

Eradicating the Drug Menace: No One Left Behind

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For the average Singaporean, it is far easier to believe that the drug problem exists far away—in another country, another neighbourhood, amongst another community, an alien and invisible segment of our society. Many of us learnt about drugs through early preventive education. Surely, we can all recall those school assemblies where stern-faced officers from the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB), would show us slides with photos and videos of the various drugs and the terrifying impacts that their use can have on the human body and appearance.

We might also have penned some messages about staying drug-free on one of those pledge cards handed out at anti-drug roadshows. We remember as children how we would be encouraged to pin an always-fraying green-and-white ribbon to the collars of our school uniforms for one month as part of the ‘Say No to Drugs’ campaign. We might also have been approached by a man with a carabiner of pens and keychains, who claimed to be an ex-drug offender working with a social enterprise to get his life back on track, selling the items at two dollars apiece, and whom, more often than not, we would wave away, avoiding eye contact and hoping the twinges of our guilt would wash away as swiftly as he would from our presence.

Adding to the ongoing discussions on drugs, AMP and its research subsidiary, Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA), had recently concluded the Community in Review (CIR) 2019 seminar, titled *Addressing the Drug Menace: Rethinking Preventive, Rehabilitative and Reintegration Strategies* on 16 March 2019. It brought together a spectrum of perspectives from various key players in the battle against drugs in Singapore such as the state authorities, represented by Senior Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Health, Mr Amrin Amin; the warm and affable academics, Associate Professor Ganapathy Narayanan from National University Singapore (NUS) and Dr Justin Lee of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at NUS; and the practitioners with invaluable on the ground knowledge of working with drug abusers, Associate Psychologist Mr Cher Jing En of the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA) and the Deputy Head of Home at the PERTAPIS Halfway House, Mr Muhammad Sufian Muhammad Salim. Most precious, perhaps, were the perspectives from the former drug users themselves, who were in recovery and who were brave enough to share their experiences during the question and answer sessions.

Through these speakers and the discussion sessions following their panels, members of the audience were able to glean insights into the latest structural framework to tackle drug offences—codified mainly by the current laws and series of correctional programmes—the underlying gaps in current approaches, the dynamism inherent in the problem, as well as the help that is available to drug users, which ensures that their families’ needs are met during the period of incarceration and prepares them for reintegration into society, and the lived experiences of those who had gone through the system.

Faces of drugs in our society

For those who have grown up on the rough side of town such as in poorer neighbourhoods with a high concentration of one- and two-room flats, or in blocks of government rental flats where interiorities spill out into common corridors, experiences with the drug world can mean walking past a man at the staircase landing, sitting on his haunches while an empty can of glue or a used needle sat by the bare feet he was clutching as he rocked back and forth in a drugged up haze. It can mean being made an offer or two of a 'hit' while you were on your way back home from school, confused and fatigued. It can mean knowing which flat just got hit and whose father just got hauled off by CNB officers.

The profile of drug abusers are also shifting to middle to higher income groups between the ages of 20 to 29, who are better educated with stable family environments. In his speech at the CIR, Mr Amrin attributed this rise to increasingly liberal attitudes towards drugs, likely bolstered by increased representations of casual drug use in popular media, the legalisation of drugs such as marijuana in various countries around the world, and greater access to drug peddlers through the internet.

We can imagine this group—gunning to try new and exciting things, with access to a wealth of information at their fingertips, and increasingly sceptical of authority—who may find the state's rigid, long-held positions on drugs rather antiquated, backdated and even exclusionary. So, they would not see much harm in going to a friend's condominium apartment or dormitory for a bit of pot.

Challenges to staying clean

The drug environment in Singapore is becoming a varied one, with different segments presenting a different set of needs, perceptions, and resources (or lack thereof) when it comes to mitigating drug abuse and its arising challenges. These challenges can be understood through, as Assoc Prof Ganapathy shared at the CIR, the spheres of influence, rehabilitation, reintegration and recidivism, all of which form an interlinking nexus within a drug user's life.

Recidivism is a cause for concern as the numbers reveal that two-thirds of drug offenders are return offenders. While the two-year recidivism rates have fallen from 60% to 28% between 1996 and 2015, the five-year recidivism rates still stands at about 60%, which means more find it challenging to reach five-year milestone when it comes to staying drug-free.¹ To help us gain some insight into why this might be so, both Assoc Prof Ganapathy and Dr Lee discussed the significant role that an individual's social capital can play on the spheres of influence and recidivism. An individual's social network, and its inherent group dynamics and ethos would determine his or her proximity to certain activities, including his or her access to criminal opportunities. In this respect, prison life may actually be rather counter-productive.

¹ Mr Amrin Amin's speech at the Community in Review 2019 seminar titled, "United Against Drugs: Community Progress and The Way Forward". Available at <https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/speeches/news/association-of-muslim-professionals-community-in-review-2019-united-against-drug-community-progress-and-the-way-forward-speech-by-mr-amrin-amin-senior-parliamentary-secretary-ministry-of-home-affairs-and-ministry-of-health>

To put this into perspective, a member of the audience at the CIR shared his experience of prison life. He revealed that while the rehabilitation programmes in prison are robust and fully engaging, it was in the quiet of night that the depths of an inmate's social reality would come to surface. He shared that inmates would talk about what they would do once they have served their sentences, which typically comprise alcohol, sex and gambling. Dr Lee, in his presentation, shared how these very activities, invited to by 'old friends' upon release, could be gateways back into taking drugs, leading to relapses and turning to crimes to feed their renewed habit.

In the article, "How do you escape Singapore's invisible prison?" featured in The Pride, writer Pan Jie humorously puts that "Prison is a LinkedIn for drug offenders", in that prison is exactly the place for drug users to network and forge friendships. This is not a hard fact to imagine. The spatial configuration of prison, with its shared, confining spaces, brings inmates—some 70% of whom are in there for drug-related offences—into close proximity. This cultivates what Jensen Lee, a coordinator for the Prison Fellowship of Singapore (PFS) and a former drug offender himself, calls a "drug-friendly ecosystem". Where before going to prison he had only one or two sources to get his drugs from, prison time could easily multiply that number. The police station, too, becomes a place for ex-offenders to meet and catch up as they gather there for mandatory urine tests.²

Freedom, as it turns out, may not always be a boon for former drug users looking to turn their lives around. In his presentation, Dr Lee revealed the challenges that families would often face when there is an incarcerated member. Due to the restrictions and regulations imposed on written correspondence and face-to-face time, it is often difficult to maintain meaningful relationships or engage in reparative conversations throughout one's period of incarceration. Often, and especially after repeated incarcerations have strained, even broken, familial ties, the ex-offender's social circle would end up being made up of only people with similar profiles.

As inmates, their housing situation may also have been compromised, as shared by Mr Sufian. Their HDB tenancies may have been taken away or they may have lost ownership of their homes in the course of their divorces, rendering them homeless upon their release. In such situations, they would be forced to stay in halfway houses or rent flats with another former inmate. The latter arrangement can lead to relapses as addiction is a contagion that is hard to beat when one's roommate has slipped back into the habit.³

Dr Lee pointed out that employment and financial stability can also be a key factor contributing to relapses among former drug users. This is in spite of the support available to help ex-offenders be gainfully employed. There are programmes, for example, at the halfway houses targeted not only at building their self-esteem but also at upgrading their skills, thus increasing their employability. Residents at the home are also introduced to national agency resources such as tapping into their SkillsFuture credits and Post-Secondary Education Account (PSEA) to apply for relevant courses. There are also prison job fairs and social enterprises such as restaurant chain

² Pan Jie, "[How do you escape Singapore's invisible prison?](#)," The Pride, 15 March 2017.

³ Ibid. See also, Shaffiq Idris Alkhatib, "Malay groups roll out programmes to give help", The Straits Times, 16 April 2017.

Eighteen Chefs that are focused on getting the ex-offenders back on their feet. Restrictions on foreign labour have also forced many employers to take a chance and employ ex-offenders.

However, the availability of employment opportunities does not necessarily translate into financial stability and a better quality of life for the ex-offenders and their families. Jobs that are often available to ex-offenders are often low-income ones, which give no guarantee of financial stability. Pre-existing financial problems, such as debt and loan arrears, are not likely to be settled while they are incarcerated. Without financial stability, Dr Lee shared, minor problems can quickly escalate into bigger ones. This is where the nexus of an individual's social network and proximities to criminal or offending behaviours may come into play. Assoc Prof Ganapathy spoke of how responses to crises—an individual's way of coping with stress and the experiences of prejudice and exclusion—are often managed through familiar ways.

Dr Lee illustrated that when a former offender is faced with a host of problems, for example their children needing new school uniforms, arrears in loan payments and household bills, the threat of homelessness as rent payments are not met, exacerbated by a strong sense of marginality, he may turn to drugs, for it is something familiar and, even if only momentarily, comforting.

Noting the large impact that an individual's network has on the success and failure of his or her recovery, Assoc Prof Ganapathy emphasised the need for introducing bridging capital in the rehabilitative and reintegration framework. Bridging capital would take the form of ties and networks that span across racial, religious and class identities, and is crucial in guarding against a network closure. A network closure would mean that members of certain communities would have no access to the resources that are present outside of the society. This is especially pertinent to members of minority communities who are already experiencing structural marginalisation or social exclusion. Case in point, according to Assoc Prof Ganapathy and Dr Lian Kwen Fee in a paper titled, "Race, integration, and social capital in Singapore", rehabilitation programmes and reintegration initiatives are likely to be less effective for racial minorities in the country, as compared to the Chinese ex-offenders, who can access wider networks for employment in the SME sector.⁴ However, Dr Lee contended that when it comes to ties and peers, it is hard to put interventions in place.

Rethinking of reintegration and the complicity of mainstream society

The challenges outlined above are only the tip of the iceberg. Further points to consider would be intergenerational offending where the children literally take up the sins of their fathers, the stigmatisation faced by children with parents who are incarcerated for drug offences and its impacts on socialisation, academic performance and subsequently future opportunities, as well as impacts of gender and sexuality.

Drugs and its surrounding concerns are inherently complex, yet it is still easy for us to fall into the trap of individualising the problem, attributing it as a problem of one particular race or community. It is easy to say, "Those people are all like that lah!", or that "those people" need to be more resilient, or that they lack willpower or strong religious grounding. It is easy to attribute a society's

⁴ Ganapathy Narayanan & Lian Kwen Fee, "Race, reintegration, and social capital in Singapore", *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 40(1), 1-23, 2016.

ills to the boogymen of increasingly hedonistic lifestyles and liberal attitudes. Both Assoc Prof Ganapathy and Dr Lee posited that tackling the drug menace will require a more holistic and structural approach, which includes turning the mirror to ourselves and critiquing the kind of society we are.

Most interesting was their call to rethink the very concept of 'reintegration'. Both speakers pointed out that the term 'reintegration' implies that the ex-offenders were integrated in mainstream society in the first place. More often than not, these individuals were not. Many inhabit the margins of society, discriminated against either by virtue of their race and/or socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status have huge bearings on social and resource capitals and thus also impacts academic performance and employment. These then have bearings on the presence of "nurturing role models, rewarding experiences at school or work, and constructive friendships", which are found to be lacking in the profile of most ex-offenders.⁵ Dr Lee called for us to question if we have become a society that so "overly privileges performance" that it justifies the disproportionate allocation of resources to groom the elites and privilege those most likely to succeed. Perhaps we even expect it and come to see it as the only *natural*—normal—conclusion.

Many of us, who have never tasted the air of a prison cell and who never had to make a decision between buying food or paying for the utilities bill which are already four months in arrears, have, without even thinking about it, come to believe that our ease of access to resources and amenities—our privileges—is a *right*. And for those who have somehow beaten the odds, it is easy to fall into the mentality of, "Hey, I grew up in a one-room flat in Toa Payoh. I made it, why can't they?" without examining the various external factors beyond their control that have put them in the right place, at the right time. Without a culture of critical self-reflection and in a mainstream culture that believes strongly in personal responsibility and accountability, marginalisation can end up becoming a norm. Dr Lee pointed out that marginalised individuals are less likely to subscribe to mainstream values—because why should they, when the mainstream has closed so many doors to them?

What can be done then?

As mentioned before, Assoc Prof Ganapathy have put forth the suggestion of incorporating more bridging capital into the rehabilitation and integration framework to help bolster the efforts of the current faith-based, community-driven approaches. Groups such as PERTAPIS and SANA are already doing commendable work of providing inmates, ex-offenders and their families with the help they need through all stages of their recovery. However, it is time that the network of aid is expanded in order to exact further change.

Assoc Prof Ganapathy also suggested that in order for ex-offenders to feel more integrated into the society and for the recidivism rates to be reduced, their social stakes in that society should be increased through the development of the following key areas: involvement, attachment, commitment and belief. However, the biggest change would need to happen with larger society,

⁵ Justin Lee & Fern Yu, "Commentary: Reintegrating ex-offenders a noble cause, but into what kind of a society?", Channel News Asia, 16 September 2017. Available at <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/commentary-reintegrating-ex-offenders-a-noble-cause-but-into-9219224>

and in its structures and institutions. We would need to step away from seeing the problems within our society as individual problems that someone else is always accountable for, and instead take the first step in seeing how we can be an active part of the solution. We can each learn to create spaces in our circles for members of our society who are falling through the cracks by befriending them and learning about their situations, being a sort of social first responders ourselves, instead of always waiting for and referring them to relevant organisations.

We can also learn to make it a part of our daily mental exercise to learn to refer to people without labels or generalisations—one participant who spoke up felt that he was continually criminalised even after his release, by law enforcement officers who seem to be exercising a disproportionate amount of power and privilege whenever they have him in a vulnerable position, and by larger society who insists of the label of “offender” despite him having stayed clean for over more than a decade. We need to be less accepting of the structures and institutions—and their leadership—that normalises inequality and marginalisation.

For if the society does not change, it would not matter if some day we see recovering drug users be employed as nurses, teachers, police officers or even government leaders, for they would still continue to inhabit our margins, more likely to fall off the edges of the world than to be saved by it.

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