

Assisting desistance through a prison-model of CoSA

Rosie Kitson-Boyce

PhD researcher at Nottingham Trent University

Dr Nicholas Blagden

Prof. Belinda Winder

Dr Gayle Dillon

CoSA and desistance

- Desistance-focused initiatives offer support to help those convicted of sexual offences to rebuild the social bonds with their families and develop new social capital.
- Being part of a CoSA can assist in the regaining and strengthening of social criteria in cases whereby the individual faces barriers to successful reintegration
- Can also encourage and reinforce the cognitive transformations previously undergone by the Core Member

CoSA and desistance

- The early stages of release are a particularly sensitive period in terms of achieving desistance. **(Aresti et al., 2010; Fox, 2015).**
- In the community CoSA model however, support for the Core Member commences once they have been released into the community, sometimes with delays of several weeks.
- For many potential Core Members this may not be a problem – however for some, additional support is needed through the transitional period.
- Effective resettlement for some requires through-care involving the establishment of a close relationship with the individual while they are still in prison, which is then continued on release.

(Maguire & Raynor, 2006)

CoSA in Minnesota

MnCoSA:

- In 2008 a CoSA project was implemented in Minnesota, US involving individuals convicted of sexual offences who are due to be released from prison.
- MnCoSA is systematically designed to begin at least four weeks prior to the offender's release.
- The volunteers meet with the Core Member approximately 3 times whilst in prison before the sessions move with the Core Member as they re-enter the community **(MnCoSA, 2017)**
- MnCoSA focuses upon providing a continuum of support from prison to the community

CoSA: A UK prison-model

Following the success of the community CoSA projects in the UK a prison-based model of CoSA was established in the UK.

- Established under the Safer Living Foundation - a charitable organisation including:
 - HMP Whatton, Nottingham Trent University, National Probation Trust (Nottinghamshire), Nottinghamshire Police, Circles UK representatives.
- The CoSA begin approximately 3 months before a Core Members' release from prison.
- The volunteers come in to the prison for weekly circle sessions with the Core Member.
- They then continue in the community once the Core Members have been released – using the same volunteers for continuity of support

CoSA: A UK prison-model

- Core Members consist of high-very high risk individuals convicted of sexual offences who are either elderly (55+) or Intellectually Disabled (ID)
- Concern some high risk prisoners were leaving Whatton without any family or community support.
 - Particularly those with ID or who were elderly
 - These type of individuals are particularly vulnerable and can often find the transition from prison to the community the most difficult and socially isolating.
 - Known that social isolation is a significant risk factor for further reoffending
 - Those who do not meet the above criteria but who for example have a severe lack of social support on release will still be considered.

CoSA: A UK prison-model

Data was collected from when the project was first started in 2014 until August 2016

Qualitative and Mixed method data collected from the core members at 3 time points:

T1. Prior to the core members starting the prison-model CoSA (n=9)

T2. Just before the core members were due to be released back in to the community (n=6)

T3. Once the core members were in the community but still part of the CoSA (n=7)

Qualitative interviews were also collected from volunteers (n=10).

CoSA: A UK prison-model

Knowing they'll have support

Without the CoSA the Core Members would be facing release alone

'They (Prison-model coordinator) approached me yeah because I haven't got any erm support network out there at all, there's no family, friends or anything' **Core Member participant 2**

The importance of this support coming from 'normal', 'non-professionals' was evident – volunteering and not being paid to be there

'Because you know, they're volunteers, they come all this way to see a prisoner but they want to come and see you for a purpose...we talked a lot about it and it's wonderful.' **Core Member participant 7**

Social relations characterised by a sense of 'we-ness' improves well-being, assists the ex-offender in realising their pro social aspirations and motivates change

(Weaver & McNeill, 2015)

CoSA: A UK prison-model

Building relationships

Enables time and space for relationships to be built and dynamics to settle before the reality of release sets in.

‘as I say it takes erm several times to meet each other and talk to each other and understand each other and trust each other but once that’s all done it’s good.’ **Core member participant 7**

Ex-offenders are more likely to accept direct guidance regarding desistance from people whereby the relationships involve rapport and listening to one another

(Barry, 2007; McCulloch 2005)

HMP Whatton - a safe place, which reduces anxiety and additional ‘head space’ for the prisoners to reflect upon the self and contemplate change.

(Blagden, Winder & Hames, 2016)

Would prison-models of CoSA be as beneficial in different prisons with different climates?

CoSA: A UK prison-model

Being prepared

Time for the volunteers to help prepare the Core Members for possible risky situations on release and to discuss management strategies in relation to their restrictions – in language they understand.

‘Err explaining things to me in a different light, how I deal with like err somethings I don’t grab and they’re on about doing like roleplays, I don’t mind doing that, they talk to me and everything so that’s a good thing.’ **Core Member participant 4**

“I took all my stuff from HSP and they read it and so on, it was lovely to disclose it. You know it makes you feel better, you don’t hide anything inside yourself and you think ‘ooh what will they think of me if I tell them what I’ve done’ and so on but none of that, they were superb.” **Core Member participant 7**

Reinforces the Core member’s use of strategies to manage offence-related thoughts and behaviour – also by offering acceptance and inclusion upon hearing this information they are reinforcing this new pro-social identity also.

CoSA: A UK prison-model

Through the gate

Core members are supported through the difficult and often scary period from prison to community

‘It was good because we’d already met inside **** (prison) I think we met for 6 months inside before so it was good to have a couple of familiar faces...I think the bond needs to be there before you leave prison because if it’s not there, if you’re not fully committed before you leave then there’s always a chance that someone might just say no it’s not working on the outside. You won’t be committed unless you’re bonded and you need that bond on the inside I think’ **Core member participant 10**

Encourages them to ‘stay on track’ and stops them slipping back in to old behaviour during the sensitive period of release

‘with the group yeah I found them very supportive, they was always there straight away swapping phone numbers and stuff like that and then they explained to me who was going to be on duty that weekend you know if anything happened I could get in touch with them and they’re still doing that now.’ **Core member participant 2**

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Re-entry, can be seen as a process beginning well before release and continuing after offenders have re-joined society

The lack of support offenders receive generally during this transitional period from prison to community can make the process difficult and uncertain.

(Elliott & Zajac, 2015)

This period can be a considerably more vulnerable time for those with intellectual disabilities or who are elderly due to additional difficulties in establishing a social network.

(Cummins & Lau, 2003; Crawley & Sparks, 2006)

For these individuals a prison-based model CoSA appears to provide additional benefits and through-care during the transitional period from prison to community

- Encourages and supports desistance during the lead up to and immediately on release from prison

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Is it enough?

Offering support to help the Core Members develop new social bonds with the wider community is reported to help counteract any feelings of disconnectedness that may be felt through perceived stigmatisation from society **(McNeill, 2009).**

Despite this and the additional benefits of the prison-model Core Members are still worried about never being able to leave the 'sex offender' label behind.

Concerned that they will always face restrictions and are afraid of people finding out.

'There is no normal once you've been inside really, you're forever under conditions, even after probation finishes you're still under conditions, you're not free really' **Core member participant 9**

"I suppose I'm under, I feel under pressure, I feel that I'm an outsider I suppose in how I feel...I don't feel that I'm relaxed, I can't relax, I don't know how...I feel I've lost my place like in the community" **Core Member participant 6**

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Next steps:

From the findings at this stage in the participants' journey one cannot conclude whether or not the participants will reach full desistance from crime

It would be useful to revisit the participants after their time with CoSA has come to an end.

- Exploration in to whether the additional benefits of the prison-based model is enough for the participants to reach desistance
- Are they able to withstand the societal challenges to reintegration once the volunteers are no longer there to support them.

Thank you for listening

rosie.kitson-boyce2004@my.ntu.ac.uk
 [@RosieBoyce1](https://twitter.com/RosieBoyce1)

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