

## PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING OF THE URBAN POOR IN MALAYSIA



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### ABSTRACT

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Similar to other countries, Malaysia is also affected by the social and economic process of urbanization leading to various concerns, particularly among the urban poor. This conceptual literature review draws on the theoretical framework of absolute poverty, relative poverty, and causal attributions in defining and explaining poverty in urban areas. Psychological and social well-being are known as significant aspects of an individual's life. Studies conducted internationally and locally have indicated that several factors of psychological well-being such as mental health, financial constraints, and housing vulnerability, contributes to poor psychological well-being of the urban poor. Additionally, previous research has highlighted that the social well-being of urbanites is impacted due to factors such as social exclusion and lack of social support. However, further studies in Malaysia are needed to emphasize different dimensions of individual psychological and social well-being, such as personal growth, autonomy, social contribution, and social coherence.

**Contribution/ Originality:** This paper presented an insight on how further research is needed regarding the psychological and social well-being among the urban poor in Malaysia, specifically on individuals' psychological functioning. Previous studies have mostly focused on the factors that affect individual well-being and limited research has explored the overall functioning aspect of well-being.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the [United Nations \(2019\)](#) urbanization is a complex socio-economic process whereby the mass population migrates from rural to urban areas. The process involves a variety of changes including profession, lifestyle, culture, and behavior. The approach to governing urban growth is to ensure that all individuals have adequate access to infrastructure and social services such as housing, education, and healthcare, particularly among the urban poor and vulnerable groups ([United Nations, 2019](#)). Essentially, the process of urbanization is to enhance economic growth, reduce poverty, and increase individual development. In general, poverty is defined as a process in which individuals with low income are economically, politically, and psychologically disempowered due to limited and insufficient resources to support their lives ([Panday, 2020](#)). However, urban poverty is not solely associated with low financial income, other factors such as poor housing quality and physical infrastructure, lack of access to healthcare and policing services, and difficulty accessing educational facilities are also considered ([Mathur, 2014](#)). Similar to most countries, Malaysia is also experiencing rapid urbanization resulting in social diseconomies including environmental deterioration, congestion, and unemployment ([Siwar, Ahmed, Bashawir, & Mia, 2016](#)). In

addition, Mok, Gan, and Sanyal (2007) identified that some of the determinants of urban poverty in Malaysia involve lack of individual skills or knowledge, household sizes, race, and regions.

### 1.1. Problem Statement

Essentially, the rising cost of living and reduced economic growth in Malaysia have been a primary concern that has posed challenges among Malaysians, which has intensified due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Bank Negara Malaysia (2021), the lower-income households in Malaysia, or known as the B40 category, are the most affected by the increase in living costs as 35% of their monthly expenses are spent on food and the price increases are largely on food items. Due to spatial price differences, some of the high-cost states are the urban cities, which include Johor, Kuala Lumpur, and Selangor (Simler et al., 2020). Hence, the urban poor population is deemed one of the most vulnerable to the increase in living costs causing individuals to work longer hours or take on multiple jobs, which could risk their personal well-being (Simler et al., 2020).

Consequently, the pandemic and financial pressure have been the main sources that have caused the increase in mental health problems in Malaysia. Raaj, Navanathan, Tharmaselan, and Lally (2021) emphasized how economic burden is significantly related to the increase in mental health prevalence among Malaysians. With the economic struggles, the cultural changes of rapid urbanization are one of the influential factors of various social problems including divorce, increase in alcohol and drug use, and changes in parenting methods (Raaj et al., 2021). Furthermore, it has been highlighted that social cohesion and national unity have been low among Malaysians with an increase in issues such as juvenile crimes and domestic violence (Economic Planning Unit, 2021). Without the appropriate resources, these economic and social issues may inevitably impact individuals' mental health, leading to reduced psychological and social well-being such as low levels of positive relations with others, personal growth, and social integration.

Evidently, there are several issues that have significantly affected the urban poor in Malaysia and their well-being. This conceptual literature review will outline the theoretical aspects related to urban poverty and well-being. It will also include previous research studies conducted internationally and in Malaysia that explored factors of psychological and social well-being among the communities in urban areas and the urban poor. Therefore, the main objective of this literature review is to highlight the current studies and determine the gaps in research regarding the issues impacting the psychological and social well-being of the urban poor in Malaysia.

### 1.2. Urban Poverty Theories

In general, there are various theories to explain the concept of poverty, and the two fundamental definitions of poverty are absolute poverty and relative poverty. Absolute poverty refers to the circumstances in which individuals with low income are not able to afford basic necessities, including food, water, hygiene, clothing, shelter, healthcare, and education (Polat, 2021). Secondly, relative poverty is related to individuals who are living below the average welfare level of society, which can have adverse psychosocial effects such as low self-esteem, feelings of disrespect, and shame (Polat, 2021). Urban poverty is associated with both absolute and relative poverty. However, relative poverty explains and emphasizes how psychological and social factors of the urban poor are negatively impacted. Furthermore, the causal attributions theory demonstrates the perceptions of urban poverty with three dimensions, which include individualistic, fatalistic, and structural attributions (Feagin, 1972). Individualistic refers to personal efforts and beliefs regarding one's situation, fatalistic attribution is related to how individuals believe the situation is due to fate, and structural attribution focuses on the social structures and economic systems of a society (Noviawati, Nuzulia, & Undarwati, 2017; Polat, 2021). Noviawati et al. (2017) study comparing rural and urban communities in Indonesia found that the urban poor community perceived lower individualistic attribution. This could suggest they lack certain skills or knowledge for the different jobs or education that are available in the city. The authors also found that there was no difference in structural attribution as both communities believed they lack support from the

government (Noviawati et al., 2017). Within the urban community, this may indicate that the social and economic structures are inadequate in providing support and assistance for lower-income individuals. Consequently, the effects of relative poverty among the urban poor are also negatively associated with an individual's well-being.

### 1.3. Well-Being Theories

The general concept of well-being is a state in which individuals experience positive feelings and are able to function well within the physical, psychological, social, emotional, and economic aspects of life (Aked, Marks, Cordon, & Thompson, 2008). Based on different well-being theories, Dodge, Daly, Huyton, and Sanders (2012) defined well-being as a state of equilibrium that can be affected by life challenges. Dodge et al. (2012) suggest that an individual's physical, psychological, and social well-being depends on the stability between their resources or skills and the life challenges they face. If one is not equipped with certain resources or coping mechanisms to deal with life adversities, their well-being will be affected. Dodge et al. (2012) definition of well-being is relevant to the urban poor community as they have limited resources for managing their situation and life events. Additionally, well-being has also been categorized as subjective well-being (Diener, Suh, & Oishi, 1997) and objective well-being (Ivković, Ham, & Mijoč, 2014). Subjective well-being refers to an individual's evaluation of life satisfaction, whereas objective well-being is related to an individual's living conditions and economic development. Accordingly, both subjective and objective well-being factors are needed to measure psychological and social well-being among the urban poor.

Psychological well-being is when individuals feel good with positive emotions such as happiness, contentment, interest, affection, engagement, and confidence, which then leads to the ability of functioning effectively to develop their potential (Huppert, 2009). According to Ryff (1989), psychological well-being consists of six dimensions, including self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose of life, and personal growth. The element of self-acceptance is one of the core features of mental health that relates to "self-actualization, optimal functioning, and maturity" (Ryff, 1989). Secondly, maintaining positive, trusting, and warm relationships with others is important in allowing one to possess strong feelings of empathy and affection for others. Thereafter, autonomy refers to living independently and having the freedom to control one's life. Ryff (1989) then stated that the environmental mastery element allows individuals to choose or create their own physical environment that best suits their mental health needs. The fourth dimension is the belief in having a purpose and a sense of meaning to life, which is significant in defining positive mental health. Lastly, the personal growth factor indicated that expanding opportunities and being open to new experiences help individuals to reach their potential in life (Ryff, 1989).

Furthermore, social well-being is another important aspect of well-being as it allows individuals to be connected with others in the community and feel secure within the environment we live in (Dunaeva (2018)). The basic concept of social well-being involves equal accessibility to basic needs such as food, water, living space, healthcare services, and educational services (Dunaeva, 2018). Keyes (1998) has established five dimensions of social well-being, which consist of social acceptance, social actualization, social contribution, social coherence, and social integration. Social acceptance refers to when individuals are able to trust and feel comfortable with others around them. Secondly, the social actualization element highlights how individuals are hopeful and able to recognize their community's potential (Keyes, 1998). Subsequently, social contribution relates to an individual's social values and their responsibility to give back to society. Keyes (1998) then stated that social coherence refers to the way individuals perceive society and their understanding of what happens around them. Lastly, social integration evaluates the quality of an individual's relationship with society and community participation (Keyes, 1998). Essentially, it is significant to explore the psychological and social well-being associated with the urban poor to identify the different factors that are reducing their potential.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The literature review for this article was selected through various database sources, including SCOPUS, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. During the searches, several different combinations of terms were used to find the articles, such as “*well-being urban poor*”, “*psychological wellbeing urban*”, “*social wellbeing urban*”, “*psychological wellbeing urban poor*”, “*social wellbeing urban poor*”, “*mental health urban poor*”, “*psychological wellbeing urban*”, and “*well being urban poor malaysia*”. Based on the searches, the criteria selected were mainly limited to empirical and review journal articles and the search produced various results, for instance, SCOPUS (426 results), JSTOR (5,243 results), Web of Science (1,010 results) and Google Scholar (629,000 results). Relevant articles related to the topic were then selected based on the title and abstract. Additionally, the discussion and findings of the articles were further considered in the selection process. Thus, this review article included a total of 22 journal articles for the literature review on psychological and social well-being that was studied both internationally and domestically.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1. Psychological Well-Being and the Urban Poor

Previous research has emphasized how the urban population is most negatively affected by urbanization factors. Some of the aspects of urbanization that affect individuals' well-being are lack of a healthy diet, pollution from congested urban environments, lack of access to services, and poor housing quality (Dahlberg & McKee, 2018; Kuddus, Tynan, & McBryde, 2020; Zainal, Kaur, Ahmad, & Khalili, 2012). It was also highlighted that factors contributing to poor psychological well-being may exacerbate mental health problems, including depression and anxiety (Hiremath, 2021; Low, Sharif, Ishak, Kozlowski, & Ismail, 2018; Srivastava, 2009; Trivedi, Sareen, & Dhyani, 2008). Cobb-Clark and Kettlewell (2021) explored the psychological, social, and cognitive resources between disadvantaged groups with housing vulnerability and the general population in the urban cities of Australia. Their findings suggested that individuals with improper housing (e.g., homeless, public housing, couch surfing) presented poorer sleep quality, which decreases their psychological resources, including locus of control, conscientiousness, and emotional stability (Cobb-Clark & Kettlewell, 2021). This shows the importance of adequate living space in maintaining psychological well-being for making decisions and the ability to cope with general stress. The results also found that reduced life satisfaction by 12 to 24% is associated with an increase in psychological distress, loneliness, and mental disorders (Cobb-Clark & Kettlewell, 2021). Although the authors mentioned that males are more likely to be vulnerable to homelessness, it is significant to explore this issue among the female population as it may propose different results and highlight the challenges they experience. Considering another study investigating poverty between the urban and rural populations in Brazil, Nepomuceno, Cardoso, Ximenes, Barros, and Leite (2016) findings presented that the urban poor scored a lower average of well-being with a higher prevalence of common mental disorders. In contrast with previous research, the authors found that low income was not a significant factor in low levels of life satisfaction. This may signify that the psychological distress of the urban poor is due to other factors, including social and environmental disadvantages of living in the city.

Furthermore, García, Turnbull, Fuentes, Cruz del Castillo, and Cohen (2019) conducted a systematic review focusing on psychological resilience among the urban poor. Psychological resilience is a concept that links stressors and risks to certain coping mechanisms to manage adversities, which can help with psychological well-being. Being resilient is also a form of protective factor when dealing with challenges and the studies found that it helps with aspects of psychological well-being such as self-confidence, autonomy, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships (García et al., 2019). The review indicates how the urban poor can manage their life circumstances with resilience, however, most of the urban poor may have challenges in being resilient due to the disadvantages of limited access to resources and skills such as education and social support. A qualitative study by Ho et al. (2016) explored the factors associated with psychological well-being among Chinese children in Hong Kong. Their results indicated four elements, including living space, physical health, social life, and the ability to function in school, that affect the

psychological well-being of children from low-income families (Ho et al., 2016). Due to financial constraints and limited resources, the children are more likely to develop lower self-esteem, insecurity, and distress compared to children from high-income families. Additionally, they also found that unhealthy eating habits and lack of physical activity mediate the impacts of poverty and psychological well-being (Ho et al., 2016). Ho et al. (2016) study only measured poverty based on income disparity; however, it is also important to consider other factors of the urban environment, such as inadequate physical infrastructure and poor housing quality. Factors relating to sedentary lifestyle and living space may also contribute to reduced psychological well-being. A research study conducted by Raffaelli, Koller, Cerqueira-Santos, and De Morais (2007) examined the developmental risk factors associated with psychosocial well-being among urban poor youth in Brazil. The three developmental risk factors that were assessed include threatening community, economic deprivation, and family instability. Generally, their findings identified that higher exposure to risks affects psychosocial well-being with gender differences among Brazilian urban youth (Raffaelli et al., 2007). It was found that exposure to dangerous communities and poverty is related to lower psychological well-being of self-esteem, negative emotionality and an increase in substance use behaviors, especially among young males (Raffaelli et al., 2007). This evidently presents factors of urbanization that greatly affect the developmental and psychological well-being of young urban poor communities. The study also highlights the importance of exploring the risks and factors of urban poverty among youth to enable intervention and prevent further decline in well-being. Accordingly, Mondy and Reynolds (2022) investigated a longitudinal study following early childhood intervention and its impact on psychological well-being among individuals from urban poverty in Chicago. The childhood program essentially provided education and thorough family support services to enhance academic achievement (Mondy & Reynolds, 2022). Their findings supported how individuals from urban poor communities who participated in the program presented positive psychological functioning and well-being in later life at the ages of 35 to 37 years old. In relation to Raffaelli et al. (2007) study, Mondy and Reynolds (2022) provided advantageous results, suggesting that intervention among children and youth from urban poor areas is necessary to facilitate their potential and well-being.

Focusing on past studies in urban areas of Malaysia, Low et al. (2018) systematic review concluded that urbanites in Malaysia are at a high risk of mental deterioration due to the relationship between urban settings and stress, with the added stigma regarding mental health. Furthermore, a cross-sectional study in Peninsular Malaysia by Tan and Yadav (2013) found that 12.3% of the urban poor in Kota Damansara, Selangor were more likely to develop depression. The risk of depression is also associated with diverse factors and other common mental health problems, such as anxiety disorders. In contrast to most research, Tan and Yadav (2013) found that the male population in this area presented a higher risk of depression. Although mental health problems can affect any individual, it is necessary to further explore different urban factors such as economic pressure that may affect the male population compared to females. Additionally, they also found that respondents who did not exercise regularly experienced higher levels of depression (Tan & Yadav, 2013). Accordingly, this may suggest that various urban factors might influence the ability to exercise, as individuals may not have either adequate access to physical space and parks or lack of resources and time. Another study based in Kuala Lumpur investigated factors of loneliness and stressful life events in relation to depression among married adults of the urban poor (Muhammad Yamin & Kadir, 2016). Their findings indicated that there is a relationship between loneliness, life events, and depression, with loneliness being a significant predictor of depression. However, the study did not explore which aspects of loneliness predict depression, for instance, social support and marital satisfaction (Muhammad Yamin & Kadir, 2016). Moreover, loneliness can be a factor that relates to an individual's psychological well-being, which could further determine the likelihood of developing depression.

Previous studies in Malaysia focused more on specific factors of urbanization and the mental health of the urban poor in relation to psychological well-being. As mentioned, mental health problems among the urban poor may arise due to an individual's psychological well-being. Thus, measuring psychological well-being is important to

determine the likelihood of experiencing mental health problems. Galea and Vlahov (2005) also stated that spatial segregation of different ethnic and racial groups is a significant factor of health in an urban environment. As Malaysia is a diverse country, it would also be important to explore the effects of urbanization and well-being among the different ethnic groups.

### 3.2. Social Well-Being and the Urban Poor

Social well-being is referred to as the basis of social equality that determines an individual's sense of belonging to a community, interpersonal relationships with others, and accessibility to local support and services (Aked et al., 2008). According to De Snyder et al. (2011), social vulnerability in health is due to the process of urbanization, where social inequality and exclusion are present, particularly among the urban poor. Previous research has highlighted various factors that contribute to the reduced social well-being of the urban poor, such as neighborhood disorder, community support, family support, and social exclusion (Dahlberg & McKee, 2018; García et al., 2019; Kushitor et al., 2018; Nóbrega et al., 2022).

Dahlberg and McKee (2018) conducted a study that focuses on the relationship between social exclusion and psychological well-being among older adults in rural and urban areas of the United Kingdom. There were five domains of social exclusion, which consisted of civic activity, material resources, social relationships, services, and neighborhood. It was found that older adults in urban areas experience higher levels of social exclusion from material resources, civic non-engagement, neighborhood alienation, and neighborhood threat (Dahlberg & McKee, 2018). Consequently, some of the social exclusion indicators of the urban areas, including low social resources, poor access to amenities, and neighborhood alienation, were linked to poorer well-being. Although the study compared the general rural and urban population, their results also highlighted that lower well-being was due to income discomfort and poor access to healthcare among the urban group. Although Dahlberg and McKee (2018) explored social exclusion and psychological well-being, the indicators of social exclusion are also associated with an individual's social well-being. As psychological and social well-being are greatly interdependent, it is important to assess an individual's social well-being factors of support, integration, and sense of belonging in relation to social exclusion. Another study by Nóbrega et al. (2022) examined the psychosocial factors and support networks among older adults with disability in rural and urban Brazil. They found that functional impairment impacted older adults in urban areas, especially those living in subjective poverty and those with financial limitations. The results proposed an association between urban older adults with disability and loneliness, which further impacts their functional decline and increases the likelihood of depressive symptoms (Nóbrega et al., 2022). Evidently, the findings are related to individuals' social well-being and suggest the importance of social support and network among older adults in the urban population with financial constraints and disability. Both studies by Dahlberg and McKee (2018) and Nóbrega et al. (2022) investigated the association of social exclusion, social support, and decreased well-being among older adults in urban areas. This may indicate that further research is needed to explore these factors in relation to social well-being among the younger population in urban areas to prevent poor well-being in later life.

Furthermore, Kushitor et al. (2018) investigated the community and individual sense of trust on psychological distress among Ghanaian urban poor communities. Kushitor et al. (2018) measured the community sense of trust through the perception of neighbors' willingness to trust, protect, and help others, whereas individual trust was measured by their willingness to ask and receive help from neighbors. Their findings portrayed that higher individual sense of trust is associated with lower psychological distress (Kushitor et al., 2018). However, community sense of trust was not significantly associated with psychological distress, suggesting that there may be some form of disorder in the neighborhood. Trust within a community is one of the important aspects of social cohesion, which is related to one's social well-being. Although the study found positive results regarding personal trust and psychological well-being, it is also beneficial to explore other aspects that affect individuals' social well-being and

the relationship with their community, such as social integration. [García et al. \(2019\)](#) review on psychological resilience also included the significance of social support and a sense of belonging among individuals in urban poverty. They discovered that social and government support are needed to address social disorder and exposure to neighborhood violence ([García et al., 2019](#)). Moreover, they mentioned that social engagement and involvement are also advantageous in motivating and implementing self-regulation in dealing with urban poverty situations ([García et al., 2019](#)). This indicates that social well-being factors of integration and support are needed to develop a sense of belonging and relationship with others. Furthermore, [Cox \(2012\)](#) investigated the predictors of life satisfaction and subjective well-being among different poor and extremely poor groups in Nicaragua, including the urban poor. They discovered no significant differences in life satisfaction with neutral levels of satisfaction between rural and urban poor. However, their findings proposed that social support, which consists of sense of belonging, emotional support, and maintaining relationships with friends and family, is a predictor of increased life satisfaction across all groups ([Cox, 2012](#)). This is significant as social support is one of the factors that leads to greater individual social well-being.

In general, the 11th and 12th Malaysia Plan reports have highlighted that there are issues of social cohesion and national unity that may influence individual well-being ([Economic Planning Unit, 2021](#); [Ministry of Economics Affairs, 2018](#)). The report does not address urban poor communities specifically, however, this may suggest that lack of social cohesion in the society can lead to low levels of individual social well-being. Additionally, it is important to explore the causes and factors that are impacting the issues of social cohesion and social interaction within Malaysia. A few studies in Malaysia have also explored some factors of social well-being in relation to the urban poor communities. For instance, [Che-Mohd and Ramli \(2020\)](#) conducted a study investigating the predictors of happiness among the urban poor in six districts of Kedah. The community dimension of social happiness includes elements of dealing with social issues, the attainment of fundamental human needs, and increased chances for social mobility ([Che-Mohd & Ramli, 2020](#)). Highlighting the social determinants of happiness, their main findings suggested that factors of community impact the happiness of the urban poor. It was found that stronger community relationships increase happiness and the population of these districts made efforts to participate in the social activities organized by their local communities ([Che-Mohd & Ramli, 2020](#)). In addition to measuring happiness, future studies are needed to understand the perception of social well-being such as social contribution and social actualization among the urban poor. [Hew, Low, Goh, and Lau \(2020\)](#) conducted a study investigating crime in urban areas and societal well-being, which are more prevalent in lower-income residential areas. Their findings suggested that social problems and crime increase the possibility of residents leaving their neighborhood. Nonetheless, their findings also highlighted that these issues may be prevented through knowledge sharing and social involvement in community gatherings ([Hew et al., 2020](#)). The possible solutions mentioned by the residents indicate that factors of social well-being are essential in [Gopal and Sathyanarayanan \(2021\)](#) reviewed various studies on gender socialization and the capabilities of urban poor women in Malaysia. They highlighted several capabilities that decrease the potential growth and impact urban poor women's abilities such as educational attainment, employability, and social skills. Focusing on the social capabilities, it was found that urban poor women often have limitations in participating in social activities and interactions due to urban dangers such as sexual violence and fear of violence ([Gopal & Sathyanarayanan, 2021](#)). Furthermore, the authors also stated that urban poor women are deprived of adequate education, which can affect their employability. Consequently, the findings highlighting insufficient education and employment may lead to poor social contributions that can greatly influence the social well-being among women of the urban poor. This also suggests that further studies are necessary to understand and elevate the social well-being of the urban poor, especially among women in Malaysia. Overall, there is very little research on social well-being among the urban poor in Malaysia, and the studies mentioned above address specific aspects of social well-being.

## 4. RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

### 4.1. Recommendation for Future Research

Based on the literature reviewed in this article, the majority of the studies focused on specific factors that affect psychological and social well-being, such as living environment, low income, mental health and social exclusion. However, there are still limited studies that explore the psychological functioning and dimensions of individual psychological and social well-being such as positive relations with others, personal growth, autonomy, social contribution, and social coherence that were established by Ryff (1989) and Keyes (1998). Future research should determine the specific dimensions that influence the overall poor psychological and social well-being, especially among the urban poor in Malaysia. Determining low levels of the well-being elements may facilitate in further understanding of individual experiences in relation to the challenges of urban poverty. Additionally, identifying the dimensions of, for instance, low levels of personal growth or social contribution, may help governmental institutions implement the appropriate interventions or programs to enhance individual psychological and social well-being.

### 4.2. Conclusion

Overall, the process of urbanization and the current issues in Malaysia have exacerbated various challenges, including economic burden and mental health, particularly among the urban poor. These challenges have a significant influence on individual psychological and social well-being in how they manage their situation and resolve their issues. Previous literature from other countries and Malaysia has evidently presented how the circumstances and quality of the environment of the urban poor cause greater vulnerability to individuals' psychological and social well-being. However, very few studies in Malaysia have explored the issues of this population in relation to the certain elements of psychological and social well-being. It is important that these concerns are addressed from individual, social, and institutional perspectives to elevate both individual and societal well-being.

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