

The impact of 'the knock' and the criminal justice journey for non-offending family members of individuals suspected of child sexual abuse material offending

Ethnographic study exploring child sexual abuse material (CSAM) investigations' impact on family members and police investigators, examining systemic support gaps and impact of an indirect victim support officer.

Key details

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Collaboration and partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anglia Ruskin University • Lincolnshire Police • Leeds Beckett University
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Research context

The arrest and subsequent investigation of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) offences involve complex legal and law enforcement processes, yet the impact on non-offending family members of suspects remains largely unexplored.

Existing research suggests that 'the knock', the police intervention at the point of arrest or investigation, constitutes a highly traumatic and distressing event, as well as having financial, social and physical effects (Armitage and others, 2023; Kavanagh and others, 2023). Despite profound impacts, no official support services exist for this group.

The systemic absence of non-offending family members in criminal justice discourse further exacerbates their marginalisation and underscores the need for their formal recognition as indirect victims. Existing scholarship has noted that the 'collateral' consequences of CSAM investigations often extend beyond the suspect, yet indirect victims remain absent from policy frameworks (Armitage and others, 2023; Kavanagh and others, 2023). Furthermore, research on families of sex offenders highlights secondary trauma, social isolation, and stigma (Condry, 2007; Furlong, 2021), suggesting parallels with the experiences of CSAM suspects' families who face unique barriers to support.

This research explores how families navigate the investigative and judicial process when dedicated support is in place. It focuses on Lincolnshire's indirect victim support officer (IVSO) (the first of this role) and the effects of this role on family members' journeys through the criminal justice system starting from 'the knock'.

Situating the IVSO within the policing landscape brings into focus the absence of consistent mechanisms for supporting and advocating for families as they manage the consequences of investigations. The role's impact within the Lincolnshire Police's paedophile online investigation team (POLIT) also warrants attention, as it arguably reduces operational pressures while alleviating the emotional labour borne by investigators engaging with distressed and vulnerable family members. By connecting these organisational and familial dimensions, the study contributes to wider debates on legitimacy, safeguarding, and trauma-informed policing.

Research methodology

Grounded in feminist criminology and interpretivist ethnography, this research employs a qualitative methodology through ethnographic fieldwork by being embedded within POLIT and observing the work of the IVSO, as well as semi-structured interviews and focus groups with non-offending family members, police officers and staff.

Prolonged immersion provided access to everyday routines, decision-making processes, and emotional dynamics often hidden from external view. Reflexive fieldnotes and iterative thematic analysis ensured that participants' voices were foregrounded while situating findings within broader organisational and cultural contexts.

References

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Tags

- [Child sexual exploitation](#)