An Exploratory Study on the Perceptions of Neighborhood Safety among Low-income

Singaporean Families in Public Rental Housing and Purchased Public Housing

Sze Min Toh[1], Charlene S. L. Fu[1], Kuo Min Chew[1], & Saw Han Quah[2]

[1] Singapore Children's Society

[2] T. A. P: The Affinity People

Author Note

Sze Min Toh https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3736-3131

Charlene S. L. Fu https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3130-0324

Saw Han Quah https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1331-8870

Sze Min Toh, Research Officer at Singapore Children's Society. Her research focuses on resilience in children and youth from economically disadvantaged families.

Charlene S. L. Fu, PhD in Psychology. She oversees the research at Singapore Children's Society, which pertains to issues regarding children, youths and families.

Kuo Min Chew, former Research Officer at Singapore Children's Society. She actively listens to and empowers vulnerable communities as a social worker.

Saw Han Quah, PhD in Psychology. She has done work related to child welfare and trauma for more than 20 years.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sze Min Toh, Research & Advocacy Department, Singapore Children's Society, 51 Telok Blangah Crescent #05-01, Singapore 098917. Email: smtoh@childrensociety.org.sg

Abstract

Singapore is known as one of the safest countries in the world, where there are low physical crime rates. However, past studies suggest that low-income families – especially those living in public rental housing (i.e., social housing) tend to experience more community violence, which is associated with poorer developmental outcomes. Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, this study investigated the factors affecting the perceptions of neighborhood safety of 25 parents and their adolescent children (aged 12 to 17 years) from low-income families. The study also aimed to explore if there were differences in perceptions of neighborhood safety between participants residing in purchased public housing and participants residing in public rental housing. Findings revealed that participants residing in public rental housing perceived their neighborhood as more dangerous than participants residing in purchased housing, which contributed to their isolation from the community. In contrast, participants from purchased housing mentioned that social cohesion and a sense of trust with their neighbors contributed to their sense of safety. Our findings suggest that close bonds and greater social cohesion among neighbors could be a possible factor to target in improving the safety perceptions of families residing in public rental housing.

Keywords: community/neighborhood, adolescence, violence, Asia, poverty

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Living in disadvantaged neighborhoods has been linked with experiencing more community violence (Ceballo et al., 2022; Gibson et al., 2009), which can negatively affect the brain development of children, especially in brain circuits that support executive function and emotion processing. This, in turn, influences child outcomes negatively (Hyde et al., 2022), such as resulting in increased internalizing mental health symptoms (Miliauskas et al., 2022; Ozer et al., 2004) and increased externalizing behavior (Deane et al., 2018). Thus, it is important to explore the perceptions of neighborhood safety and the types of community violence experienced by both parents and adolescents. Such insights would be valuable in informing interventions that can help create safer environments for the healthy development of children from low-income families.

Singapore is known as one of the safest countries in the world, where, compared to the global average of 71%, 95% of residents feel safe walking alone in their neighborhoods at night (Gallup, 2022). Both violent and non-violent crime rates in Singapore are low relative to other countries (Reynolds, 2017). Some factors contributing to the low physical crime rate in Singapore include (i) harsh punishment for unlicensed possession of arms and death penalty for unlawful use of arms, (ii) effective enforcement of penalties for violence and possession of arms, and (iii) confidence in the local police force (Attorney-General's Chambers of Singapore, 2021; Gallup, 2022; Ministry of Home Affairs, 2022). Although violent crime rates were low, in an earlier study, we found that witnessing (or hearing) community violence was the most prevalent adverse childhood experience (44.8%) among a sample of 270 adolescents from low-income families in Singapore (Toh et al., 2021). Exposure to community violence is usually defined as exposure to incidents involving harm or threats of harm to individuals in neighborhoods, such as fights or shooting incidents

(Ceballo et al., 2022; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). However, given that it is illegal for a civilian to possess arms or ammunition (Attorney-General's Chambers of Singapore, 2021) and the generally low crime rates, it was surprising that almost half of the respondents were exposed to community violence.

In Singapore, more than 80% of residents live in public housing, known as Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats (HDB, 2023a). Most residents who live in HDB flats (around 90%) are owners of their flats, and these flats are meant to be occupied by families for extended periods. Currently, those who purchase a flat in Singapore are required to physically occupy the house for a minimum period of 5 years (or 10 years for flats in prime locations) (HDB, 2023b). Generally, those with a lower household income (i.e., up to S$7,000) are eligible to purchase smaller flats (i.e., two-room or three-room flats), while those with a higher household income (up to S$14,000) are eligible to purchase larger flats (i.e., four-room or five-room flats) (HDB, 2023c). For families with a household income of S$1,500 and below (within the bottom 10th percentile of the average monthly household income of Singapore residents), an alternative to purchased flats is public rental flats, which are social housing meant for temporary occupation before families build up sufficient resources to progress to home ownership (HDB, 2023d; Singapore Department of Statistics, 2023). In Singapore, about 50,000 households are under the Public Rental Scheme (Ministry of National Development, 2020). Prior to year 2018, all rental and purchased flats were housed in separate blocks, although they may be within the same neighborhood (Ng, 2018).

Previous research suggests that perceptions of neighborhood safety could differ in high-poverty neighborhoods versus low-poverty neighborhoods. In a large-scale randomized controlled trial ("Moving to Opportunity"), parents who moved from public housing in high-poverty neighborhoods to less poor neighborhoods reported significantly less physical and social disorder, and significantly greater satisfaction with their neighborhoods, compared to

those who remained in high-poverty neighborhoods (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). According to the World Values Survey, Singapore had the highest proportion of respondents (72.2%) who perceived that street violence and fights did not frequently occur at all, compared to other countries' respondents (Mathews et al., 2021). However, there were differences in respondents' experiences of community violence depending on their household income levels and type of housing. A higher proportion of those in the lowest income bracket (below S$1,500 on the survey) and those residing in one- to three-room flats felt that street violence and fights occurred very frequently or quite frequently, compared to a small proportion of those in the highest income bracket (above S$6,999) and those residing in four- or five-room flats (Mathews et al., 2021). Other past studies also suggested that residing in a rental flat was associated with lower perceived neighborhood safety, as compared to residing in a purchased flat (Teo, 2018; Wee et al., 2019). For instance, warnings about loan sharks (unlicensed money lenders) and crime notices were more frequently sighted at rental flats, contributing to lower perceived neighborhood safety (Teo, 2018).

The Present Study and Research Questions

Based on our earlier finding that a high proportion of children from low-income families experience community violence (Toh et al., 2021) and findings from past local studies on differences in neighborhood safety and violence depending on the type of housing and income levels (Mathews et al., 2021; Teo, 2018; Wee et al., 2019), the present study will explore the following research questions qualitatively, using semi-structured interviews:

1. What are parents' and adolescents' perceptions of neighborhood safety? What contributes to them feeling safe or unsafe in the neighborhood?

2. Are there differences in the perceptions of neighborhood safety among parents and adolescents from low-income families residing in purchased public housing versus those in public rental housing?

The present study makes two key contributions to the literature on neighborhood safety. First, the present study could give a unique perspective of what community violence and perceptions of neighborhood safety looks like in a relatively safe country with low physical crime rates and in the housing context of Singapore. Second, exposure to community violence is typically measured as frequency of exposure or exposure/no exposure in most studies (Ceballo et al., 2022), including our previous study in which exposure to community violence was measured as a single binary score (i.e., exposure or no exposure) (Toh et al., 2021). However, there is greater complexity in adolescents' perceptions of neighborhood safety and community violence than can be captured by such quantitative measures. Zuberi (2018) examined the subjective perceptions of youths from low-income families on neighborhood safety. They found that some youths felt safe in the neighborhood despite living in the presence of crime, sale of drugs, and fighting. Within that context, some youths described that protective social ties helped them to feel safe, while some youths isolated themselves from people in order to feel safe. Thus, despite experiencing community violence, some adolescents found ways to make themselves feel safe. This is an important gap as perceptions of decreased neighborhood safety was one of the mechanisms through which exposure to community violence is associated with more negative child outcomes, such as post-traumatic stress symptoms (Overstreet & Braun, 2000). Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by allowing parents and adolescents from low-income families to share their experiences of community violence and their subjective perceptions of what makes them feel safe and/or unsafe in their neighborhood.

Method

Participants

Twenty-five parent-adolescent dyads participated in this study from November 2020

to March 2021. Participants were recruited through convenience and purposive sampling. First, the authors (Chew and Toh) contacted those who agreed to participate in this follow-up study from an earlier study conducted between 2017 and 2019. Then, the authors explained the study and asked if they were interested in participating. Participants were selected if the following inclusion criteria were met: a) the child was between 12 and 17 years old, b) the child was in primary or secondary school, or had not begun post-secondary education yet, c) the parent and child were able to speak mainly in English for the interview, and d) the family had a gross monthly household income of S$4,500 or less, or a gross monthly household per capita income of S$1,125 or less. As there is no official poverty line in Singapore, we took reference from a government financial assistance scheme for students from low-income families (Government of Singapore, 2023). The mean gross household income of our sample was S$2,068.60 ($SD$ = S$1,197.87), and the mean per capita income was S$455.00 ($SD$ = S$301.69).

A total of 25 parents (23 mothers) between 33 and 59 years old (M = 42.4, SD = 5.93) and 25 adolescents participated in the study. Most parents were ethnic Malay (n = 15, 60%), followed by Chinese (n = 5, 20%), Indian (n = 3, 12%), Javanese (n = 1, 4%) and Filipino (n = 1, 4%). Four adolescent transcripts were excluded from analysis as the participants were unresponsive during the interviews and their transcripts lacked elaboration. The 21 adolescents were between 12 and 17 years old (M = 13.7, SD = 1.35), and eight adolescents were male. Most of the adolescents were ethnic Malay (n = 15, 71.4%), followed by Chinese (n = 4, 19%), and Indian (n = 2, 9.5%). The distribution of ethnicity in our sample was not representative of the ethnic make-up of Singapore, where majority are Chinese (74.1%), followed by Malay (13.4%), Indian (9.2%), and other ethnicities (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2021). However, the distribution was proportionate to other studies done with low-income families in Singapore (Goh et al., 2020; Goh et al., 2022).

Procedure

After the authors confirmed that the parent-adolescent dyad met the eligibility criteria, they arranged either a video/audio call (via Zoom) or an in-person interview with the dyad. Interviews were conducted with the parent and adolescent participants separately. The study was approved by the internal ethics review committee of the [organization masked for double-blind review]. Participants were informed about the purpose, the risks, and benefits of participating in the study, and the confidentiality of their personal information, before written consent and assent were obtained from the parent and adolescent participants respectively. Participants were also informed that they could decline participation at any point of the interview. Verbal parent consent and adolescent assent were also sought by the authors to audio and/or video record the interviews for transcription.

At the beginning of the interviews, a unique participant number was assigned to each parent and adolescent for de-identification. Both parent and adolescent participants filled in their demographic information. Although the semi-structured interview had three sections: (i) Parent-child relationship and social support, (ii) community violence and neighborhood safety, and (iii) impact of COVID-19, this report will only focus on the findings from the community violence and neighborhood safety section (see Appendix for the relevant section of the interview guide). The semi-structured interview included questions about parents' and adolescents' perceptions of safety of their neighborhood and the reasons for it, whether they encountered or witnessed / heard about any unsafe situations and violence in the neighborhood, how they kept themselves safe, and how the neighborhood can be made safer for them. At the end of the interview, each parent-child pair was given a S$35 voucher as a token of appreciation. On average, the total duration for the three sections of the interview was around 80 minutes for each parent and around 51 minutes for each adolescent.

Data analysis

All audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and securely stored in a password-protected cloud drive, accessible only to the authors. Each interview transcript was checked against the audio recordings multiple times to ensure the accuracy of the transcript. Inductive thematic analysis was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two coders (Chew and Toh) read through the interview transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data. Chew was trained in psychology and social work, while Toh was trained in psychology.

First, both Chew and Toh coded three out of 25 of the parent transcripts (12%) and drafted a codebook based on their initial codes. They identified areas of disagreement, discussed reasons for disagreement, reached a consensus on coding and revised the codebook accordingly. The remaining parent transcripts were split between the two coders to code independently. The coders reviewed the codes together and refined and organized them into sub-themes and themes. Next, Toh coded the 21 adolescent transcripts independently and discussed the codes and refined the sub-themes and themes with Fu (research supervisor).

Results

There were nine sub-themes that were generated from the interview data, which were categorized into four major themes. The results will begin with an overview of the perceptions of neighborhood safety among the parent-adolescent pairs, followed by the four major themes: (i) factors contributing to perceived neighborhood safety, (ii) factors contributing to perceived neighborhood danger, (iii) factors contributing to mixed perceptions of neighborhood safety, and (iv) effect of neighborhood danger on parenting and social isolation. The differences (if any) in perceptions of safety for families based on their type of housing (purchased flats versus rental flats) will be compared in each of the sections. Quotes from parents and adolescents were presented below to illustrate each theme. The quotes that were used in this report were cleaned up by removing repeated words (e.g., "you know, you know", "I, I, I") and fillers (E.g., "uh", "erm", "yah", "lah") to improve readability.

Overview of the Perceptions of Neighborhood Safety of Parent-adolescent Pairs

Among the 25 parent-adolescent pairs, 11 pairs resided in public rental flats, while the rest resided in purchased flats. Based on the interview transcripts, participants' general perceptions of neighborhood safety were assigned into one of the three categories: Safe, unsafe, and mixed perceptions of safety (see Table 1). This overview highlighted variations in participants' perceptions of neighborhood safety based on their type of housing.

[Table 1 goes here]

Eighteen out of 25 parents (72%) perceived that their neighborhoods were safe, while five parents (20%) perceived that their neighborhoods were unsafe. Two parents (8%) who lived in rental flats had mixed responses when describing their perceptions of neighborhood safety. For instance, P07 shared that her neighborhood seemed safe and there were no fights or arguments, but she tried to not let her children go out too often as there were drug takers in the neighborhood. Twelve out of 21 adolescents (57.1%) perceived that their neighborhoods were safe, and most of these adolescents resided in purchased flats. Five adolescents (23.8%) perceived that their neighborhoods were unsafe, and they were all residing in rental flats. Four adolescents (19.0%) had mixed responses when describing their perceptions of neighborhood safety. For instance, C03 (Adolescent 3) shared that she thought that her neighborhood was "50% safe, 50% not safe", while C22 described that the neighborhood was safe but "there is also some crime".

Nine out of 21 parent-adolescent dyads (42.9%) had incongruent perceptions of neighborhood safety. Out of the nine dyads, seven parents perceived that their neighborhoods were safer than their children (i.e., they perceived their neighborhoods as safe while their children had mixed or unsafe perceptions, or they had mixed perceptions of neighborhood safety while their children felt the neighborhood was unsafe). The majority (six out of seven)

of parent participants who perceived that their neighborhoods were safer than their children resided in rental flats. These findings suggest that parents, especially those residing in rental flats, might not be fully in tune with their children's perspectives about neighborhood safety. This is a concerning finding as parents might be unaware and not communicate or process with their children on their feelings of danger in the neighborhood.

Factors Contributing to Perceived Neighborhood Safety and Danger and its Effects

1. Factors Contributing to Perceived Neighborhood Safety

The most common reasons mentioned by both parents and adolescents for feeling safe in their neighborhoods were (a) perception of low crime rates, (b) social cohesion and a sense of trust with neighbors, and (c) presence of community amenities.

Perception of Low Crime Rates. Most parent and adolescent participants mentioned that the low levels of crime (e.g., theft) and danger (e.g., fights) made them feel safe in their neighborhood. All participants who mentioned this aspect resided in purchased flats. Interestingly, parents primarily associated low crime rates with the absence of theft, particularly instances involving items left along the corridor outside their units or when they failed to close their house doors, while adolescents' ideas of low crime rates were associated more with the absence of fights, danger, or crime incidents.

P10 (Parent 10) shared that her neighborhood is "totally safe" as no one tried to break into her house when she accidentally "close[d] the gate but didn't close the door" (most public housing apartments in Singapore have a gate and a door) and she was out past midnight. Both the items within and outside her unit were left untouched. Similarly, P19 (Parent 19) shared that in her new neighborhood (she used to live in a rental flat but moved to a purchased flat), it is safe and "even if we put our things outside [our flat], no one will steal". She also shared that "they don't really throw rubbish anywhere [that they want to]". In

comparison, C19 (P19's adolescent daughter) shared the same sentiments that "everything here [in my current neighborhood] is safe" and she "don't see any dangerous things that could happen" to her. Other adolescents such as C08 shared that she felt safe as "there isn't like much fights and everything", and there is "nothing chaotic [that] happen" in her neighborhood, while C04 shared that he felt safe as "there isn't any crime incidents".

The findings highlighted that parents and adolescents had varying perspectives regarding what constitutes low crime rates and safety in their neighborhood.

Social Cohesion and Sense of Trust. The second most common reason cited by parent and adolescent participants for feeling safe in the neighborhood was a sense of familiarity and friendly ties with neighbors, and a sense of trust with neighbors. This aspect was prominently highlighted by parents and adolescents from purchased flats, but not mentioned by those residing in rental flats.

For instance, P01 shared that she felt safe in her neighborhood as she knew the neighbors on her level within the block, and she could recognize the other neighbors on other levels too. Similarly, P01's daughter (C01) also shared that she felt safe in her neighborhood as she had "many kind people here I can talk to, and many people that I know here". P01 was also able to recognize those who did not belong to her neighborhood and shared that "if there's anyone we have not seen before, we know that they don't belong in here".

Other parents and adolescents shared that they had friendly ties with their neighbors. For example, P09 shared that her neighbors knew each other well and she "fe[lt] safe in this neighborhood" as "the whole stretch of neighbors, we know each other. When there are special occasions like birthday or what, we will gather together and celebrate".

P10 shared that she had close ties with her helpful and trustworthy neighbors who were shop owners at the ground floor of her block. She would leave her house keys with

these neighbors, and they would pass her child the keys when he returns from school. The neighbors also looked out for P10's child and lent him money to call P10 during an emergency. She felt grateful and commented, "how good it is to get this sort of environment, very hard you know. They look out, especially [my child C10] they look out for him". She felt blessed that her family lived in an environment where neighbors help each other.

The findings showed that the social cohesion and sense of trust among neighbors that was formed through many years of residing in the neighborhood contributed to the sense of safety of low-income families living in purchased flats.

Presence of Community Amenities. Five parents and two adolescents residing in both rental and purchased flats mentioned that the presence of community amenities near to their block contributed to their sense of safety. Some parents mentioned that they felt safe when they returned home or went out to buy something at night as a 24-hour supermarket or a coffee shop (i.e., a food establishment with many food stalls, usually located in residential areas) was located at the ground floor of their blocks. For example, P19 mentioned that "… this place is much more safe, for us. … because … I have Giant [supermarket] 24 hours downstairs, so if C19 were to go to shop 2:00 a.m. in the morning, still safe". Other parents like P20 mentioned that due to the presence of hawker centres (i.e., open-air complex with multiple food stalls) and other shops, "everybody is always moving around [to] buy food or whatever it is", so it ensured safety as there were always people around.

Similarly, adolescents (C02 and C11) also shared that the presence of shops, coffee shops, police post, a 24-hour convenience store, and car parks made them feel safe when walking in their neighborhood. For example, C11 mentioned that, "… it's … 1 minute to just walk out, then when I just reach out[side] I feel safe already, because ... there's this one coffee shop on my left-hand side and there's this car park".

Overall, the presence of community amenities appeared to have a positive impact on the sense of safety for parent-adolescent dyads as such commonly shared areas ensured the presence of other people.

2. Factors Contributing to Perceived Neighborhood Danger

When exploring the sources of unease, it became evident that parents and adolescents shared similar concerns regarding their safety. The most common reasons that both parents and adolescents gave for feeling unsafe in the neighborhood were (a) drug-related activity or substance use and (b) petty theft.

Drug-related activity or substance use. Seven parents and three adolescents mentioned that there were drug-related activities or substance use (e.g., alcohol or cigarettes) in their neighborhood, which made them feel unsafe. This was mentioned by both participants from purchased flats and public rental flats. P07 tried to not let her children go out alone as there were drug users in the neighborhood which was unsafe for her children. P07 shared a distressing incident to illustrate her worries, where a man passed a drug (disguised as a "sweet") to her child's tuition classmate. As the child brought the "sweet" to the Social Service Agency (Voluntary Welfare Organization), the volunteer there noticed and warned the children in time to not take anything from strangers. Since that incident, P07 was worried that someone from the neighborhood would also pass drugs to her child.

Similarly, P25 shared that her neighborhood was not safe for her children as there were drug addicts in her neighborhood. Although parents from both rental and purchased flats shared about drug-related activities contributing to neighborhood danger, it only affected the parenting strategies of parents in rental flats. For example, parents may impose restrictions on when children could leave the home or play outdoors to limit their exposure to drug activity.

P25: The area I stay in … [is] not so safe actually, for my children, … that's why we

are moving out soon, … . Because here prone to … more to drug addicts, so … that's why my children, right, usually we won't let them play after 7pm.

C08 had mixed perceptions about the safety of her neighborhood. Reflecting on the reasons that she felt unsafe, she shared that she suspected that there was sale of drugs going on in her neighborhood.

> C08: ... every time, when I want to go back home, … I will see this guy … carrying the bag, he will always like give this packet to the teenage guy. And then I'm like, is that [drugs], you know? … I don't know … what is it, that he's selling, … but … his actions [are] damn suspicious. Like he don't want people to see what he['s] giving ...

Besides drugs, alcohol use and underage cigarette consumption were also mentioned. C12 shared that "every time when I … go down and buy food, I can see all the kids holding their, hand with cigarette ... my primary school classmate also … smoke. So like, nowadays, a lot of kids like to smoke". C13 shared that when he went down to his block's void deck (an open space at the ground floor of HDB blocks), there were people who consume alcohol and "get drunk easily" and he "do[es]n't like the smell". These made them feel that their neighborhood is unsafe.

Petty Theft. Three parents and four adolescents mentioned that petty theft made them feel that the neighborhood is unsafe. All participants who mentioned this resided or used to reside (P19) in rental flats. P19 compared her current neighborhood where she could leave her belongings outside her flat to her previous neighborhood (where she lived in a rental flat) where "C19's shoes got stolen. My shoes got stolen. My clothes got [stolen], my bra got stolen. It's been three hours only, it got stolen".

Both parents and adolescents tended to feel more unsafe when a petty theft incident happened to someone that they knew or when they personally experienced it. When C13

(who resided in a rental flat) heard from his schoolteacher that grocery vouchers given by the government to residents in one- and two-room flats were stolen from letter boxes in other neighborhoods, he felt alright about it. However, he shared that "when I kn[ew] that my friend's mother['s vouchers were stolen], I fe[lt] scared. But lucky for me I took the vouchers already". He was afraid as his friend's family lived two blocks away from him, which was very close to him. Therefore, it seemed like the worry of petty theft committed by others living within the neighborhood contributed to the sense of danger and lack of trust between neighbors residing in public rental flat communities.

3. Factors Contributing to Mixed Perceptions of Neighborhood Safety

Different Perceptions of Police Presence. Although we expected that the presence of police would be associated with better perceptions of neighborhood safety, participants residing in purchased and rental flats had varying perceptions of the presence of police.

Association between Police Presence and High Levels of Crime. Two parents and two adolescents associated the presence of police with high levels of crime. However, this section will focus on a detailed vignette of one parent-adolescent dyad (C12 and P12) to illustrate their experiences with the presence of police based on their circumstances and to demonstrate how parents introduce different strategies help their children keep themselves safe. C12 (who resided in a two-room rental flat) shared that frequently seeing the police at her neighborhood arresting people who committed crimes made her feel unsafe.

> C12: In a month like, seven or eight times you can see the police around here. ... they
> will be in [block numbers listed by C12]. These three main blocks. ... Because all of
> them, … they have bad habit[s]. ... Either they smoke, or like parents abuse, or
> children abuse, something like that. ... . I always see police come down to do their
> stuff. ... Made me feel unsafe.

C12 also mentioned a past incident which made her mother afraid whenever the police were in the neighborhood. A few years prior, when her mother returned home from buying something, she was barred from entering the home as the police were arresting one of the neighbors residing next to her flat. C12 described that her mother cried as "She (P12) was scared, because we [were] all [in the] house alone, … what happens [if] somebody break in, or we get hurt. … Nothing happen[ed], we [were] all safe. … She [was] just worried".

After the incident, P12 educated her children to lock the door whenever they see the police as she "d[id not] want them to be out and then suddenly, anything might happen. We won't know what the accused would think and what the accused would do". She described that whenever her children saw a police officer, "on the spot they will close the door …, to keep their siblings safe", they would inform her what was happening and if they were safe.

This incident and P12's fear and instructions also affected C12's perception of the police as her parents told her to remain at home and keep herself safe whenever the police were present in the neighborhood. C12 thus associates the presence of police with the arrest of people who committed serious and violent crimes.

> C12: Over here, got a lot of … drug person. Then, a lot of police, here. So, every time we can see police downstairs. So my parents very scared. They say, "Stay at home, don't go downstairs. Don't do anything." … Very violen[t] case over here. … Two days ago, … there were like a police truck, then some police. … br[oke into someone's house] and do all the stuff. We never saw, but then we saw all the police. Both of my parents weren't around, so we handled it ourselves [by] locking the gate.

These insights indicate that the frequent presence of police was associated with crimes being frequently committed in the neighborhood, thus contributing to an unsafe perception of the neighborhood among those living in rental flats.

Association between Regular Patrol and Neighborhood Safety. Conversely, there were some parents who felt that the presence of police or volunteers on patrol in the neighborhood made them feel safe. P13 shared that when she was on her way home in the neighborhood at night, she "will see some of the police officers walking around, that's when I will feel safe". As there were people "sitting around, drinking [alcohol]" at her block's void deck, she felt safe in the neighborhood when she "s[aw] these patrollers talking to them".

Relatedly, P19 shared that, "I think here (my current neighborhood) is safer than [my previous rental flat neighborhood]. … They have the *Neighborhood Watch*, patrol. … I saw at the lift actually, like 'You're being watched by our *Patrol Citizen*s'". *Neighbors on Watch* refers to volunteers who promote safety in the community and are updated with the latest crime information within the neighborhood, while *Citizens on Patrol* refers to trained Singaporean volunteers who patrol the neighborhood in groups (Singapore Police Force, 2023a, 2023b). She also added that in her previous neighborhood, which she described as a very "ghetto" place, "I don't think [there were *Citizens on Patrol* in my previous neighborhood], because [in my previous neighborhood] I stay in [a] rental flat. … they have like, police cars, keep on coming in [as] they have like, [drug] addicts". It was interesting that P19 thought that having *Citizens on Patrol* made her feel safe when the presence of police did not make her feel safe in her previous neighborhood. This suggests that living in a different neighborhood could change the perceptions of the presence of police depending on the disorderliness of the neighborhood, or that some participants viewed volunteers on patrol and regular police officers differently. Although the presence of police is usually associated with neighborhood safety, none of the adolescents shared that the presence of police or volunteers on patrol was a factor contributing to their sense of safety in the neighborhood.

Different Perceptions of Incidences of Violence. Among the participants, it was mentioned by seven parents and five adolescents from both rental and purchased flats that

there were physical aggression and conflicts (i.e., quarrels) in the neighborhood. Some felt that their neighborhood was unsafe because of these incidences of violence. However, some felt that it was normal, and they were curious about the conflicts that happened.

P18 shared about an incident where one neighbor stabbed another neighbor due to their unhappiness with each other over loud sounds from the television. She shared that the neighbors had started fighting again and "because of that [my] children they are very scared". She had to accompany her children when they took the lift or went to school, and she also called the police when her neighbors were "both shouting and one of them bang[ed the] window" as she was afraid that they would stab each other again. C03 shared about her neighbor who came out of his house, shouted "dirty, dirty", used an umbrella to hit her family and threatened to complain to the police when they were dyeing their hair outside the house, which made her feel that the neighborhood is unsafe.

Some adolescents who witnessed their neighbors' family fights or conflicts felt that it was normal, and they were curious about it. When asked what he felt about witnessing or hearing about fights, C02 responded that "it's like more interesting". Similarly, C06 expressed that he was "not really" affected by those quarrelling in his neighborhood and he would "just watch". Both of them did not perceive the fights as unsafe. Furthermore, P06 shared that she often watched family fights in the neighborhood together with her children, and her children would "laugh because their (the family's) reaction [is] very funny". C12 (who lived in a rental flat) also shared that witnessing fights did not affect her daily life, as she felt that witnessing or experiencing fights "are going to be left off when you grow up" and "all these fighting, all these stuff like, it's part of our life".

Two possible explanations for the mixed perceptions of safety in response to incidences of violence will be explored further in the Discussion section.

4. Effect of Neighborhood Danger on Parenting and Social Isolation

In response to the dangers in the neighborhood, four parents (residing in public rental flats) mentioned that they set boundaries for their children to remain at home. P18 shared that when her children were back from school, she would remain at home with them and lock the door as her children were safe within their flat.

> P18: When they go back from school, I will just go back home, just stay at home and lock the door, I will never let them play downstairs or outside the house. Because I am at work, I will make sure that they are at home safe. Everything will be at home, do homework, eat also at home. … I am not so sure, but anything can happen we won't know. But it's safe when they are at home. … she [daughter] will lock the door …

This was similar to P25 (previously mentioned in the section on drug activity) who did not allow her children to be outdoors after 7pm as her neighborhood had drug addicts. She preferred for her children "play computer games" at home instead of being outdoors.

C12 (adolescent residing in rental flat) also mentioned that she keeps herself safe by staying at home, according to her mother's instructions. She also shared that "Sometime[s] if my mum or dad, we too scared right, then we stay at home. Or sometime[s if we are] not too scared, then we just dare go out. But then we really don't dare to do anything.".

Therefore, the fear of potential danger happening within the neighborhood seemed to affect not just the parenting strategies of parents on their adolescent children, but it seemed to contribute to the social isolation of both parents and children within their home.

Discussion

This study investigated the factors affecting the perceptions of neighborhood safety among a sample of low-income Singaporean parent-adolescent dyads and the differences in perceptions between those residing public rental housing versus purchased housing. Most

parents felt safe in their neighborhoods, with fewer having mixed perceptions and unsafe perceptions about their neighborhood. Approximately half of the adolescents felt safe in their neighborhoods, and all adolescents who did not feel safe resided in public rental housing. Findings revealed that (a) perceived low crime rates, (b) social cohesion and a sense of trust among neighbors, and (c) community amenities contributed to perceived neighborhood safety, while (d) drug-related activity or substance use and (e) petty theft contributed to perceived neighborhood danger. The presence of police in the neighborhood was associated with perceived neighborhood safety in purchased homes, but with perceived neighborhood danger in rental homes. There were also adolescents who feared incidences of violence in the neighborhood, while others felt unaffected as it was a part of their everyday lives.

Perceived Neighborhood Safety and Danger in the Singapore Context

Incongruent Perceptions of Neighborhood Safety Among Parent-adolescent Dyads

First, our study showed that parent-adolescent dyads from low-income families in Singapore had incongruent perceptions of neighborhood safety, in line with past research (Ceballo et al., 2001; Lewis et al., 2012). Previous studies had shown that parents tended to underestimate their children's exposure to community violence (Zimmerman & Farrell, 2013; Zimmerman & Pogarsky, 2011), especially as their children moved on to adolescence (Alers-Rojas et al., 2020). We observed a similar pattern – most parents who had incongruent perceptions of neighborhood safety with their adolescent children perceived that their neighborhoods were safer than their children. Parents in our study may not have experienced any incidences of violence personally (even if they had witnessed or heard violence), while their children felt that their neighborhoods were unsafe if they had witnessed or heard any violence in the neighborhood. Some parents did not seem to know that their children witnessed or heard about violence/theft in the neighborhood.

Past studies had shown that parents' underestimation of their children's exposure to

community violence was associated with more child internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Zimmerman & Farrell, 2013; Zimmerman & Pogarsky, 2011), while greater parent-child agreement about community violence exposure was associated with fewer child externalizing problems (Alers-Rojas et al., 2020). As parent-child agreement on their perceptions of neighborhood safety and community violence exposure is a malleable protective factor, future studies could seek to explore the factors that contribute to a greater alignment in parent-adolescent perceptions of neighborhood safety, such as better parent-adolescent communication and parent-adolescent relationship closeness. This could be an important point to address as part of other ongoing interventions to support low-income families residing in unsafe neighborhoods.

Factors Contributing to Neighborhood Safety and Danger and its Impact on Adolescent Development

Next, although Singapore is known as one of the safest countries in the world with low crime rates and an effective police force, this study provides a unique contribution on other factors (besides gun violence) that could affect perceptions of neighborhood safety. Although guns and weapons are not allowed in Singapore, the presence of drug-related activity and substance use at the void deck, and other physical crimes such as petty theft contributed to low-income families' perceptions of neighborhood danger. It should be noted that Singapore has tough drug laws (Attorney-General's Chambers of Singapore, 2023). Consistent with previous studies conducted on adolescents from low-income families (De la Vega-Taboada et al., 2023; Zuberi, 2018), adolescents' perceptions of neighborhood safety were complex, albeit in a different manner. In our study, incidences of violence affected low-income families' perceptions of neighborhood safety depending on the (i) proximity to the incidences of violence and (ii) adolescent's age (Fowler et al., 2009). For example, C03 who personally experienced her neighbor's beating felt unsafe, while the other adolescents (C02,

C06, and C12) who witnessed the fights from a distance felt that such incidences of violence were normal. Second, younger children (such as P18's children) and younger adolescents tended to display more internalizing symptoms (e.g., fear) and feel more unsafe as they may not have been as able to regulate their emotions at a young age and had not yet developed the necessary coping skills (Fowler et al., 2009), while older adolescents (i.e., C02, C06, and C12) were curious, interested, or felt that it did not affect them as it is just a part of their daily lives. This finding was in line with Fowler et al.'s (2009) study which suggested that older adolescents who were chronically exposed to community violence may gradually over time perceive these incidences of violence as normal and become more emotionally desensitized and numb to incidences of violence. Thus, exposure to incidences of violence in the neighborhood environment over time could affect adolescents' emotional development. Due to perceptions that Singapore is a safe country with relatively low incidences of violence, there is a need to conduct longitudinal studies in the local context to examine the long-term impact of perceptions of neighborhood safety on adolescent development as there is a paucity of research on this area.

Differences in Perceptions of Neighborhood Safety of Families Residing in Rental versus Purchased Flats

Third, this study showed us that perceptions of neighborhood safety were not only affected by income levels or socioeconomic status alone, but it was affected by the type of housing / environments that families were residing in. Although all participants in our sample were from low-income families, most parents from purchased flats felt safe in their neighborhoods, while a smaller number of parents from rental flats felt safe. The differences in safety perceptions of adolescents residing in rental versus purchased flats was even more apparent. A majority of adolescents from purchased flats felt safe in their neighborhoods, and only a few adolescents from rental flats felt safe. Most adolescents from rental flats felt

unsafe or had mixed perceptions of neighborhood safety.

Differences in Perceptions of Police. There were differences in how parent-adolescent dyads perceived the presence of police based on their type of housing, with residents of purchased flats viewing police presence positively and residents of rental units viewing police presence negatively. In previous research conducted with adolescents residing in low-income neighborhoods, the impact of police presence on adolescents' perceptions of neighborhood safety was contingent upon the effectiveness of the police in maintaining social order and preventing violence and crime (De la Vega-Taboada et al, 2023; Zuberi, 2018). However, it was interesting that families residing in public rental units perceived the presence of police as a signal that the neighborhood was dangerous and had a high rate of crime, even when the police were effective in their duties of arresting the alleged offenders. Thus, perceptions of neighborhood safety are more complex in rental flat neighborhoods where crimes happen frequently. Based on what parent-adolescent dyads from rental units shared, it seemed like parents were concerned that their family members would be in danger if they were in close proximity to the police when the police arrested the alleged offender. One possible way to help rental flat residents to be less fearful and to view the presence of police more positively is for the police in rental flat neighborhoods to build rapport with families living there and to empower families in contributing to policing work.

Importance Of Close Ties for Families in Purchased Flats Versus Isolation of Families in Rental Flats. Participants residing in purchased flats were able to list out more factors contributing to neighborhood safety than participants residing in rental flats. For instance, only parent-adolescent dyads from purchased flats mentioned that social cohesion and a sense of trust among neighbors contributed to their sense of safety. They found that neighborhood relationships were an important factor to feeling safe in the neighborhood, but no dyads from rental flats mentioned this factor. A possible reason for this difference is that

families living in purchased flats were required to stay for a minimum period of five years. Hence, they had more time to interact with their neighbors and had the mentality that their neighbors were going to reside in the same block for a long period. Thus, they were able to bond, form trust and social norms with their neighbors, which contributed to their social capital. In contrast, families living in rental flats either did not have enough time to build trust and bonds with their neighbors before their neighbors move out or had the mentality that their neighbors were just staying temporarily, which prevented the formation of trust and social norms that reduces crime and violence (De la Vega-Taboada et al., 2023; Ke et al., 2021). This was consistent with Leviten-Reid and Matthew's (2017) findings that residential stability (length of residence in neighborhood that was five years of more) was positively associated with bonding social capital (familiarity and exchanges among neighbors). Furthermore, families in rental units intentionally isolated themselves to keep themselves safe from perceived dangers in the neighborhood and they preferred not to build relationships in the neighborhood. This withdrawal or isolation was consistent with past qualitative studies of low-income families living in high-poverty neighborhoods (Graves, 2019). Parents preferred to remain at home and keep their doors locked as they were concerned about both their own and their children's safety. They also tend to keep children and adolescents at home so that they can be kept safe from drug users or other unsafe crime or persons in the neighborhood. As adolescents do not have much to do at home, they tend to watch television, play computer games or use their tablet in their free time. While staying at home and withdrawing from social networks in the neighborhood might give parents a sense of peace in their minds and keep the adolescents safe in the short run, this could have an adverse impact on the size of the parents' social support network and adolescents' social, emotional, and physical development if it continues for the long-term. Second, parents from rental flat neighborhoods also prevented their children from interacting with peers in the neighborhood. Although it is an

effective way to protect adolescents from negative peer influences, it also prevents adolescents from having outdoor time, social interaction and social activity, and potentially limits the size of adolescents' social network.

Factors in the neighborhood environment (e.g., trust and connection between neighbors) play an important role in shaping perceptions of neighborhood safety and are potentially important points of intervention. If opportunities were provided to facilitate the building of connections and trust in neighborhood community, parents and adolescents may feel safer, less socially isolated and more supported in their neighborhood.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice and Policy

The "Moving to Opportunity" (MTO) program had shown that it could be helpful when parents living in high poverty neighborhoods (similar to those in rental flat neighborhoods in Singapore) moved to less poor neighborhoods. For example, parents and children (between 8 and 18 years old) who moved to less poor neighborhoods reported significantly fewer depressive and anxiety symptoms than parents and children who continued to stay in high poverty neighborhoods (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). For those who moved to less poor neighborhoods in the MTO program, improvements in collective efficacy and informal social control could have contributed to fewer crimes committed (e.g., sale of drugs), which improved perceptions of neighborhood safety and contributed to less psychological and social stress (Sanbonmatsu et al., 2011). Thus, current initiatives to integrate rental flats and purchased flats in the same block (Ministry of National Development, 2023) might help low-income families residing in these integrated blocks to have a different perspective of their neighbors and be more open to interact with their neighbors, as there would be more neighbors who stay permanently in integrated blocks. This could contribute to the building of social norms and informal social control over time, which might improve the mental well-being of low-income families in the long run. For families

who continue to reside in rental flat neighborhoods, one possible way to increase informal social control and perceived neighborhood safety is to set up more amenities such as convenience stores as both parents and adolescents mentioned the importance of community amenities in ensuring the presence of other people, especially at night.

Next, the findings showed us the importance of friendly ties and a sense of familiarity with the community in contributing to perceived neighborhood safety. As every child has the right to feel safe in the environment that they live in, more could be done to foster the building of relationships in rental unit neighborhoods where many families are still residing in, including the building of relationships with the police. Social Service Agencies or community organizations can step in to be the catalyst to promote community participation and interaction by creating safe spaces and structured community activities so that adolescents could play and interact with friends instead of remaining at home to stay safe (Ceballo et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2017). For example, the South Central Community Family Service Centre (SCCFSC) created a community space at a void deck where residents in the neighborhood could walk in and have meals together, where volunteers provided learning support to children and adolescents, and residents could also ask for support or contribute in giving to others (SCCFSC, 2023). If these community groups and spaces are successful at building supportive relationships within the neighborhood, both parents and adolescents may be more likely to feel safe, improving their overall social support and emotional well-being.

Limitations and Future Directions

These findings should be interpreted in light of the study's limitations. As this was an exploratory study, participants were only asked about their housing type (rental or purchased) as we wanted to compare if there were any differences in their perceptions of neighborhood safety. Although the length of residence might be an important factor that affected the

perceptions of neighborhood safety among our sample, possibly through the formation of social capital (Leviten-Reid & Matthew, 2017), not all participants were asked about the number of years that they had stayed in their unit. Thus, future studies should explore if both housing type and length of residence affects the perceptions of neighborhood safety of low-income families. If the length of residence emerges as a factor that is more important than housing type (i.e., home ownership) in helping residents to form social capital (similar to findings from Leviten-Reid & Matthew, 2017), future policies could consider targeting areas related to the length of residence and not just home ownership alone in helping low-income families to have better perceptions of neighborhood safety. Participants were also not asked if they had participated in any existing programs by Social Service Agencies and community organizations to build social bonds in the neighborhood. Therefore, future studies could also explore the effectiveness of such efforts in helping (i) to build trust and social bonds and (ii) to improve perceptions of safety within the neighborhood.

Conclusion

This is the first study in Singapore to hear from low-income families directly about their perceptions of neighborhood safety. Although Singapore is one of the safest countries in the world where there are strict laws for the possession of guns and effective social control, this study showed that there were other factors contributing the perceptions of neighborhood danger in low-income families. This study also confirmed that families who resided in rental flats viewed their neighborhoods as less safe than those who lived in purchased flats, which contributed to their isolation from the community. Our findings suggest that greater social cohesion and trust could be one possible factor that could improve the perceptions of safety among families residing in rental flat neighborhoods. Future research should continue to identify other important factors that could improve neighborhood safety perceptions so that the well-being of low-income families in these neighborhoods could be better supported.

Table 1

Overview of Perceptions of Neighborhood Safety of Parents and Adolescents

Participant pair number	Type of housing	Perceived neighborhood safety		Congruence of perceptions
		Parent	Adolescent	
1	Three-room flat	Safe	Safe	Congruent
2	Three-room flat	Safe	Safe	Congruent
3	Three-room flat	Unsafe	Mixed	Incongruent
4	Three-room flat	Safe	Safe	Congruent
5	Two-room flat	Safe	Safe	Congruent
6	Two-room flat	Mixed	Unsafe	Incongruent
7	Two-room flat	Mixed	Unsafe	Incongruent
8	Two-room flat (purchased)	Safe	Mixed	Incongruent
9	Three-room flat	Unsafe	Safe	Incongruent
10	Three-room flat	Safe	Safe	Congruent
11	Two-room flat	Safe	Unsafe	Incongruent
12	Two-room flat	Unsafe	Unsafe	Congruent
13	Two-room flat	Safe	Mixed	Incongruent
14	Four-room flat	Safe	Excluded from analysis [a]	-
15	Two-room flat	Safe	Excluded from analysis [a]	-
16	Three-room flat	Unsafe	Excluded from analysis [a]	-
17	Four-room flat	Safe	Safe	Congruent
18	Two-room flat	Safe	Safe	Congruent
19	Four-room flat	Safe	Safe	Congruent
20	Four-room flat	Safe	Safe	Congruent
21	Four-room flat	Safe	Safe	Congruent
22	Two-room flat	Safe	Mixed	Incongruent
23	Three-room flat	Safe	Safe	Congruent
24	Two-room flat	Safe	Unsafe	Incongruent
25	Two-room flat	Unsafe	Excluded from analysis [a]	-

Note. All three-room and four-room flats were purchased flats. All two-room flats were rental flats, except for participant pair 8.

[a] Four adolescent participants were excluded from analysis as their transcripts lacked elaboration.

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Appendix

Interview Guide for Parents

1. Some people think their neighborhood is very safe, while others don't feel safe in
    their neighborhood. Do you feel safe living in your neighborhood?

    a. What makes you feel safe in your neighborhood? What makes you feel unsafe
        in your neighborhood?

    b. Do you feel that your neighborhood is safe for your child? Why?

2. Have you seen or heard anyone having an "unsafe" encounter in your neighborhood?

    a. If yes: Can you tell me more about what you seen or heard?

    b. How often do these situations happen?

    c. How did seeing or hearing these situations make you feel?

    d. Did you do anything to cope with these feelings? How did you cope?

3. Have you seen or heard any violence (e.g., people fighting, people taking or selling
    drugs, robbery) in your neighborhood? (If yes: Repeat questions 2a to 2d)

4. Have you or your child had an "unsafe" encounter in your neighborhood?

    a. If yes: Can you tell me more about what happened?

    b. How did these experiences make you feel?

    c. Did you do anything to cope with these feelings?

    d. Did these encounters affect you or your children's daily living?

        i. If yes, how did this affect you and your children?

5. If parent feel "unsafe", seen/heard about "unsafe" encounters or seen/heard violence,
    or had an "unsafe" encounter before, ask these two questions:

    a. How do you keep you and your children safe?

    b. In your opinion, how can your neighborhood be made safer for you and your
        children?

Interview Guide for Adolescents

1. Some people think their neighborhood is very safe, while others don't feel safe.

   Do you feel safe living in your neighborhood? Can you share with me why?

   a. What makes you feel safe in your neighborhood? What makes you feel unsafe

   in your neighborhood?

2. Have you seen or heard of anyone experiencing anything "unsafe" in your

   neighborhood? (For example, did anyone's things get stolen, or was anyone being

   beaten up by someone?)

   a. If yes: Can you tell me more about what you seen or heard?

   b. How often do these situations happen?

   c. How did seeing or hearing these situations make you feel?

   d. Did you do anything to make yourself feel less _____ (e.g., scared)?

      i. If yes, what did you do?

      ii. Do you tell anyone about your experience?

      iii. If yes, did they help you to cope with these feelings?

         • If yes, what did they do?

   e. Did seeing or hearing about the unsafe event in your neighborhood affect your

   daily life?

      i. If yes, how did it affect you?

3. Have you seen or heard any violence in your neighborhood? (e.g., people fighting,

   people taking or selling drugs, robbery)

   a. If yes: Repeat questions 2a to 2c

   b. Did you do anything to cope with these feelings? How did you cope?

   c. Did seeing or hearing violence in your neighborhood affect your daily life?

      i. If yes, how did it affect you?

4. Have you seen or heard any violence and bullying in school? (e.g., people fighting, physical bullying)

    a. If yes: Repeat questions 2a to 2c

    b. Did you do anything to cope with these feelings? How did you cope?

    c. Did seeing or hearing violence and/or bullying in your school affect your daily life?

        i. If yes, how did it affect you?

5. Have you or your family members experienced anything "unsafe" in your neighborhood?

    a. If yes: Can you tell me more about what happened?

    b. How often does it happen?

    c. How did these encounters make you feel?

    d. Did these encounters affect you or your family members lives?

        i. If yes, how did it affect you and your family?

6. How do you keep yourself safe?

7. In your opinion, how can your neighborhood be made safer for you and your family?

Note. Some questions from the interview guides for parents and adolescents were adapted from Zuberi (2018).