

Gang Membership among Malaysian Indian Young Adults

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Abstract

Young people involvement in gang crime is not only a problem in Western countries but also in middle and low-income countries. Globally, gangsterism has become a threat to the well-being of young adults. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the issue of gang membership, especially among Indian young adults in Kuala Garing Park, in Rawang. An in-depth interview approach was used to identify the demographic profile of the gang members and explore the risk factors that promote gang membership. The present study's findings show that the majority of the respondents were single, male, drug dealers, aged between 23 and 24 years old, and had completed their education up to lower secondary level. The findings also show that the respondents were involved in gangsterism due to various reasons such as peer influence, poor relationships with parents, financial deprivation, and a desire to gain power and esteem in society. Since gangsterism is a sophisticated and multidimensional phenomenon, it is therefore recommended that collaboration and synergy among families, schools, social support groups, and law enforcement agencies are essential to create a comprehensive approach to tackle gangsterism issues. Through early intervention, community engagement, and targeted enforcement we can work towards reducing the allure of gangs and creating safer and healthier communities for everyone.

Keywords: Young Adults, Crime, Gangsterism, Indians, Malaysia

Introduction

Gangsterism has become a global phenomenon that has existed in Western and Eastern societies for centuries. In general, gangsterism is defined as an association of three or more individuals whose members collectively identify themselves by adopting a group identity that they use to create an atmosphere of fear or intimidation (Petrus et al., 2019). As early as the 1600s, London was terrorised by a number of organised gangs such as the Mims, Hectors, Bugles, and Dead Boys; such gangs were known to smash windows, attack guards, and demolish taverns (Van Deuren et al., 2022). The gangs also fought pitched battles among themselves and dressed in coloured ribbons to indicate gang affiliation (Van Deuren et al.,

2022). In the 17th and 18th centuries, English gangs wore belts and metal pins, with motifs of stars, animals, arrows, serpents, and hearts pierced by arrows (Belokurova, 2018).

On the contrary, the history of gangsterism in America has its roots in the 1920s and is linked to the stereotypical image and myths surrounding American gangs (Belokurova, 2018). Some of the notable gangsters who emerged during the Prohibition era in the 1920s and 1930s were Al Capone, John Dillinger, Baby Face Nelson, Machine Gun Kelly, and Ma Barker (Deuchar et al., 2010). It conjures up the image seen in the gangsta film genre of a well-dressed, charismatic, hypermasculine Italian immigrant brimming with contradictions: On the one hand, he is a devoted family man and “breadwinner” who is protective of his family, on the other hand, he is a ruthless psychopath who slaughters his enemies and extorts “protection” money from small business owners. At once, he is portrayed as a powerful public hero and a menacing public enemy. Images of trench coats, Tommy guns, and Ford Model 18 V8 getaway cars readily come to mind. Classic gangsta image aside, the lasting impact of the Prohibition era on gangland was associated with the rise of highly centralised and disciplined organizations, often referred to as syndicates. Moreover, the popular image of the gangster emerged from this era as the US underworld fought for markets to control the illegal production and distribution of alcohol (Belokurova, 2018).

Gangsterism is still present in the popular imagination and is expressed, and in some cases, glamorised in entertainment cultures such as in the cases of rap music, film, and video games. In the latter case, a recent role-playing video game well expresses gangster ethos known as “Cyberpunk 2077” that features the Scavenger’s Gang (Nasseri et al., 2020) operates in a Northern Californian corporate-owned megacity that is unbound from state and federal law. Here, the law of the jungle reigns. “Scavengers” or “Scavs” kidnap people to harvest their cyber ware and organs on the black market (Nasseri et al., 2020). The majority of gang members are low-achieving youth and school dropouts (Nasseri et al., 2020) who strive for meaning and self-esteem via gangland power and dominance in this dystopian setting. The Social Darwinian ethic that permeates Cyberpunk 2077 seems to reflect the corporate and gangster ethos discernable in today’s zero-sum globalised world in which individuals and communities are left to fend for themselves as the welfare state continues to decline and an authoritarian state rises: In this world, “might make right.”

Gangsterism in entertainment culture notwithstanding, territorialism in the context of real-world gangs is considered a major manifestation of gangsterism. Territorial gangs are the main perpetrators of urban violence, as they monitor potential criminal activities in their territory with an iron fist (Deuchar et al., 2010). A key characteristic of the territorial gang is its good organisation and initiation rituals for gang-member candidates (Muhammad, 2019). These rituals separate the gang members from non-members. Corporate gangs are highly structured criminal enterprises geared toward illicit drug distribution and sales (Petrus & Uwah, 2019). Corporate gangs are money-oriented groups that commit criminal acts (e.g., drug trafficking) for profit and personal revenge (Petrus et al., 2019). Corporate gangs are controlled by drug-selling terrorists and their members are subject to surveillance, secrecy, and strict rules of conduct. They operate in both urban and rural areas (Decker & Pyrooz, 2013). Some sources suggest that the rise of global white supremacist ideology is linked to growing white power gang activity in various American and European cities, leading to more gang problems in some communities. While white supremacist gangs are responsible for much of the vandalism, theft, graffiti, and burglaries, Hispanic and black are known to be largely responsible for drive-by shootings. (Petrus et al., 2019). Mlangeni (2018) noted that while the drug problem among

black and Hispanic gangs differs in terms of sales and consumption patterns, Asian gangs are known for their relative diversity and growth.

One of the most indisputable findings of criminological research shows that young people involved in gangs are more likely to engage in delinquent and criminal behaviour compared to those who are not involved. For example, in a study of high school students and dropouts in Chicago, San Diego, and Los Angeles gang members accounted for 23% of the sample but were responsible for 67% of aggravated assaults, 53% of weapons offenses, 72% of felony thefts, 55% of drug use, and 59% of alcohol use (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). Gang membership appears to be linked not only to delinquency but also to general behavioural problems among young adults. For example, Black female gang members have an earlier onset of sexual activity, a relatively higher number of sexual partners, a lower frequency of condom use, and higher rates of STDs (Walker-Barnes et al., 2001). Although there are limited data on the long-term effects of gang membership, it is conceivable that gang members are at higher risk for incarceration, adolescent parenthood, low occupational status, school failure, and dropout (Belokurova, 2018; Petrus et al., 2019). In addition, gang affiliation makes an individual a potential target for violent crime from rival gangs.

Research on risk factors for adolescent behaviour problems has consistently shown the importance of peer group influence. Exposure to criminal peers has been shown to be one of the strongest predictors of juvenile delinquency (Chi et al., 2012; Brantingham et al., 2021; Hamdulay et al., 2011). A comprehensive review of youth gang research by Fufa, Wonde, and Gudeta (2022) revealed that peer gang involvement is positively associated with gang membership among Black males, but not Hispanic males. There is also some evidence that peer criminality can significantly influence youth gang membership (Hamdulay et al., 2011). Other researchers have found that the most common reasons for joining gangs are due to peer pressure and a desire for companionship and an associated sense of belonging (Mlangeni, 2018; Petrus et al., 2019). In this context, there has been much speculation that gang membership is the result of dysfunctional family relationships. This is prompted in part by studies that have shown that parenting behaviours, particularly inappropriate use of control, negative parent-child emotional relationships, and inadequate supervision are associated with delinquent behaviour (Deuchar et al., 2010; Van Deuren et al., 2022; Walker-Barnes et al., 2001).

The logical model of gang membership assumes that structural disadvantage and lack of social capital at the community level, combined with family factors and child-level risk factors such as aggressive and impulsive temperament, can lead to preschool-stage behavioural problems (Howell & Egley, 2005). It is suggested that these aggressive and disruptive behaviours may lead to rejection from pro-social peers, increasing the likelihood of early delinquent behaviour, and lower academic performance (Higginson et al., 2015). In addition, ethnographic and observational studies of gang members in the context of families generally have shown conflictual and distant relationships between family members and inappropriate family management practices (Walker-Barnes et al., 2001). The hypothesis that family environment significantly influences gang membership is supported by some studies. For example, in a study of 536 adjudicated black and white youths, Friedman and colleagues (1975) found that gang members reported higher levels of aggressive acts of rebellion against their parents.

Gang Crimes In Malaysia

Over the years, the social epidemic of gangsterism in Malaysia has seen a marked increase. According to Malaysian Home Ministry Chief Secretary Datuk Abdul Rahim Mohd Radzi, the total number of gang members in Malaysia is 40,313, most of whom belong to 49 established gangs engaged in drug trafficking, extortion, and other criminal activities (Sim, 2015). A total of 28,926 (71.75%) of them are Indians, 8,214 (20.38%) are Chinese, 1,923 (4.77%) are Malays, 921 (2.28%) are Sarawakians, and 329 (0.82%) are Sabahans (Sim, 2015). Table 1 shows the top 10 list of large gangs in Malaysia.

Table 1

Top 10 biggest gang list in Malaysia

Gang Information	Description
Gang 04	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of members: 5,440. Previously known as Hua Kee. The gang was active in drug dealing, murder, extortion, and robbery.
Gang 08	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of members: 4,423. Founded in the 1970s, the gang is active in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Penang, Perak, Johor, Negeri Sembilan, and Malacca. Their activities include drug dealing, collecting protection money, and robbery.
Double 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of members: 1,053. Majority of the gang members are Malays with businesses in Food and Beverage and entertainment sector. The group is active in Peninsular Malaysia.
Tiga Line	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of members: 729. The group members identify themselves with the colours green, yellow and red, inspired by the Rastafari movement in Jamaica. They are active in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Kedah, and Perak.
Geng 24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of members: 758. A Chinese gang that is active in Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Perak, and Johor.

- Gang 18
- Number of members: 1,209.
 - This gang originated from traditional Chinese organized crime organizations.
 - Active in Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Perak, and Johor.
 - They are responsible for much of the drug dealings in the country.
- Gang 36
- Number of members: 8,512.
 - Active in Peninsular Malaysia and mostly made of Indian members with financial backing from Chinese real estate and other businessmen.
 - The number "36" signifies Triad 6, an offshoot of the long existing Chinese triad Hung Meng Hooi.
- Ang Soon Thong
- Number of members: Unclear.
 - It's a secret society based in Singapore and Malaysia.
 - Active since the 1950s when the gang was mainly in Sembawang, Singapore.
- Wah Kee
- Number of members: Unclear.
 - A secret society started in the 19th century dealing heroin.
 - Mainly based in Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Malacca, Penang, Perak, Pahang, Negeri Sembilan, and Sarawak.
 - The triad also has branches in Singapore, Australia, Thailand, Vietnam, China, Hong Kong, United States, Canada, and New Zealand.
- Sio Sam Ong
- Number of members: Unclear.
 - Literally means "Three Little Emperors," a leading Chinese triad in Malaysia with a strong presence in Penang and other Northern states in Malaysia.
 - Its main activities included international drug trafficking, kidnapping, murder, extortion, racketeering, and loan sharking.
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Source: The Straits Times (2014)

Malaysia's Indian Gangs

Police statistics show that the Chinese, who make up 23.2% of Malaysia's population, have 65 gangs, putting them at the top of the ethnic groups in terms of the maximum number of secret societies (Dewi, 2018; Dass, 2019). Indians, on the other hand, who make up only 7% of the population, have 18 secret societies, two less than the 20 led by Malays. Nevertheless, Indian

gangs are the most active among others (Dewi, 2018). Dewi (2018) found that the Chinese, who make up just over seven million of Malaysia's population, are behind 65 secret societies. These societies have 167 branches and 3,113 active members, while Indians, who constitute approximately two million of Malaysia's population, have 18 gangs, 267 branches, and 4,143 active members (Dewi, 2018). Former Bukit Aman Criminal Investigation Department director Datuk Hadi Ho Abdullah divulged that in 2013, about 70% of the 40,000 suspected gang members in Malaysia, a country of 28 million people, were Indians, while Chinese and Malays made up the rest (25%) and 4.77% respectively; Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018; Dewi, 2018). The 70% Indian gang member statistic converged with data given in an Al Jazeera documentary in 2014 (Dewi, 2018).

One of the names that immediately come to mind in Malaysian gangster history is that of P. Kalimuthu, who is also known as "Bentong Kali". He made headlines in the 1990s for his daring robberies and escape from police. Kali joined a Chinese gang at the age of 14, started robbing and then moved on to drug smuggling. He was imprisoned and released at the age of 19 and formed his own Gang 04 in Kuala Lumpur. Gang 04 had its origins in Hua Kee, a very active secret society in the 1980s. According to police, Gang 04 was taken over by its Indian members and expanded its activities from collecting protection money and fighting for territorial dominance to robberies and murders (Malay Mail, 2021). Bentong Kali was eventually killed in a shootout in Medan Damansara, Kuala Lumpur on 29 June 1993. However, the most violent Indian gang is Gang 36 (Malay Mail, 2021). This gang is a spin-off of an old Chinese gang known as the Hong Men, along with Gang 18 (formed in the 1970s; Malay Mail, 2021). According to statistics from MIB, nearly 60,000 of the bottom 40% of Indian households earn less than RM 2,000 (450 USD) per month (Dewi, 2018). Of those earning less than RM 1,000 (225 USD) per month, about 84% do not have enough savings to cover three months of living expenses. Moreover, the community also lags behind the Bumiputera and Chinese in education, where the number of school dropouts among Indians is disproportionately high and is estimated to be 13% of the total primary school population (Dewi, 2018). The selected location for this study is Rawang, Malaysia, a popular place for gangsters, especially after the clearing of plantations for housing in the 1980s. This event contributed to the emergence of displaced labour and led to social problems among young adults taking up anti-social and criminal activities (Malaysia Today, 2013). In Rawang, gangs 08, 21, and 36 were actively involved in various illegal activities such as loan sharking, kidnapping, robbery, theft, extortion, drug trafficking, murders, and rapes (Malaysia Today, 2013; The Star Online, 2010). Marimuthu and Malayalam (2020) found that a large number of Indian communities in Rawang, are economically and socially underprivileged, leading many Indian young adults to engage in criminal activities to support their families and themselves. To address the seriousness of this phenomenon, the current study examined Indian young adults involved in gangsterism in Rawang, Malaysia. The present study also suggested tailored interventions to the relevant stakeholders.

Research Objective

The aim of the present study is

- (i) To identify the demographic profile of gang members.
- (ii) To explore the factors that promote gang membership.

Materials And Methods

Research Design and Materials

Research design is the "glue" that brings together all the components of a research framework (Akhtar, 2016; McCombes, 2021). Generally, a qualitative analysis focuses on collecting data pertaining to an individual or a group of individuals by studying a particular phenomenon through collecting and analysing information such as text, video, or audio (Babbie, 2012; Haber, 2020). In this study, the researchers used qualitative methods, specifically, a semi-structured interview approach. Open-ended questions were used as they lead to better discussions between the researchers and the respondents.

Sample

According to Hopkin, Hoyle, and Gottfredson (2015), a smaller set of data from a population is defined as a sample. Selecting a sample requires a predefined and efficient method with sampling units, sampling points, or observations (Hopkin et al., 2015; McLeod, 2019). Bhandari (2020); Denzin (2012) stated that it is crucial to select an appropriate sample as it provides the best representativeness for the population of interest. To achieve the study's aim of identifying the demographic profile of gang members and exploring the risk factors that promote gang membership, the researcher recruited six male Indian young adults involved in gangsterism aged between 18 and 25 years old. All the respondents gave their consent to participate in the study at a time and place of their convenience.

Data Collection

The respondents completed one-on-one, in-depth semi-structured interviews running approximately 90 minutes each. The interview questions focused on the demographic profile of gang members and risk factors that promote gang membership. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the collected data, the researcher described the data from the respondent's perspective by including verbatim quotations in research accounts. This ensured an insightful, rich, and trustworthy respondent point of view. In addition, the researcher referenced respondents using pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data obtained from the interview. This method is generally used to condense responses into organised patterns (or themes) of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun et al (2006), there are six steps that should be followed to obtain themes from the data. The steps include (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes from the responses, (3) organising codes into patterned themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes where the story's map and themes are charted, and (6) producing the report. Applying the six-stage of thematic analysis enabled the researcher to explore the risk factors that promote gang membership.

Location of the Study

This study was conducted in Kuala Garing Park, Rawang, Malaysia. This location is known for being one of the earliest mining areas in the country (Property Insight, 2023). The British Empire introduced mining in 1825, developed rubber plantations in Rawang in the 1950s and oil palm plantations in the 1970s (Khoo & Chan, 2019). Today, Rawang is a popular location for new projects by numerous developers and a "hotspot" for those seeking low-cost business (Property Insight, 2023). Several highways, to wit, the Rawang Bypass, the Kuala Lumpur - Selangor Expressway, the Guthrie Corridor Expressway, and the North-South Expressway,

provide an excellent, easily accessible route around the Rawang area, as well as Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad, also known as Malaysian Railways Limited (Khoo et al., 2019).

The location of this study is in the south-western centre of Rawang (EdgeProp, 2022). Kuala Garing Park is a residential area surrounded by several schools such as Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Tamil Rawang, Sekolah Kebangsaan Rawang, Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Seri Garing, and Sekolah Kebangsaan Sinaran Budi. In addition, Kuala Garing Park is also an attractive location for industrial development, including construction, heavy engineering, manufacturing, and fabrication (EdgeProp, 2022). Figure 1 shows the location of Kuala Garing Park in Rawang.

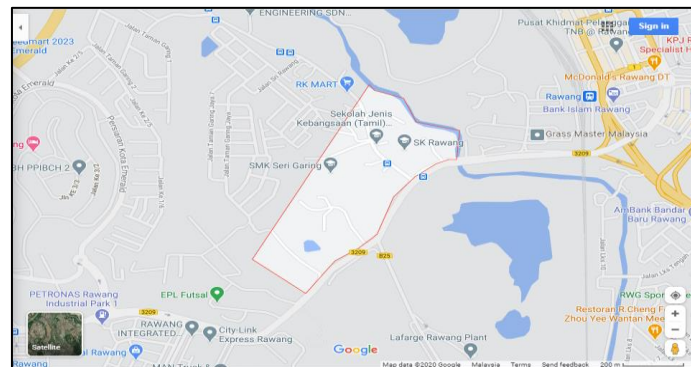


Figure 1: Location of Kuala Garing Park, Rawang

Source: Google Maps

Results and Discussion

The findings of the study were presented in two main sections, namely (i) demographic profiles of the gang members and (ii) risk factors that promote gang membership among Indian young adults.

Demographic Profile

A demographic profile presents the basic information of the respondents. Based on the descriptive analysis, all six respondents are male between 23 and 24 years of age. In addition, most of the respondents have completed their education until the lower secondary level and are still single. Table 2 shows the demographic profiles of the respondents.

Table 2

Demographic Profile

Variable	Description
Age	
CK	24
AX	24
LV	23
TS	19
SK	18
NT	20
Education Level	
CK	Malaysian Certificate of Education
AX	Lower Secondary Assessment
LV	Lower Secondary Assessment
TS	Lower Secondary Assessment
SK	Malaysian Certificate of Education
NT	Lower Secondary Assessment
Occupation	
CK	Loan sharking
AX	Scrap metal business/drug dealer
LV	Car wash/drug dealer
TS	Scrap metal business/drug dealer
SK	Scrap metal business/drug dealer
NT	Scrap metal business/drug dealer
Marital Status	
CK	Single
AX	Single
LV	Single
TS	Single
SK	Single

Note: Pseudonyms is used to protect respondent's identity

Factors That Promote Gang Membership Among Indian Young Adults

Based on the thematic analysis, this section outlines the main four themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts to wit; (i) peer group influence, (ii) poor parent-child relationship, (iii) low-income families, and (iv) desire to gain power in society. It should be noted that two of the respondents (i.e., Respondent AX and NT) had difficulty understanding a few of the interview questions. Hence, the researcher paraphrased some of the questions to facilitate their understanding of the interview questions.

Theme 1: Peer Group Influence

Based on the interview, all three respondents were somewhat influenced by their peers to get involved in gangsterism.

"This place, this place, should I tell? You know, right, there are many people here, so I got mingled with everyone when being with them feel different as everyone will be afraid to talk with them. So, you will have the gut feeling; you will feel amazed. That's why." (CK)

"I study until Form 4 only; after that, I stopped schooling. Okay, because of whom I am involved in this field? One brother was involved in the scrap metal business and was also Kuala Garing school ex-student. It is so good to see him. He had so much money and used good cars. While seeing this, I was friends with him. I started to follow him once I stopped my schooling. He also drives a car." (AX)

"I can't tell you the exact age when I started to involve in this field. I discontinued school after standard 6. In that class, everyone was like me, none studied well, and I was loitering with them. When I was 13 years old, I worked at a car wash center, and there I meet people who are older than me and who are from gang backgrounds. I was close with them, and I started to follow them in their work; from there, I get involved in gangs." (LV)

One of the most consistent and robust findings in the literature on juvenile delinquency is the link between peer criminal behaviour and gang membership. As noted by Pyrooz (2014) and Tharshini et al (2020), active gang membership peaks at the age of 15, with approximately 80% of gang members reporting that they joined a gang before age 18. During the adolescent stage, individuals seek to imitate peers and are often uncomfortable with gangs that tie them to the older generation. Isaac and Tanga (2015) found that young adults look up to their peers as companions in their quest for independence, but these interactions can have negative consequences if they fall into the wrong circle of peers. Ethnographic studies of adolescents in a school setting provide crucial information about the importance of friendship networks in adolescence. In these studies, it has been consistently reported that many students try to expand their personal networks to avoid becoming lost and isolated in the school environment and to gain a sense of belonging among peers (Isaac et al., 2015; Piquero et al., 2005). Thus, girls use gossip as a means to maintain friendships, while boys enforce 'policing masculinity' (e.g. dominance, toughness, aggressiveness, etc.) to ensure conformity among peers (Puzzanchera, 2008). Therefore, casual explanations of delinquency that focus on criminal peer associations (e.g. social learning and development theories) seem justified. Burt and Klump (2013) found that joining gangs involves two variables made up of both 'pulls' and 'pushes'. Pulls consist of attractive features, such as exciting opportunities, protection, fun, prestige, monetary incentives, and significant others already in a gang (Laura, 2009; Tharshini, 2022), whereas the pushes consist of ethnicity, worldview, and social reasons (Breen & Matusitz, 2008). These findings are consistent with Respondent CK's statements as he mentioned joining the gang for protection and to have fun with his peers. Gangs also provide other attractive opportunities and increase the sense of excitement, especially when involved in activities such as selling drugs which brings easy money (Burt et al., 2013). Researchers looking at gang crime studies have argued that some individuals are attracted to gangs due to their early exposure to the gang world during their formative years (Breen et al., 2008; Isaac et al., 2015; Tharshini, 2021). Furthermore, the findings in this study support the idea that individuals with low educational aspirations and low school attachment are at high risk of joining a gang in adolescence.

Interaction with peers is crucial for moral development. Indeed, our findings suggest that young adults are vulnerable to peer pressure during their formative years. Often peer pressure can lead a person to join a gang, drink, take drugs, smoke, and generally engage in harmful behaviours (as indicated by our respondents). Our findings also show that young individuals involved with criminal friends turn away from good kids (i.e., the outgroup) preferring instead their criminal friends (i.e., the in-group). This may also be due to the fact that they cannot talk to their parents or teachers when problems arise. Ergo, they may also be rebelling against the pressure put on them as adolescents. Therefore, examining the ways in which school and family can lead adolescents to succumb to peer pressure may lead to a better understanding of its causes. Future research should further explore this avenue of inquiry. Additionally, our findings suggest that young adults involved in gang activity attempt to ignore or minimise the consequences of their actions, and for the most part seem to glorify gang membership. This is particularly worrying given that they engage in violent behaviour at a young age.

Theme 2: Poor Parents-Child Relationship

The relationship between child delinquency and family attachment could be reciprocal and bidirectional. Two of the respondents stated that they had a bad relationship with their parents from an early age.

"I am alone at home. Not alone, but there are 4-5 boys with me. When I was in Form four as I was involved in gangs. I am the only son. My parents are not together, I am on my own."(SK)

"Since I started to get involved in gang activities, my family stopped bothering me. I got away from my family and stayed separately with my friend in a house. If I meet my family members anywhere, I will talk to them, that's all. Nothing more than that. My family didn't even bother me, they don't know what I'm up to, and I don't know what I am doing." (TS)

Young-age gang membership is the result of cumulative risk factors in a number of interlocking personal and environmental domains. One important risk factor is family dynamics, particularly poor relationships between parents and children (Aldridge et al., 2009). Maliki and Inokoba (2011) found that the home environment is an important factor in the development of a child's personality. In general, parenting styles fall into three main categories: (i) authoritarian parents, (ii) permissive parents, and (iii) authoritative parents. Maliki et al. (2011) found that children of authoritarian parents tend to be unfriendly, shy, unsociable, and relatively withdrawn. In contrast, the children of permissive parents are immature, dependent, moody, and have low self-control. The children of authoritative parents, on the other hand, do best in terms of their social skills, self-confidence, independence, likability, and willingness to cooperate. Children who were dominated in an oppressive home environment may seek to dominate others in a hierarchical social structure (Maliki et al., 2011; Symonds, 2003). Consequently, children who come from uncaring families are more likely to engage in antisocial behaviour or join gangs (Symonds, 2003).

Experts on juvenile delinquency recognise that the family plays a central role in predicting and preventing juvenile delinquency because families are responsible for teaching their children to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, to defer gratification, and to

respect the rights and property of others (Kakar, 1998). Henggler (1989) reports that delinquent behaviour occurs primarily when an individual grows up in a "dangerous family environment". Gluecks (1950) found that many parents of delinquent children are less loving than parents of non-delinquent children. This is consistent with the findings of the present study, particularly in the case of Respondent TS who stated that he has a poor relationship with his family, and they do not seem to care about their son's involvement in gangsterism. This response supports Bandura and Walters' (1959) contention that a lack of affection from parents increases children's propensity for antisocial behaviour. However, little is known about whether children's delinquent behaviour also influences parents' behaviour (a bidirectional effect) and creates stress in the family.

Theme 3: Low-Income Families

Most of the literature suggests that gang membership is part of a dangerous lifestyle and is a risk factor associated with higher rates of offending and victimisation (Deuchar et al, 2010; Friedman et al, 1975; Higginson et al, 2015; Howell et al, 2005; Van Deuren et al, 2022; Walker-Barnes et al, 2001). The interviewee CK stated that he got into gangsterism because of his family's destitute financial situation.

"Everything starts with the family situation. My parents were busy working to find the money to pay for the debtors. suffer". No money, life was hard." (CK)

As previously mentioned, most criminological researchers assume that gang membership is a risky lifestyle that translates into higher rates of violent offending (Isaac et al., 2015; Piquero et al., 2005; Pyrooz, 2014). Low income is an economic situation in which a person is unable to obtain resources to survive and live a decent life in a given context. The psychological cost of poverty often amounts to the erosion of humanity, a strong sense of inferiority and marginality, insecurity, fear, helplessness, and a 'live-for-the-moment' attitude (Burnett, 1999). Some social scientists offer insights into the strategies people use to survive in disadvantaged circumstances. For example, the lack of positive self-perception and self-esteem often leads to a negative self-assessment in which individuals classify themselves as failures (Burnett, 1999). The inability of young men to experience success in accordance with societal norms socialises individuals to the streets, where violent behaviour is an accepted norm and is perceived as a form of "alternative success" (Burnett, 1999). Ultimately, gangs become a significant reference group, providing an effective network for accessing material resources that would otherwise be out of reach. In gangs, one can carry out burglaries to obtain items or drugs, which makes the material resources necessary for survival available and making them financially stable, owns a car, can afford housing, and support one's family, which would otherwise be impossible (Burnett, 1999). During the interview, the Respondents CK and NT stated that their poor living conditions in their childhood motivated them to join a gang:

"I live in poverty when I was young. No money, no food. Now, I have lots of money to spend. I can buy everything. Even tomorrow I can shop for RM 1000 as I have so much money. No one can question me." (CK)

"I have money in my hands; I don't have to bow in front of anyone to get money; I own a house, I got a car, I can do anything as per my wish. I like the freedom of life."

When I was young, I was begging for money. Life was difficult. Many days I have spent without eating anything.” (NT)

Given its impact on individual development, financial deprivation is difficult to mask, as it is a burdensome psychosocial stressor. Children in poverty are likely to experience frustration and ultimately progress to “acting out” to provide economic resources for themselves and their families. A previous study conducted by Bolland (2003) defined hopelessness as “the product of a negative belief about future orientation.” Under this notion, children living in poverty believe they are lost, helpless, and accept that it would be difficult to surmount their predicament (Bolland, 2003). This internal submission is foreseen to allow one to disconnect from their vulnerable position and life capriciously, and get involved in antisocial acts to gain money. Though poverty is hypothesised to perpetuate feelings of hopelessness, the results of this study indicate otherwise. The results of this study converge with Bolland et al (2005) suggesting that despite destitute living, adolescents are likely to feel optimistic about the future and ability to improvise in the context of their family situation by joining gang activities to provide money. Similarly, as a vulnerable economic group, individuals who joined gangs at a young age use intimidation and physical violence as a mechanism to negotiate access to relative material prosperity and essential living resources (Burnett, 1999).

Theme 4: Desire to Gain Power in the Society

Gang members normally project an arrogant and defiant attitude in an attempt to intimidate others, especially in a public place and while in the presence of other gang members. According to Pyrooz (2014), most gang members are opportunists who take advantage of a situation that will allow them to enhance their reputation and create a sense of fear towards them. Respondent CK and Respondent AX, for example, stated that:

“I don't know whether they will respect me or not, but I'm sure they are afraid of me. When I collect the debts, they will pay me accordingly because they know I will beat them if they never pay back. So, it's a plus point for me.” (CK)

“Feeling dominant. Wherever I go people would be scared and also respect me. Okay, that's what I want.” (AX)

Maintaining respect is a fundamental goal for gang members. To lose face, get challenged, or be made fun of, are situations where gang members believe they have lost respect, often causing them to respond violently. Respondent AX and Respondent LV said:

“I got arrested by police, but halfway to the police station our gang leader will bribe them. Then they will set us free. I have been in lockup, but I only spend a half- day in lockup.”(AX)

“I possibly can be sentenced to death, but I know that my boss will get me out of any charges. He is powerful. So, I am not scared of police.” (LV)

In that regard, Alleyne and Wood (2010) stated that young adults are typically attracted to two types of social power, namely; (i) coercive power – the threat or actual use of violence and force, and (ii) power to pay – to buy, impress, delegate rank, and status. As such, gangs

reflect the universal need among young people to have identity, power, status, and companionship (Klein & Maxson, 2006). It is feasible that young status-seeking adults living in deprivation with little opportunity are more tempted to join a gang. South and Wood (2006) noted that individuals who give importance to status are more inclined to bully and this behaviour is associated with gang membership. Besides, Sykes and Matza (1957) argued that cognitive dissonance resulting from shame or guilt following harmful behaviour (e.g., gang crime) is usually neutralized by employing defense mechanisms such as denial of injury, responsibility, and harm to others. There is evidence that supports that gang members do indeed use such neutralization techniques (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005), however, it is unclear which specific strategies they employ.

We agree with Chi et al. (2012) that gang research has been primarily focused on the sociological and criminological aspects. There is a need to understand more about the social and psychological aspects of gang membership among young adults. Based on the response given by the respondents, our data shows that gang members cope with their behaviour by neutralizing the negative consequences of their actions, and most disturbingly, the respondents seem to be guilt-free about their criminal conduct. For instance, Respondent LV mentions that “he is not afraid of the police”, hence we reckon that anti-authority attitudes serve as a justification for gang membership, perhaps serving as a cognitive strategy of identifying with a more powerful figure (gang leader) who can save them from any situation. So, gang members feel protected by their gang membership and do not perceive authorities as a threat. Although our data do not provide in-depth detail, it is certainly testable in future research.

Conclusion

The present study was conducted to investigate the underlying factors that promote gang membership among Indian young adults in Kuala Garing Park in Rawang, Malaysia. Our findings show that young adults’ involvement in gangsterism is fluid, and associated with multi-dimensional themes such as peer group influence, poor parent-child relationships, low-income families, and desire to gain power in society. The identified risk factors can be used to develop a suitable crime prevention framework to curb gangsterism among Indian young adults. For instance, the identified risk factors could help crime-related stakeholders to develop suitable mentoring, family therapy, group therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, school-based anti-gang curriculums, and gang awareness education for schools, particularly among students with disciplinary problems. In addition, subsequent research done in high-risk neighbourhoods can beget a more comprehensive understanding of the traits, predispositions, and criminogenic factors that are pro-gangsterism. Furthermore, delineating the rewarding mechanisms that sustain gang culture among Indian young adults would prove fruitful.

To curb the expansion of gangsterism in Malaysia, the Royal Malaysia Police (RMP) has continuously planned and enforced many suppression strategies. The “Ops Cantas” and “Ops Cantas Khas” constitute some of the special operations carried out by the RMP in several states over the past few years that have aimed to reduce gang-related activities. Furthermore, new amendments have been made to the Prevention of Crime Act (POCA) to reduce the crime rate in Malaysia. Moreover, notable task forces such as Special Task Force for Anti-Vice, Gaming, and Gangsterism (STAGG), and Special Task Force on Organised Crime (STAFOC) have been established under the command of the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) of RMP to control gang-related activities in Malaysia. From the academic angle, we suggest that gang

membership among young adults is preventable by following three stages of neutralization namely; (i) primary prevention – should focus on ending the problem before it occurs. This involves reducing opportunities for gang membership among young people by establishing family, community, and social structures that monitor individual, social, and situational factors, (ii) secondary prevention – should aim to change young people engaging in gang-related activities by providing intensive rehabilitation and supervision (e.g., mentoring, family therapy, group therapy, and cognitive-behavioural therapy). At this stage, prevention must focus on rapid and effective interventions (e.g., skill streaming, anger management, empathic skills, positive recreational activities, developmental recreational activities, gang awareness education for parents, and counselling for parents (and young adults) in high-risk neighbourhoods, and lastly (iii) tertiary prevention – should targets incarcerated gang members to reduce recidivism and break the vicious cycle of gangsterism. At this point, gang members are dealt with at the criminal justice system level.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest regarding the publication and authorship of this research.

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