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No Safety in Numbers A New Way to Treat Sex Offenders

It's a Monday evening in February, and four people sit around a conference table at a United Church of Christ in Fresno, California. The fluorescent lighting makes the room feel cold. But the people here have a warm demeanor and a seriousness of purpose. They're part of a group called Circle of Support and Accountability (COSA), and they help manage recently released sex offenders.

The focus of the group's work is "Jim," a convicted offender in his 40s who's near the end of his parole. Each member says a few words about how their week has been. Jim's hasn't gone so well—he's felt lonely. He has a temp job and a 7 p.m. curfew, so after work every day, he goes home, eats dinner, and goes to bed. Even his brother doesn't always want to talk to him. Warning flags go up for Clare Ann Ruth-Heffelbower, the program's 63-year-old director, as Jim talks about how cut off he feels. "Do you think you're going to do things that you know you shouldn't do?" she asks.



He admits that he's thought about drinking again. "Wasn't that something that was a big part of your life before?" asks Heidi, a seminary student with a pierced tongue and multiple earrings. "You can't blame what you did on your drinking problem, but as we've talked about, it's something that you have to pay attention to."

"I know," he says.

"If you're needing to meet people, find something to occupy your time, you could go to Alcoholics

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Anonymous,” suggests Ruth- Heffelbower. “You can make some new friends, maybe even meet a female friend that you like,” she says.

“Well, OK, that’s a good idea,” he says softly. “I’ll go.”

When they reconvene the following Monday, Jim admits he hasn’t made it to AA. This time Ruth-Heffelbower brought a meeting schedule, though, and Jim says he’ll go on Saturday. Another COSA volunteer suggests someone who could give him a ride.

This strategy runs counter to the prevailing approach to managing those convicted of sex crimes. In every state, once offenders are released from prison they are required to register their names, addresses, and photos. Putting such information in the public domain, the theory goes, will make them less likely to commit another sex crime because they know they’re being watched. But in practice, it hasn’t been that simple.

Registries began as a sound idea that grew from a terrible crime. On an October night in 1989, a masked gunman abducted Jacob Wetterling, an 11-year-old Minnesota boy. He was never found. Over the next five years, Jacob’s parents successfully pushed for legislation requiring sex-offender registries that would be accessible to the police, though not the public. President Clinton signed the Jacob Wetterling Act in September 1994. It gave police a critical tool that they could use to quickly check suspects early in a sex crime case.

On July 29, 1994, as the Wetterling Act was making its way through Congress, a 7-year-old in New Jersey named Megan Kanka was raped and strangled by a neighbor with a history of sex offenses. Kanka’s parents lobbied for Megan’s Law, which Clinton signed in May 1996, expanding the Wetterling Act to require states to open up their sex-offender registries to the public. “In some ways,” says Jacob Wetterling’s mother, Patty, “Megan’s Law hijacked our intentions.”

The impact of putting offenders’ identities into the hands of a fearful public was predictable. In a 2005 study, 47 percent of 121 sex offenders interviewed said they’d been harassed as a result of being on a registry, and 16 percent said that they’d been assaulted. Since 2005, at least five sex offenders have been murdered by people who used a registry to track them. A 2007 Human Rights Watch study found that private employers were reluctant to hire sex offenders, and a 2008 U.S. Department of Justice report concluded that cases of offenders being forced into homelessness were “widely reported.”

While registries have been very effective at marginalizing convicted offenders, a December 2008 study on the impact of Megan’s Law in New Jersey found that the law “has no effect on reducing the number of victims involved in sexual offenses.” Studies in other states came to similar conclusions. In 2009, analysts at the Washington State Institute for Public Policy looked at seven studies on recidivism by registered offenders. Only two showed that being on a registry decreased the chances that an offender would commit another sex crime.

The public, however, remains convinced that registries work. In a national poll of 1,005 people early last year, 79 percent said they thought registration is an effective deterrent. And offender registries are making inroads in other areas of crime policy. Since 2005, at least 13 states have launched websites listing those convicted of a range of offenses, from manufacturing meth to drunk driving.

By these standards, COSA’s approach seems crazy. But the model is almost as old as sex-offender registries themselves. In the summer of 1994, a psychologist at the Correctional Service of Canada named Bill Palmer was desperate to prevent a high-risk child molester named Charlie Taylor from victimizing another child. While sex offenders’ risk of committing another crime varies considerably, reoffense rates for untreated offenders who target children can run as high as 40 percent. So Palmer connected Taylor with a local Mennonite minister, Harry Nigh, who agreed to have several members of his congregation help keep an eye on Taylor.

That group, which called itself “Charlie’s Angels,” was the first COSA, a model that has since been adopted in 16 sites in Canada and has spread to four U.S. states and Great Britain. The service matches each offender with four to six volunteers, who provide emotional support and

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lend a hand on practical details, from job applications to transportation. Volunteers are trained to monitor the offender's behavior for signs of relapse. "We're not there to hold the hand of a sex offender because he's a poor sad guy who everybody despises," says Andrew McWhinnie, national adviser to the Correctional Service on the COSA program. "Yes, we're there for that, too, because he's a human being and no one is disposable. But the reason is that we don't want to see any more sexual victims."

Taylor died in 2005 having never committed another sex crime. The first study of the program, published in 2005 by the Correctional Service of Canada, found that offenders who had been through COSA were 70 percent less likely than those who hadn't to return to prison because of a sex offense. A second study conducted in 2007 and a third, published in the journal Sex Abuse in 2009, both found an 83 percent drop.

Attempts to replicate COSA in the United States are in early stages, but when the Fresno group was evaluated in September 2009, none of the 16 offenders who had been through the program had reoffended, according to Ruth-Heffelbower.

Jim's experience shows that while support and accountability go together, keeping sex offenders on the right track isn't easy. He never made it to AA. The week after the COSA meeting, his parole officer searched his hotel room and found pornography, a violation. So he went back to prison for two months.

But Ruth-Heffelbower wrote to him, and Jim replied that he wanted to continue meeting with COSA when he got out. Ruth-Heffelbower sees progress: "When people like him mess up, if they continue working with us when they come out, they're much more serious and open."

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