



Urban Youth male gangsters and analyze tendencies for youth to involve in criminal acts through gangs

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Abstract

The experience of Sri Lanka on Gang activities has different forms and shapes due to its own historic, ethnic and political characteristics. It is notable that gang activities in Sri Lanka were not limited to urban setting but it was a countrywide phenomenon. However, as observed, the organized male gangs are active with key gangsters stationed in Colombo. There for this research designed to find out, what are the factors causing youth males to join with gangs and engage in delinquent activities through gangs?, in order to identify concept of gangsters through studying the behavioral patterns of urban male gangs and to analyze tendencies for youth to involve in criminal acts through gangs.

14 locations selected out of 47 wards in Colombo which are quite prominent for gangs and gang related criminal activities were selected as the research area and 493 gang members selected as the research sample using the snow ball technique, available contacts and through observations. Field observation, questionnaires and interviews, focus group studies, participation observation and case studies were used to gather data.

The outcome of the research identified friends, freedom, social acceptance and protection, the prevalence of supportive environment for delinquent behavior as well as the easy access for economic benefits become facilitative factors for the existence of delinquent gangs and tendencies for youth to involve in criminal acts through gangs. This research was benefited as a higher investment for the police department of Sri Lanka as 10 police officers had been trained to perform in-depth assessments of gang behavior through this research. Furthermore, this initiative research would guide future studies and researches of refined subjects related to the ganging and related social problems.

Keywords: gang, tendencies, criminal acts, youth gangsters, urban

1. Introduction

Youth joining gangs and their deviant behavior becoming a general phenomenon as well as a common social problem in countries all over the world. According to the Webster 9th New Dictionary, gang defines as “Group of people with a common purpose who joined for various reasons, including illegal activities and tend to display antisocial behavior against the rest of society” (Webster 9th New Dictionary). (I.e. group of persons working together, a group of persons working to unlawful or antisocial ends). Thrasher (1927) ^[14] defined gang as, “an interested group originally formed spontaneously and then integrated through conflict and characterized by meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict and planning. The behavior develops a tradition unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, group awareness and attachment to a territory” (Thrasher F. 1927) ^[14].

If criminal activity is not a pre-requisite for defining a gang then inevitably there will be good and bad gangs (i.e. those involved in criminal activity and those who are not). For example, Everard (2006) ^[4] notes that in Glasgow in Scotland, groups of teenagers who were labeled as gangs reported that the primary reason they were together was to stay out of trouble (Everard, S.2006) ^[14]. Others note the difficulty with identifying gang members and the fears that references to the

term gang would stigmatize youth and create a gangster identity (Bullock, K., & Tilley, N. 2008) ^[1].

Media, police and crime reports information reveals almost daily that there are increase number of incidences related to delinquency, abuses, abduction, drug addiction murders, robberies and other crimes happening in Sri Lanka, especially in Colombo city. Very high majorities of these crimes or anti-social activities are reported to be occurred with the involvement of youth male gangs. There are lack of information on the gangs such as, types of gangs, number of gangs, their members, and factors causing people especially youth males to join with gangs, activities of gangs and their expectations. There is a great demand from the society, academic community, police and legal institutions, law makers & policy makers to conduct an initiative & comprehensive research study on the male youth gangs in order to use the research outcomes for their requirements & activities towards establishing proper social security measures. Colombo city, the capital of Sri Lanka is selected as the study area for this research. The city of Colombo is a highly populated urban area, which is consisted with a complex of socio-economic and cultural contexts which contains opportunities such as income generation avenues and career opportunities. Researching Colombo based ganging and their activities would reveal the extent of seriousness of problems,

effective root causes for gang culture, behavioral patterns etc. This research would produce a resource document for sociological, criminological and legal authorities to recognize the extent of problems as well to advocate for introducing/improving and implementing federal and State laws to enforce the social security. Furthermore, the police and other legal institutions can use the research information for investigating, controlling, and implementing preventive measures of gang related crimes. Also this will facilitate parents to understand the requirement of putting good attention on their children in order to prevent them from drug abusing, sexual abduction, and any other anomie behavior by being members of gangs.

2. Literature Review

Youth gangs typically engage in delinquent, criminal, and violent activities, often for financial gain (Harper, Row). One important behavioral pattern of youth male gangs is that loyal gang members follow a gang-defined system of rules, rituals, and codes of behavior (Spergel, I. A. 1995) [12]. Gangs serve some individuals as a substitute family structure (Lyon J.M, Henggeler S, and Hall JA.1992) [7]. Membership imparts a sense of empowerment as members act together to defend territory and provide mutual protection (Hispanic Advocacy and Community Empowerment through Research.2005) [6]. The result of this collective behavior is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, solidarity morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory (Thrasher, F. M.1936) [15]. Although ages range between are in 11 - 24, generally the vast majority of gang members (i.e. 71%) are reported to be between 15 and 24 years old (National Youth Gang Center.1999). Whereas, the same is enacted in Sri Lanka to be within 18 – 29 (Ministry of Youth Affairs, Sri Lanka. 2001).

While early interest in gangs was primarily descriptive, Thrasher (1927) [14] paved the way for the explosion of Chicago based research and theory development with his account of why adolescent boys become gang members. Thrasher argued that economic destabilization contributed to social disorganization, which in turn, led to the breakdown of conventional social institutions such as the school, the church, and most importantly, the family, which “failed to hold the boy's interest, neglects him or actually forces him onto the street” (Thrasher F. 1927) [14].

Some of the key reasons for youth to join gangs in Colombo city symbolize few major concerns as revealed by *Sevanatha*, a registered institution working for the betterment of poor in Colombo. One of the visible reasons is the increased number of people moving to Colombo resulting unmanageable congestion of inhabitants which gets worse due to the insufficient town planning. Whereas, poverty has become a visible reason where 23% of families belong to the category of poor and socially unprotected (Chularathna, H.M.U.1999). Other key factor is the type of dwelling where the poor inhabitants living in slums and shanties in a crowded manner. Also revealed that families living in congested setting do not sufficiently interacting among each other due to cultural and ethnic differences and the isolation life style creates positive

environment for the gangsters. Conversely, poor interaction between parents and children due to specific social factors creates growing demand for adolescents to seek membership within gangs.

The group formation of urban male gangsters is influenced by multiple factors that include their social setting as well as collective psychological behavior. Albert K. Cohen (1964) in his research on delinquent boys, the culture of the gang, attempts to formulate and to solve certain neglected problems. Most of the literature in the field of juvenile delinquency is concerned with the question: Why does this or that boy become delinquent? Cohen's study argued gangs of boys doing things together: sitting on curbs, standing on the corner, going to the movies, playing ball, smashing windows and going robbery. These things they do are not the simultaneous expression and magical coincidence so many discrete impulses, each with his own history, each fully understandable apart from the others. They are joint activities, deriving their meaning and flavor from the fact of togetherness and governed by a set of common understandings, common sentiments, and common loyalties (Cohen, A.K, 1964).

3. Research Problem

3.1 Statement of the research problem

Lack of awareness on the gangs and their activities, the elder community has not taken sufficient preventive actions to avoid being victims as well as to protect their young children from joining with the gangs. Authorities have not identified properly the impact of male youth gangs on the society, extent and the criticalness of the social problems, methodology to protect the society from this anti-social development etc.

3.2 Research problem

According to the above problem identification the research problem was identified as follow: What are the factors causing youth males to join with gangs and engage in delinquent activities through gangs?

4. Objectives of the Research

- To identify concept of gangsters through studying the behavioral patterns of urban male gangs
- To analyze tendencies for youth to involve in criminal acts through gangs
- To suggest the intervention measures so as to prevent the gangstering and to provide a framework for utilizing urban male gangsters as a human resource in urban social development.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Field of Study

The northern part of Colombo city in Sri Lanka is recognized for higher rate of crimes. Therefore 14 locations selected out of 47 wards in Colombo are quite prominent for gangs and gang related criminal activities and these areas are as follows:

1. Mattakkuliya; 2. Modera; 3. Blumendhal; 4. Kotahena; 5. Grandpass; 6. New Bazar; 7. Maligawatta; 8. Kochchikade; 9. Maligakanda; 10. Panchikawatta; 11. Kehelwatta; 12. Pettah; 13; Suduwella 14; Fort.

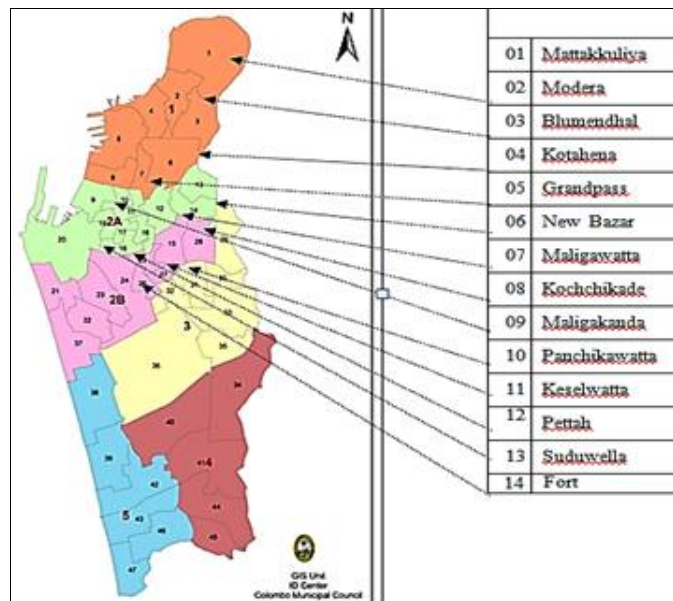


Fig 1: Study Area

5.2 Study Sample

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;

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

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)

In consideration of above stated methodological perspectives a respondents’ sample consisted by 493 gang members.

5.3 Process of data collection

5.3.1 Collection of primary data

- FIRST PHASE- Field observations carried out to study the characteristics, behaviors, and apparent norms of the gang members and gangs
- SECOND PHASE - An interviewer-administered questionnaire used for collecting quantitative data from gangsters and related groups
- THIRD PHASE- In-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted with selected gang members

5.3.2 Applied research methods and the nature of gathered data

- Field observation - to study the characteristics, behaviors, and apparent norms of the gang members and gangs.
- Questionnaires and Interviews - to collect quantitative data from gangsters and related groups.
- Focus group studies - to study group behavior, hobbies, generation of income and expenditure patterns. Family relations including other relationships, Health related needs, Leaderships, Sub-cultural factors, etc.
- Participation observation - to study anti-social behavior of gangsters, external agencies linked with them, youth, Sub-cultural factors, responses aligned with the law and security settings.
- Case studies - to identify details or the in-depth assessments of Urban youth members, history of lives, ways and means of living pattern

5.4 Data analysis

The data collected from each participant were entered in to the new data base system which was specifically developed for this research. This system was developed using Microsoft Visual Studio 2010 and Microsoft SQL server Management Studio 2008.

6. Results and Discussion

Below charts and figures shows main information about gangsters.

Table 1: Number of listed gangs vs. membership in Colombo urban zone

Grama Niladhari Division	Number of Listed Gangs	Total number of membership
Mattakkuliya	09	52
Modera	05	39
Blumendhal	03	16
Kotahena	03	14
New Bazar	09	67
Fort	09	71
Pettah	09	68
Grandpass	04	22
Maligawatta	05	28
Kochchikade	06	30
Suduwella	02	17
Keselwatta	03	20
Panchikawatta	04	24
Maligakanda	04	25
Total	75	493
The ethnicity configuration of gang members within study area (n=493)		
Ethnicity of Gang members	No. of youth	Percentage

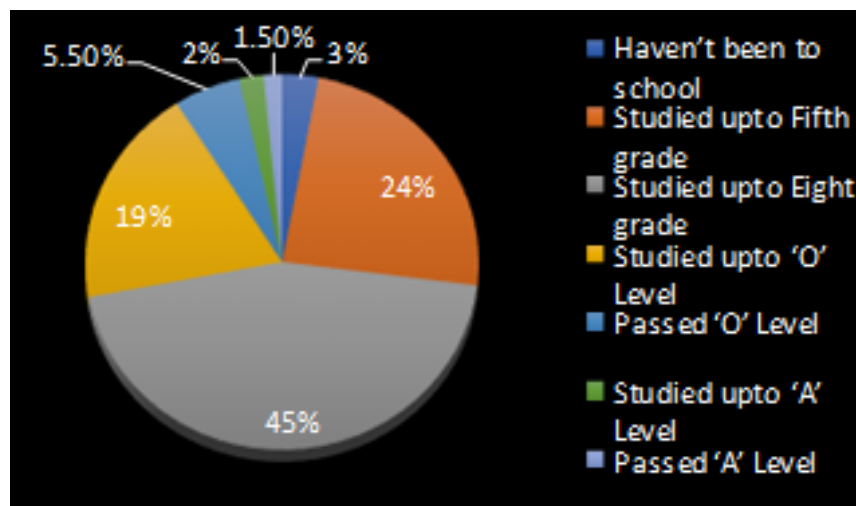
Sinhala (Buddhists)	233	48
Tamil (Hindus)	86	17
Muslim (Islamic)	169	34
Other	05	1
Total	493	100
Reasons for moving to Colombo		
Reasons for moving to Colombo	Numbers	Percentage
On an Employment	180	58
Being a child left to the street	29	9
On educational purposes	32	10
To undergo a Training	09	3
Owing to Matrimonial purpose	11	3.5
Due to a juvenile offense, or other offensive behavior	18	6
Owing to an unexpected reason	31	10
Other	02	0.5
Total	312	100

Source: Field Survey

Table 2

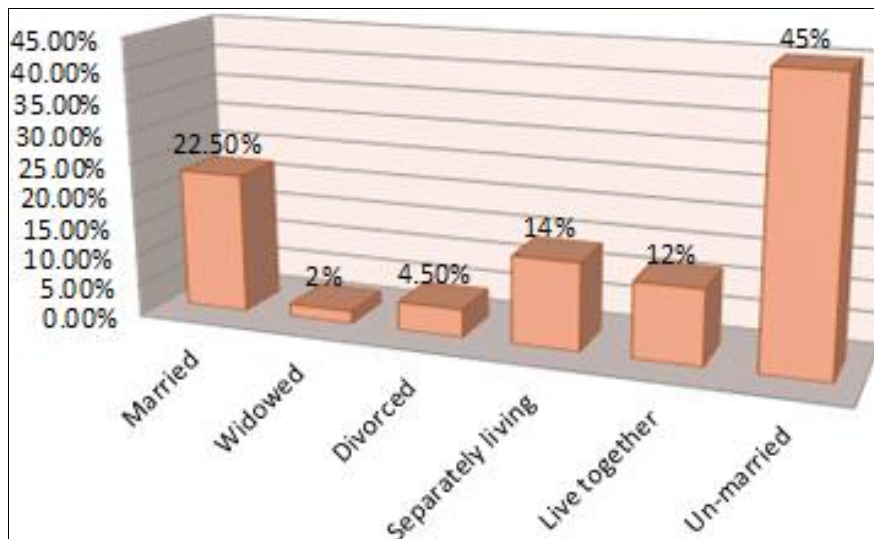
1.1. Percentage distribution of Employment (n=493)			1.2. Distribution Of Monthly income (n=493)		
1.5.1. Status of employment	Nos.	%	Description	Nos.	%
Employed	445	90%	Rs. 2500 >	06	01%
Unemployed	48	10%	Rs. 2501 - 5000	49	10%
1.5.2. Employment Status (n=445) %			Rs. 5001 - 10,000	117	24%
Permanent Job	09	02%	Rs. 10001 - 15000	128	24%
Temporary Job	332	75%	Rs. 15001 - 20000	99	20%
Casual Job	49	11%	Rs. 20001 - 25000	25	05%
Other	55	12%	Rs. 25001 <	69	14%
1.5.3. Category of Employment (n=445) %					
State Sector Job	03	01%	Permanent Vender	39	09%
Private sector job	11	2.5%	Taxi driver	16	3.5%
Business Owned	32	07%	Load carrier (Natami)	42	09%
Trade labourer	179	40%	Business broker	22	05%
Self Employed	44	10%	Other	57	13%

Source: Field Survey



Source: Field Survey

Fig 2: Backgrounds of basic Education of respondent youth (n=493)



Source: Field Survey

Fig 3: Position of Married / Un-married revealed through the study sample

6.1 Key Finding

Table 2

Ways of contacting the gang					
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		
Reasons for joining gangs					
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		
Data that reflects nature and tendencies for youth to involve in criminal acts (within previous year) - (n = 493)					
Offence and the attributes of it	Misdeed was done		Both ways	Punishment or juristic experience.	
	Collectively	Alone		Offended	Not offended
Misdeeds related to alcohol	481(97.5)	38 (7.7)	409 (83)	29 (5.8)	464 (94)
Misdeeds related to drugs	490 (99)	102 (21)	490 (99)	32 (6.5)	461(93.5)
Quarrels / clashes insulting	50 (11.8)	02 (0.4)	09m (1.8)	02 (0.4)	56 (11)
Injuring / Wounding	22 (4.5)	09 (1.8)	04 (0.8)	01(0.2)	30 (06)
Unethical sexual behavior	37 (7.5)	29 (5.8)	09 (1.8)	02 (0.4)	64 (13)
Watching pornographic videos	302 (61)	16 (3)	14 (2.8)	00 (00)	00 (00)
Looting / burglaries etc.	43 (8.7)	01 (0.2)	00 (00)	04 (0.8)	40 (08)
Domestic violence	00 (00)	67 (13.5)	00 (00)	01 (0.2)	66 (13)
Child Abuses	26 (5.2)	09(1.8)	06 (1.2)	02 (0.4)	33 (6.6)
Other	62 (12.5)	19 (3.8)	54 (11)	16 (3.2)	65 (13)
Other	62 (12.5)	19 (3.8)	54 (11)	16 (3.2)	65(13)

Opinions shared by gang members on factors leading to keep the anti-social activities obscured or to keep in a concealed manner. (n =493)								
The effective factors shared by gang members				Number		percentage		
Political linkages				178		36		
Relationship with police				192		39		
Social bondage within gang members				490		99		
Fearful attitudes of the public on gangs				319		64.7		
Uncertainty on the legal practices				107		21.7		
Protection asserted by affluent groups				402		81.5		
Other				21		4.2		
Most appealing parts of being a gang member (n=493)								
Most attract parts		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



Source: Field survey

Fig 4: Attributes of gang delinquencies

This shows causes that has become main influential factors for youth to repeat the misdeeds at different levels as gang members.

6.5 Case Studies

The table below mentioned some information identified from the case study:

Table 3

Case I	“An house-wife aged 36 from Keselwatta 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.
Case II	A 29 years old youth identified as MW/BG 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 affairs.
Case III	Youth age of 18 years, says “we are bound to follow boss’s permission to go to a shop or just to go out, or even to look outside to see what’s happening around. One way, we are compelled to accept such practice to avoid unexpected problems.”
Case IV	“There is nothing called one and only. When one business or a carrier found to be without profit or felt boring we find other income source with the help of my gancy (gang). Nothing to be worried about.I wasn’t starving though I couldn’t earn money, at times. Our gang hasn’t kept anyone hungry”.

Case V	A 29 years old youth identified as MW/BG 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’ .
Case VI	When one of our guys happened to be jailed he uses his tactics and become friends of several groups inside the prison. These prisoners too are desperately spending their time without access for drugs. We are capable for directing our sales channels through known guys to the deserving prisoners. This transaction is based on a strong trust. Because of that whenever they are released from the prison they want to become our customers. Even some of them get the opportunity to join our gangs too.

6.6 Discussion

A very high higher percentage (63%) of youth have joined gangs by associating with youth generally in similar age substantiates the degree of freedom inherited culturally on youth being a notable issue in gender sensitization. On the other hand, as illustrated by Edwin Southerland, a Criminological scientist, that criminal behaviors are accomplished by evolving learning practices which affirms through his ‘Differential Association theory’ corroborating that ‘each behavioral element is added through education.’ Southerland reveals further the ways of growing the criminal behaviors as follows affirming the findings during the research. “Criminal behavior is an invention of associated learning. Delinquency is learned as an inter-related outcome of ideas exchanged with external parties. Personal contact of similar aged individuals enriches behavioral skills”. “To carry out a criminal act a set of rudiments are necessary. Sufficient motive to act as a criminal, psychological drive, rationalization, and attitude are the key essentials ^[1].

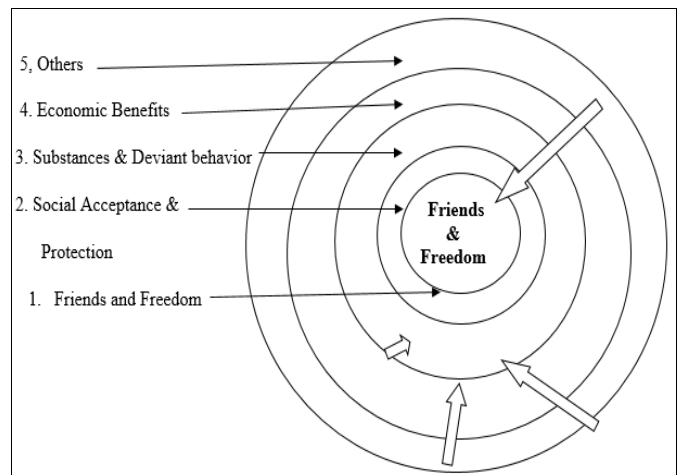
It is admittedly acceptable that even in the main society the protection covers wider area of the basic needs pyramid. However, the expected degree of protection within the sub culture of gangs differs from the mode of protection seeking through the culture of main society. Normally the main society 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.

As written by Robert Merton in his study on anomie that when social acceptance is getting diluted in front of middle class community groups, it is apparent that such youth follow other processes to win the society. 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. Notwithstanding the above, gang

members also gain popularity within communities in several zones within study area namely, Modera, Mattakkuliya, Dematagoda, Keselwatta, Maradana, Maligakanda, Suduwella and Panchikawatta mainly due to the accessibility to drugs.

Based on these ideologies the study carried out by a team of environmentalists in Chicago has discussed ways how criminal acts ate originated. Team also had defined slums as delinquency areas. In line with these findings, the book titled “Juvenile Delinquency in Urban Areas” authored by C.R. Shaw and H.D. Mckey (1942) has affirmed the practicality of above occurrences. Study has further envisaged that; areas inhabited mostly with migrant families, areas of slum dwellers, areas affected by hardcore poverty, and also the areas famous for adult criminals are noted as delinquently vulnerable areas and these findings are similar to the outcomes of the study areas in Colombo too.

According to the above findings this research introduces a formula on Aims and expectations of joining gang.



Source: Field survey

Fig 5: Aims and expectations of joining gang

7. Conclusion & Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

Gangsters are a group of people who Share common interests and purposes, join together for various reasons such as protection, leadership, authority, freedom, use of substances, financial benefits etc. They use most of their time to live within the group and display antisocial and unlawful behavior against the rest of society. 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. 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

¹ Sutherland, E. H. (1947). Principles of Criminology, 4th ed. New York, NY: J. B. Lippincott

protection through a ganging. 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, are joining to gangs to apply a kind of value for them and to have better income to carry on. 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. Finally, the prime factors that become tendencies for youth to involve in criminal acts through gangs can be categorized as friends, freedom, social acceptance and protection whereas, the prevalence of supportive environment for delinquent behavior as well as the easy access for economic benefits.

7.2 Recommendations

- a. Use CPTED to Avoid/reduce social and environmental factors for gang forming
- b. Establish and maintain Law and Order appropriately
- c. Implement and monitor above practices at GN division level and employ necessary measures to protect families and society
- d. Establish and maintain improved opportunities for education, employment and other social and individual needs for low income communities people living in slums and sanities, street children etc.

8. Benefits from this research

On completion of the research, the Department of Police gained access to various important information about gangs, their membership, behavioral pattern, activities involved, geographical distribution etc., through the team of Sub Inspectors. The researchers together with a committee of police officials have started to design 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.

9. Acknowledgement

The researchers highly appreciate the realistic decision made by the Sri Lankan Police and the Ministry of Defense, Sri Lanka to deploy 10 Sub Inspectors (SIs) support the research in civvies, attached to several police stations within Colombo urban zone.

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