognising social and legal barriers

As a result of the many collateral (unintended) consequences of sexual offending and being criminally convicted (e.g. psychological, legal, social, economic) (Hamilton et al., 2022), many people experience a sense of hopelessness for the future. To help combat this, police professionals should work to promote and encourage a sense of hope and agency in the person. This is because the "relationship between agency and context is a reciprocal one" (Heffernan and Ward, 2015, p.257) and some situations or environments can trigger vulnerabilities in people (as noted earlier), if ones sense of agency (personal identity, belief about self, personal values) rejects offending, then the prospect of desisting is increased. Thus, to combat 'offender' identities, the development of positive professional relationships is crucial. These positive relationships must recognise the 'journey' the person has travelled and the future legal and social challenges they face (McNeill, 2019). Through careful supervision, they could help to explore how they can realistically achieve personal goals and targets by nudging cognitive identity transformation (Maruna, 2001) and offering 'hooks for change' (Giordano et al., 2002). Police professional interactions must demonstrate a commitment to work 'with' the person rather than do things 'to' or 'on' them. Involving the person in the decision-making and planning process serves to increase self-efficacy and agency, essential to the desistance process.

5.4.5. Reinforce person-centred de-stigmatising language

Police professionals should address the choice of labels and language used (Harris, 2021). When working with people attempting to desist and live a life free from crime in the community, the use of person-centred language will reinforce all stages of the desistance process. Indeed, even pre-desistance, careful and positive language helps provide focus to the person rather than the behaviour we do not want them to engage in (Willis, 2018). As Willis (2018) suggests (police) professionals should stop using stigmatising or pejorative labels (e.g. sex offender; perpetrator; nominal; high risk) when speaking directly with the person or writing reports about them; instead, they should describe their behaviour (sexual abuse). When discussing people with convictions in meetings or at presentations, police professionals should use person-first statements (instead of saying Mr X is a registered sex offender, say, Mr X has a sexual conviction). By modelling pro-social person-centred language, people with sexual convictions can themselves begin to shift their own labels and offending narrative away from one that confines them to the belief they are "doomed to deviance" and towards one that narrates who they were in the past (Maruna et al., 2004).

5.4.6. Strengths-based approaches

Police professionals should lean towards a greater use of strengths-based tactics to help set goals for a good life. In setting goals to achieve a 'good life', there are helpful strategies police professionals could use.

- The Good Lives Model (Ward and Stewart, 2003) promotes well-being, which, by default, reduces reoffending by building individuals' strengths to help them lead fulfilling and prosocial lives. Humans are goal-oriented, striving to achieve universal goods like knowledge, relationships, happiness, and autonomy. Offending behaviours arise when people lack the capacity to achieve these goods through appropriate means, resorting to maladaptive strategies. For instance, someone with a fearful attachment style might avoid adult relationships and seek intimacy with children as a misguided attempt to fulfil their need for safety and connection. Police professionals should help people identify what goals they were in pursuit of when they offended, to help them achieve life goals through healthy and legal means.
- Use of approach goals rather than avoidance goals. For example, if a person has problems with alcohol, set a goal they can achieve (e.g. I want to drink more healthy options) rather than an avoidance goal frame (e.g. I never want to step foot in a pub). Equally, professionals could help the person think and talk about themselves by distinguishing between 'old me' and 'new me' narratives (Haaven and Coleman, 2000). This helps the person desisting create distance away from the offending behaviour; this is not the same as denying or minimising the offence, but taking responsibility for making changes. Discussions using this approach can also reinforce identity transformation and tertiary desistance.
- Motivational Interviewing (Miller and Rollnick, 2013) can be an important feature to help promote change and goal setting. Here, police professionals should ensure the goal-setting process is collaborative; they should draw insight from the person themselves. It is not for the professional to impose wisdom but promote autonomy. Professionals should invite the person to make a change, rather than enforce these. Any change takes time, and so when working in this way, police professionals will need to demonstrate empathy for the person they are working with. They may need to 'roll with resistance,' meaning, not every minor transgression should be challenged; however, discrepancies in what the person is saying/doing ought to be presented to them. This should be undertaken in a supportive and encouraging way, to enable the person to recognise the need for change within themselves.

6. Conclusion

"Wherever possible rebuilding and rehabilitating offenders to prevent further offending, the best way to serve and protect victims is to better serve offenders" (Creedon, 2023, p.4). As the number of people with sexual convictions under police supervision continues to grow (Kewley and Karsna, 2025), police professionals play a crucial role in supporting the desistance process. However, helping people desist from offending is complex and multifaceted. It requires a balanced combination of biological, psychological, social, and environmental support, coupled with a host of significant challenges faced by both those desisting and the professionals supervising them; desistance can be easily derailed. Therefore, providing better guidance and support for police professionals is essential, especially since desistance has yet to be fully integrated into policing practice.

We collaborated closely with police professionals and people with sexual convictions to bridge the gap between desistance theory

and practice, creating a meaningful framework (Sullivan, 2022) that complements existing correctional theories and guidance. Despite limited resources and a challenging criminal justice policy landscape, we believe that implementing our Desistance Practice Framework will help police agencies better support professionals in adopting desistance-focused approaches to prevent future sexual violence. Our framework outlines key values, assumptions, and interventions that are essential for fostering desistance.

Police professionals involved in the development process were highly receptive to the framework and expressed enthusiasm about its potential to support their work. Rather than viewing it as an additional burden, they saw it as a practical tool that aligned with their existing responsibilities and values, particularly around rehabilitation and risk management. Similarly, individuals with sexual convictions welcomed the approach, recognising its relevance to their lived experience and its potential to support meaningful change.

Thus, the next steps in this project are to operationalise and pilot the framework across five police constabularies. We are currently working in partnership with the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for the *Management of Sexual and Violent Offenders* to implement, test, and refine the Desistance Management Framework and related resources. This pilot will commence in 2026 and run for 6–12 months; findings will be reported in due course. We recognise that facilitators to implementation include strong practitioner buy-in, alignment with existing policy priorities, and the framework's grounding in both theory and lived experience. Likewise, potential barriers may include resource constraints, variation in local practices, and the need for training to ensure consistent application. These are being actively considered as part of the pilot phase. Additional resources, including guidance materials and case studies, are being developed to support implementation. One such case study, focusing on the Desistance Management Plan, is currently in press. We trust that police professionals working with people with sexual convictions can more effectively identify and leverage opportunities to support the desistance process and help prevent future reoffending by adopting desistance approaches in their practice.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used Co-Pilot in order to exclusively improve grammar and clarity. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published article.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Stephanie Cain: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Sarah Pemberton:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Leona Mydlowski:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Data curation. **Paul Burnside:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Data curation. **Andy Horne:** Writing – review & editing, Resources, Funding acquisition, Data curation.

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