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# “Your world, everything just implodes, it really is a life-changing experience”: how do relatives of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) offenders navigate life following discovery of the offence?

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## ABSTRACT

There is a gap in understanding how family members of sexual offenders, and specific to the present study, families of those who download CSAM, navigate their life experiences after the point of discovery of the offence. Their psychological experiences are a direct result of their association with a family member's sexual crime and yet, they themselves are innocent. A qualitative approach with fifteen female partners, ex-partners and mothers of CSAM offenders was used to examine how they experienced life following the discovery of the crime. Using reflexive thematic analysis, two themes were interpreted: (1) Navigation through Secondary Stigma Experiences and (2) Fragile Future. These findings provide practical suggestions for increasing support for non-offending families, which would enhance their ability to provide support to desisting CSAM offenders, and advance the literature to better understand complex trauma for secondary victims of sexual crime.

## PRACTICE IMPACT STATEMENT

Family members of CSAM offenders play an important role in both safeguarding children and desistance processes. Their efforts to cope with secondary stigma experiences need to be acknowledged with access to appropriate support options made available. Our findings contribute important insights into what assistance optimises family members' ability to deal with their circumstances as they struggle to cope with powerful stigma experiences, thus enhancing their ability to protect children and support offending relatives.

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## Introduction

In 2019, Maddie Corman wrote a one-woman play she called “Accidentally Brave”, a title she chose following the discovery that her husband had been downloading Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), and after many people told her that she was brave. In the New York Times broadsheet article (Bennett, 2019), Ms Corman stated “*I didn't mean to be brave, but this is what I was dealt*”. Her one-woman show challenged societal perceptions about non-offending families' experiences and provided insights about the emotionally charged question no one would wish to contemplate, *what would I do?* (Kavanagh & Levenson, 2022). The question of how non-offending individuals navigate life following discovery of a CSAM offence in their family unit is the focus of the present study.

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Sex offenders hold a special status as a group that is feared, and stigmatised with offence features so denigrated that the stigma radiates out to include others in their family circle, a reality dubbed “courtesy stigma” (Evans et al., 2023; Goffman, 1963). While there are indications of an increased research interest in this area (Armitage et al., 2023; Duncan et al., 2022), the limited available literature documents how family members experience numerous difficulties including, but not limited to, lost friendships, financial problems, the burden of childcare and, not least, an array of problems faced by children suddenly separated from their parent, all of which collectively have been referred to as “collateral consequences” in the literature (Condry et al., 2016; Evans et al., 2023; Kirk & Wakefield, 2018; Kury, 2021; J. Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009). At the same time, scholars have noted the importance of friends and family in criminal desistance, where the provision of social, emotional and financial support correlates with a decrease in criminal behaviour (Sample et al., 2018)

### *Sexual crime as a special case*

The past three decades have produced a body of empirical evidence noting an increase in public punitiveness towards those who commit crimes in general (Costelloe et al., 2009; King & Maruna, 2009; Rogers & Ferguson, 2011; Shea, 2009; Tonry, 2009). Sexual crimes, however, are viewed as a “special case” (Rogers & Ferguson, 2011). In prison settings, the stigma and fear sexual crimes elicit have resulted in sex offenders experiencing greater hostility (Blagden et al., 2016; Schwaebe, 2005) than non-sex offenders. After prison, residential restrictions serve to promote social alienation (Clark, 2007; Levenson & Cotter, 2005), convicted sex offenders face poor employment prospects (Levenson et al., 2007; Willis et al., 2010) and opportunities to establish supportive social networks are diminished, an aspect long considered important to the reduction of recidivism (Levenson et al., 2007). Essentially, the stigma associated with the label “sex offender” endures long after formal punishment ends (Fitzgerald O’Reilly, 2018). It is against this background that sex offenders have been posited as a “special category” of offender (Rogers & Ferguson, 2011) and a group believed to represent a continuous threat to the general public which, in turn, holds serious consequences for their family members. There is surprisingly little empirical research about the experiences of non-offending family members which might be a result of early literature (Riemer, 1940) which located causal explanations for intrafamilial abuse with the non-offending mother of the victim; and subsequent research replete with blaming narratives focusing on the female family members of men who have sexually offended, including their mothers and intimate partners (Azzopardi et al., 2018; Bolen, 2003; Cahalane et al., 2013; Duncan et al., 2022).

### *Family secondary stigma experiences*

Explanations placing responsibility for sexual abuse did not stop with blaming female family members but radiated out to include all family members, that is, grandparents, siblings, and the minor children of men who have sexually offended (Evans et al., 2023; Kavanagh et al., 2023; Sample et al., 2018). Families become confronted with a range of negative experiences as a result of an association with a “sex offence”, which may be due to a general belief that sex offenders were fashioned by “bad families” (Condry, 2010), where the stigma flows from the offender to include them (Condry, 2007). While Goffman (1963) described this phenomenon as “courtesy stigma” the present study will utilise Condry’s (2007) descriptor of “secondary stigma” to relay the negative repercussions experienced by non-offending families arising from stigma by association. In addition, from our perspective, the term better signifies how an association with a sexual crime confers a new and stigmatised sense of “self” onto relatives (Condry, 2007; Farkas & Miller, 2007; Kavanagh et al., 2023).

It would be inaccurate to suggest that societal blame is unique to family members of sex offenders in light of evidence about relatives of other serious offenders, with notable high media profiles, becoming both the subject of intense public curiosity and outright vilification (Condry, 2010). For example, Primrose Shipman, wife of serial killer Harold Shipman, became the focus of a

furious public outcry in the United Kingdom in 2004 when she was awarded a widow's pension (Oliver, 2004) and family members of mass shooters such as the Seung-Hui family, whose son shot and killed thirty-two people in Virginia Tech in the United States in 2007, found their lives were placed under extreme scrutiny by world media agencies and went into hiding (Somashekhkar & Hanrahan, 2008). However, there is evidence to suggest that men who sexually offend (and by extension their relatives) experience serious public retaliatory actions even in the absence of any conspicuous media profiles. The rapid passage of sex offender policies in the 1990s in the United States and United Kingdom (Burchfield et al., 2014) sent a message to the public that sex offenders represent a continuing threat to the safety of others (Fitzgerald O'Reilly, 2018), resulting in severe repercussions for their family members. For example, in jurisdictions without public sex offender registers, such as Ireland, family members of sex offenders have experienced public ostracism. In 2010, a local authority passed a motion stating that all convicted sex offenders and "those who consort" with them were to be removed from their housing lists (Fitzgerald O'Reilly, 2018). This motion came about as a result of an incident where a house, intended for the partner and children of a convicted sex offender was set on fire, despite the local community receiving assurances that the offender would not reside there (Hayden, 2010). Essentially, associations via kinship ties have resulted in innocent family members being perceived in the same way as the offender, they become "tarred with the same brush" (Condry et al., 2016) with evidence that families internalise the stigma, with negative repercussions for their sense of self (Kavanagh et al., 2023).

Families of men who have sexually offended have reported becoming more isolated as they limit their social interactions with others in an attempt to mitigate stigma experiences (Farkas & Miller, 2007; J. Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009). A number of family members found they incurred significant costs due to a need to move home and place children in a new school because of legislative residency restrictions. Often, non-offending relatives became the sole financial provider for the family, due to the reality that sex offenders encounter considerable difficulties in securing any type of employment (Levenson & Cotter, 2005) or are incarcerated following conviction or in cases where a partner decides to leave the relationship (Farkas & Miller, 2007; Kavanagh et al., 2023). Indeed, families identified how the stigma of an association with the label "sex offence" left them feeling as though they had been convicted of the crime (Condry et al., 2016; Farkas & Miller, 2007). Such findings have been replicated in subsequent years (Bailey, 2018; Duncan et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2023; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009) across different jurisdictions with differing legislative approaches, highlighting a universal denigration of sexual crime and the power of relatives' secondary stigma experiences.

Surprisingly however, questions about how such families cope with their stigma experiences have received limited empirical attention despite acknowledgement about their importance in desistance processes (Farkas & Miller, 2007; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Sample et al., 2018). More specifically, for non-offending families of CSAM offenders, is the reality that incidents of CSAM crime are rising rapidly, (Fletcher, 2022; Landi, 2021). The National Crime Agency (NCA) in the United Kingdom described the prevalence and easy access to CSAM as a "crisis for modern society" (National Crime Agency, 2021). In Ireland, Hotline.ie, an Irish national reporting centre, in its 2021 annual report revealed 29,794 publicly sourced reports of CSAM, which represented the same number of reported CSAM in the previous three years combined, thus highlighting the increasing rise in online CSAM. It is against the background of shame, blame and ostracisation experiences (Bailey, 2018; Condry, 2007; Duncan et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2023; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Sample et al., 2018) that questions about how such families, and in the present research, families of CSAM offenders, cope with their new situation and a new identity as the "relative of a sex offender".

### *The current study*

Despite the widespread agreement about the importance of familial support in offender desistance and safeguarding children (Evans et al., 2023; Farkas & Miller, 2007; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009;

Sample et al., 2018), little is known about how those family members are supported, psychologically, socially and emotionally. It is particularly important to consider the experiences of this population due to the understanding that sexual offences (including CSAM crime) hold a special stigmatised status in society (Rogers & Ferguson, 2011). The central research question of this study is: *how do those with a family member who has been arrested on suspicion of, charged with, or convicted of a CSAM offence cope with, manage and adapt their lives following discovery?* The present research explores this research question and seeks to address an identified gap in the literature. The findings have the potential to offer practical guidance on supporting those family members as well as enhancing their ability to facilitate desistance from crime.

## Design

### *Participant recruitment and data collection*

Data for the current study came from a purposive sample of 15 participants (see Table 1) located, via four gatekeeper agencies, across Ireland and the UK. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with participants. Thirteen participants requested telephone interviews, with two participants requesting a face-to-face meeting. Although some researchers indicate distrust for the use of telephone interviews due to a lack of verbal cues (Novick, 2008), the medium provided an increased sense of anonymity for participants (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Participants were debriefed post-interview and interview transcripts were forwarded to those that had indicated a wish to review their interviews.

### *Ethics*

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Limerick (approval code: 2019\_05\_09\_EHS) to recruit adult family members only due to the sensitivity of this research.

### *Analytic approach*

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to interpret key themes within the data, its application facilitated a reflection on families' accounts of their experiences while also acknowledging the influence of the researchers' interpretation of their accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2019). An inductive approach was taken with no attempt made to prioritise latent over semantic coding, reflecting the underlying constructionist epistemology.

A six-phase iterative process was used to facilitate analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and the first phase of familiarising oneself with the data began with participant interviews and transcription

**Table 1.** Participant information.

Pseudonym	Circumstances
Ava	50's, married with adult and minor children. Husband arrested a number of months ago.
Bess	50's, married with adult children. Husband arrested a number of months ago.
Cora	40's, divorced, mother of minor children. Ex-husband arrested a number of months ago.
Daisy	50's, divorced, mother of adult children. Ex-husband convicted and imprisoned.
Ella	50's, divorced, mother of adult children. Ex-husband was not charged.
Faye	30's, divorced, mother of minor children. Ex-husband arrested a number of months ago.
Gail	40's, married with adult children. Son was convicted and imprisoned.
Hazel	60's, married with adult children. Husband arrested a number of years ago.
Ivy	30's, married, no children. Husband convicted and not imprisoned.
Jane	40's, divorced, mother of minor children. Ex-husband convicted and not imprisoned.
Karen	70's, married with adult children. Husband convicted and not imprisoned.
Lily	40's, divorced, mother of minor children. Husband convicted a number of years ago.
Mila	50's, married with adult children. Son arrested, yet to be charged.
Nell	30's, divorced, mother with minor children. Ex-husband arrested yet to be sentenced.
Orla	40's, divorced, mother with adult and minor children. Son convicted and imprisoned.

processes. Phase 2 began the open-coding process to identify aspects within the dataset that could be informative in developing themes. Phase 3 involved reviewing the coded data with the focus shifting from the interpretation of individual data items within the dataset to the interpretation of meaningfulness across the dataset. This was a lengthy and iterative process when the principal investigator was both actively immersed in the data and also distancing from it to allow time for reflection to develop (Braun & Clarke, 2021). A review of the accuracy and reliability of identified themes represented phase 4. Analysis remained iterative and progressed on two levels, first, the relationship between the candidate themes and codes that informed them were reviewed to ensure they contributed to the overall narrative of the data. Second, candidate themes were reviewed in relation to each other and the dataset to ensure they best answered the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Phase 5 required themes to be refined and labelled, with each theme providing a coherent account of the data independent of other identified themes. Phase 6 involved generating the report which subscribed to the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2019) where the data was synthesised and contextualised with available literature as reported in the analysis section.

## Analysis

Two themes are presented with their accompanying subthemes which were interpreted from fifteen interviews. Interviews were fully transcribed and anonymised to comply with ethical requirements. In addition, to ensure participant anonymity, pseudonyms are utilised and omitted lines are represented by three dot ellipses [...]. All references to timeframes have been removed, gendered information pertaining to participants' minor children has been removed, and gender-neutral references utilised.

### *Theme one: navigation through secondary stigma experiences*

Following discovery, participants had to continue with their daily lives and, in line with previous research, their narratives highlighted significant experiences of secondary stigma (Armitage et al., 2023; Bailey, 2018; Condry, 2007; Duncan et al., 2022; Farkas & Miller, 2007; J. Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Sample et al., 2018) despite having no prior knowledge that the offence had occurred in their home (Kavanagh et al., 2023). Their narratives demonstrate how they were not passive recipients of societal blame (Condry, 2007) but employed various strategies to manage and resist their experiences of secondary stigma. In the current study participants' strategies for managing stigma manifested in their interactions with others. The following subthemes capture the ways in which relatives adjusted and attempted to re-organise their lives following discovery and its aftermath.

#### *Reconciling a loved one with the crime*

This subtheme explored how participants attempted to reconcile the offence with their offending relatives with whom they had strong emotional ties. Participants' narratives revealed that they had been unaware that their family member had been viewing online CSAM and experienced significant shock at the time of discovery: *"It was just mind blowing. And I couldn't really wrap my head around what she was saying ... no not him"* (Jane, ex-partner). Due to kinship ties, the notion that criminals are "family made" also made them a *subject* of the offence, because they were not only contaminated by the offence but, to some degree, answerable for its occurrence (Condry, 2007). As such, participants' accounts about a family member's offence tended to try and counteract a perception that they were in any way responsible for the offence through the provision of explanations designed to diminish blame and shame from the offender and, by proxy, themselves (Duncan et al., 2022; Iffland et al., 2016).

Previous empirical research (e.g. see Cahalane et al., 2013; Duncan et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2023; Iffland et al., 2016) found that family members utilised a number of strategies, including one of "deflection" or "minimisation" to reconcile the actions of a loved family member with the reality of their offence. In the present study, participants deflected causation for the offence primarily

onto childhood trauma and addiction. Nell accounted for the behaviour as a symptom of illness: *"There's a judgment of society, it's a taboo thing, and it isn't recognised as an illness, which quite clearly it is"* (Nell, ex-partner). Karen blamed a childhood trauma for her offending partner's behaviour: *"It was something that had happened to him, my husband, as a child, something he had witnessed"* (Karen, supportive partner) and Ava cited addiction issues as the causal factor behind her offending relative's engagement in a sexual crime and not a result of any sexual attraction to children:

The problem with porn addiction is it's a very isolating and a very shameful addiction ... They get deeper and deeper and they're looking for this high and they go somewhere where they really shouldn't go ... It's not because they're sexually attracted to children. It's just that this addiction just grows and grows and grows. (Ava, supportive partner)

Notable was an absence of references to the child victims in CSAM in several participants' accounts. These were primarily supportive partners with parents of offenders with ex-partners more likely to articulate awareness about child victims. Ava's quote above is representative of supportive partners in particular, who did not perceive their offending partners as having had any sexual attraction toward children with an absence of references about victims. This finding is consistent with previous research (Cahalane et al., 2013; Cahalane & Duff, 2018) where it was noted that supportive non-offending partners struggled to explicitly contemplate victims in contexts of non-contact and extra-familial sexual abuse. However, it is possible that the considerable distress experienced by family members from the time of offence discovery (Armitage et al., 2023; Condry, 2007; Duncan et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2023; Farkas & Miller, 2007) contributed to an absence of acknowledgement about victims and may be indicative of a struggle to reconcile a loved one with the crime. In the present study, participants adjusted their beliefs to ease the psychological distress which discovery brought to their lives in an attempt to restore balance (Festinger, 1957) through a denial, or in the current research, an absence of acknowledgement that harm was committed against innocent child victims.

In addition, many participants expressed frustration about issues which they believed contributed to their relatives accessing child sexual abuse material, including common social media sites which permitted such material to be available. Ivy explains: *"One of the sites is actually a social media site. So, so any person could go on it. A child could go on it, an adult could go on it, it wasn't something that you could just easily block"* (Ivy, supportive partner). These causal explanations afforded participants an avenue toward more normalising accounts about the perpetrator's motivation because issues such as addiction, childhood trauma and unscrupulous social media platforms provided mitigation for the occurrence of the offence. Past research has suggested that minimising culpability for sexual offending serves a protective function for those with sexual convictions as it assists in the maintenance of a more positive self-concept while lessening feelings of shame (Maruna & Mann, 2006). For participants in the present study, deflecting responsibility for the crime onto childhood trauma or addictions might serve a similar adaptive function. Conferring diminished responsibility for the crime onto a loved family member may have enabled participants to ease their psychological conflicts while assisting them to maintain a pro-social image of their offending relative (Armitage et al., 2023; Duncan et al., 2022).

Moreover, consistent with Duncan et al.'s (2022) research findings, supportive partners appeared to accommodate their offending family members' engagement in a CSAM offence, but not other categories of sexual crime. They specifically differentiated between contact and non-contact sex offenders which was an important distinction for them:

There's a big difference between somebody that has actually abused a child and somebody that's got images, or they chatted to somebody online or what have you. Not actually physically going to meet and no actual physical contact with – massive difference (Bess, supportive partner)

Duncan et al. (2022) suggested that supportive partners' accommodation of their offending partner's crime, but not other categories of sexual offending pointed to a degree of cognitive flexibility

which enabled them to rationalise their decision to remain in the relationship. Additionally, participants' stances on their family members' type of sexual crime were possibly taken to try and neutralise the stigma surrounding the offence and by extension, their association via kinship ties (Armitage et al., 2023; Condry, 2007; Goffman, 1963).

Notable in the present study is that while supportive partners and parents of offenders made cognitive adjustments about their offending relative, ex-partners also exhibited cognitive modifications. While Duncan et al. (2022) noted that one participant in their study who had instigated divorce proceedings against their offending partner did not display any minimisation about the offence, this finding was not replicated in the present study. Some, but not all ex-partners in the present study were found to make cognitive adjustments that mitigated the occurrence of the offence, for example, in Nell's quote above "*and it isn't recognised as an illness, which quite clearly it is*". While Duncan et al. (2022) suggested that the absence of cognitive adjustments might suggest that such protective mechanisms were not necessary, due to marriage separation, the present study challenges this assertion. In line with previous findings (Frost, 2011; Jones et al., 2022; McLaren, 2016), it may be possible that the stigma associated with the offence was sufficiently powerful that those who were no longer associated with the offender had internalised "sex offender" stigma to such an extent, the internalisation did not abate.

### *Changes designed to mitigate against societal stigma*

A number of participants recounted how they took material steps to mitigate against potential stigma should the offence become public knowledge. Available research points to innocent families experiencing considerable hostility from previously supportive community networks, including other family members, which led some to fear for their personal safety (Cubellis et al., 2019; E. Kavanagh et al., 2023; J. Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009). Some participants attempted to counter such repercussions through actions such as changing their name: "*I've just changed my name as well and I'm doing the same for the children*" (Faye, ex-partner). Other participants, such as Jane, sold their homes and moved to different geographical locations as a way to remove themselves from potential community backlash and judgements: "*I knew as soon as the offence happened that, you know, a lot of those mums were snobs like me back then and would immediately think, you know, what happened to my children and how did you not see it, you know. There would be lots and lots of questions that I had no answers for, so, I actually put my house on the market because it was a lovely house that we'd renovated completely*" (Jane, ex-partner). Such actions, which had the net effect of protecting anonymity, served as a defence against experiences of secondary stigma, a finding in line with those of Condry (2007).

### *To whom, how and when to tell the truth*

Nonetheless, community rejection was *expected* by participants. Those who remained in their localities were candid about taking steps specifically designed to maintain distance from others to avoid disclosure. Participants described a more isolated existence, such as Ivy who said she was living like "*a recluse, in a word*" (Ivy, supportive partner). Gail described how she limited opportunities that would lead her to speak to anyone about the crime or be confronted by societal judgements:

I try to do everything in the morning. When I know people will be dropping kids and people will be busy doing their own thing, you know, I try and get everything done then. So, there's less people that might know to bump into. (Gail, parent of offender)

These findings are consistent with available empirical research (Armitage et al., 2023; Evans et al., 2023; Farkas & Miller, 2007; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009) where non-offending family members were found to engage in acts of secrecy and a general withdrawal from society to mitigate against experiences of secondary stigma.

While strategies around withdrawal and maintaining secrecy were evident, participants remained confronted with another significant stressor with regard to the management of how, when and whether to make their stigmatised identity visible to others (Frost, 2011; Goffman, 1963). “To tell or not to tell” (Condry, 2007) was an evident struggle in participants’ narratives, as illustrated by Faye: *“The balance of choosing who you’re going to tell and how many people you’re going to tell is really really difficult to make”* (Faye, ex-partner). For most, disclosure to friends and family occurred only when there was a strong possibility that matters would be reported in the media: *“And then another few friends after that when we thought it might come out in the papers which it did”* (Gail, parent of offender). Particularly trying were decisions about how and what to tell minor children. For example, Ava told her child a version of the truth: *“[child] doesn’t, [child] doesn’t know law, [child] just knows that he was talking to girls that he should not have been, they were too young”* (Ava, supportive partner). Other participants with younger children struggled with age-appropriate disclosures:

It’s always hard to answer these questions in an age-appropriate way with children. And you know, my three-and-a-half-year-old is sufficiently curious that [child] asks lots of questions that [child]’s not really old enough to obviously understand the proper answers for a lot of these things. (Faye, ex-partner)

The consequences of being associated with a sexual crime have the potential to be long-lasting and some participants expressed concerns about how the secondary stigma might impact their children in years to come. In some cases, this resulted in parents deciding not to tell children about their father’s offence to protect them from life-long secondary stigma experiences:

You’ve got to kind of work it forward and it never works forward the way you’d like it to. Like you two are going to have to keep a secret from everyone forever ... it wouldn’t be fair to, you know ... so, no. (Lily, ex-partner)

### *Overcoming the issue of scarce supports*

Participants recounted a scarcity of support services for those in their position, the lack of which contributed to their secondary stigma experiences: *“There was just nothing. There’s no counselling. There’s no one to talk to. There’s no one that helps you with grieving for your old life, with processing your feelings, processing what’s happening”* (Nell, ex-partner). Support was accessed, in the main, by those in a financial position to afford private counselling: *“I had the money to put myself through counselling”* (Jane, ex-partner). Others persevered until appropriate supports were located: *“Four years after, I got nine months of CBT”* (Lily, ex-partner). However, for those that could not afford private counselling or those that were required to persevere and wait for support, for example on waiting lists: *“there is a waiting list, and it could be several months”* (Cora, ex-partner), there was a considerable personal cost: *“If I could have got it four years before ... I would say that I probably damaged myself like medically and psychologically hugely by self-harm. Not not cut myself, just destroyed myself for four years to make myself feel better”* (Lily, ex-partner). In the absence of support, harmful approaches to cope were described by a minority, for example, a return to an eating disorder:

I use my coping mechanisms that I’ve had since I was a teenager, to cope. So, I have, I used to have an eating disorder and I’ve kind of gone back to that, that’s where if I can kind of control my eating I can control my life in my head, if that makes sense. (Ivy, supportive partner)

Lily and Ivy’s experiences highlight how the psychological and emotional harm associated with their secondary stigma experiences resulted in their use of some maladaptive management strategies in the absence of support. This finding is in line with previous research which found that the extent to which some relatives loss of family, friends and social networks (Duncan et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2023; Farkas & Miller, 2007), due to their kin connection with a sexual crime, compounded their experiences of despair and their sense of being a failure and led to them becoming workaholics and/or engaging in excessive alcohol consumption, all of which served to isolate them and diminish their coping abilities (Fuller, 2016).

Nonetheless, in line with previous research (e.g. see Bailey, 2018; Farkas & Miller, 2007; Jones et al., 2022; Kavanagh & Levenson, 2022; Sample et al., 2018) the support found to be of primary importance to participants in the present study was that derived from other similarly situated individuals, who met via online forums or through psycho-educational groups. However, a number of participants indicated that they remained unaware that any form of peer support existed for a considerable time following discovery: *"It took me three years before I even knew that there was a charity of this nature"* (Jane, ex-partner), highlighting a need for raising awareness about the existence of such services.

The analyses highlighted how those who had the benefit of in-group support experienced reduced stress and enhanced well-being which collectively allowed them to interpret a significant life challenge, that is the discovery of the CSAM offence, and its aftermath, as more manageable (Bailey, 2018; Haslam et al., 2004; S. Kavanagh & Levenson, 2022; Sample et al., 2018). More specifically, peer support was described as buffering negative emotional experiences: *"Knowing that there was someone there to rant at or to cry with or go through whatever emotion you're going through at that particular time, that kind of really did help"* (Ivy, supportive partner), and provided opportunities to be heard and reassured: *"But just the level of understanding put me so much at ease. And it made me actually feel in a safe place"* (Faye, ex-partner).

Additionally, peer support was described as facilitating new outlooks on life: *"I don't know what I would have done without that, I would not be in this situation I'm in now trying to get the positives out of it, I don't think, if I hadn't come across that"* (Bess, supportive partner). Essentially, when participants accessed support from others, in similar situations, the negative impact of stigma was diminished which allowed them to start to progress from the trauma and shame following the discovery of the offence toward a path of reconstructing shattered worldviews (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

### *The need to protect oneself and one's family*

Additionally, while not necessarily a strategy used to cope with secondary stigma experiences, a consistent feature in participants' narratives was how they felt they needed to become "givers" rather than "receivers" of support. Many participants revealed efforts to emotionally protect others in the aftermath of discovery: *"I needed to protect myself, I needed to protect the children, I needed to protect the business. Everybody suddenly needed protecting"* (Nell, ex-partner). These findings extend those of Bolen (2002) in which mothers in cases of intrafamilial sexual abuse were found to take steps to protect their children even though they admitted that they initially did not fully believe abuse had occurred. In the present study, despite participants' evident struggles to explain the occurrence and causal reasons behind the crime, their protective actions, which may appear contradictory with regard to their attempts to reconcile the actions of a loved one with the crime, demonstrated an acceptance that a crime had occurred. However, while participants quickly took on a protective stance, the urge to protect other family members came with a sacrifice with descriptions about how a protective stance compounded a sense of isolation:

I had to hide things from my children, which was easy to start off with, but my son said one day, he said, we'll come round to yours and I said no, I'll meet you at [name of place] and he said, oh, you're being very protective of your house. And I thought, no, I'm protecting you (Ella, ex-partner)

The protective stance was a particular challenge for participants with minor children. Those individuals spoke about needing to find a balance between protecting their children from information about the offence, trying to mitigate their children's as yet unknown, future reaction toward them for withholding information about the offence, while, at the same time, permitting an ongoing relationship with the offending father. Jane explained her view:

It's been put to me that my children may stay angry with me for allowing them to carry on seeing him and having a relationship with the man that was capable of that. And how would I handle that? How do I feel about that? Um, but, I'm comfortable with my decision. I know it's the right thing to do. (Jane, ex-partner)

In the main, the remaining safeguarding parents believed that their children's interests were best served by a continued relationship with their offending parent, despite holding concerns about

how the children might one day react, if/when told in years to come. Parents' beliefs that their children's best interests were served through a continued relationship with the offending father was an interesting finding in the context that previous studies have suggested that non-offending partners did not appreciate the possibility that the offending parent might pose a risk to their children (Cahalane et al., 2013; Cahalane & Duff, 2018). Notable in the present study was an absence of any explicit acknowledgement about whether participants rejected or accepted the possibility that the offending father posed a potential risk to their children, even though views were expressed about the importance of the father/child relationship remaining intact ("*I know it's the right thing to do*" Jane). In the context of previous research findings suggesting partners struggled to contemplate issues of risk in relation to their children (Cahalane et al., 2013), the present research findings of an absence of acknowledgement should be interpreted with caution for a number of reasons. First, it remains possible that a continued relationship might be encouraged because they genuinely did not perceive any risk to the child. Second, child protection agencies may have indicated, on completion of their risk assessments, that continued access, albeit supervised, was in the best interests of the child. Third, in the context of participants' normative explanations behind what motivated the offending family member's engagement in a CSAM offence, it remains possible that any open admission about a potential risk to their children would not fit with their normalising narratives.

### **Theme two: fragile future**

When considering the question about how participants viewed their future, a resounding response was one in which they saw their lives, going forward, as fragile and delicate. Participants' narratives continued to depict ongoing trauma and uncertainty about what the future might hold but also reflected a tentative move toward a restoration of self-worth.

#### **Beginning to advocate for change**

Despite acknowledgements that their lives were forever altered, participants rallied toward advocacy. Narratives indicated that this did not happen immediately and was therefore not an immediate coping mechanism or stigma management strategy. Nonetheless, advocacy seemed to develop over time and came about through awareness about the rising numbers of families impacted by CSAM offences. Contact with similarly situated peers via online forums represented the medium through which they felt empowered toward activism. Participants expressed opinions about how the online possession of CSAM was a crime likely to continue to increase due to ease of access to the internet: "*I very much believe that this is going to be one of the things that is going to increase vastly over the next five to ten years*" (Faye, ex-partner), and in the context of rising CSAM cases participants called for the immediate availability of support for those in their situation: "*If there could be a support for people on day one for this, for therapy, because you will not survive it, I don't think emotionally without*" (Lily, ex-partner).

However, while participants in the present study identified with their peer support group and enjoyed the important benefits of feeling understood, supported and socially connected to others, their experience of secondary stigma remained a confounding factor. Participants accepted the negative connotations associated with their stigmatised position and stated a continued need to conceal it. In this context, despite moves toward advocacy, participants maintained their anonymity and considered this aspect one of paramount importance because they could not publicly identify as being related to someone accused and/or convicted of a CSAM offence, as Bess explained:

You feel that you can't even as a group stand up and say, look you need to listen to this ... because you're identifying yourself. And that's the real issue with it. How do you get somebody to listen to you when you can't put yourself into that line of fire? (Bess, supportive partner)

Similarly, Jones et al. (2022) found that while the power of supportive in-group emboldened partners of sex offenders toward advocacy efforts in Australia, consistent with the present study, Jones et al.

(2022) found that partners maintained anonymity and used a support agency to represent their collective voices. Thus, while group identification prompted participants to move toward advocacy, their experience of secondary stigma hampered their ability to openly identify as a “relative of a sex offender”, highlighting the power of their secondary stigma experience and participant expectations about being devalued and rejected by society.

### *Ongoing uncertainty about the future*

The trauma surrounding an association with a vilified crime (Fitzgerald O’Reilly, 2018) left many participants fearful about future prospects. While some articulated some positives and hopes about what their future might hold: *“I live to look to the future for myself, so, my future, I look at it and I think, yeah ... I’d love to be happy”* (Nell, ex-partner), the devastation in the aftermath of discovery left most participants describing an inability to look toward their future with any certainty: *“I don’t, can’t look beyond what’s here. Everyday, like, is just another day, I do my best, I take it one day at a time, I don’t actually go forward”*. (Hazel, supportive partner)

Interestingly, and contrary to past research (Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009) which found that relatives expressed certainty their offending family member would not re-offend, the present study noted how primarily supportive partners spoke about a future characterised by a contradiction. On one hand, they trusted their partner not to re-offend, and on the other, they held concerns about the possibility of a recurrence of the crime, as exemplified by Ivy’s quote:

For family members, I think there was a lot of stress and worry about it happening again, and you always have that doubt in your head that it will happen again even though you do trust the person it happened to. You’ll always have that doubt. (Ivy, supportive partner)

### *Reconstructing self-worth*

Despite their uncertainty about the future, participants’ narratives also acknowledged that they persevered through their post-discovery journey because they had no choice in the matter: *“I’ve got no choice ... we’re doing this because we’ve got no bloody choice”* (Daisy, ex-partner). Notably, the present study located tentative findings of post-traumatic growth, that is, the experience of secondary stigma brought about positive personal growth which was previously located in one study (Cahalane & Duff, 2018). Post-traumatic growth was not expressed by all participants, with some, such as Orla, describing a lengthy temporal aspect of reconstruction:

It’s probably taken two years for me to get back on track, kind of professionally and start, to like, believe in myself. Yeah, my ability to just just do stuff because I just didn’t have that, I just lost all that sense of faith in myself and I think that was all tied in with this whole experience. (Orla, mother of offender)

From Orla, there is a sense about how much her core identity was intertwined (*“all tied in”*) with her experience of being a relative of a sex offender, as well as the time it took for her to traverse these changes. Other participants came to view their experience as an opportunity for new possibilities in life: *“I wanted to get positives out of this situation ... So, I have revisited old hobbies and I have started new ones”* (Bess, supportive partner). Some expressed a view that the experience had changed them for the better:

I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy, but it has allowed me to be a person that I like more, and it’s allowed me to, I suppose, learn that I have to love myself ... Having built myself back up from being destroyed, I am only relying on myself for my happiness now, not anybody else. So, but I do feel that I’ve just been very lucky. (Nell, ex-partner)

It remains important to note however, that while post-traumatic growth was located in some narratives, *all* participants’ accounts consistently described the overall damaging impact that secondary stigma had on their lives, which is also in line with Cahalane and Duff’s (2018) findings. In the present study, tenuous findings of growth were preceded by lengthy temporal periods, as Orla described above: *“it’s probably taken two years for me to get back on track”*. Particularly pertinent for participants

whose relationship ended following discovery was a reclaiming of autonomy, where they established independence through practical tasks which had previously been completed by their offending partners, thus positively impacting their self-worth: “*And, you know when I first moved in this house the fuse went on the tumble dryer ... and then I changed the fuse and it felt like I’d re-wired the entire house*” (Daisy, ex-partner). Notably, factors of kin relationship, age group or conviction stage (that is pre- or post-conviction) were not identified as contributing factors to post-traumatic growth in this study.

## General discussion

A conviction for a sex offence can elicit a stigma of sufficient power that impacts innocent family members (Condry, 2007; Goffman, 1963). This study highlighted how non-offending family members coped with secondary stigma experiences over time, at both the interpersonal and intra-personal levels. The present research represents an important contribution to the relatively sparse literature about family members of CSAM offenders, particularly in the context of the reported sizable increases in this type of sexual crime (Landi, 2021).

### Key findings and implications

#### Coping with secondary stigma

Relatives’ experience of secondary stigma was powerful. However, participants were not passive recipients of societal judgements and secondary stigma experiences but employed various strategies to manage their experiences of secondary stigma. For example, some relocated to new geographical areas while others remained in their homes and tried to somehow survive, mostly using some type of withdrawal behaviour to counter their sense of loss of power and control. Participants often refrained from telling others about their family member’s CSAM crime or used selective disclosure to limit details and protect themselves. Controlling other peoples’ knowledge about the crime was important and the fear that others would find out loomed large (“*The main worry is, you know, just not knowing if it’s going to get out*” Bess). In addition, in line with past research, this study located evidence of cognitive adaptations about crime causation (Duncan et al., 2022; Iffland et al., 2016). However, contrary to recent research findings (Duncan et al., 2022), which noted how ex-partners did not exhibit cognitive adjustments, the present study found that ex-partner narratives *did* make cognitive modifications to alleviate their distress to cope with their secondary stigma experiences.

#### Coping through peer support

The present study emphasised how peer support provided participants with opportunities to share experiences of shame and trauma and served to alleviate their secondary stigma experiences (Jones et al., 2022; Kavanagh & Levenson, 2022; Sample et al., 2018). The extant literature highlights the need for trauma-informed approaches when dealing with this cohort (Evans et al., 2023; Kavanagh & Levenson, 2022; Jones et al., 2022; Sample et al., 2018) and the present study located further evidence about the efficacy of peer-to-peer support. In line with available research, participants’ narratives indicated that sharing experiences with similarly situated peers enabled them to better manage the emotional and psychological impacts of a family member’s engagement in a sexual crime.

The policy implications of such a finding are clear - there is a need for an informal, open social support system for the non-offending family of CSAM offenders. Peer support services need to be more widely available to assist family members to cope with an unprecedented crisis, one worsened by the reality that non-offending family members lose vital support from family and close relationships due to the actions of another (Farkas & Miller, 2007; Kavanagh et al., 2023; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Sample et al., 2018). Participants in this study described a decrease in their sense of isolation and a greater capacity for emotional and practical coping as a result of participating in a

peer-support group. However, while most participants enjoyed the important benefits of peer support, their experience of secondary stigma remained a central feature with many expressing an intention to continue to conceal their stigma into the future, a finding consistent with the broader literature on family members of sex offenders (Condry, 2007; Evans et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2022). Importantly, it remains unclear whether the availability of peer support might have fostered the tentative and surprising findings of post-traumatic growth located in the present study. While factors about the type of kin relationship, age group or conviction stage (that is pre- or post-conviction) were not identified as contributing to this finding, it would be beneficial for future research to identify the specific factors that may have influenced it, which could then be targeted more explicitly by intervening agencies and support agencies.

### *Coping and relationship with offender*

Participants' specific experiences, cognitive adjustments and support needs may differ depending on their relationship with the offender. While the available literature, in the main, has explored the experiences of supportive non-offending partners (Duncan et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2023), the present study represented a more heterogeneous group comprised of supportive partners, ex-partners and parents of offenders, whose experiences, to some degree, depended on their relationship with the offender. For example, in this study, ex-partners and parents of offenders were more likely to consider the impact of the crime on victims, but supportive partners made no reference to child victims, an aspect this present study suggests was indicative of cognitive dissonance (Iffland et al., 2016) and not necessarily a rejection of harm caused to the primary victims of sexual abuse. In this context, future research could focus on exploring the lived experiences of different categories of family members, which would further elucidate strategies different family members use when adapting to a new, post-discovery life. In addition, research should consider whether those partners who remain supportive exhibit more cognitive distortions than those who sever relations with the offender. More information in this area is important as psychoeducational interventions provided by child protection agencies to assess safeguarding parents "ability to protect" their child, while controversial in their use of partners as protective tools (Wager et al., 2015), are designed to address cognitive distortions (Cahalane & Duff, 2018). Importantly, however, the use of such distortions may serve a protective function, or a normal response to the trauma of discovery, and are not necessarily evidence of a lack of protective capabilities (Armitage et al., 2023; Duncan et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2022). In this context, dismantling protective distortions might not best serve the needs of such family members, but rather increase their experiences of distress.

Additionally, while recent research (Duncan et al., 2022) found that an ex-partner did not minimise the offence, the present study found that ex-partners did engage in cognitive modifications about the offence, suggesting that their secondary stigma experience was internalised and persisted despite a lack of proximity to the offending label (Frost, 2011). Little is known about ex-partners' specific support needs following their experience of discovery of the offence, arguably due to a research focus, albeit limited, on supportive family members that might assist in desistance processes or child protection (Cahalane & Duff, 2018; Galloway & Hogg, 2008; Shannon et al., 2013; Wager et al., 2015). Nonetheless, future research might consider their experiences to better ascertain their specific support needs.

### *Strengths and limitations*

Although the findings of the present study have clear policy and clinical implications, there are a number of potential limitations. There is a possibility of selection bias as participants were a group that had sought support from professional agencies and took opportunities to discuss their experiences. In acknowledging this, participants represented a diverse group, comprising of ex-partners, supportive partners and parents of offenders, with research data capturing a number of different perspectives, age groups and backgrounds. Notably, however, all participants identified

as female with cultural backgrounds specifically associated with Ireland and the United Kingdom. Future research should consider the experiences and perceptions of relatives of different ethnicities, ages, social demographics and genders because it remains possible that people with different experiences might experience stigma differently. In addition, the findings of the present study did not differentiate between different classifications of CSAM crime (e.g. possession of CSAM and possession and/or production of CSAM) or reference victim age groups (e.g. pre-pubescent children or young teenagers) the nature of which may have influenced participants views and responses. Future research should consider the different types of CSAM offences to further an understanding of family members' stigma experiences.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study provide further evidence about the long reach of secondary stigma (Condry, 2007) and support calls for the non-offending family of CSAM offenders to be afforded greater acknowledgement and support (Armitage et al., 2023; Duncan et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2023). However, it will require a shift in societal views in relation to the non-offending families of CSAM offenders. Sexual crimes warrant punishment, but this reality does not negate the need to recognise the rights of innocent people. Burgeoning research about the experiences and needs of partners of sex offenders in recent years (Armitage et al., 2023; Duncan et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2022; Kavanagh & Levenson, 2022) while encouraging, has yet to translate to the availability of widespread, easily accessible supports and the realities faced by family members of sex offenders have yet to enter everyday discourse. Lasting change will require a multi-faceted approach at all levels, that is, relational, community, institutional and macro social levels to progress greater accessibility to support for such families.

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## Data availability statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, therefore supporting data is available to the researchers.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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