

# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

November 2020 No 251



# 'No one told me about Circles': Perspectives of Circles of Support and Accountability and Perceived Support to Prevent Sexual Reoffending

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## Introduction

The proportion of reoffences committed, dependent on the type of index offence, has remained broadly stable over time. The lowest rate of reoffending in the adult cohort was observed amongst those with a sexual index offence, with a rate of 13.6 per cent<sup>1</sup>. At present, so-called 'through the gate services' (TTGS) focus on practically supporting all individuals who have committed an offence in preparation for release. TTGS are responsible for providing individuals who have committed sexual offences accommodation in a range of locations depending on their level of risk and need. The National Probation Service manage those with sexual convictions when they are in custody, and on release, and help individuals prepare for release and utilise relevant organisations to help with accommodation, employment, training and education, finance, benefits, and health and social care. TTGS are provided automatically to those in prisons which are set up to help resettlement, for instance by helping with CV's, vocational courses, etc., although not all individuals who have

committed sexual offences will reside and subsequently be released from such establishments. In addition to these statutory services, charities such as the Safer Living Foundation<sup>2</sup> and the Lucy Faithfull Foundation<sup>3</sup> provide support to individuals who have committed sexual offences upon release, although resources limit the number of individual's such charities are able to support.

There can also be restrictions as to the placement of those with sexual convictions. For instance, offence history can result in individual's being barred from some hostels, hotels or bed and breakfast establishments, and, when funded by the National Probation Service, need to be personally authorised by the Chief Probation Officer and/or the Director General for Probation. Indeed, research regarding those being released having committed a sexual offence<sup>4,5,6,7</sup> have reported difficulties in finding accommodation and employment. This can be a result of legal restrictions placed on them with regard to where they can live and or work. Furthermore, it can be due to public perceptions (or fear of them) due to their offence history. Some research has shown individuals subject to such

1. Ministry of Justice (2019). Proven reoffending statistics quarterly bulletin, July 2017 to September 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/proven-reoffending-statistics-july-to-september-2017> 31.8.19.
2. The SLF It is a joint venture between HMP Whatton and Nottingham Trent University, and is supported by the likes of the National Probation Service (East Midlands) and Nottinghamshire Police. As a Charitable Incorporated Organisation that adopts a multi-agency approach with a strong research component, the SLF is focused on reducing sexual offending and re-offending through rehabilitative and preventative initiatives.
3. The mission of the LFF is to prevent the sexual abuse of children and young people by working with protective adults, those affected by abuse and those perpetrating it, including young people with harmful sexual behaviour. They educate families, professionals and the public to help children and young people to stay safe. Through Stop it Now they provide a confidential helpline.
4. Tewksbury, R. (2012). Stigmatization of sex offenders. *Deviant Behavior*, 33, (8), 606-623. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2011.636690>.
5. Tewksbury, R., & Connor, D. P. (2012). Incarcerated sex offenders' perceptions of family relationships: Previous experiences and future expectations. *Western Criminology Review*, 13, 25-35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885512467318>.
6. Tewksbury, R., & Copes, H. (2013). Incarcerated sex offenders' expectations for re-entry. *The Prison Journal*, 93, (2) 102-122. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0032885512467318>.

residency restrictions show increased levels of stress<sup>7</sup> and report a persistent sense of vulnerability<sup>8</sup>. Further, some of those released feel they will never be free from the label of a 'sex offender', the status of that label being seen above other identifiers the person may have, for example fatherhood<sup>9</sup>. Researchers<sup>4</sup> reported that some individuals who committed a sexual offence described fearing being viewed by others as 'the lowest of the low' and the 'worst of the worst' which reportedly resulted in them withdrawing from social opportunities, thus increasing their social isolation. Many individuals convicted of sexual offences also report problems maintaining social and familial relationships due to their status as a 'sex offender'<sup>5,6</sup>. Indeed, research has emphasised the importance of reducing social isolation, with a particular focus on enhancing familial relationships<sup>10</sup>, to reduce an individual's risk of reoffending. Thus, it appears some existing strategies currently implemented may inadvertently contribute to an increase in offence-related risk factors for some individuals.

For some individuals who have committed a sexual offence, it is apparent the risk of reoffending is higher and additional support is needed to adequately manage their risk of reoffending. Expanding on this further, some individuals released having been charged with a sexual offence can find it difficult to gain support to manage their emotions in relation to sexual interests<sup>11</sup>. The Integrated Theory of Desistance from Sexual Offending (ITDSO<sup>12</sup>) relates to how those convicted of sexual offences can successfully re-integrate in the community. As both deviant sexual interests and poor

emotional coping are known risk factors for sexual recidivism<sup>13</sup>, the perceived support by individuals who have committed a sexual offence upon release in relation to this is arguably essential to reduce the risk of reoffending. This issue is discussed further<sup>14</sup>, through exploration with individuals preparing for release. They found that individual's pertaining the belief that they were going to be supported by 'normal' people, helped provide them with a sense of belonging they had not experienced previously. Further, individuals in the process of desistance from sexual reoffending have noted the importance of social support and new employment opportunities<sup>15</sup>, as well as reporting a sense of hope and optimism for their future<sup>16</sup>. Consistent with the principles of ITDSO, individuals appearing to be in the process of sexual desistance have reported structural and social processes, as well as internal personal shifts, as relevant to positive change and desistance from sexual offending. Whilst the sexual desistance research is growing, understanding how public protection services can mirror the latest findings remains challenging.

Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) is an organisation which attempts to provide support through recruiting, training and supervising volunteer members of the public to provide tailored support and monitoring of those who have been convicted of sexual offences when they are being released from custody. Support is offered as a means of reducing feelings of isolation and emotional loneliness, factors known to relate to sexual reoffending<sup>17</sup>. Its' efficacy is reported elsewhere<sup>18:19;20;21;22</sup> but, in general, it is seen as a

7. Tewksbury, R., & Mustaine, E. E. (2009). Stress and collateral consequences for registered sex offenders. *Journal of Public Management & Social Policy*, 15, (3), 215-239.
8. Tewksbury, R. & Lees, M. (2007). Perceptions of Punishment: How Registered Sex Offenders View Registries. *Crimes & Delinquency*, 53, (3), 380-407.
9. Mingus, W., & Burchfield, K.B. (2017). From prison to integration: Applying modified labelling theory to sex offenders. *Criminal Justice Studies*, 25, (1), 97-109.
10. Farmer, L. (2017). *The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime*. UK: Ministry of Justice.
11. Akerman, G. (2017 online first). Providing treatment in a prison-based therapeutic community for those who have committed sexual offences. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*.
12. Göbbels, S., Ward, T., & Willis, G. M. (2012). An integrative theory of desistance from sex offending. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 17, (5), 453-462.
13. Mann, R.E., Hanson, K.R., & Thornton, D. (2010). Assessing risk for sexual recidivism: Some proposals on the nature of psychologically meaningful risk factors. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 22, (2), 191-217.
14. Kitson-Boyce, R., Blagden, N., Winder, B., & Dillon, G. (2019). "This time it's difference" preparing for release through a prison-model of CoSA: A Phenomenological and Repertory Grid Analysis. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 31, (8), 886-907.
15. McAlinden, A.M., Farmer, M. & Maura, S. (2017). Desistance from Sexual Offending: Do the Mainstream Theories Apply? *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 17, (3), 266-283.
16. Farmer, M. (2015). Understanding desistance from sexual offending: A thematic review of research findings. *Probation Journal*, 62, (4), 320-335.
17. Hanson, R. K., & Morton-Bourgon, K. E. (2009). The accuracy of recidivism risk assessments for sexual offenders: A meta-analysis of 118 prediction studies. *Psychological Assessment*. 21(1), 1-21.
18. Kitson-Boyce, R. (2018). Do CoSA work? A review of the literature. In Elliott, H., Hocken, K., Lievesley, R., Blagden, N., Winder, B., & Banyard, P. (Eds.) *Sexual Crime and Circles of Support and Accountability*. UK: Palgrave.
19. McCartan, K. (2016). *Circles of support and accountability: Cabinet office - Social Action Fund evaluation*. Project Report. University of the West of England, Bristol, UK.
20. Wilson, C., Bates, A., & Völlm, B. (2010). Circles of support and accountability: An innovative approach to manage high-risk sex offenders in the community. *Open Criminology Journal*, 3, (1), 48-57.
21. Wilson, R. J., Picheca, J. E., & Prinzo, M. (2005). Circles of support and accountability: An evaluation of the pilot project in south-central Ontario. Ottawa, Canada: Correctional Service of Canada.
22. Wilson, R. J., Picheca, J. E., & 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 the recidivism rates. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 46, (4), 327-337.

supportive network for those being released from custody having committed a sexual offence. The person who has been released from is referred to as the 'Core Member'. The 'Circle' around them generally 4-6 people, spend time with the core member and aims to provide a supportive social network that also requires the Core Member to take responsibility (be 'accountable') for his/her ongoing risk management. The Circle can also provide support and practical guidance in such things as developing their social skills, finding suitable accommodation or helping the Core Member to find appropriate hobbies and interests. Volunteers are fully informed of the Core Member's past pattern of offending, and whilst helping them to settle into the community the Volunteers also to assist them to recognise patterns of thought and behaviour that could lead to their re-offending. Within it, the Core Member can grow in self-esteem and develop healthy adult relationships, maximising his or her chances of successfully re-integrating into the community in a safe and fulfilling way. The Core Member is involved from the beginning, is included in all decision making and, like all other members of the Circle, signs a contract committing him or herself to the Circle and its aims. Each Circle is unique, because it is individually designed around the needs of the Core Member.

This paper considers the viewpoint of three men who were released having committed sexual offences, their perceived support in the community, their awareness of CoSA at the time of their release and now, and their views on community support which would be beneficial upon release. As the current paper focuses on men who did sexually reoffend, their perceptions of support may provide essential insight into identifying and supporting high risk individuals to protect against sexual reoffending. The present study was part of a larger piece of work, which focused on increasing awareness of CoSA and exploring if any additional training was needed for volunteers with CoSA to work with this client group. All participants had been through a process of leaving prison and sexually offending again and expressed deep regret for this. Their subsequent work within the Prison-based Therapeutic Community (TC) had arguably enabled them to be more honest about that they had done and be more accepting of others.

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## Method

### Data Collection and Participants

Within the prison-based TC, comprising of five treatment wings, resident research representatives are voted in by fellow residents. The authors met with the research representations on each wing who subsequently announced the research to the community and invited participants to apply. The residents who fitted the criteria were also identified, that is having been previously released following being charged or convicted of a sexual offence, and reoffending, as that was the topic in discussion. The information about the research was given to them and those who took part provided written consent. While there was an interview schedule to guide the focus group and encourage participants to consider their past experiences, at times it was deviated from in order to focus on the actual experiences of the participants and fully explore their narratives. Three men (referred to as Harry, George and Oliver), volunteered to participate in the research. All had been convicted of a sexual offence, have previously been released and committed a further sexual offence for which they are now serving a prison sentence. The focus group was facilitated by both authors, lasted just over an hour and was audiotaped. The group took place in May 2019.

The participants had committed sexual offences against adult women. There was some discussion at the start of the focus group in order to relax the participants. The themes that were the discussed asked what experience the participants had (if any) of working with CoSA, how helpful this had been, what support they had received in the community, and what was missing. What they had learned in therapy and offending behaviour programmes to help understand their motivation to offend, and how they were apply this to their plans for the future. The participants were asked what particular needs they would have in the future, in terms of emotional management. The participants were asked if they had any particular support in relation to their sexual offending.

It is worth noting that both researchers are female. One of whom is known to two of the participants, and not well to the other. The second author was not known to any of the participants. This may well have an impact on the discussion.

It was later transcribed and analysed by the researchers independently using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA<sup>23</sup>). IPA is an idiographic approach in which individual responses are analysed in detail before moving on to the next, generating general themes. This method allows for a detailed examination and interpretation of lived experience. It is noted<sup>24</sup> that the number of participants depends on: 1. *the depth of analysis of a single case study*; 2. *the richness of the individual cases*; 3. *how the researcher wants to compare or contrast single cases*; and 4. *the pragmatic restrictions one is working under*. As there were few residents who had experience of the research subject it was helpful that those who did were willing to take part. Each researcher immersed herself in the data, making notes and analysing emerging themes, and those with a weaker evidential base were removed. Quotes were used to illustrate the themes to retain the voice of the participants' personal experience. There was then a discussion between researchers to agree on wording of the themes that emerged.

## Results and discussion

### Results

The superordinate and sub-themes are exemplified with narrative examples. As space is limited not all the themes are reported but the full information is available from the corresponding author.

### Feeling fearful

Fearful of self/reoffending — not ready to change

*Harry. I questioned myself prior to release but I didn't tell anyone out of fear of being kept in prison. I was questioning why I was still having the thoughts but out of fear of rest of life in prison I didn't talk.*

...such as fantasies,  
inadvertently  
functioning to  
heightened and  
perpetuate some of  
the factors  
associated with  
their risk of  
reoffending.

*Oliver. Fearful of my anger, I took it out of the house, the arsons. I left prison this wouldn't have mattered. I left very angry and was determined to go on how I was. Now I've made changes and now it becomes more relevant.*

*George. Had the fantasy but no one to talk to. Fear of putting it out I'd get flak.*

Participants had mixed reasons for not talking about their thoughts and fantasies, being kept in prison, sent back to prison or not perceiving they had anyone to talk to, but each was fearful of re-offending.

Previous research<sup>25</sup> reports how those being released from custody can soon feel overwhelmed.

Oliver acknowledges the level of his anger and how he took it out on others through arson. Grievant and angry hostile rumination are associated with sexual, interpersonal violence, and violent recidivism<sup>13, 26, 27</sup>. These are arguably evident within this subtheme, suggesting the participants are likely to have presented with these around the time of their re-offense. It also suggests all the men in the current study were aware and fearful of, to varying degrees, some of the underlying

difficulties associated with their risk of reoffending. Whilst they may not have been able to directly relate this to risk of sexual reoffending, for example Oliver notes his anger but was unable to link this to factors associated with his sexual reoffending, their descriptions imply a level of self-doubt and fearfulness regarding their own safe functioning in the community. It appears this fearfulness of themselves, and risk of reoffending, inhibited their ability to disclose risk-related matters, such as fantasies, inadvertently functioning to heightened and perpetuate some of the

23. Smith, J. A., & Osborne, M. (2003). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In Smith, J. A. *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*, (pp. 25-50). London: Sage.
24. Pietkiewicz, I., & Smith, J.A. (2014). A practical guide to using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in qualitative research psychology. *Psychological Journal*, 20, (1), 7-14.
25. Fox, K.J. (2017). Contextualizing the policy and pragmatics of reintegrating sex offenders. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 29, (1), 28-50.
26. Norlander, B., & Eckhardt, C. (2005). Anger, hostility, and male perpetrators of intimate partner violence: A meta-analytic review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 25, (1), 119-152.
27. Huesmann, L. R. (1998). The role of social information processing and cognitive schemas in the acquisition and maintenance of habitual aggressive behavior. In R. G. Geen & E. Donnerstein (Eds.), *Human aggression: Theories, research, and implications for policy*. New York: Academic Press.

factors associated with their risk of reoffending. All participants were able to describe the presence of fearing themselves and their risk of reoffending, suggesting this was a shared lived experience for all the men in the current study.

### **Fearful others will 'find out'**

*Harry. Had a good support network but as in denial of sexual offending so they didn't know that side of me. I couldn't talk about it as I'd go straight back inside. Got job on drays but when men having chats about normal things, when they looked at me, I had nothing to say. I only had 20 years in prison. The dray people were ordinary people, they may say I won't work with him — another may be interested in wrong reasons.*

*Oliver. Family didn't know my past, living a lie. I was stuck in two lives. I couldn't say anything as they would not know that was me. I couldn't talk to wife as she didn't know I'd been in prison.*

Harry spoke of being 'in denial' which is not generally linked to risk of re-offending<sup>13</sup>, but in his case his inability to discuss his fantasies led to them building up. His fear of being recalled to custody overrode his wish to talk about his feelings. Likewise, Oliver's description suggests he also felt a degree of fearfulness regarding disclosure to others, even his wife with whom he states did not know he had been incarcerated. Previous research<sup>28</sup> suggested maintaining a social distance between themselves and others enabled individuals to manage the way they are viewed, and the impression that is subsequently formed. Thus, for those who have committed sexual offences, maintaining social distance from others can prevent them having to disclose their past, where they have been and what they have done. However, maintaining social distance to such a degree may be problematic if the individual is unable to form psychologically meaningful and safe relationships. Indeed, a key principle of the prison-based TC is to provide residents with an emotionally corrective experience whereby individuals are exposed to an environment and individuals with whom they can begin to reorganise problematic interpersonal strategies to ones which are pro-social and safe. Whilst non-disclosure to others is not necessarily related to an individual's ability to form such relationships, in the case of the participants in the present study, their fearfulness

of others knowing their offending history appears to have heightened feelings of mistrust, exacerbated the suppression of related thoughts or feelings and prevented them from being able to develop pro-social relationships. In the case of Oliver, it seems he was able to form some relationships and was married, although the secrecy he held means the degree of emotional closeness was most probably superficial. As seen below, George described feeling fearful of all intimate relationships, particularly with adult females with whom his offending was against.

*George. I'm fearful of relationships outside — it's easier inside. The thought of relationship or intimacy with a female makes me so fearful. I'm fearful of forming a relationship or having intimacy — I'm fearful that something would be said.*

Ultimately, for all the participants in the current study, their varying degrees of fearing others likely maintained the underlying risk factors associated with sexual reoffending. This suggests providing an environment where individuals are able to talk about troubling thoughts without fear of being recalled to prison is of upmost importance to dismantle fearfulness which, the case of the current participants, appears to directly relate to their risk of reoffending.

### **Fearful to disclose**

Hidden past

*Oliver. I had made a new life, but I had a hidden past. If I went to mental health they would have gone to police. I have been reassured because of where I am and who I am. The things that changed my life, I had never had a family, but I got the family environment it changed my life, but it was too late. I was always on Crimewatch. Family didn't know my past, living a lie. I was stuck in two lives. I couldn't say anything as they would not know that was me. I went from a person happy living on the streets to having a house and family. It was major change but a big lie. People always say I keep nose clean for 20 years, but I didn't. I was committing arson — getting warnings at written and verbal warnings work for aggression. Self-harming was outrageous. My family didn't question me. I couldn't talk to wife as she didn't know I'd been in prison.*

28. Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of the self in everyday life*. Woodstock: Overlook Books.

## Fear of losing what you have built up

*Oliver. With my family not willing to give it up for anything. For not having it for 35 years, I didn't drink or take drugs — ended up in arson, severe self-harm, ways of getting anger out, wouldn't show it to children. Fearful of my anger, I took it out of the house, the arsons. Anything that made me angry, I'd be paranoid. I'd get angry so quickly. You remember how I was when I first came, I was so angry. I feel calm and relaxed now. I hate this place [Prison] but I keep much calmer and more relaxed. It's important to feel like a member, part of something. When you spend your life alienated it's nice to be part of something*

Oliver's account arguably reflects an externalised and dysfunctional coping strategy, an identified risk factor for sexual reoffending<sup>13</sup>. The Integrated Theory of Desistance from Sexual Offending (ITDSO<sup>12</sup>) suggests that the individual wants to change, and also possess the cognitive and emotional capacities to take advantage of opportunities, 'decisive momentum' which acts as 'a necessary, but not sufficient condition for behaviour or identity change'<sup>12</sup>. Oliver seems to have reached that point but can reflect that it was not always the case, particularly around the time of his initial release. Researchers,<sup>29</sup> reported how each individuals' negative evaluation of their past offending could act as a motivation not to re-offend and promote an openness and readiness to change.

### Techniques to avoid disclosure

*Harry. I couldn't talk about it as I'd go straight back inside. Back then I don't think they would have done anything differently. I was questioning why I was still having the thoughts but out of fear of rest of life in prison I didn't talk. Now I am in for life as I did offend.*

*Oliver. I did [have support] due to mental health but they told me if I said something relating to potentially committing a crime, they would have to report it. I didn't want to say. I was so aggressive in the support group, just to get out of it.*

*George. My head was spinning pressure of what I'd been through, local papers etc. Gave me sleeping meds — I didn't take it — used drugs and alcohol, I didn't have anything I had to deal with it my own way and sadly I went on to offend.*

As having a support network to whom it is possible to discuss problems aids desistance, not having so could well increase likelihood of re-offending. Others,<sup>30</sup> suggest that having a high level of motivation to change leads to more successful outcomes if working towards self-improvement goals. The participants reported that they felt under pressure and did not have such goals or outlets, arguably increasing their risk of reoffending. Harry spoke of having anti-social peers upon his initial release, which is correlated with general and sexual recidivism<sup>31, 13</sup>. It appears the participants' fearfulness, as previously outlined, dampened their motivation to change and ability to begin trusting others and forming more pro-social relationships.

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### Perceived Support on Release

Lack of knowledge about what's available

*George. I had no groups, not aware of anything — for example Samaritans. I wasn't aware of anything. As a sex offender<sup>32</sup> I'm concerned what's available. I need to know what's available, what's available. I would take any support I could. I questioned if it applied to me.*

*Harry. If I knew there was available support I would have spoken. Wish there had been a*

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29. LeBel, T. P., Burnett, R., Maruna, S., Bushway, S. (2008). The "chicken and egg" of subjective and social factors in desistance from crime. *European Journal of Criminology*, 5, (2), 131-159.
30. Paternoster, R & Bushway, S. (2009). Desistance and the "feared self". Toward an identity theory of criminal desistance. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 99, 1103-1156.
31. Andrews, D. A., & Bonta, J. (2006). *The psychology of criminal conduct (4th ed.)*. Newark, NJ: LexisNexis/Matthew Bender.
32. Whilst George uses that term the authors preference is for person first language.

*safe place for talking and support, 1:1 or wherever.*

Lack of support in Community. This was a theme they all agreed with.

*George. No support on release. I had to deal with things in my own way used own support — drugs and alcohol.*

*Harry. I didn't have anything I had to deal with it my own way and sadly I went on to offend. People in the community were supportive of our rehabilitation — I was on a bus and being hassled by reporters and they chased the reporters away. The environment was offender-friendly, they knew what the prison was about, that forms trust.*

Participants spoke of having troubling sexual fantasies, with no one to whom to disclose this to and a perceived lack of support from the community. They spoke of having dysfunctional coping strategies (using drink, drugs, arson to manage emotions), and had some support (for instance the people in the town where Harry worked) but they generally felt unsupported.

Attitudes supportive of sexual offending, including pro-rape and sexual entitlement beliefs, are empirically supported risk factors for sexual offending<sup>33, 13</sup>. Recent programmes developed to help those who have committed sexual offences have goals of developing healthy thinking, healthy sex, positive relationships, managing life's problems, and a sense of purpose, all things that were missing with these participants<sup>34</sup>.

Further, it appears all participants in the current study shared the same lived experience of not knowing what support was available on their initial release and perceiving a lack of community support at the time. For Harry, who spoke about people in the community chasing reporters away and 'knowing' about prison, this still was not enough to prevent his sexual reoffending. Arguably, this level of perceived

community support was largely superficial with individuals he did not know but with whom he simply lived in the same area with. Whilst this may promote some level of social belonging, the issue of not being able to form meaningful social relationships and a lack of community support where they could safely discuss their fears and problematic thoughts still remained unattainable. This could be through a lack of relevant services, lack of promotion of services to individuals in prison prior to release and/or difficulties identifying and supporting individuals to access available and suitable support. As all the participants highlighted a fearfulness of themselves and disclosing to others, access to such support where a safe and non-judgemental environment was enacted could have alleviated some of this fear. What is apparent, is that all participants

perceived little to no community support upon release which, when combined with the other themes from the current study, potentially increased their risk of reoffending, as each participant stated.

#### **Self-responsibility for utilising support**

*Oliver. On release — and parole officer — they should give you all the information of what is available, right from the start. Then ball is in your court, you read it in privacy, and you have the information and can seek them out. The onus on you to look for what's available. It wouldn't be hard to find — could trawl for info on internet but should be made available. I'm asking for Circles, but why wouldn't that be given to me on release. It would be minimal cost.*

*Harry. At the end of the day it's my responsibility to be absolutely honest. You said you were having those thoughts. Loads of people come back because they don't talk.*

Oliver takes less responsibility for his actions, blaming others for a perceived lack of support, whereas Harry acknowledges it is his responsibility for his actions

## **Attitudes supportive of sexual offending, including pro-rape and sexual entitlement beliefs, are empirically supported risk factors for sexual offending**

33. Helmus, L. Hanson, R. K., Babchishin, K. M., & Mann, R. E. (2013). Attitudes supportive of sexual offending predict recidivism: A meta-analysis. *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse*, 14, (1), 34-53.

34. Walton, J. S., Ramsay, L., Cunningham, C. & Henfrey, S. (2017). New directions: integrating a biopsychosocial approach in the design and delivery of programs for high risk services users in Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. *Advancing Corrections: Journal of the International Corrections and Prison Association*, 3, (1), 21-47.

to seek out and utilise relevant support. It is possible Oliver still retains some grievant thinking in relation to community support although, arguably, accurately summarises the perceived experience of some individuals' who have been released following a sexual offence conviction.

### **Lack of support with accommodation**

*Oliver, I had no support in a parole hostel. No support. Day 1. I was in a hostel it was a shithole. I wanted to go back to my home area, so I offended to get back to that area.*

*Harry. Got moved to a hostel, where people are too busy to talk to you. The hostel was awful, chaos. To be put in a hostel was worst thing. Just walking out of hostel into town I thought I had a sign on my head that's what led me to fantasy time.*

The lack of help in attaining accommodation was described. Accommodation is seen as an important factor in desistance<sup>35</sup> and has been identified as an independent factor significantly increasing the likelihood of reoffending after release<sup>36</sup>. Again, the participants' descriptions of their shared lived experience upon initial release appears to reflect known risk factors in reoffending.

### **Understanding of Circles**

Participants showed a lack of understanding and knowledge of CoSA, which may not be surprising given that it is reported<sup>20</sup> that even those involved with CoSA had a lack of understanding of its purpose.

### **Lack of Awareness**

*Oliver. I heard about them on the news. That's the only organisation I heard about. On the news they said there is an organisation for*

*people who have thoughts about children and can talk in privacy.*

*Harry. I have a Quaker friend who was on a Circle. You could be more open with a Circle rather than Probation Officer or when you are in prison, I could talk about risk and then would decide among themselves if it was cumulative.*

*Oliver. On release — and parole officer — they should give you all the information of what is available, right from the start. On the news they said there is an organisation for people who have thoughts about children and can talk in privacy. If there was someone to talk to you.... You need a pamphlet with list of resources. Go into a group who will help — I won't go to a police station; they would give you a cell. If I tell OM they will say tell them to take you into prison.*

*George. There needs to be support networks and groups out there. No one told me out there was Circles.*

Accommodation is seen as an important factor in desistance and has been identified as an independent factor significantly increasing the likelihood of reoffending after release.

It is not surprising that the participants were not aware of CoSA or had misconceptions. Thompson and Thomas<sup>37</sup> reported that some Core Members stated they held little understanding of the purpose and intentions of CoSA before they participated. Whilst all the participants described little to no understanding and/or awareness of CoSA upon their initial release, their descriptions suggest a level of awareness they share now. Their descriptions of how they understand CoSA, as a safe space to discuss thoughts related to and risk of sexual offending, suggests this may meet their previously outlined descriptions of feeling unable to safely talk about troubling thoughts and a lack of community support.

35. Duwe, G. (2018). Can circles of support and accountability (CoSA) significantly reduce sexual recidivism? Results from a randomized controlled trial in Minnesota. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 14, (4), 463–484.

36. Brunton-Smith, I. & Hopkins, K. (2013). The factors associated with proven re-offending following release from prison: findings from Waves 1 to 3 of SPCR. UK: Ministry of Justice.

37. Thompson, D., & Thomas, T. (2017). *The Resettlement of Sex Offenders after Custody, Circles of Support and Accountability*. UK: Taylor and Francis.

## Misconceptions of Circles

*Oliver. It would be 'bored housewives' group — who panic when I say anything — now I will have support, they won't all run out screaming. I will be able to talk like I do here, not think I'm a mad maniac. So, you can't be in a group of bored housewives or men in midlife crisis, they wouldn't know what to say. One day I had the opportunity of students coming out of college, obviously something was going on in my head — where could that have gone? Where might it have ended up? It could have gone so far then. If I had a group then I could have talked, years later I can't remember my thought processes then, but must have been bad. Could think what was going through my head. When I came to prison it was 30 years later, my thoughts have changed.*

*Oliver. I don't want to go to group with men with mid-life crisis — I need people who can relate to me. I need people with the same thoughts. You'd have to say it to like-minded people, not just talk to a doctor. He would think I'm at risk. So, you can't be in a group of bored housewives or men in midlife crisis, they wouldn't know what to say. In group I can say it — we can say we have similar thoughts.*

The participants demonstrated a misunderstanding of who would volunteer with CoSA and its purpose. This could be due to a lack of publicity for it, or for a lack of will on their part to seek support. It is suggested<sup>20</sup> that Core Members (individuals who have committed a sexual offence and are part of the Circle) who subscribe to negative beliefs about women may be particularly demotivated by female volunteers. It is noted that some participants assumed it would be female volunteers. Further, their misconceptions may arguably reflect their previously outlined fearfulness of disclosing troubling thoughts and/or fantasies and

mistrust of others, rather than an accurate understanding of what CoSA could provide. Nonetheless, these misconceptions highlight the underlying need to better educate potential users of the service about its purpose and role in their reintegration back into the community,

### **Reoffending was likely**

*George. The thought of re-offending was not my intention, but it was a risk.*

*Oliver. I left prison this wouldn't have mattered. I left very very angry and was determined to go on how I was. I fed off the fear on people's faces — I liked to see that on peoples' faces. I got that hatred I felt for myself. That's what I'm doing. I fed off it.*

The participants demonstrated a misunderstanding of who would volunteer with CoSA and its purpose. This could be due to a lack of publicity for it, or for a lack of will on their part to seek support.

Oliver demonstrates his anger and the inevitability of his re-offending. Some barriers to desistance, for instance the stigmatisation and suspicion of others, can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy so that the individual can internalise this view of themselves and fulfil the prediction by returning to criminal behaviour<sup>38</sup>. Combined with the previous themes highlighting a lack of motivation to change, fearfulness of reoffending as well as a perceived lack of community support, the

shared belief that reoffending was likely is unsurprising. The shared experience of all the participants in the current study reflects a belief that other people could not be trusted, others did not want to help them and a lack of hope that life could be better, arguably maintaining the poor motivation to change.

### **Self-Risk Assessment**

#### ***Discussing sexual fantasies dissipates them***

*Harry. It goes around in my head. I used fantasy. I use fantasy to control it. I got out*

38. Maruna, S., Lebel, T. P., Mitchell, N., & Naples, M. (2004). Pygmalion in the reintegration process: Desistance from crime through the looking glass. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 10, (3), 271-281.

*not knowing it would come out again. I just did on psychodrama — what I did on fantasy was what happened to me. I didn't know that. If they don't share, they go on to do it. Loads of people come back because they don't talk. As soon as you say it there's less chance of it happening.*

*Oliver. When fantasies are talked about it takes the pleasure out of them. It starts to dissolve.*

Insightful of escalating risk. There's a different if I start to fixate or thoughts are running away. For me the warning signs would be me isolating — playing lip service — getting rid of people, good riddance. Didn't think of it as a risk, I saw it as a strength. Now see the need for intimacy. Need love that doesn't have conditions — can laugh, cry etc.

Further research,<sup>17</sup> found sexual deviancy, sexual pre-occupation, poor self-control, grievance thinking, and lack of meaningful intimate relationships with adults to be the most important factors related to risk: all of these were identified by the participants. Further, as they were not disclosing their current sexual thoughts and so their risk could not be accurately assessed. Nonetheless, all the participants were able to reflect on their shared experience of discussing sexual fantasies as a way of dissipating the power these have over their functioning. Given their previous descriptions of feeling fearful and/or unable to discuss thoughts related to sexual offending and/or fantasies, it is likely they were unable to do this upon their initial release.

*Oliver. When I met wife, I didn't think she would be a wife, but she got pregnant and for the first time ever I could show my children care and be vulnerable. I was able to cuddle baby and show my love for first time. I'm not a big horrible person. I can cuddle my children — I still cuddle them in their 20's my parents never did that for me.*

*George. Grew up in houseful of women, mum, grandma and sister, etc. I cheated and had lots of sexual partners. It was inevitable I*

*would do it [re-offend]. Lots to look at from different angles.*

George's comments highlight a range of issues going on at the same time. His complex views of women, his concerns about re-offending, but not having anyone to talk to about them, and not having acknowledged his past or resolved the feelings about it.

### ***Relationships with others and impact of shame***

*Harry. I slowly got to know people; it was a small village. That time was sociable. When I was doing it, I thought 'what would those in X say' they were positive role models. When I first came people didn't like me. I haven't felt better than I have for the past 6/7 months. Others now smile at me.*

*George. I spent all my time with friends. I felt safest with friends, let guard down. My shame and guilt shut me down for a long time. Now I do smile, and others want to interact with me. Now I do get on with others.*

*Oliver. Now I see others smiling — is it because I've been more relaxed — I don't know how it's worked. I want to interact with others. I had never had a family, but I got the family environment it changed my life.*

Most desistance research<sup>39</sup> highlights the importance of family support in desistance. Further, having shame and guilt can also impact on self-identity and thus on relationships. Researchers<sup>40</sup> describe how those who have committed a sexual offence maintain self-preservation through management of shame and guilt and protecting their loved ones. This dilemma seems apparent in the fear of disclosure and the impact that may have on self and family. Social isolation and loneliness are a widely accepted risk factor for sexual recidivism<sup>13;41</sup>, so it is likely that reduced isolation, would aid desistance<sup>42</sup>. Indeed, the participant's shared experience of feeling shameful likely reflects their previously outlined fearfulness and/or inability to talk about their troubling thoughts and fantasies related to sexually inappropriate and/or offending behaviour and inability to form pro-social intimate relationships.

39. Laub, J.H., & Sampson, R.J. (2001). Understanding desistance from crime. *Crime and Justice*, 28, 1-69.

40. Ware, J. & Mann, R.E. (2012). How should "acceptance of responsibility" be addressed in sexual offending treatment programmes? *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, 17, (4), 279-188.

41. Malinen, S., Willis, G. M., & Johnston, L. (2014). Might Informative media reporting of sexual offending influence community members' attitudes towards sex offenders?. *Psychology, Crime and Law*, 20(6), 535-552.

42. Höing, M., Bogaerts, S., Vogelvang, B. (2013). Circles of Support and Accountability: How and Why They Work for Sex Offenders. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Practice*, 13, (4), 267-295.

## Creating a safe environment to talk

### Feeling able to talk

*Harry. Wish there had been a safe place for talking and support, 1 — 1 or wherever. As soon as you say it there's less chance of it happening. All I ask if someone listens. I used to, all I ask is for someone to listen, not be judgemental. My fantasy was horrific, but I told people; I told fantasy of kidnap rape, inflict harm and kill the person. I accept the consequences of that. Early on in offence the fear my victim showed stopped me. I knew I was coming back to prison. The choice to reoffend was there. As if I didn't have that fear. I wish I had someone to talk to. I just did on psychodrama — what I did on fantasy was what happened to me. I didn't know that.*

Harry reports his need for someone to whom he can talk about his troubling sexual fantasies at the time of his initial release. Currently, the availability of such services is in its infancy, with interventions such as the Aurora programme under the auspices of the Safer Living Foundation in Nottingham making strides in providing this service. The Aurora programme enables group members to discuss and learn to manage such fantasies. In addition, the StopSO and Lucy Faithfull telephone helplines offer such support. Arguably, such services may address the gaps in support identified by the participants in the current study.

*Oliver. Even asking the group could make you seem at risk. I just needed people to help. Who would you tell? You couldn't go to police. Probably — they would have a fit. Why can't I talk to those who help? I could meet with circles have a cup of coffee and talk. I would always be paranoid, thoughts rattled round my head. Now I talk about it. I say why I'm pissed off. Once it's out it's okay — before it would have led to violence — now it doesn't.*

*George. We are in group together we can bounce off each other. In group we spoke of sexual acts — fantasies and role play. If like-minded people in that niche to say it in a safe*

*place. It would be helpful to have a group or support to talk to.*

The ITDSO involves a positive view of self and draws on the desistance theories, for instance the role of cognitive transformation on route to a pro-social identity<sup>43</sup>. Furthermore, others<sup>44</sup> highlight the need to develop pro-social self-narratives. From the participant descriptions, it appears group settings with individuals who experience similar thoughts or reflection may be helpful in providing an environment in which this is possible, thus addressing some of the needs previously outlined. All participants in the current study highlighted feeling able to talk as an essential factor in promoting positive change, an aspect which they all highlighted was missing upon their initial release.

### Reintegration

*George. Fear of going to community with a brand of sex offender.*

*Harry. I'm 100 per cent institutionalised — been in structured environment since age of 9 years been in prison since I was 21, I visualise living on my own freestyle problematic — somewhere with structure — not barbed wire but structure. It's hard to admit, those who have done a short time don't feel institutionalised. I do. Slower integration into the area you will live in.*

These accounts from George and Harry echo some of the underlying principles of CoSA in relation to easing the transition into community settings. CoSA aims to encourage individual accountability of offending alongside accepting individuals for their entirety: mirroring strategies identified to reduce future sexual deviance<sup>45</sup>. As identified within Relationships with Others, shame and guilt about one's identity can increase the risk of offending. This, combined with perceived stigmatised by others in the community, may further increase the likelihood of sexual deviance<sup>47,46</sup>.

## Summary

The three participants in the current study shared their lived experience of initial release following conviction for a sexual offence, prior to their subsequent sexual reoffending. Analysis of the data revealed pertinent

43. Maruna S (2001) *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*, American Psychological Association Books

44. Ward, T., & Laws, D. R. (2010). Desistance from sex offending: Motivating change, enriching practice. *International Journal of Forensic Mental Health*, 9, (1), 11-23. doi:10.1080/14999011003791598

45. Braithwaite, J. (1989). *Crime, shame and reintegration*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

46. Braithwaite, J. & Mugford, S. (1994). Conditions of successful reintegration ceremonies. *British Journal of Criminology*, 34, (2), 139-171.

themes, including fearfulness and perceived lack of community support. Further, analysis revealed themes of self risk-assessment both at the time of their initial release and today, alongside reflections of what has supported their therapeutic journey to-date. The three participants thought that they had gained insight on their risk and future needs through discussion in therapy and reported they found participating in the research helpful to focus their thoughts on the future. As taking a strengths-based approach is integral to the work in a prison-based TC the need to develop a prosocial identity is vital. The subsequent work in the TC had enabled them to be more honest about that they had done and the thoughts and fantasies they had following their earlier release. Such progress demonstrates psychotherapeutic work,<sup>47,48</sup> and can be considered an important aspect of psychological change<sup>49</sup>.

The participants also discussed their risk after prison and were asked about their understanding of CoSA. It is suggested<sup>12</sup> that it is important to have mentors in the community and CoSA can provide such. They, like the SLF projects, can provide social modelling to the individual, as well as provide encouragement to maintain desistance. CoSA may arguably be able to address many themes identified from the current study, including a lack of support with accommodation, feeling there was no safe space to talk about troubling thoughts related to risk of reoffending and feeling unable to talk to anyone. The volunteers for CoSA can also encourage them to build social networks, outside of the CoSA, from which to move forward, promoting positive change and encouraging the development of more pro-social relationships. Their work is found to reduce risk of re-arrest for a new sexual offence by 88 per cent and a decrease in general recidivism, ranging from 49 to 57 per cent<sup>37</sup>. It is also reported that individuals who have engaged with CoSA have also reported gains in emotional wellbeing, prosocial attitudes and behaviours as well as improvements in their social network<sup>50</sup>. However, the three participants had not engaged with CoSA following their previous release. The prison-model developed by the Safer Living

Foundation, in a treatment prison in the UK for those who have sexually offended<sup>51</sup>, and so it may well be useful for all men in that position. All participants spoke of the importance of feeling comfortable and safe to talk, about their sexual thoughts and fantasies, a notion arguably addressed both within the TC and within CoSA. The findings add to literature exploring service-user's views of factors contributing to sexual reoffending through their shared lived experience, as well as aiding community services understanding of perceived needs.

## Limitations

The feedback provided helps inform CoSA in their practice to assist with individual's reintegration into the community. However, the three participants may have a very different experience from those being released now, and so may not be applicable to others in that position. This may be further exacerbated as all three participants are currently residents at a therapeutic community prison. Individuals who have committed sexual offences and who are not currently engaging with therapy or within a therapeutic environment may describe very different experiences and/or needs. Furthermore, as the data was gathered within a group setting this arguably may have influenced the confidence of participants to share experiences which were not addressed. Although this is consistent with the TC approach, future research may wish to explore individual-based interviews. It was not possible to repeat the study with more respondents due to the lack of individuals in the position under investigation. A replication of this study would help increase the knowledge base and depth of data. A further mixed-method methodology would also be helpful to enrich the data. For example, a blend of qualitative and quantitative research can be used, thus drawing from the strengths, and minimising the weaknesses of both. Methods such as repertory grids<sup>52</sup> and personal construct theory,<sup>53</sup> can be used to enrich the participants' meaning making<sup>54</sup>.

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47. Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K. D., & Wilson, K. G. (1999). *Acceptance and commitment therapy: An experiential approach to behaviour change*. UK: Guilford Press.
  48. Linehan, M. (1993). *Cognitive-Behavioural Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder*. Guilford Press.
  49. Higginson, S., & Mansell, W. (2008). What is the mechanism of psychological change? A qualitative analysis of six individuals who experienced personal change and recovery. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 81, (3), 309-328.
  50. Bates, A., Williams, D., Wilson, C., & Wilson, R. J. (2014). Circles south east: The first 10 years 2002–2012. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 58, (5), 861–885.
  51. Saunders, L., Kitson-Boyce, R.J., & Elliott, H. (2014). Safer Living Foundation: circles of support and accountability. In: The Second Annual HMP Whatton Conference, HMP Whatton, Whatton, Nottinghamshire, June 2014.
  52. Winter, D. A. (2003). Repertory grid technique as a psychotherapy research measure. *Psychotherapy Research*, 13, (1), 25-42.
  53. Kelly, G. A. (1991) *The psychology of personal constructs. Volume 1: A theory of personality*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.
  54. Blagden, N., Winder, B., Thorne, K., & Gregson, M. (2014). "Making Sense of Denial in Sexual Offenders: A Qualitative Phenomenological and Repertory Grid Analysis." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 29, (9), 1698–731.