

# Circles of Support and Accountability: An international partnership in reducing sexual offender recidivism

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**Sexual offenders are unwelcome in virtually every community. The mere thought that such a person might possibly move to one's community inflames negative public sentiment beyond seemingly every other contemporary social issue. Until recently, some released sexual offenders in Florida were living under bridges. Now, they have been evicted from even those locations. In other jurisdictions, there is virtually no place within city limits that is not within 1,000 feet of a park, school, daycare, or community centre. As a society, we are slowly but surely banning sexual offenders from our midst. We are forcing sexual offenders into lives of secrecy. However, given that secrecy is a hallmark of sexual offending, are we, in our haste to rid ourselves of these people, potentially making the situation worse?**

The Good Lives zeitgeist (i.e., Good Lives Model — GLM<sup>2</sup>) suggests that we must see offenders as whole persons, if we hope to achieve maximal reductions in recidivism. Balanced, self-determined lifestyles<sup>3</sup> are, by definition, free of offending. This is a necessary goal for offenders who seek to change their future — gain some balance and perspective in their lives. For the community-at-large, we need to remember that offenders were once members of the community and that, with appropriate rehabilitation and monitoring, many of them can likely reclaim some aspect of their former lives. Instead of pigeon-holing offenders as Bob-the-sexual-offender, we need to consider that a more realistic appraisal of the individual requires acknowledgement of Bob-the-son, Bob-the-mechanic, and Bob-the-father, among others. It has become increasingly clear that the community's failure to appreciate the wholeness of offenders has perpetuated the sort of marginal, disaffected anomie that likely contributed to Bob's offending in the first place.

While many legislators, law enforcement personnel, and members of the community have

worked to increase monitoring and decrease access for sexual offenders, others have attempted to build bridges to this population, in the hope that engagement will assist in increasing safety. Many in this latter group come from faith communities or other groups steeped in restorative justice traditions. In this paper, we hope to familiarise readers with a restorative initiative directed at sexual offenders, known as Circles of Support and Accountability.

## Circles of Support and Accountability

The Reverend Harry Nigh — then the pastor of a small, urban Mennonite church in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada known as the Welcome Inn — had no idea what he was getting himself into when he agreed to meet with Charlie Taylor. Having been institutionalised since he was a pre-schooler, Charlie was about to be released from prison, yet again, after serving a sentence for molesting children. The last time he got out, he reoffended within weeks of release, and because he was now being released at the end of his sentence (referred to as Warrant Expiry in Canada, leading to the term WED — Warrant Expiry Date), Charlie would have no strings attached. That is, he would have no Parole Officer with whom to meet, and he would have no conditions on his community interactions other than those which apply to all citizens (keep the peace and be of good behaviour).

The summer of 1994 was pretty typical for Southern Ontario — hot, hazy, and humid. Children abounded in neighbourhoods, wearing shorts and bathing suits as they played in turtle-shaped plastic pools and lawn sprinklers, trying to take the edge off the heat. This was the sort of community to which Charlie would be released, and the sort of community that would be spurred to uproar at the notification of his impending arrival.

Psychologist Bill Palmer of the Correctional Service of Canada knew intrinsically that the circumstances of

1. A small portion of this article has been published previously as Wilson, C. (2008) 'Circles UK: Variation on a Canadian theme' *ATSA Forum*, Vol. 20.
2. Ward, T. & Stewart, C.A. (2003) 'The treatment of sexual offenders: Risk management and good lives' *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, Vol.34, pp. 353-360.
3. Curtiss, P.R., & Warren, P.W. (1973) *The dynamics of life skills coaching*. Prince Albert, SK: Saskatchewan NewStart Inc. (for the Training Research and Development Station Dept. of Manpower and Immigration).

Charlie's release were not optimal — for Charlie or the community. Having worked with him in prison, Palmer knew that Charlie was a marginalised man with few life skills and a persistent sexual interest in children. Those attempts at treatment that had been made were largely unsuccessful, due both to a failure of the system to appreciate Charlie's responsibility needs and his stubborn and antisocial refusal to accept that society had strong expectations regarding him and his behaviour. Charlie would be going to the community essentially cold, unless Palmer could find some help.

Upon calling his counterpart in the community (the first author of this paper), Palmer was rightly informed that the Correctional Service of Canada would not be able to provide Charlie with support or service. Charlie was at the end of his sentence and, upon WED, would be a free citizen responsible for himself. A suggestion was made to investigate options in the faith community, which led Palmer to contact Rev. Nigh. As the story goes, Palmer contacted Rev. Nigh because Charlie remembered that he had known Nigh through his former involvement in a restorative justice initiative called M2W2 (Man to Man, Woman to Woman<sup>4</sup>). For his part, Nigh had difficulty remembering much about Charlie, other than that he did not like him very much. Nonetheless, Nigh and several of his congregants (aptly euphemised as 'Charlie's Angels') decided to accept Charlie into their midst and to provide him with guidance and support.

When Charlie arrived in Hamilton, the city went wild. His name, visage, and other personal details were continuously provided in the media and the police arranged for around-the-clock surveillance. The next morning, every schoolchild in the city was greeted by a flyer with Charlie's picture and a warning of the risk he posed. Picketing began outside of the Welcome Inn. Stones were thrown and threats of death were made against Charlie, Rev. Nigh, and other members of the church. In a bold move, Rev. Nigh invited the most vocal of these demonstrators into the church to sit and talk about the situation. That dialogue resulted in a tenuous truce, wherein the picketers agreed to scale back their actions and emotions in return for assurances that Charlie's Angels would keep Charlie in check. Over the ensuing weeks, the community clamour subsided and Charlie and his supporters went about the task of establishing him in the community.

Approximately four months after Charlie's release, another infamous and high risk sexual offender was about to be released from prison. Wray Budreo had also spent the bulk of his adult life incarcerated for sexual interactions with children. Dan Haley — then prison chaplaincy volunteer — not so fondly tells the story of spiriting Wray out of Kingston Penitentiary in the trunk of his car. When Dan and Wray arrived in Peterborough, a small community about two hours northeast of Toronto, Ontario, Canada, they were met by the same kind of community anger that had resulted from Charlie's release earlier that year. Again, death threats were made and, ultimately, those working with Wray decided that he needed to go to a larger centre where there would be greater access to support and services.

Having watched Rev. Nigh's intervention with Charlie with great interest, the Reverend Hugh Kirkegaard, a community corrections chaplain, decided to try the same approach with Wray. Together with members of an Anglican congregation and a member of the Sexual Assault Squad of the Toronto Police Service, Rev. Kirkegaard encircled Wray and started the difficult process of establishing him in the community. For her part, Detective Wendy Leaver has

remarked that her involvement was initially spurred by a fear that her faith-based compatriots were naïve to the risk posed by Wray — essentially, she saw them as Christian do-gooders who had little idea what they were getting themselves into. However, in spite of these beliefs, Det. Leaver has remained involved with this project and is now an ardent supporter and public speaker on the topic.

Based on the apparent successes of the two fledgling circles with Charlie and Wray, the Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario (MCCO) was approached and asked to provide stewardship of what was named the Community Reintegration Project<sup>5</sup>, colloquially known as 'Circles of Support'. A short while later, the moniker was changed to include 'and Accountability' in recognition that support without accountability would not be sufficient to accomplish the group's goal of 'no more victims'. A group of supporters, including Rev. Kirkegaard and the Commissioner of the Correctional Service of Canada, subsequently traveled to Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Canada to seek funding from the Solicitor General. In spite of the fact that the government had no legal responsibility to offenders who were no longer under

4. Yantzi, M. (1998) *Sexual offending and restoration*. Waterloo, ON: Herald Press.

5. MCCO (1996) *The Green Manual*. Toronto, ON: Author.

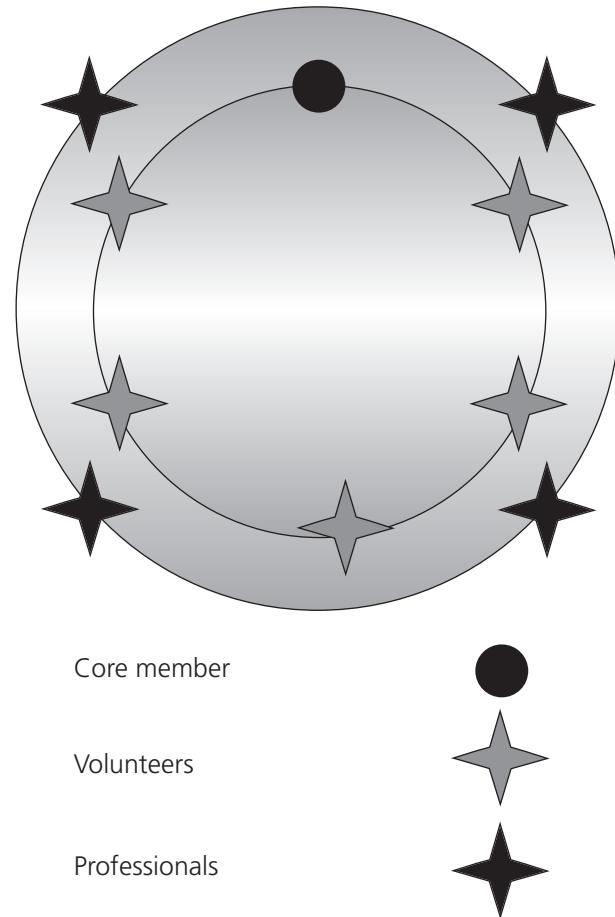
their umbrella (by way of serving a sentence), the Solicitor General was convinced of the moral responsibility inherent in providing funding to MCCO as it worked to manage the risk posed by high risk sexual offenders released to the community with 'no strings attached'. This small amount of funding provided the seed money for what has since become Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA), an integral part of the Canadian community response to sexual violence.

CoSA projects were ultimately supported in a number of communities across Canada, in recognition of the strong results obtained in the original pilot project in Toronto<sup>6</sup>. There are now well-established projects in most major Canadian centres. And, following a visit to the UK in 2000 by a group of Canadian CoSA pioneers, a Circles-type project was initiated principally in Hampshire and the Thames Valley. It is also of merit to note that CoSA projects have begun to spring up in several American cities, including Denver, Fresno, and variously in the state of Vermont.

### Circle Mechanics

Circles of Support and Accountability is a community response to sexual violence prevention. At its core, it is informed by restorative justice principles, but it would be unfair to suggest that the progenitors of this approach were experts in offender reintegration or correctional risk management. Rather, the strength of the CoSA model lies in its volunteers. That is, virtually everyone involved in circles in Canada is a volunteer — often, a member of a church group. Although some operational support is provided by paid staff, the true work of a CoSA is accomplished by the volunteers. In Figure 1, the most common model of CoSA is depicted. The inner of two concentric circles consists of the ex-offender (known as a 'Core Member') and four to six community volunteers. These volunteers are provided with training in working with sexual offenders; although, not to the extent that they would be seen as 'experts' or counsellors. The outer of the two circles consists of professionals (psychologists, social workers, police, correctional staff, etc.) who have expert knowledge in sexual offender risk management and who can provide support to the members of the inner circle.

Offenders who participate in CoSAs are typically identified approximately six months prior to release and asked if they would like to be involved. This allows the future Core Member to become familiar with his volunteers and to begin developing trust that they will have his best interests in mind when he is released. As one might expect, there is often discrepancy between what he sees as his best interests and what the community believes should occur. A principle function of CoSA volunteers is to promote the sort of balanced, self-determined lifestyle that we identified earlier in this



paper as being so crucial to living reoffense-free in the community.

**Figure 1: Graphic Representation of a COSA**

Upon release, the Core Member meets frequently with his circle as the task of community integration

6. See Wilson, R.J., Picheca, J.E., & Prinzo, M. (2005) *Circles of Support & Accountability: An evaluation of the pilot project in South-Central Ontario*. [Research Report R-168] Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada; Wilson, R.J., McWhinnie, A.J., Picheca, J.E., Prinzo, M., & Cortoni, F. (2007) 'Circles of Support & Accountability: Engaging community volunteers in the management of high-risk sexual offenders', *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 46, pp. 1-15; Wilson, R.J., Picheca, J.E., & Prinzo, M. (2007a) 'Evaluating the effectiveness of professionally-facilitated volunteerism in the community-based management of high-risk sexual offenders: Part one – Effects on participants and stakeholders', *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 46, pp. 289-302; Wilson, R.J., Picheca, J.E., & Prinzo, M. (2007b) 'Evaluating the effectiveness of professionally-facilitated volunteerism in the community-based management of high-risk sexual offenders: Part two – Recidivism rates', *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 46, pp. 327-337; Wilson, R.J., Whealy, G., & Leaver, W. (2007) *Collaborative care: Pairing police supervision and community volunteers to manage risk*. Poster presented at the 26th Annual Conference of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, San Diego, CA; see also Wilson, R.J., Cortoni, F., & Vermani, M. (2007) *Circles of Support & Accountability: A national replication of outcome findings*. [Research Report R-185] Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

moves forward. This often involves liaison with local law enforcement and seeking aftercare treatment from outpatient services. As the Core Member becomes more settled in the community, daily meetings decrease to weekly. Although it was originally expected that a CoSA would run for about two years, whereupon the Core Member would be functional enough to get on with his own life, we have learned that most Core Members are such incredibly damaged and socially ostracised people that the circle becomes a virtual replacement for the family and friendly supports that they effectively lost as a consequence of their offending behaviour.

It is important to note that the first CoSAs were a *community response* to an unpalatable situation. This is a critically important distinction. Canadian CoSA participants refer to themselves as a 'community-based' initiative. They are likely among the very few — and certainly they were the originators of the CoSA model as a 'community-based' initiative — who can lay claim to that distinction. It was a community response simply because there was no one else — no individual, not an NGO in sight, nor any government agency outside of law enforcement — prepared to step up to the plate and offer a remedy to the dangerous situation posed by Charlie's release. Even to this very day, there are Christian churches that will not permit sexual offenders to grace their hallowed halls.

Yet, in many ways, this is exactly as things ought to be. For instance, in her now famous book entitled *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs<sup>7</sup> wrote:

*The first thing to understand is that the public peace — the sidewalk and street peace — is not kept primarily by the police, necessary as police are. It is kept primarily by an intricate, almost unconscious, network of voluntary controls and standards among the people themselves and enforced by the people themselves. No amount of police can enforce Civilization where the normal causal enforcement of it has broken down.*

Sadly, we need only think of Rwanda (and now Kenya) as examples of what Ms. Jacobs was writing about. It is ordinary citizens together who ultimately guarantee the public peace, or tear a society apart. It was the choice that the congregants of the Welcome Inn Church made when they took Charlie in. And it is a choice, in Canada at least, that ordinary, unaffiliated citizens have been making in CoSAs across Canada and elsewhere ever since.

The type of involvement citizen volunteers offer in CoSA is referred to by others as 'informal social control,' or 'the informal capacities of residents to regulate neighbourhood order and the connections between neighbourhoods to public institutions, especially the police'<sup>8</sup>. The words, 'especially the police,' are key. It should never be the case that informal social control networks such as CoSA act in isolation from formal controls found within systems of criminal justice. Rather, as the CoSA model stresses, it is important to work with police to 'co-produce'<sup>9</sup> a measure of safety and social cohesion within the community. It is how that relationship is constructed that spells the difference between a community-based, informal

network of control supported by local professionals, and a professionally-based, formal network of control supported by citizen volunteers. The latter construction is a traditional model. In contrast to the diagram in Figure 1, such traditional models put the professions in the centre circle surrounded by volunteers. There is certainly nothing new in seeing formal social institutions (e.g., health care, hospitals, theatre networks, senior care homes, mental health) as relying on aid provided by a volunteer corps. However, out of necessity, the Canadian CoSA innovation turned that tradition on its head. The Canadian model represents an informal network of community-based volunteers at the centre of the diagram, aided and supported by a corps of locally derived professionals. There are those who would say that this is a quibbling distinction. But it is not, and here is why. Nils Christie (summarized below by David Cayley<sup>10</sup>) probably put it most succinctly in his now famous 1977 paper, 'Conflicts as Property', when he talks of the shadow cast by formal justice:

7. Jacobs, J. (1961). *The death and life of great American cities*. New York: Vintage Books, cited in Renauer, B.C. (2007) 'Reducing Fear of Crime: Citizen, Police, or Government Responsibility?', *Police Quarterly*, Vol. 10, pp. 41-62.
8. Renauer, B.C. (2007) 'Reducing Fear of Crime: Citizen, Police, or Government Responsibility?', *Police Quarterly*, Vol. 10, pp. 41-62; see also Bursik, R., & Grasmick, H. G. (1993) *Neighborhoods and crime: The dimensions of effective crime control*. New York: Lexington Books.
9. Renauer, *ibid.*
10. Cayley, D. (1998) *The expanding prison: The crisis in crime and punishment and the search for alternatives*, Toronto, ON: Anansi.

*Community, [Christie] says, is made from conflict as much as from cooperation; the capacity to resolve conflict is what gives social relations their sinew. Professionalizing justice 'steals the conflicts,' robbing the community of its ability to face trouble and restore peace. Communities lose their confidence, their capacity, and, finally, their inclination to preserve their own social order. They become instead consumers of police and court 'services,' with the consequence that they largely cease to be communities.<sup>11</sup>*

The ability to function as a community is not a quibbling thing. Yet, for that to happen, for there to be a 'republican practice of crime control'<sup>12</sup> (Braithwaite and Petit, 1990), there must be, as Cayley suggests, a *res publica* — a public thing. And this is what is at the centre of the Canadian model; indeed, at the heart of CoSA— a *res publica*—that public thing we know as community.

The job of CoSA should not be sidelined as a really 'neat' re-entry model for high risk offenders. Its function is more than that. CoSA is an act of community *building*. To miss that is to have missed what the 'buzz' is all about in CoSA. Research we will present later suggests that this model reduces sexual recidivism remarkably, but many are compelled to ask why that is. In our estimation, it is because the power of intentionally-formed community, working in collaboration with the formal justice system, has been brought to bear on a vexing social problem. For the academics, it is harnessing the power of social learning theory. It is the application of prescriptions found in the Risk/Need/Responsivity model espoused by Andrews and Bonta<sup>13</sup> — surrounding an ex-offender with positive, pro-social influences. It is Hanson and Harris and associates asking their research question in the lead-up to the Stable 2000 and Stable 2007: 'How many people are around this person who are not paid to be around him'<sup>14</sup>. It is as simple, and as immediately complex, as that.

When an individual transgresses sexually in our community — offends us in the most intimate of ways

short of murder — we want to know that if they come back, they will be held accountable for their actions and that they are ready to behave responsibly among us. To ensure that this happens, as Jane Jacobs reminds us, we as a community must be prepared to invoke the peace. In the words of British Columbia's Assistant Deputy Attorney General addressing the BC Chapter of the Canadian Criminal Justice Association:

*... from my perspective we need to engage the community much more, I think if we engage the community much more you are going to see people willing to participate. If they are willing to participate you are going to see an environment created whereby offenders are actually going to be held accountable. So it's kind of a hand-in-glove kind of connection ... In my view, if we can make communities aware of what we do, we can actually achieve something called accountability.<sup>15</sup>*

This is the case for community-based initiatives such as CoSA. What these volunteers are doing, quite simply, is increasing an ex-offender's social capital, through ties to a social network and to friends.<sup>16</sup> Sociologists have long recognised the importance of social ties with respect to the health of individuals and, ultimately, the health of the community. The word 'capital' derives from the field of economics and may be thought of in terms of an individual's ability to gain access to a variety of resources. The greater one's social capital, the greater the likelihood one can make achievements in society.<sup>17</sup> In the case of ex-offenders, increases in social capital relate to access to affordable housing, mental health and addictions treatment, employment, and increased opportunities to simply normal their lives following incarceration. The Canadian Policy Research Institute summarises social capital in this way:

*It is about getting the social dimension right. This means creating new opportunities, or at*

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11. Ibid, p. 168.
12. Braithwaite, J. & Petit, P. (1990) *Not Just Desserts: A Republican theory of Criminal Justice*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
13. Andrews, D.A. & Bonta, J. (2007) *The psychology of criminal conduct*, (4th Edition), Cincinnati, OH: Anderson.
14. see Hanson, R.K., Harris, A.J.R., Scott, T.-L., & Helmus, L. (2007) *Assessing the risk of sexual offenders on community supervision: The Dynamic Supervision Project*, [User Report 2007-05] Ottawa, ON: Public Safety Canada.
15. Gillen, R.W. (February 22, 2007) Talk given to the BC Chapter, Canadian Criminal Justice Association, University of Victoria.
16. Coleman, J. (1988) 'Social capital in the creation of human capital', *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 94, pp. S95-S120 and Putnam, R. (1993) *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
17. Sampson, R.J., Raudenbush, S.W., & Earls, F. (1997) 'Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy', *Science*, Vol. 277, pp. 918-924; Rose, D.R., & Clear, T.R. (1998). Incarceration, social capital, and crime: Implications for social disorganization theory. *Criminology*, 36, 441-480; Putnam, R. (1993), op. cit.; White, J., Spence, N. & Martin, P. (2005) 'Impacts of social capital on education attainment in Aboriginal communities: Lessons from Australia, Canada, and New Zealand', *Social Capital in Action: Thematic Policy Studies*. Canada: Policy Research Initiative; and Burchfield, K.B. & Mingus, W. (2008) 'Not in my neighbourhood: Assessing registered sexual offenders' experiences with local social capital and social control', *Criminal Justice and Behaviour*, Vol. 35, 356-375.

*least not disrupting existing opportunities, for connecting people with others in ways that are beneficial for the individuals and for the community. This requires, at a minimum, a focus on the impacts of policies on networks of social relationships, and being aware of the importance of preserving or protecting social ties, without draining their resources.*<sup>18</sup>

Increasingly, however, the release of high risk sexual offenders — indeed any sexual offender — is met with a response that is punitive. Measures such as sexual offender registries, residency restrictions, 1,000 foot laws, and others now look more and more like extra-judicial measures aimed at heaping continually more punishment on sexual offenders than the drafters of the original judicial measures ever contemplated.<sup>19</sup> Sexual offenders have fallen out of community — for whatever reasons — most often long before their offence cycles began. Even though we know that close, supporting relationships are found to decrease the risk of relapse in child molesters and rapists,<sup>20</sup> we continue to enact legislation that serves only to separate sexual offenders from those types of supporting relationships.<sup>21</sup> Even though we are aware of the research indicating violent sexual reoffence is related to the extent and quality of positive prosocial support, particularly by male associates,<sup>22</sup> and that sexual offenders with domestic stability (i.e., stable housing and social support) are less likely to commit new sex offenses compared to those offenders who lack such stability,<sup>23</sup> we continue to enact laws that effectively curtail those types of supports.

Legislation in the United States, Great Britain, Australia, and Canada increasingly deprives sexual offenders of the very wherewithal that would enable them to lead stable, socially responsible, supportive and — above all — accountable lives. Not to put too fine a point on it, this is a reaction to a fear that serves not to protect society, but to endanger it. As an example,

'Jane Doe,' a victim of a vicious rape in Toronto at the hands of the infamous 'Balcony Rapist,' successfully sued the Metro Toronto Police Department for not notifying her and her neighbours that a serial rapist was running amok in her neighbourhood. When the man convicted of her rape was released some 20 years later in Vancouver, British Columbia, the entire country was swept into a firestorm of exceptionally emotional publicity. Residents in the neighbourhood into which this man moved demanded he be removed. 'How could 'they' release a man like this to a neighbourhood like this? There are children here!' went the refrain, even though this man had never harmed a child.

After several weeks of sustained community unrest, a reporter caught up to Jane Doe, who said that as a victim she would feel safer if she knew her assailant was in a supportive environment with stable housing and some access to treatment

professionals. Circles of Support and Accountability, often working in collaboration with other agencies such as the Salvation Army, the John Howard Society, Catholic and Anglican Archdioceses, and the Quaker Religious Society of Friends, offers the stability and support Jane Doe and other victims of sex crimes often want for their perpetrators. They, like us, simply want one thing: *No More Victims*. For Canadians, the proof of the simple logic of providing support and inviting released men in to community is seen in the empirical evidence gathered for CoSA in Canada.<sup>24</sup>

### **Circles of Support and Accountability in the United Kingdom**

Are the original Canadian Circles of Support and Accountability and their British offspring so greatly different? There are some significant differences, but it is their similarities, the principles of inclusion and restoration through positive human relationships, which allow us to celebrate a creative criminal justice initiative.

18. White, Spence, & Martin, see n.17, p. 28.
19. see Levenson, J. S., D'Amora, D. A., & Hern, A. (2007) 'Megan's Law and its impact on community re-entry for sex offenders', *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, Vol. 25, pp. 587-602.
20. Grubin, D. (1997) 'Inferring predictors of risk: sexual offenders', *International Review of Psychiatry*, Vol. 9, pp. 225-231.
21. Bazemore, G. (2007) 'The expansion of punishment and the restriction of justice: loss of limits in the implementation of retributive policy', *Goliath Social Research*. Accessed January 27, 2008 at [http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/browse\\_R\\_S084](http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/browse_R_S084); and Wilson, McWhinnie, Picheca, Prinzo, & Cortoni, see n.6.
22. Gutiérrez-Lobos, K., Eher, R., Grünhut, C., Bankier, B., Schmidl-Mohl, B., Frühwald, S., & Semler, B. (2001) 'Violent sexual offenders lack male social support', *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, Vol. 45, pp. 70-82.
23. Lane Council of Governments (2003) *Managing sexual offenders in the community: A national overview*, Eugene, OR: Author.
24. See n.6.

Their differences are more to do with cultural and legal context, rather than any deep philosophical divide.

The Religious Society of Friends (the Quakers), aware of the significant effect this restorative approach was having in Canada, brought the concept to the notice of the Home Office. The Home Office, impressed by the impact CoSAs appeared to be having in reducing re-offending amongst the high risk population of sexual offenders, commissioned three pilot projects, Hampshire and Thames Valley (managed by Quaker Peace and Social Witness) and the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, which had a national remit. These projects became operational in April 2002 and their success has resulted in the development of a further seven projects across the United Kingdom and a government funded umbrella organisation, called Circles UK.

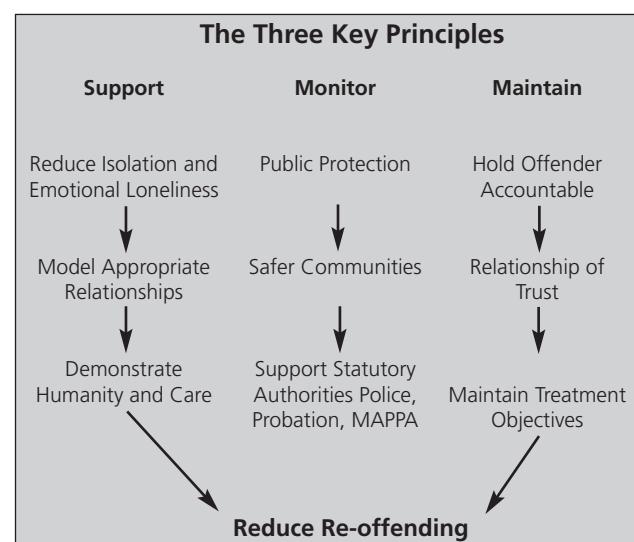
It was important when developing CoSAs within a British context to be mindful of both the legal and cultural differences between Britain and Canada. In Canada, those offenders statistically assessed as high-risk tend to serve the whole of their sentence and be released without parole or supervision (WED offenders). In Britain, there has been consistent legislation, over the past 10 years, designed to enhance the effective management of high risk offenders being released from custody. Canadian CoSAs are a community response to a community fear. British Circles were piloted by government, crossing the boundaries of both the criminal justice and civil renewal agendas. The principal objective was to adapt the Canadian model to support the statutory agencies in the successful management of high risk sexual offenders living in the community. It is, therefore, important to recognise that the development of the British model was systemic, as opposed to the organic growth of Canadian CoSAs.

The systemic approach taken in Britain recognised the importance of two important key factors in offender management. Firstly, the impact of sexual offender treatment programmes and secondly the role of the Multi Agency Public Protection Panel (MAPPA). MAPPA has a strategic responsibility for the oversight of agencies charged with the management of this group of offenders living in the community. MAPPA brings these agencies together on a regular basis to review, discuss, and formulate action plans. The design of the British Circles model was founded on three key principles,<sup>25</sup> which are based on those significant issues relating to the recidivism of sexually aggressive behaviour. The reduction of isolation and emotional loneliness was an imperative, while perceptions of intimacy and the significance of attachment deficits demonstrated the need for appropriate modelling — a central feature of

the volunteer's role. Circles are only effective if a relationship of honesty and trust is developed within all the constituent parts. As with treatment, therapeutic alliances are important. By definition, the Circle has a therapeutic dynamic, and humanity and care become the context in which the Core Member is held accountable for his past abusive behaviour.

Graduates of treatment programmes, who have truly internalised values of safety and responsibility, recognise the need for a model of openness and honesty between the Circle and or police and probation. This is also the case with CoSAs in Canada. Representatives of these two agencies are invited, when appropriate, to attend the Circle so that the Core Member is overtly aware of the communication that takes place between his Circle and these agencies.<sup>26</sup> This model of communication does not seem to inhibit the relationship between the Core Member and his volunteers; particularly, if volunteers are clear in enunciating the need to keep all concerned stakeholders in the loop. Core Members have consistently shared problematic behaviours with their Circle volunteers, knowing that the information may be shared through the MAPPA process. Indeed, the fact that they are prepared to disclose information to the volunteers is testimony to the viability of positive community involvement relating to public protection. As such, monitoring becomes a positive and community based activity.

The third key principle relates specifically to treatment and prevention of reoffending. Many high risk sexual offenders are, by definition, socially isolated and without a support network other than that provided by key professionals — persons paid to be in their lives. A new life plan detailing reoffence prevention strategies is a dynamic document that needs to be shared with



25. Saunders, R. & Wilson, C. (2003) *Circles of Support and Accountability in the Thames Valley, Interim Report* (available from the author).

26. In Canada, identified sexual offenders in the community who demonstrate a high risk to reoffend may be brought before the Court and placed on what is known as a Peace Bond (essentially, a recognizance), which can include conditions to meet with police, stay away from certain places, and avoid certain persons, among other possible proscriptions.

significant others. The purpose of a Circle, in its purest form, is to provide sexual offenders with a support network, so that their efforts to prevent re-offence become meaningful tools in their attempt to sustain the sort of balanced, self-determined lifestyle we have spoken of earlier in this paper. Through that all-important relationship of trust and honesty, the Circle can help to hold the Core Member accountable, maintaining treatment objectives and community expectations.

Volunteers are the essential ingredient to the success of any Circle project, Canadian, British, or otherwise. It is essential that volunteers are supported, monitored, and held accountable for the work they are undertaking. This supervision needs to be undertaken by a coordinator who not only understands the issues related to risk management, but who also understands the needs of the volunteers. The challenge is to find a balance whereby the volunteers feel supported, but are not wholly dependent on that support to work effectively. It is important to understand that when undertaking something new, that this something new is approached from a point of naivety. Both advice and guidance are needed until experience consolidates sound judgement. The Circles coordinator provides this guidance and advice both formally and informally. The personal well-being of volunteers is paramount and, as such, they are invited to attend quarterly reviews in which they can explore their experience of Circle work. The coordinator will also ensure that the Circle as a whole is regularly reviewed.

Like the original Canadian model, the experience of volunteers working in Circles is built upon a foundation of training. The aim is to ensure that each Circle has a balance of gender, age, experience and skills, reflecting a true representation of community. After an initial interview, designed to elicit motivation, attitudes and beliefs, the prospective volunteers are invited to an introductory training programme lasting 16 hours. They are screened and assessed for suitability. After training, it is our hope and expectation that volunteers are familiar enough with the model and expectations that they are able to be functional, effective volunteers. We also need to know that they are able to recognise when the Core Member is falling into

old patterns of behaviour. This ensures a healthy robustness to the Circle and ensures that the needs of the Core Member can be addressed and managed by the volunteers. A series of further training events are made available to the volunteers throughout the year, which include housing and employment issues, substance misuse, questioning styles, and listening skills.

The response of the public to Circles has been magnificent. Since the first pilot projects went operational in 2002 there has been the creation of 70 Circles across the UK. The original pilot site in Hampshire and Thames Valley has alone created 40 Circles and, over six years, have had no Core Member reconvicted of a sexual offence. The evaluation of Hampshire and Thames Valley projects<sup>27</sup> shows that Circles is well positioned to identify and contain potential risk, and to provide a valuable source of information and support to partnership agencies. Detective Chief Inspector Neale of the Thames Valley Police commented, 'A Circle provides the local community input which society clamours for, but without the dangers of lynch mobs. Public protection would be more difficult, more challenging, and more dangerous without the Circles service'.<sup>28</sup>

The number of Circles created across the United Kingdom has led the Home Office's research department to undertake a major retrospective Circles evaluation. Until the publication of that research, the majority of statistical evidence as to the effectiveness of Circles still relies on Canadian evaluative data.<sup>29</sup> However, Circles UK is ensuring that there is consistency in the data collected from all existing, new and developing Circles projects, helping to build a body of evidence as to the effectiveness of Circles in reducing reoffending. During the Hampshire and Thames Valley Circles project's first three and a half years of operational activity, it was recorded that from a total of 16 Circles, nine Core Members displayed high risk behaviours subsequently reported to the police by their Circle volunteers. Of that nine, four of the Core Members were recalled to prison on licence, while the remaining five were managed through MAPPA, in the community by police, probation, and the Circle. For those recalled to prison, their volunteers continued to have contact with them and, when released, these men returned to their Circles. These Core Members learned that being held to account

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27. Bates, A., Saunders, R., & Wilson, C. (2007) 'Doing something about it: A follow-up study of sexual offenders participating in Thames Valley Circles of Support and Accountability', *British Journal of Community Justice*, Vol. 5.

28. Neale, S. (2005) 'A police perspective', In Quaker Peace and Social Witness (2005) *Circles of Support and Accountability in the Thames Valley: The first three years April 2002 to March 2005*, London, UK: Author.

29. See n. 6.

does not equate to being abandoned — a profound experience for men who have known little else other than anger and isolation. For its part, society is witness to a powerful model of change.

In many respects, having a Core Member recalled for re-engaging in behaviour of an unacceptable nature should also be viewed as a Circle success. Specifically, no further victims were created and public protection was enhanced. This issue of enhanced public protection was acknowledged in the Hampshire and Thames Valley Circles' evaluation: 'The Circle process provides unique insights into the details of Core Members' behaviours and lifestyles well beyond statutory supervision by agencies such as the police, probation and treatment services'.<sup>30</sup>

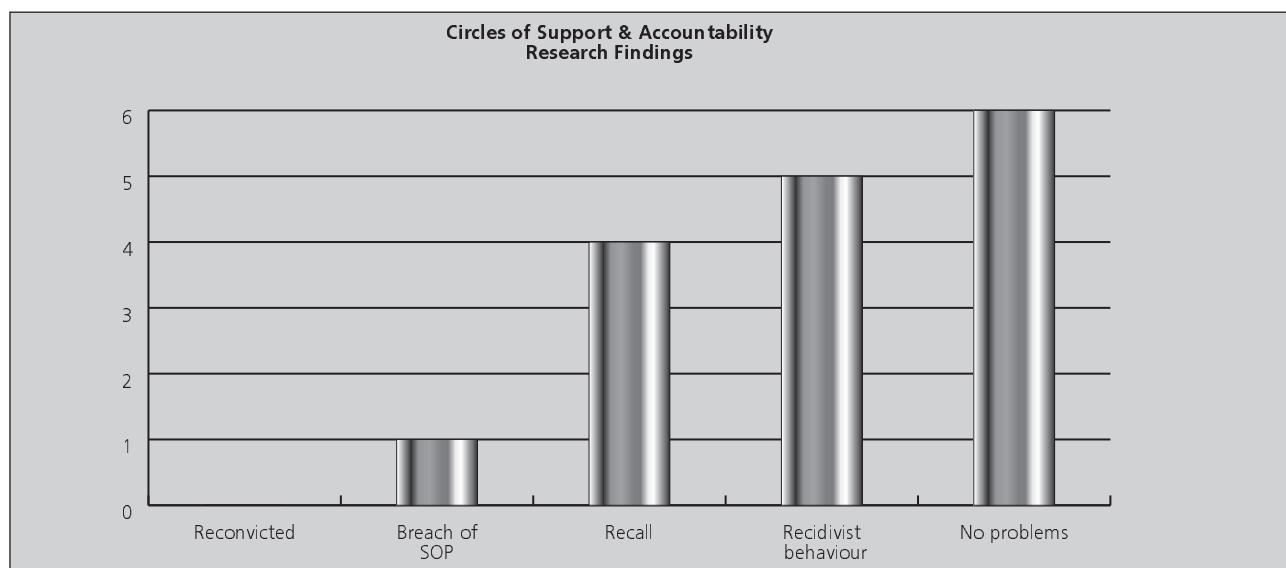
The success experienced by the pilot sites has resulted in continued government funding to sustain the expertise and knowledge accrued over the past six years. The last three years have also seen a plethora of other organisations and probation areas expressing genuine desire to implement Circles of Support and Accountability as a means of strengthening public protection. Others see Circles as representing a policy of inclusion, civil renewal, and restorative justice. A number of these jurisdictions now have operational Circles projects, including Yorkshire, Lancashire, Greater Manchester and Liverpool, North Wales, the Midlands, over and above the originals in Hampshire and Thames Valley. In addition, the six probation areas of the east of England (Suffolk, Norfolk, Essex, Hertfordshire, Cambridge, and Bedfordshire) have combined to provide a regional project. Last, the Scottish government has requested a feasibility study to look at Circles in the Scottish context. Partnerships between faith groups, voluntary agencies, and public protection agencies provide a model of excellence, while the government funded organisation Circles UK provides

training, evaluation, and support for all these new and developing projects.

The vital component evident in the Canadian experience was the strength that was offered through their independence from statutory agencies. However, success for Circles can only be achieved if supported by those agencies with a confidence and respect. Partnership is important and statutory agencies need to perceive themselves as stakeholders in their Circle of Support and Accountability project. But, it is the community members who must perceive themselves as the primary stakeholders of a Circles project. As stated in the Canadian evaluation, when referencing the long-term future for their Circles, 'We are very much inclined to believe that if the COSA model is to achieve broad acceptance and implementation, the community itself must accept ultimate responsibility for ensuring its long term success'.<sup>31</sup> This is just as true for Britain as it is for Canada — not so very different then.

## Research Findings

Rehabilitative practice in criminal justice has come to be dominated by the concepts of 'best practice' and 'evidence-based practice'. Simply put, it is not enough to engage in a practice that intuitively would seem to reduce risk, we must know for sure. As such, researchers continue to explore the value added by the various measures initiated or, in some cases, legislated to manage the risk posed by sexual offenders in the community. CoSA is no different. Although, at its heart, CoSA is a restorative justice initiative driven (or, in the UK, implemented) largely by volunteers, there is also much about CoSA that is entirely consistent with the RNR<sup>32</sup> and GLM<sup>33</sup> models, in addition to elements of good psychotherapy.



30. Bates, Saunders, & Wilson, *op. cit.*

31. Wilson, Picheca, & Prinzo (2005), *op. cit.*

32. Andrews & Bonta, *op. cit.*

33. Ward & Stewart, *op. cit.*

To date, the research regarding the efficacy of CoSA has been two-pronged: 1. There has been a need to establish comparative rates of reoffending between those in CoSAs with matched controls who have not had the benefit of such interventions. 2. We have sought to understand the qualitative elements of the initiative.

In 2005, the first of two outcome studies providing reoffence data was published by the Canadian Correctional Service<sup>34</sup>. In this study, we compared 60 men who had been in CoSAs in the South-Central Ontario Region to 60 matched controls. The matching protocol was intended to ensure that the two groups would be different only in that one group had been involved in a CoSA and the other had not. In looking at the comparative rates of reoffending, there were striking differences. In terms of sexual reoffending, the men who had been (or still were) in CoSAs reoffended at a rate 70 per cent less, while rates of violent reoffending (57 per cent less) and general offending (35 per cent less) were also strongly encouraging. Mean time of follow-up was approximately four and a half years. Interestingly, there also appeared to be a harm reduction<sup>35</sup> effect at play, in that those CoSA participants who reoffended appeared to do so in a qualitatively less violent and invasive manner than they did in the offences for which they had previously been incarcerated (i.e., last time around). This was clearly not the case in the matched control sample, for whom reoffending was every bit as violent and harmful as previous.

On the strength of the first set of encouraging data, we were interested to know whether that sort of success was localised, or whether there was cause to believe that if the model was generalizable to other communities with the same effect of increased public safety. In the years since the first Circles were offered in Ontario, the model has proliferated across Canada — to the extent that there are now well-established CoSA projects in most major Canadian cities. The next research project was designed to provide outcome data similar to the first study; however, looking at CoSA participation on the national level.

In the second study,<sup>36</sup> the community integration of 46 men in CoSAs across the country was matched to 46 matched comparison subjects, using essentially the same methodology as the earlier study. In completing this study, the aim to see whether provision of CoSAs in other

centres in Canada was having the same beneficial effect. The results were equally encouraging: rates of sexual reoffending in the CoSA group were dramatically lower than in the matched comparison sample (i.e., two per cent vs. 13 per cent, respectively). Rates of violent and general recidivism were also greatly diminished in the CoSA group (i.e., nine per cent vs. 32 per cent; 11 per cent vs. 38 per cent, respectively). Mean time of follow-up was just short of three years. These findings were ultimately interpreted as being indicative that the success of men involved in CoSA is not site specific.

The second prong in the Canadian CoSA research agenda has focused on the human element; that is, how has being involved in a CoSA changed the lives of participants? A component of the first study<sup>37</sup> included more qualitatively oriented outcomes. It is clear that the Canadian CoSA initiative has had a profound effect on all stakeholders: offenders, community volunteers, affiliated professionals, and the community-at-large. Considerable credibility has also been achieved with those law enforcement agencies in jurisdictions where CoSAs have been established. The teamwork approach has clearly contributed to both public information and public

safety, as demonstrated by the perspectives of community members not affiliated with the project, and the recidivism data reported above.

Regarding the teamwork element, the UK model developed with the involvement of statutory agencies being front and centre. This has been something more of an evolution in the Canadian model. Indeed, the Canadian approach developed out of a perceived failure on the part of those so-called statutory agencies to provide the sort of public safety the community demanded. The subsequent choice to partner with police, probation, and other similarly-oriented agencies came as a necessary part of the risk management learning curve for Rev. Nigh and those who followed. Canadian CoSAs now enjoy a necessary partnership with local law enforcement; particularly, given that many of the Core Members are on the sort of Peace Bonds (i.e., recognizance orders) noted earlier. In a recent exploratory study undertaken jointly by the Sexual Assault Squad of the Toronto Police Service and the first author of this paper,<sup>38</sup> we explored reoffending and breaches experienced by men in each of four conditions:

34. See Wilson, Picheca, & Prinzo (2005) op. cit.; Wilson, McWhinnie, Picheca, Prinzo, & Cortoni, op. cit.; Wilson, Picheca, & Prinzo (2007a) op. cit.; Wilson, Picheca, & Prinzo, (2007b) op. cit.

35. See Marlatt, G.A. (1998) *Harm reduction: Pragmatic strategies for managing high-risk behaviors*, New York, NY: Guilford.

36. See Wilson, Cortoni, & Vermani, op. cit.

37. Wilson, Picheca, & Prinzo (2005) op. cit. and Wilson, Picheca, & Prinzo (2007a), op. cit.

38. Wilson, Whealy, & Leaver, op. cit.

1. membership in a CoSA alone, 2. receipt of a Peace Bond alone, 3. being in both a CoSA and on a Peace Bond, and 4. being subject to neither a CoSA or a Peace Bond. Although the results were somewhat preliminary, it was observed that being in a CoSA was better than not being in a CoSA, and that the greatest incremental reductions in renewed community dysfunction were observed for those men who had the benefit of both a CoSA and a formal plan of accountability via a Peace Bond monitored by local law enforcement. These results were taken as proof positive of the need for partnership in truly achieving the 'no more victims' goal.

The British began their CoSA variant in 2002. As noted above, the UK model differs from the Canadian one, in that the Circles are formed within a greater framework of government supervision, and Core Members are not necessarily post-sentence completion. However, the models are similar in that Core Member involvement in CoSA is largely monitored and facilitated by community volunteers. The findings noted in both Canadian studies were echoed in an interim review of the CoSA project in the Hampshire and Thames Valley pilot project,<sup>39</sup> in that significant reductions in reoffending were also observed. As noted above, a large scale, retrospective evaluation of Circles UK has been started by the British Home Office, from which we hope to see equally encouraging results. *Ad hoc* observations, made by Circles participants on the ground, are that Core Members are leading significantly more productive lives — free of renewed sexual offending.

While the results between UK CoSA projects and the original Canadian model appear as if they might reflect a similar impact on criminal behaviour, we have noted that these two 'iterations' of the CoSA model differ significantly in their application. The original Canadian model has evolved from the first application of a primitive CoSA in Charlie's case outlined above. When Bill Palmer and Robin Wilson first grappled with the dilemmas facing Charlie and his community upon his release, no one wanted anything to do with Charlie. At the same time, the criminal justice system was finished with him — he had completed every day of his sentence behind bars and now had to be released. One thing was certain, every time this had happened in the past, Charlie victimised another child. Neither Palmer nor Wilson could accept this inevitability. In the end, neither could Harry Nigh or his congregants. What

happened next represented a fundamental shift in the approach Canada has taken in the management of high risk releases to the community. Community volunteers are regularly matched with high risk sexual offenders returning to a community following the expiration of their sentence through Circles of Support and Accountability. These volunteers offer one thing: support in return for a commitment from the returning prisoner to join them in working towards their common goal of no more victims. There is no 'programming' offered, there is no treatment provided — at least not as a fundamental part of the Circle (treatment can be arranged as an adjunct). Volunteers act as friends of the

Core Member. Indeed, their entire relationship is based on learning how to become friends and behave towards one another as friends would normally do — which many of our Core Members have either forgotten or, more commonly, never knew in the first place. This includes an insistence on the part of volunteers that their Core Member be accountable for his behaviour and conduct himself in a responsible, law-abiding manner.

In closing this paper, we wish to highlight the courageous and emotionally-challenging work done by the volunteers who have, really, been the success of the model. It is very important to recognise that few communities are interested in having sexual offenders in their midst—especially, not those deemed to be at high risk. Indeed, Charlie (and later Wray) was released with an actuarial risk rating of 100 per cent chance of reoffending in seven years post-release.<sup>40</sup> This is the highest rating offered by any of the actuarial tools typically used by risk prediction professionals, and the research by Wilson and colleagues cited here has demonstrated that the average Core Member is released to the community with an analogous rating. Charlie Taylor died on Christmas Day 2005 of complications of poorly managed diabetes, some 11 and one half years after his release. Wray Budreo died in the fall of 2007, nearly 13 years after his release. These two infamous paedophiles, each cantankerous and difficult to manage in his own way, beat the odds. In living safely in the community and keeping strong ties to their new CoSA families, these two men and those who came after them have taught us all something of the true nature of community.

## ... Core Members are leading significantly more productive lives — free of renewed sexual offending.

39. See Quaker Peace and Social Witness (2005) Circles of Support and Accountability in the Thames Valley: The first three years April 2002 to March 2005, London, UK: Author.

40. Qinsey, V.L., Harris, G.T., Rice, M.E., & Cormier, C.A. (2006) *Violent offenders: Appraising and managing risk*, (2nd Edn.) Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.