

## EMPLOYMENT PATTERNS OF YOUTH GANGSTERS, THEIR SOCIAL BEHAVIOR AND EXISTENCE IN 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 issue is excessively prevalent among the poverty stricken and ill-educated communities in the city. Deprived of the joys of a normal and secured childhood and adolescence, many of these children get involved in abrasive street gang activities and face adverse life threatening experiences that even include death through criminal activities unleashed by themselves or other rival groups. Those who survive roam the streets or waste away in despair, relieving their suffering by escaping into the often self-destructive lifestyles and income generation mechanisms. Purely for survival purposes, they lead a gloomily ignorant and dangerous existence on the streets. For them, every day is a cycle of torment: hunger, thirst, risky and poorly paid jobs, disease, loneliness, lack of affection, police harassment, legal red tape, institutions, sordid prisons, drugs, slavery disguised as housework or even bare-faced slavery, prostitution, sexual abuse and terminal diseases such as AIDS that come as a result. Merely to understand or combat this apparently uncontrollable, 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.

**Keywords:** Employment, Patterns, Gangsters, Social Behavior, Urban Youth

### 1. Introduction

The group formation of urban male gangsters is influenced by multiple factors that include their social setting as well as collective psychological behavior. Addressing livelihood based job status of sample respondents felt important as to access for real causes and facts affecting the living means of the gang members. The resource bases in Colombo city became direct or indirect living means of the residents living in Colombo. Further, it was found that the informal sector has a high labour absorption capacity and that is one of the services rendered by it to the larger city population. Yet, there is a visible factor that several groups who are benefitting from these resource bases are holding supremacy and 'kingship'. According to literature on gang studies, Walter B. Miller (1980) has defined a gang as "A self-formed association of peers bound together by mutual interest. A gang has an identifiable leadership; well-developed lines of authority, and other organizational features who act in concert to achieve a specific purpose which

generally include the conduct of illegal activities and control over particular territory, facility or type of enterprise.” Miller defines gangs are subject to variations based on the parameters such as time, culture, society, etc.

One of the reasons for youth to form illegal gangs is to be partners of the said kingship or to grab the ownership of same. Because of the above explained state of affairs, organized gangs have established their hierarchical boundaries and their images as ‘authority’ or ‘Thugs’ within each Grama Niladhari division. The society in general represents social structural factors such as; Caste, Class, Ethnicity, Gender as a socio-genetic feature, while, urban youth gangs maintain structural factors namely; number of members of the gang, inter-personnel strength, types of activities executed, clashes between gangs and the law & order. It is apparent that these factors have been evolved by gangs to garb job opportunities having crashed into the regional authorities.

The direct indirect employment opportunities offered by the Colombo city life has provided visible income generation means to these youth gangsters, who in turn convert the contacts, connections and networks they build through these legal sources of income, to engage in their hidden, secretive and anti-social activities. These hidden activities then become the key income source of these youth gangsters, as these activities are sourced and patronized by various influential and powerful segments of the society.

Through this study, the researchers have attempted to explore the factors that help youth gangsters to engage in these employment activities and how they use these occupational networks to sustain and strengthen their gang membership and their own sub-culture. In addition how these networks allow them to claim power and authority in the city while claiming an indirect ownership of the geographical space in the urban context. Further it studies how these gang power bases and networks support them in their day-today existence and to expand and sustain the gang and their own identity in the community.

## **2. 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. This study was continued with the assistance of 10 data collectors within a year on required instances. For this purpose varied time lines were applied such as; morning, afternoon and nights, also continuing on weekends, festival days, holidays, and within the days when public meetings are held or on the days affected due to bad weather .Colombo DS’s area was subjected for observatory data collection.

#### **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.

When the overall achievement is concerned, the data collection efforts were continued required data collection were activated in 14 GN divisions. Altogether, 631 applications were filled up with information gathered from 631 youth those were

presumed to be gang members. Yet, when the age ranges of youth respondent Vs. the youth in age between 18 - 32 years which is the age range followed to determine youth, only 491 interviewee responses could be accepted. Nonetheless, the information carried on the balance 138 was immensely helpful for the common analysis made on gangs.

### **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. Interviews conducted time to time with urban youth, attending community police programmes conducted in urban zones, and the participation in the New Year festivals (eg. Keselwatta), etc. During the process some of the tools applied are; chain of interviews which were launched constantly. One other too, namely, the transect walks too were helpful to a large extent. By walking along the streets passing pockets where gangsters used to meet etc. enabled to get feedback from children, youth and adults, also with the opportunity to listen to different persons etc., enabled to gather vast amount of information needed for the research. The above said tools were also enabled the team to view the maximum diversity of the (study) findings.

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. Contents of these studies are composited by an in-depth study attended on particular socio-economical and politically driven factors that forced these children to reach where they are now, and the family backgrounds, education, associates, liked groups etc., In-depth discussions are one other tool which is applied on varied topics and continued with the assistance of gang leaders, gang members, shop owners, road side dwellers as well as the security personnel. 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. Research entailed the collection of data on more than one case of youth gang or youth involved. Yet a volume of sources of data were handled. The study team, in the latter part of the interviews a body of quantitative and qualitative data was reviewed in connection with dependable and also independent variables while examining information given collectively since sources of informal informants are extremely high in number including police records as well. 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

$\alpha$  = 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.

### 3. Results and Discussions

**Table 1.1 Number of listed gangs vs. membership in Colombo urban zone**

Nos.	Grama Niladhar Division	Number of Listed Gangs	Total number membership
01	Mattakkuliya	09	52
02	Modera	05	39
03	Blumendhal	03	16
04	Kotahena	03	14
05	New Bazar	09	67
06	Fort	09	71
07	Pettah	09	68
08	Grandpass	04	22
09	Maligawatta	05	28
10	Kochchikade	06	30
11	Suduwella	02	17
12	Keselwatta	03	20
13	Panchikawatta	04	24
14	Maligakanda	04	25
<b>Total</b>		<b>75</b>	<b>493</b>

(Source: Field Survey)

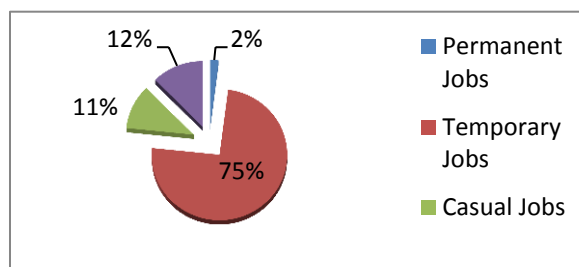
**Table 1.2 Status of employment of responded youth (n= 493)**

Status of employment	Nos.	Percentage
Yes	445	90
No	48	10
Total	493	100

(Source: Field Survey)

Since 90% of youth claimed they are employed further exploration was instigated to assess the sectorial distribution of employment. Figure 1.1 gives the distribution and nature of employment engaged by the respondents.

**Figure 1.1 Nature of employment of responded youth (n= 445)**



(Source: Field Survey)

Information shared by 445 interviewees confirms that 75% of them are employed on temporary jobs, while only 2% are employed on permanent basis. All in all, 98% out of employed youth need to be complied with job risks or minimal benefits available on casual nature of jobs. This reflects, these workers are skilled enough to find alternative survival measures either within the existing job market or within the changing nature of other income earning processes. However, these information can be analyzed better followed by further inquiries on possible income derivable through holding ownership of physical resource bases accessible within the Colombo urban zone. Or else, the study group needs to identify potential income generating processes.

**Table 1.3 Classification of jobs engaged by the youth respondents (n= 445)**

Category of Jobs	Nos.	Percentage
State Sector	03	01
Private sector	11	2.5
Business owner	32	07
Trade Labourer	179	40
Self employed	44	10
Pavement vendor	39	09
Taxi Driver	16	3.5
Cooli / Load carrier ( <i>Nattami</i> )	42	09
Brokering	22	05
Other	57	13
Total	445	100

(Source: Field Research)

As evident from Table 1.3 out of the 10 categories of jobs the most accessible carrier is the grouping of Trade Laborer which covers 40% as per the analysis. When the popularity is concerned, brokering reaches highest, though it represents in number 5%. It could be observed that Muslim youth showed best performance in Brokering jobs. Skills possessed on tricks and stratagem, wisdom, adroitness, efficiency and very especially the eagerness of them had paved the way to carryout brokering within the urban zone. Also noticed that the brokering team became the most popular within the rest of the gang members. The intermediary role of brokers had widely stretched even on tiny sales, prostitution, trafficking and sale of alcohol / drugs. Also seen this team has involvement on some other professions in the midst of brokering. Jobs within the range of 13 % listed under

'other category' is a composition of varied nature of jobs eg: Pavement venders, self-employment, cooly jobs, load carriers (*Natamy*) whereas, Colombo urban setting is a blessing for those involved on above jobs. These jobs in their nature are subjected for frequent changes as revealed through the responses. Youth identified as Bm/./KM, is a 30 years old from Blumendhal claimed that....

***“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”.***

A 19 years old gangster identified as Ko/./Gn from Kotahena stated that....

***“The most important thing is to inform Lokka (Leader) when the job to be changed. Such things cannot be done by stealth to Lokka.”***

### **Specific features of the social behavior of Gangs**

Financial security plays a crucial role in the social behavior of gang members. A specific feature noticed was that all 14 gangs have established a common fund through weekly collected basis. A treasurer too is appointed within the gang to maintain the social security fund. The intended purposes of the social security fund are ;

- To manage emergencies or sudden cash shortages particularly to meet expenses of their social events.
- To meet expenses on sicknesses or a funeral.

Youth named as Mw/./PG A 20 year old from Maligawatta

***“ For us, the emergency means that there are times we none of us have a single cent. On such evenings we become furious to be without a shot. That are the times we see the real value of this collective fund and not having that much security against sicknesses or a funeral. ”***

However, the study disclosed that there are gangs jointly raise funds to assist when someone falls in trouble. The general public in the above mentioned locations believe these gang leaders as Godfathers. As mentioned by several house wives they used to approach these gang leaders and seek their intervention to surrender their drunken husbands. A 39 year old mother from Modera expresses that .....

***“ It is Mo/Rag/R , leader of gang named Mo/Rag, who stands for our protection as well as to surmount our distresses all the time similar to our parents. ”***

Whoever, a hard bitten drunkard who frequently assaults wife and children at home, shows extreme fear in front of gang members even beyond the degree of fear arises in front of a Police officer.

Another important feature was that gang members held leadership on emergencies such as funeral, cases of out-broken fire, family clashes, ethnic riots etc., which is accepted and highly respected by the rest of the community. Through this effort SW/MS's gangs might have intended to gain popularity as well as self-protective environment. Even, most of the job seekers who happened to migrate to urban zone need to get preliminary support from one of these gangs. SW/MS's gang at Suduwella is a well-known gang. The founder of this gang named 'S' died in age of 69 and its continuing even today under the leadership of his son under the same title. Majority of population at Suduwella contact this gang for all their needs whether the requirements are on legal, political or other aspects causing insecurity. A mother, aged 49 years from Suduwella articulates that .....

***“After the death of Sw/Sg/MS his son ' came forward to look after us. Nine youth are actively engaged in the gang at present. I wish all the blessings of***

**God for them otherwise there is no one to safeguard us. In an incidence of quarrel or civil unrest we used to run to this gang”**

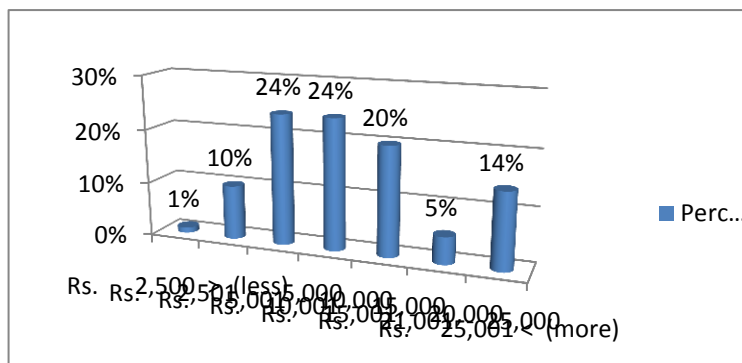
A youth introduced as SW/KM, 22 years old from Suduwella emphasizes that ...

**“Born in this locality owing to our destiny or fate. This country is a property of them. If no Heroin no existence for them. Even there is no Police to look into these happenings. These gangs manage their businesses having also decoyed the public.”**

In contrary, majority of the public whether they had suffered due to criminal acts or not, are solemnly dissident over the growing trend of gangs and had expressed their apprehension and anxiety on gangs or gangsters and the issues such as spreading menace of the drugs. Yet, there is a limit in the expression of resist or voicing against these incidences due to the insecurity of doing so. The articulations appearing in above are rather contradictory and illustrating two episodes or occurrences directly affecting their living. It can be argued that there is a gap between civilians and the authorities responsible for law and order in which the public awaits for methodical intervention to assure a supportive atmosphere for living.

Further investigations revealed that some personnel had moved away from these localities and living elsewhere with relatives. Though gangs behave as Gods among the poor communities it is to be believed that general public is aware of the contacts these gangs maintain with under-ground groups, well to do businessmen and politicians. When the elections are held gangs become a resource for certain candidates due to the fact that they can win the public through these gangs. When the income status in the study area is concerned employment and means of deriving income that is discussed earlier, the research was broadened to analyze the position of monthly based income too. While, 445 respondents are asserted that they derive certain amounts being monthly income. Consequently, the study had to be widened to know precisely how a considerable percentage of youth being unemployed yet to earn an income. Information also needed to know whether there are hidden reasons that they wanted to unveil. Some respondents said they do not earn income yet, wanted to emphasize that all of them are income earners. It is also required to affirm the accuracy of answers shared by the majority with the variation of income derivability and within their typical habit of spending income lavishly for different events. The following details are in line with the figures cited by the youth interviewed.

**Figure 1.2 Categorization of income of the responded youth (n= 493)**



(Source : Field Survey)

Based on the categorized income levels, that 14% of youth earn more than Rs. 25,000 a month and the means of income were; trading, trade owners and to work as technically driven service providers. Those 6 youth of this sample, whose

income was less than Rs. 2,500 and represented as 1%, revealed that they had been used by gangs for various improvised actions. Persons benefiting under this category were also appeared to be suffering from physical and psychological setbacks. It was disclosed that these persons were provided with food, clothing too, by the gang leaders while paying tiny amounts in cash. Habitually, these 1% of persons used to spend in total the sum they earn each day and shown higher dependency on gangs yet, expressing that there is no single day that their 'pockets are empty'.

## **5. Conclusions**

When the term "jobs" referred by the gang youths are concerned, most commonly it is only a temporary way of income generation. The vast majority of the gang youths have temporary ways of income generation, while very few of them have permanent employment. Some of them earn money in irregular activities. It was a special feature that casual employees became as direct or meandering owners of assets available within the Colombo urban limits. It is observed those youths acquire public properties by force while formulating authoritative powers illegally. Vigorously active teams of youth take authority to make money by allocating spaces adjoining to markets, bus stands and car parks to pavement hawkers for carrying out their businesses. It is mandatory for such pavement hawkers to pay regular tax; daily or weekly tolls to the respective gang members. It was visible that special youth gangs are practicing regular collection of levies in demarcated places in the city limits. Several individuals in these groups carry this task from generation to generation. Father run the business or activity and then hand to son, so that son becomes the "king" and no other person can compete. As only few gang youths are permanent employees, the remaining vast majority create links with regional political personnel to find income generation means. It is easy to find jobs through the politicians in the posts such as office peon, laborers in hospitals etc. Yet, these youths strongly reject such assistance since they feel the difficulties to follow routines of such employment hence, look for easy and quick ways of income generation irrespective of legal ways.

In contrast, those youth belong to the main society are struggling to find a job with a monthly salary, yet the expectations of gang youth are rather contradictory. Gang youth were accustomed to deal with changing income generating avenues within urban limit. They had also designed their involvement on such jobs as to be able to move with friends having enjoyed utmost freedom. In spite of the said avenues, youth were able to apply their entrepreneurial skills as to earn money having involved in miscellaneous income sources for which the basic requirement was to be as casual workers. Therefore these informal income generating avenues became solid sources to earn extremely good turn over compared to a monthly salary expectable through a permanent carrier.

Most popular categories of jobs among the gang youth are ; self-employment, to run own businesses, sell sundry items, being pavement hawkers, trade laborers, weight carriers, motor repair cum garage work, taxi drivers and involved in brokering jobs as well. It is noticeable that Muslim youths in gangs have special skills in brokering jobs. Those involved in brokering could manage those well having applied their keenness, shrewd thinking, language skills as well as the skills acquired in most business related tasks. With the commencement of income earning activities with knick knack amount, these Muslim youth could expand their income avenues to perform even prostitution, drug trafficking including many other profitable trades.



It was revealed that almost all the youth earn monthly income in dynamic and self-motivated manner. Besides, all strategic moves applied, the gangs' involvement in each and every income generating action was amazing. In spite of the purpose of betting, gambling and horse racing etc. were meant for pleasure, in reality, such processes are implemented to generate sudden income which was a message prevailing among the youth.

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