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### IMPLEMENTING EFFECTIVE REHABILITATION AND COMMUNITY REINTEGRATION PRACTICES FOR YOUNG OFFENDERS IN SINGAPORE

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#### I. BACKGROUND

This paper outlines Singapore's efforts to implement effective rehabilitation and Community Reintegration Practices for young offenders sentenced to Reformatory Training Centre. Singapore's robust criminal justice system consists of tough laws against crime, highly professional and prosecutorial agencies such as the police force, the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau and the Attorney-General's Chambers, as well as our independent, efficient, and effective judiciary.

In addition to efforts to prevent and fight crime, Singapore has also focused and invested resources in the rehabilitation of offenders, especially juvenile and young offenders. As a nation, Singapore's response to youth offending has been to pursue a fine equilibrium in the management of juvenile offenders such that the justice and restorative models complement each other as mutually supportive elements of the juvenile justice system.

#### II. JUVENILE OFFENDERS IN SINGAPORE

##### A. Juveniles and Young Offenders in Singapore

In Singapore, persons aged 10 to under 16 years old are defined as "juveniles" while a person who is 14 years of age or above and below the age of 18 can be referred to as a "young person". The following principles and considerations underpin the rehabilitation of juvenile offenders in Singapore:

- (i) Diversion from court process where possible and appropriate;
- (ii) Institutionalization as the last resort;
- (iii) The family as the basic building block of society and change agent;
- (iv) The many helping hands approach to community rehabilitation.

Juveniles who have committed offences are not excused of accountability for their misconduct. However, principles of care, welfare and protection are in place through a continuum of preventive and rehabilitative services available for their respective circumstances. Community-based rehabilitation programmes such as the Community Service Order (CSO) and Probation Order are used to rehabilitate young offenders in the community. Residential rehabilitation programmes such as Juvenile Rehabilitation Centres and Reformatory Training Centre (RTC) belong to the tail-end of the continuum, where RTC is seen as a last resort for the young person. The reformatory training sentence is reformatory in nature compared to an imprisonment sentence. Rehabilitation efforts in RTC have led to positive outcomes thus far and further elaboration will be shared in the subsequent sections.

Looking at the youth offending situation in Singapore, there was a 43.3 per cent fall in the number of youth offenders between 2010 and 2020. The number of juvenile and young offenders has been on a general downward trend in the past decade. It should be noted, however, that the decline in the number of youth offenders between 2019 and 2020 might be partly due to the temporary impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting movement restrictions, which might have disrupted the commission of certain types of crimes.

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Despite the downward trend, from 2016 to 2020, three types of offences were observed to be on an upward trend namely shop theft, cheating and related offences, and drug abuse. Across the four years, there were four times the number of male young offenders compared to female young offenders.

## **B. Singapore's Evidence-informed Rehabilitation and Reintegration**

In Singapore, we believe every offender, especially a young person, has the potential to live a crime-free life and be a contributing member of society. This first part of the paper will discuss Singapore's rehabilitation approach and the factors necessary to make it work.

Firstly, to help offenders desist from crime, the Singapore Prison Service (SPS) adopts evidence-informed rehabilitation and reintegration practices. Singapore's rehabilitation system is based on both international and locally conducted research that is contextualized. Our experience highlights that a throughcare approach that includes intervention programmes conducted during the in-care phase would be better supported by the pre-release preparation and reintegration case management in the community.

Secondly, SPS designs psychology-based correctional programmes (or PCPs),<sup>1</sup> drawing from evidence-informed models in the corrections literature such as from the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model,<sup>2</sup> the Good Lives Model<sup>3</sup> (GLM) and Desistance Theory.<sup>4</sup> As each young person has unique needs, differentiated rehabilitative intervention programmes are aligned to various rehabilitation needs of the RTs.

Thirdly, Singapore applies the principles of implementation science, which is the scientific study of methods to promote the integration of research findings and evidence-informed interventions into policy and practice. As part of implementation science, we evaluate our programmes on both process and outcome.

## **III. REFORMATIVE TRAINEES (RTS)**

### **A. Minimum Detention Period**

Research has shown that youths with shorter institutional stays were found to have lower recidivism rates<sup>5</sup> and that longer detention may work against their rehabilitation. A minimum detention period of six or twelve months followed up by community supervision are legislated for young persons sentenced to RTC. The release of the trainees to community supervision will be subject to their progress and suitability for release, such as: responsivity to rehabilitation, family support, and aftercare arrangements. While the recidivism rate for 2019 was recorded to be lower than the previous years, SPS continues to observe and monitor the revised RT Regime's impact on supporting rehabilitation and successful reintegration of the young offenders.

### **B. Profile**

According to Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, youths develop a sense of identity as they make the transition from childhood to adulthood. During this phase, youths may experience some role confusion and experiment with a variety of behaviours and activities as they seek to achieve an identity. These behaviours and activities may be risky as youths typically have problems anticipating consequences and controlling their impulses due to the under-development of the part of the brain that is responsible for

<sup>1</sup> PCPs play an important role in the rehabilitation of offenders, stimulating readiness to change in offenders and helping them understand the factors which contributed to their offending behaviours. These interventions provide structured learning and application of prosocial skills to aid the offenders in developing a reintegration plan that addresses their unique life situations, challenges, and goals.

<sup>2</sup> Andrews, D. A. & Dowden, C. (2006). "Risk Principle of Case Classification in Correctional Treatment: A meta-analytic investigation." *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 50 (1), 88-100.

<sup>3</sup> Ward, T., & Stewart, C. A. (2003). "Good lives and the rehabilitation of offenders: A positive approach to treatment." In Linley, A. & Joseph, S. (Eds.), *Positive Psychology in Practice* (pp. 598-616). John Wiley & Sons.

<sup>4</sup> Maruna, S. (2003). "Desistance from Crime: A Theoretical Reformulation." *Cologne Journal for Sociology and Social Psychology*, 43, 171-194.

<sup>5</sup> Winokur, Smith, Bontrager, Blankenship (2008). Juvenile recidivism and length of stay. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 36, 126-137.

executive functioning. Below are some of the descriptive characteristics of RTs generally observed by RTC staff:

- Short attention span;
- Prevalence of gang affiliations;
- Lack of motivation to change;
- Lack of family support.

### **C. Operating Model**

In consideration of the existing literature and reformative nature of the RT sentence, the RT philosophy is one that believes that every youth is capable of change. We aspire to create a safe and supportive environment that empowers youths to take ownership of their lives and realize their potential. Within RTC, RTs would be engaged actively in programmes and by staff to live out the values that were jointly chosen by RTC staff, further amplifying the behaviours exhibited by each RT. In RTC, the respective elements of intentional staff engagement, programmes, and processes, defined RTC as a “Transformative Environment (TE)”. Further elaborations of the TE will be shared in the subsequent segment.

### **D. Transformative Environment – Staff**

Staff are a critical factor in the transformative environment as RTs generally portray a lack of motivation to change with mandated programmes to attend. Voluntary and genuine emotional involvement (trust, support, reciprocity) have been found to be critical in the development of working alliances between support persons working with the youths.<sup>6</sup> Youths who have good relationships with correctional staff perceived the greatest likelihood of success on release in the following areas – potential for success, social networks, managing substance abuse/ reoffending, and conflict reduction. In this regard, staff are intentional in forming working alliances with each RT and through the engagement, impact positively towards their change journey. One of the ways this is done is through the adoption of restorative practices<sup>7</sup> in the daily engagement with RTs and use a collaborative stance when working with the RT as part of the management strategy.

RTC staff, consisting of correctional unit officers (CUO), correctional rehabilitation specialists (CRS) and reintegration officers (RO) work closely with each other to support the rehabilitation and reintegration of the RTs. CUOs are uniformed staff who carry out daily routine operations and facilitate the smooth attendance of RTs for their respective programmes. On top of these functions, the CUO takes on a secondary role akin to a life coach to the RTs, motivating them towards planning their prosocial life upon release from RTC. While they used to focus on delivery of psychological interventions, CRSs have in recent years taken on a more active role in the daily routine operations of RTC, for example, facilitating restorative circles among RTs and engaging RTs' families.

To help CUOs better engage, manage, and positively influence the RTs, specialized training in the areas of youth developmental theories, engagement of youths, management of resistant youths, and management of mental health issues in youths are provided. The concerted effort from the various stakeholders in the rehabilitation of RTs would not only allow for the development and implementation of both sound operational and rehabilitation policies that characterize the Transformative Environment in RTC, but also ensure an increase in quantity and quality of services. For example, it helps staff to understand how to work with RTs who might present with a short attention span.

### **E. Transformative Environment – Prison School or Vocational Training**

Currently, RTs are channelled into either the education or vocational training pathway based on their interests and eligibility. RTs could pursue an education at the Prison School, i.e., National Institute of Technical Education (ITE) Certificates, GCE “N” Levels, “O” Levels, or “A” Levels during their stay in RTC. For RTs who are on the vocational training pathway, they could also attend courses under the Singapore Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) framework to acquire marketable vocational skills to enhance their employability.

<sup>6</sup> Marsh, S. C. & Evans, W. P. (2009). Youth Perspectives on their Relationships With Staff in Juvenile Correction Settings and Perceived Likelihood of Success of Release. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 7, 46-67.

<sup>7</sup> Costello, B., Wachtel, J. & Costello, T. (2009). *The Restorative Practices Handbook*. International Institute for Restorative Practices, p. 50.

### **F. Transformative Environment – Psychology-based Correctional Programmes (PCP)**

The programme framework for the tier-based PCPs is developed based on the evidence-informed Principles of Effective Rehabilitation, namely the Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) model, which prescribes a differentiated approach of rehabilitation for young offenders with different rehabilitation needs profiles based on empirically supported assessments. In the programme, RTs attend different tiering of PCPs based on their assessed needs. They are guided to evaluate the extent that their offending behaviours helped them achieve their goals and are equipped with skills to secure their goals in more socially acceptable ways.

Considering the developmental needs of the youth offenders, specific intervention strategies are incorporated in the tier-based PCPs to make them youth centric. For instance, narrative and strength-based approaches are utilized to support the youths in developing a pro-social narrative of self-identity to enhance their sense of agency in desisting from crime and violence. Youths are responsive to active modes of learning; hence more hands-on and experiential activities are designed to increase their levels of engagement.

### **G. Transformative Environment – Family Engagement**

SPS recognizes that good family support during incarceration is essential to an offender's rehabilitation journey. Family programmes seek to increase offenders' knowledge, skills, and confidence in maintaining ties and rebuilding stronger relationships with their loved ones. Through these programmes, offenders learn about the roles in their families and take meaningful actions to change for the sake of their families.<sup>8</sup> Research has shown that the involvement of the family and the community is critical in the effective rehabilitation of young offenders. RTC staff observed that family support was lacking for the RTs, and they had also turned towards forging closer ties with friends from their gangs, many of whom RTs considered as their "family". Besides the family programmes, RT's families are also engaged regularly by both CUO and CRS on the progress of their children before supporting the reintegration of RTs back to their families. As we encourage closer family ties to be bridged and rekindled, we also observed that RTs often would begin to distance themselves from their gang affiliations. Thus, engaging the families, helps with the overcoming of challenges stated earlier.

### **H. Future Action Plans**

Moving forward, we believe we can do more in expanding the prosocial supportive network of each RT by providing a positive Befriender prior to community supervision. The Befriender could also increase the social capital of the young offender by sharing his/her resources such as employment and leisure-activity options.

Our current efforts in engaging RT's families have illuminated the possible reintegration challenges faced by the RT when he/she returns home. We believe that with timely assessment of and providing the support needed by the families of our youths, it would further allow us to equip families as they provide guidance and love.

Considering the developmental stages of the RTs, another possible exploration would be to enhance the current array of employment options for RTs and allowing them to have concrete job matches before ROS. Employment brings with it opportunities to practice the various skills shared during the PCP programmes, and being financially independent could further develop the young offenders, propelling them towards living meaningful prosocial lives.

## **IV. CONCLUSION**

Over the past decade, SPS has incorporated and implemented youth-informed practices that attend to youths' pathways to offending. The practices include: (1) developing evidence-informed youth targeted

<sup>8</sup> As part of SPS's continuous review of programmes, two programmes – the Social Skills Training Programme (SSTP) and the Family Reintegration Programme (FRP), were developed and implemented. Attended by all newly admitted offenders, SSTP seeks to raise their awareness of the impact crime and incarceration have on family relationships. It also equips them with basic skills in managing and enhancing family and social relationships, such as communication skills, conflict resolution skills and emotion regulation techniques.

## PARTICIPANTS' PAPERS

programmes and processes in the transformative environment which addresses social skills for pro-social living; (2) implementing staff training and encouraging collaborations between operations and rehabilitation staff to equip staff with skills to de-escalate conflict and deal with offenders' motivation to change; (3) family and parenting programmes that address the parental guidance and positive supervision of RTs, and (4) conducting community interventions that support RTs when they are out in the community to facilitate successful rehabilitation and reintegration.

All in all, our approach is underpinned by the belief that every person in Singapore, especially our young offenders, has the right to live in an environment free of crime, and that young offenders should be provided with the necessary help to rehabilitate and successfully reintegrate into our society as contributing citizens.