

The importance of multi-agency and partnership working in the field of sexual abuse

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Sexual abuse is an international and transnational issue (See the UN and EU for ongoing debates as well as projects), which makes it a complex challenge to prevent as well as respond to. Sexual abuse being a global norm means that we need to get better at communicating around the issue as a worldwide community, but also as a professional community as well. We need to break out of our silos and work in partnership.

The challenges of national partnership working are well demonstrated (i.e., the recent John Worboys case in the UK is a good example) as are the challenges and issues linked to cross border, international partnership working (Hilder & Kemshall, 2015). Professionals believe that good partnership working, although challenging, is essential to the successful management of perpetrators of sexual abuse; this was emphasised by two research council funded projects that the author was involved in, one being UK based (“Public disclosure of sex offender information”) and the other taking place across five different countries (“Community engagement and partnership working in facilitating sex offender reintegration”). As sexual abuse is a multi-dimensional issue that ties to ideas around societal attitudes, culture, mental illness, personality and anti-sociality it means that we need a rounded approach to understanding as well as managing perpetrators; therefore we need probation, police, social work, social welfare, therapist, psychologists, counsellors, educators and employers to work together in synch. However, as Hilder & Kemshall point out, not all European countries or affiliated countries have a concrete and comprehensive multi-agency approach to managing perpetrators of sexual abuse released into the community in their own country; which poses some real offender management and risk management issues.

MAPPA

In England and Wales Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements are a matter of course when dealing with serious, violent and/or sexual offenders. The MAPPA process enables members of different agencies linked to the offender (i.e., police, prison, probation, housing, social welfare, etc) to come together and plan a coherent, response and risk informed approach to their management in the community. This practice is also used elsewhere in the UK and follows a similar process (Public Protection Arrangements Northern Ireland in Northern Ireland or Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (Scotland) in Scotland).

Research on the impact of MAPPA in England and Wales indicates that although the numbers of MAPPA eligible offenders is increasing (mainly due to increased reporting, recording and sentencing of perpetrators of sexual abuse) the process is still managing to successfully manage offenders in the community, reduce reoffending and protect the public (Ministry of Justice, 2017). The continued success of MAPPA in England and Wales reinforces the importance of partnership and multi-agency working around serious sexual offenders, another programme that also demonstrates this is Circles of Support and Accountability.

Circles of Support and Accountability

Circles of Support and Accountability which over the last 20 odd years has spread from one project in Canada to multiple countries worldwide, many of which are in Europe. The Circles model, like MAPPA, also emphasises partnership working and the importance of communication, but unlike MAPPA is not criminal justice orientated (although they are partners), it is instead grounded in the community. The circle enables members of local communities to support the integration of perpetrators of sexual abuse into their communities, while holding them accountable for their past and future behaviours. The role of the community in the circle is to parallel statutory working and communicate information to the professional organisations that manage the offender (McCartan et al, 2012; McCartan, 2016); it is a grassroots form of partnership working that has shown preliminary success internationally (for examples of research and evaluation, please see Circles UK). Hence, circles emphasises collaboration, community engagement, partnership and collaboration, not a form of “probation lite”. Although, there are similarities between Circles and MAPPA, MAPPA has a more coherent evidence base but it is safe to say that both show that cohesive partnership working is the best means to manage as well as integrate offenders.

The role of managing perpetrators of sexual abuse in the community is a challenging one, both on a practice and a personal level. Partnership working is central to the successful risk management of these individuals upon release, but we need to start thinking about how we can move successful partnership working to the prevention end of the sexual abuse spectrum. How can professionals communicate and work more effectively in tandem to prevent sexual abuse from occurring?