Registered Sex Offenders' experiences of home visits in England & Wales: Are the police expected to integrate "risk" with "desistance"

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ABSTRACT:

In England and Wales, adult male registered sex offenders (RSOs) are risk assessed and managed using a tool known as Active Risk Management System (ARMS) and this risk assessment is carried out by a specialist group of police officers known as Management of Violent or Sexual Offenders (MOSOVO) at the RSOâ€™s home, known as â€˜the home visitâ€™. The purpose of this paper is to understand RSOs views of the home visit and risk assessment and to make recommendations to MOSOVO as to improve future home visit and risk assessment practice.

This study aimed to examine a sample of RSOsâ€™ views of the risk assessment and home visit process. Three police forces in England and Wales agreed to facilitate sampling of 10 RSOs who varied in their level of risk - namely, low, medium, high and very high. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken and thematically analysed using Braune & Clarke (2006).

Three themes were developed from the analysis: Waiting for the first home visit provoked feelings of anxiety and heightened levels of shame; the first home visit was â€˜like a chatâ€™ but not for the higher risk RSOs; and the property search and observations were non-invasive, but RSOs were not fully informed of the home visit. We discuss these experiences in light of the growing call for MOSOVOs to both manage risk and assist desistance and present recommendations for improving both the home visit and risk assessment practice.

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Registered Sex Offenders' experiences of risk assessments and home visits in England & Wales: Can we expect the police to integrate "risk" with "desistance" practices?

Authors details have been removed for peer review

Abstract

Purpose

In England and Wales, adult male registered sex offenders (RSOs) are risk assessed and managed using a tool known as Active Risk Management System (ARMS) and this risk assessment is carried out by a specialist group of police officers known as Management of Violent or Sexual Offenders (MOSOVO) at the RSO's home, known as 'the home visit'. The purpose of this paper is to understand RSOs views of the home visit and risk assessment and to make recommendations to MOSOVO as to improve future home visit and risk assessment practice.

Methodology

This study aimed to examine a sample of RSOs' views of the risk assessment and home visit process. Three police forces in England and Wales agreed to facilitate sampling of 10 RSOs who varied in their level of risk - namely, low, medium, high and very high. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken and thematically analysed using Braune & Clarke (2006).

Findings

Three themes were developed from the analysis: Waiting for the first home visit provoked feelings of anxiety and heightened levels of shame; the first home visit was 'like a chat' but not for the higher risk RSOs; and the property search and observations were non-invasive, but RSOs were not fully informed of the home visit. We discuss these experiences in light of the growing call for MOSOVOs to both manage risk and assist desistance and present recommendations for improving both the home visit and risk assessment practice.

Originality

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Key words

Sex Offenders, Home Visits; MOSOVO; Risk assessment; Desistance

Introduction

There are currently 68,357 persons that have been recorded as a registered sex offender (RSO) in England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, 2023). RSOs are placed within the constraints of the Sexual Offenders Act 1997, which provides a lawful obligation on certain RSOs post-conviction, with a specific type of sexual offence, to register with the police service in England and Wales, otherwise known as the 'Sex Offenders Register' (Thomas, 2008). Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA; Ministry of Justice, 2022a), established by the Criminal Justice Act 2003, places joint statutory duties on the Police, Probation and Prison Service, with a primary function of protecting the public through the management of RSOs. MAPPA deal with different categories of offenders: Registered Sexual Offenders (Category 1); Violent Offenders (Category 2); and Other Dangerous Offenders (Category 3), with MAPPA determining the level of management and resources required to safely manage people within each sub-population. Those contained at Level 1 are managed by a single lead agency, at Level 2 a multi-agency approach to support the risk management plan is required, and Level 3 requires senior management oversight to authorise additional resources when needed (Kewley & Brereton, 2022).

The majority, three quarters of MAPPA cases (68,357 as of March 2023), are grouped under Category 1 (Ministry of Justice, 2022a) - this being RSOs, with nearly all (99.2%) managed at the lowest level of risk (Ministry of Justice, 2022a). Allocating a case to the lowest level of risk management means that single agency management has been deemed sufficient to manage the identified risks and needs of the case; without the need for formal multi-agency intervention (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2023). Of course, information sharing, and multi-agency co-operation continues, particularly if risk or need changes, but even cases assessed as 'high risk' of re-offending can be managed by a single agency (Ministry of Justice, 2022a).

The management of RSOs is carried out by specialist teams of police officers and staff, also known as Offender Managers, generally located within Public Protection Units (although unit structures vary across each force); Offender Managers are tasked with the Management of Sexual or Violent Offenders (MOSOVO; College of Policing, 2020a). MOSOVO teams are a highly specialist and unique group within the police. They are trained, experienced police officers and staff, whose role it is to assess risk and manage MAPPA

cases. Despite the large number of people with a history of sexual offending being managed by MOSOVO officers ('MOSOVOs') across the country, very little is known of this unique group (Thomas & Marshall, 2021). This is perhaps surprising given their role is critical in both public protection and helping support people convicted of sexual offending reduce and manage their risk.

One of the key roles MOSOVOs undertake is the assessment of risk a person convicted of a sexual offence may pose in relation to both the likelihood of future sexual re-offending and the degree of harm future offending might cause (College of Policing, 2020a). Assessing future risk of sexual re-offending is complex and a notoriously thorny problem for criminal justice agents (Kewley *et al*., 2020a). Thus, to assist MOSOVOs to reach conclusions about potential future behaviours, they have at their disposal a variety of actuarial and clinically informed tools (including the Active Risk Management System: ARMS, Spousal Abuse Risk Assessment: SARA, Offender Assessment System: OASys and Risk Matrix 2000: RM2000) the results of which inform a person's *Risk Management Plan*. We have previously and extensively discussed the development of these risk tools (Kewley & Blandford, 2017) and the subsequent quality of risk assessment and risk management plans (Kewley *et al*., 2015, 2020b); MOSOVOs' views as to the effectiveness of ARMS (Kewley, 2017); as well as the effectiveness of police training in relation to the risk management of this population and the extent to which MOSOVOs implement this training in practice (Mydlowski & Turner-Moore, 2023); thus, we do not intend to repeat those discussions here. Instead, we intend to extend the dialogue around the voices of the RSOs and their experiences of the current risk assessment and home visit practice.

Before we consider this, we provide some context to the risk paradigm MOSOVOs operate within. Risk assessment is not the same as risk prediction; no-one can guarantee the future behaviours of others (Kewley *et al*, 2020a); however, this is to some extent the expectation placed on MOSOVOs. In response to a number of high-profile cases such as Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman and subsequent media and public pressure, legislators have sought to increase sentencing in ways that Thomas and Marshall (2021) have argued to be punitive (e.g. longer prison sentences and rigid Sexual Harm Prevention Orders [SHPO] for people with sexual convictions), rather than rehabilitative. Legitimising processes of *pervasive or mass punishment* is not limited to people convicted of specific offences but is a political approach and response to general *crime* and *the criminal*, evident across all facets

of Western criminal justice systems (McNeill, 2019). Yet, Thomas and Marshall (2021) have argued that, for those with histories of sexual offending, strategies to punish and perceptions of risk can be very harsh, or pervasive, so much so, that people with sexual convictions often exist in a state of 'civic purgatory' (Henley, 2018), in which, arbitrary timescales can be applied to legal sanctions, such as stringent registration and SHPO requirements. The introduction of registration requirements in the 1997 Sex Offenders Act required people convicted of a sexual offence to provide details, such as their name and address, to the police at a specified point in time following conviction/release, now known as the Sex Offenders Register. Initially intended as a register for the police to verify and identify suspects after a sexual crime was committed, also it is increasingly claimed (usually by politicians) to be a tool that protects the public and deters sexual violence (Levenson *et al*., 2016).

Pemberton *et al*., (2023) further outline the challenges in which MOSOVOs themselves operate. On the one hand they work within cultures of containment (English, 1998) which require them to manage the RSOs' restrictions that are imposed by the court, issued as a result of both retrospective (past behaviours) and prospective (future potential behaviours) risk. While some containment policing techniques show promise, including targeted management that prioritises the direction of resources to those deemed high risk, and technology-assisted management (Christensen *et al*., 2021); using these approaches alone, might serve to inhibit the desistance process. Albeit unintentionally, such approaches are potentially stigmatizing due to the restrictions placed on the RSO and limit opportunities for people to access social and psychological capital (Mann *et al*., 2019), which may inhibit or facilitate desistance, respectively. Indeed, given the pervading perception by the media and general public, who perceive the risk presented by those convicted of sexual offences as fixed and unchangeable, it is unsurprising that professionals working in the field operate with an overactive focus on risk and suppress opportunities or interactions to foster the desistance process (Mullins & Kirkwood, 2022). Calls for practitioners to integrate both risk and desistance practices into assessment and risk management approaches is now standard across MAPPA agencies (Kemshall, 2021) because comprehensive approaches to risk management are found to be more effective (*The HMPPS Approach to the Management and Rehabilitation of People Convicted of Sexual Offending*, 2021; Maruna & Mann, 2019).

Despite limited empirical examination of the MOSOVO context, wider criminal justice literature indicates that when formal relationships between those sanctioned by the court and supervising officers are grounded in trust, respect, and a belief in change; desistance can be fostered (Villeneuve *et al*., 2021). Indeed, the *Four Pillars of Risk Management*, central to the work of all MAPPA agents (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2023), requires risk management plans to detail how both the risk and needs of people subject to MAPPA sanctions will be met through a) Supervision, b) Monitoring and Controls, c) Interventions and Treatment, and d) Victim Safety plans. Comprehensive and detailed risk management plans ought to account for each of these four elements and be driven and justified by the risk and needs as assessed by the Offender Manager. Risk management plans must detail strategies to both mitigate potential future risk, as well as tactics that strengthen the capacity and capability of the RSO to successfully reintegrate into society and help identify and provide opportunities that encourage the desistance process (Kewley & Brereton, 2022).

However, MOSOVOs walk a thin line between protecting the public and helping support the rehabilitation process of those convicted of sexual offending, as one of the traditional roles of policing is to protect the public, yet the OM role has a focus on desistance and rehabilitation. This is perhaps most evident when we consider the pillars of 'supervision' and 'monitoring and control' in which MOSOVOs use (usually unannounced) home visits (Mydlowski & Turner-Moore, 2023) to: check compliance (notification or court conditions); confirm the person lives at the address; fulfil a duty of care to the public; monitor new/existing risk; gather information/intelligence; detect other offences; and fulfil a duty of care to the person convicted of sexual offending (College of Policing, 2020b). The frequency of home visits varies case to case but should be clearly determined by the MOSOVOs risk assessment and outlined and reviewed in the subsequent risk management plan (Mydlowski & Turner-Moore, 2023).

Given that the role of MOSOVO is crucial to public protection, it is surprising that there is little evaluative research in this area. To date, there has not been any study that has gathered the experiences of RSOs in the UK who have been subject to the risk assessment and home visit process. This paper addresses that gap in the literature. It is important to highlight and understand RSOs' views of both the risk assessment and home visit process to enable MOSOVO to further improve their practices to discourage RSOs from offending in

the future and to promote desistance, which ultimately, will further protect the public. This paper therefore explores RSOs' experiences of risk assessments and home visits, and the implications of these findings for assisting desistance.

Method

Sample and Recruitment

Three police forces in England and Wales (one urban, one rural and one semi-rural force) agreed to participate in the research, and this agreement was confirmed with the College of Policing. Each police force was asked to invite and recruit four male RSOs, one from each level of risk (low, medium, high, and very high). Participants deemed by the police to be a risk to staff/researcher were excluded. Although the aim was to recruit 12 RSOs in total, only one force had a willing RSO at the 'very high' risk level, therefore, 10 RSOs agreed to take part. Table 1 provides the demographic characteristics of the participants, their convictions, and how many home visits they had been subject to.

[insert Table 1 here]

Prior to taking part in the study, the first author provided participants with a participant information sheet and they were asked if they had read and understood the purpose of the research. After being given the opportunity to ask questions, and on agreeing to participate, participants signed a consent form, but were also advised they could withdraw at any time, and their data be destroyed, without any cost to them. It was explained that the research was independent to the police. Once participants agreed to take part, a date, time, and location for the interviews was agreed.

Data Collection

For privacy and security, the interviews were conducted in a private room within the police headquarters for each force. Only the first author was in the interview room with the participant, although participants were made aware that police staff were available should assistance be required. Interviews were audio recorded. Participants were informed they were not required to answer all questions, and to ensure anonymity, no names of participants were recorded in the researcher's handwritten notes. If participants referred to

others by name, or provided a location, these were not added to the researcher's notes or the transcript of the recording. The audio recording was destroyed once the study had been written up.

An interview schedule consisting of three parts was used to structure the interviews. Part one invited participants to share their views of the home visits, their expectations of the home visit and their experiences of the first visit. Participants were asked to describe whether subsequent visits were similar or different to the first, and whether their expectations of the home visits had now changed. Participants were also asked how the home visit process might be improved. Part two focused on whether the home visits were unannounced or if participants were notified in advance of the home visit and participants' views and experiences of these. Part three concerned questions around their understanding of the risk assessment process. In particular, we asked if they understood terms like 'priority rating' or if they were aware of their 'risk category' and how they felt about the police monitoring them to conduct a risk assessment.

Upon completion of the interview, participants were debriefed, which further explained the purpose of the research and contact details if they had any questions after the interview or wished to withdraw their data. The debriefing also directed participants to mental health and counselling services, should participants require these services post-interview.

Data Analysis

All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by the first author. The transcripts were analysed using an inductive, semantic, realist thematic analysis, following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first author immersed themselves in the dataset to become familiar with it and to record initial impressions and notes. Next, they coded the entire dataset and then organised these codes into an initial set of candidate themes. These initial themes were then discussed with the second author and refined further. Lastly, these themes were then further refined by checking them back against the codes included in the theme and then against the raw data (i.e., re-reading the dataset to check that the themes were a good "fit" for the data) and through additional discussion with the second and third authors.

Ethical Approval

The research adhered to the British Society of Criminology's (2015) Statement of Ethics and ethical approval for the study was granted by [REDACTED FOR PEER REVIEW].

Findings and Discussion

Through our analysis of the ten interviews, three themes were developed: *Waiting for that first home visit provoked anxiety and heightened shame; The first home visit 'was just like a chat really' but not for those deemed high-risk, and; Property search and observations were non-invasive, but, RSOs were not fully informed of the visit purpose.* We present a brief narrative of these themes here, followed by our observations of how these experiences might assist (or otherwise) the desistance process. Where participant extracts are used, we use pseudonyms (see Table 2) to protect identity.

[insert Table 2 approx. here]

Waiting for that first home visit provoked anxiety and heightened shame

Across the sample, participants were unclear and unsure of what to expect of their first home visit. To some degree they assumed MOSOVOs would want to ensure they were coping with everyday life**,** as stated by Arthur, *'[I] didn't know what to expect, I just thought it would be to see how I was getting on'.* It was interesting to note, participants who were assessed at a higher level of risk felt the purpose of the visit was to specifically discuss their sexual offence, as stated by Joshua, *'I thought they would want to talk about the offence',* and Cameron, that it was to do *'some kind of checking up on me coz of what I had done'.* Thus, as participants were unsure what to expect of their first home visit, they recalled feeling elevated levels of anxiety and apprehension; as Arthur reports, it was *'the first time I had ever been in trouble with the police, so I was really nervous, especially because of what it was'.* Their anxiety appeared to be driven by fear of the MOSOVO officers judging them due to the nature of their offence, as reported by Ryan, who *'felt embarrassed more than anything about it all and thought they would judge me*'. This anticipation and internalised shame resulted in participants not being able to *'sleep for thinking about it coz they [the police officers doing the home visit] knew what I had done […] the wait was awful'* (Jamie).

Anticipating a first home visit from the police, following release from prison or after receiving a community sentence for a sexual conviction, would understandably induce levels of anxiety, and for some, even fear. Particularly given that officers attending home visits have powers to breach or take action that enforce court orders should they find a RSO has not complied with the orders of the court (Criminal Justice Act, 2003; Police & Criminal Evidence Act, 1984). In addition, RSOs will be acutely aware of the perception society and others, including criminal justice practitioners, have of them. It is likely their experience of the criminal justice system by that point has been hostile and combative (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006) with the public and criminal justice practitioners holding negative perceptions of them. In an earlier study, we found MOSOVOs held unfavourable views of this group (Mydlowski & Turner-Moore, 2023; Kewley, 2017), echoed by others in the field (Mann *et al*., 2019), and in their interviews with 84 men incarcerated for sexual offences, Levins and Mjåland (2021) found the criminal justice system to be predominantly one that viewed this group of people to be a risk to others.

While we found high levels of anticipation and anxiety prior to the home visit, irrespective of the level of risk of the RSO, we were encouraged to hear that these feelings soon dissipated, and participants (in the main) were made to feel at greater ease by the MOSOVOs. Aiden recalled his *'first visit was really frightening'* but went onto describe MOSOVO officers putting him at ease and engaging with him in a non-judgemental way: *'the officers made me feel okay. They didn't judge me or anything, so it was okay in the end'.*

The participants did however continue to experience shame, as can be seen from this extract from Nicholas: '*I felt really embarrassed though, it did make me feel quite bad after they had gone',* which is not unique to our sample. Stigmatisation and labelling (Lowe & Willis, 2020) is a social control mechanism by which one group of people deem the characteristics, beliefs, or behaviours of another, as problematic and/or negative; this often results in feelings of shame, and ought to play a role in deterring behaviours in the first place. When responding to behaviours that are socially unacceptable and criminal, such as sexual abuse, the roles of stigma and labelling (Snape & Fido, 2021) play an important part in the punishment and rehabilitation of the person. When a message of condemnation regarding the behaviour is delivered in a way that is respectful of the person, but disapproving of the behaviour, then shaming is said to be reintegrative (Braithwaite, 1989), allowing the person to move on from their transgression. But shame that causes the person or group to be outcast or demonized,

known as disintegrative shaming, has detrimental consequences for those RSOs who are actively seeking to desist from future offending (Braithwaite, 1989). The consequences of disintegrative shaming for people convicted of sexual offending, and those suspected of sexual offending, range from "discrimination and exclusion from social participation to violent victimization and murder" (Cubellis *et al*., 2019. p.225). Indeed, secondary stigma is experienced by those associated with the person convicted, and family members are often equally penalised, experiencing serious physical, psycho-social and economic harms (Armitage *et al*., 2023; Evans *et al*., 2023). Our participants did not report examples of actions by MOSOVOs in which their behaviours could be deemed disintegrative, despite the participants' ongoing feelings of shame. This is encouraging, because working with shame in a reintegrative manner can help promote the desistance process (Villeneuve *et al*., 2020) and as such, if MOSOVOs continue to work in this way, they will be well-placed to serve as formal agents to change.

The first home visit 'was just like a chat really' but not for those deemed high-risk

All participants that were new to the notion of notification requirements (the Sex Offenders Register) or who were in a low or medium risk category described positive experiences of home visits with MOSOVOs. Participants remembered the first home visit as one in which MOSOVOs took time to explain the purpose of that home visit, outline the licence conditions or notification requirements, and make observations of the property. Owen felt it was *'just a general chat really…about what I had been doing with my time'*, and this was further stated by Nicholas, that he didn't *'mind the visits, they are always good with me, no I think they [the visits] are okay'*. Lower risk participants felt MOSOVOs were trying to help them and offer support during the visit, as stated by Arthur, '*they are always really good when they come to visit me. They do try and help you with stuff if they can'*. Over time, a positive relationship between MOSOVOs and participants developed. Participants reported the building of good relationships and rapport during the home visits, as Jamie stated: *'it's not like when you get arrested, they are okay with you, nice and down to earth',* and as visits became more informal, Charles stated, '*I think I have quite a good relationship with them. I'm on first names terms with them'.* This was repeated by Arthur, who stated, while the unannounced nature of the visit *'keeps you on your toes, coz you never know when they gonna turn up',* this was not perceived negatively, with participants stating that the visits

help them focus on what they should and should not be doing, which was reinforced by Jamie, '*without a doubt, it makes you think positively from when they have been to visit you and you know what you should do and what not to do'.*

However, participants assessed as high or very high risk described a hostile experience during MOSOVOs' visits to their home. They did not encounter casual or informal interactions; instead, Joshua felt '*they spent a long time on the notification thing and saying what I can and can't do'* and Aiden stated that '*all the questions they ask, they['re] trying to trip you up to say summat [sic] so they can send you back to prison… I hate it'*. Unlike Jamie, one low risk participant who reported how home visits left him reflecting positively on his life, Aiden maintained a state of hostility and resistance to change: '*Nothing the police will do will help me, I can't stand the police, they sent me to prison. I'm not gonna change now anyway',* although Aiden did concede the difference in approaches between MOSOVOs and investigative police, in that MOSOVOs '*aren't like the normal ones that arrest you, they made me feel comfortable and they didn't judge me'.*

The participants also varied in their experience of the types of questions posed to them by MOSOVOs. For low and medium risk participants, these were not intrusive or interrogatory, but appeared to be casual enquiries about their daily routine, as stated by Jamie: '*they asked what I had been up to with my day, was I drinking or doing drugs, stuff like that or was I looking for work, that kind of thing'.* This was not experienced as being part of an assessment or investigation, but, instead, they described this more like 'a general chat'. Charles recalls that MOSOVOs *'wanted to know who I was spending time with, if I had a new girlfriend and who I was speaking to on the internet […] like a chat really'.* These low to medium risk participants appeared to have no concerns, or indeed knowledge, that in providing answers to these questions a risk assessment was being developed, whereas, the opposite was found for high risk participants, as can be seen by this quote from Cameron: *'I'm not stupid…I know they think I'm a risk and that's why they keep coming and ask all them questions*'.

Despite low and medium risk RSOs viewing the home visits as a 'general chat', it is surprising that *all* participants reported being asked questions at the first home visit and each subsequent visit about what they were thinking at the time they committed their sexual offence, as well as questions about their current offence-related attitudes and

behaviours. This line of questioning does not appear to fit with what one may expect from a 'general chat' and appears a more intrusive style of questioning.

It was evident that some participants, particularly, the medium to higher risk participants, lacked trust in MOSOVOs or had a sense that MOSOVOs perceived it inevitable that the RSO would commit a further offence, as Ryan stated, '*all the checks they do, it's just to see what they can find, they think we are offending all the time innit [sic].'* This is unsurprising, as in previous research, MOSOVOs appeared sceptical of RSOs' ability to live a life free from crime (Mydlowski & Turner-Moore, 2023; Kewley 2017). Instead, MOSOVOs often believe RSOs are deceitful, are playing other criminal justice agents off against each other, and ultimately, if given the chance to sexually offend again, would do so (Kewley, 2017). This is a challenge, if we are to consider MOSOVOs as potential formal agents who can promote desistance, as a greater level of trust, transparency and relationship building would be required for RSOs at all levels of risk, but particularly high risk (Villeneuve et al., 2020).

Building rapport and positive relationships is key to assisting the desistance process; even within the confines of unannounced visits, these can provide valuable opportunities to promote social and psychological change (King, 2014). Indeed, the length of time RSOs are required to work with MOSOVOs, is not insignificant; many RSOs are subject to notification requirements indefinitely (Sexual Offences Act, 2003), thus, we note the opportunity for MOSOVOs to foster a meaningful social bond that has the potential to impact lifelong change. The differing treatment experienced by those labelled as 'high risk' is interesting and it may be that MOSOVOs' more challenging and accusatorial approach is less effective than a 'general chat' approach when attempting to manage higher risk RSOs during the home visit; further research is needed to determine this.

Property search and observations were non-invasive, but RSOs were not fully informed of the visit purpose

Participants described how MOSOVOs would conduct observations of their property by having a general look in all rooms within their home. Participants described this as non-invasive (in that it was a quick visual check throughout the house), as more time was spent looking through the electronic devices that participants disclosed they had, as Cameron

stated: *'Yeah they had a look about, not a lot though, just put their head in each room, but they spent a lot of time on my devices and checking my internet history'.*

All participants described that the specific time/day of the home visits were generally unannounced; they did not receive any prior notice from the MOSOVO officers that a visit would take place, as stated by Arthur: *'you don't get any notice, they just turn up'.* If they were not at home when the police attended their property, the MOSOVO officers would telephone the RSO to ascertain their whereabouts, asking them to return home for the visit to take place, as Charles stated: "*Sometimes they will ring if I haven't been in to tell me they need to see me and they always ring me to tell me about my yearly registration'.* We acknowledge one purpose of the unannounced home visit is the element of surprise. MOSOVOs are required to detect crime, thus, the strategy of attending unannounced is to 'catch' the RSO off-guard, potentially engaging in offending behaviour or to prevent them from disposing of evidence of offending behaviour. Yet, it is unclear how effective this approach is and what rates of crime detection are actually made using this strategy. Recidivism rates across RSO populations where unannounced home visits are not undertaken remain low (Zgoba & Mitchell, 2023). While none of our participants considered the unannounced home visit problematic, for those RSOs with family members in the property, unannounced visits might create instability or have the potential to re-traumatise non-offending citizens (Duncan *et al*, 2021).

Subsequent home visits were similar to the first home visit, as Nicholas stated: *'they asked the same stuff, what are you doing, has anything changed since last time. They check your devices when they are there'.* This process appears to get easier in time, as Ryan stated, '*it's easier each time, you know how they will start it and what questions they will ask, so it's okay now'.* The more visits they receive, the more they become familiar with the types of questions they will be asked, as Nicholas states: *'you know what they are going to ask and what's going to happen'.*

While MOSOVOs reportedly attempted to put the participants at ease during the home visits, meaning that they then felt reassured about what to expect for future home visits - as stated by Owen: *'I felt a lot better after it as they were okay with me and made me feel better about the whole thing'* - there was an inconsistency in terms of which MOSOVO officers attended subsequent visits. This could result in a 'new' MOSOVO officer asking and repeating questions that the participant had already answered at the first home visit

regarding their initial offence. This increased levels of anxiety as participants were required to re-tell their experiences, as Nicholas stated, *'that is the bad bit of it coz the new one wants to start from the beginning when I've done that already and I don't like that bit'*. The re-telling of past offending behaviour meant that the participants felt they were still being judged on their past behaviours, despite wanting to focus on the future and move on with their life, as stated by Charles: *'They ask…if I'm still thinking of doing it but I'm not and I won't do it again. That bit makes me feel awful and [as] if they are not letting me move on'.*

Apart from one high risk participant, participants were unaware that one of the purposes of the home visit was to undertake a risk assessment which would place them into a risk category and inform a management plan that could involve changes to the conditions on civil orders, as Nicholas stated, *'they never told me it was a risk assessment, they just asked lots of questions. This is the first I have heard of any kind of assessment'.* Arthur was told '*it was coz I was on the register for 10 years, due to what I had done, so they will keep coming and asking the questions until I am off the register'.* Of course, not all participants were naïve; Ryan states he '*knew it was coz I was found guilty and because of the type of offence it was. I thought they would be more checking up on me'* and that home visits would be used as a form of monitoring *'to make sure I was keeping in line with my notification requirements, and I was keeping away from schools'* - although it was *his 'probation officer'* who informed Ryan of the ramifications of the home visit for his risk assessment. Participants did not recall being explicitly informed by the police of the risk assessment process and the implications this might have.

A lack of collaboration and shared goal development was noted, as the participants reported that MOSOVOs did not appear to focus on the RSO's future behaviours or provide any details or copies of action plans. Joshua described that he would have welcomed this, particularly when not coping or needing extra help or support: *'they didn't say anything about an action plan. That would have helped me though coz I had just got out prison and was all over the place'*.

Ensuring home visits include a balance of surveillance as well as supportive/reintegrative practice is without doubt a genuine tension for MOSOVOs (Pemberton *et al*., 2023). Christensen *et al.* (2021) found two key effective (or at least promising) strategies to manage RSOs by the police which included a) a formalised and targeted approach to those deemed 'high risk' through risk assessment and registration and

b) use of technology-assisted management, which included use of electronically monitored bracelets; the polygraph; linguistic technologies; computer scans on site; and remote monitoring software. But, with the additional obstacles and barriers for those attempting to desist being so great, adopting these practices alone might prevent effective reintegration. Thus, home visits ought to include more welfare-orientated activities as RSOs are reportedly far more positive and foster authentic desistance when the police provide opportunities for support and help (Creswell, 2020; Farmer *et al*, 2015). Once convicted of a sexual offence, people are predominantly discounted from opportunities to genuinely re-enter society (Levins & Mjåland, 2021); this is despite RSOs needing significant levels of practical help and support for additional issues such as housing, welfare, and accessing healthcare (Mann *et al*., 2019). Thus, where there is a lack of transparency and collaboration with MOSOVOs, as found with some of our participants, it is possible this approach might unintentionally serve to inhibit the development of a relationship that would assist desistance, nor does it promote the 'good lives model' for rehabilitation into society (Ward & Gannon, 2006). Indeed, if MOSOVOs fail to provide a space in which RSOs can access support and feel able to reach out and ask for help, the likelihood of lapse and re-lapse becomes greater (Halsey *et al*, 2017).

We suggest that, for MOSOVOs to ensure each home visit provides an opportunity to promote the desistance process, and serve as a formal agent of change, a focus *only* on control and management should be avoided (Villeneuve *et al*., 2021). Instead, a blend of support, control and the promotion of a multi-agency approach ought to be applied, and the purpose of home visits communicated with a greater degree of transparency. Also, MOSOVOs ought to refrain from the view that RSOs are manipulative and pose a continuous risk to society (Mydlowski & Turner-Moore, 2023) as this will simply allow for the RSO to feel further levels of disintegrative shame. This can be achieved even with an aim of detecting crime because, where the relationship between the person with sexual convictions and correctional officers are perceived as positive, increased disclosures are actually made (Kras, 2019) resulting in improved prevention and detection rates.

Strengths and limitations of the research

Firstly, a strength of this study is that this is the first study to gain an insight into a sample of RSOs' views of the risk assessment and home visit process, which will undoubtedly assist MOSOVO in improving their future home visit practices. However, each RSO was selected by each police force that took part in this study and it may be that the RSOs that were selected were classed as 'compliant' with MOSOVO; nevertheless, it would appear that the police did not select RSOs that only had positive views or experiences, as demonstrated by the findings we reported. Further, the RSOs were invited to attend each force headquarters, where there was a police officer outside of the interview room and this location may have hindered RSOs' responses. However, each RSO that participated in this study was aware that this was a research study that was independent to the police and that would share their voice, which potentially allowed participants to fully engage with the researcher during the interviews. As this study provided a small sample of participants, a further larger scale study with RSOs ought to be undertaken in the future, perhaps outside of police headquarters.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study aimed to explore how RSOs experience risk assessments and home visits, and the implications of these findings for assisting desistance. From the findings of this study, it is evident that RSOs have a high level of anxiety prior to the first home visit and are not clear about the purpose of the visit, which could be reduced by the RSO being advised as to the purpose of the home visit in advance or being provided with a fact sheet as to what the home visit by the police is for and what it will entail. It is also clear that MOSOVOs employ a 'general chat' approach during the home visit with low and medium risk RSOs, but a more challenging approach with high risk RSOs, who are often hostile towards MOSOVOs. Whilst it is understandable that MOSOVOs will need to challenge hostile behaviour during the home visit, it is proposed that a more consistent approach is trialled for RSOs of all levels of risk, and the effectiveness of a 'general chat' approach with high risk RSOs is explored. RSOs also feel anxiety when discussing their previous offence(s), which can be difficult to re-tell and reinforces the label of 'RSO' and a reduced propensity for change. Relatedly, MOSOVOs did not appear to focus on the RSOs' future or support needs or provide details or copies of action plans. We suggest that MOSOVOs should provide a blend of control and support and

apply a multi-agency approach. It is unclear whether MOSOVOs direct RSOs to organisations such as the Lucy Faithfull Foundation or Safer Lives for further support. If not, we propose that these sources of support should be discussed with the RSO either before or during the home visit, particularly if the RSO is displaying high levels of anxiety.

Lastly, the priority of criminal justice practitioners remains one of public protection, but the pressure to operate and adopt more desistance-focussed approaches appears to detach from this priority. It would be useful for MOSOVO to be provided with desistance-based approaches to utilise in their practice in order to assist in the role of public protection, rather than detach from it. For example, the *HMPPS Approach to the Management and Rehabilitation of People Convicted of Sexual Offending* (2021), outlines a summary of 11 desistance-focussed approaches (see Figure 1) deemed useful for practitioners in prison and probation when working with people convicted of sexual offending.

[insert Fig 1. Approx. here]

Indeed, in a recent independent review of police-led sex offender management (Creedon, 2023), amongst the many recommendations to improve police-led practice, there were calls for further training of police officers to develop greater desistance-focussed practice. This report highlights that in order for people with sexual offence histories to safely reintegrate back into the community, an approach that helps them rehabilitate must be one that is prioritised alongside more traditional policing approaches. Our study supports the recommendations made by Creedon (2023) and provides examples as to how MOSOVO may amend current practices to the risk assessment and home visit in order to promote desistance focussed practice.

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Table 1. ***Participant Demographics***

	Force 1	Force 2	Force 3	Total
Gender				
Male	3	3	4	10
Female	-	-	-	0
Age				
18-25	1	-	-	1
26-35	1	2	1	4
36-45	1	-	1	2
46-55	-	-	1	1
55+	-	1	1	2
Ethnicity				
White British	3	1	3	7
Black	-	-	-	-
Asian	-	2	1	3
Other	-	-	-	-
Nationality				
English	3	-	2	5
Scottish	-	-	1	1
Irish	-	-	-	-
Welsh	-	1	1	2
Multi-Nationality	-	2	-	2
Total number of convictions for sexual offences:				
1 conviction	-	2	2	4
2-5 convictions	3	1	2	6
6+ convictions	-	-	-	-
Total number of home visits by police				
1 home visit	-	1	1	2
2-5 home visits	2	1	2	5
6+ home visits	1	1	1	3

Table 2. ***Participant pseudonym, force, and risk level***

Participant pseudonym	Force	Risk Level
Arthur	1	Low Risk
Jamie	3	Low Risk
Charles	2	Low Risk
Ryan	3	Medium Risk
Nicholas	1	Medium Risk
Owen	2	Medium Risk
Joshua	2	High Risk
Luca	3	High Risk
Cameron	1	High Risk
Aidan	3	Very High Risk

Figure 1