



Evaluating the Effectiveness of Professionally-Facilitated Volunteerism in the Community-Based Management of High-Risk Sexual Offenders: Part One – Effects on Participants and Stakeholders

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Abstract: This study presents evaluation data from the Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) pilot project in South-Central Ontario, Canada – specifically regarding the effect that COSA has had on the community and those personally involved in the project. Results suggest that the COSA initiative has had a profound effect on all stakeholders: offenders, community volunteers, affiliated professionals, and the community-at-large. Being involved in a COSA appears to have greatly assisted many high-risk sexual offenders released to the community in remaining crime-free, with many reporting that they likely would have returned to offending without help from COSA. Community volunteers involved in the project reported a perceived increase in community safety as a result of COSA, as well as a belief that Core Members were motivated to succeed in the community. Professionals and agencies (for example, police officers, social services professionals, administrators, and other similar professionals) identified increased offender responsibility and accountability, as well as enhanced community safety. Survey results obtained from members of the community-at-large showed substantial increases in perceived community safety in knowing that high-risk sexual offenders in the community were involved in the project. The results of this study are discussed within a framework of empowering communities to participate in the effective risk management of released sexual offenders.

Risk management of sexual offenders in community settings is perhaps the most controversial of all contemporary correctional issues. Silverman and

Wilson (2002) have likened the community's abhorrence and, sometimes, morbid fascination with these offenders to a 'moral panic'. The typical release of a 'high-risk' sexual offender goes something like this: offender released . . . police conduct community notification . . . media frenzy . . . community panic . . . offender driven out of said community or into hiding. This pattern of events appears to be universal, and there are countless examples on both sides of the Atlantic. However, despite repeated experience of this progression, few have ever seriously questioned whether such practices are actually effective in managing the community-based risk of released sexual offenders.

The latter part of the 20th Century was witness to a flurry of legislative attempts at increasing offender accountability, with an assumed attendant degree of increased community safety. However, some have questioned whether those practices have really done either. Typical examples are found in 'three strikes' laws, civil commitment, lifetime probation, and offender registries, the latter being particularly popular of late in Canada. The first Canadian sexual offender registry was instituted in the Province of Ontario in 2001, with a national registry being proclaimed in December 2004. The Ontario registry was heralded as a 'bold measure in community safety'; however, some have questioned whether the community is really any safer since the establishment of the registry (Wilson 2003; John Howard Society of Alberta 2001).

The primary criticism of sexual offender registries is that they are only as good as their compliance rates, and it is widely believed that the most problematic offenders (that is, those most likely to reoffend) are also those most likely to thwart efforts to maintain accurate data on a registry. While we accept and fully support the contention that law-enforcement agencies must have access to accurate information when investigating crimes, we also assert that sexual offender reoffence statistics are such that a majority of crimes being investigated are more likely than not to have been committed by offenders not presently on a registry. These difficulties have begged the question: Is there another way?

Restorative Approaches

The latter part of the 20th Century was also witness to considerable renewed interest in restorative approaches to crime and offender management. Ironically, professional interest in restoration increased as the public's cries for more punitive measures rang out loud and clear. Politically, such measures as detention (that is, denial of conditional release), specialised peace bonds, registries, and long-term supervision orders, were instituted as a means to demonstrate that the system was serious about 'getting tough on crime'. Meanwhile, meta-analytic reviews of the effects of incarceration and rehabilitative programming continued to suggest that longer, harsher sentences were not likely to achieve the sort of value-added that either the public wanted or the government hoped to achieve. No offender population has been more affected by these perspectives than have sexual offenders.

Understandably, the public has rather strong views about sexual offender risk management, and this has been reflected to a degree in policy and practice. However, one simple truth remains: most sexual offenders receive determinate sentences and, as such, will return to the community. Experiences in the past ten years have clearly demonstrated the need for a co-ordinated approach to sexual offender reintegration, but serious short-falls in both service provision and offender accountability have remained.

The Circles of Support and Accountability initiative (see Wilson, Picheca and Prinzo 2005; Wilson *et al.* 2007) began, quite simply, as an innovative response to a single set of circumstances: a high-risk, repeat, child sexual abuser was released to the community from a federal penitentiary. The response of the community was swift – picketing, angry calls for political intervention, heightened media attention, and 24-hour police surveillance. In response to the offender's pleas for assistance, a Mennonite pastor agreed to gather a group of congregants around him, to offer both humane support and a realistic accountability framework. Following a similar intervention with another offender a few months later, the Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario (MCCO) agreed to sponsor a pilot project called the Community Reintegration Project, and the Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) movement was born. Thorough descriptions of the COSA model are available elsewhere (Correctional Service of Canada 2002; Wilson and Picheca 2005; Wilson *et al.* 2007).

Ten years after the initiation of the first Circle, similar projects have been seeded in all Canadian provinces, several jurisdictions in the United States of America, each of the member countries of the United Kingdom, and interest has been indicated by such countries as the Netherlands, South Africa, and Bermuda. These projects have come about as a result of positive outcome data originating from the MCCO pilot project. This article represents the first part of a formal review of this project, and focuses on the effects that involvement in this project have had on participants and the community-at-large.

Method

Measures

Survey questionnaires were produced to sample the experiences of each of four COSA stakeholder groups: Core Members, circle volunteers, professionals affiliated with the project, and members of the community-at-large. A survey was constructed specifically for each group, with all surveys including a section requesting demographic data. For the circle volunteers, survey content included previous volunteer and COSA experience and attitudes regarding COSA. The Core Member survey addressed criminal history, initial experience with COSA (that is, upon release), current experience with COSA, and attitudes regarding COSA. The questionnaire devised for professionals and agency members surveyed experience with COSA and attitudes regarding COSA. Members of the community-at-large were asked to share their feelings and attitudes regarding COSA and its existence in their community.

Procedure

Surveys were distributed to the Core Members, circle volunteers, and professional/agency members through several means. Some questionnaires were distributed to Core Members and circle volunteers following a brief presentation regarding the purpose of the survey. Surveys were also circulated during administrative meetings, with the questionnaires then being distributed to Core Members and circle volunteers during subsequent meetings (for example, surveys were provided to the project co-ordinator who then gave them to relevant circle volunteers, who then passed them on to associated Core Members). Otherwise, surveys were emailed to administrators and circle volunteers, who then distributed them to other circle volunteers or to Core Members, or the surveys were mailed directly to potential participants. The surveys were distributed to the community sample primarily through pre-arranged workshops/lectures, faith communities, and places of employment. Regardless of the means of distribution, all respondents were provided with a package that included a letter of introduction and consent, one of the four survey questionnaires constructed specific to the particular group, and a stamped addressed envelope in which to return the completed survey.

Participants

Core members

Thirty-seven surveys were distributed to past and current Core Members. Twenty-three surveys were returned completed, one was returned incomplete, and the survey of one past Core Member was returned undeliverable ('return to sender'). Overall, there was a 65% response rate (24/37). The Core Member sample consisted of 24 male offenders convicted of a sexual offence, who had since completed their sentence and were living in the community.

To address the relatively low response rate in this group, we attempted to ascertain why some Core Members had refused to complete questionnaires. In some cases, literacy was a major issue. The most common reason for a Core Member's refusal to complete the survey was due to a generalised mistrust of researchers and other persons affiliated with the correctional system. Simply put, when they found out that the researchers were employees of the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), they flatly refused to be involved.

Circle volunteers

Eighty-four surveys were distributed to past and present circle volunteers, of which 57 were returned completed, three were returned incomplete, and the survey of one past volunteer was returned undeliverable ('return to sender'). The response rate was 68% (57/84). The circle volunteer sample consisted of 35 men, 21 women, and one case where gender was not specified (total n = 57). In terms of occupation, 25% identified themselves as being retired. Of the remaining 75%, the majority (48%) reported working in the helping services field (for example, counseling).

Professional/agency members

Twenty surveys were distributed to professionals and agency personnel who had provided consultation services to the project on at least one occasion. Sixteen were returned, for a response rate of 80%. The professional/agency sample consisted of twelve men and four women. In terms of employment, there were several different types of occupations represented. One-quarter of the sample was employed in law enforcement and 31% worked in social services. The remaining respondents were either administrators, managers, or did not specify their occupation.

Community-at-large

Initially, there were 176 community respondents (65 men, 107 women, and four did not specify gender). However, respondents who indicated that they were employed in the area of criminal justice or who had prior volunteer experience in the correctional system were selected out, as we did not wish to bias this particular sample by including persons who might be favourably disposed towards the correctional system. As a result, this sample was reduced to 77 (34 men, 41 women, and two did not specify gender). Analyses were conducted only on this subsample. In terms of occupation, 27% were students, 23% worked in the helping service field, and 20% worked as administrators/managers. Thirty per cent did not specify their occupation. The response rate for the community sample is unknown as surveys were distributed in large quantities.

Table 1 outlines the demographic characteristics of the four samples.

Results

Core Members

The majority of respondents were repeat offenders (provincially or federally). While 67% reported having a previous conviction for a sexual offence, 33% reported having a previous conviction for an assault-related offence. Twenty-nine per cent of the respondents also indicated that they had previous conviction(s) for property related offence(s).

For the 83% of respondents who indicated previous incarcerations, 26% reported having an inter-incarceration period (that is, time in the community between sentences) of less than six months, whereas approximately one-half reported being in the community for two years or longer before being incarcerated again. In terms of inter-incarceration experience, 67% reported experiencing loneliness and 56% experienced lack of support. Sixty-seven per cent found the experience of being out and alone challenging.

The respondents reported that they first learned of the COSA project from various sources; namely, other inmates (25%), psychologists (21%), volunteers (13%), and community chaplains while on institutional visits (13%). Approximately two-thirds of the respondents were in the community for more than two years and 17% were in the community for less than six months prior to responding to this survey.

TABLE 1
 Demographic Information

	Core Members (n = 24)	Volunteers (n = 57)	Professionals (n = 16)	Community (n = 77)
Gender				
Male	100%	63%	75%	38%
Female	0%	37%	25%	62%
Age (years)				
Mean (SD)	48 (11)	55 (14)	48 (9)	40 (15)
Marital Status				
Married/common-law	0%	57%	94%	62%
Divorced/separated	38%	25%	6%	11%
Widowed	4%	4%	0%	1%
Never married	58%	14%	0%	25%
Education				
≥ 8 years	21%	0%	0%	0%
9-13 years	54%	9%	6%	8%
College	8%	9%	6%	43%
University	0%	30%	19%	33%
Graduate school	8%	51%	69%	16%
Other	8%	2%	0%	0%
Dependant children				
0	87%	61%	44%	41%
1	0%	17%	13%	14%
2+	13%	23%	43%	45%

Initial and current experiences with the COSA

Several of the survey items addressed the Core Members' experiences at the onset of their joining a Circle ('initially') and at the time of completing the survey ('currently').

Initially, why did you enter a Circle?

Eighty-three per cent of the respondents reported that they decided to enter a Circle because they did not have any other form of social support. Approximately two-thirds reported that they were willing to try anything that would help them with their reintegration into the community. Negative community reaction to their release was the motivation for just over half of the respondents entering into a Circle.

Initially/currently, how did you feel about being in a Circle?

In terms of their initial feelings about being in a Circle, almost all of the respondents expressed that they were thankful, anxious, or relieved at having this type of help available. Sixty-one per cent were proud of their involvement, and one-third felt supported by others and were confident that they would be able to cope with difficult situations that may arise. One-third of the respondents experienced negative feelings, such as concerns about lack of confidentiality, skepticism that their involvement would make a

difference, and feeling pressured by others to participate in a Circle. Twenty-nine per cent were angry about having to be involved in the project.

In terms of their current feelings about being involved in a Circle, reductions in negative feelings were noted. Specifically, fearful feelings dropped by approximately 20% and anger feelings dropped by approximately 10%, while feelings of confidence increased by approximately 10%.

Initially/currently, I thought/think the COSA was/is going to . . .

At the onset of their participation in a Circle, 74% of the respondents reported that they believed that the Circle was going to help them adjust to life in the community. Three-quarters believed that the Circle was going to provide them with supportive people to talk with. Seventeen per cent of the respondents thought the Circle would provide them with a role model. After having at least some experience with the project, however, some respondents changed their perceptions. In particular, 86% believed that the project helped them adjust to the community and 48% thought the project provided a role model.

Initially/currently, how would you describe your relationship with circle volunteers?

Initial experiences with the circle volunteers were quite positive. Between 52% and 70% of respondents reported that they got along with everyone, that the circle volunteers were very supportive of them, and that they were very honest and went out of their way to help them.

The way in which Core Members described their relationships with circle volunteers became considerably more positive after having some experience with the project. In fact, more Core Members reported that they got along with everyone (52% then versus 90% now) and that the circle volunteers were very supportive of them (61% then versus 86% now).

How did the Circle help you cope or adjust to the community when you were first released?

When first released, approximately two-thirds of the respondents reported that the Circle helped them cope/adjust to the community by providing assistance with practical issues such as finding a job or getting identification papers and providing emotional support. Sixty-five per cent reported the Circle provided them with an opportunity to socialise. These results remained constant after having some experience with a Circle.

When you first joined, what do you think you got from the Circle?

The majority of the respondents (92%) reported that when they first joined the Circle they experienced a sense of support and acceptance by others. An increase in anxiety/pressure in terms of attending to accountability structures (for example, Circle contract, Peace Bonds, prohibition orders imposed by the court) was experienced by 62% of the respondents. Finally, 39% reported that the Circle provided them with a realistic perspective of their position in the community. Briefly, many Core Members failed to grasp that they had to earn the trust and acceptance of society.

When considering their current experience with their Circle, the rates regarding support and acceptance and anxiety/pressure changed minimally: 88% reported experiencing a sense of support and acceptance by others and 67% experienced an increase in anxiety/pressure. More importantly, offenders became more realistic about their position in the community (62% now versus 39% then).

What do you think might have happened if the programme did not exist? The respondents were asked to reflect upon what their experience would have been like if the COSA project did not exist. The vast majority of the respondents reported that they would have become lonely, isolated, and powerless. Ninety per cent reported they would have had more difficulty adjusting to the community. Approximately two-thirds reported they would have had difficulty with relationships and would have returned to crime.

Circle Volunteers

Sixty-three per cent of circle volunteers reported that they were first made aware of the COSA project through friends or family members who either had information about it or who were actually participating in a Circle. Previous experience with corrections or contact with a Core Member provided 40% of the circle volunteers with knowledge of the COSA project. Twenty-eight per cent of circle volunteers learned of this project through interactions with their faith community.

For a large number of the circle volunteers (72%), the transition from first becoming aware of the project to actually becoming involved was motivated by an interest in working with this population. Approximately 30% of the circle volunteers were motivated by wanting to give something back to their community. Identification with the offenders (through personal experiences or family histories of victimisation) was the impetus for approximately one-fifth of the circle volunteers to become involved in a Circle. Slightly more than 10% thought this would be an exciting experience.

Approximately 70% felt that the circle volunteers experienced a sense of community and 38% reported that they experienced increased self-worth as a consequence of their involvement in the project. Approximately 30% reported that they experienced an emotional bond to others and one-quarter reported that they experienced friendship within the context of the COSA project.

Experience working with Core Members

Some interesting differences were revealed when initial and current experiences of circle volunteers with Core Members were examined. Initially, 32% of volunteers felt anxious that they would not be able to deal with difficult situations. However, this reduced drastically when considering their current experience, with only 4% reporting such feelings. In addition, 51% initially indicated fear that they would be unable to cope with difficult situations; however, only 27% felt this way currently. Sixty per cent of the circle volunteers felt they were initially supported by the organisation; however, this was reduced to 23% when considering their

current experience. Lastly, 91% were initially hopeful that they would be making a difference in a former offender's life; however, this was reduced to 43% when considering their current experience.

In terms of the circle volunteers' relationship with the Core Members, the vast majority of respondents (92%) felt they were at least somewhat positively received. Only 25% reported that they experienced some pressure to assist the Core Member in a way that made them uncomfortable. Among those Circles with Core Members who experienced difficulties (for example, lapses or a breach of conditions), 44% of the respondents noted that the Circle was extremely supportive of the Core Member, 12% reported a moderately supportive approach, and 7% reported that the Circle was only somewhat supportive. A majority of the circle volunteers also noted that their Circle was effective at recognising when a Core Member was experiencing difficulties.

Technical requirements

Regarding the time commitment required in being a part of a Circle, 84% of the circle volunteers felt it was moderately or totally manageable. No respondents reported that the commitment was unmanageable. Circle volunteers reported that the frequency of Circle meetings often depended on the needs of the Core Member (32%), although weekly meetings were also common (36%).

Circle volunteers reported that they were available to respond to the needs of the Core Member in approximately 75% of instances. In cases where they were not available, they were always able to ensure that another circle volunteer made telephone contact.

While the vast majority of circle volunteers reported that they were at least moderately satisfied with their Circle (93%), only 35% reported that they would not change anything about their Circle if they had the opportunity. Of the changes that they would like to see, 23% reported they would make the Circle larger, 19% reported they would include more social activities, and 14% reported they would like to see more youthful members.

How COSA benefits the various parties

Almost all of the circle volunteers (96%) reported that they believed the Core Member felt supported by the Circle. Ninety per cent believed that the Core Member received a sense of acceptance by others and 82% believed the Core Member was able to establish friendships. In addition, 84% of the circle volunteers reported that they felt the Core Member experienced an increase in self-worth, and 68% felt the Core Member experienced a sense of self-acceptance as a result of their participation in a Circle.

Volunteers were asked to anticipate what would have happened had the Core Member not been involved in a Circle. Sixty-one per cent of the respondents reported that they felt the Core Member would have reoffended. Most believed that the Core Member would have had a difficult time adjusting to the community (93%) or in leading a stable life

(82%). Seventy-three per cent reported that the Core Member would have become isolated and 91% believed he would have experienced loneliness. The vast majority of the circle volunteers (93%) felt the Circle was at least moderately helpful for the Core Member.

In terms of benefits to the community, 89% of the circle volunteers felt the community experienced an increase in safety. Seventy-eight per cent felt that Circles were a rational approach to integrating the Core Member back into the community, and 71% of the circle volunteer reported that the fear of a reoffence is reduced.

At the personal level, three-quarters of the circle volunteers felt that their participation in the project gave them a sense of community. In addition, 66% reported it provided them with friendship. Finally, just over half (54%) felt they had an emotional bond with others.

Professional/organisation support, training and teamwork

Just over half of the circle volunteers felt that they were working as part of a team with the other professionals involved with the project. In terms of the perception of support provided by the organisation and associated professionals, the majority of circle volunteers found it to be helpful. In particular, 82% found the members of the organisation to be generally helpful and 63% thought the organisation provided support when needed. Only 5% found that the support provided by the organisation was inadequate. In terms of associated professional support, 62% found it to be generally helpful, and approximately half (49%) found that the professionals provided direction when needed. Fifteen per cent reported that the professional support provided failed to meet their expectations.

Part of being a volunteer with the COSA project involves working with other volunteers in a Circle. In the survey, almost 60% felt they were working as a team with other individuals in the Circle. Although a quarter of the respondents experienced a sense of teamwork only some of the time, 17% did not feel like they were working as part of a team at all.

Training was received prior to volunteering in a Circle for 55% of the respondents. Approximately 40% reported that more training would have helped prepare them for this experience, and 46% were not sure if more training would have been beneficial for them. While a variety of topics were covered in different training sessions, most received training in restorative justice (61%). In terms of more training opportunities, the area that received the most interest was listening skills and responding to resistance (38%). In terms of improving training sessions, 42% suggested having more sessions available prior to joining a Circle, and 44% suggested having more ongoing sessions while in a Circle. Only 7% reported that no improvement was necessary.

Professional/Agency Members

In addition to the circle volunteers and the Core Members, there are also several professionals and agency members involved with the COSA project. Of the professionals and agency members who responded to this

survey, approximately one-quarter were police officers, 13% were psychologists, and 20% were part of the advisory board/working group. A considerable majority of these respondents had been involved with the COSA project for more than three years. In terms of motivation behind their involvement, one-third reported that they wanted to work with offenders who are being given a second chance, and 20% reported they felt a sense of 'call' to work with this population. Most of the respondents (93%) reported that they are still motivated to be involved.

Adequacy of training for volunteers

The professional/agency members were asked a series of questions regarding the training provided to the circle volunteers. More than half of the respondents reported that they felt the circle volunteers should receive more intensive training in particular topics, and 43% felt more extensive training opportunities should be provided.

Approximately half of the respondents reported they had been asked to provide training workshops or consultations to the circle volunteers. Of these respondents, 57% reported that they provided workshops on self-care, and 25% provided workshops on the use of relapse prevention methods with sexual offenders. Twenty-seven per cent reported being asked to provide training on more than three occasions.

Perceptions of the project

Most of the professional/agency respondents reported a belief that participation in COSA provides a Core Member with a positive experience. In particular, 94% believed Core Members felt supported by others and 81% believed that Core Members experienced increased self-worth and a sense of acceptance by others. Sixty-three per cent reported that the Core Members experienced a sense of community. Interestingly, 75% also reported that they did not think Core Members derived much from this experience.

Approximately 70% of the professional/agency respondents believed that the community-at-large would experience an increase in safety in knowing that a high-risk sexual offender is part of a COSA and 63% felt the fear of reoffence would be reduced. In addition, 44% reported that the community would also get a contributing member of society as the Core Member became more functional.

Professional/agency respondents reported that what they liked most about COSAs was that they increase offender responsibility and accountability (70%) and that community safety and support are the focus (63%). What the professional/agency members liked the least about this project was that they felt it was difficult for circle volunteers to maintain boundaries (33%) and 22% didn't like the lack of structure or formality. Along these lines, 36% reported they would change the project by adding more guidelines regarding boundaries for the circle volunteers. Nine per cent felt more structure and more treatment opportunities were needed. Three-quarters of the respondents felt their agency was part of a 'team' with the other professionals involved with the project. Three-quarters also felt that the project should be expanded.

Community

Prior to this survey, 46% of the 77 respondents reported having prior knowledge of the COSA through corrections experience, news coverage, courses at school, or word of mouth.

How do you feel knowing that such a programme exists?

Knowing that the COSA project exists, 69% reported that they were 'glad' that these offenders got extra support, and 62% reported feeling relieved that they were getting help. While 30% reported being positively surprised, approximately 14% reported being skeptical that it would actually reduce crime. A few respondents reported negative feelings, such as anger that these offenders were getting extra support (8%) and irritation that people would want to help these offenders (3%).

How would you feel if you knew that a high-risk offender moved into your community/neighbourhood?

Given hypothetical knowledge that a high-risk offender had moved into their community/neighbourhood, 33% of the respondents reported that they would feel unsafe, 30% would feel afraid for their safety, and 25% would feel shocked. About one-fifth reported that they would feel angry that this offender was in their neighbourhood and 14% would feel angry that the offender was let out of prison. However, 68% of the respondents reported that these feelings would change in a positive direction if they knew that the offender in question belonged to a Circle. They felt that participation in a Circle would indicate that the offender was receiving additional support from others (48%), that he was under some kind of supervision (53%), and that he was motivated not to reoffend (48%).

Discussion

Overall, it appears that the COSA project has been viewed favourably by all stakeholders surveyed in this component of the pilot project evaluation. Although the professional/agency members continue to express concerns regarding boundary issues with volunteers and former offenders, it is likely that these concerns are borne of their natural tendency to avoid dual relationships. Unlike psychologists or physicians, however, volunteers are not professionally inclined in this endeavour and, as such, are not bound by such proscriptions. Indeed, the development of friendly relationships between volunteers and Core Members is an intentional component of the COSA project. Both the volunteers and Core Members spoke clearly in describing the reciprocal positive influences their relationships have produced.

One area of potential concern is the perceived negative drift in organisational support for circle volunteers and Core Members. We believe that this is a side-effect of the call to provide more Circles without necessarily matching that call with increased human or financial resources. As the community becomes more aware of the successes of the project via various media reports, this shortfall is further exacerbated. The former

Commissioner of the Correctional Service of Canada frequently spoke of her wish to see 'Circles' in place for all or most offenders coming out of federal institutions. However, funding and recruitment continue to be the biggest hurdles to the more widespread proliferation of the model. While attempts have been made to solicit support from sources outside corrections, those efforts have been met with only mediocre success. However, we are very much inclined to believe that if the COSA model is to achieve broad acceptance and implementation, the community itself must accept ultimate responsibility for ensuring its long-term success.

The future of COSA rests fully in the hands of the community. All levels of government are reticent to carry the full burden of financially supporting this endeavour. In many respects, sexual offending is a community-based problem that should, perhaps, be managed in a more intentional manner by the community itself. In this regard, we wholeheartedly agree with Silverman and Wilson (2002), who suggest that a viable solution to community violence is found in community engagement of the criminal justice system. COSA is an excellent example of the community taking an active role in managing risk in its midst. However, the unpalatable nature of our target population continues to make solicitation of both volunteers and funding particularly difficult.

We believe that support of initiatives like COSA represents a more efficacious means by which to manage offender risk in the community. One criticism that has been leveled at sexual offender registries is that they fail to distinguish between offenders of varying risk levels. That is, a high-risk offender committing a crime under a certain section of the Criminal Code of Canada is registered in the same fashion as a lower-risk offender committing the same criminal code offence, although the details of the individual offences might be quite different. Because they are only offered to those offenders with demonstrated high potential for reoffending and low potential for reintegration, COSAs represent a means by which to increase community safety over and above registration.

Based on the dramatic positive results achieved by the COSA pilot project in South-Central Ontario, fledgling COSA projects have been initiated in all Canadian provinces. Projects are well-established in Victoria, Winnipeg, Montreal, and Ottawa. As we write this article, we are aware of several COSA-type projects in development in the United States, including a relatively well-established endeavour in Minnesota and a very enthusiastic group in Denver, CO. In addition, projects based on the Canadian COSA model are also in progress or development in all of the member nations of the United Kingdom (that is, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England and, interestingly, the Isle of Man), the Republic of Ireland, and the Netherlands. The main UK project in the Thames Valley has published a three-year evaluation report, having formed more than a dozen COSAs (Quaker Peace and Social Justice 2005). Interest in the COSA model has also been generated in South Africa, Bermuda, and Australia. Despite the oft-noted unpalatable character of sexual offenders, there is clearly an international will to try other means by which to increase offender accountability and community safety. As it has always been, 'no more victims' is our shared goal.

Generally, we have been struck by the positive elements of public education and engagement noted in the questionnaire responses of the community-at-large. In several instances in Canada where public outcry has followed the release of a 'high-risk sexual offender', the popular media has eventually focused on the COSA project as a bright light in an otherwise troubling state of affairs. With each piece of television or newspaper coverage, more citizens learn about the challenging work being undertaken by their compatriots. We hope that the eventual result will be that the community learns that risk management is something within their grasp.¹

Note

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