The Promise and Potential of Circles of Support and Accountability

A SEX OFFENDER REENTRY PROGRAM

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Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) is a sex offender reentry intervention that originated in a small Mennonite community in Canada in the 1990s. Established in response to the Christian call to radical hospitality, CoSA is an intervention rooted in the restorative justice perspective, which views crime as a harm committed against both the victim and the community. Circles contain between four and six community volunteers, one of whom is a primary volunteer, who meet with the offender (i.e., the core member) on a regular basis.

The program attempts to help core members successfully reenter society by providing them with social support as they try to meet their employment, housing, treatment, and other social needs. Through the regular meetings that occur among circle members, CoSA is designed to help core members forge friendships with the volunteers in their circles. But given its goal of “no more victims,” CoSA also emphasizes accountability by insisting that offenders accept responsibility for their actions.

Outcome evaluations of CoSA programs in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States have shown the intervention is effective in reducing recidivism. A recent evaluation of a CoSA program in Minnesota (Minnesota Circles of Support and Accountability, or MnCOSA), which was based on a randomized controlled trial, found that it significantly decreased sex offense recidivism, lowering the risk of rearrest by 88 percent. Results also showed MnCOSA significantly reduced recidivism for any type of offense by as much as 57 percent. Due to this large reduction in recidivism, findings from the cost-benefit analysis reveal that MnCOSA has generated an estimated $2 million in costs avoided to the state, resulting in a benefit of $40,923 per participant. For every dollar spent on MnCOSA, the program has yielded an estimated benefit of $3.73.

Despite its demonstrated effectiveness, CoSA is an intervention that has been difficult to implement in the United States. Developing a more effective startup strategy for CoSA programs is possible only when we achieve a better understanding as to why it has been challenging to successfully implement. To this end, federal funding should be allocated for the implementation and evaluation of CoSA pilot projects. In addition, given the challenges in recruiting community volunteers to work with convicted sex offenders, applying CoSA to other high-risk offender populations could be helpful in further expanding the use of this effective intervention.
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A relatively small proportion of the inmates in state and federal prison systems have a criminal conviction for a sex offense. Like other prisoners, the vast majority of sex offenders in prison will eventually be released. Following their release from prison, the rate at which sex offenders recidivate, or commit a new crime in the future, is lower compared to other released prisoners. But when we focus on reoffending for a specific type of crime—sex offenses—the evidence shows that sex offenders have a higher rate of sex offense recidivism than other released prisoners.

Due to concerns over the rate at which sex offenders recidivate with a new sex offense, which is the second costliest crime to society behind only murder, many states in the US have attempted to reduce sex offense recidivism by implementing legislation that increases the risk and costs associated with committing a sex crime. Examples include longer sentences for sex crimes, involuntary civil commitment for dangerous and psychopathic sex offenders, residence restrictions, and sex offender registration and notification. While studies have shown some of these interventions can reduce sex offense recidivism, they may also yield a negligible return on investment (ROI) due to high operational costs.

Unlike these punitive legislative strategies, sex offender treatment is a cost-effective therapeutic approach that reduces sexual reoffending. The most comprehensive meta-analysis found a 3.6 percentage point difference in sex offense recidivism rates between treated and untreated sex offenders, resulting in a 26 percent reduction in sexual reoffending. Moreover, cost-benefit analyses indicate the ROI for prison-based sex offender treatment ranges from $2.05 to $3.11.

Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) is an intervention that has been found to produce better outcomes than those observed for either sex offender treatment or any of the legislation enacted over the past few decades. Recent research has found that CoSA reduces sexual recidivism by 88 percent while generating a benefit of more than $40,000 per participant. Therefore, CoSA is not only one of the most promising interventions for sex offenders but also one of the most cost-effective programs for offenders in general. Nevertheless, CoSA has been seldom used in the US.

The infrequent application of CoSA has been due, at least in part, to implementation challenges. As I discuss later in this report, some of these challenges can be overcome. But before doing so, I describe the origins and operation of the CoSA model. In addition to reviewing what existing research has found, I explain why it works in reducing recidivism. I conclude by exploring ways in which to expand the use of CoSA in the United States.
What Is CoSA? And Where Did It Come From?

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. Circles contain between four and six community volunteers, one of whom is a primary volunteer, who meet 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. In addition to this “inner circle,” an “outer circle” of professionals (psychologists, law enforcement officers, supervision agents, social service workers, etc.) volunteer their time to support the inner circle in its work. Although the duration of circles varies, circles generally last between six and 12 months.

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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 CoSA. Along with its growth 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 Minnesota, Vermont, Colorado, North Carolina, and California.

The formation of the first circle in Canada in the 1990s was, in large measure, a response to the Christian call to radical hospitality. The core member of that circle was a high-profile sex offender who was released to the community amid a great deal of fear and concern. In contrast to the prevailing societal response (both then and now), which is to ostracize sex offenders, the Mennonite community in Ontario took a different approach that exemplified the Gospels’ exhortation to provide hospitality for those who are strangers, imprisoned, hungry, or thirsty. As Jesus explains in Matthew 25, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” In many ways, sex offenders epitomize the least among us. They are social pariahs who are, to a large extent, the lepers of our time. Indeed, for many, sex offenders are the dregs of humanity who deserve to be permanently cut off from the rest of society.

But despite its origins, CoSA is not a faith-based correctional program. For example, circle volunteers are strongly discouraged from proselytizing. Moreover, while the Canadian CoSA has drawn many of its volunteers from faith communities, other CoSA programs, such as the one in Minnesota, have recruited circle volunteers primarily from local colleges and universities. Instead, CoSA is best characterized as an intervention rooted in the restorative justice (RJ) perspective, which views crime as a harm committed against both the victim and the community. Like other RJ interventions, CoSA emphasizes
offender accountability and community participation. But unlike most RJ interventions, which promote restoration by involving all three parties (offenders, victims, and community members), the victims of the offenders participating in CoSA have not been participants in the circle process.

What Does the Research Say About CoSA?

More than a decade after the first circle formed in Canada in 1994, the evaluation of the pilot project that had operated in Ontario was first published. Comparing 60 core members with 60 sex offenders who did not participate in CoSA, the report found that CoSA participants had significantly lower rates of sexual, violent, and general recidivism. Four years later, a national outcome evaluation of circles that had been formed across Canada compared 44 CoSA participants and 44 nonparticipants. Researchers again found that CoSA significantly decreased sexual, violent, and general recidivism. Most recently, in an evaluation of circles that formed in the UK during the 2002–12 period, researchers matched 71 core members with 71 sex offenders who were referred, but not selected, for circles on the basis of their scores on a risk assessment instrument. None of the core members had reoffended with a violent contact offense versus 10 (three of which were for sex offenses) for the comparison group, a statistically significant difference according to Andrew Bates.

Research on CoSA in Minnesota

Based in part on the promising results from the initial Canadian evaluation, the Minnesota Department of Corrections (MnDOC) implemented Minnesota Circles of Support and Accountability (MnCOSA) in 2008. In addition to relying heavily on college students as circle volunteers, other ways in which MnCOSA has differed from the Canadian model include its origin (which was the MnDOC, a government agency), the types of sex offenders it targets (it has focused on those released to supervision instead of those released at their sentence expiration), initiating the circle while the core member is still in prison (as opposed to beginning it after release), and meeting in secure public venues (rather than individual’s homes).

The findings showed that MnCOSA significantly reduced sexual recidivism, lowering the risk of rearrest for a new sex offense by 88 percent.

After MnCOSA had been operating for four years (2008–11), I published a preliminary evaluation in 2013 based on 31 circles. Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of the MnCOSA evaluation is that it has used a randomized controlled trial (RCT), which is widely considered the “gold standard” when it comes to evaluating programs. Because the evaluations of the CoSA programs in Canada and the UK used quasi-experimental designs in which program participants were matched with nonparticipants, one concern raised about these studies is that they suffer from selection bias. By randomly assigning sex offenders who expressed a willingness to participate in MnCOSA to either the treatment or control groups, the outcome evaluations of MnCOSA have successfully isolated its impact on recidivism. In doing so, these studies offer the strongest evidence to date on the efficacy of the CoSA model.

In the preliminary outcome evaluation, I compared 31 core members with 31 sex offenders in the control group. The results from this study showed that MnCOSA produced a cost-avoidance benefit of more than $11,700 per participant by significantly...
reducing the rate at which core members recidivated with any crime (i.e., general recidivism). By the end of 2011, none of the core members had been rearrested for a new sex offense compared to one offender in the control group.\textsuperscript{31} This difference in sex offense recidivism, however, was not statistically significant.

In a recent, updated evaluation of MnCOSA, I compared recidivism and cost-benefit outcomes among a larger sample of sex offenders in the MnCOSA group ($N = 50$) and control group ($N = 50$) over a longer period of time (2008–16).\textsuperscript{32} This time, the findings showed that MnCOSA significantly reduced sexual 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 has 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 has yielded an estimated return of $3.73.\textsuperscript{33}

### Why Does CoSA Work?

An offender’s likelihood of recidivating is influenced by several risk factors, which are also known as “criminogenic needs.” Given that the best predictor of future behavior is often past behavior, prior criminal history is, not surprisingly, the strongest risk factor for recidivism.\textsuperscript{34} Another major risk factor for recidivism is associating with antisocial peers.\textsuperscript{35} In general, individuals are a greater risk for recidivism when they have friends and acquaintances who are involved in crime. For example, research has shown that prisoners who are gang members have a greater likelihood of recidivating when they are released from prison.\textsuperscript{36}

On the other hand, research has also shown that recidivism is lower for offenders who have sources of pro-social support. When inmates are visited in prison, most often by family members and friends, they tend to recidivate less than unvisited prisoners.\textsuperscript{37} The friends and family members who visit not only provide offenders with emotional support during their imprisonment but also frequently offer housing, employment opportunities, and financial assistance following offenders’ release from prison.\textsuperscript{38} As important as this assistance from friends and loved ones can be in making a successful transition from prison to the community, social support may be especially influential if it comes from individuals an offender did not know before entering prison. For example, recent studies have shown that prison visits and mentoring from community volunteers are particularly effective in reducing recidivism.\textsuperscript{39}

The results from a qualitative process evaluation of MnCOSA underscore that pro-social support from “strangers” can have a powerful impact.\textsuperscript{40} Natalie Kroovand Hipple and I were coauthors of a study led by Miriam Northcutt Bohmert in which interviews were conducted with 10 core members and 33 circle volunteers involved with MnCOSA. This study examined whether the social support core members received was expressive (i.e., providing advice, friendship, special outing, or helping with drug abuse) or instrumental (i.e., finding housing, searching for jobs, and providing money, material goods, or transportation).

Several common themes were identified in the interviews with the core members. While many prisoners lack social support in general, what little support they have often comes from those who maintain criminal lifestyles. The prison visitation literature has shown, for example, that most inmates are not visited in prison.\textsuperscript{41} The relative absence of pro-social support is illustrated by the comments from one core member, who said:

> Because all my association and affiliations have been with people who are criminal-minded and just, not really working class people. [MnCOSA] gave me an out where I could develop positive relationships and have positive support, you know. . . . I’ve never really had an opportunity to sit down with a group of working class people in society and gain perspective from their lifestyles. I could gain their trust and be able to interact with them. The interaction was great. To know that I was able to create a connection and have them work with me, at such a close level.\textsuperscript{42}
Even though most of the core members reported receiving some instrumental support, all indicated receiving expressive support. The most common type of expressive support was receiving moral or emotional support, followed by friendship and advice. In a powerful example of expressive support, one of the core members shared a story about how one of his circle volunteers came to his house because he was feeling suicidal:

Just like, Saturday, last Saturday, I was thinking about committing suicide. And I was depressed. You know, things wasn’t going right for me. I’ve been trying to find a job and things wasn’t going right. And I was thinking about using versus selling drugs and things like that and I called Jerry [COSA volunteer] instead of going to do that. And he came over and he talked to me and we sat down and we had a long talk. . . . He was there to comfort me and listen to me. You don’t have that out here, you know? And to find somebody that cares about me, that’s something that I look forward to. . . . When you need somebody to talk to, they’re there. When you need somebody, just for a shoulder to cry on, they’re there. I was crying Saturday and Jerry patted me on my back. You know, that’s something my dad used to do. You know, so. And just having him there was the most important thing. If I wouldn’t of had nobody there I don’t know what I might have done.43

Of the instrumental support that core members indicated they received, the most common form was employment assistance. In general, core members were satisfied with the social support their circles provided, and they generally emphasized the gains that were achieved in the areas of moral and emotional support, help with employment, advice, and friendship. As one core member put it:

I think just the friendship, sober friendship, has been the best part of it. You know, it’s hard to go to an AA meeting and kind of figure out who you want to associate with. You don’t know what’s really going on with a person. And these guys, my circle, I’ve got to know them real well. You know, I mean, to know their lives and what’s going on in their life, has been a big support for me. . . . The thing with my circle is that they don’t look at me as a sex offender; I’m a core member. We started out as equals you know. So that really helps.44

The comment from this MnCOSA participant also speaks to the possibility that circles help core members see themselves in a new light. Research that has focused on why offenders desist, or quit crime, has emphasized the importance of establishing a new identity that replaces the old criminal identity they once had.45 And hope for a new future that is rooted in a sober, clean, and law-abiding lifestyle is critical to the desistance process. One core member explained:

[MnCOSA] gave me hope. Hope, as far as, you know, you have people out here in society that look at you like you’re some kind of animal or beast because of the case. I mean, put it like this, if the shoe was on the other foot, I probably would look at a person different. I’m not sittin’ here and lyin’ in your face. I came from Chicago and you hear a sex offender, my immediate thought was, “Oh, you mess with kids right?”46

By offering hope to core members, CoSA helps offenders either begin or maintain the identity transformation process that can lead to desistance. Core members are also connected with sources of pro-social support that, in all likelihood, they would not have experienced in the absence of 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 critical in making a successful transition from prison to the community.

### Challenges to Implementing CoSA

The findings from CoSA evaluations in Canada, the UK, and in particular, Minnesota indicate the program is an effective correctional intervention that delivers an impressive ROI. In fact, the ROI for
MnCOSA is even more impressive when compared to the cost-benefit results observed for other correctional interventions. For example, in their extensive research on the cost-effectiveness of 24 different adult correctional programs, Steven Aos and Elizabeth Drake reported that the estimated benefits from these interventions (after subtracting the costs) ranged from a low of $1,115 to a high of $24,840 per participant. Therefore, the estimated benefit (minus the costs) of $40,923 per participant for MnCOSA is 65 percent higher than the best estimate reported by Aos and Drake. Given these findings, why is CoSA not being used on a much broader scale? The main reason is that CoSA appears to be a difficult program to implement. In the places where it has been implemented, CoSA has been a low-volume intervention. Programs in Canada and the UK have averaged between 10 and 15 circles per year, while the annual average has been closer to six for MnCOSA. In addition, there are instances in which some jurisdictions in the US have tried, but ultimately failed, to implement 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. 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. To alleviate these challenges, reducing the number of volunteers per circle is one strategy that has been proposed. However, it is worth remembering that cutting corners or delivering the “light” version of an intervention can compromise its effectiveness.

Another challenge with CoSA is the difficulty in delivering quick results. For example, due to the low volume of core member enrollment in MnCOSA (just 50 core members from 2008 to 2016) combined with the relatively low sexual recidivism base rates that have recently been observed for US sex offenders (between 2 and 5 percent), it took nearly a decade since the start of the program to achieve significant results for sexual reoffending. Currently, it is unclear whether the findings for MnCOSA are unique or whether they are generalizable to other places in the US that have implemented a CoSA program (e.g., California, Colorado, North Carolina, and Vermont).

If Minnesota is a best-case scenario in terms of the impact on sexual recidivism, then the wait could be even longer (e.g., 15 years before significant results are obtained, if at all). As long as the figures for sexual recidivism and core member enrollment remain relatively low, lengthy periods of time will be needed to adequately determine whether CoSA programs in other jurisdictions are effective in reducing sexual reoffending.

**Expanding the Use of CoSA**

These challenges notwithstanding, efforts to establish new CoSA programs should continue given the impressive results that have been observed in the locations where it has been implemented and evaluated. To this end, a few strategies are worth considering to expand the use of CoSA in the US. First, developing a more effective startup strategy for CoSA programs is possible only when we achieve a better understanding as to why it has been difficult to successfully implement. Accordingly, federal funding should be allocated for the implementation and evaluation of CoSA pilot projects. Preference should be given to projects that not only use RCTs but also can carry out process evaluations to better determine the reasons why programs succeed or fail.

Second, given the challenges in recruiting community volunteers to work with convicted sex offenders, applying CoSA to other offender populations may help expand the degree to which it is used. There is no reason why CoSA cannot be effective for individuals who have not been convicted of a sex offense. After all, a lack of pro-social support is common to many prisoners, which helps explain why antisocial peers is a major
criminogenic need. Moreover, results have shown CoSA has had a relatively large impact on general recidivism, which implies it would likely be effective for individuals who have not been convicted of a sex offense.

But due to the heavy reliance on community volunteers, a CoSA program that targeted non–sex offenders would likely remain a low-volume intervention. As long as this is the case, CoSA should continue to focus on individuals with a higher risk for violent crime. Low-enrollment programs are generally more costly to operate on a per-participant basis, which is why the return (i.e., the cost-avoidance benefit) needs to be substantial for it to be cost-effective. Because violent crimes are the most costly to society, preventing their occurrence optimizes the potential size of the cost-avoidance benefit. Applying CoSA to a high-risk population also helps highlight its ability to reduce recidivism.

**Conclusion**

For some, any intervention—even one with good results—that provides sex offenders with another chance at being a productive member of society may still be perceived as misguided. Recall, however, that core members in CoSA programs have generally been sex offenders who were going to be released from prison regardless of whether they participated in CoSA. When these individuals return to the community, do we want their reentry to fail or succeed? It is worth remembering that when they fail, it means not only more crime but also more victims. But when they succeed, and CoSA clearly increases the odds for success, that means less crime in the future. Therefore, while CoSA produces benefits for the core members by providing them with pro-social support, it is also important to emphasize that CoSA delivers benefits for society by reducing the number of victims of crime, especially sex offenses.

Still, because CoSA is not a punitive intervention, some may perceive it as “soft” on crime. Ultimately, whether an approach to crime is “soft” or “tough” is beside the point. Instead, what should matter is whether the approach works. Does it reduce crime while delivering a positive ROI? By this standard, CoSA is a smart, humane approach to crime that works.

The effectiveness of CoSA 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. Many of the core members who participate in CoSA are aware of how sex offenders are perceived by society. For these individuals who have offended sexually, the circle not only provides them with much-needed sources of pro-social support but also offers hope and a path to redemption.

**About the Author**

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Notes


12. Wilson, Picheca, and Prinzo, “Circles of Support and Accountability.”


16. Wilson, email.


20. Wilson, Picheca, and Prinzo, “Circles of Support and Accountability.”


22. Wilson, Picheca, and Prinzo, “Circles of Support and Accountability.”

23. Wilson, Picheca, and Prinzo, “Circles of Support and Accountability.”

24. R. J. Wilson, F. Cortoni, and A. W. McWhinnie, “Circles of Support & Accountability: A Canadian National Replication of


27. Wilson, Picheca, and Prinzo, “Circles of Support and Accountability.”


29. Duwe, “Can Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) Work in the United States?”


31. Duwe, “Can Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) Work in the United States?”

32. Duwe, “Can Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) Significantly Reduce Sexual Recidivism?”


48. Aos and Drake, “Prison, Police and Programs.”
50. Wilson, email.
54. Wilson, email.