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FROM ADVERSITY TO DESISTANCE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES, AGENCY, AND SOCIAL SUPPORT AMONG JUSTICE-INVOLVED YOUTHS

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Abstract

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are known barriers to desistance for justice-involved youths, with research showing its high prevalence among them. Additionally, agency to desist and social support have been identified as facilitators of desistance among justice-involved adults and may play an important role to mitigate the impact of ACEs for justice-involved youths. Given the lack of research on desistance of justice-involved youths, this exploratory study examined the role of ACEs, agency to desist, and social support in the desistance journey of justice-involved youths in Singapore. Findings reveal the complex interplay of these factors and provide insights for targeted rehabilitative interventions.

Keywords: desistance, justice-involved youth, adverse childhood experiences, agency, social support

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Introduction

Singapore has seen a decline in the proportion of justice-involved youths below the age of 21 who reoffended within two years. The two-year recidivism rate for the 2021 release cohort decreased to 16.3%, marking a 12.5%-point reduction from the 2018 release cohort's 28.8% (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2024). This improvement, attributed to enhanced in-care rehabilitation programs and aftercare supervision services, reflects Singapore's ongoing commitment to youth rehabilitation and reintegration (Tan, 2018).

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are a known barrier to desistance among justice-involved youths. Such experiences arise from stressful and potentially traumatic events that occur during childhood, such as family abuse, neglect and dysfunctional household dynamics (Oei et al., 2021). Justice-involved youths experience ACEs at an elevated rate compared to their peers in the general population, with a systematic review showcasing that over 85% of justice-involved youths had experienced at least one ACE (Malvaso et al., 2022). Similarly, 93% of youths in Singapore's juvenile justice system reported experiencing at least one type of ACE (Singapore Prison Service, 2020).

The high prevalence of ACEs among justice-involved youth is concerning, as research consistently demonstrates their negative impact on youth desistance. A meta-analysis by Yohros (2023) indicated that exposure to each ACE increases the risk of reoffending among justice-involved youths by 4.4%. In Singapore, specific ACEs such as family criminal history, substance abuse, and poor parenting correlate with accelerated reoffending rates (Chng et al., 2016), while parental loss or criminal history increases the risk of repeated justice involvement (Xu et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, declining RTC recidivism rates suggest that desistance remains achievable despite high ACE prevalence. Facilitating factors, such as agency to desist and social support, may contribute to promoting desistance among justice-involved youths (Yeo et al., 2017). Therefore, the current exploratory study examines the interplay between the barriers and facilitators of desistance among a group of justice-involved youths in Singapore.

Desistance from Offending

Desistance occurs when justice-involved individuals transition from a pattern of offending to a law-abiding life (Gålnander, 2024; Goodwin, 2022). It is a dynamic and ongoing process marked by progress and setbacks, as various factors like cognitive patterns, social relationships, and life circumstances may support or hinder desistance efforts (Halsey et al., 2017; Au & Wong, 2022).

Farrall and Maruna (2004) differentiated between two forms of desistance: primary desistance represents a temporary break in criminal activity where criminal activity is absent, but not necessarily ceased (O'Shea, 2020), while secondary desistance represents the adoption of a non-offender identity beyond just the cessation of criminal behavior (Reich, 2023). McNeill (2014) later introduced tertiary desistance to represent the social recognition of one's reformed identity and the subsequent reintegration into society. Altogether, this indicates that desistance involves behavioral changes, identity transformations, and social recognition and acceptance (Graham & McNeill, 2017).

Given the ongoing and tortuous nature of desistance, it is challenging to identify "successful desisters" as it is never certain if one might reoffend. To address this concern, Maruna (2012) proposed

the concept of desistance signaling where desisters can be identified based on credible actions they take as proof to others that they are committed to desisting. Examples of such actions include completing rehabilitation programs (Maruna, 2012) and pursuing education and/or employment (Bushway & Apel, 2012).

Adult versus Youth Desistance

Literature theorizes certain key differences in the desistance pathways of justice-involved adults and youths. For justice-involved adults, their desistance tends to be facilitated by the cognitive and psychosocial developments associated with aging (O'Shea, 2020), such as enhanced self-control and increased ability to resist peer pressure (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2015). This is evidenced by the age-crime curve which shows that criminal behavior increases during adolescence, peaks in late adulthood, and rapidly declines thereafter (Shulman et al., 2013). Moreover, adulthood typically involves the assumption of conventional adult roles such as marriage, parenthood, and employment, which deters justice-involved adults from continuing their criminal behavior (Nader, 2019).

In contrast, justice-involved youths have yet to reach full cognitive and psychosocial maturity. O'Shea (2020) proposed that for justice-involved youths, desistance is more dynamic and agentic than for adults. This is supported by a study showing that youth desisters who were motivated to desist made active decisions and cut off connections with their criminal lifestyle and peers, leading them to desist for longer (Terry & Abrams, 2017). Conversely, youths who were merely focused on avoiding arrest were ambivalent about doing the same, which resulted in more relapses (Terry & Abrams, 2017). These results indicate that active decision-making and intentional effort are important for long-term youth desistance.

Facilitators of Desistance: Agency to Desist and Social Support

Past studies on justice-involved adults identified agency to desist and social relationships as important for desistance. Agency to desist is the belief that one can control and change their self and lifestyle to become crime-free (Lloyd & Serin, 2012), which crucially supports one's efforts to stop offending.

Several studies have linked agency to desistance among justice-involved adults. In Maruna's (2001) study, desisting adults were found to use 'language of agency' more within their narratives, expressing a willingness to take ownership of their lives and a strong ability to desist. Persistent adults, on the other hand, lacked this agentic language; they tended to view themselves as victims of their environment and expressed little hope in their ability to change their offending ways (Maruna, 2001).

These findings are further corroborated by Howerton et al. (2009), who found a link between desisting justice-involved adults' perceived likelihood of successful re-entry and their actual recidivism outcomes. Adults who were pessimistic about their ability to stay away from crime prior to their release had poor outcomes after their release (e.g., drinking, homelessness). In contrast, those who were optimistic and hopeful about desisting prior to their release experienced more success in their community following their release (e.g., living a crime-free life, securing employment). The results indicate that justice-involved adults who believed in their ability to desist actively pursued this goal,

whilst those with lower self-belief resigned themselves to a fate of continued offending. Taken together, as Terry and Abrams (2017) identified active decision-making and intentional effort – both cognitive aspects of agency – as key to desistance for justice-involved adults, agency may be as important for youth desistance too.

Apart from agency, social support can support or hinder desistance (Albertson et al., 2022). Chouhy et al. (2020) state that social support can influence desistance by enabling or constraining one's agency and one's positive attitude towards change. The researchers proposed two possible mechanisms on how social support may affect agency, and thereby desistance.

First, support from family and friends can catalyze the transformation of attitudes and narratives for justice-involved individuals. In their observation of Maruna's (2001) findings, Chouhy et al. (2020) interpreted that formerly incarcerated individuals often gained confidence and made meaningful changes in their lives through the support from others. Additionally, several narratives described close ones as inspiring and supporting these individuals in transforming their lives – a sign of agency (Chouhy et al., 2020).

Second, support from loved ones reminds justice-involved individuals of their prosocial identities and their sense of personal value (Chouhy et al., 2020). This promotes a positive attitude towards change and foster a sense of confidence that one can control one's life and to desist. Hence, social support not only empowers justice-involved individuals with the internal confidence to change but also provides external recognition of their merits and capacity to stay crime-free.

Taken together, these two mechanisms suggest that social support can promote desistance by enhancing individuals' agency to desist, which may apply to justice-involved youths. Barry (2007) explained that although justice-involved youths often start offending to gain social recognition from their offending peers, the negative social repercussions within the wider community lead them to re-evaluate the banes of continuing down this path. The efforts taken to recover their social capital catalyze the desistance process further and keep them from reoffending.

Overall, the overseas studies discussed thus far indicate that agency to desist and social support are facilitators of desistance. Consistent with this conclusion, a local qualitative study by Yeo et al. (2017) found agency to desist and social relationships to be central to desisters' accounts of their journeys, with many noting these factors as important and helpful in their desistance. The study concluded that agency and social relationships play a crucial role in facilitating adult desistance. Taking into consideration the discussions about the relationship between agency, social support, and desistance thus far, it was implicated that agency and social support are promising factors to consider for youth desistance too.

Current Study

The aim of this exploratory study was to examine whether factors known to influence desistance for justice-involved youths and adults also apply to justice-involved youths in Singapore. Given the well-established research on the negative impact of ACEs on reoffending, it was hypothesized that ACEs would be a risk factor for reoffending among justice-involved youths in Singapore. Additionally, the study investigated the positive roles of agency and social support as facilitators of desistance among

justice-involved youths with a history of ACEs.

To investigate the role of ACEs, agency, and social support in youth desistance, this study compared two groups of youths: repeated justice-involved youths and prospective youth desisters. Repeated justice-involved youths were operationalized as currently incarcerated youths who were sentenced at least two separate times at the point of recruitment. For the study, these youths recalled their experiences in the community before they were re-admitted to the Reformative Training Centre. Prospective youth desisters were operationalized as youths who were incarcerated at least once and had been released into the community for a minimum of six months at the point of recruitment. The following four research questions (RQ) were investigated:

RQ1: Does the number of ACEs vary between repeated justice-involved youths and prospective youth desisters?

RQ2: What does the relationship between ACEs and agency look like for repeated justice-involved youths and prospective youth desisters?

RQ3: Does the level of agency vary between repeated justice-involved youths and prospective youth desisters?

RQ4: Does the relationship between social support and agency vary between repeated justice-involved youths and prospective youth desisters?

Method

Participants

The sample comprised of 63 justice-involved youths: 48 were repeated justice-involved youths and 15 were prospective youth desisters. All participants were male and included those of Chinese, Malay, and Indian ethnicities. Recruitment and data collection took place between July 2022 and August 2023. Participants with offences of any category, except sexual offences, were recruited. The average age of participants was 21.48 years (range: 18 – 23). Among the prospective youth desisters, the average offence-free period was 1.14 years (range: 0.5 – 3.4).

Data Collection Procedure

Repeated justice-involved youths were recruited from the Reformative Training Centre (RTC) and Changi Prison Complex institutions. Group data collection sessions were conducted using pen-and-paper surveys, at the start of which participants were briefed on the survey and informed consent was obtained. These youths answered the survey retrospectively based on their experiences in the community before they were re-admitted.

For prospective youth desisters, those who were released into the community for a minimum of two years were contacted and completed surveys over the phone after consent was obtained. The sampling criteria were broadened, owing to limited initial participation, to include youth who had successfully completed and received early discharge from community supervision following a minimum six-month supervisory term. The recruitment criteria were informed by behavioral markers associated with preliminary desistance processes, as evidenced by participants' successful early discharge, adherence to supervisory conditions, and maintenance of either employment or educational pursuits.

The verification process encompassed several key mechanisms to confirm desistance of prospective youth desisters. Records were examined to ensure they had not been re-admitted into the institutional system. For those granted early discharge, electronic monitoring devices were deployed to track their movements. Furthermore, community supervision reports were reviewed to verify that no reoffending behavior had been flagged during the mandated supervision period.

Prospective youth desisters who agreed to participate were provided with an online survey link and completed it on their phones. The achieved sample size remained suboptimal despite recruitment strategy adjustments, primarily due to the voluntary participation protocol.

Survey Measures

Social support was assessed using two adapted scales. The Caring Relationships scale, taken from the Resilience Youth Development Module (National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2007), measured perceived support from six sources (peers, family, workplace, school, community, and a Community Supervisor¹). The Significant Other subscale of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988) measured perceived support from significant others.

Agency to desist was measured with the Agency for Desistance Questionnaire (Lloyd & Serin, 2012), and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) were assessed using the ACEs Questionnaire (Felitti et al., 1998), with binary "Yes" or "No" responses.

The link between social support and desistance was explored using Personal Network Analysis, a social network analysis approach that focuses on the individual and their social relationships (McCarty, 2002). Participants listed five people they felt closest to, described their relationship, and profiled each person on factors like closeness, marital status, employment, schooling, criminal history, and perceived influence (antisocial or prosocial).

Analyses Method

Due to recruitment challenges, the prospective youth desister group had a small sample size, leading to an imbalanced sample size between the two groups. To account for this, non-parametric statistical methods were employed which included Spearman's correlation and Mann-Whitney U test.

Results

Repeated justice-involved youths reported experiencing more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) than prospective youth desisters, $p = 0.02$ (Figure 1). Additionally, ACEs was negatively linked with agency to desist for repeated justice-involved youths, $p = 0.02$.

Repeated justice-involved youths had lower agency as compared to prospective youth desisters, $p = 0.005$. Additionally, repeated justice-involved youths perceived less social support from their significant other ($p < 0.005$) and community supervisor ($p = 0.003$) as compared to prospective youth desisters (Figure 1). Community support was positively linked with agency for repeated justice-

¹ Each youth supervisee on community program is supervised by a civilian rehabilitation specialist and/or a uniformed Reintegration Officer (RO). The term 'Community Supervisor' in this paper thus refers to either type of supervision staff.

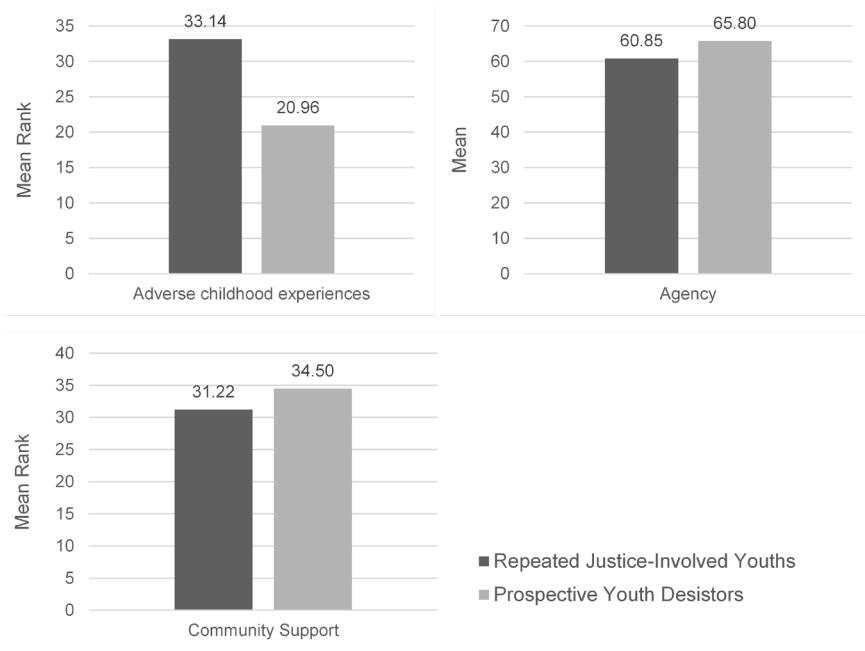


Figure 1: Comparison Between Justice-Involved Youth Groups for Adverse Childhood Experiences, Agency, and Community Support

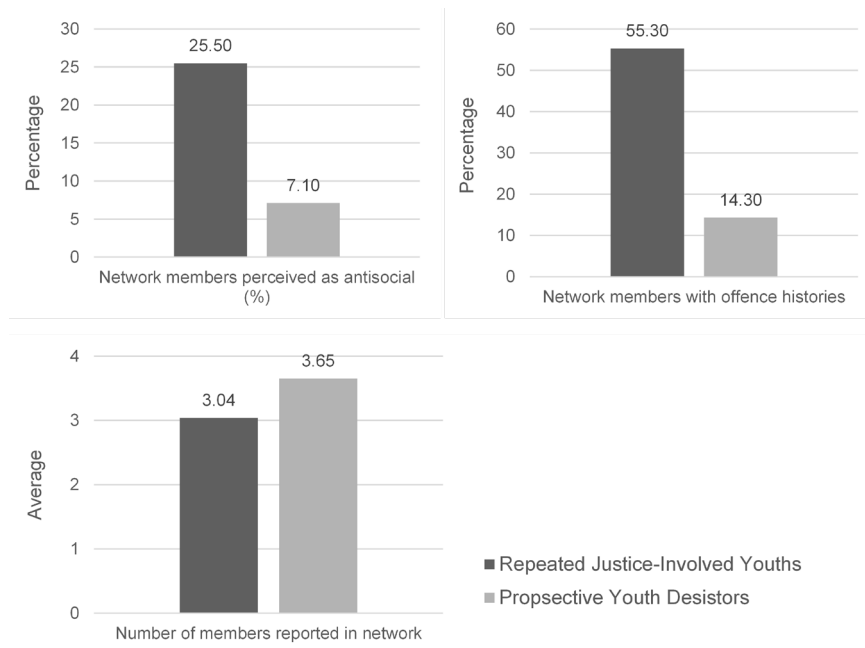


Figure 2: Comparison Between Justice Involved-Youth Groups for Characteristics of Social Support Network

involved youths, $p = 0.02$, such that those who perceived greater support from their community had higher agency to desist.

Majority of repeated justice-involved youths (38.3%) and prospective youth desisters (42.9%) reported feeling closest to their parents, with 77.1% of youths in general feeling closer to a family member than a friend. A greater percentage of repeated justice-involved youths had a perceived antisocial member and/or a member with a criminal history in their social support network, as well as a lower average number of members reported as part of their network, than prospective youth desisters (Figure 2).

Discussion

Adverse Childhood Experiences among Justice-Involved Youths and Its Link to Agency

The study showed that repeated justice-involved youths had higher adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) relative to prospective youth desisters. This aligns with past research showcasing that cumulative childhood adversity increases the risk of reoffending among young and adult offenders (Weber & Lynch, 2021; Yohros, 2023). Additionally, ACEs was linked to agency among repeated justice-involved youths, with those experiencing more ACEs reporting lower agency to desist. These findings indicate that cumulative ACEs may erode one's belief in their ability desist and potentially increasing one's risk of reoffending.

Agency among Justice-Involved Youths

Results also showed that repeated justice-involved youths had lower agency to desist relative to prospective youth desisters. This is in line with research on justice-involved adults where those with persistent offending often demonstrated a lower sense of agency by expressing hopelessness about change and resignation towards deviance in their self-narratives (Maruna, 2001; Howerton, 2009). Desisting adults, in contrast, often used a 'language of agency' in their narratives, expressing a strong belief in their ability to desist (Maruna, 2001). This agentic language is echoed in the Agency to Desist questionnaire used in this study, which includes items such as "I am in charge of whether I stop doing crime," and "I believe I can be good at going straight, just like I was good at getting what I wanted through crime." The difference in reported agency levels between the two groups suggests that the feeling of having agency over one's behavior and future plays an important role in encouraging youth desistance, which is in-line with Yeo et al.'s (2017) findings that agency was important and helpful for desistance amongst adults (Yeo et al., 2017).

Social Support among Justice-Involved Youths

Results revealed that repeated justice-involved youths perceived less social support from their significant others and community supervisors relative to prospective youth desisters. This result highlights significant others and community supervisors as key figures in enhancing desistance outcomes for justice-involved youths. The result is particularly relevant for Singapore Prison Service (SPS) as most youths in this sample (71.4%) reported having a significant other. Thus, leveraging support from significant others may be effective in supporting SPS' efforts to improve youth desistance outcomes. The importance of social support for desistance is also supported by research, with studies showing that social support acts as a protective factor against recidivism (Kras, 2019), whereas a lack of support following release can lead individuals back to crime (Brown et al., 2009).

Community Support and Its Link to Agency

Among repeated justice-involved youths, those who perceived less community support also reported lower agency to desist. This result suggests that community support is crucial in helping youths regain their confidence to remain crime-free. Particularly during periods of setback, acknowledging their efforts to reform and encouraging them not to abandon their path to rehabilitation can be pivotal in strengthening their resolve to avoid criminal behavior. Indeed, Farrall and Calverley (2005) showed that community trust and recognition are key in helping those attempting to leave their criminal lifestyles behind to sustain their desistance.

Social Support Networks of Justice-Involved Youths

The social support networks of repeated justice-involved youths were less conducive to desistance relative to those of prospective youth desisters. Compared to prospective youth desisters, a higher percentage of repeated justice-involved youths had an antisocial member and/or a member with a criminal history in their network, as well as a lower average number of network members. These results are consistent with research on social network and their influence on desistance. Studies show that interactions with antisocial peers and limited social capital can make it hard for individuals to successfully desist (Best, 2016; Boman IV & Mowen, 2017).

Additionally, both groups reported feeling closest to their family members rather than their friends. This is surprising as peer relationships typically become more important during adolescence and early adulthood (Malonda et al., 2019). The current result suggests that parents remain a significant figure of support for justice-involved youths in Singapore. Importantly, most youths in this sample rated their parents as prosocial influences (96%) and without a criminal history (86%), suggesting that parents can be positive role models that encourage and guide their children's desistance efforts. Nevertheless, careful appraisal of the quality of familial relationships and dynamics is crucial when leveraging family support for youth desistance, as negative familial dynamics or the presence of antisocial family members may hinder the youth's efforts to desist.

Limitations and Future Directions

As social support was measured using self-report data, results may not accurately reflect the actual level of support provided by different sources. Future studies could collect data from multiple sources, including family members and peers, regarding the support provided to justice-involved youths during and after incarceration. Corroborating their perspectives with youths' self-report would provide a more comprehensive understanding of social support dynamics.

Recruitment challenges resulted in a small sample size and necessitated a change in the desistance period criteria for the prospective youth desister group. This limits the generalizability of the findings. Although non-parametric analyses were used to address the small sample size, future studies should recruit larger samples with longer desistance periods to strengthen findings. This can be done by diversifying the recruitment strategies from the get-go to maximize the number of potential participants.

The limited sample size also restricted the study's ability to examine potential ethnic or racial differences, underscoring the need for more representative samples in future research. Additionally, the small sample size precluded the use of randomized sampling, and the resulting imbalance

between groups made it difficult to match participants on potential confounding variables such as age, offence type, and assessed risk of recidivism. Hence, results might have been confounded by other unassessed variables.

As only male youths were included in this study, findings might not be representative of the desistance experience of female justice-involved youths. Mixed-gender or female participant samples should thus be considered for future research.

Finally, the study design being cross-sectional instead of longitudinal limits the ability of the results to illuminate the dynamic nature of desistance, as the process is often nonlinear and better understood via longitudinal methods.

Conclusion

The current exploratory study identified adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) as a barrier to desistance among justice-involved youths, emphasizing the need for trauma-informed approaches within juvenile justice systems. Such approaches stress the importance of addressing trauma early among at-risk youths. Preventive measures, such as school-based interventions and community programs, can help mitigate the impact of ACEs and reduce the likelihood of future offending and reoffending. Moreover, by gaining a deeper understanding of how trauma contributes to offending (Mouhiddin & Adams, 2022), trauma-informed practitioners can translate this knowledge into interventions that target the needs of justice-involved youths. This study also highlighted the roles of agency and social support in promoting youth desistance. Early interventions that nurture agency and positive relationships with family, significant others, community supervisors, and others in the community can further mitigate ACEs' effects, enhancing youth desistance outcomes.

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About the Authors

Fann is a Lead Psychologist with the Singapore Prison Service, currently serving as Assistant Director of the Correctional Research Branch, where she leads on the team's evaluation portfolio. In her 12 years of service, Fann has been involved in a variety of correctional work which includes developing and evaluating Psychology-based Correctional Programmes for a range of offenders such as those who have committed violent, sexually violent, and drug abuse offences. In the last five years, Fann was leading the research team on studies that examined desistance in different incarcerated populations as well as studies that investigated family-related issues which are topics that she is passionate about as well. Fann holds a Master of Forensic Psychology degree from University of York, United Kingdom.



Devni is a Senior Research Analyst at Singapore Prison Service, currently working in the Correctional Research Branch, where she contributes to projects in the evaluation team. In her time at the organization, Devni has worked on research projects serving a range of offending populations, including justice-involved youths, sexually violent offenders, drug offenders, and incarcerated mothers, which coincide with her research interests. She is passionate about research work that explores restorative interventions, safe institutions, and supportive community corrections frameworks.



Jocelyn is a Research Analyst at Singapore Prison Service, currently working in the Correctional Research Branch. She is actively involved with the research team, contributing to projects focused on youth desistance and desistance prediction. Previously, she conducted research projects examining desistance across various incarcerated populations and studied the impact on offenders' families. She is passionate about research work focused on social and community capital, faith-based interventions, and tailored approaches for sexual and violent offenders.



April is a Principal Psychologist with the Singapore Prison Service, currently serving as Senior Assistant Director (SAD) of the Correctional Research Branch, where she oversees the organization's research activities. In her previous role as SAD of the Programme Design and Evaluation Branch, she was instrumental in developing Psychology-based Correctional Programmes and evaluating rehabilitation programs, regimes and policies. With over 16 years of experience in correctional research and practice, April is a strong proponent of the scientist-practitioner model. She remains committed to enhancing service delivery for the offender population through evidence-based approaches. April holds a Master of Applied Psychology from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Her research interests encompass positive psychology interventions with offenders, desistance from crime, substance addiction, and the neurocognitive functioning of offenders with drug



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Angeline is a Lead Correctional Rehabilitation Specialist with Singapore Prison Service, currently serving as Senior Assistant Director of Correctional Rehabilitation Services (Reformative Training) where she oversees a range of rehabilitation and reintegration services for justice-involved youths sentenced to Reformative Training Centre (RTC). She is passionate in advancing the work with reformative trainees and their families, addressing criminogenic needs such as family relationships, substance abuse, youth violence and gangs. She believes strongly in the evidence-based rehabilitative practices and has been instrumental in initiating various regime activities, both in RTC and in community supervision. Angeline holds a Master of Counselling degree, and her professional training consisted of Post Graduate Diploma in Solution Focused Brief Therapy and in Clinical Supervision. Her research interests encompass family-centric intervention, gamified behaviors, mentoring, and substance addiction of youth offenders.



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