



03

FSC Senior Social Workers' Perceptions of Roles in Financial Assistance Decision-Making Process

Do FA recommendations change based on social workers' perception of their roles?

07

Youth Drug Situation in Singapore - Insights from the EPYC Longitudinal Study

Examining young offenders' patterns of drug use

11

Upcoming Events

Find out what's up next at SSR!

EDITOR'S WORDS

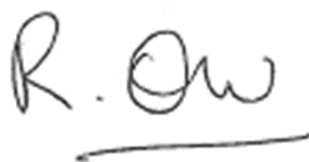
Time flies! The second issue for 2019 is already here. It contains two papers that has answers to very significant questions related to two very important areas of practice in the social services.

The first question: Do you want to know how senior social workers perceive their role in financial assistance (FA) recommendations and decisions? Are there dominant attitudes and beliefs that underlie these decisions? If you do, then the article by Bavani based on an exploratory study with 13 senior social workers will stimulate thoughts for reflection and further debate in this area of practice.

The second question: Do you want to know who among the youth are more likely to start abusing substances at an early age and what we can do to address the problem? If you do, then the article by Dongdong and her colleagues based on two waves of data from a 10-wave longitudinal study of youth offenders will provide the answers.

Both articles are good reading as we seek more evidence to help improve policy and practice. As a 'Snippet', they make easy reading and I hope you will enjoy them and find them useful.

With warm regards,



Rosaleen Ow
Editor

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FSC Senior Social Workers' Perceptions of Roles in Financial Assistance Decision-Making Process – A Qualitative Exploratory Study

Bavani Pillai

The decision-making processes involved in financial assistance (FA) disbursement are inextricably linked to Singapore's larger socio-political context. Singapore's stand towards nation building is one that is built on key values like meritocracy, hard work and family as the first line of support. Those who are fit to work and eligible for assistance usually qualify for the 'Short to Middle Term Assistance' (SMTA), with regular reviews as FA in this category is meant to be temporary and to help the individual or family when other sources of support have been exhausted and to enable them to become financially self-reliant through employment (Wong, L., 2019). The ideal of families achieving self-reliance is thus seen as the goal for those living in poverty. The way in which policies are designed and services are meted out is geared towards this goal – if not within the same generation, then the next.

The increasing cost of living in Singapore will continue to push the gap between the 'have' and 'have not's and bring forth more discussions on Singapore's narratives about welfare. There is now more scrutiny on what constitutes a decent standard of living for those in the lower income brackets, on whether the existing safety net provided is sufficient and most importantly if the various financial schemes made available do in fact help move families out of poverty and towards self-reliance (Hussain, Z. 2018). Social workers are positioned and poised to lend a voice to shaping this discourse – they have access to not only the families that they serve, but also to the funders, policy makers, academics and colleagues within the sector. Senior social workers in particular have greater influence and power in this regard. In their leadership roles, they are in a position to vet the junior workers' social reports and FA recommendations, shape work culture and decide how and when issues related to poverty and FA get discussed, interface with funders, management committee and other stakeholders, and also have more opportunities to network across Family Service Centres (FSCs) and raise their views to policy makers. Hence, how senior social workers perceive their roles and their organization's role in FA is critical because these perceptions shape FA recommendations for clients.

While disbursement of SMTA is managed by Social Service Offices (SSOs) and follow clear and standardized

eligibility criteria, there is still room for FSC social workers as street bureaucrats to influence FA decisions pertaining to how these policies are implemented on the ground (Lipsky, K., 2010). In working closely with the families, they are privy to information that would be used in their assessment of deservingness. FSCs in general also have access to another relatively small pool of funds – that come from private donors and Government linked funds like FSC ComCare funds. These funds are distributed to the clients either in cash or in kind, and according to the discretion of the workers and the internal policies of the FSC or conditions attached by the donors. Clients receive cash either via a one-time assistance or a stipulated amount at regular intervals for a period of time. In kind funds could include food rations, EZ link cards, NTUC vouchers, milk powder, diapers etc. The type of conditions pegged to assistance could include a variety of reasons and these are often linked to the worker's assessment of the case.

This exploratory study was borne out of the curiosity to delve into the attitudes and beliefs that consciously or unconsciously shape a senior worker's financial assessment. It hopes to use the responses from the sample to identify dominant underlying beliefs, trends and potential stark differences or anomalies as an indication of views within the fraternity of leaders in FSCs. The over-arching question posed to the participants was: How do senior social workers perceive their role in FA recommendations and decisions?

**The over-arching question posed to the participants was:
How do senior social workers perceive their role in FA recommendations and decisions?**

FSC Senior Social Workers' Perceptions of Roles (Cont.)

Findings from this paper is based on data gathered from a larger mixed-method study conducted by Social Service Research Centre (SSR) to understand social workers' decisions on FA. This study utilizes in-depth semi-structured interviews to draw out the diverse and complex views on how workers make FA assessments when presented with hypothetical cases of clients' situations and in actual practice. This paper will focus on the 13 senior social workers' interviews from the total interview sample. Senior social workers are classified as those who have at least 5 years of social work experience. They hold designations of senior social workers, lead social workers, principal social workers, executive directors/directors and centre heads.

The findings suggest that how senior workers perceive their role in relation to their clients, colleagues and of the role of FSC in turn shapes their assessment of FA.

a. Role in relation to clients

Many participants spoke about how playing the role of a gatekeeper was important to them and a responsibility they felt entrusted with.

“...we have accountability towards government funds, public funds...”

– 011 participant

A few of the respondents also shared that playing the role of gatekeeper sometimes came at odds with their role as an advocate for clients. This was especially so if they did not believe that it was their role to oversee if clients adhered to the conditions pegged to the assistance they were receiving.

“...not sure who your client is whether your client is the government because you are doing the financial assistance on their behalf to make sure the client fits into their requirements before they qualify...”

– 002 participant

Most if not all of the workers quoted using FA as a tool to engage families in working with them. They saw their role as using FA to build relationships with the families in order to address family patterns that they saw to be the underlying issues that kept families stuck in poverty.

“ ...so I now start to see financial assistance more like a tool to...there are other issues that multi-stressed families face that require continued in-depth work...”

– 001 participant

For example, they shared that by choosing to disburse FA in smaller quantum on a regular basis, they hope to ensure that clients meet them regularly, hence giving them the opportunity to build trust and address other identified issues.

b. Role of FSC

There was an overwhelming sentiment that FSC Social Work is focused towards the more complex cases that do not “just” manage financial cases. With the creation of SSOs, there seems to be a delineation of the type of cases that FSCs take on that distances FSC Social Workers from “pure financial cases”.

“...I mean I don't think FSCs want to run into the business of doing financial budgeting workshops for clients and all that. I don't see that as our role at this juncture. Because uh, if and only if there is somebody else doing that la...”

– 006 participant

“... So the more straightforward financial cases, day to day you know families going through transition, they can be stabilized with like a 3 months, 6 months of financial assistance ... the cases that we are handling are more complex and usually with risk...”

– 009 participant

While this was the majority sentiment, there was one participant who shared a different viewpoint and felt that FSC's core work should remain with dealing with financial issues before addressing other psychological or emotional issues.

“...But if the problem is money problem, then you don't intervene... it is not consistent with social work thinking also. Which is that if the basic needs are not met and if there is no psychological and emotional safety, you can't resolve anything else...”

– 008 participant

FSC Senior Social Workers' Perceptions of Roles (Cont.)

c. Role in relation to colleagues

They also had differing opinions about whether level of experience impacted the 'generosity' of workers. While some felt that less experienced workers tended to be more generous, there were a few who believed that more experienced workers tended to feel more confident of their assessment and hence would dare to recommend amounts that are beyond the usual approved quantum.

"...It's the middle management syndrome. Whereas for us, we are more confident with our decision rules. So it is a professional development process as well. So I don't blame them. I would think that the quantum process is lower and they will have a lot of decision rules because they are afraid of making choices, which is very common in workers who are not sure about their own position and who are not sure about what it would mean if let's say you shift and say I want to do something completely radical..."

– 008 participant

"...I think caseworkers will recommend more. General caseworkers. People who are in more supervision position or management position seems like they tend to approve less..."

– 010 participant

Many senior workers pointed out that open communication about FA assessment in spite of differences in seniority was healthy and should be encouraged across different levels of experience. They reflected that their position inevitably meant that their opinions held more power in influencing the stand of other workers and in swaying decisions.

"...as long as you can convince me, you can justify me, I will approve. So this is a culture that we try to build up, it's not about the seniority, it's about your clinical purpose, your clinical reason. If clinically you can justify, then I will approve... but I like this debate, I think the more we debate on it, the more we are clear why we have this assessment and intervention..."

– 004 participant

Implications for practice

Senior Social Workers hold considerable power in influencing their FSC's narratives and views towards FA. This study has identified the different perceptions that senior workers hold about their roles as practitioners, supervisors/leaders and the role of their FSCs in relation to FA disbursement.

When a worker sees their primary role as a gatekeeper of resources, how does that impact on their assessment of client's needs? If a senior worker sees their leadership role as a collaborative one, how does that influence how FA decisions are made in the agency? How does the senior worker's perception about the role of FSC influence the FSC's stand in working with low-income families? These are questions that beg for closer scrutiny and discussion.

The assumptions made when reflecting on one's roles are often packaged as clinical reasons or practice wisdom. And as the responses have shown, even with considerable years of experience, they vary depending on the values that underpin the workers' worldview, their training orientation and the experiences that have shaped the way they see poverty as an issue. There could be a correlation between social workers' perceptions of roles and their perceptions of poverty or ideas about deservingness. While one cannot conclude this correlation solely based on this study, the larger study that has drawn on survey and interview data would be able to comment further on this. The findings from this study will be shared in the SSR conference "Working with low-income families through the life course: Challenges to Social services" on 18 July 2019.

The objective of this paper is not to give weight to one point of view over the other. There may not be a "correct" stance or viewpoint and it would certainly be contentious to assert that this is possible at all. It is through the range of responses elicited that we wish to draw attention to the fact that differing views are bound to exist and thereby influence the FA decisions for the clients that are served. It is hence imperative to examine these views and to be aware of one's position before being able to articulate them to others within the organization and social work community.

FSC Senior Social Workers' Perceptions of Roles (Cont.)

The process of interviews itself seem to have unearthed discussion points for Senior Workers to take back to their supervisory or managerial roles. Since many reflected that they have not explicitly discussed the 'why' behind FA decisions (mostly, workers tend to focus on the 'how'), senior workers can use this opportunity to reflect on their own positions and the positions of their colleagues within the same organization.

"...We don't actually talk a lot about what we think is enough. In terms of basic minimum standard of living... "

– 008 participant

Differences are bound to exist and leaning into that does not have to divide workers into polar camps. Senior workers have the leadership power and skillsets to facilitate discussions in a safe space across differences in views and positions. This process of critical enquiry could also give rise to other similar practice-led research topics, especially since there is little to none local literature documented on this area. The senior workers also have opportunities to articulate their FSC's position in larger platforms like networking meetings that involve other stakeholders.

Social work education is a powerful influencing tool in shaping and expanding how workers see their role in

helping families break out of poverty. There are studies in United States that indicate that there is a gap in social work education in meeting the financial needs of lower income families and a critique that it is mainly focused on clinical interventions. Beyond clinical interventions, there is room for training and education in this area to be expanded within Singapore as well (Eamon, M.K., & Zhang, S.,2006; Gates.et.al., 2017). This would offer the foundation and necessary language for practitioners to critically think about their interventions with lower income families.

On this note, we hope that this study has planted more questions and acts as a catalyst for senior social workers to clarify and articulate their FA decision-making processes within their FSCs and the larger FSC network. Social workers are tasked to make assessments about FA decisions within the context of Singapore's dominant narrative on welfare and their organization's stance. Senior workers in particular, are not passive recipients of policy and it's implications on practice. They have a greater responsibility to examine the implicit values and assumptions that they hold as these decisions are translated tangibly into the lives of the clients, organizational culture and possibly shaping the nation's policies towards lower income families.

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Youth Drug Situation in Singapore - Insights from the EPYC Longitudinal Study

Dongdong Li, Nyx Ng, Chi Meng Chu, Grace Chng, Adam Oei, Nandini Anant, Kala Ruby

It has been three years since SSR teamed up with the Ministry of Social and Family Development's Centre for Research on Rehabilitation and Protection to embark on an ambitious research project - the **Enhancing Positive Outcomes in Youth and the Community (EPYC)** study.

Slated to last 12 years, EPYC is a 10-wave longitudinal study of three cohorts of youth offenders aged 12 to 19 years. EPYC commenced in 2016 and recruited both youth offenders and their primary caregivers to participate in the study's interviews. The EPYC study focuses on the overarching themes of crime prevention, rehabilitation, and societal reintegration of youth offenders.

The broad aims of the study are:

- a. To investigate factors that contribute to youth offenders' initial offending and drug abuse.
- b. To examine factors that influence successful rehabilitation and other long-term outcomes.
- c. To determine factors that sustain rehabilitative effects and contribute to the successful reintegration of youth offenders into society.
- d. To identify factors that protect non-offending youth from offending and abusing drugs.
- e. To track and compare the long-term outcomes of non-offending youth with youth offenders.

Our Youth Sample

The study uses a census survey method, targeting every youth offender aged between 12 and 19 years under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social and Family Development or the Singapore Prison Service. For Cohort 1, we recruited those who were sentenced in 2016 and successfully completed 385 interviews. For Cohort 2, 406 youth offenders who were sentenced in 2017 participated in the study. Our combined sample for the first two years of the EPYC project is thus 791.

The youth offenders supervised by the Ministry of Social and Family Development were either placed on a Probation Order, Juvenile Residential Order, or the Youth Enhanced Supervision Programme (YES), which is a structured case management programme co-managed by the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) for first-time drug users. Those

supervised by the Singapore Prison Service were either sentenced to the Community Rehabilitation Centre (CRC) or Drug Rehabilitation Centre (DRC) for drug offences, or to the Reformatory Training Centre for a variety of offences.

Prevalence of Substance Use

A major area of investigation for the EPYC study relates to substance use. The term "substance use" refers to the consumption of tobacco products (such as cigarettes) or alcohol (such as beer or wine), and the use of inhalants (e.g., glue), controlled drugs (e.g., cannabis), and uncontrolled drugs (e.g., prescription tablets, cough syrup). Substance use has been associated with a myriad of deleterious consequences, many of which are enduring (Green, Doherty, Stuart, & Ensminger, 2010; Scholes-Balog, Hemphill, Evans-Whipp, Toumbourou, & Patton, 2016; World Health Organization, 2016). Studies from the World Health Organization show that tobacco kills more than 7 million people each year (World Health Organization, 2017) while more than 3 million deaths in 2016 were attributable to the harmful use of alcohol (World Health Organization, 2018). Disconcertingly, some 31 million persons worldwide have drug use disorders (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018).

Substance use, particularly drugs, appears to be on the rise among youth offenders in Singapore. According to the Youth and Public Perception Survey conducted by the National Council Against Drug Abuse (NCADA) in 2015 and 2016 (National Council Against Drug Abuse, 2017), there is a growing number of youth in Singapore who are holding more liberal attitudes towards drug use. In their 2018 Drug Situation Report (Central Narcotics Bureau, 2018), the Central Narcotics Bureau reported an 11% year-on-year increase in the number of drug abusers arrested in 2018. In total, 3,438 drug abusers were arrested last year. Approximately 2 in 5 were new drug abusers and about two-thirds of the new drug abusers were below 30 years of age, highlighting the sizeable proportion of younger drug abusers.

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particularly drugs,
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Youth Drug Situation in Singapore (Cont.)

Among EPYC's first two cohorts of participants ($N = 786$; 5 participants did not respond to the items on substance use), only a mere 3% abstained from using tobacco, alcohol, and drugs. Tobacco (92%) and alcohol (79%) consumption was extremely widespread among EPYC's youth offenders. An alarming 57% of our participants reported having used controlled and/or uncontrolled drugs in the year leading up to their interviews.

Nearly 9 in 10 of the sampled drug users engaged in poly-substance use (i.e., the consumption of more than 1 type of substance). Worryingly, nearly half of them (46%) reportedly consumed all three substances. Further, while only 2% of the alcohol users reported signs of alcohol dependency, 30% of the drug users exhibited drug dependency, which is indicative of severe drug abuse problems.



Photo 1. Unsplash/ Matthew T Rader

Drug Type and Motivation

Most of EPYC's first two cohorts of drug users abused a combination of controlled and uncontrolled drugs. Controlled drugs are substances prohibited under Singapore's Misuse of Drugs Act, while uncontrolled drugs and inhalants are substances that are not prohibited by law in and of themselves, such as cough suppressants and sleeping tablets.

Ninety-two percent of the youth offenders who used drugs in the 12 months leading up to their interviews abused controlled drugs, while 38% and 14% abused uncontrolled drugs and inhalants respectively. The most commonly abused drugs as shown in the EPYC study are methamphetamine (used by 77% of the drug users), followed by cannabis (used by 47%) and synthetic cannabis

(used by 30%). This finding mirrors the findings that were shared in the Central Narcotics Bureau's report, which consistently reports methamphetamine as the most widely abused drug in Singapore.

With regard to the youth offenders' motivations for using drugs, we found that most of our youth drug users were predominantly motivated to start doing so in order to enhance their sensations. For instance, 51% of the drug users reported that they started consuming drugs because they wanted to feel high while 41% reported that they started abusing drugs for the thrill. Curiosity (45%) and stress management (43%) appeared to be important catalysts of youth drug use as well.

Age of Onset of Substance Use

The average age of onset for our youth offenders to start using tobacco, alcohol, and drugs ranged from 12 to 15 years old. Tobacco had the earliest average age of onset at 12 years old, while the average onset ages for inhalants, alcohol, and drugs (i.e., all drug types besides inhalants) were around 13, 14, and 15 years old respectively. Notably, tobacco, which tended to be the first substance youth offenders used, appeared to be a possible gateway substance among Singapore's youth offenders: Out of those who started smoking by the age of 13 years, nearly 60% subsequently abused drugs by the age of 16 years. This gateway hypothesis mirrors research conducted by the National Institute of Health in the United States (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2018) and may have a biological basis, in that the early abuse of one type of substance may render the brain more susceptible to other illicit substance use (Fergusson, Boden, & Horwood, 2006; Kandel & Kandel, 2014).

But an important question remained - who were more likely to abuse substances at an early age? The EPYC study showed that youth offenders who hailed from disadvantaged families, as well as those who experienced child abuse, were more likely to start abusing substances early. For instance, youth offenders who lived with a household member who had been incarcerated or who abused alcohol and/or drugs were more likely to start abusing substances earlier. Physically or sexually abused youth offenders and those who witnessed violence among household members were also at greater risk of early substance abuse.

Youth Drug Situation in Singapore (Cont.)

Problems Associated with Substance Use

Examinations of youth drug users' backgrounds and characteristics revealed several important findings. Firstly, family substance use was found to be associated with an increased likelihood of drug use among youth offenders. In other words, youth living in households where other members consumed alcohol and/or drugs were at a higher risk of using drugs themselves. This could be due to the ease of access to drugs or early exposure to substance abuse. Secondly, youth drug users also reported having more symptoms associated with depression and conduct disorder. Conduct disorder referred to a serious behavioural disorder characterised by a persistent disregard for the rights of others. Lastly and crucially, as compared to youth offenders who had never abused drugs, youth drug users tended to have more pro-criminal attitudes, to express more intent to engage in antisocial behaviour, and to associate with criminal others.

Are such problems exacerbated by an early onset of substance abuse? Unfortunately, our research suggests that early substance use is related to a gamut of negative behavioural characteristics and outcomes.

The EPYC team identified three main clusters of substance abusers among the study's participants: those who started abusing substances during their childhood years (10 to 13 years old), those who started abusing substances during their early teenage years (13 to 15 years old) and late-teen years (15 years old and older).

As compared to those who abused substances at a later age, youth offenders who started abusing substances early (i.e., those in the childhood and early-teen onset groups) tended to:

- Have more pro-criminal attitudes and associate more with criminal others
- Exhibit more problematic personality traits, such as being impulsive and thrill-seeking
- Exhibit symptoms of drug dependency
- Engage in more problematic behaviours such as rule-breaking and aggressive behaviours
- Engage in more types of risky behaviours such as risky sexual behaviours, criminal and risky sexual behaviours in online domains, and affiliating with gangs.

Implications

Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of instituting systems that ensure the early prevention and identification of youth substance abuse problems. A concerted effort from families, schools, communities, social services, and the government will be required to tackle this problem head-on.

Given the heightened risks and problems associated with early substance use and the finding that tobacco potentially serves as a gateway substance, it is vital that we adopt preventive measures to pre-emptively protect our youth from using such substances. For instance, the Health Promotion Board and the National Addictions Management Service could explore conducting more anti-smoking campaigns and stress management workshops in Primary and Secondary schools as well as student welfare centres. Knowledge of stress management and coping techniques could potentially discourage youth from resorting to substance use to relieve stress.

Interventions should also be targeted at youth from at-risk backgrounds. For instance, teachers and the general public could be equipped with knowledge on how to identify signs of child abuse and support systems for abused children should be readily available. Social workers could also reach out to youth from families with a known history of incarceration or substance abuse, and ensure that such youth are aware of the various helplines and services available in Singapore (e.g., the talk2SANA Live Chat service for drug-related issues). Parental training and family therapy may also help to curb some of the aforementioned familial risks in substance use.



A concerted effort from families, schools, communities, social services, and the government will be required to tackle this problem head-on.

Youth Drug Situation in Singapore (Cont.)

Concluding Remarks

The substance use situation in Singapore is indubitably of growing concern. Since early substance abuse is associated with a multitude of maladaptive outcomes and behavioural tendencies, it is pertinent that we identify this problem early and provide the necessary interventions to minimize further substance abuse. Notably, even though 57% of our first two cohorts of participants self-reported their drug use, only 27% of the total sample were placed

under the supervision of YES, CRC, and DRC. This suggests that the youth drug problem in Singapore may still be underestimated.

The EPYC project will continue to track and investigate youth offenders' substance abuse behaviour over the years. As the study progresses, the team hopes to continue to glean and share more meaningful insights into the unique struggles, characteristics, and behavioural tendencies of Singapore's youth offenders.

Note: The EPYC findings shared in this report on the youth drug situation in Singapore were presented previously (Li, Ng, & Chu, 2018; Oei, Li, & Chu, 2018) at the 2018 Yellow Ribbon Conference held on the 6th of September.

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