

# FAQs about COSA



## 1. What is COSA and how does it work?

COSA stands for 'Circles of Support and Accountability' and is a community based program, in which local volunteers support a person who has been convicted for sexual offending (core member in COSA). The program was developed in 1994 in Canada. The aim of COSA is to prevent new victims of sexual offending, and to offer a person who was convicted for a sexual offence (the core member) a chance for a better life. The core member has a medium to high risk of reoffending and a high need for social support.



In COSA, a circle of three to five trained and closely supervised volunteers meet with the core member on a regular basis. They offer support and guidance on all kinds of issues that arise in the core members daily life, and engage in social activities with the core member. Together they form the inner circle. They are trained, supervised and supported by a circle coordinator, usually an experienced professional. An

outer circle of experts (usually professionals who are involved in the core members' after care arrangements) offer support and advice to the inner circle. If volunteers signal increased risk or other causes for concern, the professionals are informed and can intervene. The circle coordinator acts as a linking pin between the inner and outer circle, and facilitates the exchange of information.

## 2. How many Circle projects are there and how many circles do they run?

The projects and numbers known listed below are based on publications and may not reflect the actual numbers. However, they provide an indication of the capacity of projects. There may be projects in other parts of the world, which we are not aware of.

Table 1: Circle projects and number of circles as of June 2019 (Höing, 2019)

Start	Country	Provider	No. of circles
1994	Canada	multiple	Ca. 350 total
2002	UK	multiple	Ca. 900 total
2005	USA	multiple	Ca. 250 total
2009	Italy	CIPM	19
2009	Netherlands	Dutch Probation/Avans &Exodus	159/1

2011	Belgium	CAW Antwerpen/ I.T.E.R. Brussels	12/8
2012	New Zealand	Te Piriti*	Ca.12
2013	Catalonia/Spain	Fundación Salud y Comunidad	21
2015	Ireland	P.A.C.E.	14
2015	Australia	OARS	3

### 3. How long do circles offer support to a core member?

The circles duration depends on the needs of the core member, with a minimum of 12 months in mainstream circle projects. Some projects offer an extension in the form of a mentoring volunteer who keeps in touch with the core member on a more irregular basis. Some statistics about average circle duration (mentorate excluded) from different countries:

- UK: 15,9 months (Bates et al., 2014)
- Netherlands: 18,2 months (Höing, 2019)
- Canada: 36 months (Chouinard & Riddick, 2015)

### 4. Who are the core members?

Circles are developed for people with convictions for sexual offending and a medium to high risk of sexual re-offending and a high need for social support. Since circles are based on openness and mutual trust, participating in a circle must be based entirely on the free will of the core member. Since Circles are based on group dynamics, the core member must be able and willing to function in a group of people. Therefore core members with severe psychiatric disorders sometimes will be excluded. The majority of core members has committed sexual offences against minors, but this is not a selection criterion. Some facts about core members in different countries:

*Table 2: Characteristics of core members*

Country	Study	Sample size	Male gender	Mean age at start	Child-abuser	Risk category medium & high
		n	%	years	%	%
Canada	Wilson et al. (2009)	60	100	47,5	73,3	na*
UK	Bates et al. (2014)	71	96	47,8	86,2	79
UK	Clarke et al. (2017)	275	na	46	na	74,2
USA	Duwe (2018)	50	100	38,5	na	100
Netherlands	Höing (2019)	149	100	46,6	85	85,5

\*na= information not available

## 5. Are circles effective?

A number of effect evaluations have shown the high potential of COSA to effectively reduce the re-offence rate of people with convictions for sexual offending. The table below lists the findings of effect studies conducted so far. In this table, only studies in which core members are compared with a control group are presented. Core members typically show a reduction in sexual re-offence rates between 70.1 and 100%. These results however must be seen as indicative, since many studies (except Duwe, 2018) are not meeting the gold standard for effect studies. Circles are also cost-effective. Duwe (2018) calculated that every dollar spent on COSA generates a benefit of 3,73 US dollars.

*Table 3: Effect-evaluations*

Country	Study	Design	Sample	Results: Core members vs. controls
USA	Duwe (2018)	Randomised controlled trial	50 core members vs. 50 controls	Re-arrest for sexual offence: 2% vs 14% Reconviction for new sexual offence: 0% vs 8%
Canada	Wilson, Picheca & Prinzo (2007)	Quasi experimental	60 core members vs. 60 matched comparisons	New sexual offence, or breach of license conditions: 5% vs 16,7% Violent recidivism: 15% vs 35%
Canada	Wilson, Cortoni & McWhinnie (2009)	Quasi experimental	44 core members vs 44 matched comparisons	New sexual offence, or breach of license conditions: 2,3% vs 13,7% Violent recidivism: 9,1% vs 34,1%
UK	Bates et al. (2014)	Quasi experimental	71 core members vs 71 broadly similar comparisons	Contact Sexual or violent re-conviction: 0% vs 14,3% Non-contact sexual re-convictions: 4,2 % vs 2,9%

## 6. Why are Circles effective?

While there is still a lack of research on the theory behind COSA effectiveness, studies so far revealed three important mechanisms that contribute to the outstanding results (Fox, 2016, Chouinard & Riddick, 2015; McCartan et al., 2014, Höing et al. 2013, Wilson et al. 2007):

- The circle offers social support and an inclusive small group and in doing so addresses generic and specific risk factors for sexual offending in a personalized manner, such as:

- social isolation and emotional loneliness
- stress
- lack of problem solving behaviour and competences

The long term involvement in a positive group offers the opportunity to develop a more positive identity, which is one of the typical processes in desistance from crime. Emotional wellbeing is a protective factor that contributes to desistance from sexual offending. Evaluation results in the UK demonstrated that, at the commencement of a Circles, Core Members had significantly poorer emotional wellbeing than the average person. However, emotional wellbeing of Core Members improved significantly throughout the duration of Circles. The data demonstrate an 18% increase in wellbeing scores, with 67% of the Core Members demonstrating significant improvements in wellbeing by the end of their Circles (Dwerryhouse, Winder & Elliot, 2017).

- The circle offers a safe place for the core member in which the core member is encouraged and supported to exercise new behaviour.
- In the circle, the offence and risk factors are discussed openly whenever appropriate, and in case of concerns in terms of risk this is shared with the Outer Circles. In doing so, the circle addresses specific risk factors for sexual offending such as
  - cognitive distortions about sexuality and sexual offending
  - sexual problematic behaviour
  - rule breaking behaviour

## 7. What are volunteer experiences in COSA?

Several studies show positive outcomes for volunteers as well. In Spain, Cercles CAT evaluated characteristics and experiences of volunteers (Cejfe, 2020). 75% is female, average age is 35,5 years. The majority is of Spanish origine and has a higher education level. Approximately half of them has had no prior experience with volunteering; 45% is working or studying in a psychosocial area. Their reported personal outcome of circles is:

- good health, no psychological discomfort or disorders
- high level of self-esteem, they experience their work in circles as efficient, meaningful and supporting change
- a more accurate perception of sex offenders regarding their social isolation, ability to change and their sexual deviation and dangerousness

They value the good organisational support which is provide through focus groups, workshops, training and supervision

In the UK, the Big Lottery Fund Project Evaluation (Winder, Belinda, February 2020) focused on the benefits of being involved in Circles by volunteers. The study involved 431 volunteers and showed that Circles had a widely positive impact on them in terms of increasing local skills, level of confidence and employability.

## 8. How is COSA financed?

While the COSA model looks simple and logical, the implementation is not cheap, nor a quick fix. COSA is effective because of high quality standards, which demand an intensive cooperation between professionals and volunteers and a close supervision of circles by the circle coordinator.

Projects have very different financing schemes. Circles may be funded through a commissioning scheme (e.g. Ireland, here the Probation Organisation commissions a number of circles per year in cooperation with PACE, an NGO; in Catalunya the Prison Directorate commissions Circles to FSYC, also an NGO). Other projects work through a procurement model (e.g. in some UK projects, Circles are contracted by the probation services or a consortium of Police and Probation). Some projects are embedded in professional or semi-government organizations and structurally funded through the organisation (e.g. in the Netherlands, the Dutch Probation runs a COSA project and employs circles coordinators and volunteers).

Other projects are run by NGO's who offer circles as part of their services, with diverse (and often insecure) funding schemes.

## 9. What to do when you are interested in starting a COSA project?

Contact CirclesEurope ([info@circleseurope.eu](mailto:info@circleseurope.eu)), we will be happy to support you with our expertise and experience in setting up a COSA projects. We will help you to meet the necessary quality standards.

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