

# How to Reduce Youth Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour by Going Round in Circles

A submission to ippr's Britain's Got Brains competition

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October 2008

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This paper was first published in October 2008. © ippr 2008

## 'Britain's Got Brains'

Britain's Got Brains is a new annual competition run by ippr that aims to identify and promote rigorous, original and exciting policy ideas from postgraduate students and postdoctoral researchers in British universities who may or may not be working in the policy sphere already. The judging panel for this competition includes a wide range of influential politicians, policymakers, journalists, thinkers and academics.

This paper is one of four papers shortlisted by the judges of the 2008 Britain's Got Brains competition. The competition will be run again in 2009. For further details, please visit [www.ippr.org/britainsgotbrains](http://www.ippr.org/britainsgotbrains).

ippr is grateful to Diageo for its generous financial support of the competition, and to *Prospect Magazine*, the competition's media partner.

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## About the author

Simon Mackenzie is a Senior Research Fellow at the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research at the University of Glasgow. His research interests include white-collar crime, organised crime, illicit markets, policing, art crime, and the micro-sociology of civility and antisocial behaviour. He is author of *Going, Going, Gone: Regulating the Market in Illicit Antiquities* (2005), as well as a number of articles in socio-legal and criminological journals. His most recent paper, published in the *Journal of Law and Society* (2008), sets out a critical review of the philosophical underpinnings of the trend towards 'contractual governance' of crime and anti-social behaviour through measures such as the ASBO.

## Executive summary

Anti-social behaviour and crime committed by young people remain problems that occupy politics, the media, and the public. This paper recommends a new ‘social’ approach to youth crime prevention, a community-based model that has been used to support the reintegration of convicted sex offenders into society after they are released from prison in some places.

### **Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA)**

Circles of Support and Accountability is a novel and interesting approach to the post-release management of high-risk, high-needs sex offenders. It originated in Canada, and has recently been piloted in England.

Evidence suggests the recidivism of serious sex offenders is fuelled by feelings of social and emotional isolation. COSA seeks to address the causes of this isolation by establishing a ‘circle’ of three to five volunteers who meet regularly with the offender.

The ‘support’ element provides offenders with discursive ways to think about their lives, and helps them confront psychological problems. The volunteers may also be able to help address some of an offender’s more practical problems. The ‘accountability’ element provides ‘eyes and ears’ for the local community in ensuring that warning signals of the onset of recidivism are picked up early (the ‘public protection’ element), and gives the offender standards, and people, to ‘live up to’.

### **Applying Circles to the youth justice system**

This paper proposes a significant extension of the COSA model, building it into the youth justice system’s policy framework at the early stages, and in some cases even before offending has occurred.

The proposal is to use volunteers to set up Circles of Support and Accountability:

- (a) for young people at risk who volunteer for them, and
- (b) as a diversionary measure to be available to decision-makers in the early stages of the youth justice process.

Volunteers will help young people to overcome barriers to accessing opportunity structures and give them a source of normative influence through exposing them to, and helping them negotiate, conventional value and behaviour systems.

The COSA model for young people at risk and young offenders would:

- Enhance the monitoring capacity of statutory agencies
- Address the social needs of young people that are linked to offending but beyond the capacity of professionals to manage
- Empower communities to participate in reducing offending
- Provide a means of public education for volunteers and their social networks about the realities of young people’s lives.

Below are six reasons to think the proposal worthwhile.

#### **i) Early intervention**

There are really two main ways to reduce Britain’s burgeoning – and costly – prison population: either stop awarding so many custodial sentences or reduce the number of people committing crime. The initiative proposed here would address both of these possibilities, offering judges another diversionary sentencing option, and offering a community-based support service to at-risk young people before they begin offending.

#### **ii) Social capital**

Residents of Britain’s poorest estates are likely to know a lot of other locals, but not many people

beyond this. Where most or all of the locals are experiencing similar problems to one another, individuals cannot find the support that would be available to them if they had more distant networks of acquaintances. Social problems are left to fester. By creating circles that include some local community members, but also members of other communities in the city or region, links can be built between socially-isolated, deprived regions of cities and more affluent areas. These circles therefore stand to address a wide range of problems related to social capital through the implementation of a single model of practice.

### **iii) Inter-generational relations**

Young people in deprived circumstances may have parents or guardians who are unable to help them solve their problems, and may not be especially good role models. Young people need support from members of older generations, as, among other things, it can give them access to the different life perspectives necessary to enable them to begin to analyse their decisions in terms of likely longer-term objective consequences, rather than shorter-term impulsive desires. Circles can also help to counter the way in which young people are portrayed as problematic, colouring older people's judgement of them.

### **iv) Volunteers**

One of the defining features of the COSA model is its reliance on volunteers as the main 'service providers'.

The use of volunteers in a programme such as that proposed here has several attractions, among them:

- The underlying ethos of truly social support for young people seems to require some level of community participation in the process.
- Young people who benefit from the programme might be encouraged to become circle members for other young people at risk in the future.
- Many established agencies in the UK have a ready supply of volunteers to hand, and mechanisms in place for accessing them.
- The voluntary aspect to participation in the programme aids the formation of relationships of trust, and encourages open disclosure between the young person and the circle.
- Circles run with volunteers have the capacity to adapt to periods of particular need in a young person's life in a way that other more formal measures might not.

### **v) Cost-benefit**

The sex offender circles currently operating in England are run for £9,000 per annum per circle. Against this, the average annual cost of a young person in the criminal justice system is around £40,000, rising to £57,000 if some of the measurable social costs of their crimes are included. Circles are therefore cost-effective diversionary measures, and are extremely cost effective if they prevent future criminality.

### **vi) Success of similar programmes**

Many early intervention programmes have been found to reduce the incidence of the onset of offending in young people. The common thread is their attention to known criminogenic risk factors. One such programme is the Youth Inclusion Programme, which targets at-risk youth with 'youth club' style activities, plus training, emotional support and personal mentors, and which has achieved strong results so far. Circles provide considerably more breadth and depth of interaction between volunteers and young people, and can be hoped to achieve more impressive results still.

# 1. Introduction

The ideas I present here are the foundations of a fundamental social story that tells us that society is the source of, and can therefore solve, its own problems. This should not be a revelation. If it is, this is in part due to the cultural dynamics of contemporary Western societies, which tend to externalise problems so that, for example, rather than seeing our own individual or group defects, we project them onto others. When this tendency is seen at the level of the social, we can observe that individuals and groups within societies lose perspective, becoming blind to their own role in the production or maintenance of social problems, and blaming others instead.

The anti-social, and sometimes criminal, behaviour of young people in our communities is a good example of a social problem that we routinely externalise: rather than seeing the issue as an indicator of a defect in the social system, we cast young delinquents as something of an alien threat, 'othering' them, in the language of cultural sociologists (Lister 2004, Young 2007). The problem is thereby constructed as an attack from outside on an imagined core of 'good' society, rather than an inherent problem in the culture and structure of that society, produced from within.

This paper focuses on anti-social behaviour and youth as it remains a problem that occupies politics, the media, and the public to the point that it ranks among the social problems about which people declare they are most fearful (Innes 2005, Margo *et al* 2006). I argue for an initiative that has the potential to harness readily available social support in order to mitigate the strains and obstacles that result in young people behaving in anti-social and criminal ways. I suggest exploring and expanding the philosophy underpinning a particular initiative for post-release sex offenders, Circles of Support and Accountability, in order to apply the model of practice represented by the Circles concept to young people who require support in order to escape the cycles of social production and reproduction of criminogenic risk factors that place them 'at risk' of becoming offenders.

The risk factors in question include deprived, disrupted or problematic family circumstances (including lack of effective supervision, lack of suitable role models, child abuse, and having a parent who is an offender), anti-social peer-group influence, drug and alcohol abuse, and joblessness, as well as a range of cognitive deficits (Farrington 2007). Young people whose lives are characterised by these risk factors are significantly more likely than others to pass through the criminal justice system (CJS), especially where they do not have adequate exposure to countervailing 'protective factors', such as living in a neighbourhood that shows a high degree of collective efficacy (those in which the ties among individual members are such that those members are able to come together to 'get things done'), and having positive experiences in relationships with parents, conventional peers, and school (Margo and Stevens 2008). This paper will refer to this group who have high exposure to risk factors and low exposure to protective factors simply as 'young people at risk'.

The paper introduces the concept of Circles of Support and Accountability in its current manifestation as a sex offender programme, and explains why it seems a useful model to take to the field of youth crime and anti-social behaviour. In particular, three key topical social science debates are relevant: the attraction of early intervention; the importance of social capital; and the need for improved intergenerational relations.

The paper also sets out some of the practicalities of implementing the initiative across large numbers of communities, and tries to pre-empt some of the key challenges to such an ambitious roll-out. It concludes with a brief discussion of similar social support programmes that have been introduced in the UK. This discussion shows that such ideas work to reduce crime and achieve a range of other socially beneficial consequences, and I will argue that the development of the Circles concept in the way described captures all of these benefits while adding even more.

## 2. Circles of Support and Accountability

Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) originated as a policy initiative in Canada in the 1990s, developed and presided over by the Canadian Mennonites with the support of the Correctional Service of Canada. In 2002, the model made the transition to England and Wales, initially developed by the Quakers. Various pilot schemes were set up, funded by the Home Office. The main scheme in England and Wales is now run by a charity called Circles UK, and is still supported by funds from the Public Protection Unit of the Ministry of Justice.

My introduction to this programme came through a recent request by the Scottish Government that my research centre, the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research (SCCJR), investigate the initiative and report on the feasibility of introducing something similar in Scotland. We delivered that report in the spring of 2008 (Armstrong *et al* 2008).

COSA is a model of social crime reduction for high-risk, high-needs sex offenders. When these offenders are released from prison it will generally be in one of two ways. First, they may achieve some form of early release, in which case they will be released on licence or probation. Second, they may serve the full length of their sentence, and be released on its expiry, in which case there will be no licence or probation. In neither case is their reintegration into society adequately supported: in the first the requirements have been described in our research into the issue as little more than the formalities associated with occasional meetings with a probation officer, and turning up at a police station weekly to sign a register (Armstrong *et al* 2008). In the second case there is no support at all. COSA involves groups of volunteers forming a 'circle' around a released sex offender in order to offer them 'support' and 'accountability'.

Evidence suggests that the recidivism of serious sex offenders is fuelled by feelings of social and emotional isolation resulting from a lack of integration into the community, problems relating to peers and poor self-esteem, as well as an absence of supervision and control either by the community or the authorities (Wilson and Picheca 2005, Wilson *et al* 2007a). COSA seeks to address these issues by establishing a circle of three to five volunteers who meet regularly with the offender. The volunteers receive training and ongoing support from a central agency.

As the name suggests, the purpose of the circle is both 'support' and 'accountability'. 'Support' is important because it provides offenders with discursive ways to think about their lives, and helps them confront psychological problems. The volunteers may also be able to help fix some of an offender's more practical problems, such as accessing services, and writing job applications.

'Accountability' is important in two senses: first, it provides 'eyes and ears' for the local community in ensuring that warning signals of the onset of recidivism are picked up early (the 'public protection' element), and second, the offender is helped in internalising conventional norms by being given standards, and people, to 'live up to'.

So in support and accountability, offenders receive guidance on how to form constructive, positive relationships as well as exposure to the pro-social attitudes of the volunteers, who can act as models for behaviour. They also receive assistance with addressing practical needs, challenges to their attempts to neutralise or rationalise offending behaviours and ways of thinking, and general encouragement to lead a life free from offending. At the same time, the community achieves an enhanced level of protection when behaviour that displays risk of future reoffending is picked up and reported by circle members, and the authorities can intervene at an early stage before further offending occurs.

The structure of the circle's schedule of meetings and activities is relatively flexible. Current practice in the English pilots is that the whole circle meets with the offender on a weekly basis to begin with, and then when both the circle members and the offender (referred to in non-stigmatising terminology as the core member) feel ready, these group meetings become less frequent and are supplemented by one-to-one ad hoc meetings between the core member and individual circle members. This more

fragmented period of operation of the circle allows individual circle members to share the burden of keeping the circle going, where weekly group meetings may in the long run have become difficult to sustain given other pressures on volunteers' time.

The initial group meetings usually run for around six weeks, and the circle is generally expected to have a life of at least one year. The flexible nature of the circle adds to its resilience, and if the need for support and accountability continues beyond a year the circle can in principle remain active for as long as is necessary. Although the circle is not intended to be an eternal support mechanism, the experience of the initiative so far is that individual circle members often retain an association with the core member after the circle has been officially dissolved, continuing to take an interest in their lives and offering support where needed.

There is no reason why this programme should be restricted to sex offenders. There is nothing particular about sex offenders as compared to, for example, young 'street crime' offenders, recipients of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, or young people at risk, that suggests that support and accountability are needed by one group but not the other. So the proposal presented here is to extend the model of COSA dramatically, building it into the criminal justice policy framework at the early stages, and in some cases even before offending has occurred.

### **For and against the Circles approach**

In the course of the SCCJR research, we had discussions with a wide range of UK stakeholders, including those currently running COSA schemes in England, and public and voluntary sector workers involved in the Scottish offender-management infrastructure. That research documented what we found to be the core arguments these key respondents raised for and against the Circles approach.

The main points voiced in support of the COSA model have been that it:

- enhances the monitoring capacity of statutory agencies
- addresses the social needs of offenders that are linked to offending but beyond the capacity of professionals to manage
- empowers communities to participate in reducing reoffending
- provides a means of public education for volunteers and their social networks about the nature and realities of sex offending. (Armstrong *et al* 2008)

Evaluation evidence suggests that COSA achieves some admirable results in relation to helping sex offenders reintegrate into the community and in reducing reoffending (Bates *et al* 2007, Wilson *et al* 2007b, 2007c, Armstrong *et al* 2008) although these evaluations have been quite narrowly conceived and it remains the case that more research is needed to fill out our understanding of the range of effects the initiative has.

As well as the above perceived benefits, our research into the feasibility of 'transplanting' the COSA concept into Scotland found that Scottish policymakers and statutory and third-sector practitioners did have some concerns about this particular policy transfer on several fronts, including that the Circles model:

- was an attempt to use volunteers in order to deliver 'on the cheap' a service that should more properly be delivered by statutory authorities
- presented not inconsiderable risks to volunteers in respect of their involvement with relatively high-risk offenders
- would be difficult to sustain in terms of the practicalities of finding sufficient numbers of volunteers
- would be deceptively costly, since the actual level of training required by volunteers would be high. (Armstrong *et al* 2008)

Overall, though, despite these concerns, we found wide support for the COSA philosophy. And if there is any doubt that beneath what may be perceived as a sex offender treatment programme is a model



that might be useful in addressing youth crime and anti-social behaviour, it is worth reciting an observation from our report that captures the aspirations of our stakeholder respondents in that research:

‘Many respondents expressed the hope that Circles would be able to fill the post-treatment gap in support of offenders and address the issue of social isolation, by providing what seems to be in short supply (or absent) within current statutory arrangements – friendships, local community networks, positive role models, “human touch”, the sense of care, and more continuity in the relationship with the offender... In the view of one respondent the knowledge that someone is there for you not because it is their job but just because they want to help could be a very powerful inducement to offenders seeking to rebuild their lives.’ (Armstrong *et al* 2008: 22)

All of the sentiments expressed in that passage seem to be equally applicable to many socially dislocated youths who will become offenders, if they have not begun offending already, and who are ‘isolated’ in a sense rather different from the sex offenders in our prior study: not necessarily lonely or ostracised, but suffering the effects of a macro-structural problem of social dislocation that they may not be able to fully comprehend.

### 3. Applying the Circles concept to young offenders

My proposal is to take the basic premises and structures of the COSA initiative as it is currently applied to post-release sex offenders, and set up a programme of COSA for young people at risk across the UK. This would involve sourcing, training and monitoring volunteers (three to five per circle), and a mode of referral for the young core members themselves.

I suggest that there would initially be two routes of entry for young people into these circles. First, a circle should be offered on a voluntary basis to any young person in the risk category we have referred to by way of criminogenic risk factors above. This risk category would clearly need to be more specifically defined, and this would be a subject for further, more detailed discussion. A simple way to define it would be by area of residence, for example, or household income. More sophisticated category requirements might involve social work referral, or a combination of measures informed by the risk factors mentioned.

Second, a Circle of Support should be an option given to young people as a diversionary measure at an early stage of the criminal justice process: referral to the Circles mechanism might be initiated by the police, or an option given to an offender by the Crown Prosecution Service or a judge, where the circumstances of the offence and the offender are thought appropriate. In this way, Circles can be tied into the currently burgeoning support for restorative justice initiatives: they do not involve mediation between victims and offenders in the manner of family group conferences, but they embody the philosophy of diversion and the community/offender nexus that restorative justice advocates support (Braithwaite 2002).

The Circles model as currently applied to sex offenders provides a good starting reference model for the development of a similar initiative applied to young people at risk. Whether the same structure of initial weekly group meetings followed by less structured individual contact proves the most suitable structure for young people is a question that will be best answered through reflexive practice and close monitoring and evaluation as the initiative is implemented for this new constituency. This paper is less concerned with these sorts of practicalities (which can, after all, be reviewed and altered fairly easily) than with assessing the underlying conceptual structure of the COSA idea, and arguing for its value for progressive social policy.

## 4. Early intervention to combat youth crime

Stanley Cohen, a leading criminologist at the London School of Economics, once characterised the criminal justice system by way of an analogy with a bystander on a river bank rescuing drowning people floating past. After some time spent fishing them out, and with new bodies continuing to appear, she eventually decides to stop rescuing them and instead travels upstream to try to find out how they are ending up in the river, and to fix that (Cohen 1985: 236-9). The contemporary CJS in the UK largely continues in the tradition of dealing with the bodies that float past in the river rather than venturing upstream to attend to the root causes of the problem. However, some initiatives have been developed in the spirit of early intervention, supported by a considerable weight of academic theory and evidence that argues for the worth of such interventions.

The idea of early intervention as a means of combating youth crime, and indeed preventing young criminals from taking steps down a pathway that may lead to a longer-term criminal career, has proved understandably popular in both political and scientific circles, although its transition into legal processes has tended to remain somewhat rhetorical. In a similar vein to a prevention-orientated approach to epidemiological threats, prevention in criminology is better than cure.

This is true for many reasons. Each crime prevented saves society one or more victims. ‘Curing’ some offenders, in the analogy, is considerably more difficult than it may seem as it involves changing habits, routines and personalities, all of which can be somewhat ingrained. Convicted offenders suffer the stigma of having been through the CJS, which makes it harder to find employment. They are returned to the same social context, the same neighbourhoods and structural barriers to conventional success that created the environment for the offending behaviour in the first place.

There is quite some variance in how ‘early’ an intervention can be. Programmes are currently available that reach into very early childhood, addressing aggressive, hyperactive and impulsive tendencies, teaching empathy, and more. An intervention can also be ‘early’ in the sense that it pre-dates the onset of offending, or is offered at the stage at which young people are at high risk of offending. Most recorded crime is ‘street crime’ committed by young people (predominantly male) between the ages of 14 and 21, with the peak age of offending for young men between 16 and 19 (Home Office 2005). Interventions that seek to divert young offenders from the CJS might also be said to be ‘early’ (albeit ‘late’ compared to many other initiatives) in the sense that they do not wait until a sentence has been served before trying to redirect or rehabilitate the offenders.

The Circles initiative would not be an early childhood intervention, but one that is early in both of the latter senses: it targets young people who are in the ‘at-risk’ age group, and those who are receiving a court disposition.

### **The ‘justice gap’**

Early intervention offers a more theoretically-persuasive model for actually achieving crime reduction than does the current punishment-orientated CJS (Margo and Stevens 2008). Besides, the CJS is known only to attend to a very small minority of crimes. Estimates vary in this respect. In 1981, approximately one individual was convicted for every 25 offences estimated by the British Crime Survey to have occurred. In 2000, the figure was approximately one individual convicted for every 30 offences estimated by the British Crime Survey (Garside 2006:10).

These figures, however, are thought to be radical underestimations of the true extent of the ‘justice gap’. A Home Office Study in 2000 estimated that 60 million indictable offences were committed in the year 1999-2000, which would mean that around 125 offences were committed in that year per successful conviction (Brand and Price 2000, Garside 2006). In the same year, Lord Birt estimated that the real level of indictable offences ‘was as high as 130 million’, which Garside points out means around one conviction per 250 indictable offences (Birt 2000, Garside 2006). On either Birt’s or Brand and Price’s measure, over 99 per cent of indictable offences would not have resulted in an individual being convicted in that year.

Relying on the CJS to engage with the problem of crime in the UK begins to seem faintly ludicrous in light of these statistics. The justice gap also lends criminal justice a taint of unfairness: if such small percentages of offences are resulting in conviction, the system appears either almost random or, worse still, skewed towards those sectors of society viewed as 'police property' (Lee 1981).

### **Net-widening and false positives**

Early intervention, although a popular idea, has become unduly associated with a ratcheting-up of the level of engagement of the CJS with often relatively powerless citizens. Thus, increased interventionism has been criticised as 'net-widening' (that is, engaging more people in the grip of the CJS) as well as 'mesh-thinning' (making it harder for them to get out of the system once they are in it).

Front-end interventions such as Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) have been criticised on these measures and others, and indeed I have been one of their critics (Mackenzie 2008). One of the key failures of ASBOs is that they offer no support to offenders: they thus operate on the basis of an assumption of extreme agency; in other words that people can simply decide to change themselves when threatened with further punishment, and that they can then implement that decision without any outside help. This is a hopelessly naive assumption, as the extremely high breach-rate of ASBOs confirms (Bullock and Jones 2004, DTZ Piedad Consulting and Heriot Watt University 2005, DTZ Consulting & Research and Heriot Watt University 2006, Youth Justice Board 2006, National Audit Office 2006).

Another key issue with the concept of early intervention, this time in its more 'pseudo-scientific' or 'medical' vein, is the problem of false positives. This is essentially a civil liberties issue: that government should resist the temptation to interfere in the lives of those who qualify for attention simply by being members of an identified demographic group that has a higher than average likelihood of becoming criminal. Only some of these people will in fact become offenders; the others are the false positives.

This kind of critique is certainly important when the 'intervention' we are talking about is punitive or intrusive, but where the intervention is an offer of social support, matters are different. This is especially so if, for those in the pre-offending category, the intervention is offered on a voluntary basis. Offering social support to young people in a group at risk of offending but who would not in fact offend just because no support were offered does not seem to be a bad thing, particularly if the social support enhances their lives in other ways.

Medical-style early intervention can be distinguished from the social-style early intervention proposed here on the basis of the difference between trying to change individuals and trying to change the social context of those individuals' lives. Many current attempts at early intervention have taken the first path, and it is these types of individual-orientated 'treatments' that have (rightly, in many cases) raised the hackles of civil libertarians. Social support systems, however, are capable of being sensitive to the needs of the individual while making efforts to change either the circumstances surrounding individuals (such as opening up opportunities) or the way individuals engage with those structures (such as providing educative functions or unlocking aspirations) rather than assuming that the problem is with the individual alone and can be remedied by a programme of psychological reorientation.

Early intervention into the social context of the lives of people who are at risk of becoming criminals is also a cost-effective means of addressing the problem of crime. The average annual cost of keeping one prisoner exceeds £40,000 per year, and street-level 'crackdowns', while popular, are unsustainably expensive (see, for example, the 2002 mugging crackdown referred to in Toynbee and Walker [2005], which claimed to have reduced the annual rate of that offence in the targeted areas by 17 per cent, but at a cost of £51,500 per arrest).

As Britain's prison population continues to stretch infrastructural capacity, it becomes clear that there are really two main ways to reduce the prison population: either stop awarding so many custodial sentences or reduce the number of people committing crime. The initiative proposed here would

attend to both of these possibilities, on the one hand offering judges another diversionary sentencing option, and on the other being capable of offering a community-based support service to young people at risk before they begin offending.

## 5. The importance of social capital

Social capital describes the bonds and bridges that tie individuals and groups together in society. Social capital is a prerequisite for collective efficacy (Sampson 2006), which is a concept that can perhaps best be described with reference to 'community mobilisation'. Communities that are collectively efficacious are those in which the ties among individual members are such that those members are able to come together to 'get things done'; this can be anything from informal policing of the neighbourhood, perhaps through schemes like Neighbourhood Watch, to mounting resistance to the siting of a nuclear power station in the community's 'back yard'.

Low-crime communities tend to be rich in social capital, and highly collectively efficacious. High-crime communities tend to be characterised by deficits in both social capital and collective efficacy (Sampson 1999). It has long been observed, however, that deprived communities are often characterised by strong kin and friendship bonds. They are therefore not entirely devoid of social capital. Rather, their deficits tend to lie in what Granovetter has famously called 'the strength of weak ties' (Granovetter 1973, 1974, 1983).

To understand the great social importance or strength of weak ties, we need to know that individuals tend to have a group of close friends, and also a larger number of more distant acquaintances. These acquaintances themselves will usually have close-knit friendship circles, which means the 'weak' ties between acquaintances are actually links between dense clusters of friends. Granovetter found that it was these weak ties (among other things) that were important in helping individuals to achieve social goals such as getting a job. This was because weak ties function as information and support conduits, linking an individual into the communal knowledge pool of all of the outlying dense friendship clusters they connect to.

Granovetter's theory predicts better outcomes for late-modern middle class individuals than it does for the geographically immobile residents of Britain's poorest estates who are also 'information-poor' in the sense of being cut off from opportunity structures and the knowledge networks on which they are built. It is precisely the absence of expanded networks of weak ties that propagates many of the social problems these neighbourhoods experience: residents are likely to know a lot of other locals, but not many people beyond this. Where most or all of the locals are experiencing the same problems as each other – poverty, social immobility, unemployment, and ill health – individuals cannot find the support that would be available to them if they had more distant networks of acquaintances (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000, Sampson *et al* 2002, Rosenbaum *et al* 2002, Musterd and Andersson 2006).

Social problems, including the problem of crime, are left to fester in such situations (Wilson 1987): academic interpretations of this goldfish-bowl syndrome referring to constructs such as social learning theory and differential association theory are matched by terms that everyone uses and understands, such as 'gang culture', 'ghettoisation' (Wacquant 2007) and the 'culture of poverty' (Lewis 1966).

It can therefore be argued that establishing some sort of acquaintance network for young people living in deprived circumstances would provide them with a form of social capital – namely weak ties – that would establish lines of communication down which useful information might travel.

### **What do these ties transmit?**

If this talk of 'information' and 'networks' all sounds rather sterile, let us begin to put some social flesh on these theoretical bones. There are many kinds of useful 'information' that these ties may represent.

Very weak ties will tend only to transmit what we might call 'socially weak' information: basic news about job opportunities, for example. Clearly this sort of information might be very useful to

jobseekers, but its transmission will not perform any great regulating function on their behaviour. For this kind of regulating function to occur, ties must be stronger: where strong family or peer-group ties are present we will find the behavioural regulator we call 'normativity'. Norms are social rules that individuals feel they ought to obey, and adherence to these rules – which may be moral, legal, religious, and suchlike, but often are none of these things, so that they are purely 'social' – can explain a large proportion of all behaviour. As well as being basic information conduits, therefore, social ties can be normative conduits, provided they are of a sufficient level of 'strength'.

Friends and acquaintances are thus both our access routes to social realisation, or mobility, and normative reference points. They may be such reference points in a strong sense, through role-modelling, or serious chastisement of our deviant behaviour, or in a weak sense, through simply informing us of what others think about our actions. The ties established in a circle may begin as weak acquaintance-style ties, and over time develop into closer friendship/mentor/guardian types of ties.

Both of these types of ties may be beneficial for young people, but it is important to note that while close or 'strong' ties can provide benefits in such circumstances, these strong ties are different from the local family and peer networks of the core members. This is true insofar as the strong ties given form in circles are the development of weaker ties with volunteer 'strangers', many of whom will come from outside the young person's community.

### Opening closed communities

The COSA concept has spawned imitators and replications, and the idea of a 'circle of support' has been widened in some cases to include a circle around anyone who 'for one reason or another is unable to achieve what they want in life on their own and decides to ask for help'. This quote is taken from the website of a UK-registered charity called the Circles Network,<sup>1</sup> which is not affiliated with the sex-offender COSA model, and assists in the setting up of circles for anyone, which 'may include family, friends and other community members'.

It is important to distinguish this sort of familial/friendship support from the COSA model represented by the COSA projects working with convicted sex offenders, and from the adapted model proposed here for young people at risk and young offenders. Circles that consist of family members, friends and local community members will be relatively tightly clustered networks and will not afford the core member the social capital benefits of being linked into a less dense network of geographically and socially more diverse individuals.

The theory of the importance of weak ties would seem to suggest benefit in creating circles that may well include some local community members, but also consist of members of other communities in the city or region. This provides links between deprived regions of cities that are socially isolated for 'structural' reasons and those that may be similarly socially isolated, but for quite different 'agentive' reasons. In the former – those that have been called 'communities of fate' (Little 2002: 158) – young people are trapped by circumstance and a lack of opportunity to achieve social mobility. In the latter – those that have been called 'communities of choice' (ibid: 158) – people have more agency in determining their fate, but still tend increasingly to make choices towards constituting their communities as relatively 'closed' groups. The growing popularity of gated communities for relatively affluent residents serves as a good example of this trend.

Circles therefore appear to offer something of a double benefit. The key to increasing social integration and cross-community support in contemporary society is to remove the structural barriers that keep some communities bounded, while influencing the decision-making processes of those in other communities that *choose* to make their worlds bounded.

The COSA model proposed provides a point of intersection in relation to these two concerns, being a mechanism for increasing the reach of young people's networks beyond their communities of fate, and encouraging those in communities of choice to reach beyond the edges of their communities in order to draw excluded young people into their field of concern.

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1. [www.circlesnetwork.org.uk/circles\\_of\\_support.htm](http://www.circlesnetwork.org.uk/circles_of_support.htm)

## 6. Inter-generational relations

Inter-generational conflict has, in the field of crime control, been manifested in recent years as a concern by older generations about the behaviour of young people in public spaces (Muncie 1999, Goldson 2000, Pain 2005), linked into more diffuse public concerns about a range of matters including security and risk (Girling *et al* 2000, Sparks and Loader 2007). As this might suggest, a proportion of the problem of inter-generational 'conflict' is actually a matter of differential perceptions of threatening behaviour, and fear of crime rather than crime itself (Innes 2004, Dixon *et al* 2006).

This is not to deny or discount the problem of anti-social behaviour by young people, however. It simply draws to our attention the fact that this problem is bound up with a range of contemporary social shifts, including:

- the breakdown of lines of communication between generations
- increasing individualism (the entrenchment of the Westernised conception and concern with 'self' and the associated attenuation of community ethos) and the decline of communal supervision of young people in public by community members
- the absence of more productive, alternative opportunities and pastimes to 'hanging out' for at-risk youth, which marks an opposite trend to the increasing (costly) indoor and/or adult-supervised leisure options available to children in better-off families (Walker *et al* 2006, Margo and Stevens 2008)
- the consequent disengagement of at-risk youth from inter-generational pro-social routines and activities, which increases the likelihood of anti-social norms being cultivated in peer-group settings.

Young people at risk lack both support from older generations, and pro-social role-modelling influences from them (Margo *et al* 2006). Generational segregation leads to problems that criminologists and sociologists might describe with reference to theories of differential association, subculture, social learning and anomie, but which the public now tend to understand in terms of the contemporary discourse of 'anti-social' conflict. This conflict is stoked by the social constructions of current media discussions of inter-generational issues, which in portraying young people as problematic, colour our judgement of them, and are capable of doing so especially if we lack the level of routine contact with them that might give us different impressions.

The picture of the inter-generational relationships of young people at risk complements the geographical and social class story: that these young people have often been born into social circumstances that strongly constrain the opportunities that will be available to them, and their capacity to make rationally optimal decisions in respect of what opportunities are available. Young people in deprived circumstances may have parents or guardians who are unable to help them solve their social and economic problems, and may not afford them especially good role models. This, combined with the fact that most role-influence comes from peers, can lead young people without adequate sources of social support and positive normative influence to make all sorts of objectively bad decisions.

This observation has been obfuscated somewhat by the 'seductions of crime' literature, which presents much criminal activity as a quite understandable choice for young people deprived of conventional ways to experience thrills (Katz 1988). This may be true, but it is also true that these short-term thrills by way of criminal decisions are often made at the expense of a risk of longer-term involvement in the CJS. Thus, we might say that these decisions are subjectively rational (they make sense to the individual in the moment) but objectively irrational (on a longer, more balanced view they are unlikely to be in the individual's best interests).

Young people need support from members of older generations in order to break out of these ongoing cycles of crime and deprivation. Intergenerational links can help give at-risk young people

access to the different life perspectives necessary to enable them to begin to analyse their decisions in terms of likely longer-term objective consequences, rather than shorter-term impulsive desires.

In many neighbourhoods, a significant percentage of adults do not know any young people in their community (Pain 2005) and between different communities in any given city the percentage will be even greater. If greater inter-generational cohesion is required, an initiative needs to be put in place to encourage and structure inter-generational contact; we may hope that this contact and cohesion would happen without intervention, but in the face of the current social trajectory in Western neo-liberal societies this seems unlikely (Putnam 2000).

Apprenticeships once formed a widely-applied model for inter-generational social learning in the UK (Pain 2005, Granville 2002); they still do, but to a far diminished extent. The initiative proposed here draws on the inter-generational bonding and learning structures of the apprenticeship, offering a less intensive system of influence removed from the confines of the sphere of vocational employment training. It draws people together, within and across local communities, making space for adults to be interested in the lives of young people, and concomitantly allowing young people to feel, possibly for the first time, that others are interested in their lives.

While connections are made under the auspices of a circle, they may have spill-over effects in communities. Young people in public places who were previously a source of fear and did not attract community supervision would now between them be known to many community members who would be well-placed to exercise the sort of non-authoritarian intervention necessary to successfully control public anti-social behaviour in groups.

## 7. Volunteers

One of the defining features of the COSA model is its reliance on volunteers as the main 'service providers' in relation to its mechanisms of support and accountability. In the last few years, the voluntary sector has increasingly come to be seen by UK governments as a key provider of services in communities. Whereas, previously, volunteers tended to be seen in the policy discourse as helpful contributors 'at the edges' of local service delivery, the bulk of which was delivered by public agencies or contracted out to the private sector, it is now the case that the third sector is seen as an integral cost-effective resource for carrying out state or state-supported functions.

The movement of the voluntary sector from the periphery to the centre of public service delivery continues, and has to date largely taken place under the auspices of a discourse referring to the importance of communities as social institutions. The domestic political context in which the attractiveness of COSA emerges in the UK is therefore one in which a heightened concern with the role and capacity of communities to perform certain desirable social functions has been extended in recent policy movements towards volunteering, and the third sector generally, being seen as a central part of community activities in the future.

Despite the current 'trendiness' of community discourse in general, and within this, the great social potential that might be unlocked through volunteering in particular, volunteering is not an especially new phenomenon in criminal justice. The CJS has for some time been supported by a range of volunteers. Perhaps the most obvious of these are over 14,000 Special Constables, but there is a less visible range of volunteers who support various system aims and functions.

The website of the Youth Justice Board intimates to potential volunteers the range of positions available. One can volunteer for involvement in the youth justice system in England and Wales in the following ways:

- As an 'appropriate adult', who represents and supports an arrested young person at the police station until release or charge
- As a business that provides opportunities for young offenders to undertake reparation work

- As a magistrate
- As a mentor
- As a reading coach for the Reading Matters programme
- In various roles in the secure estate, including as a member of an Independent Monitoring Board, and as a prison visitor
- As a youth volunteer, in various roles
- As a member of a Youth Offender Panel
- In resettlement and aftercare provision.

There are many volunteer organisations operating throughout the UK which provide opportunities for interested members of the community to become involved in and around the CJS. These include Community Service Volunteers, Victim Support (which comprises 10,000 volunteers), Supporting Others through Volunteer Action, Crime Concern, and the Shannon Trust, along with Circles UK. Of course, beyond criminal justice, volunteers are central providers of some essential services, such as blood donation, and the work of the Samaritans.

The role of volunteers in community justice initiatives also fits to some extent with the current policy manifestations of the ongoing concern with public protection, particularly in relation to attempts to reduce the fear of crime, through measures such as reassurance policing (Innes 2007). The integration of policing functions and community needs is seen as important in reducing the fear of crime, and through the resulting interventions and activities of less fearful communities, in reducing crime itself.

Volunteer participation in supporting aims such as the reduction of offending and reoffending may actually reduce the incidence of offending, as the Canadian evaluations of Circles suggest in relation to sex offenders, and as we might hope to replicate in respect of young people at risk. Even if Circles did not reduce offending in young people, however, they might still operate to reduce fear of crime in communities, if these communities feel reassured that ‘something is being done’ in relation to the problem of youth crime and anti-social behaviour. Whether this reassurance does in fact result from the operation of Circles programmes is an empirical question, although there is anecdotal evidence that the initiative has had this effect in communities into which sex offenders have been released.

Where are all these volunteers going to come from? As we have seen, the CJS already attracts surprisingly high numbers of volunteers: we might therefore look at the feasibility of rolling out and expanding upon current recruitment methods. One of the more interesting findings of the survey underpinning the recent Casey report was that 75 per cent of the public ‘are prepared to play an active role in tackling crime’ (Casey 2008: 7), and one in four said they would be interested in helping to run youth activities and community or parenting groups (ibid: 38). As the report notes, ‘even if this [the 75 per cent figure] were only half true, that would be equivalent to an army of over 15 million community volunteers across England and Wales’ (ibid: 75).

In fact it seems unlikely that the 75 per cent figure would be ‘even half true’ when this army of apparently willing volunteers were called on in practice, since it is one thing to say you are prepared to give up your time to tackle crime and another to actually do it. However, the report also cites other encouraging statistics – a Government citizenship survey in 2007 which found 73 per cent of adult respondents to have volunteered at least once in the last 12 months, with 47 per cent having volunteered at least once a month (ibid: 72) – and overall there seems clearly to be a base of willing volunteers in our communities, even if its size for criminal justice uses is hard to discern through these relatively speculative survey methods.

Just as Casey reports, police have said to us in the course of our SCCJR research activities that they organise youth activities and other social crime-prevention initiatives because ‘nobody else will’. This is not an effective deployment of police resources, and often the demands on police time mean that good initiatives cannot be sustained in the long term. It may be that community volunteers can become the service providers needed to sustain crime prevention initiatives, if they are given the appropriate organisational form in which to do it.



The use of volunteers in a programme such as that proposed has several obvious attractions, among them:

- The underlying ethos of truly social support for young people seems to require some level of community participation in the process.
- The programme has the capacity to reproduce itself in some degree, to the extent that young people who benefit from being core members of the programme might be encouraged to become circle members for other young people at risk in the future, 'paying back' the benefit they have received.
- Volunteers are a community resource that tends to be seen as relatively cost effective.
- Many established agencies in the UK have a ready supply of volunteers to hand, and mechanisms in place for accessing them.
- The voluntary aspect to participation in the programme is an important part of the philosophy of this particular form of social support. This may be thought to support the formation of relationships of trust between the parties, and to make open disclosure more likely between the young person and the circle.
- Circles run with volunteers have the capacity to adapt to periods of particular need in a core member's life in a way that other more formal measures might not. If a core member goes through a period where they do not need high levels of support, the circle can adapt its workings accordingly; likewise, in times where more support is needed, the circle can offer a suitable response.

These attractions of recruiting volunteers to the programme need to be considered in the context of the associated demands the sustained recruitment and training of large numbers of volunteers presents, including that:

- A vetting procedure would need to be established in order to ensure that only suitable candidates were selected as volunteers. This would mean that a substantially greater number of initial candidates would require to be found, to allow for attrition through rejection, or withdrawal for candidates who decided after learning more about COSA that it was not for them. Standards would need to be developed in order to set the criteria for rejecting unsuitable volunteers (ranging for example from the obvious, such as those with a history of sexual abuse of young people, to more subtle issues of 'fit' which might rule out those with aspirations to armchair psychology and the like).
- Volunteers would need to receive training and support before and throughout the life of the circle. The current training programme for COSA provides a model that could be adapted for use with young people, and the same is true of the ongoing support package provided by the Circles UK infrastructure. Core members stand to benefit if circle members are aware of the full range of procedures and social services on which they can help the core member to draw, and therefore support, education and some level of supervision for volunteers would seem desirable.
- The model of social support envisaged here is not intended to be introduced as an alternative that overwrites existing measures of support or criminal justice intervention aimed at young people. Rather, it is proposed as an additional component to be added on to the current system. At first sight, therefore, while volunteers may seem to be providing a 'free' service, the cost implications of the associated training present the project as an additional cost to the system.

### **Further cost considerations**

In fact, the cost implications of an initiative such as this require some more detailed consideration. Despite the apparent additional cost of the project to the CJS, it may be cost-beneficial in at least two ways. First, most obviously (and measurably), if it were introduced as an alternative diversionary disposition available to judges, then if the cost of a circle were less than the cost of the alternative disposition, it would present a saving to the system.

What is the cost of a circle? The Scottish Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (Sacro) estimated the cost of their proposal, submitted to the Scottish Government in 2007, to pilot the sex offender COSA model in Scotland at £350,000 (Sacro 2007). This proposal was for the setting up of 'up to eight' circles in four pilot areas in Scotland, with up to five volunteers in each, to run for three years. That would put the annual running cost of one circle at £43,750.

The Sacro proposal included the costs of setting up the infrastructure necessary to make Circles possible in Scotland, including development of protocols and procedures, and referral and monitoring mechanisms. It also included the costs of employing a development officer, administrative support, four local support workers, volunteers' expenses, the costs of their training, travel expenses, the costs of producing and disseminating information on Circles, and 15 per cent of the sum was allocated to evaluation costs. This is therefore probably a particularly high-end estimate for the cost of running Circles, given the extra costs of evaluation and publicity surrounding the project, the fact that such pilots do not benefit from economies of scale, and the front-end start-up costs involved.

By contrast, Chris Wilson, Project Manager of Thames Valley COSA has suggested the annual cost of running one of their circles is £9,000 in the first year (Wilson 2006, Drewery 2007). This estimate is likely to be more accurate than Sacro's, being based on actual running costs rather than projections.

In 2006, the average annual cost of a young person in the CJS was estimated to be around £40,000 (Barrett *et al* 2006). This figure is effectively an average of the costs of custodial and community sentences, the cost of the former being considerably higher than the latter. It does not, however, include the societal cost of the crimes committed, and when this is included the average annual cost represented by a young person in the criminal justice system rises to £57,000. 'Societal cost' was conceived in the relevant study as 'the cost of property stolen or damaged, emotional and physical impact on victims, lost output, victim services and victim health services' (Barrett *et al* 2006: 542, Brand and Price 2000). It will be apparent, however, that attempts to impose a purely economic analysis on some of the categories of loss or harm caused by crime will always be unsatisfactory. By comparison, in 2007/08 the actual annual average cost per adult prisoner place in Scotland calculated on a resource accounting basis (including capital charges) was £41,470 (Scottish Prison Service 2007: 38).

Even using only the average annual cost of criminal justice offender management as a benchmark, we can therefore see that at the high-end estimate of its cost, Circles does not present a resource escalation, and at the low end it would present a substantial saving to the system. However, the attraction of a preventative initiative like Circles in cost-benefit terms is, of course, that it does not only present a reasonably cost-efficient way to 'process' young offenders, but also aims to reduce offending and reoffending. Thus, the second and more important cost-benefit consideration in relation to the proposal here is the long-term cost benefit of reducing the number of young people entering the criminal justice system. The costs of processing young offenders who desist when they reach adulthood, as is the norm, can be considerable, while the costs to the state of processing offenders throughout the course of a persistent criminal career are massive.

Where they are successful, initiatives such as the one proposed here can save the state the cost of its criminal justice dispositions, and associated social crime costs, every year for as long as the person in question would otherwise have been offending, as well as eliminating the economically-unmeasurable social impact of the crimes that would have been committed, and greatly improving the life chances of the young people concerned.

## 8. The success of similar programmes

Attempts at early intervention to prevent the onset of criminal offending in young people have in fact been quite representative of one side of the approach taken by New Labour to the problem of crime over the last decade. The other side of the New Labour approach has attracted more comment: the punitive rhetoric, the populist fear-stoking and the crackdown mentality (Pratt *et al* 2005, Mackenzie 2008). Yet at the same time as this counterproductive political routine has been playing out, some attempts have been made to address the social causes of crime. Tony Blair was criticised, after his 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' banner, for attending to the former at the expense of the latter, but this is not an entirely fair representation of his approach while in office.

New Labour did attend to the latter, albeit patchily: it was just that while one side of the governmental brain was taking the causes of crime seriously, the other was buried in a party political competition to appear tough on crime. This distracted public attention from some good work being done on the ground, and also of course added fuel to public fears and tabloid demands for a tougher approach to crime, which was incompatible with the social aspirations of the more progressive policy agenda and caused problems for its unadulterated implementation.

Nonetheless, the social programme is evidenced (in apparent intention if not always in effect) in some of the more progressive work of the Youth Justice Board; the establishment of Youth Offending Teams; the movement towards partnership-working as a means to enable different agencies to come together to deliver joined-up solutions to problems of social exclusion, crime and poverty; the delivery of intensive supervision for the most criminal young people through the Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme; and a range of other mentoring and support schemes.

A review of policy approaches to youth justice in the UK, with a focus on early intervention, has recently been published by ippr (Margo and Stevens 2008). That review includes a brief report of some primary (that is, pre-onset of offending) and secondary (post-offending behaviour) interventions which have been evaluated and found to 'work' in reducing offending. The former include a variety of parenting programmes, nurse-family partnerships, and educational provision.

The common thread in these successful approaches is in their attention to known criminogenic risk factors, and their attempts to support their subjects in overcoming the various challenges these risk factors present. As well as academics, many CJS practitioners know the value of these styles of supportive intervention through professional experience. A stakeholder in our prior research summed up in a particularly concise way this practical knowledge of the relatively poor results punitive criminal justice responses achieve in changing behaviour, when compared to attention to risk factors and support for change:

'If you want to get the best out of people you really need to get alongside them rather than in their face.' (Armstrong *et al* 2008: 30)

Among recent schemes aiming to 'get alongside' young people at risk is the Youth Inclusion Programme. Introduced by the Youth Justice Board in 2000, it targets at-risk youth and delivers 'youth-club' style activities to them for a few hours a week, as well as 'some training, general emotional support and personal mentors' (Toynbee and Walker 2005: 228). The YIP programme is entirely voluntary as far as the young people are concerned and identifies relevant young people 'through a number of different agencies, including the YOT, police, children and family services, local education authorities or schools, neighbourhood wardens and anti-social behaviour teams' (Youth Justice Board 2008).

The 2003 evaluation of 'phase one' of the YIPs found the programme had 'reduced arrests by 65 per cent among those who were already offenders, and 74 per cent of those who had never committed an offence continued crime free' (Toynbee and Walker 2005: 228; and see Morgan Harris Burrows 2003). There are many theoretical reasons to think this sort of pre-emptive social support to be useful and it is gratifying, although not in the least surprising, to note that when implemented even on a very

modest scale these interventions work to reduce crime. If the rather attenuated model of support represented by YIP can achieve results such as these, it seems reasonable to see the considerably deeper and wider levels of support and accountability mechanisms represented by COSA as being capable of delivering much more.

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