***(Re)drafting research on the treatment of sex offenders' prison experiences and social reintegration suggestions in the pandemic***

**Anna Kasapoglou**, PhD in Criminology, Democritus University of Thrace, Affiliated Staff, Hellenic Open University

**annakasapoglou@gmail.com**

**Dimitris Koros**, PhD in Penitentiary Policy, Democritus University of Thrace, Affiliated Staff, Hellenic Open University

**dimikoros@gmail.com**

**Nikolaos Koulouris**, Associate Professor, Department of Social Policy, Democritus University of Thrace, Affiliated Staff, Hellenic Open University

**nickoulouris63@gmail.com**

**Abstract**

The paper presents the impact of restrictive measures adopted in Greek prisons since March 2020 to prevent the spread of the pandemic on a research concerning the experience of imprisonment and the social reintegration prospects of pretrial and convicted prisoners for sexual offences. The adoption of such measures and their implementation during the COVID-19 period affected seriously prison research planning and methodologies. Researchers had to redraft methods and techniques. The shift of the field of the research as well as the target group (released, ex-prisoners who refer to social reintegration services) and the use of alternative methods of contact and interviewing are explained and documented, while additional research ethics issues and concerns raised are discussed. The paper focuses on the use of new technologies and online research methods and the challenges generated thereof. The use of a mixed method approach is analysed and a focus on new methodologies of approaching and interviewing the participants is presented, in a qualitative research based on interviews and data collection. The paper concludes with the inherent restrictions and further opportunities of qualitative research methods.

**Key words:** sex offenders,released prisoners, online interviews, COVID-19

1. **INTRODUCTION:**

In recent years, the internet is all the more gaining ground in the field of qualitative research, especially with the spread of COVID-19 virus and the pandemic experienced globally. Therefore, due to restrictive measures and proximity prohibitions, researchers worldwide are increasingly resorting to alternative and at the same time innovative methods of collecting qualitative data (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014: 603; Janghorban, Roudsari & Taghipour, 2014; Sullivan, 2012: 54-55; Rezabek, 2000).

Research via the internet is approached in bibliography in two basic forms: either as an *asynchronous* procedure where participants answer, discuss and interact at a different time, using emails, chat rooms or bulletin boards (Abrams & Gaiser, 2017: 435; Bryman, 2016: 515; Krueger, 2015: 211-212; Kenny, 2004) or as a synchronous procedure where participants take part in the research simultaneously via teleconference-videoconference, voice calls and/or chat rooms (Abrams & Gaiser, 2017: 435; Bryman, 2016: 515; LoIacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016; Sullivan, 2012: 54-55).

Τhe presented research is a synchronous procedure of collecting data via video conferencing. It was carried out with individual semi-structured interviews conducted with ex-prisoners who have committed sexual offences and have served their penalty in Grevena and Tripolis prison facilities, where prisoners of this category are held. The separation of prisoners for sexual offences from other prisoners is a long-standing practice of the Greek prison administration, although the Greek Penitentiary Code does not provide for any offence-based category and treatment of prisoners, recognising gender, age, legal status (pretrial, convicted and debtors), sentence (imprisonment or incarceration) and health condition as criteria to separate and allocate prisoners in different custodial institutions or units. This practice, based on sex offenders’ social stigmatisation and exclusion which is also found within the prison community and defines them as people in need of protection from potential victimisation, constructs a de facto category of prisoners and is expressed in Circulars 61966/1997 of the Secretary General of the Ministry of Justice and, especially and clearly 14/2020 of the Supreme Court Public Prosecutor, adopting a similar scientific approach as regards the devaluated position of sex offenders in prisons (Paraskevopoulos & Fytrakis, 2011: 76 [=2021: 58].

* 1. **Internet as a research field**

The reason that led to the use of this particular method (interviews via the internet) was necessitated by the restrictive measures that followed the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The initial research plan exclusively included prisoners who had committed or were accused of sexual offences and therefore the research plan provided for visits to Grevena and Tripolis prison establishments. However, after the first lockdown (March 2020), a period that coincided with the beginning of the research, a number of problems emerged regarding the procedure for granting access permissions to the two prisons. Due to the extension of the restrictive measures and the project funding authorities’ deadlines to deliver the research outcomes, alternative solutions were sought to approach the research target population.

Thus, the research plan turned its focus to ex-prisoners who have been imprisoned for sex offences, and the research team targeted prisoners’ aftercare institutions, such as EPANODOS (Legal Entity of Private Law for the Social Reintegration of Ex-Prisoners subjected to the Ministry for Citizen Protection) and the Special Social Groups Office of the 2nd Employment Center of the Manpower Employment Organisation (OAED). The following presentation of the research methodology and the online interviews is limited to the beneficiaries of EPANODOS, because OAED supported released prisoners either did not respond or refused to participate.

EPANODOS is based in Athens, where the coordinator of the research team resides, while the researchers reside in Thessaloniki, where the unit of OEAD contacted is located. The time when the interviews were conducted coincided with the second period of restrictive measures resulting in further delays for researchers’ access to prison facilities to conduct face-to-face interviews. For that reason, internet as a means to conduct the interviews became a necessity and prior familiarisation of the research team with online communication platforms was also important (O’ Connor & Madge, 2017: 418).

The internet-based interviews will be used supplementarily to other data collection tools (face-to-face interviews, focus groups with prisoners, interviews with prison staff, etc.) (LoIacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016); the findings of interviews with released prisoners were used to draft the interviews with prisoners conducted at a later stage (Rezabek, 2000).

1. **FINDING THE PARTICIPANTS**

Interviews that are conducted via the internet have common characteristics with those conducted face-to-face, as their difference lies in the milieu where they take place (Abrams & Gaiser, 2017: 435; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014: 608). Technology, thus, is approached as a means to collect data (Salmons, 2012: 12). The selection of participants follows the logic of face-to-face interviews (LoIacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016). They are intentionally chosen with selection criteria stemming from the research agenda and interviewed after their availability to participate is considered. More specifically, in the present research participants were chosen by identifying the target population (released ex-prisoners for sexual offences), while other criteria were set too (regarding the specific custodial institution where they served their sentences) (Babbie, 2011: 291-292; Fox, Morris & Rumsey, 2007: 543∙ Glesne, 2018: 99; Salmons, 2012: 13-15; Sullivan, 2012: 57∙ Ritchie, Lewis & El am, 2003: 78-80).

Subsequently, the staff of EPANODOS, after a permission granted to researchers by the organisation’s Administrative Board, processed their archives and made a selection among beneficiary released prisoners meeting the research criteria. The sample frame, therefore, was extracted from the existing database of the aforementioned after-care organisation (Babbie, 2011: 316-321; Salmons, 2015: 152; Salmons, 2012: 14-15).

Online research offers the possibility of participation to persons from all around the world (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014: 603). However, despite the fact that the internet has reached most parts of the world, the selection of participants is affected and therefore limited respectively, as not all potential participants are internet users nor have access to it (Fox, Morris & Rumsey, 2007: 545). Obstacles of this kind inevitably become additional filters for participant selection as someone might fit the criteria of a research project but in the end be excluded from it (Salmons, 2015: 141-144).

In our research such obstacles could affect the participation of identified ex-prisoners. According to most of them (with the exception of one, the youngest of all), they were not fluent digital technology users and they did not have access to the internet, some of them being homeless and all of them being deprived of basic goods. However, the innovative aspect of the research is that it combined the traditional research procedures with those that could take place through the use of the internet. More specifically, the participants were called to participate in interviews at an office kindly offered by EPANODOS, where the coordinator of the research was present, with the use of a laptop brought there by him and linked to the internet account of the institution. The coordinator facilitated the connection of the researchers and the participants to the electronic platform used and familiarised the latter with the aims of the research. During the interviews, the coordinator left the room and the participant was alone with the researchers. Furthermore, the coordinator was present during the interviewing procedure in EPANODOS, next to the interview office, available to help in cases of technical failures. Thus, despite the lack of knowledge on the part of the participants regarding the use of the internet and communication platforms, their participation was achieved, with no exclusions or bias issues, problems arising as regards research participants in internet-based interviews but avoided in the present research (O’ Connor & Madge, 2017: 424-425; Salmons, 2015: 143).

Finally, regarding the number of participants considered appropriate for an internet-based research, the same principles and procedures apply as with face-to-face interviews. In qualitative methodologies the aim is not the statistical representation of a sample of individuals, but the in-depth research of a small number of participants fulfilling certain conditions (Salmons, 2015: 134). In any case, both the participant selection procedures and the number of persons that will be included in a qualitative research project do not follow representative sampling standards and guidelines. Those procedures depend on the criteria posed, which eventually are affected by the aims of the research and its questions (Glesne, 2018: 101-103; Salmons, 2015: 136-140). In the particular research seven (7) interviews have been conducted. According to the personnel of EPANODOS only a small number of the organisation’s beneficiaries meet the criteria of the research. From the list of eligible released prisoners who were receiving some kind of support at the time of the research, all volunteered and participated, except for one who initially agreed but then he cancelled twice his appointment due to work related obligations.

Research with ex-prisoners has inherent difficulties regarding the identification of potential participants, as it is not easy for them to be traced.[[1]](#footnote-1) Furthermore, EPANODOS provides services mostly to people residing in Attica and other neighbouring regions of Central and Southern Greece. For that matter, the research group approached OAED Office in Thessaloniki (Northern Greece) so as to include as many persons from the two largest urban centers of the country in order to examine reintegration issues and difficulties in both areas. The effort to interview released prisoners residing in the wider area of Thessaloniki failed, as none of them accepted to meet researchers either online or in person (see above, 1.1).

1. **CONDUCTING ONLINE INTERVIEWS**

**3.1 Research method’s advantages**

The choice to conduct interviews online as a method to collect qualitative data offers important advantages; distances are eliminated (Sullivan, 2012: 54) and costs to access participants is minimised or nullified. In the present research, researchers utilised the aforementioned “pros” due to the pandemic that resulted in prohibitions to access custodial institutions and travel there to conduct the interviews (LoIacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014: 603-604; Fox, Morris & Rumsey, 2007: 545; O’ Connor & Madge, 2003: 135-140; Rezabek, 2000).

Beyond such barriers, participants might have been excluded if all interviews were to be conducted face-to-face, as persons living in distant places and / or unable to bear transportation costs would not easily participate in such a research (Abrams & Gaiser, 2017: 436). Therefore, the method employed is allowing the participation of persons and groups that otherwise might face severe access issues. Bibliographic inquiry shows that the Greek criminological discourse regarding sex offenders (prisoners and ex-prisoners) is rather poor. Sex offenders, at least in Greece, as it happens with groups and communities of people that are marginalised due to geographical, political, social and financial characteristics, and thus are isolated (Beaton et al, 2017: 563), constitute a largely marginalised group, in terms of research dedicated to issues arising from their special characteristics. Usually, research conducted with these groups focuses on processes of marginalisation and does not shed light on the needs of people constituting them. Consequently, the planning of policies, projects or interventions do not address the reality that those persons experience. Online interviews offered a means to achieve this end.

Beyond the cost reduction and overcoming geographical / distance barriers, saving time is also important (LoIacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016) both for participants, who simply connect online, and researchers, who do not have to organise face-to-face meetings that, especially when they must be re-scheduled, are time consuming and costly. In that way, also, important logistic issues, such as the location, microphones, tape recorders, etc. (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014: 608), are resolved as the internet offers high flexibility. Also, recording via various teleconference platforms (Skype, Zoom, etc.), allows researchers to analyse data with greater accuracy, having at their disposal sound and video, means that offer the opportunity to avoid faults arising from tape recorders (failed battery, etc.) (LoIacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016; Hanna, 2012: 241). Furthermore, most teleconference platforms are offered online free and are easy to use (Cater, 2011).

Where participants are familiarised with technology, a device (computer, tablet, smartphone) and an internet connection suffice to conduct the interview (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014: 608; Sullivan, 2012: 57). Furthermore, participants can stay in an environment of their choice, familiar, safe and comfortable for them (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014: 608; Hanna, 2012: 241; O’ Connor & Madge, 2003: 139), without the need to socialise with unknown people (Fox, Morris & Rumsey, 2007: 540). In this way, conditions of conducting the interview/discussion are better than those where physical presence is mandatory (Janghorban, Roudsari & Taghipour, 2014). In the present research participants might not have been at their own place or a place of their choice, residence or other location, but were called to participate from the headquarters of EPANODOS, a place they were familiar with, while also people who they knew contacted them, invited, received and spoke to them before introducing the coordinator of the research and the researchers. Shy and introvert participants feel more comfortable in an internet mediated meeting and feel freer to disclose information or to express themselves regarding more sensitive issues (LoIacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016; Fox, Morris & Rumsey, 2007: 543-544; O’ Connor & Madge, 2003: 139; Rezabek, 2000).

**3.2 Research limitations and alternative practices**

Teleconference though, still casts doubts regarding its use (Hanna, 2012: 241∙ Sullivan, 2012: 54). In non-face-to-face research, body language is not observable, and it is not possible to be used as relevant information from the researcher, as non-verbal communication is absent. However, in the present research the visual contact via the camera was clear and the researchers were in position to understand the gestures and body language, as much as the frowns of participants (O’ Connor & Madge, 2017: 420-422, 427-428; LoIacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016; Seitz, 2016: 231-232; Salmons, 2015: 214-219∙ Deakin & Wakefield, 2014: 605; Janghorban, Roudsari & Taghipour, 2014; Cater, 2011). As restrictive measures were in place when online interviews took place, participants entered the interview room wearing a mask and kept wearing it until the research coordinator left, after presenting the research to them and introducing them to the researchers. Then they took their masks off and stayed in the ventilated room, being heard better by the researchers, who could also see their whole face.

Another issue is whether the lack of physical proximity in online interviews-based research obstruct the creation of familiarity and trust between the participant and the researcher and, subsequently, whether that could affect the collection of data (LoIacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014: 605 & 610). A solution proposed to strengthen the relation of the involved parties is the exchange of electronic messages before the interview or even the exchange of photos and other personal and biographical information that would help them to get to know each other better (LoIacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016∙ Deakin & Wakefield, 2014: 605 & 610-612). However, other research findings suggest that the good relationship between the participant and the researcher depends on both their personality and the research subject (LoIacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014: 610); also, where participants are hesitant to share personal information, this could be attributed to the means used and not to the quality of their relationship with researchers or lack of trust (LoIacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016).

In the present research two paths have been followed to build a positive researchers’ / participants’ relationship. First, participants were contacted via an organisation that / by people who they already knew and collaborated, initially informed of the research and invited to visit a place familiar to them. Second, the research coordinator welcomed participants in person, explained to them the purposes of the research and introduced them to the researchers (who were present online). The fact that the interviewing researchers were two allowed participants to experience the procedure more as an open discussion and less as a formal interview.

Relevant literature shows that the familiarity between a researcher and a participant might be affected also by various technical problems that could emerge during the interview (LoIacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016). Connectivity delays and low visual or audio quality, the distance from the microphone, sounds from the environment, are the most common problems that arise (Seitz, 2016: 231; Sullivan, 2012: 59). For those cases the researcher should have a back-up plan, for example continuing the interview only with sound or using chat, or to re-schedule the interview in cases where the technical problem might interfere with the quality of the data collected (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014: 611∙ Hanna, 2012: 241∙ Salmons, 2012: 26-27∙ Sullivan, 2012: 59∙ Fox, Morris & Rumsey, 2007: 545).

To address assumed technical issues the two researchers changed roles, being either interviewer or interviewer assistant. The assistant was in charge of the technical aspects of the procedure, following up with the conversation and recording. Furthermore, the coordinator of the research was present, next to the interview room, ready to assist in cases where a technical problem arose, as was the case with certain interviews. Only in one interview the research team had to abandon the teleconference, a few minutes before the completion of the discussion as the connection collapsed. In that case, the researchers, who were connected to each other, decided to continue, resorting to a phone call with the speaker on, so that both could hear the answers to the few remaining questions, which were recorded both in the platform and to a tape recorder with no compromise regarding sound quality. The tape recorder was used in all interviews as a supplementary recording means, upon interviewees consent, and it was very useful in one occasion where online recording was not possible.

Internet use might be very common in our times in most parts of the world, but access to it is affected by socioeconomic background, income, gender, ethnicity and age (O’ Connor & Madge, 2003:136), resulting sometimes in the exclusion of possible participants (Seitz, 2016: 233). Consequently, digital accessibility and familiarity may be on the one hand valuable assistance to conduct research and on the other hand a factor excluding some candidate participants (LoIacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014: 605; Janghorban, Roudsari & Taghipour, 2014). In our case, the presence of the research coordinator, the use of his own equipment and the connection offered by EPANODOS, gave all invited participants the opportunity to have their experience heard.

Furthermore the ability of participants to choose the environment where the discussion will be held, i.e. their house or their workplace, may help to conduct an interview smoothly, but also cause some perplexities (Seitz, 2016: 231; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014: 609; Janghorban, Roudsari & Taghipour, 2014). For this reason, participants should be informed of all these advantages and disadvantages and advised to choose a quiet place (Seitz, 2016: 233). The fact that EPANODOS offered a room exclusively for conducting the interviews where nobody else was present safeguarded that participants could be interviewed focused on the process (Salmons, 2015: 215).

In addition, the use of video and recording could negatively affect some participants and make them cautious as regards researchers’ intentions and use of data (LoIacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016; Seitz, 2016: 232-233). Moreover, abandoning an online interview is easy, as leaving an electronic platform can be achieved by pressing one button, which is not the case in a traditional, face to face interview (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014: 610; Janghorban, Roudsari & Taghipour, 2014). In the present research, the video communication proved to be a very helpful tool and the interaction of the participants with the researchers in real time contributed to the quality of interviews. Besides, one of the most important benefits of the synchronous online interview is that it resembles face-to-face methodology (O’ Connor & Madge, 2017: 421). In the present research, all interviews took place smoothly and offered rich data.

**3.3 Description of the online interviewing procedure**

As mentioned above, conducting qualitative online interviews resembles much of face-to-face interviews (O’ Connor & Madge, 2017: 425). Therefore, bearing in mind the purposes of the project, the research questions and the digital environment where procedures took place, researchers used semi-structured interviews (Salmons, 2012: 19-20). A set of pre-determined research questions was drafted, creating a framework for discussion and simultaneously promoting flexibility for participants to freely answer, even respond not strictly following the series of issues of concern or skip some questions in the course of the interview (Iosifides, 2008: 112; Bryman, 2004: 321, Salmons, 2015: 215; Salmons, 2012: 21).

The interviews began with an introduction to the subject and purposes of the research and the intended use of the findings, an introduction of the researchers and an explanation regarding the content of the questions. The opening questions concerned demographical data and issues relevant to participants’ legal status and criminal history, the following main section was dedicated to participants’ prison experience and the interview concluded with their post-release life, concerns and prospects (O’ Connor & Madge, 2017: 425; Salmons, 2015: 210-211). Immediately after the introductory remarks, the researchers asked for the consent of the participants regarding the visual and/or audio recording of the interview, and, depending on their answer, they had to tick the relevant choice offered in the consent form which they signed with the presence of the coordinator of the research; a copy of the consent form was given to all participants.

The participants were eager to discuss and they answered to all questions unreservedly. Some slight hesitation was observed at the start of some interviews, but later on it was understood that it was due to the terminology researchers used in relation to the offences for which interviewees had been imprisoned, namely “offences against sexual freedom and exploitation of sexual life” called by the latter “vice offences”. Hesitation was especially observed in cases where the victim was a minor and/or an interviewee’s relative, but it was overcome as researchers and participants got to know each other at the course of the interview (O’ Connor & Madge, 2017: 42426-427). The researchers also avoided discussions insulting participants or making them feel pressed and embarrassed for their offences.

At the end of the interviews participants were asked if they wished to refer to something that was overlooked by the researchers or something that they consider worthy to add or mention at that point. Concluding each interview, researchers thanked participants for their time and for sharing with them their experiences. Finally, participants were asked to offer their feedback answering “what went well, what went wrong and what could have been done differently” and researches shared their thoughts and feelings (Salmons, 2015: 212).

1. **ETHICS AND DEONTOLOGY IN ONLINE RESEARCH**

As challenges, dilemmas and ideas are discussed regarding the procedures that have to be followed in an online interview, some concerns on the use of digital technology also arise, in terms of research ethics and deontology. These refer to data storage, identification of the participants, video / audio recording and the online environment (LoIacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016), as well as the participants’ informed consent procedures (Abrams & Gaiser, 2017: 446-448; Sullivan, 2012: 58; Fox, Morris & Rumsey, 2007: 541).

In the present study, the web was used as the research venue, where the collection of data took place in a way that assimilates traditional methodologies (Eynon, Fry & Schroeder, 2017: 27-30; Sugiura, Wiles & Pope, 2017: 186; Shelley-Egan, 2015: 3-4; Markham & Buchanan, 2012: 3).. In any case deontology rules should be observed and adjusted to every different framework where research with the aid of technology takes place (ibid: 26).

Furthermore, the deontological issues regarding the identification of the personal data of the participants were overcome as they, with one exception, were linked with the use of the computer and account of the research coordinator and thus the disclosure of their personal data was avoided, as they only used their first name. As for the one person who participated from his residence his personal data were not kept, and the emails exchanged to prepare the interview were immediately deleted. Regarding audio and visual recording, the archives were stored in the personal computers of the researchers with the use of a code and not in the “cloud”, where data are more exposed, and were immediately deleted upon transcription. As it was mentioned before, the consent form was signed by the participants in the beginning of the interviews with the presence of the coordinator.

1. **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Conducting qualitative research with interviews involving released prisoners convicted for sex offences is a challenging endeavour, should one consider the particularities of the target group (ex-prisoners belonging to one highly stigmatised group of offenders, even within the prison community, and bearing the burden of their conviction and imprisonment). This research becomes more complicated during the pandemic, as restrictions imposed on movements and socialising of people hamper the participants’ – researchers’ communication and contact, and impact negatively on planning, arranging and conducting meetings and interviews. It is a condition that is setting the stage for a digital technology explosion (also) in the field of social research, that is able and ready to overcome any distance and cost barriers, even set aside the formal and informal ethical restrictions of previous decades. Then it is the researchers’ duty to turn the necessities stemming from- and the potential exaggerations this condition poses to the integrity and dignity of all involved parts in an ethically clear, safe and sufficiently regulated research methodology, taking advantage of the possibilities and the facilitation digital technologies offer, while respecting conventional research quality rules and legal safeguards. In our work, an effort was made to combine the strengths of the internet (that made the research possible during the pandemic) with the respect of the participants’ rights, protected through the established research standards (which allowed our positive and sincere interaction with them).

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1. Other formal social control institutions that could provide relevant information, such as police authorities and prison administration, were not considered as researchers’ options, due to their wish to approach released prisoners through organisations they have been addressed themselves, voluntarily. This, of course, is a conscious limitation for the research: all participants, by definition, were in need for social support after their release from prisons and tried to obtain it. On the other hand, the same choice, was a “must” for the research, as one of its aims was to define ex-prisoners’ social reintegration suggestions and needs. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)