

# MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS



## *An Outcome Evaluation of Minnesota Circles of Support and Accountability (MnCoSA)*

September 2012

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In 2008, the Minnesota Department of Corrections (DOC) implemented MnCoSA, a sex offender reentry program based on the COSA model developed in Canada during the 1990s. Using a randomized experimental design, the DOC evaluated the effectiveness of MnCoSA by conducting a cost-benefit analysis and comparing recidivism outcomes in the MnCoSA (N = 31) and control groups (N = 31). The average follow-up period for the 62 offenders in this study was nearly two years.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Compared to sex offenders in the control group, MnCoSA participants had lower rates of recidivism for all five measures.
  - Rearrest: 39% MnCoSA vs. 65% Control
    - No MnCoSA participants were rearrested for a new sex offense compared to one sex offender in the control group
  - Reconviction: 26% MnCoSA vs. 45% Control
  - New Offense Reincarceration: 10% MnCoSA vs. 26% Control
  - Technical Violation Revocation: 48% MnCoSA vs. 68% Control
  - Any Reincarceration: 48% MnCoSA vs. 61% Control
- Participation in MnCoSA significantly decreased three of the five measures of recidivism. The reductions in recidivism risk were:
  - 62 percent for rearrest
  - 72 percent for technical violation revocation
  - 84 percent for any return to prison
- Due to less recidivism, MnCoSA has reduced costs to the State of Minnesota.
  - MnCoSA has produced an estimated \$363,211 in costs avoided
  - The benefit per MnCoSA participant is \$11,716
  - For every dollar spent on MnCoSA, the program has generated a benefit of \$1.82 (an 82 percent return on investment)

The use of the COSA model with high-risk sex offenders began in a small Mennonite community in Canada in the early 1990s. Grounded in the tenets of the restorative justice philosophy, the COSA model attempts to help sex offenders successfully reenter the community and, thus, increase public safety, by providing them with social support as they try to meet their employment, housing, treatment, and other social needs. Each COSA consists of anywhere between four and six community volunteers, one of whom is a primary volunteer, who meet with the offender on a regular basis. The results from several evaluations of the Canadian COSA model suggest it significantly reduces sex offender recidivism.

The impetus for implementing MnCoSA in 2008 was based not only on the promising results from the Canadian studies, but also on the findings from the DOC's evaluation of broad community notification. In determining that broad community notification significantly reduces sexual recidivism, the DOC study found that sexual recidivism rates were highest among Level 2 sex offenders. Therefore, when it began in 2008, MnCoSA targeted Level 2 sex offenders as part of a risk-management strategy.

The MnCoSA evaluation used a randomized controlled trial to determine whether it had an impact on recidivism. Prior to randomly assigning eligible offenders to either the experimental (MnCoSA) or control groups, MnCoSA staff recruited volunteers from the community to form a Circle around a soon-to-be released Level 2 sex offender who was returning to Hennepin, Ramsey, Dodge, Fillmore, or Olmsted counties. During the 2008-2011 period, 31 sex offenders participated in MnCoSA and were released from prison. Recidivism outcomes for these offenders were compared to those of the 31 sex offenders in the control group.

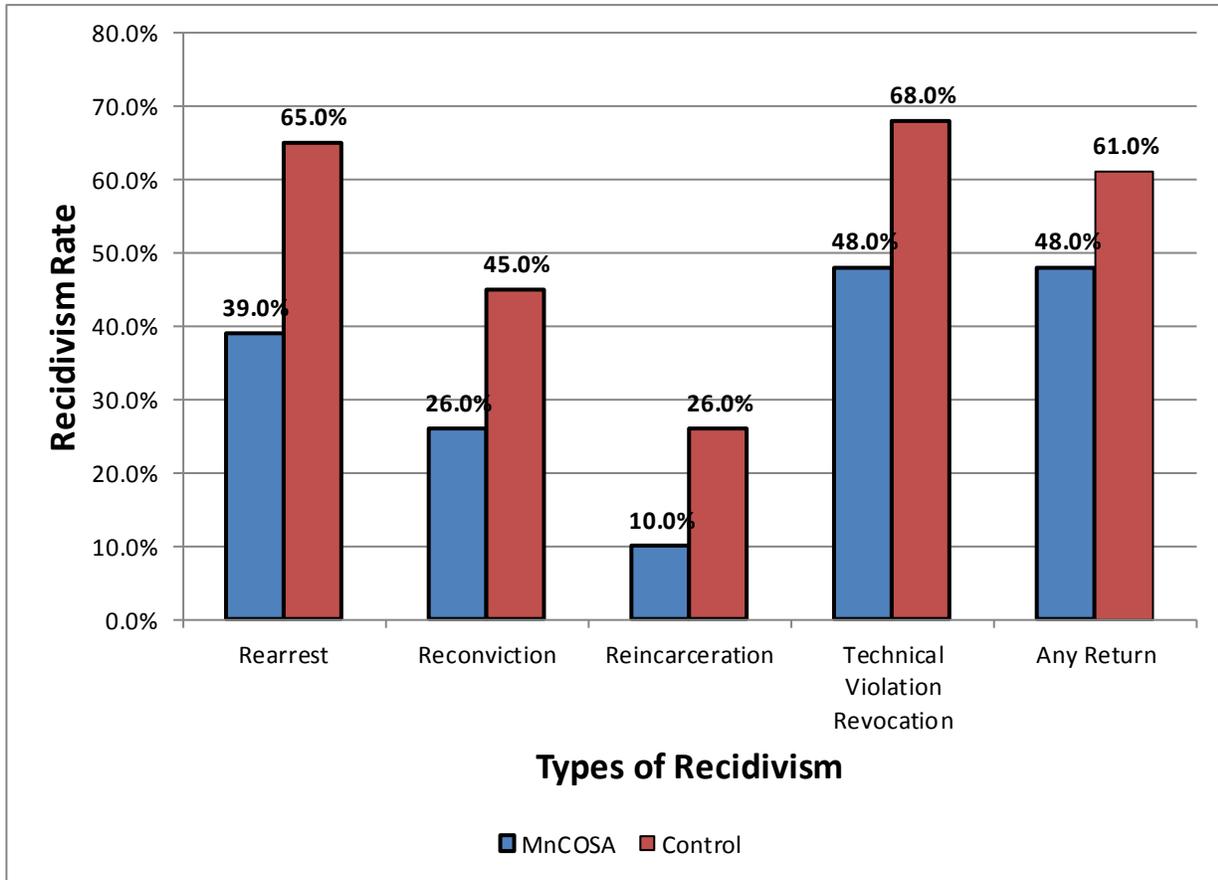
The MnCoSA evaluation also assessed whether the program is cost effective by comparing program operating costs with the costs resulting from recidivism. To determine whether MnCoSA has produced a benefit resulting from reduced recidivism, the study compared the number of offenses committed by offenders in the MnCoSA and control groups. The costs of these offenses were then monetized based on cost of crime estimates developed through prior research.

### **Recidivism Results**

The data in Figure 1 show that MnCoSA participants had lower recidivism rates than the offenders in the control group. For example, 39 percent of the MnCoSA participants had been rearrested for a new offense by the end of December 2011 compared with 65 percent of the control group offenders. The results also show that 26 percent of the MnCoSA participants were reconvicted for a new offense compared to 45 percent in the control group. In addition, 10 percent of the MnCoSA participants were reincarcerated for a new criminal offense compared to 26 percent of the control group offenders. Further, compared to the offenders in the control group, who had a technical violation revocation rate of 68 percent, MnCoSA participants had a rate of 48 percent. Lastly, 48 percent of MnCoSA offenders returned to prison for a new offense and/or a technical violation versus 61 percent of those in the control group.

The results from the multivariate statistical analyses, which controlled for time at risk and other observed differences between the two groups, showed that participating in MnCoSA had a statistically significant effect on three of the five recidivism measures. MnCoSA participation significantly lowered the risk of recidivism by 62 percent for

rearrest, 72 percent for technical violation revocation, and 84 percent for any return to prison. Due mainly to the small sample size and short follow-up period, MnCoSA did not have a statistically significant effect at the .05 level for reconviction or new offense reincarceration.



**Figure 1. Recidivism Rates for MnCoSA and Control Group Offenders**

**Cost-Benefit Results**

Because MnCoSA relies heavily on volunteers, the costs to operate the program are confined mainly to project staff salaries and volunteer training and recruitment efforts. As shown in Table 1, it cost nearly \$450,000 to operate MnCoSA from 2008-2011. The results also show, however, that the benefits resulting from reduced recidivism amounted to a little more than \$800,000. More specifically, MnCoSA participants were rearrested for 33 fewer offenses than the control group and spent about 100 fewer days in prison following their release.

After subtracting the program operating costs from the recidivism costs avoided, the results in Table 1 show that MnCoSA has, within its first four years of operation, produced an estimated benefit of \$363,211, which amounts to \$11,716 per participant. The cost-benefit ratio indicates that for every dollar spent on MnCoSA, the State of Minnesota has seen an estimated benefit of \$1.82, which results in an 82 percent return on investment.

**Table 1. MnCoSA Cost-Benefit Results**

<i>Program Operating Costs</i>	
2008	\$104,800
2009	\$144,050
2010	\$112,456
2011	\$81,455
<b>Total Costs</b>	<b>\$442,761</b>
 <i>Costs Avoided</i>	
Estimated Reoffense Costs Avoided	\$629,500
Reincarceration Costs Avoided	\$176,472
<b>Total Costs Avoided</b>	<b>\$805,972</b>
 <b>Total Benefits</b>	
Benefit Per Participant	\$11,716.48
Cost-Benefit Ratio	\$1.82
Return on Investment (ROI) Percentage	82%

**Summary**

Existing research has shown that providing offenders with a continuum of social support from prison to the community produces better recidivism outcomes. Consistent with this evidence, MnCoSA has been effective in helping sex offenders successfully reenter society. It is too early to tell, however, whether MnCoSA is effective in reducing sexual recidivism. The near absence of sexual reoffending observed in this evaluation is likely due not only to the brief follow-up period, but also to low contemporary sexual recidivism rates found among Minnesota sex offenders.

Although MnCoSA is a cost-effective program that produces public safety benefits, it is effective only for a relatively small number of offenders. Recruiting suitable volunteers from the community is often challenging due to prevailing public perceptions regarding convicted sex offenders. Because MnCoSA is a high-impact, low-volume program, it should be reserved only for high-risk offenders, which will likely help maximize its cost-effectiveness.