

Visiting Scholarship Report
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This report is intended to provide information about the visiting scholarship, undertaken by Dr. Mechtild Hoing and Angele Geerts from April 11 until April 15 2016 as part of the Community Engagement and Partnership Working with Sexual Offenders network funded by the Leverhulme Trust. A two weeks visit for Dr. Hoing was originally planned, but could not be organized within her other obligations at home, therefore the time of the visit was reduced to one week, but two people took part of the program instead one. In this way, the appointments that were made could be met within half the time. Angele Geerts, Departmental Coordinator International Affairs and International relations manager at Avans University of Applied sciences, and also expert in the field of juvenile criminal justice social work accompanied her and took part in the program. The visit was coordinated by Professor Andrew Harris of the University of Massachusetts (UMASS) at Lowell, MA.

A number of activities took place during this week:

- A meeting with the coordinator of "Thrive Communities" project, who is just starting a CoSA project, and currently engaged in building relationships with professional service providers and experts in the field of sex offender management and COSA
- A onsite visit of the United Teen Equality Center (UTEC), which is an innovative program based in Lowell that works with youth with prior justice involvement or at high risk of such involvement. <https://www.utec-lowell.org/>
- A guest lecture by Mrs. Angele Geerts about the Juvenile Justice system in the Netherlands to a class of our graduate (mostly PhD) students in their juvenile justice seminar
- A dinner meeting with representatives of the Vermont CoSA project, which is run by the Department of Corrections
- Participation in the third conference arranged by the Leverhulme Trust and presentation about different models of COSA projects in Europe.
- A guest lecture by Mrs. Angele Geerts to students in a pre-service training program for Juvenile Justice and Youth service workers
- A guest lecture by Dr. Mechtild Hoing for student in a Program evaluation course about evaluating Circles of Support and Accountability
- A presentation by Mrs. Angele Geerts to a Juvenile Area Interest Group, about the Juvenile Justice system in the Netherlands, including the treatment of juvenile sex offenders.
- A presentation at the MATSA/MASOC conference by Dr. Mechtild Hoing, about the public attitudes on sex offenders in the community in Europe.

International perspectives on the management of sex offenders in the community

Thanks to the sponsoring by the UK based Leverhulme foundation, an international group of practitioners and scholars has been able to examine international approaches to the reintegration and management of child sexual abusers in the community over the past two years. Lack of community integration - and the social isolation which is resulting from this - is one of the risk factors for recidivism by this group of sex offenders.

The network focused on a range of issues such as state intervention, community engagement/partnership programs and outreach work by professionals. The network especially looked at approaches such as Circles of Support and Accountability in order to understand their

impact and effectiveness in helping communities understand and engage in partnership working with the state in sex offender reintegration, as well as the broader ripple effect in the wider community of this work. To do this, the network enabled institutional visits, online debates, the development of a website, meetings at key conferences and a number of international seminars.

The network provided the opportunity for a critical review of the reality of community engagement on sex offender reintegration, internationally and transnationally, and how it can be improved through sharing good practice.

Meeting with coordinator of “Thrive communities”

In Lowell, a new community initiative (Thrive Communities) is currently in the process of starting a CoSA initiative, and a meeting with the project coordinator was arranged. Learning from existing projects and building a network of professionals that are experts in the field are usually the first necessary steps in the development of a CoSA project. Since Dr. Hoing had been involved in the Dutch CoSA project development from its beginnings, as well as in two European CoSA projects that supported the development of CoSA projects in a number of other European Countries, she was able to provide the project coordinator with inside information about challenges that other projects have encountered and the solutions they have found. The results of the collective learning process in these European projects have been documented in a European Handbook for CoSA project providers (available at www.circles4.eu).

Onsite visit UTEC

UTEC is a comprehensive nonprofit organization that draws in disconnected and gang involved young people and offers them intensive support as well as jobs in its café, catering, furniture making and mattress recycling services. Young people can pursue a high school equivalence degree while doing these jobs, which also provide a small amount of funding for the non-profit. The place is a hub for teaching, learning and policy making, and one of the rare sports where young people in danger of becoming imprisoned can ‘land’ and make a new start, when they have run out of all other options. The positive atmosphere and the genuine enthusiasm of the young people (project staff as well as young people following the program) gave us the impression that this is not only a place of last resort for them, but also a place of hope and regaining strength.

Guest lectures on the Juvenile Justice system in the Netherlands.

Mrs. Angele Geerts provided a series of guest lectures to different student audiences and a juvenile interest group of professional stakeholders from the Lowell area. In the Netherlands, juvenile crime rates have been dropping consistently during the past years, and incarceration rates have dropped accordingly, leading to the closure of the majority of the juvenile prisons. This is the result of the combined preventive efforts of professional organizations that work with youth at risk, the police and justice department. A rights based approach, early interventions and treatment rather than punishment have brought about this dramatic changes in crime statistics. With a similar size of the adolescent population, the state of Massachusetts has about ten times the number of incarcerated juveniles than the Netherlands. After hearing these facts, the discussions with students and professionals were animated and focused on the question whether the Dutch approach could be transferred to the US.

Dinner meeting with Vermont CoSA project representatives

A meeting with the staff and volunteers of the CoSA project in Vermont highlighted many communalities between their CoSA experiences and the European model, but also striking differences, that raise questions about the different ways in which the community is taking responsibility for sex offenders in the community. In the European model, volunteers are trained to function according to the goals and guidelines of the project and to act on their own as a circle. The circle coordinator is an experienced professional, employed by the Dutch probation organization. Usually the circle coordinator only attends the first 4-5 meetings with the core member, and after that volunteers are on their own with the core member. The circle coordinator monitors the circle from a distance through written minutes of circle meeting, which are provided by one of the volunteers, and supports mainly by telephone or e-mail. In the Vermont project, circle coordinators attended all circle meetings. Volunteers acting on their own in a circle was thought of as a no-go area, since volunteers in their opinion would not be able to understand and act according to the many legal restrictions that core members have to respect. These differences in the model, stemming from differences in the legal and professional context and the differences in norms and values regarding volunteer accountability, are very interesting and their impact on CoSA processes and effectivity should be studied in the future.

Guest lecture on COSA evaluation

The importance of systematic data collection in CoSA projects, and the different types of research questions that emerge in different stages of a circle project were highlighted in a guest college at the UMASS in a research and evaluation course at the School of Criminology and Justice studies. Media and the general public are always interested in issues around sex offenders, correct information about CoSA is a way of showing accountability and transparency and informing the public. Professional agencies and project partners are important allies in offender rehabilitation. Often they want to know what can be expected of COSA, how cooperation works, what kind of volunteers are involved, how they are trained etc. Structured data collection in user friendly, but safely store databases help project researchers to provide all involved with the necessary answers. Research to show CoSA effectiveness should follow a stepped approach, that produces information fitting the developmental stage of the project.

The International Forum on Sex Offender Community-Based Management, Reentry, and Reintegration (Leverhulme conference)

The International Forum on Sex Offender Community-Based Management, Reentry, and Reintegration on April 12, 2016 in Lowell, offered information about cutting-edge practice and research developments in the domain of sex offender management and community reentry. The conference program was oriented toward audiences of criminal justice professionals, human service professionals, researchers, students, interested citizens, and those engaged in public policy development.

After an introduction into the challenges of sex offender management in the community by Professor Andrew Harris (UMASS), Dr. Robin Wilson from McMaster University in Hamilton, Canada informed the audience about the state-of the art knowledge on sex offender risk. In a short presentation by Dr. Hoing, the European COSA projects were introduced as a form of co-creation of sex offender rehabilitation services, involving public services (professional organizations) and third sector organizations (volunteer organizations). The origins of the communalities and differences between the projects were explained through differences in the national and local context on three different levels: policies, planning and production of services. Derek Miodownik introduced the COSA project of the Vermont department of corrections. This project is strongly rooted in scientific evaluations of community needs as well as normative principles that underline the strength of communities who are able to solve their own internal conflicts. The COSA project was implemented in 2005 and has developed over 200 CoSA's by now. Here, COSA's are not restricted to serving sex offenders, core members who have committed other types of offences, but have a high risk/high needs profile are also accepted. Currently an outcome evaluation (matched comparison study is ongoing, and first results showed a 74% reduction of reoffending in sex offenders, 36% reduction in violent offenders and 27% reduction in general offenders, showing that COSA appears to best most effective for sex offenders.

After the presentations, experts and volunteers shared their experiences with sex offender rehabilitation in two panels.

First a panel of three focused on addressing housing an employment needs, and their stories highlighted the many challenges that sex offenders face in the US, when they try to re-enter the community after detention.

The second panel focused on the engagement of community members in sex offender management, and highlighted the important role of volunteers in projects like COSA. Volunteers gave the audience a unique insight into their motivations and experiences.

MASOC/MATSA conference

The MASOC/MATSA conference later that week, Prof. Andrew Harris, Dr. Kieran McCartan, Dr. Robin Wilson and Dr. Mechtild Hoing held a workshop about international perspectives, considerations and strategies on engaging communities in the integration of those who have committed sexual harm in the UK, Holland, Canada and the USA. Prof. Harris talked the audience through the current policies in the US regarding sex offender management, which sometimes lead to counterproductive situations and increased risk instead of public safety. Dr. Hoing presented the results of a web-based survey which was held in nine European countries, assessing community attitudes towards sex offender rehabilitation. Dr. McCartan presented about the need for a more public health oriented approach to the prevention of sexual offending. In such an approach, primary prevention strategies (addressing potential groups within the general population who are at risk of sexual offending), secondary prevention strategies (addressing identified groups who are at risk of offending) and tertiary prevention strategies (addressing former offenders in order to

prevent re-offending) should be combined into a comprehensive preventive effort. He also talked about the position of COSA projects and their preventive potential. After the presentations we discussed with the audience how these practices could be adopted in the current landscape of sex offender management.