

Submission to Queensland Productivity Commission Inquiry into Imprisonment and Recidivism

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Introduction

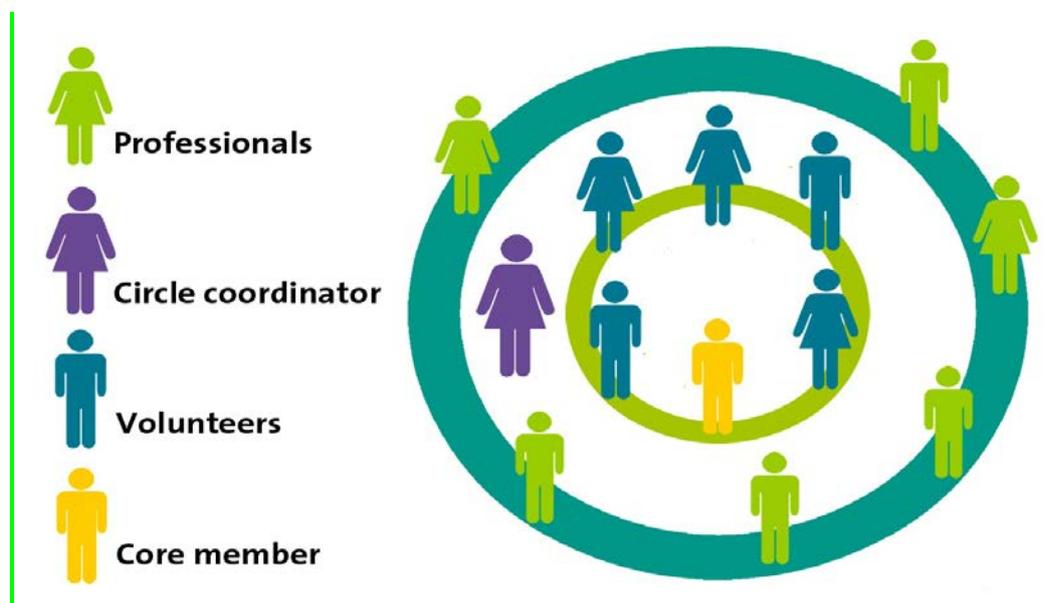
This Submission relates primarily to the Inquiry area ‘Preventing Recidivism’, and more specifically to the issue of ‘post-prison support’. It provides evidence about the efficacy of one innovative post-prison reintegration measure for sex offenders - ‘Circles of Support and Accountability’ - and argues that given the effectiveness of this measure, consideration should be given to its implementation in Queensland. This is especially critical given that the period immediately following the release of high-risk sex offenders from prison into the community carries the highest risk of reoffending (Hanson, Harris, Helmus, & Thornton, 2014).

Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA)

Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) are groups of trained community volunteers who support (usually child) sex offenders to reintegrate into the community after prison (Hannem & Petrunik, 2007; Wilson, Picheca, & Prinzo, 2005). CoSA have twin aims: to reintegrate child sex offenders into the community; and to reduce the sexual victimisation of children. Since their emergence in Canada in 1994 (Correctional Service Canada, 2002; Hannem & Petrunik, 2004), CoSA have become a feature of criminal justice systems in North America (Chouinard & Riddick, 2014; Fox, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017), the United Kingdom (McCartan, 2016; McCartan et al., 2014; Nellis, 2009; Thomas, Thompson, & Karstedt, 2014), and Western Europe (Hoing, Bogaerts, & Vogelvang, 2013, 2015, 2016; Hoing, Vogelvang, & Bogaerts, 2015; Petrina, Alards, & Hoing, 2015). Most recently, a small CoSA pilot program was established in Adelaide, South Australia (Richards & McCartan, 2018; Worthington, 2015).

CoSA programs all operate on the premise that by providing recently-released sex offenders (known as “Core Members”) with a circle of community volunteers who provide both practical support and accountability, offenders will be equipped to lead law-abiding lives in the community. Circles meet weekly at the beginning of the process and this may reduce as the Core Member progresses, with each circle usually lasting between 12 and 18 months (Harvey, Philpot, & Wilson, 2011). CoSA are typically managed by a Circles Co-ordinator, who is an experienced criminal justice professional (see figure 1) (for a more detailed logic model of CoSA service delivery, see Elliott & Zajac, 2015; Elliott, Zajac, & Meyer, 2013; Hoing, et al., 2013). Volunteers provide a weekly report to the Co-ordinator, who reports regularly to statutory authorities (eg police, parole). If there is any concern there is an apparent risk of a further offence, this is reported to authorities. This has resulted on some occasions in an offender being recalled to prison (Bates, Saunders, & Wilson, 2007; Quaker Peace and Social Witness, 2008).

Figure 1: Model of a Circle of Support and Accountability



Research on the effectiveness of CoSA

The international research on CoSA demonstrates that this approach can be effective in reducing reoffending and reintegrating Core Members into the community, enhancing community safety, and lowering criminal justice costs. The remainder of this Submission provides an overview of the existing research literature in this regard.

Only one Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) has been conducted on CoSA to date. The RCT is part of an ongoing evaluation of the Minnesota Department of Corrections' CoSA program ("MnCOsa"). In his evaluation of the program, Duwe (2018) randomly assigned 50 sex offenders into a CoSA (the treatment group) and 50 sex offenders not into a CoSA (the control group) and measured the recidivism of the two groups over an average of six years. Duwe (2018) found lower rates of recidivism among Core Members than among the control group for all six measures, which were defined as follows:

- **Rearrest** - Rearrested for a new offense—misdemeanor, gross misdemeanor, or felony—after release from prison;
- **Sex offense rearrest** - Rearrested for a new "hands-on" sex offense—gross misdemeanor or felony—after release from prison;
- **Reconviction** - Reconvicted—misdemeanor, gross misdemeanor, or felony—after release from prison;
- **Sex offense reconviction** - Reconvicted for a new "hands-on" sex offense—gross misdemeanor or felony—after release from prison;
- **Resentenced** - Resentenced to prison for a new felony reconviction after release from prison; and
- **Technical violation revocation** - Returned to prison after having supervised release (i.e., parole) revoked for violating the conditions of supervision.

Statistically significant differences in sexual recidivism were found between the CoSA Core Members and the control group, with only one Core Member being rearrested for a new sexual offence (2% of the total number of Core Members) compared with seven in the control group (14% of the total) (Duwe, 2018). **The rate of rearrest for a new sexual offence was thus 88 percent lower for Core Members than those in the control group.** In terms of reconviction

for a new sexual offence, no CoSA Core Members (0%) were reconvicted compared with four from the control group (8%). As all four of these offenders were subsequently sentenced to prison, the figures for reincarceration in relation to a new sexual offence are identical (0% for Core Members and 8% for the control group) (Duwe 2018).

Duwe's (2018) study provides the most rigorous evaluation of CoSA to date (see also Duwe, 2013). However, a number of quasi-experiments have also been undertaken to examine the effectiveness of CoSA in reducing recidivism among Core Members in other parts of the globe. Quasi-experiments use *comparison* groups rather than *control* groups - rather than randomly assigning offenders into treatment and control groups, quasi-experiments compare the treatment group with a matched group of offenders.

Wilson, Picheca and Prinzo's (2005) evaluation of a CoSA pilot in South-Central Ontario matched 60 high-risk sex offenders who participated in CoSA with 60 high-risk offenders who did not participate, and measured the two groups' levels of recidivism, over an average follow-up time of 4.5 years. They found that levels of recidivism among CoSA participants were statistically significantly lower than for offenders who did not participate in a CoSA. In comparison with the matched group of offenders, CoSA participants had: 70 percent less sexual recidivism (5% (n = 3) versus 16.7% (n = 10)); 57 percent less violent recidivism (including sexual recidivism) (15% (n = 9) versus 35% (n = 21)); and 35 percent less recidivism of any kind (including sexual and violent recidivism) (28.3% (n = 17) versus 43.4% (n = 26)). Wilson, Picheca and Prinzo's (2005) study also found that where sexual reoffending did occur, CoSA participants had committed offences of a less serious nature than their counterparts who did not participate in a Circle.

In 2009, Wilson, Cortoni and McWhinnie (2009) replicated Wilson, Picheca and Prinzo's (2005) study, using data from CoSA programs across Canada. Wilson, Cortoni and McWhinnie (2009) matched 44 CoSA participants with 44 offenders who did not participate in a CoSA, and found that in comparison with the matched group of offenders, CoSA Core Members had: 83 percent less sexual recidivism (2.3% (n = 1) versus 13.7% (n = 6)); 73 percent less violent recidivism (including sexual recidivism) (9.1% (n = 4) versus 34.1% (n = 15)); and 71 percent

less recidivism of any kind (including sexual and violent recidivism) (11.4% (n = 5) versus 38.9% (n = 17)).

Similar research conducted in the United Kingdom (Bates, Williams, Wilson, & Wilson, 2014) likewise found statistically significantly higher violent and sexual reoffending among the comparison group than the CoSA group, as well as harm reduction among the CoSA Core Members (ie the small number who did reoffend sexually did not commit contact offences but offences of a less serious nature than their previous offending).

Cost effectiveness of CoSA

In addition to reducing reoffending, studies also indicate that CoSA can significantly reduce criminal justice spending. Elliot and Beech's (2012) United Kingdom research demonstrated a cost-benefit ratio of £1.04 for every pound spent on CoSA. In the US, Duwe (2018) found that for every dollar spent on the MnCOSA program, it generated an approximate benefit of US\$3.73, a 273 percent return on investment (see further Chouinard & Riddick, 2014).

Conclusion

The evidence is now clear, after nearly quarter of a century of practice in other parts of the world, that CoSA can reduce sexual recidivism and protect children and women in the community. Moreover, CoSA can provide a long-term return on investment. Given this evidence, as well as the enduring public concern about the issue of sexual offending, this Submission suggests that it is time for the Queensland Government to consider funding and supporting a CoSA trial.

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