

# **Lived experiences of female relatives (Ireland and UK) of men who download Child Sex Abuse Material (CSAM)**

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# Background

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**My Background:** Social Worker with over 25 years of experience in both child protection and criminal justice arenas. I repeatedly asked the question: *How do relatives of people accused or convicted of sexual crimes cope?*

**Problem:** People accused and/or convicted of sexual crime are awarded a 'special criminal status' in the eyes of the public (Rogers & Ferguson, 2001; Torvey et al., 2022). However, little known about their families' experiences despite being viewed as valuable in terms of child safeguarding and desistance processes.

**Gap:** Very limited knowledge base about their experiences and therefore not possible to target specific support needs of such families.

# Background to Research

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This research **did not specifically seek family members of those accused and/or convicted of downloading CSAM** – People who answered the call to participate in this research identified as having a family member associated with possession of CSAM.

Numbers accessing **CSAM are known to be increasing:**

- Hotline.ie – An Irish national reporting centre, noted that since its inception in November 1999, **51% of all CSAM ever identified was recorded in 2019 and 2020**, highlighting the sharp and rapid rise in online CSAM
- UK – 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).

**Many people arrested or convicted of sexual crimes do not live alone, but with close family members**

# Media headlines

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## **‘Father of three caught in possession of images and videos of child pornography’**

(Dodd, 2022) – Media reporting specific to CSAM crime in Ireland and the United Kingdom as there is no identifiable primary victim - associated reporting included the name and address of the individual, identifying family members, including minor children.

Evidence, following media coverage, that **relatives of serious offenders in general** can face societal blame for the actions of their family member - e.g., Harold Shipman’s wife or the families of mass shooters in the United States faced extreme scrutiny and stigma experiences.

**In jurisdictions without public sex offender registers, innocent families can also experience repercussions**

**Example – Ireland (2010):** a local authority passed a motion that no one convicted of sexual crime or “those who consort” with them would be allocated housing. Reason: the home planned for the partner and children of a person convicted of sexual crime was burned by the local community despite assurances he would not reside there.

# Limited Available Research

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Questions about **how families cope with their stigma experiences** have received limited empirical attention despite their importance in **desistance processes and in safeguarding children**.

What is known about their experiences (similar across many jurisdictions) includes:

- Lost friendships
- Ruptured family relations
- Increased childcare responsibilities
- Financial problems
- Impact on children – an under-researched array of problems faced by children suddenly separated from a parent

(Armitage et al., 2023; Condry et al., 2016; Farkas & Miller, 2009; Kavanagh et al., 2023; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009).

# The present research

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***RQ: What are the lived experiences of those with a family member who has been arrested on suspicion of, charged with, or convicted of a CSAM offence***

Qualitatively explored family **experiences of fifteen participants (mothers, partners and ex-partners)** recruited via four gatekeeper agencies across Ireland and the United Kingdom (seven of whom identified as parents with minor children).

## **Interviews:**

- Use of a semi-structured qualitative interview schedule.
- Thirteen participants - telephone interviews which provided an increased sense of anonymity (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004)
- Two participants – face-to-face interviews
- Post interview debriefs and transcripts forwarded to those who indicated a wish to review their interviews.

# Analytic Approach

**Reflexive Thematic Analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2021) – inductive 6-phase iterative process - constructionist epistemology using experiential orientation to data analysis.

1

Phase 1:  
**Familiarization  
Phase**

2

Phase 2: **Open-  
Coding  
process:**  
Systematically  
working through  
dataset

3

Phase 3:  
**Generating  
Themes:**  
Iterative  
process of  
interpreting  
meaningfulness  
across the  
dataset

4

Phase 4:  
**Reviewing  
Potential  
Themes:**  
Reviewing  
accuracy and  
reliability of  
identified  
themes

5

Phase 5:  
**Defining and  
Naming  
Themes:**  
Candidate  
themes were  
refined and  
labeled, with  
each providing  
coherent  
account of data  
independent of  
each other

6

Phase 6:  
**Generating the  
Report:** data  
were  
synthesized and  
contextualized  
in Results  
Section

# Results: Interpreted Themes

Theme	Subtheme
Shattered Worldview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Trauma of discovery</li><li>○ Emotional collapse</li></ul>
Injured Self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ The birth of a shameful liar</li><li>○ Increasingly negative views about the self</li><li>○ Fractured trust in self and others</li><li>○ Self-blame for the sexual crime</li><li>○ A silent grieving</li></ul>
Contamination by Association	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Ruptured family relationships</li><li>○ Contagion effect</li><li>○ Collateral damage via institutional processes</li><li>○ Invisible yet 'othered' by society</li></ul>
Navigation through secondary stigma experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Reconciling a loved one with the crime</li><li>○ Changes designed to mitigate against societal stigma</li><li>○ To whom, how and when to tell the truth</li><li>○ Overcoming the issue of scarce supports</li><li>○ The need to protect oneself and one's family</li></ul>
Fragile Future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Beginning to advocate for change</li><li>○ Ongoing uncertainty about the future</li><li>○ Reconstructing self-worth</li></ul>

# Shattered Worldview

## Shattered Worldview

### Truama of Discovery

*“You know, it is difficult to explain because, literally, everything is normal and within one sentence your life's completely different, and it will never be the same again. Never ”*

### Emotional Collapse

*“And, you know, I’ve hit rock bottom, I’ve had thoughts of suicide”*

# Injured Self

## Injured self

### The birth of a shameful liar

*“We’re all tainted by it. So, it still can’t come out and we can’t talk about it to people”*

### Increasingly negative views about the ‘self’

*“It just knocked my confidence . . . I didn’t want to go out. I still find social things very difficult”*

### Fractured trust in self and others

*“The trust in yourself just goes completely, so, you know, even now, I’m ten years on and I don’t, I don’t trust myself”*

### Self-blame for sexual crime

*“I would still blame myself, yeah. and I’ll always blame myself”*

### A silent grieving

*“It took me so long to get over him, longer than I ever admitted to anybody. I think that people wanted me to be over him a lot quicker than I was over him”*

# Contamination by Association

## Contamination by Association

### Ruptured family relationships

*“Although my son dealt well with it at the start when I told hm, he has since withdrawn...he hasn’t been able to talk to his dad about it”*

### Contagion Effect

*“My house was attacked with my children in it”*

### Collateral damage via Institutional practices

*“The person who has to deal with this is not the person who’s done the offending. That is what is so, so, unjust”*

### Invisible yet ‘Othered’ by society

*“ You should be glad you haven’t been sexually abused, or your kids haven’t been sexually abused...I’m supposed to be grateful that I’m not a victim or perpetrator and my children aren’t victims. I’m supposed to sit here saying, oh, just carry on then. ”*

# Navigating Secondary Stigma

## Navigation through secondary stigma experiences

Reconciling a loved one with the crime

*“It was just mind blowing...I couldn’t wrap my head around what she was saying...no not him”*

Changes designed to mitigate against societal stigma

*“I’ve changed my name...and I’m doing the same for the children”*

To whom, how and when to tell the truth

*“The balance of choosing who you’re going to tell and how many people...is really really difficult to make”*

Overcoming the issue of scarce supports

[Peer support] *“just the level of understanding put me so much at ease...it made me actually feel in a safe place”*

The need to protect oneself and one’s family

*“I needed to protect myself, I needed to protect the children...everybody suddenly needed protecting”*

# Fragile Future

## Fragile Future

**Beginning to advocate for change**

*“If there could be support for people on day one for this...because you will not survive it emotionally without”*

**Ongoing uncertainty about the future**

*“I don’t, can’t look beyond what’s here...I do my best, I take it one day at a time, I don’t actually go forward”*

**Reconstructing self-worth**

*“I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy, but it has allowed me to be a person that I like more”*

# Key findings and implications

## Need for Trauma-Informed Approach

- Participants (**parents, supportive partners and ex-partners**) expressed high levels of confusion and bewilderment at the time of and following discovery of the offence. A more systemic trauma informed approach emanating from institutional services would assist family members to manage trauma and help safeguard the whole family.

## Privacy requirements to protect innocent family members

- The research highlighted **a lack of acknowledgment** about the impact that sexual crime has on non-offending family members, including a **right to privacy**.
- While privacy laws ensure data collected from research participants remains confidential, the media remains unregulated in its power to stigmatise through providing identifying information about those convicted of CSAM offenses, across Ireland and the United Kingdom, with harmful consequences for family members and the minor children of such offenders

# Key findings and implications

## Coping with secondary stigma:

- Participants (**parents, supportive partners and ex-partners**) were **not passive but employed various strategies to manage their situation**, including geographical relocation, limiting knowledge by reducing their circle of social supports, and using cognitive adaptations to explain why a loved family member downloaded CSAM.

## Coping through peer support:

- **Peer support** provided participants with opportunities to **share experiences of trauma and shame and alleviated secondary stigma experiences**.
- A number of participants were unaware for a significant period about the availability of peer supports, highlighting a **clear policy implication** about the need for **informal, open social support system for families** of those accused and/or convicted of CSAM crimes.

## Coping and relationship with offender:

- Experiences and **cognitive adjustments differed depending on the relationship with the offender**, and this research suggests that the **use of adjustments served a protective function**, a normal response to the trauma following discovery of the offence (Duncan et al., 2022).
- All participants (incl. ex-partners) engaged to differing levels in cognitive modifications about offence causation, suggesting the secondary stigma experience was internalised despite a lack of proximity to the stigmatised label (Frost, 2011).

# Evidence-Based Recommendations

(Secondary) **Victim status** awarded, with ensuing protections, including a right to privacy in **recognition of families' trauma experience**, needs to start to become a central consideration of policy and practice.

A fundamental **perspective shift** in how families, including **children of CSAM offenders**, are viewed to mitigate experiences of shame and judgment.

Need for more trauma-informed approaches harnessing the power of **peer support** - future research might look at whether support from similarly situated others contributed to findings of **tentative post-traumatic growth**.

Need for services (incl. social services and criminal justice agencies) to understand the extent to which the use of **cognitive adjustments serves a protective function** when safeguarding parents engage with psychoeducational interventions.

Future research might consider **children's experiences from children's perspectives** to generate greater depth of understanding about their lived experiences.



**QUESTIONS?**  
**COMMENTS?**

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