METRO MANILA AT FIFTY:
POVERTY, DENSITY, AND GOVERNANCE

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Abstract: Metro Manila at Fifty highlights the contradictions between economic progress and persistent inequality. Despite having the lowest poverty incidence in the Philippines at only 1.1% of families in 2023, the urban poor continue to face overcrowding, precarious housing, and stigmatisation in times of crisis (Philippine Statistics Authority 2024, 12–13). This study examines the intersection of poverty, density, and governance through official statistics and qualitative accounts from disaster risk and political studies. Findings reveal that official poverty data often conceal lived vulnerabilities, particularly among informal settlers whose experiences are shaped by overcrowding and inadequate services (Villarama et al. 2021, 3–4). Political dynasties remain dominant in the governance structure, creating barriers to inclusive development and citizen participation (Balanquit et al. 2017, 120–125; Mendoza et al. 2022, 6–7). Evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic further illustrates how high-density, impoverished areas suffered disproportionately due to weak social protection and moral labelling of communities as "pasaway" (Eadie et al. 2025, 8–9). These results underscore that poverty in Metro Manila is not solely an issue of economic deprivation but also of governance and spatial vulnerability. The study concludes that reforms in governance, improved measures of deprivation, and stronger citizen engagement are essential to achieve an inclusive and resilient future for the metropolis.

Keywords: Metro Manila, poverty, density, governance, inequality

INTRODUCTION

Metro Manila, also known as the National Capital Region, is the political, economic, and cultural centre of the Philippines. It was

formally declared a metropolitan area on 24 November 1975, by virtue of Presidential Decree No. 824, primarily to harmonise the urban governance of its constituent cities and municipalities. Yet the urban character of Manila draws some of its roots from far before this. Historical records tell that, by the 10th century, the polity of Tondo and the Kingdom of Maynila were thriving centres of trade and politics. With the advent of Spanish colonisation in 1571, the city was carved into the colonial capital, marked by a distinct urban planning paradigm around the walls of Intramuros and church establishments. The infrastructures that would cement Manila's transition into a modern metropolis were foisted upon her through the American regime. The political history of the region since then has remained largely under the control of elite and dynastic families, which continue to play an important role in governance structures today (Balanquit et al. 2017, 118–120). Currently, Metro Manila is the most densely populated urban area in the Philippines.

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (2024, 14–15), despite having only 1.1% of families living in poverty in the NCR compared to 15.5% nationally in 2023, this data does not fully consider the lived deprivation from being poor in informal settlements. Studies conducted with urban poor communities during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed multiple vulnerabilities, from lack of access to clean water and healthcare to being labelled as "pasaway" (disobedient) when lockdown orders were violated (Eadie et al. 2025, 9–10). This paradox highlights that while Metro Manila appears affluent and modern, issues of inequality and governance capacity remain unresolved. This research, therefore, asks three important questions: (1) How have historical narratives shaped poverty, density, and governance in Metro Manila? (2) In what ways do political, social, and spatial connections influence the lived experiences of urban poor communities amidst overcrowding and deprivation? (3) Which governance reforms are most urgent to address poverty and inequality in high-density areas of Metro Manila, and how can citizen participation strengthen these reforms?

METHODOLOGY

Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, this study combined a review of existing literature with secondary datasets. Official statistics on poverty incidence and population density were obtained from the Philippine Statistics Authority's 2023 report on family and individual poverty (Philippine Statistics Authority 2024, 5–7). Qualitative studies from publications were also reviewed: Balanquit et al. (2017, 117–142) examined political dynasties of Metro Manila using electoral data (1988–2016); Mendoza et al. (2022, 4–8) unpacked the relationship between dynastic politics and poverty alleviation; Villarama et al. (2021, 2–5) investigated the spatial distribution of COVID-19 positive cases in relation to the density of impoverished communities; and Eadie et al. (2025, 6–11) conducted in-depth interviews with street dwellers to explore experiences of vulnerability during the pandemic. For the sake of analysis, these studies were thematically coded under three interrelated domains: (1) poverty and deprivation, (2) density and spatial vulnerability, and (3) governance and political structures.

RESULTS

Colonisation under Spain and America formed centralised structures of governance that have ejected to its current metropolitan structure. Balanquit et al. (2017, 120–126) demonstrate that the prevalence of political dynasties in the region is high, particularly in Quezon City, Manila, and Caloocan, where families from dynasties hold multiple offices at the same time or over multiple generations. Mendoza et al. (2022, 6–7) showed that areas of high concentrations of dynasties experienced weaker poverty reduction, suggesting elite capture of resources. Second, poverty statistics show contrasts. Though the NCR is the official lowest family poverty incidence in 2023 (1.1%) compared to the national 15.5% rate, studies suggest this as an inadequate measure

of vulnerabilities from informal settlements (Philippine Statistics Authority 2024, 13–15). Villarama et al. (2021, 3–4) have also shown that COVID-19 cases mostly occurred in poor, high-density areas, where infection clusters were statistically distributed among residents living in cramped conditions. Third, qualitative evidence articulates social-political exclusion and stigmatisation. Eadie et al. (2025, 8–10) document that urban poor communities were framed as "pasaway" during lockdown enforcement, with residents facing precarious decision-making between bodily hunger and governance sanctions. However, community solidarity led to resilience through community networks and NGO operations that supported livelihoods, while governance crises remained an issue of equity.

Table 1. Metro Manila Cities: Poverty and Density Data

City	Population (2020 Census)	Area (km²)	Population Density (per km²)	Poverty Incidence of Families (2023, %)
Manila	1854974	42.88	43252	1.5
Quezon City	2960048	161.11	18376	1.2
Caloocan	1661584	55.8	29770	1.4
Makati	629616	27.36	23016	0.8
Pasig	803159	31.46	25529	0.9

The demographic and poverty characteristics of selected cities in Metro Manila are presented in Table 1. The population density in the city of Manila is the highest, with over 43,000 individuals living in every square kilometre, an indicator of severe overcrowding, in space-vulnerable land. Caloocan has a close population density, with nearly 30,000 individuals/kms² occupancy, while Quezon City is the most populous city in Metro Manila, but has the lowest density, due to its overall large size of its land area. Interestingly, poverty incidence does not correlate with the population density of an area. For example, the poverty incidence rate in Manila (1.5%) and Caloocan (1.4%) is higher than that of Makati (0.8%) and Pasig (0.9%). This indicates that poverty rates in Metro Manila, like or

density, do not occur as a result of urban density, and that other, more heuristic economic, governance, social, and quality of services structure impact economic poverty.

Figure 1. Population Density vs. Poverty Incidence
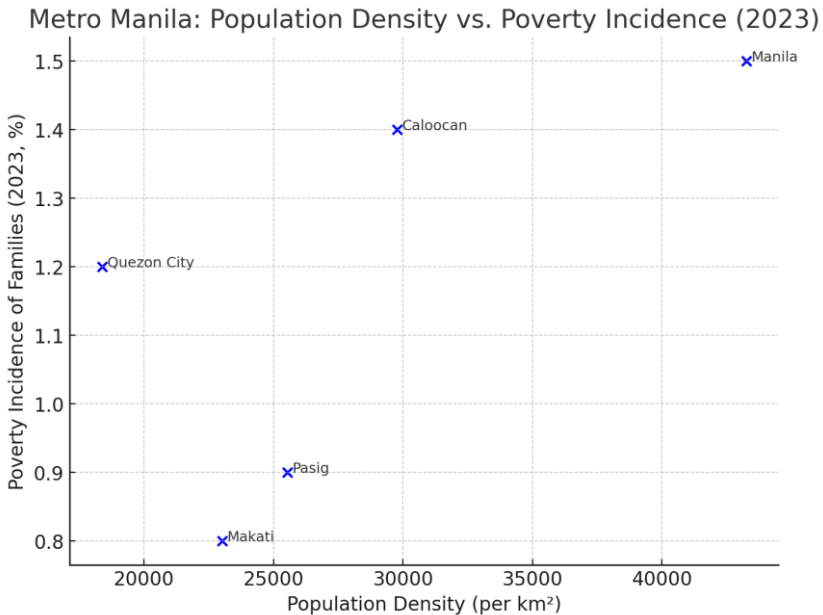

Figure 1 depicts the relationship between population density and poverty incidence across the same cities. The scatterplot illustrates that density and poverty are not naturally related in a simple linear form. Manila and Caloocan show that while high density can be associated with relatively higher poverty incidence, Makati shows that a dense urban environment can also reflect a low poverty incidence, relative to other cities, assuming that economic bases are robust, and governance is efficient. The arrangement of the points illustrates that poverty incidence in Metro Manila is mediated by factors such as employment and housing, and local government performance, not poverty density alone.

In general, the data being presented in the table and figure reflect that poverty in Metro Manila is complex and multifaceted. Density fuels stress on housing, health, and infrastructure, but ultimately its impact will depend on the relative strength of the local economy and governance capacity. For example, indicative of the fact that presumptive high-density makes poverty reduction possible, are cities such as Makati and Pasig, where more established business districts (and thus higher local revenue) are present. Poverty is exacerbated even in neighbourhoods in cities such as Manila and Caloocan with fewer resources and weaker governance systems. These findings support the argument that any efforts to address poverty in Metro Manila will require not just urban planning to address density, but also systemic reform across governance and social protection to ensure that development is inclusive.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that the inequities present in Metro Manila cannot be understood through poverty rates alone, but must be comprehended through temporal legacies and political systems (Balanquit et al. 2017, 130–135). Political dynasties reinforce the centralisation of power, diminishing democratic participation and inhibiting responsiveness in governance (Mendoza et al. 2022, 7–8). Significant population density, combined with a lack of adequate infrastructure, amplifies socio-ecological vulnerability, as evidenced during the pandemic (Villarama et al. 2021, 4–5). Moreover, the moral othering of the poor and labelling them as "pasaway" demonstrates how governance practices can disaffirm or displace vulnerable groups (Eadie et al. 2025, 9–10). Solutions to such inequities must involve reforms to sectoral governance, investment in equitable housing and infrastructure, and nationwide crisis responses that recognise the dignity and agency of all citizens.

In summary, Metro Manila at fifty serves as an indicator of national development, as well as a reminder of unresolved disparity

issues. While official statistics depict relative wealth, the daily lives of residents in the poorest neighbourhoods expose vulnerabilities that deter resilience and equity. Governance reform is needed, especially reforming political dynasties, broadening participation processes, and reforming anti-poverty programs that take into account urban density and informality. "Competitive" development needs to include social protection, equitable urban planning, and inclusive capacity/protection from crisis so that Metro Manila evolves into a metropolis that is economically competitive and socially and racially just.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Given the qualitative nature of understanding lived experiences in Metro Manila, semi-structured interviews are an appropriate research instrument. Below is a sample interview guide adapted from Eadie et al. (2025):

1. Can you describe your household situation (members, income sources, type of housing)?
2. How long have you been living in this community?
3. How would you describe your access to basic services such as water, electricity, and healthcare?
4. What challenges do you face in obtaining these services?
5. How did the COVID-19 lockdown affect your family's livelihood?
6. Were you able to access government support (cash aid, food packs, healthcare)? Why or why not?
7. What challenges did you experience with the enforcement of restrictions?
8. How do you feel about the label 'pasaway' often used by officials or media?
9. Do you think this label fairly represents your community? Why or why not?

10. What coping mechanisms did you and your neighbours use during the crisis?
11. Were there any NGOs or organisations that supported your community?
12. How would you describe your relationship with local government officials?
13. Do you feel that your voice is heard in decision-making that affects your community?

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