The Promise and Potential of Circles of Support and Accountability: A Sex Offender Reentry Program

By Grant Duwe
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Key Points

- Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA), whose goal is “no more victims,” provides sex offenders released from prison with pro-social support as they return to society and emphasizes accountability by insisting that offenders accept responsibility for their actions.

- Findings from a CoSA program in Minnesota showed that the program significantly reduced sex offense recidivism, lowering the risk of rearrest for a new sex offense by 88 percent.

- By helping sex offenders successfully transition from prison to the community, CoSA prevents individuals from being victims of crime, including sex offenses.

Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) may be the most promising prisoner rehabilitative intervention no one has ever heard of. So far, CoSA has been used on sex offenders, and the results from evaluations in Canada, the United Kingdom, and most recently, the US have been positive. In fact, a randomized controlled trial (RCT) of a CoSA program in Minnesota showed it reduced sex offense recidivism by 88 percent and yielded a favorable return on investment. But it is also an intervention that has been seldom used.

What Is CoSA?

CoSA traces its modern origins to a small Mennonite community in Ontario, Canada, where, in 1994, a pastor and several members of his congregation formed a “circle” to help a high-risk sex offender transition from prison to the community. Rooted in the restorative justice perspective, which views crime as a harm committed against both the victim and the community, CoSA is predicated on the idea that no one, including a sex offender, is “disposable” in society. As its name implies, CoSA provides sex offenders released from prison with prosocial support as they return to society. But given the program’s goal of “no more victims,” CoSA emphasizes accountability by insisting that offenders accept responsibility for their actions.

Each circle contains between four and six community volunteers, one of whom is a primary volunteer who meets with the offender (i.e., the core member) on a regular basis. Whereas the primary volunteer meets with the core member on a daily basis during the first 60–90 days following release, the other community volunteers meet with the core member on a weekly basis. Although the duration of circles varies, circles generally last between six and 12 months.
Due to the success of the first circle in 1994, the Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario later formed a partnership with the Correctional Service of Canada to implement CoSA more broadly in Canada. Since 1994, more than 350 Canadian sex offenders have participated in circles. Along with the growth of circles in Canada, CoSA programs have been implemented in countries such as the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In the US, CoSA programs have been established in locations such as California, Colorado, Minnesota, North Carolina, and Vermont.

The findings showed that Minnesota Circles of Support and Accountability significantly reduced sex offense recidivism, lowering the risk of rearrest for a new sex offense by 88 percent.

**Does CoSA Work?**

While research on CoSA programs in Canada and the UK has revealed positive results, the strongest evidence in favor of CoSA’s effectiveness comes from a RCT in Minnesota. The findings showed that Minnesota Circles of Support and Accountability (MnCOSA) significantly reduced sex offense recidivism, lowering the risk of rearrest for a new sex offense by 88 percent. The results also indicated that MnCOSA significantly decreased all four measures of general recidivism, with reductions ranging from 49 to 57 percent. Due to the size of this decrease in recidivism, findings from the cost-benefit analysis revealed the program generated an estimated $2 million in costs avoided, resulting in a benefit of $40,923 per participant. For every dollar spent on MnCOSA, the program yielded an estimated benefit of $3.73.³

**Why Does CoSA Work?**

While individuals are a greater risk for recidivism when they have friends and acquaintances who are involved in crime, research has also shown that recidivism is lower for offenders who have sources of pro-social support. By offering hope to core members, CoSA helps offenders either begin or maintain the identity transformation process that can lead to desistance from crime. Core members are also connected with sources of pro-social support that, in all likelihood, they would not have experienced without the circle. These sources—the circle volunteers—not only deliver instrumental support such as employment and housing assistance but also provide core members with the friendship and guidance that is crucial in making a successful transition from prison to the community.

**CoSA Implementation Challenges**

With such a large impact on sex offense recidivism and a benefit of more than $40,000 per participant, why is CoSA not being used on a much broader scale? The main reason is that CoSA appears to be a program that is difficult to implement. In addition to being a low-volume intervention in the places where it has been established, there are instances in which some jurisdictions in the US have tried, but ultimately failed, to start a CoSA program. These failed CoSA startups include efforts that never got off the ground (e.g., Idaho, Illinois, Nebraska, New Mexico, and Washington) and programs that folded after a brief period of time (e.g., Oregon and Pennsylvania).

Implementing and sustaining a CoSA program is challenging because it relies heavily on community involvement (four to six volunteers per circle). Finding enough suitable volunteers from the community to help support or mentor offenders in general is often difficult. But it is arguably even more difficult for a program such as CoSA due to prevailing public perceptions regarding convicted sex offenders. Indeed, CoSA advocates an approach—“no one is disposable”—that can be at odds with the popular view of sex offenders.

**Expanding CoSA**

One potential way to expand CoSA would be to apply it to other offender populations besides sex offenders. A lack of pro-social support is common to many prisoners, which helps explain why antisocial peers are a major recidivism risk factor. The large impact CoSA has had on general recidivism also
implies it would probably be effective for individuals who have not been convicted of a sex offense.

Nevertheless, it is still important to figure out why it has been challenging to successfully implement CoSA. When we gain a better understanding of the implementation challenges, it may be possible to develop a more effective startup strategy for CoSA programs across the US. To this end, federal legislation that allocates funding for the evaluation of CoSA pilot projects—those with and without sex offenders—would be helpful.

The Promise and Potential of CoSA

For some, any intervention—even one with good results—that provides sex offenders with another chance at being productive members of society may still be perceived as misguided. Still, sex offenders who have participated in CoSA would have been released from prison regardless of whether they were involved in the program. When these individuals return to the community, do we want their reentry to fail or succeed? When they fail, it means not only more crime but also more victims. By helping sex offenders successfully transition from prison to the community, CoSA prevents individuals from being victims of crime, including sex offenses.

Because CoSA is not a punitive intervention, some may perceive it as “soft” on crime. Ultimately, what should matter is whether the approach works. By this standard, CoSA is a smart, humane approach to crime that works. Its effectiveness speaks to the power and promise of local, community-based interventions in reducing crime. At a more profound, individual level, CoSA also speaks to the power of compassion, friendship, and love. For the core members who participate in CoSA, many of whom are aware of how sex offenders are perceived by society, the circle provides them with hope, much-needed sources of pro-social support, and a path to redemption.

About the Author

Grant Duwe is an academic adviser to AEI for criminal justice reform. He is also the research director for the Minnesota Department of Corrections, where he develops and validates risk assessment instruments, forecasts the state’s prison population, and conducts research studies and program evaluations. Duwe has published more than 60 articles in peer-reviewed journals on a wide variety of correctional topics, and he is a coauthor of the recent book The Angola Prison Seminary: Effects of Faith-Based Ministry on Identity Transformation, Desistance, and Rehabilitation.

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