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Towards Safer Communities: A Desistance-Centred Approach to Managing People with Sexual Convictions



Professor Stephanie Kewley

In recent years, the management of people with sexual convictions in the community has faced renewed scrutiny. The 2023 Independent Review into the Police-Led Management of Registered Sex Offenders (Creedon, 2023) challenged the status quo, calling for a move beyond containment strategies and towards approaches that support long-term behavioural change — in short, a shift towards desistance. This article introduces a new Desistance Practice Framework, developed in partnership with police professionals and people with sexual convictions. It provides a clear roadmap for how police can support desistance and strengthen public protection through relationship-based, person-centred policing.

Why Desistance Matters

Desistance refers to the process through which a person moves away from criminal behaviour. For those convicted of sexual offences, desistance is complex — but it is possible. While surveillance and enforcement will always be essential for high-risk individuals, many people with sexual convictions are not persistently dangerous and can be supported towards safer, offence-free lives.

Current policing approaches tend to focus on risk, control and compliance. Yet, the evidence is clear: restrictive tactics alone are not enough (Kewley and Brereton, 2022). Long-term public safety is best achieved by combining risk management with efforts to help people change. Desistance is more than just “not reoffending” — it involves rebuilding identity, relationships and purpose.

The Challenge for Police

Under Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA), police professionals in England and Wales supervise thousands of people subject to sexual offender notification requirements. Most of this population lives in the community and is managed not by probation but by specialist police teams. These specialist officers face a difficult balancing act: enforcing conditions while also supporting rehabilitation.

We know that police professionals work in a high-pressure, risk-averse culture. Yet they are also uniquely placed to influence change (Pemberton, Kewley and Mydlowski, 2023). Regular home visits, welfare checks, and community engagement create opportunities for police to act as agents of change — if they are equipped with the right tools and mindset.

Introducing the Desistance Practice Framework

Our Desistance Practice Framework (presented at the NOTA Conference 2025) bridges the gap between criminological theory and everyday policing. It outlines the values, knowledge and actions needed to support desistance while maintaining robust risk management. The framework is built on three interconnected components:

- **Core Values:** Change requires hope, respect and agency. Police must recognise that identity transformation — supported by trust and consistent relationships — is key to desistance. This means seeing the person, not just the offence, and reinforcing pro-social choices.
- **Knowledge Assumptions:** The pathways into sexual offending are complex and often rooted in trauma, neuropsychological is-





sues or social isolation. Equally, desistance is shaped by structural barriers — such as stigma, unemployment, or homelessness — that can undermine efforts to change. Police need to understand these dynamics to engage effectively.

- Intervention Guidance: Officers should adopt a strengths-based, welfare-informed approach. This includes supporting access to mental health services, helping set realistic goals, and encouraging participation in community life. Tools like the Desistance Management Plan (Kewley et al., in review) can be used during visits to discuss progress and identify positive activities — such as volunteering, hobbies, or repairing family ties.

Language Matters

The way professionals talk about people with sexual convictions has a real impact. Terms like “sex offender” or “nominal” can entrench stigma and undermine efforts to change. Instead, our framework promotes person-centred language — focusing on the person, not just their past. This shift is not about being soft; it’s about being effective.

From Risk to Reintegration

It is important to acknowledge that some people remain committed to offending and require strict control measures. But for many others, desistance is not only possible — it is already underway. For these people, continued emphasis on punishment may do more harm than good.

Supporting desistance has wide-ranging benefits: it protects future victims, reduces long-term police workload, and fosters safer reintegration into society. It aligns with national policing priorities — including the National Prevention Strategy and the Violence Against Women and Girls framework.

What Next?

Our Desistance Practice Framework is already being shared with key stakeholders including the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC). Recommendations include:

- Integrating desistance training into existing MOSOVO training
- Piloting the framework in five constabularies
- Reviewing how well the Active Risk Management System (ARMS) risk tool accounts for protective factors

In the long term, a more balanced approach to police supervision — one that combines control with support — can help ensure that those under police management are less likely to reoffend and more likely to rebuild their lives in positive ways.

Conclusion

The police service is under growing pressure to reduce sexual reoffending and protect vulnerable people. Our Desistance Practice Framework offers a timely, evidence-based tool to help meet this challenge. By supporting desistance, police professionals can enhance public protection, promote justice, and make a lasting difference — not just in the lives of those they supervise, but in the safety of the communities they serve.

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