Exploring Practitioner Attitudes of 'Paedophile Hunting' Groups

Laura Frampton explores some of the issues in relation to managing the risks that arise as a result of 'paedophile hunting'.

Both in the UK and internationally research on 'paedophile hunting' activity is limited. This lack of research has serious implications for policy, and that is problematic given the potential consequences of this type of activity on community-based risk management. This research - which you can read in full [here](#) - was designed to consider both public and practitioner attitudes towards paedophile hunters, as well as the implications of the activity on risk management. 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 (Frampton, 2021). Despite these inaccuracies, 'paedophile hunter' was the term used most commonly by participants and is therefore the term used throughout this article.

In this research, a mixed methods approach was utilised, comprising 28 in-depth qualitative interviews with Police Offender Managers and Probation Officers, and a large-scale online survey to generate data on public perceptions. Semi-structured interviews with practitioners generated rich and illuminating material and it is these interviews that I focus on in this article. The four key themes that emerged from talking with practitioners were: emergence and prevalence, resources, safeguarding and risk, and attitudes.

Social media was an area that was discussed widely across many of the interviews, because of the prevalence of 'paedophile hunting' videos across these outlets. Facebook was mentioned most often by participants, followed by YouTube.

Laura Frampton

Former Practitioner and Recent Graduate of the University of Portsmouth

All but two police officers made some reference to professionalising 'paedophile hunting' groups. This means that the groups would formally work together with police. Some officers appeared in support of this, whilst others were more cautious and raised the interesting question of whether in professionalising these groups, the police would also have to make them accountable to the same laws and procedures as the statutory agencies currently undertaking the work. It was interesting to note that fewer probation officers made reference to professionalising 'paedophile hunting' groups. When they did mention it, they were less ambiguous and felt that the work being undertaken by 'paedophile hunting' groups, should be left to the police. Pertinent questions around the suitability or resilience of members of the public to carry out work of this kind were also highlighted, and there were also several references made to community policing.

Whilst probation officers did not mention community policing specifically, police officers did. In one police interview, an interesting observation was made regarding community policing and other types of offending. The suggestion here was that engaging communities with some types of offending behaviour was happening regularly, but that there were different expectations when considering community policing and offences of a sexual nature. This demonstrated that some practitioners view 'paedophile hunters' as unique because of the moral and ethical dilemma surrounding the activity. This is a particularly pertinent finding because it adds to the debate about suitable punishments and effective risk assessment, particularly of people convicted of sexual offences (Hill & Wall, 2015).

With regard to risk, police officers were more focused on the victims of child sexual abuse. This could be an indication of a more victim centred approach, or of a different understanding between the two organisations, of who a victim is.

When referring to risk police officers referred to a different type of risk to that being referred to by probation officers. Police officers often spoke of the *risk posed by paedophile hunting activity* in terms of the risk to possible victims of child sexual abuse, whilst probation officers spoke

more commonly of the *risk posed by paedophile hunting activity* to the individual being targeted by the 'paedophile hunting' group. The question of who the victims of 'paedophile hunters' really are, was beyond the scope of this research, but is an important consideration for future research in this area. Even so, it demonstrates a need for clarity when discussing this activity in the context of criminal justice work.

Risk of harm and reducing re-offending was important to both sets of practitioners, and they described the need to ensure that the methods utilised to assess risk were meaningful in the first instance. Recently, relationships between the police and the probation service have changed dramatically. Close working relationships between the agencies have not always been easy, raising problems around information sharing, conflicting objectives, different ways of working, contrasting attitudes towards offenders and cultural tensions (Mawby & Worrall, 2011). The results of this research show that 'victim' and 'child' are very commonly the key concern of both sets of practitioners. Irrespective of the differing constructs of a 'victim', this research demonstrates that for both police and probation practitioners, the issue of the risk posed by 'paedophile hunting' activity has serious practice implications.

As a result of the research, 3 key recommendations for probation and police services have been made:

1. Design and deliver training for police and probation practitioners to understand 'paedophile hunting' groups and the vigilantism to activism continuum.
2. Practitioner attitudes and opinions should be collected on a larger scale, and from a wider geographical area, to help structure and influence 'paedophile hunter' policy and the associated training.
3. Ensure a Criminal Justice System wide criminological input that focuses on understanding 'paedophile hunting' activity, the vigilantism to activism continuum victims and the associated offending/offenders. (Frampton, 2021).

These recommendations reflect the learning from the research and support practitioners working with people convicted of a sex offence in the community who, on an individual level, are also mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles themselves. The recommendations do not advocate that current policies and procedures should not be adhered to, as they are the current legislative structure through which criminal justice work has to be conducted. However, what is required is recognition of the uniqueness and complexities of the work that these professionals are undertaking, balanced with their own human experiences, morals and values.

References

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