

THE TRANSFORMATION OF YELLOW RIBBON SINGAPORE

Ng Hui Ling
Yellow Ribbon Singapore

ABSTRACT

Since the launch of the Yellow Ribbon Project in 2004 to encourage acceptance of ex-offenders in Singapore, surveys have found that Singaporeans are generally willing to foster or reconcile relationships with ex-offenders, and companies are open to hiring them. In turn, recidivism rates have lowered substantially. Nonetheless there are still ex-offenders who struggle with numerous hurdles and lack of social support in their reintegration journey. Without enough assistance, ex-offenders often find themselves isolated and destitute, and some begin to reconsider deviant activities. Meanwhile, modern society continues to evolve technologically. Automation and AI leave countless worried about their future employability. This includes a sizeable population of ex-offenders who, having received little education previously, might not be able to keep up without extra support. In recognition of pending and future challenges, SCORE, a statutory board set up within Singapore's correctional system in 1976 to provide rehabilitation and aftercare services to inmates and ex-offenders, rebranded itself in May 2020 as Yellow Ribbon Singapore (YRSG), a vessel to unite and advance the Yellow Ribbon cause. Together with an extensive network of community and industrial stakeholders, YRSG aims to coordinate tailored support to ex-offenders and lower recidivism rates. Ultimately, the organisation hopes to empower ex-offenders to become agents of change, and inspire the public to build a more inclusive and cohesive society together, to go Beyond Second Chances.

BEYOND SECOND CHANCES FOR EX-OFFENDERS

The Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (SCORE) was established in 1976 as a statutory board. Together with the Singapore Prison Service (SPS), SCORE worked with like-minded organisations to support inmates' rehabilitation and pave the way for their eventual return to society. Amidst the then widespread prejudice and discrimination against ex-offenders, both institutions launched the Yellow Ribbon Project (YRP) in 2004 to raise awareness, increase acceptance and inspire community action to help ex-offenders reintegrate successfully. The success of the YRP has been key to lowering recidivism rates (which in Singapore, is defined as the percentage of local inmates detained or sentenced to imprisonment or day reporting order for a new offence within two years of their release).

Today, society has become more accepting towards ex-offenders, with good faith that they can be responsible and contributing citizens. This comes with active advocacy by the YRP to raise social awareness, as well as a sense of trust in the extensive rehabilitation programmes conducted by SPS and other aftercare organisations. After the 2019 YRP campaign concluded, a survey was conducted by market research company KANTAR to evaluate its effectiveness. The results showed that more than 90% of the 500 participants believed that ex-offenders, like others in society, "have talents and skills" and could "contribute to society". More than 83% were confident that ex-offenders have a strong work ethic that would make them responsible and cooperative employees. Generally, there was an encouraging 90% of respondents who were willing to support ex-offenders as they reintegrate back into society after their release.

These sentiments towards inmates and ex-offenders cannot be taken for granted. In “The Courage to Believe”, a commemorative book published to celebrate the YRP’s 10th anniversary in 2014, former Director of Prisons Chua Chin Kiat recognized a strong “culture built on distrust” within the penal system when he took over in 1998. Chua led SPS through an extensive re-visioning exercise, where prison officers collectively agreed that they wished to contribute to the positive rehabilitation of inmates to build a better society (Chua, 2016). They were eager to shed their then role as “instrument[s] of punitive incarceration” (Singapore Prison Service, 2013). But this goal could not be achieved solely through rehabilitation programmes within prison walls. A bridge between prisons and the rest of society had to be created. Recognising that discrimination against ex-offenders is a significant obstacle to their reintegration, the SPS restyled its officers as Captains of Lives, and worked hand-in-hand with SCORE to launch the YRP. It aimed to equip inmates with useful economic skills, to develop in them positive work and social values, to assist in re-integrating them back to society, and to involve their families, the authorities and the community in their rehabilitation.

Since 1998, the recidivism rate has fallen from 44.4% for the cohort of inmates released in 1998 to an all-time low of 22.1% for the cohort released in 2018 (Singapore Prison Service, 2011, 2021). Many factors undoubtedly account for this halving of the 2-year recidivism rate over 20 years, including the deterrence of long prison sentences and prison regime stringency, as well as better economic conditions in Singapore. Inmate rehabilitation has also contributed to reducing re-offending, and, as former Director of Prisons Ng Joo Hee has noted, two “universally accepted” factors are key in preventing re-offending: gainful employment and family ties (Ng, 2010).

Gainful Employment

Since its establishment, SCORE has operated on the basis that gainful employment is critical

for successful reintegration to lower recidivism. Employment provides a stable income to meet one’s material needs. It also provides a structured routine to one’s life as well as a sense of purpose and belonging. The workplace introduces individuals to positive social networks that encourages self-improvement. For repeat offenders who commit crimes for monetary gains, perhaps motivated by impoverished circumstances, or because of negative influences in their lives, gainful employment provides a healthier path to break out of that cycle. Hence, SCORE has been setting up work-related training programmes to prepare inmates to enter the workforce after their release. It engages external vendors to conduct skills training to boost the employability of inmates. It has also improved the management and operation of prison industries, including formulating the concept of rehabilitation through work discipline by having prison workshops mirror actual work conditions outside of prisons. Since then, inmates have been able to hone their vocational skills with some work experience and get ready for the mental and physical demands of employment after their release. The SCORE Bakery is one such example. Operating from Cluster A in the Changi Prison Complex, inmates learn and hone professional baking skills. Today, the bakery produces special goodies for sale during festive events. Indeed, the willingness of Singaporeans to purchase and consume goods produced by inmates is a stark difference from the disdain towards them in the past, a clear sign of social progress.

Following the amendment of the SCORE Act in 1987, SCORE expanded its scope and services, establishing the Job Placement Unit to provide employment assistance to inmates after their release. Employers were invited into prisons to conduct job interviews with inmates. Because of this, inmates were able to secure a job before their release, which helped to ease some anxieties from financial and employment insecurities. As SCORE’s placement unit expanded over the years, it introduced job profiling tools to assess

¹In 1965, SPS started a Prison Industries department so that inmates could 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. SCORE was thus established in 1976 as an independent statutory body focused on enhancing the employability of offenders and preparing them for their eventual reintegration into the national workforce (Wee, 2019).

and match inmates to industry sectors most suitable for them. The results were used to plan for the inmates' skills training in prison. This strategy promoted longer-term job retention, necessary for sustained financial stability. For ex-offenders in the community, SCORE set up the Industrial and Services Cooperative Society (ISCOS) in 1989 to cater to their employment and social needs. ISCOS also reached out to entrepreneurial ex-offenders who were keen to develop small business opportunities.

The successful job retention of ex-offenders depends on the support from employers and the workplace environment. SCORE actively partners with external employers to advocate for second chances and encourage them to hire ex-offenders. It works with Human Resource managers to chart progression plans for ex-offenders, and with ground supervisors to recommend constructive coaching methods. Ex-offenders can thus continue to develop in their jobs, which in turn increases job retention.

Over the years, SCORE has provided skills training to over 200,000 inmates, and helped over 100,000 ex-offenders secure jobs (Tan & Tan, 2020). In 2019, 64% of ex-offenders assisted by SCORE attained 6-month job retention. Over 5,900 employers have registered with SCORE, committed to giving ex-offenders opportunities in the job market. Ex-offenders are given the opportunity to become productive members of society and choose a better path for themselves after their release. In 2020, Sumit Agarwal, a professor from the National University of Singapore, conducted a research study on the effects of SCORE's employment assistance programme on ex-offenders. By studying ex-offenders released from 2010 to 2016 for a two-year post-release period, Agarwal observed that SCORE's employment assistance had, in particular, raised the employment rate of high-risk ex-offenders by 4.5 percentage points, while lowering their recidivism rate by 8.3 percentage points. Overall, SCORE's efforts helped to reduce the "probability of reoffending by 11.95% (effect size), which decreased the recidivism rate by 3.2%". Agarwal's research outcomes affirmed SCORE's mission in boosting the employability of ex-offenders to reduce recidivism rates. (Agarwal, 2021)

Family Ties

Besides employment, ex-offenders need strong family and social support to tide over rough times. SCORE supports this in various ways: it is the secretariat of the YRP, and coordinates the Project's strategic planning, events and fundraising efforts with SPS. It oversees two shelters – New Hope Community Services and HCSA Highpoint – that cater to ex-offenders that struggle with post-release accommodation needs. SCORE is also the secretariat for the Community Action for the Rehabilitation of Ex-offenders (CARE) Network, which is an "alliance of various Social Service Agencies (SSAs) and Government Organisations dedicated to community engagement, coordination of aftercare efforts and enhancing service delivery for ex-offenders and their families" (Yellow Ribbon Singapore, 2019). To date, SCORE maintains active partnership with over 300 community partners.

Social support is not limited to inmates and ex-offenders. The CARE Network is also committed to help their families, who are often hardest hit by the actions and incarceration of their loved ones. For example, in 2014, the Yellow Brick Road programme under the Yellow Ribbon Fund was established to tackle the damaging impact of incarceration on inmates' families and children. It also aims to prevent intergenerational offending by providing offenders' children with various enrichment programmes to foster stronger social-emotional development. Through this, the community provides ample support for offenders' families, so that they in turn can build a conducive environment at home that will later boost the offenders' reintegration (Yellow Ribbon Singapore, 2020).

The successful reintegration of offenders does not just happen within prison walls. Society – both public and private domains – must play their part in building inclusive and conducive environments and give ex-offenders another chance. Ex-offenders too have to take personal responsibility for their rehabilitation and have the determination to overcome the various challenges in their reintegration journey.

CHALLENGES FACED IN ASSISTING EX-OFFENDERS IN A CONSTANTLY CHANGING WORLD

Low Education and Digital Divide

According to the Annual Statistics released by SPS in 2020, as of 31 Dec 2019, 74% of the inmate population in the Drug Rehabilitation Centres have secondary or lower levels of education. For the convicted penal inmate population, the figure increases to 82%. These inmates did not advance their education due to challenging circumstances or personal decisions. As a result, they often find their career options limited to vocational training and jobs within the service industry, or labor-intensive positions. This includes F&B service crew positions, courier and delivery jobs, as well as positions in the cleaning industry. These jobs usually come with lower salaries. Having lower educational qualifications thus put ex-offenders at a disadvantage in a knowledge-based economy.

While SkillsFuture Singapore and Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) have established the Training and Adult Education Industry Digital Plan 2020 to boost the local industrial transformation by helping small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) digitalise and automate their work processes, many challenges remain for low skilled workers. For example, the courses offered to bridge the digital divide often require at least some knowledge of technological skills on top of proficiency in literacy and numeracy. Since a significant percentage of inmates have below secondary education, it is unlikely that they can reap the full benefits of these courses. They may be able to catch up if they have substantial employment experience, but that could still be interrupted by incarceration.

Gaps in Society's Support for Offenders

As ex-offenders grapple with their future employability, community support remains vital

to prevent recidivism. While Singapore has witnessed a commendable decline in the two-year recidivism rate, the five-year recidivism rate remains rather high, standing at 41% for the 2013 release cohort (Ng, 2019). This suggests that current efforts could be revised to sufficiently address longer-term issues that emerge after the second year of ex-offenders' release, so that they could have a more persistent impact against the risk of re-offending. More research relating to long-term recidivism is recommended.

One possible gap in social support could be the community's perception of ex-offenders. Undeniably, Singaporeans generally practise and express acceptance of ex-offenders. However, it usually comes with the condition that ex-offenders make "better choices" in life from thereon to avoid reoffending. If ex-offenders slip and make "poor choices", especially after crossing the two-year mark after their release, they are harshly criticised and society might even withdraw its support. At the root of our reactions is the misconception that ex-offenders have complete agency over their lives and should know better than to make poor choices.

But this is often not the case. Many ex-offenders have lower educational backgrounds, so the jobs they take up usually pay lower salaries that push them into lower socioeconomic classes. In 2020, REACH Singapore conducted a listening point exercise with offenders at the Lloyd Leas Supervision Centre. According to their responses, one of the top worries of ex-offenders is financial stability. Without a good salary, they struggle to make ends meet and take care of their families. Studies have shown that financial stress reduces an individual's ability to plan for the long-term because of the scarcity mindset:

²The Yellow Ribbon Fund was established in 2004 as the country's first charitable fund that provides financial support to (i) rehabilitative and aftercare services for inmates and ex-offenders, (ii) support programmes for inmates and ex-offenders' families, as well as (iii) public awareness programmes to increase public support for the Yellow Ribbon cause (Yellow Ribbon Singapore, 2021).

³About 40% of the ex-offenders assisted by YRSG each year are former inmates of the DRCs.

"one's attention gets consumed by immediate problems, and one's best long-term interests are rarely considered", resulting in "inferior choices" (Paulo & Alshahab, 2018). These poor choices include poor financial planning, and resorting to deviant means to get more resources to make ends meet when one is desperate. While this does not justify nor excuse criminal behaviour, we have to acknowledge the difficulties and barriers they face, and provide them with means of addressing these barriers in a systematic and law-abiding manner. This includes giving them better support at work, at home, and in their communities, beyond the second year of their release.

Finally, we ought to remember that a successful reintegration does not stop at stable employment, financial independence, having a healthy lifestyle, and having a pro-social support group. These are essential, but successful reintegration should go one step further and consider the ways that ex-offenders can be empowered to give back to their society. Ex-offenders deserve a chance to leave unique and bright legacies.

SCORE'S FUTURE STRATEGIES AND REBRANDING AS YELLOW RIBBON SINGAPORE

In view of these considerations, SCORE decided to spearhead the next lap of the Yellow Ribbon cause.

For a start, SCORE came to recognise that its name no longer reflects its purpose in society. In a series of public engagements, many members of the public admitted to having no knowledge of SCORE's purpose and work. The name SCORE was also frequently confused with other brands and even gambling. If the organisation wished to continue its efforts and advocacy, its name must be well-known and instinctively associated with the cause.

After rounds of consultation with its beneficiaries, partners and staff, SCORE officially rebranded itself as Yellow Ribbon Singapore (YRSG) in May 2020. In doing so, YRSG reaffirms its aim to champion the cause of Second Chances for ex-offenders. YRSG recognises that it is a vessel to galvanise society, coordinate and unite existing agencies under the Yellow Ribbon umbrella for the larger cause of supporting ex-offenders; it does not presume to subsume the entire cause itself.

YRSG has also established a new Strategic Framework to chart a new direction for the next decade in response to the evolving socio-political and economic climates. In particular, it looks towards the following three frameworks to tackle current gaps and forge a path into the future:

- From Training in Prison to Lifelong Learning & Skills Deepening
- From Job Placement to Long Term Career Development
- From Community Engagement to Collective Impact by Whole of Nation

From Training in Prison to Lifelong Learning & Skills Deepening

It is no longer enough to simply conduct vocational training in prison. Inmates must take charge of their own learning and continue to climb the skills ladder after their release in order to keep up with fast changes in the economy. If they wish to remain employable, they must be adaptable and continue to learn new skills and upskill after their release.

To facilitate this, YRSG plans to expand its current job profiling techniques to include **career interest assessments** to understand the career ambitions of inmates, as well as the gaps in their skillsets that require training to reach their target careers. YRSG will also expand its current training pathways to ensure that they remain relevant for inmates, regardless of their profiles. It will continue to review its skills training programmes and align them with the national frameworks and initiatives from Workforce Singapore (WSG) and SkillsFuture Singapore. It also looks to partner with WSG and Continuing Education and Training Centres to provide ex-offenders with career conversion programmes.

YRSG is also building a Digital Literacy Masterplan for inmates, which includes developing tiered training pathways for inmates of different technological savviness, following Agarwal's recommendations to enable inmates to "acquire higher cognitive and digital skills progressively" (2021). Outside of training, it is important that inmates have opportunities to use and be exposed to digital tools. YRSG aims to develop a digital ecosystem within prison walls,

by adopting the use of tablets for inmates to access various career resources. This will boost inmates' digital savviness, to help them adapt better in an increasingly digitalised job market.

Beyond the prison cells, YRSG hopes to shape offenders' mindset and attitude towards lifelong learning and career ambition. Recognising the logistical and financial limitations of conducting training courses in prisons, YRSG taps on public resources by arranging for inmates to complete their training in the community. With more resources, inmates can potentially advance their skills beyond what they were able to learn in prison. To ensure that inmates can apply their skills at work and continue to receive upgrading opportunities from their employers, YRSG encourages partner employers to introduce a mentoring system at work to continuously track ex-offenders' progress. Finally, YRSG's dedicated team of career coaches continues to work with ex-offenders after their release. They keep track of their progress at work, and provide timely advice to ex-offenders about advancing their skillsets for better opportunities at work.

From job placement to long term career

The post-release employment landscape for ex-offenders is fast-paced as the economy becomes more digitalised. It is not sufficient for YRSG to ensure placement into jobs prior to their release. YRSG must work with inmates and ex-offenders to chart their long-term career pathways and development goals so that they are able to adapt, change, and thrive in a competitive job market.

This needs to be facilitated upstream: skills training programmes should not be held with short-term goals of immediate employment after release, but consider competencies potentially required by future employers and digitalised industries. Skills training programmes and employment assistance should also be aligned with current Industry Transformation Maps. These efforts aim to help ex-offenders receive the right skills aligned with targeted sectors after their release. Subsequently, it will be easier for them to seek relevant training courses in the community to deepen their competencies.

There should also be a nexus between the skills acquired and jobs secured by ex-offenders. This is necessary to promote career stability and growth opportunities for ex-offenders. To do this, YRSG will establish the **"Train and Place" (TAP) and Grow initiative**, where YRSG partners various employers and training institutions to set up training academies in prison. Employers can also offer internships, further traineeships, or employment to well-performing ex-offenders. To this end, YRSG signed, in 2019 and 2020, separate agreements with the Singapore Precision Engineering & Technology Association (SPETA), and Mediacorp, to set up training academies for Precision Engineering, and Media skills (Tan & Tan, 2020; Mediacorp, 2020; Wong, 2020). These fields – Precision Engineering, Information and Communications Technology, and Media – have been identified in as industries that will undergo robust transformations and development. Allowing inmates to develop skills in these sectors will give them a competitive footing in the industries after their release.

Next, YRSG intends to develop a **throughcare approach to skills and career development**. For instance, it will enhance career coaching and placement support, to better advise and support ex-offenders in planning their career paths. The YRSG placement team will ensure that inmates have a good match to secured jobs, based on their learned skills, on top of competitive salaries. Career coaches will also work closely with employers and ex-offenders to advance the latter's competencies and position in the workforce. Beyond that, apprenticeship initiatives will also be introduced to ensure continuity of learned skills in ex-offenders' careers.

In time, YRSG aims to prevent ex-offenders from stagnating in their careers. It will introduce differentiated tiers of career pathways, so that ex-offenders have enough opportunities for career growth.

With these strategies, YRSG hopes to set a good foundation for preparing inmates for the challenges of future economies. Inmates will be equipped with skillsets that are relevant in today's job markets, and opens doors of

opportunities for them in the future. More importantly, inmates have to develop a positive mindset towards lifelong learning and career progression. Inmates who advance in their careers can continue to be financially independent and exposed to prosocial networks, which facilitate their desistance from crime.

From Community Engagement to Collective Impact by Whole of Nation

Besides employment, community support for aftercare is crucial for successful reintegration. More can be done to bring down the five-year recidivism rates. Members of the CARE Network, its partners, as well as ex-offenders have embarked on a strategic review and developed a framework for action to lower the recidivism rate.

To execute the strategies optimally, the CARE Network will invest in enhancing the **professional capabilities of aftercare institutions**. It looks to develop a competency framework and training roadmap to enhance the capabilities of these institutions. Beyond the professional institutions, it aims to empower the community by supporting ground-up initiatives by Yellow Ribbon community advocates and desistors. Finally, it will champion the Beyond Second Chances movement by providing inmates and ex-offenders with opportunities to give back to society. For instance, inmates have had the opportunity to **pay it forward** as the country battled with COVID-19 in 2020. They baked treats at the YR Industries Bakery and sent them to frontline workers as a display of their appreciation (Tan & Tan, 2020). Some inmates volunteered for the Mask for Migrants Project to sew reusable masks for migrant workers. Others participated in #CareKitWithLove, producing hand-made mask pouches for beneficiaries of the Rainbow Centre (Yellow Ribbon Singapore, 2020; Tan & Tan, 2020).

YRSG recognises that besides volunteering for good causes, successful desistors are in an excellent position to motivate other ex-offenders, especially since they have braved through the same arduous journey. YRSG aims to identify and

empower successful desistors to be mentors for struggling ex-offenders, in hope of motivating the latter group through challenging times.

With strengthened awareness and actions, the community can better support ex-offenders through their financial and emotional challenges at different phases of their reintegration journey. They can better manage their triggers instead of resorting to crime. These strategies also recognise that ex-offenders can progress beyond being mere recipients of second chances. When they are ready, they can also participate in social initiatives to give back to society. For ex-offenders who have struggled with negative labels, these initiatives allow them to create a more positive identity, which adds further motivation to their reintegration.

CONCLUSION

As society continues to advance, YRSG hopes to continue its mission of empowering ex-offenders with skills and career mobility, so that they do not get left behind in an increasingly digitalised global economy. Ex-offenders have to be able to take care of themselves and their loved ones financially, have access to a pro-social support network with their colleagues at work, and lead a structured lifestyle, in order to avoid potential triggers that could arise from the lack thereof of the above. Beyond increasing their skillsets and employability, YRSG recognises the need to galvanise society to increase mindshare of the Yellow Ribbon cause.

We can equip ex-offenders with relevant vocational skills and train their work ethic, but we need employers to practise inclusive hiring and build conducive workplace environments. We can inspire ex-offenders to give back to society, but we rely on our partners for actual opportunities for them to contribute positively. Finally, we can provide them with social support, but often the best support comes from those who have walked their journeys before, for they are in the best position to empathise and inspire others to turn their lives around, just as they did, Beyond Second Chances.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ng Hui Ling

joined YRSG as a Career Coach in 2016 shortly after her graduation from NTU, where she majored in Sociology. She assisted over 200 ex-offenders during her stint, supporting them through their reintegration journey. For her efforts, Hui Ling was given the SCORE Special Commendation award in 2018. In April 2020, Hui Ling joined Strategy@YR division as an Associate with YRSG's new Research, Policy and Analytics Unit. The newly formed unit is instrumental in YRSG's transformation, spearheading organisational change through digitalisation and research capabilities.

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YELLOW RIBBON SINGAPORE'S IMPACT ON INMATE RECIDIVISM RATES

Sumit Agarwal
National University of Singapore

ABSTRACT

This study looks at the impact of Yellow Ribbon Singapore's (YRSG) employment assistance for inmates by quantifying YRSG's value add to society in terms of reducing the recidivism rate, inmates' employment outcomes as well as the potential cost savings and economic returns. A statistical and quantitative methodology was used to estimate the effects of YRSG on the various measures of success based on seven outcomes. The data covered offenders' employment performance within two years after release for the period of 2010 to 2016 in Singapore. The key findings showed that having gone through YRSG employment assistance, i) the recidivism rate was improved, ii) the period of desistance prolonged, iii) the next sentence length shortened, iv) the employment rate improved, v) the time taken to secure a job reduced, vi) the average monthly earnings increased, and vii) the job retention period extended. The findings suggest that YRSG's employment assistance has pronounced positive effects on the recidivism rate and reveal that inmates perform better in the employment market.

INTRODUCTION

Recidivism rate is defined as the percentage of inmates in every cohort released who re-offend

and subsequently return to prison within two years. Singapore's recidivism rate remains low and stable over the years, and consistently achieved better results compared to many international counterparts.



Note: CY2015, CY2016 and CY2017 recidivism rates are not available for all countries.

Figure 1. Recidivism Rates

Due to the severe consequences of crimes, it is essential to understand measures that can lower the crime rate and the rate of recidivism. However, related policy guidance is rare, especially for Asian countries. One important reason is the data limitation; we usually require a panel dataset for prisoners' criminal behaviours and demographic factors. In this report, we try to address this question by exploiting a unique dataset from the Singapore Prison Service (SPS) and YRSG, which contains a detailed record of the universe of ex-offenders in Singapore released between 2010 to 2016. We used rich controls and sub-segment analysis to alleviate the selection issues, although even with rich information on inmates, the endogeneity problem may still be of concern as inmates are not randomly sent to prison.

Singapore is well known as one of the safest places around the world. Many people attribute Singapore's low crime rates to its strong arm of the law and severe penalties. What is lesser known is the effort the Singapore government has put into helping inmates' successful reintegration into society after release. Employment is a crucial factor in the successful reintegration of offenders. YRSG's employment assistance aims to help inmates realise their career potential and strengthen their career mobility. Key components of YRSG's employment assistance include: i) job profiling, ii) skills training, iii) job placement ,and iv) job retention support. In this report, we evaluate the

effectiveness of YRSG's employment assistance in lowering the reoffending rate and enhancing the employment performance of inmates.

Data Sources and Descriptive Statistics

The dataset contains all inmates' employment performance within two years after release from 2010 to 2016, along with their demographic factors. It is a cross-sectional data, tracking ex-offenders' performance for two years after release. If individuals reoffend after two years, they will re-enter the dataset but assigned with a new ID.

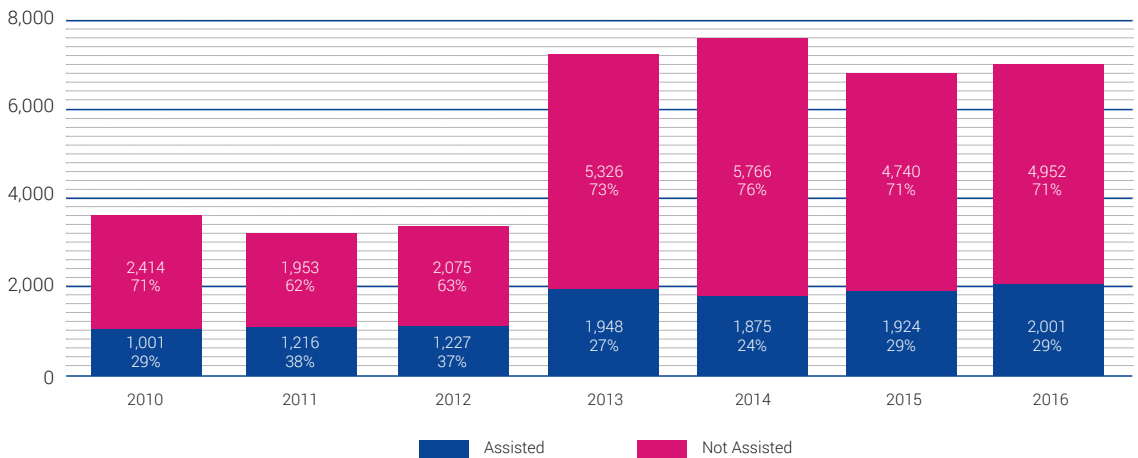
Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics of inmates released from prison from 2010 to 2016 in Singapore. Around 90% of inmates are male, 80% lowly-educated with education levels equal to or below secondary school, and at the prime-working-age on average. Three points are noteworthy. First, the YRSG programme participation rate is around 42.1%. It is not a small number but there is still some room for improvement. Second, the average recidivism rate in Singapore is stable at 26.5%, much lower than in many other developed countries, such as 42.2% in New Zealand, 37.8% in Western Australia, 38.9% in Scotland, and so on, according to the data from SPS. Third, most ex-offenders assisted by YRSG (93.8%) successfully secured a job after release, which is vital for them to integrate into society.

Table 1. Data Profile

VARIABLES	(1) N	(2) Mean	(3) SD	(4) min	(5) max
Male=1, Female=0	38,418	0.894	0.308	0	1
Education	38,418	1.861	0.709	0	3
Age at Year of Release	38,418	39.220	11.900	15	86
YRSG programme participation (Y=1, N=0)	38,418	0.421	0.494	0	1
Recidivate (Y=1, N=0)	38,418	0.265	0.442	0	1
Employment (Y=1, N=0)	38,418	0.938	0.241	0	1

Notes: Education is defined as: No formal education=0, Primary=1, Secondary=2, Above secondary=3.

Employment is defined as the individual having at least one record of monthly salary. According to YRSG, zero denotes employment with zero payment.



Note: 11,424 inmates released from 2010-2012 were excluded from the research study as their risk profiles were not classified.

Figure 2. Overall Participation of YRSG's Employment Assistance

Key Trends of Offenders' Participation

In this section, we aim to study the profiles of inmates who tend to participate in YRSG's employment assistance. We first demonstrate how the number of released inmates and the rate of inmates' participation in YRSG employment assistance evolve with time. As shown in Figure 2, the blue bars denote the size and the share of assisted inmates in certain years, while the pink bars represent the statistics for inmates who were not assisted. In 2016, 29% of the released inmates were assisted by YRSG.

We then explored how the inmates assisted by YRSG vary by the demographic factors including risk levels, age, and education levels. If we can better understand their characteristics, specific actions could be designed to increase the participation rate.

First, in Figure 3, we find inmates assisted belong to the moderate risk group (32.2%), followed by the high risk group (25.5%) and the low risk group (25.4%). The SPS uses the Risk-Needs-and-Responsivity (RNR) Model, an internationally recognised model for treatment and assessment of offenders, to assess criminogenic risks and rehabilitation needs of each inmate, and charts appropriate programmes for intervention based on their identified risks and needs (Wee, 2019). Suitable and eligible inmates may be employed on SPS's Community-based Programme, where employment is compulsory. YRSG's employment assistance is open to all inmates, regardless of their risk levels.

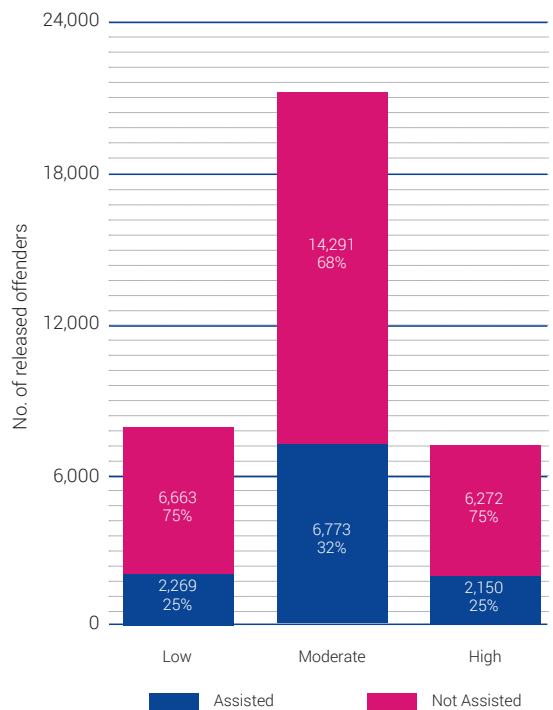


Figure 3. By Risk Level

Regarding the education level of inmates, we find, as shown in Figure 4, that around 60% of those assisted have primary or secondary school education. More inmates with secondary education (32%) have been assisted by YRSG. Finally, in Figure 5, we find that the numbers assisted in different age groups ranging from 20-59 years is about 30% each.



Figure 4. By Education Level

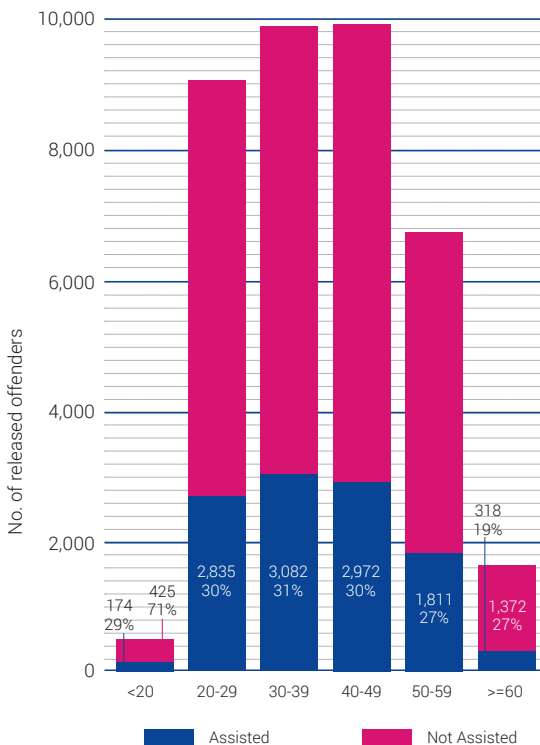


Figure 5. By Age

METHODOLOGY: REGRESSION ANALYSIS

To evaluate the impact of YRSG’s employment assistance, we exploit a linear model. Formally, the specification can be written as:

$$Y_i = \beta YRSG_i + \Theta X_i + Y_d + \epsilon_{id}$$

Where Y_i are the recidivism outcomes and the employment outcomes of inmate i , including the recidivism rate, the period of desistance, the next sentence length, the employment rate, the time taken to secure job, the average monthly earnings, and the job retention period. $YRSG_i$ denotes the variable of interest, equalling to 1 if inmate i participated in the programme, or otherwise zero. The term X_{id} is a vector of individual i ’s pre-determined characteristics, including gender, risk level, education and age attainment. Since the employment assistance may change contents across years, we include the year fixed effects, denoted by Y_d . The coefficient of interest is β , which represents the effects of inmates participating in YRSG’s employment assistance.

We first estimated the equation using the full sample, and then conducted sub-segment analysis based on the risk levels of inmates.

SUMMARY OF TOPLINE FINDINGS

Through the research study, seven topline findings are observed:

Recidivism Outcomes	
Finding 1	Recidivism rate decreased by 3.2% points
Finding 2	Period of desistance prolonged by 2.03 months
Finding 3	Next sentence length shortened by 10.42 months
Employment Outcomes	
Finding 4	Employment rate improved by 7.2% points
Finding 5	Time taken to secure job reduced by 0.64 months
Finding 6	Average monthly salary increased by \$135.24
Finding 7	Job retention period extended by 0.95 months

Each topline finding is further elaborated below. The impacts on inmates' risk and education levels were also analysed for each finding.¹

Finding 1: Recidivism Rate

YRSG's employment assistance has helped to reduce the probability of reoffending by 11.95% (effect size), which decreased the recidivism rate by 3.2%. The impact is largest for inmates of high risk and above secondary level education.

Categories	Recidivism Rate	Impact
Risk	8.3% points lower for High Risk	17.33%
Education	3.5% points lower for Above Secondary	18.65%

Finding 2: Period of Desistance

YRSG's employment assistance has helped to increase the probability of offenders remaining crime and drug free by 16.36% (effect size), which increased the period of desistance by 2.03 months. The impact is largest for inmates of high risk, and primary level education.

Category	Period of Desistance (months)	Impact
Risk	Increased by 2.3 months for High Risk	20.85%
Education	Increased by 2.32 months for Primary Education	19.36%

Finding 3: Next Sentence Length

YRSG's employment assistance has helped to decrease the length of next sentence by 25.55% (effect size), which reduced the next sentence length by 10.42 months. The impact is largest for inmates of low risk and secondary level education.

Category	Next Sentence Length (Months)	Impact
Risk	Reduced by 9.197 months for Low Risk	33.45%
Education	Reduced by 14.89 months for Secondary	37%

Finding 4: Employment Rate

YRSG's employment assistance has helped to increase the inmates' probability of being employed by 7.68% (effect size), which improved the employment rate by 7.2% points. The impact is largest for inmates of low risk and primary level education.

Categories	Employment Rate	Impact
Risk	Improved by 11.7% for Low Risk	12.62%
Education	Improved by 6.3% for Primary	6.83%

Finding 5: Time taken to Secure Job

YRSG's employment assistance has helped to decrease the time taken by inmates to secure jobs by 35.73% (effect size), which reduced the overall time taken to secure job by 0.64 months. The impact is largest for offenders of low risk. The impact is also similar across all education levels.

Category	Time taken to Secure Jobs (Months)	Impact
Risk	Reduced by 1.11 months for Low Risk	65.16%
Education	Reduced by 0.50 months for Primary	33.22%
	Reduced by 0.53 months for Secondary	37.01%
	Reduced by 0.51 months for Above Secondary	38.93%

Finding 6: Average Monthly Salary

YRSG's employment assistance has helped to increase the average monthly earnings of inmates by 13.91% (effect size), which increased the earnings by \$135.24. The impact is largest for offenders of high risk, primary level and secondary level education.

Category	Average Monthly Earnings	Impact
Risk	Increased by \$104.48 for High Risk	65.16%
Education	Increased by \$129.81 for Primary	20.15%
	Increased by \$136.87 for Secondary	15.24%

¹The regression tables for the various findings are available from YRSG. Please write to Wee Zi TAN at corpcomms@yellowribbon.gov.sg.

The finding also highlights the salary gap among risk levels (see table below for the mean monthly salary²). Among the risk levels, there is a huge salary gap between low risk and the higher risk levels (both high and moderate risk).

Risk	Low Risk	Moderate Risk	High Risk
	\$1,824.13	\$807.23	\$488.13

Finding 7: Job Retention Period

YRSG's employment assistance has helped to increase inmates' length of employment 4.55% (effect size), which extended the overall job retention period by 0.95 months. The impact is largest for offenders of moderate and low and primary level education.

Category	Job Retention Period (months)	Impact
Risk	Increased by 1.25 months for Moderate Risk	65.16%
	Increased by 1.10 months for Low Risk	5.68%
Education	Increased by 0.85 months for Primary	4.19%

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study can help to sharpen YRSG's focus in providing employment interventions for offenders. Three proposed implications are considered:

- Expanding the numbers of high risk inmates assisted;
- Future proofing the employability of inmates; and
- Calculating the estimated social and economic returns

Expand Numbers of High Risk Inmates Assisted

The findings have shown that high risk inmates have benefited from YRSG's employment

assistance. The specific impact on high risk inmates is as shown below:

Recidivism Outcomes for High Risk	
Finding 1	Recidivism rate decreased by 8.3% points
Finding 2	Period of desistance prolonged by 2.30 months
Finding 3	Next sentence length shortened by 11.76 months
Employment Outcomes for High Risk	
Finding 4	Employment rate improved by 4.5% points
Finding 5	Time taken to secure job reduced by 0.35 months
Finding 6	Average monthly earnings increased by \$104.48
Finding 7	Job retention period extended by 0.57 months

The findings have also revealed that YRSG has only assisted a smaller proportion (25%) of high risk inmates released from 2010 to 2016. The recidivism rate of inmates has remained stable at 26.5% in recent years. Targeting a large proportion of high risk inmates for employment assistance will help to reduce the overall recidivism rate in future. YRSG can consider prioritising its resources to expand the number of high risk inmates for employment, over the next few years. To better support this group, YRSG would need to work closely with SPS in developing a throughcare approach and institute a "wrap around" reintegration support to enable high risk inmates to remain gainfully employed.

Future Proofing the Employability of Inmates

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an acceleration in digital adoption, amidst restructuring at both economic and industry sector levels. Most Rank-and-File jobs are expected to disappear or be redesigned, with sustained digital innovation. Job seekers with lower academic qualifications will need greater assistance to upskill and remain relevant in the future economy.

²The salary data used in this study are derived from administrative sources such as contributions to the Central Provident Fund. Actual salaries may thus be higher.

The majority of the inmates possess academic qualifications of secondary education and below. They will face challenges to reintegrate into the workforce, if they are not assisted to remain abreast with the evolving skills and job nature. Given this, YRSG's current employment assistance needs to move beyond helping offenders secure jobs. To keep up with the shifts in the economy, YRSG's assistance should focus on strengthening the career mobility of inmates through:

- a. Developing inmates' career aspirations and identity, so that they can make informed career decisions. Along with this, opportunities to develop careers and continual skills acquisition should be made available for the inmates to adapt and thrive in an evolving job market;
- b. Strengthening the nexus with industry sectors to remain abreast with industry developments and identify "future jobs" in growth sectors, where inmates can be trained and placed; and
- c. Enabling inmates to acquire higher cognitive and digital skills progressively to remain competitive in the labour force.

Estimated Social and Economic Returns

We conclude this work by conducting a back-of-envelope calculation for Singapore. McCollister, French, and Fang (2010) have reported the potential social costs, both tangible and intangible, for each crime type. Specifically, the social costs for a case of assault, rape, murder, robbery, larceny and burglary are US\$66,888, US\$240,776, US\$9 million, US\$42,310, US\$3,532 and US\$6,462. Based on 2016 data, the average cost weighted by crime rates in Singapore is US\$0.22 million per case. Based on our estimates, YRSG employment assistance reduces the recidivism rate by 3.2% per year. According to SPS, the number of inmates released in 2016 was 7,168. The estimated social cost reduced by YRSG per year is thus $7,168 \times 3.2\% \times \text{US\$}0.22 \text{ million} = \text{US\$}50.5 \text{ million}$ (S\$69.19 million, at the exchange rate 1.37).

Apart from the social cost savings, we also calculate the incremental economic gains to the society arising from YRSG's effort to secure employment for released inmates. Using data collected during 2010 to 2016 by administrative sources, we derive the average monthly salary per inmate who works to be S\$885.17, and thus the estimated economic returns contributed by YRSG per year (based on 2016 released cohort) is $7,168 \times 3.2\% \times \text{S\$}885.17 \times 12 = \text{S\$}2.44 \text{ million}$.

Therefore, the total social and economic return is the sum of S\$69.19 million and S\$2.44 million, equalling to S\$71.63 million. In other words, YRSG adds an estimated incremental value of S\$71.63 million to the state per year. This only estimates the direct incremental value. While there is high societal cost savings that cannot be quantified, YRSG is contributing to society beyond its budget allocation.

CONCLUSION

The number of ex-offenders who re-offended within two years of their release has remained low and stable. The overall recidivism rate for the 2016 cohort was then the lowest record in history at 23.7%. This has now been overtaken by the new all-time low of 22.1 per cent for the cohort released in 2018 (SPS, 2021). This achievement is inseparable from the efforts made by SPS and YRSG.

Based on our analysis, we find that YRSG participation has significant impact on released inmates' recidivism and employment outcomes. Overall, we find that the YRSG plays an important role in reducing the recidivism rate in Singapore and helping offenders perform better in the employment market. We acknowledge that these benefits may be partly due to the recovery state from the 2008 financial crisis which resulted in a better employment situation faced by the offenders, but we argue that without YRSG, these positive effects would not have remained strong after the early 2010s.

³The crime rates for assault, rape, murder, robbery, larceny and burglary were 46.8%, 16.0%, 1.60%, 0%, 15.4%, and 20.2%, respectively in Singapore in 2016, according to the Singapore Police Force.

⁴Our BOE calculation is based on 2010 US price data and may be subject to inflation, making our costs underestimated.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sumit Agarwal

is Low Tuck Kwong Distinguished Professor of Finance at the Business School and a Professor of Economics and Real Estate at the National University of Singapore. In the past, he has held positions as a Professor of Finance at the Business School, Georgetown University. Before that he was a senior financial economist in the research department at the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, and prior to joining the Chicago Fed, he was a senior vice president and credit risk management executive in the Small Business Risk Solutions Group of Bank of America.

Sumit's research interests include issues relating to financial institutions, household finance, behavioural finance, international finance, real estate markets and capital markets. He has published over 90 research articles in journals like the *American Economic Review*, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *Journal of Political Economy*, *Journal of Finance*, *Journal of Financial Economics*, *Review of Financial Studies*, *Review of Economics and Statistics*, *Management Science*, *Journal of Financial Intermediation*, *Journal of Money, Credit, and Banking* among others. Additionally, he has co-written three books – *Household Finance: A Functional Approach*, *Kiasunomics*, and *Kiasunomics 2* – and also co-edited two collected volumes: *Impact of COVID-19 on Asian Economies and Policy Responses*, and *Household Credit Usage: Personal Debt and Mortgages*. He writes regular op-eds for *The Straits Times* and has been featured on various media outlets like the BBC, CNBC, and Fox on issues relating to finance, banking, and real estate markets.

Sumit's research is widely cited in leading newspapers and magazines like the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *The Economist*, and the U.S President's Report to Congress. He also runs a blog on household financial decision making called *Smart Finance*.

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