

Understanding the risk and protective factors for females with sexual offence convictions

Project aiming to enhance the field of knowledge and produce practical tools to inform agency practitioners in the management of female sexual offenders.

Key details

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Police region	East Midlands
Level of research	PhD
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Date due for completion	August 2028

Research context

Female sexual offending remains one of the most underexamined and misunderstood areas within criminology. Despite the gender neutral provisions introduced through the Sexual Offences Act 2003, women who commit sexual offences continue to be obscured in reporting practices, public discourse and criminal justice responses.

This research investigates three interconnected dimensions of this issue:

- risk and protective factors associated with women with sexual offence convictions
- professional and public attitudes toward female sexual offenders
- the structural limitations within current criminal justice frameworks that shape assessment, sentencing and rehabilitation outcomes

Findings from an extensive literature review reveal entrenched sociocultural assumptions surrounding femininity, caregiving, passivity and sexual disinterest, which contribute to the minimisation of female perpetrated abuse and significant professional biases. These biases manifest in lower reporting rates, reduced likelihood of prosecution and more lenient sentencing outcomes for women compared with men convicted of the same offences. Current risk assessment tools, including RM2K, ARMS and OASys, remain grounded in models designed around male offending profiles, leading to inconsistent and often inaccurate assessments of risk for women. Compounded by gender specific vulnerabilities such as trauma histories, mental health needs and socio-economic disadvantage, women with sexual offence convictions are routinely managed within systems not designed for them.

To explore perceptions surrounding these disparities, a mixed-methods attitudinal survey using gender-reversible vignettes has been developed to compare public and practitioner responses. Early findings indicate significant gender-based differences in perceived culpability, harm and rehabilitation potential. Early indications suggest that although professionals working with offenders are trained to approach female offending behaviour in similar manner to male offenders, the criminal justice system does in fact treat them in a disparate manner in terms of sentencing.

This study contributes urgently needed evidence to inform gender-responsive risk assessment, trauma-informed rehabilitative models, and improved safeguarding practices for an under-recognised offender group.

Research methodology

An electronic questionnaire will be distributed via email to criminal justice agencies (around 200 FTE staff) and online via social media snowball sampling to the UK public and to prison, probation and police practitioners in the UK. Quantitative data collected will be inputted into statistical software (SPSS) for exploratory data analysis. Variable factor analysis of the survey will be used to investigate the underlying constructs of responses. Specifically, the respondent demographic variables will be triangulated with the main body of survey responses. In particular, this will include the respondent variable relating to their employing HMPPS agency, and the individual's response to the vignette question.

Responses will be compared with the standard modified ATS questions (Hogue and Harper 2019, Blagden and Pendeford 2025) to ascertain a more positive or more negative attitude towards sex

offenders. This attitude scale will then be triangulated with the male or female vignette randomly assigned to the participant.

Qualitative analysis will follow the stages of reflexive thematic analysis, outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Qualitative data will be systematically managed and coded using thematic analysis software (Nvivo) to facilitate initial coding, develop thematic nodes and ensure a rigorous audit trail. This approach is not restricted to a single epistemological view, and enables description of respondent's personal opinions and interpretation of how these were shaped by deeper processes.

Research participation

Participation would involve practitioners and staff completing an anonymous 10-minute attitude survey online. All participation would be entirely voluntary, and all data will be anonymised and handled in accordance with ethical approval granted by the University of Derby. IRAS approval has been requested, but not yet approved. No identifying information about individuals, service users or the organisation would be published. The survey has already received over 100 responses from the public.

[Access the survey](#)

References

- Blagden N and Penford E. (2025). Exploring the therapeutic and rehabilitative climate of three prisons for men with sexual convictions, *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*. [Read open access article](#)
- Clarke V and Braun V. (2017). 'Thematic analysis'. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, volume 12, issue 3, pages 297–298.
- Hogue TE and Harper CA. (2019). [Development of a 21-item short form of the Attitudes to Sexual Offenders \(ATS\) Scale](#), *Law and Human Behavior*, volume 43, issue 1, pages 117–130.