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“We’re Not Allowed to Have Experienced Trauma. We’re Not Allowed to Go through the Grieving Process” - Exploring the Indirect Harms Associated with Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) Offending and Its Impacts on non-offending Family Members

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ABSTRACT

Online child sexual abuse encompasses a range of offenses including the accessing, downloading, sharing and creating of images of child sexual abuse, often referred to as Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). CSAM consumption has increased exponentially, and the lockdowns implemented as a response to COVID-19 have exacerbated this problem. CSAM offenders are more likely than other sex offenders to be married, to have children and to live with a partner and child(ren). Policy, practice and research has largely considered these families within the context of their protective properties, with little consideration for the individual and collective harms that they experience, and their unique support needs. Using data from 20 interviews with family members of those convicted of CSAM offenses in the UK, we propose seven key elements that characterize the impacts of CSAM offending on non-offending family members. We categorize these as: 1) Disenfranchised Grief; 2) Ambiguous Loss; 3) Ontological Assault; 4) Contamination by Causal Responsibility; 5) Wall of Silence; 6) No-Win Situation, and 7) Burden of Responsibility. We propose policy and practice responses to minimize these harms.

KEYWORDS

Child Sexual Abuse Material; indecent images of children; secondary victims; trauma; Disenfranchised Grief; the knock

Introduction

Online child sexual abuse encompasses a range of offenses including the accessing, downloading, sharing and creating of images of child sexual abuse, often referred to as Indecent Images of Children (IIOC) or Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM – we will use this term throughout). This includes pseudo-images as well as genuine images of children. CSAM consumption has increased exponentially (Bursztein et al., 2019) and Covid-19 and associated lockdowns have exacerbated this problem (Taddei, 2020). To give some indication of the scale of the problem, in the UK, for the year ending March 2019 (pre-Covid), across 39 of the 43 police forces, 17,521 image-related offenses were recorded

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(Elkin, 2020). Arrests of CSAM offenders increased by 184% in England and Wales between 2010–2015 (Key et al., 2017), and recorded police data for arrests suggest that this steep upward trajectory continues. Data provided by the National Police Chief's Council (NPCC) lead for Child Protection (personal communication, June 14, 2021) revealed an almost inconceivable rise from 419 arrests for *the year* 2009/10, to 850 *per month* by June 2021. An update of these figures for the 2021/2022 financial year showed that there were 10,181 arrests – an average of 848 per month, and a doubling of offenses since December 2017 (NPCC lead for Child Protection, personal communication, July 28, 2022).

CSAM offenders are more likely than other sex offenders to be married (Prat & Jonas, 2013) and to have children (Wolak et al., 2011). Data collected for those arrested or in treatment for the 2010–2011 financial year (for Australia, New Zealand, Italy and the US) suggest that 42% were living with a partner/child (ren; Salter et al., 2022). Data provided by the NPCC for England and Wales (NPCC lead for child protection, personal communication, June 14, 2021) for a four-month period January–April 2019 suggests that 35% of those arrested for CSAM and communication offenses had children living with them at the time of the warrant taking place. A rough extrapolation of these figures for England and Wales suggests that approximately 300 families (with children) each month will experience the warrant (often referred to as “the knock”) and subsequent “aftershocks” that this paper presents.

The wider impacts of this offense are significant, and yet for reasons that include misconceptions about the impact and support available, the harms experienced by non-offending family members have remained rarely discussed (Duncan et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2022; Kotova, 2017) and virtually absent from academic research and publication. Where family members have been discussed, this is largely in relation to partners, particularly where there are children in the home, and where the offense relates to contact as opposed to online offenses. These partners have been predominantly regarded as a protective tool (Brogden & Harkin, 2000; Duff et al., 2017; Duncan et al., 2022; J. Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Sample et al., 2018; Wager et al., 2015) to assist in the process of child protection and/or to monitor the behavior (Galloway & Hogg, 2008; J. S. Levenson & Morin, 2001), aid rehabilitation, and reduce the suicidal risk of the offender (Duncan et al., 2022; Halsey & Deegan, 2015). These rehabilitative and protective roles of partners and families more broadly, have been described as “*exploitative*” (Wager et al., 2015, p. 358) as unrealistic (Brogden & Harkin, 2000; Shannon et al., 2013) and as a failure to address these individual support needs (Serin, 2018; Thompson, 2017). This paper aims to go some way toward redressing this imbalance through identifying the impacts and support needs of this group of people. The objectives being: To further the dialogue on this issue, started by Liddell and Taylor (2015) and revived by Duncan et al. (2022), Jones et al. (2022), and Salter et al. (2022); to explore the similarities and differences in the harms experienced by the families of CSAM offenders as compared to other sexual offenses (particularly child sexual abuse); to ascertain whether it is justified to draw upon these experiences to further the existing theoretical explanations of harm, and to establish the extent to which policy and practice interventions can be developed to minimize these largely predictable harms.

Literature review

The impact of CSAM on families of suspects/offenders

A recent review of the existing literature on the impact of non-contact sexual offenses on family members, concluded that: *“The experiences of families of perpetrators of non-contact sexual offenses, such as CSAM offenders, have been subject to minimal research attention”* (Jones et al., 2022, p. 2). The few studies that have been conducted with families of CSAM offenders in Australia (e.g., Jones et al., 2022; Liddell & Taylor, 2015; Salter et al., 2022) and the UK (e.g., Absalom, 2021; Duncan et al., 2022) reveal extensive and ongoing trauma, and highlight the need for policy and practice to consider this group of individuals as secondary victims and to recognize the unique and complex harms that they experience.

Using a survey (n = 45) and follow-up interviews (n = 7) with family members of CSAM offenders in Victoria, Australia, Jones et al. (2022) identified several recurring themes that characterize the impacts of the discovery and aftermath. Participants described *stigma* and *shame*, not only related to the impact of the offense itself, but the responses from agencies, friends and family also compounded their feelings of shame, humiliation, and judgment. Partners described the *dual judgment* – a “no-win” situation, specific in their view to this non-contact offense, which involved minimization by some, and revulsion by others. Partners also described the *isolation* experienced through internalizing emotions (linked to stigma and shame) and the humiliation specific to external (social, community and agency) judgment. The study identified far reaching and relentless practical, emotional, physical and financial “*crises*” that the discovery brought, including sudden single parent status, childcare, housing and financial impacts that were “*thrown into turmoil*” (p. 12).

Using the same data as Jones et al. (2022), Salter et al. (2022) identified three key themes emerging from female partner’s experiences. The impact of *discovery* – the shock associated with the event itself and agency responses that include suspicion, blame and humiliation. Partners also spoke of the impacts associated with the *aftermath* of discovery, including the lack of information shared regarding the offense, guilt, a burden of responsibility, fear of judgment, feeling stigmatized and the realization of a shattered identity. Salter et al.’s (2022) final theme, labeled *Connections*, focused on the overlap with other offense types – particularly domestic violence and coercive control. Salter and Woodlock (2021) further explored this intersection with domestic abuse, both in terms of the experiences described by partners (often not realized until the disclosure), of the challenges of leaving the relationship, and of the need to explore the expansion of services that currently exist to support victims of domestic abuse.

Walker (2019) again focuses specifically on the families of CSAM offenders in Australia and frames the impact around *trauma* – specific to the shock of discovery and the responses from agencies, friends and family. Partners in Walker’s (2019) study described *isolation*, *shame*, *stigma* and *blame*.

In their evaluation of the PartnerSpeak peer support group established by Walker in Victoria, Australia, Liddell and Taylor (2015) identified several key themes specific to the experiences of families of CSAM offenders. *Police responses* included a lack of communication, a “*secrecy*” that often left them learning of key information through the media, and a judgment of assumed collusion. *Partner reactions* to the discovery led to an adoption of responsibility for managing suicide risk, mental health support and supervision of children. Blame, particularly experienced by sexual partners, was a common response that increased

the psychological impact of this offense. *Their own reaction* focused largely upon shock, trauma, disbelief, shame, stigma and a sense of bereavement and loss. *Family tension, disruption and the loss of friendships* was a common theme – with judgment, disassociation, loss of contact and the pressure of managing multiple disclosures. As with Jones et al. (2022), Walker (2019), and Liddell and Taylor (2015) reported the sense of feeling judged whatever decision they made regarding the future of their relationship with the offender. Partners also highlighted the *lack of support* from key agencies, at the warrant/knock and in the aftermath.

Focusing on the impact of families in the UK, Duncan et al. (2022) interviewed nine partners of those convicted of sex offenses, five of whom were CSAM offenders. Key themes overlap with the Australian studies, and these include: the *devastation of discovery* – a shattered identity, a loss of control and a new reality. *Mourning your life* and the associated grief and loss – be those physical or psychosocial losses. A *tainted identity* including stigma by association, blame and guilt; and the *cognitive gymnastics* of reconciling the person you knew, with the person who has been convicted of these offenses.

Absalom's (2021) study of six partners of CSAM offenders within the UK reiterated these impacts. Partners spoke of *a living nightmare, something needs to change* and *adjustment and adaptation*. Key impacts included the shock and trauma (often described as a *blow*) associated with discovery, a burden of responsibility (including managing their partner's suicide risk, legal, housing, childcare and disclosure), a sense of loss and bereavement, feeling that they are simply collateral damage and a sense of total disbelief.

Whilst studies that focus specifically upon the broader impacts of CSAM are limited, there are corresponding themes that emerged from each of the studies relating to the discovery (largely through the warrant or knock), and the aftermath and ensuing after-shocks. Key impacts included *trauma* (shock, blow), *stigma and shame*, linked not just to the offense itself, but to the relational, community and agency responses to the offense (including *judgment* and *blame*). *Grief and loss* were widespread and these related to physical losses as well as the psychosocial losses of the person they thought they knew and the relationship that they thought they had. *Isolation* was a key theme expressed in all studies – particularly linked to the silence, secrecy and fear of judgment associated with this offense type. Finally, a *burden of responsibility* for the management of the suspect/offender's mental health, suicide risk, supervision of children, childcare, housing, and legal practicalities as well as the multiple disclosures to friends and family.

The impacts of child sexual abuse on families of suspects/offenders

The impacts on families of those convicted of child sexual abuse offenses more broadly have received greater recognition and there are key overlaps with the harms reported in the, albeit limited, studies on families of CSAM offenders. We explore these here as a means of identifying similarities and differences experienced between families of CSAM offenders and families of child sexual abuse offenders, and to ascertain to extent to which we can draw on these theoretical explanations of harm to describe the broader impacts of CSAM offending. These include psychological and emotional impacts (particularly for partners of offenders) including *stigma* (Cohen, 2021; Evans et al., 2021; Farkas & Miller, 2007; J. Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Marsh et al., 2022; Russell, 2020), *isolation* and the *loss of friendships* (Brogden & Harkin, 2000; Farkas & Miller, 2007; J. Levenson & Tewksbury,

2009; Russell, 2020; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009), *shame, guilt* and *self-blame* (Cohen, 2021; Evans et al., 2021; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009), *fear* (Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009) and *trauma* (Brogden & Harkin, 2000). Family members also experience practical impacts including the sudden single parent status and associated difficulties with *childcare* (Cahalane & Duff, 2018), a *burden of responsibility* regarding safeguarding, access and minimizing risk of suicide and/or re-offending (Brogden & Harkin, 2000) as well as *financial, employment* and *housing* challenges related to their association with the offender (Brogden & Harkin, 2000; Farkas & Miller, 2007). Where the offender is a parent, research reports children experiencing depression, anxiety, fear and suicidal ideations (J. Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009).

Loss, grief and the compounding effect of stigma, have also been recognized as impacts on the families of those convicted of sexual offenses more broadly. Readjustment and resolution following the trauma of discovery of a family member or partner's sexual offenses are hampered by both the context of their loss(es) and the stigma-by-association that they invariably encounter. Irrespective of whether the individual severs their relationship with the offending person, they will often feel a sense of profound loss for the relationship they thought they had, the person they believed their partner/family member to be, and their envisaged future together (Cahalane & Duff, 2018; Cassidy et al., 2021; Cohen, 2021; Duncan et al., 2022). This is experienced as a bereavement outside of physical death (Duncan et al., 2022; Dwyer & Miller, 1996), due to the psychosocial death of the offending individual (Doka & Aber, 1989). Whereas loss that arises from bereavement is finite, since it focuses on the death of the loved one, ambiguous loss, as would arise in the context of discovering one's partner has committed a child sexual abuse offense, is ongoing and infinite. There are constant reminders, new hurdles to jump and readjustments to be made to living. Consequently, *Ambiguous Loss* describes a loss that is unclear, unverified, often without resolution and accompanied by a lack of acknowledgment from society (Arditti, 2005; Boss, 2016; Howarth, 2011; Knight & Gitterman, 2019).

The lack of resolution places the bereaved in limbo, unable to move forward, and isolated, since the normal rituals of support that accompany death loss do not apply and therefore are unavailable. (Knight & Gitterman, 2019, p. 165)

The loss will likely occur suddenly and without warning, and it is the warrant (or knock) – described by Bailey (2018) as “*the death*” – which instigates the physical loss of a partner or loved one, as well as the psychosocial death of the relationship they thought they had. Losses in the aftermath can be multiple, including the loss of friends, family and social networks (Bockneck et al., 2009; Boss, 2016; Brogden & Harkin, 2000; Farkas & Miller, 2007; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009), housing (Farkas & Miller, 2007; J. Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009) and employment (Brogden & Harkin, 2000; Farkas & Miller, 2007; J. Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009).

Such *ambiguous loss* receives little social recognition and thus, there is a distinct lack of rituals that guide the grieving process, or that instigate any outpouring of empathy and compassion for those suffering the loss. For those who are separated from loved ones due to imprisonment or arrest for sexual offending, the ability to grieve is constrained by social pressures that see their suffering as illegitimate and undeserving of consideration by others, resulting in what has been termed *Disenfranchised Grief*.

Disenfranchised Grief is described by Doka (1989) as a sense of bereavement, loss and grief that cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported. Knight and Gitterman (2019) identify six key factors that lead to the disenfranchisement of that loss: 1) The loss is ignored, minimized or not acknowledged; 2) The feelings in response to the loss are ignored, dismissed, criticized and misunderstood; 3) The bereaved receive minimal or no support; 4) Opportunities to grieve are absent or discouraged; 5) Reactions of others to the bereaved convey disbelief, reproach and condemnation, and 6) The loss and/or the individual's grief reactions occur within the context of stigma.

Doka (1989) highlights how social norms dictate: “.who, when, where, how long, and for whom people should grieve” (p. 4) and in what circumstances an individual has the right to grieve, and disenfranchisement results because of that social construction (Attig, 2004). This disenfranchisement is reinforced by an individual's social networks (friends and family) as well as organizational policies (police, social services and education). Having an unrecognized grief can exacerbate the intensity and the longevity of the grief (Bailey, 2018; Bordere, 2017; Hermann, 2011; Memarnia et al., 2015; Radosh & Simkin, 2016), and individuals can become: “Frozen or stuck in a state of chronic mourning” (Zhang et al., 2006, p. 1192).

Disenfranchised Grief has been recognized within the families of those incarcerated (Arditti, 2005; Travis & Waul, 2003; Turanovic et al., 2012), families of prisoners on death row (Jones & Beck, 2006) and where a family member has been convicted for a child sexual abuse offense (Bailey, 2018; Cain et al., 2015; Cohen, 2021). Bailey's (2018) in-depth study of the impacts of a sexual offense conviction on 29 spouses/significant others, recognized how, unlike a death that requires family and friends to recreate a new normality in the face of a loss, where the loss is associated with a sexual conviction, the loss is partial (particularly in the case of a community sentence) and is often associated with a long period of uncertainty (forensic analysis and sentencing can take years to reach a conclusion).

One of the fundamental elements of *Disenfranchised Grief* – the sixth factor highlighted by Knight and Gitterman (2019), is the concept of that grief occurring within the context of stigma, resulting in a “judgment” of the worthiness of that person's grief for the loss of an individual who has committed (or is suspected of) such a stigmatized offense. Goffman's (1963) *Courtesy Stigma* clearly applies to the judgment felt and/or experienced by families of sex offenders – a stigma by virtue of association (Cohen, 2021; Evans et al., 2021; Farkas & Miller, 2007; Marsh et al., 2022; Russell, 2020). DeShay et al. (2021) and Russell (2020) highlight how courtesy stigma can impact as significantly as the primary stigma. Kotova's (2017) research emphasizes how this stigma is often felt more intensely by the sexual partner of those convicted of sex offenses because they are the ones sexually linked to the accused/convicted.

The importance of identifying harms

The harms associated with a family member being arrested/convicted of a sexual offense (primarily discussed within the context of parental imprisonment) have been referred to as collateral consequences, secondary punishment and secondary victimization. Within this paper, we adopt what we believe to be a more accurate description, using the term *Symbiotic Harms* proposed by Condry and Minson (2021). They argue that the harms associated with a family member's conviction deserve significance in their own right; are not a legal sanction; do not run in parallel to, nor do they necessarily bear similarities to the sentence

imposed on the offender and are neither inevitable nor unavoidable. We argue that reference to collateral consequences suggests an inescapable outcome that permits agencies a certain passivity that allows these families to be viewed as part of a means to a greater good – the protection of children abused for the creation of indecent images.

Condry and Minson (2021) use the term in relation to families of those imprisoned but recognize distinctly that the framework proposed applies just as fittingly to families of those facing community sanctions – after all, the time between warrant and sentencing for CSAM in England and Wales is likely to be years not months, deeming the sentence imposed, in our view, largely irrelevant.

Although we do not consider it within this article, we do think that the analysis we propose could extend to the harms linked to arrest, trial and community sanctions (Condry & Minson, 2021, p. 541.)

The Criminal Justice System has a function – suspects must be arrested, children must be safeguarded, but as with the principle that: “*war should not harm innocents – and where it does, compensation is necessary*” (Condry & Minson, 2021, p. 553), non-offending family members should be “compensated” in the form of access to therapeutic interventions, trauma-focused education, housing support, consideration within media reporting (again, to name but a few). As Bülow (2014) states, any act which inflicts harm: “*stands in need of a grounding reason which explains why such harm is morally justified*” (p. 785). The apprehension of potential CSAM offenders is absolutely justified but must be accompanied by interventions to minimize the harms inflicted on families – harms that impact psychologically, physically, financially and emotionally; that disproportionately impact women and children and for the children, can be conceptualized as a form of Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), (Christian, 2005; Codd, 2008; Comfort, 2008; Condry, 2007; Granja, 2016).

When the seriousness of these harms is recognized and acknowledged not to be part of legally justified ‘punishment’, but instead a breach of the rights of citizens who are innocent of wrongdoing, punishment theorists will have to wrestle with the issue of justification and the place of symbiotic harms within punishment theory. (Condry & Minson, 2021, p. 552)

Methods

The data presented within this paper were collected as part of a research project conducted in collaboration with the Lucy Faithfull Foundation – a UK based charity focused upon preventing child sexual abuse. The study had two aims, the first of which is reported in this paper – to identify the impact of CSAM offending on family members. The second focused upon evaluating their Family and Friends Forum, an online source of peer-support for people in relationships with someone apprehended for CSAM offenses; we report those findings elsewhere.

Design

This qualitative study consisted of one-on-one semi structured interviews with twenty family and friends of twenty men apprehended for CSAM offenses within the UK.

Participant recruitment and data collection

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation facilitated access to potential participants through advertising the study and a link to an electronic survey on their online Family and Friends Forum and by emailing the details to people who had (at some point) registered on the Forum since its launch in 2018. The survey participants were asked if they would be willing to take part in a follow up interview, designed to allow a more detailed exploration of their experience. Those who selected this option were asked to follow a link to register their interest and to provide additional information on their age, gender, relationship to accused and time since discovery of the offense. Of the 126 survey respondents, 26 initially volunteered to participate in the interview study. This allowed for the selection of a breadth of participants, based on their relationship to the person accused and the length of time since the discovery of the (alleged) offense(s). While no identifying information was asked of the participants regarding the person accused of CSAM offenses, the 20 participants were discussing 20 alleged offenders – each being asked to relate their family’s experiences with an offender/alleged offender.

Materials

The interview schedule was co-designed with the Project Reference Group and piloted on a small sample of individuals with lived experience to ensure that all key issues were covered, with careful consideration to prevent triggering/re-traumatization. Within the interviews, participants were prompted to discuss topics including the warrant/knock, police responses, children’s services, courts, media, disclosure, children and support. However, the format was participant-led and largely involved them “telling their story.”

Procedure

All interviews were conducted remotely (due to Covid restrictions) and from private/confidential locations. All interview transcripts were anonymized. Additionally, to enhance the interviewees’ anonymity, they were given the interviewer’s contact details to avoid the sharing of their own e-mail address or phone numbers and the option of how the interviews would be conducted (e.g., via telephone, Microsoft Teams or Zoom).

Sample

Details of the sample of 20 participants are outlined in [Table 1](#). This included 18 females and two males (one friend and one partner/ex-partner, with an age range of 28 to 73 (where age was disclosed).

With regards to their relationships to the person apprehended for CSAM offenses, most ($n = 15$) were partners or ex-partners of the accused, one was the adult child, one a sibling, one a friend, one a mother and one a mother-in-law. We use the label partner/ex-partner because many of the participants felt unable and/or unwilling to define their relationship status; many stating that they were *awaiting the results of the forensic analysis before making a decision, standing by him for now, still thinking about what to do*. We can state that all but

Table 1. Interview participants.

	Relationship to offender	Gender	Age	Children	Offense type	Time since offense disclosure
P1	Sibling	Female	42	Yes	Images	3.5 years
P2	Friend	Male	73	No	Images	1.5 years
P3	Partner/Ex	Female	31	Yes	Images	2.5 years
P4	Partner/Ex	Male	N/K	No	Images and Communication	2.5 years
P5	Partner/Ex	Female	N/K	Offender has children	Images	2.5 years
P6	Partner/Ex	Female	N/K	Yes	Images and Communication	Less than a year
P7	Partner/Ex	Female	N/K	Yes	Images and Communication	2 years
P8	Partner/Ex	Female	N/K	Yes	Images	3 years
P9	Partner/Ex	Female	N/K	Yes	Images and Communication	2.5 years
P10	Parent	Female	70	Grandchildren	Images	7 years
P11	Partner/Ex (met post offense)	Female	N/K	Offender has children	Images	1.5 years
P12	Partner/Ex	Female	N/K	N/K	Images	2.5 years
P13	Parent	Female	N/K	Grandchildren	Images	2 years
P14	Partner/Ex	Female	N/K	No	Images, Communication and Contact	3 years
P15	Partner/Ex	Female	59	Yes	Images	1.5 years
P16	Partner/Ex	Female	52	Yes	Images	3 years
P17	Partner/Ex	Female	53	Yes	Communication	3 years
P18	Partner/Ex	Female	N/K	Yes	N/K	4.5 years
P19	Partner/Ex	Female	28	No	Images	Less than a year
P20	Daughter	Female	N/K	No	Images	1 year

one of these had been partners at the time of the disclosure. Only one had started the relationship post warrant (P11).

For 14 of the 20, children were involved in their experience – 10 had child(ren) with the accused; for two the accused had children (but the respondents were not the parents), and for two there were grandchildren (the children were the accused). The time since discovery of offense ranged from less than one year to seven years. Where the accused had been sentenced there was some discussion about the sentence, and in some cases this included a custodial (two of the twenty); however, as sentence was not a specific question, and a respondent omitting to discuss prison could not be presumed to mean a community sentence, we have selected to exclude “sentence” from Table 1, but to discuss its relevance (where appropriate) throughout the paper.

Analysis

Interviews were fully transcribed and anonymized to comply with ethical requirements. Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify key themes within the data, with researchers producing and validating a Coding Frame before coding each transcript using NVivo software. The production of the Coding Frame, and the coding of data were conducted collaboratively across a team of four researchers. This allowed an element of validation of themes and minimized the risks of researchers pre-determining codes and/or failing to acknowledge emerging themes. The themes presented within this paper emerged inductively, and whilst the aim of the research was to establish the extent to which the impacts of CSAM offending on family members aligns with/differs from research focused upon child sexual abuse offenses more generally, the themes were informed entirely by the data. All quantitative analysis is presented in a separate paper (forthcoming) and this includes

a detailed content analysis of the themes presented within this paper. However, to add some context to the regularity with which themes were discussed, we do present the number of participants that discussed (at some point in their interview) each of the six identified themes.

Ethics and co-design

The project received ethical approval from both the University of Huddersfield Human and Health Sciences Ethics and Integrity Panel and the Lucy Faithfull Foundation Ethics Panel. All data collection tools, methods of data collection and debriefs were discussed in detail with the Project Reference Group to ensure that any further trauma was minimized. Where relevant, participants were directed to key agencies, particularly where lack of support was discussed. These included Safer Lives, Children Heard and Seen, Talking Forward and Acts Fast.

Findings

The impact of CSAM offending on families of the accused

Here we present seven key themes that emerged from the interviews with 20 family members of those arrested/convicted for CSAM offenses. The first two themes – *Disenfranchised Grief* and *Ambiguous Loss* overlap with existing literature on the impact of a family member's arrest more broadly – particularly where that involves a custodial sentence and/or the attachment of a stigmatizing label. The similarities expressed by families of CSAM offenders highlight the need for parity in consideration and support.

Disenfranchised grief

Mirroring previous research on the disenfranchised losses experienced by family members of those convicted of other serious offenses, the data revealed that a grief and loss that is neither acknowledged, recognized, or socially supported was a key element of the harms described by family members. Direct losses are significant where a family member is arrested for CSAM, and this was amplified for partners and children that live with the suspect/accused – the suspect will be bailed to another address and contact with children will be removed or limited to supervised access. Fourteen of the 20 participants referenced some form of disenfranchised grief; the six that did not, included a friend, a parent and four (ex)partners – one who had met the offender post-conviction.

Participant 4 described this grief and the difficulty of being expected to *unlove someone overnight* – that expectation being linked to society's judgment of the offense that they have committed.

I know this is going to sound a bit weird, but when I found out, there was always that element that actually I still loved him. You can't unlove someone overnight, it's impossible. I've tried it. You just can't. I loved the person that I had before that day. The day after is someone completely different (P4 – partner/ex-partner and 2.5 years since the warrant).

In addition to the physical loss, partners in particular described experiencing a psychosocial loss specific to their identity, their beliefs about their relationship prior to the disclosure, and their sexuality. Participant 4 (partner/ex-partner and 2.5 years since the warrant)

described the impact of questioning the relationship that they had had with the accused prior to disclosure: “For ten years, I never knew this person. It’s so difficult.”

Confirming the disenfranchisement of their loss, many participants discussed not feeling permitted to grieve because of their association with the suspect, or because of the severity of the offense type. Participant 14’s response typified this perception.

Partners of offenders. People in my situation . . . It’s like we’re not allowed to have experienced trauma. We’re not allowed to go through the grieving process, it’s not okay because of what they did (P14 – partner/ex-partner and 3 years since the warrant).

The importance of *stigma* as an influencing factor in the disenfranchisement of the grief was highlighted by many participants, be that the explicit judgment at a community, organizational and/or relational level, or the *anticipation* and/or *fear* of this judgment. The former was described by Participant 17 in relation to the judgment, and subsequent isolation from close friends following disclosure; these emotions were still raw three years after the warrant.

I did confide in one very good friend because I was just so in shock that day, and I confided in one friend, and she never contacted me ever again. She just completely, that’s it, she never contacted me ever again when I told her what had happened. She just went, and I know I’ll never hear from her ever again (P17 – partner/ex-partner and three years since the warrant).

Participant 17 described how her *shame* and treatment from the police and social services prevented her from reaching out to her son’s school for support.

I never had any communication with school about it, they never contacted me. I didn’t contact them because I was so ashamed. You know, a policeman and Social Services woman going into school. Oh my God! I never contacted them, they never contacted me, we never spoke about it and the case was closed (P17 – partner/ex-partner and three years since the warrant).

The fear of the stigma associated with this offense type was also evident within our sample. Participant 9 describing this as a *paranoia* that limits their ability to seek support or acknowledgment of their loss.

I suppose at the start it’s about keeping everything anonymous and the shame behind it . . . because paranoia is quite something at the beginning. You sort of walk down the street and you think that everybody knows, everybody’s looking at you (P9 – partner/ex-partner and 2.5 years since the warrant).

Ambiguous loss

Closely linked to some of the elements of Disenfranchised Grief, *Ambiguous Loss* describes a loss that is unclear, unverified, often without resolution and accompanied by a lack of acknowledgment from society. In the case of families of those being investigated for CSAM offenses, the losses (as described above) are significant. Yet, there are key features of this offense type that create a definitive ambiguity – and these are described by our sample as: 1) the loss being incomplete – with the offender unlikely to receive a custodial sentence, yet restricted from access to their children; 2) the stigma associated with this offense type, and the incomplete disclosure leading to a confusing explanation; and 3) the delays in forensic analysis and sentencing, often up to three years post warrant. Fourteen of the 20 participants described an ambiguous loss (interestingly,

the two participants who stated that their (ex)partner had received a custodial sentence did not discuss experiencing these losses).

Participant 14 described the loss associated with limited access between the accused and their children, highlighting the abrupt nature of this devastating change as their father being “*wiped out*” of their lives.

What about the children of the offender who, as far as they’re concerned, daddy has always been this loving dad? Then all of a sudden, he’s wiped out of their life, not allowed to have contact (P14 – partner/ex-partner and three years since the warrant).

Many participants spoke of the loss of connection that arose from the limiting disclosure of the true nature of their partner’s departure from the family home. Participant 1 and 14 typified the responses given by the sample as a whole.

One of the things that I really struggled with was isolation, because you can’t really confide in many - normally, if you’ve got a problem, you can speak to somebody. Once you’ve told your problem, it’s quite often to get their perspective and it’s really useful, but this kind of subject is so emotive and you feel judged, so it’s actually really difficult to speak to any of your friends about it (P1 – sibling and 3.5 years since the warrant)

We’re then being told you’re not allowed to tell anybody. Don’t talk to anybody about it because it’s an ongoing investigation. If you talk to anybody there’s a lot of stigma attached to it, so then again, you then feel like you’re lying to everybody because you’re not coping, you’re being told not to say anything because then it can escalate (P14 – partner/ex-partner and three years since the warrant).

Almost all participants spoke of the lengthy delays in forensic analysis and the *limbo* that their family faced during this period. Participants spoke of this limbo as unsettling and stressful, particularly where there were children and access to negotiate.

No, we’ve had nothing. Nothing from the police, absolutely nothing. They took the home computer which, okay it was very old and slow anyway, but that’s got on it all videos and photos of [name of child] since he was born up until the age of ten. I can’t lose all those videos and photos of him from when he was born (P17 – partner/ex-partner and three years since the warrant).

The features of *Disenfranchised Grief* and *Ambiguous Loss* align with the existing literature on the harms experienced by family members of those receiving a custodial sentence, and/or a sexual offense. Five further themes emerged from the detailed interviews with family members – *Ontological Assault*, *Contamination by Causal Responsibility*, *Wall of Silence*, *No-Win Situation* and *Burden of Responsibility*.

Ontological assault

One of the clearest impacts on families was a shock (14 of the 20 referenced this theme), linked to the sudden discovery of offending. For the vast majority of our participants (79%) this “discovery” was at the warrant or “knock.” One could argue that the discovery of any offending would shock a close family member, but with a CSAM suspect (and the associated safeguarding concerns) the warrant takes place in the early morning, before the family have left from work and school, making this a very visible event, described by family members as a *shock, blow, explosion, trauma*.

As an additional element of that sudden discovery, participants describe the immediate and unmitigated challenge to their identity – framed around the shattered assumptions and beliefs about the person they have lived with and (in many cases) had children with. Bailey (2018) frames the shock associated with the search warrant/knock as “*the death*”- associating this with the grief and loss encompassed by Disenfranchised Grief. Here we argue that this is more than a death, it is a traumatic shock event (*assault*) that demands recognition within the literature as well as remediation within policy and practice.

We borrow the term *Ontological Assault* (Pellegrino, 1979) – originally used to describe the diagnosis of life-threatening illness. The *assault* describing the sudden discovery or disclosure; the *ontological* describing the threat to a person’s identity and the shattering of assumptions regarding their life, relationship and, in most cases, their womanhood. Many of the participants described the discovery of offending as a *shock, bomb, bombshell*. The emotions described below still evident 2.5 and three years after the warrant and discovery of the offending.

They come in, drop a bomb and walk out, and we’re left to clean that up, and that’s my argument. It’s so wrong, because my mental health has dipped. If someone knocks on my door now, I’m frightened because I’m like, ‘Who’s that?’ I never lived like that before this (P5 – partner/ex-partner and 2.5 years since the warrant).

Personally, I feel they just dumped this bombshell on me, and then that was it. For all they know, I could have gone and completed suicide, and I genuinely think nobody would have given a shit about me until that had happened (P14 – partner/ex-partner and three years since the warrant).

Participants 16 and 20 discuss this shock in relation to the children of offenders – in the case of Participant 16, the child (a teenager) witnessing the warrant. In the case of Participant 20, the grown-up daughter being asked to read the descriptions of images as part of the safeguarding process – she had two young children (the grandchildren of the offender).

My daughter was here, at the time, and the knock, when the police came to take the devices and that, was absolutely horrendous. It really, really did affect her. She was crying, she was making noises like a wounded animal, she was being sick. Absolutely horrendous (P16 – partner/ex-partner and three years since the warrant).

So the same sister ended up getting the crime report. That had graphic descriptions of images. For my sister to have read that and needing to read that because she has two babies: she’s in the house with her eight-month-old and three-year-old and she’s reading this description of an indecent image and penetration of a baby. Her babies are there (P20 – daughter and one year since the warrant).

Participants also spoke of the *ontological* impact – the way in which the discovery, and subsequent treatment by family, friends and agencies had threatened and altered their identity:

For ten years, I never knew this person. It’s very difficult, but it’s something I’d rather talk about, it’s actually part of the healing process, I guess (P4 – partner/ex-partner and 2.5 years since the warrant).

I got put on diazepam because I was feeling like things weren’t real. I was in shock. Reality just didn’t feel real (P19 – partner/ex-partner and less than one year since the warrant).

Contamination by causal responsibility

The second distinct theme that emerged, we label *Contamination by Causal Responsibility* – a term borrowed from Kotova (2017). Contamination by Causal Responsibility goes beyond the stigma by association that we referred to within Disenfranchised Grief, it describes the perception (and in some cases the reality) that they (as family members) are being viewed as: a) causally responsible because of their failure, as a sexual partner, to fulfil the “sexual needs” of the person accused of sexual offenses, and b) as the “all knowing wife/partner,” they should have known. The latter continues to be, albeit subtly, implied through deterrence campaigns (see, Dunstan, 2021 as an example). Seventeen of the 20 participants described this theme as impacting their lives post discovery of the offense(s).

Participant 8 described perfectly what many participants expressed, that the suspect, as well as agencies, either explicitly stated or implicitly implied that they, as the sexual partner of the suspect, were somehow responsible for the offending:

It was due to the loveless marriage that we had, which I wasn't aware of at the time, but obviously, that played a major part in it. Oh, he just blamed everybody, and it definitely wasn't him. Anyway, it was him (P8 – partner/ex-partner and three years since the warrant).

Others spoke of the perception that friends, family and key agencies – particularly social services, felt that they were complicit in their partner's offending.

Yes. Yes, like I say, with the certain professionals, at least, our first lot of professionals, I had a lot of judgment. It was like even I was being accused of having done the offence, as well, and I just in denial of the fact that anybody could do it, kind of thing (P3 – partner/ex-partner and 2.5 years since the warrant).

It was like, the police dealt with the husband; social services dealt with me. I felt as though I was the criminal because I wasn't protecting my son (P15 – partner/ex-partner and 1.5 years since the warrant).

Participant 4, even two and a half years post-conviction, still opened the interview by stating that he hadn't done anything wrong. Sadly, he felt the need to reiterate this throughout the interview, even though the focus of the research, made clear in all correspondence, was about *his* experience and *his* trauma.

Before I start any of this, I always say - because my story is very unique to everyone else's, I've not found anyone else's. Before I start this, first of all, I never did anything wrong and second of all, I've not done anything wrong (P4 – partner/ex-partner and 2.5 years since the warrant).

Wall of silence

The next feature of harm that dominated the participant's experiences we describe as a *Wall of Silence*, and this encompasses three key elements of the participants' experiences, Firstly, the secrecy required, largely associated by stigma, in minimizing the disclosure of offense type to family, friends and the wider community. Next, the requirement for key agencies (largely the police) to minimize the sharing of information specific to the crime to protect the suspect's privacy and to reduce the risk of suspect suicide. Finally, the reluctance, particularly within political discourse, to be seen to be “supporting” anyone related to/ associated with a child sexual abuse offender. Seventeen of the 20 participants described the emotional and physical impact of this theme.

We discussed the role that stigma and fear of judgment played in the ambiguity of loss and the necessity to minimize disclosure to avoid community judgments. This theme overlaps to some extent, but the level and nature of the *silence* and associated isolation experienced by families warrants a distinct theme with regard to the harms that participants described.

One of the key factors described by participants, was the *need* to maintain a false narrative surrounding their situation, to avoid telling people what had happened for fear of a negative reaction, and as we have seen earlier, this is often a reality that partners face. Participants made clear that they were often advised by police not to share their experience with others, to protect them from negative community judgment and to minimize the risk of suspect suicide.

It's an indescribable feeling of despair, and it comes with a lot of emotions: shame; grief; embarrassment; association; worry; your reputation's on the line, you worry about your home being a target. There's a hell of a lot to process, and then on top of it, you've got to go to work and carry on as normal, and then you're told you're not allowed to speak to anyone (P5 – partner/ex-partner and 2.5 years since the warrant).

Participants spoke of how the need to conceal the offense and the impact it had on them and their family, created a social isolation, an inability to confide in anyone and thus a loss of relationships because of the difficulties of *living a lie*.

... you feel like you're constantly lying because you then try and explain your situation, but you feel on edge to explain your situation because feel that there's going to be judgment and stigma (P14 – partner/ex-partner and three years since the warrant).

Participant 5 talked of the *embarrassment* of discussing her experience – linked to the child sexual offending and how this made talking about it almost impossible.

The police weren't interested; my doctor wasn't interested. I had no one and embarrassing to talk to my mum and dad about it. I felt like such a failure. I didn't want to talk about paedophilia with my mum and dad (P5 – partner/ex-partner and 2.5 years since the warrant).

Participants also discussed the impact of the lack of information, driven by police requirements to protect the suspect's privacy. Whilst the majority understood the principle behind this, it was clear that being given only partial information, and having to wait months, and often years, for full disclosure in court (if they felt able/willing to attend) enhanced the extent and longevity of the trauma experienced.

I think I cried then and just said, 'What has he done? What's happened?' They were just so apologetic, and they were like, we're so sorry that we can't tell you anything (P6 – partner/ex-partner and less than a year since the warrant).

Yes, and of course, they can't. I do understand that, but I said to them, 'I've kind of lost everything at the moment and I just want to know why.' The policeman, that same policeman, said to me, 'I do understand, but actually, you're collateral damage. That's what you families are (P8 partner/ex-partner and three years since the warrant).

No-win situation

One of the complexities described by family members of CSAM suspects/offenders is the judgment experienced on all sides – a feeling that “they cannot win” whatever decision they

make regarding their relationship. As Jones et al. (2022, p. 4) highlight: “*Not only are the affected families stigmatised for their association with the CSAM offender, but also for their actions in denouncing their family member’s use of CSAM.*” We propose that the non-contact element of this offense, leads to very different reactions from individuals and organizations and that this exacerbates the feeling of being judged, for remaining in the relationship (he’s a child sexual abuse offender), or leaving the relationship (it’s a victimless crime). Sixteen of the 20 participants described this judgment and of feeling that the responses from family, friends and key agencies led to a perception that whatever decision they made (regarding the future of their relationship), someone would judge this to be the “wrong” decision.

Several participants referred to feeling that they could not win, that they would be judged and criticized if they stayed in the relationship; and a different set of friends, family and community members would judge them for staying. Participant 14 described this as *everyone having a judgment of you* and how difficult this is to live with when you need support.

The people that have been the worst with me, and people that I’ve known for 20 years, and I really didn’t expect that outcome. I guess it has changed me a bit in terms of, not a bad thing I guess, I guess I’m learning to be, you know what? If everybody had a judgment about you - you either know me or you don’t (P14 – partner/ex-partner and three years since the warrant).

Participant 6 described the impact of leaving her husband and how his family did not react well to her decision: “*Whereas I have quite a lot of animosity with his family and obviously he and I have separated and he’s obviously not very happy in the approach that I’ve taken to things*” (P6 – partner/ex-partner and less than one year since the warrant). Others describe how staying in the relationship has resulted in physical and verbal abuse and being viewed as condoning child sexual abuse.

All I’m doing is I’m standing by and I’m supporting another human who is struggling and has made some big mistakes that they’re willing to take ownership for. I’ve had close family friends say that by me supporting my husband, I obviously condone child abuse. It’s like, I know full well that I don’t condone child abuse (P14 – partner/ex-partner and three years since the warrant).

It was evident that some participants wanted to clearly distinguish image offenses from contact offenses – this was invariably where they had remained in the relationship and it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which they believed the narrative that they gave, or whether this helped them in maintaining their relationship with the suspect/offender.

I know child abuse imagery tends to not be in this country. So the material has not been created in this country . . . our own children of the UK are actually becoming victims of abuse because of this (P14 – partner/ex-partner and three years since the warrant).

“ . . . it’s [contact child sexual abuse offending] a different level. It’s a different level because it’s like, oh, hold on a minute, I wouldn’t know how to talk to someone if it was actual contact. I wouldn’t know how to advise someone. As I say, it’s a different level” (P7 – partner/ex-partner and two years since the warrant).

Participant 8 perfectly describes this indecision and feeling that might change from shock and horror, to wondering whether you have *over-reacted* and *it’s not that bad*. The data would suggest that this indecision is highly likely to be linked to the responses and judgments experienced at a relational, institutional and community level.

Probably about three or four weeks later, he came round and . . . you've got this kind of shock horror hits you between the eyes. When that shock horror starts to wear off a little bit, you've got that, but I love him. He's my husband and I love him, and you've got that to deal with. I thought, well, perhaps I've overreacted and perhaps it's not that bad, and perhaps I could - I was missing him so badly. Really missing him (P8 - partner/ex-partner and three years since the warrant).

Burden of responsibility

The final theme that emerged from the participant responses was the *Burden of Responsibility* that overrides the permissions that partners/family members felt they were entitled to experience regarding their own sense of trauma, shock, grief and loss. A common theme (11 of the 20 spoke of this emotion), particularly where the suspect/offender was a partner or parent, was the need to minimize their own trauma and to focus their energy and attention on reducing the risk of suspect suicide and the impact that a lack of support might have on further offending. Participant 14 spoke in detail about the fear of leaving her husband (even three years post-warrant and discovery of offending) and the burden that this would place on her should he take his own life - which she felt strongly that he would.

What people don't understand is, okay, his mental health, he has really fucked up and he knows that, but I don't think that's enough for him to lose his life over this because I genuinely believe if everybody walks away, and how they're made to feel, he is a high suicide risk (P14 - partner/ex-partner and three years since the warrant).

Participant 6 talked of needing to take responsibility for her partner on every level from health and medication to legal support, liaising with his family and replacing his technology.

I'm a very practical, let's sort things out person, so I thought right, he needed to see a GP, he needs to get some medication, he's really, really anxious. I booked him a GP appointment, we sorted that out, medication. I researched online solicitors and tried to find someone who I thought would be best to, that's their specialist, kind of a top solicitor because his parents can afford to pay for all of that, so I contacted his parents . . . But yes, I kind of tried to . . . I went and bought him a phone because all his devices had been taken, trying to set him up with all these things (P6 - partner/ex-partner and less than one year since the warrant).

Participant 20 spoke candidly about the belief that she was viewed as (and to some extent accepted this) a protective factor in preventing her father's reoffending. She spoke of her own emotions, trauma and hurt being secondary and how this made supporting her dad very difficult.

There is a sense in which there is a pressure on you as a family member, that you are part of the support, and if you are not part of that support, well your Dad might do it again! But you are the one that has been hurt, you are the one that has been wounded - the secondary victim alongside the primary victims - the children in the images, so how can you be that support? I'm having to juggle this alongside enormous hurt and woundedness. I've lost my sense of having a Dad (P20 - daughter and one year since the warrant).

The burden of responsibility regarding managing children and supervising access was clear from the interviews, participants were juggling work, childcare and supervision and doing this with little or no professional guidance. Participant 6 spoke of this within the context of limited information and being asked to make decisions regarding her children, without sufficient information on her partner's offending:

You do not leave any of them with him for one second, sort of thing. I was like, okay. He said you need to really think about whether you can manage that risk before you go ahead and do it. It did feel almost a bit like, you're putting all this on me, like this responsibility, and then telling me this is how it needs to be, and then just leaving me. You're asking me to somehow assess risk of this person to my children when I'm not in possession of any of the information that you are, that the police are (P6 – partner/ex-partner and less than one year since the warrant).

Discussion

This paper presents a unique and, we argue, significant framing of evidence relating to the impact of CSAM offending on the family of those arrested. There has been little consideration for or recognition of the needs of the families of CSAM offenders within research, policy or practice, and their harms have been viewed as an unavoidable consequence of a greater good. Their role within the criminal justice and safeguarding processes have been framed within the context of their protective role – their presence/compliance reducing the risk of suspect suicide, facilitating access (where the suspect has children) and minimizing the likelihood of recidivism. The absence of a focus on their own psychological, physical, financial, social and emotional needs has, we argue, allowed policy and practice to, at best, overlook their needs, and at worst disregard the broader harms of current policing and child protection processes.

There exists a body of literature that explores the harms associated with a family member receiving a custodial sentence and of the impacts associated with the attachment of a “sex offender” label and the accompanying restrictions. Research has recognized the Disenfranchised Grief and Ambiguous Loss associated with these punishments (Arditti, 2005; Bailey, 2018; Cain et al., 2015; Jones & Beck, 2006; Travis & Waul, 2003; Turanovic et al., 2012). The findings of our study confirm that the families of CSAM offenders experience a Disenfranchised Grief that is associated with both a physical and psychological loss. Our participants describe the sudden and immediate physical losses – the loss of a partner, parent, sibling and the associated financial and childcare losses as well as the practical difficulties of losing electronic devices.

A loss of identity and death of psychosocial self was described by many of the participants, and this was exacerbated where the participant was a sexual partner, supporting the experience of the non-offending partners of child sexual abuse offenders presented by Bailey (2018) and CSAM offenders by Absalom (2021) and Duncan et al. (2022). The prominence of shame and stigma contributed to the disenfranchisement of grief, by restricting disclosure and impeding social connections. Participants were encouraged or chose to compose an alternative reason for their loss, based largely on their fears (often realized) of community, organizational and relational judgment of the offense type and their association with the accused. The specific impact of this stigma on grief responses has been recognized in families of child sexual abuse offenders (Bailey, 2018; Kilmer & Leon, 2017; J. Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Russell, 2020) and in the families of those arrested by CSAM specific offenses (Duncan et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2022; Walker, 2019). Disenfranchised grief was described by 14 of the 20 participants. The six that did not discuss this unacknowledged grief included a friend, a parent and four (ex)partners, one of which had met the offender post charge. For these six, the sentence was either awaiting, or

was not discussed. The period post-warrant ranged from 1.5 to seven years, a factor which may affect the absence of this impact.

An ambiguous loss was described largely in relation to the “removal” of a partner/father from the home and from their role within the family, with their physical presence within the community remaining. Participants also described the significant period of “limbo,” where delays in the forensic analysis of technology left families separated, but without charge. Again, 14 of 20 described this loss. The six that did not, included a friend and five (ex) partners, with all six being 1.5 to 2.5 years post-warrant. Ambiguous loss was not discussed by the two (ex)partners where the offender received a custodial sentence.

In terms of the harms experienced by families of CSAM offenders, elements of our findings align with research on the impacts of child sexual abuse offending more broadly – particularly the impacts of *Disenfranchised Grief* and *Ambiguous Loss* on families of the accused. CSAM families also experience significant grief that goes unrecognized and losses that are unclear, unverified and without resolution. We go further to identify five additional features that characterize the harms experienced by the families of CSAM offenders. These features are not inevitable consequences of the discovery of offending participants described examples of actions that agencies could employ (often at little or no extra cost) that would reduce the trauma associated with their experience (we present these below).

The discovery of CSAM offending, that is often instigated by “the knock” has been labeled by others as “the death” (Bailey, 2018) and framed within the context of grief and loss. Our findings suggest a distinction from a *loss* and point to a more intense *trauma* or *blow* (Absalom, 2021; Jones et al., 2022) that we label an *Ontological Assault*. In witnessing the knock, participants describe a *bombshell* event that they link to flashbacks, anxiety and fear. This goes beyond the physical (assault) to impact their sense of identity through what they describe as a humiliating event and devastating experience for children in witnessing this event (supporting the findings reported by the Centre for Social Justice, 2022). Fourteen of the 20 described this blow; the six that did, not included three who had not been present at the knock (friend, parent and partner who met the accused post-conviction), and three (ex)partners – each with children. The significance of “the knock” on participants’ physical and emotional wellbeing not only warrants recognition, but also adds weight to demands calling for a change in policing policy and practice to conduct this procedure with more empathy and discretion.

Whilst previous research has discussed the impact of shame and stigma on the harms experienced by families of child sexual abuse offenders, our sample identified a more considerable consequence. We borrow Kotova’s (2017) term *Contamination by Causal Responsibility* and argue that this goes beyond the perception of a judgment, to involve the active discrimination by friends, family and key agencies such as the police and Children’s Services. Participants described feeling judged, isolated and disconnected, and these responses were often exacerbated by community and professional responses. This chimes with previous research more broadly around the families of child sexual abuse offenders (Brown, 2017; Condry, 2007; J. Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009) and with CSAM offenders (Absalom, 2021; Duncan et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2022; Liddell & Taylor, 2015; Salter et al., 2022; Walker, 2019). Participants also reported feeling that they should have known, that they failed to spot the signs and that they had somehow failed to satisfy their sexual partner. Again, this aligns with previous research on sexual offenses more broadly (Codd, 2008; Comfort, 2008; Condry, 2007). Each feeding a sense of complicity that

exacerbated guilt and responsibility (previously evidenced by Arditti, 2005; Evans et al., 2021; Hoffer et al., 2010; Stubbley, 2015). Seventeen of our 20 described this impact – the three that did not included a friend, a partner that had met the offender post-conviction and an (ex)partner that did not describe having children.

Previous research has highlighted the likely extension and intensification of harms where the loss and grief are not recognized (Bailey, 2018; Bordere, 2017; Hermann, 2011; Memarnia et al., 2015; Radosh & Simkin, 2016). Creating a false narrative to conceal sexual offenses has been recognized within previous literature (Evans et al., 2021; Gramling & Forsyth, 1987; Jones et al., 2022; Levey & Pinsky, 2015; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Phillips & Gates, 2011; Saunders, 2018). Jones et al. (2022), Duncan et al. (2022), and Walker (2019) describe this internalization of emotions and the false narrative that CSAM partners present following an arrest, many telling friends and family that the accused is working away or that they are separating for very different reasons. Our participants describe the creation of a false narrative, an inability to discuss their situation with friends, family and professionals, and an isolation associated with their own withdrawal, or the withdrawal of others. We characterize this feature of the harms associated with CSAM offending as a *Wall of Silence* and assert that its impact requires specific consideration. Again, 17 of the 20 described this impact, with the three that did not including a parent, a partner who had met the offender post-conviction and a (ex)partner who did not discuss having children with the accused.

Confirming the findings of Liddell and Taylor (2015) and Jones et al. (2022) specific to CSAM offending, our participants describe feeling like they are in a *no-win situation*. Remaining in contact with the suspect/offender leads to judgment of condonement of child sexual abuse, cutting ties leading to accusations of an over-reaction – “*it’s a victimless crime*,” “*it’s not a contact offence*,” “*you are overreacting*.” Participants described the impact of being judged by friends and family, their community as well as professionals, and highlighted the impact of this relentless appraisal on their physical and emotional wellbeing. Only four of the 20 did not refer to this theme, and these included a parent, an (ex)partner who did not share biological children with the offender and two (ex)partners with children. Of these four, one was awaiting sentencing, one received a community sentence and two did not refer to the sentence given.

The fifth and final theme that emerged from the data we describe as a *Burden of Responsibility* – 11 of the 20 referred to this impact. Participants discussed a responsibility to minimize the risk of suspect suicide, to facilitate supervision between suspect and children and to act as a protective agent in preventing further offending. The specific needs of family members are overlooked, worst still, their role is exploited (Wager et al., 2015) for the very reasons that they describe as their burden of responsibility and which, in some cases, influenced their decision to remain in the relationship. This is exemplified emotively by a daughter of a CSAM offender who described herself as “*part of the support*,” continuing that if she isn’t that support “*her dad might do it again*.” We argue that family members’ own needs must be considered external to their role (albeit important) in managing suicide and recidivism risks. While families are viewed within the context of what they can do for support agencies, their needs are being minimized and often ignored.

Study limitations

The findings presented within this paper represent the experiences of a sample of 20 family members of individuals charged with CSAM offenses. There are limitations with this study design which should be noted. Participants were recruited through the Lucy Faithfull Foundation's Family and Friends Forum, and through e-mails to those who has previously registered to use the Forum. Whilst this provided a diverse sample in terms of their stage in the criminal justice system, it excludes individuals who have sought support from alternative agencies (or more crucially) have not sought or found support from this organization. It is a self-selecting sample, participants volunteered to discuss their experiences and this risks excluding those who were unable or unwilling to share their story. It may be that we have characterized harms based upon the two extremes of those who felt their experience was notably positive or negative, without reflecting the middle ground. Other limitations are being addressed through further research, and these include collecting data on police perceptions of current procedures and the impact on their physical and emotional well-being; differential experiences based on gender, disability, parental status, relationship to the person apprehended for CSAM offenses and police force area. We are also exploring the concurrent experiences of domestic abuse – in particular, coercive control, recognized in recent Australian studies (Jones et al., 2022; Salter et al., 2022).

Recommendations and future research

Based upon the lived experiences of those family members taking part in this study, we suggest key recommendations specific to policy and practice that would address and minimize these seven key features of harm. Specific to policy, we identify eight fundamental requirements. The first, a recognition of victim status for children of CSAM offenders, would address the remaining seven. Given the challenges of achieving this, we would like to see: 1) Recognition amongst all key agencies regarding the psychological, physical, financial and social impacts for family members of CSAM offenders. 2) Trauma informed interventions – particularly education, healthcare and Children's Services for CSAM affected families. 3) Improvements in police recorded data to allow the identification of numbers of children present at the time of a CSAM search/knock. At present, this requires time consuming data mining to differentiate "children safeguarded" from children living at the address at the time of the knock. Accurate data would allow the assessment of necessary service provision. 4) Priority given to the forensic analysis of electronic equipment where a suspect has children. At present, families are waiting up to three years for an outcome and this limbo exacerbates trauma and limits the provision of support. 5) Recognition of the significant harms associated with the punishment/safeguarding measures irrespective of sentence. The loss experienced by families where a community sentence is given appear no less significant than where a custodial sentence is imposed – only two of our 20 discussed the offender receiving a custodial (less than 20% of convicted CSAM offenders in England and Wales will receive a custodial sentence – NPCC lead for Child Protection, personal communication, December 3, 2020). Access to children is limited or prohibited, and where an offender remains in the community, this can exacerbate the ambiguous nature of the loss. Organizations such as Children Heard and Seen can support children where a parent receives a custodial sentence. Support for children whose parent receives a community sentence is limited, and this inequity should be addressed. 6) There should be restrictions on media reporting where the suspect/offender has children living with them at the time of the arrest.

These children are not victims, and therefore, restrictions are not imposed, but experiences of bullying, negative community judgment, physical and verbal threats deem this, in our view, an essential requirement. 7) Finally, lessons should be learnt from domestic abuse policies – the multi-agency approach seen in Operation Encompass in particular.

We propose six realistic and achievable practical measures that should accompany these policy changes. The first, aligns with the proposals contained within the Centre for Social Justice's (2022) report – *The Golden Thread*, which highlights the harms of witnessing a parent's arrest (not necessarily specific to CSAM). Most police forces conduct the "knock" in the early morning before children leave for school. We understand the rationale for this, but we argue that the damage caused to children in witnessing this trauma is significant, and measures should be implemented to avoid these harms. 2) Where children are present at the property at the time of the warrant, a Family Officer should be allocated to focus on minimizing the trauma for children (and the partner). Some police forces already implement this policy, as do the National Crime Agency. We suggest that this is adopted at a national level. 3) A more costly approach, but one we advocate, would be to create an IDVA/IDSVA (Independent Domestic Violence/Independent Domestic and Sexual Abuse Advocate) type role to support the family from warrant through to sentencing. 4) Families should be left information and guidance when the police leave the property. In many cases, electronic equipment will have been taken, and where it isn't, families talk of the fears of using "child sexual abuse" specific search terms on the internet. Discreet hard copy guidance should be left directly with the family, and we should not rely on this being distributed via the suspect. South Wales Police have developed a Family Pack, and this is currently being adopted by the College of Policing. This should be a nationwide policy for all CSAM warrants. 5) Families should be referred to the relevant support services that assist with housing, finances, educational support, and therapeutic interventions. These needs will become apparent at different stages post discovery, and this emphasizes the importance of 6), which is to maintain communication between key agencies and the family throughout the criminal justice process.

Conclusion

Our findings mirror those harms previously identified – including psychological, physical, emotional and financial and highlight the role of relational, community, institutional and societal responses that exacerbate those harms (Absalom, 2021; Duncan et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2022; Liddell & Taylor, 2015; Walker, 2019; Salter et al., 2022). We confirm the presence and impact of disenfranchised grief and ambiguous loss identified in the wider literature on families of child sexual abuse offenders, but go further to identify five additional, significant and distinct harms experienced by families of CSAM offenders. We view these harms as contributing to substantial trauma and assert that, in treating family's individual support needs as part of the process of minimizing suicide and recidivism, agencies have failed to provide (or refer on to) appropriate support specific to finances, psychological therapy, housing, education, media protection and advocacy. We argue that these harms are not inevitable and are entirely predictable, and that viewing families as collateral damage or collateral consequences allows a certain passivity amongst agencies that can do more to minimize this trauma. Whilst we cannot avoid arresting suspects of

CSAM, nor can we avoid the impacts of the consequent safeguarding, we absolutely can predict who will be impacted and when that impact will commence.

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Data availability statement

The data reported in this paper includes interview transcripts (Word documents) and survey findings (SPSS files). To discuss access to these data, please contact the Corresponding Author – Rachel Armitage, on: r.a.armitage@hud.ac.uk.

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