A Community-Based Approach to the Reduction of Sexual Reoffending: Circles of Support and Accountability.


Over the last two decades, the management of sexual offenders has received a disproportionate level of attention from both media & government. Since the creation of the Sex Offenders Register in 1997, the media’s ‘naming & shaming’ campaigns in 2000 and the introduction of Sarah’s Law in August 2010, the whereabouts of convicted sex offenders has been high on the public agenda. This has led to a new ‘moral panic’ often culminating in violence against ‘suspected’ sex offenders. In such a retributive and control-focused climate how can we prevent re-offending and re-integrate sexual offenders back into the community when so many of those convicted of sexual offences are, on release from custody, socially isolated and without a support network?

This book focuses on a community-based approach to reducing sexual reoffending - The Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA). A COSA is a ‘group of trained volunteers who meet on a regular basis with a high-risk sex offender living in their community’ to support re-integration and rehabilitation, but also to maintain accountability of actions by the sex offender.

Although not its main focus, this book challenges the reader to consider the role of faith-based responses to crime and whether faith organisations and people of faith can work symbiotically with criminal justice agencies. It does this by highlighting religious foundations of rehabilitative-restorative justice models and the beginnings of the COSA approach. It explains that this is not a soft option solely providing support for ‘ex-offenders’, but one that also requires accountability for actions from the offender and is designed to lead to ‘no more victims’.

The first chapter, ‘The Beginning of the Circle’, sets out the history and development of Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) from their inception in 1994, the foundations of which were laid by the Mennonite community in Ontario, Canada, and clearly identifies the underpinning philosophy as restorative justice.

The second chapter gives as comprehensive a review as possible (given the length of the book) of what we know about sexual offenders. This is then followed with a chapter on the treatment and management of sex offenders.

The fourth chapter addresses the key principles and practice realities of Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) and chapter five provides the ‘unmediated and without judgment’ personal narratives of both ex-offenders and volunteers within COSA, which go a long way to exploring the myths and stereotypes surrounding those who commit these offences and those who work with them.

The sixth chapter, ‘But does it work? Evaluation & Evidence’, discusses the retributive-restorative continuum and the theoretical, contextual and methodological challenges faced in proving whether this approach works. It goes on to argue that it is important to ask not just whether it works but how it works and these questions are answered by first person accounts from ‘core members’ (ex-
offenders) and well as by the acceptance of this approach by criminal justice agencies and the Home Office itself.

This book concludes with an unashamedly honest critique of the media's influence on the public and government, a necessary honesty which is also found at the heart of the Circles approach itself.

It is a must read for anyone working (or planning to work) within the criminal justice system and allied fields, as well as for students across a wide range of disciplines from criminology to theology.

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