
Circles of Support and Accountability, and community reintegration for those at risk of sexually reoffending

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines the role, scope and methodology of Circles of Support and Accountability, (CoSA) now well established in Canada, some regions of the USA, England, Wales and Scotland, and most recently in the Netherlands and Belgium. CoSA provides moderate to a high risk sex offender who is re-entering society but wishing not to reoffend (the 'core member') with a Circle of four to six local volunteers who support, monitor, but crucially also hold accountable to their offence-free intentions. The volunteers are assisted and supervised by a professional and experienced Circle Coordinator and by professionals who are involved with the sex offender's treatment and after care. Across the three European CoSA partners there are currently 80 Circles in operation; 65 in England and Wales, 14 in the Netherlands and one in Belgium. First recidivism studies in Canada, where the model was initiated show a 83% reduction in recidivism in CoSA participants compared to a matched control group. The theoretical model of change and conditions for effectiveness are described. Theoretical support for its effectiveness is outlined. Finally, the implications of further European

dissemination are discussed. One courageous and generous gesture of community responsibility by a Mennonite church in Ontario, Canada in 1994 sparked an innovative response to an intractable social challenge; how to reintegrate into often hostile and understandably fearful communities, the high-risk sex-offender leaving prison? This article outlines the role, scope and methodology of Circles of Support and Accountability, (CoSA) now well established in Canada, some regions of the USA, England, Wales and Scotland, and most recently in The Netherlands and Belgium. The availability of a CoSA European Handbook, funded by the European Commission's Daphne III programme will facilitate, from 2012 the roll-out of CoSA by any European member state, to a consistent methodology and standard of practice, based on the solid practice and research of the past fifteen years' operation of 'Circles'. Simple in concept, and increasingly attractive to financially stretched government agencies by virtue of the model's dependence on a volunteer 'work-force', CoSA are rooted in the community, drawing on the range of skills and commitment of so-called 'ordinary' people. The original Mennonite volunteers unwittingly created the first template for the Circle

model.¹ What has developed since is a service of locally recruited, carefully screened and professionally trained and supervised volunteers who commit, for a minimum of a year, forming groups of usually four or five, to give practical and emotional support to someone professionally assessed as presenting a medium or high risk of sexually reoffending but who crucially recognises the risk he, or she, still poses, and who expressly does not want to continue perpetrating such harmful acts. Accountability comes through a formally agreed contract between each offender or 'core member', as they are known, and his volunteers². This agreement serves to remove one of the most dangerous control mechanisms through which previous offending has often been possible; secrets. The volunteers will know the broad nature of the sexual offending history and the Core Member will know that they know. He will also know that if the volunteers, who are supervised by the professionally qualified 'Coordinator' (with probation, and/or sex-offender treatment programme experience) have any concerns as to his attitudes, behaviour or a failure to engage with the volunteers, this will be reported back to the appropriate government agency, and a recall to custody may occur. Indeed around this 'inner' Circle, is an 'outer' ring which will comprise relevant partner agencies; police, probation, mental health etc. The community volunteers provide 'early warning' and feed-back, as to more positive signs of dynamic risk reduction to these partners, through written accounts of their meetings with the Core Member as they work to keep him focussed on all that he can be doing to avoid falling back into reoffending patterns and situations. The focus of weekly or fortnightly Circle meetings is not 'therapy', but rather the practical here and now; what steps have been taken to keep to relapse prevention plans, help completing housing application forms, accompanying on hospital visits etc. The feed-back from Core Members is that nowhere else in their lives do they have this very basic human support, with a real sense of acceptance of them as individuals as opposed to the 'monster' often portrayed in the media. Occasional visits to the local cinema, while avoiding situations of risk, meeting up with CoSA volunteers for coffee of a Saturday morning in town etc. are key elements of the reintegration process, working to counteract the alienation and isolation so critical otherwise in

contributing to reoffending. One Core Member voiced this eloquently as, "They're ordinary things, but extremely precious because that's somebody that's not giving up their time because they have to; they're giving up their time because they want to. That's incredible for them to actually sort of say, 'I wanna spend time with you' (Hanvey, Philpot and Wilson 2011). The risk that volunteers might allow their care and support to over-ride the accountability and monitoring functions has not been featured in reality as originally feared. The early pilots provided some uncomfortable but invaluable lessons as to the importance of clear boundaries on the part of the volunteer's, their relationship to the Core Member and overall child protection responsibilities. Volunteer supervision and their careful selection, together with monitoring of Circle minutes by the professional Coordinator, are the key means for mitigating this particular risk of imbalance.

Rapid growth of Circles Projects in England and Wales, facilitated by 'Circles UK', the partially government-funded national organisation for CoSA in England and Wales was noted across the channel, taken up by probation staff in the South of the Netherlands, in conjunction with colleagues from Avans University of Applied Sciences, who both set up their own CoSA with Circles UK support, and initiated the development of a European Handbook, with EC funding support. The participation of Justitiehuis Antwerpen (Antwerp House of Justice, the local Probation Service) in the two year development programme has led to CoSA established too in Belgium.

In terms of the effectiveness of CoSA, analysis by reference to statistical evidence is of course particularly challenging. Reconviction figures generally for those with sexual convictions are likely to be below the actual incidence of actual offending for reasons of non-reporting. But research from Canada indicates a marked impact in reducing reoffending amongst this high-risk group. Matched control studies, comparing cohorts of those who had had time in a Circle, with those who had not by Wilson, Picheca and Prinzo. (2007b) and Wilson, Cortoni and McWhinnie (2009) demonstrated reductions in sexual offending of up to 83% in the CoSA group. In England more recently The Hampshire and Thames Valley Circles Project have

reviewed their first 60 Core Members, through nine years of Circles provision. The study could evidence just one reconviction for a sexual offence by this group of medium and high-risk offenders (Bates, Macrae, Williams and Webb, 2011). Where Circles have been in operation in England and Wales since 2002, not one of the 21 probation trusts involved in referring and often supporting Circles financially have walked away claiming reservations as to the model or its effectiveness. While no face to face engagement between offender and victim is part of the CoSA methodology, there are principled similarities with restorative justice concepts. There is for instance an inclusive communitarian justice approach which focuses on community safety, offender reintegration and reconciliation between offender and the wider community (Raynor and Robinson, 2009; McNeill, 2009). Restoration here is a two sided process: not only is the offender expected to restore damage done to the victim and society, by acknowledging responsibility and changing his behavior, but the community is also restoring the harm that is done to the offender's resources and opportunities as a consequence of detention and social exclusion (Raynor and Robinson, 2009; Duff 2001). In CoSA, local members of society become involved and actively support and monitor the sex offender in this struggle to regain at least some dignity and control over their lives and to refrain from reoffending.

THE CoSA MODEL OF CHANGE

Ever since the first Circle, CoSA has proven to be able to prevent recidivism in the majority of cases, but how is this achieved? Three Circle functions are viewed as essential (Saunders and Wilson, 2003). First of all, a Circle provides moral and practical support. Moral support is offered not only in times of crises but also by celebrating successes with the core member. By this the core member is acknowledged as a fellow human being who is struggling and essentially is granted a place where he is accepted. Practical support in issues of housing, work and income and leisure activities enhance the chances for real social integration. A second function of the Circle is to monitor the risk of the core member, to act upon changing risk and, if necessary disclose relevant information to the outer Circle of professional agencies immediately,

who then may act accordingly. The third Circle function, holding the core member accountable, is expressed by confronting the core member with inadequate and risky behaviour and attitudes and encouraging him to use adequate coping strategies which he has learned in sex offender treatment.

These functions are only developed when some pre-conditions are fulfilled. Selfless commitment of volunteers, a shared and meaningful agreement to the general aim ('no more victims') and openness ('no secrets') through a written covenant are requirements, that support a 'moral' bond and increase the core members' motivation (Brown and Dandurand, 2007, Petrunik, 2007). A perceived reciprocity in the relationship between core member and volunteers is also essential to make a circle 'work' (Höing and Vogelvang, 2011).

To support the building of a trusting relationship within the inner circle and good working alliances between the inner and outer circle some basic procedures need to be attended to: a careful selection, training and coaching and supervision of volunteers and Circle coordinators, a thorough assessment of the core members risk and needs and a clear protocol on information sharing between inner and outer circle are essential (Höing and Vogelvang, 2011). Within this highly protocol led framework, the Circle deals with the core member's risk and needs in a 'tailor made', pragmatic and flexible way, guiding him past marginalisation and isolation and shattering life events as long and as intensively as necessary.

THEORETICAL SUPPORT FOR THE CoSA MODEL OF CHANGE

In the past decades several theories on effective sex offender rehabilitation and relapse prevention have been developed. Most influential were the Relapse Prevention model (Pithers et al. 1983), the Risk Needs Responsivity (RNR) model (Andrews and Bonta, 2003) and lately the good-lives/self regulation model (Ward and Stewart, 2003; Ward and Gannon, 2006) and the desistance theory (Maruna and Toch, 2003; Farral and Calverley; 2006; McNeill, 2009). These models have – at least partly- proven to hold their ground when tested empirically and have contributed to sex offender

therapy and management considerably. The CoSA model - though being developed as a practice based approach- incorporates several effective aspects of these models.

The key ideas of relapse prevention theory are incorporated in the functions of the inner Circle: to offer support, especially in stressful circumstances, monitor behaviour and emotional deterioration, and hold the core member accountable for exercising adequate relapse prevention strategies. CoSA is in line with the Risk and Needs principles in the RNR model, which state that the intensity of the intervention should match the level of risk and target criminogenic needs. Circles are reserved for medium to high risk sex offenders with a high need for social support. The responsivity principle of the RNR model is met by matching the volunteers and their personality and skills with the sex offender and his specific needs. The holistic and strength-based approach of the Good lives/Self regulation model is also represented in CoSA, as the core member is not only supported in managing risk and risk factors, but also encouraged and supported to develop adequate life skills and strategies to achieve goals that are instrumental to (adequate) primary needs like autonomy, intimacy, mastery etc. He defines his needs and targets together with the Circle and the Circle advises, assists and models adequate strategies, skills and behaviour. Finally, the process is consistent with the desistance theory, which places the offender's behaviour in a biographical context. The absence of recidivism in desistance theory is described not only as an outcome of treatment of intervention, but as a result of an individual process of a former offender. The motors of these processes according to Mc Neill (2009) are his human capital (skills and social competences), his social capital (the quality of his social network) and the transitions in his narrative identity, the cognitions he holds about himself. Circles help the core member to build social and human capital, and support and encourage the development of a positive narrative identity. Social capital is increased by offering a surrogate social network, by supporting the core member in his efforts to develop a social network of his own and to improve the quality of relationships within his existing social network. Human capital (like social

skills, adequate coping strategies, self regulation skills) is increased by offering modelling behaviour, holding the core member accountable for his actions and by encouraging him to practice and enforce the skills and strategies he has learned in sex offender treatment. The Circle supports the core member in his efforts to build a positive narrative identity by offering him a safe space to incorporate his offence history into the narrative about himself. In the Circle, the core member experiences that his disclosure is not leading to exclusion and rejection, as long as he is accepting responsibility and allows to be held accountable. CoSA acknowledges the fact that desistance is not a linear process. Critical incidents and life events may occur at any time and bring about emotional stress, potentially raising the level of risk instantly. Frequent contacts and explicit discussions about the emotional state of the core member reduce the opportunity for him to isolate himself and fall back into problem behaviour without anyone noticing. The exchange of this kind of information with professionals in the outer Circle allows immediate and adequate intervention if risk levels are unacceptably high.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Relapse prevention is only one part of the total contribution CoSA makes to public safety, which is not only reflected in crime statistics, but also in subjective evaluations. Through a Circle, the local community takes responsibility (and control) for the safe re-socialisation of sex offenders, while at the same time volunteers are gaining a more realistic and experience based view on sex offenders and the risk they pose in society. Research shows CoSA has the potential to increase subjective feelings of public safety (Wilson et al., 2007a). On the other hand, the feasibility of any CoSA project is totally dependent on the initial support of volunteers as representatives of local communities. Support from local and national media can be highly valuable. Experiences in the UK, Belgium and the Netherlands show that media attention for CoSA, even if negative, can be an effective way to mobilise society and as a consequence, often many volunteers apply for Circles.

EUROPEAN DISSEMINATION

With vital standards of service delivery, protocols and training material for volunteers developed by 'Circles UK', the lead organisation in England and Wales responsible for setting national standards and guidance protocols, the door for others to explore developing CoSA elsewhere in Europe was open. The intention behind the EC Daphne III funding for a CoSA European Handbook is that other member states can avail themselves of the CoSA model, and set up Circles, without having to reinvent the wheel. While this is unashamedly to do with capacity-building, the other driving force behind the handbook is to ensure consistency of quality. Clearly this is a service which has in-built risks which need managing through clear standards and defined protocols. Volunteers, untrained or unsupervised could lose perspective, objectivity and unwittingly undermine the work of their statutory partners. Busy professional staff might be tempted to make short-cuts on risk-management by virtue of volunteer back-up. The public, including particularly those who have been victims of such abuse, need to know that rigorous protections are in place in any programme claiming to help offenders reintegrate back into the community more safely. This raises key questions for the roll-out of the CoSA European handbook, once available. Who determines that an applicant for its use, and inevitable adaptation to the national context, is properly aware of the risks, and prepared to match the standards specified? How can such an application by a member state be policed and enforced, in order, partly, to protect the wider integrity of the CoSA model and reputation? Discussions are underway as to the possible formation of a European platform or 'forum' to hold the CoSA handbook's 'licence', apply and monitor its usage by member states.

At the same time, with growing experience and learning from CoSA in Europe, other development possibilities arise. For instance, while to date the majority of referrals for CoSA have related to male offenders, what might be done to explore and increase the model's usefulness to women sex-offenders, smaller in number, but bringing additional needs and complexities? In England, the growing awareness and concern as to the prevalence of teenagers who sexually abuse is prompting

exploration of adapted models of Circle combined with more individual mentoring support. They particularly should be helped towards being able to make a responsible and offence-free contribution to society, given the importance and value of early intervention.

With strong interest now in Catalonia, and Latvia as to the potential to include CoSA in their community rehabilitation services, it does appear that our 'founding fathers', this time in Canada, may have done us Europeans a considerable service. Their pioneering work in this innovative community service could usher in a truly enlightened approach as to how we deal with perhaps the most demonised group of offenders in our societies.

NOTES

- ¹ A fuller account of the Circles model can be found in "A Community-Based Approach to the Reduction of Sexual Reoffending. Circles of Support and Accountability", Hanvey, Philpot and Wilson, 2011.
- ² Although CoSA have been provided for some women with sexual convictions, they have predominantly been used with men.

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