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Crime, Urban Flight and Societal Wellbeing: A Case of Malaysia

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Abstract
Today, the exploding population, rising costs of living, and limited living spaces have led to various social problems for urban residents. World governments have been gradually moving towards promotion of urban wellbeing where urban centres must be ecosystems that promote societal health and wellbeing as well as conducive for improving its residents' quality of life (21). Malaysia is of no exception; despite the various initiatives by the Government, recent years have seen an increase in residential crime and this has adverse impacts on urban wellbeing. This paper discusses how crime affects urban wellbeing and how the problem may be contained. Semi-structured interviews conducted with residents in crime-prone areas in Malaysia have found that growing criminal activity might lead to urban flight or depopulation of residential estates. This runs counter to urban wellbeing as it increases the stress levels of families by destabilising them. The interview also revealed that these problems may be curbed by increasing the safety through various spatial management practices as well as knowledge sharing and participation by residents in community events. This study provides recommendations to federal and local authorities in spatial policies as well as for housing developers in designing future housing projects.

Keywords: crime; urban flight; urban wellbeing; society.

1 Introduction

Towards the end of the 20th century, there was a great shift in global economy; many of the world's nations, which were formerly self-contained and closed economies have begun to embrace globalisation and open their doors to foreign investments. This have facilitated the rapid transition of many of the world's nations from rural to urban economies. Asia for instance has grew by leaps and bounds with the emergence of countries like South Korea, India, China into the global economic landscape. Even Malaysia has progressed from being a developing nation to a *newly industrialised nation*. This process of transformation is referred to as *urbanisation*. It speaks of the transformation of a society's rural economy and lifestyle to one that is predominantly urban (21) resulting in a society which is clustered, with a size so large that it has never been regarded possible previously (5). Most if not all high-income countries in the world today owed their success to urbanisation. It has been reported that nearly all countries that achieved middle-income nation have at least a 50 percent urban population, and for high income nations, the urbanisation rate would have reached about 70 to 80 percent (33). In Malaysia, the urban population has risen dramatically from 20 percent in the 1950s to 72 percent in 2010. Is was estimated that rate would reach 82 percent in 2030 (38).

However, urbanisation also raises various problems. Because urbanisation involves rapid change in a nation's social structure, disparities are common (33). Urbanisation encourages migration of rural folk into cities, and they are usually disadvantaged at salaries, employment opportunities,

and access to urban housing in comparison to their urban counterparts. These rural migrants often end up working in dangerous, filthy, and low-paying jobs; turning them into resentful urban poor (34). Until now, sociologists have never failed to link urban poverty with crime. Criminal activities are usually prevalent in areas where there are high concentrations of low-income (3,16, 26, 27, 32).Making matters worse, crime no matter how petty, often have a multiplier effect on larger crime and the ability of law enforcement agencies to monitor the area. Criminal activities can be seen as a form of contagious disease because it projects a perception of an unstable neighbourhood where committing crimes do not bring any social penalties, and where the probability of getting arrested is low. Hence the self-reinforcing nature of crime has led it to continually thrive in these neighbourhoods (16, 25, 26, 27).

In Malaysia, crime has continued to be prevalent and threatening residential order and safety. The Malaysia Performance Management and Delivery Unit, PEMANDU (2014) under the Prime Minister's Department reported that crime rates have systematically reduced since the commencement of a *Government Transformation Programme* initiated early of the decade. Crime index have reportedly fell by 15, 11 and 7.6 percent respectively in 2010, 2011, and 2012 (p.108). Nonetheless, these figures may be understated; the Malaysian Crime Prevention and Suppression Department (*Jabatan Pencegahan dan Pembanterasan Jenayah*) considers the possibility of 'dark figures' where many cases remained unreported and claimed that the actual crime rate to be significantly higher. It appears that Malaysians tend not to report these cases because of poor confidence in obtaining their due justice from the nation's legal system. A survey has shown that Malaysians tend to regard most residential crimes to be petty cases of personal concern. They also fear the possibility

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of reprisal from the perpetrators should they report the incidences to the authorities. Findings suggests that about 25 percent of criminal cases remained unreported (13).

Moreover, in the same year an international survey also supported the fact that crime is still rampant in Malaysia. Expatriates involved in the survey were congruent in nailing the ineffectiveness of the police and local law enforcement agencies in combating crime; a majority (69 percent) have fallen victim to crime at least once in the past two years and 92 percent of them who have been to Singapore felt that it was safer to live there. The survey revealed that snatch theft was the main form of crime in housing estates (76.4 percent) followed by break-ins (42.4 percent), physical assault (27.8 percent) and carjacking and theft (21.5 percent) faced (6). Between 2015 to 2016, the national crime rate was reported to have been reduced by 0.8 percent (1). However, further scrutiny revealed that the decrease was mainly contributed by lower incidences of organised crime *e.g.* murder; in terms neighbourhood-related and petty crimes, the incidences remained high (1). During the first quarter of 2016, crime rates in Malaysia has spiked by 4.6 percent, and 58 percent of it was attributed to property crimes, with increases in snatch thefts and burglaries as criminals learnt the art of lock-picking and outsmarting the security systems (29).

In more recent years, the public has begun to doubt the accuracy of these projected crime statistics. Despite various assurances that the crime rates in Malaysia is within control, residents were feeling increasingly unsafe and threatened (10). For instance, in 2018, referring to unofficial sources, Malaysia has been found wanting for exceptionally high crime rates. Numbeo (2018) an independent online database, reported that Malaysia ranks first among 23 Southeast Asian countries with the highest Crime Index of 66.95, and ranks second among a list of 90 Asian countries. These statistics which are accessible worldwide, projects an ill image of safety in Malaysia. However, because Numbeo's data sources also include individual perceptions, the reliability is may be questionable. Nonetheless, it gives an insight into crime conditions in Malaysia and it can be assuredly said that crime is a serious concern in Malaysia.

1.1 Impact of Crime on Residents' Housing Tenure and Urban Wellbeing

Generally there are three kinds of neighbourhood in Malaysia. The first is *open* neighbourhoods, or residential enclaves that are freely accessible to the general public trough the major streets. Then there are *guarded neighbourhoods* where these residential enclaves that were formerly open, are now barricaded, with certain streets closed or controlled boom gates, and security is hired to control access. Finally there are *gated communities*, or residential enclaves where the neighbourhood is barricaded by physical barriers such as a fence or a wall (37). As gated neighbourhoods often employ security to patrol and control access, the terms *guarded* and *gated* may sometimes be used interchangeably.

Traditionally, most residential enclaves were open neighbourhoods. A major distinction between an open neighbourhoods from a gated community is that the former has a diverse mix of residents from different socio-demographical background; people with different levels of income and class were living together. The traditional model of housing has allowed residents to freely socialise with people of other neighbourhoods and develop close friendships (23). Nonetheless in time, the housing landscape has become more fragmented, urbanisation has socially divided urban residentswhere more affluent dwellers preferring to distance themselves from the lower-income residents as the lower-

income group is increasingly being stigmatised for rising social problems and crime. As many were formerly from disadvantaged families, their newly-attained social upgrade has motivated them to provide a better, safer environment for their children to grow up in (14, 24).

Thus the attractiveness of traditional open neighbourhoods have been declining in favour of more protected alternatives *i.e.* guarded or gated communities. Urban planners and housing developers are generally aware of the seriousness of addressing the issue of safety in both social and private housing, nonetheless many new projects were built for the sake of building; the design and spatial planning of social housing in particular are usually minimalist without much considerations of safety and sense of place. In many parts of the world, social housing projects often morphed into modern 'ghettoes' devoid of public order and rampant in crime and gang activities (9, 18, 39). It has been documented that crime increases the chances of more street crime, alters residents' behaviour to being antisocial, increases the chances of mental illness, and then residential turnover. This finally result in ultimate depopulation of the area and closure of local institutions and business establishments (2). Residents will then opt for gated communities with protected surroundings (8, 12, 24).

The situation in Malaysia is by no means different. The dwellers of affordable housing estates often hail from the lower-income group and by such, their tight finances have often compelled them to attempt maximising income derived from these homes, even if it meant renting to immigrants and foreign workers. News reports are abound on how affordable homes have been leased to foreign workers, and they have been blamed for creating social problems and turned these areas undesirable. For instance, there were complaints how these immigrants made a nuisance by roaming the neighbourhood in their undergarments, drinking alcohol, quarrelling and fighting among themselves (15). Criminal incidents such as robbery, car break-ins, and burglary have also been rampant particularly in affordable housing areas and residents have been increasingly living in fear (17). Even in regular neighbourhoods, residents have constantly feared for their safety against burglary and snatch theft within the housing estate. This have resulted in urban flight; with many opting to move into gated communities with constant surveillance and security patrols (37, 40, 28).

Research have also shown that neighbourhood crime and presence of security were among the main determinants to one's decision to purchase a home (36). Housing ownership is an important contributor to economy and societal wellbeing. Owning a home promotes familial stability which in turn encourage families to raise children and increase their propensities to consume more household goods and services (4). In addition, they also make interest payments on bank mortgages, which makes them a source of commercial banks' income. These payments will be then used as a primary source of lending funds for business operators to expand their operations (7). The importance of homeownership to the world economy was demonstrated through its role in the 2008-2009 Global Financial Crisis, where mortgage payment defaults threw many financial institutions into banking emergencies (22, 30, 11). In terms of societal contributions, homeownership increases the value of the neighbourhood, and increases the wellbeing of owners through financial gains from house value appreciations. Furthermore, owning a home have been found to increase a person's perception of their neighbourhood, encourage them to stay in the neighbourhood longer, invest into maintenance of the area, and increase their socialisation with the local community. Through their close dealings with neighbours, they were able to supervise their children better

and this have resulted in improved children behaviour and better academic performance (35, 31).

Given that, it is important to identify Malaysian residents' perceptions of crime in their neighbourhood, how it affects their livelihood, and methods to contain it in order to improve the quality of lives of Malaysians.

2 Methodology

Between November and December 2017, semi-structured interviews were conducted with residents residing in crime-prone locations in the southern region of Peninsular Malaysia. The locations were identified based on crime data provided by local police headquarters, under the condition that these locations shall not be explicitly named in order to avoid drawing unwanted attention to these neighbourhoods and to protect the residents from provoking ire and reprisals from criminals. The residents who had experienced crime in their neighbourhood were identified using snowballing sampling, where a resident who had experienced victimisation identifies another victim in their neighbourhood. Assumption was made that victims usually share their experiences among their social circles. A total of 25 respondents have agreed and responded to our invitation, however only 24 were chosen for the interview because one respondent did have not have any experience of being victimised.

The majority of the interviewees are young adults aged between 21 to 40 years old (79.17 percent), followed by mid-life adults aged between 41 and 60 (12.5 percent), and seniors aged 61 and above (4.17 percent). Females constitute approximately two-thirds (62.5 percent) while males made up one-third of the interviewees (37.5 percent). They have generally moved into the neighbourhood for less than 10 years (75 percent), followed by those who have resided between 11 to 20 years (20.83 percent), and those who have been rooted for more than 20 years (4.17 percent). In terms of ethnicity, they were Malays (45.83 percent), Chinese (45.83 percent), and Indian (8.33 percent). The majority are staying in open neighbourhoods (66.67 percent) while the remainder are staying in guarded, gated communities (33.33 percent). The interviewees were asked to comment on the following issues:

(a) The nature of their criminal victimisation in the neighbourhood.

(b) Their perception on the severity of crime in Malaysia

(c) Their perceptions of the crime on the neighbourhood safety, attractiveness, and property prices

(d) Their threshold and tendency to leave the neighbourhood in the future should crime escalate

(e) The safety and security loopholes in their neighbourhood

(f) Their perceptions of appropriate steps that may be taken to enhance safety and security in the area.

3 Results and discussion

Table 1 summarises the opinions and issues raised by the interviewees. This summary shows that in brief, residents in crime-prone locations are generally worried about the escalating crime in Malaysia and how it devalues their properties. Many have even considered leaving the neighbourhood should crime worsens. Security problems cited are mostly on the neighbourhood environment and community support and to improve safety. Residents have ranked neighbourhood general security rather than for individual homes to be the most important. The findings are detailed in the following sub-sections.

3.1 Nature of Crime in the Neighbourhood

Burglary remained the most common crime in the neighbourhoods; 83.33 percent of interviewees have cited at least one incidence of burglary each. One interviewee remarked an astounding 25 cases of break-ins in her neighbourhood within a month's period alone. Most of the burglary cases involved theft of cash, jewellery, computers and electronic devices and occur during festive seasons when families were away on vacation or returned to their hometowns. Other common cases include smashing of vehicle windows and theft valuables placed within andcar accessories.

Table1: Summary of findings from the interview

Factor	Findings	Frequency	Percentage	Remark
The nature of residents' victimisation	Burglary / House Break-ins	20	83.33%	Most of the burglary happened at open neighbourhoods as opposed to guarded and gated communities
	Robbery	6	25.00%	
	Snatch theft	1	4.17%	
	Vehicular-jacking / break-ins	3	12.5%	
Perception on the severity of crime in Malaysia	Not serious	1	4.17%	Crime are perceived to be more serious in urban areas than rural areas
	Serious, under control	3	12.5%	
	Serious	20	83.33%	
Impact of crime on property values and area attractiveness	Will not affect property values	2	8.33%	Property values perceived to drop at higher crime areas
	Reduce property values	22	91.67%	
Urban flight or tendency to leave the neighbourhood	Will not leave	1	4.17%	Urban flight tendencies more common in mobile respondents
	May consider leaving	23	95.83%	
Safety and security loopholes in the neighbourhood	Poor housing environment	17	70.83%	The environment refers to the layout and ambience
	Lack community support	9	37.5%	
Residents' recommendations to improve safety and security	Home security features	7	29.17%	Residents believed that neighbourhood safety should be considered before individual home safety can take place
	Neighbourhood security features	11	45.83%	
	Improve residents' involvement	12	50.00%	
	Being vigilant and self-driven	8	33.33%	

In recent years, burglars have also becomeingenious and emboldened; example are (i) pretending to be moving into an abandoned house but then looted everything within, (ii) breaking in while the victim's neighbours are obviously around; guised by the pitter-patter of rain falling; (iii) climbing over a locked gate in daytime, (iv) pretending to be a representative of the owners sent to collect their belongings; and (v) entering the victim's car while she was nearby, engine with a baby in the passenger seat. The next common crime is robbery (25 percent); followed by snatch theft (4.17 percent); and vehicular -jacking and break-ins (12.5 percent). One of the most common methods used by robbers is to trick the owners into believing that they are government officials or working with utilities companies, but residents were generally well-informed about this method. From the interviews, it was evident that criminals were also uncompassionate (i) threatening the owner with weapons to gain entry and (ii) clobbering an elderly and snatching his belongings. While the majority of these cases were in open neighbourhoods, enclosed communities were not spared; gated and guarded communities made up the significant minority. Surprisingly, few of the gated and guarded neighbourhoods were even hotspots for crime.

3.2 Residents' Perception on the Severity of Crime in Malaysia

In general, 83.33 percent of residents interviewed perceive that crime is escalating in Malaysia; 12.5 percent believed that it is serious but under control and 4.17 percent believed that it is not serious. It appeared that residents that considered crime to be serious mostly reside in urban areas within 10 to 15 kilometres from the urban centres, whereas residents who believed that crime is under control and not serious reside mainly in the suburbs. The difference in opinions is mainly because in urban areas, the disparity of income is large.The interviewees have cited instances where rural folk taking their chances of employment in urban centres had difficulty making ends meet; thus the high the cost of living have forced those from the lower income group to commit crimes. Conversely, the costs of living in neighbourhoods located in the suburbs are lower, hence the lower crime rates. It also appeared that communities at suburbs are more closely-knitted hence the residents are more likely to engage in community safety initiatives andwilling to watch out for one another out against potential break-ins and robberies.

3.3 The Effects of Crime on Neighbourhood Safety, Attractiveness, and Property Prices

A high 91.67 percent of residents interviewed believed that criminal activities would drive property prices down while the remainder 8.33 percent believed that the situation would remain unchanged. For those who believed that property prices may fall, they were also concerned thatthat this may have a multiplier effect on further degradation of the neighbourhood. As property prices fall, the neighbourhood would become less attractive to investors and respectable homeowners but instead become attractive to criminals and social outcasts for their low rents. 83.33 percent were troubled by the possibility that criminal activities would intensify which in turn create more problems such as (i) the abandonment of homes which would reduce the living element of community life in the area, (ii) this would worsen as businesses like eateries and retail followed suit and moved from the neighbourhood, (iii) as houses and business premises get abandoned, they may harbour of drug addicts and social outcasts, (iv) the transformation of the neighbourhood into a 'black spot' as more illegal activities are carried out in the area, and (v) the influx of illegal immigrants and foreign workers as property values drop and rents reduced.

For those who believed that the property prices would remain unchanged, they were confident that as people moved out, other residents will move in and the thus the crime conditions would remain fairly unaffected.

3.4 Residents' Crime Threshold and Flight Tendencies

A majority of respondents (95.83 percent) will consider moving out should the crime levels escalate while only one resident (4.17 percent) will not consider moving. From the interviews, work and family commitments seemed to affect residents' flight tendencies. Residents who are younger and have resided for shorter periods were seemingly more willing to move should crime escalate. On the contrary, residents who are older and have resided for longer periods were generally more reluctant to move; they would give more considerations when the situation calls for it. This may be because younger residents are more mobile and are constantly seeking for better employment opportunities. Thus, they would not have much commitments to a place and reside for shorter periods. On the other hand, older residents who have resided for extended periods usually have commitments to the place such as fixed employment, and having their parents or dependencies nearby, or schooling arrangements for their children.

Nonetheless, each person has a threshold; despite the deep attachments and emotions linked with the place, if the criminal activities surpass their levels of acceptance, the need for self-preservation would be prioritised and they would move. For those reluctant to move, there were concerns that these older residents may become easy target for robbers and snatch thieves should the neighbourbood gets deserted. In addition, as businesses and other conveniences move out, they would need to travel far distances to procure their daily necessities and health services.

3.5 Safety and Security Loopholes in the Neighbourhood

70.83 percent cited poor housing environment as a major security loophole in their neighbourhoods while 37.5 percent considered the lack of community support as a major concern. In regard to the housing environment, the most commonly discussed issue was the ambient factors such as (i) or the sense of safety in the neighbourhood, (ii) street lighting, (iii) presence of unknown people or cars in the vicinity, and (iv) cleanliness, as cleanliness is a sign that the place is being maintained and cared for by the local council. In terms of layout, (iv) residents were also concerned over the presence of open roads and multiple entry and exit points to the neighbourhood which allowed robbers and snatch thieves to escape. For community support, (v) residents felt that the authorities have not put in enough effort to combat crime, and the community itself does not have much initiatives to safeguard the neighbourhood.

At present, it appears that safety and security is very much at the hands of the houseowners rather than the authorities; and that the focus of safety measures were more towards individual homes rather than the neighbourhood as a whole. One resident exemplified the ineffectiveness of individual home security: in case of burglary or break-ins, residents may install alarms; however many do not pay any attention to the sounds of house or vehicle alarms, believing them to have been triggered by accident, or they were just not concerned since it was not their property. In case of snatch thefts and vehicular-jacking, auto gates may be installed so that the owners need not alight their vehicles to manually open the gates and leave the car and belongings therein vulnerable; nonetheless a robber may sneak into a house compound using a motorbike when the gate is closing and the owner is not aware. Therefore without safety

measures implemented at the neighbourhood level, house security systems would be ineffective.

3.6 Residents' Perceptions on Dealing with Crime

In general, residents suggested that safety and security should be improved by improving residents' involvement in maintaining security through neighbourhood watch committees and community policing (50 percent); having security features at the neighbourhood level (45.83 percent), being self-aware and vigilant of one's own surroundings as well as willing to take initiatives when identifying suspicious activities in the neighbourhood (33.33 percent) and interestingly, home security features such as closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras and alarm systems were believed to be the least effective measures (29.17 percent). The residents of crime-prone housing estates generally believed that home security systems are effective, but only to a certain extent. Many have called for (i) more active resident involvement in community safety initiatives, (ii) greater involvement of authorities, such as greater police presence, especially in open neighbourhoods, (iii) developing awareness on crime-prevention measures (iv) as well as spatial management that facilitates security and better monitoring. One resident with a background in estate management remarked that new housing projects should be designed in such a way that there are minimal entry and exit points, which are "choke points" that can be monitored. The houses must also be visible from one another, meaning they should all face a common space like a field where every house is in perfect view of all other houses. Then, the roads exiting the housing area should pass eateries, markets, police stations where there is large concentration of people. These will all discourage criminals from attempting to enter the area.

4 Conclusion

In brief, criminal activities are destabilising crime-proneneighbourhoods in Malaysia, particularly those located within the urban centres in the southern region of Peninsular Malaysia. It seems that the residents are getting increasingly restless of crime and social problems coupled by the prospects of losing the value of their property investments and hinted the possibility of leaving the neighbourhood. If this happened on a large scale, large tracts of residential estates in Malaysia would be abandoned, and this would run counter with the Malaysian Government's hopes of attainingsocial sustainability as championed in the Tenth and Eleventh Malaysia Plan though good spatial management practices which include containing urban sprawl.

Thus, significant efforts must be devoted on combating crime. Residents have lamented the inaction by various housing stakeholders including the local planning authorities, developers, and other residents. The local planning authorities should increase the presence of police, improve street cleanliness and lighting to make the area presentable and conducive for community life, as a strong and living community is the best method to deter crime. In addition, property developers should attempt to incorporate security features when designing the housing projects, such as the street width, presence of long backlanes, and the number of entry-exit points in the neighbourhood. Such planning have been incorporated by several eco-property developers in Malaysia and have been claimed to save built up space and reduce overall costs. Finally, residents themselves should engage more with one another and participate in community safety-related initiatives. As crime may become an undoing of the urbanisation process, combating crime is of utmost importance to ensure that the urbanisation process is in line with sustainable development practices, one which propels the nation a step closer to social sustainability.

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