'YOU DON'T SEE THE SKY'

LIFE BEHIND BARS IN SINGAPORE

2022

A REPORT BY TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE COLLECTIVE
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About Transformative Justice Collective

The Transformative Justice Collective (TJC), founded in October 2021, encourages the reimagining of Singaporean society as one that is compassionate and committed to abolishing systems of oppression so that individuals can not only survive, but thrive within communities of care.

Our members, most of whom are volunteers, are committed to educating ourselves and one other on transformative justice principles and the harms of Singapore’s criminal punishment and legal systems, and to share what we have learnt with other groups and communities in Singapore. To date, we have produced research reports and educational resources, and organised events, campaigns and community efforts geared towards ending state violence and building community-based capacities for responding to harm in generative ways.

There are multiple working groups within TJC, focusing on issues ranging from Singapore’s death penalty regime to drug policy, policing, incarceration and transformative justice facilitation.

Find out more about our work, and how you can support us, at transformativejusticecollective.org.

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Acknowledgements

The Transformative Justice Collective thanks every person who shared their experiences of incarceration — be it in prison, a Drug Rehabilitation Centre, or Reformative Training Centre — with us. We know that it can’t have been easy to talk about such an experience, and we are really grateful for how generous with their time and recollections everyone has been.

We would also like to acknowledge the hard work of many TJC volunteers who poured time, energy and resources into the production of this report, from transcribing hours of interviews to writing and producing social media posts!

The icons used within this report (and accompanying presentation) have been downloaded from Icons8.com.
Executive Summary

“You don't break a person down before you build them up. You empathise with them, you feel what they're going through from there, both of you work together. You cannot break him down, make him feel like a total piece of shit, and then say, ‘Let's start working on him now.’ I mean, that's just not how it works. In prison, or anywhere else I feel. That's not how it works. The prison likes to say they are ‘Captains of Lives’. ‘Rehab, Renew, Restart.’ Actually, it's more like repress, oppress, suppress.”
— Quote from a previously incarcerated person

This exploratory report is an analysis of Singapore's prison system and the laws and policies that govern how it is run. It highlights the experiences of people who have been incarcerated and aims to shed light on a system which is often opaque and lacks accountability, before moving on to argue for decarceration.

TJC's findings reveal that the state narrative surrounding incarcerated persons, including the Yellow Ribbon Project — which only showcases success stories of rehabilitated individuals — excludes the experiences of those who have been traumatised and abused by a system which shows scant respect for their dignity and rights. Prison conditions in Singapore can be dehumanising; many of the ex-prisoners we spoke to describe poor cell conditions, deteriorating mental health, and a lack of social and psychological support.

Most of the respondents who shared their accounts were incarcerated for drug-related offences or for consuming prohibited substances. Over three-quarters were ethnic Malay or Indian. This is consistent with statistics showing that most individuals who come into conflict with the law are racial minorities, demonstrating the need to be aware of intersections of race, class, and social capital when thinking about Singapore's criminal punishment regime.

Singapore's extremely regimented prison system goes beyond denying individuals their freedom: extrajudicial punishment such as caning, solitary confinement, and denial of yard time are widespread practices. Living environments are crowded and prisoners spend most of their time in cells with nothing to do: they are not allowed to exercise while in their cells, and activities such as counselling, family visits, work programmes and recreation are not guaranteed rights. Prisoners with mental health problems or suicidal tendencies are subjected to even worse treatment, as they are restrained for indefinite periods which may last for weeks. Privacy is non-existent as surveillance cameras are everywhere, and officers are constantly monitoring prisoners' movements, even when they go to the toilet. There is very little
independent oversight of prison practices to prevent abuse, procedural impropriety, and to ensure the basic welfare of prisoners.

Rehabilitation while in prison was described to TJC as superficial, sanctimonious and infantilising. Little is done to address issues which contribute to individuals coming into conflict with the law in the first place. The stigma of having been incarcerated affects self-esteem, job prospects and acceptance by family members and society. ‘Work programmes’ in prison are exploitative and provide little employment protection. While respondents said that individual prison officers may be kind, understanding and encouraging, the dehumanising effects of incarceration — which denies basic rights to proper accommodation, food, and mental well-being — has made it difficult to adjust back to society and life upon release. Ex-prisoners often find themselves only eligible for jobs which do not pay adequately to support themselves or their families.

Research has shown that imprisonment, especially long-term imprisonment, has limited impact in reducing criminal behaviour and may even hinder reintegration efforts. The Singapore government has made small steps towards the use of community-based sentences instead of incarceration. However, TJC argues that a more fundamental rethink is necessary, and recommends moving towards decarceration. We highlight an urgent need to critically examine current alternative sentencing and community rehabilitation initiatives, especially since independent, longitudinal studies of the effectiveness of current programmes are either non-existent or not publicly available.
Chapter 1 — Why Research Prisons?

The Singapore Prison Service plays a significant role within the criminal punishment system in Singapore. Incarceration is a common form of punishment for those who have broken the law, and is also seen as a way to separate those viewed as a threat or harm to society from the community.

Singapore's criminal legal system, by open admission of the state, is modelled on achieving "crime control" as its main function. This "crime control" model facilitates high levels of convictions and places emphasis on the "administrative efficiency" of the punishment system, at the expense of the procedural rights of accused individuals. Underpinning this model are the concepts of retribution, deterrence, and incapacitation as the principle rationales for punishment. Seen through this lens, harsh prison conditions and the use of penalties such as caning and the death penalty seem acceptable. This frame of reference also justifies extensive detention powers under the Internal Security Act, Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) Act, and Section 304 of the Penal Code.

Despite operating within this ideological framework, the state and the prison service has, over the years, attempted to soften public presentations of incarceration in Singapore, focusing on talking points about rehabilitation and reintegration in society. In 1999, the Singapore Prison Service rebranded its staff as "Captains of Lives". Senior prison officers were subsequently referred to as rehabilitation officers.

It is important to pay attention to how the system conceptualises and perceives 'rehabilitation'. It is not uncommon in Singapore to hear 'rehabilitation' understood as little more than a means of preventing reoffending and lowering recidivism rates. However, the value of incarceration as a means of reducing criminal offences is increasingly questioned by criminologists. There is also mounting international evidence on the negative effects of incarceration on physical and mental health, and the risk of entrenching people into the prison system, creating vicious cycles that place people in situations or perpetuate behaviours that lead them into conflict with the law. (See Chapter 6.)

Another criticism of the 'rehabilitation' framework is that it disproportionately places blame on individuals, without paying sufficient attention to socio-economic factors that result in people coming into conflict with the law in the first place.

As incarceration plays a significant role in the government's approach to 'rehabilitating' individuals, it is important to critically examine the functions of

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Singapore’s prison system and understand the lived experiences of those confined behind bars.

**Our Research**

Between 2020 and March 2022, TJC interviewed 36 formerly incarcerated individuals. Within our interview pool, 27 were male, 8 were female, and 1 was a transgender female who served their sentence pre-transition. The majority of respondents were of Malay or Indian ethnic origin. More than half of the respondents had been to a Drug Rehabilitation Centre, and one had experience with the Reformatory Training Centre.

We recruited these interviewees mostly through word-of-mouth, as well as via an open call online.

We asked interviewees questions related to these three main areas:
- The prison conditions they had experienced
- How they were treated within the prison system, including by prison officers and during rehabilitation programmes
- How they feel about these conditions and their treatment by the system

A significant number of our respondents had served prison sentences for drug-related offences, which is consistent with the fact that drug-related offences form the largest category of incarcerated people within Singapore’s prison system. As part of our interview protocol, we did not explicitly ask them to share further details of their conviction, unless they offered to share this information first.

To complement our interviews, TJC also conducted a review of the legal framework governing the Singapore Prison Service, and reviewed literature relevant to prison experiences and governance in Singapore.

**The Need for More Transparency**

Despite its significant position within Singapore’s criminal legal framework, there is limited publicly available information on the operation of the prison system. The government does not disclose basic data, such as the ethnic breakdown within the penal population, or the number of people on death row.³

The government justifies the absence of these public disclosures by alluding to the sensitivity of information requested, as well as concerns relating to national security.

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The government rarely responds to enquiries from NGOs or independent journalists for more data when it comes to addressing complaints of mistreatment in prisons.⁴

In writing this report, TJC contacted the prison authorities to seek verification of issues raised by our respondents. We sent them a draft and a final version of the report for their comments but, as of the time of publication, have not received a response.

Nevertheless, TJC hopes that this report will fill some urgent information gaps, provide Singaporeans and other interested parties with some insight into the Singapore prison system, and provide opportunities for more thought and conversations on incarceration, criminal punishment, and imagining different approaches within the Singaporean context.

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Chapter 2 — Singapore Prisons: Structure and Legal Framework

The Structure of the Singapore Prisons
Before scrutinising the legal framework relevant to prisons — which confers rights to prisoners and responsibilities to prison staff — we cover some basic facts about the structure of the Singapore prison system, which is overseen by the Commissioner of Prisons.

In this report, we refer to the Singapore prison system and the Singapore Prison Service (its official name) interchangeably, abbreviated to SPS.

Sentencing Regimes
The Singapore prison system usually houses inmates who have been sentenced to imprisonment after conviction by a judicial officer. However, apart from judicial sentencing, other sentencing regimes also expose individuals to imprisonment.

For instance, judges are empowered to impose preventive detention on repeat offenders aged 30 and above in lieu of imprisonment, when it finds that it is expedient for public protection that a person be detained for a substantial period of time. Upon consideration of a preventive detention suitability report, and a finding for preventive detention, a court must impose a term of detention between seven and 20 years. This is regardless of the maximum sentence provided by law for the crime committed, and is in practice usually longer than the maximum sentence of imprisonment available.

Corrective training also applies to repeat offenders aged 18 years and above, which can be anywhere between five and 14 years. Reformative training for offenders between 14 and 21 years old, while envisioned to be an alternative to incarceration, still occurs within the prison system.

Drug Rehabilitation Centres
The Misuse of Drugs Act allows the Director of the Central Narcotics Bureau — the main investigative body for drug offences in Singapore — to require a person, whom they reasonably suspect to be a drug addict, to undergo tests and, if found positive for drug use, to undergo rehabilitation or treatment at an approved institution.

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6 Criminal Procedure Code 2010, s. 304. https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/CPC2010; Recently, the Ministry of Home Affairs held a public consultation to merge the corrective training and preventive detention regimes. However, at the time of writing, the two regimes remain separate.
known as the Drug Rehabilitation Centre (DRC). This is a form of compulsory detention that does not require a judicial process.

There are two such centres in Singapore. One, recently opened in Selarang Park Complex, primarily houses drug users arrested for the first and second time. The other, situated in Institution B5 of Changi Prison Complex, houses “repeat drug offenders”. SPS explains that this division is “to better segregate and rehabilitate the DRC inmates of different risks”.

Individuals housed within DRCs are subject to the same prison conditions as other inmates, and only go through different rehabilitative programmes. (See Chapter 4.)

Remand
Individuals who are in remand (i.e. waiting for their hearings to plead guilty or seek trial) are also subject to prison conditions. At the end of 2021, there were 1,109 persons in remand.

Prison Administration
The administration of each prison within the larger prison system is managed by the Superintendent of Prisons, who is appointed by the Commissioner. The Prisons Regulations states that the Superintendent is responsible for, amongst other things, “ensuring that the prison is administered in accordance with the [Prisons] Act, the regulations made under the [Prisons] Act, and the Prison Standing Orders”.

Board of Visiting Justices
The Board of Visiting Justices is appointed by the Minister for Home Affairs, drawing from the pool of Justices of the Peace, who are in turn appointed by the President of the Republic of Singapore. It is the job of Visiting Justices, or VJs, to inspect prisons and make sure that the basic welfare of incarcerated people is taken care of.

Under the Prison Regulations, the Superintendent should not accompany Visiting Justices in prison inspections. However, he has a duty to inform VJs of any prisoner who has requested to see them. A VJ may at any time visit any prison and inspect the wards, yards, solitary or punishment cells, test the quality and quantity of the prisoners’ food, hear any complaint of the prisoners and question any prisoner or

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prison officer. They must ascertain whether the Prison Regulations are adhered to, and must inform the Superintendent of any irregularity in the working of the prison or of the treatment of any prisoner.\textsuperscript{14}

Beyond carrying out inspections and considering complaints, VJs are also empowered to impose punishments on prisoners found to have committed aggravated offences, if the Superintendent is of the opinion that power of punishment he possesses is inadequate.\textsuperscript{15}

Although the Board of Visiting Justices is meant to be a check on prison operations and the treatment of prisoners, the experience of formerly incarcerated persons interviewed by TJC suggest that prisoners are not well-informed of their right to speak with VJs, therefore making it insufficient as a complaints mechanism and independent check on prison authorities. (See Chapter 4.)

**The Rights and Entitlements of Prisoners Under the Prisons Act**

Most of the rights and entitlements of prisoners in Singapore are laid out in the Prisons Act and its subsidiary legislation, the Prisons Regulations. Although these pieces of legislation occasionally reference the Prison Standing Orders, it does not appear as if these standing orders are publicly accessible, and therefore cannot be subjected to independent scrutiny.

**Food and Health**

Every prisoner must be provided with regular meals that are nutritious enough for the basic health of the prisoner.\textsuperscript{16} Prisoners who are sick should be separated from the rest of the penal population in a proper room or infirmary.\textsuperscript{17}

**Medical Examination of Prisoners**

The medical officer is required to inspect every prisoner as soon as possible upon admission.\textsuperscript{18} In this examination, the medical officer must record the state of health of the prisoner and any other particulars that the medical officer considers necessary.

**Complaints by Prisoners**

The Superintendent must ensure that every prisoner who wishes to make a complaint or request to a prison officer or a Visiting Justice is given a reasonable

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{14} Prisons Act, s. 79(3). \url{https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PA1933}
\textsuperscript{15} Prisons Act, s. 74. \url{https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PA1933}
\textsuperscript{16} Prisons Regulations, s. 110. \url{https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/PA1933-RG2}
\textsuperscript{17} Prisons Regulations, s. 108. \url{https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/PA1933-RG2}
\textsuperscript{18} Prisons Regulations, s. 74(A). \url{https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/PA1933-RG2}
opportunity to do so, and any complaint of misconduct involving a prison officer must be dealt with without undue delay.\(^{19}\)

**Punishments in Prison**

Offences that occur in prison are largely categorised into minor and aggravated offences. Minor offences include showing disrespect to any officer or official visitor, or immoral, disorderly or indecent behaviour.\(^ {20}\) Aggravated offences include repeated assault on any other prisoner, wilful destruction of prison property, and taking part in any assault or attack on any officer.\(^ {21}\)

The maximum punishments stipulated for minor and aggravated offences differ. The Superintendent may punish a prisoner who has committed a minor offence by giving them a written warning, or solitary confinement for up to seven days, among other punishments.\(^ {22}\) For aggravated offences, the Superintendent may impose a maximum of 12 strokes of the cane, and/or solitary confinement for a maximum of seven days, among others.\(^ {23}\)

**Solitary Confinement**

A prisoner can be confined to a solitary cell for breaching prison rules. Prisoners confined for breaches of prison discipline are not allowed to see anyone beyond the prison officer, a minister of religion and the medical officer, and can only have outdoor exercise if a medical officer finds that it is “absolutely necessary for health”.\(^ {24}\) A prisoner should not be confined for an aggregate of more than 90 days in a year. If a prisoner is sentenced to two periods of confinement, there must be a break in between. This break needs to at least be equal to the longer sentence period.\(^ {25}\)

Each aggravated offence committed by the prisoner may earn him confinement in a solitary cell for a term not exceeding seven days. However, if the Superintendent thinks that their power of punishment is inadequate for the offence, they can forward the matter to a Visiting Justice. The VJ may impose confinement in a punishment cell for a term not exceeding 30 days.\(^ {26}\)

**Corporal Punishment**

The Superintendent may sentence a prisoner who has committed an aggravated prison offence to not more than 12 strokes of the rattan cane. As with solitary confinement, the Superintendent can also refer the matter to a Visiting Justice if

\(^{19}\) Prisons Regulations, s. 13(1). [https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/PA1933-RG2](https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/PA1933-RG2)
\(^{20}\) Prisons Act 1933, s. 72. [https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PA1933](https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PA1933)
\(^{21}\) Prisons Act 1933, s. 73. [https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PA1933](https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PA1933)
\(^{22}\) Prisons Act 1933, s. 70. [https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PA1933](https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PA1933)
\(^{23}\) Prisons Act 1933, s. 71. [https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PA1933](https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PA1933)
\(^{24}\) Prisons Regulations, s. 140. [https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/PA1933-RG2](https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/PA1933-RG2)
\(^{25}\) Prisons Regulations, s. 141. [https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/PA1933-RG2](https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/PA1933-RG2)
\(^{26}\) Prisons Act, s. 74. [https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PA1933](https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PA1933)
they feel that their own power of punishment is not sufficient. The VJ may impose corporal punishment of not more than 24 strokes of the cane.\(^{27}\)

If the Superintendent has ordered a prisoner to undergo corporal punishment for an aggravated prison offence, an Institutional Discipline Advisory Committee must decide whether the punishment imposed on the prisoner is excessive. Their opinion is reported to the Commissioner.\(^{28}\)

A prisoner cannot be punished until they have had an opportunity of hearing the charge and evidence against them. They should also be allowed to make their defence, but the legislation is silent on whether they are allowed access to legal counsel.\(^{29}\)

Judicial corporal punishment is prohibited under international standards for prisons. (See Chapter 5.)

**Treatment of Prisoners on Death Row**

Despite not facing further punishment within the prison system, individuals who have been sentenced to death are confined alone, with no meaningful contact with others, for at least 23 hours a day. This is allowed under the Prisons Regulations, which state that every prisoner awaiting capital punishment “must be confined apart from all other prisoners”\(^{30}\).

**Use of Restraints on Prisoners**

Prison officers are not allowed to use restraints on a prisoner unless it is necessary to prevent the inmate from causing self-injury, injuring others, or escaping.\(^{31}\) Restraints must be removed once they are no longer necessary. The type of restraint and the manner that the restraint is used must be approved under the Prison Standing Orders.

In 2019, a question was asked in Parliament about the use of restraints for persons in custody of either the police or the prisons. Amrin Amin, then the Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Home Affairs, responded that while restraints are sometimes necessary, the policy relating to the use of such restraints had been reviewed and modified:

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\(^{27}\) Prisons Act, s. 74. [https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PA1933](https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PA1933)
\(^{30}\) Prisons Regulations, s. 162(2)[a]. [https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/PA1933-RG2](https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/PA1933-RG2)
\(^{31}\) Prisons Regulations, s. 137. [https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/PA1933-RG2](https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/PA1933-RG2)
“We will, as a general position, not restrain a [Person-In-Custody, or PIC] known to the relevant enforcement officers to be below 16 years old or aged 65 years old and above when the PIC is being arrested. But if the PIC is suspected of committing serious crimes like murder, rape or drug trafficking, or if the escorting officer assesses, for example, that there is a risk of the PIC escaping or causing harm to others or self, then he or she is likely to be restrained. Any indication of unstable or irrational behaviour could also be reasons for coming to such conclusions. We will have to go by judgements made by officers on the spot.”32

However, Amrin also made clear that this policy would only apply to those in police custody, and not to incarcerated persons.

Upon a further question about the use of restraints on persons with intellectual disabilities, Amrin stated that such individuals would be treated “no differently from other PICs as they might exhibit non-compliant behaviour and attempt to escape or hurt others without any tell-tale signs.”33

Visitation Rights and Correspondence

The Prisons Regulations state that visits and letters are a “privilege” for inmates, and the frequency with which they receive this privilege is determined according to the Prison Standing Orders.34 Permission to write and receive letters, or to receive visits, may be denied at any time, at the discretion of the Superintendent, as punishment for misconduct.35

For prisoners “whose conduct and industry has been excellent”, they may receive visitors in a visiting room instead of the normal visiting cubicles, supervised by a prison officer.36

All correspondence sent to and by a prisoner can be opened and read by a prison officer, with the exception of communication with a prisoner’s legal adviser.37 However, multiple death row prisoners have found that their privileged communication, including communication with lawyers, had been copied and forwarded to the Attorney-General’s Chambers. (See Chapter 4.)

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33 See 32.
36 Prisons Regulations, s. 127(4) and s. 127(5). https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/PA1933-RG2
Chapter 3 — Changes in the Singapore Prison Service 2011–2022

Prison Demographics

The Prison Population
The number of individuals in prison has declined over the years, from 10,028 in 2011 to 5,945 in 2021. This marked decline can be explained by significant changes to the criminal punishment system, which now channels more drug users towards Drug Rehabilitation Centres, and the introduction of more community-based orders and sentencing options. Between 2011 and 2021, the number of people in DRC increased from 1,280 to 3,120. The number of individuals on community-based sentences (now renamed community corrections) also increased from 1,764 in 2011 to 3,402 in 2021.

Under amendments to the Misuse of Drugs Act made in 2019, first- and second-time arrested drug users deemed to be at moderate or high risk of reoffending can be detained in DRC instead of being charged and sentenced to prison terms, as long as they admit to drug consumption and have not been simultaneously arrested for any other offences. For first-time arrested drug users deemed to have a low risk of reoffending, the director of the Central Narcotics Bureau may impose an Enhanced Direct Supervision Order.

According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, those put on these enhanced direct supervision orders are “assigned a case manager who will provide support to them and their families, and will have to undergo counselling.” In a recent parliamentary question raised by Workers’ Party Member of Parliament Leon Perera, it was disclosed that just under 10% of first-time arrested drug users between 31 September 2012 and 30 September 2021 were on these orders.
2019 and 31 August 2021 had been issued such orders. In other words, the vast majority of first-time arrested drug users had been deemed to be at moderate or high risk of reoffending.

Prison Population by Offence Type
Despite efforts to shift drug users out of prisons towards DRC or community-based orders, the proportion of those in prison for drug offences remains high, at over half the prison population. “Drug offences” is a composite category used by SPS, which includes consumption, possession, and trafficking. However, it is likely that there would still be a number of drug users who are convicted for consumption and imprisoned given the exceptions to detention in Drug Rehabilitation Centres described in the section above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2021</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incarcerated for Drug Offences</td>
<td>6,061</td>
<td>6,666</td>
<td>3,682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incarcerated for Drug Offences (as proportion of total penal population)</td>
<td>60.44%</td>
<td>70.15%</td>
<td>61.93%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1

Prison Population by Ethnicity
There is limited data on prison population by ethnicity, as the government has previously refused to disclose the relevant data. However, in a speech by Minister for Home Affairs and Law K Shanmugam, it was revealed that the proportion of inmates who were Malay had increased from around 40% in 2011 to over 55% in 2017.

44 In reporting such statistics, the Singapore Prison Service does not provide disaggregated figures.
45 There is indirect evidence to support this. In 2021, the total number of drug users arrested was 2,724 (CNB Drug Report 2021), whereas the number of DRC admissions was only 1,714 (SPS Annual Statistical Release 2021). The number of individuals served with supervision orders is also low (See 43).
Separately, the Central Narcotics Bureau releases data on the number of drug users arrested, categorised by ethnic group. In 2020, half of the drug users arrested for consumption were Malay. They would thus also be disproportionately incarcerated in the prison system or detained in Drug Rehabilitation Centres.\(^{49}\)

## Increase in Elderly Inmates

Published statistics by the Singapore Prison Service show a growing proportion of elderly prisoners, and an increase in the actual numbers. The proportion of inmates aged 60 and above stands at 13.20% of the total prison population.\(^{50}\)

While not a focus of this report, such figures raise questions about the quality of accommodation and care for elderly people within the prison system, especially in terms of healthcare. One SPS study highlighted that approximately 32% of elderly offenders had declared at least one existing health problem.\(^{51}\)

The same study also stated that 75% of elderly offenders were charged with drug-related offences such as possession, consumption or trafficking of drugs, and that individuals who had committed the offence with a “financial gain element” tended to come from “similar social contexts”. “These individuals viewed themselves as criminals who had no choice but to offend and their accounts reflected strong anti-social networks and poor familial relations,” the study said.\(^{52}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Prisoners Above 60 Years of Age</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2021</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>261</td>
<td>581</td>
<td>787</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Total Prison Population</td>
<td>2.60%</td>
<td>2.75%</td>
<td>13.20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2\(^{53}\)


\(^{52}\) See 51.

Developments in the SPS’ Approach to Incarceration

Pivoting Towards Rehabilitation

In a 2014 paper written for the civil service college, Lena Leong gives an account of how the Singapore Prison Service evolved from an institution centred on punitive action to one which embraced rehabilitation. During the 1990s, the recidivism rate was at 44.4%, which meant that almost half of the number of former prisoners were incarcerated again within two years of release. Leong observed that rehabilitation was a “remote concept” to prison officers, and considered the job of counsellors and volunteers outside of the prison system. Efforts were piecemeal and limited to “work regimes, education and religious counselling”. A proposal to set up a Rehabilitation Division by the Singapore Prison Service was rejected by the Ministry of Home Affairs. The government had worried that such a division would require a large amount of resources for little return. Prison officers also feared that “‘better’ treatment would encourage defiance in inmates and compromise security.”

After a period of consultation and internal lobbying within both the prison service and the Ministry of Home Affairs, a go-ahead was given in 1999 to experiment with rehabilitation. The Singapore Prison Service rebranded itself into an institution which went beyond security and safety to one embracing rehabilitation and reintegration. The Yellow Ribbon Campaign was one of the programmes implemented as part of this new approach. According to statistics provided by SPS, recidivism rates had dropped to 22.1% by 2018 as a result of this new direction. (The Singapore Prison Service defines recidivism rate “as the percentage of local offenders under the custody of the Singapore Prison Service, who were subsequently detained or sentenced to imprisonment or day reporting order within two years of release into the community.”)

Introduction of Throughcare Framework

While rehabilitation is not a new concept for the Singapore Prison Service, significant changes in their approach towards rehabilitation have taken place in the last decade. In 2014, the Throughcare Framework was introduced, identifying successful rehabilitation as requiring interventions at all three stages of ‘in-care’, ‘pre-release’, and ‘aftercare’.

This approach is largely crafted based on the Risk-Needs-and-Responsivity (RNR) Model. This model underlines the need for differentiation in treatment by tailoring

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rehabilitative interventions for the prisoner according to their assessed risk of reoffending. The model states that specific risk factors need to be targeted in order to reduce future reoffending, including: pro-criminal attitudes, pro-criminal associations, antisocial personality patterns, family/marital relationships, and substance use. Intervention is further differentiated according to different learning styles, motivations and abilities, pointing towards cognitive-behavioural and cognitive social interventions.

“Prison Without Walls”
With increased importance placed on rehabilitation and reintegration, SPS has expanded their scope of rehabilitation efforts into community settings, as part of their “Prison Without Walls” strategy. In the last decade, a number of schemes were introduced to facilitate such efforts. This included the Mandatory Aftercare Scheme, introduced in 2014, which targets those assessed to have a higher risk of re-offending with halfway house or day release schemes for work or study. Upon placement in a community-based programme, formerly incarcerated people can attend counselling sessions at community facilities, such as Work Release Camps and halfway houses. Through such programmes, they can work and study during the day before returning in the evening to these community facilities. They are also concurrently provided with case management officers and “closely monitored through assessments, casework, electronic monitoring, urine tests and reporting sessions”.

After completion of community-based programmes, individuals proceed to home supervision, with electronic tagging or other conditions, including curfew and urine testing. The introduction of such schemes were facilitated by changes to the relevant legislative frameworks, including a number of changes to the Misuse of Drugs Act and the Prisons Act, with more recent amendments that allow for longer periods of monitoring and supervision after people leave detention.

“Prison Without Guards”
The “Prison Without Guards” programme was formally introduced in 2016 by then-Commissioner Desmond Chin, with an emphasis on increasing the automation of routine tasks and maintaining prison security with less manpower.

60 Misuse of Drugs Act 1973, s. 34(2)(a), https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/MDA1973; In 2019, the maximum length of the supervision order was amended from two years to five years.
Two of the technological initiatives under “Prison Without Guards” are the facial recognition system and a Human Behaviour Detection System. The former, implemented in Institution A4 of Changi Prison Complex, involves matching facial biometrics with a prisoner’s photograph and cell allocation. The Human Behaviour Detection System, on the other hand, involves two projects with the Home Team Science and Technology Agency: Advanced Video Analytics To detect AggRession (AVATAR), and Video Analytics to Detect Abnormal behaviour (VADAR). Both focus on early detection of abnormal and aggressive behaviours to ensure that guards are able to intervene quickly before situations escalate.

In 2021, Selarang Park Complex was reopened as a “Smart Prison” that utilises the aforementioned technologies to monitor and surveil inmates.
Chapter 4 — Experiences of the Incarcerated

**General cell conditions**

Participants of the report we spoke to described prison cells as “cramped”, “very packed” and “small”. A cell that is approximately 2.5m by 2.5m in size — including the toilet — usually houses three to four people. According to our interviewees, most prisoners are put in cells that can accommodate up to eight people. They sleep on hard cement floors and are only issued straw mats to lie on. “We are like sardines in a can,” said one respondent, who told us that there was barely enough space between one person and the next when everyone lay down to sleep.

Cells are also bare, and prisoners given only the barest necessities. “No pillow, no tables, no chairs… nothing,” said another respondent. “They only give you a plastic box with your T-shirt and shorts, a plastic mug, soap, toothbrush, a face towel, toothpaste and a small plastic spoon.”

Ventilation is very poor, and fans are not provided. Many participants said that the only way to cool off was to wear as little as possible and take regular showers. The only window in the cells is covered by a large piece of metal with small holes in it, thus preventing prisoners from looking out or natural light from coming in. There is no way of telling time due to the absence of clocks and electronic devices. Prisoners spend 23 hours a day in the cell, with only an hour of yard time and day room per day on weekdays. Prisoners are not allowed out of their cells at all on Saturdays and Sundays.

Respondents described life under such conditions as “frustrating”, “boring” and “stressful”. One called it a “total mindfuck”, and “psychological torture”, saying that the lack of space, absence of mental stimulation and interrupted sleep made him feel as if he was “going crazy”. Despite the lack of other options to fight boredom, physical exercise is not allowed in cells; the flouting of this rule could lead to punishment.

While the respondents we interviewed said most people generally try to get along, it can be difficult given how cell conditions often took a toll on their mental health. The lack of space and privacy made it difficult for people to process what they were going through. As one respondent said, “Sometimes what you need is a private space to cry… to let out your emotions… It’s impossible inside there.”

Under such conditions, it is not surprising that disputes, which can then lead to fights, happen. One respondent said that he always felt “edgy” inside the cell. Another respondent said that being confined with boys below the age of 21 meant
that there was a lot of restlessness, which resulted in occasional scuffles in the cell. He believed that the pent-up frustration at being confined in close quarters made it easy for tempers to fray and fights to break out.

One respondent said:

“Popular media portrays prison with a bed, at least a mattress, your cell is open, you get to roam around more... intermingling... in general more socialising and freedom to move about, sometimes there’s a table or chair in the cell... It looks more humane. It was really so different inside... it was hard to get used to being trapped inside such a small area for 23 hours. Luckily, I got along with my cell mates.”

The only activity permitted inside the cell is reading. Prisoners are allowed up to three books, either borrowed from the prison library or sent to them by their families. However, all books are censored; anything that compromises “operations or security”, or which “incites emotion” are not allowed.

The conditions described by the inmates, in particular the overcrowdedness, lack of natural light, poor ventilation and spartan living conditions, fall short of international standards on the human rights of prisoners. (See Chapter 5.)

**Meals**

Breakfast, lunch and dinner are served to prisoners daily in their cells. These meals are prepared by other prisoners who have been assigned to work in the kitchen, and served by prisoners known as “cookies”.

Breakfast is usually four slices of bread with either margarine, strawberry jam or chocolate spread, with a mug of milk tea. Lunch and dinner consists of rice with vegetables and meat, usually chicken or sardines. Occasionally, rice vermicelli noodles (bee hoon), hard boiled eggs, sausages and vegetarian options such as bean curd are served. Each prisoner gets two pieces of fruit a day, usually apples, bananas or oranges.

Formerly incarcerated people told us that the food in prison is “really bad”, but “it’s prison, you just get used to it.” However, some respondents also said that they encountered poorly prepared meals with questionable hygiene standards and cleanliness:

“The one thing that always happened to me was finding insects and things in my food box. I’ve had an egg that had a half-fertilised chick that smelt so bad. And then there was a worm in my apple. After that day I literally don't touch apple already, until now... In the last one there was a cockroach in my bee hoon and I had already...”
Unclean vegetables which were poorly prepared was a common complaint among the respondents:

“Food, terrible. Sometimes I don’t eat. Because it’s really so bad, yah. Sometimes the vegetable still have the sand. Can you imagine? They still have the sand. So how bad is that?”

Another respondent told us:

“But I tell you seriously it’s shitty... there are a lot of times I see caterpillar inside the food, cigarette butts in the sardine. I don’t even know where the cigarette butt come from in the sardine curry... shit, the food sucks. And sometimes they serve us spoiled tofu. But they will tell you that everything is okay and stuff. The other time I made a complaint and stuff, and they said, ‘No, it’s standard SOP [operating procedure].”

Requests for extra servings of food and fruit are not allowed. If it is discovered that someone obtained extra servings, both the prisoner who made the request and the cookie who obliged could be punished. One respondent, who spent a combined total of almost 15 years in prison, said that the way meals are served have a subtle yet negative psychological impact on inmates:

“When you meet an individual, no matter what race, language or religion, whether he is a criminal or not, you don’t serve the person food through a hole at the bottom of the door. We are not dogs, we are not pigs. Yes, we committed an offence but it is basic human respect. I disagree with this. Just by doing this, without realising, there is a very strong psychological effect, to an individual: that we are inmate and we take food from below. During whatever time we have inside, it grows a certain behaviour in the individual that he brings out to the real world. Even until today, I have friends who are very very low because they have done so much time and you have been programmed. Even when we are born, nobody give you food on the floor lah, the baby also never eat food from the floor lah, so what is the idea of giving food through a flap through a hole at the bottom? There is a kind of sick idea there.”

Surveillance and Privacy
Prisoners are constantly under surveillance, as CCTV cameras are installed above the toilet in every cell. While this has made respondents feel uncomfortable, most say they got used to it after a while. It is not clear what happens to the footage recorded by the cameras, how long they are kept for, and what safeguards exist to ensure that they are not leaked or abused.
In 2021, it was confirmed that 13 prisoners on death row had had their private correspondence, including privileged communication with lawyers, forwarded to the Attorney-General’s Chambers, which functions as the state prosecutor.\(^6\) The Court of Appeal has stated that while the prison is allowed to screen prisoners’ correspondence, there is “no legal basis” to forward copies of the letters to the prosecution.\(^6\)

**Prison Psychiatric Ward**

The Psychiatric Housing Unit (PHU) was formed in 2011 and comprises two specialised housing units in two prison institutions, providing gender-specific psychiatric intervention and correctional rehabilitation. Prisoners transferred to PHU typically have at least a minimum of six months before their release date, but the PHU has also set up a programme accepting inmates with only three to four months of their sentence remaining, if they require dedicated intervention.\(^6\)

In 2019, SPS revealed that about 10% of prisoners are diagnosed with mental disorders, most commonly insomnia, adjustment disorder and depressive episodes.\(^6\) Dr Christopher Cheok, a senior consultant at the Institute of Mental Health’s department of forensic psychiatry, told the press that the process of working with patients in prison is no different from that in hospital clinics. “Patients are assessed, given medication as needed and provided with psychotherapy and occupational therapy. The only difference is that they are seen in a secure setting,” he said.\(^6\)

However, as seen in Diagram 4.1 below, not everyone who is diagnosed with mental illness will be transferred to the prison’s psychiatric housing unit. Instead, a more complex process of evaluation applies.

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69 See 68.
Diagnosis for Transfer to PHU

Experiences in the Psychiatric Housing Unit
TJC spoke to three respondents who had been admitted into the prison's psychiatric ward during the period of their incarceration.

One respondent had been sentenced to six weeks' imprisonment. Due to Covid-19 isolation measures (see next section), she was placed in solitary confinement for two weeks. The prolonged period of confinement without meaningful human contact led to significant mental distress, and she disclosed to prison officers that she felt suicidal. They asked if she wanted to see a psychiatrist. She agreed, thinking that it might help her as she was also not able to sleep properly on the hard floor. However, she was only able to see a medical doctor at first, as there was no psychiatrist available over the weekend. The doctor was not proficient in English and the conversation ended up being “lost in translation”. It was decided that she would be admitted to the psychiatric ward.

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“I was hysterical, screaming and crying,” she recalled. Restrained by her wrists and ankles to the bed, the psychiatrist only came in two days later and discharged her from the ward.

While in the psychiatric ward, the respondents who spoke to TJC had not been allowed to shower, nor go to the toilet. Instead, they had to defecate and urinate in a container next to the bed, and were not able to wash their hands after. Prisoners could only clean themselves with one hand, with the other still cuffed to the bed. The same respondent told us that the ward was hot and stuffy as there were only two wall fans in operation in a room that had at least 10 beds. Her wrist and ankle restraints were checked every hour, which meant that she could not get any proper rest, even at night. The lights were on for 24 hours. “I felt like I was going to lose my mind,” she said.

She also found out that the only other person in the ward with her had been restrained to the bed for two months. This person was naked from the waist down as she had soiled herself too often. The only good thing about the psychiatric ward, this respondent said, was that it “made the remainder of my sentence more bearable.”

Another respondent revealed that he spent almost a month restrained to a bed in the psychiatric ward:

“I was not eating and I was still in shock. It was actually very depressing and I couldn’t cope with it. So they asked me to see a psychologist or counsellor and it didn’t work out. That was when they put me in the ward. I feel like I walked into my own grave...

The counsellors and psychiatrists don’t give a shit about you, they don’t even acknowledge you. I can tell by just looking at them... I actually understand why they’re like that, because probably a lot of people try to malingering by doing this. You know, they pretend like ‘oh, I’m going to kill myself’, maybe that’s the reason why they acted like that. So they didn’t give a shit. They didn’t ask me whether I was suicidal.

It was only after I was admitted to the ward, then every few days they will come and visit, and only then they will ask that question.”

According to him, he initially only had one hand tethered to the bed. Even though he was not feeling suicidal at the point of his admission to the ward, he felt like killing himself after a few days:

“They cuffed me on one hand. I was lost, I couldn’t understand. And then honestly after like two or three days, honestly, I really felt quite suicidal by then. Like, I don’t
I don't even know day or night 'cos there was no window. No window and lights on for 24 hours throughout. It was sometimes cold, sometimes hot. Then there's a button for you to press if you need help. But I rang the bell, there's no response, no nothing. I had to pee on the bed once because there was no response 'cos they were probably busy. It was that bad. When the psychiatrist finally came to see me, I admitted and I said I was feeling suicidal, only to know they put more handcuffs on me. Before that they only cuffed one hand. After I said I was suicidal, they cuffed my other hand.”

Covid-19 Measures

Prisons have been identified as hotspots for the transmission of COVID-19, given that they are commonly overcrowded, poorly ventilated, and provide less access to healthcare services relative to community settings. There were a number of Covid-19 outbreaks within the Singapore prison system since the beginning of the pandemic, including in 2021 when the virus spread among prisoners on death row.

Measures were implemented within the Singapore prison system to manage Covid-19. Newly admitted inmates are screened and segregated from the general population for 14 days, undergoing swab tests both at time of admission and at the end of their quarantine.

Other measures include temperature-taking for both prisoners and staff, safe distancing in common areas, increased area cleaning, and provision of hand sanitisers, among others.

Given the Covid-19 situation within the complex, in-person visits have occasionally been suspended and replaced with virtual ones. Other activities, such as religious services, or interviews and placement exercises provided by the Yellow Ribbon Project, also pivoted towards pre-recorded sermons or online sessions.

SPS has said that pandemic measures within the prison will continue to be refined and calibrated in accordance with evolving situations. The Ministry of Health also told The Straits Times in November 2021 that they were satisfied that SPS’ measures

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74 See 73
75 See 73
76 See 73
were appropriate and robust.\textsuperscript{77} However, not much is known about how the SPS decides when to tighten or loosen restrictions, and how the Ministry of Health's assessment was carried out.

The suspension of activities due to Covid-19 are likely to have serious mental health implications for the prisoners, since these activities represent the only chances they get to leave their crowded cells. The occasional lack of in-person visits when Covid-19 restrictions tighten also reduces the interaction that prisoners can have with their families. Coupled with border closures and travel restrictions, prisoners whose family members live outside Singapore are likely to be left even more isolated for long stretches of time.

At the time of writing, new arrivals to prison are still subjected to 14 days’ quarantine, some in solitary cells. At least two respondents who spoke to TJC described the isolation period as “torture”, since they had no social interaction and could not do anything apart from reading books. One felt suicidal and was sent to the psychiatric housing unit. (See previous section.)

Another ex-prisoner told us that when he developed a fever, and was suspected of having Covid-19, he was put in an isolation cell for four days. The cell was the size of two prison toilet cubicles and he had to sleep on the floor. He said:

“There were insects everywhere, crawling around in the middle of the night. There was no window and only one lightbulb. The only air coming in is below the door, and a small ventilation at the toilet area. The lightbulb was on for 24 hours the whole time I was there. But the officers were nice and treated us with respect. They give us advice. There are good officers, not all of them are bad. I didn’t have any yard time, I couldn’t get out. The only thing I had was a small towel, a plastic spoon and cup. Ironically, the isolation cell was worse than the punishment cell.”

Solitary Confinement and Punishment Cells

It is unclear how many prisoners are put in solitary confinement at any one time. Prisoners can be incarcerated alone for the purpose of Covid-19 quarantine, when they are ill, as punishment for offences committed inside prison, or if they have been convicted of specific crimes. Solitary confinement can also be imposed on prisoners assisting in investigations for offences committed while in prison, regardless of whether the prisoner is guilty of a disciplinary breach or not.

TJC understands that prisoners who commit serious offences — such as those that attract the death penalty, those which are violent in nature, or which involve drug trafficking — are usually placed in solitary confinement throughout their sentence. They are placed in maximum security cells in Cluster A within Changi Prison Complex and are usually isolated from the rest of the prison population.

TJC interviewed a social worker employed in a halfway house who told us he had spoken to someone who felt frustrated and depressed after spending five years alone in a cell, with only one hour of yard or day room time a day on weekdays. The former prisoner said that he would talk to himself and the walls every day. Even after his release, he kept talking to himself as if he could hear voices in his head.

One former prisoner who had spent seven years in solitary confinement told TJC that the only activity he was permitted in his cell was reading. He did not find the sole hour of yard time that he was allowed very helpful, as, after spending 23 hours in his cell, he felt that “the one hour will be very fast.” The tedium of his situation resulted in suicidal thoughts. However, he felt there was nothing he could do about it, and that telling the prison wardens might make things worse. Two respondents we spoke to who experienced solitary confinement for a period of 14 to 16 days due to Covid-19 isolation measures also experienced feelings of suicide and self-harm.

Solitary confinement as a form of punishment is widely used in both the men's and women's prison. Known colloquially as “going into PC (Punishment Cell)”, offences that attract such punishment range from serious infringements such as fighting to minor infractions such as losing the tip of a pen, or flushing a bar of soap down the toilet by mistake. One respondent said that punishment cells in the men’s prison are located at the Disciplinary Housing Unit (DHU) in the same area where corporal punishment is carried out; he said that he could sometimes hear people getting caned.

TJC spoke to respondents who experienced being punished with time in solitary confinement ranging from a few days to a few months. In addition to being denied yard or day room time, those placed in punishment cells were also denied visits, letters, books (with the exception of one religious book) and other benefits usually received by prisoners. In the cell, the lights are on “round the clock” which makes it difficult for prisoners to sleep. While some punishment cells have windows, not all do. Even if there was a window, it would be sealed. “You cannot tell day from night,” said one respondent who had spent three months in a punishment cell. “When I was tired, I just covered my eyes with a T-shirt to sleep. There’s nothing you can do.”

One respondent told TJC that he had spoken to prisoners who spent almost a year in conditions similar to a punishment cell for secret society-related activities under the prison’s ‘zero-tolerance policy’ towards gang members and gang-related activities.
According to him, such prisoners are not confined in the Disciplinary Housing Unit where the punishment cells are but at Tanah Merah Prison. TJC wrote to the prison authorities to confirm whether solitary confinement for breaching prison rules can exceed three months as stipulated by the Prisons Act, but we did not receive a response. As Tanah Merah Prison has since been closed, it is not clear if this practice still continues, and, if so, where such prisoners are now confined.

Respondents of the report had different experiences with food served in the punishment cell. Three former prisoners said that they were given a “liquid diet” only for lunch and dinner, which consisted of food such as rice and vegetables blended together. However, another said that his meals had been no different from other prisoners in normal cells.

Studies show that solitary confinement causes adverse psychological effects and increases the risk of serious harm to individuals who experience it.78 It has even been observed that isolation can cause as much distress as physical torture.79 According to the United Nations’ minimum standards for prisons, prolonged solitary confinement of over 15 consecutive days is considered a form of torture.80 (See Chapter 5.) Experts have strongly recommended that inflicting solitary confinement on those with mental or physical disabilities and onto those on death row should be prohibited,81 but individuals who have psychosocial disabilities, like death row prisoner Nagenthran K Dharmalingam, are kept in solitary cells within Singapore’s prison system.82

Caning
Judicial corporal punishment, or caning, is meted out for a wide range of offences under Singapore’s laws, both violent and non-violent. It often applies to those convicted of drug-related offences, but can also be applied to immigration offences.83 Caning is carried out on men below the age of 50, up to a maximum of 24 strokes. Extrajudicial caning can also be imposed on prisoners who commit offences within the prison facility; this is considered an administrative action and does not require a

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judge to determine if caning is a suitable punishment or to decide the number of strokes to be meted out.

Corporal punishment is carried out by prison staff who are colloquially known among the prisoners as “commandos”. A prisoner is tied to a frame, and a long and thick rattan cane used on his bare buttocks. One respondent shared: “I got 12 strokes of the cane… the scars are like stripes and they have never gone from my skin, it's still there… And it was numb. It was burning. And it was very painful.”

Prisoners are not usually told when they will be caned, and tend to only find out on the morning itself. From TJC’s interviews, we surmise that caning is usually carried out after they have been incarcerated for at least a month.

Shortly after breakfast, prisoners scheduled for caning will leave their cells and wait outside a designated room. As one respondent said: “We queue up like idiot lah, like want to go voting lah, like queuing babi babi go slaughterhouse.”

Extrajudicial caning is imposed by the Superintendent. Between 2011 and 2020, SPS administered 2,875 instances of institutional caning to 2,149 prisoners (i.e. some prisoners were found guilty of multiple offences, and were punished with caning more than once). The median number of strokes imposed on a prisoner between 2011 and 2020 was three. Most of the prisoners were caned for aggravated violence against other prisoners and violence against staff.\(^8^4\)

While waiting for one’s turn, a window allows one to see others being caned. One respondent told TJC that the “commandos” could be seen stretching their arms and swinging their canes. He interpreted this as an intimidation tactic.

Another respondent told TJC:

“\textit{They will never tell you when the caning is. On the day itself at 10 o’clock, they will call your number, today you 12 strokes, get ready ah. But each and every day you sleep, you worry. I waited three months before I kena the caning. For three months you just waiting, when and where ah... The medical check up came after two months. After two months then you get ready for the cane. A number of people will wait with you. The one with the most strokes go first. It’s two person at a time. You wait inside the room. One caning, one standby. But all wait outside. No matter how pain, you}”

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cannot shout, that is the rules. This is the inmates, among ourselves. It is your pride. One stroke already blood come out.”

When it is their turn to be caned, prisoners have to take off their prison uniform and put on a protective covering which exposes their buttocks. Their wrists are strapped to a trestle. Each “commando” administers a maximum of six strokes; if a prisoner has been sentenced to 12 strokes of the cane, two officials will administer his caning, while three officials will administer it for someone who has been sentenced to 18 strokes, and so on.

One respondent recounted:

“They make sure there is enough strength so they have different people. When the caning finish you get the medication. They never stop, all do the same thing. Six strokes okay lah. 12 strokes. When the first stroke come, you feel lah. Every stroke you feel lah. You have to sleep on your chest and cannot sleep on your back. It takes about one month to recover. You don’t get medicine every day. They just give you the medicine one time, unless got pus lah. They only give the medicine once. Everything they want you to feel the pain. You cannot shower, damn pain lah. Squatting to shit also painful... if you have diabetes or high blood pressure ah, it will take time to heal lah. If the shorts get stuck to the wound, you need to let the trousers soak under the shower, the water will let it go. If you don’t do like that, and just pull the shorts, it is damn pain you know.”

Another respondent told us that the “commandos” are so “well-trained that none of the strokes will criss-cross, it will look like kueh lapis (a layer cake).” While caning is administered, prisoners are watched by other prison officials. One respondent recalled: “With a shield… a window, and they are happily enjoying you getting whacked”. Another respondent told us that when he was caned, there were students who were on a prison “tour” who watched him being caned.

During the 2022 Committee of Supply Debate for the Ministry of Home Affairs, Minister of Home Affairs and Law K Shanmugam said that “there was no such requirement” for prisoners to thank the officers after caning.85 However, all four respondents who had experienced caning told TJC that after they were caned, they had to say “thank you”. As one respondent recounted:

“What is the most sick process of this whole thing... do you know that after you are caned, there’s a panel of people watching you, three people or so, do you know that

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after you get caned, it is mandatory for you to look at them, and say ‘thank you’? Sick or not, bro? If you never say, you cannot leave the room.”

Another respondent told us that he heard laughter after he was given six strokes:

“And then they started laughing. I was like ‘what the fuck!’ I don't know if it's their own joke that they're laughing at or they are laughing at me. But it's not the fucking place to be laughing. Right? We are not treated as humans anymore, right? We are treated as another object.”

Respondents we spoke to said it took their wounds several weeks to heal; during this period, it was impossible to sleep properly on the hard floor. They were not given more medication apart from what was applied on their buttocks immediately after the caning, nor were their wounds checked by a doctor in the days and weeks after they were caned.

**Strip-searching**

Body searches in prison often involve the removal of all clothing before a prison official or several officials. Even though prisoners would have been strip-searched at the court or police station lock-up before entering the prison complex, they will still be subjected to full strip-searches upon registration at the prison complex.

In the men's prison, all prisoners will form a horizontal line and be instructed to remove all their clothing. They will be ordered to turn around, squat down and to lift up their legs in succession, before being allowed to put their clothes back on again. The entire process can take up to half a minute.

Strip searches are also performed before a prisoner goes for their yard and day room time, and before they return to their cells. It will also be performed before they meet their lawyers and family members, go for classes, go to work in the prison complex, and when they return from their activities.

Respondents told TJC that the strip-search process upon registration at the women's prison in Changi happened in smaller rooms, with at most one or two other women with them. It appears that more privacy is accorded to women prisoners.

The prisons have argued that strip-searching is a necessary security measure to prevent the entry of contraband items. However, the respondents we spoke to felt that such searches are carried out far more often than strictly necessary. A female respondent recounted:
“I found it very weird lah. Eventually I got so desensitised, and I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not, obviously it's not a good thing. You shouldn't have to be desensitised. I can understand why strip-searches have to be conducted. But even during a cell search they will ask you to do a strip-search. And the cell door sometimes will be left open or if the ma’am is nice enough she will close the door.”

This respondent told us that strip-searches happen on a daily basis even when a prisoner has not come into contact with anyone outside of the prison, or even other prisoners, which points to the excessive nature of strip-searching in Changi Prison. This routinely humiliates people who have been incarcerated:

“Yeah, humiliating. Very humiliating. You get naked with a lot of people standing there... the whole experience makes everyone docile because basically every day you are strip-searched whenever there is movement.”

Another respondent who did work in a workshop said that even people who were not prison staff had access to the area where strip-searches took place. Prison officials dismissed his concerns by telling him not to “think so far” and “we are all men”. It was only when the respondent threatened to get his family to write in officially to complain that his immediate supervisors relented and restricted access to the strip-search area, but not without first mocking him for raising this as a concern.

Strip-searching also happens after prisoners have left Changi Prison and have to go for regular tests, or when they are living in a halfway house:

“Even when doing urine test at Selarang [halfway house], you have to do it naked... it is dehumanising, during the two-month work programme, strip-search and you squat over a mirror.”

Another respondent said:

“Every time you go back to the hostel they will strip-search you and there are lockers for you to put your stuff. This is the reintegration part. I don't have that many complaints except the strip-search was dehumanising ‘cos it was every single day.”

Several respondents shared that the body- and strip-searching was a degrading experience. The negative psychological effect was particularly acute for those with strong religious backgrounds. While strip-searching can make prisoners vulnerable to harassment and discrimination, we did not hear accounts of individual officers abusing their authority through it. However, the frequency with which it occurs, and the manner in which it is carried out, suggests that one of the objectives of strip-searching is to put prisoners in their place.
Yard Time and Day Room

Prisoners are usually given at least one hour of recreation outside of their cells per weekday. TJC understands that yard time is scheduled twice a week and day room three times a week. Yard time usually takes place in an indoor space, which according to one respondent, is “like a school sports hall.” Games such as basketball and sepak takraw are played.

“Day room” allows for activities such as watching television, playing board games, and reading newspapers. Prisoners may also borrow books from the library. Newspapers are heavily censored; from what TJC understands from one respondent, crime and soccer news are disallowed to prevent prisoners from engaging in illegal betting.

Several respondents told TJC that prisoners do not have the opportunity to access outdoor areas during yard time and day room. One said:

“There is no outdoor yard, all indoor. If you are lucky you get the top-floor yard. It is outdoor but it is caged and you can see the sky but there is a cage above lab. For most people their yard has no natural light. I must say for the whole sentence I did not see much natural light... when I first came out of prison I was like, ‘Whoa very bright!’ I felt like a vampire, I actually felt giddy you know. You don't see cars, trees, or outdoor scenery in prison.”

Rehabilitation and Social Support

Experiences of Rehabilitation Support in Prison and DRC

All the respondents TJC spoke to did not think that the prison’s rehabilitation programme had been effective in helping them, or those they met in prison, gain normalcy in their lives. Several respondents were not involved in any counselling, skills training, or family programmes at all. When the topic of rehabilitation was brought up, respondents often criticised the prison’s approach, saying it was “useless”, “a joke”, “dehumanising”, “tokenistic”, and that prison officers and counsellors could be “condescending”, “discriminatory” and “uninterested”.

The lack of dignity was a recurring theme. One respondent told us that the dehumanising environment of the prison made drug rehabilitation difficult. He believed that the prison “doesn’t make a meaningful commitment to treat you as a human being” and that is why many people relapse:

“I remember there was one guy who accidentally flushed his plastic spoon down the toilet ‘cos you have to wash it there right? So he had to eat with his hands for a while! They don’t replace your straw mats if it's dirty or spoilt, and it is all very
discretionary. As I reflect on it, it’s not the big things like physical or verbal abuse, but it’s all these other things, the quiet indignities, which for me and my friends we can laugh about it ‘cos our lives have gone back to normal and we have the pleasures of life now, and we look at the microcosm of that existence for two, three months but for others who are in there for the longer haul, and if they don’t have anything else, it is really quite horrible. I think that we look at it with a sense of irony now, we joke and laugh about it, but for many people, it is a very real existence.”

This respondent's drug dependency started because of various problems he was facing at work, at home and other aspects of his personal life. When his drug use worsened, he knew that he needed to seek help, but did not know how without getting in trouble with the law — under Singapore law, doctors are required to report people they suspect of using drugs to the authorities. He turned to crime and gang activities because they provided him with support, and importantly, an avenue to obtain more drugs:

“A lot of times I felt the only way for me to stop this is maybe by going prison. No, there's no help. Like, I want to break the cycle. But the next morning, I wake up, I turn to my right, and the first thing I see is drugs again. So I mean, I've tried throwing it away, I've tried not buying, I've tried going cold turkey, but it's impossible to deal on your own. It's very hard to deal on your own, and there is no proper help out there. So I Googled, and they say, you can go to [the Institute of Mental Health] or something. But I mean, it might leave a record, and all that kind of stuff. You know, like how in the US they have rehab centres where you can just check in yourself and then get lost. Like, yeah, there's nothing available here. So there's really no rehab at all.”

Another respondent started taking drugs because he had to work 14 to 15 hours daily, and drugs helped him to overcome fatigue. He was his mother’s main caregiver; she had kidney problems and he had to pay for her dialysis. At the time, they lived in a one-room rental flat. After using drugs for four years, he decided he had to stop as he wanted to settle down with his then-girlfriend. He was reluctant to seek help from hospitals as he knew that he would be reported to the Central Narcotics Bureau. In 2018, he almost overdosed and was sent to the hospital. The authorities were alerted and he was sent to a Drug Rehabilitation Centre.

All the respondents who were incarcerated for drug consumption told us that DRC was no different from prison. Those who have consumed drugs can be incarcerated without charge or conviction in a court of law. When they are caught, the experience is usually very traumatising. One respondent who was caught consuming cannabis told us:

“They came to my workplace and arrested me. There was no warning... And then, I was brought to Cantonment and remanded over the weekend, for two nights, and then after that was told I had to go to DRC...”

The same respondent likened the experience to being kidnapped. He said he was not given an opportunity to contact loved ones to tell them what was happening:

“People who are in your life have no idea where you are. We rely on our mobile phone, and the only person whose number I memorised was one of my colleagues. There is no way for me to call any other people. I wasn’t allowed to refer to my phone to look for any other numbers. They said ‘no way’, I was not allowed to. I managed to call my colleague and she happened to know other people in my life. And it was through my colleague that these people are being informed but they were also in the dark ‘cos how the hell do they reach me?’

Another respondent said:

“Many of us were psychologically in a state of shock ‘cos it all happened very quickly, and many are first-timers... especially the first couple of weeks... for people who are recovering addicts, DRC is another mindfuck for them. First of all you are trying to deal with your personal addiction and demons, then to be tagged with the idea of prison sentencing, their [the prison guards] typical answer would be like ‘this is not prisons, it is DRC.’ And you’re like, how is that different right? So it makes you feel very dirty, that you are very wrong, the stigma.”

Entry into DRC

Upon admission into a Drug Rehabilitation Centre, a prisoner is placed in a medical cell for an observation period of five to seven days. The respondents we spoke to described it as a torturous experience. Apart from having to deal with the trauma of being incarcerated without any warning, prisoners are confined without any yard or day room time throughout that entire period. Books and other recreational activities are not provided. The lights remain on all the time. The experience was described by a respondent to TJC as disorienting and traumatic:

“That seven–day thing is terrible, and you are in the cell with many other people. And you sleep toe to face, and it is always crowded... people come and go and there will always be new people. You don’t know day from night. It stresses you... I had this massive headache. You can’t sleep ‘cos the lights are forever on, and you only know the time of the day through the meals they serve you. It screws up your whole body system. It’s fluorescent light and at the most it might be dimmed but it is still damaging to you and your sleep cycle because you don’t experience darkness. ‘Cos of the lack of sleep, I was completely shaken by it. I wasn’t steady myself, I was like ‘oh
my god, I can’t handle this anymore.’ And then there was this medical check by this extremely rude doctor. He was so rude, like you are seeking an audience with God.

And ‘cos I did not sleep well and had a massive headache from the light, and they ask you to put out your hand, and of course because my hand wasn’t steady, and they said, ‘You see, you are a drug addict, your hand is trembling’, and I was like, ‘No, it’s ‘cos the past few nights I cannot sleep and it’s screwing me up’, and the doctor told me to shut up. I also told him I have a knee injury which has degenerated ‘cos I can’t squat. ‘Cos the toilet is a squat toilet and I can’t squat so every time I have to squat the chronic pain will come to me and he just dismissed it and said, ‘That’s your problem.’ From that moment, I started to question, are they calling this drug rehab, ‘cos there is nothing rehabilitative about it. It’s more destructive than rehabilitative.”

Another respondent said:

“It is five days of not knowing what time it is, what’s going on. The weed guys are pretty much aware of what is going on. The meth guys are sleeping, and then you have the heroin guys and the withdrawals are bad. And you are with them and you see the withdrawals. It is not easy. They don’t attend to you. No one explained to me what I was doing in there.”

Family visits only happen much later after incarceration. Friends are not allowed to visit. The suddenness with which drug users get incarcerated is also highly disruptive to their life. This is made worse if the individual is already facing multiple family crises, or is the main breadwinner of the family:

“By the time I was caught, I was quite depressed at the same time. And of course with that happening, I was quite suicidal. So I’m the sole breadwinner for my family. So when that happened, of course, my concern was mainly, who is going to provide for my family now... so that really screwed things up for me and my family.”

Lack of Transparency of Length of Incarceration

The trauma of being incarcerated without warning is often made worse by not knowing how long the imprisonment will last. According to ex-prisoners interviewed by TJC, those imprisoned for drug consumption usually go through either one of the following regime timelines:

- Four months’ imprisonment, two months at a halfway house, and six months of home tagging
- Two months’ imprisonment, four months at a halfway house, and six months of home tagging
- Six months’ imprisonment and six months of home tagging
- Twelve months of incarceration only
This timeline is not official; such information is not disclosed by the prison authorities, and prisoners often have to find out from their peers. TJC has also been unable to verify it. However, even if prisoners find out, they have no way of knowing which timeline they are eligible for, or how these decisions are made. All they can do is wait, which adds greatly to their anxiety.

One respondent said:

“Nothing is told to you by the prison authorities. They don’t explain the process to you... I sat there in my cell for weeks without knowing what was happening or what was going to happen... I had to find out only from talking to other inmates..”

Another respondent told TJC:

“Obviously, there is a lot of fear. Because you are in there, you don’t know how long, and it can be up to a year. So you are always in a lot of anxiety... And the shitty part of DRC is, you don’t know how long you are staying, you don’t know whether you will get [into a] programme, you don’t know whether it is two months, four months, or six months. I mean there was one guy, he got caught, he has a kid, a daughter who is a few years old. He got caught, his wife refuses to see him, and the wife decides to divorce him while he is in prison.”

Psychological Support and Experiences with Rehabilitation Classes

Counselling and psychological support while incarcerated appear to be limited. One respondent told TJC that she asked to see a counsellor because she found it difficult to adjust to life in prison and she was worried about her family. Her requests were denied. Another respondent said that he had been facing marital problems before incarceration and it was made worse by his imprisonment. He asked to speak to a counsellor but his requests also fell on deaf ears.

One respondent who managed to receive counselling said that he got 30-minute sessions every fortnight. He found them useful “to an extent”, but said that they were “very short”: “Nothing special, but it might help you figure out your shit, other than that I would say basic. It is nothing too in-depth.”

Those who are in DRC are required to go for classes to hear counsellors talk about the harm that drugs cause. One respondent said:

“The first class we had was more about [how] drugs are bad, that kind of thing. Very basic, running through your different paraphernalia and its effects. The second class was to work out communication skills, anger management skills a bit.”
When we asked if they found this useful, the respondent said:

“Inside, you get a bit brainwashed. They are pushing an agenda, but the problem is that the counsellors or teachers are very [politically correct]. They are very stuck to a certain set of rules that they can or cannot do. They let you know also. They are trying to be accommodating, but there are cameras in the classroom.”

One respondent told us he felt that the classes were “condescending” and the counsellors “clueless”. In one of the group counselling sessions he attended, a prisoner shared that the reason he took drugs was because he was working two jobs and needed a boost to stay awake at work. However, the counsellor’s responses were limited to just saying that drugs were bad for him.

“The quality of the counselling wasn't good. I feel that these people have good intentions but poor training. Very rudimentary training. There is no real intent to understand why people commit these kinds of crimes and get into addiction troubles. Many of them are also caught because of drug consumption and have been involved in other petty crimes but there is little understanding why they act out socially, and I just feel that there is little consideration of that.

Many people take drugs because they are trying to escape whatever issues they have with life, whether you are privileged or not so privileged... addicts do things because we can't deal with our realities. So it’s not conceptualised based on an intent to rehabilitate. It is based on an intent to basically scare you into going back in again.

I think that the system doesn’t bear in mind that people probably need to be given some sense of self-worth first... and a lot of it is also tied to your means and your sense of self-worth... These people are in prison, you have 24 hours of their time, why not dedicate the resources to working with them individually? The ways things are done just seem so tokenistic...”

Another respondent felt that counselling seemed to be aimed at making her feel guilty for being incarcerated:

“The classes felt like they were just there to guilt-trip you, instead of really getting to the root cause of things. Instead of really trying to find out, you know, what is beneficial for one inmate or what can we do to help one inmate, it was more like to guilt-trip you, you know? What if your kids don't see you anymore, what if your parents, what if you lose your parents while you are in here, things like that.”

One respondent told us that the counsellor assigned to the class he was mandated to attend agreed that their interventions were not useful:
“One of us did say that this class is not helping us recover. Even the counsellor agreed and said that, ‘I know it's not helping you guys but then this is just how they structure this rehab programme to be. And this is part of the syllabus that I have to go through with you.’”

The same respondent said:

“I just feel like the rehab process itself needs revision and correction. Because I did have talks with the inmates, all the inmates. I think everybody that I talked to agreed that this system is not the best system for anybody to recover, or anybody to grow. It's not called rehab. It's just called prison. So what's the point of having two different names but the system is the same.”

Another one told us:

“I used to be grateful to the system. I mean... in DRC I had the mindset that this institution will change my life, ‘cos I really wanted to stop. And I was grateful I got caught, I was grateful there was a sign for me to change. But then it didn't happen. DRC wasn't what I expected it to be. It’s prison culture, you’re still on the floor. What I see in other countries, in US, their rehab is so professional... I'm a law-abiding citizen, you know. I tell you, I park properly, everything nicely done, and my problem was drugs ah. So I felt that... and then in DRC they treat you like prisoners, like I did a big crime. That was hurtful lah.”

All the respondents TJC interviewed agreed that many prisoners cooperated and went for classes simply to break the monotony of prison life. Prisoners were also aware that they had to give socially desirable answers so that they could leave their cells, continue going for classes, be considered for early release, and be put on the prison’s post-release programme. As stated by one respondent:

“This is just to pass time, just go there to listen to God’s word lah, make yourself easy a bit lah. I go there and listen and talk about God, talk about Jesus, all just like that lah. As long as my time is moving lah. You can sit there in the air-con because the cell is very hot mah.”

Rehabilitation Support
According to a former prison officer TJC spoke to, rehabilitation programmes for those who are not drug users usually take place after a prisoner has served a third of their sentence. It is also reserved for those sentenced for the mid- to long-term, although it is not clear how this is defined.

The first third of a sentence is known as the “deterrence phase”, and prisoners are not allowed out of their cells, except for their hourly weekday yard time. Whether a prisoner can participate in rehabilitation programmes depends on whether they are
“well-behaved” and have “potential” for rehabilitation. This is determined via an assessment tool that categorises prisoners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class A</th>
<th>Prisoners deemed to be “low-risk”, in that they are likely to change their ways and unlikely to re-offend whether or not rehabilitation treatment is provided.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class B</td>
<td>“Moderate risk” prisoners with a high probability of changing their ways with appropriate treatment or rehabilitation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class C</td>
<td>“High-risk” prisoners who are not expected to change whether they get rehabilitation or not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class D</td>
<td>Prisoners who are non-Singaporeans, or who have mental illness. For these prisoners, rehabilitation is seen as “not a concern”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2

One former prisoner who spoke to Associate Professor Narayanan Ganapathy and Professor Lian Kwen Fee shared his experience:

“I went to see the superintendent officer for the multimedia course which is a two-year course. Even without going through me, he told me, ‘Just look at your record. You’re an eight-timer.’ ‘Why don’t you give me a chance,’ I asked. Then he told me, ‘One class can only take 30 people so first- and second-timers will get their choice first...’”

In their paper, Narayanan and Lian also cite the experience of a Malay-Muslim informant who had been convicted of drug and penal offences five times:

“There is really no way to break from this. It is a chicken-and-egg thing. They say you cannot change and so don’t put me on programme. I am not prepared to go out [out of prison] but have to. No choice. Outside cannot survive, commit crime again and then come inside [prison].”

What all the respondents TJC spoke to agreed on was that rehabilitation provided by the Singapore Prison Service was ineffective because of a “one size fits all approach”. There was very little depth in SPS approaches because prison authorities did not take

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87 Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. (2018). Rehabilitation, Recidivism, and Reintegration: An Examination of Singapore’s Penal System for Drug Offenders. 


89 See 88.
into account an inmate’s unique personal history or circumstances in providing social support, vocational training and counselling. One respondent told us:

“We were required to attend classes to prepare us for our release although this is incoherently done as there was no direction on what skills we are supposed to acquire.”

**Post-Release Challenges**

Under the Conditional Remission System, people serving prison sentences can be released after serving two-thirds of their sentence. Upon their release, they are issued with a Remission Order that covers the remaining third of their sentence. This order imposes the basic condition that they may not commit another offence for the duration of the order. If they commit another offence for which the punishment is imprisonment, the court may also sentence them to additional imprisonment for breaching their Remission Order. In addition to this basic condition, there may also be other mandatory aftercare conditions such as electronic tagging and curfew.90

Whether an individual is deemed eligible for early release often depends on the level of family support they can get, which affects SPS’ assessment of their risk of reoffending. Similarly, whether a prisoner in the Drug Rehabilitation Centre is eligible for release depends on whether their family members are contactable and willing to support them in the rehabilitation process.

One respondent told us that prison officers often told prisoners in DRC that if they did not get enough family visits, emails and letters, it would delay their release. Another respondent who was imprisoned for consuming cannabis told us that because his biological parents are no longer around and he only had an adoptive family, he was told he may have to stay in for the maximum period of 12 months.

In order to be released, it is compulsory for those imprisoned for drug use to take up a job with a company registered with the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises, or SCORE. Those released will stay at one of several halfway houses in Singapore. The Lloyd Leas Community Supervision Centre, usually referred to as “Lloyd Leas”, was one which many of our respondents were sent to. Described by respondents as resembling an army barracks, released prisoners are electronically tagged and allowed freedom of movement only for the purpose of work. If they do not report back to the halfway house on time after work, they risk being incarcerated in Changi Prison again. They are also not allowed to deviate from the prescribed route between the halfway house and their workplace.

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TJC understands that after a period of supervised residency (usually between two to four months) at Lloyd Leas or other halfway houses, people are allowed to return home, but will still be subjected to electronic tagging and strict curfew for another six months. After those six months, they will continue to report to a police station or to the Central Narcotics Bureau on a weekly basis for urine tests.

The Need for Family and Community Support

Family and community support during and after incarceration is crucial. Research has shown that previously incarcerated persons are usually only able to cope and not fall back into a cycle of drugs and conflict with the law if they have supportive family members, partners, friends, and a decent job which allows them some level of financial security.

However, many of our respondents have had to battle insecurity, the stigma of having been incarcerated, and the psychological trauma of harsh prison conditions. One respondent said:

“After my release, I was a mess... I'm sure you hear inmates tell you this all the time: inside stress is very different from outside stress. Very true. And there's a reason why a lot of inmates tell you also, they would rather be inside. Because inside, they will say this, they will say inside people accept you easier. Inside you don't worry about so many things, you only worry about yourself. So initially when I came out, the stress was on me to fix my family bonds. The trust you need to rebuild is very hard. And your parents always think that you're going to be up to something again, you're gonna be doing this again, you're gonna be doing that again... It took them very long for them to understand that it wasn't necessarily my fault. And I really don't have a very easy relationship with my parents as well. So it was very hard for me. And at the same time, every little thing that went wrong they would blame me... It was really hard for me because I was also dealing with other issues and not just prison. There was a lot of things going on in my head. I didn't feel I was myself. I had no idea who I was... I was binge-drinking a lot to deal with the stress.”

Strained family ties was a recurring theme among some respondents. One told TJC that his incarceration shocked his family and even after his release, it was difficult to restore ties with them. Another one said that his wife decided to divorce him while he was in prison and he received very little emotional support from the prisons both during and after his sentence. The loss of income as a result of incarceration also threw some families into disarray, resulting in fractured relationships.

For some respondents, support to repair the harms caused by incarceration were non-existent. One respondent told us that post-release support can be so weak that those incarcerated for drug consumption even found “happiness” in incarceration,
because it provided relief from the pressures they had to face outside the prison system:

“You get the sense that they are happy inside ‘cos they form a certain brotherhood, three meals are settled for them, all their financial woes and their social pressures like, ‘Are you feeding your children?’ and ‘So and so is doing better than you’... They are just completely divorced from that.”

The same respondent, who said he was able to “pull the right strings” because he had an influential relative, told us that he got significantly more support than others who were incarcerated with him because of his social capital and privilege:

“Many of their families do not have the privilege or the social currency to ask the right questions, pull the right strings or write to the right people to ask all these things. When is my next visit? How do I get things to them? For me I had tons of shit because the guard will say your relative called, she wrote in... even post release, I was lucky that my place of work was a relative’s home because I had someone advocating for me right?

I was lucky ‘cos my relative decided to register his company under SCORE and hired me. He set up a home office and basically asked me to help him run admin for his business. I had a counsellor come in to talk to me... my family had the resources to get help for me... I could see my family every day... whereas most of these other guys, they don’t have the same resources I did... I was able to rehabilitate myself, but not because of Changi, but I was part of that lucky group who could get help on my own.”

Impact of Incarceration on Mental Health
Several respondents also shared the psychological impact their experience in prison had on them:

“It really affects the way how I think, like, over small things, like I'll get angry easily and question people and stuff like that... ever since [the incarceration] I have felt very cautious of everything, you know? But what really affected me was how I socialise. I used to be outgoing, making new friends, but now I'm very introverted, always in my own shell, I try to be as anonymous as I can. I prefer to just have a small group of friends.”
Another respondent said:

“Even ‘til now, I can’t sleep properly at night... I will wake up after every sleep cycle. I still get a bit of flashbacks here and there... I think it’s PTSD, it’s hard for me to tell people...”

Yet another respondent:

“It’s hard. It took me a while to get back my self-esteem. ‘Til this day, I still have feelings of shame and doubt myself a lot. My family gave me a hard time, you know ‘cos you’ve been to jail and this is how society judges you.”

A respondent shared his experience of being housed in a part of the prison complex where many death row prisoners are confined, and its impact on him:

“I tell you, where I was in A1, two storeys below is the gallows, just right below me is where people hang... So on some nights it is too disturbing. Sometimes you can hear them screaming. Thursday nights you hear them screaming, shouting, praying. Because we can hear them. We can literally hear people in the gallows. The inmates below, those waiting to die, we can hear them shouting. It’s so traumatising. These things disturb me at night. I think about them. I think about their family members, how they actually go through this. When I came out of prison I read about all their cases... why the government don’t give them a chance. The foreigner [on death row] was so innocent, he was only 21 years old when he got caught.”

Employment Challenges

Stable and secure employment has been identified as one of the key factors in successful rehabilitation. However, the respondents TJC spoke to said that the jobs offered to them by the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (SCORE) did not pay enough for them to support themselves and their families. These were often menial jobs in the services, logistics and process industries which paid basic salaries of between S$1,000 to S$1,500 per month. One respondent told us:

“I can’t survive on a job like this. It’s difficult. I also have kids, family to support. My wife struggling on her own... when I came out, I could only get this kind of job. It added a lot to my stress.”

The stigma of having been incarcerated also made finding jobs offering decent pay difficult. Respondents shared that SCORE jobs were often ones that other Singaporeans did not want to do as the pay was low, the nature of the job was tiring, and the hours were long. One respondent observed that such exhausting conditions can make adjusting back to life outside prison difficult:
“Most of these other guys who get these jobs... manual jobs... exhausting jobs... many of them were working in factories, doing baking whatever, in the kitchen or work the outlets... But it's hard work, and they are always on their feet.”

Job application forms and interviews may ask if an applicant has been convicted of an offence. One respondent was dismissed from his job after the company discovered that he had lied about his criminal record. He had felt compelled to lie to secure his employment, as the position on offer was better paid than the other ones he had interviewed for. “The dismissal affected me a lot. I knew it was wrong to lie. But I knew if I didn’t, they wouldn’t even consider me.”

Seeking financial assistance from the Social Service Office upon release was an uphill task for this respondent. His incarceration had meant a significant loss of household income for his family, and financial stability was an urgent problem. However, he failed to meet the government-administered means test:

“When I came out, I needed financial assistance as I had not been working for over a year... my family was quite financially exhausted already. So they said you go and try Family Service Centre, and you know the stupid Family Service Centre said, 'Last year your income was 50-over thousand, it's not much but it's not little also, so this year you don't qualify.' But yes, that's last year! But this year, no job, prison! So how? But sorry last year, so you should be earning this. But how you want me to work? Sorry lah. It was impossible to get financial assistance. I tried to get at the [Family Service Centre]. My wife was working at honestbee at the time, but she was earning only $1,000-plus and I had kids to support.”

Relationships with Prison, Probation and Rehabilitation Officers
Respondents had mixed reactions when asked about their relationships with prison authorities. One respondent told TJC:

“The prison guards don't talk to us like we are equals. They are not nice lah. They may not shout but they can be very condescending. But I have to ask myself, what does one expect? 'Cos this is prison, right?’”

Another respondent told us:

“The way they talk is dehumanising. No dignity. They call you things like bodoh [stupid], you feel low... they raise their voice for no reason, small things... this is one of the key things that need to change about prison, I feel... it’s not a good feeling... it affects you psychologically.”
While some told us that there were officers who were “nasty” and “rude”, other officers were described as “nice”, “encouraging”, and being able to “understand our plight”. One respondent said:

“I think to be fair to the officers, there are good ones, not all are bad. I did meet those who showed care and concern. I suppose that is the same with most institutions, there are good and bad eggs around.”

Another respondent relapsed after he was released from the DRC programme because the delivery rider job provided by Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (SCORE) was too stressful for him. The long hours took a toll on his physical and mental health and he started taking drugs again. He informed his rehabilitation officer, hoping to receive help. However, once his rehabilitation officer heard that he was using drugs, he was told that he would have to be incarcerated again. Afraid of being sent to prison, this respondent removed his electronic tagging device and went on the run. He was eventually caught by the authorities, sentenced to imprisonment, and given six strokes of the cane. He said it was the “lowest point” of his life:

“He [the rehabilitation officer] said, ‘Come down now, come down now and give me your urine.’ Because if I come down when my urine is dirty, I'll be charged for a second time. I have to serve my current sentence and add on another 18 months for my second time. So I know I don't want that. And then I said, “I've been honest with you, help me lah.' I said I'm being honest. But no lah. The way he ask me to come, I already know that he wants to charge me. So I took off and ran... Panic, panic, without thinking. I told him directly, I was honest, I won't be coming to... this is what I'm going to do. I told him, I informed him. Then he just tell me okay then be ready to face the consequences ah. Which I didn't know was six strokes of the cane lah.’”

The above account shows the difficulty that those who have been in DRC experience when seeking help: being honest with your rehabilitation officer or counsellor upon release could result in punitive sanctions or even re-incarceration.

Another respondent had a similar experience with his probation officer when he was 17 years old. He was encouraged to be honest with the officer about his drug consumption, and was promised that he would receive support and assistance. However, the officer included this information in their probation report. When his case was brought before the courts, it was cited as an aggravating factor which led to him receiving a heavier prison sentence for consuming drugs while on probation. He said: “I felt betrayed, I didn't expect it to be used against me. I found it hard to trust authority figures and counsellors again.”
Some respondents shared with TJC that random “cell checks”, “raids”, and body strip-searches by officers were means by which power was exercised by individual officers to show ‘authority’ over prisoners. They said that this could happen to particular prisoners whom an officer or officers did not like:

“Sometimes they pick on the room, they will remark that they don’t like this fellow then every time they go inside the room and make it upside down, take this out, take that out…”

TJC spoke to a contractor who provides services to the women’s prison. She shared with us that, during one of her visits, she was shocked at how harsh the officers were towards the prisoners. She told us:

“I was accompanied by a guard and when we entered an area where there were several prisoners, the guard shouted at them, ‘Who said you can look! Look away! Face the wall!’ I was shocked. It is not surprising that the prisoners would want to look at me because I’m a visitor… you mean that is not allowed? How can it be wrong to even look at someone? She was so fierce, I felt scared myself.”

**Assault by Prison Officers**

Most of the respondents TJC spoke to said they did not experience or hear of prison officers assaulting prisoners. A few of them said that, based on stories they had heard from other prisoners, violence against prisoners was more common during the 2000s and earlier. According to these respondents, assaults usually took place in the staircase landings of the prison block, in areas known as “blindspots” which were not captured by CCTV cameras. They told us that officers may taunt, push, slap and kick prisoners who were deemed to be problematic. One respondent shared that he was assaulted by an officer when he served his sentence during the 1990s. He was re-incarcerated in the 2010s and said he did not experience, witness or hear of any more violence.

Another respondent who served various sentences over the last 20 years told TJC that, in 2010, he witnessed a guard who used his walkie-talkie to hit a prisoner’s head repeatedly. Even though he no longer witnessed violence in the subsequent years, he said that he still heard stories from affected prisoners and even prison officers themselves who “randomly open the cell, raised their voices, and provoke you and even get rough.” According to him, such treatment was reserved for those who were recalcitrant or violent, and the purpose was to “tame these hardcore gangsters”. He said that he believes prison officers “still beat up inmates”, but also that “they are quite careful with violence on inmates already.”
Punishment and Access to Justice

Respondents who were punished in prison for offences committed while incarcerated have described the process of meting out punishment as arbitrary, unclear and untransparent. From TJC’s interviews, punishments have been doled out for offences ranging from fighting among inmates, assaulting a prison officer and insubordination, to raising one’s voice, losing a pen, exercising in the cell, not walking in line, exchanging books with prisoners from other cells, and even intervening to stop a fight that broke out in their cell. One respondent told us that hugging is not allowed: “You cannot touch anyone. Not even hug. Once you’re caught, you have to thumbprint, demerit point. You go into the punishment cell.”

TJC was told that the prisons operate on a “three strikes” system. They are required to “thumbprint” (i.e. similar to receiving a demerit point) for each breach of prison discipline. Accumulating three “thumbprints” will lead to isolation in a punishment cell. This period of isolation can range from one day to several weeks, or even several months, depending on the severity of the offence (see the section ‘Solitary Confinement and Punishment Cells’).

Prisoners with good behaviour will accumulate “merit points” over a period of time. These points can be redeemed in the form of snacks, candy, and extra visits from loved ones.

The arbitrariness with which punishments are handed out can result in extremely severe and disproportionate disciplinary measures. One respondent said that a fight which happened in a neighbouring cell resulted in the authorities denying yard and day room time to all the prisoners on that floor for almost two months, even though most of them had not been involved in the fight. Describing his two months in a cramped and poorly ventilated cell with no respite as “pure torture”, he felt that it was unfair to punish everyone for the actions of a few:

“So almost every week, there is a fight. And when there’s a fight, there’s a lockdown. There was a period of time there was a lockdown when no one came out of the cell for almost two months. There were times it went further beyond two months also...

When these fights happen, sometimes the whole institution is on lockdown, or it could just be one level... Because the fight was gang-related and stuff, the reason they confine [all of us] is because they don't want anyone else to fight. And also because they don't want the message to spread... That's why they do the confinement. I mean, I totally understand, but the fact that it affects the people who have good conduct and all, it's just not fair.”

When a prisoner is deemed to have committed an offence, a prison officer will take a statement to record their version of events. All parties who are involved will be
separated and put in solitary confinement, regardless of whether they are guilty of an offence or disciplinary breach. One respondent told TJC that he stayed alone in a cell for two weeks during the investigation period, even though he had only been a witness to the fight that had broken out.

Prisoners who are being investigated for offences will eventually face a disciplinary committee within the prison. TJC understands that the Superintendent of that particular prison cluster or block chairs the committee. Decisions made by the committee are final and cannot be appealed to a higher authority. Prisoners are not represented by legal counsel throughout this process. This lack of legal representation and avenues for appeal triggers concerns relating to abuse of power, procedural propriety, and miscarriage of justice. Even if a prisoner feels like they have been unfairly punished, or even deliberately picked on by prison officers, they have limited avenues to raise such complaints.91

In 2008, the Institutional Discipline Advisory Committee was introduced, made up of members of the public appointed by the Minister for Home Affairs. Its duty is to provide an opinion to the Commissioner of Prisons on whether the corporal punishment imposed on an inmate is, in their view, excessive. Under the Prison Regulations, while the Commissioner shall refer each case of corporal punishment to the Committee, the Commissioner is not required to take up the opinion of the Committee even if the punishment is found to be excessive. The opinion is only to “assist the Commissioner in making a decision”.92 There is little further information on the operation of the committee — the number of times the Committee convened, who sits on the committee, or the number of instances in which the Committee found the punishment to be excessive. From 2011 to 2020, SPS administered 2,875 instances of institutional caning to 2,149 inmates; the median number of strokes imposed was three.93

Board of Visiting Justices
The Minister for Home Affairs appoints Justices of the Peace to the Board of Visiting Justices. (See Chapter 2.)

Many of the respondents interviewed by TJC were not aware of the role of the Board of Visiting Justices, nor had any of them met a Visiting Justice. When asked what a prisoner could do if they were not happy with their treatment while incarcerated, several said that feedback could be given to the Superintendent of the prison during

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92 Prison Regulations, s. 73. https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/PA1933-RC2
yard time. However, many felt that there was no point in doing so; in their view, speaking to a higher-ranking official would not have resulted in their grievance being addressed, as the Superintendent was part of the system that was giving them problems. Respondents felt that “nothing will change” even if they spoke out.

Even when a prisoner does manage to speak to Visiting Justices, it is unclear how often the Board of Visiting Justices conducts its own independent investigations into complaints of abuse of power or bullying by prison officers. In a letter to the mother of a man serving a life sentence, the Singapore Prison Service confirmed that her son had spoken to a Visiting Justice about his complaints of mistreatment at the hands of prison officers, but that “[the Board of Visiting Justices] understood and did not raise any further queries after we explained to them that the allegations raised by Sallehin were baseless.”

**Prison Labour**

Prisoners may be employed to work while incarcerated. Some are engaged to support the operations and management of the prison. Known colloquially as “cookies”, they perform tasks such as cleaning, laundry, and meal deliveries to other prisoners. Others are contracted to “workshops” within the prison, run by private enterprises in industries like food-and-beverage or electronics.

TJC understands that whether a prisoner is eligible for work is dependent on a few factors, such as the nature of the offence, the length of the sentence, the behaviour of the prisoner and their potential for ‘rehabilitation’. One respondent, whose sentence was less than a year, said:

"Less than one year, no way of getting work. Don't ever dream of it. I begged to work. I begged so hard. You don't pay me also can. Because I was bored to death you know! But they refused. I couldn't take my mind off other stress…"

Another respondent told us that prison labour was seen by many as an opportunity to earn some income, and, more importantly, to escape the boredom and frustration of being confined to a cell. He told us that as the demand for work is higher than the jobs on offer, this made it easy for prison officers to abuse their power and "play favourites", only offering work to the prisoners they liked.

According to the Home Affairs and Law Minister, K Shanmugam, prison labour — which the state refers to as “work programmes” — is meant for prisoners to gain useful skills, develop a positive work ethic and prepare them to join the workforce upon release. Prisoners are paid an allowance of between $0.30 and $2.60 per hour,

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94 Han, K. (2020, November 9). WTC Long Read: A mother’s concerns in a time of POFMA. We, The Citizens. [https://www.wethecitizens.net/wtc-long-read-a-mothers-concerns/](https://www.wethecitizens.net/wtc-long-read-a-mothers-concerns/)
and participation is voluntary. The allowance, Shanmugam said, is not meant as a wage but serves to “motivate inmates to perform well and develop themselves while on work programmes.”

However they are framed, the low sums that prisoners are paid for their labour raises questions:

- Which companies are profiting off prison labour by paying workers as little as $0.30 an hour?
- How are the companies that participate in these “work programmes” selected?
- If prisoners participating in “work programmes” are not considered to be receiving wages, only “motivation”, are they then covered by labour law, occupational health and safety measures, and work injury insurance?

Apart from this, it is also unclear if the quality of work carried out by prison labourers actually supports integration and work opportunities post-release.

TJC is concerned that the use of prison labour for profit, or to meet prison functions — such as laundry, provision of meals, etc. — with little or no regard to wage and labour protections amounts to state-mediated worker exploitation. This exacerbates existing structural inequality, since people who end up incarcerated tend to come from marginalised and disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Putting them to work for paltry sums of money while they are incarcerated is simply transferring them from one oppressive, exploitative situation into another.

Chapter 5 — International Standards on Treatment of Prisoners

As a collective, TJC does not accept incarceration as part of a "justice" system that purports to protect social safety, or as a legitimate method of addressing and repairing harms. In fact, we actively advocate for decarceration (see Chapter 6).

However, we are providing this overview of existing international standards on prison conditions and treatment of prisoners to illustrate how far Singapore’s prison conditions — based on what we have been able to find out — fall below even this most basic threshold.

Mandela Rules and Bangkok Rules

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, otherwise known as the Nelson Mandela Rules, were first adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1955, and updated in 2015.

The Mandela Rules were passed in order to promote humane conditions of imprisonment, and to raise awareness about prisoners being a continuous part of society. They are not meant to be exhaustive; instead, they “seek only, on the basis of the general consensus of contemporary thought and the essential elements of the most adequate systems of today, to set out what is generally accepted as being good principles and practice in the treatment of prisoners and prison management.”96 In other words, the Mandela Rules are meant to provide guidance on the baseline for standards and conditions to prison systems around the world.

The Mandela Rules make clear that incarceration and separation from society is in itself sufficient punishment for criminal offenders, and prison conditions should not aggravate their suffering. Rule 3 of the Mandela Rules is worth setting out in full:

“Imprisonment and other measures that result in cutting off persons from the outside world are afflictive by the very fact of taking from these persons the right of self-determination by depriving them of their liberty. Therefore the prison system shall not, except as incidental to justifiable separation or the maintenance of discipline, aggravate the suffering inherent in such a situation.”

Since prisons were historically designed with male prisoners in mind, the Mandela Rules are supplemented by the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women

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Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules). The Bangkok Rules provide guidance to meet the specific needs of women who are imprisoned.  

**International Committee for the Red Cross**

The International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) has published the document Water, Sanitation, Hygiene and Habitat in Prisons (ICRC Handbook), a resource providing guidelines on the material conditions of detention, from food and accommodation to access to healthcare, the maintenance of social relationships, and the ability to engage in physical exercise, leisure activities, and vocational training, among others. The ICRC Handbook is also accompanied by a Supplementary Guidance.

**International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination**

Singapore ratified the International Convention for the Elimination of all Racial Discrimination (CERD) in 2017. The CERD committee set out, in its General Recommendations 31, that racial minorities who are serving prison sentences must enjoy treatment which is free of racial discrimination.

Next, we set out some of the key provisions in the Mandela Rules and other international standards, and how Singapore’s prison conditions stand in contrast.

**Key Provisions in International Standards**

**Cell Size and Occupancy**

The Mandela Rules state that, where sleeping accommodation is provided in the form of individual cells or rooms, each prisoner should occupy a cell or room by themselves at night. If the prison administration needs to make an exception to this rule for special reasons — such as temporary overcrowding — it is not desirable to have two prisoners in a cell or room.

It is worth noting that the UN Minimum Standards do not set out recommended cell sizes. However, the ICRC Handbook recommends that each individual should get

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5.4m² in single cell occupancies, and 3.4m² in multiple occupancy cells. According to the Supplementary Guidance, “The larger the number of people in the accommodation space, the more possibilities there are for tensions which can lead to prison unrest”.

The ICRC Handbook draws guidance from the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO), a British organisation which has proposed specific dimensions for places of detention. NACRO suggests the following:
- A minimum floor space of 5.4m² per person, regardless of whether they are in a single cell, or sharing with someone else
- A minimum distance of 2.15m between the walls of the cell
- A minimum ceiling height of 2.45m

People who have been incarcerated should also have space to lie down to sleep, to move freely within their cells, and to have space for their personal belongings.

**Singapore's prison cells fall well below these recommendations. Cells that measure about 2.5m by 2.5m house about three to four persons.** (See Chapter 4.)

**Bedding**
The Mandela Rules state that every prisoner shall be provided with a separate bed, and with separate, sufficient and clean bedding.

**Prisons in Singapore do not provide bedding. People who have been incarcerated tell TJC that they usually use extra sets of clothing given to them as a cushion between their bodies and the cell floor.**

**Light and Ventilation**
The Mandela Rules state that all accommodation provided for prisoners’ use — in particular, all sleeping accommodations — should pay due regard to climatic conditions and particularly to cubic content of air, minimum floor space, lighting, heating and ventilation.

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The ICRC Supplement recommends that in very hot countries ventilation can be improved by electric ceiling fans; “these do not cost a great deal to install and use little electricity.”

The Mandela Rules state that the windows of rooms in which people live and work should be large enough for prisoners to read or work by natural light, and should allow the entrance of fresh air, regardless of whether there is artificial ventilation.

International guidelines also recommend that the total size of windows and openings in a cell (or accommodation area) should be no less than 10% of the floor space. Windows should allow detainees to see part of the external environment. Artificial lighting should not be kept on 24 hours a day in rooms where prisoners sleep.

**Singapore prisons do not allow inmates to view any part of the external environment, and there is little allowance for natural lighting to enter cells through windows. Prisoners in solitary confinement, especially punishment cells, have to remain in cells with artificial lighting on all the time.**

### Healthcare and Mental Health

According to the Mandela Rules, every prisoner shall have access to a healthcare service to ensure their physical and mental health. The provision of healthcare for prisoners is the responsibility of the state, and prisoners should enjoy the same standards of healthcare that are available in the community. The prison should also ensure continuity of treatment for HIV, tuberculosis and drug dependency, and healthcare services should consist of interdisciplinary teams with enough qualified personnel acting with full clinical independence. This includes expertise in psychology and psychiatry.

If a physician considers that a prisoner’s physical or mental health has been, or will be, injuriously affected by continued imprisonment, or any condition of imprisonment, they should report this.

The Bangkok Rules state that individualised, gender-sensitive, trauma-informed and comprehensive mental health care and rehabilitation programmes should be available for women prisoners who have such needs while incarcerated. Women’s prisons should also implement a comprehensive policy of mental health care that

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106 Mandela Rules, Rule 14.  
108 See 107.  
110 Mandela Rules, Rule 25.  
111 Mandela Rules, Rule 33.
includes the development of strategies to prevent suicide and self-harm among prisoners, and to provide appropriate, gender-specific and specialised support to those at risk.\textsuperscript{112}

\textbf{Mental health care in prisons in Singapore can be described as abysmal, particularly during the pandemic, when more prisoners were confined to their cells with no respite. Inmates who profess to having suicidal thoughts are placed in the prison psychiatric ward, where they are restrained to their beds. They have to eat and relieve themselves while restrained, and are released from the ward only after they are assessed by a psychiatrist to confirm that they no longer have suicidal ideation. (See Chapter 4.)}

\textbf{Exercise and Yard Time}

Every prisoner who is not employed in outdoor work should have at least one hour a day of suitable exercise in the open air, as long as the weather permits.\textsuperscript{113} The ICRC Handbook says that the “more hours a detainee spends engaged in positive activities in a safe, secure environment outside the accommodation area each day, the greater the possibility of mitigating the negative effects of close confinement for both the detainee and staff.”\textsuperscript{114}

NACRO standards also specify that detainees should be allowed to spend at least 10 hours a day outside their cells or dormitories. This does not include the time needed to use the sanitary facilities (if these are not in the cell) or the period set aside for physical exercise.\textsuperscript{115}

\textbf{Prisons in Singapore offer little opportunity for yard time and day room facilities. Due to the pandemic, many prisoners have — from time to time as Covid-19 measures shift — been isolated in their cells 24 hours a day as visits and other activities were cancelled. This includes those who have to endure solitary confinement for a period of up to three weeks as part of Covid-19 measures.}\textsuperscript{116} (See Chapter 4.)

\textbf{Solitary Confinement}

Under the Mandela Rules, solitary confinement is defined as the confinement of prisoners for at least 22 hours a day without meaningful human contact.\textsuperscript{117} This is

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{112} \textit{Bangkok Rules}, Rule 12 and Rule 16.
  \item \textsuperscript{113} \textit{Mandela Rules}, Rule 23.
  \item \textsuperscript{114} \textit{ICRC Handbook: Supplementary Guidance}, pp 35.
  \item \textsuperscript{115} \textit{ICRC Handbook}, pp 18.
  \item \textsuperscript{117} \textit{Mandela Rules}, Rule 44.
\end{itemize}
discouraged in the Mandela Rules and should be only used in exceptional cases as a last resort.\textsuperscript{118}

In particular, indefinite solitary confinement, prolonged solitary confinement (referring to solitary confinement for over 15 consecutive days), placement of a prisoner in a dark or constantly lit cell, corporal punishment, the reduction of a prisoner’s diet or drinking water, and collective punishment are to be prohibited.\textsuperscript{119}

In situations where solitary confinement is strictly necessary, the Mandela Rules say that it should be for as short a time as possible and subject to independent review, with the authorisation of a competent authority. It should not be imposed by virtue of a prisoner’s sentence.\textsuperscript{120}

In Singapore, solitary confinement in punishment cells is commonly used for prisoners who commit offences or breach disciplinary rules while in prison. Respondents told TJC that the lights in punishment cells are switched on for the entire duration of their isolation, yard time and day room is denied, and water is rationed for only 10 minutes a day.

In its reply to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the Singapore government asserted that our laws only limit solitary confinement to no more than 90 days within a single year, as stipulated under the Prisons Act.\textsuperscript{121} However, this provision is only for prisoners who have committed offences while inside prison, and not those who are convicted of crimes which the prison authorities deem serious enough to be put in solitary confinement. If the definition provided in the Mandela Rules is followed, solitary confinement is commonplace in Singapore prisons, and imposed as a matter of course upon prisoners convicted of various offences, including persons on death row. (See Chapter 4.)

**Corporal Punishment**

Corporal punishment is prohibited under the Mandela Rules.\textsuperscript{122}

Judicial corporal punishment is applied to a number of offences in Singapore, including non-violent ones such as drug- and immigration-related offences. Beyond this, the prison authorities are empowered to mete out corporal punishment for aggravated offences committed while in prison. (See Chapter 4.)

\textsuperscript{118} Mandela Rules, Rule 45.
\textsuperscript{119} Mandela Rules, Rule 43.
\textsuperscript{120} Mandela Rules, Rule 45.
\textsuperscript{122} See 119.
Strip-searching
The Mandela Rules state that strip searches and body cavity searches should be undertaken only when strictly necessary, and prisons are encouraged to use alternatives to these intrusive searches.\textsuperscript{123} Searches should also not be intended to intrude upon a prisoner’s privacy.

The ICRC Handbook states that when searches are required, there should be sufficient staffing to ensure that searches of women are only carried out by female officers, out of sight of male officers.\textsuperscript{124}

Respondents told TJC that the Singapore prison carries out an excessive number of strip-searches, often requiring them multiple times a day whenever there is prisoner movement. They found the experience degrading and humiliating. (Chapter 4.)

Communication
The Mandela Rules state that prisoners have a right to receive visits, and correspond with the outside world by way of letter, or through other electronic means.\textsuperscript{125}

In Singapore, visits and correspondence are considered privileges rather than rights, and can therefore be denied to prisoners.

Punishment and Access to Justice
The Mandela Rules state that prisoners should be allowed to defend themselves in person, or through legal assistance when necessary. This is especially so in cases involving serious disciplinary charges. If the prisoners do not understand or speak the language used at a disciplinary hearing, they should have access to a competent interpreter, free of charge. Prisoners should be informed, without delay and in a language that they understand, of the accusations against them, and be given enough time and facilities to prepare their defence. Prisoners shall have an opportunity to seek judicial review of disciplinary sanctions imposed against them.\textsuperscript{126}

Prisoners subject to disciplinary action while incarcerated are able to give statements to a prison officer and be questioned by a disciplinary committee, but are not represented by legal counsel throughout this process. There are also no clear avenues to appeal disciplinary sanctions imposed against them. (See Chapter 4.)

\textsuperscript{123} Mandela Rules, Rule 51 and Rule 52.
\textsuperscript{124} ICRC Handbook, pp 60.
\textsuperscript{125} Mandela Rules, Rule 58.
\textsuperscript{126} Mandela Rules, Rule 41.
Chapter 6 — Decarceration: The Evidence

Most of the local studies on incarceration found by TJC for the purpose of writing this report focused on factors that lead to desistance from crime, or were contextualised within the need to prevent re-offending. As highlighted in Chapter 1, deterrence and preventing re-offending are central to the justification of the use of custodial sentences in Singapore. Much less attention has been paid to the impact of incarceration on individuals and communities — a gap that urgently needs to be filled.

However, even if we look at metrics like recidivism rates, there are indications that incarceration is not the ‘solution’ that the state claims it to be. Prisoners’ access to rehabilitation programmes and social support that might keep them from coming into conflict with the law again is uneven and unequal; even if we take the Singapore Prison’s Service professed desire to “Rehab, Renew, Restart” the lives of incarcerated persons at face value, these efforts continue to perpetuate existing social inequalities.

Furthermore, research on the impact of incarceration on people — and the ripple effect on their families and communities — has been done in other jurisdictions and contexts. These studies indicate that incarceration can have a detrimental effect on an individual’s mental health, and might even cause personality changes that make it even more difficult for people to reintegrate into society upon release.

In this chapter, we round up research that scrutinises recidivism rates and questions the effectiveness of incarceration, and present arguments for decarceration.

Understanding Recidivism and Rehabilitation in Singapore

The Available Data on Recidivism

The government and SPS consistently highlight falling recidivism rates as a marker of the success of SPS’ rehabilitation programmes more broadly. But while recidivism rates after two years of an inmate’s release may have fallen by more than half since the 1990s (see Chapter 3), it is important to note that it increases exponentially at the five-year mark: 40% are incarcerated again within five years of release.127 This means that almost half of those released eventually end up in conflict with the law again. It was also revealed in Parliament that repeat offenders constitute more than 80% of

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the penal population in Singapore, and many have drug antecedents. This means that the vast majority of incarcerated persons in Singapore have been incarcerated more than once. The Singapore Prison Service does not release recidivism statistics for periods beyond the five-year mark.

**Recidivism Rates and Race**

Annual arrest data for drug users by ethnicity, provided by the Central Narcotics Bureau, also highlights that a larger proportion of Malay and Indian drug users arrested are repeat users, compared to Chinese drug users. In 2021, 57% of all Chinese drug users arrested were repeat users, whereas 71.4% of Malay drug users and 68.2% of Indian drug users arrested were repeat users. The data shows that, in the last five years, a gap between the annual recidivism rate of ethnic minority drug users and Chinese drug users have emerged. That higher proportions of ethnic minorities are repeatedly being arrested for drug use indicates that they are more likely to be trapped in the revolving door of incarceration, release and re-arrest.

Higher proportions of arrest and re-arrest of ethnic minorities is potentially linked to policing practices towards ethnic minorities. See Transformative Justice Collective’s *Alternative Report to Convention of Elimination of Racial Discrimination* for discussion of Singapore’s crime control strategies and racial discrimination.

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128 Ministry of Home Affairs. (2021, August 2). *Written Reply to Parliamentary Question on the Five-Year Recidivism Rate for Each of the Years from 2011 to 2015, by Mr K Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law*. 

129 Higher proportions of arrest and re-arrest of ethnic minorities is potentially linked to policing practices towards ethnic minorities. See Transformative Justice Collective’s *Alternative Report to Convention of Elimination of Racial Discrimination* for discussion of Singapore’s crime control strategies and racial discrimination.
In a paper published in 2016, Associate Professor Narayanan Ganapathy and Professor Lian Kwen Fee highlighted similar concerns that the recidivism and incarceration rates for ethnic Malays and Indians were far higher than their Chinese counterparts:

"In 2010, the Chinese reoffending rate stood at 18% that was far below the recidivism rate for the Malays and Indians, which was 28.8% and 30.8%, respectively (Task Force Report on the Community-based Aftercare Services for Indian Prisoners, 2014). Overall, the Chinese recidivism rate for the year 2010 was below the national recidivism rate of 23.6% (Mohamad Salleh, 2014) even though they comprised 76.8% of the national population (Census of Population of Singapore, 2010). Additionally, 86% of the total Indian inmate population had been incarcerated more than once and a significant 78% three or more times (Task Force Report on the Community-based Aftercare Services for Indian Prisoners, 2014)."

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130 Central Narcotics Bureau. Drug Situation Report. https://www.cnb.gov.sg/newsandevents/reports-(overview); This statistic is calculated by dividing the number of repeat users arrested of each ethnicity by the total number of drug users arrested of the same ethnicity.

They argued that this has resulted in the systemic marginalisation of ethnic minority inmates:

“...the higher recidivism rate among the Malay and Indian offenders relative to the Chinese has led to the exclusion of minority inmates from participation in rehabilitative programs. While there is no explicit discrimination based on race per se, prison authorities are reluctant to extend rehabilitative opportunities to ethnic minorities who are perceived to be recalcitrant offenders. As one senior prison officer plainly stated: ‘I mean given our limited resources and based on the risk of relapse prediction by our psychologists, we have to make sure that we put our resources where we get our returns back... I mean you put in your money in investment schemes where you get the best out of it... We have to show results too.’”

Narayanan and Lian reference a 2010 Report of the Committee on the Prevention of Reoffending, which states that a significant number of Indian/Hindu prisoners are released annually into the community without undergoing any form of rehabilitation programme in prison. They conclude that “given the heightened racial consciousness and systemic racialisation in prisons, such exclusion from rehabilitative programs may be interpreted as a form of institutional discrimination against minorities.”

One Malay respondent of their study said:

“I wanted to go for this trade course, I told my RO (Rehabilitation Officer) about it. He said that I cannot go because of my record and also no vacancy. Then two weeks later, I find out that one Chinese guy has applied for it. He also same like me, third timer, but how come he got it? Last time when my brothers all say that “Yellow Ribbon” is really for “Yellow” people only (meaning the Chinese), I didn’t believe. Now I do.”

This indicates that inequalities in access to opportunities and social capital present in Singaporean society are reproduced within the prison system, leaving ethnic minorities less likely to be provided with programmes and courses that can help them transition back into life outside prison. Taken together with the findings covered in a later section that say that one’s risk of re-offending increases with every incarceration, we can only come to the alarming conclusion that many individuals from already marginalised communities end up trapped in a system that makes it more difficult for them to lead thriving, fulfilling lives outside of prison, then penalises them for it while incarcerated.

132 See 131.
133 See 131.
Less Recidivism Does Not Mean Better Reintegration

In their 2016, Associate Professor Narayanan Ganapathy and Professor Lian Kwen Fee advised caution in comparing SPS’ seemingly low recidivism rates against other countries, as different jurisdictions employ different methods of calculation.\(^{135}\)

Putting aside the question of the comparability of recidivism rates, it is important to look beyond the binary of whether a person re-offends in assessing the impact of incarceration on them and the ‘success’ of the rehabilitation they undergo. Indeed, the interview work done for this report has highlighted the lasting trauma of incarceration on people and its effects on mental health. It has also shown the challenges — caused by the disruption and associated stigma of incarceration — of finding rewarding employment post-release; these difficulties often amplify already existing socio-economic and racial marginality.

As Ganapathy highlights in a different article, the emphasis on rehabilitation in the Singapore prison system focuses on the responsibility of individuals in preventing their own re-offending and their “willingness to change”, instead of acknowledging or addressing the socio-structural roots of marginalised communities and its impact on their disproportionate representation in offending statistics.\(^{136}\)

Finally, high levels of supervision and surveillance of formerly incarcerated people is also a feature of Singapore’s prison system. It is mandatory for those incarcerated for drug consumption to go for regular urine testing, and electronic tagging and curfew are often part of the aftercare conditions that come with release. Amendments to the law in 2019 have increased supervision periods from a maximum of two years to up to five years following release.\(^{137}\) Conditions like electronic tagging and curfew can further exacerbate the stigma that ex-incarcerated individuals face. More broadly, the use of more supervision and surveillance post-release raises questions of where the experience of prison actually ends, and if the targeting of persons deemed ‘higher-risk’ further traps them in cycles that see them incarcerated over and over.

The subsequent section highlights various studies on the impact of incarceration on individuals, including the stigma they face and various financial or social difficulties.

**Studying the Impact of Incarceration in Singapore**

Local research on the impact of imprisonment found incarceration to contribute to recidivism. A study of 230 incarcerated individuals in Singapore, published in *The Prison Journal* in 2019, found that a multiple incarceration history predicts a higher

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\(^{135}\) See 134.


risk of reoffending (‘risk’ as defined in SPS’ own risk assessment framework) and that an individual is 3.51 times more likely to reoffend with every incarceration.\textsuperscript{138}

The authors, psychologists Aston Tan and Lay See Yeo, highlighted that multiple incarcerations could lead individuals to acquire antisocial behaviour in prisons, and that incarceration prevented individuals from achieving developmental and vocational milestones. In their view:

\begin{quote}
“…the cumulative years of incarceration produce a gradual, but substantial, impact when considering that most high-risk individuals once entered the criminal justice system at the lower end of the reoffending risk spectrum.”\textsuperscript{139}
\end{quote}

A 2019 study by SPS’ internal research unit interviewed 30 individuals incarcerated in Changi Women’s Prison. Their findings highlighted that 90% faced difficulties finding employment after exiting prison, owing to a lack of expertise in job requirements and experience of stigmatisation. Over 60% experienced financial problems when it came to paying for housing and daily expenses, alongside difficulties affording care expenses and obtaining financial aid from public agencies. Over two-thirds of interviewees reported negative experiences with family and partners post-incarceration, including a lack of support, conflict and abuse. 30% reported mental health issues arising from fear of stigma, as well as difficulties in seeking treatment.\textsuperscript{140}

There is a degree of state recognition that it is not desirable to rely too much on jail terms: in 2016, former Attorney-General V K Rajah observed that community-based sentences were “under-utilised”, and suggested that people who have committed less serious crimes could serve such sentences instead of being subjected to harsher punishments in prison.\textsuperscript{141} This recognition, however, does not negate an underlying approach that continues to rely heavily on punitive measures, emphasising deterrence through harsh conditions, isolation from society, and (individualised) rehabilitation. A growing body of research from all across the world indicates that such punitive approaches do more harm than good.


\textsuperscript{139} See 138.


The International Evidence for Decarceration

“Even when prison conditions are relatively humane, with clean, modern facilities, the psychological effects persist in that ‘prisons can gradually but profoundly and problematically shape the way that prisoners think, feel, and act’.”
— Dr Craig Haney, social psychologist

Research by scholars and experts in various different jurisdictions have found that incarceration not only fails to reduce crime, but also hurts many families. The book *Prisoners Once Removed: The Impact of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families, and Communities*, edited by Jeremy Travis and Michelle Waul, examines the American experience, and found that families impacted by incarceration already tend to be vulnerable in many ways. In most cases, incarceration actually *adds* to the burdens of families that are already struggling with life's obstacles and setbacks. Instead of helping people improve and rebuild their lives, the incarceration of a family member might further exacerbate ongoing situations of poverty, stress and trauma.

Evidence in criminological literature suggests a weak link between incarceration and the reduction of violent crime. A 2019 study done by sociologists at the University of California, Berkeley found that imprisoning someone had no effect on their chances of being convicted of a violent crime within five years of release. The study concluded that prison has “no preventative effect on violence in the long term among people who might have been sentenced to probation.”

Imprisonment can also cause changes in people’s personalities. This was found in interviews with hundreds of prisoners in the United Kingdom, conducted by researchers at the Institute of Criminology. “Many... told us that they had undergone significant and sometimes wholesale personal transformations,” the researchers wrote in 2015. They went on:

“As the long-term prisoner becomes ‘adapted’ — in the true sense of the term — to the imperatives of a sustained period of confinement, he or she becomes more emotionally detached, more self–isolating, more socially withdrawn, and perhaps less well suited to life after release.”

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An exploratory paper published in February 2018 used neuropsychological tests to show that even a short stay in prison had an impact on personality. The researchers at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, a public research university in the Netherlands, tested 37 prisoners twice, three months apart. In the second test, prisoners demonstrated increased impulsivity and a diminished capacity to control what they focus their attention on.¹⁴⁷

According to the neuroscientist and psychologist Dr Christian Jarrett, these results suggest that the prisoners’ conscientiousness — a trait associated with self-discipline, orderliness and ambition — suffered while they were in prison. While acknowledging that there is currently a dearth of research examining the ways in which prison environments can shape someone’s character, Dr Jarrett argues that current evidence suggests that incarceration impacts one’s personality in ways that hinder rehabilitation and reintegration.¹⁴⁸

Research done in the United States has shown that certain mood disorders, such as depressive disorder and bipolar disorder, are linked to imprisonment. The removal of people from their families and society — coupled with prolonged periods of confinement and poor conditions such as overcrowding — causes damage to mental health. Boredom, social disconnection, the loss of autonomy and lack of purpose have been linked to negative mental health outcomes.¹⁴⁹ Those recently released may continue to suffer the effects of incarceration, manifesting as symptoms that can include a sense of helplessness, fear, flashbacks, anxiety attacks, impulse towards aggression, and many other negative cognitive-behavioural traits. Some researchers have termed this Post-Incarceration Syndrome, similar to those who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.¹⁵⁰

The argument for decarceration becomes even more stark when in the context of drug offences, particularly consumption. The United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has repeatedly stated that compulsory detention for drug rehabilitation and treatment should be replaced with voluntary and community-based drug treatment, with complementary health, harm reduction and social support services.

¹⁴⁸ See 146.
In a 2022 report, the UNODC said that the criminalisation of drugs, and the implementation of administrative sanctions such as mandatory drug testing, “stoke stigma and fear among people who use drugs and hinder access to health and social services.” This is borne out by the testimonies that TJC heard from respondents who were incarcerated for drug consumption: because Singapore sees drug consumption as a crime for which incarceration — be it in Drug Rehabilitation Centres or prisons — is an answer, people are deterred from seeking treatment or support from medical professionals as they fear being reported to law enforcement officers, and eventually incarcerated.

Conclusion
The experiences documented by TJC in this report, alongside a mounting body of international evidence, suggest that incarceration neither helps people stay out of conflict with the law, nor helps them to live full, thriving lives with strong social bonds to their families and communities. Instead, incarceration causes more suffering and trauma, with effects that ripple out beyond the incarcerated individual to their loved ones and society at large.

While the Singapore Prison Service has made much of a supposed pivot towards ‘rehabilitation’ and being “Captains of Lives”, we have not fundamentally shifted our approach towards criminal punishment. Instead of fixating on success stories of people whose lives the prison system claims to have been able to “Rehab, Renew, Restart”, it is our collective views on crime, punishment, repairing harms and the true meaning of justice that need to be refreshed.

Prisoners are, in many ways, the most voiceless group in any society. Imprisonment has been described as social and civil death, because in many ways, one ceases to be a citizen with the basic rights that others in society take for granted. In Singapore, prisoners don’t have the right to vote, to meet with journalists on their terms, correspond with their family members or lawyers freely without surveillance, or be represented fairly before they are punished by the prison for alleged transgressions. There are so few ways for them to be heard, and even post-release, stigma and fear of censure make it difficult for many to speak up. This report is a first step towards giving voice to people who have experienced imprisonment, and it is limited by who was willing to speak to us, and who we were able to gain access to (experiences of lifers and those on death row are close to impossible to document, for example). If we are to meaningfully engage with questions around incarceration and its place in our society, we need to first allow prisoners to have a voice, and to listen deeply and

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honestly to the contradictions their testimonies surface between what we are told prison is meant to do and the lived realities of people behind bars.