

## **PAEDOPHILE HUNTERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICE COURTS AND PROBATION**

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### **Abstract**

The National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) position on paedophile hunting groups is that their motivation should be questioned since there is no positive advantage to policing. Such activism increases risk to potential victims, the suspect, and to the efficiency and effectiveness of criminal justice processes (NPCC, 2018). Whilst public naming and shaming of those convicted of sexual offences against children is not a new phenomenon, the rise in popularity of the internet and the surge in content available online is. Increased accessibility to information made available by paedophile hunters has implications on all aspects of the criminal justice system including policing, courts and probation. Through an examination of the existing literature, this paper outlines how paedophile hunting activity has become a concept in the management of sexual offending in England and Wales.

### **Keywords**

Paedophile hunters; sexual offending; probation; police; risk assessment; risk management

## Introduction

The NPCC's typology of the different groups of paedophile hunters currently operating in the UK, helps to begin charting what they deem acceptable forms of justice to be. Their four-point typology of operation, which they describe as imprecise, outlines the following types:

- 1) **Law Enforcement** - people and organisations who engage in policing activities with the appropriate training, safeguards, and control measures.
- 2) **Passive Partners** - organisations and individuals who gather information passively but who do not undertake proactive activity.
- 3) **E-Activists** - Online Child Abuse Activist Groups (OCAGs) that engage in undercover tactics but who pass enforcement material to law enforcement agencies prior to any real-world contact.
- 4) **Real World Activists** - OCAGs that engage in real-world contact with suspected perpetrators (NPCC, 2018).

In addition to the NPCC's typology, alternative typologies including Web sleuthing have been suggested within the academic literature. While this has been defined as the embodiment of participatory media, research concerning web sleuthing is limited (Jewkes & Yar, 2013; Yardley, et al., 2018). Also, Digilantism or Digital Vigilantism, which is defined as internet vigilantism and cyber-vigilantism, has been described as one person's reaction to another person's transgression of social norms in the online space (Dunsby, & Howes, 2018; Loveluck, 2019). Not dissimilar is Cyber-Vigilantism, which is crowdsourcing for justice where justice-seeking civilians collectively pool their expertise in response to real and perceived societal wrongs (Smallridge et al., 2016). And finally, Citizen Lead Policing is described as citizen-led digital citizens challenging democratic principles of transparency, accountability, and the rule of law (Campbell, 2016; Hadjimatheou et al., 2019).

The number of typologies emerging demonstrates the rise in popularity of using the internet for access to information of this kind. As this article will explore, increased accessibility to information made available by paedophile hunters has implications on all aspects of the criminal justice system. The term paedophile hunter is problematic ethically, because paedophile implies that those who commit child sexual offences are innately predatory, and hunting implies an activity targeted at animals, rather than people (Hadjimatheou et al., 2019). Despite the inaccuracies, paedophile hunter is the term used most commonly in mainstream and social media and by professionals working within the criminal justice system. It is therefore the term used throughout this article. Through examination of the existing literature, and an exploration of cases heard in UK courts, this article examines the complicated relationship between the police, courts, and paedophile hunters. It will then explore how paedophile hunting activity has become a concept in the management of sexual offending in England and Wales. Finally, the article will conclude by outlining the serious implications that paedophile hunting is having upon our criminal justice system, its processes, and our individual human rights.

## **Community Policing?**

Evidence gathered by paedophile hunters led to 150 convictions in England and Wales during the 12 months to April 2018 (BBC, 2019d; Gillespie, 2019). In 2018, the NPCC documented that instances of paedophile hunting were in the region of 100 occurrences per month and were taking place across the UK (NPCC, 2018). The 2018 NPCC report went on to outline that analysis of incidents of paedophile hunting activity revealed a mixed picture, with some groups having amended their mode of operation. By moving away from highly publicised public meetings, groups were instead presenting packages of information and evidence to the police without having any real-world contact with the suspect (NPCC, 2018). The literature pertaining to naming and shaming (online or otherwise) is now well established, and research, including the NPCC's report, continues to document that there is no advantage to investigation or community-based risk management, and that paedophile hunting actually increases risk to victims, the suspect and the efficiency and effectiveness of the entire criminal justice processes (Boone & van de Bunt, 2016; NPCC, 2018).

What makes paedophile hunting unique from other types of naming and shaming, is the moral and ethical dilemma surrounding it, which adds to the debate about suitable punishment and effective risk assessment of sexual offenders (Hill & Wall, 2015). Carty (2015) explains that social movements, unlike other forms of collective behaviour are a sustained, collective voicing of resistance and the availability of technology aids how actors organise campaigns (Loveluck, 2019). It is a nuance that has little research basis currently, but what is clear is that inaccurate beliefs about the nature and extent of sexual offending are strongly linked with policy preferences (Hebenton & Thomas, 1996; Williams, 2015). For instance, the perception that sexual crime is on the rise, and the view that sexual offenders are untreatable or unchangeable - beliefs which are perpetuated by the omnipresence of paedophile hunters - helps to increase support for punitive sexual crime laws and policies. Yet, overwhelmingly, the available evidence shows not only that sexual victimization rates are not rising, but that overly punitive responses to sexual offenders can be counterproductive, both in terms of reducing recidivism and reducing risk (Hebenton & Thomas, 1996; Pickett et al., 2013).

Punitive responses to sexual offences, such as those seen in this citizen-initiated, cyber-policing, has invited media commentary which does not always appear to warn against the implications of a shift towards overly punitive forms of justice in the same way that academic literature does (Campbell, 2016). And so, despite widespread concerns about paedophile hunting, this form of policing has not only continued to flourish and intensify, but arguably has also started to connect and align with existing networks of authorised and legitimate policing provision (Jewkes & Yar, 2013; The Guardian, 2017; Yardley, et al., 2018,). Such a development moves the police and public collaboration well beyond its conventional, and relatively harmless responsibility of providing the police with additional eyes and ears. In so doing, it poses questions of where the boundaries of citizen involvement in policing affairs should be drawn (Jewkes & Yar, 2013; Yardley, et al., 2018). And whether a successful blend of social, technological, and legal controls is required if the Internet is to see a reduction in forms of online deviance (Williams, 2007).

Williams (2007) argues that such an approach, where recourses and responsibilities are shared, diffuses power across a diverse field of security and governance. If paedophile hunters are to become established within a pluralised policing landscape, then resolving issues around whether they are legitimate entities with scope to provide a formal policing role is essential (Berg & Shearing, 2018). Notwithstanding how this style of citizen-led policing emerges, we must also consider how it develops as an identifiable policing form, and how it gains influence with authorised policing actors (Jewkes & Yar, 2013; Campbell, 2016; Yardley, et al., 2018). The criminal justice system has a responsibility to think through the conditions and potential for this kind of police work (Jewkes & Yar, 2013; Campbell, 2016; Yardley, et al., 2018). Paedophile hunters not only create a dialogue concerning conventional multifaceted policing and how it is assembled, but they also cast an investigative spotlight on the social and cultural relations through which new security networks are created and organised (Jewkes & Yar, 2013; Campbell, 2016; Yardley, et al., 2018). And so, a complex debate is now emerging over the extent to which the police should work with paedophile hunters. Some are considered vigilantes or 'digilan-tes' acting outside of the law, whereas others are viewed as a useful information source that is increasingly being used in successful prosecutions (Hadjimatheou et al., 2019). Concerns are likely to persist and grow simultaneously as issues around resourcing for policing online and cyberactivism continue to emerge. Key challenges are likely to remain where police are required to determine the line between justified covert interactions with criminals, and unjustified entrapment (Hadjimatheou et al., 2019).

Clearly, the relationship between the police and paedophile hunters is complicated. The police may make public appeals for information that may trigger vigilante responses or may otherwise make use of data collected by paedophile hunting efforts (Haas, Keijser & Bruinsma, 2014; Hill & Wall, 2015; NPCC, 2018). These developments are not the first instance of police-public cooperation. However digital media facilitates a new purpose for police appeals or content for non-police investigations. Therefore, private entities such as social media platforms could be said to be complicit actors in paedophile hunter campaigns insofar as they facilitate such coordination (Trottier, 2017).

### **Implications for Courts**

Invariably, the complex relationship between policing and paedophile hunting, extends into the courts. In July 2018 the Court of Appeal (R v TL [2018] EWCA Crim 1821) heard that a judge had applied the wrong test when attempting to stop a criminal prosecution. The judge had made a mistake by not distinguishing between the conduct of a private citizen and that of state agents when making a finding of entrapment (Gillespie, 2019). Therefore, the prosecution appealed because it was alleged that the respondent had attempted to meet a child following sexual grooming. He had communicated online with a person he believed to be a 14-year-old girl, but was actually communicating with an adult male. The respondent's pre-trial application to have criminal proceedings stopped, based on the argument that there had been entrapment, relying on Looseley case law, was refused (R. v Looseley, 2001). At the end of the prosecution case, the respondent's renewed application was granted on the basis that such vigilante groups incited offences which would otherwise not be committed (Gillespie, 2019). The Court of Appeal, while overturning that decision, concluded by saying:

‘In reaching this conclusion, we do not seek to undermine or contradict the stated position of the police, by which they discourage [paedophile hunters]. [The police] have concerns that...the zeal of some ‘vigilantes may lead them to seriously improper conduct. It would be much better for [paedophile hunters] immediately they have suspicions about the conduct of an identifiable individual to involve the police and leave them to investigate’ (R v TL [2018] EWCA Crim 1821).

Two additional, yet contrasting, Crown Court cases further demonstrate the difficulties paedophile hunting activity poses in the Courts. In R. v Walters and Ali (2017), the judge rejected an application to stop criminal proceedings based on the activities of a paedophile hunting activity. Yet in R. v Slusalarczik (2018), the judge did stop proceedings, stating that the activities of paedophile hunters brought the criminal justice system into disrepute. While there have been several successful prosecutions following paedophile hunting activity (BBC 2019d), concern has evidently grown about the appropriateness of accepting the evidence of paedophile hunters (Gillespie, 2019). But the question remains as to whether or not condemnation by Judges in the Courts goes far enough. Whilst the Court of Appeal may have decided that relying on the evidence gathered by paedophile hunters constituted an abuse of process (R v TL [2018] EWCA Crim 1821), some have argued that it is not for the courts to tackle paedophile hunters (Gillespie, 2019). Whether the courts should hear evidence from paedophile hunters is arguably a policy decision for the government and not for the courts or indeed the police. Yet in the absence of a ban, the courts must do what they can to balance the need to prosecute those who have potentially committed serious crimes, with the rights of those coerced into committing a crime (Gillespie, 2019).

More recently in Sutherland v Her Majesty’s Advocate [2020] UKSC 32, the appeal discussed whether prosecutions based on the covert sting operations of paedophile hunters are compatible with the right to private life and correspondence. In 2018, Mr Sutherland matched on a dating application with somebody who, when he communicated with them, claimed to be a 13-year-old child. He sent sexual messages and images to that person, and they eventually arranged to meet at Partick station. He was in fact speaking to an adult member of a paedophile hunter group. Members of that group confronted Mr Sutherland at the meeting point at the arranged time. They broadcast the encounter on social media and handed the evidence to the police. Mr Sutherland was convicted of attempting to communicate indecently with an older child and related offences. He appealed against his conviction on the basis that the covert investigation (and the use of the resulting evidence by the prosecuting authorities), breached his right to respect for his private life and correspondence under ECHR Article 8. The Supreme Court unanimously dismissed the appeal. The court held that there was no interference with his rights at any stage, because the nature of the communications rendered them incapable of being worthy of respect under Article 8. And the appellant had no reasonable expectation of privacy in relation to the communications. Furthermore, the judgement concluded that the state had no

supervening positive obligation to protect the appellant's interests that would prevent the respondent making use of the evidence to investigate or prosecute the crime. On the contrary, the obligation was on the respondent to ensure that the criminal law could be applied effectively to deter sexual offences against children. Article 8 has the effect that the respondent should be entitled to, and might indeed be obliged to, make use of the evidence in bringing a prosecution against him (*Sutherland v Her Majesty's Advocate* [2020] UKSC 32).

These cases further demonstrate how intricate the relationship between the police, courts, and paedophile hunters is. Complicated decisions about whether evidence provided by paedophile hunters is evidence that has been obtained legitimately, as well as questions over whether it breaches human rights, are indicative of the complex and high-level debate being played out within the early stages of the criminal justice process. Whilst agents of the state may dislike the activities of paedophile hunters (NPCC, 2018), they cannot ignore evidence passed to them. Yet this results in the complicated and murky relationship continuing post-court and into community-based risk management.

### **Paedophile Hunters and Community-Based Risk Management**

Evidently, one of the central issues regarding paedophile hunters is the issue of public protection and risk management, and indeed, who is responsible for this. Campbell (2016) succinctly outlines that in the UK, paedophilia is represented across five core public protection elements including; robust legislative frameworks statutory checks and disclosures; sexual offender registries and notification schemes; the development of transnational policing organisations representing both the voluntary and private sector; the establishment of specialist national level policing units; and finally, the growth of a market of anti-paedophile software. In short, paedophilia creates an expansive space for governance, and a diversification of the means and methods for responding to it (Kemshall & Maguire, 2001; McAlinden, 2010; Campbell, 2016).

In the UK, statutory management of sexual offenders originates from several policies, including the Criminal Justice Act 2003; the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000; the Sexual Offenders Act 1997; and the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (McCartan et al., 2017). Largely, it focuses on public protection and punitive sentencing as a basis for risk management (Williams & Nash, 2014; Nash, 2016). Current management policies for perpetrators of sexual harm include establishing the sexual offenders' register and multi-agency risk assessment and risk management of sexual offenders, often overseen by the Probation Service (McCartan et al., 2017). The Probation Service has a statutory responsibility for conditions and supervision for all offenders (McCartan et al., 2017). In relation to sexual offences, in England and Wales, local authorities are permitted to have notice of the discharge of such an offender from prison. Even after supervision, surveillance may be continued on known Schedule One offenders by Children's Services, if the offender encounters children in a household. Additionally, since its inception in September 1997, the sexual offenders' register has contained details of anyone convicted, cautioned, or released from prison for a sexual offence against a child or adult (McCartan et al., 2017). Convicted perpetrators of sexual harm remain on the register for differing periods of time, ranging from one year to lifetime registration, depending upon their offence and sentence (Kemshall et al., 2010).

To enable the criminal justice system, but especially police and probation, to better manage and preserve the sexual offenders' register in England and Wales, an overarching intelligence database called ViSOR was developed (McCartan et al., 2018). ViSOR was rolled out to all UK police forces by mid-2005 and although the police are responsible for ViSOR, it can now be accessed and used by the Probation Service and HM Prison Service. Initially, the register was developed and only used by professionals to assist them in their offender management and investigative roles (Harris et al., 2016). However, high-profile cases, such as Sarah Payne, changed this, with risk management and public protection becoming the main driving force. In the UK, this started following the murder of Sarah Payne by Roy Whiting, and the subsequent News of the World campaign (McCartan et al., 2018). After being sentenced for Sarah's murder, it was revealed that Whiting already had a conviction of a sexual nature and so the government were keen to develop a model for the community notification of information about perpetrators of sexual harm.

The Child Sexual Offender Disclosure Scheme (CSODS, Kemshall et al., 2010) is one example of the governmental response. It is also evidence of how security through knowledge and risk management processes characterizes our response to the problem of the release of sexual offenders back into the community (McAlinden, 2016). The availability of detailed knowledge about offenders becomes the major concern, and with the development of community notification, the wider public can be said to become knowledge empowered consumers. However, risk management in this context is itself paradoxical, in that the process is underpinned by research that contradicts its effectiveness (Hebenton & Thomas, 1996). Registry for sexual offenders in the UK is promoted as a crime prevention measure, to involve the public in an informal network of neighbourhood surveillance (Zevitz & Farakas, 2000). The concept being that sexual offenders would be more closely monitored and knowing this would serve as a deterrent to their reoffending. Demonstrations by criminal justice and penal practice such as registration and multi-agency working are not just threats aimed at offenders, they are also positive symbols which help produce subjectivities, forms of authority and social relations. Notification speaks of a system that will address the threat by allowing parents to advise children to avoid certain individuals, by facilitating community monitoring of released sexual offenders, and by deterring future crimes by such offenders by increasing the likelihood of apprehension (Hebenton & Thomas, 1996; McAlinden, 2016). From supervision, to registration, to community notification, the anonymity afforded to repeat offenders in the impersonal environment of large, increasingly transient modern communities is becoming more and more regulated.

Critical to this community notification debate are police and probation, who can be said to reconfigure society into communications about risk and who are responsible for the monitoring and management of sexual offenders in the community (Hebenton & Thomas 1996; Kemshall & Maguire, 2001). As a result of the increased attention to sexual offences and offenders, often triggered by events such as the News of the World campaign, in recent history we have witnessed the adoption of numerous "get tough" sexual offender laws that are exceptionally repressive in comparison with other crime polices and often at odds with desistance literature (Jenkins, 1998; Williams, 2015). Whilst invariably, evidence is available supporting each side of the argument, there is now an emerging suggestion which argues that punitive sexual offender laws are ineffective and may contribute to recidivism (Zevitz

& Farakas, 2000; McAlinden, 2010; McAlinden, 2016). Even so, the research up to this point suggests that the public overwhelmingly support these policies (Zevitz & Farakas, 2000). The intense hostility toward those convicted of sexual offences constitutes a significant impediment to efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate them (McAlinden, 2010), and this intense hostility is no more explicit than in activity of paedophile hunters.

The salient point here is that research has shown that the expansion and heightening of the intention of control of sexual offenders, ultimately ends up producing the opposite (McAlinden, 2005). Ageing, stable employment, marriage, abstinence from substances, lack of stress, and good mental health, have all been found to have a protective effect on criminal behaviour. Therefore, achieving these things should be promoted and protected where possible. Moreover, if those who desist hold patterns of cognition that include the ability to evaluate one's behaviour, and the importance of establishing meaningful intimate relationships, these are the things that should be prioritised when managing the risk of recidivism (de Vries Robbé, et al., 2015; Harris, Pedneault & Willis, 2019). This adds to the growing debate about paedophile hunters and their actions having an unintended consequence of possibly increasing risk of harm and recidivism. The prominent issues that may therefore arise when notification is executed by paedophile hunters include management accountability, which is currently unclear, structures are variable, and public accountability is absent (Pickett et al., 2013).

Such a significant lack in accountability means the potential threat to individual rights is substantial. Of particular concern is the extension of such procedures to un-convicted persons. Nonetheless, the promise of prevention is an exceptionally powerful rhetoric (Hill & Wall, 2015). Paedophile hunters create a seemingly value neutral construction of public protection and prevention of dangerous offenders harming others, which mask serious implications for individual rights (Jewkes & Yar, 2013; Yardley et al., 2018). It is true that the process of paedophile hunting is self-justificatory and difficult to challenge without appearing to side with a highly unpopular group of people (Jewkes & Yar, 2013; Yardley et al., 2018). But the risk management regulations associated with statutory public protection partnerships, raise a number of questions in relation to the lack of accountability and regulation of paedophile hunters. The increased activity of these groups may therefore indicate a public desire for achieving effective systems of accountability under conditions of a more enhanced risk penalty (Kemshall & Maguire, 2001).

Patterns of offending behaviour, primarily facilitated by the increase of access to the Internet, and more specifically, social media, may benefit from these multi-lateral policing arrangements as they are able to respond to new types of offences (Jewkes & Yar, 2013; Campbell, 2016; Yardley, et al., 2018). Clearly, technological advances can overwhelm traditional policing crime control capabilities until the threat exceeds capacity. But perhaps more concerning, they can also generate new opportunities for the involvement of vigilant and concerned citizens who are encouraged to play a role in the provision of security online (Jewkes & Yar, 2013; Campbell, 2016; Yardley, et al., 2018; Hadjimatheou et al., 2019). Especially in cases of paedophile hunting where publication of information alone can entail punitive consequences by generating negative publicity long before the complete facts are established (Loveluck, 2019). This fact is often compounded in paedophile hunting situations because the events are often relayed by mainstream media who, simply by



documenting an event, in fact widely expand its audience (Johnston, 1996; Loveluck, 2019). In doing so, this may have the unintended consequence of encouraging proactive citizen involvement in the policing of online sexual offending, so encouraging paedophile hunting activity. What would be better, would be for mainstream and social media to be encouraging the general public to act preventively by installing protective software, or to promote reporting of suspicious on or offline behaviour to assist police investigations (Trottier, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to use existing literature to demonstrate how paedophile hunting activity has become a concept in the investigation, prosecution, and eventual management of sexual offences in England and Wales. Both in the UK and internationally, research investigating paedophile hunting activity, motivations and objectives, and the public's standpoint on them, is limited. The existing literature concerning paedophile hunters calls for greater accountability from all members of the public to ultimately 'watch and de/legitimize these vigilante groups' existence' (Trottier, 2017, p.10). What is required, in order to formulate a clearer understanding of the presence of paedophile hunters and the impact of their activity, is further research concerned with empirical data relating not only to public opinion on the matter, but also practitioners' perspectives, to provide greater insight into the impact of paedophile hunters upon risk management of sexual offenders by the police and probation service.

The lack of empirical research in this area means that it remains uncertain whether paedophile hunters are supported by the public and/or professionals working within the criminal justice system. Nonetheless, exploration of the literature provides evidence that public naming and shaming, specifically via the means of paedophile hunters, is ineffective in reducing re-offending and risk (Hebenton & Thomas, 1996; Pickett et al., 2013; Trottier, 2017). Indeed, research, including the 2018 NPCC report, documents that there is no advantage of paedophile hunting activity to investigation or community-based risk management, and that it actually increases risk to victims, the suspect, and the efficiency and effectiveness of the entire criminal justice process (Boone & van de Bunt, 2016; NPCC, 2018). Even so, the literature also suggests that there is a public desire for increasingly punitive approaches to dealing with sexual offenders, leading to, and then sustained by, the presence of paedophile hunters (Kemshall & Maguire, 2001).

The cases presented in this article show that the complicated relationship between the police, courts and paedophile hunters remains, and is oftentimes exasperated by paedophile hunting activity being relayed by news outlets or social media. By doing so, media outlets may be inadvertently promoting involvement in paedophile hunting activity and showing it as having positive results. The result is that while agents of the state may dislike the activities of paedophile hunters (NPCC, 2018), and the academic literature documents the potential it has to increase risk (Zevitz & Farakas, 2000; McAlinden, 2010; McAlinden, 2016), evidence passed to the police cannot be ignored. What is required therefore, is action by news outlets and social media to encourage the general public to act preventively themselves, and to report suspicious behaviour to the police (Trottier, 2017). Currently, the criminal justice system reluctantly accepts the activities of paedophile

hunters, but it does not support or endorse them. It is difficult to dismiss the actions of these groups as problematic, without appearing to be sympathetic to an extremely damaging type of offending. However, the fact remains that paedophile hunting activity has serious implications for our criminal justice system and its processes, for our individual human rights, and for those wishing to make meaningful and long-lasting changes to their lives.

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