


Circles of support and accountability for sex offenders

A community-based approach to the reintegration of sex offenders following release from prison.

First published
27 March 2020

| Effect scale | Quality of evidence | | | | |
|--|---|--|-----------------------------|--|--|
| | Effect Impact on crime | Mechanism How it works | Moderator Where it works | Implementation How to do it | Economic cost What it costs |
|  Some reduction | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> Moderate | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> Low | No information | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> Low | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> Low |

Focus of the intervention

Circles of support and accountability (also known as Circles) are small groups of community volunteers who support sex offenders as they reintegrate into society after release from prison. Examples of support provided by volunteers include mentoring, practical help and monitoring.

This approach is intended to promote successful reintegration into the community and reduce reoffending among high risk sex offenders. The focus of the Review is on studies that evaluated the effect of Circles programmes on the following offender outcomes: reoffending rates, risk level and reintegration into the community.

This narrative is based on one systematic review covering 15 studies, which primarily focuses on the effect of Circles programmes on reoffending (including reconviction for any offence and any sexual offence, arrest, recall, or breach of licence). Other factors that can influence reoffending – such as psychosocial adaptation, housing, relationships and employment – were also considered.

Most of the primary research was carried out in the UK (nine studies). There were also three studies conducted in Canada, two studies in the USA and one study in the Netherlands.

Effect – how effective is it?

There is some evidence that Circles programmes have reduced general reoffending, but overall the Circles programmes have not had a statistically significant effect on crime.

The evidence suggests that Circles programmes had no overall impact on reoffending for sex offenders who received the Circles programme compared to the sex offenders who did not. However, it is possible that sex offenders in the control groups, as well as those who participated in Circles programmes, may have also participated in other sexual offender treatment programmes.

Within this review, general reoffending is defined as ‘being charged with or convicted of a new offence’. Sexual reoffending is defined as either ‘being charged with a new sexual offence or breaching a court-imposed condition’.

The four studies with control groups reported that the sex offenders who received the Circles programme had lower rates of general reoffending than those who did not, although few of these differences were statistically significant. However, the review was not able to demonstrate a reduction in reoffending for sexual offences, which the authors suggest may be in part due to short follow-up periods and a lack of studies with control groups.

The effect of the Circles programme on psychosocial outcomes (for example, psychosocial adaptation, housing, relationships and employment) that might lead to a reduction in reoffending is unknown. The studies that found improvements did not use control groups and as a result it is not possible to know whether these improvements were a result of the Circles programme.

How strong is the evidence?

The review was sufficiently systematic that some forms of bias that could influence the study conclusions can be ruled out.

The review had a well-designed search strategy and the authors considered the validity of the way outcomes were measured and/or combined. However, the review did not sufficiently assess the risk of bias in the analysis, report the effect sizes of the reviewed studies or undertake a meta-analysis.

The review authors identified several risks of bias in the primary studies. Most of the studies were case series (11 of the 15 included in the Review). The remaining four studies had a control group but only one of these was a randomised controlled trial.

Other limitations were small sample sizes, a short follow-up period in most studies and a lack of reconviction data in some of the studies. The exposure of the offenders to the Circles programme (for example, length of the programme and frequency of the meetings) was not always recorded.

Mechanism – how does it work?

Circles programmes are assumed to reduce the risk factors associated with offending behaviour, and therefore crime, by enhancing offenders' capabilities to achieve and maintain prosocial behaviour.

Volunteers provide offenders with practical help and support (for example, to find work or housing and building appropriate friendships), with both parties maintaining an open and honest relationship at all times.

Together they work to develop offenders' capabilities in several areas, including:

- improved insight
- problem solving
- social skills
- coping and self-regulation skills
- social integration and participation in society

However, information was not available from the primary studies to test whether these mechanisms were responsible for the outcome patterns observed.

The review authors note that Circles programmes are provided on a relatively small scale. This is due to the relatively low number of sex offenders released into the community at any one time, the novelty of the Circles approach and the availability of willing volunteers. This means there are few large-scale studies of their effectiveness.

Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?

The review did not examine the conditions under which the Circles programmes might work best.

Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

The Circles programme should include a group of four to six volunteers from the community, with a range of ages and backgrounds, who meet with the offender on a weekly or sometimes daily basis.

The volunteers are supported by a Circle coordinator. In turn, they provide sex offenders with support and help to be accountable for their own reintegration.

Volunteers also work with the multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) and provide a monitoring function by alerting the relevant organisations to any potential risk posed by the sex offender. The review authors suggest that openness and honesty within the relationship between the volunteers and these organisations is essential to the success of the Circles programmes.

Economic considerations – how much might it cost?

While the review did not undertake an economic analysis, some mention of costs were reported in the primary studies.

- One USA study estimated a cost-benefit ratio of 82% return on investment – for every \$1 spent the estimated benefit was \$1.82.
- Two UK studies calculated a small cost-benefit of participating in Circles, ranging from £0.04 to £0.18 in savings for every £1 invested in Circles. In both studies, the cost savings substantially increased when intangible costs to society were considered.

General considerations

The studies included in this review have several limitations in terms of the study design, small sample sizes, short follow-up periods, limited data sources for reconviction data and limited information about how the Circles programmes were implemented.

The methodological limitations of the studies and the variations in implementation limit the ability to generalise the outcomes to a wider population.

It is also worth noting that offences committed by participants in Circles programmes are more likely to be detected because Circles volunteers also provide a monitoring function.

Summary

Overall, the Circles programmes have not had a statistically significant effect on crime, but there is some evidence that they have reduced general reoffending.

The review authors suggest that a number of methodological and programme issues (including short-follow up periods, a lack of studies with control groups and the small scale of Circles programmes) impact the ability to be more certain about the effectiveness of Circles programmes.

Circles programmes are assumed to reduce crime by having a small support group of volunteers who provide practical help to enhance offenders' capabilities to achieve and maintain prosocial behaviour.

Openness and honesty in the relationship between the volunteers and the offender is said to be essential to the success of the Circles programme.

The volunteers also provide a monitoring function, alerting the relevant organisations to any potential risk posed by the sex offender.

Additional evidence is required to test the assumptions about why Circles programmes may be effective and to identify the contexts in which Circles programmes work best.

Reviews

Review one

Reference

- Clarke, M., Brown, S. and Völlm, B. (2017) '[**Circles of Support and Accountability for Sex Offenders: A Systematic Review of Outcomes**](#)', Sexual Abuse, Vol 29(5) 446–478

Summary prepared by

The coding for this narrative was carried out by University College London and the narrative was written by the College of Policing. ESRC grant title: 'University Consortium for Evidence-Based Crime Reduction'. Grant reference: ES/L007223/1.

[Return to the toolkit](#)

Tags

- [Crime reduction](#)
- [Violence against women and girls](#)