

Ex-convict discrimination in singapore



After leaving the physical incarceration, ex-offenders find themselves entering into the “ second prison”, where they have to tear down the invisible walls formed by the social stigma, the fear and distrust from the society (Youth Reloaded, 2005). Because mindset and attitudes are difficult to change, they often find difficulties in integrating back to the society. If the situation does not improve, inequality will continue to exist in the society. We should then implement pragmatic solutions to alleviate the discrimination against them.

The Issues and Who Are Involved

Ex-offenders are those who have finished serving their prison term or those with a criminal record or history (Guralnik, 1970). Every year in Singapore, around 11, 000 ex-convicts are released back to the society (Singapore Prison Service). The employment statistics is one of the key indicators on the ability of these ex-offenders to reintegrate successfully in the society. Industrial & Services Co-Operative Society (ISCOS) has helped 3, 000 ex-offenders to find jobs so far (938Live, 2010). 81 percent of those who got a job stayed on for 3 months (Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises, 2008). In this essay, I seek to discuss on the causes, implications, and propose solutions on discrimination against ex-offenders. Support programmes such as the Yellow Ribbon Project (YRP) and organisations such as SCORE exist and it is important that we evaluate the effectiveness of these organisations in helping ex-offenders to reintegrate into the society. In my opinion, isolating other effects, the re-integration rate will therefore serves as an indication of the level of discrimination against these ex-offenders.

The little interaction between the public and ex-inmates is a result of feeling of unequal treatments and stereotyping. The public treats ex-offenders unfairly as they feel that they should compensate for their wrongdoing. Ex-offenders themselves are also aware of the prejudice against them. Some resigned this to their fate and ended up avoid opening up to the society. It is therefore important that we recognize the existence of such issues and raise awareness to reduce the degree of discrimination and to assist these ex-offenders.

Firstly, most of the offenders have tattoos on their body, which signifies status, power and belonging to a certain group. Because of stereotyping, we tend to group those who have tattoos as those who have committed crimes. Out of fear and concerns of being associated with these people, we reacted by standing far away. What we failed to recognise is that how we interpret the information we obtained affects our judgement. These tattoos could have been due to a moment of folly during their adolescent stage.

On an organisational level, some employers are still unwilling to hire ex-offenders, because they believe that ‘leopards can never change its spots’. It is heartening to see the number of ex-offenders being employed have increased with the years but we cannot guarantee that they have been given equal rights as the others. For example, at least 30 employees at the Marina Bay Sands and Resorts World Sentosa had to leave their job because all of them failed the Casino Regulatory Authority (CRA)’s background checks. Failure to disclose was taken to assess the applicant’s “integrity, honesty and character” (Lim & Lim, 2010). There is no difference on whether if those with criminal records declared or not, they still had their contracts

terminated anyway. Does the criminal history necessarily the best and only predictors for future performance? Do we judge those have continuously erred and condemn that they do not deserve the chance to repent?

In addition, job applicants are required to declare that if they have been convicted in a court in any country before. Because this is usually a one-liner question, ex-offenders' applications can be filtered out without considering the seriousness of the offences or even the recidivism rate of the offender (Youth Reloaded, 2005). This may provide an opportunity for employers to screen out ex-offenders and justify if there any inappropriate acts in the company in future (Coble-Krings, 2007). Being desperate, these applicants may lie about their background and will be marked down further for dishonesty.

Moving up to legislation, the Registration to Criminals Act was amended in 2005, to allow the ex-offenders to mark their records as spent, meaning that there is no need to discuss the existence of the records in most cases, if the offences committed are minor and they were crime-free for five years (Attorney-General's Chambers, 2005). This means that those with serious offences such as sentences imposed include imprisonment term of more than 3 months or a fine exceeding \$200, 000, are not allowed to do so, thus, the implementation of the policy is unfair as it deprives those with a serious offence a chance to start anew.

Comparing with United States, the treatments of ex-offenders in Singapore are, in my opinion, much better. In the United States, the ex-offenders were not allowed to apply for employment licenses or work in organisations

dealing with those that needs more attention, such as elderly and children (Love, 2006).

Why is it important for us to talk about it?

The society plays a significant role in the reintegration of the ex-offenders. Ex-offenders, no matter what mistakes they made, are still part of us and are assets to the society. However, despite their willingness to start to from ground zero, we shun away and discriminate them. High unemployment is linked to increase in rate of recidivism (Finn, 1998). Therefore, when they are unable to secure a job, the path of recidivism seems easier and they will revert back to their old ways to survive. This remains risky although the recidivism rate in Singapore has remained at 25 % since 2006 (Singapore Prison Service, 2009).

Where can we start to fix the problem?

No steady source of income means ex-offenders and their families may not be able to afford basic necessities for survival and cannot move away from their social class. Those families that grew desperate may resort to crimes to get what they wanted. Thus, it is difficult for ex-offenders to live a better life when they are not given the same opportunities. The vicious cycle continues as their future generations may follow the footsteps of the older generations.

To reduce and even eliminate the stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination against these ex-offenders, it is important that we find out the root causes of this issue and implement various programmes and activities to encourage active participation as increased interaction may improve the perspective of the public towards ex-offenders.

To begin with, organizations should organize more activities to provide both the public and ex-offenders an opportunity to interact. Such activities may be visit to the prisons and / or halfway houses, outdoor and indoor activities, community service projects or even, encourage ex-offenders to participate in existing events such as Yellow Ribbon Prison Run. Through interaction, we develop bonds and trust and these may change the perspective of the public towards them and therefore reduce the extent of discrimination.

Many ex-offenders have low self-esteem and are afraid of rejection.

Therefore, we should involve the ex-offenders in the planning and executing of events in the community. These events provide an opportunity for the ex-inmates to showcase their talents in various areas. Also, besides the technical skills acquired from the support programmes, the programmes should also focus on soft skills such as interpersonal skills. These ex-convicts should also learn more about resume writing and interview skills, as these will help them to market themselves well.

As mentioned above, employers often do not want to give ex-offenders a second chance. Non-acceptance has killed the only hope that these ex-offenders have to reintegrate into the society. Currently, we have campaigns such as “ Help To Unlock The Second Prison” (Yellow Ribbon Project), which focuses on the role that society plays. However, I feel that the campaigns should also focus on the ability and skills that these ex-offenders have to contribute. We have job seminars from SCORE and ISCOS, but to enhance the public confidence in them, we can consider cooperating with companies to provide these ex-offenders transitional jobs as probationers (Fahey, Roberts & Engel, 2006) to start them off for several years so that they have

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relevant working experience, instead of merely skills acquiring in the rehabilitative programmes. After the transition period, these organizations can also help to recommend the employees to other companies.

We should further improve on the interview question so that it allows the ex-offender to declare that they have convicted for which offences and also the year of conviction. Company can now decide if these offences are detrimental to the interests of the stakeholders. The company will suffer the heaviest losses if the ex-offenders cause any troubles. Also, the job applicants gain from this as the employers are practising selective screening rather than a total elimination. There are also calls to ban the declaration box so that past criminal record will not affect employment. (Henry & Jacobs, 2007). However, I feel that the employers are right to protect their interests and the ex-offenders should be honest and convince the employers on their efforts to stay out of crime.

I acknowledge that the amendment to the Registration of Criminals Act is a good move to redress discrimination. However, I feel that this should be made applicable to all ex-offenders, retaining the five years crime-free period, but instead of disqualifying serious offenders, their time-frame could be extended up to 10 years.

If the solutions proposed above are being implemented on a long-term basis, the mindset of the public may change and be more accepting towards ex-offenders and the Singapore will move towards as a progressive society as a whole.