

Us vs Them? A Review on Migration and security Issues in Sabah

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ABSTRACT

Migration is increasingly discussed as a security issue in Sabah, especially in urban areas with large undocumented populations. Policymakers and researchers often associate migrants with rising crime, overcrowding, and pressure on public services. Yet questions remain about how these security views are formed, and whether they reflect real-life situations or assumptions that label migrants as security threats. This article reviews existing studies, media coverage, and policy discussions on migration and security in Sabah. The review identifies recurring patterns of fear, competition, and social distance that continue to shape public perception and official responses. It also shows the lack of community-level perspectives in current debates. Drawing from security studies and human security approaches, this article suggests a more balanced understanding of migration one that does not view it solely as a threat, but as part of shared experiences and mutual interdependence between migrants and local residents.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by integrating security, economic, and social perspectives to explain how “Us vs. Them” perceptions develop in Sabah. The paper’s primary contribution is documenting an issue that remains under-examined in Malaysia, offering one of the few studies that highlights community-level implications of migration discourse.

1. Introduction

Migration has long shaped Sabah’s demographic and urban landscape, particularly in areas such as Likas where undocumented Filipino communities are concentrated. These populations, often residing in informal settlements, have become central to public debates on urban congestion, crime, and pressure on public services. Over time, migration has been increasingly framed as a security issue that not only in terms of border control, but also through emotional responses, spatial anxieties, and symbolic boundaries that define who belongs and who does not.

The 2013 Lahad Datu incursion remains a pivotal moment in Sabah’s collective memory, reinforcing the idea that migrants are potential threats. Media framing and policy

discourse frequently link undocumented migration to insecurity, even though there is limited empirical evidence of direct harm. Analyses of news reports (Ismayatim, Srinuwass & Jauhari, 2018) and political discourse studies (Anom, Chang & Zawawi, 2014) show that aspects like visibility and symbolic representation often drive public unease more than actual criminal events. These studies suggest that migration in Sabah is perceived not only through legal status, but through emotionally charged narratives and symbolic representations often shaped by media and political discourse rather than empirical evidence.

Despite extensive literature on migration in Sabah, existing studies remain fragmented. Some focus on legal categorization (Azizah Kassim, 2009), others on economic contributions (Ajis et al., 2014), and others on media discourse (Soo, 2024). Yet few synthesize these perspectives to explain how public perception is formed and sustained. Moreover, community-level insights are largely absent, leaving a gap in understanding how locals interpret and respond to migrant presence in everyday life.

This article addresses that gap by reviewing existing literature, media coverage, and policy discussions on undocumented migration in Sabah, with a specific focus on Filipino communities in Sabah. Using a thematic approach, the review organizes insights into three interrelated domains that are security, economic, and social including critiques on how these domains shape public attitudes. Framed through the lens of “Us vs. Them,” the article explores how symbolic boundaries between citizens and migrants are reinforced through fear, labeling, and contested notions of belonging.

Drawing from human security theory and symbolic boundary analysis, this review argues that migration in Sabah is not merely a legal or economic issue, but a deeply social and emotional one. By synthesizing diverse studies and identifying conceptual gaps, the article offers a more balanced understanding of migration, one that recognizes both vulnerability and interdependence between migrants and local communities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining Migrants and the ‘Us vs. Them’ Perspective

Migration studies often use terms such as migrant, refugee, and illegal immigrant interchangeably, yet each carries distinct meanings and social implications. In the context of Sabah, these labels have become deeply politicised and emotionally charged. Scholars like Azizah Kassim (2009) and Sadiq (2005) argued that the term migrant generally refers to individuals who move from one place to another, temporarily or permanently, in search of safety or better living conditions. Meanwhile, undocumented or illegal immigrants are those who enter or reside in a country without valid documentation or who overstay their permitted duration, as defined by Malaysia’s Immigration Act 1959/63.

However, in everyday discourse, these legal distinctions often blur. Terms such as “*pendatang*”, “*pilak*”, and “*palauh*” are commonly used in Sabah that reflect social attitudes more than legal categories (Soo, 2024; Azizah Kassim, 2009). They frame migrants as outsiders and reinforce a symbolic boundary between “*us*” (the locals) and “*them*” (the newcomers). This boundary is not only legal but also cultural, shaping how communities understand belonging, safety, and fairness.

In this article, the term of migrant refers to any person who moves across borders for economic or safety reasons, regardless of legal status. The term undocumented migrant refers specifically to those without valid documentation due to expired permits, administrative barriers, or lack of recognition under Malaysia's immigration system. This distinction acknowledges the complexity of Sabah's migration landscape, where many individuals fall between legal and illegal status because of bureaucratic delays, inherited statelessness, or historical displacement.

By situating these definitions within the "Us vs. Them" framework, this review highlights how perceptions of legality and belonging shape community attitudes toward migrants. It highlights that public debates about migration are not only about law enforcement but also about identity, trust, and social coexistence between them.

2.2. Framing Migration through Symbolic Boundaries and Human Security

To understand how migration is perceived in Sabah, this review draws on two interrelated conceptual lenses: symbolic boundary theory and the human security framework. These perspectives help explain why migrants are often viewed not just as legal subjects, but as emotional and symbolic outsiders.

First, the concept of symbolic boundaries, as developed by [Lamont and Molnár \(2002\)](#), refers to the social distinctions that communities use to categorize people and define belonging. In Sabah, this is evident in the everyday use of emotionally charged terms such as *pendatang*, *pilak*, and *palauh*. Although these labels are not formal legal categories, they carry deep social meaning and reinforce the divide between "us" (local citizens) and "them" (migrants). These terms are frequently used in media, policy discourse, and casual conversation, shaping public attitudes regardless of actual migrant behaviour or legal status ([Soo, 2024](#); [Azizah Kassim, 2009](#)).

In parallel, the human security framework offers a broader understanding of safety that goes beyond traditional state-centric definitions. Rather than focusing solely on border control or legal documentation, human security emphasizes emotional, economic, and social dimensions of vulnerability ([United Nations Development Programme, 1994](#); [Acharya, 2020](#)). In the context of Sabah, ethnographic and media studies ([Allerton, 2020](#); [Soo, 2024](#)) show that public discomfort often arises from the visibility of migrant communities in urban spaces rather than from direct threats or criminal activity. This suggests that insecurity is socially constructed, shaped by perception, memory, and discourse rather than empirical harm.

Taken together, these frameworks reveal that migration in Sabah is interpreted through a complex interplay of legal ambiguity, emotional response, and symbolic exclusion. The "Us vs. Them" divide is not merely rhetorical, it reflects deeper anxieties about identity, fairness, and control. By applying these lenses, this review moves beyond descriptive accounts and offers a critical interpretation of how public perception is formed and why it persists even in the absence of direct conflict.

3. Method

This article adopts a thematic review approach to examine existing literature on migration and security in Sabah. The selection of materials was guided by relevance to three main dimensions that are security, economic, and social reflecting the intersections

that shape public perception toward migrants. The reviewed sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and media analyses published between 2005 and 2024, with particular attention to studies involving Filipino migrants and undocumented populations in urban areas such as Likas.

Rather than following a systematic protocol, the review identifies recurring themes and conceptual patterns across studies to reveal how migration is discussed, perceived, and securitized within Sabah's public discourse. This approach allows for a more interpretive and contextual understanding of migration, focusing not on measuring frequency but on exploring how narratives and assumptions are constructed and sustained.

4. Findings

This section organizes the literature into three interrelated themes that are security, economic, and social. Each of these contribute into how migrants are perceived by local communities in Sabah. These themes do not operate in isolation; rather, they shape and reinforce public attitudes, emotional responses, and symbolic boundaries between citizens and noncitizens.

4.1. Security Perceptions

In Sabah, the issue of migration has become inseparable from the idea of security, as conversations about migrants often revolve around control, protection, and perceived threats. Much of the public and policy discourse links undocumented migration to rising crime, border vulnerability, and social instability. Scholars such as [Dollah et al. \(2016\)](#) and [Azizah Kassim \(2009\)](#) observe that this association is rooted in decades of historical tension surrounding cross-border movement between the southern Philippines and Sabah. The influx of migrants any undocumented migrants as well has been framed as a challenge to sovereignty and internal order, giving rise to securitized narratives that emphasize control, surveillance, and exclusion. These narratives have been reinforced by political rhetoric and media portrayals that often equate undocumented presence with threat.

Security measures such as ESSCOM (Eastern Sabah Security Command) and recurrent crackdowns on "PATI" (*Pendatang Asing Tanpa Izin*) demonstrate how migration is governed primarily through enforcement. While intended to curb crime and illegal entry, these measures also construct migrants as potential security risks rather than as economic contributors or community members. [Mahalingam \(2022\)](#) notes that such approaches often blur the line between genuine security concerns and social prejudice, as fear of insecurity becomes intertwined with local perceptions of ethnicity and legality. Consequently, public anxiety toward migrants tends to grow not from direct experiences of harm but from institutional and media framings that continuously associate migration with disorder.

Scholars such as [Dollah and Abdullah \(2018\)](#) and [Dollah et al. \(2016\)](#) explain that Sabah's porous maritime borders and bureaucratic weaknesses complicate consistent policy enforcement, resulting in fluctuating numbers of undocumented residents. Instead of resolving insecurity, these dynamics sustain a cycle of policing and marginalization that deepens mistrust between locals and migrants. At the community level, this manifests as social distance, suspicion, and the everyday reproduction of the "Us vs. Them" boundary where locals equate security with exclusion, and migrants internalize fear of authority.

Taken together, the literature suggests that security discourses surrounding migration in Sabah are less about concrete threats and more about the management of uncertainty and identity. By treating migration as a problem of control, rather than coexistence, these narratives obscure the structural roots of insecurity that are poverty, displacement, and unequal access to resources. The emphasis on protection of borders and order thus reinforces a securitized perception that shapes not only policy priorities but also the emotional geography of belonging in Sabah.

4.2. Economic Impact and Labor Perceptions

Beyond security narratives, migration in Sabah is also deeply rooted in economic realities that reveal both dependence and division. Migrant workers especially from the Philippines and Indonesia form the backbone of Sabah's informal and low-wage sectors, filling jobs that locals are generally unwilling to take due to their demanding and poorly paid nature. [Azizah Kassim \(2009\)](#) and [Ajis et al. \(2014\)](#) emphasize that these migrants dominate what are often referred to as the "3D jobs" namely dirty, dangerous, and difficult particularly in agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and domestic work. Their labour sustains Sabah's key economic sectors, contributing significantly to productivity and local livelihood chains.

However, this economic contribution is rarely acknowledged in public or policy discourse. Instead, migration is often viewed through a zero-sum lens, where migrant labour is perceived to threaten local employment and suppress wages ([Ajis et al., 2014](#)). Public frustration over limited job opportunities, low wages, and rising living costs often fuels resentment toward migrant communities, even though such conditions are shaped by broader structural issues rather than direct competition. As [Azizah Kassim and Mat Zin \(2011\)](#) observe, many migrants shift between legal and undocumented status due to expired work permits or bureaucratic delays, blurring distinctions between "legal" and "illegal" workers and complicating enforcement.

[Lasimbang et al. \(2016\)](#) further note that despite their vital contributions, migrants remain excluded from formal protections such as social security and health benefits. This exclusion leaves them vulnerable to exploitation, wage theft, and hazardous working conditions, reinforcing a cycle of precarity. The result is an uneven dependency where the local economy quietly relies on migrant labour while public narratives frame them as outsiders or burdens. This paradox sustains the "Us vs. Them" divide: migrants are simultaneously essential yet unwelcome, visible in their labour but invisible in recognition.

Overall, the literature shows that economic perceptions of migration in Sabah are entangled with issues of inequality, policy restriction, and social prejudice. Rather than being understood as contributors to development, migrants are often portrayed as symbols of economic strain. This highlights a persistent disjuncture between material reality and public perception one that continues to shape the socio-economic fabric of Sabah's urban communities.

4.3. Social Visibility and Everyday Discourse

Beyond security and economic considerations, migration in Sabah is deeply shaped by social perceptions that influence how communities interact and define belonging. The

coexistence of locals and migrants, particularly Filipino communities, has produced a complex web of acceptance, tension, and mutual dependency. Studies such as [Gunggut et al. \(2006\)](#) and [Azizah Kassim \(2009\)](#) note that long-term settlement, intermarriage, and shared livelihoods have blurred distinctions between “local” and “migrant.” However, despite these integrations, public narratives often maintain rigid social boundaries. Migrants are frequently portrayed as outsiders “*pendatang*” or “foreigners” whose presence disrupts social order or dilutes cultural identity.

Media representation plays a powerful role in sustaining these divisions. [Soo \(2024\)](#) observes that local media often frames migration through themes of criminality, overcrowding, and disorder, reinforcing public unease and moral panic. Such portrayals rarely highlight everyday coexistence or shared struggles, instead emphasizing difference and danger. These narratives not only shape public sentiment but also legitimize exclusionary policies and community prejudice. Consequently, social attitudes toward migrants often shift between practical acceptance and quiet resentment, as they are welcomed for their work but rarely seen as part of the local community.

The persistence of stereotypes and stigmatization reflects a broader “Us vs. Them” mentality, where social distance becomes both a psychological and spatial reality. Migrants, particularly those without legal documentation, often reside in informal settlements or on the outskirts of urban areas, which further highlights their separation and visibility as outsiders. This segregation, as [Azizah Kassim and Mat Zin \(2011\)](#) argue, is not only physical but also symbolize the marks of who belongs and who does not. Locals’ perceptions of safety, cleanliness, and community harmony are often intertwined with these spatial divisions, creating invisible barriers to social integration.

However, the literature also hints at spaces of everyday negotiation and adaptation. In markets, schools, and shared public spaces, interactions between locals and migrants often reveal subtle forms of acceptance, cooperation, and cultural blending. These everyday interactions challenge common narratives of fear and division, showing that social boundaries are not rigid but are constantly reshaped through daily experiences. However, these more detailed and human realities are still rarely explored in existing research, which often focuses on broad security and policy issues instead of everyday human experiences.

Overall, the social side of migration in Sabah shows the tension between how people see migrants and how they live close to them. It reveals that even when locals and migrants share the same spaces, they can still remain socially divided. This situation highlights how physical closeness does not always lead to real understanding, trust, or acceptance between the two groups. The “us versus them” mindset continues not only because of the differences between groups but also because of the repeated stories and messages that keep those divisions alive. Changing these perceptions requires shifting the way migrants are seen from being viewed as threats or temporary outsiders to being recognized as active members of Sabah’s shared urban life and community.

To summarise the key studies discussed in this review, [Table 1](#) presents an overview of previous research on migration in Sabah. The table outlines each author’s focus, the main findings, and the limitations that shape the current understanding of migration and security issues in the state.

Table 1: Table of Reviewed Studies

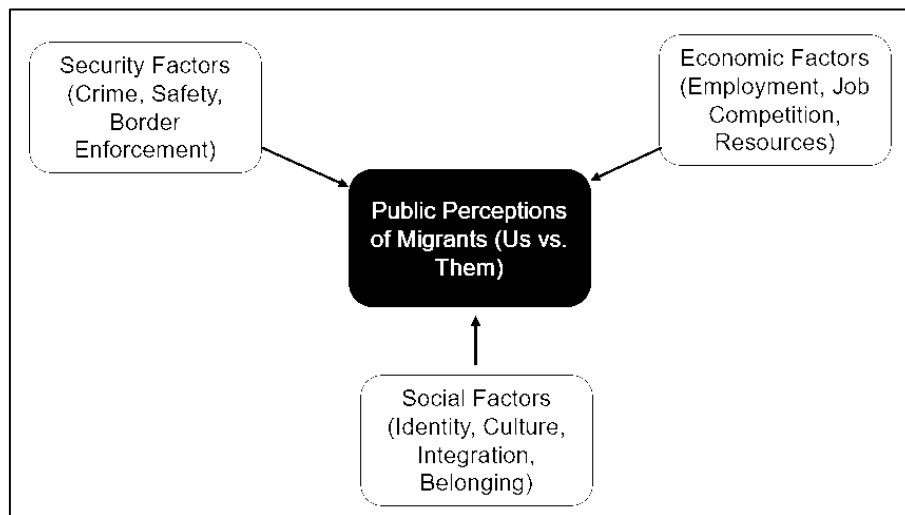
Author's	Study Focus	Key Findings	Gaps and Limitations
Azizah Kassim (2009)	Legal status and migrant categorization in Sabah	Highlights long-standing presence of Filipino and Indonesian migrants; links migration to socioeconomic demand and weak border control	Overgeneralizes categories; lacks attention to emotional and social perceptions
Sadiq (2005)	Migrant visibility and public anxiety	Explains porous borders, documentation issues, and political implications	Dated analysis; context has changed significantly due to evolving policies and security frameworks
Lasimbang et al. (2016)	Access to healthcare and welfare among migrants	Shows inequality in service access and social protection gaps	Does not connect exclusion to broader perception issues
Dollah & Abdullah (2018)	Structural causes of insecurity	Insecurity stems from weak governance and infrastructure, not migrant behavior	Macro-level focus; lacks insight into how locals interpret insecurity in daily life
Ajis et al. (2014)	Migrant documentation and informal labor	Migrants face administrative barriers that push them into undocumented status	Descriptive focus; doesn't explore how locals perceive undocumented workers
Soo (2024)	Media portrayal of migrants	Identifies how media reinforces stereotypes and moral panic	Strong on discourse; weak on connection to policy impact or lived community experience
Azizah Kassim & Mat Zin (2011)	Policy and legality of foreign workers	Explores challenges in enforcement and fluid migration status	Discusses legality, not social integration; limited on perceptual effects

Table 1 has combined collective insights from the reviewed studies reveal recurring intersections among security, economic, and social dimensions of migration. These relationships are summarized in the conceptual framework below ([Figure 1](#)), which illustrates how these factors interact to shape public perceptions and sustain the “Us vs. Them” dynamic in Sabah.

The conceptual framework illustrates how migration in Sabah is shaped by the intersecting influences of security, economic, and social factors. These dimensions are not separate, rather, they interact continuously to form and reinforce public perceptions of migrants. Security narratives focused on crime, legality, and control often intersect with economic realities of dependence and competition, while both are mediated through

social attitudes of acceptance, fear, and exclusion. Together, these forces sustain a perception divide between locals and migrants, sum up in the “Us vs. Them” mindset. This synthesis suggests that migration issues in Sabah cannot be understood solely through enforcement or policy lenses but must be viewed as part of a wider social process involving identity, livelihood, and belonging. Recognizing these interconnections offers a pathway toward reframing migration discourse beyond threat-based narratives and toward a more inclusive, human-centered understanding of security and coexistence.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of migration and perception in Sabah



5. Conclusion

Migration in Sabah remains a complex and evolving issue that is shaped by the continuous interaction of security, economic, and social dimensions. The literature reviewed in this paper shows that while migrants, particularly those from the Philippines, have contributed significantly to local development, public and policy narratives tend to focus more on issues of legality, control, and security. These narratives have gradually reinforced a persistent sense of division, often described as the “Us vs. Them” perception, where migrants are seen as outsiders rather than members of a shared community.

By bringing together insights from different thematic perspectives, this review emphasizes the importance of viewing migration not merely as a policy or enforcement concern but as a broader social process that involves identity, livelihood, and belonging. A more inclusive understanding of migration requires recognising the realities faced by migrants and the roles they play in sustaining Sabah’s economic and cultural life. Reframing security to include human and community dimensions can encourage more empathetic and effective policymaking. In the long term, the sustainability of coexistence in Sabah depends on how both locals and migrants can see themselves as part of an interdependent social fabric built on trust, equity, and mutual respect.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This article is based solely on a review of existing literature, policy documents, and media sources. It does not involve human participants, primary data collection, or the use of personal information. Therefore, ethical approval and informed consent to participate were not required for this study.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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