

Prison-based Circles of Support and Accountability: A new approach to sex offender reintegration

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What will we cover today?

- What Circles of Support and Accountability are and where they have come from
- How they work, including how effective they are in the UK.
- The future of Circles of Support and Accountability

What are Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA)?

- A Circle involves 4-6 volunteers who offer support to a high-risk sex offender
 - Screened, selected and trained
 - Meet with a Core Member (sex offender) in the community once a week to offer social support

- Volunteers are supervised by a professionally qualified Project Co-ordinator
 - Provides advice and support through supervision
 - Communicates and shares information with other risk management agencies through the MAPPA process

Where did CoSA come from?

First developed in Canada as a communities response to a potential moral panic created by the release of a high profile sex offender.

- Circles were shown to help to successfully reintegrate individuals back into society whilst at the same time helping to enhance community safety

Following its success in Canada, the UK Government funded three pilot CoSA projects in 2002: Thames Valley; Hampshire and; the Lucy Faithful Foundation.

Circles are used with high risk sex offenders to support and enable their reintegration back into society, whilst still holding them accountable for their behaviour.

Cesaroni, 2001

Need for Circles in the UK

- Society and media representation.....

The public's attitudes towards those who commit sexual offences, fuelled by the media hype surrounding such crimes, encourages a punitive response to the offenders responsible.

McAlinden, 2006

- Being released from prison can often involve social isolation, loneliness and alienation for offenders, especially if they have been rejected by their friends and family, which can often drive them towards networks of similar individuals and re-offending.

- Based on restorative justice principles Circles can help sex offenders, with little or no pro social support, to overcome these feelings and successfully reintegrate back into society.

The theory behind the Circles

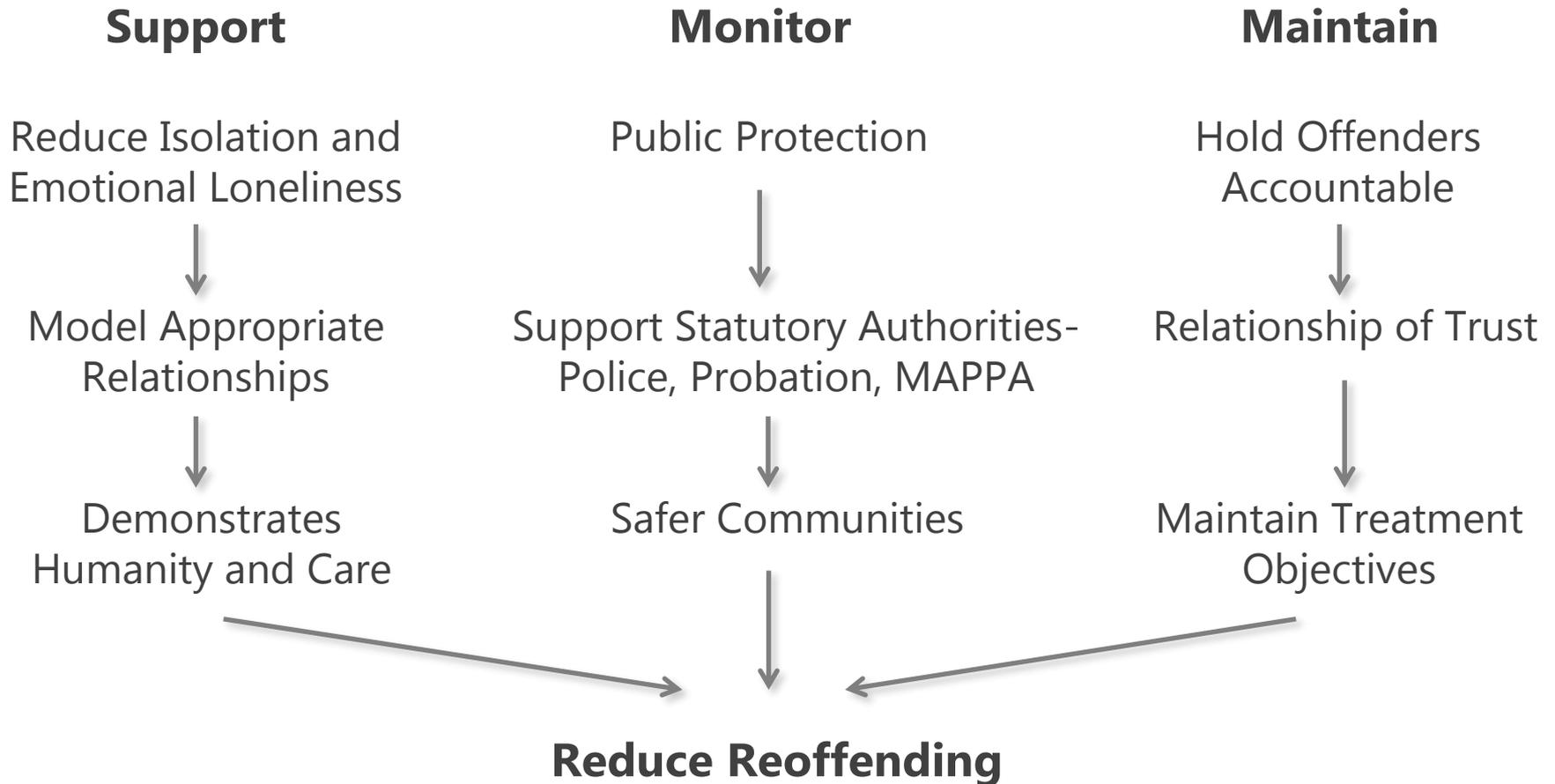
Good Lives Model – Circles can help sex offenders to construct a balanced, pro-social identity, as is emphasised in the GLM as essential in order to reduce re-offending.

Bates, Macrae, Williams & Webb, 2012; Ward & Gannon, 2006 .

Desistance Theory - the individualised and subjective process CoSA projects take mean each Circle is essentially a small, desistance –friendly community that rewards desistance with a qualified welcome and eventually safe inclusion.

Bates, Williams, Wilson & Wilson, 2014

How do Circles work?



How effective are CoSA in the UK?

A UK study observed 60 Circles over the first eight years in the UK

- One sexual reconviction – Circle still reported as making positive progress due to reduction in CM's risk of harm & severity of offending behaviour
- 70% resulted in an improvement in the offenders' emotional well-being - reducing their emotional loneliness and social isolation
- Almost 50% of Core Members had improved links with their families and increased their support networks
- 50% had increased their engagement in age-appropriate relationships

Significant as majority of offenders previous crimes involved child victims

Bates, McRae, Williams and Webb (2012)

How effective are CoSA in the UK?

Studied 71 out of the 100 Circles established in the South East of the UK in the first ten years since the project started.

- Core Members had a significantly lower number of sexual or violent re-offences than the comparison group of persons referred to, but not placed, in a Circle.
- Critics have stated there is not enough evidence to suggest whether or not CoSA significantly reduces sexual recidivism by the core member - existing research varying in quality and involving a lack of statistically significant results.
- Low base rate makes demonstrating this hard though.
- Many other benefits to Circles

Bates (2014)

The future of CoSA

Following the success of the community CoSA projects in the UK, for the first time ever, prison-based Circles will be established in the UK.

- Established under the Safer Living Foundation - a charitable organisation and a joint venture between HMP Whatton, Nottingham Trent University, National Probation Trust (Nottinghamshire), Nottinghamshire Police and Circles UK representatives.
- The Circles will begin 5 months to 8 months before a prisoner's release and will continue into the community.
- Aim is for the Circles project to start in Autumn 2014 with 4 Circles in year 1, 8 Circles in year 2 and 12 Circles in year 3.

The future of CoSA

- Core Members will consist of high-risk sex offenders who are either elderly (55+) and/or Intellectually Disabled
- Concern some high risk prisoners were leaving Whatton without family or community support.
 - Particularly those with Intellectual Disabilities and the elderly
 - These type of sex offenders are particularly vulnerable and can often find the transition from prison to the community the most difficult and socially isolating.
 - Known that social isolation is a significant risk factor for further reoffending
 - Those who do not meet the above criteria but who for example have a severe lack of social support on release will still be considered.

The future of CoSA

My PhD:

Semi- structured interviews with core members

- Will look at the expectations, hopes and fears of release and will be carried out both pre and post prison-circle.
- Qualitative data, analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Repertory grids with the same core members

- Again carried out pre & post prison circle to examine how they construe themselves compared to other meaningful people and other selves e.g. self in the past/ future self.
- Quantitative & qualitative data, analysed using Idiogrid and IPA

The future of CoSA

My PhD:

Semi- structured interviews with volunteers

- To examine the volunteers' experiences of being part of this new initiative
- Carried out alongside previous studies
- Analysed using IPA

Vital that, research and evaluation co-exists alongside the implementation of this initiative in order to impact on both public protection and to measure effectiveness adequately

- Issues of research having to play catch up during history of Circles

References

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Thank you for listening