

# Circles of Support & Accountability: Supporting Evidence and Evaluations

Provided below is a summary of some of the key research regarding the efficacy of Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) both in England and Wales and internationally. For further reading please refer to the more comprehensive list of articles pertaining to COSA at [www.circles-uk.org.uk](http://www.circles-uk.org.uk)

## **The growth and rationale supporting Circles**

COSA are one of the fastest growing approaches to the management of sex offenders living in the community. The origins of COSA are rooted in the principles of restorative justice, in particular a belief in the importance of healthy relationships and an individual's accountability for what they do and its effect upon others. COSA is particularly relevant to the conceptual thinking that underpins sex offender treatment and can be interpreted as the practical application of both the Good Lives Model (Ward *et al.* 2007) and Desistance Theory (McNeill, 2006; Fox, 2014).

## **The impact of Circles on recidivism and encouraging desistance**

A detailed critique of studies and reports investigating the effectiveness of Circles on relevant outcomes is provided by Clarke *et al.* (2015).

### ***The International Experience***

Circles of Support and Accountability were first established in Canada in 1994. An initial evaluation of their impact on recidivism, in which 60 COSA participants were matched against a control group of high risk sex offenders, found that offenders who participated in COSA had a 70% (statistically significant) reduction in sexual recidivism, a 57% reduction in all types of violent recidivism and an overall reduction of 35% in all types of recidivism, compared to the control group (Wilson *et al.* 2007). Where Core Members did commit a new sexual offence, a harm reduction (Marlatt, 1998) effect was observed, whereby the new offences were categorically less severe and invasive than their original offences; this was not seen in those reconvictions within the control group. A further study of COSA (Wilson, *et al.* 2009) across Canada found that a cohort of 47 high risk sex offenders who participated in COSA had an 83% reduction in sexual recidivism in contrast to a matched comparison group, a 73% reduction in all types of violent (including sexual) recidivism and an overall reduction of 72% in all types of recidivism (of which only violent recidivism reached statistical significance).

In the Netherlands, a prospective study of 17 Core Members participating in Circles demonstrated improvements in psychological and social functioning, such as emotion regulation, internal locus of control, problem-solving and social skills (Hoing *et al.* 2015).

In the United States, Circles were established in Minnesota in 2008. The programme was evaluated using a randomised control design and found that it significantly decreased sex offence recidivism, lowering the risk of re-arrest by 88%. Results also showed that the programme significantly reduced recidivism for any type of offence by as much as 57%. As a result the cost-benefit savings to the public purse were found to be

significant: for every dollar spent, the programme yielded an estimated benefit of \$3.73 (Duwe, 2018). The most distinguishing feature of this evaluation is that it used a randomized control trial (widely considered the 'gold standard' of research) and therefore arguably offers the strongest evidence to date on the efficacy of the Circles model.

### ***The UK Experience – Local Providers***

The Ministry of Justice have published a case file review of Hampshire & Thames Valley Circles and The Lucy Faithfull Foundation Circles, the two OCSA pilots in England and Wales (McCartan *et al.*, 2014). Key findings of this review were that Circles supported and complemented statutory supervision of Core Members and supported risk management. They reduced social isolation and supported Core Members to comply with treatment programmes and engage in pro-social activity.

Circles South East (formerly Hampshire & Thames Valley Circles) has published three evaluations of CoSA since they were established in 2002. The first, a case file analysis, indicated that of 16 individuals managed by CoSA 2002-2006, none were reconvicted for a sexual offence, one was convicted for breach of a Sexual Offences Prevention Order (SOPO) and four were recalled to prison for breach of licence conditions (Bates *et al.* 2007). Bates *et al.* (2012) found that only one Circles South East CoSA participant had been reconvicted of a sexual offence and that CoSA made positive contributions to the seven "pathways" considered by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) Offender Assessment System (OASys). Again, a harm reduction effect was observed. Most recently, Bates *et al.* (2013) undertook a reconviction study comparing 71 Core Members who had engaged with CoSA against a control group who had been referred to Circles South East and deemed suitable but who did not receive a Circle. Over a comparable follow-up period of 55 months, the incidence of violent and contact sexual reconviction in the comparison group was significantly higher than for the Circles cohort.

Yorkshire and Humberside CoSA also reviewed outcomes for 38 Core Members who had participated in a Circle, 15 of which had a follow up period of at least two years (Banks *et al.* 2015). Although no control group was available for comparison, only one participant was convicted of a further sexual offence, with a further two breaches of a SOPO.

### ***The UK Experience – The National Picture***

A qualitative review of Circles in England and Wales has been conducted by Leeds University, based upon interviews with Core Members, volunteers and stakeholders (Thomas *et al.* 2014). This research identified that Circles Volunteers were highly motivated and thought highly of the training they received; stakeholders such as statutory agency professionals considered CoSA to be a good model and regarded Circles volunteers positively; most Core Members interviewed reported positive impact such as increased confidence, a wider social circle and an improved relationship with statutory agencies.

McCartan (2016) evaluated 29 Circles set up across the South West, South East, North East and Yorkshire and Humberside. The progress of the Core Members over the course of the Circle was assessed using the Dynamic Risk Review (DRR: a scored questionnaire completed by Volunteers based on the domains of the Structured Assessment of Risk and Need) and structured interviews with the Core Member based on the DRR. The majority demonstrated reductions in dynamic risk over the course of the Circle, and many showed improved outcomes with respect to accommodation, employment, relationships and other circumstances compared

to at the start of the Circle. In the absence of a control group, these changes could not necessarily be attributed to the action of the Circle.

Clarke *et al.* (2016) examined data from 275 Core Members in Circles between 2002 and 2013. Most were assessed as medium or higher risk of reconviction using Risk Matrix 2000S and, compared to at the start of the Circle, significantly fewer Core Members were unemployed, significantly fewer were claiming benefits and significantly more were living with a partner, family or alone in independent accommodation. Significantly more Core Members reported to be in a relationship than at the commencement of the Circle. These outcomes could not necessarily be attributed to participation in a Circle.

Circles UK is engaging with the Ministry of Justice to explore the feasibility of control-group reconviction comparison of this national data.

### **Cost effectiveness**

A cost-benefit analysis of the Minnesota COSA programme identified that for every dollar spent, the programme yielded an estimated benefit of \$3.73 as a result of avoiding the costs associated with recidivism (Duwe, 2018). Elliot & Beech (2012) also reported an overall cost benefit of COSA in England and Wales: an investment in COSA was found to provide a cost saving of £23,494 per annum and a benefit-cost ratio of 1.04. Accounting for estimates that the full extent of the cost to society may be 5 to 10 times the tangible costs substantially increases estimated cost savings related to COSA.

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