

# Different rehab approach for elderly inmates mooted

**Seow Bei Yi**

A different approach to how prison inmates aged above 60 are rehabilitated while in jail may be needed as their numbers grow, said a National University of Singapore (NUS) professor.

From 243 in 2010, the number of such inmates has more than doubled to 650 last year, making up 5.4 per cent of the total prison population, said Professor Paul Cheung of NUS' Social Service Research Centre.

"For the elderly, will harsh sentencing and long jail terms really be effective in deterring crime, and improving chances of rehabilitation?" he said, referring to a recent case where a high court judge questioned the logic of applying benchmark jail terms without considering the offenders' situation.

The judge's comments were made during the sentencing of two drug offenders aged 59 and 60.

Prof Cheung was speaking yesterday at an offenders' rehabilitation conference attended by more than 250 academics, researchers, practitioners and policymakers.

Prof Cheung, who has been involved in research on recidivism and the criminal justice system, cited Japan's experience, where it was reported that some seniors are driven to crime because of issues such as poverty, loneliness and a lack of social support.

"It is evident that a crucial part of

helping elderly offenders requires community support to address the financial, medical and social difficulties that create the perverse incentives for them to go back to prison," he said.

The number of inmates above 60 years old has been climbing since 2010.

In 2012, there were 359, a spokesman for Singapore Prison Service told *The Straits Times* in an earlier interview. Meanwhile, the overall prison population fell from around 12,500 in 2012 to about 12,200 last year.

Criminal lawyer Rajan Supramaniam, who used to be a senior prison officer, said the elderly are particularly vulnerable as they may have "lost touch with family members and lost their sense of direction in life", he said, adding that existing health problems may compound the difficulties they face as well.

Speakers at the event also addressed the issue of youth offenders.

Second Minister for Home Affairs Desmond Lee, who was guest of honour, highlighted the need for rehabilitation to be introduced earlier. He added that efforts should also continue after offenders re-enter the community, and should work on strengthening family support and addressing issues such as income, social mobility and reducing stigma.

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243

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650

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