

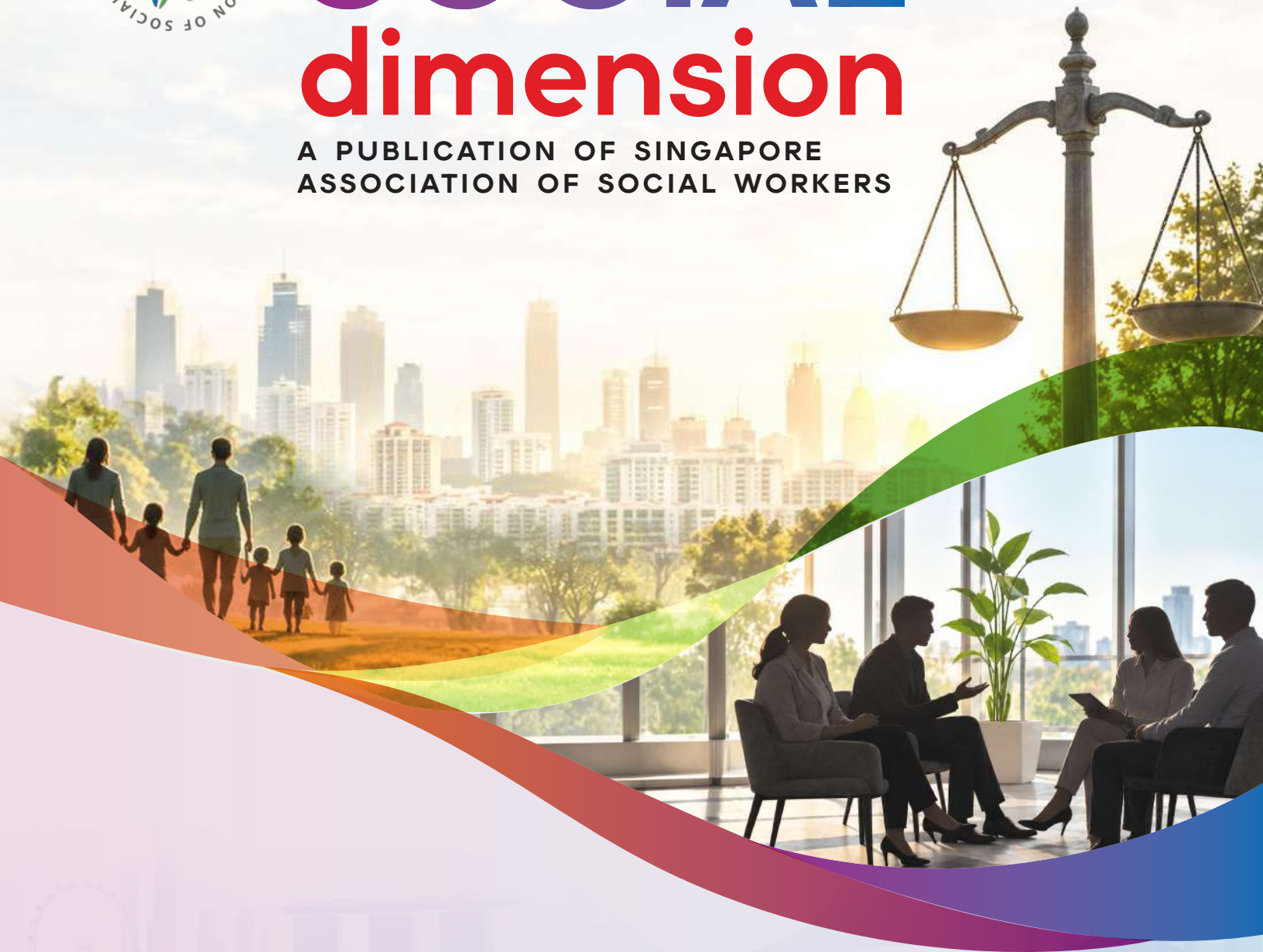


SOCIAL dimension

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Vol 2026/2

Special Issue on
Criminal Justice



CONNECTIONS *BEFORE* CORRECTIONS

A Relational
Approach to
Working with
Justice-Involved
Individuals

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by

Dr Nicodemus Lim

Chair, SASW Publications Standing Committee



This issue of Social Dimension is truly special in several ways.

Firstly, it is one of the most ground-up issues with numerous expressions of interest from various contributors approaching the Association and the Publications Standing Committee (the Committee) directly. Though they came up in a seemingly scattered manner, what the Committee saw was a concerted maturing of the Criminal Justice (CJ) sector, particularly in terms of CJ Social Work (CJSW) scholarship. This observation gave rise to the idea of an issue on CJ, way before the previous issue was published.

Secondly, what the Committee had sensed is the capability of the CJSW Chapter in promoting their specialisation, and dedications over the past 8 years in encouraging continuous learning and practice development. We recognised that the Chapter possesses the subject expertise that would enhance our editorial inputs, thus giving rise to this collaborative issue between the two teams to jointly support the article contributors. The quality of the articles is reassuring. Expectedly, this collaborative approach with respective Chapters for such "special issues", would likely be replicated. To this end, I would like to thank CJSW Chapter Chair, Mr Roger Tan, and his members for contributing their time and critical insights that would otherwise be regrettably missed.

Thirdly, on a personal note, is the opportunity to reconnect and collaborate with Roger at another "special project". Roger and I first met as colleagues at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) in 2007. The following year, we performed together (see photos below), with two other IMH Medical Social Workers, at the SASW Social Workers' Day 2008. Roger composed the theme song "Keep the Fire Burning", which we sung and later joined by the 300 over Social Workers, including our late President SR Nathan, to sing in unison.

Thereafter, I went on to practice in the community while Roger continued to practice at the IMH, to date. At the SASW's Volunteer Appreciation last year, we caught up, reminisced that memorable event, while congratulating one another for being appointed to lead our respective teams.

This special issue can be said to be two decades in the making and reflective of the culture of the Social Work fellowship established by the Association.



Nicodemus Lim currently practices at the Methodist Welfare Services' Family Services Group Office as the Lead Clinician, with prior experiences in the area of child protection, mental health, senior care, and suicide intervention. He is also an Adult Educator with the Social Service Institute and serves on various academic and social service committees and boards.

SPECIAL ISSUE EDITOR'S NOTE

by

Roger Tan

Chair, SASW Criminal Justice Social Work Chapter



We are pleased to present this special issue of Social Dimension, dedicated to Criminal Justice Social Work (CJSW). When the CJSW Chapter was invited to contribute to this issue, we readily embraced the opportunity. The publication reflects the Chapter's commitment to:

- ★ Promote Criminal Justice Social Work through diverse platforms in response to an evolving criminal justice landscape;
- ★ Create opportunities for learning and collaboration within and beyond the criminal justice sector; and
- ★ Champion effective and evidence-informed Social Work practices.

Recent developments signal growing recognition of the important role that Social Work plays within the criminal justice ecosystem. The launch of the Inclusive Justice Taskforce in January 2026 reflects increasing awareness that systems, services, and practitioners must continually work together to better support justice-involved individuals (JIIs). This special issue aims to contribute to the growing body of Social Work knowledge in the sector. As I reflected on the collection of articles featured in this issue, a common thread emerged: the importance of connection.

Social Workers practise across the continuum of the criminal justice system, from community-based interventions to court services, custodial settings, and aftercare. The individuals we serve are diverse,

including youths and adults, and those navigating issues such as substance use, family violence, and mental health conditions. Amid this complexity, Social Workers help foster connections, between individuals and families, between services and systems, and between hope and opportunity. Through a person-in-environment perspective, we seek to strengthen the relationships and support networks that enable meaningful and sustainable change.

This special issue offers a glimpse into the breadth and depth of CJSW practice. While it does not capture every perspective within the sector, we invite readers to explore the challenges and aspirations reflected in these contributions. Whether or not you work directly in criminal justice settings, many of the themes discussed may resonate with your own practice and inspire reflection on how they apply within different contexts.

As you journey through this special issue, we hope you will gain a deeper appreciation of the many roles Social Workers play within the criminal justice system. Like the shifting patterns within a kaleidoscope, each perspective presented here offers a different view of practice. Yet together they reveal a common truth: that change is made possible through connection, with individuals, families, communities, systems, and one another. We hope these articles encourage continued dialogue, learning, and collaboration as we work towards a more responsive and inclusive criminal justice landscape for all.

Roger Tan is the Chairperson of the Criminal Justice Social Work Chapter in the Singapore Association of Social Workers. He is also preoccupied with living in a galaxy far, far away.

FEATURE ON THE INCLUSIVE JUSTICE TASKFORCE

An interview with a Social Work Leader, Ms Tan Sze Wee

In January 2026, it was announced that a 20-member task force has been convened to review how the Government can better support people with mental health conditions and special needs within the criminal justice system (Tan, 2026).

The task force brings together professionals from legal, healthcare and social service sectors to examine existing support measures and identify opportunities for improvement. Among its members is Ms Tan Sze Wee, then Executive Director of Rainbow Centre. In this interview, she shares her perspectives on the need for inclusive justice, and the role Social Workers can play.

For context, how come there's this need? What gaps or concerns brought this issue to the fore?

Sze Wee: Singapore has existing measures to support vulnerable individuals, including the Appropriate Adult Scheme and MINDS' Community Forensic Services. However, Social Workers and practitioners have observed gaps in how people with special needs and their families are supported across different stages of the criminal justice process.

Several key gaps:

- ✦ **Identification:** Support can only be activated if a person's disability or vulnerability is recognised. Some individuals may not display obvious signs of disability, and when vulnerabilities are not identified at the point of first contact, access to appropriate support can be affected throughout the process.
- ✦ **Disability awareness across the system:** Police officers, lawyers, court personnel and prison officers all require a baseline understanding of disability and vulnerability. This helps ensure that individuals receive appropriate support and participate meaningfully in legal proceedings. For example, a person with special needs may admit guilt without fully understanding the consequences of doing so.
- ✦ **Continuity of support:** Existing support mechanisms are often strongest at the investigation stage. However, a person's journey through the criminal justice system also involves remand, court proceedings, sentencing, incarceration and eventual reintegration back to community.

The Inclusive Justice Taskforce therefore presents an important opportunity to examine the entire journey, from prevention and investigation to court proceedings, sentencing and post-sentencing support, with the aim of ensuring that people with mental health conditions and special needs receive appropriate and coordinated support throughout the process.

What is the current support landscape look like for persons with special needs navigating the legal system, and where do you see the most significant gaps?

The Appropriate Adult scheme, administered by MINDS, is probably the most established safeguard. The Scheme ensures that a trained volunteer sits in during police interviews with persons with disabilities, to facilitate communication and watch for distress.

MINDS' Community Forensic Services provides advocacy and emotional support during investigation and legal proceedings, develops customised rehabilitation plans, and continues behavioural and social support after sentencing. It also facilitates communication between families, legal authorities and community partners. This service supports not only accused persons, but also victims and witnesses with disabilities.

The most significant gaps to me, are threefold: identifying vulnerability at first contact, building a baseline of disability capability at every touchpoint in the system, and ensuring continuity of support across the whole journey rather than at isolated stages. **Many pieces exist but we do need to connect them.**

Why should this issue matter to social workers? How does it connect to the core values of the social work profession?

People with disabilities who encounter the law are the very same individuals we support across family services, disability services, schools, healthcare and eldercare settings. At some point, any of them may encounter the justice system, be it as an accused, victim or witness.

The ability to recognise vulnerabilities, ask the right questions and connect individuals and families to appropriate services can have a significant impact on how situations develop, including whether concerns escalate into legal issues. For this reason, a basic understanding of the criminal justice landscape should form part of competent generalist Social Work practice.

Fundamentally, this is also a Social Work concern because it raises questions of fairness, participation and access to justice. It concerns whether people who may be less able to understand complex processes or advocate for themselves are able to participate meaningfully and be treated fairly within the justice system. This connects to our profession's core values of dignity and social justice. While treating everyone the same may appear fair, genuine equity sometimes requires additional support to ensure that individuals can understand proceedings, communicate their views and exercise their rights.

The Social Work person-in-environment perspective is particularly relevant. It encourages us to consider not only an individual's actions, but also the influence of other factors such as disability, communication needs, family dynamics and broader social circumstances. Recognizing these factors does not diminish personal responsibility. Rather, it helps ensure that responses are proportionate, reduce the risk of further harm while supporting rehabilitation and reintegration where appropriate.

As someone on the taskforce, what does meaningful progress look like to you? What would you hope for?

Sze Wee: As the Taskforce undertakes its review and puts forward recommendations, meaningful progress must go beyond the recommendations themselves. It will depend on how recommendations are translated into practice - how organisations work together, how professionals respond at each point of contact, and whether individuals and families experience real improvements on the ground.

To me, this requires inclusive justice to be understood not only as the responsibility of legal or forensic professionals, but as a shared responsibility across social services.

For Social Workers, this shared responsibility can be translated into three actions: A, B and C.



Be **Alert**



Recognise when a person's disability, communication needs or circumstances may affect their ability to understand and participate in the legal process.

Be a **Bridge**



Help the individual and family understand what is happening, communicate their needs to other professionals and connect with the appropriate services.

Social workers can help bridge the gaps between the person, the family, social services and the justice system.

Contribute to change



Bring what we learn from individual cases to the attention of our organisations and policymakers, to move from helping one person at a time to improving the system for many others.

My hope is that every Social Worker sees a place for themselves in this effort. Meaningful progress will be achieved when persons with disabilities do not have to rely on chance just to be understood and supported, and when the different parts of the system work together to provide a fair, accessible and coherent journey.

Tan Sze Wee is the former President of SASW (2021-2025) and former Executive Director of Rainbow Centre. A passionate advocate for service and leadership, she believes in making a meaningful difference in the lives of others while embracing life's pleasures.



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Eugene Tan has been a Medical Social Worker since 2011. Having been a part of the multiple developments in the medical Social Work setting, he continues to view the role of a MSW akin to being on a journey, not only with patients, but with the communities and practitioners alike.

BEYOND MANDATES

How Social Workers Navigate Service Interruptions in Domestic Violence Offender Counselling

by Nurhafidzah Kamal

Domestic violence remains a growing concern in Singapore, with increasing case reports and recurring offending behaviour. In response, community-based rehabilitation programmes have been strengthened, with Social Workers playing a central role in counselling domestic violence offenders, many of whom are court-mandated to attend. Yet a critical and often overlooked challenge persists: what happens to therapeutic work when the system itself is fragmented?

Drawing from interviews with six experienced Social Workers across three community agencies, my research explores how practitioners navigate service interruptions in domestic violence offender counselling. Applying Lipsky's (1980) Street-Level Bureaucracy theory, the study examines how Social Workers exercise professional judgement within systemic constraints to sustain engagement, manage risk, and keep therapeutic work alive.

The Reality of Court-Mandated Counselling

Court mandates require offenders to attend counselling as part of their legal obligations. While continuity of therapeutic engagement is essential for rehabilitation, this is frequently disrupted when offenders serve short prison sentences. These interruptions fracture therapeutic relationships, create gaps in risk management, and complicate the already challenging work of building trust with a population that is often ambivalent about seeking help.

What the research reveals, however, is that Social Workers are not simply delivering mandated sessions, they are actively exercising professional judgement to hold the work together when systems fall short.

Mandated Does Not Mean Unwilling

One of the most significant findings challenges a common assumption in the field: that court-ordered clients are inherently resistant and unmotivated. The research identified what I term "willing mandated clients", perpetrators who, despite initial reluctance, develop genuine engagement and motivation for change within a skilled therapeutic relationship.



As one Social Worker observed: "Some of them actually do want help, even though they are mandated." Court orders, rather than being barriers to authentic engagement, can serve as entry points, reducing stigma and providing external justification for participation. The therapeutic relationship, built patiently and with cultural sensitivity, is what transforms a mandate into a meaningful opportunity for change.

This finding aligns with Wild's (2021) assertion that therapeutic relationships and informed professional judgement, rather than mandates or punitive measures alone, form the foundation of effective intervention with domestic violence perpetrators. It has direct implications for practice: effective engagement requires Social Workers to move beyond compliance-checking and invest in rapport-building, shame-sensitive communication, and recognising moments of genuine readiness for change.

When Short Sentences Interrupt Continuity

The more pressing systemic concern is not the sentence itself, but what happens, or fails to happen, around it. When offenders serve short sentences, counselling continuity is disrupted at precisely the moment when structured support matters most. The problem is compounded by a coordination gap: Social Workers often learn of a client's release through family members rather than official channels, leaving little time to prepare for timely re-engagement or to manage safety risks for victims.

As one participant noted, offenders serving short sentences often "just go in and come out" with minimal rehabilitative intervention, a missed opportunity, given that the period around incarceration can be one of heightened reflection and receptiveness to change. Skilled Social Workers do attempt to maintain continuity during these periods, passing information through family connections, staying in contact where possible, and preparing for re-engagement upon release. But these are individual workarounds for what is fundamentally a systemic gap.

The concern, therefore, is not that short sentences should be avoided so that counselling can continue. Rather, it is that when short sentences occur, systems need better coordination so that risk management, counselling continuity, and post-release follow-up are not lost in the gaps between institutions.

A Call for Coordinated Systems

These findings point to a clear practice message: effective domestic violence offender counselling requires more than mandates. It requires coordinated systems that support Social Workers' professional judgement, continuity of care, and timely communication across justice and community services.

Concretely, this means accessible information-sharing platforms between the Singapore Prison Service, Courts, and Family Service Centres; structured rehabilitative planning that accounts for all sentence lengths; and consistent enforcement of counselling orders that reinforces rather than undermines therapeutic goals.

Social Workers consistently demonstrate the capacity to sustain meaningful work even within fragmented systems. However, as Tan (2025) highlights in the context of inter-agency lapses, adaptive practice by individual practitioners should never be a substitute for systemic coordination. When institutions work together, Social Workers can focus on what they do best, building the therapeutic relationships that make real change possible (Lipsky, 1980).

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Nurhafidzah Kamal is a Senior Court Social Worker who recently completed her Master of Social Work at the National University of Singapore. She conducts court conferences with accused persons and their families to formulate care plans and community referrals. This article draws from her capstone research, which explores the intersection of criminal justice and Social Work practice, an area she is passionate about through her daily work. She is also a member of the Criminal Justice Social Work (CJSW) chapter under the auspices of the Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW).



AN EXPLORATION OF HUMAN AND SOCIAL CAPITAL FACTORS OF DESISTANCE FOR FEMALE OFFENDERS IN SINGAPORE

by **Camelia Liow, Marilyn Lee & Charlotte Stephen**

As practitioners working in correctional rehabilitation, we know that women's pathways out of crime differ from men's — a difference the research confirms. Much of the existing desistance research has been broad and primarily focused on men (Osterman, 2022), yet growing evidence suggests that while desistance theories developed on male populations are applicable to women, the factors that aid women in desisting from crime are distinct (Rodermond et al., 2016).

Our study (Liow et al., 2025) explored the narratives of twelve Singaporean women who had remained crime-free for five or more years. It examined the human and social capital factors that sustained their desistance (crime-free journey) — with findings that carry direct implications for rehabilitation practice.

Human Capital: Building Internal Resources

Three internal factors emerged as central. First, participants developed emotional regulation skills, replacing drugs as their primary coping tool. They applied what they had learned in psychological based rehabilitation programmes to manage stress through relationships, exercise, and faith. Second, participants spoke about the importance of self-efficacy. One shared, “I am so much different (now), I have pride, I have my self-esteem back. My kids respect and look out for me,” and another shared the personal responsibility towards change, “If you really want to change, you need to show them. I used to blame others: why they don't trust me, why they never give me a chance, but actually it is because I never give myself a chance”. Identity change drove their motivation: seeing themselves as capable, responsible people — no longer defined by past failures — was what sustained their commitment to change. Third, for seven participants, religion provided hope and meaning for internal growth and change — a “hook for change” that reframed their situation and supported cognitive and identity transformation, not merely attendance at religious services or gatherings.

Social Capital: The Importance of Relationships

All twelve women named relationships as central to their desistance — not just receiving support but giving it. Women were motivated by the desire to be present for their children, to care for ageing parents, to be a reliable partner. This reciprocal dynamic — reclaiming relational roles rather than merely returning to them — was what gave family its motivating force in that their support provided an impetus to cope with reintegration challenges. One participant shared, ‘Whoever wants to contact you for whatever reason, I will tell them (it's) not worth it. Everyday work, weekend keep for family’. This sense of establishing a reciprocal relationship amongst their loved ones showcased strongly in their desistance.



Implications for Rehabilitation Practice

These findings point to three practical shifts for rehabilitation practice. First, family connections should be actively maintained during incarceration, not just restored after release — women return immediately to their social roles, and the relational gap created by incarceration can undermine even the strongest individual progress. Second, the quality of the practitioner relationship matters as much as programme content: participants consistently identified support from staff, befrienders and mentors as vital to their success — people who visited them at work, called when they were struggling, and offered steady non-judgmental guidance. Third, peer environments need deliberate attention: eleven participants actively cut ties with anti-social peers and built pro-social networks. Practitioners can play a key role in facilitating this, including by connecting women with peer mentors who have themselves desisted successfully.

Our reflections

It was a deeply humbling experience to meet and hear from female desistors in the community. Each interaction carried a quiet weight – not just of their pasts, but of the strength it took to move forward in their journey of change.

These experiences transformed how we approach our work as practitioners. Listening to these narratives revealed the inadequacy of viewing desistance purely through a clinical or programmatic lens. These women's journeys were deeply relational, shaped by love, loss, hope and the courage to choose differently. We found renewed hope in their narratives and celebrated together the successes of not just staying crime free but rejoicing in their new worth and belonging to a family and community. This experience reminded us that our professional expertise must be tempered with humility, and our role is to create conditions where their wisdom can flourish alongside evidence-informed interventions.

Moving Forward

This research contributed to recognising that women's desistance pathways are unique and deeply connected to relationships and require approaches that strengthen the relational connections that sustain their change. The findings underscored the need for programmes specifically designed for women that build both individual skills and social networks simultaneously, supporting family connections during incarceration and after release. For women whose sense of self is constituted through relationships, incarceration severs the very connections that sustain change. Rebuilding those connections is not a secondary concern, it is the work.

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Camelia Liow is currently working as a Senior Correctional Rehabilitation Specialist at Singapore Prison Service, conducting counselling and Psychological Correctional Rehabilitation Programmes for both female and male offenders. Her past working experience was with families and children affected by family violence and abuse.

She holds a Master's degree in Social Work (Crisis and Trauma Studies). Her research interest focuses around trauma and the rehabilitation field. She co-authored two books, 'A Woman's Journey Home' and 'When Love Hurts' (published by Straits Times Press) and co-wrote a book chapter in 'Cumulative Childhood Harm in Family Law and Criminal Justice Systems'.



Marilyn Lee is a Senior Correctional Rehabilitation Specialist at Singapore Prison Service, where she oversees the professional development, training and leadership development of psychologists and correctional rehabilitation specialists. Her previous experience includes conducting Psychological Correctional Rehabilitation Programmes for female offenders. She has contributed to practice research focusing on gender-responsive evaluation in prisons and understanding the challenges faced by youth offenders. Her commitment to amplifying women's voices in desistance narratives stems from her direct experience working with women inmates, where she witnessed their unique challenges and triumphs in recovery journeys that often go unheard in rehabilitation conversations.

Charlotte Stephen is a Principal Correctional Rehabilitation Specialist with Singapore Prison Service, providing clinical supervision and training as well as conducting counselling and Psychological Correctional Rehabilitation Programmes for both female and male offenders. She was previously working with individuals and families in the community. Her interests are in understanding the effect on families affected by substance use and trauma.

She holds a Master's degree in Family and Systems Psychotherapy. She also co-authored a Chapter in a book on Correctional Rehabilitation & Psychological Interventions in Singapore.



PREVENTION THROUGH INNOVATION

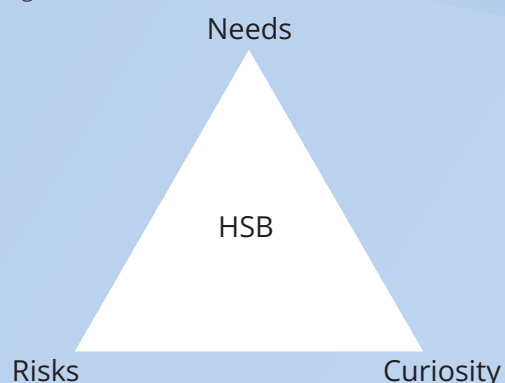
Reimagining Youth Sexual Health Conversations

by Aaron Scott Donovan

Youth sexual offences remain a significant concern in Singapore. In 2023, more than 470 youths aged 19 and below were arrested for sexual offences — a 30% increase from previous year (Chua, 2024). The Ministry of Social and Family Development's 2024 Supporting Youth Rehabilitation Trends Report further identified sexual offences as one of the top three youth offences between 2019 and 2023. These figures underscore the urgency of addressing harmful sexual behaviours (HSB) early, before they escalate into criminal offending.

HSB refers to sexual behaviours expressed by adolescents that fall outside normative developmental exploration and may be harmful, coercive, or abusive (Hackett, 2010). Research indicates that such behaviors arise from a combination of risk factors, including trauma, inadequate supervision, problematic peer associations, socio-emotional regulation difficulties, and exposure to sexually explicit material (Owens et al., 2012; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). However, understanding HSB requires more than identifying risk factors (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Harmful Sexual Behaviours (HSB)



Unmet needs

From a developmental perspective, many youths who engage in HSB may also be attempting to meet underlying needs. Adolescence is a period characterised by curiosity about bodily changes, emerging sexuality, and a desire for intimacy and belonging (Fortenberry, 2014; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). When youths lack safe and trusted spaces to ask questions about sex, consent, and relationships, they often turn to peers or online sources for information (McKee, 2012). Without appropriate guidance, misconceptions and distorted beliefs may develop. HSB can therefore emerge not only from risk but also from unmet developmental needs and poorly supported exploration.

Social Workers working with youths are uniquely positioned to intervene early, beyond managing risks to building assets, fostering strengths, and supporting healthy development. Yet discussions about sex and boundaries often occur only after an offence has been committed. The topic can feel taboo, and practitioners may feel insufficiently equipped to initiate preventive conversations in ways that are developmentally appropriate and engaging. For early interventions to be effective, Social Work practice must move beyond reactive, remedial responses and towards intentional, theory-informed prevention that is grounded in a youth developmental lens. Innovation in practice is therefore essential.

Life Quest: Choices and Connections

This imperative became clearer during a 2023 professional visit arranged by my organisation, Fei Yue Community Services, to observe practitioners from the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups using a card-based game to facilitate dialogue on sexual health. The approach demonstrated how structured play could reduce defensiveness and create psychological safety around sensitive topics. Inspired by this experience, my teammates and I developed Life Quest: Choices and Connections, a locally adapted game-based preventive tool that is grounded in the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model (Andrews & Bonta, 2010) and informed by the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI) (Hoge & Andrews, 2011).

Over a year, the game underwent multiple iterations and pilot sessions with practitioners and youths, guided by feedback in making language refinements, scenario realism, and facilitation prompts. Through fictional yet relatable scenarios, youths are encouraged to reflect on choices, relationships, boundaries, and consequences. The game format reduces stigma and defensiveness, enabling conversations that might otherwise feel confrontational or moralizing. It also promotes peer learning by creating opportunities for participants to hear and consider different perspectives.



By integrating RNR principles, YLS/CMI domains, and Positive Youth Development (PYD) theory into a youth-centric format, Life Quest represents an effort to operationalise prevention within Social Work practice. Addressing HSB cannot rely solely on post-offence interventions. Equally important are structured opportunities for youths to develop insight, build pro-social competencies, and strengthen protective factors before harm occurs.

Early prevention is not merely about mitigating risks. It is about equipping youths with insights, skills, and the confidence to make informed decisions about relationships and sexuality. Theory-informed, engaging tools such as Life Quest offer an avenue for bridging the gap between policy aspirations for upstream interventions and day-to-day practice, empowering youths to navigate their choices and connections with awareness and responsibility.

Special thanks to my teammates Joshua and Natalene, colleagues Sze Yong and Germaine, NUS interns Rosemarie and Elena, and our youth, Angel, for their contributions to this project.

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With over six years of experience in youth Social Work, he works with youths involved in risk-related and offending behaviours, including adolescents who display harmful sexual behaviours.

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CONSTRUCTING CONNECTION

Prosocial Support for Justice-Involved Individuals Facing Drug Use Challenges

by William Soh

Introduction

Criminal justice-involved individuals (JII) with drug use challenges face expected and unforeseen circumstances upon their re-entry into the community, attempting to reintegrate into the community while attaining drug abstinence.

Considering this challenge, over the past decades, Singapore has developed a comprehensive ecosystem known as the CARE Network, which provides sustainable and systematic support for criminal justice-involved individuals. Within this network, diverse community actors participate in reintegration and rehabilitative efforts in institutional and community settings. These actors include multidisciplinary professionals, support staff, and volunteers (Sarah, 2021). Among the volunteers, there are two distinct groups: individuals with lived experience in the criminal justice system and people without.

Volunteers are social capital, providing JIIs with resources and access to networks (Putnam, 2000). While the benefits of social capital for JIIs are well-documented (Brown & Ross, 2010; Mills & Codd, 2008), research has yet to adequately explore how relationships between JIIs and volunteers are developed. Understanding this building process is crucial to determining its impact on crime desistance and sustained drug recovery, particularly when comparing the contributions of volunteers with and without lived experience with the criminal justice system.

Research Methodology

The research, which is ongoing, adopts a qualitative method, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2022), to investigate the lived experiences of twelve dyads in prosocial support relationships. This article highlights insights from two volunteer-JII dyads.



Male JII, above 50s,
with prior drug
offences

At least 18 months
in the community

Female volunteer
(without criminal
antecedents),
above 50s

Male JII, above 50s,
with prior drug
offences

At least 72 months
in the community

Male volunteer (with
criminal/drug
antecedents), above
50s

(Legend: NV – volunteer without criminal antecedents;
XV – volunteer with criminal antecedents)

Insights – The Prosocial Support Journey

Re-entering a World of Challenges

Both JIs had the desire to change and stay away from drug use. However, their endeavours to recover proved challenging. One faced prolonged struggles in securing stable shelter, while the other felt trapped in cycles of relapse and recovery. Initial engagements with volunteers lacked enthusiasm, as the JIs doubted the volunteers' capacity to aid in their reintegration or recovery.



I like to read people... he is trying to challenge himself to change me... Let's see.

Cornerstone of a Strong Relationship

Initial scepticism dissipated as both JIs experienced the volunteers' availability, acceptance, and care.



She familiar with computer... she stays so far... she come to (help me) change address (sic).

Volunteers' commitment towards the JIs' personal goals strengthened the relational bonds, which were characterised by empowerment and reciprocal appreciation. This enhanced the JIs' self-determination and accountability. Ultimately, these combined factors helped sustain drug abstinence and kept the individuals in the community longer than before.



Anyway, he's quite good in updating me... he feels that I should know, he will always either call me or text me.

Bringing in the "Whole Person"

Rather than relying on formal engagement skills, nurturing the relationship and supporting JIs required volunteers to bring their "whole person" into the relationship—leveraging their unique expertise, lived experience, resources, and networks, regardless of whether they had criminal antecedents.

Long-term drug recovery entails more than drug abstinence; it is a journey toward holistic well-being and growth (Best & Ivers, 2022). Crucially, volunteers with lived experience in recovery can detect relapse triggers early and render timely support.



Because behaviour never lie when you use... you using, your behaviour never lie (sic).

Conversely, volunteers without criminal antecedents can provide equally invaluable support, helping JIs address basic needs while facilitating their long-term growth and aspirations.



Implications and Applications

Relationship matters

The findings suggest that relationship itself matters in influencing change of the individuals. This idea is consistent with Donati's relational theory of reflexivity (Donati, 2019), which posits that individual actions are guided not by personal concerns alone, but meaningful social relations. Individuals deliberate on the compromises needed to sustain relationships and maintain "relational goods" like subsidiarity (empowering help), reciprocity (mutual care), and solidarity (working towards common goals). This relational reflexivity motivates individuals to adopt positive behaviours they might otherwise forgo (Weaver & McNeil, 2015) including lifestyle changes required for long-term drug abstinence.

A Community of Diverse Support

These insights also underscore the need for varied prosocial support, as volunteers with and without criminal histories offer distinct lived experiences, skillsets, and networks. A diverse community of support can be highly effective, echoing a United Kingdom initiative where peer supporters, professionals, families, and citizens formed a unified recovery coalition (Best, 2019). The power of such a coalition stems from its diversity, which blends varied personal capital (skills) with expanded social capital (networks). Significantly, a distinction emerges based on the author's practice observations as a Social Worker: volunteers contribute differently from helping professionals; consequently, the types of competencies and relational boundaries expected of these two groups will inherently vary.

Conclusion

Prosocial support begins with a strong relationship and extends into a multi-layered network of diverse individuals, ultimately helping JIs sustain drug abstinence and lead flourishing lives. The findings presented in this study are emerging, with further insights as data from the remaining dyads are analysed.

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With over 20 years of experience in correctional rehabilitation, William has developed programmes for drug users, young offenders, and community-based supervisees, alongside asynchronous courses for professionals and volunteers. He has also served as an associate lecturer at the National University of Singapore, teaching Social Work and offender rehabilitation.

Additionally, William serves on the board of a social service agency supporting rough sleepers, youth, and seniors, demonstrating his multifaceted commitment to the sector.



THE STREET LINGO PROJECT

Using Slang in the Criminal Justice Context

by Roger Tan & Benny Thiam

What is Slang?

Slang has been defined as an “informal, non-technical language that often seems novel to the user and/or listener, and that challenges a social or linguistic norm. It can also imply complicity in value judgements and thus play a performative role in defining personal or group identity” (Coleman, 2014, p. 7). Slang had been used by people who need to keep their activities secret such as people engaging in criminal activities or people who use substances (Miric, 2020). Slang has entered the popular culture and the potential to spread further with social media. For instance, “6-7” captured the imagination and frustrations of society, depending on which generation you belong to.

In the criminal justice and youth outreach space, slang exists within the local subculture and mystifies others not familiar with the terms. For instance, people might be familiar with the term “hantu” (ghost in the Malay language) but holds an additional meaning of “informer” in the prison or gang context.



Use of Slang in the Practice of Social Work

Two theoretical frameworks could provide guidance regarding the use of slang in Social Work practice, namely symbolic interactionism and person-in-environment.

Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism focuses on how people create meaning through shared symbols, especially language and gestures (Blumer, 1969). Slang can be framed as a set of symbols that communicate identity, belonging, resistance, and in-group membership. Using clients' everyday language honours their own meaning-making systems rather than imposing professional jargon. Slang can be used to build shared definitions, for example, how people describe situations or relationships. Miscommunication and mistrust can arise when workers misinterpret, ignore or stigmatise those symbols.

Person-in-environment theory

Person-in-environment theory emphasises understanding people in the context of their families, communities, and social structures (Gitterman, Knight & Germain, 2021). Using clients' slang can be a way a Social Worker aligns their practice with their clients' ecological context. For example, when a Social Worker uses a familiar term to a client based on the clients' social circle, the client may be more open to engage the Social Worker.



Tips on Using Slang in Social Work Practice



Certain settings, such as prisons, halfway houses, or outreach services, present a dominant culture where the Social Worker is from the minority group entering in and practicing. For Social Workers, showing curiosity about the terms their clients use “can build rapport and create a space where they feel they can be their authentic selves” (Abrams, 2026, p. 47).

A criticism of this approach might be that using slang could blur the boundaries between the Social Worker and justice-involved individuals, thus impacting the worker’s professionalism or professional image. Social Workers may over-identify with justice-involved individuals, and this may potentially impact on their clinical judgement. To avoid this, Social Workers would need to develop the skill of ‘code switch’ and use slang depending on their audience, task and context.

Tips on the use of slang in social work practice

01



Let the Justice-involved Individual Lead:

Notice the words they use and mirror very lightly, rather than trying to sound like a peer

02



Use Sparingly:

Use small amounts of slang to reduce distance, but keep it respectful

03



Check Meaning Explicitly:

Check meaning when unsure: “When you say ‘hantu’, what does that mean for you?” so you do not misinterpret slang for the client

04



Acknowledge Mistake Promptly:

If you use a term wrongly, acknowledge it, apologise briefly and invite the person to tell you how it should be used

05



Avoid Offensive Slang:

Be cautious in using sexual or violent slang which may be vulgar or offensive to listeners, demeans certain population groups or glamorises anti-social

06



Avoid Stereotypical Slang:

Avoid slang that encourages stereotypes of labels, especially around crime, gangs or behaviour

07



Keep Documentation Professional:

Do not use slang in documentation, court reports, or formal meetings. If you need to record it, put the exact words in quotation marks and then explain what they mean in formal language

08



Engage in Reflective Supervision:

Reflect in supervision about language choices; when to mirror justice-involved individuals’ language, where slang helped build trust, where it confused things, and how to stay authentic without trying too hard to appear part of the group

In conclusion, by maintaining curiosity and cultural humility when encountering unknown slang words, Social Workers pursue continuous learning and familiarise themselves with the justice-involved individuals’ world and experiences. Slang should be used intentionally and sparingly as a relational bridge, not as a substitute for professional language, ensuring that engagement remains respectful, professional, context-appropriate, and grounded in clear clinical judgment.

The Street Lingo Project

The Street Lingo Project, initiated by the CJSW Chapter, aims to consolidate local slang used by justice-involved individuals and to facilitate new Social Workers' entry into the criminal justice sector and improve engagement with justice-involved individuals.

Here are samples of collated slang

No.	Slang phrase	Explanation	Example usage
1	Am pai	Plain-clothes detective / undercover cop ("hidden card"). From Hokkien "暗牌".	"I saw some suspected dealers disperse as soon as am pai turned up."
2	Kaki	Malay/Hokkien loanword meaning a close associate, accomplice or 'mate' (literally "leg"); used for an accomplice in crimes.	"His kaki helped move the goods."
3	Tua-kee	Literally "big head" — used for a boss, senior gang leader or influential inmate.	"Inside the prison block, the tua-kee decides who gets protection."

Additional words have been collated in this link:
<https://for.sg/xagg5o>



Moving Forward

Readers are invited to contribute local slang that they have encountered to build a library of resources to supplement their case work using the following link:
<https://form.gov.sg/6986bdf897f5db1b76921e25>



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Benny Thiam is a Committee Member of the CJSW Chapter with over a decade of experience in social services in the fields of corrections, rehabilitation and family services. A recipient of the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) Gold Award at the SUSS Convocation as the top Social Work undergraduate in 2017, he holds a Bachelor of Social Work and integrates his professional expertise to enrich the Chapter's initiatives.



REMEMBER WHY YOU STARTED

Interview with Nanyang Polytechnic Award for Outstanding Performance in Internship Programme Winner, Mr Brendon Boo

Brendon Boo is a recent graduate from the Nanyang Polytechnic (NYP) Diploma in Social Work and the award recipient of the Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW) Industry Attachment Award. Nicodemus Ching, a member of the SASW Publications Committee, caught up with Brendon to talk about his path into the profession, his internship in family violence, and the idea he keeps returning to: remember why you started.

Nicodemus: Congratulations on the award, Brendon. Take us back — how did you find your way to Social Work?

Brendon: Since Secondary 3 or 4, through a lot of volunteering, I already knew I wanted to go into the Social Work setting — though I was more fascinated by the psychological side. Most of my classmates wanted the Junior College route; I wanted Polytechnic. My final two choices came down to Social Work and Applied Chemistry — I was actually very good at chemistry. But I told myself that an academic passion wouldn't last me as long as an intrinsic passion to help the community and really help people. So, I chose Social Work. Three years on, I still want to do this — which is exactly why I'm going on to read Social Work at the National University of Singapore.

Nicodemus: What did those three years in NYP do to you?

Brendon: The most overt change is that I became a far more reflective person — which is really the point of the Diploma. Practitioners have to be reflective by nature, and to practise introspection.

Nicodemus: Prior to the interview you emphasised "remember why you started." Where does that come from?

Brendon: In any education system — not Social Work specifically — there's a lot of academic pressure. There's competition, the pressure to do well. Mugging for exams, mugging for project work, stressing through presentations — sometimes I lost myself in the process, and lost sight of why I even did this in the first place. That's why I want to put it out there, for anyone in a Social Work diploma or degree, or any allied health professional in the helping field: remember why you chose this in the first place. If you can hold on to that, everything falls back into place. You'll want to keep going.

Nicodemus: You interned at a Family Violence Specialist Centre. What was that like — and who shaped you there?



Brendon: I went in with a lot of apprehension. My peers and I knew such a setting can be emotionally burdening, with a high risk of burnout. Over those three months it felt very real— some cases were really bad, and I felt anger, sadness, fear of what a perpetrator might do next. But it opened my eyes to how the family violence ecosystem works, and made me want to enter that setting after my degree. I'm grateful to my internship supervisors, Mr Lee Wee Leong from Calvary Community Care; Ms Nurul Hannah from TRANS SAFE and Mr Augustine Yu from Saint Francis University Hong Kong, and to my NYP practitioner-educators like Ms Revati and Ms Grace Xu, whose extensive fieldwork experience helped us ground concepts in how Singapore's ecosystem really works.

Nicodemus: This issue centres on criminal justice. Your thesis stepped into a niche within it.

Brendon: After my internship, I wrote a thesis on how migrant women in Singapore are disproportionately exposed to spousal violence by their Singaporean male partners. The data opened my eyes to niche social issues here — family violence may seem less prominent than senior or youth needs, but it carries an immense risk of harm. I don't feel comfortable commenting on the criminal justice system itself; I don't know it well enough yet. On restorative justice — I support it, but with extreme caution. There are times, meeting a perpetrator in session, when it's genuinely difficult to hold my own bias, knowing the harm done, alongside my belief in restoration.

Nicodemus: Picture Social Work in 2045, when you're 40. What changes, and what stays the same?

Brendon: Definitely more integration of technology, and a super-aged society will make the ageing population one of our most prominent needs. Even now, tools like the genogram have moved from coloured pens on paper to online platforms. But the human element should stay — our foundational theories, and client engagement itself, where relationships form and emotional needs are met. Technology should stay minimal there. To myself at 40, I'd say: I still won't know everything, so stay open-minded, humble, and willing to learn. Social Work is ever-evolving — the theories hold, but the application always changes. I have to keep adapting.

Nicodemus: A final word to the fraternity?

Brendon: Remember why you started. Hold on to that, and everything else falls back into place.

The SASW Industry Attachment Award is a Course Award given annually since 2013 to the most outstanding graduant of every graduating class who topped his/her Field Placement modules. Students in the NYP Diploma in Social Work typically complete two internships in their course of studies. Graduates may work in the social services or continue their studies local and overseas universities. They can also join SASW as associate members.



Nicodemus Ching is a member of the SASW Publications Standing Committee.



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