

Youth Ganging and Gang membership: Characteristics of formation in gang culture and what sustains them on the urban Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Youth gangsters have grown to become a common sight and a festering issue in the Western province of Sri Lanka, especially in the Colombo district. This issues is excessively prevalent among the poverty stricken and ill-educated communities in the city. Thus, the behavioral patterns of gangs and related matters have been subjected for researches conducted by varied researchers throughout the world. It has been identified that there are distinctive variables associated with the lives of gangsters, out of which their family background, socio-economic settings, social stratification factors, addictions and social adaptation etc. have become key factors. In an in-depth inquest of those studies, it clearly reveal that a sub culture is emerged in forming gangs in line with socio-economic, cultural and religious backgrounds prevailing in different countries. Merely to understand or combat this apparently incontrollable, growing and unbearable phenomenon, authorities and academics must ask: What are the root causes? Who invites them to the streets? What sustains them on the streets?

In addressing the above, this paper has been developed to understand the factors that attract youth onto the streets and the factors that play a pivotal part in sustaining them on the streets, giving specific emphasis to youth gangs operating in Colombo and suburbs. In supplementing, the research focused on areas to ascertain the negative impact youth gangs have on the lives of general public in the specified area.

The Research focused on 493 identified youth gang members belonging to 75 gangs within 14 GN divisions in Colombo city, within the age group of 18 – 32 years. All the said gangs and the gang members were identified within the study area through a snowball technique using available contacts and via the data gathered using formal research methods.

(Key Words -Characteristics, Gang membership, Ganging, Gang culture, Urban)

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1.1 Introduction

Virtually, the trend of increasing establishment of youth gangs in most of the countries turns to be a social menace. Thus, the behavioral patterns of gangs and related matters have been subjected for researches conducted by varied researchers throughout the world. It has been identified that there are distinctive variables associated with the lives of gangsters, out of which their family background, socio-economic settings, social stratification factors, addictions and social adaptation etc. have become key factors. In an in-depth inquest of those studies, it clearly reveal that a sub culture is emerged in forming gangs in line with socio-economic, cultural and religious backgrounds prevailing in different countries. As far as the gang culture in Sri Lanka is concerned, this paper focuses on more specific causes and facts concerning the status of formation, activities and impact on the society of urban youth ganging and their anti-social behavior.

1.2 Objectives

To study the behavioral patterns of urban male gangsters and investigate the factors that lead for ganging.

To identify gang membership, Characteristics of formation in gang culture in urban context

To identify the intervention measures so as to prevent the ganging and to provide a framework for utilizing urban male gangsters as a human resource in urban social development.

1.3 Research Problem

Overwhelming evidence has proved that image built on urban youth gangs by observing their usual behavior such as; assemblage in groups or gangs, clustering youth of similar age categories in selected places, following inherent practices of gangs etc. are not the authentic image promising the characteristics of real youth in gangs. Their responses towards who are they, what are the forces behind them, the real living styles they follow in urban society and many other identities are found to be completely different to the picture shown outwardly. The authentic focal point of this paper is to emphasize purposive facts supported with basic elements explored after an in-depth study on the criminal behavior of youth those assembled in gangs together with affirmative analysis on how their behavior is affected by the dominant sub-culture they respect. Also being direct or in-direct inheritors of the enormous amount of resources available in the city, their presence and behavior as well as the negative impact of the behavior of youth gangs on the overall family setting in the society too has given prominence emphasis in this paper.

1.4 Methodology

Collection of Primary Data

Compilation of primary data of the study was attended in several steps.

Step One:

Observation was the key instrument applied during the above time span on field data and information.

Step Two:

A questionnaire was used in this research too. There were 67 questions consisting of both close ended and open ended questions. Going one step ahead number of case stories too, could be recorded while interview was in progress. These stories are direct views of the respective respondents or the indirect interviewees and these articulations were electronically recorded with the permission of the responding youth. Small group based discussion was one other method applied to get views of respondents.

Step Three:

Over and above, the informal approaches practiced such as casual interviews, observatory information sharing, and small group interviews, planned under this step played a facilitative role in the successful completion of the research.

During this period building an information network was possible with the representation of Youth gangs, Security sections, Road dwelling communities, GOs and NGOs etc. Similarly, several Case studies of children attributed by gang leaders and also the children holding membership in gangs too, were prepared.

Recording life histories is another technique used in this study to generate more information relating to the central theme. Some life histories provide a profile of the ganging.

Sample Size.

This research is a descriptive Cross-sectional study. All interviewee samples in the study area were identified through snow-ball technique and a random sample as well as through observations. The sample size for this component was calculated using the following formula;

$$n = [\alpha^2 \times p(1-p)]/d^2$$

Where,

n = required sample size

α = critical value for specified confidence level (taken as 1.96)

p = proportion of events being measured among the gang members (taken as 0.5 to obtain the maximum sample size, as the previous proportions are not known)

d = absolute precision (taken as 0.05)

Though final sample size earmarked at the planning stage was 423, it had to be increased up to **493** mainly due to the snowball effect. Participants: Based on the research data, the most basic characteristic of the samples have been structured as follows by using the key variables such as age, location of the respondents and activities. According to this, 75 **gangs** within the selected 14 **GN divisions**. These GN divisions are; **Fort, Pettah, Mattakkuliya, Modera, Blumendhal, Kotahena, New Bazar, Grandpass, Maligawatta, Kochchikade, Suduwella, Keselwatta, Panchikawatta and Maligakanda.**

Data analysis

Survey System

Once the data collected from each participant of the questioner, the same data were entered in to the new data base system for analysis. The System stores the data entered in the Database for future use and data sorting and analyzing techniques have programmed in the system to get different analysis and thus reports as per the objectives of the research. This system has developed using Microsoft Visual Studio 2010 and Microsoft SQL server Management Studio 2008. The software interface and its functionalities are developed using C# programming language. It is a simple and modern, but object oriented programming language which has being developed by Microsoft.

The system database built using slandered SQL (Structured Query Language) with support of Visual Studio - entity framework 4.0.

1.5 Findings / Discussions

This paper discusses the behavioral pattern and the activities accomplishing by a group of gangs having organized in the urban society in the same fashion as explained above also using gang membership as an ornament. It is clearly discernible as reflected in the research outcomes that there are lots of hidden and inherited plans, norms and behaviors of gangs though they appear just as 'groups' of youth or a 'drove' of individuals as seen superficially. A critical element of ganging is the exceptionality with main society or else the inconsistency against norms and values of the main society which becomes a root cause on the existence of gangs. Because of the colliding nature of gangs with the leading society each gang has gained acceptance with recognition. Thus, it is obvious that emergence of a gang leader based on espoused chivalry and popularity becomes possible due to the run over situation mentioned above.

Culture of urban youth ganging

Gangs became part of the main society they practice physical as well as non-physical cultures which are modified to suit their ambitious. The types of dressings, food styles, norms, technical equipment, beliefs and also the social bondage etc., are followed within a specific mode adopted by them. This could be noticed clearly when attention is paid to the types of activities are evolved by gangs within the gang culture. Otherwise, the sharpness of the sub culture of gangs can be visualized by focusing on one common feature identifiable in all the gangs. Before endeavoring to identify such features, i.e. Linkages as well as bondages between gangs, it is important to pay attention on common indicators of the gang sub culture which are displaying the behavior of gangs.

Youth who are in association with various gangs representing diverse socio economic and cultural backgrounds such as; those lived in streets since childhood or those living in slums and shanties or poorly established settings, those migrated to city from rural and interior localities etc. Gang youth are exposed to certain complexities of social milieus of fishing communities, middle class family settings, war affected personnel, and those were freed after imprisonment and the criminals moving confidentially having escaped from the police custody. Therefore ganged youth pursue massive socio-economic and cultural complexities in comparison to youth in the main society.

Gang leadership

Youth gang members who did not merely find their means of living but also aimed at leadership, acceptance from others as well. Very especially the leadership characteristics of these gangs are composited with different precedents. Though there is no much concern shown over the respect of the norms and values of the main society it was clear that they respect with life-long commitment for the norms visible within the sub culture of gangs. It also noticed that priority has been given to maintain confidentiality within gangs while paying attention to keep membership details in a concealed manner. There is no interest for appreciating social values pursued by the society in general, on the fact that they know well the culture which is blended with general public never accepts the conduct of gangs and the gang leaders. Nevertheless, the gang leaders are able to gain acceptance through an attributed leadership. Yet, the leaders are in a continuous struggle to maintain their attributed leadership within their own society in order to impose their outrageous power, personality, or to enter into friction with law & order. The pyramidal structure that exists within leaderships is quite important. Gang leader represents the highest layer of the pyramid while the next layer is symbolizes by his closer associates and the commanding orders from the leader pass through the second layer to the followers. Hence, the pyramidal structure is composited in an organized manner. In comparison with the authoritative hierarchy that exists within the bureaucratic system proposed by the sociologist Max *Weber*, certain exceptional conducts within the social structure of gangs can be identified.

While, the similar model of modern administrative structure of the modern society is visible within the sub cultural groups too, there are noticeable differences. Similar characteristics to the bureaucratic structure that exists within the modern society can be found within these groups as well, but there are variations also. When the bottoms to top approach of bureaucratic structures are concerned there are similarities in both settings where the number of persons are reduced yet the power increases in a centralized manner.

Gang membership

Boys in the adolescence age have complicated behavioral patterns. There is no identity on the activities, as well as the groups of youth associating with them particularly in the urban townships with corrupted social milieus. The social adaptation process of adolescence is manipulated partly by the groups associate with them and partly with influence of existing characteristics of the social setting within the township they live. It is a known factor that when the delinquency and criminal acts become frequent and common in any society it turns to be anomic and disorganized. The law and order becomes less important. Money and strength becomes the most powerful asset. Accordingly, money turns to be the dominant factor in decision making in the urban setting and there is no concern on the moral values of the sources of earning money. Since, monetary values become exceptional; bondage between money and efforts for satisfying needs becomes one of the basic human factors of motivation. In satisfying these events money turns into an extraordinary element not only for meeting expenses of food, clothing etc., but also for other habitual needs such as; usage of drug, consumption of alcohol, gambling, betting, prostitution etc., In the effort of understanding anti- social behavior of gangs, series of contiguous factors such as how youth members join with gangs, causes and effects forced them to join gangs, qualitative values prevailing in gangs etc. were to be focused on. Since, adolescence is the compelling age for grouping or joining with teams of friends, those youth joining gangs expect to meet all persuasive needs hence, gang turn as the own house of its members. Gang also becomes as the family for the gangsters. Thereby, the respective youth members have devolved an in-depth inter connection together with

inter dependency with gangs whether the gangs are existed for them to join or formed by a team of like-minded youth. Based on these attributes, the investigations were lengthened to assess methods they followed in joining gangs.

Table 1.1: The mode of connecting the gang by male youths (n=493)

Ways of contacting the gang	Number	Percentage
1. Through Friends	311	63
2. Via Neighborhood contacts	16	3
3. While searching for employment	09	2
4. While schooling	09	2
5. At the place of work place	109	22
6. While in the prison	18	3.5
7. Other	21	4.5
Total	493	100

(Source: Field Survey)

Culturally, boys are allowed to have more freedom than others. Therefore, boys behave freely as they please to hang with friends around the neighborhood; it creates a situation for them to come into contact with gang members through friends. The youth male may view their contacts with gang members not necessarily as “recruitment” but rather a socialization process.

Sutherland in his ‘Differential Association theory’ explains further that persons in certain groups live in more congenial areas for illegal behaviors than other groups and a person living in such area can be socially adaptive towards crimes due to an influence of a similar aged colleague. The above explained view is affirmed through data shown in Table 1.1. Further, 95.5% of respondents claimed that the surrounding factors prevailed in the area where the youth were living had influenced them to join the groups. Hence it is obvious that a known person’s guidance had been the root cause for joining gangs in frontage of all other factors such as; friends, neighborhood, school, place of employment, imprisonment. Consequently, the initiative of an associate becomes a decisive factor for a person to decide his/her living concerns. This becomes a self-evidence to prove that the associates of a person acquire a wider scale of influential power than the parents, or the family settings of such a person.

Table 1.2: Reasons for joining gangs by youths (n = 493)

Reasons influenced to join gangs	Number	Percentage
1. Seeking protection	452	92
2. In quest of freedom	493	100
3. On socialization reasons	22	4
4. On the hunt for economic benefits	401	81
5. Towards social acceptance	481	97.5
6. To associate with friends	490	99
7. On sexual desires	59	12
8. On the needs of Alcohol, drugs and smoking	309	62.5
9. On community based aspirations	462	93.5
10. No special reason	11	2
11. Other reasons	09	1.8

(Source: Field Survey)

As shown in the Table 1.2: there are obvious reasons for youth to join urban gangs. One of the most desirable reasons is to seek out secured and protective environment in the urban setting. It is admittedly acceptable that even in the main society the protection covers wider area of the basic needs pyramid. However, the expected degree of protection within the sub culture of gangs differs from the mode of protection seeking through the culture of main society. Normally the main society does not intend to join in gangs for protection instead the individuals of main society practice varied other techniques. In this regard the protection through the law is considered as a key component. But 92% of youth joining gangs for protection for the simple reason on their involvement in anti-social activities. Therefore they prefer protection mainly against the main society. It could also found that 90% out of 92% of youth kept utmost credibility on gangs' protection than other types of safety measures since all of them needed protection from the Police.

Box : 1.1

A 29 years old youth identified stated that; “We are not afraid of any one in the region. Yet, we need protection from some source to relieve us from problems likely come through police. As long as we are dangled by means of a strong support structure nobody can harm us. Everyone in this area becomes ‘alarmed’ when they hear the name of our ‘Lokka’ – boss. It is also a fact that everyone becomes surrender to us too, when they know we are working under ‘Lokka’. Those who happened to notice the thing we do and we utter, they used to move pretending they are unnoticed. Even police is scared at times to involve in risky affaires.

The Box 1.1 provides enough space to believe reasons why they are so scared to police. If they could behave similar to the main society the law does not become a challenge instead, provides protection. In contrast, protection becomes a key factor, since varied offences such as drug related misdeeds, smuggling, sexual harassments, passing secret information etc., are handled within the gang represented by them. All the respondents (100%), prefer protection through a gang. But the in-depth assessment confirmed the conduct of most of the gangs is not in favor of the safety of its members. Since, gang leaders practice dictatorship role on some of the youth, it is unavoidable that such members turn into puppets.

Undoubtedly, social acceptance is a desirable factor among the gang members. It is also a fact that those youth inherited within disturbed family setting cannot reach values of well to do families. It was noted that gang members endeavor to gain popularity by actions to create clashes with the law, in other words to act as ‘thugs’. An even woman feels happy to say that they are friends of these youth. A large segment of youth interviewed (93.5%) claimed their interest on community support activities. The community support actions are headed by gang members in order to assist fellow community in specific events such as; funerals, wedding occasions, hospitalization of injured parties, in an accident, or other natural disasters.

Box : 1.2.

An house-wife aged 36 shared her views “ All inhabitants in these slums and shanties are either alcoholics or drug users. There is no difference between male, female or youth in drug usage and the drug suppliers are the gang members. In the night these areas become places of gambling. Because of these guys our children cannot relax at home whether they are fed or not.

Evidently, the children in these locations though they precede with education the chances are much higher to follow steps of gang members when they grow up. Basically inherent social menaces such as alcoholism and harmful drug addiction are known factor to the neighborhood of active gangs.

Table 1.3: Most appealing parts of being a gang member (n=493)

Most attract parts	Protection	Protection Friends	Drugs	Money	Freedom	Sexual desires	Others
Number	452	493	399	411	400	182	40
Percentage	92	100	62.5	83	81	37	82

(Source: Field Survey)

The contents of Table 1.3 discusses the direct and indirect factors affected youth to join gangs. Assessment also carried out as part of the field study to see proportionally, to which degree the respondents became attractive on privileges they enjoy upon becoming a gang member of which the results are shown in Table 1.3. Amongst the responses (92%) claimed as protection, (100%) stated as a chance to be with friends, (62.5%) highlighted the fact as drugs, (83%) commented being financial gains and (81%) quoted as freedom to be as leading factors.

Gang and characteristics of gang culture

It is imperative to study the reactions of the gangs towards legal proceedings in their sole exertion of securing the leadership and identity among the urban community. When the attitudes of gang members and those groups under formation are concerned, they perceive their leaders as exclusive rulers instead of the legal aspects. Since, existence of a gang is uniquely based on illegal actions; gangs are tending to be a challenge for the institutions such as police, judiciary, prison and other rehabilitating groups. In line with above facts and several other causes it substantiates precisely that the disreputable gangs are a social group diverging against prevailing social norms. This section focuses on the sub cultural behavior being adopted by the youth gang members in order to continue varied illegal activities without interruptions. Also attends to put emphasis on the legal background of varied crimes and other anti-social activities and their affectivity towards the general public.

Key concerns of the localization process:

As a whole, appropriately followed localization method is a crucial factor for a gang to perform in a planned and secured manner. Basically, a sufficient time margin might be necessary for a gang to be established in a geographical area. As an average, it needs minimum 5 years of duration to attain such stability. There are many groups in different locations within Colombo urban area, used to be assembled in different times during the day yet, these groups cannot be considered as gangs as they do not display certain characteristics of gangs. Taxi drivers, load carriers, pavement hawkers etc. are assembled in certain places in every streets, in an informal manner and shows certain features such as helping each other, working with unity etc., but these

groups cannot characteristics to be predominantly embedded in formal gangs. These groups usually do not have personal information of each associate but in formal gangs it is an extraordinary requirement that each ones identity and individual details are available. With these characteristics formal gangs take measures to institute their popularity at the preliminary stages and achieve steadiness as well as solidity within the respective geographical area and achieve the localization. Another important matter is that any new group or gang cannot be formally established in a particular area without permission or acceptance of established gangs in the targeted area.

4 Conclusions, Implications

Conclusions

From the gangs' point of view it is essential that each gang maintains utmost confidence in their dealings within therein involvement merely to accumulate financial assets via anti-social acts. For this reason, gangs themselves have adopted several 'codes of ethics' or certain conditions formulated by them and such principles became values or the sub culture of gangs. Those can be identified as follows;

- Basically, all must be obedient towards the leadership of the gang Leader. Each member must be obliged to carry out any task assigned by the leader irrespective of whatsoever factors externally assumable such as the time perspective, environment, any physical or mental factors or any other reason.
- It is extra ordinary that each member must maintain utmost confidence on each and all activities pursued by the gang. It also necessary to sustain strong inter-relationship between members. In short, life guarantee is a must to safe guard the gang.
- It is also prohibited any personal contacts with other gang members or any outsider. What is permitted is only related to the assigned tasks means that all such contacts must be familiar to the gang.
- It is noticeable that enrolling new members to the gang happens in a more astute manner. One of the principles is that when a gang member is to introduce a new member to his leader the introducing party has to hold its responsibility in a life-long basis. It is a standard rule that if the new comer happens to be guilty over an issue the member who introduced him needs to undergo the penalty.
- All new recruits are subjected for a period of probation which lasts until the new comer gains confidence of all seniors. The length of probation period depends on the time he takes to gain the said assurance and the popularity.
- Each gang has a sub-leader as well. He becomes a person with several skills such as aptitudes to control and to lead the gang and very specially the attributed capacity to run into clashes frequently with legal personnel. Gang leader in line with the opinions of others too, and based on popularity appoints sub leader and virtually, both has similar powers within the gang.
- On obvious reasons, if anyone found guilty over an issue, he is supposed to be expelled from the gang, yet it is likely that such expelling can be a threat to the security of the gang hence, the guilty party will have to scarify his life instead of expelling.
- Due to whatsoever reasons there is no permission for anyone to create or continue internal clashes and if anyone initiates such action he is subjected for punishment.

- It is prohibited to create any vulnerability to the gang to secure his life interest even in the event of a legal complicity that arises within the gang.

Policy implications

(a). A network of police stations in Colombo urban zone

The researcher highly appreciates the realistic decision made by the higher authorities of police to deploy 10 Sub Inspectors (SIs) to involve in the research in civil dresses, attached to several police stations within Colombo urban zone. At the completion of the research, the Department Of Police could access to various important information about gangs, their membership, their behavioral pattern, activities involved, geographical distribution etc., through the involvement of said team of Sub Inspectors. The researcher together with a committee of police officials have started a design of a Database Network in order to cover 7 police stations in Colombo so as to find appropriate actions as a follow up to the research. As of now, 10 police officials have been trained to perform in-depth assessments of gang behavior. This is one of the higher investment made for the 7 police stations, and a valuable resource of trained officers for such researches, it was possible due to the distributive policy structure prevailed in the Dept. of police.

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