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Circles of Support & Accountability

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Overview

Originally an *ad hoc* response to a difficult scenario in which a high-risk sexual offender was released to an angry community, the 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.

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, Picheca, & Prinzo, 2007; Wilson, Cortoni, & McWhinnie, 2009). 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, Cortoni, & McWhinnie, 2009). 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.

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“[Circles South-East: The first ten years 2002-2012](#)” by A. .Bates, D.Williams, C. Wilson, &

R.J. Wilson (2013). *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 58, 861-885. doi:10.1177/0306624X13485362. ([read article](#), requires [Acrobat Reader](#))

"Circles of Support & Accountability: An innovative approach to community-based risk management for high-risk sexual offenders" by R.J. Wilson & A.J. McWhinnie (2010), in M. Herzog-Evans (ed.), *Transnational criminology manual*. Oisterwijk, Netherlands: Wolf Legal Publishing. ([read article](#), requires [Acrobat Reader](#))

"Circles of Support & Accountability: A Canadian national replication of outcome findings" by R.J. Wilson, F. Cortoni, & A.J. McWhinnie (2009). *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research & Treatment*, 21, 412-430. ([read article](#), requires [Acrobat Reader](#))

"Circles of Support & Accountability: An international partnership in reducing sexual offender recidivism" by R.J. Wilson, A.J. McWhinnie, & C. Wilson (2008). *Prison Service Journal*, 138, 26-36. ([read article](#), requires [Acrobat Reader](#))

"Evaluating the effectiveness of professionally-facilitated volunteerism in the community-based management of high risk sexual offenders: PART TWO—A comparison of recidivism rates" by R.J. Wilson, J.E. Picheca, & M. Prinzo (2007). *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 46, 327-337. ([read article](#), requires [Acrobat Reader](#))

"Evaluating the effectiveness of professionally-facilitated volunteerism in the community-based management of high risk sexual offenders: PART ONE—Effects on participants and stakeholders" by R.J. Wilson, J.E. Picheca, & M. Prinzo (2007). *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 46, 289-302. ([read article](#), requires [Acrobat Reader](#))

Circles UK works to support the development and effective operation of Circles of Support and Accountability across England and Wales.
web site: www.circles-uk.org.uk

CoSA-Ottawa is one of currently 18 Canadian cities operating CoSA programs, representing approximately 150 to 200 Circles.
web site: www.cosa-ottawa.ca/

Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies at Fresno Pacific University, Circles of Support and Accountability
web site: peace.fresno.edu/cosa

Minnesota Circles of Support and Accountability (MnCoSA) — Volunteer opportunities.
web site:
www.doc.state.mn.us/volunteer/mncosa.htm

Associated Ministries, Pierce County Circles of Support and Accountability
web site:
www.associatedministries.org/pages/PC-CoSA.htm

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