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## Why Vigilante?

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Sexual abuse is an issue that pits the public against the criminal justice system (and related professionals) like no other. There is a prevailing public view that offenders in general, and sexual offenders in particular, are not sufficiently punished for the crimes that they commit, that they do not get long enough sentences and that treatment/rehabilitation is a waste of resource ([The Sun](#); [Channel 4](#)). The general public at times can be moved to taking action themselves in lieu or in spite of the work of professional organizations; which is what has happened in the UK over the last 10 years with the increase of community action and against suspected or known child sexual offenders ([BBC](#)). The consequence of this is the establishment of “pedophile hunter” community groups ([Channel 4](#)). These are groups of people who go online and pretend to be children or other pedophiles in the hope of snaring other child sexual offenders. A lot of the volunteers in these organizations say that they are doing it because the police and the criminal justice system cannot be relied upon, with many of them coming from areas of social inequality and vulnerability. These groups argue that they are doing what they are to aid the police in protecting children and catching potential or known offenders. However, as we know, it is never that straightforward or one dimensional.

Previous discussions regarding pedophile hunter groups highlight emphasis their inherent problems for the system, in that they can increase the risk from potential [or active] offenders, the potential harm to themselves as well as the fact that they maybe jeopardizing the cases that they are investigating, potentially resulting in the cases being thrown out of courts. A colleague of ours observed what many miss. She works outside of our field, primarily in the field of treating combat veterans and road accident victims. Her response was, “Why aren’t we just helping people?” The world needs more of this kind of unvarnished truth-telling.

In the present situation, there is juxtaposition in the debate: these communities do not like or want the police in their communities and feel that they are better able to handle the issue with their own brand of



### SAJRT Bloggers' Profile

Chief Blogger Kieran McCartan, Ph.D. and Associate Bloggers David S. Prescott, LICSW and Jon Brandt, MSW, LICSW are longtime members of ATSA. We are dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.

*The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse.*

*Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are risk to abuse.*

*The views expressed on this blog are of the bloggers and are not necessarily those of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research & Treatment, or Sage Journals.*

justice. There was some work done by NIACRO in Northern Ireland a few years ago (Base 2) where they worked with paramilitary organizations to get them to stop targeting sexual offenders because of the impact that it was having on the communities in question and the victims ([McLean & Maxwell](#)). The issue is that while we may balk at the ethic, morality and consequences of this vigilante action the communities themselves see it as being fit for purpose and know the courts and the police are starting to soften their attitudes. Over the last three years there has been an increase in the use of evidence from these groups in court 20 out of 176 cases in 2014, 77 out of 256 cases in 2015 and 114 out of 259 cases in 2016 ([BBC](#)). Which has lead Chief Constable Simon Bailey, the national lead for child protection at the National Police Chiefs' Council has stated that the Police may have to work with these groups to prevent and catch child sexual abusers ([BBC](#)). This is a problematic statement because in the same breath he is stating that these groups are putting themselves, communities and children at risk. This is not the first time Simon Bailey has caused controversy in his statements around sex offender management for in March 2017 he suggested that internet only offenders should not be prosecuted ([The Telegraph](#)). The driving force behind his belief that internet only sex offenders should not be prosecuted was access to resources, finances and time for the police to deal with the volume of offences and offenders; it would not be beyond the realms of possibility to see that resources would be a driving force in working with pedophile hunters. The main issue is that there is growing interest and support for working with pedophile hunters from the courts, [media](#) and [professionals](#); however, if you really want to engage communities and aid them in reporting and preventing child sexual abuse is this really the best method? We should be engaging with communities around education, around safeguarding and around child protection. We should be encouraging communities to work with the police and representatives of the state, to give these professionals information and allow them to do their jobs effectively. What we don't want is people taking the law into their own hands and causing untold harm ([Death of a man confronted by pedophile hunters in Northern Ireland](#)).

On one hand, citizens throughout history have tipped off the police to wrongdoing. On the other hand, entrapment can be an abuse of police power. When even the Chief Constable believes this to be a problem, however, it's time for society to take a closer look at its response not only to crime, but to sexual attraction to children. At what point do we give police the tools to do their job as ethically as possible and set limits on vigilantism? And how can we as citizens do more to aid efforts in prevention and treatment? At what point do we look at efforts such as Project Dunkelfeld and other prevention-focused organizations, figure out what works best about them, and move forward? At what point do we accept decades of scientific findings and conclude that punishment-only responses might be effective at punishment, but not at prevention?