

Is Yishun jinxed - or merely misunderstood?

Statistics show that the town might not be the hotbed of crime many may think it is. Talking Point investigates.

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SINGAPORE: Yishun has developed a reputation for bad news – home to mall stabbings, brothel raids, civilians trying to attack policemen with stun guns, as well as cat killers, among other incidents.

So much so that it became a meme, with YouTube spoof videos and a hot topic on which to sound off. "Build a wall around Yishun," says one meme, while one Twitter account has been set up dedicated to weird happenings there.

But does the town deserve this reputation?

Current affairs programme Talking Point investigated, and found that Yishun might not be the hotbed of crime many may think it is. There are other neighbourhoods with a higher ratio of preventable crimes, specifically snatch theft, robbery, housebreaking, theft of motor vehicle and outrage of modesty.

In 2015, Orchard's crime rate was 11.7 percentage points higher than Yishun's. And out of Singapore's 28 estates, Yishun ranked 13th, behind the likes of Changi, Geylang, Rochor and Marine Parade.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Leong Chan-Hoong, who studies neighbourhood profiles in Singapore, has an explanation for why Yishun is perceived as a place with a high crime rate, belying the national statistics.

"Yishun has one of the lower national income (profiles) compared to other housing estates. And in general, people tend to perceive lower-income neighbourhoods as associated with higher crime rates, for example," he said.

"A place like Marine Parade has a lot of landed properties and condominiums, a lot of well-to-do residents, but at the same time, it also has quite a number of rental units. But the whole estate in general gives the impression that it's a reasonably well-to-do neighbourhood."

The Devil's Ring

In contrast, the negative perception of Yishun has been a trending topic for some time now. There is even a blog dedicated to the weird happenings in the town.

Blogger Lhu Wen Kai, who has been compiling news articles of the unfortunate events that have happened in his estate for the past 10 years, agrees that every town in Singapore has its fair share of bizarre incidents.

But he is amazed at the "frightening consistency" of such incidents in Yishun.

His research for his blog The Yishun Dream includes using Google Maps to plot the locations of those events, and he found that most of them occurred within the area enclosed by Yishun Ring Road, which he nicknamed The Devil's Ring.

"There was this case of a bank executive who tried to rob a bank with a toy pistol, and he got cold feet in the end," he cited.

He had started his blog mostly to practise web design, but with the narrative of Yishun as a "cursed town" – in his words – gaining traction at the time, his blog began to garner more and more reactions.

Cat Abuse Cases

Of late, the impression is that Yishun is full of cat abusers, judging by the 41 media reports on cat abuse cases there in the last five years, far more than in any other estate.

However, the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority says that of the 18 per cent of alleged cat cruelty cases in Yishun between 2015 and last month (out of 451 cases nationwide), only 5 per cent - or four cases - were actual cruelty cases.

Most of the other cases were the result of accidents or attacks by stray dogs.

Cat Welfare Society executive director Laura Ann Meranda believes that the current perception of Yishun may have stemmed from cat volunteers in the area being "very gung-ho" about fighting abuse.

"When a case is actually reported by the town council, or even by any residents, the first thing is (the volunteers) swiftly come in to report the case and then they go to social media asking for help," she said.

While this may reinforce the negative image of Yishun, she hopes the volunteers continue to give voice to animal rights. She added: "It's only fair that they still come forward."

There is now a standard operating procedure to ensure that cat carcasses are not disposed of until the authorities can conduct a proper on-site investigation, shared Member of Parliament (Nee Soon) and animal rights advocate Louis Ng.

When he became a MP for the constituency in 2015, he realised that there had been a spate of cat killings for years, and what was needed was to "bring all these cases to the forefront" to raise awareness.

So did we create a hype? Yes. Was it intentional? Yes as well... It was important in terms of addressing this issue and really addressing the root cause.

The number of cases have dropped in the last two years, he noted.

Making Yishun Great Again

Whether there has been bad publicity, extensive social media coverage or preconceived notions, much of Yishun's reputation has also been a made-up phenomenon.

Filmmaker Mohd Ridhwan Mohd Yunos, a Yishunite since birth and the creator of the video Yishun Resident Evil, a spoof of a video game about a deadly virus and zombies, views the send-ups of the town as just entertainment.

“So I don’t really get affected by all these comments about the negative parts of Yishun,” he said.

There are others, however, who hope to counter the negative headlines of the past. The Make Yishun Great Again hashtag started during United States President Donald Trump’s campaign last year – a takeoff of his promise to Make America Great Again.

One team of individuals even put together hundreds of “care packages” of food and drinks in June and delivered them to an entire block, to soften Yishun’s image.

Each package came with this note: “Hello neighbour, in the light of all the Yishun news that has been making headlines, a small team of individuals passionate about making good vibes decided to come together to surprise a whole block overnight ...”

Ms Dawn Lim did not think Yishun deserved to have a bad reputation, so she and her friends came up with this idea. It soon sparked the media coverage they wanted.

She said: “There's a lot to be done, but this was a great first step to make Yishun great again.”