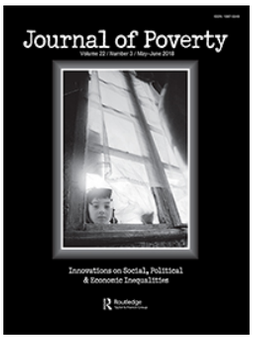

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'Policing the poor' and 'poor policing' in a global city

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ABSTRACT

Singapore's soft authoritarian style of governance provides for interesting analysis of its state-society, interethnic, and intra-ethnic relations, which adds to the literature on policing deviant behavior in liberal democracies. The notion of 'policing the poor' emerges, and this seems to be the premise adopted not only by the Singapore state but also by the poor themselves. This concept of 'policing the poor' exists in tension with the idea of 'poor policing' as the underprivileged too devise strategies to enact structures of social control in their everyday lives.

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Introduction

The sociology of policing has taken on a number of diverse trends. Its literature presents several key elements that address the broad notion of social control and the essential features of 'the police' of any city. The first element centers on policing systems worldwide that have always been diverse. Banton, William, and Brodeur (2006), for example, point out the fact that the nature of crimes often determines how policing resources are distributed. However, they also highlight that the historical exigencies of cities and states would decisively influence policing models – particularly with respect to colonialism and state formation. The second element focuses on the police. Scholars have extensively scrutinized how the work culture and structures, like the organizational formation of the policing industry and the penal law of the country, influence the dispositions of officers in the street (Chan, 2011; Herbert, 1998). Third, unlike the more traditional forms of social control in rural areas, the police, as an instrument of the state, is often borne out of urban living. Therefore, demographic trends become key. Related to the role of demography in shaping policing system is the enmeshing of the issues of social class and ethnicity that has evoked much theorizing among sociologists. This gives rise to the notion of policing the poor, which I will further discuss in this article. Yet another development has focused on the tensions and symbiosis between formal and informal agents of social control

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(Drakulich & Crutchfield, 2013; Kamaludeen, 2016a). Therefore, this element examines the roles of non-state apparatus and private actors, including commercial bodies and the criminal underworld, in providing social order.

This paper on the case study of Singapore touches on more than one of the elements above. In the section on 'Authoritarianism and Racialization in a Global City' below, I will demonstrate how the nature of policing in Singapore is borne out of its soft authoritarian model of governance. The policing industry in Singapore, I argue, is highly influenced by the characterization of 'Malays as a Social Problem.' I will discuss this in the third section of this paper. Singapore stands out from the other studies where the policing industry had similarly consumed the conflation of poverty, race, and criminality, due to its co-option of a disproportionate numbers of Malay officers in policing fellow members of their minority ethnic group. The narrative of the Malay Problem influences not just the disposition of officers on the street and the systematic criminalization along ethnic lines. In addition to the heightened securitization by the state apparatuses, in a high-surveillance society like Singapore, citizens, as part of public community policing campaigns, also participate as informal agents of social control, cementing the commonly accepted conception of 'the Problem of Poor Men,' which is the fourth section of this article. The last section on 'Poor Policing: Dependency on Police Services' discusses the unintended impact of Singapore's policing model.

Before I proceed, it is pertinent to ground this paper against the rich backdrop of studies on 'policing the poor.' This notion has its roots in the conflation of deviant behavior with the poor and particular ethnic groups, in academic works. Through the golden era of the sociology of deviance from the 1950s to the 1970s, scholars have focused their attention on examining criminality and subcultures that evolved from the lower working class. The works of sociologists such as Albert Cohen (*Delinquent boys: The culture of the gang,* 1955*), Richard Cloward and Llyod Ohlin (*Delinquency and opportunity, *1960*), Travis Hirschi (*Causes of delinquency,* 1969*), and Stanley Cohen (*Folk devils and moral panics, *1972*) remain as classics in the field. The overwhelming conclusion was that social pathologies are the result of the unequal distribution of economic resources. In many countries, this criminalization of the have-nots takes on an added ethnic dimension – blacks and Hispanics in America (Venkatesh, 2000), aborigines in Australia (Carrington, 2011), Arabs in France (Joly & Beckford, 2006), and South Asians in the United Kingdom (Goodey, 2001). The shooting of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, and the protests that ensued, which include the Black Lives Matter movement, were a case in point. Alice Goffman's book, *On the run* (2014), documents vividly the extensive policing that minority men from the underclass have to live with on an everyday level to devastating effects. The omniscient panoptic gaze of the law inevitably breeds a state of deregulation and a culture of fear in these neighborhoods.

Wacquant (2001) posits that this form of surveillance and policing evokes critical sociological questions about the function of the state in managing poverty and sustaining racial inequality. The widespread adoption of policing practices amongst most states, which intrinsically links poverty with criminality and race – a view that also resonates amongst the poor themselves – calls for a close study of the discourses surrounding those at the receiving end. Through the different trajectories, most studies on policing practices have converged in their overwhelming focus on the policing of the poor, the underprivileged, and the downtrodden, predominantly within the context of Western liberal democracies. In the case of Singapore, the act of 'policing the poor' is reaffirmed with the dominant narrative of the Malay Problem, which conflates deviant behavior with the economically depressed from a particular ethnic group. The following section details out the context of this practice, as well as the methods used in data collection.

Authoritarianism and racialization in a global city

The Singapore example provides an extension of these observations from the unique context of a soft authoritarian regime – the only regime the city-state has ever known since it emerged out of British colonial rule, a short-lived merger with its neighbor Malaysia before their separation in 1965, and a tumultuous start as a new nation fighting the communist insurgence in Southeast Asia. 'Soft authoritarianism' describes political systems with limited components of democracy where basic social and political rights are often compromised in favor of rapid modernization and state control of the economy and the media. Compared to liberal democracies where legitimacy lies upon the protection of civil liberties, legitimacy in soft authoritarian regimes often lies upon the deliverance of economic and social goods. The employment of a guided economic development model and the adoption of an education system constructed to discipline rather than create an informed citizenry result in a passive citizenry and a low-trust environment, placing the duty to provide security and the weeding out of 'citizens who are troublesome' primarily on the state (Kamaludeen & Turner, 2013). Within this context, extensive policing by the state may even be viewed favorably. Coupled with the climate of fear engendered by the state, this partially explains the reason why there are only two academic books ever published on policing in Singapore, *Friends in blue: The police and the public in Singapore* (1987) and *Policing marital violence in Singapore* (2008).

Like many states, Singapore's style of governance in general and policing approach in particular are greatly influenced by its geography and demography. The state often makes reference to its small size and unique geographical location, lacking natural resources, and in need of a strong bargaining position amidst the predominantly Muslim neighbors in the Malay

Archipelago. The island's compactness as a city-state allows for easy management and control, as well as heightened surveillance (Kamaludeen & Turner, 2014). Specifically, land scarcity gives much credence to the institution of public housing run by the Housing Development Board (HDB) that was set by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) in 1960 to provide subsidized public housing where most Singaporeans live.

Unlike most cities where an urban–rural divide is still possible, Singapore does not have a hinterland that allows for members of the lower social classes to retreat from the economic pressures and the nature of policing in urban living. This 'pressure cooker' situation, although it is a threat, also presents the state with a huge leverage for social control. The HDB building program has been fundamental to the government's social engineering of its demography. The policy of regulated public housing, successful town planning, efficient urban surveillance, and extensive policing contributed to a highly controlled civil society. More importantly, as more than three quarters of the Singapore population has been living in these apartments on 99-year leases from the government, the arrangement has allowed the state not only to exercise 'discrimination in the dispensing of state infrastructure against electorates voting for opposition parties' (Rodan & Jayasuriya, 2009, p. 29), but also to organize the racial composition of the electorate.

The micromanagement of ethnic relations and ethnic-based policies plays itself out in almost every aspect of the Singaporean life. It is therefore imperative to provide a background to the race relations in Singapore. Malays constitute about 14% of Singapore's resident population, the majority Chinese constitute 74%, and the other significant minority race, the Indians, comprise 9% of the population. Singapore is a highly racialized society. Multiracialism, rather than multiculturalism, is a long-standing state ideology. Its different races are artificially classified into a crude CMIO (Chinese, Malay, India, Others) model, with social policies surrounding issues of housing, education, conscription, and political representation revolving around this rigid typology. In Singapore, the state sponsors community self-help groups based on the major racial groups: Mendaki for the Malays, Sinda for the Indians, and the Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC) for the majority Chinese. There had been recurring calls for the government to provide socioeconomic assistance on a needs-based approach in order to be able to identify and address systemic issues causing economic dislocation in the first place. The disproportionate number of poor ethnic minorities in Singapore therefore provides further credence to the truism that social pathologies are the consequence of an unequal distribution of resources. However, the state maintained that social problems are the most effectively resolved within the respective communities who understand their needs best. This reinforces a cultural deficit thesis against minority ethnic groups that are lagging in the various economic and social indicators (Lily Zubaidah,

1998; Kamaludeen, 2007). On the other hand, the dominance of the Chinese majority in both the legitimate and illegitimate spheres, as I will later elaborate, reveals how, in addition to economic and political capital, the transference of culture is also vital in not only maintaining, but also reproducing social stratification.

In Singapore, where the legitimacy of the government rests on economic performance, and while the rest of Singapore had been enjoying high growth and development, there has been a decades-long anxiety stemming from the fact that the Malays are set apart as an ethnic group by their economic backwardness as well as social pathology, especially with regard to juvenile delinquency and broken families (Li, 1989; Lily Zubaidah, 1998). In 1980, the average monthly household income for Malays was S$770, whereas it was S $800 for Indians and S$920 for the Chinese. In 2010, the divisions had widened considerably, with the average household income for Malays at S $4,575, whereas it was S$7,664 for Indians and S$7,326 for the Chinese. Another indicator of economic status is occupational stratification. In this regard, there are fewer Malays holding professional or managerial positions in comparison with other ethnic groups. This outcome is probably the result of the fact that the Malay workforce generally holds lower educational qualifications than the Chinese or Indians. In 2011, only 62.3% of Malay students received a minimum of five 'O' level passes, compared with 73.8% for Indians and 85.6% for Chinese. In 2010, 22.36% of Malay students qualified for tertiary education (university or polytechnic), compared with 55.31% of Indians and 47.65% of Chinese. On the issue of juvenile delinquency, the state has been most concerned about drug and substance abuse within the Malay community. Although Malays make up a mere 13% of the population, in 2010, it was reported that almost half (48%) of those arrested for abusing drugs were Malays. Malays also made up the largest proportion of single-parent births, at 45.9% in the same year.

Although one cannot dismiss the staggering statistics relating to the Malays' lack of socioeconomic progress, it is important to view critically the popular pejorative cultural stereotypes promulgated not only by state elites but also by some academicians. Tania Li's anthropological work, simply called *Malays in Singapore*, dismissed some of these perspectives. She contended that Malays were not culturally or biologically inferior compared with their Chinese and Indian counterparts, but were besieged by class-based problems common in any community making the transition from traditional to modern society. Lily Zubaidah's (1998, p. 23) study suggested that the government's policy of multiracialism – that each racial group is left to its own devises despite the structural inequalities – was the most crucial factor that accounted for the Malays' general backwardness, or what is commonly referred to as the 'Malay Problem.'

It is against this backdrop of the Malay Problem that one can better situate the primacy of the Chinese cultural capital in Singapore and its effect on policing. This is in part possible because of the tensions and symbiosis between the police as a formal agent of the state and the Chinese gangs in the criminal underworld. Ganapathy and Lian (2002) observe how the latter are given the role of gatekeepers in problem areas of policing such as prostitution and illegal moneylending, among others. The Chinese cultural capital therefore extends to the illegitimate sphere as 'Chinese-ness… is still one of the chief variables determining upward social mobility in the established secret societies.' What used to be a 'zero-tolerance' policy toward secret societies, which were predominantly Chinese in the postcolonial period, is reversed, benefitting young Chinese gang members. These gangs could carve out areas under their 'protection' – albeit under the watchful eyes of the Secret Societies Branch (SSB) of the Singapore Police Force (SPF). Minority gang members who join Chinese gangs have to be content with being the runners to Chinese gang leaders who are registered with the SSB. This means a greater propensity to commit public acts of deviance such as rioting and hence a higher chance of being caught red-handed (Kamaludeen, 2016b, 2016c). All these contribute to the deviantizing of other ethnic minority gangs, particularly the underclass Malays.

This unique contributor toward racial profiling within the police subculture in Singapore is coupled with the peculiar situation where the Malays are significantly overrepresented in the police force despite being a numerical minority in the country. The organizational framework of the policing industry greatly mirrors the state-sponsored model of community self-help groups. The disproportionate number of Malay officers in the police force can be traced to the government's conscription policy from the age of about 18. No statistics are readily available, but it is common knowledge that there is an overrepresentation of the Malay population drafted into the SPF and the Singapore Civil Defense (Tan, 2004, pp. 81–82). These men, quite a significant number of them with relatively good educational qualifications, are not promoted to the higher ranks because senior officers tend to be parachuted from the army. Hence, during the years of conscription, although an uneven number of Malay men make up the manpower of the SPF, the top positions within the police force are overwhelmingly Chinese. This racial imbalance is maintained after conscription and replicated among the full-time career police officers. If one views this against the discourse of the Malay Problem, one can understand this as yet another strategic move on the part of the state to ensure social order. Similarly, if Mendaki is instituted to deal with the Malay Problem on the issues of education and socioeconomic development, this notion of 'letting a Malay deal with a Malay' permeates into the area of policing. The situation results in low-ranking police officers of the minority race policing the deviant poor, who are also

disproportionately from the minority race. As such, despite the hyper-racialized manner of policing, Singapore has managed to thwart what is common in many other countries such as the United States, where many works have pointed to the misuse of power by the white police officers against ethnic minorities (Brunson, 2007; Zauberman & Levy, 2003).

This hyper-racialization influences policing subculture even at the level of community policing. All police forces globally employ a form of community policing as an explicit strategy in combatting crime (Brogden & Nijhar, 2005; Crowther, 2000). Likewise, in 2013, the SPF rolled out a community policing system (COPS) that would reside in the local Neighbourhood Police Centres (NPC). Under COPS, police officers in polo t-shirts would be patrolling on bicycles around neighborhoods in order to raise their level of engagement with the public. The community forms an integral part of their policing efforts. Community policing in Singapore is inadvertently colored by the racial stereotypes that is played out spatially and socially – even among the poor, as this study will show.

Singapore thus becomes an ideal laboratory to examine issues of social control, economic marginality, and racial inequality within the context of a global city. Many concur that the latest phase of capitalism, with its emphasis on knowledge industries as well as global finance and networks, has ushered in an era where cities are gaining prominence over countries (Sassen, 1991). This development has brought about what has been described as a divided or dual global city, where there exists a group of peripheralized urban poor. Some of the findings in this article concur with those from other global cities, such as the constant surveillance of the poor and the tendency to overlook social class and overstate the amalgamation between ethnicity and criminality. However, Singapore's compactness, style of governance, and sharp rise to the status of developed country since gaining independence provide a useful lens to chart the shifting landscape of poverty in a rapidly evolving cosmopolitan city where the poor is no longer ghettoized spatially but live in an integrated and highly dense environment among their middle-class brethren.

However, one has to note that to even speak of poverty in Singapore can be somewhat of an anomaly. In 2012, Singapore was named the wealthiest nation in the world by financial heavyweight Knight Frank and Citi Private Wealth, with its gross domestic product per capita of US$56,532. The report foresees Singapore maintaining its position for most of the next 30 years. The other side to the Singapore success story is the less-discussed increasing income inequality. There is no minimum wage in Singapore and no established poverty line. Whereas the number of those earning $10,000 a month or more has risen fourfold from 2000 to 2010, as of 2011, 4.2% of employed Singaporeans earned less than $500 a month. In a country where public housing is deemed as one of the rites of passage to citizenship, with about 90% living in state-managed housing estates, 45,000 households are living in

subsidized one- or two-room flats, up from the previous years (Straits Times, September 14, 2011). Therefore, in the absence of the poverty line, the nature of house ownership becomes an important determinant of one's economic position. The paragraphs that follow explore the impact of Singapore's policing model.

This study presents interview data from three low-income neighborhoods that are characterized by households living in subsidized flats, in order to excavate their personal experiences and deconstruct their responses. It documents in-depth interviews with 25 residents from the three neighborhoods over the course of a year. These neighborhoods are unique as they disproportionately comprise Malay residents. The dwellers were sampled purposively to reflect a diversity of ethnicity, age, and gender. The fieldwork was conducted from 2013 to 2014 and carried out in places of the respondents' convenience, often in their respective dwellings or in void decks in the vicinity of their homes. I also engaged in participant observation where I hung out with the members of the community in their respective homes, void decks, corridors, and coffee shops. It is not difficult to surmise that these narratives that revolve around the issues of space, ethnicity, and gender reflect the nature of policing on the island-state. These spatial, ethnic, and gender dimensions are seen in the internalization of the Malays as a social problem and frequent lamentations of the problem with 'poor men.' 'Poor' dependency on the police manifests from this mix of practices that have emerged amongst residents.

Malays as a social problem

As with the dominant national narrative, the most salient narrative amongst residents of low-income neighborhoods reveals the conflation of criminality and deviant behavior with being Malay. Like other soft authoritarian states that focus on procedural democracy, with tight laws governing the media and society, the Singapore newspapers are a contentious platform whose state-centric coverage of events has been widely debated (George, 2002; Lee & Willnat, 2009; Kamaludeen, 2016a). The frequent reports in mainstream media on the Malays' inability to integrate with the rest of the society clearly show that the state not only condones but also sponsors such a narrative. Decades of racialized social policies have crystalized certain preconceived notions about various races even among the most educated strata of society. For example, a survey conducted of trainee teachers in 2004 revealed that they predominantly view Malays as 'happy-go-lucky' and lazy (Khoo & Lim, 2004). It is not surprising that the narrative of the Malay Problem has trickled down to the masses. When asked about some of the issues the residents of these low-income neighborhoods confront, a significant number candidly summed up their concern, 'It is *just* that there are too many Malays living here.'

> There are a lot of Malays here. Hence, when my son comes home late, I will tell my son not to walk here but to walk from the front… This place, when I first shifted here, often have people, especially Malays, breaking into fights. It was only in the recent two years that the security of this placed improved as we told the police about the situation and asked them to come regularly to check because there are a lot of… They said they are aware that this is a blacklisted area… those caught are mostly Malays… Especially at our void deck, we could tell that they are on drugs when they walk. Sometimes they are drunk, on drugs, on pills or syrup, you can tell.
>
> Charlie, 47-year-old Chinese male, unemployed

As the respondent described above, the continued large presence of the Malays in the neighborhood perpetuated his safety concerns, with the only redeeming factor lying in increased police surveillance in the area. The respondent's concern was even validated by the police who, he claimed, concurred that many of those who were arrested came from the Malay community and that the area was indeed on the 'blacklist.' The lines of alliance are thus drawn between the ethnic majority Chinese and the police officers who are disproportionately Malays.

Stratification also surfaces within the Malay community, with some Malay respondents internalizing this view and end up shunning their racial group. In turn, this has invited snide remarks from other Malay residents such as, 'That's what happened when you are friends with the Chinese, you don't want to make friends with the Malay.' The deviantizing of the Malays may start very early, with parents adopting a precautionary approach in their children's socialization.

> So when at school, I told my boy, mix with the Chinese. Do not mix with the Malays… the Malay kids have words that they use, like 'S' or 'PK'… those kinds of bad words. The Chinese kids do not use such words unless when they are older, like 'CB' and 'KNN'… So the smaller Chinese children do not use such words. So, one time, when my boy came back from school, he said, 'Mummy, my friend was saying S, S what S? And then he spelt out S,I,…' and I said, 'Oh my God'. And then from there, I told him do not mix with the Malay boys. And he said OK… Oh in the neighborhood, I don't greet them. Never. We just close our door. Only recently, my neighbors, the elderly Malay ladies here started to greet me. Only, 'Hi' but not more than that.
>
> Fatimah, 36-year-old Malay female, unemployed

From the sentiments expressed thus far, it is clear how segregation has formed between and within ethnic groups. However, segregation also manifests itself in spatial forms, with deviant behavior generally associated with those coming from the lower floors.

> I do not intend to be harsh, but I feel the people here are different… The way that they socialize … maybe it is their education, I do not know for sure. Yes, we do cross each other's paths but we would not acknowledge each other. Sometimes, those weird types of people will scare me. (Laughs) But thus far, the people staying

> on my floor have been generally okay. Noise would usually be from the floor below. The houses starting from the seventh floor downwards are all problematic. There are no problems for the houses at this floor, the one above, the ninth and tenth floor. I noticed the houses from below are the problematic ones as they are mostly inhabited by Malays. They are really problematic. Noise, fights and … drugs. Sometimes, I do fear for myself.
>
> Ratna, 43-year-old Malay female, unemployed

Even as the respondent above had initially refrained from making generalizations about the Malays, being Malay herself, her comment about residential units from the lower floors being primarily responsible for the problems in the neighborhood eventually led her to mention the Malays as the problematic ones. Contrary to popular belief, the reason for Malays residing on the lower floors of HDB flats cannot be merely reduced to cultural factors but is intrinsically linked to certain state policies. The lesser value of HDB apartments on lower floors, as well as the ethnic quota policy of the state, replenishes the disproportionately high percentage of Malays living on lower floors. This adds to the spatial element in the construction of deviance in low-income neighborhoods.

In addition to the sense of detachment individuals faced amidst the ubiquity of crime and surveillance, social stratification also results from the practice of policing in Singapore. The narrative of the 'Malay Problem' is sustained – not only by the political elites and the privileged class but also amongst the poor. One also has to acknowledge the spatial element in the construction of deviance due to the state's urban planning policies – although it is beyond the scope of this article to fully explicate the architecture of poverty in Singapore.

The problem with poor men

The blanket application of the concept of 'policing the poor' obscures the strong gender aspect on the ground. Although statistics on racial incarceration is kept a secret by the state, many works, both scholarly and biographical, have mentioned the overrepresentation of Malay men in the Singapore prison system (Ganapathy and Lian, 2016; Lloyd, 2010). As with the global trend, the reality of the high rates of incarcerated poor serves as the most compelling reason to link poverty with criminality, and there is inevitably a strong gender component to this narrative.

Many interviews with the residents included either personal stories or anecdotes shared by others, of the struggles women often have to undergo while their fathers, husbands, sons, and boyfriends were behind bars. In quite a number of instances, the pain of having significant male others serving a jail sentence repeats within single families. As such, even within family units,

divisions appear along the lines of gender. The narrative of the absent male figure is a prevalent one.

> Even if I wanted to bail him, I feel this is a 50-50 situation. Because I went through once, so, I feel… Wary. I think if I bailed him, he would get worse. So I better not. Why do all men behave like this? It is difficult. All are drug addicts. Aiyoh! OK – lah. People know you are a drug addict, people give you a second chance. Then you will do again and again and again and again. Are you not tired? Are you not bored? Maybe it's just habit. Sorry to say this but, there are some old people who stay there out of habit. Like to them, it is like heaven there.
>
> Farah, 26-year-old Malay female, part-time kitchen helper

Farah's lamentation of 'why do all men behave like this' captures the sentiment of many of the women interviewed. Unlike other individuals who could choose to completely shun these men, familial or marital ties ensured a level of tolerance for such deviance at some point. However, for these women, the problem with the 'poor men' was not so much that they had been involved in taking drugs, but that they continued to do so out of 'habit,' even into old age, leaving the women behind to fend for themselves.

Extensive policing does offer a negative unintended consequence for the men. Sociologists have described that within these spaces where stories of drug abuse and incarceration are pervasive, not only are hustlers and addicts, mostly men, not likely to want the police around as they carry illegal goods, but they also do not appreciate the presence of the formal agents of social control owing to the deviant identity formation that evolves out of these dialectical relationships. Hustling is the most common way that men in ghettos or impoverished communities gain social status, manifested in an exhibition of hypermasculinity. A significant aspect of hustling is the capacity to exert an influence over others, and the ability to stand up to hustlers confers upon the addicts a social status, a sign that they should be respected (Copes, Hochstetler, & Williams, 2008, p. 268). Therefore, it may seem that the strategy of 'policing the poor' is effective in rooting out the deviants in the community. However, the flip-side to the profiling of deviance in Singapore, which is set against the racialized nature of policing by the SPF, often reduces the problem to that of the 'poor Malay men.' Whereas Singapore's formal policing thwarts opportunities for hustling amongst the 'poor Malay men,' the latter's loss of agency is also compounded by informal agents of social control. The campaign by the state to encourage community policing not only undermines the ability of the poor men to gain social status and prestige in their immediate communities, a transfer of the paternalistic role also takes place from the 'poor men' to the state due to the former's frequent absence in family units.

It is a universal reality among the poor in urban cities that the rate of incarceration is higher among men than women. However, unlike other

settings where divorces and single-parenthood are normalized, divorced women or married women with absent spouses in Singapore face an added challenge. In a soft-authoritarian regime where social goods such as housing are often disbursed based on the notion of an ideal family, the state plays a part in crystalizing these groups of families within these neighborhoods, hence subjecting them to heightened policing. At the same time, the vulnerable position of families without reliable male figureheads and breadwinners justifies the paternalistic role of the state and the policing that result.

'Poor Policing:' dependency on police services

Although being subjected to heightened policing due to poverty may seem like a tremendous disadvantage, one cannot ignore the agency of the underprivileged to devise strategies with regard to the structures of social control in their everyday lives. Marginalized from an affluent mainstream society, displaced spatially from close relatives, and at times socially isolated from other residents, the police become the only recourse for the vulnerable. In fact, many of the police visits to low-income estates are the results of law enforcement officers responding to calls from the residence themselves. The dependency of the poor on police services does not stem only from the need to ensure public safety due to the prevalence of crime in their neighborhood. This is compounded by the opportunistic manner that criminals prey on the weak and the fact that many of these poor residents do not have the resources or the necessary information to solve personal and familial crises.

Being poor and lowly educated make these dwellers easy targets for crime. Con-men go door to door approaching prospective victims within the safe confines of the latters' homes hoping to make quick gains even in broad daylight.

> Scared…. later that thing happen to me… People, the person that trick people… Ah, already happened recently… it's been two to three months… I thought like real, the things he says. He can still say, see my IC (Identification Card) outside. It's a Malay guy also. He said, later aunty, two to three days later somebody will come and send hamper, you will get new things, can change everything. That's lies right: later if I give the old key he will cheat me …food things, cost $350. He say he will kick the door if I do not let him in, so let him in. He persuades me, so he thinks we will give in. Then, he asked where the money is… See, he tricked me. Then my siblings, all don't have, how to help. We like stupid, like was hypnotized, go open the gate… Ah, like whatever he says, we listen… If like that, why would people ask for donation, want to take money. I could have asked why… So we call, call the younger sibling, bring her husband. But nothing at all. We wait until 11pm, got cheated ah, nothing ah…So call the police, make police report. Somebody say call already, police come already and ask what he take? After that he said, make a report also. In case anything happen again, just report to the police. Report 999.
>
> Salmah, Malay, female, unemployed

The state of helplessness described by the elderly female above is not uncommon as many residents live in relative isolation, may it be self-imposed or involuntarily. The latter may be attributed to having relatives who are not accessible because they were living far away or were working at the time of the incident. At the same time, their isolation had also been out of choice as they attempt to carve out safe retreats within their own homes and family units surrounded by a chaotic, even dangerous, neighborhood. Although the residents may placate themselves that '(i)n case anything happens again, just report to the police,' they are aware that the police will not have the resources to investigate each and every case, much less to ensure that they will be able to redeem their loss. Although many calls are made to the police out of desperation, this dependency of the poor on police services may also be, more often than not, overplayed. These indicate, what I will call, 'poor policing' that results from a poor dependence on the police.

'Poor policing' is seen in the high police involvement in these neighborhoods that stems from the frequent use of the police as a threat in dealing with one another. Marital arguments and neighborhood spats frequently trigger calls for police intervention.

> … my wife is a little mental. Her mentality seems to be towards depression. She had created a lot of issues in this family. She wanted to jump off the building, she brought guys home, she played a fool outside, called the police and wanted to catch me and the reason is because my daughter was one-year-old at that time. She called the police to say that I raped my daughter. She made a mess out of me. So it is not that I do not want to salvage this relationship, but when I wanted to salvage, she tried to destroy it. She created so much trouble for me until MCYS, Family Services Center, Family court and the police all came to look for me. They interviewed me. Every department interviewed me for two to three hours. It was a headache for me. So I chose to divorce.
>
> Ah Tan, 41-year-old Chinese male, unemployed
>
> Yeah, and I did not tell any one of my friends or family and then at last I decided to get my daughter to my parents' place to let them look after because she's still a baby that time and I do not want because of me, she'll get beaten also. Then goes on like that, every day until I can't take it. The police will come to my house, you know, because he beat me so loud and I'll definitely shout for help right? I tried to run out from the house so that my neighbor will call the police. Then he was being interviewed by the police, then my parents got to found out and my sister in States came down and told me this is not a kind of man. He's not a father and he's not a husband. And I knew, it's like, how can he beat you up? I mean, just one minute late you get smashed up? What does he want? You're going to work. He went to work. What else? You do everything in the house. So you think you want to get divorced or you want to stay with him for life? So it takes time for me to think, you see, but at the end I decide I got the protection [order]. Yeah but then he still did the same. And so I decide I have to let him go. So we divorced. And he regretted. I'm sorry but I said, 'No, it's over.'
>
> Rita, 45-year-old Malay female, teaching assistant

> We bought chair and table for my kid and hit the wall, and they hit back. So we quarreled and called the police. I called the police. I also quarreled with the Indian. Because of Karung Guni. Karung Guni does recycling…
>
> Sam, 44-year-old Chinese male, cleaner

In Ah Tan's case, his former wife's criminal allegations against him seemed to be the key strategy in ensuring child custody. Although one needs to reserve judgment before getting both sides of the story, there is however no way to deny how the narrative of the problematic 'poor men,' especially with his unemployed status, had played into her hands in getting the web of social protection services and enforcement agents against him. For Rita, although domestic violence is an offence under the law, her initial outreach to the police was not to press charges against her former husband. Instead, she was attempting to use the threat of the police to deter his behavior while trying to protect her marriage. It took the full involvement of Rita's family before she applied for a Personal Protection Order from him, and even some time later before seeking for a divorce.

Whilst the police involvement in the first two cases seems justifiable given the presence or allegations of criminal elements, there are significant instances where the police was called over petty matters. The perfunctory way in which residents call the police on each other reflects their sense of moral superiority over their 'deviant neighbors.' In Sam's case, the use of racial references to describe his antagonists, without giving much detail of the issue causing the conflict, illuminates the highly racialized nature of the relationships in these neighborhoods. The police would have to be neighborhood arbitrators rather than law enforcers. Their role would simply be to provide 'stopgap' measures such as pacifying angry parties and advising one party to leave the premises, in order to prevent the escalation of events into something more undesirable. Given the domestic nature of a lot of these complaints that requires extensive probing into the lives of the residents, the police are also more likely to advise them to approach more relevant institutions like the Family Court, for a more comprehensive resolution.

More importantly, due to the often noncriminal nature of many of these complaints, the police often have to navigate the various and even competing narratives in arbitrating these conflicts. The state's official ideology of family as the building block of society affects, directly or indirectly, the support battered wives can get from the agents of formal social control. Studies have shown that police officers are hesitant to intervene for fear of wrecking a family. However, when called upon and faced with a conflict where crisis is imminent, deference is likely to be given to women rather than men, as shown above. In addition, the police also act according to racial stereotypes. In a revealing study of ethnic stereotypes in Singapore, Ganapathy argues that despite the state's official multiracial ideology, racial profiling is not only

ingrained in the local policing culture but also operationalized in everyday tasks. Police officers acknowledge the pervasiveness of this stereotyping and are noted to have remarked that, 'you can ask any policeman, they will tell you the same thing. Chinese families some can change, Malays no point, Indians no chance! Once you know this, you will know how to handle them. No problem' (Ganapathy, 2008, p. 46). Police officers are also known to associate certain vices to particular ethnic groups, alleging that for 'Chinese families it must be gambling and financial problems, for Indian families it is the drinking problem…For Malays, it's everything' (Ganapathy, 2008, p. 121). Minority women tend to be taken more seriously given the perceived violence of minority men. For example, police officers are inclined to show more sympathy for Indian women compared to Chinese women because of their strong will 'to stay in the relationships as good mothers and wives despite the whacking they get from their husbands who can be really violent because of their drinking habit' (Ganapathy, 2008, p. 170).

The data collected with regard to the dependency of the poor on the police reveals a wide variation in the ways formal social control is appropriated ranging from the normative need to protect the vulnerable members of the society, to addressing dealings that unfortunately make poor use of police resources due to their trivial nature. This culture of dependency stems out of factors that are very specific to the poor. The daily presence of the police and the high rates of incarceration, as well as the high possibility of being at the receiving end of a complaint, mean that many amongst the poor have had prior dealings with the law enforcers. These make the threat of the police very real in the context of these residents. In addition, the notion of policing, that invariably captures the minute details of neighborhood happenings through panoptic surveillance, evident in the numerous CCTV cameras installed, in turn results in the expectation for the state to police even neighborly and domestic conflicts. Within the context of soft authoritarian Singapore, the various state-adopted narratives with respect to space, race, and gender also pave the way for the state to be called to regulate. Hence, whereas the poor depends on the police to manage their everyday lives, this inevitably leads to 'poor policing' practices as officers are deployed casually.

Conclusion

The practice of 'policing the poor' that is evident in low-income neighborhoods in Singapore is the outcome of the pervasiveness of the notion that links poverty and criminality amongst policy makers. The enduring narrative of the Malay Problem adds an ethnic dimension to this complex. There is very little difference in the intensity and style of policing in the three low-income neighborhoods in this study due to the high state capacity in Singapore as a product of a single-party dominant system, its unique status

as a compact city-state as well as its micromanagement of race relations through ethnic-based policies. Even the racial identities of the law enforcement officers have been co-opted to reflect the disproportionate number of ethnic minorities both among the underclass and in incarceration, following the model of the ethnic self-help groups in Singapore.

The data from Singapore demonstrates the management of the poor in a soft authoritarian environment. The government's racialized divide and rule strategy, derived from the experiences of colonial rule, have led to a number of observations. First, the approach, to a certain degree, absolves the state from being directly involved in uplifting the socioeconomic welfare of the less privileged. This responsibility has been passed to racialized self-help groups and more significantly the family, as the first layers of social support. For those who slipped through the cracks, the state's role has been to provide interim and affordable housing. In these spaces, the police and the system of racialized policing play a significant function in the everyday lives of its inhabitants.

Second, these racial categories and narrative of the Malay Problem affect not only the police subculture but also the group dynamics within these neighborhoods that reinforce the stereotypes through Singapore's unique slant on community policing that includes not only the formal operational framework of the COPs program but also a self-surveillance philosophy amongst the poor. It has led to racial segregation between different groups and within a minority group, which also manifest itself spatially. This is seen in the degree of self-loathing within members of a minority group and the internalization of popular stereotypes among the poor. These social stratifications are compounded by the tendency for the poor to detach themselves from their immediate community and retreat to the comforts of their own homes amidst the pervasiveness of crime and surveillance.

Third, despite the blanket application of the strategy to 'police the poor,' this research uncovers competing narratives amongst the residents in their attempt to differentiate themselves from the rest – either along value systems, ethnic, or gender lines between or even within familial settings. These result in the highly volatile domestic and community relations in these neighborhoods. Therefore, there is a tendency among the peripheral to utilize the police, or use them as a scare tactic, in solving internal and external disputes. These threats are often taken seriously, which results in the high frequency in which it is evoked – resulting in what I identify as 'poor policing.'

Singapore's high rate of economic success has focused the attention of the global media, politicians, and scholars on its financial achievements. However, the plight of the bottom strata of society, their everyday lives, and their relationships with the state and its apparatuses are very rarely broached. The Singapore government has time and again mentioned its exceptionalism in achieving results in their own unique ways, maintaining

that the country has to chart its own specific trajectory despite global influences. The social realities of the poor and their experiences with the police provide a rich platform for these claims to be critically engaged.

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