

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia

Report by Dr Kelly Richards – 2010 Churchill Fellow

**The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Government Office for Women Audrey Fagan
Churchill Fellowship to study Circles of Support and Accountability**

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Executive summary

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Project description: This report presents material from the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Government Office for Women Audrey Fagan Churchill Fellowship for 2010. The topic of the Fellowship was the potential of Circles of Support and Accountability to reduce the sexual victimisation of children in Australia. The United States of America, Canada and the United Kingdom were visited as part of the Fellowship.

Summary of project: Child sexual abuse is an important social concern in Australia. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' *Personal safety survey*, 12 percent of women and 4.5 percent of men in Australia report having been sexually abused before the age of 15. Research has clearly demonstrated a wide range of negative consequences resulting from child sexual abuse, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, antisocial behaviours, suicidality, eating disorders, and substance misuse.

Circles of Support and Accountability are groups of trained and supported volunteers who work with child sex offenders who have been recently released from prison, to assist offenders' reintegration into the community, and thereby reduce sexual recidivism. Circles of Support and Accountability have twin objectives: to reintegrate child sex offenders into the community; and to reduce the sexual victimisation of children. The aim of Circles of Support and Accountability is 'to substantially reduce the risk of future sexual victimization of community members by assisting and supporting released individuals in their task of integrating with the community and leading responsible, productive, and accountable lives' (Correctional Service Canada 2003).

Although there has been a great deal of interest in Circles of Support and Accountability in Australia, and one program, Five8, is operating in Melbourne, Circles of Support and Accountability are yet to be more fully implemented in Australian jurisdictions.

A recent evaluation of Circles of Support and Accountability in Canada found that offenders who participated in a Circle had 83 percent less recidivism than a comparison group of offenders. Participants also had 73 percent less violent recidivism and 71 percent less recidivism of any kind.

The evidence about the capacity of Circles of Support and Accountability to reduce the recidivism of child sex offenders is promising. This report therefore concludes that an Australian jurisdiction should commit to piloting a Circles of Support and Accountability program. Although Circles can only ever be one measure among others to reduce the sexual victimisation of children, they are a promising strategy to which Australian criminal justice policy-makers should give further consideration.

Introduction

This report presents material from the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Government Office for Women Audrey Fagan Churchill Fellowship for 2010. The topic of the Fellowship was Circles of Support and Accountability in the United States of America, Canada and the United Kingdom. Appendix 1 outlines the people and places visited as part of the Fellowship.

As Appendix 1 indicates, the majority of my Fellowship was spent in Canada. In addition, all the Circles of Support and Accountability that I observed were in Canada or the United States of America. It is inevitable that some of the comments contained within this report are more reflective of the situation in North America than the United Kingdom. Although I was able to meet with program staff in the United Kingdom, and have sought feedback on this report from experts in the United Kingdom, the reader should bear this difference in mind. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of all those who provided feedback on the contents of the report, while acknowledging any errors as my own.

This report addresses a number of issues relating to Circles of Support and Accountability, and their compatibility with the Australian criminal justice context, including:

- What are Circles of Support and Accountability?
- When and how did Circles of Support and Accountability emerge?
- What forms do Circles of Support and Accountability take?
- What is the purpose of Circles of Support and Accountability?
- Where do Circles of Support and Accountability currently operate?
- Why is it important for Australia to understand Circles of Support and Accountability?
- What is the scope of the problem of child sexual abuse in Australia?
- What is the research evidence about the effectiveness of Circles of Support and Accountability?
- Some key issues for consideration.
- Some limitations and potential “dangers” of Circles of Support and Accountability.
- Recommendations for Australia.

The report concludes that given the research evidence about Circles of Support and Accountability, Australia should build on its existing interest to more fully implement Circles of Support and Accountability, while taking the limitations of this criminal justice measure into consideration.

What are Circles of Support and Accountability?

Circles of Support and Accountability can be broadly defined as groups of trained and supported volunteers who work with child¹ sex offenders who have been recently released from prison, to assist the offender's reintegration into the community, and thereby reduce sexual recidivism.

A number of definitions of Circles of Support and Accountability have been proposed. Hannem and Petrunik (2004: 100) define a Circle of Support and Accountability as:

A group of four to seven trained volunteer members who enter into a covenant with a high-risk sex offender who is known as the core member. COSAs have the dual objectives of preventing further victimization and helping the core member function in the community.

More broadly, Petrunik, Murphy and Federoff (2008: 120) call Circles of Support and Accountability 'a restorative justice initiative that helps high-risk sex offenders integrate into communities while holding them morally accountable for their behavior'.

As Wilson, McWhinnie and Wilson (2008: 28) claim, Circles of Support and Accountability are a crime prevention strategy – specifically, a 'community response to sexual violence prevention'. Crime prevention strategies are typically categorised as *primary*, *secondary* or *tertiary* crime prevention. Singh and White (2000) define primary, secondary and tertiary crime prevention as follows:

- **Primary interventions** aim to prevent offending before it begins. This may involve community development activities and policies and programs that seek to minimise risk factors and enhance protective factors in communities. Primary prevention activities are often directed towards whole communities;
- **Secondary interventions** are those that seek to address problem behaviour or assist 'at risk' individuals: 'they may also target the reduction or avoidance of crime before it reaches the notice of the authorities or becomes more serious' (Singh & White 2000: 23); and
- **Tertiary interventions** seek to reduce reoffending, and target those offenders already in serious contact with the criminal justice system (see also Australian Institute of Criminology 2003).

¹ As noted below, although Circles of Support and Accountability usually work with child sex offenders, some programs also work with those who sexually victimise adults.

Circles of Support and Accountability, which aim to prevent sexual recidivism by previously incarcerated sex offenders, should therefore be considered a tertiary crime prevention strategy.

When and how did Circles of Support and Accountability emerge?

Circles of Support and Accountability are widely considered to have emerged in the Canadian province of Ontario during the summer of 1994. The story of their coming into being has been rehearsed at length in the Circles of Support and Accountability literature (see Correctional Service Canada 2002; Drewery 2003; Hannem & Petrunik 2004; Petrunik, Murphy & Federoff 2008; Wilson 2007; Wilson, McWhinnie & Wilson 2008; Wilson, Picheca & Prinzo 2005).

In Ontario, as in many other Western jurisdictions, offenders who are sentenced to a period of incarceration typically serve a portion of their sentence in the community. That is, offenders typically serve, say, two-thirds of their sentence in custody, and the remaining one-third supervised in the community. The purpose of this strategy is that offenders will have an opportunity to reintegrate into the community with the supervision and support of a parole officer; to 'help manage offenders' risk of recidivism by allowing for a monitored re-entry into the community' (Hannem & Petrunik 2004: 98).

This is not, however, always the case. In some jurisdictions, it appears that due to legislative changes made in response to public concern about certain "classes" of offender, entire sentences are required to be served in custody. In Canada, legislation passed in 1986 allowed offenders to be denied statutory release and be required to serve their full sentence in custody if they are considered to be at 'high risk of committing an offense causing death or other "serious harm", including any sexual offense against a child' (Hannem & Petrunik 2004: 98).

Although the primary rationale for this type of strategy is that keeping offenders incarcerated for the entirety of their sentence will increase community safety, an important consequence is that offenders are increasingly being released "cold" – that is, without any supervision (Hannem & Petrunik 2004). In Canada, this is referred to as being released at 'Warrant Expiry Date' (WED) (Wilson, McWhinnie & Wilson 2008). Therefore, as Wilson et al. (2007: 6) argue, paradoxically, these offenders, arguably those in most need of community supervision and professional attention, are those most likely to receive neither'. Wilson et al. (2007: 6) describe this as a 'cruel system of logic that beggars description'.

Although it is difficult to ascertain what proportion of incarcerated child sex offenders in Australian prisons are held until the end of their sentences and released without supervision, this has been known to occur. In 2003, notorious child sex

offender Dennis Ferguson, for example, 'served the entire term of his sentence and upon release was not subject to any conditions under parole supervision' (O'Leary 2008: 9).

In the summer of 1994, repeat child molester Charlie Taylor was due to be released at his Warrant Expiry Date in Hamilton, Ontario. Charlie would have 'no strings attached....he would have no Parole Officer with whom to meet, and he would have no conditions on his community interactions other than those that apply to all citizens (keep the peace and be of good behaviour)' (Wilson, McWhinnie & Wilson 2008: 26).

This situation alarmed Correctional Service Canada psychologist Bill Palmer, who, having worked with Charlie in prison, was aware that he was a 'marginalised man with few life skills and a persistent sexual interest in children' (Wilson, McWhinnie & Wilson 2008: 27).

To make the situation more dire, Charlie Taylor was the subject of considerable media attention:

As a repeat child molester, Charlie was well known to police and was the immediate topic of discussion in most households....Meanwhile, the local television station ran stories at every possible opportunity, complete with "mug shot" photographs. Charlie was an instant pariah (Wilson et al. 2007: 7).

After attempts to make professional links in the community were unsuccessful (Wilson et al. 2007) and Correctional Service Canada correctly informed Bill Palmer that they no longer had any capacity to assist Charlie (Wilson, McWhinnie & Wilson 2008), Bill decided, as a 'last ditch effort' (Wilson et al. 2007: 7) to contact the Reverend Harry Nigh. At the time, Reverend Nigh was the pastor of a small Mennonite congregation in Hamilton, the city to which Charlie would return. Charlie recalled knowing Reverend Nigh through his former involvement with a restorative justice program called Man to Man, Woman to Woman (M2W2) (Wilson, McWhinnie & Wilson 2008).

Harry Nigh initially had difficulty remembering Charlie Taylor; when he finally did, he recalled that he did not like him very much (Wilson et al. 2007; Wilson, McWhinnie & Wilson 2008). Today, Reverend Nigh describes recalling Charlie as 'goofy' (Harry Nigh, personal communication, 28 October 2010).

After some reluctance, and motivated primarily by his concern for preventing any further victimisation of children in the community (Harry Nigh, personal communication, 28 October 2010), the Reverend Nigh agreed to help Charlie.

A number of years previously, Harry Nigh had discussed 'Circles of Support' with Ed Vandenberg (Harry Nigh, personal communication, 28 October 2010), who went on to become involved with Toronto's Circles of Support and Accountability program, and remains employed by the program today. 'Circles of Support', as they were originally known, had initially been used to support parents of children with disability and/or mental health issues.

A 'Circle of Support', consisting primarily of members of Harry Nigh's Mennonite congregation, was formed around Charlie Taylor (Wilson et al. 2007; Wilson, McWhinnie & Wilson 2008):

Nigh and his volunteers helped Taylor find a place to stay, welcomed him to attend church services and social functions, and set up a safety net of daily contacts to protect Taylor and minimise his risk to children (Hannem & Petrunik 2004: 100).

Members of the Circle became known as 'Charlie's Angels' (Wilson, McWhinnie & Wilson 2008: 27).

Four months after Charlie Taylor's release, another notorious pedophile, with 36 convictions, Wray Budreo, was due to be released in Peterborough, Ontario, at his Warrant Expiry Date (Hannem & Petrunik 2004; Wilson, McWhinnie & Wilson 2008). Budreo was met with the same kind of community response that had accompanied Charlie Taylor's release: 'Dan Haley – then prison chaplaincy volunteer – not so fondly tells the story of spiriting Wray out of Kingston Penitentiary in the trunk of his car' (Wilson, McWhinnie & Wilson 2008: 27).

A colleague of Harry Nigh's, the Reverend Hugh Kirkegaard, a community corrections chaplain, decided to emulate his approach with Charlie Taylor, and formed a 'Circle of Support' for Wray Budreo (Hannem & Petrunik 2004; Wilson, McWhinnie & Wilson 2008).

Based on the apparent success of these two fledgling 'Circles of Support', the Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario, with the community chaplaincy of the Correctional Service Canada, obtained a small grant to establish a formal Circles of Support and Accountability pilot, 'to more systematically develop and promote the Circles of Support and Accountability concept and implement it across Canada (Hannem & Petrunik 2004: 100).

Around this time, the name of the program was changed from 'Circles of Support' to 'Circles of Support and Accountability'. This occurred 'in recognition that support without accountability would not be sufficient to accomplish the...goal of "no more victims"' (Wilson, McWhinnie & Wilson 2008: 27). This name change was driven by Dave Worth, whose key role in developing restorative justice initiatives (see Peachey

1989) made him keenly aware of the perspectives of victims' groups (Harry Nigh, personal communication, 28 October 2010).

What forms do Circles of Support and Accountability take?

Circles of Support and Accountability take a variety of forms, and vary considerably among locations in which they operate. Two main "models" of Circles of Support and Accountability have emerged, although it is important to recognise that practices vary substantially even within these two models.

1. **The Canadian model.** The dominant model used in Canada involves one released sex offender (called the "Core Member") and a small number of volunteers, supported by Circles of Support and Accountability program staff and other professionals (sometimes called the "outer circle").

Wilson, McWhinnie and Wilson (2008: 28) describe this model as follows:

The inner of two concentric circles consists of the ex-offender (known as a "Core Member") and four to six community volunteers. These volunteers are provided with training in working with sexual offenders; although, not to the extent that they would be seen as "experts" or counsellors. The outer of the two circles consists of professionals (psychologists, social workers, police, correctional staff, etc) who have expert knowledge in sexual offender risk management and who can provide support to the members of the inner circle.

2. **The United Kingdom model.** Although Circles of Support and Accountability in the United Kingdom are described in the literature as reversing the roles of community members and professionals – that is, as being 'professionally-driven, community-supported' (Wilson 2007: 293) – this does not appear to be the case in practice. Rather, the primary difference between the Canadian and United Kingdom models of Circles of Support and Accountability appears to be that in the United Kingdom, Circles of Support and Accountability are operationally embedded within Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPAs). As their name suggests, MAPPAs, which were introduced in 2001, are processes through which 'Police, Probation and Prison Services work together with other agencies to manage the risks posed by violent and sexual offenders living in the community in order to protect the public' (National Probation Service 2008). Circles of Support and

Accountability themselves are, however, “staffed” by volunteers in the United Kingdom as in Canada and the United States of America.

Another important difference between the Canadian and United Kingdom models is that in the United Kingdom, a national “umbrella organisation”, Circles UK, has oversight over all Circles of Support and Accountability projects. Circles UK is a national charity, funded by the Ministry of Justice, that aims to ‘support the development and effective operation of Circles of Support and Accountability....[and]....to ensure that Circles Projects across England and Wales are of a high standard’ (see www.circles-uk.org.uk).

Although there are structural differences among the Circles of Support and Accountability projects in the United Kingdom (e.g. some are managed by the probation service while others are operated by charities), the United Kingdom has in place a national Code of Practice that defines and sets standardised service delivery protocols for all Circles of Support and Accountability projects. As a result, although Circles of Support and Accountability projects in the United Kingdom maintain a degree of flexibility, there is greater standardisation among projects than is the case in Canada. For example, all volunteers in the United Kingdom are provided with the same training program using material provided by Circles UK. Under the National Crime Prevention Centre’s National Demonstration Project, consistency across Circles of Support and Accountability is increasingly being pursued.

Within these two models, Circles of Support and Accountability vary according to a number of factors, including:

- **Whether Circle meetings begin while the offender is incarcerated or when he² is released from prison.** As described above, Circles of Support and Accountability originated when an offender was released from prison at his Warrant Expiry Date. In many locations, Circles of Support and Accountability are formed on an offender’s release from incarceration. In other locations, however, Circles of Support and Accountability begin to meet while the offender is incarcerated. In Minnesota, for example, Circles of Support and Accountability form four to six weeks prior to an offender’s scheduled release (Minnesota Department of Corrections n.d.a). Correctional Service Canada (2003) recognises that while it is ideal that Circles of Support and Accountability are formed before a Core Member’s release into the

² As the vast majority of both sex offenders and Core Members (Correctional Service Canada 2003) are male, I refer to these as males throughout. It should be noted, however, that females can and do sexually offend (Salter 2003), and that COSA can and have been formed around female child sex offenders (Correctional Service Canada 2003).

community, this is not always possible. In some locations, correctional institutions are geographically so remote from Circles of Support and Accountability programs (and/or communities into which Core Members intend to return), that it is not practicable to form a Circle of Support and Accountability until the Core Member's release. Typically, this occurs very soon after the Core Member's release: 'COSAs have been formed within weeks or days (and even hours) of a core member's release' (Correctional Service Canada 2003).

- **Whether Core Members are exclusively child sex offenders.** In some locations, all Core Members have offended sexually against a child. In others, Core Members have a sexual offence conviction of any kind (against a child or adult). In yet other locations, Core Members may have a sexual offence conviction, or may have offended non-sexually.
- In addition to offence type, **eligibility criteria for Core Members vary among programs in a number of ways.** This may, for example, be dictated by legislative and/or policy requirements. In Minnesota, only offenders categorised as 'risk level 2' are eligible to participate in a Circle of Support and Accountability (Minnesota Department of Corrections 2010). In many Canadian locations, Core Members must either be offenders released at their Warrant Expiry Date or under a Long-Term Supervision Order (LTSO).
- **Whether program staff members participate in Circles.** In some locations, Circles of Support and Accountability program staff members are included in Circles alongside volunteers. In other cases, program staff members manage the program without having direct input into Circles.
- **Whether Circles have an appointed facilitator.** In some locations, one volunteer is appointed as a facilitator for the Circle. Correctional Service Canada (2003: 23) describes the role of facilitator as follows: 'facilitators assist with process dynamics. They stimulate dialogue, pose relevant questions, and keep the group focused'. Only one Circle that I observed had a clear volunteer facilitator role. In this case, the volunteer formally "opened" and "closed" the Circle and directed the discussion. In this case, the volunteer was a very experienced addictions counsellor, and had qualifications, skills and experience to assist in performing this type of role.

What is the purpose of Circles of Support and Accountability?

Circles of Support and Accountability have twin objectives: to reintegrate child sex offenders into the community; and to reduce the sexual victimisation of children. The concomitant twin mantras of Circles of Support and Accountability are: 'no one is dispensable' (or 'no one is disposable') and 'no more victims' (Fox 2010; Liautaud 2010). Circles of Support and

Accountability also have twin methods for reaching these objectives: *support*; and *accountability*.

The Correctional Service Canada (2003: 12) describes the aim of Circles of Support and Accountability as 'to substantially reduce the risk of future sexual victimization of community members by assisting and supporting released individuals in their task of integrating with the community and leading responsible, productive, and accountable lives'.

Where do Circles of Support and Accountability currently operate?

Circles of Support and Accountability currently operate in a number of locations around the world.

- **Canada** – there are currently 16 locations in which Circles of Support and Accountability operate in Canada (Vancouver/Fraser Valley, Calgary, Regina, Saskatoon, Prince Albert, Winnipeg, South Western Ontario (Toronto/Kitchener/Hamilton), Peterborough, Kingston, Ottawa, Montreal, Montreal Southwest Community Ministries, Corporation Jean-Paul Morin, Moncton, Halifax, and St John's) (Correctional Service Canada n.d.). Most of these locations are currently part of Canada's National Crime Prevention Centre's Circles of Support and Accountability Demonstration Project (Correctional Service Canada n.d.).
- **United States of America** – a number of Circles of Support and Accountability programs currently operate in various locations across the United States of America, as follows:
 - The Minnesota Department of Corrections is currently operating a pilot Circles of Support and Accountability program in three counties – Hennepin, Ramsey, and Dodge/Filmore/Olmsted (Minnesota Department of Corrections n.d.a);
 - A Circles of Support and Accountability program is operated by the Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies at Fresno Pacific University, in Fresno, California;
 - The Vermont Department of Corrections implemented Circles of Support and Accountability in 2003 following a federal grant (Russell 2007). Circles of Support and Accountability were operational in six communities in Vermont during 2009 (Vermont Department of Corrections 2009); and
 - Both Pearce County, Washington (Associated Ministries n.d.), and Dubuque, Iowa (Catholic Charities 2008), appear to have faith-based Circles of Support and Accountability programs, although little information about these program is publicly available, and they do not appear to be specifically for sex offenders (see e.g. Morrissey 2010).

- **United Kingdom** – under the umbrella of Circles UK, Circles of Support and Accountability operate in a number of regions in England and Wales, including: Hampshire and Thames Valley; North Wales; Cumbria; East of England; Greater Manchester; Leicestershire and Rutland; Yorkshire and Humberside; Devon and Cornwall; Dorset, Avon and Somerset; Northumbria; and London (see www.circles-uk.org.uk). In addition, the Lucy Faithfull Foundation has a national focus and can establish Circles of Support and Accountability in any location in the United Kingdom (see www.lucyfaithfull.org). There are currently 64 Circles of Support and Accountability operating in the United Kingdom, with the involvement of over 400 volunteers.
- **Australia** – there has been a great deal of interest in Circles of Support and Accountability in parts of Australia (see e.g. Church Council on Justice and Corrections 2008; Stewart 2010; Wilson, Pichecha & Prinzo 2005).

A community-based program, Five8, is operating in Melbourne, Victoria (O’Sullivan 2010). The program, which is auspiced by the Prisoner Aftercare Support Services builds “micro-communities” around prisoners and assists prisoners’ release into the community by offering practical support and friendship (“Five8” is prison slang for “me mate”) (Five8 2010). Five8 (2010: 2) describe the program as follows:

Five8 is not a formal process with a beginning and an end. The relationships formed may be short-term (at least one year) or lifelong. It is expected over time that the title “Five8” will be dropped in favour of just “friends”. Most importantly, the relationships teach former prisoners effective interpersonal skills, pro-social modelling, and the value of new and ever widening circles of friendship and support.

There has been interest in Circles of Support and Accountability in other countries also, including Scotland (Armstrong et al. 2008), and South Africa, Bermuda, France, The Netherlands, Latvia and New Zealand (Wilson & McWhinnie n.d.).

The above is not intended to be an exhaustive list of Circles of Support and Accountability around the world. Circles of Support and Accountability programs are often run by small, community- or faith-based organisations, many of which do not have a presence on the internet and/or have not been documented. In addition, there are a range of practices similar to Circles of Support and Accountability (such as Ohio’s ‘Citizen Circles’ (Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction 2010) and citizen panels (see Fox 2010)) that may be important to take into account in any consideration of Circles of Support and Accountability. It is difficult to draw precise parameters around Circles of Support and Accountability – indeed, any attempt to do so (including my own above) is likely to be

arbitrary. Nonetheless, the list above should be a helpful starting point for those interested in Circles of Support and Accountability programs around the globe.

Why is it important for Australia to understand Circles of Support and Accountability?

Australian jurisdictions often adopt criminal justice measures from other Western jurisdictions. A range of restorative justice measures were, for example, adopted from New Zealand and Canada during the 1990s. Given the apparent success of Circles of Support and Accountability in a number of international jurisdictions (see Richards (under review a) for more detail), and the climate of community concern about sexual offending against children in Australia, a “policy transfer” (Jones & Newburn as cited in Nellis 2009) of Circles of Support and Accountability into the Australian criminal justice landscape is likely.

What is the scope of the problem of child sexual abuse in Australia?

To gain an insight into the potential of Circles of Support and Accountability to reduce the sexual victimisation of children in Australia, it is necessary to understand the scope of the problem of child sexual abuse in Australia.

How many Australians are sexually abused as children?

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ (ABS 2005) *Personal safety survey*, 12 percent of women and 4.5 percent of men in Australia report having been sexually abused before the age of 15. The survey defined child sexual abuse as ‘any act, by an adult, involving a child under the age of 15 years in sexual activity’ (ABS 2005: 12).

In total, the ABS (2005: 42) estimated that 1,294,000 people living in Australia (337,400 males and 956,600 females) had experienced sexual abuse before the age of 15. This is likely to be an underestimate, as approximately 120,000 persons living in very remote areas of Australia were excluded from the survey design. People living in very remote communities comprise 23 percent of the population of the Northern Territory (ABS 2005: 43). Many of these persons are Indigenous, and it has been documented that there is a high prevalence of child sexual abuse in some Indigenous communities (Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce 2006; Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse 2007).

Young people are at greater risk of sexual assault than adults. The ABS’ (2009) *Recorded crime victims Australia* report, which presents data on victims of selected offences recorded by the police in each jurisdiction, demonstrates that the highest victimisation rate for sexual

assault is recorded against 10 to 14-year-olds. During the 2009 calendar year, there were 108 male victims per 100,000 males aged 10 to 14 years (compared with 26 male victims per 100,000 males), and 579 female victims per 100,000 females aged 10 to 14 years (compared with 144 female victims per 100,000 females) (ABS 2009). As the ABS (2009: 12) claims, 'for both male[s] and females, these rates were more than four times higher than the overall male and female victimisation rates [for sexual assault]'.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's (2010) data on child protection indicate that during the 2008-09 financial year, there were 5,591 substantiations of child abuse notifications for sexual abuse of children aged 17 years or less.

Who sexually abuses children in Australia?

Of all those who reported having been victimised, 11.1 percent were victimised by a stranger. More commonly, child sexual abuse was perpetrated by a male relative (other than the victim's father or step father) (30.2%), a family friend (16.3%), an acquaintance or neighbour (15.6%), another known person (15.3%), or the father or step father (13.5%). It should be noted that these totals add to more than 100 percent (103.7%). This indicates that a small proportion of child sexual abuse victims (3.7%) were abused by perpetrators belonging to more than one of these categories.

Small proportions of victims were sexually abused by a female relative (other than the mother or step mother) (0.9%) or their mother or step mother (0.8%) (although both of these figures have a high standard error and should be interpreted with caution) (ABS 2005: 42). It should be noted, however, that the perpetrator categories 'family friend', 'acquaintance/neighbour', 'stranger' and 'other known person' have not been disaggregated by gender. We do not know, therefore, what proportion of each of these categories is male/female.

The relationship of victims of child sexual abuse to the perpetrator varied by the sex of the victim. Female victims were most likely to have been abused by an other male relative (35.1%), followed by their father or step father, a family friend (both 16.5%), an acquaintance/neighbour (15.4%), an other known person (11%) or a stranger (8.6%). Very small proportions were sexually abused by an other female relative (1%) or their mother or step mother (0.6%) (although both these figures have a high standard error and should be interpreted with caution). A small proportion of female victims (4.7%) reported perpetrators from more than one of these categories.

Male victims were most likely to be sexually abused by an other known person (27.3%), followed by a stranger (18.3%), an other male relative (16.4%), an acquaintance/neighbour (16.2%), or a family friend (15.6%). Small proportions were sexually abused by their father or step father (5%) (this figure has a high standard error and should therefore be

interpreted with caution). Proportions of male victims who were sexually abused by their mother or step mother or an other female relative are either not available for publication or considered too unreliable for general use.

Why is addressing child sexual abuse important?

Research has clearly demonstrated a wide range of negative consequences resulting from child sexual abuse (Kendall-Tackett et al. 2001; Salter 2003). Zwi et al. (2007) list depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, antisocial behaviours, suicidality, eating disorders, alcohol and drug misuse, post-partum depression, parenting difficulties, sexual revictimisation and sexual dysfunction as some of the manifestations of child sexual abuse among victims.

As the data from the ABS outlined above indicate, a substantial proportion of Australian children is affected by child sexual abuse.

What is the research evidence about the effectiveness of Circles of Support and Accountability?

A small number of research studies have been conducted on Circles of Support and Accountability:

- Bates A, Saunders R & Wilson C 2007. Doing something about it: A follow-up study of sex offenders participating in Thames Valley circles of support and accountability. *British Journal of Community Justice* 5(1): 19-42
- Haslewood-Pócsik I, Smith E & Spencer J 2008. *IMPACT Circles: balancing risk management with support: a study of an innovative approach in working with sex offenders*. University of Manchester: Unpublished
- Muscat B 2009. *An evaluation of circles of support and accountability (COSA): Final report*. Fresno: California State University
- Quaker Peace and Social Witness 2008. *HTV Circles: Six years of safer communities. Six year report April 2002 to March 2008*. London: Quaker Peace and Social Witness <http://www.quaker.org.uk/files/Circles-of-Support-six-year-report.pdf>
- Quaker Peace and Social Witness 2005. *Circles of Support and Accountability in the Thames Valley: The first three years April 2002 – March 2005*. London: Quaker Peace and Social Witness <http://www.quaker.org.uk/files/Circles-of-support-first-3yrs.pdf>
- Quaker Peace and Social Witness 2003. *Circles of Support and Accountability in the Thames Valley: Interim report*. London: Quaker Peace and Social Witness <http://www.quaker.org.uk/files/Circles-Interim-report-Nov-03.pdf>
- Wilson R, Cortoni F & McWhinnie A 2009. Circles of support and accountability: A Canadian national replication of outcome findings. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment* 21(4): 412-430

- Wilson R, Picheca & Prinzo M 2007a. Evaluating the effectiveness of professionally-facilitated volunteerism in the community-based management of high-risk sexual offenders: Part one – effects on participants and stakeholders. *The Howard Journal* 46(3): 289-302
- Wilson R, Picheca & Prinzo M 2007b. Evaluating the effectiveness of professionally-facilitated volunteerism in the community-based management of high-risk sexual offenders: Part two – a comparison of recidivism rates. *The Howard Journal* 46(4): 327-337
- Wilson R, Picheca J & Prinzo M 2005. *Circles of support and accountability: An evaluation of the pilot project in South-Central Ontario* (research report No. R-168). Ottawa: Correctional Service Canada http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/rsrch/reports/r168/r168_e.pdf

In addition, some preliminary results from Minnesota Department of Corrections' Circles of Support and Accountability program are available (Minnesota Department of Corrections 2010). More concrete results are not, however, currently available.

It should be noted at the outset that Circles of Support and Accountability are inherently difficult to evaluate, for a range of reasons.

Firstly, there is usually a **small number (“n”) of Core Members** in a Circles of Support and Accountability program. The number of Circles that a Circles of Support and Accountability program can operate varies substantially across locations, and depends on a range of factors, including: the staffing/resources a program has access to; the number of volunteers a program has access to; the level of need of Core Members; the “eligibility requirements” for Core Members; and the administrative/bureaucratic process via which offenders can become participants in a Circles of Support and Accountability program (i.e. the process via which an offender becomes a Core Member).

Circles of Support and Accountability are, by their nature, intensive. That is, Circles of Support and Accountability may require many hours of staff and volunteer time outside of formal Circles of Support and Accountability weekly meetings. This may vary, however, according to both the needs of the Core Member, and the “life cycle” of the Circle. Circles of Support and Accountability program staff often commented to me that Circles of Support and Accountability seem to “wax and wane”; they are often very intensive and time-consuming in the weeks immediately following a Core Member’s release, but may become less so over time. There may also be “crises” in a core member’s life that necessitate increased involvement from Circle members later in the “life cycle” of a Circle. Correctional Service Canada (2003: 20) recognises that even as a Circles of Support and Accountability officially disbands, ‘perhaps a few COSA members will agree to remain in contact with the

core member over the longer term, allowing volunteers to be reassigned to other, more needy core members’.

It should also be noted that participation in a Circles of Support and Accountability is voluntary on the part of the Core Member. As a consequence, Circles of Support and Accountability programs have only limited control over the number of offenders who might become Core Members in their program.

From a research perspective, the small number of Core Members in a particular Circles of Support and Accountability program (i.e. the small “n”) can be problematic, as it may mean that there are too few units of analysis (i.e. research participants in the form of Core Members) for the results of a quantitative study to be able to be generalised.

Secondly, there is a high degree of **local specificity and variation among Circles of Support and Accountability programs**. Circles of Support and Accountability programs vary on a range of factors (see discussion on pp 11-12). While this is laudable – it has been argued that community-based programs should ideally be responsive to the context and needs of the local community – it makes comparisons among programs difficult, and limits the generalisability of research findings.

Thirdly, **Core Members do not always consent to participate in research**. In any research project, a range of factors may influence individuals’ decisions about whether to participate. One Circles of Support and Accountability staff member observed that Core Members may refuse to participate due to their reluctance to become involved with, and mistrust of, the Government (and anyone or anything perceived by them to be “the Government”). This mistrust often translates to a refusal to report to authorities and/or complete written forms – again, making research participation difficult. This issue may be exacerbated if the Core Member has mental health problems, such as paranoia.

Minnesota Department of Corrections’ MnCOSA program has avoided this issue by simultaneously gaining each Core Member’s consent to participate in both the Circles of Support and Accountability program and an evaluation of the Circles of Support and Accountability program. This is possible as the MnCOSA program is a research project; that is, the program and the research do not exist independently of one another (Minnesota Department of Corrections 2010). This is not, however, possible in most locations, in which Circles of Support and Accountability emerged independently of a program of research.

Fourthly, studies consistently show that child sex offenders have **low levels of recidivism** (Bates, Saunders & Wilson 2007; Doren 1998). What this means for evaluations of Circles of Support and Accountability programs is that comparisons between groups of offenders (e.g. those who participated in a Circle of Support and Accountability and those who did not) are often difficult. As Bates, Saunders and Wilson (2007: 20) argue, ‘achieving statistically

significant differences between treated and untreated populations becomes problematic as there is effectively only a small number to reduce from in the first place’.

This raises an important issue. If child sex offenders have low rates of recidivism, why are Circles of Support and Accountability necessary? It is important to recognise that low levels of recorded recidivism do not necessarily accurately reflect genuine rates of reoffending among any offender population, and perhaps particularly among child sex offenders. Many sexual offences against children are not reported to or recorded by police, and child sex offending has a very high rate of attrition (Eastwood, Kift & Grace 2006). As Salter (2003) argues, research that measures recidivism over the short to medium term may not accurately capture the true extent of recidivism among this group of offenders; furthermore, some subgroups of child sex offenders (such as those who target male victims and/or extrafamilial victims) do reoffend at very high rates (see Richards (under review b) for more discussion of this issue).

Fifthly, evaluations of Circles of Support and Accountability focus primarily on **measuring the recidivism of Core Members**. This is unavoidable, given that Circles of Support and Accountability are explicitly designed to reduce the recidivism of Core Members. Measuring recidivism is, however, a challenging task (Ferrante, Loh & Maller 2010; Friendship, Beech & Browne 2002), and measuring the recidivism of child sex offenders can be particularly fraught (Falshaw, Friendship & Bates, 2003). Ultimately, any measure of recidivism is only a proxy; there can be no “true” measure of recidivism (Hedderman 2009). In some jurisdictions, legislative changes have also resulted in technical breaches of orders being counted as “recidivism”; these shifts also impact on measures of recidivism.

Most of the evaluations listed above have focused on *processes* rather than *outcomes* and/or have considered qualitative indicators, such as the experiences of volunteers, Core Members and/or program staff and other professionals (see e.g. Haslewood-Pócsik, Smith & Spencer 2008; Muscat 2009; Quaker Peace and Social Witness 2008, 2005, 2003; Wilson, Picheca & Prinzo 2007b). These studies indicate that typically, Circles of Support and Accountability have been implemented as intended, and those who are involved in Circles of Support and Accountability are committed to the process and find their participation very rewarding.

It is critical to consider in addition to this, however, the efficacy of Circles of Support and Accountability in reducing the recidivism of Core Members. This is, after all, the primary purpose of Circles of Support and Accountability. This section therefore outlines the available evidence on the recidivism of child sex offenders who have participated in Circles of Support and Accountability.

The most rigorous evaluations of Circles of Support and Accountability in this regard have been conducted in Canada (Wilson, Cortoni & McWhinnie 2009; Wilson, Picheca & Prinzo 2007a, 2005). Wilson, Picheca and Prinzo’s (2005) evaluation of Circles of Support and

Accountability in South-Central Ontario matched 60 high-risk offenders who participated in a Circle of Support and Accountability with 60 high-risk offenders who did not participate in a Circle. Offenders were matched on a number of factors, including: risk level; length of time the offenders were “at large” in the community (the average follow-up time was 4.5 years); and whether they had previously participated in a sexual offender treatment program. In this study, recidivism was defined as ‘having a new sexual offense, or having breached a condition imposed by the court’ (Wilson, Picheca & Prinzo 2005: ii).

Wilson, Cortoni and Prinzo’s (2005) evaluation found that levels of recidivism among Circles of Support and Accountability participants were statistically significantly lower than for offenders who did not participate in a Circles of Support and Accountability. The study also found that where sexual reoffending did occur, Circles of Support and Accountability participants had committed offences of a less serious nature than their counterparts who did not participate in a Circle (Wilson, Picheca & Prinzo 2005). The evaluation found that in comparison with the matched group of offenders, Circles of Support and Accountability 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)).

In relation to the seriousness of the reoffences, Wilson, Picheca & Prinzo (2005: 24) found that

in each of the three instances of sexual recidivism in the COSA group, the new offense was qualitatively less severe or invasive than the offense for which they had most recently served [a] sentence. For instance, the new offense of one of the COSA members was making an obscene telephone call, while his prior offense was a violent rape. No function of harm reduction was found in the comparison sample; their new offenses were just as violent and invasive as their most recent offense.

In 2009, Wilson, Cortoni and McWhinnie (2009) replicated Wilson, Picheca and Prinzo’s (2005) study, using data not from one geographical area, but from across Canada. Wilson, Cortoni & McWhinnie (2009) matched 44 Circles of Support and Accountability participants with 44 offenders who did not participate in a Circles of Support and Accountability. The two groups were again matched on a number of factors: risk for general criminality; time and location of release from prison (average follow-up time was 35 months); and participation in sexual offender treatment during incarceration (for a variety of reasons, few men in either group had completed sexual offender treatment). Wilson, Cortoni and

McWhinnie (2009: 419) defined recidivism as 'being charged for or convicted of a new offense'.

The evaluation found that in comparison with the matched group of offenders, Circles of Support and Accountability 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)).

These studies rely on official data on charges and convictions to measure recidivism. As has been acknowledged, however, sexual offences against children are often not reported (Abel et al. 1987), and sexual offending against children has one of the highest rates of attrition of any offence (Eastwood, Kift & Grace 2006). Research on Circles of Support and Accountability in the United Kingdom has sought to address this limitation of the Canadian studies by adopting a very broad definition of "recidivism" and examining not only formally-documented rearrests and/or reconvictions, but "pro-offending behaviour" among offenders participating in Circles of Support and Accountability (see Bates, Saunders & Wilson 2007; Quaker Peace and Social Witness 2005).

In a study conducted by Quaker Peace and Social Witness (2005) on Circles of Support and Accountability in Thames Valley, United Kingdom, none of the twenty Core Members was reconvicted of a new sexual offence during the period April 2002 to March 2005. Eight of the Core Members did, however, demonstrate behaviours that were identified (usually by the Circle of Support and Accountability) as pro-offending. For example, one Core Member developed a relationship with a single mother with three children aged less than 16 years; another was identified as being in possession of inappropriate pornographic material, in which adults were dressed as children (Quaker Peace and Social Witness 2005). In some of these eight cases, Core Members were recalled to prison due to having breached their parole conditions; in other, more minor cases, the Core Member's problematic behaviour was addressed in his Circles of Support and Accountability.

Bates, Saunders and Wilson's (2007) research, also in Thames Valley, also found that while none of the Core Members involved in the Circles of Support and Accountability program at the time of the research (n = 14) were convicted of a new sexual offence, a number breached their parole conditions or other community-based order, and/or displayed pro-offending behaviour. For example, one Core Member developed a friendship with the 11-year-old nephew of a neighbour. Another was discovered to have pornography on his mobile phone (Bates, Saunders & Wilson 2007).

The research on Circles of Support and Accountability in Thames Valley, described above, suggests that while most offenders who participate in a Circle do not reoffend sexually (at least in the short to medium term), some exhibit problematic, pro-offending behaviours. As Bates, Saunders and Wilson (2007: 38) argue, this might be considered a “success” rather than a “failure” of Circles of Support and Accountability:

These incidents of recidivism...are not necessarily regarded as a ‘failure’ in the way that reconviction for a new sexual offence and the creation of another victim would have to be....The fact that...core members have been recalled to prison can be seen as evidence of the effectiveness of current public protection procedures of which COSA forms an active part (see also Nellis 2009).

The existing evidence about the capacity of Circles of Support and Accountability to reduce the recidivism of child sex offenders is therefore promising. Where rigorous quantitative studies have been undertaken, statistically significant reductions in reoffending among those who participate in Circles of Support and Accountability have been found (Wilson, Cortoni & McWhinnie 2009; Wilson, Picheca & Prinzo 2005).

One limitation of these studies that is important to consider, however, is the extent to which the motivation of those who participate in Circles of Support and Accountability is correlated with the reduction in recidivism among this group. That is, while in both Wilson, Cortoni and McWhinnie’s (2009) and Wilson, Picheca and Prinzo’s (2005) studies the samples of Circles of Support and Accountability participants have been compared with matched samples of non-participants, it must be recognised that it is voluntary for an offender to participate in a Circles of Support and Accountability. As a consequence, it is possible that the two samples in these studies are not matched on one critical feature – whether they are motivated to desist from offending. To overcome this issue, a randomised controlled trial of Circles of Support and Accountability is currently being undertaken by the Minnesota Department of Corrections. This research addresses the issue of offender motivation by randomly assigning from a cohort of offenders who have indicated their motivation to participate in a Circles of Support and Accountability either into a Circles of Support and Accountability or into the control group (Minnesota Department of Corrections 2010).

It should also be noted that “offender motivation” to participate in a Circles of Support and Accountability may exist along a scale. That is, “offender motivation” is not a black-and-white concept whereby offenders are either motivated to participate or not. As one Circles of Support and Accountability staff member in the United States of America pointed out, some Core Members agree to participate in a Circle at their parole officer’s suggestion. In some jurisdictions, Core Members may therefore feel some degree of pressure to participate in a Circles of Support and Accountability program. (This is very unlikely to be the

case in the United Kingdom, however, where the structure of Circles of Support and Accountability precludes Core Members receiving any legal benefit from their participation).

As Wilson, Cortoni and McWhinnie (2009) argue, furthermore, some members of the comparison group in the Canadian studies may have been motivated to participate in a Circles of Support and Accountability but were unable to due to there being no Circles of Support and Accountability program in the location to which the Core Member was released. That is, the comparison groups in these two studies were not all necessarily program “refusers”. It should be noted, therefore, that in terms of motivation to participate, the two groups (Core Members and the comparison group) may not be entirely discrete.

In addition to the above, a four-year program of research by Circles UK and Leeds University is currently underway. This study will use qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate the outcomes of Circles of Support and Accountability, including levels of recidivism. National police data and prison records will be used to compare Core Members with released prisoners who do not participate in a Circle of Support and Accountability. Results will be available in approximately three years.

As also noted above, research is currently underway on the Minnesota Department of Corrections’ Circles of Support and Accountability program.

Circles of Support and Accountability: Some key issues for consideration

Volunteer recruitment, training and retention

Volunteer recruitment is considered one of the primary struggles of Circles of Support and Accountability (Nellis 2009). Many of the Circles of Support and Accountability projects that I visited struggled to find enough volunteers. Volunteers are critical for Circles of Support and Accountability; if adequate numbers of appropriate volunteers cannot be recruited, trained and retained, Circles of Support and Accountability cannot function successfully.

Circles of Support and Accountability volunteers come from a wide variety of backgrounds and have a variety of motivations for becoming involved with this type of program. Some, however, come from:

- **Professional occupations** such as counselling, social work and the criminal justice sector;
- **Student populations** (often postgraduate students in related disciplines such as social work, criminology and psychology);
- **Faith communities** (primarily Christian denominations such as Mennonite, Quaker and Catholic); and

- **Victim/survivors of sexual violence** (volunteers may have experienced sexual abuse themselves or have had a family member or friend experience sexual violence).

It should be noted that the constitution of Circles of Support and Accountability varies among jurisdictions, with some of these cohorts of volunteers present in some jurisdictions but not others.

Volunteers have a wide range of motivations for wanting to participate in a Circle of Support and Accountability. These include:

- **Wanting to contribute towards the safety of children in the community.** Many volunteers simply saw their participation in a Circle of Support and Accountability as a way of contributing to community safety.
- **Faith.** Many volunteers expressed to me that their faith underpinned their involvement in a Circle of Support and Accountability. Elements of the Christian faith, such as believing in the good of all people and practising forgiveness were seen as compatible with Circles of Support and Accountability. The “peace churches” (Mennonite and Quaker traditions) also have a strong focus on serving others. Importantly, Mennonite and Quaker communities have been heavily involved in establishing restorative justice practices in North America since the 1970s.
- **Sexual victimisation.** A number of volunteers had either been sexually abused themselves or had connections with family members or friends who had been abused. For these volunteers, participation in a Circle of Support and Accountability is a way to contribute to community safety, to prevent other individuals becoming victims, and to hold offenders accountable. In some cases, parents of men who had sexually offended have also shown an interest in becoming involved with Circles of Support and Accountability.
- **Gaining experience working with offenders.** For students, participation in a Circle of Support and Accountability can mean gaining valuable experience working with offenders. Volunteers are, however, carefully trained and screened; as a result, students usually have motivations in addition to wanting to gain work experience (such as those described above).

Circles of Support and Accountability projects have a diverse range of strategies for recruiting volunteers, including:

- **Targeting individuals** who they think would make appropriate volunteers. Sometimes this may take many months or even years;
- **Targeting specific groups** such as faith communities, universities and colleges, Universities of the Third Age and other seniors’ groups, 12-step programs, Indigenous organisations, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) groups. The latter can be particularly useful if the Core Member is confronting issues about his sexuality;

- **Using local Volunteer Bureaux** or similar organisations. Many Circles of Support and Accountability programs advertised through volunteer organisations and/or worked closely with staff at these organisations to source appropriate volunteers;
- **Volunteer word-of-mouth.** Almost all Circles of Support and Accountability programs that I visited sourced volunteers through existing volunteers. In this respect, it appears that although finding volunteers is usually difficult, finding the *original* volunteers for a Circle may present the most significant challenge. Some Circles of Support and Accountability programs use techniques such as “invite a friend” flyers for information evenings to capitalise on volunteer word-of-mouth;
- **Using the media.** A number of Circles of Support and Accountability programs I visited had had some media interest and/or coverage. As described above, this often results in potential volunteers coming forward.

Volunteers are usually provided with extensive training, and most Circles of Support and Accountability programs I visited have structured training manuals (see e.g. Minnesota Department of Corrections n.d.b). In the United Kingdom, a standardised training package developed by Circles UK is used by Circles of Support and Accountability projects. The content of volunteer training packages varies substantially across other locations.

Volunteer retention, while not presenting as critical a difficulty as volunteer recruitment, is also important to consider. Circles of Support and Accountability programs described some attrition of volunteers, for a variety of reasons. In some instances, Circles of Support and Accountability simply draw to a natural conclusion, with the Core Member functioning successfully in the community; in other cases, the Core Member may return to prison as the result of breaching conditions and/or committing a new offence. Volunteers may also choose to leave a Circle due to feeling unable to cope (this has occasionally been the case with volunteers who have been victims of sexual violence themselves). Primarily, however, Circles of Support and Accountability programs that I visited described the “recycling” of volunteers. That is, in many cases, volunteers opt to participate in another Circle after the “completion” of their first.

Some limitations and potential “dangers” of Circles of Support and Accountability

My research in the United States of America, Canada and the United Kingdom suggested a number of “dangers” or issues that should be considered by government or other organisations considering implementing Circles of Support and Accountability in Australia.

- **Limited scope.** As described above, Circles of Support and Accountability are a tertiary crime prevention measure. By definition, they deal with child sex offenders who have already offended; their purpose is to prevent reoffending. As a result, Circles of Support and Accountability have limited scope and are not a panacea.

Although the research suggests that Circles of Support and Accountability can be effective in minimising reoffending, it should be acknowledged that they are only one measure – one piece of the puzzle – needed to reduce the sexual victimisation of children.

- **Striking a balance between “support” and “accountability”.** In theory, Circles of Support and Accountability use twin mechanisms to reduce the reoffending of Core Members: “support” and “accountability”. In practice, however, it may be difficult to strike a balance between these two strategies. The Circles of Support and Accountability that I observed in North America often appeared to have a stronger focus on support than accountability. (I acknowledge, however, that the Circles of Support and Accountability that I observed were not a representative sample, and that my observations may not be generalisable to all Circles of Support and Accountability. Importantly, all the Circles of Support and Accountability that I observed were in North America; it is likely that given their embeddedness with the MAPPA framework in the United Kingdom, Circles of Support and Accountability in that jurisdiction have a stronger focus on accountability).

Compared with “accountability”, “support” is both easy to understand/articulate and to provide to Core Members. Volunteers who I spoke with were able to articulate what it means to support a Core Member, and could provide examples of support activities they had undertaken. Both practical and emotional support is offered to Core Members. For example, volunteers assisted Core Members to find employment, educational opportunities, social activities and accommodation, and provided emotional support by listening to the Core Member, empathising with his struggles to reintegrate, and becoming his “friend”. Core Members I spoke with were also able to articulate the support functions of their Circle of Support and Accountability very easily.

Some of the volunteers, staff and Core Members I spoke with found “accountability” far more difficult to define and to provide examples of. In addition, in some cases, Circles of Support and Accountability that I observed in North America appeared to lack this function.

The Circles of Support and Accountability literature also has less to say about “accountability” than “support”. The little that the literature has to say on “accountability” does, however, suggest a convergence of views. Correctional Service Canada (n.d.: 1) describes “accountability” as ‘confronting inappropriate attitudes or behaviours [of the Core Member]’. Similarly, Associated Ministries (n.d.: 1) claim that in Circles of Support and Accountability, ‘volunteers offer practical and

emotional support but they also confront Core Members to challenge problematic attitudes, behavior, and cognitive distortions with the goal that the Core Member never reoffend'. Catholic Charities (2008) provides the most detailed consideration of the meaning of "accountability", claiming that Core Members are held accountable through:

1. Increasing their awareness of the impact of their behavior on victims and the community;
2. Creating opportunities for them to accept responsibility and take appropriate steps to repair harm and make amends; and
3. Living responsible and pro-social lives and protecting their dignity as community members.

In addition, reporting concerns about Core Members' behaviours to the authorities could be considered a key aspect of accountability. This can and does occur, as Bates, Saunders and Wilson's (2007) research in the United Kingdom clearly demonstrates.

Unlike offering support to Core Members, it appears that providing accountability may present difficulties for some volunteers. As the above definitions suggest, holding an offender accountable may require confronting or challenging a Core Member. As an observer of Circles of Support and Accountability in North America, I witnessed a number of instances in which I felt a Core Member ought to have been challenged by volunteers, but was not. (I acknowledge, however, that this is my subjective opinion, and also that "accountability" may occur over time in a Circle of Support and Accountability).

In summary, the concept of "accountability" needs to be given further consideration, and needs to be better defined. In addition, the presumed link between holding an offender accountable, and reducing his recidivism, needs to be further interrogated and articulated. What is it about holding offenders accountable that is supposed to prevent recidivism, and how should this be applied in practice? These issues could also be given further consideration in volunteer training.

- **Use of faith-based volunteers.** In some locations I visited in North America, Circles of Support and Accountability volunteers came primarily from faith (i.e. Christian) communities. Others had found it difficult to recruit from faith communities, or had volunteer recruitment strategies that involved recruiting from diverse groups (see above). As outlined above, volunteers are vital for the operation of Circles of Support and Accountability, and should be applauded irrespective of whether they have been recruited from a faith community or another community or group.

A number of issues have, however, arisen as the result of a reliance on volunteers from faith communities. One of these is that volunteers from faith communities are considered too naive to work with child sex offenders. One child sex offender (as cited in Liataud 2010: 51) claims that 'I considered church people easy to fool. They have a trust that comes from being Christians. I think they want to believe in people'. Another child sex offender (as cited in Liataud 2010: 52) says, 'most churches don't even want to talk about sex, much less sex offenses'. This is an important issue, and one that should be considered when recruiting volunteers for Circles of Support and Accountability. Although I witnessed some naivety among Circles of Support and Accountability volunteers from faith communities, however, I also observed volunteers from faith communities having frank discussions with Core Members about Core Members' sexual fantasies and masturbatory habits. This suggests that while some volunteers from faith backgrounds may be naive, others are certainly not. The same could undoubtedly be said about volunteers from other communities or backgrounds.

An issue that the Circles of Support and Accountability literature does not discuss, but that I observed during my research in North America, is the potential for Circles of Support and Accountability to become fora in which Christian moral values are imposed on Core Members. This is a complex issue; Circles of Support and Accountability are by their very nature fora in which a moral or ethical framework or standard is imposed on Core Members. If one of volunteers' key roles is to hold Core Members accountable, a moral framework or standard of some nature is assumed. This moral framework needs to be further interrogated and better articulated. In relation to the use of volunteers from faith communities in Circles of Support and Accountability, suffice it to say that where Circles of Support and Accountability are government-funded, the imposition of Christian values on (unwilling) Core Members should be avoided. It should be noted, however, that in some Circles of Support and Accountability I observed in North America, Core Members clearly welcomed religious guidance from volunteers.

The issues discussed above highlight the importance of recruiting volunteers from diverse communities and with diverse motivations for participating in Circles of Support and Accountability, as well as the importance of creating balanced Circles of Support and Accountability wherever possible. They also suggest that national standards (such as those adopted in the United Kingdom), which enable baseline values to be articulated and implemented across Circles of Support and Accountability, should be considered by governments or other groups implementing Circles of Support and Accountability.

- **Volunteer safety and wellbeing.** Armstrong et al.'s (2008) study of the feasibility of Circles of Support and Accountability in Scotland highlighted that there is a lack of research into potentially negative impacts of Circles of Support and Accountability on volunteers. Although studies have shown that participating in Circles of Support and Accountability has resulted in a range of positive outcomes for volunteers (such as providing a sense of community), it is possible, as Armstrong et al. (2008) argue, that outcomes such as trauma and stress also affect volunteers.

Armstrong et al.'s (2008) interviews with volunteers in the Hampshire/Thames Valley area found, however, that no volunteer identified his/her safety as a major concern. In addition, a range of protocols are in place to ensure the safety and wellbeing of volunteers. These range from those identified by Armstrong et al. (2008) (e.g. only using first names within the Circle; not meeting with the Core Member in an isolated place) to intensive training and support of volunteers. One program I visited has an annual self-care retreat for volunteers, which has the primary purpose of ensuring that volunteers are not suffering any adverse impacts from participating in a Circle of Support and Accountability.

As described above, some volunteers are motivated to participate in Circles of Support and Accountability due to having been victimised sexually themselves. This group of volunteers may have additional emotional wellbeing needs. Often, survivors of sexual abuse are screened out as volunteers as they are deemed too vulnerable to participate (Armstrong et al. 2008). Alicia Hinton (2008) describes in detail the issues survivor volunteers may face if they participate in a Circle of Support and Accountability in her useful booklet *Circles of Support and Accountability: Are you ready to be a volunteer? Information for survivors*. In this booklet, Hinton (2008: 17) argues that 'I doubt that any survivor can participate in COSA without experiencing some degree of re-victimization or triggering of our past abuse'. As Armstrong et al. (2008) suggest, therefore, although volunteer safety and wellbeing have to date not posed major problems for Circles of Support and Accountability, this is an important issue and is deserving of further consideration and research.

Recommendations

In this section, I make a number of recommendations based on knowledge gained during my research on Circles of Support and Accountability in Canada, the United States of America and the United Kingdom. It should of course be noted that my research was limited in its scope and generalisability.

1. **That one or more Australian jurisdictions commit to formally piloting and evaluating a Circles of Support and Accountability program.** Given the strong research evidence from international jurisdictions, and the capacity of Circles of Support and Accountability to result in the reduced sexual victimisation of children, as well as substantial cost savings, one or more Australian jurisdictions should consider trialling this innovative criminal justice initiative.
2. **That a Program Logic model be designed to reflect the intended operation of Circles of Support and Accountability.** As described above, although there is evidence to demonstrate that Circles of Support and Accountability can be effective, there is only speculation as to why this is the case. For example, it is posited that holding offenders accountable will result in reduced recidivism, but the way in which this is to occur has not been well articulated. The creation of a Program Logic model, graphically depicting the intention of Circles of Support and Accountability, and based on the available evidence, would help to define how and why they appear to work to reduce recidivism among child sex offenders.
3. **That the theoretical underpinnings of Circles of Support and Accountability are examined and articulated.** Circles of Support and Accountability are premised on multiple and diverse theoretical frameworks. In addition to the development of a Program Logic for Circles of Support and Accountability, the theoretical underpinnings of Circles of Support and Accountability should be more thoroughly examined.
4. **That the moral framework on which Circles of Support and Accountability are premised be considered.** As argued above, Circles of Support and Accountability by their very nature involve the imposition of some type of moral standard or framework. This should be given further consideration and be formally documented where possible.
5. **That Circles of Support and Accountability implemented in Australia consider the issues raised in this report.** This report has highlighted, for example, the importance of having a strong volunteer base, of recruiting volunteers from diverse groups and communities, implementing strategies to ensure volunteers' safety and wellbeing, and striking a balance between support and accountability. Strong relationships among key agencies (e.g. police and corrections) and Circles of Support and Accountability are also vital.
6. **That a pilot of Circles of Support and Accountability be rigorously evaluated.** This report has outlined the strong research evidence from international jurisdictions that demonstrates that Circles of Support and Accountability can have a positive impact

on recidivism rates of child sex offenders. Quality research evidence from a local program is critical if Circles of Support and Accountability are to be effectively utilised in Australia.

7. **That consideration be given to whether any development is to be overseen by a national umbrella agency** (as is the case in the United Kingdom) to set standards of service consistency and quality across Circles of Support and Accountability. As highlighted in this report, this is a key difference between the Canadian and United Kingdom models of Circles of Support and Accountability, and each approach has strengths and limitations.

Conclusion

Circles of Support and Accountability have been shown to reduce recidivism among child sex offenders released into the community in a number of international jurisdictions. While this type of crime prevention measure may appear controversial, this evidence should inform future responses to released child sex offenders in the Australian community.

Although as outlined above, Circles of Support and Accountability can only ever be one measure among others to reduce the sexual victimisation of children, they are a promising strategy to which Australian criminal justice policy-makers should give further consideration.

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Appendix 1: Places and people visited as part of Churchill Fellowship

Name	Place	Role	Organisation
Clare Ann Ruth-Heffelbower	Fresno, California, USA	Program Director	Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA), Centre for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies
Ron Claassen	Fresno, California, USA	Director	Centre for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies
Wayne Northey	Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada		Circles of Support and Accountability, M2/W2 Restorative Christian Ministries
Frank Sawatsky	Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada	Associate COSA Coordinator	Circles of Support and Accountability, M2/W2 Restorative Christian Ministries
Germaine Solaiman	Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada	Associate COSA Coordinator	Circles of Support and Accountability, M2/W2 Restorative Christian Ministries
Maureen Donegan	Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada	Associate COSA Coordinator	Circles of Support and Accountability, M2/W2 Restorative Christian Ministries
James Loewen	Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada	National Restorative Justice Coordinator	Mennonite Central Committee
Linnea Groom	Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada	Provincial Coordinator/Bookkeeper	Circles of Support and Accountability, M2/W2 Restorative Christian Ministries
Judy Dizy	Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada	Detective and former Provincial 810 Coordinator	Abbotsford Police Department
Joann Dillavou	St Paul, Minnesota, USA	Director, Minnesota Circles of Support and Accountability (MnCOSA)	Minnesota Department of Corrections
Bill Donnay	St Paul, Minnesota, USA	Director, Risk Assessment/Community Notification	Minnesota Department of Corrections
Gary Johnson	St Paul,	Reentry Services	Minnesota

	Minnesota, USA	Director	Department of Corrections
Jenn Hamrick	St Paul, Minnesota, USA	Volunteer Coordinator, MnCOSA	Minnesota Department of Corrections
Maggie DeGroot	St Paul, Minnesota, USA	Reentry Associate/MnCOSA Associate	Minnesota Department of Corrections
Nanette Larson	St Paul, Minnesota, USA	Director, Health Services	Minnesota Department of Corrections
Chris Bray	St Paul, Minnesota, USA	Deputy Commission, Community Services Division	Minnesota Department of Corrections
Jack Rusinoff	St Paul, Minnesota, USA	Psychologist, Risk Assessment/Community Notification Unit	Minnesota Department of Corrections
Grant Duwe	St Paul, Minnesota, USA	Manager, Research and Evaluation	Minnesota Department of Corrections
Lee Buckley	St Paul, Minnesota, USA	Community re-entry coordinator	Minnesota Department of Corrections
Eileen Henderson	Toronto, Ontario, Canada	Regional Coordinator	Circles of Support and Accountability, Mennonite Central Committee Ontario
Leatrice Chan	Toronto, Ontario, Canada	Program Coordinator, Greater Toronto Area	Circles of Support and Accountability, Mennonite Central Committee Ontario
Wendy Leaver	Toronto, Ontario, Canada	Detective, Sex Crime Unit	Toronto Police Service, and Circles of Support and Accountability volunteer
Ed Vandenberg	Toronto, Ontario, Canada	Program Coordinator, Greater Toronto Area	Circles of Support and Accountability, Mennonite Central Committee Ontario
Dave Blow	Toronto, Ontario, Canada	Program Coordinator, Greater Toronto Area	Circles of Support and Accountability, Mennonite Central Committee Ontario
Reverend Harry Nigh	Toronto, Ontario, Canada	Community Chaplain	Keele Centre, Correctional Service Canada

Susan Love	Ottawa, Ontario, Canada	Program Coordinator	Circles of Support and Accountability Ottawa
Pierre Allard and Judy Allard	Ottawa, Ontario, Canada	President and Executive Officer	Just.Equipping
Susan Haines	Ottawa, Ontario, Canada	Executive Director Community engagement	National Associations Active in Criminal Justice Circles of Support and Accountability Ottawa
Karen Langford	Ottawa, Ontario, Canada	Executive Assistant	Circles of Support and Accountability Ottawa
Adina Ilea	Ottawa, Ontario, Canada	Data Coordinator	Circles of Support and Accountability Ottawa
Ron Fitzpatrick	St John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada	Executive Director	Turnings
Dan McGettigan	St John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada	Assistant Director	Turnings
Stephen Hanvey	Reading, United Kingdom	Chief Executive Officer	Circles UK
Chris Wilson	Reading, United Kingdom	National Development Manager	Circles UK
Dom Williams	Didcot, United Kingdom	Operations Manager	Hampshire-Thames Valley Circles
Simon Sauze	London, United Kingdom	COSA Program Manager	Lucy Faithfull Foundation
Blair Parrott	London, United Kingdom	COSA Program Coordinator	Lucy Faithfull Foundation
Ron Viner	London, United Kingdom	Circles Administrator	Lucy Faithfull Foundation
Helen Drewery	London, United Kingdom	Assistant General Secretary	Quaker Peace and Social Witness