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An evidence review of the connections between sexual exposure and contact sexual offending

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About

This report was written by Dr Fiona Vera-Gray and Professor Clare McGlynn, commissioned by the College of Policing. It comprises a rapid review of the evidence published since 2014 on sexual exposure (commonly termed 'indecent exposure') including cyberflashing and its connections to contact sexual offending. It also sets out implications of the findings for policing and recommendations for further research.

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Executive summary

Introduction

Sexual exposure (commonly known as ‘indecent exposure’) has been historically overlooked in England and Wales as a form of violence against women and girls (VAWG), despite evidence of its impact on women and their freedom of movement. This minimisation is now being challenged, following the high-profile murders of three women – Libby Squire, Sarah Everard and Zara Aleena – by male strangers who had a history of non-contact sexual offending, including sexual exposure.

In this context of raised public awareness and concern, the College of Policing commissioned this report to provide an evidence review of recent literature exploring the connections between contact sexual offending and sexual exposure, including online exposure, known as cyberflashing.

The aim was to conduct a rapid review of the evidence on escalation from exposure to contact sexual offending published since the last significant literature review on ‘exhibitionism’ in 2014 (McNally and Fremouw, 2014). The 2014 review was primarily based on studies over 20 to 30 years old. It found that for a small minority of offenders who sexually expose and encounter the criminal justice and mental health systems, there is some evidence of a movement from exposure to contact sexual offending (5% to 10%).

The research underpinning this report was identified through a systematic search of four academic databases, supplemented with grey literature. Using an expanded inclusion criteria which included research based on community or population samples, as well as those looking at the connections between online exposure and contact sexual offences, this report found a total of six articles and reports published since 2014 in English which explore the connections between sexual exposure and contact sexual offending.

Taken together with the evidence base on the harms of exposure, this means that sexual exposure should be treated in and of itself as a serious sexual offence, rather than only serious on the basis that it may escalate to contact offending.

Key findings

- **The overwhelming majority of sexual exposure crimes and offenders do not come into contact with the police.** Office for National Statistics (ONS) data shows sexual exposure is a crime affecting 0.4% of the population aged over 16 each year ([ONS, 2022](#)). However, only a low number of offences annually are recorded by the police and these are not currently disaggregated between sexual exposure and voyeurism (with the total for both given as 12,000 per year).
- **There are no specific research studies on cyberflashing and connections with contact sexual offending.** Only one study involved online offending but it did not disaggregate data regarding online exposure and so was excluded from this review. Therefore, there are no research studies yet available on connections between online sexual exposure (cyberflashing) and sexual offending offline and online.
- **The limited literature on sexual exposure offline finds evidence of the offending behaviour remaining the same as well as escalating, and de-escalating, among exhibitionist offenders.** While this review, and the earlier review from 2014, found some evidence of escalation for some offenders, there is equally evidence of maintenance and de-escalation in the offending behaviour of convicted sex offenders.
- **There is some evidence that greater levels of interaction with victims during sexual exposure may be a risk factor for offenders who move to contact sexual offending.** However, there is no reliable research evidence suggesting that certain types of sexual exposure are more predictive of contact sexual offending or are experienced by victims as more harmful.
- **Some evidence suggests voyeurism may be more indicative than sexual exposure of more extensive patterns of sexual offending.** Two studies in this review, based on convicted offender populations, identified signs that not exposure but voyeurism may act as a 'gateway' for contact offending, something which one study claimed required 'significant investigation'.

Implications

- **Crimes of sexual exposure must be taken seriously in and of themselves as harmful, threatening and violating forms of sexual offending.** Given the

consistent evidence base on harms and the limited evidence base on escalation, greater recognition must be given by policing, criminal justice agencies and society generally to the harmful nature of sexual exposure, online and offline, in and of itself and not only where considered a 'gateway' to contact sexual offending. As such, sexual exposure should not be treated as a 'low-level' offence.

- **Focus of research and investigations should shift from 'escalation' to 'patterns of offending'.** The evidence suggests the importance of looking beyond escalation to exploring the connections between the range of non-contact sexual offences, including voyeurism against adults and contact sexual offending. As such, we suggest a policing and research approach based on 'patterns of offending' more broadly.
- **Research on sexual exposure should be commissioned to fill existing gaps in the evidence base for England and Wales.** This report has found a need for research exploring the patterns of offending between non-contact and contact sexual offences in undetected offenders in England and Wales through community samples. In addition, further research is required regarding online patterns of sexual offending, as well as research that seeks to update the existing evidence base on harms and justice from victims' perspectives.
- **New police guidance should apply to all forms of sexual exposure.** There is currently no solid evidence base to suggest that sexual exposure involving acts such as masturbation is more likely to lead to contact sexual offending, or that it is experienced as more harmful. Therefore, any new police guidance should apply to all forms of sexual exposure, including online exposure.
- **Reporting mechanisms for victims of non-contact sexual offences should be reviewed, including for 'intelligence only' reporting.** Given the low levels of reporting compared to prevalence, and the reliance on an evidence base of offenders who have been reported, there is a need to review reporting mechanisms and the response to 'intelligence reporting' to help increase numbers of offenders who are known to the criminal justice system (CJS).
- **Proactive policing responses which respond to sexual exposure as a serious offence should be explored.** Given that the evidence on patterns of offending for sexual exposure offenders shows there are repeat offenders,

proactive policing initiatives to disrupt non-contact sexual offending should be explored. These would help not only to prevent offending, but also to increase the number of detected offenders and grow the evidence base on perpetrator characteristics and offending behaviour. Such initiatives should be further explored with a view to potential application across force areas and extensions beyond the night-time economy.

Introduction

Despite its documented prevalence ([ONS, 2022](#)) and serious impact on victims, including limiting spatial and social freedom and reinforcing women's fear of crime (Vera-Gray, 2016; 2018), sexual exposure – commonly known as 'indecent exposure' – has been historically overlooked as a form of VAWG. Though not yet widely used, the reasons for the use of the term 'sexual exposure' in this report are considered in the section on terminology. Often referred to as 'low-level' offending, sexual exposure and other non-contact sexual offences, such as voyeurism, have been commonly trivialised and marginalised across society and the CJS. However, this approach is now being questioned in England and Wales, following the high-profile murders of three women by male strangers who had a history of non-contact sexual offending, including sexual exposure.

Libby Squire was raped and murdered by Pawel Relowicz in 2019 ([Mistlin, 2021](#); [Mistry, 2021](#)). He had previous convictions for masturbating in public, voyeurism offences involving watching women through windows and breaking into students' bedrooms to steal sex toys and underwear. A year later, Sarah Everard was abducted, raped and murdered by Wayne Couzens, a serving Metropolitan Police officer ([Dodd and Siddique, 2021](#)). After his arrest, it was discovered that Couzens had a history of sexual offending against women, including multiple reports of sexual exposure. Though these offences were brought to police attention in 2008, 2015 and 2020, Couzens was not charged until 2022 ([Crown Prosecution Service \(CPS\), 2023](#)). Then in 2022, Zara Aleena was followed, sexually assaulted and murdered by Jordan McSweeney, a man who also had an extensive offending history, including racially motivated offences, driving offences, assault on police, battery and assault occasioning actual bodily harm ([Courts and Tribunals Judiciary \(CTJ\), 2022](#)). Though he did not have any recorded sexual offences, evidence collected during the investigation into the murder of Ms Aleena found he followed and sexually assaulted a number of women the same night, including entering a shop to stare at a woman and masturbate without removing his penis from his trousers ([CTJ, 2022](#)).

These cases raise urgent questions about what policing and disruption opportunities were missed with these men and whether the current police response to sexual exposure and non-contact sexual offences is adequate. The public debate

surrounding these murders also brought to the fore the seriousness of sexual exposure itself, with women across the UK discussing the commonplace nature of a crime that research has routinely shown results in significant harm ([McNeill, 1987](#); [Riordan, 2008](#); [Clark and others, 2016](#); [Vera-Gray, 2018](#)).

As a result of these murders, and growing public debate and alarm, there have been a range of inquiries to review the criminal justice approach to sexual exposure and non-contact sexual offences, as well as society's attitudes more generally. The Angiolini Inquiry ([Angiolini, 2024](#)) into the murder of Sarah Everard published its first report in February 2024 and made an extensive range of recommendations. In essence, it called for a complete transformation of the current approach of policing to sexual exposure and non-contact sexual offences.

While these public debates and inquiries have largely focused on sexual exposure and other physical forms of non-contact sexual offending or harassment, it is increasingly recognised that sexual offending also takes place online and that the boundary between offline and online is blurred. In particular, questions around the prevalence and nature of cyberflashing – the sending of genital images to someone without their consent – and its link to other forms of sexual offending have been raised. As cyberflashing only became a criminal offence in England and Wales at the end of January 2024, there is little data yet on policing and prosecutions. However, the first man convicted of the offence has a background of sexual offending, including sexual activity with a child and sexual exposure ([Adams, 2024](#)). Another recent conviction also revealed a background of sexual exposure offending ([Parkin, 2024](#)), while another prosecution under the new offence is also underway (see [Corcoran, 2024](#)). In addition, the Angiolini Inquiry heard evidence that Wayne Couzens had engaged in cyberflashing, though this had not been reported to the police (2024, p 45).

It is in this context of raised public awareness and concern regarding the prevalence and harms of sexual exposure, cyberflashing and other non-contact sexual offences that this report was commissioned by the College of Policing. It provides an up-to-date rapid evidence review of the connections between contact sexual offending and sexual exposure, building on an earlier review ([McNally and Fremouw, 2014](#)) which synthesised the existing literature on male exhibitionistic behaviour and contact sexual offending.

Context and terminology

Why 'sexual exposure' is the most appropriate terminology

Much of the literature in this field uses the terms exhibitionism and exhibitionist behaviours, which refers to 'exposing of the genitals to an unsuspecting stranger' (McNally and Fremouw 2014, p 474). Reference is also made in much of the literature in this area to paraphilic desires or disorders ([Brown, 2023](#)). Paraphilias are broadly understood as atypical sexual desires. For a paraphilia to become a paraphilic disorder, the DSM-V (the widely used diagnostic manual for mental health disorders) requires that a person with a paraphilia either feels personal distress about their interest, not merely distress resulting from society's disapproval; or has a sexual desire or behaviour that involves another person's psychological distress, injury or death, or a desire for sexual behaviours involving unwilling persons or persons unable to give legal consent. 'Exhibitionistic disorder' is thus classified as a paraphilic disorder.

In this report, we use the term 'exposure' rather than 'exhibitionism', 'exhibitionistic behaviours' or 'exhibitionistic disorder' to align our work with the law in England and Wales, namely [section 66 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003](#). Section 66 provides that a person commits an offence if they intentionally expose their genitals and intend that someone will see them and be caused alarm or distress. According to the [CPS guidance](#), the term 'genitals' is 'not defined in the Act and should be given its natural meaning covering the external male and female genitalia'. It continues that the 'terms "alarm or distress" are also not defined within the Act and they should be treated as ordinary words adopting the interpretation from the Public Order Act'. The prosecution, therefore, is required to prove that the perpetrator's aim was to cause alarm or distress, not that the victim actually experienced alarm or distress. This means that a perpetrator exposing himself for the purposes of sexual gratification is likely to fall outside of this offence. This is confirmed in the CPS guidance, which states: 'If the purpose in exposing their genitals is to obtain sexual gratification, this is not sufficient, and an offence of outraging public decency should be considered'. This underscores the confusion around this behaviour, as most of the literature examining the nature and impact of offending focuses on the sexual context, both in

terms of perpetration and being experienced by victims as a form of sexual violence; whereas the criminal offence itself is based only on the intention to cause alarm or distress, rather than any sexual motive.

The term 'indecent exposure' is also widely used in the media and policy reports. This term arises from the historical origins of this offence as based on notions of public morality and nuisance ([Cox and others, 2015](#); [Grant, 2021](#)). The Angiolini Inquiry for example noted that the legal term is 'exposure', but decided to refer to the offence as 'indecent exposure' as they considered that the 'addition of the qualifier "indecent" better reflects the sexual and offensive nature of this crime' ([Angiolini, 2024](#), xii).

In this report, we have chosen not to use 'indecent' exposure but rather refer to 'sexual exposure'. The term 'sexual exposure' is used to help locate the crime as one that breaches an individual's sexual autonomy and integrity, rather than against society's 'decency' or moral codes. This term also ensures this conduct is recognised and treated as a sexual offence, noting that sexual offending is not only determined by the motivation of the offender, but also by the experience of the victim and the nature of the conduct. While the specific crime of exposure in England and Wales is classified as a sexual offence, it technically does not cover a sexual motivation. As this report includes studies from other jurisdictions which have varying criminal law definitions of this conduct, a broader term is more appropriate to ensure coverage of the range of behaviours.

The scale and nature of sexual exposure in England and Wales

Sexual exposure offline

The ONS measures the yearly prevalence of crime, including unreported crime, among adults aged 16 years and over in England and Wales. Its most recent bulletin on sexual offending ([ONS, 2022](#)) showed that the prevalence of exposure, like other sexual crimes, had not changed significantly compared with the year before the coronavirus pandemic. However, note that the Angiolini Report states that Home Office data from March 2021 to March 2022 shows a jump of more than 2,000 in the number of reported voyeurism and indecent exposure crimes (Angiolini 2024,

paragraph 3.182). Later data suggests sexual offending may in fact be higher than pre-COVID levels ([ONS, 2023b](#)), but this has not yet been published with specific detail on exposure.

However, there is a notable limit to ONS data in relation to exposure given that it currently provides data on sexual exposure only for people aged over 16. Research that has been conducted with women and girls on experiences of public sexual harassment more broadly has singled out childhood and adolescence (for example, under the age of 16) as a key time for the first experience of sexual exposure ([Vera-Gray, 2016](#); [2018](#)). This means that the ONS dataset does not capture the full prevalence of the offence in any one year. Nonetheless, even with this limitation, the ONS data on exposure shows it to be a common experience with approximately 0.4% of the population in England and Wales aged 16 and over experiencing this each year. In contrast, the police record around 12,000 crimes of exposure and voyeurism (with the two not disaggregated) yearly ([ONS, 2023a](#)). See Box 1 for more detail.

This disparity between what is experienced, what is recorded by the police, and what and who is processed through the CJS resulting in a conviction (see Box 1) significantly limits findings on the connections between sexual exposure and contact sexual offending where research is almost exclusively conducted on offences recorded by the police or on convicted populations. This follows a stark report published in 2023 from the All-Party Parliament Group (APPG) for UN Women which looked at the prevalence and reporting of sexual harassment in public spaces, including sexual exposure. The report found that 71% of women in the UK have experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public space, including, though not limited to, sexual exposure, but the incident was not reported to police in 95% of cases. The report from the APPG also showed that incidents of public sexual harassment rose to 80% among 18-to-34-year-olds with 98% never being reported. When asked about reporting, more than half of the women polled said they did not report as they did not think it was serious enough to report, yet almost half (45%) agreed that they would be encouraged to report if they had more confidence that reporting it would prevent it from happening again ([APPG for UN Women, 2023](#)).

Box 1: Key evidence on offline sexual exposure

- **Research consistently finds significant harm of sexual exposure**, with the evidence base built largely on the experiences of women and girls. Exposure has been found to limit women's spatial and social freedom, to be experienced as violating, intimidating and threatening, as well as reinforcing their fears of other forms of sexual crime ([McNeill, 1987](#); [Riordan, 2008](#); [Clark and others, 2016](#); [Vera-Gray, 2016](#); [2018](#); Angiolini, 2024).
- In 2022, approximately 0.4% of the population in England and Wales aged 16 years and over reported experiencing sexual exposure at least once in the previous year ([ONS, 2022](#)). Breakdowns suggest a sexed pattern of victimisation, with 0.8% of women experiencing sexual exposure that year. ([ONS, 2022](#)).
- Over 12,000 'exposure and voyeurism' offences have been recorded by the police in England and Wales each year since April 2021 ([ONS, 2023b](#)). This represents fewer than 6% of exposure offences experienced.¹ This means **exposure is significantly under-reported**.
- Even when reported, it is rare for a record of exposure to progress through to charge. Freedom of information (FOI) research looking at police recorded exposure offences from 2019 to 2021 suggests that close to 90% of recorded offences are not charged, and that offenders are likely to be male, White British or European and aged 30 to 39 ([Kingston and Scollay, 2023](#)).

¹ The figure was calculated for this report using population data from the ONS Census 2021, the ONS Crime Survey for England and Wales 2021, and ONS police-recorded crime 2022. The number of those aged 16 years and over experiencing indecent exposure is a count of individuals rather than incidents, so an individual could have experienced more than one incident. The number of reports to police is the number of incidents as a combined figure for exposure and voyeurism. This means that the figure of 6% is an approximation. It is likely that the true level of under-reporting is greater.

Cyberflashing and online exposure

Online sexual exposure, known as cyberflashing, is the sending of genital images or videos to another without their consent ([McGlynn, 2022](#)). The new offence in England and Wales criminalises the act of intentionally sending a genital image to another with the intention of causing alarm, distress or humiliation, or for the purpose of obtaining sexual gratification and being reckless to causing alarm, distress or humiliation (see [section 66A of the Sexual Offences Act 2003](#)). The term 'cyberflashing' refers to all non-consensual sharing of genital images, regardless of the offender's motivation (see [McGlynn, 2022](#) and [McGlynn and Johnson, 2021](#)). Cyberflashing has been included in this report to understand any connections with physical sexual exposure and other sexual offending. The need to better understand such connections has become particularly evident following the introduction of the new offence criminalising some forms of cyberflashing and the Angiolini Report raising questions around the connections between online exposure, as well as offline exposure and contact offending.

In investigating the offending of Wayne Couzens, the Angiolini Report uncovered allegations of cyberflashing, as well as physical sexual exposure (2024, pp 44-45, p 57). This shows that his pattern of offending involved both online and offline behaviours. These behaviours were not reported to the police at the time and predate the new cyberflashing offence.

As the offence of cyberflashing has only been operative since 31 January 2024, there is no evidence yet available regarding patterns of perpetration. Nonetheless, it is to be noted that the first offender convicted of the offence had previous convictions for sexual offending and sexual exposure ([CPS, 2024](#)). Another cyberflashing prosecution is now under way, with the offender also being charged with multiple other sexual offences, including sexual assault, engaging in sexual communication with a child and stalking ([West Yorkshire Police, 2024](#)).

While these cases indicate cyberflashing alongside other sexual offending, they underscore the need to consider patterns of offending rather than escalation, as the cyberflashing may be subsequent to, or taking place at the same time as, offences which are classified as 'serious' sexual offences. Furthermore, we cannot draw

conclusions for all offenders based on the small number who come before the police and courts, due to the low levels of reporting and charging.

Box 2: Key evidence on cyberflashing in the UK

- Cyberflashing is alarmingly common. A UK survey found that 47% of women respondents aged 18 to 24 years had been sent an unsolicited penis image ([YouGov, 2018](#)). A 2021 UK survey found nearly half (48%) of respondents aged 18 to 24 received a sexual photo they didn't ask for in the last year alone ([Bumble, 2021](#)). The prevalence is higher for younger women, with a study of the experiences of teenage girls in the UK finding that 76% of those involved in the research aged 12 to 18 had been sent unsolicited nude images of men and boys (Ringrose and others, 2021).
- Cyberflashing is experienced by victims as a violation of their sexual autonomy and integrity, as well as being intimidating, threatening and humiliating ([McGlynn and Johnson 2021](#); [Amundsen, 2021](#); [Jeacock and others, 2024](#); [Mandau, 2020](#)).
- Victims speak of lasting psychological harms, with some describing cyberflashing as more threatening than physical sexual exposure ([Gallagher, 2019](#)).

Summarising the McNally and Fremouw (2014) evidence review

In public and academic discussions of sexual exposure and escalation, frequent reference is made to the McNally and Fremouw (2014) study, often used to suggest that evidence supports the general notion of escalation from exposure to contact sexual offending. However, this is not what the study finds. For clarity moving forwards, therefore, we provide a succinct summary of the nature and findings of that study for future use.

What the McNally and Fremouw study tells us

- There is limited research in this area, particularly on undetected offenders, who are the majority of offenders in this area.

- For a small minority of the tiny proportion of exposure offenders who come into contact with criminal justice and/or mental health systems, there is some evidence of a movement from exposure to contact sexual offending.
- Of exposure offenders who have come into contact with the criminal justice and/or mental health systems, the evidence suggests a small minority (5% to 10%) progress to subsequent contact sexual offending.
- Of contact sexual offenders who are known to the criminal justice and/or mental health systems, a slightly larger minority (often >10%) have histories of 'exhibitionistic behaviour'.
- There is evidence of both consistency and de-escalation in the offending patterns of exposure offenders. Of men who are known to the criminal justice or mental health systems for sexual exposure, one quarter (25%) appear likely to reoffend with another exposure offence within five years. One study ([Firestone and others \(2006\)](#), rated as 'an exemplar upon which to base future studies of sexual escalation among exhibitionists', p 482), looked at recidivism for exposure offenders and found that after seven years, reoffenders were much more likely to have been convicted of a criminal offence (29%) compared to a sexual offence (13%) or a violent offence (19%).
- For the minority who do offend with a subsequent contact sexual offence, there may be several potentially useful risk factors to help with disruption. The most supported risk factor across studies was a general clustering of anti-social behaviour.

What the McNally and Fremouw study does not tell us

- Whether there is any evidence of escalation from sexual exposure to contact sexual offences among most offenders (for example, those who expose themselves but are undetected by criminal justice or mental health systems).
- Whether evidence on exposure among offending populations known to criminal justice or mental health systems can reliably be applied to undetected offending populations. This means that the findings of their review should not be interpreted to apply to the large population of offenders who are undetected.

- Anything about the role of technology in exhibitionistic behaviour or the individuals who employ such technology for exposure (indeed this was an identified limitation of their work).
- That certain types of exposure are predictive of more serious offending than others, for example masturbation during exposure. The McNally and Fremouw review did refer to two studies (Petri, 1969; [Sugarman and others, 1994](#)) that it suggested found that masturbating (along with communicating with or touching the victim) during exposure could be a predictor of contact sexual offending. However, Petri (1969) is a theoretical article published in German which reports on the treatment of exhibitionists, including 'chemical castration'. As such, it was not included formally in their review and is not a study of exhibitionism and co-occurrence or escalation to contact offending. Sugarman and others (1994) did explore 'escalation' but did not suggest that masturbation is among the key indicators. In fact, they found only a weak association between masturbation and contact offending, with many other factors having much stronger predictive value, including touching, cornering or pursuing a victim. In any event, they made clear that all their findings are 'tentative' (p 293) as regards the general population of exhibitionists, as their study was based on a criminal justice sample and so was not representative of undetected offenders. Bader and others (2008), referred to in the McNally and Fremouw review, found that those who masturbated during the exposure offence were no more likely to sexually reoffend than those who did not.
- Crucially, therefore, despite this study being widely used as evidence for the claim that sexual exposure is a 'gateway' offence that often escalates to contact sexual offending, the study only provides evidence based on very small samples of offenders who have come into contact with criminal justice or mental health systems. Further, even for that sample, movement between contact and non-contact offending is only seen in a minority of offenders.
- For sexual exposure, as with all sexual offences, most offenders are never brought to the attention of either the criminal justice or mental health systems. Exposure in particular has a very low reporting rate (see Box 1) meaning that most offenders are undetected. For this reason, in their study of non-contact paraphilic sexual offences from 2016, [Krueger and Kaplan \(2016\)](#) caution

against making claims about escalation from previous studies based on samples known to criminal justice and mental health systems, given that they are not generalisable. We urge this caution be applied to the use of the McNally and Fremouw study which is not in itself evidence of escalation from sexual exposure to contact offending for the vast majority of offenders.

Method

This report initially aimed to replicate the method of the commonly cited 2014 literature review by McNally and Fremouw (2014). That study sought to synthesise and evaluate the relevant literature relating to escalation from what they termed 'exhibitionistic behaviour' to contact sexual offending among males from 1981 to 2013. Their team conducted searches of three academic databases – Google Scholar, EBSCO Host and PubMed – with a select list of keywords, as well as searching in the references of returned articles.

Twelve studies satisfied their inclusion criteria and were included in the final review. The studies were included in the 2014 review if they:

- were published in a peer-reviewed journal after 1980
- were written in English
- examined individuals charged, adjudicated or believed to have committed acts of public exposure, and
- provided information regarding at least one type of contact sexual offence (for example, not recidivism via further exhibitionistic behaviour or other non-contact offending) perpetrated by individuals believed to have committed acts of public exposure

Building on this methodology, we searched three subscription academic databases – EBSCO, Science Direct and ProQuest – as well as the free-to-access database, Google Scholar. We developed two sets of search terms, with one focusing on returning results looking at the evidence of offline exposure (sex offen*; paraphilia; indecent exposure; exhibitionis*; voyeur*; frotteurism) and the other looking at online exposure or 'cyberflashing' (exhibition*; voyeur*; non contact sexual; dic* pic*; sexual exposure; cyber flash; cyberflash).

We then conducted Boolean searches on the four databases, where all keywords were searched with additional phrases '+escalation'; '+pattern'; '+recidivism'; '+progression'. The online set was additionally searched for with '+risk factor'. References of returned results and articles citing the returned results were also reviewed. Finally, given the topic's policy relevance, we conducted broader searches using Google to return relevant grey literature.

Results were sifted for relevance using an extended relevance criteria (given below) which was introduced after initial sifting of the offline exposure literature using the 2014 criteria found just one result ([Howard and others, 2023](#)). The amended criteria for this report included a study if it:

- was published after 2012 (we extended the search parameters to two years prior to the 2014 review to ensure we captured any material missed due to the lengthy academic publication pipeline)
- was written in English
- examined individuals who had committed offline and/or online sexual exposure, including where this was undetected (for example, self-reported), and
- provided information regarding the offender also committing at least one contact sexual offence

Given the significant levels of underreporting of exposure both online and offline (see Boxes 1 and 2 above), we considered it important to examine whether there is any evidence on offenders who were not in contact with the police or psychiatric services, for example through self-reports from community samples. This means that we did not limit inclusion to studies only on criminal justice or mental health samples. Finally, our criteria were expanded to include the changing nature of exposure perpetration, particularly online exposure which, though not a new behaviour, was only criminalised recently (see section ['cyberflashing and online exposure'](#) above). It was important therefore to expand the criteria to include online exposure, as well as grey literature.

Though no formal assessment of the quality of the evidence was made, the strengths and limitations of the included articles are given below, together with each study's relevant findings to the question of escalation.

Evidence review

Using the method and criteria described above, **a total of six articles and reports** were returned, which explore in some way the patterns of offending between exposure (including online) and contact sexual offending.

This section sets this literature out in summary format, including information on the studies' aims, method and sample, any limitations and key findings of relevance to this report. The summaries given here have been written for a lay audience. Please refer to the studies themselves for further methodological detail, including detail on any statistical analysis conducted.

Hewitt and Beauregard (2014)

Title

Offending patterns of serial sex offenders: Escalation, de-escalation, and consistency of sexually intrusive and violent behaviours

Aim

To discern whether serial stranger sex offenders escalate or de-escalate in the types of sexually intrusive behaviours committed and the amount of physical force used during the commission of the crime over time.

Method

In-depth semi-structured interviews and content analysis of police investigation reports for the sexual offending of 72 serial stranger sex offenders.

Sample

The sample included any individual who had committed two or more sexual assaults or other sex-related crimes (for example, sexual homicide) against a stranger victim. Offenders included in this study had sexually assaulted adult women (n=33), children (n=17), or both (n=22).

Strengths

- Statistical analysis focused on patterns of offending for relevant offending group for this report (for example, serial stranger sex offenders).

Limitations

- Incarcerated sample and no information provided regarding sex of offenders (assumed male but not confirmed).
- Findings on non-contact offences were not separated by offence type and so, though included in this review, some non-contact offences committed by the sample will be voyeurism or other non-contact sexual offences and not sexual exposure.

Relevant findings

- The study found evidence of escalation as well as de-escalation when examining both no-contact and contact offences.
- 'For no contact, 0% of the offenders in the sample engaged in "hands-off" behaviours during the first two crime transitions' (p 65). However, as the sample were all convicted serial stranger sex offenders who had offended with a sexual assault, this is perhaps to be expected as non-contact offenders who continued to offend only through non-contact offences would not be in the sample.
- In terms of sexual contact: '55% of offenders who sexually contacted their first victim also engaged in this behaviour with their second victim. Of those who changed their behaviour, 5% escalated to oral sex, whereas 35% escalated to penetration. An additional 5% de-escalated to no-contact behaviours' (p 65).
- Though a small percentage (5%), it is notable that there is evidence of de-escalation from contact offender back to non-contact. The study also found that '100% of offenders who engaged in no contact with their third victim also engaged in no contact with their fourth and fifth victims' (p 65).

Wood, Wilson and Thorne (2015)

Title

Offending patterns, control balance, and affective rewards among convicted sex offenders

Aim

To explore the self-reported offending patterns of convicted sex offenders. This includes the volume of their offending (the number and types of offences committed and frequency of offending); the preferred characteristics of their victims; the factors that sex offenders say motivate their offending behaviours; and the emotional/affective rewards and sanctions that these offenders say they experienced while offending.

Method

Self-administered survey and focus groups of incarcerated sex offenders enrolled in a residential sex offender treatment programme in a US medium security correctional facility.

Sample

The data was collected in 1997 from a sample of 125 incarcerated sex offenders. No information is given on what offences the sample had been convicted of, though information on their offending more broadly was included. Of the sample of self-reported offending, 85% admitted to child molestation; 56% child rape; 32% adult rape; 69% exhibitionism; and 82% admitted to voyeurism. As these were self-reports, not all of these offences would have been detected by the CJS.

Strengths

- Qualitative data about patterns of offending included, which is rare in the studies, found both in this review and the earlier McNally and Fremouw (2014) study.

Limitations

- Incarcerated sample and no information provided regarding sex of offenders (assumed male but not confirmed).
- No information provided on either the order of offending (for example, what was the index offence) or the specific offence for which the participants were convicted.
- This means that no quantitative data is given about the percentage of the sample who moved from non-contact to contact offending. However, there is some qualitative data exploring this (see below).

Relevant findings

- Though the study did not analyse the self-reported survey results in terms of offending patterns, it did provide some qualitative evidence from focus groups about the movement from exhibitionism to contact offending for some offenders.
- Some respondents talked about ‘how they progressed from property crimes or “other” sex offences like voyeurism and exhibitionism to the commission of more serious, personal, contact crimes like child molestation and child and adult rape. They noted that this progression was characterised by more intense sensations and affective rewards that accompanied the move to more personal and violent crimes. For some of these offenders, it seemed as if less serious offences like voyeurism and exhibitionism were “gateway” offences that could lead to more personal and violent crimes that generated more intense affective rewards and a greater sense of control’ (p 383).
- However, the study also found the opposite was true: namely that ‘at the same time, some offenders were reluctant to move toward more personal contact crimes, citing the increased risk those crimes represented for the escalation of violence and apprehension’ (p 383). This supports the findings from [Hewitt and Beauregard \(2014\)](#) above that there are patterns of both escalation and de-escalation in the offending of convicted sex offenders.

Baur, Elena and others (2016)

Title

Paraphilic sexual interests and sexually coercive behavior: A population-based twin study

Aim

To explore the relationship between specific paraphilic behaviours and sexually coercive behaviours independent of age, gender, other co-occurring paraphilic behaviour, as well as independent of confounding familial (genetic or common family environment) factors.

Method

Self-reported data on paraphilic and sexually coercive behaviour from twins in a contemporary population cohort in Finland. Exhibitionism was addressed by asking 'have you ever exposed your genitals to a stranger and become sexually aroused by this?' Sexually coercive behaviour was assessed with the Sexual Coercion Scale (see [Forbes and Adam-Curtis, 2001](#)).

Participants were asked: 'Have you ever engaged in [a contact] sexual interaction with somebody even if that person did not want to because you: (1) said things you did not mean?; (2) pressured him/her by making continuous demands?; (3) threatened to otherwise end the relationship?; (4) exploited the fact that the person was unable to resist for example, after drinking too much alcohol)?; (5) threatened to use physical force? or (6) used physical force?'

Sample

Twins responding who provided at least one valid response (answering yes or no) to both the paraphilic behaviour and the sexual coercion questions, respectively.

Overall, this yielded 5,990 male and female twins aged 18 to 32 years.

Where data on sex in the sample is given (n=5,590) the sample comprises 2,092 male respondents and 3,898 female respondents.

Strengths

- Population-based self-reporting sample means sample is more indicative of undetected offenders than criminal justice samples.
- Co-twin control design enables the study to come closer to exploring causal associations.

Limitations

- Wording of sexually coercive question may mean some respondents include behaviours that may not count as a contact sexual offence (for example, coerced a sexual interaction by 'saying things you didn't mean').
- Methodological questions about the reliability of retrospective self-reports (for example, these based on the ability or will of respondents to respond truthfully; risk of social desirability bias).

Relevant findings

- 2% (n=112) of the sample in total reported having committed the offence of exposure at any time in their life. Self-reports were heavily gendered, with 4% of male sample and 0.6% of female sample.
- The overall lifetime prevalence of sexually coercive behaviour was 9% (n=530), approximately five times higher in men (19%) compared to women (4%). Figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number for this report.
- Exhibitionism (as well as voyeurism, masochism and sadism) was consistently and independently associated with self-reports of having used sexually coercive behaviour. This was found across both the male and female sample, though as above the sample of those who had committed exposure was heavily weighted towards men.
- The association between self-reports of exhibitionism and of using sexually coercive behaviour was found to be moderate to strong and independent of other variables.

Hopkins and others (2016)

Title

[Hopkins and others \(2016\)](#)

Aim

To obtain a greater understanding of individuals who engage in exhibitionism and voyeurism, as well as features, consequences and indicators of these behaviours.

Method

Analysis of clinical records of patients being treated for problematic sexual behaviour and/or sexual addiction.

Sample

Participants were 4,492 patients, including 3,951 men and 541 women presenting for inpatient or outpatient treatment for problematic sexual behaviour and/or sexual addiction in the US.

Patients were selected based on ranking high on clinical scales measuring exhibitionism, voyeurism and covert intrusions. A control sample comprised of individuals presenting for treatment of problematic sexual behaviour who did not exhibit elevations on either of these scales was used for the purpose of comparison.

Strengths

- Large clinical sample so includes undetected offenders.

Limitations

- Not a study on escalation, looking instead at exhibitionists and exploring their engagement in risky sexual behaviour and/or sexual offending. Therefore, it is not able to make claims about the order of non-contact or contact offending.
- Measurement of voyeurism also reflected engagement in wide variety of covert behaviours, including frotteurism and stalking, meaning that this group encompassed a much wider range of behaviours than the exhibitionist group.
- Based on a clinical sample that may not be representative of the general population.
- No date given as to when the data was collected.

Relevant findings

- Male exhibitionists were the least likely (when compared to solely voyeuristic or covert intruders) to 'engage in forcible sexual activity, to use substances to take advantage of others, or to engage in predatory actions on the internet [...] [Thus] although these men report a high likelihood of being arrested [...] they are not reporting to be the main offenders of the most severe types of sexual crimes' (p 27). The term 'covert intruders' is used in the study to refer to 'secretive behaviours, including surveillance, stalking and obtaining media, enacted on another person without their permission or awareness' (p 8).

Howard and others (2023)

Title

Escalation in the severity of offending behaviour

Aim

To examine whether particular previous offences are more frequent among criminals who 'escalated' to very serious offending than other repeat offenders, controlling for broader reoffending risk.

Escalation to sexual and non-sexual homicide is studied, and to serious sexual assault for those with and without prior sexual offending.

Method

Case histories of offenders identified as escalating to homicide, sexual homicide or serious sexual assault (see sample below) were matched with other offenders who also satisfied the history and data quality criteria but had not escalated to homicide or serious sexual assault. Matches were made based on factors 'known to be related to violent reoffending risk or contact sexual reoffending risk' (p 2).

In these matched groups, statistical analyses compared cases and controls to determine whether certain 'precursor' offences were found more frequently among the criminal histories of the cases than the control.

Sample

Good quality criminal records of male offenders in England and Wales convicted since 2011, aged 18 and over in the prison and probation caseload at 30 June 2021, with no history of homicide or indeterminate sentences prior to the current sentence. This comprised men who escalated to sexual homicide (n=234) and men who escalated to non-sexual homicide (n=3,746).

Additionally, two groups who had escalated to serious sexual assault with no serious sexual assault history were identified: men who had a known history of sexual offending (n=1,264) and men who had no known history of sexual offending (n=4,052).

Strengths

- England and Wales sample looking directly at escalation.

Limitations

- Prison and probation sample, meaning findings have limited application to non-convicted offenders.
- Associations based only on convicted precursor offences (not on those charged or ended at no further action).
- This is particularly limited given what is known about how few sexual exposure offenders are reported or convicted of the offence in England and Wales. Possibility that the findings here only apply to the most extreme or serial exposure offenders.

Relevant findings

- While the study reports a 'very strong' association between exposure as a precursor for sexual homicide, this is based on only one case and most of the sexual precursors proved to have very strong positive associations with sexual homicide.
- Exposure had a strong negative association as a precursor for offenders convicted of non-sexual homicide (based on 16 cases) meaning that those offenders who had exposure as a precursor offence were less likely than those who did not to be convicted of non-sexual homicide.
- For serious sexual assault offenders with a sexual offending history, exposure had a negative association as a precursor offence (n=51). This includes a negative association for escalation to serious sexual assault against adult victims, and a very strong negative association of 'exposure' as a precursor offence for escalation to serious sexual assault against child victims.
- Conversely, for the same offenders, voyeurism was found to have a strong positive association as a precursor offence (based on 13 cases).
- As such, the study suggests that exposure has an association with escalation in men who commit sexual homicide (based on one case), but that it does not have an association with escalation for men convicted of serious sexual assault.

Páv, Sebalo and Perkins (2023)

Title

Outcome Evaluation of a treatment program for men with paraphilic disorders convicted of sexual offenses: 10-year community follow-up

Aim

Examine treatment effectiveness and recidivism risk for men convicted of paraphilic sexual offences who attended inpatient and outpatient treatment in Czechia.

Method

Analysis of variables relating to diagnosis, offence severity, institutional behaviour, chemical treatment (including 'chemical castration') and data on general, sexual and violent recidivism.

Sample

Observation and data analysis of 117 men receiving treatment for paraphilic behaviours via inpatient and outpatient treatment centres. The average length of inpatient forensic treatment was 659 days. Only 9% (n=11) were diagnosed with exhibitionism.

Strengths

- Sample followed up for average of 10 years.

Limitations

- Study of very particular sample who were sanctioned to psychiatric hospitalisation on conviction.
- Very small number (11) in sample diagnosed with exhibitionism.

Relevant findings

- After 10 years on average follow-up, 5% of 117 men who were receiving treatment for paraphilic behaviours reoffended with a contact sexual offence.

- The non-sexual recidivism rate overall was 33% (n=21), violent recidivism 6% (n=8), the sexual contact recidivism rate was 8% (n=6) and the sexual non-contact recidivism rate was 12% (n=15).
- The recidivism risk was seven times higher for those diagnosed with exhibitionism than with paedophilia, sadomasochism or anti-social personality disorder.
- However, none of the exhibitionist offenders (n=11) who reoffended (n=6) did so with a contact sexual offence, although some had a history of anti-social behaviour and non-sexual convictions.

Key findings

- Taking the studies above as a whole, as well as drawing on the earlier McNally and Fremouw (2014) review, we detail below the key findings. These are followed by implications from this evidence review for both further research and policing more widely.
- **The overwhelming majority of sexual exposure crimes and offenders do not come into contact with the police.**

ONS data shows sexual exposure to be a crime affecting 0.4% of the population aged over 16 each year ([ONS, 2022](#)). However, only a low number of offences annually are recorded by the police and these are not currently disaggregated between sexual exposure and voyeurism (with the total for both given as 12,000 per year). This creates a substantial gap in the evidence base on perpetration as most existing studies on sexual exposure are based on offending populations who are known to the CJS. Further, the ONS data does not include the annual rates of sexual exposure for people under 16, a common target of exposure offenders ([Vera-Gray, 2018](#)).

- **There are no specific research studies on cyberflashing and connections with contact sexual offending.**

Only one study involved online offending ([Barra and others, 2021](#)) but as it did not disaggregate data regarding online exposure, it was excluded from this review. Therefore, there are no research studies yet available on connections between online sexual exposure (cyberflashing) and sexual offending offline and

online. This may be partly because of the reliance on criminal justice samples to explore escalation and the fact that cyberflashing has only recently been subject to criminal sanctions. In undertaking this review, we identified that much of the literature regarding online non-contact sexual offending examines child sexual abuse material and sexual offences involving children. For example, a recent report investigating child sexual abuse offenders found that 40% said they sought contact with a child after viewing child sexual abuse material. Of those, 70% sought such contact online – for example, on social media platforms, gaming platforms or messaging apps ([Insoll and others, 2024](#)). As such, research into online sexual offending against adults and its connections to offline sexual offending is an urgent area for future research.

- **There is an extremely limited evidence base on which to base claims of escalation from sexual exposure to contact sexual offences.**

Given the findings of this evidence review, including our [summary](#) of the earlier [McNally and Fremouw \(2014\)](#) study, the evidence base on escalation from sexual exposure to contact sexual offending is extremely limited. This review found only six studies exploring the connections between sexual exposure offences and contact sexual offending published since 2014, with only one of these ([Howard and others, 2023](#)) looking at progression from exposure to serious sexual offending and homicide in the offender population in England and Wales. For this one study, sexual exposure was **negatively associated** with serious sexual offending, though it was positively associated with sexual homicide based on a sample of one case.

- **There is evidence of offending behaviour remaining the same, as well as escalation and de-escalation in the offending of convicted sex offenders, suggesting the importance of looking more broadly at patterns of offending.**

The research evidence reviewed as part of this report shows patterns of both versatility and consistency in the offending of convicted sex offenders ([Hewitt and Beauregard, 2014](#); [Wood, Wilson and Thorne, 2015](#)), including 'escalation' from exposure to contact offending and 'de-escalation' from contact offending to exposure. Therefore, though we found little evidence to support a

predominant focus on 'escalation' being a clear linear progression from exposure to contact sexual offending, there is evidence that exposure offenders are often repeat offenders of both exposure and other offences, and as such an effective response to detected offenders is needed to prevent further harm.

- In particular, [Hewitt and Beauregard's \(2014\)](#) study found that most of the convicted serial stranger sex offenders in their sample (which included contact offenders who had also committed non-contact offences) should be considered **consistent** in both their sexually intrusive behaviours and their level of physical force used during the commission of the crime. Indeed, the [McNally and Fremouw \(2014\)](#) review found the same, suggesting that exposure offenders were significantly more likely to have a pattern of offending which did not crime switch. They found that the evidence points to approximately one quarter of exposure offenders continuing to commit exposure offences, compared to the 5% to 10% that the literature found reoffended with a contact sexual offence. They also found evidence that exposure offenders reoffended with non-sexual offences (for example, the [Firestone and others \(2006\)](#) article mentioned previously). Additionally, in the literature reviewed for this report, but excluded as outside its scope, there is some evidence that burglary can operate as a 'gateway' crime to sexual offending, and that though the primary motivation of burglary offenders is property gain, this likely conceals other powerful motivations including sexual gratification (see [Harris, Pedneault and Knight, 2012](#); [Pedneault, Harris and Knight, 2015](#)).
- **There is some evidence that greater levels of interaction with victims during sexual exposure may be a risk factor for offenders who move to contact sexual offending.**

As there was little evidence of escalation from sexual exposure to contact sexual offending in the studies examined, identifying any risk factors for those who might escalate their offending was not easy. However, though its findings are complex, the recent study from the Ministry of Justice ([Howard and others, 2023](#)) finds that a general pattern emerges from examining men convicted of serious sexual assault. Specifically, sexual offences involving greater degrees of contact and coercion with victims, and those with victims aged under 13, are associated with escalation (p 39). An earlier study (Sugarman and others, 1994), drawn on in the

McNally and Fremouw (2014) review, is sometimes suggested as evidence of an increased risk of escalation from masturbatory exposure. However, as noted earlier in this report, the study actually found that touching, cornering or pursuing a victim during an exposure offence was more predictive of escalation to a contact sexual offence. This means that there is some evidence that increased interaction with a victim of exposure may be a risk factor for an exposure offender to move to a contact sexual offence. Note that one study involving a survey of 1,075 women, 58.7% of whom had encountered an exhibitionist, found that most exhibitionists touched their genitals and a third of them talked to the victim ([Szumski and Kasperek 2020](#)).

- **A few studies suggest voyeurism has an equal or sometimes stronger association with movement from non-contact to contact sexual offending than sexual exposure.**

Two studies in this review based on convicted offender populations (Hopkins and others, 2016; Howard and others, 2023) identified signs that the non-contact voyeurism offenders may engage in more extensive patterns of offending. Further, though excluded from this review as not focused on sexual exposure, a recent study on imprisoned voyeurism offenders in the UK ([Lister and Gannon, 2024](#)) found that of the 17 male offenders in their sample, 11 had also committed contact sexual offences and for 9 of these offenders, the voyeurism was prior to the contact offence (for the other two, the voyeurism was committed at the same time as the contact offence). The authors note that whether voyeurism acts as a 'gateway' for contact offending requires 'significant investigation' as the study had limited numbers and only examines imprisoned offenders. The CPS has stated that one third of men prosecuted for upskirting (a form of voyeurism) between 2020 and 2021 were simultaneously charged with other sexual crimes, including child abuse, sexual assault, extreme pornography and wider voyeurism offences ([CPS, 2021](#)). Therefore, there are some signs that the non-contact voyeurism offenders may engage in more extensive patterns of offending. This underscores the need for further research into non-contact offending generally, not only sexual exposure.

Research gaps

- **Research exploring escalation with detected populations is under way.** This review has affirmed the identified gap in research looking at the connections between exposure and contact sexual offences. This gap is not particular to crimes of exposure (see also Lister and Gannon (2024) on the lack of research regarding voyeurism). Indeed, [Lussier and Cale \(2013\)](#) argue that patterns of escalation and de-escalation in sex offending more broadly have been largely overlooked. For exposure, however, it appears that two studies on this connection are under way in England and Wales.
- As part of the research for this review, we identified a PhD candidate based at Bournemouth University currently researching these issues. Using a data set drawn from Operation Soteria (over 7,000 RASSO cases with access to three years of suspect sexual offending histories and 15 years of any prior offending history over three forces), the candidate is exploring escalation in frequency and severity, with a particular focus on non-contact to contact sexual offending and is due to complete next year. In addition, Professor Sarah Kingston and Dr Clare Scollay from the University of Central Lancashire are undertaking an analysis of FOI police data on exposure offences between 2019 and 2021 ([Kingston and Scollay, 2023](#)).
- **There is a gap in evidence on undetected non-contact sexual offenders in England and Wales.** Both the studies currently under way in England and Wales focus on offender populations known to the CJS. In addition, the existing evidence base in England and Wales on ‘escalation’ appears to be solely on offenders known to the CJS. Given what is known about the extent of the offending revealed in the ONS compared to the low levels of reporting and charge rates of offenders of exposure and other forms of non-contact sexual offending, there is a risk that the evidence base is already skewed towards a minority of offenders, missing larger patterns that may better help to identify risk. Research which includes data from undetected offenders, such as those in broader community or population samples, is needed to fill this gap. Such research should explore the prevalence of committing non-contact offences more broadly, including voyeurism and cyberflashing, and its connections to other

forms of sexual offending. This should be alongside data on whether these offences have ever come to the attention of criminal justice or mental health systems, and the ability to disaggregate findings by non-contact sexual offence type.

- **Research is required regarding online patterns of sexual offending.**

Similarly, there is a need for specialist research regarding the role of technology in sexual crimes and the potential crossover between sexual offences that take place online and in the physical world (whether that be contact or non-contact, for example moving from online exhibitionism to exhibitionism in a physical space). This need is regularly identified in the literature such as in [Bara and others \(2021\)](#). In their review of non-contact paraphiliac disorders and offending, [Kaylor and Jeglic \(2022\)](#) discuss a particular research gap regarding online exhibitionism and voyeurism, including in relation to whether or not these behaviours are likely to move beyond the screen and into the physical world as contact sexual offences. Further, in their review of technology and sexual offending, [Fisico and Harkins \(2021\)](#) highlight the need for further research regarding perpetrators of image-based sexual abuse, including instances where technology may be helping to facilitate contact sexual abuse as well as non-contact sexual abuse.

- **The existing evidence base on the harms of sexual exposure needs to be updated.** Further, research on the harms and victim experiences of non-contact sexual offences is needed to clearly articulate the seriousness of the offence on those who experience it. The Angiolini Report also called for such research on the harms to society of indecent exposure (Angiolini 2024, paragraph 3.181) including whether there is any difference in victim experience for sexual exposure offences which include masturbation.

Implications

The findings of this review have the following implications.

- **Crimes of sexual exposure must be taken seriously in and of themselves as harmful, threatening and violating forms of sexual offending.** Given findings on prevalence, the consistent evidence base on harms and the limited evidence

base on escalation found by this review, greater recognition must be given by policing, criminal justice agencies and society generally to the harmful nature of sexual exposure, online and offline, in and of itself and not only where considered a 'gateway' to contact sexual offending. As such, sexual exposure should not be treated as a 'low-level' offence.

- **Focus of research and investigations should shift from 'escalation' to 'patterns of offending'.** The evidence suggests the importance of looking beyond escalation to exploring the connections between the range of non-contact sexual offences, including voyeurism and contact sexual offending. As such, we recommend a policing and research approach based on 'patterns of offending' more broadly to refer to the varied ways in which non-contact and contact sexual offending is perpetrated and the relationships between the two, as well as extending consideration to explore the role of non-sexual crimes in the offending patterns of sexual offenders.
- **Research on sexual exposure should be commissioned to fill existing gaps in the evidence base for England and Wales.** This report has found an urgent need for research exploring the patterns of offending between non-contact and contact sexual offences in undetected offenders in England and Wales, as well as research regarding online patterns of sexual offending, including the connections between cyberflashing and offline non-contact and contact sexual offences. It has also identified a need to update the existing evidence base on the harms of sexual exposure to explore online offences, as well as whether there is any difference in victim experience for sexual exposure offences which include masturbation.
- **New police guidance should apply to all forms of sexual exposure.** Given there is currently no solid evidence base to suggest that different types of sexual exposure are more likely to lead to contact sexual offending, or that they are experienced as more harmful, it is vital that any new police guidance applies to all forms of online and offline sexual exposure.
- **Reporting mechanisms for victims of non-contact sexual offences should be reviewed, including for 'intelligence only' reporting.** Given the low levels of reporting compared to prevalence, and the evidence base reliance on offenders who have been reported, there is a need to review reporting

mechanisms and the response to ‘intelligence reporting’ to help increase the numbers of offenders who are known to the CJS and help to build the evidence base on risk with a wider pool of offenders. Women have suggested they would be encouraged to report if they had more confidence that reporting would reduce future incidents, if they were more aware of what can be reported and how to report it and if they had confidence the report could be kept anonymous and/or confidential (APPG UN Women, 2021). As such, a review of methods of reporting mechanisms, processes and ‘intelligence reporting’ for cases of sexual exposure is needed.

- **Proactive policing responses which respond to sexual exposure as a serious offence should be explored.** Finally, given that the evidence on patterns of offending for sexual exposure offenders shows there are repeat offenders, proactive policing initiatives to disrupt non-contact sexual offending should be explored. These would help not only to prevent offending, but also to increase the number of detected offenders, and grow the evidence base on perpetrator characteristics and offending behaviour. There are existing examples of such suspect-focused initiatives in some forces. Such initiatives should be further explored with a view on potential application in other force areas and extensions beyond the night-time economy.

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We set the standards in policing to build and preserve public trust and we help those in policing develop the expertise needed to meet the demands of today and prepare for the challenges of the future.

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