Forensic Science International: Synergy 11 (2025) 100639

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Forensic Science International: Synergy

journal homepage: www.sciencedirect.com/journal/forensic-science-international-synergy

Canadian correctional program officers facilitating programming for sex offenders: The stickiness of stigma

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Correctional services
Sex offenders
Correctional program officers
Stigma
Convict/inmate code

ABSTRACT

The stigma of being convicted (or suspected) of sex–related offenses is long recognized, resulting in people being viewed as being the most abhorrent of offenders. Sex offenders (SOs) have been studied, as well as the parole and correctional officers who work with them. Yet, despite their centralized role in prisoner rehabilitation, correctional program officers (CPOs) facilitating programs to SOs have yet to be examined in relation to their interpretations of SOs and of prison culture around SOs. Drawing on interviews with 12 CPOs who have delivered SO-focused programming to groups of SOs exclusively, we unpack the stigma and label of SOs in institutions and the community, the perceived implications of stigmatization on SO and CPOs, and on their ability to complete programs safely and successfully. Our findings reveal i) SOs remain stigmatized with repercussion for reintegration opportunities; ii) SOs remain at the bottom of the prisoner hierarchy; iii) SOs require support to physically attend programs; and iv) the SO stigma sticks to people facilitating sex offender programs. Findings are discussed in relation to stigma theories but also considerations for program delivery and CPO education and wellness are put forth.

1. Introduction

Convicted sex offenders (SOs) are long recognized as a stigmatized population both within prison and in the community. The stigma of being convicted (or even suspected) of sex–related offenses has resulted in people being viewed as monstrous chimeric assemblages [1] and being severely ostracized in prison and society [2,3]. The sexual offending/offender (SO) label evokes contempt, hatred, and images of extreme sexual harm (often thought caused to children) and is tied to fallacies and misconceptions about who is an SO as embedded in the SO label. There are few, if any at all, labels as stigmatizing as the SO, creating negative reactions because, simply said, a SO, due to interpretations of their criminality, offends citizens' morals, ethics, and values [4]. Even in prisons, the informal norms governing prison conduct (i.e., the "inmate" or "convict" code, see Ref. [5]) reinforces how SOs are perceived and their placement on the lowest rung of the prisoner hierarchy. The SO label renders the SO as in need of both "repair" and "retribution" in both prison and society [4,6]. Due to their extreme stigmatization, SOs are thought to deserve the harshest punitive measures and require specific interventions through programs [7].

Serving as a punishment and providing hope to change, sex offender programming (SOP) is intended to respond to an integral component of SO rehabilitation, the requirement to "optimize" their opportunities for successful community reintegration after incarceration. To date, SOs have been studied in prison and communities and in terms of how SOs are interpreted by the police as well as parole and correctional officers who work with them [8–11], yet CPOs who facilitate sex offender programming (SOP) have not been studied. Thus, in–depth knowledge of SOs' "rehabilitative" journey through programming is relatively ignored. In this article, we draw on data from interviews with 12 CPOs (see Table 1: Participant Demogrphic Data), who have facilitated programing exclusively to people convicted of sex offenses, to learn about program provision to SOs. We examine how CPOs interpret criminality in relation to offenses that violate societal morals, ethics, and values and particularly when interpretations are invoked around child and adult victims [4]. We show how SOs are deeply affected by their stigma, and the imposed label, when in prison, leaving prison, and when trying to complete programming, all context that CPOs navigate when facilitating sex offender progrms (SOPs).

We begin with an overview of the literature on stigma and labeling in

This article is part of a special issue entitled: Sex Crime published in Forensic Science International: Synergy.

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fsisyn.2025.100639
Received 4 January 2025; Received in revised form 30 August 2025; Accepted 3 September 2025
Available online 10 September 2025

Table 1
Demographic data of participants.

CATEGORY	Value	Count
GENDER	MEN	5
	WOMEN	7
WORKSPACE PLACEMENT	COMMUNITY	3
	INSTITUTION	9
EDUCATION	UNIVERSITY	9
	COLLEGE	3
	HIGH SCHOOL; SOME COLLEGE	1

the context of sex-related offenses, correctional work, and offender treatment as our conceptual framework. We then present our methods and approach to data collection and analysis. Our findings focus on stigma, social hierarchy, and the precautions CPOs must take when navigating the 'stickiness' of stigma. We provide a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of these findings, particularly in terms of how stigma may influence the effectiveness of program fidelity and efficacy of correctional practice. Finally, we offer directions for future research and outline the limitations of our study while proposing a novel research agenda for Canadian CPOs.

2. Sex offender stigma and label

In Canada, mandatory minimum (duration) sentences shape the lived experiences of people convicted of sex–related crimes (for a discussion on the versatility in what constitutes a sex crime, please see Ref. [1,4]. The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) relies on the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* [12]. Put simply, CSC uses that manual's diagnostic criteria for different types of sexual disorders where no consent exists between parties which constitutes the person "convicted of a sexual offense; convicted of a sexually motived crime; or [who] has admitted to a sexual offense which has not resulted in conviction," and labeled a SO [13]. They could have done a variety of sexual crimes, but what remains for society is the interpretation of the SO as a person who violates an ideal victim (i.e., a child who can never consent see Ref. [14]). SOs, due to their stigma, are made vulnerable as a population [15–17], simultaneously creating fear and becoming a target of vigilantism in prison and society. Although stigmatizing, we use the term SO(s) to remain consistent with the language used by our participants and, as CPO clientele, to indicate their sexual offence conviction.

The SO label is driven by a group, not individual, identity and represents illegal, immoral, wrong, unjust, and vile actions [1]. As a label, it constructs a monolithic, marginalized identity, positioning individuals as both "in need of repair" and "deserving of retribution" [4]. Mediatized representations further reinforce stigma while conflating sexual offending with risk, violence, and predation, particularly in cases involving child vulnerability [18]. Stigma thus "sticks," creating a snowball effect where even short-lived suspicion can lead to long-term social, legal, and institutional repercussions [19]. Labeling theory underscores how stigma exacerbates social exclusion, rejection, and weakened social bonds by reinforcing deviance, leading to criminogenic outcomes rather than deterrence [19,20]. Bernburg [19] identifies three criminogenic processes central to contemporary scholarship in labeling theory: the development of a deviant self-concept which is internalized; rejection and withdrawal in society as they become grouped as deviants; and institutional segregation. In consequence, labeling processes can extend the stigma to those working with SOs, like CPOs, who must navigate societal biases while managing their own emotional responses. Here, countertransference emerges when associated with the labeled individual [6,21]. For example, Markowitz [22] shows how the anticipation of rejection due to stigma can harm individuals—independent of actual rejection—an insight applicable to persons suspected of sex-related crimes as well as practitioners assigned to support these criminalized individuals.

2.1. Prison hierarchy and social positioning

There is a long–recognized hierarchy in prison based on, at least in part, a prisoner's conviction (or charges) that transcends men's and women's prisons. Masculine self–presentation, in men's prisons, also informs the hierarchy to some extent, but never the same extent as criminality, although the two are intertwined [23–25]. Part of interpreting masculinities is the role of consensual sex (i.e., male dominance over women in part), where those who do not have interested or consenting partners are seen as emasculated [25,26]. As a result, SOs are positioned on the lower rungs of informal social hierarchy in prison. Moreover, different SOs are further segregated and subordinated according to their victims, with the lowest status held by those who victimized children and those preying on women as marginally higher in position [27–29]. In prison, then, there is a collective hatred toward the SO or anyone holding the label, which also ties other prisoners together by creating a collective group hatred toward the SO and thus bonding the non–SO population [2].

The stigma of SOs is totalizing and quickly becomes a master status [30]. To exemplify, decades ago, Åkerström, wrote of how prisoners interpret SOs as prison outcasts who are never welcome in the general prisoner population because of their crimes which determine the SO is "less than human" (p. 4) [31]. SOs are historically segregated in Canadian prisons and were either housed in "protective custody" or "vulnerable persons units", and some were transferred to a prison known to largely only house SOs. Such institutions inflicted what Ricciardelli and Moir [2] called a structural stigma with a hefty label – one imposed on people who reside within a space due to the systemic nature of the attributed taint. The exclusion reflects a broader form of institutional bias, where labeling mechanisms reinforce conditions that further entrench individuals within criminogenic interventions rather than supporting desistance and reintegration [32]. The segregation was considered necessary for SOs who are otherwise alienated, ostracized, and targeted for victimization [2,4,33]). The segregation was argued to be enacted to preserve life. Such structural stigmatization and the resultant ostracization is not limited to life within prison contexts but carries over to when SOs leave prisons. Thus, if CPOs are working in the community or in a prison, they experience administrative and service challenges when providing SOPs.

2.2. Correctional programming

CPOs are integral to the rehabilitation process in correctional institutions and community correctional spaces. They facilitate a range of programming that addresses Indigeneity, gender, social dynamics and, our focus here, specialized interventions (SOPs) exclusively for individuals convicted of sex crimes. They deliver these as educational programming aimed at behavioural change among incarcerated individuals and those re-entering society. Such programs are designed as pedagogical interventions that challenge distorted thinking patterns and promote behavioural modification among this population [34,35]. As such, CSC programming operate within a rehabilitative framework, with the goal of supporting criminal desistance and facilitating reintegration into society [36,37].

CPOs often navigate a tension between evidence–informed assessments and subjective judgments, shaped by their backgrounds and societal narratives, constituting a form of situational awareness [38]. Added layers of complexity to the awareness include technological advancements in how information is organized and mediated [39]. Thus, divergence—or occupational drift—can influence situational awareness over time [40,41] sometimes leading to inflated risk perceptions and increased personal strain [42]. There is some evidence that subjective biases, influenced by broader cultural narratives about sex crimes, shape CPOs' perceptions within the carceral environment, affecting both professional decision–making and mental health [5]. Therefore, personal bias can form the basis of entrenched thinking patterns which can

affect job satisfaction and contribute to the cumulative stress some officers experience in their roles vocationally, and organizationally [43, 44].

For example, the correctional environment reinforces status quo bias through stigmatizing narratives, labels, and hostilities that affect both prisoner residents and staff [5]. This is particularly true in cases where the stigma of sex offenders may 'stick' to those working with SOs, particularly CPOs that provide SOPs. To understand the role of stigma in relation to SOs and how stigma may stick to those providing programming to them, we analyze the coded CPO interview transcripts. Our aim is to show how the implications of stigma occur when the SO label is attached to SOs in programs; and how CPOs facilitate and navigate SOPs while interpreting its effects. In doing so, for this study, we ask how interpreting the nature of stigma, for CPOs working with individuals convicted of sexual offenses, related to the experiences of facilitating sex offender programming? And, in the eyes of CPOsproviding programming to SOs, in which ways does stigma stick?

3. Methods

We analyzed data collected through 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews with CPOs who have delivered SOPs, employed by CSC, thus working in federal penitentiaries or in the community. The Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) at Memorial University of Newfoundland approved the study (File No. 20231269). The primary investigator and the Union of Safety and Justice Employees (USJE), who also funded the research, determined the sampling and recruitment processes. USJE's role was also to support the recruitment, by advertising the study nationally and sending emails for recruitment to their French and English-speaking CPO-members in both official Canadian languages. Of the interviews, 84.3 % were conducted in English and the remainder in French (15.7 %).

We used an interview guide and followed a semi–structured approach, always prioritizing the conversational paths put forth by participants. We provided opportunities for them to speak about whatever was front of their minds [45]. We probed for depth and clarification as needed according to our guide to ensure topics were comprehensive. Although the order of discussion was flexible, and featured occupational questions around career entry, role challenges, well-being, and mental health as well as resource needs and what they most enjoyed about their work. In practice, this meant learnning through the discovery of participants' experiences and nuancing topics that emerged when describing their work with SOs and facilitating SOPs. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 min in duration, occurring between June and November 2023, and were conducted by phone due to geographic limitations. We found qualitative in-depth interviewing by phone productive and aligned with studies confirming it could sufficiently enable rapport-building and provide opportunities for participants to converse comfortably [46–49]. As interviewing covered sensitive topics including employment and occupational exposures to trauma, phone interviews proved particularly apposite for this research context [50, 51]. Research assistants transcribed the interviews verbatim and the core team of five researchers constructed a codebook where we each coded five transcripts to develop an initial set of codes. We then integrated our respective codebooks into one master document while discussing discrepancies and commonalities as we worked to ensure a qualitative variant of inter–rater reliability, known as consensus coding [52].

Our approach to coding used QSR NVivo (version 14) without any artificial intelligence as we manually coded all transcripts referencing our constructed codebook. Thus, we engaged in an iterative process of consolidation, and as new nodes emerged, coders reconciled differences until our repeated process achieved theoretical saturation and no new discoveries emerged [53,54]. We used a realist, appreciative, semi–grounded constructed approach to analysis of coded data—always with a lens to the entire narrative of each excerpts' context [55–57]. Our analysis remains semi-grounded because these thematic findings emerged from the data and, while we were theoretically guided by our scholarly and practical backgrounds, it was not our aim to create theory *per se*, but merely discover nuances of this exploratory work [58].

Regarding interviewee work environment, 79 % worked in penitentiaries and 21 % in community correctional settings (e.g., parole offices or Community Correctional Centres)—several participants had worked in both settings. Regarding occupational tenure, 23 % reported less than 10 years of CSC work experience, 40 % reported between 10 and 19 years of experience, and 32 % had 20 or more years of occupational tenure (we omitted non-responses). The median years of tenure was 15. The sample represented all five CSC regions: Prairies (26 %), Pacific (22 %), Ontario (20 %), Quebec (18 %), and Atlantic (11 %), which is a composite of the federal correctional service at a national scale.

However, our current findings are limited to respondents (n = 12) situated in workplaces across four provinces (i.e., British Columbia, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and Ontario). Of these 12 participants, seven were women and five men (see Table 1: Participant Demogrphic Data). All reported heterosexuality, most between 45 and 64 years of age, and eight identified as White and four as Indigenous. They had worked on average, 15 years with CSC. All worked full-time in their capacity facilitating correctional programming at the time data was collected, except one who worked part-time. We present data in terms of transcript excerpts and represent quotations by participant ID number to reduce bias inherent to pseudonyms, recognizing the paradox in which stigmatizing language was used by participants and sometimes reflected in our presentation of data.

4. Results

Our findings confirm that labeling and SO stigma are central themes in how CPOs navigate their work with individuals convicted of sexual offenses. We begin by examining the nuances of SO labeling and exploring how stigma mediates social hierarchies which position SOs at the lowest rungs of the prison hierarchy, finding status further stratified by victim typology. Next, we consider how stigma influences institutional structures and prison units, shaping CPOs' interpretations of their students' needs in programming, including protecting SOs in programming. Finally, we examine how stigma extends beyond SOs to CPOs themselves, as transference and societal narratives surrounding sexual offending impact the efficacy of pedagogical instruction in sex-related rehabilitative programming.

4.1. Stigma

Highly aware of how "society has a stigma around [SOs]," P054 explained:

> somewhere inside of me, I don't like some of those types of offenses. There may be sort of a scare of what's worse to what's a bit more [pause] not as bad so … I think we are all susceptible to that. I try to consciously know they've committed some crime, societies bestowed their judgement upon them and then this is their punishment.

With these words, P054 shows an awareness of SO stigma but distances themselves from judgment, despite their negative feeling toward some of their crimes and their awareness of the hierarchy in offense typology. As such, they show an awareness of the implications of working with SOs because of the stigmatizing nature of their criminality which transcends to their self and can manifest how their approach to work is interpreted by others. Some participants, readily aware of concerns around victimization and sentencing, disclosed how the shorter sentences which tend to be awarded, from their perspective, to SOs with child victims are notlong enough. As P046 explained, "I teach serial killers how to be better people" while describing security classification in the context of "violent" behaviour and stated they "personally really

struggle with the really short sentences that the guys end up getting a lot of the time who have crimes against children." Through these words the experience of social stigma converged upon themes of violent behaviour and sexual predation.

However, additional consequences of the social stigma are felt as inappropriate and unfair. For instance, regarding suspensions, P074, who works in the community, explained how their office is rather "conservative" meaning parolees are:

> suspended [from their parole] a lot—like in my mind—I've worked in many different offices …. But I mean every office suspends at a certain rate. They just seem to suspend everybody. Especially sex offenders. Like if they can find a reason to suspend a sex offender, they're gone. They're not getting them six chances.

The interpretation presented by P074 suggested SOs are more likely to be suspended, in comparison to others convicted of non-sex-related crimes, which is attributed to the social distain connected and normalized for those suspected or, as in this case, convicted of, and thus labeled with, sex crimes. To further explain, P074 said there is a misperception that SOs as more likely to breach, however, instead in truth feels most of them are not going to reoffend while they are serving a sentence. P074 exclaimed "there are the chosen few that you need to be real careful with. But they believe the risk is higher than it really is," articulating how perceived danger and risk conflate with empirical realities.

Regarding historical crimes, P074 explains how impactful stigma is when using the example of assessment tools when dealing with a historical offender on their caseload:

> a guy molests his grandchildren. And he's a historical sex offender. So, he didn't get convicted and sent to jail until many years later. So, these grandchildren are now say, thirty or whatever. He has no contact with them. He has no grandchildren. No nothing, right? So, this guy comes out into the community, and everyone is freaking out because of what he did like thirty-five [or] forty years ago. But he has no victim pool.

Here, the P074 spoke to how, with historical offenses, the person being punished is not necessarily the person with the opportunity or desire to re-commit such crimes despite public interpretations of risk or punishment [59,60]. Thus, they questioned, like many others, how a person who has not committed such a crime in several decades—and evidently presents no threat to public safety—must serve a federal prison sentence. The reason, as per P083, is simply because society is preoccupied by the "most heinous crimes and that is the social norm of what's the most heinous" in shaping understandings of sexual recidivism [61]. Society is thought to want to punish all SOs—no matter their actuarially validatedrisk. Therefore, P083 recognized, SOs "usually [have] the [least] risk for recidivating" but nevertheless was challenged by the optics around "public image."

In a similar vein, P044 explained why they do SOP, noting "because there is nobody else to do them" and persist to despite feeling underqualified. However, they recognized how that "part of the job" is "an important aspect of public safety. Its huge because in my opinion—from what I've noticed, people are more horrified of sex offenders than people that commit a one–time murder." Here, P044 confirms the stickiness of SO stigma with this associated label in society, which is reinforced in prisons, including among some staff and people who are incarcerated.

P062 articulated the nuance of working with SOs, who they found "definitely interesting and described the subpopulation as "fairly pro–social, quite educated often times, they understand the skills." Yet, recognizes how "it's a tough topic to talk about with people because they're kind of like the—how to say this? [pause] the … [stigma]. Yes, they are. Yeah, compared to any of the other like crimes … And even you know with their offenses. There's kind of like a hierarchy within that as well." In P062's words, the stigmatic affect of sex crimes—made the topic almost unbroachable for discussion. Thus, the low-level hierarchical status brings challenges to working with the SO subpopulation, a reality to which we now turn.

4.2. Hierarchy

Consistent with prior research suggesting there is a hierarchy in, at least, Canadian federal prisons tied to gender presentation; sexuality; and more predominantly, criminality [33,62], P057 recognized "obviously the inmates don't care for sex offenders." While P072 said "There's a lot of bias against sex offenders. There's a certain image that goes with it" and P061 explained:

> a lot of the adult offenders have a serious hate on themselves for child offenders. Mostly because they were offended against when they were children. So, you got a guy who offended against an adult female. And he hates child molesters and then he has to sit in his room with a bunch of child molesters.

With these words P072 and P061 describe the structure where hierarchical status is attributed according to one's victim pool. Thus, criminality reveals a nuance around relationships within prison spaces and how governance structures take place. For P026, the ease of working with some SOs is attributed to the "pecking order" in the institution where "sex offenders are towards the bottom … They can be very compliant as far as that goes. So, they're, for the most part, quite easy to deal with." The hierarchy in prisons thus emerged as affecting how programming and intervention operate, leading to precaution.

4.3. Precaution

Participants explained how the hierarchy in prisons necessitated a degree of conscientiousness when facilitating programs, particularly regarding the nature of SOs' convictions. For instance, P036 believes when facilitating SOP, the stigma meant a need for enhanced due dilligence because SOs "need to be isolated a bit more. The group needs to be more private. You have to be tricky about the way you phrase things." Interpreting these words, P036 described attending to the subpopulation's privacy to preserve safety for SOs participating in programming. As such, they described tact and discretion for negotiating sensitivity with security for SOs, in the group, where disclosure posed various challenges.

Beyond stigma concerning the nature of programming, P072 felt reticence an issue: "[T]hese guys are often reluctant to take programs because it could bring them to [be] notice[d]. Especially given the nature of the institution I work in." Echoing others, P049 recognized SOs are "a target in the prison … they always got that stigma… you['re] always … aware [of] how much they might be a target to other offenders." Relevant here is how, despite not being responsible, technically, for prisoner security, CPOs did feel responsible for SOs' wellbeing. They, in delivering programs, are "doing the best to prevent it [SO victimization]". Likewise, P057 described diligence and precaution for preventing harm to SOs:

> You have to be a little bit more vigilant with regard to them getting to and from programs in a safe way. You have to try to keep the fact that you were doing a sex offender program you keep that knowledge as quiet as possible to the other inmates.

Thus, silence is represented as an organizational feature of facilitating SOP [63], when concerned about protecting prisoners, particularly those who have victimized children and lowest in social status.

While P044 find the hierarchy affects class participation where those who "committed an offense against a child, they barely say something because they're always going to be picked on. They're always going to be made an example of. It's just the culture." They suggested to remedy this an approach that placed program participants into cohorts based on one's offense-type was warranted (i.e., with prisoners of similar criminality so they are more comfortable and able to learn from and grow as a participant) rather than offense-date assignments. The adjustment

would then allow prisoners to learn and grow more effectively alongside peers with similar backgrounds, enhancing the benefits of program facilitation by perhaps creating a more open space. Whereas, in the current model, there are simply:

> some things you can't discuss in the classroom because you expose them [as a pedophile]. Although confidentiality is one of the core conditions for someone to be in the program. It happened a few times that people were threatened going back on the unit because someone decided to blackmail them (P072).

The hierarchy and structure of programming thus undermined program fidelity and effectiveness, as biases and stigma influenced the classroom environment when participants were not grouped according to criminogenic needs. Speaking to programs, P061 described how:

> the manual doesn't help to differentiate [SOs]. They kind of put everything in one box. Everybody in one box. And nobody fits into that box whatsoever. That's one of the biggest challenges, trying to connect and build a rapport with each guy based on his particular crime process and offending and all of those things. And none of that fits in the manual. So, it's really just a matter of—I have to make this up as I go.

Therefore, the classroom and group dynamic was a space requiring careful management, largely shaped by informal structures influencing prison society, like the 'inmate code' and prison hierarchy. Additional challenges arose from the perception of programming as falling short of adequately supporting SOs.

4.4. Stigma stickiness and the SO label

The stigma of working with SOs was pronounced by the experience of P049, who said: "that look or that question'how could you even do that? How can you even stand to talk to them? Or look at them. Or have conversations with them. How could you even do that?'" A prejudice attributed to the SO label meant stigma was experienced by P049 when describing that "there's a lot of doubt in whether they can be rehabilitated." Here, the participant described feeling judged and, in turn, questioning whether rehabilitation was dubious in some casesespecially when sexually-orientated reasoning meant some SOs were seen as impervious to change. Participants offered disorders, for example, pedophilia and anti-social personality traits were particularly concerning where a high presence of psychopathy meant a lower capacity for consciousness [64]. However, by contrast, the low recidivism rates among most SOs, despite societal intolerance, suggested CPOs were often preoccupied by heinous criminal behaviours due to sensationalized accounts where sexuality, violence, and crimes of opportunity would conflate[18,65].

Therefore, dissonance emerged for CPOs when, despite their best efforts to change cognitive processing and reduce recidivism risk, some offenders would nevertheless reoffend. Thinking otherwise, according to P049, was naïve: "I'm under no impression that you're [SO] not going to have a risky sexual thought at different times." However, the challenge here is the confluence of thoughts and behaviour at the intersection of how one relates to the other. Speaking about the crimes of a notorious offender, P049 expressed dissonance in their role when explaining a tension that was particularly "difficult to work with, because he had no remorse at all, nothing …" Struggling for words, P049 continued:

> In my job I have a lot of compassion and stuff like that. And I think it's a good thing to have that when you're trying to help people change. But I had no compassion for this guy. And that actually caused me a lot of stress coming out in different ways. Being unmotivated at home, like usually I enjoy going to work. I don't dread going to work. I'm fine with it. But I was just questioning: 'What the hell am I doing here, right? And how much longer can I do this?' But that was just a particularly difficult person to deal with.

Unpacking these words, the participant explained normative occupational responsibilities resumed once a particular SO was reassigned to another CPO's caseload. Therefore, sometimes the person—rather than the offense—made the work more challenging.

Informatively, other CPOs, such as P057, did not feel stigma or labeling was so pronounced among the SO subpopulation, instead they explained, "in terms of stigma within the sex offenders, I don't think it's really any different working with sex offenders versus working with um [the] regular population." In this sense, P057 did not discern judgements according to a prisoner's index offense or criminal history. Nevertheless, despite the remaining '"ick factor'" (P057), the CPOs explained "wouldn't you rather have them get every program [available, rather] than have [no] treatment at all?—especially if they're going to be your neighbour?" Here, the participant brings to reality the community reintegration aspect, at a societal level, needed for calibrated understandings about SOP, criminality, and reform.

5. Discussion

In the current study, we explored how the stigma and even labeling surrounding sexual offending affects programming by investigating the CPOs interpretations of delivering SOP. Our findings highlight how stigma renders SOs a monolithic, marginalized category, often perceived as the monstrous chimeric other, unlike prisoners in general populations. The stigma remains prevalent —sticking to SOs and CPOs alike—resulting in continuous discrimination and prejudice. Thus, part of the stickiness appears to be driven by confirmation bias and the self-fulfilling prophecy, wherein individuals persistently framed as risks or dangers experience treatment outcomes that reinforce stigma and ultimately shape fear-based designations of their identity [66]. The SO label persists as a master status which may reinforce myths or fallacy that raise concern about the capacity for change,particularly when practitioners adopt ideological beliefs discordent with rehabilitation.

We observed how deviant identity formation drives stigma, as SOs who were reluctant to engage fully in programming face systemic bias embedded through classification and programming assignments. This bias, in turn, extends to correctional practitioners, who work in proximity to criminalized populations and are themselves affected by the stigma attached to SO rehabilitation. For the SO, the challenges are also tied to identifying what is discrimination because of their offense type and what is a consequence of their crime and inherent to their punishment versus what is required to manage recidivism. The stigma may result in SOs having more suspensions and breaches, which impedes reentry capacity. However, more data and analyses are required thus we offer this consideration for future research.

Nevertheless, one challenge for CPOs is how the monolithic perception of the SO disregards the heterogeneous risks and needs among prison residents and parolees as they are tasked to deliver standardized programs without individualization or variation. Literature supports effective interventions require tailoring to individual circumstances rather than relying on rigid frameworks, as qualitative differentials in content delivery vary across psychological and social constructs [67]. Hence, understanding better the variation and heterogeneity of SOs who require programs, and using that information to shape programs and program delivery, is essential. We emphasize the importance of including a practitioner-focused perspective on what works best, and for whom, in programming.

Stigma, beyond shaping public and organizational perceptions, mediates professional judgment, possibly influencing the ability of different CPOs to form therapeutic alliances critical to rehabilitation [68,69]. Bias, such as "risk inflation"—arising, in part, from preconceived notions of penal populism [70]—undermines punishment legitimacy by distorting correctional workers' judgment, hindering their capacity to address unique needs among clientele [71]. Therefore, such prejudice re-creates systemic barriers to responsive programming, perpetuating a disconnect between human service goals and institutional mandates

[72–74]. Consequently, institutional bias and administrative harms reinforce how programming can sometimes become unresponsive when it means privileging bureaucratic governance over the nuanced human factors critical for individualized care [75,76].

Therefore, we observe structural stigma, as per Ricciardelli and Moir [2], manifest through perceived inequitable suspension rates, hierarchical subordination, and alienation within carceral systems, conflating offender/victim dynamics with sensationalized narratives of sexual offending [65]. For example, the quasi-legal status of sex offenders *qua homo sacer* (see Ref. [3]) where individuals are judged and treated as risks without conviction, complicates treatment delivery and perpetuates operational and organizational biases. Moreover, the strength of stigma is evidenced in the punishments of those convicted of a sole historical sex crime. These many systemic issues underscore the importance of fostering compassionate curiosity and therapeutic alliances necessary to relaize program efficacy; and both discretion and rapport-building when addressing dynamic risk factors on an individual level. To mitigate these challenges, we advocate for reframing programming objectives around well-being and human-centered design, moving beyond rigid standardization to focus on collaborative care established between service providers and clientele for achieving more meaningful outcomes.

We argue the strength of stigma's effects necessitate care and caution when scheduling SOPs, referring or mandating SOs to attend SOP, and within SOP classes. As SOs are targeted heterogeneously, based on their crimes, some represent more salient 'targets' than others. CPOs navigate such potentialities when facilitating programs and working with SOs. One such potential outcome for CPOs, when tasked with SOP, is the propensity stigma will stick to them occupationally, as we evidence in terms of CPOs who endure vitriol for working with SOs, similar to what police also experience[4]. Informatively, CPOs described being challenged less by the nature of criminality and more regarding the degree of remorse, accountability, and attitudinal indifference they encountered in their work. Here, assessments of remorse, accountability, and character remain subjective, making them vulnerable to inconsistencies in public safety mandates—especially when systemic biases compromise situational awareness in casework [38].

5.1. Implications and limitations

Our study highlights the pressing need for evidence-informed practices and approaches that genuinely respond to human needs when doing correctional programming, including SOP. Moreover, SOs remain stigmatized and to mitigate the effects of institutional stigma and support CPOs in forming the therapeutic alliances crucial for effective rehabilitation the consequences of the SO stigma require address, study, and action. Our study is limited by participant demographics and sample size, although we did have 12 and reached theme saturation. Additional limitations include exclusion of CPOs without experience facilitating SOP for a comparison in interpretations of SOs. In addition, the geographic representation of CPOs who deliver SOP excludes Quebec, and other jurisdictions, restricting insights into any culturally distinct provincial/territorial variability in findings.

Additionally, restricted access to programming manuals due to recruitment constraints prevented deeper analysis of policy frameworks guiding SOP delivery. Future research should expand sample diversity, incorporate mixed methods approaches, and explore how stigma affects both SOs and CPOs longitudinally. Examining the role of risk inflation in revocation processes and institutional decision-making could provide valuable policy insights, particularly in mitigating administrative biases affecting stigmatized subpopulations. Comparative studies across jurisdictions would also further illuminate how regional policies shape correctional programming and reintegration efforts.

6. Conclusion

Our study highlights how SO labeling functions as a persistent stigma, shaping not only the experiences of program recipients but also extending to CPOs responsible for facilitating SOPs. Stigma permeates institutional structures, influencing program fidelity, risk assessments, and interpretations of rehabilitation potential, with broader pedagogical implications beyond the scope of the current study. Ultimately, addressing the unintended consequences of labeling requires a commitment to evidence-informed, human-centered correctional strategies that balance public safety with meaningful rehabilitation.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Rosemary Ricciardelli: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Dale Spencer:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology. **Micheal P. Taylor:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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