

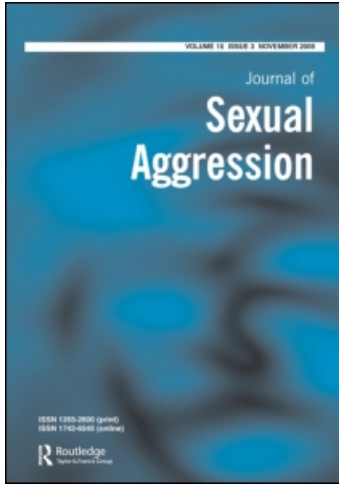
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Ever-increasing circles: A descriptive study of Hampshire and Thames Valley Circles of Support and Accountability 2002–09

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Abstract *This paper gives a history of Hampshire and Thames Valley (HTV) Circles, an organisation which recruits, trains and supports volunteer members of the public who are formed into small groups meeting weekly to provide support and monitoring of post-conviction sex offenders (Core Members) in the community. It describes the origins of Circles of Support and Accountability in Canada and gives an account of its implementation in the UK and a summary of the findings of the previous study of the first 16 HTV Circles Core Members in 2006 and some discussion about the challenges inherent in evaluating this kind of community-based and volunteer-led intervention. It describes demographic data on 60 Core Members followed-up for an average period of 36.2 months, including offence and sentence category, treatment history and statistically assessed risk of reconviction. It provides evidence of progress by these Core Members across a range of dynamic risk factors, as well as information on sexual reconviction, recall to prison and dropout from Circles. Three case studies provide details of Circles practice in community risk management of sex offenders. The paper discusses proposed areas of further research into Circles work, as well as the development of new techniques for measuring and managing dynamic risk factors displayed by Core Members in the community.*

Keywords *Community; sex offenders; evaluation*

Introduction

A Circle of Support and Accountability comprises a group of between three and five selected and trained volunteers who commit to meeting with a convicted sex offender or Core Member on a regular basis in his/her local community. The volunteers offer emotional and practical support, while at the same time scrutinising the attitudes and behaviours of the Core Member and holding them accountable to his/her declared intention to avoid further offending. The method was first employed in Canada (Wilson, Picheca, & Prinzo, 2005; Wilson, McWhinnie, Picheca, Cortoni, & Prinzo, 2005), and was brought to the United Kingdom by Quakers in 2002 (Wilson, 2006). The first Canadian Circle was set up at the request of a Mennonite prison minister, who had concerns regarding vigilante action against a sexual offender with numerous serious convictions whose imminent release from prison had been

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publicised widely in the local press. Following his release, the group met regularly with this man who, against all predictions, statistical or otherwise, was never convicted of a further sexual offence. The idea spread organically in Canada, where the Circles project has since received a generous government grant in recognition of its contribution to public protection.

In 2002, the UK Home Office agreed to fund a number of pilot Circles of Support and Accountability projects, of which Thames Valley Circles was one. The staff team, currently comprising former probation and police staff with relevant experience, are responsible for selecting, vetting, training and supervising volunteers, assessing the suitability of potential Core Members and communicating regularly with statutory and other relevant professionals. There are currently 10 Circles projects at various stages of development in England and Wales, with the umbrella organisation Circles UK established in 2008 to manage these developments, maintain standards, collect data and provide a collective response to media enquiries.

In 2006 a follow-up study was conducted of the first 16 Circles of Support and Accountability set up in the Thames Valley area (Bates, Saunders, & Wilson, 2007). This study concentrated on identifying rates of sexual reconviction, recall to prison on parole licence and evidence of other problematic behaviours that required managing in the community among the Core Members around whom Circles had been formed. In the 2006 study five Core Members had displayed general problematic behaviours that had been managed in the community, while four had breached licence conditions and been recalled into custody. However, the study suggested that although such outcomes had occurred in these cases, Circles could be deemed a success because the organisation had:

- not had any sexual reconvictions by Core Members;
- been involved in gathering the intelligence that led to recall for recidivism by Core Members (thus contributing towards the prevention of further offences);
- offered members of the community the opportunity to be involved directly with public protection;
- allowed for a humane method for safe reintegration of sexual abusers into the community; and
- proved that a third sector community programme could work effectively with statutory agencies under the auspices of the Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA).

Further to this, three of the four Core Members who were recalled to prison eventually returned to Circles following re-release from prison, demonstrating the mutual commitment of Core Members and volunteers/coordinators to the Circles process.

The current study builds upon the 2006 study in both length (now eight years instead of four, the first 60 Circles rather than 16) and breadth, in that it seeks to examine in greater detail how recognised needs in Core Members are met, and how this process helps to reduce the likelihood of their re-offending. Since the previous study there have been a number of developments. In 2005 the Thames Valley project was asked to take over Circles operations in Hampshire and was re-named Hampshire and Thames Valley (HTV) Circles. To date, HTV circles have won a total of five UK national awards for their community work in sex offender rehabilitation, including the Lord Longford Award Prize 2004, the Howard League Community Programmes Award 2006, a Justice Award 2006, the Thames Valley Criminal Justice Board Award 2006 and The Queen's Award for Voluntary Services 2010. The HTV Circles team has expanded to six, and in 2008 became an independent charity. HTV Circles continues to work closely with MAPPA, with appropriate protocols in place. It has developed its expertise and expanded its use of consultants so that they are now able to offer specialist

provision not only for Circles with female Core Members, but also those with learning disabilities or traits suggesting personality disorder. At the time of writing they have set up and run 60 Circles.

It is important to include some background information about models utilised currently by UK Sex Offender Treatment Programmes which also inform the theory and practice of HTV Circles. This demonstrates how, although a radical model of sex offender support and accountability in the community, Circles can be placed in the same theoretical context as the treatment practice of statutory agencies.

The “Good Lives Model”

The “Good Lives Model” of self-regulation (Ward & Marshall, 2004) has been incorporated into the Prison Service Sex Offender Treatment Programme booster module and the Community Sex Offender Groupwork Programme Better Lives Relapse Prevention block. Through their work with Core Members, HTV Circles are able to address offence-specific risk-related issues such as sexual preoccupation, hostility towards women and justifications for sex with children. However, more fundamental aspects of HTV Circles’ support and intervention, including reducing emotional loneliness and social isolation, improving self-management skills and building self-esteem, are widely recognised as appropriate domains in which effective work with sex offenders can reduce re-offending rates. The Good Lives Model (Ward & Gannon, 2006; Ward & Stewart, 2003) emphasises the need to construct a balanced, pro-social personal identity in offenders. HTV Circles, like the Good Lives Model, believes that this can be achieved through the use and development of internal capabilities such as skills, attitudes and beliefs, the promotion of support for the offender and opportunities for development. The Good Lives Model promotes the notion that criminogenic needs and dynamic risk factors are the motivation for distorted outcomes, which in turn produces a negative life model that ultimately leads to sexual offending. It attempts to promote the internal and external conditions for achieving human needs in safe and pro-social ways, which in turn leads to the assumption that offenders will be less likely to commit further sexual offences (Lindsey, Ward, Morgan, & Wilson, 2007). HTV Circles works in similar ways to the Good Lives Model, in that it aims to reduce sexual offending by improving the Core Member’s life through addressing the criminogenic needs identified at the assessment stage.

Method

In November 2009, 60 case files held at HTV Circles were examined with a view to identifying key facts relating to each Core Member. The maximum period of follow-up was 84 months, the minimum one month, the average period was 36.2 months and 25 Core Members had been at large in the community for more than 36 months. Information about each Core Member was taken from the beginning of their involvement with HTV Circles and the follow-up addressed the whole period since this time (e.g. not just the life of the Circle). Data gathered included descriptive demographic information and also outcome data, including whether or not there was any recall to prison or reconviction, as well as positive progress which had aided in the rehabilitation of the Core Member. Each file was examined to identify which criminogenic factors pertaining to the Core Member had been addressed by HTV Circles work and to explain briefly how this had been achieved.

There is no reference to general “recidivist behaviours”, defined in previous follow-up studies of sex offenders living in the community (Falshaw, Friendship, & Bates, 2003) as

problematic behaviours that fall short of further charges or convictions for sexual offences, e.g. social services investigations of contact with children by a convicted child abuser or evidence of failure to engage in probation supervision if such behaviour does not result in formal consequences for the offender. This revised view was taken because it became apparent in reviewing each of HTV Circles Core Members history that problem behaviours of various kinds are often to be expected when sex offenders are returning to live in the community. These do not necessarily indicate a likelihood of further sexual offending, and thus “recidivism” as per the previous definition is not a concept that can be applied consistently across cases. Since the term was defined, and earlier research carried out on non-illegal but still problematic behaviours in post-release sex offenders (Falshaw et al. 2003), much legislation has been put into place in the United Kingdom, which has resulted in both the closer monitoring of sexual offenders in the community under tighter licence conditions and the creation of new laws (e.g. those around grooming of children and the imposition of Sexual Offenders Prevention Orders) that make activities regarded previously as simply problematic now illegal and punishable by law.

Results

Rehabilitative progress—pathway evidence

The Offender Assessment System (OASys) is a standardised risk and needs assessment tool that is used by both the National Probation Service and the Prison Service. Introduced in 2001, it identifies both static and dynamic risk factors and uses them to assess an individual’s risk of serious harm and likelihood of re-offending. It accounts for a number of social, economic and personal offending-related factors or criminogenic needs which research has shown to be linked to re-offending rates (Home Office, 2002). HTV Core Members’ files were analysed in detail in order to identify where and how dynamic risk factors as categorised in OASys had been identified and reduced by means of the HTV Circles intervention. These results are given in Figure 1.

It was observed that in 70% of Circles there was evidence that the Core Member’s emotional well-being had improved, and that this improvement could be linked to the involvement of the Circle. The very fact that they had volunteers to whom they could relate

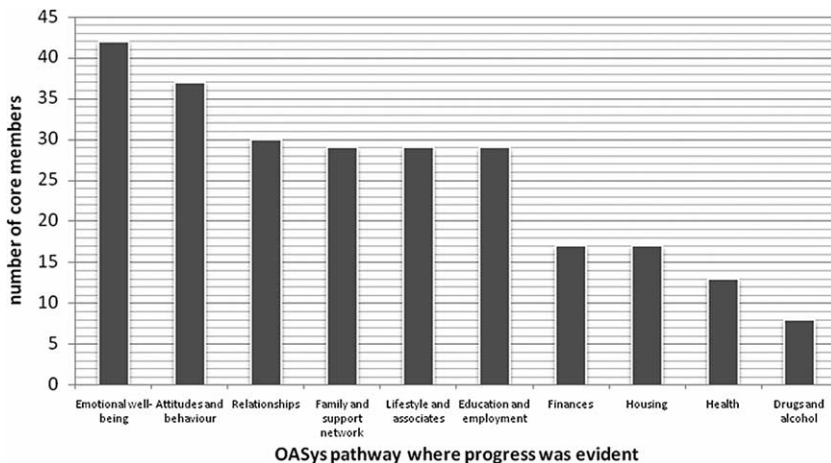


FIGURE 1. Evidence of core members’ rehabilitative progress. OASys: Offender Assessment System.

and share issues with reduced their emotional loneliness and social isolation. Sixty-one per cent of Core Members had displayed attitudes and behaviours that were pro-social. One Core Member made the decision to take anti-libidinal medication due to the critical role of the Circle in encouraging him. Through the support of the Circle, 50% of Core Members had increased their engagement in age-appropriate relationships. Nearly 50% of Core Members had improved links with their families and increased their support networks. One Core Member reported how invaluable the emotional support he had received had helped regarding a difficult family situation. Another was supported through the process of making contact with his parents, with whom he had lost touch while in prison.

Nearly 50% of Core Members were encouraged and supported by the volunteers to access employment and education. Twenty-eight per cent of Core Members experienced financial difficulties with which the volunteers were able to advise and assist them; 28% of Core Members were given assistance in accessing housing support; nearly 22% of Core Members were encouraged to seek medical help and in some cases reduction of stress and depression could be linked to the actions of the volunteers; 13% of Core Members surveyed had support for drug or alcohol problems that were beneficial. One Core Member received a great deal of one-to-one support in relation to alcohol abuse.

Demographic data

Duration of Circle

The length of time that each circle had lasted was recorded. A total of eight (13%) of the circles had lasted two months or less. This included those that had recently commenced, but also three cases where the Core Member had been recalled to prison within one month of the circle becoming functional and a further case where the Core Member had not responded to the Circle and had elected not to proceed with Circle involvement. More than two-thirds of the circles (69%) ran for between two and 24 months; this total was split almost exactly between Circles that ran for up to 12 months and those which ran for between 12 months and two years. This shows the extensive period of support provided to Core Members by HTV Circles. In 18% of cases this support exceeded 24 months (Figure 2).

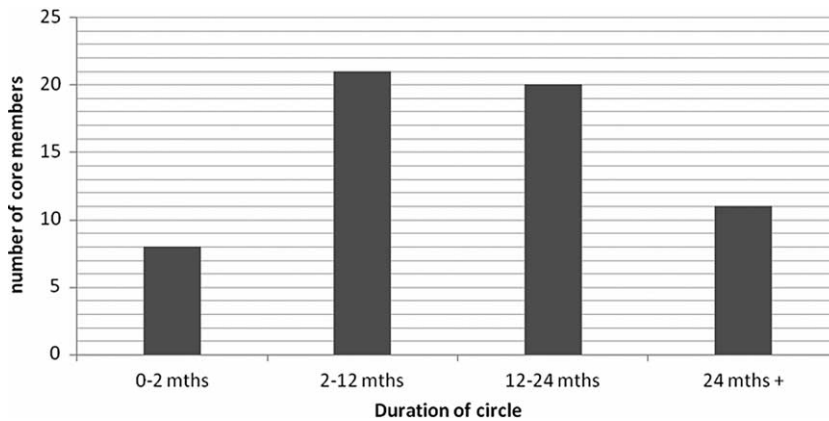


FIGURE 2. *Duration of circle.*

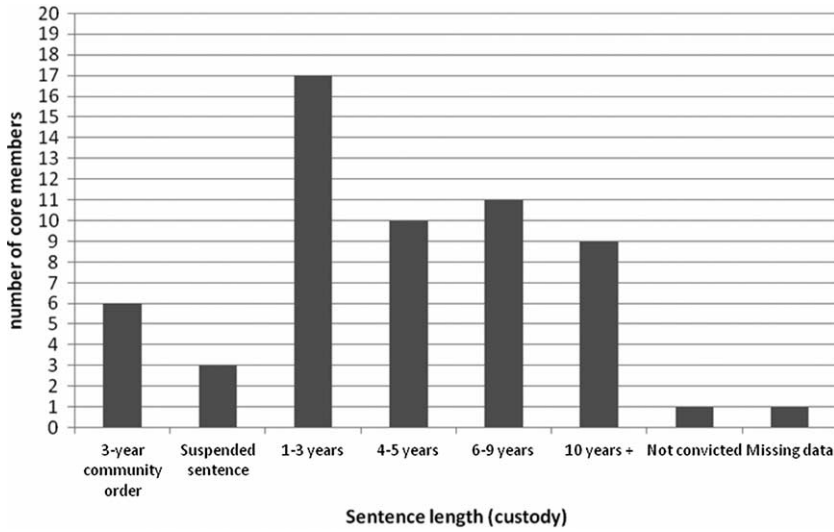


FIGURE 4. Core members' sentence length for index sexual offence.

offender re-offend, and is therefore limited in its usefulness, although it is statistically robust. The OASys includes a risk of serious harm assessment, although this was not recorded routinely in HTV Circles files. In future, risk of serious harm as a more dynamic assessment should be recorded routinely in HTV Circles records, so it can be used to describe more clearly the nature of the risk represented to society by Core Members.

Treatment history

Most Core Members (95% of the total) had undertaken a formal sex offender treatment programme of some description (Figure 6). Thirty-eight per cent had undertaken community treatment (locally the Thames Valley Sex Offender Groupwork Programme [TV-SOGP], which also operates in Hampshire). A further 35% had begun treatment in prison and continued on licence with elements of the TV-SOGP. A smaller group (11.6%) had

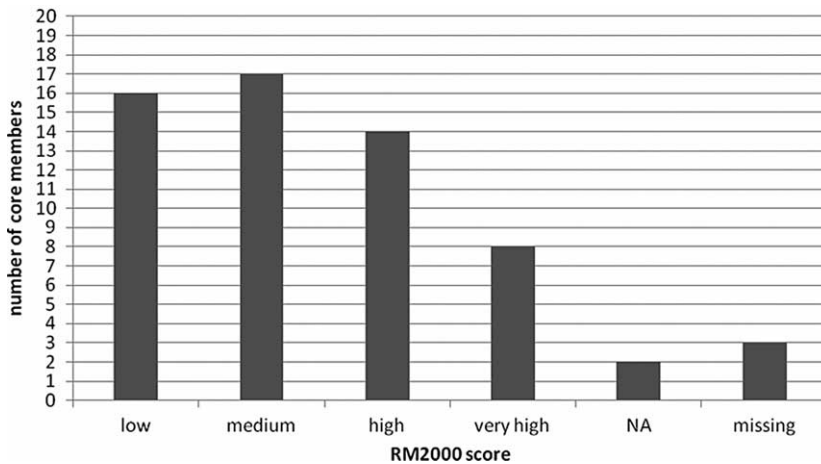


FIGURE 5. Core members' static actuarial risk assessment score (Risk Matrix 2000).

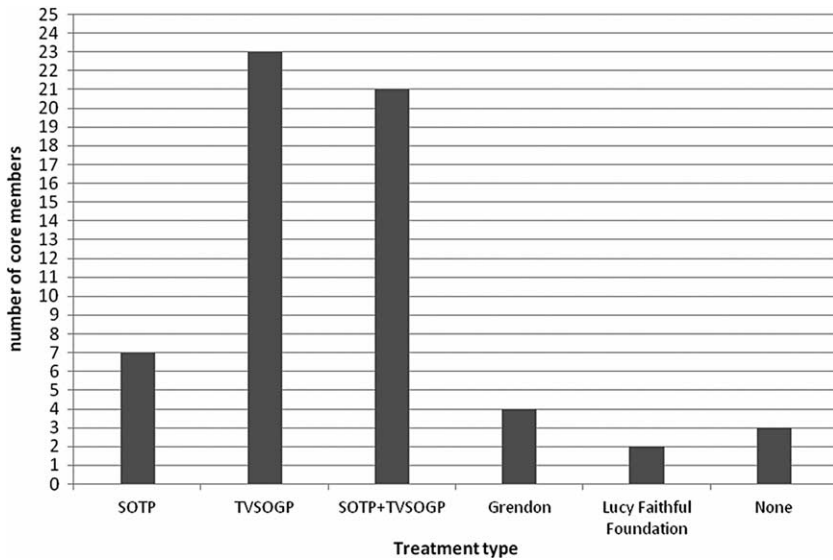


FIGURE 6. *Core members' sex offender treatment history.*

undertaken SOTP but no community follow-up, while 6% and 5%, respectively, had undertaken treatment either at HMP Grendon (Therapeutic Community programme) based in Buckinghamshire within the HTV area or individually with the Lucy Faithful Foundation.

Outcome of Circle

Summarising the impact of a Circle on the life of a Core Member is not a simple task, as the nature of the community support offered by Circle volunteers is extensive and occurs over lengthy periods of time (see Figure 2). The current study seeks to address the nature of this “support and accountability” in more detail than previous UK research. However, the key outcome which is intended in any intervention with offenders is a cessation, or at least a reduction, of their offending behaviour (Figure 7). This, in itself, can lead to complex and controversial debate, as it might be argued that certain further but “lesser” convictions are still evidence of progress with the type of heavily convicted clientele working with HTV Circles (see Figure 3 and 4).

At the point of analysis, 14 Circles (23% of the total cases studied) were still running actively at phase 1, meaning that the designated group of trained volunteers were still meeting formally on a regular basis with the Core Member. A further eight Core Members (13% of cases) were involved in phase 2 of the Circle, whereby occasional social contact with one or more individual volunteers is ongoing and subject to review by Circle Coordinators to ensure that the activities involved remain appropriate to Circles' objectives. Sixteen Circles (26% of cases) were completed, with their objectives having been fully met. Of the remaining Core Members, two remained in informal contact with volunteers from their Circle, but this was outside the auspices of HTV Circles, as the intervention had officially ended. Four Core Members (7% of total) were involved in a further Circle after a period of recall to prison following problematic behaviours displayed in the community. Three of these cases were among those recalled during the period described in the previous HTV study (Bates et al., 2007), and in two of these cases the Circle had been involved actively in the information-gathering which led to the recall.

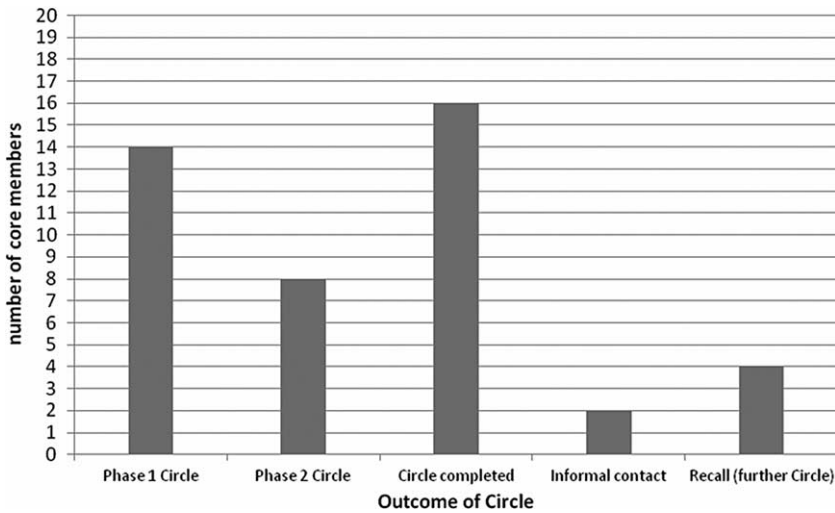


FIGURE 7. Outcome of circle: part 1.

A total of 45 of the 60 Circles analysed (75%) were categorised as having a positive outcome, in that the Circle intervention was either ongoing in some form or had completed its objectives. In some cases there had been problematic behaviours demonstrated by the Core Member over the life of the circle, but this had been managed within the Circle's intervention without formal legal sanction and with no further problematic behaviours thereafter (Figure 8).

Certain of the Circles ($n=15$, 25% of the total, displayed in Figure 8) examined were categorised as not wholly successful, although only one Core Member had been reconvicted for a sexual offence ($n=1$, 1.6% of the total). This man was sentenced to 15 months imprisonment in 2009 for downloading images of child abuse. His previous convictions involved the prolonged contact sexual abuse of a female child.

In two cases ($n=2$, 3.2%), a Sex Offence Prevention Order (SOPO: a court injunction which makes illegal certain behaviours if practised by the individual as they have been proved to have led to his sexual offending in the past) was made against a Core Member for indulging in behaviours which paralleled their previous behaviour and yet fell short of actual

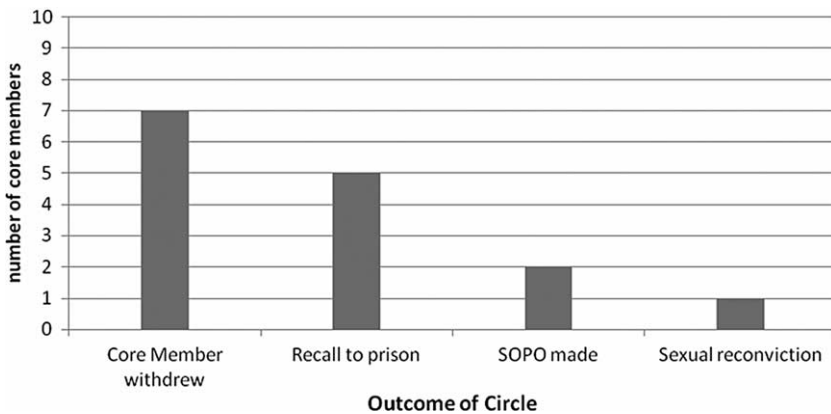


FIGURE 8. Outcome of circle: part 2.

re-offending. One of these SOPOs had been implemented in the course of the previous HTV study. One Core Member was recalled to prison for committing a burglary, the *modus operandum* of which was very similar to previous offences where sexual offending was the intention and outcome, although in this instance no further sexual victimisation took place. This Core Member was not motivated to undertake further HTV Circle involvement when eventually released from prison.

In the current analysis a trend emerged which was not evident in the 2006 study—whereby Core Members had been allocated to a Circle but were then recalled to prison very quickly, such that no meaningful engagement with HTV Circles had happened. A total of four such cases (6.7%) were identified in the study, and this is a problematic group, in that organisational effort was spent on identifying the Core Member and building the Circle around them only for the procedure to fail very early on because of the explicit or implied lack of motivation to engage by the Core Member.

Another subgroup featured in Figure 8 concerns those Core Members who elected to withdraw early from the Circle's intervention due to limited motivation. This constituted six cases of the sample (10%). Three of these Circles lasted fewer than five months, while a further three lasted between seven and 14 months before the Core Member withdrew from the Circle. However, in these cases there was evidence of progress in various dynamic risk domains of the Core Member's life and functioning as a result of Circles activity (and no recorded reconvictions) before this eventual premature withdrawal from the Circles process.

In evaluative studies of sex offender interventions it may be quite clear-cut to observe adverse outcomes (e.g. reconviction, recall to prison). However, it is more difficult to summarise positive outcomes or to depict in any detail the work which goes into the rehabilitation of sexual offenders in the community as practised by HTV circles. Given the remarkable practice of community support and social inclusion which is at the heart of HTV Circles, it seems that the best way to illustrate this work is through a small number of case studies which give an in-depth view of the Core Member–volunteer dynamic.

Case study 1: John

John is a 50-year-old white male. His index offences involved a number of serious sexual offences against a 12-year-old boy who was not related to him. For these offences John was sentenced to four years imprisonment. John has a previous conviction for indecent assault on two male children, aged 11 and 13 years. John was sentenced to 18 months imprisonment for these offences. In both sets of offences John allowed the boys to smoke and drink in his home and allowed them to watch videos, gradually introducing pornography. In 2005 John was recalled to prison for breaching his licence conditions. The details of the recall were that John had moved out of probation-approved premises into his own council flat. John's first Circle had closed as it had achieved its aims, and John appeared to be coping well. The local Police Public Protection Team made a routine call to John's flat and found a nine-year-old male playing a computer game in John's living room. John's explanation was that he was babysitting for a neighbour. He denied at the time that he was grooming the child to sexually offend against him but later, when interviewed by Circles staff, admitted that the grooming process had started and that he would have gone on to offend. Using RM2000 John is assessed as medium risk, but when applying the OASys Dynamic Risk of Harm, John was assessed as presenting a high risk of serious harm to children.

John was re-referred to HTV Circles by his probation officer (offender manager), who had identified that John was socially isolated and emotionally lonely. The devised action plan for the Circle included encouraging John to seek appropriate adult relationships, support in

accessing employment, support in managing money including debt management, becoming involved in community issues and providing a safe place for John to discuss his sexual thoughts if linked to his previous offending behaviour. The Circle was aware that the emphasis of their work with John was to focus on the dynamic risk factors that could be reduced if he maintained his treatment gains. The Circle also encouraged John to review and update his New Life Plan as his own personal circumstances changed.

John, with the support of his Circle, made significant steps to change the way that he coped with his life and now has an active social life. The volunteers were instrumental in arranging and supporting John in engaging with his local gay scene. He now has the confidence to continue attending various social events. The Circle worked with John to help him manage risky situations. A good example is the use of a checklist they helped him to produce. It is laminated and on the inside of his front door. It gives him a set of responses to say if any neighbours knock at his door with requests that might place him in risky situations. In the past he did not have the confidence to say “no” and this led him into high-risk situations, such as babysitting for his neighbour. The Circle also helped John write to all his creditors, and arrangements were agreed with them to repay his debts at a level he could afford. They also helped John prepare a CV and supported him when applying for jobs.

When looking at the pathways evidence, it is clear that the Circle helped John to achieve marked improvement on some of the key pathways linked to criminogenic need, specifically: emotional wellbeing, relationships, family and support networks, education and employment and finances.

Over the longer term John will need to continue to maintain his new life, and while the Circle has formally closed, volunteers from his Circle continue to have informal contact so that John still has support and can be held accountable.

Case study 2: Mick

Mick (aged 41) has convictions for rape, indecent exposure, wounding, criminal damage and threatening behaviour. The index offence, when Circles began to work with him, was indecent exposure, for which he had been sentenced to 12 months custody. During this sentence Mick was released twice, and recalled to custody twice (for alcohol use and aggressive behaviour in hostels), so that on his eventual release he had served the full term of his sentence and there was to be no probation involvement.

Mick’s family background was characterised by domestic and sexual violence, substance abuse and neglect. He, in turn, began to abuse alcohol in pre-adolescence, and to sexually abuse siblings and fellow school pupils. As he developed into adulthood these behaviours became the norm for Mick, along with binges on alcohol and drugs (crack cocaine being the drug of choice) and episodes of increasing violence. Being unable to respond positively to probation interventions, Mick became institutionalised (he committed one of the exposure offences on the day he was released from custody, in the hope of being re-arrested), saying that he found prison regimes easier to cope with than life in the community.

When Mick was referred to Circles, his SOTP Structured Assessment of Risk and Need report indicated high risk in all four dynamic risk domains. It was noted that, although he had participated in treatment sessions, there were significant remaining causes for concern. Specifically, he was sexually preoccupied, including beliefs of sexual entitlement, justifications for sexual activity with children and beliefs that women deserved rape. He was highly compulsive, as was evidenced by his indecent exposure offences, and unable to order or organise his life, often living homeless. Essentially a loner, Mick suffered very low self-esteem. Alcohol and drugs acted as triggers to offending episodes, although he had offended in the

past without using either. Effectively, professional opinion was that Mick possessed little or no ability to self-regulate, and that incarceration was the only way to contain his behaviour.

HTV Circles cautiously accepted Mick as suitable for a Circle, especially as he had a record of offending against women whom he “trusted”. The index offence was committed against medical staff and the previous rape offence was committed against a partner. We selected his volunteers carefully, seeking a balance of professional experience and community representation. To this end, HTV Circles assembled a serving prison SOTP facilitator (who did not know Mick), a local council worker, a retired Quaker and a retired probation officer. The latter had known Mick when he was young, and it was felt that this would be useful in terms of holding him to account and verification, although HTV Circles had to be careful that this did not skew group dynamics. A positive development prior to the start of the Circle was that Mick secured accommodation in a small residential unit that operated the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) 12 Steps method of overcoming addictive behaviours. While this was reassuring, and demonstrated that he was motivated to change at this stage, due to his high risk of harm HTV Circles was clear that it would only work with Mick when he was sober and drug-free, and that there would be no contact with volunteers individually between Circle sessions other than via mobile phone.

An initial hurdle faced by all concerned was that Mick, although residing in a therapeutic setting where honesty and personal disclosure were important, was nevertheless clearly unable to discuss his offending behaviour, as this could open him to attack from other residents. Although not the only causal factor, drink and drugs played a major part in Mick’s sexual offending, as triggers, as avoidant strategies in terms of facing the consequences of what he was doing and in the longer term undermining his self-confidence and quality of his relationships. These links needed to be explored closely, and it was decided that the Circle would act as the arena to which Mick could bring the progress he was making at the hostel in the 12-Step programme, and to ‘synthesise’ this work with discussion about the role substance abuse had played in the whole of his life, including his offending behaviour, together with discussion about his sexual development. There was also a strong focus on his current sexual thinking and attitudes towards women between sessions.

In the event, the method worked well. Good levels of trust developed rapidly within the Circle, so that Mick felt relatively free to talk about his sexual problems. Trust in the Circle was demonstrated by his admission that he had committed offences that had not been reported to the authorities (knowing that this information would be forwarded to the police). What emerged during early meetings was that Mick used sexual offending as a means of expressing anger and as a means of demeaning others in order to shore up his own minimal self-esteem. It was notable that prior to the onset of the exposing behaviour, when his life was particularly chaotic, Mick offended within relationships, or against people he felt trusted him, as this increased his sense of power and control over his emotional life. Over time, sexual arousal became a virtual intoxicant in itself, offering relief from negative self-image, shame and anxiety. This latter point in particular was useful in terms of linking the work concerning his substance abuse and his sexual preoccupation.

This early trust-building process is important in the forming of the Circle, as the volunteers are able to demonstrate and model appropriate and humane adult relationships to the Core Member, not only by their responses during Circle meetings, but also by the fact that they attend Circle meetings regularly without being paid. In Mick’s case this latter point was significant in that he had complex, somewhat dysfunctionally dependent relationships with professionals and statutory agencies. Mick was able to use this experience to help him to develop similar levels of trust in fellow residents at the unit and fellow participants at the AA meetings that he began to attend. After two months of sobriety his confidence in the process

had grown, and the Circle began to challenge continuing poor attitudes towards women. An instance of this was when Mick discussed a woman he had seen at a supermarket who wore a short skirt. His “automatic” thoughts were that this was arousing, that she was available for sex and that therefore he could abuse her in some way. He confessed that had he been drinking he may have waited until she was alone and exposed himself to her. His willingness to discuss live issues in this way showed promise in the process.

The work the Circle was able to help develop regarding the 12 Steps programme focused initially on helping Mick to construct a complete life history, including sexual development. This allowed him to reflect on negative influences, patterns and ultimately his current situation. The exercise formed a bedrock for later work. The group then helped him to rehearse disclosure to his sponsor (AA operate a “buddy system” amongst recovering alcoholics). This was seen as appropriate and necessary, as this relationship demands trust and total honesty in order to be effective, and also offered Mick an opportunity to test his apparently developing emotional maturity. The process was successful and demonstrated to Mick that personal and emotional risk (ultimately of rejection) is an inherent part of relationship-building, and that to be worthwhile he needed to surrender a degree of control. The fact that he could attach this particular relationship directly to his recovery from alcoholism reinforced this point with a useful immediacy.

A complex but crucial aspect of the work undertaken by the Circle was in assisting Mick in the step of his treatment programme which involved “making reparation to those he had harmed”. Clearly, he could not contact any of his victims to apologise, although he expressed what appeared to be sincere regret for his actions. It was decided that Mick should try to re-establish contact with his family, whom he had not seen or heard from for 10 years, due largely to his destructive and abusive behaviour towards them. This was an emotional step for Mick, fraught with the type of personal risk that had led to many of his psychological problems. The Circle helped him to form a strategy for this, and offered a forum to rehearse what he wanted to say, with appropriate feedback and encouragement. One at a time, Mick contacted his family members, apologized and offered the progress he was now making as evidence of his sincerity, and expressed his wish to remain in contact now. Although he has not yet met any family members face to face, meetings are planned and apologies appear to have been accepted in good faith.

While reflecting on the progress of this Circle to date (his Circle has been running for just over a year), three features seem striking. First, Mick has applied a pace to his development, reinforced by the Circle and the 12 Steps regime, which has prevented moving too fast into any sexual relationship. It is often a feature of recovery or rehabilitation when offenders rush into new relationships with half-learnt skills, ending frequently in bruising disappointment, reinforcement of old fears of rejection and worthlessness, and on to relapse. Mick nearly fell into this when he experienced strong feelings towards a fellow resident at the hostel. The Circle was able to help him to control and ultimately rationalize these feelings into a mutually supportive relationship. This may not have been possible without the Circle’s involvement, as the Circle was the arena in which he could discuss all the potential risks involved in a premature relationship. This was the notable early exception to an otherwise well-paced piece of rehabilitative work.

A second facet is that, with reference to the list of OASys pathways to rehabilitation, the Circle seems to have impacted positively on every relevant area of Mick’s life and functioning. Although not detailed above, HTV Circles has also assisted, directly or indirectly, in Mick’s applications for voluntary work, GCSE-standard education courses and follow-on education. His confidence has risen dramatically, and his lifestyle is currently a healthy one. Finally, while these various processes have been progressing, Mick has observed that his sexual thinking has

normalised. Specifically, he feels that he is no longer sexually preoccupied and says that when he does think about sex, it no longer contains any elements of coercion or harm to others. Relatively speaking, it is too early to say whether these levels of progress can be sustained permanently, but clearly this is a promising start.

Case study 3: Bill

Bill was convicted of sexual offences against male and female children (siblings). He was sentenced to 78 months custody with a four-year extended licence period. He was also made subject to registration on the Sexual Offenders Register for an indefinite period.

In the build-up to his offences, Bill was an active member of his local church and through the church he befriended a single female with three children. Bill was allowed to gain the trust of this woman and was eventually able to spend time unsupervised with her children, offending against them over a period of time. After being convicted of these offences, further allegations of sexual abuse were made, and Bill pleaded guilty to historical sexual offences against two nieces aged between five and 11 years.

Bill completed the Core SOTP in custody and undertook the Relapse Prevention module in the community. At the point of being referred to HTV Circles, Bill was assessed as posing a high risk of serious harm to children on OASys. Risk Matrix 2000 assessed him as being of low likelihood of reconviction. He was assessed as being a lonely and isolated individual who suffered from feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem and depression. His fear of rejection acted as a barrier to him from integrating successfully into his local community.

Bill disclosed that he himself was a survivor of sexual abuse as a child, and so prior to entering a Circle he was referred to one of HTV Circles' counsellors in order to address any unresolved issues, therefore increasing his chances of moving forward in life successfully. The Circle began at the end of 2008 and has been running for the past 15 months. The Circle comprises four volunteers, three of whom have experience of previous Circles. All the volunteers have knowledge of Bill's local community. The objectives of the Circle were to monitor Bill's progress in line with his relapse prevention plan; assist him to address emotional instability and feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem; provide support in relation to successful community integration; and to encourage him to tackle his problems in pro-social ways.

To date, the Circle has made significant progress in assisting Bill to address the following offending-related needs: emotional wellbeing, attitudes and behaviour, family and support network and lifestyle and associates. With regard to emotional wellbeing, at the outset of the Circle Bill presented frequently as being emotionally unstable; for example, being angry one moment before becoming tearful the next. This was viewed as being symptomatic of his low self-esteem and feelings of powerlessness. Over the past 15 months Bill's emotional state has improved dramatically, to a stage where he now presents consistently as being in control of his emotions. When this was reflected back to him recently, Bill stated that he might not have achieved this level of stability without the support of the Circle, stating that the Circle has enabled him to let off steam when necessary and has encouraged him to take positive action regarding solving life's problems.

Since his release from custody Bill has lived alone with his elderly mother, who is suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Despite having a number of siblings, Bill has frequently felt unsupported in his role as primary carer for his mother. This issue has been the main focus for the Circle in recent months, with Circle volunteers monitoring Bill's ability to cope with what at times can be a highly stressful role. The Circle has also provided practical advice and support with regard to applying for the appropriate benefits, and has supported Bill to

seek relevant professional care for his mother. In addition to this, the Circle has been working alongside Bill, encouraging him to engage with his siblings regarding his mother's deteriorating condition. As a result, Bill is providing regular e-mail updates to all his siblings in the hope of encouraging greater family involvement and improving family relations.

In relation to lifestyle and associates, prior to the Circle Bill was leading a very solitary and isolated lifestyle. In feedback regarding the effectiveness of the Circle, Bill himself acknowledged that "When I joined the Circle I was hoping to receive companionship, support, encouragement and adult conversation, as I was feeling increasingly isolated and insecure. I hoped that, through the Circle, I would become more socially confident and perhaps learn a few things about how to make friends and become less of a loner; a problem which has blighted my entire life to date". The Circle has undertaken a number of social activities with Bill, designed to increase his confidence and encourage greater community integration. Activities have included taking part in organised walks, attending music society concerts and going to the cinema. Although he struggles with issues of self-confidence and esteem, Bill makes efforts to engage appropriately with people outside the Circle. Bill's confidence appears to have increased in this area, and he recently attended a course designed to provide advice and support for carers. He reports that he is also planning to undertake an adult education course in the near future, and it is hoped that this will assist him to continue developing positive community ties.

During the period that Bill has been in his Circle there has been no evidence to suggest that he has committed any further sexual offences or that he is seeking to create opportunities to offend. This has enabled the Circle to focus primarily upon supporting Bill, and the level of accountability required has been minimal. While Bill continues to face the everyday challenges associated with caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease, a degree of flexibility has been provided with regard to the lifespan of the Circle. To withdraw the support of the Circle before independence has been achieved could potentially contribute to an increase in risk, and steps are being taken, therefore, to gradually reduce Bill's level of contact with the Circle in a manner which is deemed appropriate, and which takes into account both the needs of the individual and issues of public protection.

Discussion

This study demonstrates some very positive progress made with this cohort of 60 Core Members, including the finding (confirmed by access to the Police National Computer in December 2009) that only one had received a further sexual conviction, and this for a non-contact internet offence, when his previous offending had involved contact sexual offending against three female children. The period of follow-up for this man from the onset of his involvement in HTV circles was 75 months (from August 2003 to November 2009), while his active involvement in a phase 1 Circle had ended in August 2005. Only eight Core Members had an equivalent or longer follow-up period. The Core Member's RM2000 score indicated a low likelihood of reconviction, although his OASys Risk of Serious Harm to children was assessed as high. The man had been supported through his Circle and further phase 2 work with individual volunteers to a marked degree, and made progress in various areas of his life, as described in Figure 1. However, throughout the period of his probation supervision and community sex offender treatment, including follow-up fantasy modification work with a forensic psychologist, he had maintained highly sexualised attitudes towards children and repeatedly rationalised his sexually abusive behaviour. This had been a continual challenge for various agencies working with him, including the probation service and HTV

Circles. The complex and often controversial aspect of sex offender treatment and evaluation of its efficacy is illustrated by an argument that this reconviction, while unacceptable and deservedly punished significantly by the courts with a 15-month prison sentence, did not involve the direct sexual victimisation of another child and as such the Core Member could still be classed as making progress in terms of reducing his risk of harm and the severity of his offending behaviour despite the reconviction.

One acknowledged limitation of this study is that there is no control group available here to compare HTV Circles' outcomes with those which might be expected of other sex offenders released from prison who received no Circle intervention. In the majority of cases, the follow-up period we are reporting here is relatively short (although 25 have been at large in the community for at least three years), and so it is not possible to compare the sample with expected rates of reconviction for sexual offenders identified in the wider literature. A recent study by Grubin (2010), following-up 1,029 sexual offenders released from prison in Scotland between 1996 and 2001, identified an overall rate of reconviction after five years at large as 10.8%. However, only a small number of the HTV Circles' cases have been in the community for as long as five years, and three-year reconviction rates were not cited in Grubin's research. In any case, the key factor of stated motivation not to re-offend in a Core Member by volunteering for Circles' support would make comparison between the HTV Circles cohort and general sexual offenders released from prison an unfeasible one, even if the cohort included larger numbers of Core Members released for longer periods of time. The reality is that, for any evaluation to conclude that Circles is effective at reducing further sexual offending over and above regular public protection methods (probation supervision, sex offender registration and monitoring), a control group would be required which matched sexual offenders released from prison on various key variables, including their motivation to engage with Circles. At this point in time no such control group can be identified from HTV Circles' records, as the lengthy assessment process (considering the very small scale of the agency—three full-time practitioner staff) means that cases identified as suitable for this service tend to receive some kind of intervention in order to maintain the support of funders. Numbers of referrals made, assessments undertaken and interventions provided (or not) are not so large as to leave behind a group of offenders who were found suitable for the service but, due to resource limitations or other factors, never actually received it. The current study remains a primarily descriptive one, which comments positively on the HTV Circles process from the viewpoint of facilitating public protection, assisting offenders in various aspects of their rehabilitation and enabling communities to make their own contribution to this process by means of selected, trained and supported volunteers. It cannot be taken as conclusive evidence of the effectiveness of Circles over and above other public protection approaches without an extensive independent randomised control trial. This has not been possible, in spite of the fact that an evaluation of Circles nationally was agreed originally by the then Home Office when the UK projects were set up in 2002.

It is perhaps worth commenting on one observed area of difference between the previous study of HTV activity (Bates et al., 2007) and the current one. In the 2006 study, although there were four recalls to prison and one successful SOPO application made against Core Members, there were no cases of voluntary dropout from HTV Circles (e.g. Circles' input was ongoing in the case of each Core Member until objectives had been met, usually around the 18–24-month mark), and in cases where there was a recall the Circle remained active until that time and had often contributed information which led to recall. The current study shows that four Core Members who were recalled to prison in effect had very little Circles involvement prior to this event taking place, and therefore there was no evidence that Circles input contributes to the recall outcome. Overall, it now seems that

Core Members either engage effectively with Circles and do not indulge in problem behaviours or fail to engage in Circles while rapidly displaying anti-social behaviours, hence being recalled to prison. It is possible that, as the HTV Circles profile among public protection agencies has evolved over the past eight years, the number of unrealistic referrals has increased, e.g. sex offenders whose high level of risk causes particular anxiety for agencies have been referred without due consideration of their likely responsivity to the Circles process. In order to ensure the ongoing support of funders, HTV Circles has perhaps felt obliged to take on such cases without applying the necessary assessment procedures and consideration of the likely outcome of engaging offenders who lack high enough levels of motivation. While the need for HTV Circles to be focusing on offenders with high levels of dynamic risk and social and psychological need has always been a priority, it remains the case that a degree of appropriate motivation to engage by the Core Member has to be maintained as a key feature of the process—involving a bond of trust and honesty being created between the Core Member and the Circle. Inappropriate referrals to HTV Circles can result in Circles essentially being set up to fail, with the associated waste of resources in terms of the organisational work of Circles coordinators and, more important still, the high levels of motivation and interest required of the volunteers. HTV Circles is a resource that depends, primarily, on the ongoing motivation and interest of its volunteers. Being asked to work over long periods of time with unmotivated offenders may well impact upon the essential goodwill of Circle volunteers in terms of future commitment to the process. This threatens the key aspect of the work and thus needs to be guarded against despite occasional, and understandable, pressure from funding agencies to work with their most problematic cases.

Of further note is the group who elect to withdraw before the agreed end of phase 1 of the Circle, but not because of recall or reconviction (indeed, none of the reconvicted or recalled cases fell into this dropout group). Some anecdotal evidence suggests that the length of time waiting for a Circle or licence expiry can have an adverse effect on motivation of the Core Member to remain engaged with the Circles process. Seven Core Members dropped out of HTV Circles. Three of these Circles lasted less than five months, and it seems likely that the same issue of lack of true motivation to engage may have applied to this group and that, similar to the “recalled” group, more careful assessment was required and the need to resist possible pressure to work with unmotivated offenders in these cases. However, for a further three Core Members, their involvement in a Circle lasted for a much more substantial period (between seven and 14 months), thus to label them as having dropped out of the Circles process is somewhat misleading. It could be that the involvement of these Core Members needed closer monitoring by HTV Circles coordinators in order to evaluate whether their objectives in working with Circles were being met, such that an early withdrawal from the process might have been negotiated more constructively, thus again preventing feelings of failure, frustration or disappointment among volunteers. Although 69% of Circles last more than 12 months, it may be that for some Core Members this extended period of support is not required and, although they are appropriate referrals for the service and gain from it, their need for Circles involvement is over a shorter term. A more flexible approach to the expected period of Circles involvement would cut down on offenders withdrawing from Circles prematurely and the associated problematic ending of the intervention could thus be avoided, so that such cases could be categorised as successful completions rather than dropouts, so long as no reconviction or recall is recorded. If such renegotiation is not feasible within the life of the Circle, it would be useful to conduct an “exit interview” with Core Members who choose to withdraw from Circles prior to the projected end of the intervention in order to

determine if any lessons can be learned from their experience to guide both selection of Core Members and maintaining of Circles over a long time-frame in the future.

Further research and evaluation is a necessary part of all public protection and correctional initiatives. For HTV Circles this area is the domain of Circles UK, which organises a quarterly research and evaluation group including academics and practitioners from across the United Kingdom. This group reviews ongoing and proposed research activities around Circles nationally, and features a membership drawn from a range of academic disciplines, including criminology, sociology, forensic psychology and forensic psychiatry. One key development of practice arising from this forum has been the acquisition of funding for a four-year PhD research scholarship supervised from Leeds and Nottingham universities to study HTV Circles practice and effect across the UK. Another is the design and roll-out nationally of a Dynamic Risk Review, based upon the four dynamic risk domains identified in sex offender treatment literature (the Structured Assessment of Risk and Need), which is intended to gather systematically relevant information related to risk in Core Members. This will help to make comparisons across cases and, over time, evidence progress and provide details of the ways in which risk is reduced in Core Members through Circles involvement.

The overall picture of managing sexual offenders in the community post-conviction and (often) after release from prison remains a complex and problematic one which rarely involves plain sailing, but where the responsible and supportive community approach exemplified by HTV Circles has been shown to be positive and effective. In cases where problematic behaviours have occurred on licence, HTV Circles have often been involved in detecting such activities and contributed towards information which led to recall to prison. In this way, HTV Circles practice has enhanced community safety while, crucially in a number of cases, also providing ongoing support at the eventual point of release from prison, sometimes when statutory agency supervision has ceased. Whereas in works of fiction the narrative of a crime ends with the incarceration of the criminal, in reality there is often but a short period of time before the offender again has to find a way to live in the wider community, and HTV Circles has demonstrated how it can assist in this challenging process.

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