



# Community-based approaches to sexual offender reintegration:

*Key findings and future directions*

ANROWS

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL RESEARCH  
ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN'S SAFETY  
*to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children*

RESEARCH TO POLICY & PRACTICE  
ISSUE 07 | MARCH 2020

### **Acknowledgement of lived experiences of violence**

ANROWS acknowledges the lives and experiences of the women and children affected by domestic, family and sexual violence who are represented in this report. We recognise the individual stories of courage, hope and resilience that form the basis of ANROWS research.

Caution: Some people may find parts of this content confronting or distressing.

Recommended support services include: 1800 RESPECT – 1800 737 732 and Lifeline – 13 11 14.

ANROWS Research to policy and practice papers are concise papers that summarise key findings of research on violence against women and their children, including research produced under ANROWS's research program, and provide advice on the implications for policy and practice.

This is an edited summary of key findings from ANROWS research *Community-based approaches to sexual offender reintegration*. Please consult the ANROWS website for more information on this project and the full project report: Richards, K., Death, J., & McCartan, K. (2020). *Community-based approaches to sexual offender reintegration* (Research report, 07/2020). Sydney, NSW: ANROWS.

### **ANROWS acknowledgement**

This material was produced with funding from the Australian Government Department of Social Services. Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) gratefully acknowledges the financial and other support it has received from the government, without which this work would not have been possible. The findings and views reported in this paper are those of the authors and cannot be attributed to the Australian Government Department of Social Services.

ANROWS research contributes to the six National Outcomes of the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022*. This research addresses National Plan Outcome 6 – Perpetrators stop their violence and are held to account.

### **Acknowledgement of Country**

ANROWS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present, and future, and we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and knowledge. We are committed to standing and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, honouring the truths set out in the Warawarni-gu Guma Statement.

IN BRIEF

# Community-based approaches to sexual offender reintegration

- Perpetration of sexual violence is widespread in Australia, creating long-term negative effects on wellbeing.
- Community safety is enhanced through reducing the risk of reoffending by those who have sexually offended.
- A key avenue to reducing risk of reoffending is a community-based program model that aims to reintegrate sexual offenders into the community. Understanding how community-based programs impact recidivism rates is therefore very important.
- In Australia, few programs that provide this support have been the subject of research.
- The research project *Community-based approaches to sexual offender reintegration* looked at two such community-based programs, and documented program characteristics that are key to supporting reintegration and reducing the risk of reoffending.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Community safety is enhanced through community-based programs for sexual offender reintegration, and these programs should be supported.
- A stronger focus in program design on core characteristics associated with the impact of the programs is required. These include:
  - support for offenders to adopt prosocial, law-abiding identities and lifestyles rather than solely concentrating on reducing reoffending
  - (re)connecting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander participants with aspects of their traditional or precolonial culture.
- Keep victims/survivors informed about the release and reintegration processes of offenders, as this can empower victims/survivors to make informed decisions about their safety.

# High-risk sexual offenders

In Australia, sexual violence is widespread. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2016 Personal Safety Survey reported that one in five women and one in 20 men have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15 (ABS 2017). Sexual violence against children is also common, with the Personal Safety Survey also reporting that 7.7% of Australian children have experienced sexual abuse before the age of 15 (ABS 2017). There are numerous associated adverse consequences of sexual violence which can have life-long impacts on wellbeing.

Recidivism risk can be reduced through providing support to high-risk sexual offenders. The longer a high-risk sexual offender remains in the community without reoffending, the less likely is the risk of future offending. Understanding how community-based programs impact recidivism rates is therefore very important. In Australia, few programs that provide this support have been the subject of research.

## THE ANROWS RESEARCH PROJECT

# *Community-based approaches to sexual offender reintegration* by Kelly Richards, Jodi Death and Kieran McCartan

This study looked at two community-based, non-therapeutic programs to support reintegration of sexual offenders into the community: Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) in Adelaide, South Australia and the Cultural Mentoring Program (CMP) in Townsville, Queensland.

In examining the two reintegration programs for high-risk sexual offenders, the researchers asked:

1. How do these programs seek to reduce sexual recidivism?
2. Which program characteristics are key to supporting reintegration and reducing recidivism?
3. How can core program characteristics be applied most effectively?

The study documented the program characteristics that are key to supporting reintegration, promoting long-term cessation of offending behaviour and reducing the risk of reoffending. It developed recommendations for practitioners and policymakers about how core program characteristics can be applied most effectively.

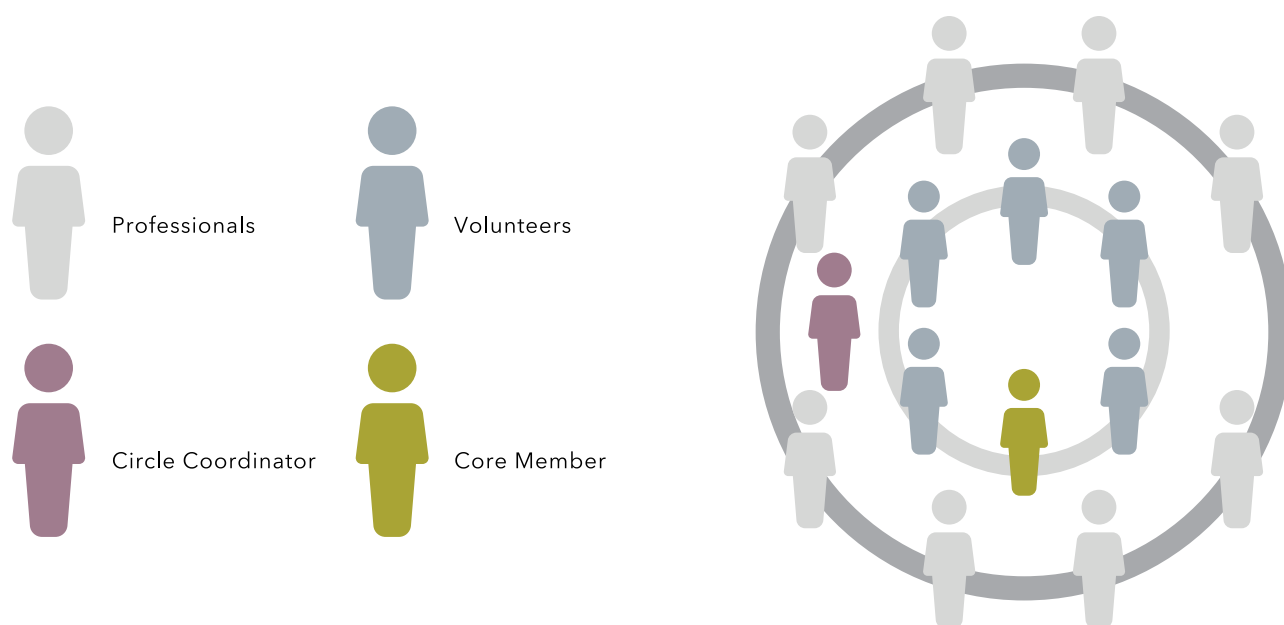
The study also interviewed victims/survivors of sexual violence, asking them about their needs at the time of the offender's release, and used these views to inform additional recommendations for policymakers and practitioners. A roundtable event in which the findings of the study were discussed was held in December 2019. It was attended by practitioners and policymakers including victim/survivor advocates.

## **Program 1: Circles of Support and Accountability**

CoSA programs use groups of trained community volunteers who support sexual offenders (usually those who offend against children) to reintegrate safely into the community after a period of imprisonment. CoSA are not therapeutic programs but rather aim to both reintegrate offenders into the community and reduce risk of future harm to children. An emerging body of research, including randomised control trials, indicates that CoSA may be effectively reducing recidivism and enhancing reintegration efforts.<sup>1</sup>

CoSA programs operate on the premise that by providing recently released sexual offenders (known as “core members”) with a circle of community volunteers who provide both practical support and accountability, offenders will be better equipped to lead law-abiding lives in the community. The use of volunteers creates a space in which core members can

<sup>1</sup> For more information about the research evidence for CoSA see the full research report *Community-based approaches to sexual offender reintegration* [insert link] or the supporting factsheet “Circles of Support and Accountability: A brief overview” available on the ANROWS website.

**Figure 1** Model of a Circle of Support and Accountability<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Graphic representation of CoSA model (adapted from Wilson & Picheca, 2005, as cited in Bates, Williams, Wilson, & Wilson, 2014, p. 863).

practice socially acceptable attitudes and behaviours, without fearing that a mistake will result in a return to prison. While paid staff may be used in some circles, this can create confusion and mistrust about their role and motivation for participating. CoSA are, however, usually managed by a Circles Coordinator, who is an experienced and paid criminal justice professional (see Figure 1).

The evidence about whether CoSA can reduce sexual offending is preliminary, but very promising. The strongest evidence comes from a long-term randomised experiment conducted in Minnesota, in the United States, which demonstrated 88 percent lower rearrest figures for core members (Duwe, 2018). Research from the United Kingdom has found that CoSA can play a key role in preventing sexual violence, as volunteers can identify when a core member is engaging in trigger behaviours and report this to a relevant professional (McCartan, 2016; McCartan et al., 2014). In these cases, the core member is usually returned to prison for breaching the conditions of his/her release.

## Program 2: The Cultural Mentoring Program

The Cultural Mentoring Program (CMP) in Townsville provides cultural and spiritual support to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander sexual offenders released from prison into the community. Like CoSA, the CMP is not a therapeutic program but uses cultural mentoring to support offenders to forge positive, law-abiding identities.

Aboriginal Elders in the CMP provide cultural and spiritual support and mentorship to sexual offenders via six 2-hour, one-on-one mentoring sessions. They seek to help participants, in culturally appropriate ways, to see the value in adhering to rules and to avoid breaching their release conditions.

The CMP supports offenders who have self-referred, often after hearing about the program through probation and parole officers. It is an unstructured program, individualised according to need. (Re)connecting participants with aspects of their traditional or precolonial culture plays a key role in the program.

Cultural activities that men are encouraged and supported to engage with through the CMP include:

- traditional arts and crafts
- involvement in ceremonies
- participation in community events
- canoeing/kayaking
- traditional cook-ups
- bushwalking
- fishing
- learning about the land.

# Key findings

## CoSA

**The CoSA program helped participants build new, non-offending identities**

The CoSA program supported participants to build new, non-offending identities through a range of activities including:

- developing life goals
- participating in (often mandatory) sexual offender treatment
- accessing community and support groups
- reconnecting in healthy and adaptive ways with family members
- taking up volunteering opportunities that supported the development of prosocial identities.

**CoSA helped reduce risks of reoffending by holding core members to account for their behaviour**

There were three main ways in which CoSA worked to reduce the risk of reoffending by core members:

- challenging core members' attitudes supportive of violence against women and children
- reporting core members to the relevant authority in circumstances in which the core member has breached his conditions of release and/or is engaging in problematic behaviours
- supporting core members to adhere to the conditions of their release both practically and emotionally.

**Staffing challenges for CoSA included gaps in volunteer skills and the use of criminal justice professionals as volunteers**

Gaps in volunteer skills that need addressing included:

- understanding technology and social media (and the role that these may play in offending behaviour)
- ability to identify pro-recidivist behaviour and respond in the moment, as well as determining whether a behaviour needs to be reported outside the circle
- understanding the release conditions of core members, which are quite complex.

A tension emerged around the need to clarify the roles of paid staff and volunteers. Initially, paid staff took up roles as volunteers to increase the program's chance of success. However, this approach does not align with the purpose of using volunteers, as established in other CoSA programs: volunteers should represent the community and reflect core community values, not solely the views and values of criminal justice professionals.



## CMP

### The CMP helped participants build positive cultural identities

Participants in this study believed that the CMP helps participants develop positive, strong and healthy cultural identities. These beliefs were based on interviewees' understanding that the CMP:

- has a strong focus on family and connection to family
- uses activities that are not simply leisure pursuits, but rather are designed to encourage the men to begin to see themselves as part of something bigger—part of history, of culture, of Country—and to develop a sense of belonging.

For the men in the program a non-offending self was explicitly a *cultural* one, in which culture was practiced and understood. It was also a *connected* one: personal identity was inextricably linked to the identities of family, culture and Country.

### The CMP manages risk through a focus on addressing stressors

The CMP's approach to minimising risk focused on mitigating and managing the emotional distress and life stressors that participants commonly experience (such as anger and frustration relating to the imposed conditions of release), in order to minimise the risk that participants may pose to the community. The CMP program also encourages and helps participants to meet the conditions of their orders as well as fostering honest and trustworthy behaviour in a broader sense.

### CMP participants experienced additional barriers to successful reintegration

In the CMP most participants were from remote communities and had little experience outside of their home communities.

Participants in the CMP were likely to have a history of trauma and institutionalisation, which impacted their beliefs about what constitutes appropriate behaviour within relationships. Some of the CMP participants interviewed for the study saw their own experiences—not only of sexual abuse, but of other forms of violence, abuse and neglect—as shaping their later perpetration of sexual violence and/or their lack of understanding about the harmfulness of their actions.

The barriers described above were further exacerbated by impairments to cognitive functioning, which are common among prisoners accessing the CMP. Stakeholders interviewed in this project observed that low intellectual functioning, including that caused by fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), significantly affected this group of men.

### Interviewees reported examples of views expressed in the CMP which characterised women as contributing to their own victimisation

This study confirmed findings from previous research that highlighted the importance of addressing gender equality as a fundamental tenet of perpetrator intervention programs.

In the CMP, some participants saw developing respect for women as a strength of the program. However, others expressed views that gave women responsibility for the violence committed against them. For example, participants spoke of women being responsible for putting men in prison, or of being manipulated by women.

## Victim/survivor voices

Victims/survivors were recruited by partner organisation Bravehearts Foundation. They were asked open questions about their needs once an offender has been released. Victims'/survivors' views were complex, but predominantly focused on preventing future offending rather than punishing past offending: their focus was predominantly pragmatic, not punitive.

**Victims/survivors identified a complex array of factors that contribute to a sense of safety**

Victims/survivors identified a need for a sense of safety, both physical and emotional, created through:

- *Physical distance* from the perpetrator that is legally enforced and may involve strategies to contain a perpetrator (for example, protection orders that include conditions to stay a set distance away), and is enforced over the long term, if not permanently.
- *Information about the perpetrator's release*, which supports the victim/survivor to make informed decisions about their safety and to retain/gain some control.
- *Affordable and accessible therapeutic support for victims/survivors*, as release is a potential trigger for anxiety.
- *Monitoring of the perpetrator*. This provides a sense of safety to the victim/survivor as officials are monitoring the perpetrator and his behaviour. This may also include containment strategies and may be required for the long term, if not permanently.
- *Help for the perpetrator to address offending-related needs*. In addition to the reduction in reoffending that may result, this also provides victims/survivors with the sense that someone is continuing to have oversight over the perpetrator.
- *Therapeutic interventions* performed by qualified professionals that are mandatory, intensive and long term.

## Victims/survivors should be stakeholders in the process of reintegration

Victims/survivors wanted to be recognised as legitimate stakeholders, not just at the time of release, but for the duration of interventions with offenders.

Additionally, victims/survivors articulated that offender needs align with the needs of the community more broadly. Providing support for offenders was viewed as a preventative strategy by victims/survivors. Continuing to provide support to victims/survivors was also seen as critical. This concern was echoed by practitioners and policymakers at the roundtable event hosted by the researchers and ANROWS which discussed the findings of the study.

# Recommendations for policymakers and practitioners

## Recommendations for policymakers

- Further investment in both CoSA and CMP is warranted. International research demonstrates CoSA can achieve value for money and generate significant cost saving through expansion of the program and the development of a more rigorous evaluation. For the CMP, better resourcing and support within policy and practice settings would strengthen the current program and allow participants to be supported for longer.
- Community safety can be enhanced with a stronger focus on supporting offenders to adopt prosocial, law-abiding lifestyles and abstain from offending behaviours in the long term.
- (Re)connecting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander participants with aspects of their traditional or precolonial culture can support measures designed to bolster reintegration and non-offending behaviours.
- The views of victims/survivors and/or their advocates should be respectfully sought and considered in relation to the reintegration measures of those who have sexually offended.

## Recommendations for practitioners

- Moving beyond a focus on meeting offenders' conditions of release to proactively working on building prosocial and law-abiding identities can reduce risk to the community.
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander practitioners and service providers should be supported to draw on their cultural knowledge and experience to foster prosocial, law-abiding lifestyles and a (re)connection with traditional culture and identity among offenders. Non-Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander practitioners and service providers should seek to connect Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander clients with Elders and others with cultural knowledge, where this is desired by the client.
- Keeping victims/survivors informed about the release and reintegration processes of offenders would be highly valued by victims/survivors. In particular, such information would empower victims/survivors to make informed decisions about their safety.

# References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2017). *Personal safety, Australia, 2016* (Cat. no. 4906.0). Canberra: ABS.
- Bates, A., Williams, D., Wilson, C., & Wilson, R. (2014). Circles South East: The first 10 years 2002–2012. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 58(7), 861–885. doi:10.1177/0306624X13485362.
- 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. doi:10.1007/s11292-018-9325-7
- McCartan, K. (2016). *Circles of Support and Accountability: Cabinet Office—Social action fund evaluation* (Final report). Retrieved from <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/28279/7/CoSA%20Social%20Action%20Fund%20-%20Full%20version%20final.pdf>
- McCartan, K., Kemshall, H., Westwood, S., Solle, J., MacKenzie, G., Cattel, J., & Pollard, A. (2014). *Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA): A case file review of two pilots*. London: Ministry of Justice.
- Richards, K., Death, J., & McCartan, K. (2020). *Community-based approaches to sexual offender reintegration* (Research report, 07/2020). Sydney, NSW: ANROWS.

This page has intentionally been left blank.

© ANROWS 2020

**Published by**

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety Limited (ANROWS)  
PO Box Q389, Queen Victoria Building, NSW 1230 | [www.anrows.org.au](http://www.anrows.org.au) | Phone +61 2 8374 4000  
ABN 67 162 349 171

***Community-based approaches to sexual offender reintegration: Key findings and future directions / ANROWS (Ed.).***

Sydney : ANROWS, 2020  
Pages ; 30cm. (Research to Policy and Practice, Issue 07/2020)

**Suggested citation**

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2020). *Community-based approaches to sexual offender reintegration: Key findings and future directions* (Research to Policy and Practice, 07/2020). Sydney, NSW: ANROWS.

**Creative Commons Licence**

Attribution-Non Commercial



CC BY-NC

This licence lets others distribute, remix and build upon the work, but only if it is for non-commercial purposes and they credit the original creator/s (and any other nominated parties). They do not have to license their Derivative Works on the same terms.

Version 3.0 (CC Australia ported licence): [View CC BY-NC Australia Licence Deed](#) | [View CC BY-NC 3.0 Australia Legal Code](#)

Version 4.0 (international licence): [View CC BY-NC 4.0 Licence Deed](#) | [View CC BY-NC 4.0 Legal Code](#)

Please note that there is the potential for minor revisions of this paper.  
Please check the online version at [www.anrows.org.au](http://www.anrows.org.au) for any amendment.

ANROWS

# ANROWS

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL RESEARCH  
ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN'S SAFETY

*to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children*

