

IMMIGRANTS' CRIMES INVOLVEMENT IN SABAH

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ABSTRACT

The influx of immigrants has been a long-standing issue in Sabah since the late 1970s. As immigrants' crimes involvement often receives media's attention, a perceived link between immigrants and crimes continues to exist. As a result, society may perceive immigrants to be prone to commit crimes, which later breeds fear and anxiety among locals (Sabahans). Yet, limited studies were conducted on this matter. This paper seeks to examine the locals' perception towards the involvement of immigrants in crimes in Sabah. Thus, the purposes of this study are: (1) to analyze the locals' perception towards immigrants' crime involvement in Sabah, and (2) to identify misperceptions or misconceptions of immigrants by Sabahans in relation to crime. This paper focuses mostly on Indonesia and Filipino immigrants, as they made up the majority of immigrants in the state. As a qualitative based research, data were obtained from past research and interviews with the locals. It was found that the interviewees have a negative perception towards immigrants in term of crimes. Apart from that, the interviewees perceived that most of the crimes occurred in Sabah were committed by immigrants. The interviewees also felt threatened of their own safety in areas that are commonly known as immigrants' settlements. Despite that, the findings indicate that the interviewees prefer to hire immigrants over migrant workers or the locals. Statistics show that immigrants were involved in crime especially violent crime. There is a need to study further on the economic and social factors that contribute to this phenomenon. While the results of this paper are still preliminary, it helps to clarify some of the myths regarding immigrants' crimes involvement in Sabah.

Keywords: crimes, immigrants, locals, perception, Sabah

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Immigration is a global problem that occurs in most countries. In Sabah, the influx of immigrants has contributed to various social problems. In fact, the issue of immigrants in Sabah has been a long standing issue since the 1970s (Gunggut, Mohamed Ajmal and Zaaba, 2006).

This issue began to be given an attention after the massive influx of Filipino immigrants to Sabah after 1978 (Sadiq, 2005; Gunggut, Mohamed Ajmal and Zaaba, 2006) which cause a huge growth of Sabah's population in the last three decades. The number of population of Sabah has dramatically increased from 929,299 in 1980 to 3,120,040 in 2010 compared to other states in Malaysia (Statistics Department of Malaysia, 2011). Apart from that, in 2010 alone, the official number of non-Malaysian citizens who live in Sabah is over 27.8 percent of the overall population of Sabah (Statistics Department of Malaysia, 2011). While the figure may only reflect the official number of non-Malaysian citizens live in the state, it could create concern towards this matter. Furthermore, based on statistics of immigrants' arrest, it is assumed that there is one immigrant for every 750 Sabahans (Wan Hassan and Dollah, 2010).

In the host countries, immigrants are commonly used as a scapegoat for problems that occurred, which includes the increase of crime rate (Kassim, 2009). In addition, the involvement of immigrants in crimes often receives wide media attention. As a result, the locals may perceive immigrants negatively, which may later turn into fear or anxiety of their own safety.

Since the majority of immigrants in Sabah came from the Philippines and Indonesia (Gunggut, Mohamed Ajmal and Zaaba, 2006), these groups of immigrants are the focus of this study. While the majority of them were previously known to settle in the East of Sabah such as Tawau, Semporna, and Lahad Datu, they now start to be seen to settle in other parts of the state such as Kota Kinabalu and Beaufort, probably due to better job opportunities.

Contrary to the negative connotation of the word 'immigrant', not all immigrants are illegal. However, movement from legal immigrants to illegal immigrants is very fluid. For example, foreign workers who do not renew their permit will become illegal immigrants. Thus, most legal immigrants in Sabah have high probability to become illegal immigrants.

Moreover, according to the Special Task Force Report (n.d.), immigrants in Sabah can be classified into three categories, namely illegal immigrants, alien workers and Filipino refugees as in Table 1.0.1.

Table 1.0.1: Groups of Immigrants in Sabah and Its Description

Group of immigrants	Description
Illegal immigrants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject to apprehension and deportation
Alien workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allowed to work in the state as long as they obey state laws and regulations • Need work pass or permit that must be updated regularly
Filipino refugees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On humanitarian grounds, they are allowed to stay in the state temporarily but are encouraged to go back to their homeland as soon as it is safe to do so

As most of the previous researchers focused on the migration theories and policies regarding immigration, only a few researchers had conducted studies on immigrants' crime involvement in Sabah. Likewise, study on perception relating to this matter remains very limited. In the 1980s, a perception study conducted by Marquez (1988) found that the Filipinos were blamed by the locals for the increase of crime rate in Sabah. However, the study only focuses on the Filipino immigrants. Apart from Marquez's study, which is clearly outdated, no other study has been found in relation with locals' perception towards immigrants' crime involvement in Sabah. Thus, there is a necessity to investigate locals' perception towards immigrants, especially in term of crimes.

This paper attempts to analyze the locals' perception towards the involvement of immigrants in crimes in Sabah. Furthermore, this study also seeks to identify any misrepresentation or misconception of immigrants by Sabahans, in term of immigrants' involvement in crime.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

Sabah had been chosen as the focus of this study since the state has attracted a large number of immigrants, mainly from the Philippines and Indonesia. The research design used in this study is cross-sectional study.

It is a qualitative research through semi-structured interviews. Primary data were obtained in September 2012 via interview to analyse the interviewees' perception towards immigrants' involvement in crime and the reasons for such perceptions. Interviews results were transcribed as soon as the interviews ended and analysed based on certain themes. Secondary data were gathered from the internet, newspaper clippings as well as reports from previous research.

In this study, 8 interviewees were interviewed. The age range of the interviewees lies between 24 and 51 years old. The interviewees came from various socioeconomic backgrounds.

3.0 FINDINGS

3.1 Locals' Perception towards Immigrants' Involvement in Crimes

All the interviewees agreed that immigrants contributed significantly to crimes that occurred in Sabah. Older interviewees gave a more confident answer that immigrants were significantly involved in crime. For instance, one interviewee said that, "chaos in Kota Kinabalu city are the fault of immigrants, especially the Filipinos".

Furthermore, immigrants were thought to disregard Malaysian law and tend to do anything as they like. For instance, they tend to take matter into their own hand. Some interviewees said that immigrants "are willing to fight or murder to satisfy themselves".

While all of the interviewees viewed immigrants unfavourably, they have a slightly positive perception towards those who they know or get used to after a certain time. However, the perception remains the same for other immigrants. In addition, most of the interviewees tend to favour immigrant workers due to the immigrants' low wage for heavy labours such as construction and agricultural works.

3.1.1 Locals' Perception on Type of Crimes Committed by Immigrants

Most of the interviewees linked immigrants with stealing, counterfeit cigarettes distribution, as well as drug (*syabu*) abuse and distribution. A few of the interviewees also associated immigrants with rape, murder and prostitution. Apart from that, one interviewee also accused immigrants to be involved in black magic that could cause harm to the locals.

While most of the interviewees perceived immigrants as responsible for the establishment of squatter areas near the city or newly constructed sites, they blamed the local authorities more for letting this to occur.

Immigrants were also blamed for the proliferation of street begging, especially when younger kids were involved. One interviewee even mentioned that these immigrants were taking advantages of the sympathy and kindness of Sabahans. Despite that, most interviewees did not think negatively and were more sympathetic towards local beggars, especially towards the elders.

3.1.2 Locals' Fear of Safety

Most of the interviewees agreed that they would be extra cautious with the presence of those whom they perceived as immigrants. However, they were only being fearful of their safety in places known to be immigrants' settlements or immigrants' hangouts.

Nevertheless, the interviewees preferred to choose immigrants as their worker (maids or for other labour works) compared to the locals due to cheaper wage. Contrary to previous responses, they did not feel that their safety is threatened when working with their immigrant workers. Yet, the interviewees still perceived immigrant workers to be untrustworthy.

3.1.3 Reasons of Perception

Most of the interviewees said that they saw immigrants' involvement in crimes such as stealing. Still, all of the interviewees agreed that their perception is mostly influenced by the local media, especially the news on the television, radio, and the newspaper, which they perceived as facts. In addition, some interviewees were advised to be careful with immigrants. Most of the female interviewees also said that their parents or older family members told them to be extra cautious to immigrants in order to avoid being raped by the immigrants.

Moreover, there was a tendency of few older interviewees to use negative connotations, for instance, referring the Filipinos as '*pelarian*' (refugee) and the Indonesians as '*pendatang*' (immigrant) in their daily conversation. These words could describe how negative the local society perceives the immigrants in everything they do.

3.2 Actual Immigrants' Crime Involvement in Sabah

3.2.1 Immigrants' Involvement in Murder, Attempt Murder and Rape

As in Table 3.2.1, it was found that the number of immigrants committing murder or attempt to murder was higher compared to the locals. In term of rape, the number of rape committed by immigrants was not consistently higher than the locals from 2001 to 2003.

Table 3.2.1.1: The Number of Immigrants' Involvement in Murder, Attempt Murder and Rape in Sabah in 2001-2003

Years/Categories	2001		2002		2003	
	Immigrants	Locals	Immigrants	Locals	Immigrants	Locals
Murder	9	6	11	4	7	5
Attempt murder	1	-	1	-	85	-
Rape	16	2	12	23	12	8

**Modified from Wan Hassan and Dollah (2010)*

3.2.2 Immigrants' Involvement in Burglary, Theft and Stealing

As shown in Table 3.2.2, it could be seen that most of the time, the locals tend to steal more compared to immigrants. While the number of immigrants' involvement in this type of crime was high, the number of locals committing this type of crime was even higher.

Table 3.2.2.1: The Number of Immigrants' Involvement in Burglary, Theft and Stealing in Sabah in 2001-2003

Years/Categories Crimes	2001		2002		2003	
	Immigrants	Locals	Immigrants	Locals	Immigrants	Locals
Burglary (Day)	90	56	70	79	50	17
Burglary (Night)	110	205	129	247	110	119
Stealing Lorry/Van	8	147	14	82	8	54
Stealing Vehicle	8	121	8	77	8	80
Stealing Motorcycle/Bicycle	15	91	13	85	11	41
Theft	65	74	50	79	60	3
Other type of stealing	131	828	151	825	121	255

**Modified from Wan Hassan and Dollah (2010)*

3.2.3 Immigrants' Involvement in Drug Abuse and Distribution

According to Wan Hassan and Dollah (2010), from 1,355 drug addicts in 2002 and 3,513 drug addicts in 2003 in Sabah, the majority of them were the locals. While the exact number of immigrants who were drug addicts remains unknown, the number of immigrants' involvement in drug distribution is alarming. In Kota Kinabalu alone, 84 immigrants were caught in 2002 for drug distribution. The number doubled in 2003 where 168 immigrants were caught for the same crime.

4.0 DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, it was found that most interviewees perceived immigrants negatively, especially in relation to crimes.

The statistics tend to substantiate the involvement of immigrants' involvement in crimes. Poverty could be the underlying cause for immigrants' involvement in crime. According to the UNODC (2005), crime is both the cause and consequence of poverty, insecurity and under-development. This could be true in the case of Sabah, where immigrants could be seen as poorer and willing to take jobs with lower wages compared to the locals. According to Wan Hassan and Dollah (2010), in Kota Kinabalu, the immigrants' best income was only about RM20 to RM30 a day. To meet life necessities, immigrants had to engage in whatever activity to earn money (DBKK, n.d.).

As they could not conduct any business or work legally, they tend to commit more crimes. In Pulau Gaya, Kota Kinabalu, poor people were used as tools by wealthy groups to carry out criminal activities involving drugs and smuggling activities (Wan Hassan and Dollah, 2005). For instance, in 2003 alone, it was found that 41.9% or 1,545 foreign

prisoners who have been convicted were earning around only RM250 to RM499 a month (Wan Hassan and Dollah, 2010). Thus, there seems to be a relationship between income earned and the commission of crime.

According to Bersani (2010), neighbourhoods of immigrants' settlement were often characterized by high crime rates, which led to the conclusion that immigration and crime were causally related. In Sabah, many activities could be linked to immigrants in the squatter colonies (Wan Hassan and Dollah, 2005). Those activities include *syabu* smuggling and distribution, prostitution, fake documents and fake money syndicates, as well as goods and arms smuggling from neighbouring countries. Apart from that, water and electricity theft were also rampant in the squatter colonies (Wan Hassan, Omar and Dollah, 2010). This is supported by Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967), who found that violence can become a normal and expected means of dispute resolution in economically disadvantaged areas.

The establishment of entertainment centres in Kota Kinabalu may also cause many foreign women to be involved in immoral activities such as prostitution. As the local women tend to perceive such jobs as disgraceful, it leaves job opportunities for the financially needy immigrants. On this basis, the locals would assume immigrants commit crimes more in order to fulfil their financial needs.

The interviewees' perception of immigrants' involvement in murders is supported by the official statistics. The number of immigrants who committed murder or attempted to murder was higher compared to the locals. A study by Wan Hassan and Dollah (2010) found that there is a clash of cultures between the home countries and host countries. Immigrant population brought in some cultures that could not be accepted by the local community. These cultures may encourage immigrants to disregard Malaysian laws and locals' norms. One of the ways to explain this situation is with the Filipinos' concept of '*martabat*', in which they believe in revenge (East, 2010). Furthermore, the Indonesians are widely known for having dissatisfaction for the failure of forming Indonesia Raya with Sabah (formerly known as North Borneo) and Sarawak. Therefore, Indonesians, especially those who migrated to Sabah, may assume Sabah as their own and disregard Malaysian laws.

In term of rape, the statistics proved that immigrants did contribute to cases in Sabah. However, the number of rape committed by immigrants was not consistently higher than the locals. The locals were involved almost equally in rape cases. Hence, it shows a misperception of the locals towards immigrants' involvement in rape in Sabah, since the immigrants were not the dominance of this crime.

While the locals blamed immigrants for drug abuse and distribution, it was found that more locals were involved in drug abuse. Still, the immigrants were mostly responsible for drug distribution, especially in Kota Kinabalu. Therefore, it is undeniable that immigrants contribute to the drug problem in this state.

However, it would be fairer to not assume every immigrant to be prone to commit crimes. This reasoning was supported by Griswold (2009) who found that immigrants would prefer to stay out of trouble in order to earn more money and send remittances to their home countries.

It is not surprising to find the media as an influence on the locals' perception towards immigrants. For instance, a study by Goodall et al. (1994) found that the media produces stereotypes towards minority migrants as a violent and criminal community. The nightly news, cable television and conservative radio talks spend considerable time discussing the issue, making it to seem serious (Caldwell and Sacks, 2007). Local media also tend to actively publicized crimes committed by immigrants compared to the crimes committed by

locals. This could easily be seen by the numbers of news articles published in daily newspaper on immigrants' crimes involvement.

The locals also learned to perceive immigrants negatively from their surrounding and the society. The sudden influx of Filipino refugees in 1970s and more immigrants from the Philippines and Indonesia later could have made the locals to feel overwhelmed in many ways. Whether they realize it or not, these negative perceptions are then passed to their children in order to protect them, so that they would be more cautious towards any immigrant. In spite of this, the locals had a slightly positive perception towards immigrants who they had recognized for a certain period of time. Therefore, it could be assumed that the negative perception would change if the locals feel secure with the situation.

Furthermore, it seemed that the locals were taking advantage of the immigrants. Some of the locals provide rental service of houses or rooms in the squatter areas as a way to boost their own income (Wan Hassan, Omar and Dollah, 2010). While the locals perceived immigrants as a threat of their safety, they are more willing to hire these immigrants for low wages. Thus, it shows that the negative perception would be kept aside given that those immigrants bring profits to them.

5.0 CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, the locals blamed immigrants for most crimes committed in Sabah, such as murder, rape, stealing, and drug distribution and abuse. Yet, according to statistics, locals were involved almost equally in crime, as more locals were involved in drug abuse and stealing. Hence, there is a misconception that most crimes in Sabah are committed by immigrants. Moreover, the locals felt that their safety is somehow threatened by the existence of immigrants. In contrast, they felt differently with immigrants who they had already known for a certain time. They were more willing to hire immigrants compared to the locals. The media needs to play part in educating the society about the reality of crime in the state instead of producing stereotype. It is hoped that this study will be able to clarify some of the myths regarding immigrants' involvement in crimes in Sabah and raise the public's awareness on this issue.

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