

TITLE PAGE

Title: Lost without a trace? Social networking and social research with a hard-to-reach population

Authors: Helen Masson*, Myles Balfe, Simon Hackett, Josie Phillips

Affiliations:

Dr. Helen Masson is Professor of Social Work (Children and Young People), Department of Behavioural and Social Sciences, University of Huddersfield, England

Dr. Myles Balfe is Research Fellow, Department of Public Health Medicine, RCSI.

Simon Hackett is Professor of Applied Social Sciences, School of Applied Social Sciences, Durham University, England

Josie Phillips is Research Associate, School of Applied Social Sciences
Durham University, England

*Corresponding author – Professor Helen Masson

E-mail: h.c.masson@hud.ac.uk

Telephone: 01484 4732284

Address: School of Human and Health Sciences, University of Huddersfield, Queensgate,
Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, HD1 3DH

Lost without a trace? Social networking and social research with a hard-to-reach population

Abstract

This paper describes the methodological approaches and challenges associated with tracing and contacting former social welfare service users in the course of long term, outcome research. Historical case file data were analysed on 117 'hard to reach' children and young people identified as having behavioural problems, including sexual behavioural problems. Various publicly available Internet and social network resources were used to try and trace these individuals in adulthood, at least a decade after the identification of their behaviour problems in childhood. Using these approaches, it was possible to locate individuals in 69% of cases. The use of social network sites, such as Facebook, in social research is discussed, together with an appraisal of the practicalities and ethics of such approaches. The implications for social work practice more generally of the emergence of new technologies for tracing and maintaining contact with service users are also discussed.

Keywords

Facebook, tracing, social networks, young people, sexual behaviour problems.

Introduction

The past decade has heralded significant advances in understandings of children and young people who present with sexual behaviour problems (Hackett, 2010) as well as the development of clearer, child-centered models of assessment and interventions in response to this group (Green and Masson, 2002; Hackett *et al.*, 2006). However, we still know relatively little about what happens to such children and teenagers as they progress into adulthood. Researchers investigating longer term outcomes amongst this population have typically relied on longitudinal analyses of criminal recidivism rates or other official data (Hagan and Gust-Brey, 1999; Worlington and Curwen, 2000; Seabloom *et al.*, 2003; Waite *et al.*, 2005; Nisbet *et al.*, 2004; Vandiver, 2006; Letourneau and Armstrong, 2008; Worling *et al.*, 2009; Hendriks and Bijleveld, 2008). The longitudinal approach most typically used involves the collection of information about a young person's behaviour and any criminal history at a baseline point, either contemporaneously through a survey/interview or retrospectively through archival research, and then obtaining recidivism data about the same young person through a follow-up search of official databases.

This approach is efficient and cost-effective but has a number of limitations. First, it is widely accepted that official statistics relating to offences are likely to represent only the 'tip of the iceberg' in terms of the true rate of abusive behaviour (Ussher, 1997) and that a significant proportion of such behaviour remains undetected. It therefore follows that many repeat sexual 'offences', including those perpetrated by youth, simply do not figure in official crime figures. Second, knowing whether someone has been convicted or not of a repeat offence does not in itself tell us very much about the processes that have led to recidivism, or indeed the factors that may have inhibited it. Third, typical longitudinal approaches to establishing re-offence outcomes based on official statistics rarely afford individuals with opportunities to offer their own perspectives on their offence histories or developmental trajectories. All three limitations could be addressed if outcome studies were to include follow-up of the young people themselves in the context of their current life circumstances.

This paper describes the methods used in a study which aimed to locate a sample of 117 individuals at least ten years after they had received interventions for sexually problematic or abusive behaviours perpetrated in their childhoods. The purpose of the study was to explore the psychosocial situations of these individuals in young adulthood and to investigate the factors that were associated with resilient outcomes and those associated with suboptimal or risky outcomes. Official databases and police records would tell us something about these individuals' criminal lives in the longer-term, but would not tell us anything about the non-criminal aspects of their lives or about their perspectives on how they were faring in early adulthood. Giving a voice to a largely invisible service user group was an important aim of the project.

Our primary focus in this article is on the challenges we faced and our approaches to tracing our target individuals at such temporal distance from their original referral, although we will also consider briefly the highly sensitive process of then making contact with those identified. The sample was identified retrospectively from a number of longstanding voluntary and private children's services in the UK which, since the 1990s, have offered interventions to children and youth with problematic or abusive sexual behaviours. The individuals concerned were not formally enrolled in an ongoing longitudinal study and therefore the contact details that services had on these former service users were at least a decade old. Extant research provides little clues as to the feasibility or difficulty for researchers seeking to follow up, in person, youth with problematic sexual behaviours. In the case of convicted adult sexual offenders, received wisdom is that, because of the nature of their offences and the social stigma attached to sexual crime, they 'go to ground' following the end of professional interventions and are reluctant, therefore, to talk about the longer term impact of their offences. Would the same be the case with our younger and broader sample? How much time and resources would it take to trace these former service users? What methods would be most appropriate for this type of research and what ethical and practical difficulties would these methods entail? Such information is not only important for practice in the sexual aggression field, but also the tracing approaches described here have applicability for follow-up social work research with other potentially 'hard-to-reach' populations in general.

Researchers outside of the sexual aggression field have noted that very little information has been published about locating retrospectively identified research participants and some have argued that internet-based tools are likely to have significant benefits for locating these kinds of subjects (Barakat-Haddad *et al.*, 2009). In this paper, we describe and discuss the results of our own tracing attempts and, following other researchers who have trialed the use of internet based approaches (Wutzke *et al.*, 2000), we suggest approaches and tips that other researchers can use in similar long term outcome studies.

Findings from previous 'tracing' studies

Retrospective tracing of respondents for either interview or survey follow up is rare in the sexual aggression field and, to a lesser extent, in general social work research, although a few studies have been undertaken. Kaltenborn (2001), for example, traced children and young people in various residential arrangements by sending a letter to their last known postal address. Fernandez (2008) followed up children in permanent foster care (a 'captive' population from a research point of view) and McAuley and Trew (2000) followed up other foster children over a very short period of time (one year). Tracing respondents after a considerable amount of time has passed between baseline and follow-up does, however, have a history in other fields, particularly in epidemiological and public health research (Hser *et al.* 2001; Lyons *et al.*, 2004,) where successful tracing of respondents is considered crucial to reduce study bias and increase study power (Haggerty *et al.*, 2008; Wutzke *et al.*, 2000).

Attempts to track individuals in such longitudinal public health research are often surprisingly successful. Weinberger *et al.* (2002) attempted to trace 708 people who had participated in clinical studies 27 years previously and found 84%, despite having no contact with study participants in the intervening years. Wilson *et al.* (2009) traced 70.1% of 810 individuals who were treated for cancer during childhood in Sydney and Haggerty *et al.* (2008) completed a 10-year follow-up of 130 methadone patients and their families, finding 99% of subjects. Boice (1978) found 93% of 1764 former sanatorium patients and Rodger *et al.* (2001) traced a sample of patients (including injecting drug users) 25 years after they were treated and found 66% of them. Finally, Wharton *et al.* (2006) traced 8,583 children who were born in 1961 in Tasmania after 36 years and

found 56% of them. Such studies suggest that it is possible to successfully trace and locate a high proportion of individuals identified from old records.

Not all populations are equally traceable, however. Three populations are considered to be especially difficult to trace: individuals involved in illegal or deviant activities; individuals who were children at the baseline point; and women. Deviant populations or those involved in illegal activities may present particular tracing difficulties, as these individuals tend to move about a lot, may be estranged from their families and may be wary about revealing information about themselves (Kleschinsky *et al.*, 2009). Attempting to trace individuals who were children at baseline is difficult since the information that researchers have about them is likely to be out of date - they may have left home, changed their name, their parents may have separated and re-married and so on (Cotter *et al.*, 2005). Women may also change their last or family names when they get married (Cadarette *et al.*, 2007, Weiner and Kermintz, 2001). By implication, then, adults who acted in sexually problematic or abusive ways in their childhoods must be considered a difficult group to trace; although they are overwhelmingly male, they may well have left home and may not be in touch with their families and they may have been involved in highly deviant activities which are often regarded with particular stigma within society.

Traditionally, a number of core sources of information have been used to trace research subjects. These include dates of birth and last known addresses as well as contact information on friends and family (Haggerty *et al.*, 2008), court records (Haggerty *et al.*, 2008), country relevant databases (Dubanoski *et al.*, 2001), electoral databases (Wutzke *et al.*, 2000) and death records, social services, medical and social security databases (Haggerty *et al.*, 2008). Techniques have included searching telephone directories (Wutzke *et al.*, 2000) and calling on last-known home addresses (Haggerty *et al.*, 2008).

Recently the Internet has become an important resource for tracing respondents. Various combinations of names and dates of births can be searched for quickly, either on search engines such as Google or on

commercial or publicly available databases (Haggerty *et al.*, 2008; Kleschinsky *et al.*, 2009). Barakat-Haddad *et al.* (2009) used the Internet to trace participants for their study using contact details that were more than 20 years old, and found 29% of subjects. However, many of the existing studies that have used the Internet to retrospectively search for respondents are several years old (an age in Internet terms). Consequently, many of the sites recommended are either out of date or have been taken off line and the majority of existing studies do not include the possibility of using social network sites such as Bebo, Myspace and Facebook to trace respondents. These sites are a dominant feature of the modern Internet landscape. At the time of writing this article, for example, Facebook is estimated to have over 500 million users (Wortham, 2010).

Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to develop online profiles and develop a list of other individuals with whom they have some connection. Individuals often put significant amounts of personal information about themselves on social network sites; for example, they often have a personal profile page called 'about me' containing their name and date of birth and other information which is controlled by the individual and which is changeable by them at any time. This information can be searched for and is, as a result, often more accurate and up-to-date than more static forms of online data, such as electoral rolls which are typically updated only annually. The potential benefit of using these sites in social research seems clear, although the practical and ethical implications need far more attention in social research methodology.

The Current Study

The work described in this article is just one part of a larger ESRC funded study (RES-062023-0850) which, at the time of writing, is involving the initial survey of 700 historical case files on individuals known as children to nine English or Welsh services because of their sexually problematic behaviours ten or more years ago, more detailed analysis of a representative sample of 117 of these cases and in-depth interviews with a number of these identified ex-service users (now adults), other family members or carers and

professionals who knew them in the 1990s. Ethical approval for all aspects of the study was progressed via our respective University research ethics committees, and via the ethics committees or panels associated with the nine research sites.

Method of tracing

Out of the total sample of 700 cases, 117 cases were identified for tracing, cases being selected to reflect the full range of young people with whom the services had worked between 1992 and 2000. Thus cases were sampled purposefully to include both young men and women; young people who exhibited problematic or abusive sexual behaviours intra- and extra-familially; young people whose behaviour included contact and non-contact activities; and young people whose problematic behaviour affected children and/or adults. Key contact information for each case was extracted including: the subject's name; date of birth; last known address; parents' and family members' names; and family members' addresses, where these were available. Contact information for each case was at least ten years old.

Using this information we searched for the person concerned on the social network sites Bebo, Myspace and Facebook. These were the dominant social network sites in the UK at the time of writing. We also searched Friends Reunited, a site where people can try to find lost friends or contacts, and the UK electoral register using two commercial databases: Tracesmart and 192.com.

The same approach was used to search for each case. First, we searched for each individual service user's name on Bebo, Myspace and Facebook (using a variety of different spelling (e.g. Myles, Miles). This usually brought up a list of possible matches. We systematically went through each possible match and compared information on the match's profile (such as date of birth) against information that we had about the case. We also cross-checked the potential match's 'friends' list' against the names of the individual's known family

members. If we did not find the subject we then searched for each of his or her family members on Bebo, Myspace and Facebook using the same systematic search approach. If a case had an unusual name and was on one of these sites it was often possible to find it quite quickly (in less than ten minutes). If a case had a more common name (e.g. John Smith) it could take up to five hours of searching to find it, or to confirm that they were not on the social networking site.

Second, we searched for the person's name, and the names of his or her family members, on Google. Third, we searched for the person's name, and the names of his or her parents and family members, on the UK electoral register using Tracesmart and 192.com. These databases usually brought up a list of possible matches for each name. It was possible to look at each possible match to see who the person currently lived with and/or with whom he or she had lived in the past. It was therefore possible to cross-check the list of the person's past and present co-residents against the list of the names of the family members of the individual that we were searching for.

A case was considered to be located if: we found a profile of a former service user on a social network site who was friends with two or more of the individual's known contacts or family members; if we found a profile on a social network site of a individual's family member who was friends with two or more of the individual's known contacts or family members; if we found a profile on a social network site of a person who had the same name and date of birth as the case who we were looking for, and who resided in the case's last known or home city; or if we found a recent address for the case and/or a family member on the electoral register (a 2008 address onwards) and the database indicated that the case and/or his family member was living with one or more of the case's (other) known family members.

Given the sensitivity of the information that we collected, great care was taken to protect both the contact information that we extracted from the children's services' historical files and the information that we extracted from cases' social network profiles. Any contact information was stored in a password protected

file that was separated from the details of cases' histories (which were stored in their own password protected files). Each case was also allocated a numerical identifier, with the list linking actual name with numerical identifier also being password protected.

Results

We searched for 117 people (111 men, 6 women) and their families. Each individual and their family members were treated as one case; so if we searched for, and found, a person and three members of a particular family, we treated this as one found case. Likewise if we searched for a young person and could not find any information about them, but could find information on their family, we treated this as one found case. Overall, we found up-to-date contact information (through a combination of social network sites and through the electoral register) on 69.2% (n=81) of cases. Of the six female cases, we located 5 cases (83%). The individuals for whom we were searching would have last been in contact with social services over ten years ago; they would therefore all be between eighteen and thirty years of age at the time of the current study.

Search results for former service users

Looking at our search attempts for former service users only (n=117), we found 29% of the former service users (n=34) on Facebook, 1% on Bebo (n=1) and 2% on Myspace (n=2). We found 7.7% (n=9) of the individuals on the electoral register using Tracesmart and 192. We found information on 5% (n=6) of the ex-service users through Google. 1% (n=1) were found through Friends Reunited. 63% (n=74) were neither found through social network sites nor through the electoral register. These results are presented in illustrative format in Figure 1.

Insert Figure One about here

Search results for former service users' families

Looking at our search attempts for families only (and treating each family as one case) (n=117), we found 30% (n=35) of service users' family members (e.g. a brother, sister or parent) through Facebook, 2.6% (n=3) of their family members through Bebo and 1% (n=1) of their family members through Myspace. We found 42% (n=49) of family members on the electoral register using Tracesmart and 192. We found information on 1% of family members through Google. No family members were found through Friends Reunited. 44% of former service users' families were neither traced through social network sites nor through the electoral register (n=52). Excluding the nil return for Friends Reunited, these results are presented in illustrative format in Figure 2. In Figures 1 and 2 it is important to note that the column totals add up to more than 100% because some individuals were found through multiple sources.

Insert Figure Two about here

Of the cases that were found (either the former service users themselves or their family members) (n=81), 31% (n=26) were found solely on social network sites and not on the electoral register.

Making contact

Once we had traced a former service user through, primarily, Facebook, we asked the service that had worked with that individual to send him or her a contact Facebook message (setting up a separate Facebook account for the service to enable them to send their communications). Messages explained that 'a child health and family service' was following-up the service users who had been in touch with it in the past. People who were interested in taking part in the study were asked to respond by Facebook message or to text

'yes' to a mobile phone number. Thirty-two such Facebook messages were sent in all. Of the thirty-two people who were messaged, nine agreed to be interviewed (28% response rate). Facebook messages were also sent by services to eleven parents, and we had two positive replies (18% response rate). We also sent postal recruitment letters to twenty of the former service users and/or their parents identified through the electoral register, and again had two positive replies (one former service user, one parent- 10% response rate).

Our working assumption was that all messages/letters could be opened and read by an individual other than the individual for whom the letter/message was intended (for example a girlfriend or boyfriend) and that this other individual would not know anything about a young person's past. Messages/letters therefore never revealed anything about the former service user's childhood behavioural problems and did not mention the name of the service that had worked with the young person.

At the time of writing this paper we are in the interview phase of the project. We asked the people whom we interviewed about how they felt about being contacted through Facebook, and the response was usually positive, though even some of those who agreed to be interviewed were understandably somewhat surprised and initially anxious about being re-contacted by services 'out of the blue'. Nevertheless those contacted generally felt that Facebook was a more secure and private way of being contacted than by telephone or letter. One 30 year old male participant commented when asked how he felt about being contacted by Facebook:

I don't know, it was kind of a shock, I don't know, I never heard nothing from any sort of social services when I was an adult, so then I'm contacted... yeah. Once you mentioned money, I was happy about it! My wife she said well, you know, talk about it, you're not proud of your past, but, you know, you're not scared of it, you know, I can't change it, but you know, it's not something that

you're worried about no more, so talk about it, get it out in the open. Facebook was fine, yeah, I'm always on Facebook on my phone.

Discussion

Only one previous study as far as we are aware has assessed the effectiveness and feasibility of solely using web-based search engines to locate a retrospective cohort of (former) children (Barakat-Haddad *et al.*, 2009) and none, as far as we are aware, has assessed the feasibility of using social network sites to trace in adulthood a cohort of former service users who, in childhood, had problematic or abusive sexual behaviours. The findings of this study indicate that it is feasible to use social network sites to do this, preferably in combination with searches in other databases, such as the electoral register.

Using the combination of databases and social network sites described in this paper we found up-to-date contact information on 69.2% of our sample. This figure compares well with other studies that have attempted to trace cases for research studies (Weinberger *et al.*, 2002; Haggerty *et al.*, 2008; Wilson *et al.*, 2009). It is especially promising given the length of time that had passed since these individuals had last been in contact with services, and given that we were attempting to trace a sample which had engaged sometimes in highly deviant activities (Cotter *et al.*, 2005; Haggerty *et al.*, 2008). Indeed, it is likely that many more of the individuals in the sample are represented on sites like Facebook than we found. Many people on social network sites set their privacy settings in such a way that anyone searching for them will only find an empty page with a name. Unless this person is approached by an email or message it is impossible to confirm their identity. Given the sensitivities of the research and the nature of the population, we did not seek to do this in the study.

The two key sites searched were Facebook and the electoral register; only a small minority of respondents was located through Myspace and Bebo. Although these sites were popular between 2005 and 2008 their popularity has been eclipsed by Facebook and so it is unsurprising that most respondents were found on the latter platform. It may well be that in just a few years after this paper has been written other social network

sites will have become popular. Researchers using social network sites will need to be alert to the rapidly changing nature of these technologies and to new sources of publicly available information.

Practical lessons for social work researchers using social network sites and for welfare services interested in investigating the longer term outcomes of their work

There are a number of practical lessons to draw from this study in relation to social research employing social network sites to trace people and for welfare services wanting to follow up cases they have worked with in the past.

Focusing initially on using social network sites to trace potential respondents, it is first important to stress that such searches should be conducted on both an individual and his or her family members. We found only 30% of the individuals whom we were looking for on Facebook, for example, but we found an equal number of family members (predominantly parents, but several siblings as well). In terms of follow-up research, family members may well be able to direct researchers to the former service users, or will know someone who could; though it is important to consider information about family histories when contemplating such indirect approaches. For example, in the current study we did not contact any parents where case history information indicated that the former service user may have been abused by a family member. Second, in contrast to searching the electoral roll, a specific address is not that important when searching social network sites (though information about the general area where the individual last lived is). We found that the most useful information for finding cases was: name; age/date of birth; home city; and a list of former service user's family members, especially brothers or sisters many of whom were listed as friends of the individual. Third, it is important to search for the most distinctive or unusual name that is associated with an individual. So if you are looking for someone called 'Frank' and you know that Frank has a sister called 'Moon Unit', it is better to search for Moon Unit first (as fewer people will be named Moon Unit than will be named Frank) and then check Moon Unit's friends' list to find Frank. Fourth, researchers should not underestimate the

amount of time it takes to find cases. In this study, it took six weeks of full time work to search for individuals in the sample of 117 cases.

It was interesting to note that the response rate to Facebook messages in this study was higher than to postal letters. This suggests that researchers interested in doing follow-up work with this service user group should consider Facebook to be an essential, rather than an optional, means of contacting individuals. We found through interviewing the former service users that many of them accessed Facebook through smart phones, iPhones or Android Phones, as well as through desk top or laptop computers. They therefore always have continual access to Facebook. In contrast none of the individuals whom we interviewed had a landline phone, and most of them had moved several times in the past two or three years, making it difficult to contact them by more traditional methods (hence the low response rate to postal letters).

Turning now to the lessons for welfare services thinking ahead to and preparing the ground for subsequent outcome-related research, it is important for such services to keep accurate information about their clientele (i.e. names and dates of birth) if this information is to be useful to internally-based or external researchers in the future. Most of the cases that we looked at contained good contact information but there were some historical case files within the nine services that could not be included in the sample due to missing and inadequate information. Even in cases where there was extensive information, searching revealed that basic contact information had, at times, been erroneously recorded ('Balfe' could be recorded as 'Bell' for example).

Related to this, it is important that welfare services who wish to learn more about the long-term outcomes of their work seek their service users' permission at the time of working with them to approach them in later life. This helps to ensure that both the services (and researchers undertaking follow-up studies) comply with the requirements of data protection legislation and should assist in making subsequent tracing and, equally importantly, contacting ex-service users much easier. Of course, even when consent to follow-up is given at

the time of contact with a service, former service users do not, subsequently, have to agree to take part in any future follow-up and, as with all research involving human participants, the right to withdraw consent to participating at any stage is sacrosanct.

Ethical issues for social researchers and welfare services in tracing and contacting ex-service users

Aside from these practical lessons, it is also important for researchers and participating welfare services to consider the full ethical dimensions of this kind of approach to follow up social research. Information on social networking sites is publicly available and individuals are free to conceal their profiles from public view. In essence, this is no different to people who choose to place their names on the electoral roll or in the telephone directory or not. In this sense, it could be said that we only found information about individuals from the sites that individuals wished to be broadcast publicly. However, there are legitimate concerns as to whether some (perhaps more vulnerable) individuals understand the full implications of making their personal details publicly visible through social networking sites. This concern has been voiced in relation to other areas of social work, such as in the adoption field where adopted individuals or birth parents have been traced through Facebook and where access to such data through social networking sites is resulting in significant shifts in the nature of practice (Fursland, 2010).

Tregeagle and Darcy (2008) raise important points about respecting users' privacy in the Internet. In the current study, the researchers and the participating services proceeded with considerable care, aware of the vulnerability of the group and the potential that individuals may be living with partners or in life situations where others are unaware of their childhood backgrounds. It is vital that the use of Internet data sources does not compromise the life circumstances of people who have much to tell us about the process of reshaping their lives following abuse. As regards tracing subjects, the safeguards already described to keep all collected data securely and in a form which kept separate actual names, contact details and histories were very important, as well as composing the contents of any messages sent to those who have been traced very carefully.

It is also crucial to be aware that, however careful and sensitive in one's approach is, making contact and seeking to arrange an interview with someone at some distant point in the future may cause anxiety and may result in some individuals experiencing distress. It is, therefore, important that researchers have an agreed support system set up prior to contacting a former service user, in case such support is needed. In our study each of the services agreed to see their former service user for a debriefing session, and then refer them on for additional support if required. In the event, this safety net did not prove to be necessary as many of the individuals whom we interviewed were either already receiving current support from mental health or social services or they did not feel the need for any further follow-up.

As occurs with many research studies and surveys today, the individuals we interviewed were each given a £30 gift voucher for a local supermarket to cover their time and for any travel costs. Grant and Sugarman (2004) note that incentives by themselves are not necessarily problematic, but can become so when conjoined with other factors: where the subject is in a dependency relationship with the researcher, where the risks of taking part in a research project are particularly high, where the research is degrading, where the participant will only consent if the incentive is relatively large because the participant's aversion to the study is strong, and where the aversion is a principled one. None of these factors was present in this study. The individuals whom we contacted were not dependent upon us for treatment, they were not being asked to participate in degrading activities and the amount of money offered in kind (£30) was modest. Although, the vouchers did not actually incentivize most of the people who did agree to be interviewed, such recompense was important in the case of those in financial hardship and the vouchers also symbolized our gratitude to those who took the trouble to take part.

The increasing impact of new technologies on social work practice and social work research

Over the past decade social workers have begun to realize the importance of the using the Internet for social work practice, learning and social work research (Shaw, 2003; Blaschke *et al.*, 2009; Cook-Craig and Sabah,

2009). Several themes have arisen in this literature: using the internet as an assistive technology (Blaschke *et al.*, 2009); using the internet to organize and monitor social work practice; using the Internet to minimize risks to patients'/service users' health (Landau *et al.*, 2009); and using the Internet as a public relations tool to advocate for service users' rights and shape how service users are portrayed (Brownlee *et al.*, 2010). Somewhat related to the current study, social work practitioners are increasingly having to embrace the new means available to make and maintain contacts with service users. Thus, ChildLine in the UK, for example, now uses a variety of means to talk to its service users (telephone, e-mail and internet chat). Such means have to be used with care and in line with professional ethics and data protection legislation but they offer much potential as ways of communicating with service users, which complement more traditional means such as office based meetings and home visits.

It is evident from the current study that the Internet also has practical utility for social work research, enabling the retrospective location of service users many years after they last had contact with services. However, given the pace and scale with which these technologies have been adopted (particularly amongst young people and young adults, though also amongst older adults as well- as noted, we found several parents on Facebook) it is important that researchers who are thinking about tracing respondents keep up to date with the latest technological developments that could affect their cohort. It is important that researchers and social work practitioners do not trap themselves in a 20th century mindset (relying on postal addresses and landline numbers) when their study respondents are using 21st century means of communication.

Conclusion

This study indicates that it is possible and feasible to use social network sites and web-based electoral databases to trace a retrospective cohort of ex-service users who, in childhood, had sexually problematic or harmful behaviours - a group traditionally seen as 'hard to reach' - and their families ten years or more after their last known contact with services. Used with care and sensitivity, researchers and practitioners working in this and other fields should not be put off about using this approach; if anything, tracing respondents can

enable researchers and collaborating services to free themselves from overreliance on official databases when conducting longitudinal research with this population, to enable a fuller picture of people's subsequent lives to emerge.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the former service users who have taken part in this study as well as the services who became partners in the overall research project. The study was funded by an Economic and Social Research Council grant (RES-062- 23-0850).

Figure 1 Search results for former service users by database/site

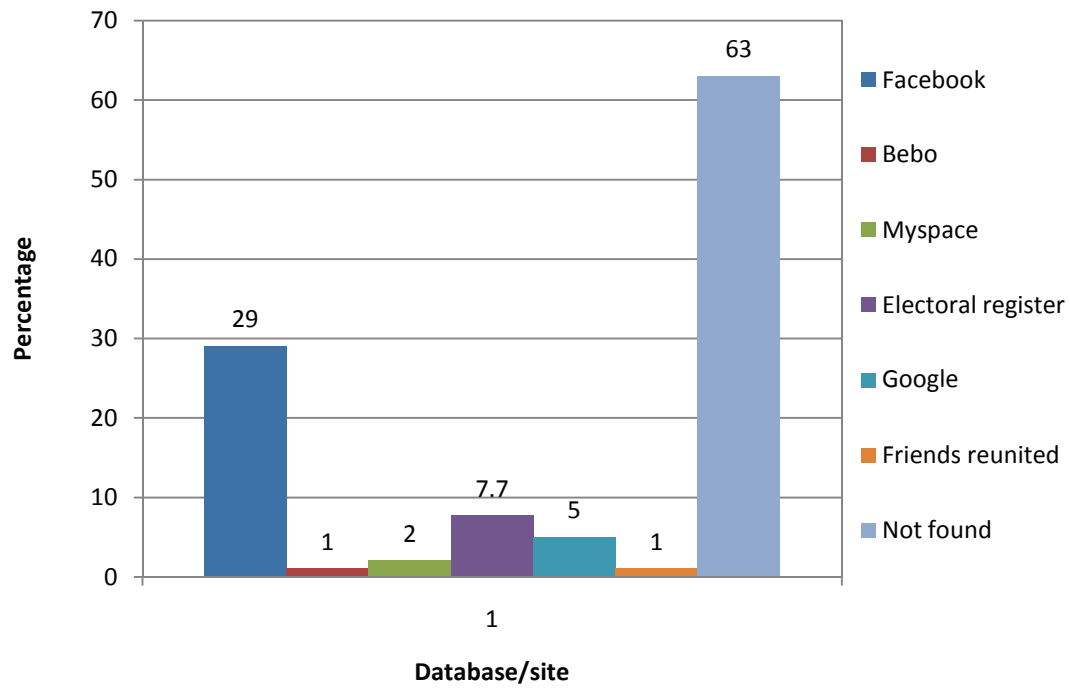
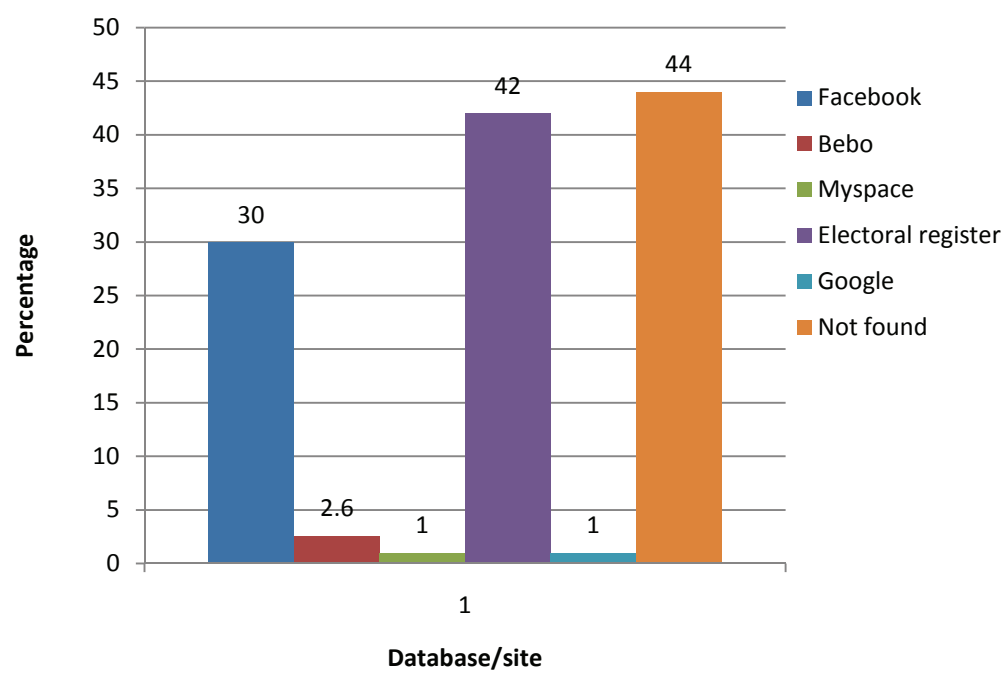


Figure 2 Search for families by database/site



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