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OLD, FRAIL ...AND A CRIMINAL

Number of seniors jailed has risen over last six years, with upward trend mirroring that in other countries

Cara Wong and Fabian Koh

By the time he was sent to prison in 2010 for drug offences, Peter (not his real name) had already been in and out of prison at least eight times.

He was 65 years old at the time and, by his estimate, one of the oldest in the Changi Prison block.

"I was a wild man. I just did whatever I wanted to," said Peter, now 75, who was released in 2015.

Like all his previous convictions, Peter's last period of incarceration, when he served about five years of a 7½-year sentence, was for consuming and importing drugs.

He estimates that he has spent a total of 20 years in jail.

"What to do? I was addicted to drugs," said Peter.

Observers noticed that over the last six years, the number of criminals aged 60 and older has climbed.

Last year, 486 criminals aged above 60 were sent to prisons here, a 50 per cent increase from the number in 2013.

And between those years, the figures show an upward trend as well.

The State Courts also dealt with 196 offenders above the age of 65 last year, the highest in at least three years.

These figures mirror crime trends in Britain, Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan.

In South Korea and Japan, the uptick in the number of elderly people committing crimes has been blamed on the countries' ageing populations, increasing poverty and social isolation among the elderly population.

WHO ARE THESE ELDERLY CRIMINALS?
 In Singapore, seniors in prison were mostly repeat offenders like Peter.

Almost nine in 10, or 87.4 per cent, of last year's prison population aged above 65 had been admitted at least once before, according to the Singapore Prison Service's (SPS) statistics.

The top three crimes committed by those aged above 65 were causing hurt, drug-related offences and traffic offences, according to the State Courts' and SPS statistics for last year.

Figures last year showed that 19 per cent had committed crimes against persons, with another 18 per cent committing at least one drug-related offence.

Those who committed traffic offences made up about 15 per cent of the elderly cohort last year, said the Prisons.

Lawyer Rajan Supramaniam, managing director of Hilborne Law, said offences run the gamut, ranging from illegal gambling to theft to molestation.

He has seen a 65-year-old first-time offender, who was caught shoplifting, and a 68-year-old, who cheated a Singapore permanent resident of about \$20,000.

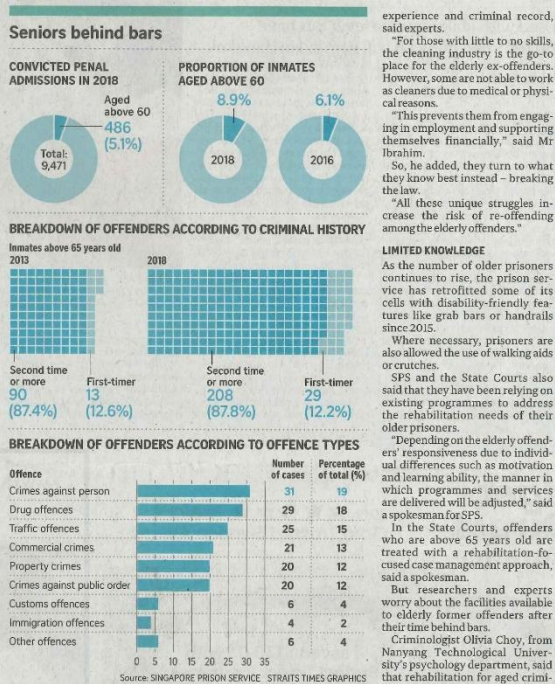
In the second case, the elderly criminal had visited online forums to look for victims, and got his victim to make fake investments by producing false documents for the victim to sign.

Said Mr Rajan, referring to elderly criminals: "They can be very tech savvy and streetwise."

The State Courts cited the case of a 67-year-old man diagnosed with delusional disorder who had destroyed a police camera sign outside his home.

The man was charged with mischief, and was referred to the Agency of Integrated Care by the courts.

The courts also dealt with a 65-year-old man who hit his wife



experience and criminal record, said experts.

"For those with little to no skills, the cleaning industry is the go-to place for the elderly ex-offenders. However, some are not able to work as cleaners due to medical or physical reasons.

"This prevents them from engaging in employment and supporting themselves financially," said Mr Ibrahim.

So, he added, they turn to what they know best - breaking the law.

"All these unique struggles increase the risk of re-offending among the elderly offenders."

LIMITED KNOWLEDGE

As the number of older prisoners continues to rise, the prison service has retrofitted some of its cells with disability-friendly features like grab bars or handrails since 2015.

Where necessary, prisoners are also allowed the use of walking aids or crutches.

SPS and the State Courts also said that they have been relying on existing programmes to address the rehabilitation needs of their older prisoners.

"Depending on the elderly offenders' responsiveness due to individual differences such as motivation and learning ability, the manner in which programmes and services are delivered will be adjusted," said a spokesman for SPS.

In the State Courts, offenders who are above 65 years old are treated with a rehabilitation-focused case management approach, said a spokesman.

But researchers and experts worry about the facilities available to elderly former offenders after their time behind bars.

Criminologist Olivia Choy, from Nanyang Technological University's psychology department, said that rehabilitation for aged criminals is "new territory" for criminologists and the criminal justice system, as it goes against widely accepted thinking that crime diminishes with age.

Offenders typically stop committing crimes between the ages of 20 to 29, so the percentage of offenders in a population should be in a steady decline, she added.

"Because of this, there has been very little research into the area of elderly crime," said Ms Choy.

Mr Elvis Overee, deputy director of ISCOS, a non-profit group that helps former inmates and their families, said elderly ex-offenders require more hand-holding and support because they have to catch up with more changes in Singapore infrastructure and amenities.

"A worrying problem is that elderly criminals often feel discouraged and overwhelmed, which invites the self-deprecating sentiment that they are too old to successfully reintegrate, and that their efforts do not matter," said Mr Overee.

Former convicts like Peter said they have kept away from crime as they fear ending up behind bars.

Since coming out of prison four years ago, Peter has actively kept away from his old friends and is committed to staying on the straight and narrow, he said.

He returned to his Christian faith during his last stint in prison, and has since been actively participating in activities with the Prison Fellowship Singapore, a faith-based non-profit organisation for former convicts.

"I realised I'm getting older, and I don't want to die inside prison," said Peter.

"Now I'm out here talking on eggshells every day. I must be very careful not to give in to temptation."

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Recidivism among the elderly

SCAN TO WATCH

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<http://str.sg/crime>

Text:

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The man was charged with mischief, and was referred to the Agency of Integrated Care by the courts.

The courts also dealt with a 65-year-old man who hit his wife and breached a Personal Protection Order.

The man revealed that he had repeatedly re-offended because of his drinking habit, and was unable to hold down a job because of his problems with the bottle.

WHY TURN TO CRIME?

For seniors who have spent time behind bars, experts and researchers said, factors such as social isolation and financial difficulties might have driven them back to a life of crime.

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser said that these older criminals might have been unable to adjust to life outside of prison.

Rejected by people outside of prison, they would have turned to their "previous deviant social networks", and might have committed crimes again as they would have considered being caught "worth the risks".

"I would speculate that they feel that they have nothing or very little to lose by re-offending", said Associate Professor Tan from National University of Singapore, adding that the offenders might have even become used to the structured prison life.

Some older criminals also have unstable social support systems because their many years of crime have strained family relationships, said researchers from the Singapore After-Care Association (Saca).



The non-profit organisation works with prisoners and former offenders in rehabilitation and reintegration.

"Some of their families may have long given up on them after they've spent so many years in prison," said Saca's head of research and training, Mr Ibrahim Abdul Alim.

The organisation concluded a small-scale study last December on the reintegration needs and challenges of elderly former offenders in Singapore.

In speaking with 42 older former offenders and convicts, Saca researchers found that many had faced financial difficulties as well.

Mr Ibrahim said that many did not have a stable source of income when they were younger, and did not have any income during their long periods of incarceration.

And upon their release, they could not find employment because of their old age, lack of work experience and criminal record, said experts.

"For those with little to no skills, the cleaning industry is the go-to place for the elderly ex-offenders. However, some are not able to work as cleaners due to medical or physical reasons.

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