

DOING SOMETHING ABOUT IT: A FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF SEX OFFENDERS PARTICIPATING IN THAMES VALLEY CIRCLES OF SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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Abstract

The paper describes the establishment and first four years of operation of Thames Valley Circles of Support and Accountability (TVCOSA), an organisation which recruits and trains public volunteers into support groups for sex offenders released from prison back into the community. The paper examines the literature around the evaluation of sex offender treatment methods and discusses the problems in demonstrating the effectiveness of interventions in this area of criminal justice. Due to low numbers involved in the intervention at the point of study (14) a qualitative approach is used and the focus of the paper is on analysing incidents of recidivism (e.g. any further instance of offence-connected behaviour) displayed in the men accommodated by the programme and subsequent actions taken by TVCOSA and other Public Protection Agencies to manage risk. Thus far none of the sex offenders involved has been reconvicted for a sexual offence. An account is given of the rehabilitation undertaken with each sex offender undergoing the programme and some key statistics relating to the group are summarised. The paper concludes with some detailed proposals for further evaluation of the TVCOSA initiative.

Key words: sex offenders, public protection, social exclusion, volunteer support.

Introduction

Thames Valley Circles of Support and Accountability (TVCOSA) was set up in 2002 with a view to providing public volunteer support to high-risk sex offenders released back into the local community from prison. Details of the establishment and maintenance of a 'circle' are available elsewhere (Wilson, 2003). In essence the process involves the recruitment of volunteer members of the public who then undergo training and are formed

into groups who meet regularly with a 'core member' who is a sex offender identified as having needs related to social exclusion. The circle works with the core member (CM) in a variety of ways offering social and emotional support and practical assistance in areas such as accommodation, education and employment, family and relationships. Each circle is maintained by means of consultancy and hands-on support by a practitioner staff team originally of two in 2002, rising to four in 2005. The team members all have prior experience of working with sex offenders in both treatment and hostel settings.

Research which evaluated the original implementation of COSA in Canada (Wilson, Picheca and Prinzo, 2005) took the form of a reconviction study whereby a cohort of 60 sex offenders who had participated in COSA was compared with a sample matched on level of risk, length of time in the community (average follow-up time was 4.5 years) and prior involvement in specific sex offender treatment. A markedly positive outcome was observed for the COSA intervention group using measures of reconviction across three categories of sexual, violent and any kind of further offending. The COSA group were sexually reconvicted at a rate of 5% as opposed to 16.7% in the control sample – overall a reduction of 70%. Reconvictions for sexual and violent offending included together occurred at a rate of 15% vs. 35% respectively and reconvictions of any kind were recorded at 28.3% vs. 43.4%. For the purposes of the research "reconviction" included new offences and breach or revocations of parole licence conditions resulting in a return to prison.

This following paper seeks to describe and in some ways evaluate the first four years (2002-6) of COSA operation in the Thames Valley (covering the counties of Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire) of the United Kingdom. However, a reconviction study replicating the Canadian research is not the methodology employed here for a number of reasons. First, the time at large in the community of any of the COSA core members was a maximum of 3.5 years, which was not considered a sufficient length of time to achieve any meaningful reconviction data. Studies which focus on the reconviction of sexual offenders for further sexual crimes ordinarily require a follow-up period of at least ten years (Marshall, 1988) in order to yield statistically significant results. In addition to this, in the UK the base-rate for sexual reconviction is generally low (Friendship and Thornton, 2001) and this has created some difficulty in the meaningful evaluation of sex offender interventions. With a low base-rate for reconviction (Friendship and Thornton's literature review of a number of UK studies identifies between 3% and 12% reconviction over periods of 2-4 years) achieving statistically significant differences between treated and untreated populations becomes problematic as there is effectively only a small number to reduce from in the first place. With the relatively small numbers of sex offenders (sixteen total) participating in COSA during the period under analysis as well as the short follow-up period involved, this problem would be compounded and a meaningful depiction of the effectiveness of the work of COSA difficult to achieve.

For the above reasons, analysis of what is known as 'recidivism' in the sexual offender literature forms the focus of this evaluation. Terms relating to the follow-up behaviour of

sex offenders after release from custodial or community sentences have been used somewhat interchangeably in the past. Recidivism, re-offending and reconviction have all been taken to mean the same thing e.g. further convictions for sexual offences. Maltz (1984) more usefully defines recidivism instead as “lapsing into previous patterns of criminal behaviour”. Further recent research (Falshaw et al, 2003, p.209) provides additional clarification of terminology. “Reconviction can be defined as a subsequent conviction for another (sexual) offence... Re-offending refers to an illegal act committed by an individual who is already guilty of previous criminal activity... i.e. reconvictions, but also... offending not detected by the police. Recidivism does not only refer to behaviour that breaks the law, but can include a conduct that is indicative of previous offence patterns... A specific example of this may be a convicted child molester loitering outside a primary school”.

In the past, as in the recent Canadian COSA evaluation, reconviction studies have been used to provide evidence of the effectiveness or otherwise of interventions with sexual offenders. Despite the problems associated with this process described above (lengthy follow-up times, low base-rates etc.) reconviction data, one might imagine, would provide hard formal evidence of the behaviour of sex offenders following treatments of various kinds. In fact, research by Friendship et al. (2001) has shown that the research methodology utilised by reconviction studies may be flawed as the official sources of information about criminal convictions (the Offenders Index and National Identification Service in the UK) were shown to have discrepancies in their data. The research concluded that “... in the future, when researchers have access to both sources of data, it is recommended that they use a combination of data sets for accessing past criminal history” (Friendship et al, 2001, p.121). Thus even the “hard evidence” of reconviction can be seen to be potentially flawed as a follow-up measure. In addition to this, a significant proportion of sexual offences which are committed are not even reported (Mayhew, Elliott and Dowds (1989) estimate as much as 80%), and of that original amount a diminishing number go on to prosecution and still less to eventual conviction. Writing about general offending Lloyd et al. (1994) suggested that “only 50% of offences are reported to the police, only 30% are reported by the police as a crime, 7% crimes are cleared up; and 3% result in a caution or conviction.” Thus, even after lengthy periods of study, figures for reconviction are likely to be a significant under-estimate of the true nature of sex offenders’ follow-up behaviour

Studies focussing on recidivism by sex offenders are at some advantage here. This kind of data can be gathered after relatively short periods so long as detailed information on the behaviour of sex offenders is recorded and is available for analysis. In the early 21st century the rise of sex offender treatment programmes run by the UK Prison (Beech and Mann, 2002) and Probation services (Beckett, 1998; Bates, 2004) mean there is a much greater amount of recorded information available on the activities of individual sex offenders than has previously been the case. This includes demographic and psychometric data as well as information about attitudes recorded during the treatment process through behavioural observation. The expansion in the work of various other agencies involved

with sex offenders (in particular children and families Social Services departments and police Public Protection offices implementing the Sex Offender Register, which became active in 1997) has created still greater amounts of recorded information. Such data sources provide a much richer source of information about sex offenders' behaviour than simple reconviction records.

However, perhaps nowhere is this kind of detailed 'soft data' about sex offenders more available than within the file information and local knowledge held by professional and volunteer staff working with COSA. The level of detail in this information goes way beyond that held even by statutory agencies such as treatment providers (Prison, Probation) and Police and Social Services. COSA have detailed knowledge about the attitudes and behaviours of sex offenders which arise from regular contact with them in formal and informal group and individual settings within the context of COSA activity. The core members (i.e. the released prisoner) will often form closer relationships with those involved in COSA than with any others in society and the accountability aspect of the COSA role provides unique access to a questioning and understanding of the process of successful rehabilitation (or the lack of it) for the core member. It seems very likely that COSA is able to provide more information about sex offenders' attitudes and behaviour in the community than any other agency working in this field.

In the current climate of public protection in the UK (Kemshall and McGuire, 2001) the theory and practice behind COSA holds a central position. No longer is the criminal justice process just a matter of identifying and convicting those who have committed crimes. In the 21st century UK society has set itself the significant challenge of stopping sexual crime, in particular, before it even happens. Such a task can only be attempted by very close co-working between a large number of agencies which are all involved in the management of sexual offenders in some respect and this is what lies behind the Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPAs). Information shared by a number of agencies will assist in understanding the attitudes and behaviours of sexual offenders and this in turn will lead to a greater degree of possible intervention and control over such unacceptable and damaging behaviour. Ultimately the purpose of the MAPPAs, as with other criminal justice initiatives, is to reduce offending and conviction but this can only be achieved by increasing our knowledge about how sex offenders live in society and what factors assist or impede them in their rehabilitation. The activities of COSA, which take place in the very grass-roots of societal functioning, provide us with a unique opportunity to learn more on this subject in order to better protect the potential victims of sexual crime both now and in the future.

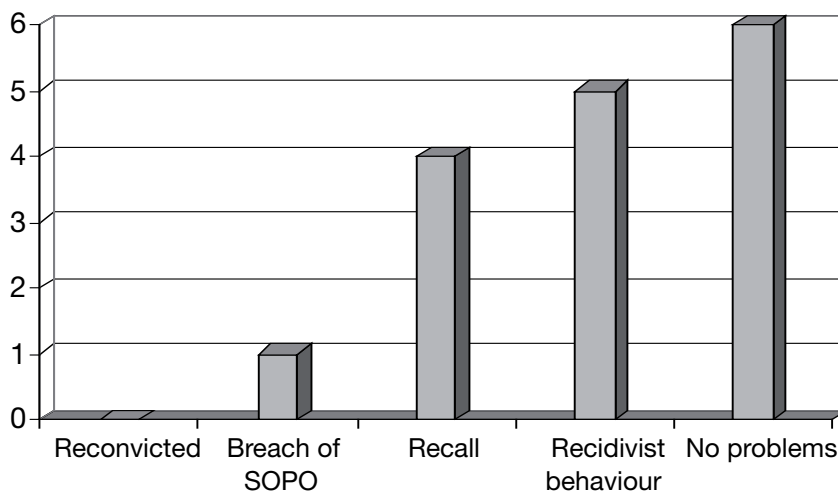
Method

Case files kept on the sixteen core members registered with COSA between November 2002 and May 2006 were examined in detail. COSA staff were interviewed for their professional opinions and recollections about each case. Relevant information about any incidents of reconviction or recidivism by Core Members (CMs) was identified together

with other significant information which is presented in the graphs and outline case studies below.

Results

- No core member was reconvicted of a sexual offence.
- One CM was convicted for breach of a Sex Offence Prevention Order and thereafter made subject to a three-year Community Rehabilitation Order.
- Four CMs were recalled to prison for breaching the conditions of their parole licence.
- Five CMs were identified as exhibiting some kind of recidivist behaviour.
- Six CMs had no further problematic behaviours identified in their management by COSA.



Graph 1. Behavioural Outcomes for Core Members

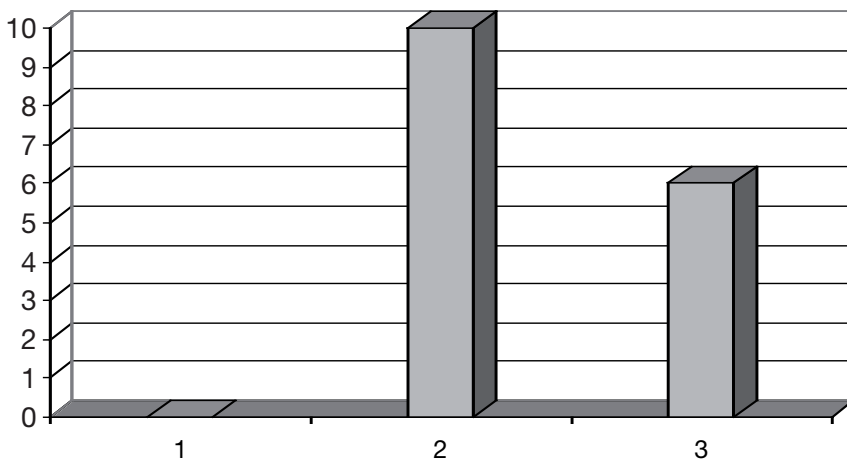
Explanation of Key Terms and Concepts Used

1. MAPPA Levels

All registered sex offenders come under the remit of the Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements, together with offenders who have served at least a twelve-month custodial sentence for a violent crime according to specific definitions or any other offender who can be formally identified as presenting a high risk of committing further serious harm. MAPPA offenders are registered as such with a central administrative body and their management in the community has to be agreed at Multi-Agency Risk Management Meetings (MARMMs) held monthly in nine separate districts across the Thames Valley Area. Each case is allocated a MAPPA 'level' in order to most efficiently apply resources to levels of risk and complexity of case management. These levels do not simply apply to risk assessment alone (see below). MAPPA levels can change as cases become more or less stable in the community. The data featured in graph 2 refers to the original MAPPA level of the CM as set in release from prison/entry into the Thames Valley community.

The meaning of each MAPPA levels is as follows:

- Level One:** Management of case by single agency.
- Level Two:** Case presents high risk of serious further harm and requires management by more than one agency
- Level Three:** Case presents imminent risk of further serious harm which can only be managed by application of additional resources from public protection agencies which would require senior management authorisation. This can also include cases of very high media interest where press disclosure could result in significant unrest and destabilisation both for the individual and agencies working with him e.g. in a probation hostel.



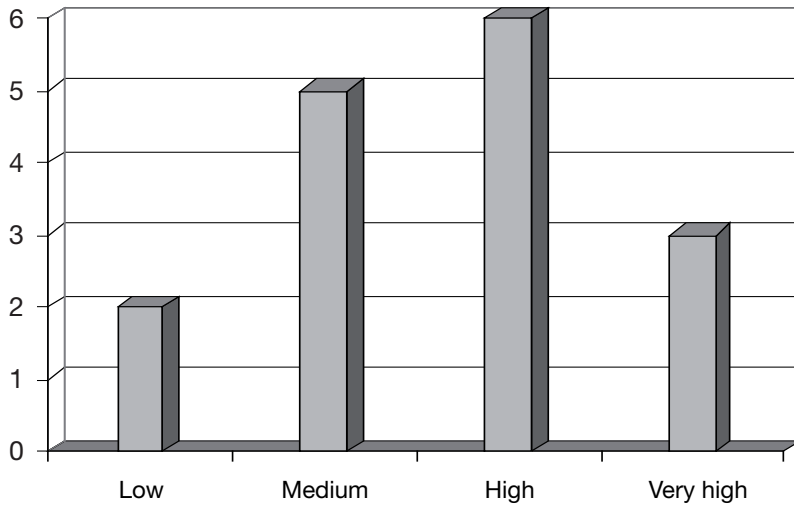
Graph 2. MAPPA Levels of TVCOSA Core Members

2. Risk Matrix 2000 Levels

Risk Matrix 2000 (Hanson and Thornton, 2000; Thornton, 2002; Beech, Fisher and Thornton, 2003) is the method used most widely in the UK for calculating risk of future reconviction in sex offenders. The algorithm uses factors identified from a sex offender's history as identified from research into the past behaviour of sex offenders released from prison. These include age at time of assessment, number of previous sexual and other convictions, nature of offending history and past experience of relationships. The process identifies four different levels of risk:

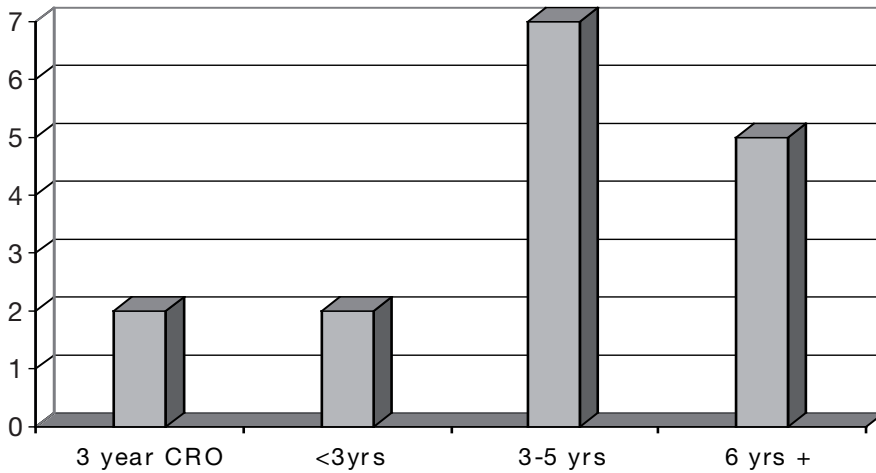
- Low risk = 7%
- Medium risk = 19%
- High risk = 36%
- Very high risk = 59%

Each percentage refers to the likelihood of further sexual conviction over a twenty-year period.



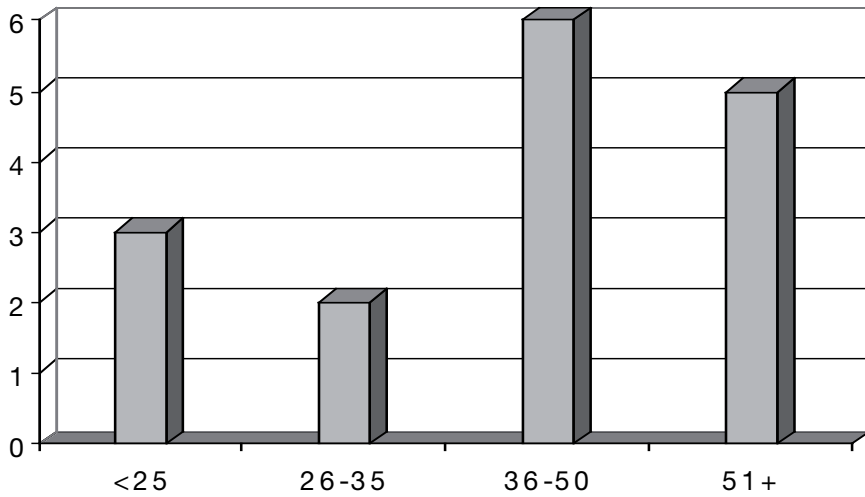
Graph 3. Risk Assessment Levels of Core Members using Risk Matrix 2000

Graph 3 indicates the generally elevated risk levels exhibited by TVCOSA CMs featuring in this study. Given this finding, the fact that none was reconvicted for a sexual offence even during the relatively brief follow-up period is of note.



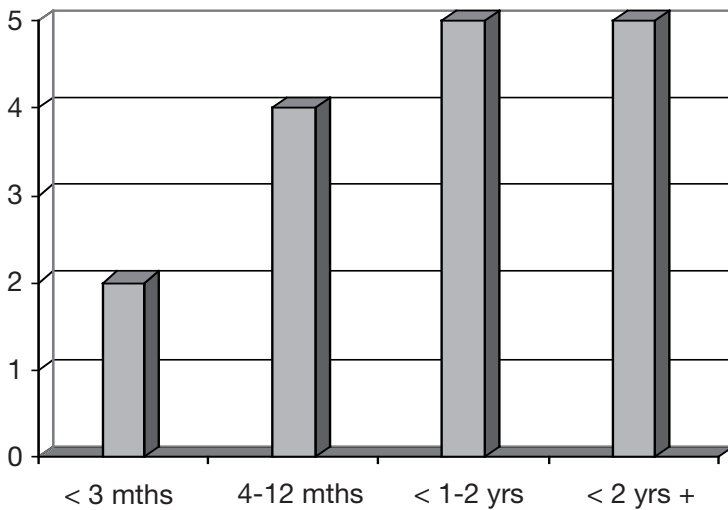
Graph 4. Sentence Length (current offence) of Core Members

Graph 4 illustrates the serious nature of the offending committed by CMs. Three quarters had served prison sentences of three years or more for sexual offences. Only two CMs had been made subject to community penalties. CRO=Community Rehabilitation Order, awarded by the court.



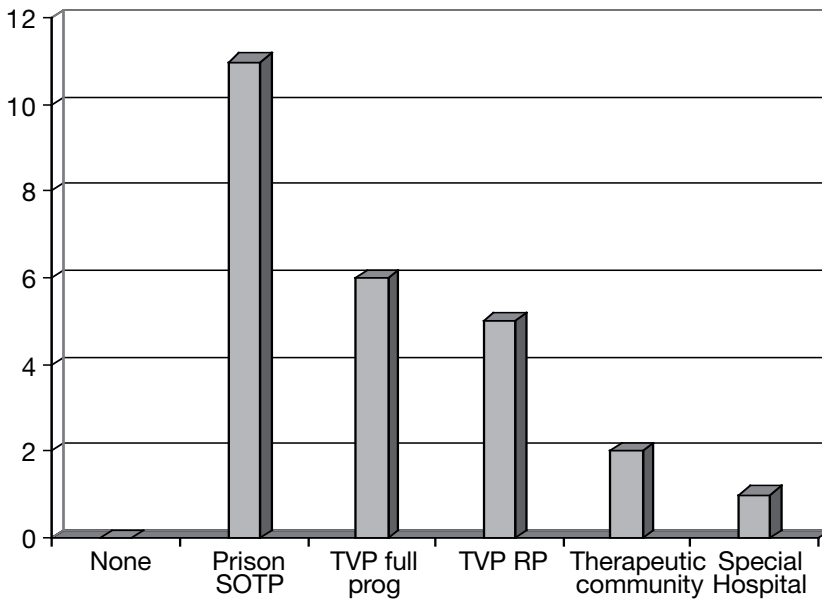
Graph 5: Ages of Core Members (in years)

Notes: Graph 5 shows that the majority of CMs were aged 36+. High levels of social exclusion were identified in this older group of sex offenders who were often rated as high risk (see graph 3) due to their offending history even though the risk indicators of younger age were not present.



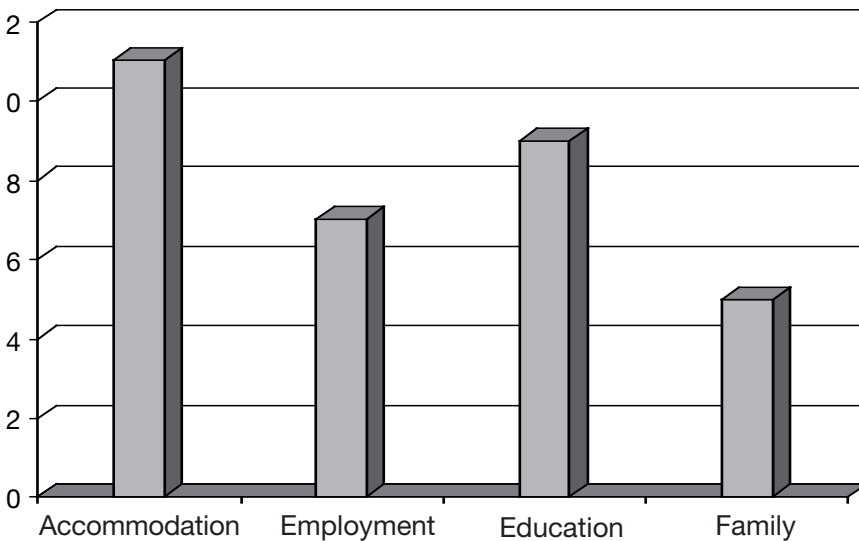
Graph 6. Lifespan of Circles

Note: Graph 6 evidences the longevity of many circles in COSA once established. Ten out of sixteen lasted more than a year, indicative of the levels of commitment of members of the public involved.



Graph 7. Treatment History of Core Members

Note: Graph 7 illustrates the fact that almost all CMs have undertaken treatment – some have been involved in different programmes hence the larger total number than 16. Future research might compare untreated and treated sex offenders who are and are not involved in COSA in order to determine if there is a specific effect of circles involvement as opposed to treatment alone.



Graph 8. Roles of circle in resettlement process of all CMs

Note: It is very difficult to quantify the precise nature of the support and resettlement assistance that any one circle provides to its CM. Their work means that social and emotional support is made available to individuals who are among the most excluded and isolated in society. Such support does much to reduce the high levels of risk to the public that have been identified in this study. Graph 8 outlines four key areas in which Circles have provided community assistance to vital aspects of their CM's life.

Detailed Breakdown of Information Pertaining to Each File Examined

CM1:

- Age of core member: 58 years
- Current offence: Breach of Sex Offence Prevention Order (SOPO)
- Sentence: 3 years
- Number of previous sexual convictions: 5
- RM2000 risk assessment level: Very high
- MAPPA level: 3
- Treatment history: None undertaken due to low IQ (full scale score=68)
- Location of circle: Oxford
- Lifespan of circle(s): November 2002-January 2005, January-May 2006
- Role of circle in resettlement progress:
 - o Accommodation: Circle staff and volunteer with housing experience provided risk assessment, monitoring and support action plan and training to housing providers, which secured accommodation. Subsequently circles staff and volunteer worked with Public Protection Officer (PPO) to encourage CM to move back to probation hostel following breach of SOPO due to inappropriate proximity to children.
 - o Employment: Volunteers assisted in attending at job centres and preparing for interviews, assisting CM in process of disclosure of offences to prospective employers.
 - o Family and relationships: Circle volunteer assisted in making appropriate contact with family members.
- Nature of recidivist behaviour if any: Secretly purchased a car, which had been part of his modus operandi for his previous sexual offence of abduction. Used car to travel to visit a previous associate involved with him in grooming of children. Two girls aged 6 and 14 were found in his flat by housing warden.
- Role of circle in detection/management of recidivism: Circle volunteers gained knowledge of car and reported this to PPO, circle staff and volunteers visited CM when children were present in his flat; Housing warden had been trained by and was included in circle, volunteers acted as appropriate adults during investigation by police into breach of SOPO.
- Outcome: Breach of SOPO and imposition of a new Community Rehabilitation Order. Under these auspices he was accommodated in reformed circle.

CM2:

- Age of core member: 33 years
- Current offence: Indecent assault of adult female
- Sentence: 4 years
- Number of previous sexual convictions: Two
- RM2000 risk assessment level: Very high
- MAPPA level: 3
- Treatment history: Undertook prison Sex Offender Treatment Programme on previous sentence, undertook Thames Valley-Sex Offender Groupwork Programme (TV-SOGP -community treatment programme) on release and prison SOTP again when reconvicted, then undertook 2nd TV-SOGP Relapse Prevention group.
- Location of circle: Milton Keynes
- Time involved with circle: March 2003-December 2004
- Role of circle in resettlement progress:
- Circle volunteers supported CM through time in hostel and assisted with anger management problems, circle was identified as integral part of RP plan, probation officer attended circle on various occasions to share information about risk management.
 - o Accommodation: circle volunteers assisted with move to independent accommodation including purchase of furniture etc.
 - o Employment: circle volunteers assisted with attending job centres, conducting 'mock interviews' to assist with gaining employment.
 - o Family and relationships: Circle assisted CM to come to terms with his brother's death through discussion.
- Nature of recidivist behaviour if any: Arrested for attempted burglary following the modus operandi used in the past to access adult female victims for sexual assault. Had identified that victim of burglary was lone female he had met in pub.
- Role of circle in detection/management of recidivism: CM was secretive and deceptive with circle, admitted high levels of alcohol consumption to circle volunteer but only after arrest, Circle fed back to MAPPA panel available information about CM but this was limited due to his high levels of deception and maintained pro-offending attitudes.
- Outcome: Recalled to prison.

CM3:

- Age of core member: 42
- Current offence: Indecent assault on male child, attempted buggery
- Sentence: 4 years
- Number of previous sexual convictions: One
- RM2000 risk assessment level: Medium
- MAPPA level: 2
- Treatment history: SOTP plus TV-SOGP RP
- Location of circle: Reading

- Time involved with circle(s): Jan 2003-February 2005, August 2005-May 2006
- Role of circle in resettlement progress:
 - Accommodation: Circle staff provided risk assessment, monitoring and support action plan and training to housing providers, which secured accommodation. Circle volunteers assisted him in moving to independent accommodation.
 - Employment: Circle volunteers assisted in facilitating access to education facilities. (CM medically unable to work).
 - Family and relationships: Volunteers accessed wider support in community, including British Gay and Lesbian Society.
- Nature of recidivist behaviour if any: CM developed a relationship with the 11 year-old nephew of a neighbour.
- Role of circle in detection/management of recidivism: Circle volunteer had information about the relationship with the child, informed circles staff and attempted to get CM to change his behaviour. However, the Public Protection Officer (PPO) was not informed. CM was caught with child in his flat during police visit pertaining to restriction of movement by Registered Sex Offenders. Major lessons learned here about need for clearer communication and information sharing with PPO staff. Circles co-ordinators pursued discussion with police and systems of communication were reviewed and improved.
- Outcome: Recalled to prison. Now released and accommodated in new circle.

CM4:

- Age of core member: 26 years
- Current offence: Rape of thirteen year-old female
- Sentence: 6 years
- Number of previous sexual convictions: None
- RM2000 risk assessment level: Medium
- MAPPA level: 2
- Treatment history: Time in prison therapeutic community (HMP Grendon 2-3 years), due to undertake TV-SOGP Relapse Prevention Programme
- Location of circle: Reading
- Time involved with circle: June-August 2003
- Role of circle in resettlement progress:
 - Accommodation: None (living in probation hostel)
 - Employment: Circles volunteers assisted in accessing education facilities.
 - Family and relationships: Volunteers assisted in gaining information about access to his children and contact with mother. Volunteers were involved in discussing and monitoring contacts he made with females on the internet with the knowledge of local PPO.
- Nature of recidivist behaviour if any: CM found to be grooming girls under 16 in Internet Chat Rooms.

- Role of circle in detection/management of recidivism: CM informed volunteer that he had met with female child and drunk alcohol with her. Volunteer informed the police and probation of this matter but supported CM through this process, which led to recall.
- Outcome: Recalled to prison for breach of licence. Now accommodated in new circle.

CM5:

- Age of core member: 20 years
- Current offence: Indecent assault of female child
- Sentence: 2 years
- Number of previous sexual convictions: None.
- RM2000 risk assessment level: Medium
- MAPPA level: 3
- Treatment history: SOTP at HMYOI
- Location of circle: Oxford
- Time involved with circle: April 2005
- Role of circle in resettlement progress:
 - Accommodation: None (living in probation hostel)
 - Employment/education: Volunteers encouraged CM's skills in artwork.
 - Family and relationships: Volunteers involved in working on appropriate sexual relationships due to CM's inappropriate sexual relationship with fellow hostel resident.
- Nature of recidivist behaviour if any: Breach of hostel restrictions due to use of alcohol and drugs plus pornography found on mobile phone.
- Role of circle in detection/management of recidivism: None – recidivist behaviour identified by probation hostel staff.
- Outcome: Recalled to prison. Due new circle on re-release from prison.

CM6:

- Age of core member: 36 years
- Current offence: Indecent assault female child
- Sentence: 3 year Community Rehabilitation Order
- Number of previous sexual convictions: None
- RM2000 risk assessment level: High
- MAPPA level: 2
- Treatment history: TV-SOGP full programme
- Location of circle: Oxford
- Lifespan of circle: February 2003-August 2004, November 2004-January 2005.
- Role of circle in resettlement progress:
 - Volunteers supported CM through attendance at Alcohol treatment agency.

- o Accommodation: Volunteers acted as advocates in move on from probation hostel to other hostel accommodation.
- o Employment: Volunteers assisted with process of job applications/interviews.
- o Family and relationships: No specific work undertaken.
- Nature of recidivist behaviour if any: CM developed a relationship and moved in with a single mother with three children aged under 16. CM breached contact with circle and statutory agencies on a number of occasions but was not recalled (MAPPA decision).
- Role of circle in detection/management of recidivism: Volunteers aware of relationship with single mother. When CM began to miss meetings this information was passed onto PPO and social services.
- Outcome: Social services re-opened case and conducted assessment of woman. CM suspended from circle for six months – suspension lifted after three. Ongoing contact for CM with experienced volunteer during suspension period. Reinvolvement of circles ceased January 2005 on end of parole licence.

CM7:

- Age of core member: 60 years
- Current offence: Indecent assault and gross indecency of male and female children
- Sentence: 5 years
- Number of previous sexual convictions: One
- RM2000 risk assessment level: High
- MAPPA level: 2
- Treatment history: SOTP, HMP Grendon, TV-SOGP RP
- Location of circle: Reading
- Lifespan circle: May 2004-May 2006
- Role of circle in resettlement progress:
 - o Accommodation: Circle staff provided risk assessment, monitoring and support action plan, which secured accommodation. Volunteers assisted in CM moving into independent accommodation, decorate flat etc.
 - o Employment: CM received incapacity benefits so could not work. Volunteers assisting in organising further education programme.
 - o Family and relationships: Volunteers supported CM in re-achieving family contact.
- Nature of recidivist behaviour if any: CM lent pornographic video to volunteer and practised evident manipulation of volunteers. Information reported to case manager and PPO who attended circle to circumvent secrecy and manipulation. Additional consultancy/training around these areas of volunteers from circles staff.
- Role of circle in detection/management of recidivism: Recidivism acted out within the context of the circle.
- Outcome: Contained within circle.

CM8:

- Age of core member: 63 years
- Current offence: Indecent assault of female children.
- Sentence: 4 years
- Number of previous sexual convictions: None.
- RM2000 risk assessment level: Low
- MAPPA level: 2
- Treatment history: SOTP and TV-SOGP (whole programme)
- Location of circle: Oxford
- Lifespan of circle: August 2003-April 2005
- Role of circle in resettlement progress:
 - Accommodation: Circle staff provided risk assessment, monitoring and support action plan to housing providers.
 - Employment: Volunteers attempted to facilitate voluntary work but this ceased after MAPPA panel required disclosure. Volunteers assisted in getting him a place on a creative writing course.
 - Family and relationships: Volunteers facilitated and supported face-to-face contact with daughters with knowledge of case manager. Volunteers assisted in improving communication with ex-wife, which led to CM taking more appropriate responsibility in his role as father.
- Nature of recidivist behaviour if any: CM was identified as keeping a diary account of his offending behaviour that he regularly edited and updated. CM kept photographs of his victims around his bed and videos of victim with his daughter.
- Role of circle in detection/management of recidivism: Volunteers discovered this information and reported it to PPO.
- Outcome: Video was destroyed. PPO and case manager invited into circle where CM was challenged on this behaviour with positive changes observed (e.g. photos of victim replaced by those of his own children). Contained within circle.

CM9:

- Age of core member: 54 years
- Current offence: Indecent assault on male child.
- Sentence: 3 year CRO
- Number of previous sexual convictions: Three.
- RM2000 risk assessment level: High
- MAPPA level: 2
- Treatment history: TV-SOGP full programme (dropped out of Relapse Prevention Programme)
- Location of circle: Oxford
- Lifespan of circle: January 2004-June 2005
- Role of circle in resettlement progress:

- o Accommodation: Circle staff provided risk assessment, monitoring and support action plan, which secured accommodation. Volunteers assisted in CM moving into independent accommodation, decorate flat etc.
- o Employment: Encouragement of voluntary work.
- o Family and relationships: Volunteers supported and assisted CM in regaining contact and appropriate relationship with son and ex-wife.
- Nature of recidivist behaviour if any:
 - o Core member dropped out of Relapse Prevention group and was interviewed by the police for inappropriate sexual behaviour with a fellow hostel resident.
 - o Also was party to illegal use of vehicle and inappropriate relations with another CM.
- Role of circle in detection/management of recidivism:
 - o This recidivism not identified within the context of Circle activity (identified by hostel staff).
 - o Illegal use of car/inappropriate contact with fellow CM was identified by circle volunteers. CM9 disclosed recidivist behaviour fully to circles staff and volunteers. Circle confronted his behaviour with assistance of Case Manager.
- Outcome: Contained within circle.

CM10:

- Age of core member: 44 years
- Current offence: Indecent Assault, Gross Indecency on female child
- Sentence: 6 years
- Number of previous sexual convictions: None
- RM2000 risk assessment level: Low
- MAPPA level: 2
- Treatment history: SOTP, TV-SOGP full programme
- Location of circle: Oxford
- Time involved with circle: Feb 2003 – May 2006
- Role of circle in resettlement progress:
 - o Accommodation: Independent accommodation secured by hostel staff with support of Circles. Volunteers helped move and furnish flat.
 - o Employment: Initially focused on education - attending local College and securing a place at University. Has now deferred university place and is currently manager for a local bookshop. All of the above secured from the CM's own initiative but with support and preparation from the circle.
 - o Family and relationships: Circle provided emotional support for CM to make contact with his sisters after a long period of no contact.
- Nature of recidivist behaviour if any: Entering a relationship with a woman known to have grandchildren without prior knowledge of case manager.

- Role of circle in detection/management of recidivism: CM disclosed relationship to circle and this information was reported to PPO. Joint meeting took place to ensure disclosure made to partner by PPO and circle staff. Volunteers involved in disclosure and continued monitoring of situation.
- Outcome: Contained in circle

CM11:

- Age of core member: 40
- Current offence: Buggery and Abduction of a male child
- Sentence: 6 Years (12 months for abduction to run concurrent)
- Number of previous sexual convictions: None
- RM2000 risk assessment level: Medium
- MAPPA level: 2
- Treatment history: Pre-accredited SOTP
- Location of circle: Reading
- Lifespan of circle: Feb 2004 – May 2006
- Role of circle in resettlement progress:
 - Accommodation: No input. CM secured accommodation prior to circle
 - Employment: No input. Already in employment prior to circle
 - Family and relationships: CM in a long term relationship with partner. Circle has focused on improving relationships between CM and PPO.
- Nature of recidivist behaviour if any: None.

CM12:

- Age of core member: 19
- Current offence: Attempt to procure a child for purposes of Unlawful Sexual Intercourse and possession of an imitation firearm.
- Sentence: 3 years
- Number of previous sexual convictions: none
- RM2000 risk assessment level: High
- MAPPA level: 3
- Treatment history: Some individual work (Fantasy Modification)
- Location of circle: Oxford
- Lifespan of circle: August 2004—Jan 2005
- Role of circle in resettlement progress:
 - Accommodation: Circle provided recommendation for resettlement and support package required by CM. However, he was moved out of area.
 - Employment: Not suitable for employment. However, circle facilitated voluntary work and social activities.
 - Family and relationships: Circle assisted with regular contact with mother
- Nature of recidivist behaviour if any: None.

CM13:

- Age of core member: 51
- Current offence: Indecent Assault, Gross Indecency, Indecent Exposure
- Sentence: 4.5 years
- Number of previous sexual convictions: One
- RM2000 risk assessment level: Very High
- MAPPA level: 2
- Treatment history: Rampton Hospital, pre-accredited SOTP, TV-SOGP full programme
- Location of circle: Maidenhead
- Lifespan of circle: July 2005 – May 2006
- Role of circle in resettlement progress:
 - o Accommodation: Housing very problematic, circles provided risk assessment and resettlement package as well as attending a considerable number of meetings to support the housing process.
 - o Employment: None, but Circle is engaging with him exploring voluntary work.
 - o Family and relationships: No contact with any family, circle is social network.
- Nature of recidivist behaviour if any: None.

CM14:

- Age of core member: 21
- Current offence: Indecent Assault x 3
- Sentence: 30 months imprisonment
- Number of previous sexual convictions: one
- RM2000 risk assessment level: High
- MAPPA level: 3
- Treatment history: SOTP, further individual work in the community with psychologist visiting probation hostel
- Location of circle: Oxford
- Lifespan of circle: July 2005 – May 2006
- Role of circle in resettlement progress:
 - o Accommodation: MAPPA coordinated move to independent accommodation on the strength of CM engaging with circles. Resettlement package provided by Circles staff.
 - o Employment: Secured work with local supermarket, circle and PPO contributed to disclosure process.
 - o Family and relationships: Developing social networks with support of circle. Good relationship with mother.
- Nature of recidivist behaviour if any: None.

CM15:

- Age of core member: 47
- Current offence: Buggery x 2, Indecency with a child x 2, Indecent Assault x 5, Aiding and abetting Incest
- Sentence: 10 years
- Number of previous sexual convictions: None
- RM2000 risk assessment level: Medium
- MAPPA level: 2
- Treatment history: SOTP, TV-SOGP RP Block
- Location of circle: Reading
- Lifespan of circle: July 2005 – May 2006
- Role of circle in resettlement progress:
 - o Accommodation: Supported move into private rented accommodation. Liaison with housing agencies and MAPPA.
 - o Employment: CM secured employment at local supermarket prior to commencement of the circle.
 - o Family and relationships: Circle staff and volunteers are involved in child protection conferences and contact with children (his victims). Circle supporting both CM and social services over difficulties relating to contact issues with children.
- Nature of recidivist behaviour if any: None.

CM16:

- Age of core member: 47
- Current offence: Indecent Assault x 10, Taking Indecent Photographs, Attempting to Pervert the Course of Justice
- Sentence: 7 years
- Number of previous sexual convictions: none
- RM2000 risk assessment level: High
- MAPPA level: 3
- Treatment history: SOTP, TV-SOGP RP Block
- Location of circle: Oxford
- Lifespan of circle: April 2005 – May 2006
- Role of circle in resettlement progress:
 - o Accommodation: CM secured independent accommodation. Circle and hostel key in securing MAPPA agreement for this move-on.
 - o Employment: CM found employment, circle volunteers and hostel worked with PPO to ensure appropriate disclosure had taken place.
 - o Family and relationships: Circle is support network.
- Nature of recidivist behaviour if any: None.

Discussion

During the time covered by this study no core member involved in COSA has been reconvicted of a sexual offence, despite the fact that the majority were statistically assessed as having a high or very high level of risk of reconviction. Having said this, the period of the follow-up (less than four years) is not long enough for a formal reconviction study. Longer-term analysis of core members' behaviour in the community would be required to achieve this objective (see Wilson et al, 2005).

A large number of recidivist behaviours have been identified in this study, some of which led to action taken by Probation and Public Protection Officers and the subsequent recall of core members to prison under conditions of their parole licences. Perhaps at some odds with the evaluation of the Canadian COSA these incidents of recidivism where they lead to breach of parole license and return to prison are not necessarily regarded as a 'failure' in the way that reconviction for a new sexual offence and the creation of another victim would have to be. In this study we have taken the perspective that high-risk offenders are, by definition, likely to behave in the future in pro-offending and dangerous ways. The purpose of the public protection system in the UK is to identify this kind of behaviour before it has led to re-offence. The fact that four core members have been recalled to prison can be seen as evidence of the effectiveness of current public protection procedures of which COSA forms an active part. It is important also to recognise that three of these four have retained contact with COSA and have been or will be accommodated in further circles intervention. This fact illustrates the ongoing nature of the public protection challenge – that sex offenders will almost always be released into the community where they will require support, monitoring and maintenance and that COSA has consistently been flexible and effective in meeting this challenge.

Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) have undergone significant developments since the inception of the Sex Offenders' Register in 1997 and the establishment of additional agency responsibilities in the field of offender management. This included the introduction within police areas of Public Protection Officers to monitor those on the Sex Offenders' Register and the development of formal protocols to which various relevant agencies have signed up either on a statutory basis (the Police, Prison and Probation services) or under a 'duty to co-operate' (e.g. Youth Offending Teams, Health and Social Services and local housing authorities). In evaluating the work of COSA we must recognise that other factors will be key in influencing the management of sex offenders living in the community. Yet in many cases here we have been able to specify how breaches in parole licence and other legislative procedures that may have prevented further re-offending came about as a direct result of COSA activity.

No system created to manage high-risk sex offenders in the community will ever be wholly effective. However, the work of COSA has allowed for a degree of knowledge and understanding about the ways in which sex offenders released from prison live their lives in the community beyond that achieved by any other agency. This is because it provides a community support network which goes beyond statutory contact such as provided by the probation service. COSA operates under the principles of civil renewal, restorative justice and social inclusion. It invites the community to take some responsibility for what is essentially a community issue. It trains and assists informed volunteers from diverse backgrounds in supporting and holding accountable sex offenders with whom they work closely in everyday community settings. Part of the reward for those volunteers might be the sense of fulfilment gained in achieving a constructive rehabilitation for this group of particularly isolated offenders which also addresses the needs of potential victims and the wider community. However, if needs be, they are also actively assisting public protection by informing relevant agencies when formal intervention is required.

The study has identified that COSA have not always got this process right. In one of the cases (CM3) circle volunteers had knowledge about a Core Member that was not shared with Public Protection Officers until routine police enquiries had independently identified the problem issue. This led to an internal review of communications procedures and the establishment of a more formal exchange of relevant information between COSA and partnership agencies. However, in three of the six cases where action was taken against core members either in the form of recall to prison, breach of SOPO or social services involvement COSA can be clearly identified as contributing to this process. Further to this, in four other cases COSA alone had identified recidivist behaviour in the core member and acted in consultation with public protection and probation officers to resolve problem issues. This highly innovative and socially responsible initiative has required constant organisational modification as it has progressed through four years of existence so that challenges were addressed constructively and not repeated in the future. At a time when the reactions to many issues within the criminal justice system in both media and political arenas have been alarmist and quick to apportion blame COSA have been required to keep a focussed and realistic view of their task in order to demonstrate the positive results described above.

Future Evaluation Recommendations

One criticism that might be levelled at COSA is the fact that no evaluative methodology was built-in to the initiative from its inception. The current study provides a retrospective analysis of the work but formal evaluative procedures should be integral to any correctional or rehabilitative programme. The employment of a psychologist or other researcher as part of the programme staff might therefore be recommended. Herewith, some future research proposals are outlined:

1. Psychometric Evaluation

Psychometric tests can be used to undertake useful short-term evaluation. In particular, the socio-affective measures which form part of the Home Office-accredited psychometrics used to assess sex offenders across the UK (Beech, 1998; Beckett, 1998) could be usefully applied at regular intervals to Core Members in order to assess aspects of their functioning relevant to circles objectives e.g. levels of self-esteem, emotional loneliness, assertiveness and locus of control. These results might be directly fed back to circles volunteers to assist them with an objective assessment of the individual they are working with and inform strategies and tactics for the circle operation. Over time movements on the relevant scales identified from psychometric testing could be studied to provide feedback about core members' progress within COSA. Questionnaires measuring offence-specific attitudes (e.g. victim empathy, sexualised attitudes to children, levels of honesty and denial regarding offending behaviour) are less relevant to COSA objectives than to those of accredited treatment programmes. However, an additional research project might use these measures to identify if changes achieved after treatment have been maintained over the time that Core Members are involved in COSA.

2. Control-group Reconviction Studies

It would be very useful to be able to conduct evaluative research similar to that carried out in Canada to evaluate COSA. This would require identification of matched experimental groups (e.g. similar in terms of age, risk levels, prison sentence and other specified variables) who could then be followed up over a period of time (five years minimum). Comparing sex offenders who have undertaken prison or community SOTP alone, or COSA alone or a combination of the two would allow for an evaluation of the effects of each intervention. However, researchers would need to bear in mind the limitations of reconviction studies as outlined in the introduction to this paper. Such an undertaking would be a long term proposition which would not be viable unless a long-term commitment to the funding of COSA was achieved.

3. More Formal Gathering of Recidivism Data

While it would be important not to overload members of the public with additional paperwork which might deter them from volunteering for COSA in the first place, it would be useful to find ways of recording the process of the Circle interaction in more detail. Currently these minutes are rather vague in what they require for completion after each meeting. It would be useful to design a feedback-form specifically focussing on the identification and/or resolution of issues pertaining to recidivist behaviour. This information could then be kept on an expanded central database allowing for more ready access at any time to information relevant to future evaluations. A more routine recording of other demographic variables appertaining to each core member would also be useful for this purpose – routinely recording offence and treatment history and formal risk assessment levels, for instance.

4. Qualitative Research into the Experiences of Circles Volunteers and Core Members

One significant failing of the current study, despite the restrictions of its scope and purpose, is that fact that it scarcely identifies the thoughts, practice and considerations of the volunteer members of the public who are at the heart of COSA and without whom none of this work would have been achieved. It seems that any procedure of evaluation and research which ignores the volunteers would be flying in the face of the ethos of the whole initiative and would be excluding vital information about the process and content of a circle. Qualitative research garnering the opinions of circle volunteers both as individuals and within the groups themselves would be a valuable requirement in any evaluation of this initiative. This is not an area addressed in the current study as we have focussed instead on the impact of COSA on the public protection arena. The fact remains, however, that COSA will live or die by their volunteers and the need to correctly recruit, train and support them in their role is utterly vital. Much more research is needed about how and why members of the public volunteer for this task and how their roles could be maintained and enhanced in the future. The identification from this work of methods of recruiting more volunteers from across perhaps a still wider range of professional and social strata is required. Similarly, qualitative information from core members achieved by means of structured interviews could prove very useful in identifying how this most impressive and socially responsible public protection initiative is successful, and might become still more successful and significant in years to come.

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