

The Mixed Method Evaluation of 188 UK-Wide Community Circles of Support and Accountability

Co-authors

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Overview

- Circles UK received funding from the Big Lottery to set up 188 Circles over the next four years.
- Projects partners included:
 - Circles Merseyside
 - Safer Living Foundation
 - Circles South East
 - Yorkshire, Humberside & Lincolnshire Circles
 - Circles North West
- CoSA started in November 2015, with the first CoSA starting December 2015
- Mixed method programme of evaluation also started at this point.

Building on past CoSA UK evaluations

- CoSA supports and complements statutory supervision.
- CoSA supported risk management through proactive monitoring of behaviours and activities.
- CoSA reduced the social isolation of Core Members, provided practical help to support compliance with treatment programmes, and enabled Core Members to develop appropriate pro-social activities.
- Core Members and volunteers agreed that the Core Members risk had reduced by the end of the circle; but they had different perceptions of the level of risk that the Core Member posed at different points during the lifetime of the circle.
- Volunteers separate out their work with CoSA and compartmentalize it as a protective mechanism.
- Clear roles, responsibilities and training are essential to the work done by CoSA.
- Different participants have different views on the role, function and viability of “Support and Accountability” within the circle.

(Thomas, Thompson & Karstedt, 2014; McCartan et al., 2014; McCartan, 2016; xxxxxxxx????)

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Aims of Evaluation

- To understand the impact and success of CoSA in risk management and re-integration of sex offenders released into the community, through a Big Lottery funded Circle of Support and Accountability.
- To ensure the required outcomes of the Big Lottery funding are addressed, where these are research/evaluation related (i.e. not directly project related, such as ensuring x number of Circles are set up).
- To ensure robust evaluation data are collated and disseminated that can form the platform for future funding bids.

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Study 1/2: Changes in Core Members

Study 1 will focus on the dynamic risk of Core Members.

- It will highlight changes over time for risk-related items, outline 'normal' trajectories of DRR scores (baseline and end points) and incorporate more advanced analysis of data (logistic regression, factor analysis, multi-level modelling of data) to maximise usefulness of the DRR in predicting the failure of a CoSA /a red flag incident.
- The study will also report on the re-integration of the CMs as assessed by participation in appropriate hobbies and activities, having stable accommodation and having any paid or voluntary employment.

Study 2 will focus on the emotional wellbeing of Core Members

- This study will research on examining changes in the emotional wellbeing of Core Members, and in particular compare pre and post CoSA levels.

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Study 3: Through the Eyes of the Beneficiaries

- This study will seek to understand areas for improvement for the service delivery of CoSA through the eyes of the beneficiaries.
- This will include understanding the following aspects of the CoSA service: volunteer input; access to Circles; experience of Circles; and attitudes of external organisations for example Offender Managers and Supervisors working with service users whilst on CoSA.

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Study 4: Circles: Examining Success and Failure

- The research will analyse the reasons for circles ending, and will explore in detail, the experiences of all components of a failed circle by developing rich, mixed method case studies that involve CMs, volunteers, coordinators, and any other stakeholders (such as offender managers/supervisors, MAPPA members), and an analysis of data on the CoSA.
- This will help understand the reasons why a circle fails, what happens on failed circles and can be learned from failures (i.e. are their volunteer training needs that are unmet?). Where CoSA fail due to recalls, the reasons for recalls will be examined.
- This research will also include 2-3 case studies of successful CoSA, exploring how the CoSA has worked and what volunteers and the CMs have gained from it. Understanding the challenges that even successful CoSA need to overcome (and how they have done this) will also be part of this research.

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Study 5: Volunteers

- The research would analyse examine the chart the level, type and volume of volunteering, and increases in skills, confidence and experience.

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CoSA research challenges

Conflicting notions of what CoSA is and how it should be evaluated:

- Qualitative – How are core member stories to be conveyed? in-depth understandings and perspectives on change?
- Quantitative – is there the data set available to do this on the scale needed? Need to reconsider data collection and measurement techniques?
- Is Core Member self report a valid source of outcome data?
- Can volunteer report back ever be rigorous enough?
- Relationships with the state and official monitoring mechanisms?
- Matched samples vs Randomised Control Studies
- Should we be looking at Core Member changes in psychology and social engagement outside of pure risk assessments? (eg, Social and community contacts; pro social activities; capacity to self regulate; and desistance.

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CoSA challenges

- Reflections from Core Members, Prisoners at HMP Grendon and the Whatton and NTU Service User Research Group
- Service users
 - OMs / OSs did not know about CoSA
 - Nothing in their area
 - Indeterminate sentences
 - Not applicable as 'got' social support (but did not want to talk to them about sexual thoughts and worries)
 - Very positive about CoSA and typically wanted one – maybe too popular
 - Grendon service users talked about the need for people to talk to post TC

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CoSA challenges

PhD research on CoSAs starting at HMP Whatton has found the following challenges.

Core Members:

- Lack of trust towards volunteers – prison sessions enable relationships to be developed prior to release.
- Potential over-reliance on volunteers (particularly ID CMs)
- Even with the support of the circle CMs are still very aware of and worried about the stigma sex offenders face in the community

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CoSA challenges

Volunteers:

- Not all circles were including structured planning and debrief sessions – circles that did this seemed to work better.
- Confusion for some in their accountability role – from the core member interviews however, it was clear that they were being held accountable from the very beginning. More a case of increasing volunteer confidence than a lack of skills.
- Volunteers are not always turning up to sessions – both volunteers and core members view the circle coordinator as the ‘leader’ and ‘in charge’

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Questions and Contact details

- Interim review and outputs November 2017
- Final report December 2019

Please feel free to ask questions or make contact with US.

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