

## **Reintegrating ex-offenders a noble cause, but into what kind of a society?**

**Successful reintegration of ex-offenders is an important aspect of social inclusion, but have we been looking at this issue from the wrong point of view?**

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THE annual Yellow Ribbon run will take place tomorrow (Sep 17), reminding us of the importance of rehabilitation and reintegrating ex-offenders into society.

Many of us probably agree with the Yellow Ribbon Project that society should be more accepting of ex-offenders. Unfortunately, reintegrating ex-offenders remains a complex, multi-dimensional challenge.

In the past two decades, our criminal justice system has taken the lead in showing willingness to “forgive and forget”.

The Registration of Criminals Act was amended in 2005 to allow those convicted of less serious crimes to have their record considered spent if they stayed “clean” for a five-year period. This means that, in most situations, they can lawfully say that they have no criminal record when asked.

Since 1998, the Singapore Prisons Service has also moved beyond its custodial function, towards the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders as responsible citizens.

Realising that this is an issue beyond the scope of any single agency, Prisons set up a Community Action for the Rehabilitation of Ex-offenders Network to coordinate the efforts of various organisations, including voluntary welfare organisations as well as other groups affiliated with the National Council of Social Service and the Ministry of Social and Family Development.

A statutory board under the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (SCORE), has also been set up to oversee the prison industry, employment, and skills training for inmates.

### **Multiple dimensions to successful integration**

Reintegration continues to be challenging despite such efforts.

Employment and employability pose a huge hurdle. Without jobs that provide financial security, the seemingly smaller problems ex-offenders face can snowball and become intractable.

A lot of work has been done to encourage employers to hire ex-offenders – in 2015, there was a 96 per cent success rate for the about 2,000 inmates referred to SCORE. But what happens to the other inmates who have not been referred?

Social enterprises like restaurant chain Eighteen Chefs have also received a lot of media attention, but more focus on mainstream employers is needed.

The influence of one's social circles is a crucial but oft neglected aspect of reintegration. Former fellow gang members may lead ex-offenders to fall back to bad ways.

Developing meaningful interventions becomes deeply personal, because what is most needed is for an ex-offender to feel encouraged and safe in a caring and supportive network.

The family has also increasingly attracted the focus of aftercare programmes because families are an immediate and important source of support for an ex-offender, yet they are also often the silent victims of incarceration. One absent parent means that the other has to work doubly hard to provide financially and emotionally for their kids.

Pilot programmes that have explored support for the families of ex-offenders, such as the ISCOS Fairy Godmother programme, provide mentoring and enrichment workshops.

One ex-offender suggested to us that whether one turns back to a life of crime can depend entirely on who's waiting at the gates on the day of their release: One's family, social worker or gang members.

### **Society as much the problem as the solution**

In 2007, a perception survey commissioned by Prisons showed that more than 60 per cent of respondents had generally positive attitudes towards ex-offenders. But ex-offenders say many potential employers still hold their past against them.

In fact, Benny Teo, owner of Eighteen Chefs, reflected in a [2015 radio interview](#): "In my lifetime, I will never be able to see Singapore society really helping ex-offenders, hiring them, helping them integrate and giving them a chance." Public support for ex-offenders needs to go beyond sharing Facebook posts and taking part in the Yellow Ribbon run.

Perhaps, all this focus on downstream efforts to reintegrate ex-offenders misses a key root cause of the issue — many ex-offenders were never truly integrated into society to begin with.

Ours is a society that believes strongly in personal responsibility and accountability, particularly when it comes to serving time for one's crimes. Yet when we look at the profile of ex-offenders, a common trend is that many seem to have lacked nurturing role models, rewarding experiences at school or work, and constructive friendships.

These events and circumstances shape them, putting some at a higher risk of engaging in criminal activities.

While we claim to support reintegration of ex-offenders and assistance for the less fortunate, it may be prudent to take a step back to consider if we have become a society that overly privileges performance, and disproportionately allocates resources to grooming those most likely to succeed. If so, why would marginalised individuals want to subscribe to mainstream values?

Today, teachers may not have adequate resources to focus attention on weaker students given their class size. Employers may turn away ex-offenders, thinking it is the responsibility of other bigger firms to hire “vulnerable groups”.

Neighbours who notice family problems next door may call the Family Service Centre or police, but fail to consider befriending the troubled family themselves.

Whether they are conscious or not, such attitudes send a message that marginalised individuals are always “someone else’s problem”.

The reintegration of ex-offenders should thus start with a reflection on the kind of society we have come to accept as normal.

Instead of wondering how we might get more people to accept ex-offenders, perhaps we should be asking if we are an inclusive community that they would want to be a part of.

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