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Circles of Support and Accountability – introducing a new Report – David Thompson and Terry Thomas

This article introduces a new research report published by the University of Leeds which presents the findings of a study of *Circles of Support and Accountability* for sexual offenders. The 274 page report entitled *Assessing the impact of Circles of Support and Accountability on the reintegration of adults convicted of sexual offences in the community* was launched at a conference at the University's School of Law on 25th- 26th June 2014.

As many practitioners who work with sex offenders know, *Circles of Support and Accountability* (Circles or CoSA) is a community-based initiative working across England and Wales that has been addressing issues of sex offender rehabilitation since 2002. In Circles volunteers work with medium and high risk sex offenders returning into their communities, their work being supervised by a professional Coordinator.

The research team from the University of Leeds, Leeds Metropolitan University and the University of Nottingham comprised Professors Susanne Karstedt, Terry Thomas, and Birgit Völlm, and Researcher David Thompson. Together they conducted an in-depth study of CoSA and *Circles UK* (the centralised coordinating body) across the country to assess the extent to which Circles Projects contribute towards a safe reintegration of adult sex offenders into the community. In seventy interviews the researchers investigated in detail the experiences of 30 'Core Members' (as the offender is known in the Circle), 20 volunteers and 20 stakeholders including, police and probation officers as well as MAPPA Coordinators and Senior Managers. The research team studied the ways in which Circles were managed and guided, and the links between their operation and statutory provisions for sex offenders.

The research findings demonstrate that *Circles of Support and Accountability* can break the vicious cycles of isolation and stigmatization that sex offenders experience on their re-entry into communities. Volunteers provide support, but they also instil a sense of being held accountable and controlled. Volunteers represent responsible but also 'caring' communities to sex offenders and they are capable of working with even difficult groups of offenders if provided with training, oversight and guidance. Stakeholders such as the police and probation officers who were interviewed appreciated the support offered by Circles and there was broad agreement as to the use of and value of volunteers.

The study findings also show that *Circles of Support and Accountability* are well received within the criminal justice system more generally and have established a reputation for themselves as reliable partners. With the necessary professional support and oversight

indispensable for volunteers working with such offenders, *Circles UK* as the national organisation has established model practices and projects in achieving this.

At the research launch conference Professor Susanne Karstedt spoke for the research team when she stated:

What is often ignored in public debates about sexual offending is the fact that the vast majority of individuals who have been convicted for these offences return to communities and neighbourhoods, often to a life of isolation and stigma. Our research confirms that Circles of Support and Accountability are a valuable tool for a safe re-entry of these individuals that support the offender and communities alike. It finds that volunteers can play a decisive role even with a group of difficult people. This collaborative research is exemplary for engagement with the wider community of service providers and funders in criminal justice.

The Chief Executive of *Circles UK*, Stephen Harvey also commented:

We are delighted to have the evidence through this study as to how it is that Circles work towards a safe re-integration of individuals convicted of sexual offences into the community. The stories of our extraordinary local volunteers, and the men they both support and monitor, and the affirmation of our statutory partners in this major study all point to the achievements of this unique service in creating safer communities.

To access an executive summary or the full report go to:

<http://www.law.leeds.ac.uk/research/projects/assessing-impact-cosa>

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