

# PREVENTING REOFFENDING IN SINGAPORE

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Corrections in Singapore achieved a major breakthrough in the last two decades with several paradigm shifts, including the introduction of various technologies in the management of offenders and initiatives to prepare them for their re-entry to society. The result of this transformation is a 20.7 percentage point drop in the recidivism rate between the cohort released in 1998 (44.4%) and the cohort released in 2016 (23.7%). The prison population has also decreased by 27.7 per cent<sup>1</sup> from 18,000 in 2002 to about 10,800 in 2018.

This paper examines the approach taken by the Singapore Prison Service (SPS) and the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (SCORE) in preparing offenders for their eventual reintegration.

## II. BACKGROUND – THE SINGAPORE CONTEXT

Singapore is a city-state located in between the Malayan Peninsula and Indonesia's Riau Islands. It is the smallest nation in Southeast Asia at 720 km<sup>2</sup>; however, it is one of most densely populated countries in the world at 7,866<sup>2</sup> people per square kilometre.

The city-state is a multi-racial and cultural society with a population of 5,638,700.<sup>3</sup> 76 per cent of the citizen population are Chinese, 15 per cent Malays, 7.5 per cent Indians and 1.5 per cent others. English is the official and working language. Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil are also widely spoken.

Singapore is a parliamentary republic, patterned after the British Westminster model. Its legal system is based on English Common Law traditions. Singapore is well known for being corruption-free and for its strong public and corporate governance. Transparency International's 2018 Corruption Perception Index ranks Singapore as the third least-corrupt country in the world, after Denmark and New Zealand.

Since independence in 1965, Singapore's national income has grown exponentially, transforming the city-state from a fishing village in the 1960s to a metropolis in 2019. It has seen strong growth over the last twenty years in GDP per capita of about US\$428<sup>4</sup> to more than US\$64,000<sup>5</sup> in 2018.

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<sup>1</sup> SPS Stats Release 2011. "Leading Reform" – Chua, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Singstats Population and Population Structure 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Singstats Population Trends 2018 and Prime Minister's Office Population Report 2019.

<sup>4</sup> CEIC Data.

<sup>5</sup> IMF Singapore July 2019 Country Report 19/233.

This exponential growth can be attributed to a safe and secure environment for citizens and foreign investors. Singapore has been ranked first in Gallup's Global Law and Order Report for six consecutive years. The most recent Gallup Global Law and Order Report 2019 indicated that Singapore was ranked first in the Law and Order Index. 94 per cent of residents reported that they felt safe walking home alone in their neighbourhoods at night. In addition, Singapore was also ranked first for order and security in the "Rule of Law Index" by the World Justice Project.<sup>6</sup>

### **A. Crime and Drug Rate in Singapore**

A majority of Singapore's population is law abiding. With 581<sup>7</sup> cases of reported crime per 100,000 population in 2018, the crime rate in Singapore is one of the lowest in the world. With an offender population of about 10,800<sup>8</sup>, the incarceration rate is 189 per 100,000 population. 70 per cent<sup>9</sup> are convicted for drug-related offences. This is a result of Singapore's zero tolerance policy against drugs. The Central Narcotics Bureau adopts a comprehensive approach in tackling both drug supply and demand. On average, about 3,250<sup>10</sup> drug abusers are arrested each year.

### **B. The Singapore Prison Service (SPS)**

The penal history in Singapore can be traced to 1925 with the setting up of penal settlements to house convicts transported from British India. SPS was institutionalized as a department on its own in 1946. Since independence, SPS had evolved from a traditional custodial agency faced with challenges of overcrowded prisons and manpower shortage due to high staff turnover and poor public perception. Today, SPS is a leading correctional agency characterized by effective inmate management and sustained low recidivism rates.

SPS administers 15 institutions grouped under five Commands. They provide safe and secure custody for about 12,800 inmates and are staffed by 2,405 uniform and civilian officers. SPS's tagline – "Rehab, Renew, Restart" emphasizes – their commitment to rehabilitate inmates who desire to change, renew and restart their lives for the better, with the support of the community.

### **C. The Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (SCORE)**

SCORE's roots can be traced to Prison Industries, which was started in 1965 as a section within the SPS for inmates to learn market-relevant trades. However, Prison Industries faced several constraints such as inadequate manpower and a lack of operational flexibility to meet market demands due to the Government's administrative and financial regulations. Against this challenging operating environment, the establishment of a separate agency was recommended to replace Prison Industries.

On 1 April 1976, SCORE was established as a quasi-government agency under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). Its status as a statutory board and separate entity from SPS enabled it to play a vital role in the Singapore correctional system by rebuilding lives and enhancing the employability potential of offenders. SCORE focuses on the domains of skills training, work programme, employment assistance and community partnerships

<sup>6</sup> Gallup's Global Law and Order Report 2019 and Rule of Law Index 2019 by the World Justice Project.

<sup>7</sup> Singapore Police Force Statistics Release 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Singapore Prison Service Statistics Release 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Central Narcotics Bureau Statistics Release 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Central Narcotics Bureau Statistics Release 2018.

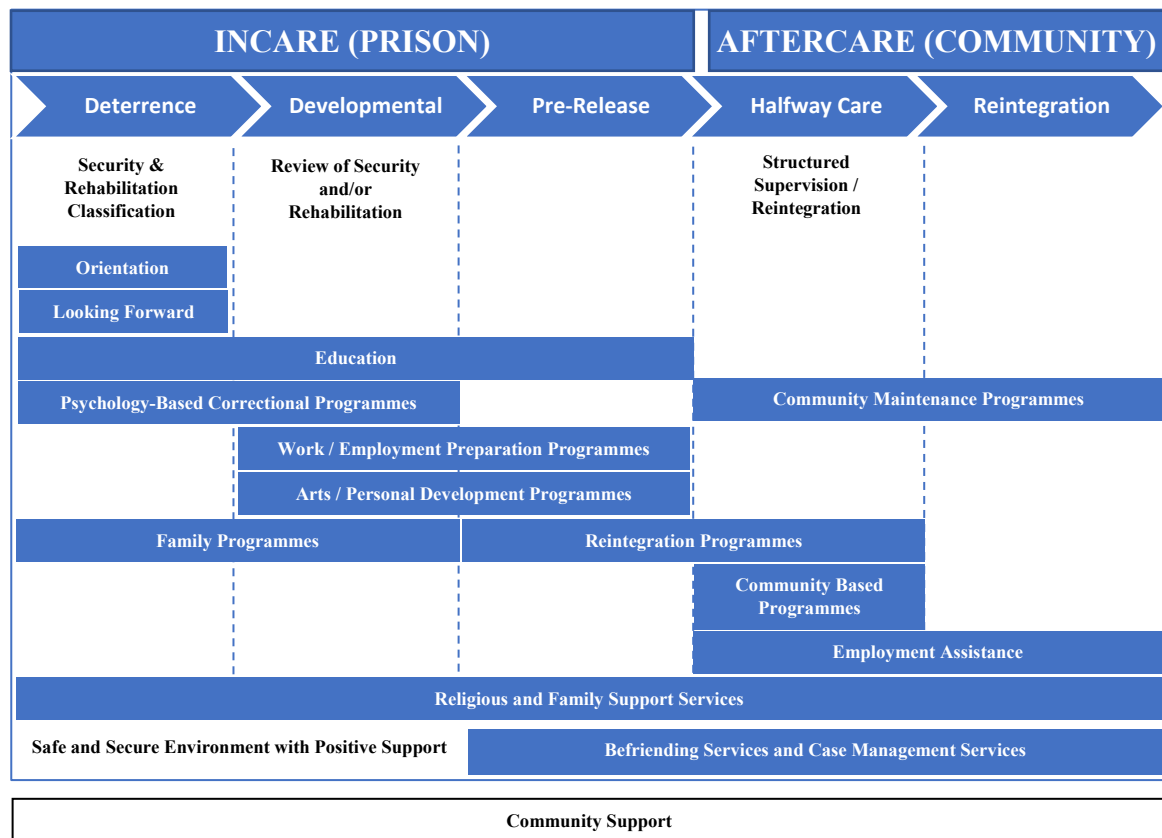
in preparing offenders for their eventual reintegration into the national workforce and the community.

As lead agencies in offender rehabilitation, SPS and SCORE form a symbiotic relationship in transforming the corrections landscape.

### III. THE REHABILITATION JOURNEY

SPS and SCORE believe that prison sentences are not just meant to punish and deter. It is important that rehabilitation administered by SPS and SCORE provides ample opportunities for offenders to turn their lives around. However, it must be complemented with the offender's own desire to change for the better. Not every offender may be willing to reform, but the right kind of rehabilitative strategy can motivate offenders to rebuild their lives.

The rehabilitation journey of an offender is divided into two main phases: Incare and Aftercare. To achieve Throughcare, there should be seamless transition from Incare to Aftercare, which in turn facilitates reintegration. The following framework illustrates this "Throughcare" concept.



Singapore's approach is based on the Risk-Needs-and-Responsivity (RNR) Model, which is an internationally recognized model for treatment and assessment of offenders. The RNR principles for effective correctional intervention are divided into the domains of the Risk Principle, the Need Principle and the Responsivity Principle:

<b>Risk Principle</b>	The level of rehabilitation services would match the risk level of reoffending. Offenders with a higher risk of reoffending would be prioritized for intervention and treatment.
<b>Need Principle</b>	Offenders with major dynamic risk factors found to be associated with reoffending, i.e. anti-social associates and substance abuse would be presented with interventions to address their reintegration needs.
<b>Responsivity Principle</b>	Interventions would aid in offenders' learning and be tailored to the specific characteristics of offenders, such as their level of motivation for change.

Upon admission, offenders are assessed to determine their criminogenic risks and rehabilitation needs. Based on their identified risks and needs, appropriate programmes are charted for intervention. The programmes include psychology-based correctional programmes, family programmes, skills training and religious services. Prior to their release, offenders will also undergo programmes to prepare them for reintegration into the community.

### **A. Employment**

In the domain of employment, SCORE is the lead agency in the provision of employment opportunities. It adopts a holistic approach in preparing offenders for employment through Employers Engagement, Employability Skills Training, Career Coaching and Job Placement Services.

SCORE works closely with trade associations, clans and corporations to provide employment opportunities for ex-offenders. As a result of its active outreach, the number of employers in SCORE's job bank had grown from 4,745 in 2015 to about 5,600<sup>11</sup> in 2019.

A key paradigm shift for SCORE in 2019 was to partner employers that can provide careers instead of jobs to deserving ex-offenders. Suitable ex-offenders can be given progression and skills upgrading opportunities as part of the employer's career development programme.

Employers are regularly invited into prisons to conduct job placements to interview and assess potential candidates before offering them a job. This model proved to be successful where 96 per cent<sup>12</sup> of ex-offenders assisted secured a job before their release.

Ex-offenders who secure jobs through Placement Exercises are assigned a Job Coach. To help ex-offenders remain on the job, SCORE Job Coaches regularly engage ex-offenders at their workplace to provide support and set behavioural goals. Job Coaches also work closely with the employers and supervisors to resolve work-related issues and understand the support that ex-offenders need.

### **B. Education and Employability Skills Training**

Another priority is the provision of academic education and vocational skills training for the purpose of levelling up the inmates' educational status and skills. SPS facilitates the offender's academic education through professional teachers seconded from the Ministry of Education.

<sup>11</sup> Singapore Prison Service Statistics Release 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Singapore Prison Service Statistics Release 2019.

Aside from formal education, SCORE looks into the provision of vocational and generic skills training for offenders. Its training administration is aligned with the national training framework to prepare offenders for employment after their release. SCORE engages training providers to provide about 27,000<sup>13</sup> training places, and about 5,923<sup>14</sup> inmates are trained annually.

### **C. Art and Personal Development Programmes**

Art programmes are conducted in prisons as a key component in the offenders' rehabilitation, where the focus on skills training and mind-set change plays an integral role in their eventual reintegration. These include Theatre Arts, Performing Arts and Visual Arts.

### **D. Religion**

Religion is a source of moral support and guidance to many in prison. Faith-based programmes can be powerful tools in the rehabilitation process, as they give inmates a strong sense of purpose, direction and meaning in life. Inmates are therefore encouraged to develop their spiritual well-being by turning to their respective faiths. Those who wish to embrace any of the main religions, such as Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism or Christianity, are encouraged to do so. Volunteers from respective faiths conduct religious services and counselling sessions for them.

### **E. Family Services & Programmes**

The impact of incarceration on families and children of inmates, the unintended victims of crime, is often significant and negative. Inmates' families are often in disarray when their family member is imprisoned. Hence, seeing families through this difficult phase can help foster stronger family bonds and networks upon the inmates' release. Since 2006, Family Resource Centres have been set up in SPS to provide social assistance and support to inmates' families to help them cope during inmates' incarceration, i.e. in the areas of financial difficulties, accommodation issues and emotional needs.

### **F. Community Volunteering**

The work of rehabilitation cannot be done by SPS alone. It requires partnership with the community to further its mission. Volunteers have been at the forefront in meeting the potential reintegration needs of our inmates. The volunteer base has grown from 124 in 1999 to more than 1,900 volunteers over the last 20 years.

To enhance the capabilities of volunteers, the Development Framework for Offender Rehabilitation Personnel (DORP) was launched in 2014 to improve capacity-building through training. It was further enhanced in 2018 through a collaboration with the Social Service Institute (SSI) – a national human capital development institution for the social service workforce to offer a greater suite of training courses. Such training enables SPS to work closely with its volunteers to deliver more effective and strategic intervention plans to better help offenders and their families.

In a separate initiative, SPS had initiated the “Yellow Ribbon Community Project” in 2010. It is an upstream intervention programme, where volunteers are forward deployed in the residential areas of offenders. The volunteers will reach out to families of newly admitted inmates to help them cope with the impact of incarceration. This involves

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<sup>13</sup> Singapore Prison Service Statistics Release 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Singapore Prison Service Statistics Release 2019.

helping them link up with relevant government entities and NGOs for social assistance and support. Annually, more than 400 volunteers are mobilized to assist over 8,000<sup>15</sup> youths, ex-offenders and families.

### **G. Community-Based Programmes**

Offenders face a myriad of challenges in the community. Therefore, aftercare interventions seek to provide them with adequate support upon their release. Suitable and eligible offenders may be considered for the Community Based Programme (CBP), where they may serve the tail-end of their sentence in the community under supervision. It includes Home Detention, the Work Release Scheme and the Mandatory Aftercare Scheme.

### **H. The Halfway House Scheme**

The Halfway House (HWH) Scheme was started in April 1995. It allows selected offenders without strong family support to spend the last stage of detention at the halfway houses. Currently, there are eight independent faith-based halfway houses participating in the HWH Scheme, and the programme comprises counselling, work therapy and moral/religious education. Under the scheme, HWHs are mandated to operate under a structured and more consistent programme to better meet offenders' reintegration needs.

In 2019, SPS and SCORE set up the Selarang Halfway House (SHWH). It is the first government-run HWH to strengthen aftercare support for selected higher-risk ex-offenders placed on the Mandatory Aftercare Scheme in the domains of employment and accommodation. It operates as a 24-hour residential facility with a capacity of 576<sup>16</sup> for residents of both genders.

The SHWH adopts a supervised step-down approach to facilitate their gradual reintegration into society. It replicates a normalized living environment for ex-offenders and applies the key learning points from the pre-release programme the ex-offenders had undergone in a real-life situation. Ex-offenders attend counselling sessions and are allowed to work or attend vocational training to enhance their employability. Suitable ex-offenders are also given time-off to return home and spend time with their families or participate in community activities.

## **IV. REHABILITATION AND THE COMMUNITY'S ROLE**

Preparing the community and creating conditions that encourage sustained desistance from criminal behaviour is a difficult and complex task. It requires political support, multi-agency collaboration, grassroots activism and the active engagement of civil society as a whole.

SPS and SCORE actively reach out to involve the community for both Incare as well as the Aftercare phase of an inmate's journey. For more than two decades now, SPS and SCORE have invested considerable resources and energy into this area.

### **A. The CARE Network**

In 2000, SPS and SCORE led the formation of the Community Action for the Rehabilitation of Ex-offenders Network (CARE Network). This network is an alliance of

<sup>15</sup> Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association's website.

<sup>16</sup> Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises Annual Report 2018.

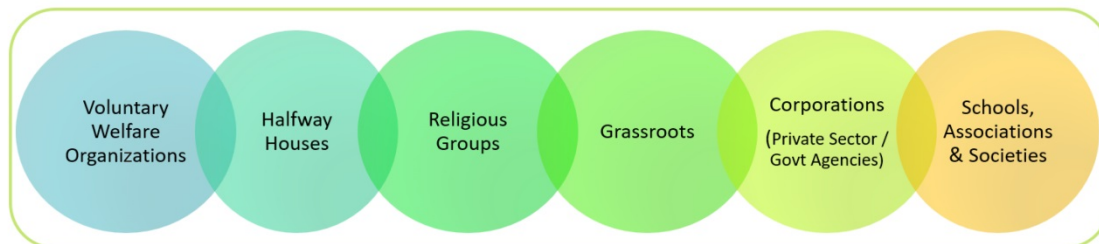
the main players in the area of offender reintegration in Singapore. The CARE Network aims to ease the reintegration journey for ex-offenders and their families through inter-agency collaborations and implementation of aftercare interventions.

The CARE Network comprises the MHA, the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), SPS, SCORE, the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), Industrial & Services Co-Operative Society Ltd (ISCOS), the Singapore After-Care Association (SACA), the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA) and the Yellow Ribbon Fund (YRF). These are all nationally accredited organizations, responsible for the delivery of programmes and services supported by the Government.

### CARE Network Members [9 agencies]

Government	Non-Government
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA)</li> <li>• Ministry of Social &amp; Family Development (MSF)</li> <li>• National Council of Social Service (NCSS)</li> <li>• Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (SCORE)</li> <li>• Singapore Prison Service (SPS)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industrial &amp; Services Corporative Services (ISCOS)</li> <li>• Singapore After Care Association (SACA)</li> <li>• Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA)</li> <li>• Yellow Ribbon Fund (YRF)</li> </ul>

### CARE Network Partners [More than 100 agencies]



As the fifth government agency in the network, NCSS was established in 1958 to provide leadership and direction in social services in Singapore. Today, it is an umbrella body for some 450-member social service agencies.

SANA was formed in 1972 as an NGO to complement the work done by the Central Narcotics Bureau in preventive drug education and to support former drug offenders. Today, SANA administers the Yellow Ribbon Community Project and runs a Step-Up Centre.

SACA was formed in 1956 as a key aftercare agency providing welfare and rehabilitation services for discharged offenders. Besides that, SACA plays an active role in the training of prison volunteers and aftercare professionals. SACA also conducts research as an initiative of the CARE Network to uplift the aftercare sector in Singapore.

ISCOS was formed in 1989 as a social cooperative for ex-offenders. It serves to connect ex-offenders with supportive employers and positive peers and mentors. A key focal area by ISCOS is the prevention of intergenerational offending through provision of academic assistance and life skills to children of the incarcerated.

YRF was set up in 2004 as the first national charitable fund devoted entirely to ex-offenders and their families. It is registered under SCORE and disbursed \$1,161,910 in 2018, benefitting 3,816 ex-offenders, families and children of the incarcerated. Its key focal areas are in the provision of emergency financial assistance, funding residential support programmes, administering programmes in education and training, and family support programmes. The YRF has also been conferred Institute of Public Character status, which allows them to issue tax deductible receipts to donors who want to claim tax relief based on the amount of qualifying donations made. The status and position of the YRF are thus significantly different to similar organizations that operate in other countries, which are typically charities formed by advocacy groups, likeminded people or religious organizations.

### **B. 3Ps Partnership – People, Private and Public**

As secretariat to the CARE Network, SCORE’s partnership strategy is based on the premise of 3Ps; People, Private and Public sector. Through this segmentation, SCORE is able to ensure greater synergy and stay effective in its partnership efforts.

Within the People Sector, the CARE Network has seen tremendous growth in the support and attention to the work of offenders’ rehabilitation and reintegration. It started with eight core member agencies in 2000 and admitted its ninth member, YRF, in 2015. Today, the network has harnessed the support of more than 100 other NGO aftercare agencies through the 250 key aftercare professionals it engages with regularly. Collectively, the corrections community in Singapore sees about 2,650 volunteers, whose unwavering support has made significant contributions to the lives of offenders and their families.

In the Private and Public Sectors, SCORE works with an extensive mix of partners annually. Comprising almost 6,700 partners, they include key government agencies, employers, trade associations, chambers of commerce and ethnic clan associations.

### **C. Yellow Ribbon Project – Reaching Out and Touching a Nation**

This strong support is largely attributed to the success of the Yellow Ribbon Project (YRP). Launched in 2004 by the former President of the Republic of Singapore Mr S.R Nathan, the YRP is known globally as the only national second chance campaign for ex-offenders. Its purpose is to generate awareness of the difficulties ex-offenders face after release, encourage acceptance of their return to society and inspire public action to support their reintegration.

The inspiration behind YRP was taken from a 1970s song entitled, “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree.” The lyrics of this song aptly describe an ex-offender’s desire for acceptance and forgiveness from his loved ones and awaiting the community to set him free:

*“I’m really still in prison and my love she holds the key,  
a simple yellow ribbon’s what I need,  
to set me free...”*

The Yellow Ribbon Project was conceived with three main objectives: 1. to create awareness of the need to give second chances to ex-prisoners; 2. to generate acceptance of ex-prisoners and their families by the community; and 3. to inspire community action



to support the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-prisoners. It is based on the rationale that every offender encounters two prisons: the first being the physical prison during incarceration, and the second is that the person is in a 'social and psychological prison' post-release. It is accepted that programmes delivered in custody are essential; however, it is equally important that community support and services are available for the reintegration of ex-offenders into mainstream society. This integrated approach was conceived as a basis to reduce recidivism and improve individual, family, community and societal outcomes.

The success of the YRP can be attributed to the media campaign and outreach strategies, and the strong community ownership of the Yellow Ribbon brand.

## V. CONCLUSION

Serving time should never be a waste of time. The period of incarceration allows SPS and SCORE an opportunity to rebuild lives and help offenders to have another shot at life. The end in mind is to reduce the recidivism rate.

Today, Singapore is witnessing a sustained improvement in the two-year recidivism rate, which has fallen to record low levels. However, the five-year recidivism rate hovered around 40 per cent.<sup>17</sup> More can be done to help ex-offenders stay crime free, longer.

Rehabilitation and reintegration are the two key ingredients for successful offender reform. They cannot be confined to within the prison walls. However, the Yellow Ribbon moniker can be leveraged as a powerful unifying brand which the Singaporean community can rally behind as one.

The government will provide support to those who need assistance. However, the community can play an even more important role by providing support and encouragement. By working as one, Singapore can overcome challenges, regardless of their circumstances, and emerge ready to build a safer future.

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<sup>17</sup> Speech by Minister K Shanmugam at the CARE Network Workplan Seminar 2019.