



Jun
2026
Issue 5

Insight:

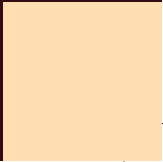
Correctional Rehabilitation Research Bulletin



Hong Kong Correctional Services



Insight: **Correctional Rehabilitation** **Research Bulletin**



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Foreword



The intersection of psychological research and correctional administration is not merely academic; instead, it provides scientific support to frontline rehabilitation, public safety and institutional stability. For correctional administrators, there is a myriad of daily challenges in balancing security mandates with the complex rehabilitation needs of a diverse incarcerated population. The aim of this bulletin remains to be building a bridge across this gap, offering evidence-informed insights tailored directly to the operational realities of correctional institutions.

Within these pages, you will find research translated into actionable strategies, beginning with integrating the Desistance model with the conventional Risk-Need-Responsivity model. This issue also introduces the “MindSport” service, which utilises a strength-based model to help young PICs discover their potential and positive identities. Since integrating global insights enhance rehabilitation management, the final article shares takeaways from the Conference of International Association for the Treatment of Sexual Offenders (IATSO), highlighting how multidisciplinary collaboration and the emerging AI technology influence sexual crime.

Psychology offers no silver bullets, but it does offer scientifically proven pathways towards safer environments and second chances. We invite you to read critically, apply selectively, and share your frontline wisdom with us. Together, we can continue our journey towards shaping a more effective and humane correctional system.

Elise S. W. HUNG, PsyD

Senior Clinical Psychologist

Coordinator of Correctional Rehabilitation Research Unit

Hong Kong Correctional Services Department



COMMITTEE

CORRECTIONAL REHABILITATION RESEARCH UNIT

Dr. Elise S. W. HUNG
Senior Clinical Psychologist (Coordinator)



Dr. Vivian W. M. MAK
Senior Clinical Psychologist

Dr. Yvonne K. S. LEE
Senior Clinical Psychologist



Ms. Winnie W. K. WONG
Clinical Psychologist

Ms. Jessica K. P. CHAN
Clinical Psychologist



Ms. Pauline P. L. CHAU
Clinical Psychologist

Mr. W. S. LAU
Principal Officer



Mr. Paul P. M. LING
Officer

RESEARCH CONSULTANTS

Dr. Frank J. PORPORINO



Prof. Patrick W. L. LEUNG



What Works?

How Research Can Help in Offender Rehabilitation

Article 1

From Risk to Redemption: A Literature Review on Integrating “What works” and the Desistance Model in Offender Rehabilitation



Dr Elise S.W. Hung¹, Mr W.S. LAU²

¹ Senior Clinical Psychologist, CSD

² Principal Officer, CSD

The Hong Kong Correctional Services Department (CSD) is dedicated to ensuring the safe custody and effective rehabilitation of persons in custody (PICs). Since 2006, CSD has extensively implemented the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model. Recently, academic literature has advocated for the integration of the Desistance model that examines the holistic, non-linear and socially mediated processes through which individuals cease offending (McNeill, 2014). While practitioners sometimes perceive these paradigms as competing, a closer review of the literature demonstrates that they are highly complementary (Maruna & Mann, 2019). Both of them are anchored in the premise of “moral redeemability,” which assumes that for a vast majority of justice-involved individuals, criminality is not an immutable, permanent trait, but an adaptation to life circumstances that can be positively transformed (Maruna & Mann, 2019).



The Risks and Needs Assessment and Management Protocol for Offenders of the CSD identifies the rehabilitative needs and re-offending risks of PICs.

The compatibility of these two frameworks lies in their distinct but complementary analytical foci. The RNR model evaluates specific interventions that target criminogenic needs, including family ties and employment, whereas the Desistance model examines individual lives and personal trajectories of change, usually alongside the transformation of those needs into assets. Both are important in conceptualising and facilitating individuals' rehabilitation. Scholars frequently illustrate this synergy using a weight-loss analogy: while clinical evaluations of diets and personal issues (analogous to the RNR approach) are essential for identifying effective structured interventions, understanding how an individual successfully maintains weight loss over time requires an examination of their personal trajectory, social support networks and identity shifts (Maruna & Mann, 2019). By synthesising risk/need assessments with desistance-focused narrative studies, correctional agencies can more effectively address the sheer complexity of human behaviour.

The conceptual evolution of desistance draws heavily upon the interactionist framework of Lemert (1951), who originally distinguished between primary and secondary deviance to illustrate how social labelling stabilises criminal careers. Maruna and Farrall (2004) later formalised the distinction between primary — or Act desistance and secondary desistance, which requires a shift in self-identity. McNeill (2006) then introduced tertiary — or relational desistance to emphasise that long-term reform is ultimately dependent on social and structural validation.



A PhD graduate PIC shares his success story with his parents, encouraging lifelong learning and expressing gratitude for their unwavering support.

A central pillar of navigating this identity shift is rooted in narrative criminology, which suggests that the stories individuals tell about themselves shape their future behaviour (Maruna & Liem, 2020). Recidivists often adopt a “condemnation script” characterised by a sense of powerlessness, victimhood and resignation to a life of deviance (Sundt, 2010). Conversely, successful desistors actively re-author their identities using a “redemption script,” reframing their criminal pasts not as permanent stains but as preludes to their pro-social identities. This transformation is frequently manifested through “generativity,” wherein reformed individuals seek to mentor others, give back to communities, and find purpose in protecting future generations from making similar mistakes. Accordingly, CSD staff can encourage PICs to reconstruct these narratives through fostering hope, self-efficacy and a sense of meaning, while encouraging them to pursue generativity in different ways.

Importantly, the foundation for these transformative narratives can begin within the prison walls. While desistance theories frequently generalised community-based turning points such as marriage and employment, a local research highlights the potential of incarceration itself as a positive turning point when paired with structured rehabilitation programmes (Lee et al., 2025). The prison environment can successfully interrupt destructive cycles of addiction and force distance from previous anti-social networks, offering PICs a chance for self-reflection and personal growth and laying the groundwork for a new pro-social trajectory (Lee et al., 2025).

The Desistance model highlights that reform is deeply social, driven by the power of relationships, trust and collective effort (Simonsson et al., 2025). This concept of “coproduced” desistance emphasising on relationship factors serves as a crucial bridge to the RNR model. While RNR in prison can target personal criminogenic needs such as crime-endorsing cognitions, the desistance framework addresses the social capital needed to sustain those cognitive changes over time (Maruna & Mann, 2019). Risk reducing interventions are most successful when paired with a prosocial support network—either dedicated, trained rehabilitation staff or family members who support the individual’s desistance both inside and outside prison.



Ultimately, an internal cognitive shift must be met with external validation for rehabilitation to be truly sustained. The desistance journey progresses from Act to Identity desistance, and finally arrives at Relational desistance. This final stage dictates that transformation only endures when society, the law and the community genuinely accept the reformed individual (McNeill, 2014). Acknowledging this reality reinforces why the RNR and Desistance models are fundamentally complementary frameworks. No single criminal justice agency can orchestrate this entire process alone; it requires targeted interventions to reduce risk alongside robust community partnerships to create legitimate opportunities for social participation (National Institute of Justice, 2021). By weaving together the structured, evidence-based tools of the RNR paradigm with the deeply human, identity-focused insights of the Desistance model, the Hong Kong CSD is not just managing risks—it is delivering a truly comprehensive and integrated path to more lasting desistance.

Insights

1. Shared Foundational Belief

- Both the RNR and Desistance models share a belief that criminality is a changeable adaptation rather than a permanent trait.

2. Complementary Analytical Foci

- The compatibility of these frameworks lies in their distinct analytical foci: the RNR model evaluates specific interventions targeting criminogenic needs, whereas the Desistance paradigm examines personal trajectories of change alongside the transformation of needs into assets.

3. Relational Nature of Change

- Effective rehabilitation requires acknowledging the relational nature of change, utilising prosocial support networks to help individuals' safe transition into conventional environments.

4. Holistic Rehabilitative Approach

- Combining RNR service matching with an understanding of personal life trajectories allows for a more holistic, robust and successful approach to offender rehabilitation.

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Strength-based Youth Rehabilitation: What Works in the “MindSport” Programme?



Dr Yvonne K.S. LEE¹, Ms. Celia W.S. HO²

¹ Senior Clinical Psychologist, CSD

² Clinical Psychologist, CSD

Why a Strength-based Approach is important for youth rehabilitation?

Contemporary correctional rehabilitation integrates the desistance framework into the traditional Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) model to achieve two key goals: **reducing re-offending and cultivating a positive self-identity**. Pioneering desistance research in Hong Kong has found that incarceration can serve as a turning point in life for persons in custody (PICs) when strength-based rehabilitation programmes are provided, opening up new learning opportunities (HKCSD, 2025). Supplementing the RNR model’s focus on risks and needs, a strength-based approach serves as a valuable add-on by empowering individuals to see themselves not merely as problems to be solved, but as individuals with possibilities to grow.



Psychologically, this is a prime moment to introduce strength-based interventions for youth. Developmental psychology highlights that one of the central tasks of adolescence is the exploration, understanding and commitment to personal identity (Erikson, 1968). In answering the question “Who am I?”, identifying and building personal

strengths help adolescents form healthy self-identities such as “I’m a sporty teen”, “I’m outgoing and sociable”, etc. For young PICs, constructing a new pro-social identity is particularly salient during the identity desistance stage, laying the foundation for long-term desistance from crime and fostering positive personal growth (Maruna, 2001).

What is the “MindSport” Programme?

“MindSport,” an innovative programme specially designed for young male PICs in Hong Kong, integrates Character Strength Intervention (CSI) into sports activities to empower youth to lead thriving, resilient and prosocial lives by leveraging their inherent character strengths (Ho, Kam & Tam, 2025). **Focusing on “what’s strong” rather than “what’s wrong”**, the programme run by clinical psychologists in partnership with sports coaches from a voluntary community agency, supports the development of a healthier self-concept during the transition to adulthood. In fact, the “MindSport” initiative is firmly grounded in the responsivity principle of RNR model. It harnesses identity-building, activity-oriented and competitive elements that align with the learning styles of young males, thereby enhancing their treatment motivation and improving outcomes.

What is the Essence of Character Strength Intervention (CSI)?

Character Strength Intervention (CSI), an evidence and strength-based positive psychology approach, focuses on identifying, cultivating and applying individuals’ inherent positive traits to enhance well-being, resilience, identity formation and prosocial behaviour (Niemic, 2018). In their landmark study, Peterson and Seligman (2004) identified **24 character strengths**



— such as teamwork, perseverance, creativity, love of learning and hope — which **are considered universal, morally valued and measurable traits that contribute to human flourishing**. Under the “MindSport” Programme, clinical psychologists guide young PICs, working in groups of 6, to identify their unique character strengths through the VIA Character Strength Survey and Top 5 Report, experiential exercises, and feedback from their parents, sport coaches and psychological staff. Young PICs are encouraged to continuously apply their character strengths in daily life and set actionable goals aligned with their emerging prosocial identities as part of their desistance journey. For example, one PIC expressed gratitude to a dedicated sports coach who provided regular training as a volunteer, which reminded him to appreciate his mother’s consistent prison visits despite long travel times. During personal reflection, another PIC shared “Change isn’t easy, but I value the chance to improve — it’s what makes my life meaningful”.

How can Therapeutic Sports Activities be implemented?



Under the “MindSport” Programme, four bodyweight training sessions — run by a sport coach from a voluntary community agency — form the active core of the intervention, providing an **experiential and engaging platform for putting character strengths into practice**. Alongside learning and performing essential bodyweight exercises, participants

engage in collaborative pair activities, monitoring each other’s posture and technique. They are guided to recognise and articulate the strengths they draw upon during training—for example, perseverance in completing a demanding set, teamwork in supporting a peer, or bravery in attempting a new exercise.

What has the “MindSport” Programme achieved?

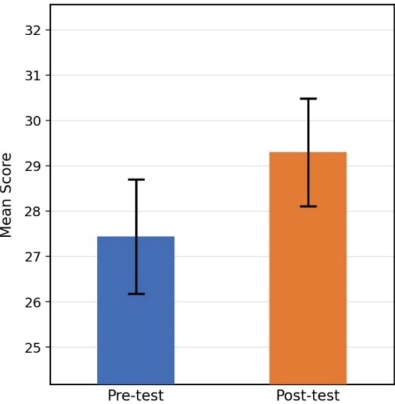
Analysis of the VIA Survey results provided insights into the strengths profile of young male PICs. Among the 64 participants, the most frequently identified character strengths were Kindness (44%), Hope (38%), Humour (35%), Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence (32%) and Curiosity (32%). From a psychological perspective, these findings are noteworthy:



Strengths Profile of Young Male PICs based on the VIA Survey.

strengths, namely Kindness and Hope, which embody prosocial orientations and a forward-looking disposition, are often absent from the self-narratives of justice-involved youth. **The “MindSport” Programme appears to help uncover inherent positive traits that may be obscured by offending behaviour and internalised negative self-concepts.**

Figure 1
Mean Pre-test and Post-test Scores on the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES-CS)



Besides, preliminary analysis of pre- and post-programme psychological measures indicated very positive outcomes. Paired-sample t-tests revealed statistically significant improvements on measures of self-efficacy and hope after programme completion. **The enhanced confidence in one’s capability and hope for the future** are critical psychological resources in the desistance process, empowering the justice-involved youth to believe in their capacity for change, sustain motivation through setbacks and envision a prosocial future.

Figure 2
Mean Pre-test and Post-test Scores on the Adult Hope Scale (AHS)

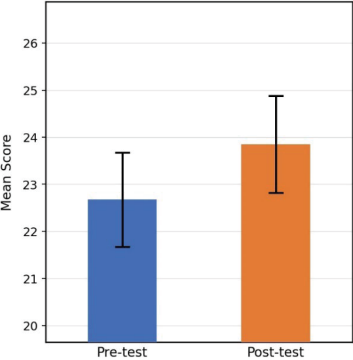
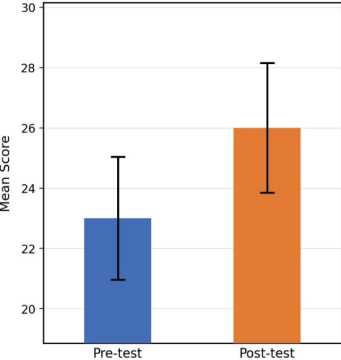


Figure 3
Mean Pre-test and Post-test Scores on the Children’s Hope Scale (CHS)



Measures	N/n	T1 M (SD)	T2 M (SD)	Mean diff	t	p	d
GSES-CS	64	27.44 (5.14)	29.30 (4.83)	1.86	2.71	.009	0.34
AHS	46	22.67 (3.47)	23.85 (3.57)	1.17	2.45	.018	0.36
CHS	18	23.00 (4.41)	26.00 (4.65)	3.00	2.23	.040	0.52

Table 1. Paired-sample t-tests on pre- and post-programme psychological measures
GSES-CS: General Self-efficacy Scale – Chinese Scale; AHS: Adult Hope Scale; CHS: Children’s Hope Scale



Insights

1. Strength-based Rehabilitation as the Integrative Key

- Strengths Intervention that focuses on “what’s strong” instead of “what’s wrong” empowers people to build positive personal identities, develop pro-social orientation and ultimately flourish.

2. Character Strengths as Foundations for Positive Identities

- The 24 character strengths are universal, morally valued and measurable traits that foster a resilient, pro-social self for the ultimate goal of sustainable personal growth and human flourishing.

3. Character Strengths Intervention enhances Self-efficacy and Hope

- The enhanced confidence in one’s capability and optimism for the future empower the justice-involved youth to believe in their capacity for change, sustain motivation through setbacks and envision a prosocial future in their desistance journey.

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Article 3

Insights from the Conference of International Association for the Treatment of Sexual Offenders – What Works in Sexual Crime Prevention



Mr. Ivan H. K. MA, Clinical Psychologist, CSD

Introduction

In August 2025, I attended the 2025 Conference of International Association for the Treatment of Sexual Offenders (IATSO) held in Poznan, Poland. IATSO is a leading global professional organisation dedicated to advancing research, clinical practice, policy and prevention in the domain of sexual offending. The Conference, gathering international researchers and clinicians, consisted of keynote, parallel and poster presentations covering a wide range of topics, including online sexual offending, incest, paedophilia, sex-offence specific assessment tools, neuropsychology, etc. This article summarises key highlights, learning points and personal reflections from the Conference.



Key Learnings

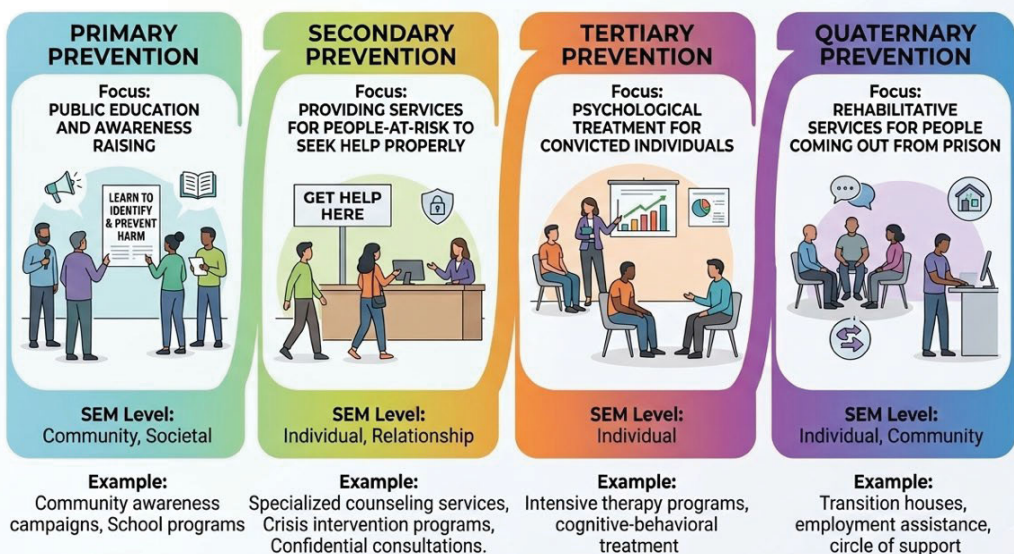
1. Global Issue of Online Sexual Offending

With the rise of emerging and ever-changing technologies including artificial intelligence (AI) and diverse digital platforms, online sexual offending becomes an alarming global issue. Technology not only facilitates the large-scale production and dissemination of and access to illegal sexual materials, but also creates new avenues for grooming, exploitation and cross-border sexual offending that are increasingly difficult to monitor and control.

For example, AI-driven tools may enable the creation of realistic synthetic images or videos (e.g. Deepfake), while anonymous digital platforms can mask offenders' identities and complicate law enforcement responses.

Researchers and practitioners from different countries are responding by conducting large-scale research and exploring innovative prevention strategies. In the Conference, there was a workshop held by The Protect and Prevent Through Support (2PS), which is a project funded by the European Union addressing child sexual abuse, particularly on the online environment. They highlighted the importance of intervening in different stages – not only after offending, but the upstream. Numerous programmes, such as *Stop It Now* in the United Kingdom (UK) and *Step To Support* in Germany, have been conducted as forms of secondary prevention to help people with paedophilia in the community, who are regarded as individuals at risk of sexual offending. The success of these pilot schemes demonstrates that providing confidential, accessible and non-judgmental avenues for individuals to seek help can reduce the risk of offending arising in the first place. In fostering safer communities, early engagement, public education and multi-agency collaboration are of paramount importance.

A STAGE-BASED INTERVENTION MODEL FOR SEX CRIME PREVENTION

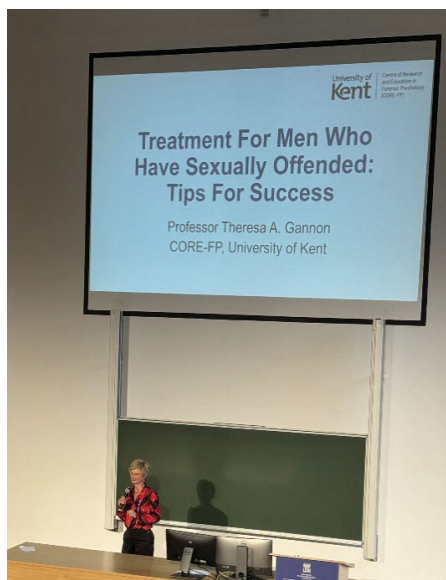


Intervention can take place in different stages for sex crime prevention

2. Updated Research on Assessment Tools

Another key takeaway from the Conference was the opportunity to gain updated research and findings on widely used risk assessment tools, including the STAT-IC-99R, STABLE-2007 and CPORT. Some of the tools are commonly applied in our daily clinical work in assessing re-offending risk and planning treatment for persons in custody (PICs) with sexual offending behaviours.

The Conference presentations provided valuable insights into how these tools are being refined and validated through ongoing international research. Updates on predictive accuracy, applicability across different populations and integration with dynamic clinical judgment were particularly useful. Such developments not only enhance our ability to conduct more reliable and culturally sensitive assessments, but also ensure that our practice in Hong Kong remains aligned with international standards. Keeping abreast of these advancements allows us to apply the best practices in offender assessment and treatment, while also contributing to evidence-based decision-making in rehabilitation and risk management.



3. Evidence-informed Practice

In one insightful keynote presentation “Treatment for men who have sexually offended: Tips for success”, Professor Theresa Gannon from the UK provided a comprehensive overview of effective group treatment approaches for male PICs with sexual offending behaviours. Drawing on meta-analytic evidence, Prof. Gannon highlighted that conducting group treatment can effectively reduce re-offending risk. She synthesised key factors that contribute to successful group interventions, such as applying the Risk–Need–Responsivity (RNR) model, incorporating the Good Lives

Model, and using cognitive-behavioural therapy as the treatment orientation.

She also pointed out that treatment effectiveness improves when the psychologists providing services give clinical supervision regularly. Gannon's findings were particularly inspiring for me, as they resonate with our ongoing efforts in the Evaluation and Treatment Unit: Psychological Programmes for Persons with Sex Offending Behaviours in Siu Lam Psychiatric Centre, which implements evidence-based treatment approaches for PICs with sexual offending behaviours. The alignment of her recommendations with our local practice reflects the potential for continuously successful outcomes and reinforces the value of continued investment in rehabilitation programmes in the Department.

4. Networking and Professional Exchanges

Beyond the formal presentations, one of the most valuable aspects of the Conference was the opportunity for networking and professional exchanges with correctional practitioners all over the world. A personal highlight was the opportunity to meet several renowned experts, such as Dr. Karl Hanson, Dr. Maaïke Helmus and Dr. Derek Perkins. They all have previously collaborated with the clinical psychologists in the Department, and it was encouraging to reconnect with them in person at the Conference. Maintaining professional contacts is important as it helps ensure Hong Kong is in alignment with international developments, and open the door for future collaborative projects in research, assessment and treatment.

In addition, I attended a meet-up organised by the Society for the Advancement of Actuarial Risk/Need Assessment (SAARNA). SAARNA is an international professional body dedicated to improving the quality and consistency of actuarial risk/need assessment tools and their application in forensic and correctional settings. The meet-up underscored the importance of networking in Promoting high standards of risk assessment methodologies, encouraging collaboration among practitioners and researchers, and supporting their ongoing development.

Conclusion

Attending IATSO 2025 provided invaluable opportunities for me to stay updated on cutting-edge research, evidence-based practices and international innovations in the assessment, treatment and prevention of sexual offending. The Conference highlighted the importance of early intervention, multi-disciplinary collaboration and evidence informed decision-making, as well as the need to address evolving challenges such as technology-facilitated offending. These insights offer guidance for enhancing rehabilitation programmes, refining risk assessment practices and exploring preventive initiatives inspired by international models.

Insights

1. Addressing Technology-facilitated Offending

- Equipping ourselves with up-to-date knowledge and strengthening assessment, treatment and prevention approaches to address the increasing trend of online sexual off ending in the digital era.

2. Multi-disciplinary Collaboration

- Effective prevention requires joint efforts between psychologists from different governmental department, correctional staff, lawyers and policy makers. Psychologists' evidence-based input can guide decision-making and enhance the effectiveness of interventions.

3. Research Collaboration with Overseas Experts

- Partnering with overseas researchers to support shared research and the exchange of clinical insights that can further strengthen local rehaiblitative services for PICS with sex offending behaviours.



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Email: email@csd.gov.hk

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Hong Kong Correctional Services

