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Chapter 8

Risk, Regulation and the Reintegration of Sexual Offenders

Anne-Marie McAlinden

Media reporting of and public concern about sexual offending, particularly relating to children, affects and reflects political, policy and organisational responses to those convicted of such crimes. The development of regulatory policies on sexual offending has taken place within a highly emotive and overtly politicized public and policy discourse. This chapter charts the various ways in which the risks imagined or posed by sexual offenders have been conceptualised within public discourses and regulated and managed under the legislative and organisational 'risk paradigm.' Ultimately, it argues that risk-based responses to sexual offending are at best uncertain in their effects and at worst counterproductive, in that they often reduce the potential for successful reintegration. In seeking to look 'beyond risk', the chapter also explores the usefulness of restorative and related practices in supporting sex offender reintegration aimed at the primary and secondary levels of harm prevention.

The structure of the chapter is as follows: The first part will explore the central tenets of media and public concerns about sexual offending, which are heavily premised on the risk posed by predatory 'strangers.' The second part will critically examine a range of measures which have been put in place to manage the risk posed by sex offenders in the community, including offender notification and pre-employment vetting, which are fuelled by

‘precautionary logic’ (Ericson, 2007)) and pre-emptive approaches to ‘risk’ (Zedner, 2009). Within the broader theoretical context of ‘strength’ and ‘needs-based’ approaches to sex offending, the third and final part of the chapter considers alternative practical routes to countering the risk paradigm.

‘Imagined Risk’: Media and Public Discourses on Sexual Offending

The media’s portrayal of sex offenders as the ultimate ‘demon’ or ‘monster’ (Simon, 1998; Wardle, 2007) has been readily absorbed by the public (Berry et al., 2012) helping to foster public panic and fear about the risk posed by sex offenders living in the community (McAlinden, 2007a). In such a context, the conceptualisation of ‘risk’ within public consciousness is characterised by at least three core themes:. First, through the public abhorrence of sexual crime, particularly where children are victims, the sex offender becomes a ‘double outsider’ – literally excluded from the community and also not seen as of the community (Spencer, 2009: 225). This ‘othering’ (Garland, 2001) of sex offenders as physical and moral ‘outsiders’ (Becker, 1963) also helps to locate ‘risk’ firmly in the public sphere, and ‘as coming from somewhere beyond the boundaries’ (Lynch, 2002: 560). This preservation of the sanctity of the home as the realm of safety and protection helps to create a minimalist version of risks to women and children (Cowburn and Dominelli, 2001; see also Newburn and Stanko, 1994). Indeed, such generalized constructions of gendered and sexualised forms of risk ignore in particular the family as a site of danger (Saraga, 2001) where women and children are known to be much more vulnerable to abuse at the hands of men well known to them.¹

¹ Research has established that approximately four-fifths of children and women are abused by those well known to them (See eg Grubin, 1998; Coleman et al., 2007).

Second, there is marked conflation of ‘risk’ into a narrow band of activity whereby generalised risks posed by sex offenders are deemed to be synonymous with the risks posed by sex offenders against children who are considered to pose a very high level of risk (McAlinden, 2007a: 10-11). Sex offending, however, is not a homogeneous category of activity but rather encompasses a wide variety of harms from non-contact offences including voyeurism, indecent exposure and grooming to those at the more serious end of the spectrum such as child sexual abuse and exploitation, rape and sexual murder. Further, not all sex offenders pose the same degree of ‘risk.’ The popular conceptualisation of the adult male predatory ‘paedophile’ as being symptomatic of the threat posed by sex offenders as a whole also helps to mask other forms of risk concerning, for example, adult victims or offending by women or children (McAlinden, 2014a). Indeed, as discussed in the concluding section new and emerging forms of sexual offending such as ‘sexting’ or ‘cyberbullying’ or ‘peer-to-peer grooming’ present new challenges for popular and official discourses on sex offending and the contemporary risk paradigm.

Third, popular discourses on ‘risk’ are also reflective of and shaped by highly polarised cultural assumptions about victims and offenders of sexual crime – who poses a risk and those susceptible to such risks. In this respect, ‘the real child abuse stereotype’ is comprised of binary assumptions about ‘at risk’ victims who are deemed to be vulnerable due to their age, gender and assumed innocence as children. This social construction of risk concerning victims is juxtaposed with that of ‘risky’ individuals who are conversely deemed threatening because of their distal proximity to victims in terms of age, gender and relationship – the older adult predatory male who was previously unknown to their unsuspecting young victim (McAlinden, 2014a). This has also resulted in oppositional ‘victim’ and ‘offender hierarchies’ (Carrabine et al., 2004; McAlinden, 2014a) which cannot accommodate, for

example, 'deviant' victims' or 'vulnerable' offenders who lie outside of dominant risk paradigms. By way of example, in relation to sexually harmful behaviour by children and young people, there is a fundamental tension between 'perceptions of children as "at risk" and as potentially threatening' (Scott et al., 1998: 689).

Archetypal notions of the risks to children concerning sexual offending have in large part stemmed from a number of high profile cases of sexual abuse and murder of children. These have included the murder of eight-year old Sarah Payne by known paedophile Roy Whiting in Sussex in the summer of 2000 and the 2002 murders in Soham of two ten-year old school girls, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, by school care taker Ian Huntley. Such cases 'crystallized fears over the image of the predatory child sex offender' (Greer, 2007: 28) and have become 'signal crimes' (Innes, 2004) in underlying the need for further regulatory measures to control the risk posed by potential sex offenders in the community. The 'Soham murders' led to the Bichard Inquiry (2004) and reform of the law on pre-employment vetting and barring.² Similarly, in the aftermath of the Sarah Payne case, the former *News of the World* newspaper established its 'Name and Shame' campaign which called for authorities to publicly identify all known sex offenders. This ultimately came to fruition with the introduction of 'Sarah's Law', allowing parents or carers to check the background of those with unsupervised access to their children.³

The existence of similar case examples throughout the USA and elsewhere (eg 'Megan's Law' in the USA and 'Natalie's Law' in Germany)⁴ is indicative of a populist approach to

² See the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 now scaled back under the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012, Part V.

³ See the Criminal Justice Act 2003, s 327A.

⁴ 'Megan's Law', named after seven-year old Megan Kanka who was raped and killed by a neighbour who had two previous convictions for sexual abuse, is a body of laws which require sex offenders to register with local

policy making (Bottoms, 1995; Johnstone, 2000) which has tended to characterise penal policy responses to this particular category of offender. In essence, in response to public concerns about the dangers posed by sex offenders and media-led calls for further punitive responses, the state has enacted a burgeoning range of risk-averse policies. However, this approach to law making has tended to result in a self-fulfilling prophecy or what Brownlee (1998) terms a vicious policy cycle – legislating against risk helps to legitimise imagined risks on the part of society which in turn fuel the demand and reinforce the need for further regulatory responses to managing risk. As discussed further below, the result is a range of risk-based policies which are at best uncertain and unpredictable in their intended effects and outcomes. Moreover, at worst, they may also be counter-productive by increasing rather than reducing the risk of re-offending and undermining sex offender management and reintegration.

Regulating ‘Risk’: Legislative and Policy Frameworks on Sex Offender Risk Assessment and Management

In the contemporary era of the ‘regulatory state’ (Braithwaite, 2000), or ‘post-regulatory state’ (Scott, 2004), risk-based logic has emerged as a key feature of debates on crime and justice (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997; Shearing, 2000). Scholars have noted a shift in the theoretical underpinnings of criminal justice policy ‘From Dangerousness to Risk’ (Castel, 1991) and towards a defining contemporary framework based on ‘precautionary logic’ (Ericson, 2007). Pre-emptive approaches to risk seek to govern ‘worst case scenarios’ and prevent all possible manifestations of future harm before they occur (Zedner, 2009).

Reactionary risk-averse policies to policing or security in general (Crawford, 2003; Loader

law enforcement and which permit various forms of community notification of information about sex offenders (Bedarf, 1995). Similarly, in Germany, ‘Natalie’s Law’, implemented following the rape and murder of seven-year old Natalie Aster by a paroled sex offender, tightens indeterminate sentencing and increases criminal penalties (Albrecht, 1997).

and Walker, 2007) have formed the basis of targeted intervention with selected 'at risk' groups such as sexual offenders. Sex offenders against children have been singled out as warranting 'extra-legal' punishment because of the emotive nature of the crime and the ubiquitous risk they are seen as presenting (Pratt, 2000). This 'differential justice' (Weaver and McNeill, 2010: 274) has manifested itself in a policy of 'radical prevention' (Hebenton and Seddon, 2009: 2) with sexual offenders via preventive detention and controls placed on dangerous or 'risky' individuals in the community.

Within this broader policy context, risk has reshaped the use of punishment as a regulatory tool. A distinguishing feature of contemporary trends in social regulation is 'hyper innovation' (Moran, 2003; Crawford, 2006) or what Lacey (2004) terms 'criminalisation as regulation', where the state attempts to assert its authority via the imposition of a burgeoning amount of criminal sanctions. Since the late 1990s a plethora of broadly exclusionary measures have been introduced as situational attempts to control the whereabouts and behaviour of sex offenders in the community (Kemshall and Wood, 2007). Key policy developments within the United Kingdom, for example, include sex offender notification, which requires various categories of sex offender to notify their personal details to the police, and pre-employment vetting and barring (McAlinden, 2010a). In addition, Part 2 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 also introduced further regulatory measures in the form of risk of sexual harm orders and sexual offences prevention orders. The latter can be used to prohibit the offender from frequenting places where there are children such as parks and school playgrounds, while the former seek to criminalise the preparatory acts involved in abuse and can be used whether or not the individual has a prior record of offending. Most notably perhaps, the enactment of the offence of 'meeting a child following sexual grooming etc'

seeks to encapsulate potential ‘risk’ by criminalising the preparatory behaviour before actual abuse or harm occurs (McAlinden, 2012).⁵

In the United Kingdom, the legislative and policy framework has been enhanced by the development of a cohesive inter-agency infrastructure as part of ‘joined up’ working (Cowan, Pantazis and Gilroy, 2001: 439) and ‘the end to end risk management of the offender.’ The introduction of Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) across the United Kingdom, with some localised variations (see Stafford et al., 2011), has formalised arrangements for assessing and managing the risks posed by sexual and violent offenders. The core task of MAPPA is to facilitate the exchange of relevant information between key statutory and voluntary agencies and classify sex offenders into risk categories based on a high, medium or low risk of re-offending (Kemshall and Maguire, 2001). The logic of this risk assessment model, which has generally been endorsed as a model of best practice, is that it targets those offenders who pose the greatest risk to public safety. Via forms of community notification such as ‘Sarah’s Law’, referred to above, or the inclusion of lay members as part of MAPPA, as happens in England and Wales and Northern Ireland, the public have also been admitted to the process of risk management, albeit on a limited and tightly controlled basis.

Criminologists have noted that expansive forms of state regulation are leading to increasingly volatile, contradictory and incoherent penal policies (Garland, 1999; O’Malley, 1999). Consistent with these broader arguments, I have previously contended that regulatory activity in the field of sex offender risk management has resulted in particularly uncertain and unsafe

⁵ See Sexual Offences Act 2003, s 15.

policies (McAlinden, 2010a). In the main, there are clear limitations to official knowledge about risks posed by largely unknown individuals who may have never come to the attention of the authorities and who remain beyond the reach of regulatory frameworks.⁶ The focus on known and identifiable risks, and not the hidden and therefore the most dangerous ones, may also divert resources and focus from the real risks and problems, including those which reside in the private sphere. This is indicative of what Hebenton and Seddon (2009: 12, quoting Sunstein, 2002) term the 'risk-risk' problem of the precautionary approach whereby enhanced focus on managing or reducing one set of risks can create increased or displaced risks elsewhere. At the same time, the state's enactment of regulatory measures as a demonstration of its strength and commitment to controlling the problem (Garland, 2001) may create a 'punishment deficit' (Brownlee, 1998) in terms of creating unrealistic public expectations about the capacity of the state to control risk.

The ethos of regulatory mechanisms such as sex offender notification is 'knowledge-risk-security' (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997) – the aim is to garner knowledge about sex offenders and their whereabouts in order to control risk and increase public protection (Hebenton and Thomas, 1996). In practice, however, the implementation of risk-based regulatory schemes may actually be counterproductive in undermining rather than securing effective risk management. On one hand, making the community part of the risk management process and admitting the public as consumers of such knowledge about sex offenders may help to reduce risks and make communities feel safer and better protected. On the other hand, however, visible public punishments which identify individuals as potential sex offenders, such as notification or tagging, may have a negative and detrimental impact on how sex offenders are

⁶ Research shows, for example, that fewer than five per cent of sex offenders are apprehended (Salter, 2003) and that only twelve per cent of rapes involving children (Smith et al., 2000) are reported to the police.

perceived and accepted by wider society and ultimately their community reintegration. The public shaming of a person as a sex offender may result in 'disintegrative shaming' (Braithwaite, 1989) which shames the offender rather than the offending behaviour resulting in the symbolic and literal exile of sex offenders from the community. This may perpetuate a cycle of stigmatisation, ostracism and ultimately a return to offending behaviour (Edwards and Hensley, 2001; McAlinden, 2005, 2007a). The underlying and unintended policy effects of precautionary approaches to criminal justice, therefore, may generate 'fear and with it intolerance,' (Ericson, 2007: 155), suspicion and exclusion of deviants from the local community.

'Beyond Risk': From Regulation to the Reintegration of Sexual Offenders

Given the deficits of 'risk-based' approaches to the reintegration of sexual offenders which have been outlined above, this section of the chapter moves to consider the alternative 'strengths-based' model of rehabilitation (Maruna and LeBel, 2002; Burnett and Maruna, 2006). The core idea behind the strengths model, which is linked to the restorative justice tradition, is that genuine offender re-integration involves 'more than physical re-entry into the community' (Burnett and Maruna, 2006: 84). It should involve 'earned redemption' (Bazemore, 1999) in the sense of "earning" one's place back in the moral community' (Burnett and Maruna, 2006: 84). Opportunities are provided for offenders to develop pro-social concepts of self, usually in the form of socially useful activities, such as rewarding work (Burnett and Maruna, 2006: 84). It also considers the other main and closely related 'deficit' model outlined by Maruna and LeBel (2002) – 'needs-based' – strategies which focus on helping ex-offenders to overcome addictions or learn basic skills in order to reduce the risk of re-offending.

Core to this approach is the notion of ‘reintegrative shaming’ (Braithwaite, 1989) which is the converse of ‘disintegrative shaming’ and formal regulatory approaches to risk management outlined above. Shaming of the reintegrative variety is comprised of two core elements: (1) the overt disapproval of the delinquent act by socially significant others; and (2) the on-going inclusion of the offender within an interdependent relationship (Zhang 1995, p. 251). Reintegrative shaming focuses on shaming the offending behaviour rather than the offender themselves and thus reinforces an offender’s membership in civil society. There is a ‘cognitive restructuring’ towards responsibility (Toch, 2000) as the offender is actively encouraged to develop community orientated concepts of self (Bazemore, 1999) and innate motivations for personal change. Such approaches offer a more constructive, viable and proactive means of addressing the myriad of problems which relate to offender reintegration which relate not only to the offender but also to the community in which they are placed (McAlinden, 2005, 2007a). Measures which reflect the hallmarks of reintegrative shame culture are circles of support and accountability.

Circles of support originated in Canada as a means of reintegrating high risk sex offenders on release from prison. They are based on the twin aims of safety and support – addressing public concerns surrounding the risk of re-offending and also the offender’s needs in terms of reintegration. The circle, comprised of approximately 4-6 trained members, is built around the offender as the core member and involving the wider community in partnership with state and voluntary agencies. The scheme provides intensive support, guidance and supervision for the offender to minimise risk and assist with the practical aspects of reintegration. The offender agrees to relate to the circle of support, pursue treatment and to act responsibly in the community. The offender has daily contact with someone from the circle in the high risk phase just after release which gradually diminishes (McAlinden 2007a, pp. 168-74). The

circles model operates across a growing range of jurisdictions. It has been extended throughout England and Wales and Scotland and is beginning to be piloted across a number of other European jurisdictions including France, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Northern Ireland. Such schemes have had considerable success over the last decade in Canada and England and Wales in particular in protecting communities by challenging pro-offending or 'risky' behaviour prior to the commission of an offence and in supporting offenders with reintegration (Wilson et al., 2007; Hanvey et al., 2011, pp. 150-65; Bates et al. 2012).

The ethos of circles is to manage wrongdoing within a communitarian society and informally sanction deviance by reintegration into cohesive networks, rather than by formal restraint (McAlinden 2007a, pp. 168-74). The community is involved in expressing disapproval of the sex offending behaviour, but also in providing protection and redress for victims, and in supporting the offender in their efforts to desist and reintegrate. Circles also encapsulate the 'strengths-based' philosophy. A combination of stable employment, accommodation, supportive relationships and treatment are part of a 'good lives' approach or positive reintegrative work with sex offenders (Ward and Marshall, 2004; Ward et al., 2007). They acknowledge in particular the critical contribution of the community in supporting offender rehabilitation as well as the important commitment required by the offender. By addressing both the individual and structural obstacles to reintegration, they offer a more effective mechanism for securing offender reintegration and reducing the risk of re-offending (McAlinden, 2010b).

Circle programmes should also be supplemented by public health approaches which address the needs of victims, offenders and communities affected by sexual crime. As Kemshall and Wood (2007) have made explicit, there are two main approaches to addressing risk: the

‘community protection model’ and the ‘public health model.’ The former, as noted above, is characterised with concerns about ‘risk’, regulation and ‘precautionary logic’ and epitomised in the legal and organisational frameworks for controlling sex offender risk. This model is bolstered by the ‘construction and demonization of the “predatory paedophile”’ (Kemshall and Wood (2007: 210-11) which has underpinned both contemporary popular and official discourses on sexual offending. In contrast, advocates of alternative public health approaches usually premise these on the failures of traditional retributive and reactive responses, particularly in terms of reducing the incidence of sexual offending and simultaneously inflating public fear and stigmatisation concerning sexual offenders (Laws, 2000: 30). The public health model emphasises the language of prevention and harm reduction rather than that of surveillance and risk management (Kemshall and Wood, 2007: 211). Key elements are the proactive (rather than reactive) management of sexual offending; challenging inappropriate behaviour; self-risk management by sex offenders; and giving the community a vested role in the day to day management of risk (Kemshall and Wood, 2007: 212).

Public health approaches, as applied to sexually harmful behaviour, identify three levels of prevention: primary, secondary and tertiary (Laws, 2000, 2008). The primary level of prevention aims to prevent sexually harmful behaviour before it occurs. This is exemplified by public education and awareness programmes which inform society about the facts and risks surrounding sexual offending, including how they be actively identified and managed. The secondary level of prevention is aimed at early identification and intervention and engaging with first time or adolescent offenders to prevent them from progressing to more entrenched patterns of sex offending. Given the limitations of the tertiary or criminal justice level of prevention in reactively responding to a limited range of known risks, a combination of primary and secondary level initiatives should be developed in order to put in place more

holistic and proactive responses to managing the risk posed by sex offenders (McAlinden, 2012: ch 7). This would include a tapestry of services for victims, offenders and communities affected by sexual crime such as early staged intervention with ‘vulnerable’ children and families; training for professionals around a wider range of forms of sexually harmful behaviour towards children, including the risks presented by children and young people themselves; fuller provision of intervention programmes with first-time or young offenders; and further mainstream work with the offender’s family as part of reintegration and release (McAlinden, 2012: 266-78).

Conclusion

The notion of ‘stranger danger’ has dominated contemporary public discourses about the risks posed by sex offenders against children. As Cowburn and Dominelli (2001) have argued, this concept calls for a scientific paradigm of risk assessment and management which promotes the false expectation that community safety can be achieved by ever more sophisticated and expansive precautionary modes of risk management. This chapter has advocated that the ‘strengths’ or ‘needs based’ model (Burnett and Maruna, 2006) of sex offender reintegration represents a more effective approach than current risk-based approaches operating alone (Ward and Maruna, 2007). An amalgam of these approaches would address the limitations of risk-based approaches and represent a more effective approach to offender reintegration and a better balance between risk management and rehabilitation (McAlinden, 2010b).

The challenges of moving ‘beyond risk’, however, are perhaps most acute for this specific category of offender. In particular, there are ongoing difficulties in getting the public to be

accepting of a sex offender living or working in their midst.⁷ Failure to address stereotypes surrounding the risks associated with sexual offending, including those which lie closest to home, via a government led public education programme may ultimately act as a barrier to public acceptance of a range of viable, less punitive interventions for managing risk. In addition, new and emerging forms of sexual offending including those presented by children and young people themselves are beginning to emerge as the ‘new frontier’ of risk management and child protection. Sexually harmful or exploitative behaviours such as ‘peer to peer grooming’, ‘sexting’ and ‘cyberbullying’ undermine our traditional thinking about ‘risks’ and risk anxiety concerning children (McAlinden, 2014b). They underline the fact that children and young people may present ‘as risk’ as well as ‘at risk.’ More broadly, they also challenge us to confront our deep seated societal and cultural assumptions about who or what constitutes a risk and how best to respond to such risks.

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⁷ For example, in one Northern Ireland based study of public attitudes to sex offenders 70 percent of the 500 adults surveyed thought that it was unacceptable for child sex offenders to live in their local community (McAlinden 2007b: 52).

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