8. Circles of Support & Accountability: An Innovative Approach to Community-Based Risk Management for High-Risk Sexual Offenders

Robin J. Wilson, Ph.D., ABPP; Florida Civil Commitment Center; Arcadia, Florida, USA

Andrew J. McWhinnie, M.A.; Andrew J. McWhinnie Consulting; Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Abstract

Originally an *ad hoc* response to a difficult scenario in which a high-risk sexual offender was released to an angry community, the Circles of Support & Accountability (COSA) model has grown significantly from its humble Canadian Mennonite beginnings. Now, some 16 years later, projects are established throughout Canada, and fledgling projects have started in several American jurisdictions. In the United Kingdom, *Circles-UK* has been established as a national project, and interest continues to grow in other nations (e.g., the Netherlands, New Zealand, Latvia, France). In this unique restorative approach, professionally-supported community members volunteer time to assist high-risk, high-need sex offenders as they attempt to integrate to society after release from prison. The COSA model has provided hope that communities can assist in risk management, the end results being greater safety for potential victims and increased accountability for released offenders. Peer-reviewed evaluative research has shown that involvement in a COSA can result in statistically significant reductions in sexual recidivism of 70% or more over statistical projections (Static-99) or matched comparison subjects. Research as to the additive effect of COSA, over and above monitoring by law enforcement, shows that Circles form a valuable component of the community-based, partnership model of risk management. Overall, experiential data demonstrate that communities with COSA projects exhibit greater tolerance of offenders in their midst while feeling more empowered in participating in the risk management process.

Résumé

A l'origine, le modèle des Cercles de Support et de Responsabilité (COSA) était une réponse ad hoc à un scénario difficile qui voyait un délinquant sexuel à haut risque être libéré dans une communauté en colère. Depuis ses humbles débuts Canadien-Ménnonite, il s'est considérablement développé. Aujourd'hui, quelques 16 ans plus tard, des projets sont créés partout au Canada, et d'autres ont été inaugurés dans plusieurs ressorts américains. En Grande-Bretagne, Circles-UK a été créé à l'échelon national et l'intérêt pour de tels projets continue à croître dans d'autres pays. Dans le cadre de cette approche

restorative unique, des membres bénévoles de la communauté, encadrés par des professionnels, acceptent de soutenir des délinquants à haut risque et dont les besoins sont immenses, dans leurs efforts à s'intégrer à la société lors de leur sortie de prison. Le modèle COSA est porteur de l'espoir que les communautés puissent participer à ce management du risque, le résultat final espéré étant une meilleure sécurité pour les potentielles victimes et une responsabilisation accrue pour les délinquants libérés. Des évaluations validées par le biais du peer-reviewing ont montré que la participation à un COSA peut réduire de manière significative la récidive sexuelle de 70% et plus, par rapport aux projections statistiques (Static-99) ou à des sujets de groupes comparables. Des recherches portant sur d'autres effets des COSA, ont montré qu'au-delà du respect de la loi, ceux-ci constituent un élément intéressant du management du risque de type communautaire et partenarial. D'une manière générale, les données relatives à cette expérience démontrent que les communautés avec des projets COSA manifestent une plus grande tolérance à la présence de délinquants parmi eux tout en se percevant comme plus en position de maîtrise dès lors qu'ils participent au management du risque.

1. Introduction

In the spring of 1994, Charlie Taylor was anxiously awaiting his release from prison. This was not the first time he had been incarcerated and, as most prison officials had told him, it would not likely be his last. Charlie was a repeat child molester who had spent the majority of his teen and adult life incarcerated for sexual offenses. In fact, the National Parole Board of Canada (NPB) was so convinced that he would reoffend that they invoked a special practice known as 'detention'. Detention occurs when the NPB deems that an offender normally scheduled to be statutorily released at the two-thirds point of his sentence is at such high risk to reoffend that the offender is held in prison until the very last day of his sentence. This was what was going to happen with Charlie — he was scheduled to be released in mid-June 1994. In theory, the practice of detention makes some sense. If you are convinced that someone is at such high risk to reoffend then why not hold him in prison until the last day of his sentence? Would this not afford the public at least some greater measure of protection? Unfortunately, the answer to this question is unclear or, at least, it was unclear in the early summer of 1994.

Most sexual offenders in North American jurisdictions receive determinate sentences. That is, they will be released at some point in the future. The literature on community corrections (see Andrews et al., 2007, also Wilson et al., 2009b) is clear that a facilitated release offers the offender increased accountability and the community greater safety while the offender attempts to reintegrate. This is essentially the reasoning behind conditional release and less restrictive alternatives, post incarceration. The thinking is that if we can provide offenders returning to the community with a safety net that includes aftercare treatment, informed parole/probation supervision, and a cadre of ancillary services (e.g., job search, life skills programming) aimed at a swifter and more efficacious reintegration, then the chances of re-offense are lowered. Studies evaluating this sort of coordinated, collaborative release protocol (e.g., containment model —English et al., 1998, also Willis, 2008, Circles of Support and Accountability model — Wilson et al., 2007a, 2008) have all clearly shown that careful post-release planning combined with monitoring, supervision, and human service work together to decrease reoffending.

For Charlie, and for close to 300 other offenders released following detention in Canada, none of these measures were available. Under these circumstances, neither the offender nor the community have any form of 'safety net' — no monitoring, no supervision, no aftercare treatment. This, in the authors' opinions, results in a 'set up' for both potential victims and for offenders in that without the supports and the accountability network for offenders, the likelihood of new offences against new victims is increased. The safety of the community is compromised. As was the case for Charlie, Canadian sexual offenders released after detention receive very little in the way of any legal framework for post-release supervision or treatment. In fact, when Charlie's institutional psychologist called the community-based counterpart (author RJW) and asked for assistance, the community psychologist quite

rightly stated that no services would be available — the federal government's responsibility for him would be finished. And, at that point, it would have been both improper and potentially illegal for the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) to have exerted any control over a (now) private citizen (see Wilson, 1996). The community psychologist suggested that his institutional counterpart seek assistance from a faith community with some experience working with Charlie.

Following up on that suggestion, the institutional psychologist made enquiries with the Chaplaincy arm of the Correctional Service of Canada and learned that Charlie had once been part of a prison fellowship program known as 'Man to Man, Woman to Woman' (M2W2—Yantzi, 1998). In M2W2, community volunteers were matched with prison inmates, in an attempt to encourage prosocial skills development and to better prepare them for release. During an earlier sentence, Charlie had been paired with a pastor affiliated with an urban Mennonite congregation in Hamilton, Ontario, a medium-sized city to the southwest of Toronto. Upon receiving a call from the institutional psychologist, and with some arm-twisting, the Mennonite pastor and several members of his congregation agreed to meet with Charlie, post-release, to see if they could assist him in reintegrating to society. This group of volunteers — a group later aptly named "Charlie's Angels" — and one offender was to become the first 'Circle of Support' (as they were called at that point).

When Charlie was released to Hamilton, there was a media firestorm. Television, radio, and print media all questioned the propriety of allowing someone like Charlie to enter their community. The local police established around-the-clock surveillance, at a cost of tens of thousands of dollars in overtime, and neighbourhood residents began picketing the Mennonite church where Charlie was now holed-up with his 'Circle'. Soon after coming together, Charlie's Circle quickly realized was that the concept of 'reintegration' was a misnomer. Due to the extent of his institutionalization and social alienation, a more appropriate appellation was 'integration', in deference to the strong possibility that Charlie had never actually been socially integrated in the first place. With no set protocol or plan, these volunteers attempted to locate suitable housing and social assistance while setting basic guidelines intended to keep the Charlie safe and out of the fray.

When the community became aware of the Mennonites' "befriending" of Charlie and picketing and threats of violence were directed at him, the pastor, the volunteers, and the church itself. Within 24 hours, every pupil in the school district had been given a photograph of Charlie, with a description of the risk he posed to the community. It was within this climate that Charlie's Circle had to find ways to settle him and ensure that he did not come in contact with situations of risk. Circle volunteers met with him daily to see how he was faring, and to take him to the various social service agencies that would provide him with support (e.g., welfare, housing authority, healthcare). Most of the meetings between Charlie and his volunteers occurred at "Tim Horton's" a hugely popular Canadian chain of coffee and donut shops named after a once-famous hockey player. In many ways, sitting down to have coffee in this less

threatening environment became the vector for Charlie talking about high risk situations, his feelings, fears, and hopes for the future.

Based on the results obtained with the first offender, a chaplain in the Toronto area used the same approach in the case of another high-risk release — Wray, a repeat child molester with a similar history, who was released approximately five months later. Wray was originally released to one community, but was driven out by that community, whereupon he was transported to Toronto, on the belief that he would be more "invisible" in a larger city. With the assistance of a detective from the Toronto Police Service's Sexual Assault Squad and a local Anglican minister and several parishioners, a community chaplain for the Correctional Service of Canada put together a support group for the offender in Toronto similar to the one in Hamilton.

At the time of their respective releases, both Charlie and Wray had been evaluated by prison officials as presenting a one hundred percent chance of reoffending within seven years (using an early version of the Sex Offender Risk Appraisal Guide [SORAG] — see Quinsey et al., 2006). However, as weeks turned into months and months turned into years, Charlie and Wray and their respective Circles proved that they could be law-abiding citizens. Armed with little more than their faith and a sheer strength of will, these two Circles weathered the storm and ultimately gained a measure of respect from both the police and the community. As a consequence of these two apparent success stories, the Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario (MCCO) was approached by the CSC Chaplaincy and agreed to steward a pilot project in the South-Central Ontario region of Canada to pilot this new and promising model. After meetings with CSC officials and the government minister in charge of such matters, MCCO received a small grant and began to operationalize the process of matching community volunteers with detained high-risk sexual offenders facing imminent release.

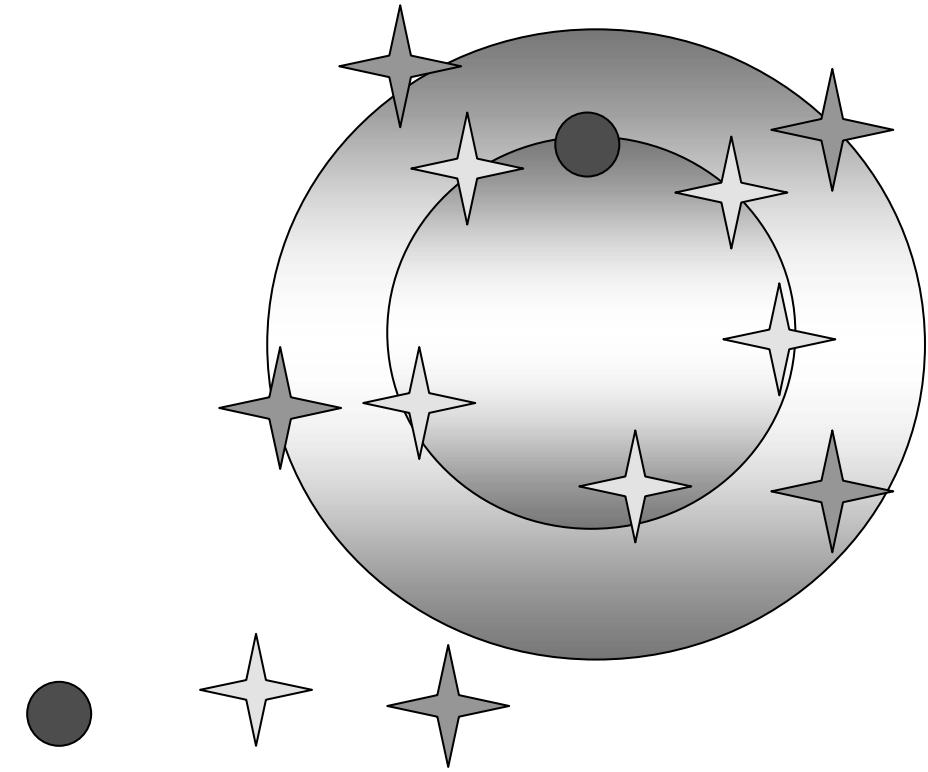
2. Circles of Support and Accountability

At its core, Circles of Support and Accountability is a grass roots attempt by members of the community to take back some measure of control over public safety. The idea behind this model is really quite simple: Persons with problems tend to do better when they have others to help them deal with those problems. This is an almost universally accepted truth that extends to difficulties in such diverse domains as medicine, mental health, criminal justice, education, and even common life problems. Essentially, many will argue that it is the sense of social-connectedness that we experience through being linked to others that assists us in being successful people. In many ways, this human tendency is seen in our tendency to *gather together* in various ways (e.g., clubs, spiritual congregations, professional organizations, political parties, etc.). Most people who are 'successful' in life are able to name those who supported them and guided them through trickier times. Simply put, we enjoy life by the help and society of others.

The Mission Statement of Circles of Support and Accountability is "no more victims". The goal of COSA is therefore to "substantially reduce the risk of future sexual victimization of community members by assisting and supporting released individuals in their task of integrating with the community and leading responsible, productive, and accountable lives…[by]… providing support, advocacy, and a way to be meaningfully accountable in exchange for living safely in the community" (CSC, 2002a). In doing so, safety is enhanced for the community, particularly where risk exists for women, children, and other vulnerable persons. Simply put, COSA promotes safety for victims (past or potential) by validating their needs for healing and continued safety while holding ex-offenders accountable for behaving responsibly. In return, their rights as citizens are protected. By supporting former sexual offenders and holding them accountable for their choices in the community, harm is reduced.

Specific to criminal justice, there is good evidence that a viable solution to community violence is found in community engagement with the criminal justice system (Silverman et al., 2002). Research in support of this assertion includes findings that social support led to reductions in violent recidivism among mentally ill patients and violent sexual offenders (Estroff et al., 1994, also Gutiérrez-Lobos et al., 2001). Further, stable housing, as well as social support, has shown a relationship to reduced sexual recidivism and general criminality among both child molesters and rapists (Grubin, 1997, also Lane Council Of Governments, 2003, Willis, 2008).

The COSA model consists of two concentric circles of persons. The inner circle is comprised of four to six community volunteers and one ex-offender, known as a Core Member. The outer circle is comprised of several local professionals (e.g., psychologists, probation officials, law enforcement officers, civic leaders) who provide expert guidance and support to the inner circle. Further, most COSA projects have a steering group, comprised of additional local professionals who provide operational decision-making for the project in total, much like a board of directors. It is also usually the case that a project will have a Coordinator — a paid staff who manages the day-to-day operations of the project and arranges training opportunities for COSA volunteers. There may also be additional paid staff, most of whom are part-time employees. In the original MCCO pilot project in South-Central Ontario, there is a part-time Coordinator and (usually) three part-time assistants.



Core Member Volunteers Professionals

Prior to becoming involved in a Circle of Support and Accountability, volunteers are screened and trained. Screening is important because of the nature of the involvement volunteers will have with ex-offenders. It is critically important that volunteers understand what they are getting into, and that we check their references and criminal histories to be sure that they are not volunteering for the 'wrong' reason. Training of volunteers is also crucial; however, it is important to note that the training offered is not of the sort that would render community volunteers 'experts' in any way. The intent is to familiarize volunteers with the sorts of issues they are likely to face as volunteers in a COSA, and to assist them in understanding when they must reach out to the outer circle for professional assistance. Topics of training, covered over a total period equalling four and a half days, are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Topics of Training for Volunteers

➢ Overview of the criminal justice system	➢ Restorative justice
➢ Needs of survivors	➢ The Circle model
➢ Effects of institutionalization	➢ Human sexuality and sexual deviance
➢ Risk assessment	➢ Boundaries and borders
➢ Conflict resolution	➢ Group dynamics
➢ Building group cohesion	➢ Circle functions
➢ Crisis response and preparing for critical incident stress	➢ Working with correctional officials, police, news media, and other community professionals
➢ Court orders	➢ Needs assessment
➢ Building a covenant	➢ Closing a Circle

The outer circle in the figure above is particularly important to the health and overall functionality of the model. We are careful to ensure that volunteers understand their role — as social guides and supports. We do not want them to stray into psychotherapy or official social control, as these functions are the responsibility of trained professionals. If the Core Member needs to debrief his day, needs assistance finding a place to live, or if he needs someone to vouch for him at the Welfare Office, these are all typical volunteer functions. However, if the Core Member admits to increased deviant fantasies or has had a lapse with alcohol or substance abuse, these are situations in need of professional assistance — to be provided by the members of the outer circle of experts.

Typically, the inner circle (referred to hereafter as the 'Circle') will be assembled up to six months prior to the offender's release, so that a relationship may be fostered prior to his return to the community. Upon release, for a period of typically 60 to 90 days following release, the full Circle will meet with the Core Member on a weekly basis (or greater, depending on need) and each individual Circle volunteer commits to meet with the Core Member at least once per week. One or two members of the Circle will step forward as 'primary' contacts, and they serve as ex-officio captains who will coordinate elements of the whole circle's efforts. Each Circle will also have a staff member assigned as the operations contact person.

Offenders targeted for COSA are typically those who have long histories of offending, have often failed in treatment, have displayed intractable antisocial values and attitudes, and who are likely to be held until sentence completion due to high levels of risk and need. Upon release, such offenders face significant community reintegration challenges, and involvement in COSA assists greatly in helping them in making better choices regarding meeting goals consistent with the tenets of the currently-popular Good Lives Model (GLM — see Ward et al., 2003, also Wilson et al., 2009c). Briefly, the GLM posits that all people seek to attain human goods that include, among others,

relatedness/intimacy, agency/autonomy, and emotional equilibrium. In short, human goods are associated with general well-being, and the sort of balanced, self-determinism also argued in the life skills model (Curtiss et al., 1973). Through COSA, participating offenders have access to 'prosocial guides' who will assist them in meeting their needs in ways that promote personal efficacy and decrease likelihood of reoffending. Those released without benefit of participation in CoSA are thus presumably less able to meet their needs in prosocial ways and are, therefore, less likely to successfully reintegrate.

One of the most important elements of any successful Circle is the development of a 'covenant' between the Core Member and his Circle Volunteers. This living document serves as a virtual contract between the various parties, in which the volunteers and Core Member essentially agree that "we will do this, if you will do that". This covenant is the basis of the trust relationship between the members and is essential to the ongoing development of support and accountability frameworks in the Circle. Over time, Circles projects have found that this covenant provides not just an accountability framework for the Core Member, but also a basis for credibility of the endeavour with local law enforcement and other statutory stakeholders. Often, the terms of the covenant serve as a reciprocal starting point for the development of probation and community supervision conditions. The COSA approach is therefore fully in line with the risk and need elements of the principles of effective interventions (Andrews & Bonta, 2007; Wilson & Yates, 2009).

In many respects, the Circle functions like an extended family or a group of close friends. Those of us who have been successful in life have done so largely because of the social linkages we have made to others. Essentially, we enjoy life by the help and society of others. However, by their offending, most Core Members have alienated themselves from anyone who ever cared about them. It is not enough to say that they have 'no' friends, they actually have 'anti' friends, in that most of the community has no positive regard for them at all. As a consequence, it becomes very difficult for such persons to engage social services or even accomplish such simple tasks as buying groceries — the latter made difficult by the community notifications that often accompany their releases.

Typical functions for volunteers are often not entirely unlike those of parents seeking to establish a young adult son or daughter in the community. They need a place to stay, they have to have a way to pay their bills, and they need periodic guidance as they experience new situations. With its focus on support, COSA provides positive social influences, concrete help with cognitive and other problem-solving, and helps counteract the social isolation and feelings of loneliness and rejection associated with sexual reoffending. Further, with its concurrent focus on accountability on the part of the offender, it targets issues related to distorted cognitions that support offending and minimize risk, including cooperation with supervision and the need to maintain a balanced, self-determined lifestyle.

Consider the following series of email questions and answers between a journalist and a Core Member (courtesy of the Lucy Faithfull Foundation in Chelmsford, UK, no publication date):

> *(Q) Why did you volunteer to go into a circle of support? What were your expectations of the people involved and what they could do for you?*
> *(A) I volunteered because I had little support in the outside world. Family yes, but they are too close. Unable to pull me up. Too easy for me to manipulate if I chose, if you understand. I needed something that was outside this 'inner circle' Expectations, to be accepted for who I am not what I had done. To be able to trust and be supported. Not judged. Did not know much about Circles as they were very new at the time.*
>
> *(Q) Did you in fact develop a friendship over time with any of the members of the group? If so, which ones? Did you like them as people or did you think they were just a bunch of do-gooders?*
> *(A) Did I like the people as them? Well, they liked me for me. HUGE STEREOTYPING. People are not a label, sex offender, white van man, journalist. Everyone has feelings, thoughts etc. I resent the word do-gooders. They are people who can see beyond the social stereotyping that causes so much harm in this world. It is a great credit to them, I only wish there were more like them. This world is full of hate malice – he's that, she's so and so. People need to be given a chance. If not where would we be?*
>
> *(Q) Do you think circles of support can reduce the chance of re-offending?*
> *(A) In a word "yes". Help, support, not judged. Without help, people hide, turn in on themselves, re-offend, disappear. Specially with adverse press. News of World etc. You can easily sink in on yourself, e.g. 'I've been labelled a sex offender, no one believes I can change, why should I?' However, Circles believe and have faith. Not much to ask, but huge in someone else's eyes. Bit of trust and kindness can go a long way in this world. Imagine, no one likes you, the press slam you, where do you go, what do you do? I was okay. I had a Circle. What would you do?*

3. Research Findings

From its inception, the COSA movement has included a strong component of research, with most projects having researchers as members of their steering groups. Initiatives that exist or got their beginning in the faith-based domain sometimes find their efforts are dismissed as the ill-guided interventions of 'religious do-gooders'. It has been very important to leaders in the COSA movement to make sure that such dismissals do not occur. To illustrate this point, consider the experience of Detective Wendy Leaver of the Sexual Assault Squad of the Toronto Police Service. Det. Leaver has been a staunch advocate

of COSA for nearly 16 years, having been one of the volunteers involved in Wray's Circle. However, she was not always as comfortable with the idea that ordinary citizens could (or should) be involved in the community reintegration of high-risk sexual offenders. In the following quotation, Det. Leaver sums up her thoughts about volunteers and the model (Correctional Service of Canada, 2002b):

> *"These people [Circles participants] have no idea what [Core Member Wray] is going to do, what he's about, and I do…As months went into years, I saw the benefit of the Circle…I think what really caught my interest was, maybe this works [sigh], maybe it does."*

The modern correctional literature has been greatly influenced by the Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) model of Andrews and Bonta (2007). Simply, the RNR model decrees that successful interventions will match the level of treatment intensity to the level of assessed risk while specifically targeting criminogenic needs in a manner that attends to individualized elements of the offender's presentation and motivation for change. Application of RNR-attendant human service programming to offenders (including sexual offenders) has been shown to greatly decrease reoffending (Andrews et al., 2007, also Hanson et al., 2009). RNR often serves as the foundation of a larger cognitive-behavioural intervention protocol (see Wilson et al., 2009c).

Even though the principal work done in the COSA model is accomplished by community volunteers, this model is entirely in line with prescriptions of the RNR model. Regarding risk, Circles have been, in most cases, reserved for those offenders who show the greatest potential for harm to the community, and who have the least amount of prosocial support on which to rely. The intensive community-based support afforded by the Circle is very much in line with the level of risk posed by those targeted for involvement. Additionally, we have been clear that successful Circles are those which hold Core Members accountable for developing lifestyle management plans that account for high risk factors and specific need areas. This is part of the process of developing a working covenant. Last, any responsivity concerns the Core Member may have or experience are accounted for by the intensive support and social engagement that is at the core of all Circles. We engage them in their environment, on their terms; however, with an eye toward having them function more effectively in the social mainstream, through the development and implementation of a balanced, self-determined lifestyle (Curtiss et al., 1973).

Studies of the impact of Circles of Support and Accountability have included both process and outcome-oriented investigations. Regarding process, Wilson and associates showed that COSA can have a dramatic impact on both those involved in a project as well as the community in which that project exists (Wilson et al., 2007b). Of principal interest, Core Members were clear in asserting that, without involvement in COSA, they would have had

much more difficulty on release, would probably have returned to old ways of thinking and behaving, and that their likelihood of returning to prison would have been high. Also striking was the finding that members of the community-at-large (who had not previously been aware of COSA) were almost unanimous in stating that they would be much less concerned about sexual offenders in their communities if they knew that the offenders were involved in COSA.

Two Canadian studies have focused on the relative rates of reoffending between COSA Core Members and matched comparison subjects who were not afforded participation in a Circle (see Wilson et al., 2007c; Wilson et al., 2009a). In the first study, a group of 60 high risk sexual offenders involved in COSA (Core Members from the original pilot project in South-Central Ontario) were matched to 60 high risk sexual offenders who did not become involved in COSA (matched comparison subjects). Offenders were matched on risk, length of time in the community, and prior involvement in sexual offender specific treatment. The average follow-up time was 4.5 years. Results showed that the COSA Core Members had significantly lower rates of any type of reoffending than did the matched comparison subjects. Specifically, the Core Members had a 70% reduction in *sexual* recidivism in contrast to the matched comparison group, a 57% reduction in *all types of violent* recidivism (including sexual), and an overall reduction of 35% in *all types of recidivism* (including violent and sexual).

The second study consisted of a Canadian national replication of the study from the pilot project (see Wilson et al., 2009a). The same basic methodology was used — comparing COSA Core Members to matched comparison subjects. Participants for this study were drawn from COSA projects across Canada, but not including members of the pilot project. In total, the reoffending of 44 Core Members was evaluated against 44 matched comparison subjects, with an average follow-up time of approximately three years. Similar to the first study, dramatic reductions in rates of reoffending were observed in the group of COSA Core Members. Specifically, there was an 83% reduction in *sexual* recidivism, a 73% reduction in *all types of violent* recidivism (including sexual), and an overall reduction of 71% in *all types of recidivism* (including sexual and violent) in comparison to the matched offenders.

Canadian COSA research to date has provided support for the perspective that trained and guided volunteers can and do assist in markedly improving offenders' chances for successful community integration. Taken together, the findings of the two studies noted above provide strong support for the utility of the model in reducing reoffending, and suggest that participation in COSA is not site-specific. In contrasting the re-offense rates of these two groups of offenders (COSA vs. matched comparison), it is interesting to note that the relative benefit, *vis a vis* risk reduction, of being involved in a COSA outstrips data currently available regarding the relative benefit of treatment vs. no treatment. In a recent meta-analysis, Hanson et al. (2009) presented data from 23 sexual offender treatment efficacy studies meeting certain basic criteria for study quality (including the first of the two studies above). Average sexual re-offense rates for those offenders completing treatment was 10.9%, while those

offenders who did not complete treatment reoffended at a rate of 19.2%, for an odds ratio of .568. In the first evaluation of COSA (see Wilson et al., 2007c), the rates of sexual reoffending were 5% for COSA Core Members and 16.67% for the matched comparison subjects, for an odds ratio of .299. In the replication study (see Wilson et al., 2009a), the respective differences in sexual reoffending were 2.3% and 13.7%, for an odds ratio of .168.

To date, no other jurisdiction has provided formal data regarding the recidivism outcomes of their Core Members. Outside of Canada, the best established COSA variant is found in the United Kingdom (Quaker Peace and Social Witness, 2005). In the Summer of 2007, the British government rolled-out Circles-UK as a national charity. COSA was first established in the Hampshire and Thames Valley (HTV) region of England in 2001 after a successful visit to London — at the request of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and the Home Office—by a delegation of COSA officials from Canada. A preliminary study published by British COSA researchers (Bates et al., 2007) provided qualitative information regarding the development of Circles in their jurisdiction; however, numbers of participants was still too low to facilitate quantitative evaluation of recidivism outcomes. Nonetheless, Bates et al. report that over the first four years of the HTV project's existence, no Core Members had sexually reoffended. An updated, more comprehensive review of COSA in the UK experience is forthcoming, the results of which will show low rates of sexual reoffending and other related misconduct roughly equivalent to the Canadian experience (less than 5% sexual reconviction in approximately three years follow-up — Bates, personal communication, July 1, 2010).

One other line of research in the COSA realm is also worthy of discussion. In its beginnings, the COSA model developed as a grass-roots, community-based response to an untenable situation resulting from unfortunate loopholes in contemporary correctional policy and practice. Some of these loopholes have since been filled by the institution of Long Term Offender legislation in Canada (see Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, 2005) and the adaptation of Peace Bond statutes (see §810.1 and §810.2 of the Criminal Code of Canada). As COSA projects have grown in their respective communities, the establishment of steering groups and strong outer circles of professionals has led to a natural spirit of collaboration amongst the various stakeholders in the risk management endeavour. Most interesting of these collaborations has been that formed between COSA projects and local law enforcement. It would appear that the police have come to the conclusion that COSA groups provide an extra measure of community safety which is especially important given the routine funding woes and high expectations that citizens have regarding police responsibility for public safety. In Canada, two of the more prominent COSA projects (Toronto and Ottawa) have both received formal letters of endorsement from their respective Chiefs of Police.

This collaborative effort between COSA and police has helped both groups to grow in their understanding of how — individually and together — they contribute to public safety. In a preliminary study (see Wilson et al., 2007d), the

community reintegration experiences of four groups of released offenders were compared: 1. offenders who were monitored by police alone, 2. offenders who were involved in COSA alone, 3. offenders who were both in a COSA and monitored by police, and 4. offenders who were neither in a COSA nor monitored by police. Results suggest that, on their own, police tend to return offenders under supervision back to custody at the first sign of a problem, but that this tendency is lessened when the offender is also involved in a Circle. This suggests that COSA involvement gives police more faith that a problem will be addressed and is not then in need of a 'law and order' response. Offenders who are in Circles tend to last the longest in the community, while those offenders who have neither a COSA nor police supervision tend to engage in a significantly higher degree of reoffending, in all domains. Actually, Wilson et al. found that, as a group, the no-COSA/no-police offenders incurred more than three times as many charges for new criminal behaviour than any of the other groups — indeed, more than all three other groups combined. These findings were seen as strongly encouraging a perspective that community safety is increased when the police and citizens collaborate in risk management. This study is currently being updated with longer follow-up.

The acknowledged founder of modern policing, Sir Robert Peel famously stated, "The police are the people and the people are the police." Peel is also believed to be the originator of the concept of community policing which, in Peel's conceptualization, was about prevention. The sexual offender treatment field has recently adopted 'prevention' as its new zeitgeist, especially as the US Centers for Disease Control includes sexual abuse in its child maltreatment prevention agenda
(see http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/childmaltreatment/index.html, accessed July 15, 2010). Over the many years since Peel, community policing has been embraced by law enforcement organizations throughout the world. The goal of community policing is to prevent crime and promote better police-community partnerships — like those we have spoken about in this paper. However, community policing requires an investment in training with special attention to evidence-based decision-making (and not decision-based evidence-making). It also requires that forward-thinking police services develop protocols regarding communication, mediation and conflict resolution with community groups and partners; resource identification and use; promoting networking and linkages; and building cross-cultural competencies. In those jurisdictions with Circles projects, we believe that these goals have been more easily attained through the collaboration between police and citizens.

As an interesting corollary, the spirit of citizen engagement in violence prevention has not solely occurred on the COSA front. Other restorative approaches have flourished (e.g., Victim-Offender Mediation, Sentencing Circles — see Wilson et al., 2002), often in spite of legislative agendas that are high on law and order, but low on community building (see Levenson et al., 2007, also Wilson, 2008). One particularly interesting project is that promoted by the US National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC—see

http://www.nsvrc.org/publications/nsvrc-publications/engaging-bystanders-sexual-violence-prevention, accessed July 15, 2010). 'Engaging Bystanders' champion Joan Tabachnik (2008, 2009) convincingly argues that ordinary citizens must be participants in the prevention of sexual violence, stating that we can no longer simply stand by as our children and other vulnerable people continue to be victimized.

4. Proliferation of the Model

As COSA projects have demonstrated utility in increasing public safety in Canada and the UK, many other jurisdictions are also looking at COSA as a means to manage the risk posed by released offenders. There are now projects established or beginning across the United States, with some having been in existence for greater than five years. We are also aware of COSA projects in the Netherlands and New Zealand, with interest growing in Australia, Bermuda, South Africa, and France. Interestingly, the authors have recently been requested to provide consultation to the State Probation Service of Latvia, as they also hope to establish a COSA project in the near future. As in Canada and the UK, the primary driving forces behind these projects has been a need to reduce sexual reoffending. However, as statutory agencies find it increasingly difficult to shoulder the entire burden of community safety, these agencies are warming up to the idea of community-based partnerships that include members of the community.

5. Closing Thoughts

Involvement in Circles of Support and Accountability is a life-altering experience. Our volunteers have risen to a difficult challenge in knowingly and intentionally making friends with some of society's most dangerous and alienated members. To date, most Circle volunteers have come from the faith community, largely because these folks have a 'calling' to help others. However, we believe that it is bigger than that. Being a volunteer in a Circle requires a commitment to community and to humanity that transcends faith. Indeed, while most COSA projects derive their origins from spiritual and religious foundations and organizations, involvement in Circles has never been about proselytizing. It simply requires being available when needed — just like a mother, brother, or close friend would be. British Columbia volunteer Linda Rathjen shares her thoughts on being a volunteer:

> *"So, when the phone rings, and I see that it's Arthur, and I don't feel like talking with him AGAIN, I am reminded that this could be the phone call that he needs to prevent him from slipping back into his crime cycle, and how could I do less than give him those few minutes of my time in exchange for the safety of my community?"*

The guidance and feedback received from the myriad professionals involved in COSA projects has been very helpful in establishing and refining risk management protocols. This is particularly true of corrections officials and local law enforcement. What was once a tenuous relationship has grown into a genuine partnership in community safety. However, most interesting has been the response of the residents in those jurisdictions where COSA projects exist. To a one, communities with COSA projects have responded positively to the notion that some of their compatriots have chosen to be involved in promoting community safety. Whenever a high risk sexual offender is released from prison, the media typically publish negative stories, laced liberally with such provocative questions as, "How could they release a monster like this?" This approach lasts a few days before the news gets old, largely because of the media's frustration with the reportedly bad person not engaging in the predicted bad behaviour. This is frequently the time that COSA gets its best press. Eager to keep the issue alive, the media starts looking for 'good news stories', and they find COSA. Interestingly, such stories provide excellent opportunities for recruitment of volunteers.

Finally, for ex-offenders — Core Members — being in a Circle means a chance at a substantially more normal life. It provides an opportunity to truly work towards development of a balanced, self-determined lifestyle, free of continued involvement with the law and social ostracism. We mentioned earlier that both Charlie and Wray were released with damning predictions of one hundred percent chance of reinvolvement in crime within seven years. This risk profile is typical of men who have become involved in COSA. In our minds, the research quoted above clearly supports the utility of this model. However, there is a human side to the statistics. Each one of those Core Members who did not reoffend did not create any new victims. And, each one of those Core Members who embraced his Circle and regained his place in the community was a human being saved from a life of deviance and victimization.

> "*They are my best friends. You can't share what we've shared and not become friends. If they weren't there, I'd be back inside by now.*" —"Kevin" in *No More Victims* (Correctional Service of Canada, 2001)

Charlie died in 2005, some eleven and a half years after his release. Wray died a year later. Both of these men maintained close contact with their Circles (really, their 'families') throughout their days of freedom in the community. While we would never be so bold as to suggest that these two men achieved full measures of the balance and self-determinism we have touted throughout this chapter, we can state with certainty that they experienced a range of community opportunities and that they embraced life. However, most importantly, we are most pleased to report that neither of these two admittedly high risk paedophilic sexual offenders ever engaged in another act of sexual deviance.

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