Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) are an intervention used with high risk sex offenders to support and enable their reintegration back into society, whilst still holding them accountable for their behaviour (Cesaroni, 2001). Established in Canada, they are now growing in the UK, in both success and public confidence (Wilson, Picheca & Prinzo, 2007a; 2007b) and for the first time ever CoSAs have been established within a prison setting by the Safer Living Foundation; a UK based charity consisting of representatives from Whatton prison, Nottingham Trent University, Nottinghamshire police and the National Probation Trust.

Following the success of Circles in the community the first ever prison-based CoSA in the UK were established by the charity in 2014 at HMP Whatton, a sex offender treatment prison. This was following concerns that some high risk prisoners were leaving the prison without family or community support, which is particularly worrying due to social isolation being a significant risk factor for further re-offending.

Within the prison model the Circles are therefore designed to start with a core member 3-8 months prior to their release, before continuing out into the community with them. It is hoped doing this provides ‘through the gate’ support at a crucial time of a prisoner’s sentence. High-risk individuals who have committed sexual offences and, due to their additional vulnerability during release from prison, are either elderly (55+) and/or intellectually disabled are being prioritised for places on these circles.

In order to achieve the goals and objectives outlined above a longitudinal research design, utilising a mixed-methodology, is being used. This involves semi-structured interviews, analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, and repertory grids, analysed using the statistical package Idiogrid, being carried out both pre and post prison circle with the core member. Alongside this semi-structured interviews, analysed again using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, involving the circle volunteers are being undertaken in order to add further depth to the data.

The research, and subsequent, that will be discussed at the conference focuses specifically on the prison-based part of the life of a CoSA. However, the long term plan of progression is to incorporate the community section of the prison-model Circles within the research, thus including another time point for data collection.
Goals of the Paper:

1. Provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the sex offenders (Core Members), and volunteers, as they engage with prison-based circles.
2. To understand and explore the psychological and risk-related changes in sex offenders, relating to reoffending over time, as they engage in this new initiative.
3. To examine the particular needs of intellectually disabled and elderly Core Member sex offenders, and their supporting volunteers, as they engage in a prison-based circle.

References


The Role of Support Networks in “Keeping Safe” in the Community

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The challenges faced by sex offenders reentering the community from prison are numerous and include difficulties securing housing, employment, maintaining prosocial support networks, drug and alcohol treatment, physical and mental health problems, and the need for sex offender specific treatment. Research indicates it is possible to reduce reoffending through the effective reintegration of offenders into the community (Willis & Grace, 2008, 2009). Successful transition is dependent in part on an offender's ability to find necessary social support within the community. The presence of a social network assists in reducing social isolation and boredom which represent threats to successful transition (Graffam, Shinkfield, LaVelle, & McPherson, 2004).

Hepburn and Griffin (2004) reported the presence of social bonds with family or friends significantly affected successful adjustment to probation. Similarly, Hanson and Harris (2000) found recidivists had significantly fewer positive peer influences and more negative peer influences than nonrecidivists. Research on dynamic risk factors identified variables that may be relevant for community reintegration including employment instability, social influences, and antisocial associates. Furthermore, a
history of imprisonment can lead to exclusion from traditional social networks (Berg and Huebner, 2011). Low social competence experienced by child molesters combined with public fear and formal responses toward sex offenders such as registration and notification weaken existing bonds to family and friends and may impede the formation of social support networks (Hepburn and Griffin, 2004; Willis and Grace, 2008, 2009).

Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) provides sex offenders returning to the community with a safety net that includes supervision, treatment, and other services to significantly reduce the likelihood of reoffending. The model provides support for sex offenders while simultaneously holding them accountable for their choices in the community (Wilson and McWhinnie, 2010). CoSA is effective because it provides offenders with prosocial sources of support which offset the adverse effects of rejection, loneliness, and social isolation (Duwe, 2012).

The Special Treatment Unit (STU) recognizes the value of continued social support during the release process and once residents’ transition into the community. Many residents lack the supports needed for successful reintegration into society. With this in mind the STU developed a protocol which is intended to provide support to discharged residents that specifically addresses the unique needs they face as they return to life beyond the institution. As a resident of the Therapeutic Community nears release from the STU he selects two peers who are familiar with his offending dynamics, his risks and potential triggers to be his “Keepsafe Buddies.” These individuals provide social support during the furlough and discharge process first in person and then via regular telephone contact. The Keep Safe process provides discharged residents with social support similar to that provided by a Circle of Support and Accountability. This study examines the role of the Keep Safe process in providing social support to civilly committed sex offenders reentering the community from the Special Treatment Unit to assist in the reintegration process and reduce rates of reoffending.

The present study is based upon a retrospective design examining the role of the Keep Safe process in providing social support. Adjustment to the community, rates of technical violations and recidivism outcomes were compared between 38 residents discharged from the Special Treatment Unit who were assigned keep safe contacts to provide social support during the transition process compared to 38 residents who did not have keep safe contacts. Measures of social bonds and support as well as an evaluation of planning for accommodation, employment, and community-based treatment were collected from the Comprehensive Discharge Plan (CDP) and Community Resource Team (CRT) documentation. Data regarding demographics, criminal history, static factors, risk level and time at risk were compared between the two groups. The follow up period ranged from 6 to 84 months.

Goals of the Paper:
1. List the challenges faced by sex offenders reentering the community from prison and civil commitment.
2. Discuss the importance of social bonds and social support in successful reintegration into society.
3. Explain the role of the Keep Safe process in providing social support to civilly committed sex offenders during the furlough process and reentering the community from the Special Treatment Unit.